



volume 15

number 4

december 2006

ISSN 1361-7710

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A burning issue:

Christian care for the environment

by Robert White

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it... Psalm 24:1

Summary

God created a world which he pronounced was very good and delegated to humankind the responsibility for its care. But human sinfulness has marred God's creation and our profligate abuse of the environment is causing global climate change. If left unchecked global warming will cause global economic loss, widespread suffering and death, particularly among the poor and marginalised who are least able to cope with rapid change. Our response is a test both of our obedience to our creator and of our commitment to care for our neighbour.

Introduction

If the earth will one day, maybe quite soon, be burnt to a frazzle, is it appropriate to put resources into long-term environmental policies?

Environmental issues have become prominent in public discourse. Tony Blair announced that climate change is 'the world's greatest environmental challenge', that it is 'so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power, that it alters radically human existence'.¹ Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, captured headlines by suggesting that 'making selfish choices such as flying on holiday or buying a large car are a symptom of sin'.² James Lovelock believes that we are fast approaching a 'tipping point' on climate change from which there is no return.³ Sir David King, the government's chief scientist, has described climate change as a bigger threat than terrorism, and Sir John Houghton, formerly head of the Meteorological Office, says it is a 'weapon of mass destruction'.⁴ When church and secular leaders, scientists and politicians all speak similarly, Christians ought to take note and consider how their faith affects their response to such issues.

Over the last century, Christians have been lukewarm about addressing environmental matters. This was not always the case: there is a long history of Christian engagement with the environment, starting with the early church Fathers such as Benedict, the sixth-century founder of monasticism who propounded a gentle attitude to nature and to animals.⁵ Calvin in 1563 wrote 'let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses'.⁶ Opposition from churches to the prevalent cruelty to animals in early modern England was effective in changing attitudes in society.⁷ In the twentieth century the founders of the London Missionary Society were committed to using science to improve the lot of humankind.⁸ So why is contemporary Christian environmental concern more muted? Maybe some have considered that it is secondary to more important matters of evangelism. Some Christians have felt a need to distance themselves from the Green agenda, because they considered it had overtones of pagan nature-worship or of New Age spirituality. As a result, throughout the late twentieth century the environmental flag was flown by the largely secular Green movement.

Yet from a scriptural perspective, Christians should have been leading the environmental agenda.⁹ The very existence of this universe is the result of God's creative

- 1 www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page6333.asp
- 2 *The Sunday Times*, 23 July 2006. He said that 'Sin is not just a restricted list of moral mistakes. It is living a life turned in on itself where people ignore the consequences of their actions.'
- 3 J. Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back - and How We Can Still Save Humanity*, Allen Lane, 2006.
- 4 J. Houghton, 'Global warming is now a weapon of mass destruction', *The Guardian*, 28 July, 2003.
- 5 R. Attfield, 1994, *Environmental Philosophy: Principles and Prospects*, Avebury contains a good historical summary of Judeo-Christian attitudes to the environment.
- 6 Writing on Gen. 2:15 in J. Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library at www.ccel.org/c/calvin
- 7 K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: changing attitudes in England 1500-1800*, Penguin Books, 1983.
- 8 S. Sivasundaram, *Nature and the Godly Empire: Science and Evangelical Mission in the Pacific, 1795-1850*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 9 The prominent secular humanist E.O. Wilson published *The Creation: An appeal to save life on earth* (W. W. Norton, 2006, 160pp.) in which he appeals for the evangelical Christian community to make care of the environment a higher priority.

activity – a world that he said was ‘very good’ and which he commanded humankind to subdue and tend.¹⁰ God shows his commitment to the material world not only by upholding it moment by moment,¹¹ but by becoming incarnate in it, taking a human body with all its limitations in the person of Jesus.¹² The ultimate destination of this world, redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, is to be renewed along with all believers to the eternal glory of God.¹³

God’s initial creation and his eventual re-creation of the new heavens and new earth provide a framework for how we should live as temporary residents in a world that still displays the creator’s glory and purposes, though marred by the effects of sin; a world with the certain hope of a renewed and perfected future; a world in which we are called to work to God’s praise and glory.

The creation ethic

The biblical narrative proclaims that God existed before the universe did, and is separate from it. He was not beholden to anyone or anything, and the entire natural order is, and remains, his possession. The first verse of the Bible makes this clear: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ John’s gospel echoes the same truth: ‘Through him [Jesus] all things were made’ – and in case we didn’t get the message, John continues: ‘without him nothing was made that has been made’.¹⁴

The picture in the early chapters of Genesis is of a workman labouring hard: of honest days’ work and rest at the end of the week: of satisfaction at a job well done, with the repeated affirmation that ‘God saw that it was good’. God gloried in his creation, and his creation in turn reflected something of his character. ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’, says the psalmist,¹⁵ and Paul comments that ‘since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...’¹⁶ This stands in stark contrast, for example, to those Eastern religions that downplay the importance of the material world in favour of the spiritual.

God created a world that is good and beautiful independently of our presence in it. The sun, moon, stars, waters, mountains, hills, weather, vegetation, animals, birds and sea creatures all praise the Lord, says Psalm 148. The Lord asks Job rhetorically ‘Who...waters a land *where no man lives*, a desert with no-one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass.’¹⁷ In Job 38–39 God lists a large range of ways in which God cares for his creation independently of any human agency or presence. This material world is one which God sustains all the time. Without him it would fall apart into chaos. ‘He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’¹⁸ As God makes clear in his covenant with Noah, he has a commitment to the earth and all life on it.¹⁹ If the physical world matters this much to God, it should matter to Christians.

Although humans are part of the created order, the Bible asserts that there is something special about us: we are made ‘in God’s image’.²⁰ We are more than animals, even though we share our material make-up with animals. Being made in God’s image includes the ability to relate to God in a personal way, and to exhibit and experience, albeit in a greatly attenuated way, some of his characteristics such as love, justice, creativity and care. At

the beginning of human history, God gave humans the command to rule over and to take care of both the living and non-living creation.²¹ We are not to be passive spectators, but are to work at ruling and ordering creation without abusing the earth for our own selfish ends. Our care for creation should be consistent with God’s care for it, enabling it to be fruitful in providing food and resources and allowing it to play its intended part in giving glory to God.

Living in a fallen world

If the relationship between humans and God had remained as it was in the Garden of Eden, life would have been a lot more straightforward. Yet it didn’t. Humans rebelled against their creator. The consequences of this sinfulness were made clear by God: living in the land became more dangerous, both from wild animals and from other people;²² the joy of procreation was scarred by an increase of pain in childbirth;²³ even producing food became difficult toil.²⁴ The current travails of this world, so much of its pain and its suffering, are a direct result of human sinfulness.

Yet the earth is still innately fruitful, even though it labours under the dissonance of human sinfulness. The orderliness of the created order and our God-given ability to understand it and to make use of it through science and technology ought to allow us to work for the good of all. And God mandates us to do so. There is sufficient food in the world to feed everyone, yet we allow food mountains to grow in one part of the world while people starve in another. People in one country die for lack of common medicines while medical resources are poured into needless cosmetic surgery in another.

Abuse of the natural environment is a consequence of human sinfulness. It is a symptom of disobedience of God’s command to humankind to care for his world, and marring the created order prevents it from giving glory to God. That is why the ‘whole of creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth’ but will be liberated, along with all believers, to fulfil its God-given function of reflecting God’s glory in the new creation.²⁵ In caring for the non-human created order we are worshipping God by allowing it to give glory to God as he intended.

New heavens and new earth

But in his mercy, God has not left us stuck for ever in a world that is out of kilter. God himself became incarnate as the man Jesus, and by his crucifixion at the hands of humans he took upon himself the punishment that justice demanded as a result of our rebellion against the creator God. The consequences of this are cosmic: the death of Jesus Christ made possible redemption from the effects of human sinfulness, not only of humanity but of all the created order.²⁶

We are currently living in that in-between state between the first coming and the final return of Jesus at the end of time. The kingdom of heaven is near, said Jesus,²⁷ but the full consummation of God’s redeeming act will not occur until the new heavens and new earth are created. That will bring the fullness of life that he always intended and purposed for his creation:²⁸ a place where his redeemed people will worship him and the whole of creation will give him glory. In symmetry with the initial creation when God walked with Adam, it will be a place restored to order where God himself will dwell with his people.²⁹

10 Gen. 1:28–31.

11 Heb. 1:3.

12 J. Jones, *Jesus and the Earth* (SPCK, 2003, 102pp.) discusses Jesus as the saviour not only of humanity but also of the planet and the whole cosmos.

13 Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1.

14 John 1:3.

15 Ps. 19:1.

16 Rom. 1:20.

17 Job 38:25–27.

18 Col. 1:16–17.

19 Gen. 9:12–17.

20 Gen. 1:27.

21 Gen. 1:28; 2:15.

22 Gen. 3:15; Gen. 4:14.

23 Gen. 3:16.

24 Gen. 3:17–19.

25 Rom. 8:19–22.

26 Col. 1:20.

27 Matt. 10:7.

28 Rom. 8:21.

29 Rev. 21:1–4.

As well as the discontinuity implicit in re-creation, there is also a sense in Scripture of continuity between this world and the next. It is as if the new creation will be the full realisation of the present order.³⁰ Although the Bible writers struggle to describe it in our earth-bound, limited terms, they paint a picture of a place where we will be completely at home, where we will have recognisable physical bodies, where we will know one another, will love and be loved, and will praise and worship God unreservedly. We may already experience aspects of this in a transient sense; in the new creation it will be the steady, settled reality.

The populist view of heaven as a place where disembodied spirits float around in a nebulous, spiritual realm is unbiblical. The decisions we make in this world, the things we do and say, our personalities, will all in some sense carry forward to the world to come. They will be purified 'as if by fire',³¹ and transformed: how we behave in this world has a bearing on the next. So how we treat the environment now ought to be a preview, a practice run, of what we will do in the new creation when we shall rule with righteousness.³² Furthermore, the new heavens and earth are represented in the Bible not only by a recreated 'natural order', but also by a city. The city is a place of human community, of relational intensity, of creativity and technology – and the 'glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it'.³³

The biblical authors are clear that although this world is flawed by human sinfulness, we need to work at using it for good. The certain hope of a renewed future creation is not a licence to abandon care for this one. Rather, the opposite is the case: because there is some continuity between this world and the next, because it will be the fulfilment of God the creator's plans for this universe, there is every incentive to foster and to use the innate underlying goodness and fruitfulness of this material world to do what is pleasing to God in our time and place.

So how might Christians use this understanding of the place of humanity in God's created order, and of the certainty of coming judgement and re-creation of the world? Christians are called to be salt and light in a needy world.³⁴ They should show by example what God requires. God has created a world where following his precepts and commandments is the best and safest way for us to live. Although those who ignore God may prosper in the short term, and we may even envy them, in the long run they are on the path to destruction, to be swept away with no more substance than fantasy dreams.³⁵

I will consider one topical environmental issue, global climate change, and outline principles for responding to it. This is of course just one of many pressing environmental problems including, for example, the extinction of species at a rate about 100 times higher than the normal background level.

Global climate change

The average global temperature is increasing at a rate and by an amount unprecedented in the history of humankind. Nine of the ten warmest years on record were in the last decade. There is now little doubt that it is caused by injecting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels – oil, gas and coal.³⁶ A consequence is the likely increase in extreme weather events – hurricanes and floods at one extreme, droughts and heat waves at the other. The effects fall disproportionately on the very young and very old, on the poor and the marginalised in places such as

sub-Saharan Africa. One quarter of the world's population live in poverty, with a marginal lifestyle that is vulnerable to changes caused by drought or flooding, by the failure of agricultural crops, or by rising sea levels. Already the number of environmental refugees is estimated as 20 million, exceeding those from war and political repression combined.³⁷ Yet the main cause of global warming is greenhouse gases produced by high-income countries in North America and Europe. More than half the global emissions of greenhouse gases are produced by less than one-sixth of the world population.

Human activity over the past two centuries has already committed the earth to future climate change about which we can do nothing at this stage. Yet all is not gloom. We could put in place measures to mitigate its worst effects, and to prevent future excesses. This could be achieved by a mixture of changing lifestyles, of using energy resources more carefully, of developing alternative sustainable energy sources, and of moving towards a more equitable distribution of carbon pollution, both by individuals and nations. For the Christian, there are strong reasons for such behaviour out of obedience to our creation mandate. But even without this motivation, there are sound economic and even self-interest reasons to amend our ways.

International perspective

We live on a planet of finite size and resources: what I do in my own backyard (especially if it involves a patio heater and propane-fuelled barbecue!) has a global impact. Yet those who suffer most from the consequences of climate change had no say in my contributing activities.

If the nations of the world could work together on equitable ways of reducing global warming – as indeed they have already come to scientific agreement, through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, on its reality and causes³⁸ – that would be an enormous step forward for the good of humankind, not only in the practical consequences but also in fostering co-operative behaviour in our global village. There are already successful models of international co-operation on environmental issues, such as the Montreal Protocol of 1987 which drastically reduced the emission of ozone-destroying substances.³⁹ But even if not everyone joins in, that does not absolve us from the responsibility of playing our part in adopting sustainable lifestyles.

More to the point, Christians in high-income countries can hardly claim to be loving their (global) neighbour when the consequences of their actions may lead to suffering and an increased probability of an early death elsewhere. To refuse to do so when the consequences of our actions are already clear is not only reckless but sinful. The high-income countries of the industrialised West have largely attained their standard of living through the profligate use of natural resources, and particularly of fossil fuels. Those countries can hardly deny the right of less industrialised nations such as China and India to pull themselves up to similar standards of living. Yet if the low-income countries simply emulate the industrialised nations in their use of fossil fuels,⁴⁰ the problem of global warming will quickly escalate. One equitable solution which Christians could well endorse is to press for all nations to move towards a position where each is allowed to produce the same amount of polluting gases per capita. Such 'contraction and convergence' could in principle be achieved if there is the political will and international unity required to do so.⁴¹

30 N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope*, Grove Books Ltd, Ridley Hall, Cambridge, 1999, B11. Also 1 Pet. 1:4–5; 1 Cor. 13:12.

31 1 Cor. 3:12–15.

32 Ps. 8.

33 Rev. 21:26.

34 Matt. 5:13–14.

35 Jer. 12:1–3; Ps. 73.

36 J. Houghton, *Global Warming: the Complete Briefing*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, and *Climate Change and the Greenhouse Effect*, 2005, at www.ukcip.org.uk/resources/publications

37 Estimates of environmental refugees are 150–200 million by 2050.

38 IPCC 2001: *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis*, Houghton, J.T. et al. (eds). Cambridge University Press, 2001, free at www.ipcc.ch

39 Kofi Annan comments that the Montreal Protocol is 'perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date'.

40 China is building a new coal-fired power station every five days.

41 Global Commons Institute: www.gci.org.uk/contconv/cc.html

National perspective

National policies, especially ones that require sacrifice by the populace, can only be implemented if there is broad acceptance of them by the electorate. This is where Christians can play their part in lobbying for change. That radical change is possible is illustrated by history: slavery was abolished largely due to a campaign by committed Christians.⁴²

Government could lead by adjusting the distribution of taxation to change behaviour and improve our living environment, for example by penalising the most polluting cars and encouraging less damaging energy sources. Legislation to improve building codes could save 60 per cent of domestic energy use, while providing more services.⁴³ The sequestration of carbon dioxide produced as a by-product of electricity generation from coal or hydrocarbons is technologically within reach.⁴⁴ The Stern review of the economics of climate change concluded that the risk of disruption makes the reduction of emissions now a prudent investment for the future.⁴⁵ If the nation were on a war footing such changes could be achieved in short order. The challenge is to see our actions that cause global pollution as equivalent to global genocide, requiring a response analogous to that of a nation at war.

Community perspective

In a secular context, there are already projects that take seriously the sharing of resources to create a low energy footprint. For example, the Beddington Zero Energy Development saves approximately 90 per cent on heating compared to conventional housing.⁴⁶ Faith communities ought to provide a ready-made platform for such co-operative behaviour. Of all people Christians ought to understand that the resources entrusted to them are only on loan from God, that they are to be used for the good of all, and thus for the worship of God. It is a challenge for fellowships to model this in practice, both in congregational sharing of resources and in ensuring that heating, lighting and use of buildings and other activities use resources in a way that takes account of impact on others.⁴⁷

Individual perspective

It is at the individual level that decisions about our energy usage hit home most sharply. Some of the decisions are costly. Should we jet off several times a year for ski-ing holidays, to top up our tan on the beach, for a break in a foreign country? Does the

unseen cost to the marginalised elsewhere come into our considerations? Christians are called to live counterculturally, and here is an opportunity to do so. Paul writes that Christians should 'not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'⁴⁸ It is a profoundly Christian perspective to be prepared to give up some of our privileges for the sake of others, modelling Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us.⁴⁹

Many of the practical things we can do are not difficult, and indeed are often personally beneficial.⁵⁰ Walking or cycling is usually healthier than driving. Changing to low-energy light bulbs, switching off the stand-by on the TV and stereo and insulating our roofs and walls will all save us money. So why are they often so difficult for us? Partly it is because we live in an intensely individualistic and materialistic society; partly it is because we are prone to put to the back of our minds the impact of our actions on those we can't see; and perhaps mainly it is because we are by nature sinful – self-centred in our thoughts and our actions. But once we are aware that our decision to drive a big car, to fly to Paris for the weekend, to turn up the heating rather than to put on a sweater, will all have a direct impact on someone already living on the edge, then how can we ignore it?

Conclusion

Christians as individuals, as members of a fellowship of believers, as citizens of a nation, and living as part of a global community should model the creation–kingdom ethic for unbelievers. And they should steward the earth as part of their worship of God. Christians should care for the stranger and the foreigner even, or perhaps especially, if they happen to live on the other side of the world but are affected by our actions. Those of us who live in the high-income industrialised nations with standards of living purchased through profligate use of natural resources have a particular responsibility in our stewardship, an imperative to care for those elsewhere in the world marginalised by global climate change. 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.'⁵¹

48 Rom. 12:2.

49 Phil. 2:1–11.

50 See For Tomorrow Too: www.tearfund.org

51 Luke 12:48.

42 John Coffey, *The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action*, Cambridge Paper vol. 15, no. 2, 2006.

43 See www.40percent.org.uk for proposals to reduce domestic energy use by 60% by 2050, while supplying all householders with more space, heat, hot water, lighting and appliances.

44 Report on carbon dioxide capture and storage at www.ipcc.ch

45 Stern Review at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk concludes investment of up to 1% of GDP p.a. now could save at least 5% and up to 20% loss of global GDP in the future.

46 www.sd-commission.org.uk/communitiessummit/show_case_study.php/00035.html

47 Ecocongregation provides resources to encourage churches to consider environmental issues within a Christian context and to enable local churches to make positive contributions in their life and mission: www.ecocongregation.org

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