



Environment & Climate

Christian Foundations for Policymaking

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the impact that humanity is having on the world around us. Environmental problems were prominent in the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2020, with climate-related issues dominating all the top-five long-term risks in terms of likelihood.¹ The problems facing our planet are many and varied: from climate change to plastic pollution, from loss of biodiversity to water issues, from poor air quality to the overconsumption of the earth's resources. This paper will not rehearse the data on these issues again but seeks instead to offer biblical foundations for Christian engagement with our environmental and climate challenges. The problems are well-known and governments and international bodies are to varying degrees trying to respond, but the heart of the problem lies deeper. This is where Christian foundations can help form the right and effective response.

Biblical themes

The Bible and Christian theology provide firm foundations for radical action to reduce climate change and protect our environment.

CREATION

First, the Bible is unequivocal that God loves the world that He has created. The repeated refrain throughout the creation account in Genesis 1 is that creation is *good*, and once it is complete, it is *very good*. This is

in stark contrast to other ancient creation accounts where the world is created as a by-product or an afterthought of the actions of the gods.² Furthermore, God did not just create the world and then sit back, but instead continues to sustain all of creation (Psalm 65:9; Hebrews 1:3), and the psalmist wishes for God to rejoice in the works He has made (Psalm 104:31). Therefore, our natural world should not be taken for granted. As those who love God, we should naturally want to love and take care of something that is so precious to Him.

In Genesis 1 and 2, humanity is given a vital role to play in caring for God's creation. Humans are made in the image of God 'so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' (Genesis 1:26). God then commands humans to 'be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28). In Genesis 2, God puts Adam to work in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). As human beings made in the image of God, we reflect Him in how we treat creation, ruling over it justly and sensitively. While the word translated as 'rule' is used of kingly rule, we need to remember that the ideal of kingship in the Bible was that of the servant-king, as seen in Psalm 72.³ Whilst God has given the earth to humankind (Psalm 115:16), we should regard ourselves as those looking after it, rather than owners. Psalm 24:1 reminds us that the earth and all that is in it still belongs to God. In our care for creation, we show that we respect and honour the God who created it.

1 World Economic Forum (2020) *The Global Risks Report 2020*, p.13. Available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf

2 For example, the Mesopotamian creation poem, the *Enuma Elish*, in Ruth Valerio (2020) *Saying Yes to Life*, pp.xiii-xviii

3 Berry, R.J. *The Biblical Basis for Creation Care*, The John Ray Initiative. Available at: https://jri.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/bp8_basis.pdf

FALL

When sin entered the world in Genesis 3, the relationship between God and humankind was fractured, as well as among human beings and in their relationship with the wider creation (Genesis 3:16-19). The link between the sin of God's people and environmental problems is seen throughout the Old Testament in the warnings of the prophets (Isaiah 24; Hosea 4; Jeremiah 4; Amos 8). It is vital to recognise that at the root of environmental problems is human selfishness and greed – we tend to think about what we can get out of creation, without thought for the effect this has on other people and all the earth's ecosystems. The Bible teaches that, as well as being capable of great good, human beings also tend towards self-interest and any policy to combat environmental problems must reckon with this reality.

REDEMPTION

Despite the fracturing of creation due to human sin, the great promise of the Bible is that God will redeem the world. The very doctrine of the incarnation – that God Himself entered His creation in physical form (John 1:14) – suggests that He has a plan for redemption which includes the natural world. Somehow, Jesus' death and resurrection redeems the whole creation. This is seen in Colossians 1:15-20, where *all things* are created through and for Jesus, and *all things* are reconciled through His blood shed on the cross. The physicality of Jesus' resurrection also reveals the redemption of the physical world and further discredits a dualism which suggests that the physical world is not as important as the spiritual.

The redemption of creation is also prophesied at the very end of the Bible. In Revelation 21, we read that there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1), which builds on Isaiah's prophecy in the Old Testament (Isaiah 65). This dispels any image of heaven being an ethereal place lacking in physicality. On the contrary, the Christian hope is one rooted in a restored creation. Isaiah also prophesied a restoration of right relationships in creation as a result of the earth being filled with the knowledge

of the LORD (Isaiah 11:9; also Habakkuk 2:14). The imagery used in Revelation 22 for the restored creation is that of a garden city. At the centre of the new Jerusalem is the river of the water of life, on either side of which is the tree of life, whose leaves bring the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2). It is a vision of a new creation where the relationships between human beings and God, amongst human beings, and between human beings and the wider creation are fully restored and also new. This is encapsulated in the Greek word used for 'new' in Revelation 21 – *kainos* – which both brings a sense of renewal, but also that this new thing is in some way different from what has gone before. Some have argued that this newness means that the current world will be completely destroyed and thus it does not matter what happens to it, using 2 Peter 3:10: *'The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.'* However, this does not necessarily mean total destruction. Just as a forest fire cleanses a land, the final judgement may only destroy what is bad, leaving what is good to remain. Despite the fact that God will establish a new creation in the future, Christians should promote the care of this creation because it is precisely *this* creation that will be renewed. Nevertheless, there is still a tension between the now and the not yet. This final restoration will only be complete when Jesus returns and so there will be a limit to what can be achieved now.

The role of Christians is to live in light of this future reality. The redemption of creation is interwoven with the redemption of humankind. In Romans 8, Paul describes how *'the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God'* (Romans 8:19-21). It will be when human beings are fully redeemed and restored that they will be able to fulfil their God-given role of caring for creation properly, and the whole creation will get to share in the blessings God has lavished on His people.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOUR

In Matthew 22:34-40, Jesus sets out the two greatest commandments. The first, loving God, is reflected in how we treat His creation, but the second, loving your neighbour as yourself, is equally important. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 reminds us that our neighbour can be anyone and in an increasingly globalised world, we need to be mindful of how we treat our global neighbours, particularly those in the poorest parts of the world who tend to be most impacted by climate change. The Bible says that God has a particular heart for the poor and vulnerable (Zechariah 7:9-10; Psalm 146:7-9)⁴, and acting on environmental issues will be a vital part of seeking justice for the global poor. This may be costly, as we reconsider our way of life, but we do it out of love for others. Paul reminds us that we should not act out of selfish ambition, but should look to others' interests before our own, following the example of Jesus Christ who made Himself nothing (Philippians 2:1-11). The love that Jesus demonstrated was self-sacrificial and He warned His disciples that following Him involves denying themselves (Luke 9:23).

SABBATH REST AND SUSTAINABILITY

Returning to the creation narrative, it is significant that after creating the world, God rested (Genesis 2:2-3). This is taken up in the Ten Commandments, when God commands His people to take a Sabbath day of rest once a week (Exodus 20:8-11). Further on in the Mosaic law, this is expanded to include allowing the land to rest as well (Leviticus 25). While we are no longer required to abide by all aspects of the Mosaic law, the message behind this should be heeded: exploiting creation in the pursuit of maximum productivity goes against the way God created the world to work. This theme is also seen in the laws around gleaning which commanded landowners not to reap to the edge of their fields or go back to pick up what was left, but instead to leave this for the poor and the foreigner (Leviticus 19:9-10).

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4 For more on this, see Timothy Keller (2010) *Generous Justice*.

Principles for policymaking

The purpose of this paper is not to recommend specific policy solutions. However, the following principles are set out for politicians to bear in mind when taking action on environmental issues. It is worth remembering that solutions will be needed on all levels: personal, local, national and international.

1. Love creation.

Christians have a duty to love the whole creation because God loves it, as seen in creation and in His redemption of all things. All humans have a God-given role in looking after the whole of creation, and this is something Christians should naturally be taking the lead in. This is also a reminder that humanity is not just another species among many; as divine image-bearers, humans have a unique role to play in caring for the world.

2. Recognise the root cause of environmental problems.

As discussed above, the Christian worldview reveals that at the root of environmental problems is human sin. As well as scientific and technological innovation, there will need to be costly changes to human behaviour too. The idols of materialism and economic growth at any cost will need to be challenged. Difficult choices will have to be made. Some actions taken to address environmental problems will be costly in the short term, and it will require boldness to break out of the short-termism that five-year election cycles engender. The antidote to human sin is the self-sacrificial love of Christ, and policies will have to include elements of self-sacrifice to challenge the prevailing culture of self-interest.

3. Love our neighbours, particularly the poor and vulnerable.

We are all called to love our neighbours as ourselves, and this must form a key part of tackling environmental problems. In all policy decisions, it is important to remember the effects these will have on our global neighbours, as well as those who will come after us. In particular, we must be mindful of the poor and vulnerable. Rather than asking ‘How will this policy affect me?’, the plumbline for all policies should be ‘How does this protect the poor and vulnerable?’. It is also vital that the burden of policies designed to protect the global environment does not fall disproportionately on the poor in our own country.

4. Be a prophetic voice.

Above all, Christians have a key role to play in being a prophetic voice in areas of environmental concern. The Christian worldview uniquely encompasses the reasons for taking action alongside a realism about the root causes. Furthermore, the Christian worldview provides a unique hope that God is at work in redeeming creation and that change to human behaviour is possible. Rather than succumbing to despair or complacency, we are called to act, holding the tension between the *now* of the present creation and the *not yet* of the new creation. The world will not be fully healed until the new creation, but in the meantime we must take seriously

the call to act in line with how God created the world. While we live in a pluralistic society with a plethora of different faiths and worldviews, as Christians we can be the prophetic voice that shifts the narrative and tells a better story: one that speaks of the inherent value of the created world and the need for humanity to care for it; one that is realistic about human sin and brokenness and yet is hopeful for redemption; one that speaks up for the poor and vulnerable and challenges self-interest wherever it is found. Christians have a unique opportunity to be this prophetic voice at a critical time for the world.

Further reading

- A Rocha UK: www.arocha.org.uk
- Operation Noah: www.operationnoah.org
- The John Ray Initiative: www.jri.org.uk
- *A Christian Guide to Environmental Issues* – Martin J. Hodson & Margot R. Hodson
- *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* – Nick Spencer & Robert White
- *Saying Yes to Life* – Ruth Valerio
- For a wider look at issues of social justice: *Generous Justice* – Timothy Keller

Christians in Parliament is an All-Party Parliamentary Group which exists to support Members and staff in their work in the Houses of Parliament. We do this through Bible study and prayer groups, one-to-one pastoral contact, chapel services, speaker events, political theology discussions and the annual National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast.

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