

Theology, Climate Change and Justice

You know the opening words of the Bible:

“In the beginning, God ...

In the beginning, God created ...

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)

From the very first words we see that the God we worship is a creator God. God is the source of life, and life is infinitely precious to God. We also know that God delights in all life, not just human life. At the end of the first chapter of Genesis we read: “*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*” (Gen. 1:31.)

In St John’s Gospel we read: “*God so loved the world ...*” (John 3:16). The “world” in Greek is not just the earth but the whole cosmos, the universe. God brought the universe into being and loves it. Whether God brought it about through evolution over a period of 15 billion years or in seven days really does not matter. What matters is that God cares for and loves this world and wants us to cherish it.

For too long we Christians have interpreted this passage as saying that God so loved us *humans* that he gave his only Son. God loves all of life, including humans but we have failed to cherish it. We have abused God’s charge to us to “*have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth.*” (Genesis 1:28). In being given “rule” or “dominion” we were given responsibility to care for, to nurture and look after creation, not abuse and exploit it for our own selfish gratification.

In the second chapter of Genesis we are told to look after and “keep” God’s creation. “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it.*” (Genesis 2:15).

Throughout the Bible we read of God’s delight in and purpose for all creation. In the Psalms we hear of all creation praising God: “*Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it.*” (Psalm 96:11-12.)

God’s Kingdom is for all of creation. In the Lord’s Prayer, when we pray that God’s Kingdom will come and that God’s will **will** be done on earth, God’s Kingdom includes all creation. St. Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: “*...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*” (Romans 8:20-23.)

So God cares for all of creation. God also told us to seek Justice. The Old Testament prophets continuously call for justice. *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream* (Amos 5:24)

The Bible also calls for equity. God provides for our needs, not our greed. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt and fed them with manna from heaven, God told them to “*Gather as much of it as each of you needs.*” We read: “*The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some gathering less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.*” (Exodus 16:16–18.)

But on the foundation of justice and equity is built love – the love of God for us and for creation. So we come to the New Testament Principle. Jesus gives us a New Commandment, that we love one

another (*John 13:34*). This means loving all that God has brought into being. Who is our neighbour? Our neighbour is **all of life**. We should love and respect it – not abuse, kill or destroy it.

Climate change and Justice

There is a clear call from the Bible to look after creation. God also calls on us to establish justice as a foundation for our dealings with one another and with all of creation.- Climate change is a clear case of injustice and inequity both to people and the planet.

We now have to recognise that climate change is the greatest threat ever faced by humanity. But it is ALL life that is threatened, not only humans. The difficulty with climate change is that until recently, we did not know that we were disrupting the health and well-being of our planet. It is also deeply unjust because the rich are benefitting. It is the industrialised countries of the North that have caused the problem while the poorer 'developing' countries have done little to cause climate change.

Why is this happening?

Climate change is happening because we are burning fossil fuels, coal, oil and gas, and now doing so at an ever-increasing rate. Fossil fuels are carbon compounds which come from dead plants and animals that were laid down in rock sediments millions of years ago. When we burn it, we release carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere. This gas acts like a blanket, trapping heat which reflects from the earth and causing temperatures to increase. Since the start of the industrial revolution when people first began to burn coal and oil, there has been a clear correlation between increasing levels of atmospheric CO₂ and average global temperatures.

Coal and oil are wonderful sources of energy which have brought massive advancement and benefit to humanity—and an immense increase in wealth on the planet. They have enabled us to develop huge machines, build skyscrapers and transport ourselves and goods at great speed around the planet.

This advancement has however not been without social and environmental problems. Injustice has flourished because those who have had access to fossil fuels have gained enormous wealth. Those without have become increasingly poor. Secondly, the release of CO₂ into the atmosphere is causing the earth's temperatures to rise.

Those who continue to be climate sceptics need to examine the evidence. It is common scientific sense that as we burn coal and oil, so we release CO₂ into the atmosphere. This creates a "greenhouse" effect by trapping the heat within the atmosphere. The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere has been at 280 parts per million (ppm) for hundreds of thousands of years. It has now reached almost 390ppm. As the CO₂ level has increased, so global temperatures have increased. We are now recording the hottest years on record.

The result of global warming is climate change. This means that we have weather patterns that are more erratic and extreme. Different parts of the world, particularly in Africa, are experiencing more severe droughts. There are more extreme storms and floods and hotter temperatures in some parts of the world while it gets colder in others. Some parts of Europe have experienced their coldest winters in 90 years. Hottest summers in Russia have caused devastating fires while parts of China and Pakistan have been ravaged by floods.

Life on this planet is only possible because of the intricate mixture of gases that forms the atmosphere around our planet. If there was more hydrogen or more oxygen in the atmosphere there could be no life as we know it. CO₂ is a crucial ingredient of our atmosphere but it occurs in

tiny proportions. The burning of fossil fuels has resulted in a higher level of atmospheric CO₂ than there has been for the last 650 000 years. Growing trees helps to absorb small amounts of CO₂ but we cannot extract this gas from the atmosphere on any significant scale. Once we release it, it remains in place for the next 100 years.

That is why it is so imperative that we take steps as a matter of urgency to decrease our carbon emissions. We owe it to God and to our children to take action to counteract climate change. It must be all of us, both individuals and governments.

Our responsibility

For people, the challenge is to live more simply. We need to change our aspirations. Do we really need to acquire more material goods? Is that the purpose of life? Are not human relationships our most important values? Health, learning, celebration of the arts, recreation, harmonious relationships and appreciation of nature help us grow in our spirituality. We need to change our culture, as the Worldwatch Institute has said, from that of *consumerism* to *sustainability*. The challenge is whether, during our own lifetime, we have worked to make this planet more sustainable and secure for our children.

Will it be a healthier place for our children to live; will it be more enjoyable; will it sustain life? Will our children have clean air to breathe and clean water to drink? Will there be good soil for them to grow our crops? Will they be able to experience nature in all its abundance? Will there be healthy oceans for fish to flourish. Will there be birds and butterflies in the air?

To ensure this will happen, we have to have a radical change in our priorities and recognise that we are called upon by God to care for this planet; to care for all life. We do this not only because God calls us to care for all life but because our own future is dependent on it. We have failed to recognise that we are totally dependent on the well-being of the planet which sustains us.

For too long we have thought that our task was to care only for one another fellow human beings. We need a dramatic change of direction to recognise that we also have to care for the planet – our only home.

Governments' responsibility

For governments, the priority is to ensure that we start reducing our carbon emissions. This means a dramatic change from generating our energy from coal-fired power stations and rethinking our energy-intensive industries. We can do it because God has provided all the energy we need through renewable resources. The sun provides ten thousand times more energy at any given time than we need. The wind provides energy in abundance as do ocean tides and waves. We have only to harness it.

This is not happening because the renewable energy industry is young and the fossil fuel industries have centralised control, possessing huge wealth which they are reluctant to give up. So we continue to mine coal and burn oil, with all the pollution and destruction of water resources involved. The alternatives are possible. The sun can produce the electricity we need, and solar-generated electricity can power cars. If we have the will, we can choose a healthier, cleaner path for our planet.

South Africa is at a crossroads as it debates its energy policy. Will this be to continue to build more coal and nuclear power stations or will it be to turn to renewable energy? This country is blessed with the best solar and wind resources of any country. There is no excuse not to turn to renewable energy. The only obstacle seems to be the power and influence of those with vested interests in the coal and nuclear industry.

People and planet

The key to bringing about a change is for governments to recognise the value and well-being of people and planet above the present the priority, which is money. This is why economic justice is so important.

The real crisis facing us is what is called “biodiversity loss.” Biodiversity is ‘life in all its fullness’ – the totality of all life. In Biblical terms, we are causing the extinction of God’s creation! Every day, we really don’t know how many, hundreds or even thousands of species are becoming extinct. As we clear tropical rainforests and other natural habitats, thousands of species, unknown to us, are disappearing off the face of the planet. As we sweep the ocean floor with kilometre long nets, we destroy marine life. It is not only the large iconic species like panda bears, elephants, tigers or rhino that face extinction. It is the myriad of plants and animals, great and small, across God’s great web of life that are threatened with or becoming extinct.

The web of life

Why is this so important, you might ask, especially if we don’t even know they are disappearing? The reason is that for life on this planet to flourish it is dependent on the variety and diversity of life. Each plant and animal contributes to the web of life – to the whole of life. We humans have upset the balance of life, with our huge numbers of people as well as our mono-crops, plantations and sprawling urban and industrial settlements. An indigenous forest flourishes with a variety of plants, and animals. A plantation is lifeless except for that one kind of tree. Einstein wrote all those years ago, that if all the bees became extinct, we people would survive for only three or four years. Humans are totally dependent on the rest of nature.

Climate change is so crucial because not only are more severe storms becoming destructive for us humans making millions of people homeless and landless – but because it will contribute massively to biodiversity loss.

Africa is likely to be the worst affected by climate change. Famine in many African countries, recurrent floods, drying rivers, destruction of tropical forests, bleaching of coral reefs – these are all warning signs. Much of Africa’s agriculture is based on rain-fed-subsistence farming which is highly vulnerable to changes in rainy seasons and water stress, from floods and droughts. The United Nations has predicted that by 2020 many African countries could have their agricultural productivity reduced by as much as 50% due to changing climate patterns. Between 75 and 250 million people will be exposed to extreme water stress and are in danger of becoming environmental refugees.

South Africa will also be badly hit, with the Western Cape becoming dryer and the Eastern regions wetter. The Cape’s fruit, wine and wheat industry is under threat, as well as the unique Cape Floral Kingdom.

Another real danger lies with tipping points. These could occur when the global average temperature reaches a point at which uncontrollable ecological events are unleashed. The melting of permafrost in the tundra of Siberia is likely to release millions of tons of methane, a greenhouse gas thirty times more potent than CO₂. The slowing down or stopping of the Gulf Stream and other ocean currents could plunge Europe into an ice age. The drying out of the Amazon Forest would turn this great jungle from a carbon sink into a carbon emitter. The warming of the oceans over 12°C would mean they no longer absorb CO₂. The bleaching of coral reefs, threatens much of our marine life with half the world’s population relying on fish for their protein. The melting of the Greenland ice cap and Antarctic ice sheet would cause sea levels to rise. If we continue with “business as usual”, with CO₂ emissions steadily increasing, we can expect an average temperature rise of at least

3°C resulting in. At this tipping point, oceans could rise as much as 5 metres, making most of our cities and agricultural lands uninhabitable. It is unthinkable. Already global average temperatures have risen 0.8°C. We know how unpredictable our weather has already become.

We have to start reducing global CO₂ emissions to a maximum of 350 ppm as a matter of urgency. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has met for the last 16 years and has still not agreed to commitments and a process that will effectively combat climate change. In December 2011 the Conference of Parties (COP) will meet in Durban. The Faith Communities of Africa believe it is essential that an agreement is reached to succeed the present ineffective Kyoto Protocol which expires in 2012. Climate Change is a moral issue and therefore must be solved by following moral principles. The Faith Communities believe these must be based on the biblical principles of Justice and Equity, rather than on financial considerations.

Faith communities

In preparation for the Durban COP17 meeting the faith communities are planning a southern African and a Pan-African conference to develop these moral principles to be delivered to our respective governments and negotiators. It is also planned to have a major gathering of people of faith at the commencement of COP 17 calling on the political leaders of the world to reach a just and binding agreement based on moral principles that will lead to protecting and preserving the world for future generations, for the sake of our people, our planet and in obedience to our Creator. Since the politicians have so far failed us, we believe the faith communities must now give a lead.

Just as South Africa had to get rid of apartheid so that we could establish a more just and equitable society, so the world must turn from its reliance on polluting fossil fuels, and turn to the new solar era of clean energy. The exciting advantage is that once we get onto the right track, new paths will open up. There will be new employment opportunities with a vision of a more just and equitable society, as renewable energy is shared by communities and power is – literally – put into the hands of the people.

Justice

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has warned that our continued failure to protect the earth and to resolve economic injustices within and between societies will lead not only to environmental collapse but also to social collapse.

One of the Millennium Development Goals is to make poverty history by 2015, but unless we stop climate change, this great aim will be just an empty dream. Without action now, we will assuredly make poverty permanent.

In Job we read “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements – or who stretched the line upon it?” (Job 38 and 39.) In Psalm 104:9 we read: “You set a boundary that the waters may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.” We are in danger of undermining God’s purpose and destroying God’s creation.

Live simply – so that others may simply live

As Christians, we are not only bound to respond to God’s mandate to us to care for God’s creation, but we should also set an example to the world by showing that we are prepared to live more simply so that others – of this and future generations – may simply live. We can do this by seeking to live in harmony with God’s creation and one another. The economic injustices of our present-day world are destroying any prospects of a sustainable world in the future. Just as there could be no peace in South Africa until the injustices of apartheid were removed, so there will be no peace in the world

until there is a more equitable sharing and caring for our natural resources. Climate justice is a deeply moral issue. The fossil fuel industry controls vast wealth and power, but it is driving us to destruction. We simply have to stop burning fossil fuels at our present levels.

We must take action, and it must be people of faith who do so, working with all who are committed to seeking a healthy planet for our children.

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