

## INTRODUCTION

EVERY AGE HAS ITS “apocalypse.” In the twentieth century there was world war, quickly followed by the threat of nuclear annihilation. Today it is climate change.

I believe that climate change will ride across this landscape as the fifth horseman. It will increase the power of the four horsemen that rule over war, famine, pestilence and death—those ancient adversaries that have affected health and human progress since the beginning of recorded history. (Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, 2007)<sup>1</sup>

Recent observations confirm that, given high rates of observed emissions, the worst-case IPCC scenario trajectories (or even worse) are being realized. For many key parameters, the climate system is already moving beyond the patterns of natural viability within which our society and economy have developed and thrived. (The March, 2009 International Scientific Congress on Climate Change)<sup>2</sup>

Few challenges facing America—and the world—are more urgent than combating climate change. The science is beyond dispute and the facts are clear. Sea levels are rising. Coastlines are shrinking. We’ve seen record drought, spreading famine, and storms that grow stronger with each passing hurricane season. (Barack Obama, two weeks after his election in 2008)

There are skeptical voices, of course. No one—at least no one capable of reading a thermometer—denies the reality of climate change, but some doubt its severity, its immediacy, and whether human activity is responsible. Others warn that the costs of responding to climate change will devastate our economy. Such voices are sounding ever more isolated and desperate, however.

There is always a danger that sober scientific assessment can be megaphoned out of proportion by public rhetoric, and, in so far as it averts this, climate change skepticism serves a useful purpose. But the overwhelming consensus of opinion among the thousands of

climatologists, meteorologists, geologists, biogeochemists, oceanographers, and others responsible for collating and analyzing the data over the last thirty years leaves no serious reason for doubt: warming of the climate system is unequivocal.<sup>3</sup> No assessment of any other scientific topic has been so thoroughly researched and reviewed.<sup>4</sup> Climate change is real, serious and potentially “apocalyptic.”

In one respect, however, apocalypse is a misleading word to use of climate change. Although the term is now used as shorthand for “(a vision of) massive and traumatic devastation,” it originally meant a “revelation” or “uncovering” of what was always there. An apocalypse was an exposing of reality, a literal and metaphorical opening of eyes to what had always been standing before us.

Whatever else climate change is, it is not this kind of apocalypse. As we discuss in chapter 1, the Earth’s temperature has fluctuated significantly over its history but the changes of the last 50 years have been unprecedented. Scientists have not been revealing an age-old phenomenon for the first time, but rather detecting a new and unparalleled change in the Earth’s atmospheric composition, which is being driven by an equally unparalleled change in human behavior.

This link—between a global temperature rise and meteorological extremes on the one hand and everyday human behavior on the other—is now well understood and is slowly becoming public knowledge. Melting glaciers, rising sea levels, and extreme weather patterns can be traced back to our massive, growing, and unsustainable use of fossil fuels. This, in turn, is driven in large part by the way we travel, use energy at home, and consume goods and services.

What is less widely recognized is that two of those same human activities are damaging our lives in the West in subtle but insidious ways. Life is good for most people living in high-income countries. Longer lives, better health, more money, more goods, longer holidays: most of us have never had it so good.

Except that we don’t think so. Social studies consistently show that, in spite of the genuine and inspiring material progress of recent years, we are no happier than our parents’ or grandparents’ generations, and in some instances rather less happy. Levels of well-being have flatlined, and we are only just beginning to understand why.

There are, of course, numerous reasons for such a complex and far-reaching trend, but, as we discuss in chapter 2, the way we travel and consume are foremost among them. Our long commutes and

overstretched families; our “clone” towns, ghost villages, and yearning after “community”; our consumer culture and searching after meaning and purpose: these may seem to have little to do with climate change, but, in reality, they are the other side of the same coin. Environmental and social sustainability cannot be understood or addressed separately.

Environmental issues, however, tend to be more newsworthy. Every now and then some disaster grabs the headlines and our attention for a few days. Oil spills are the classic example. We remember the *Torrey Canyon* pouring 38 million gallons of oil into the sea near Land’s End in 1967, or the *Exxon Valdez*, running aground in the Prince William Sound in Alaska in 1989, releasing nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil, or the Iraqi leadership deliberately releasing an estimated 240 to 460 million gallons of crude oil from tankers into the Persian Gulf during the Gulf War, and our response is instant and visceral.

We applaud the selfless work of volunteers scraping oil off be-draggled sea birds. We make a donation, “doing our bit” to help out. We hold forth about how “they” ought to do something to regulate oil companies or shipping owners. And then, unaware of any connection, we telephone our local takeaway, order a meal, drive round to collect it, and flick through the latest travel brochure, while planning our vacation break as we wait for our food.

Oil spills are headline-catchers and rightly provoke indignation. But it is our ordinary, everyday lifestyle that will, in the long term, do more to damage the environment. Counter-intuitive as it may at first seem, our lifestyles are likely to lead, albeit indirectly, to far more suffering than all the oil spills of the last 50 years put together. As we outline in Part 1, by driving, flying, consuming goods, and using energy in the way we do, we pump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which is causing the rapid climate changes that threaten not only to desecrate landscapes more severely than the oil spills we bemoan but also to kill many more human beings and other species than even the worst tanker disaster.

How long we can continue living in this way is a moot question. It is misleading to treat the apocalyptic language that surrounds the climate change debate as literal. The world will not end, burn, be destroyed, or laid waste if we do not stop what we are doing. It

has recovered from global calamities in the past and is likely to do so again.

What will happen, however, is that in the process many of the world's most vulnerable human beings will suffer and die from the effects of flood, drought, or disease, and many more will be uprooted and displaced. Environmental refugees will multiply, economies suffer, joblessness increase, social unrest grow. Many of the world's wealthiest human beings will become more and more disenchanted, exhausting themselves in the process of "getting and spending," achieving little lasting satisfaction in the process. Many species will become extinct and many more pushed to the brink of extinction. Previously fertile areas will dry up and become deserts, glaciers will disappear and the polar regions shrink. Unless we don't care about these consequences, we need to acknowledge that the way we—meaning, predominantly but not exclusively, we in the West—live is unsustainable, and we need to do something about it.

This book explores what we should do and why we should do it. There is no shortage of good Christian books on environmental ethics, such as Michael Northcott's *The Environment and Christian Ethics*<sup>5</sup> and Sam Berry's *The Care of Creation*,<sup>6</sup> and we have drawn on these as appropriate. This book, however, has a specific objective: to explore what the Christian faith has to say about the closely linked problems of climate change and sustainable living. Part 1 investigates the reality and seriousness of those problems (chapter 1) and their human causes (chapter 2). It recognizes that climate change is by no means the only environmental problem facing humanity today but that its enormity, the sheer fact that it affects pretty much everyone and everything on planet Earth, lends it an importance unmatched by any other environmental issue.

Part 2 explores what biblical teaching has to say about the matter. It begins (chapter 3) by asking a basic question: should Christians be concerned about environmental issues in the first place? Isn't Christianity about saving souls? Won't the return of Jesus render all our environmental efforts redundant in any case? Such questions will be anathema to many Christians, but they remain live issues to many others who are trying to understand the resolutely "this worldly" nature of the Christian faith. By looking at creation, stewardship, the imperative to love our neighbor, social justice, the

incarnation, and the end of all things, chapter 3 shows how and why “creation care” is critical to Christianity.

Chapter 4 argues that, having established that Christians should be bothered about climate change and sustainable living, we need a vision to inspire and unify our response. It contends that, although sustainable living is a distinctly modern phrase, it embodies an idea that is fundamental to biblical teaching: that we should live, not for ourselves or for today, but *in accordance with the right order of things*, obeying God’s law, within the kingdom of God. It goes on to suggest that, while the Bible is littered with passages that capture this idea, Isa 40–66, for all its particular context, provides the longest, most detailed, most inspiring, and most important vision of the “right order of things.”

The foundational importance of Isa 40–66 in the New Testament, in particular to its understanding of who Jesus is and what he achieved, lends it particular significance. It is not so much a vision to which we should aspire, as a vision of what God has done, is doing, and will complete; not an image of what we are required to design, build, and maintain on our own, but a live and effective prophecy, inaugurated in Jesus’ death and resurrection, fulfilled in the fullness of time, and in which all are invited to participate.

Having outlined this vision, chapter 5 explores how it was to be “filled in,” remaining conscious of the fact that it was never expected to be realized by human effort alone. Accordingly, the “filling in” is not a template for how to build a perfect society, but a model of how humans should live in accordance with the right order of creation that God is in the process of effecting. The chapter takes six major themes and explores how each might inform our response to climate change and sustainable living. In doing so it draws heavily on the work of England’s Jubilee Centre in explaining how the people of Israel were called to act as a model for this right way of living, according to God’s will.<sup>7</sup> The Torah formed the legal, political, and cultural foundation of the people of God, and the themes outlined in this chapter are rooted in it. But the chapter also seeks to trace those themes through the prophets who judged the people and the Messiah who, in his ministry and death, affirmed and fulfilled the law. The practices discussed thus apply both to the reality of life today and point to the promise of the recreated life of the kingdom of God.

Overall, Part 2 seeks first to convince Christians that they have a duty to respond to the situation outlined in Part 1, second to expose them to a vision that will guide and inspire their response, and third to detail a series of biblically-rooted measures that should inform and shape that response.

Part 3 goes on to explore what form that response should take today. Chapter 6 sketches out what sustainable living might look like in the light of the material discussed in Part 2. It outlines eight principles derived from that material and then paints a picture of a modern Western society that takes those principles seriously. In the fashion of Isaiah, it is a picture intended to guide and inspire our response.

Chapter 7 then explains how that vision might be realized. It details five levels of response: personal, communal, governmental, technological, and international. The first and second are self-explanatory: how should we, as individual Christians and as congregations, live our lives according to the responsibilities and principles outlined in earlier chapters. The third looks at the challenges and opportunities of policies at various levels of government, specifically those which might best fulfill the criteria implicit in those principles.

The fourth remains in the area of policies, looking not at those intended to change public behavior but at those intended to shape our technological response. Should we “go nuclear”? Are renewables an option? Is energy efficiency the answer? In doing so it addresses the question that so often lies just beneath the surface of this debate: is there a techno-fix to all this?

The fifth, on international responses, returns to the truly global nature of the problem, acknowledging that the only genuine solution will be international and exploring the best options currently available. It emphasizes, however, that for something to happen everywhere, it needs first to happen somewhere, and thus refocuses the question on the reader. However long a journey, it always starts with a single step. Are we, as Christians, prepared to *do* something about this?

Chapter 8 draws together these strands and returns, from the details of chapter 7, to the big picture. In doing so, it seeks to remind us that while personal and political action is critical, if we lose sight of the big story of God making “all things new” in Christ, we

are liable to lose direction, impetus, and, ultimately, hope. “What counts,” as Paul reminded the church in Galatia, “is a new creation” (Gal 6:15).

For those interested in further study, a study guide to this book is available as an additional resource. Our five-part Bible study focuses on the relational roots for a holistic response to the questions, “why and how should we care about the environment?” This guide can be found in \*.pdf format at the Hendrickson Publishers website ([www.hendrickson.com](http://www.hendrickson.com)) on the *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* book detail page and may be downloaded without further cost.

Climate change consciousness has never been higher. Former US Vice-President Al Gore won an Oscar and the Nobel Peace Prize for his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which deals solely with global climate change. Hardly a day passes without some climate-related story making the headlines. Often they are tales of gloom: the Arctic ice is melting, rainforests disappearing, the world’s coral reefs dying. Opinion formers, like the environmentalist James Lovelock, proclaim that we are fast approaching or have passed a “tipping point.” The damage is done. There is no way back.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Christian response should not be one of despair but of hope. Hope because God has created a world that he judges to be “very good” (Gen 1:31). Hope because, in spite of repeated human failings, he has promised never to give up on his creation (Gen 8:21). Hope because he has proclaimed how “I am doing a new thing!” (Isa 43:19). Hope because he came himself, in human form, to “make all things new” (Rev 21:5). And hope because it is not yet too late for us to participate in that new thing; that today’s looming environmental crisis may yet prove to be the call that summons us back towards a recognition that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Ps 24:1).

Ten years ago Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, said: “for humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation . . . to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate . . . those are sins.” More recently, Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, captured headlines with the same point: “making selfish choices such as flying on holiday or buying a large car are a symptom of sin.”<sup>9</sup>

Such sentiments sound strange, even old-fashioned to many today. Nevertheless, we need to be alert to the far-reaching consequences of sin if we wish to address them. If Christians are serious about participating in God's new creation and responding to the challenges of climate change and sustainable living, we need to be realistic about the sinful desires and actions that have gotten the world into the mess it is in today.

But God's new creation and his invitation to participate in it is *good* news. Realism about the reality and pervasiveness of sin must be balanced by properly rooted Christian hope: the hope that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection inaugurate the kingdom of God that marks the end of sin, that his kingdom is breaking into our lives even today, and that it will be fully realized when Jesus returns.

It is our hope that this book will encourage people to understand the problem, to envision the solution, and to take their responsibilities seriously. We hope that it will equip them to re-examine their values, shape their lives and communities accordingly, and to influence their leaders and policy makers as appropriate. And we hope that it will convince readers that responding to the challenges of climate change and sustainable living are not optional extras, still less distractions from the gospel, but are an integral part of the call to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Ultimately, it is our individual *choices* that collectively will determine the future of this planet. In the words of Sir Martin Rees, President of The Royal Society: "Even in a cosmic or a geological time-perspective, there's something unique about our century: for the first time in its history, our entire planet's fate depends on human actions and human choices."<sup>10</sup>