
Climate change & the countryside

A biblical viewpoint

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The 'greenhouse effect'

In 1827, the French scientist, John Baptiste Fourier, proposed that the Earth's atmosphere retains solar energy in the same way as does the glass of a greenhouse. Three decades later, British scientist, John Tyndall, identified CO₂ as the most important 'greenhouse gas' in the atmosphere. In 1896, Swedish chemist, Svante Arrhenius, estimated that a doubling of the concentration of CO₂ would increase the global average temperature by about 5°C.

It was only in the 1940s and 1950s, however, that a connection was made between rising global temperatures and CO₂ emissions from the burning of fossil fuel, first, by British engineer, G S Callendar, and then by Roger Revelle and Hans Seuss in the USA. As computer technology developed in the 1960s, computer models began to predict possible outcomes of rises in CO₂ levels, eventually fixing on a warming of 2°C with every doubling of CO₂ concentration.¹

A slightly warmer earth may not in itself seem to be an issue. However, understanding of the physics of the atmosphere, and, especially, the predictions of these models suggested that global warming would cause all other aspects of the climate to change, prompting rises in sea level, more frequent droughts and floods, and more extremes of weather - with widespread impacts on food and water resources, human health and settlements, and natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Predictions of the extent, intensity and imminence of these effects are the essential drivers of today's 'climate-change agenda' and 'climate emergency'.

¹ Houghton, J. 2004. Global warming. The complete briefing, Third edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Climate Change History, <https://www.history.com/topics/natural-disasters-and-environment/history-of-climate-change>.

The ‘climate-change agenda’

In the years since the 1960s, the accelerated use of fossil fuels and a growing concern for the environment (ie pollution, resource depletion, wildlife conservation, landscape and habitat loss) helped push the issue of global warming ever higher up the global political agenda.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)² was formed in 1989, the UN Framework Convention in Climate Change³ was signed in 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol,⁴ the first global agreement to reduce greenhouse gases, was signed in 1997 by 41 countries plus the EU.

The climate change agenda had a somewhat rough ride in the first decade or so of the third millennium, as the pronouncements of the IPCC were increasingly challenged. The US withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001.⁵ In 2012, future President, Donald Trump tweeted that, “global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive”.⁶

There was (and is) also a burgeoning of serious critiques of the ‘science’ (notably of the data and assumptions behind the models used to construct the past and predict the future) and the ‘policies’ (especially of their emphasis on mitigation as against adaptation) and of alternative scientific accounts and policies. These tend not to be reported, however, in the mainstream media.

With the election of President Barack Obama, the USA came back on board signing the landmark Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, along with 195 other countries.⁷ The Agreement is a legally binding international treaty. Its goal is to limit global warming to below 2°C, compared to pre-industrial levels and to achieve a “climate neutral world by mid-century”.⁸

² <https://www.ipcc.ch>

³ <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

⁴ https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol

⁵ Former US vice president, Al Gore, attempted to counter this with his 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, which won him a Nobel Peace Prize the following year.

⁶ <https://www.history.com/topics/natural-disasters-and-environment/history-of-climate-change>.

⁷ “The Paris Agreement is a landmark in the multilateral climate change process because, for the first time, a binding agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects” (<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>). Before Covid, climate change was arguably the biggest driver of global governance and a pretext for global government.

⁸ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

In 2018, Swedish schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, launched her 'School strike for climate', taking the world by storm and addressing the UN Climate Summit in New York City in 2019. She was joined by militant direct-action advocacy groups such as Extinction Rebellion, and more recently Insulate Britain, along with celebrities such as David Attenborough and HRH the Prince of Wales, all urging greater immediate action to achieve net zero admissions by 2050.

The late 2010s also saw the advent of the phrase 'climate emergency' and of 'declarations of a climate emergency' by local and national governments. Between 2016 and now, some 1900 local governments in 34 countries have made such declarations. On 1 May 2019, the Welsh Senedd made history by being the first national government in the world officially to declare a climate emergency.⁹

In August this year, the IPCC released its Working Group 1 report, 'Climate Change 2021: the Physical Science Basis'.¹⁰ This is the first instalment of its Sixth Assessment Report, which will be released next year. According to the official press release on this Report, climate change is "widespread, rapid and intensifying", with every region facing increasing changes. "Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C will be beyond reach... For 1.5°C of global warming, there will be increasing heat waves, longer warm seasons and shorter cold seasons. At 2° C of global warming, heat extremes would more often reach critical tolerance thresholds for agriculture and health".¹¹ The Report itself is much more nuanced, and is replete with phrases indicating different levels of confidence and likelihood regarding the scenarios it puts forward.

Apocalyptic tropes such as 'extinction' and 'emergency', as above, are just some of the indications of a growing mood of urgency, alarm and panic. This was somewhat eclipsed by the covid pandemic last year. But, in recent months (in the build up to COP26), the climate-change agenda has come back into public awareness with a vengeance, and is increasingly being presented alongside the pandemic: both constitute existential threats to humanity and 'life as we know it'; both call for similar radical, global solutions.

In the first two weeks of November 2021, leaders of more than 120 of the 196 nations that signed the Paris Agreement will meet in Glasgow for the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), to "accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_emergency_declaration

¹⁰ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1>

¹¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr>

Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change”.¹² The summit has been dubbed “the world’s best last chance to get runaway climate change under control”,¹³ the last “opportunity for the leaders of the world to save the planet” and avert what will otherwise be “catastrophic, potentially civilisation-destroying, consequences.”¹⁴

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s ‘Thought for the Day’, two days before the Summit, the Pope called for, “a renewed sense of shared responsibility for our world”, adding that “each of us - whoever and wherever we may be - can play our own part in changing our collective response to the unprecedented threat of climate change and the degradation of our common home.”¹⁵

However, hopes for the summit have been somewhat dampened by the celebrity guests who will not after all be coming. As well as the Pope himself and HM the Queen, the leaders of the world’s greatest (ie China) and fourth greatest (ie Russia) greenhouse gas emitting nations will not attend. A week before the event, the Prime Minister described the chances of success as “touch and go”.¹⁶

The UK response

The Climate Change Act 2008¹⁷ “committed the UK to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050 compared to 1990 levels. However, this target was made more ambitious in 2019 when the UK became the first major economy to commit to a net zero target.”¹⁸ Through a combination of drastically cutting emissions at source and offsetting remaining emissions through planting trees and other measures to sequester carbon and through carbon capture and storage technologies, the UK is committed to bringing all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

¹² ukcop26.org

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-59075041>

¹⁴ https://www.the-kingfisher.org/sustainable_cities/global/COP26.html

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-59075041>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/25/boris-johnson-says-chances-of-cop26-success-are-touch-and-go>

¹⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/27/section/1>

¹⁸ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/explainers/what-is-the-2008-climate-change-act>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law>.

HM Government's 'Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener' document,¹⁹ released in October 2021, sets out, for the first time, how the UK government plans to deliver both this 2050 target and an interim target of a 78% reduction from 1990 to 2035 (ie -6% relative to 2019). The document is 367 pages long, very dense and in no way an 'easy read'! Yet, despite its length, it appears to focus primarily on general goals, commitments, opportunities and funding allocations rather than the specific and practical ways in which 'net zero' will be achieved; much of it seems to be more about what should be done than what will be.

The 'independent' Climate Change Committee described the Strategy as ambitious, comprehensive and a significant step forward for UK climate policy. But, reflecting the above, the Committee calls for details, especially regarding delivery mechanisms in the agriculture sector, noting, "a combined decarbonisation strategy for agriculture and land is urgently needed".²⁰

Commenting on the Strategy, the Mail Online warned that the bill for "Boris's green dream" could hit more than £1 trillion, and will fall on both government and consumers. There will be new taxes, such as road pricing; heating bills will rise by up to 50%, and; people buying inefficient homes will struggle to obtain mortgages.²¹

Patrick Benham-Crosswell, writing in TCW,²² offers an even more trenchant critique. For him, the document is wholly devoid of common sense and honesty. For example, he laments the lack of any real indication of where all the money needed is going to come from or how the government proposes to get the 5,998,100 SMEs, who have yet to sign up to reach net zero, on board.

The document is also rather sinister, he writes. "The government will 'increase awareness of Net Zero and empower businesses and the public to make green choices, by building on government communications' – that's the propaganda machine at work and yet another Project Fear, this time dressed up as saving the planet (which this policy can't) rather than the NHS."

Although Benham-Crosswell's views may seem extreme, he does identify two critical issues. First, achieving net zero by 2050 may simply be unrealistic, even for a fully-engaged-with-the-climate-change-agenda nation like the UK, let alone developing economies like China and India - suggesting that efforts might better be directed at

¹⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028157/net-zero-strategy.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/independent-assessment-the-uks-net-zero-strategy/>

²¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10109113/How-Boriss-1TRILLION-green-dream-hit-YOU.html>

²² <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/how-much-common-sense-and-honesty-net-zero/>

adaptation and innovation rather than mitigation. Second, achieving net zero may just not be possible within free-market (or partly free-market) national economies or indeed free societies, but will call for centralised and globalised economies and global surveillance and control, ie a 'Great Reset', a 'New World Order'!

Farming & the land

Farming and food production are major sources of greenhouse-gas emissions, but rural land is also an important carbon sink.

According to a BBC article published on 21 October, the forthcoming leaked IPCC Assessment Report argues that reducing global meat consumption is essential to cut greenhouse-gas emissions. The Report states, "plant-based diets can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 50% compared to the average emission intensive Western diet". This conclusion is being contested especially by Brazil and Argentina, as might be expected. The same article states that 26% of global emissions come from food, with 58% of these from animal production, and half of these from beef and lamb.²³ In other words, 7.5% of the world's emissions of greenhouse gases are down to beef and lamb production.

A study by a group of British universities,²⁴ published in 2019, examined how the net-zero-by-2050 target could be met using today's technologies with incremental change, rather than waiting for breakthrough technologies. For the farming and food sector, it concluded that national consumption of beef and lamb would need to drop by 50% by 2029, and be phased out completely by 2049 along with all imports not transported by train and a drastic reduction in fertiliser use.²⁵

The Government's 'Net Zero Strategy (as above) include a series of commitments for farming and land use. By 2035, 85% of farmers in England will be engaged in low carbon practices. This will be achieved especially via the new environmental land management schemes. Woodland creation rates will be trebled by the end of this current Parliament and new planting will be maintained at at least 30,000 ha per year thereafter. More money will be thrown at the 'Nature for Climate Fund', which will among other goals, help restore 35,000 ha of peatlands in England by 2025 and 280,000 ha by 2050. The Strategy's vision for 2050 is of a "resilient and prosperous countryside, where farmers and land

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-58982445>

²⁴ https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/299414/REP_Absolute_Zero_V3_20200505.pdf?sequence=9&isAllowed=y

²⁵ The same report proposes that all airports in the UK except Heathrow, Glasgow and Belfast be closed by 2029, and all remaining airports closed by 2049. Only when electric planes become available, will we start flying again!

managers are supported to reduce emissions and deliver a range of environmental outcomes”.²⁶

The Net Zero Strategy reflects earlier policy intentions as embedded in the Agriculture Act 2020.²⁷ As the government explained then, the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) is the cornerstone of the government's new agricultural policy, and is founded on the principle of ‘public money for public goods.’ As the current system of farm payments is phased out, under the ELMS, farmers will be paid to deliver certain environmental, ethical, recreational and cultural public goods. In particular, the ELMS “will provide a powerful way of achieving the goals of the 25 year environment plan and commitment to net zero emissions by 2050, while supporting our rural economy”.

In June this year, Williams Stiles of Aberystwyth University noted, “current land management approaches will need to change in order to meet the challenges associated with net zero emissions”. He estimated that around 22% of UK land currently in agriculture would need to be released for other uses such as carbon sequestration, habitat restoration and bioenergy production. Along with tree planting and peatland restoration goals as above, according to Stiles, hedgerows will need to increase to 181,000 ha by 2050. In terms of reducing emissions, biomass crops may, he says, “present an opportunity to integrate climate-smart actions into existing production scenarios”. He suggests that sheep, beef and dairy consumption will need to fall by 20% and livestock numbers by 10% (compared to 2017 levels) by 2050.²⁸

Recently, Savills used their Model 800-hectare arable farm in the East Midlands to explore how the carbon footprint of a farm might be reduced and how those potential changes would affect the farm’s balance sheet. The exercise considered the effects of the following scenarios: wider margins and reduced hedge cutting (which saves fuel costs and sequesters more carbon, but lowers profit); including a 30 ha sown legume fallow (which increases soil organic matter, reduces input costs and generates income from countryside stewardship leading to a net increase in profit), and; changing to a direct drilling system (which saves a significant amount of diesel across the farm, and increases soil organic matter, but leads to an overall loss in profit). Adopting all three nearly halved emissions

²⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028157/net-zero-strategy.pdf

²⁷ The Agriculture Act 2020 is enabling legislation, i.e. provides a legislative framework to determine future support for agriculture in post-Brexit Britain. The details are currently being formulated, and the Net Zero Strategy is (presumably) part of this.

²⁸ <https://businesswales.gov.wales/farmingconnect/news-and-events/technical-articles/how-can-changing-land-management-approaches-help-achieve-net-zero>

and increased financial position by just under 1% (not including possible effects of carbon taxes).²⁹

‘Is there any word from the Lord?’

So far, I have attempted simply to set the context for my main purpose here of offering a Christian and biblical viewpoint on the climate-change phenomenon, particularly as it applies to the UK countryside.

Climate change and the climate-change agenda, and the current COP26 summit, are critical issues, which call for understanding, discernment and intercession by all who recognise our Christian responsibility to ‘understand the times and know what to do’ (1 Chronicles 12:32; Matthew 16:1-4), to “seek the peace of the city and pray to the Lord for it” (Jeremiah 29:7)), to pray for “all in authority” (1 Timothy 2:1-2), and to care for the earth (Genesis 2:15).

These imperatives, combined with the wider sense of ‘global crisis’, urge us, like Zedekiah (Jeremiah 37:17) (also in a time of great crisis) to ask, “is there any word from the Lord?”. Climate change is surrounded by a cacophony of often confusing and contradictory voices, which even divide Christians, making hearing the Lord's voice and understanding His purposes even more urgent. We should be careful not simply believe everything we read or hear, but rather to “walk circumspectly because the days are evil” (Ephesian 5:15-17).

Truth

Honesty and truth are at the core of biblical ethics. God is a God of truth. He does not lie (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29), He delights in truth (Psalm 51:6), His Word is truth (Psalm 119:43; John 17:17), Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), and He commands His people to be truthful (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20; Leviticus 19:11).

However, it is a distinctive characteristic of post-modern, post-Christian Western society that truth has been relativised, privatised, and deconstructed. Just as in the days of Isaiah, “truth has stumbled in the public squares” (Isaiah 59:14). Climate change, like much else in our culture, is shrouded in ‘epistemological fog’: we simply do not know how to know, things are not what they seem.

Author, environmental activist, former deputy editor of the Ecologist and recent convert to Orthodox Christianity, Paul Kingsnorth provides an incisive commentary on this ‘epistemological crisis’: “As the naked narratives struggle for balance, I don’t know who or what to believe anymore. And in the age of obligatory vaccine passports, facts that

²⁹ <https://www.savills.co.uk/blog/article/319632/rural-property/cutting-carbon-on-the-farm.aspx>

turn into conspiracy theories and then back again depending on who's writing the story, and up-is-down notions that nobody had heard of yesterday suddenly hardening into Official Reality, it's hard to know why I should believe in anything that I can't touch, smell, measure or make."³⁰

In pursuing the truth about climate change, there are two issues that I believe should particularly concern us: the existence of a diversity of climate-change narratives, and the authority and limitations of science.

‘We’re all doomed’ or ‘don’t panic’?

The catchphrases of two of the characters (Private Fraser and Corporal Jones) in the BBC's 1960s and 1970s sitcom, *Dad's Army* (with apologies to younger readers!), provide a useful classification of the different climate change narratives!

The ‘prevailing orthodoxy’, the ‘global consensus’, which is behind what I have called the ‘climate-change agenda’, says, in simple terms: “the climate is changing, it is our fault, it is an ‘emergency’, we only have a few years before we go extinct, we must take radical action now”. As the above makes clear, this account has the (very heavy) weight of mainstream scientific opinion, ie the ‘scientific consensus’, behind it, especially that of the IPCC.

This is essentially a ‘we’re all doomed’, position. For its proponents, humanity is the problem - ‘we have known the enemy and it is us’. As the writers of the Club of Rome’s ‘First Global Revolution’ wrote back in 1991: “The common enemy of humanity is man. In searching for a new enemy to unite us, we came up with the idea that pollution, the threat of global warming, water shortages, famine and the like would fit the bill. All these dangers are caused by human intervention, and it is only through changed attitudes and behaviour that they can be overcome. The real enemy then, is humanity itself.”³¹

While the official reports of the IPCC, international agencies and national governments tend to be relatively measured in their language, as I comment above, the mainstream media, NGOs and a host of commentators and polemicists are increasingly adopting the language of crisis, emergency, impending doom and imminent extinction. For example, David Wallace-Wells opens his 2019 book, ‘The Uninhabitable Earth – a Story of the Future’, with the phrase, “it is worse, much worse than you think”.³²

³⁰ <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/intermission-the-scriptorium>

³¹ <https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/the-first-global-revolution-1991/>

³² <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Uninhabitable-Earth-Story-Future/dp/0241355214>

There is an almost religious dimension to this. We, humanity, and especially Western humanity, have caused the problem and we must solve it or face annihilation; we are guilty and need to expiate our guilt, if necessary by sacrificing our lifestyles, comfort, prosperity and, if necessary our freedoms. As the Guardian newspaper, commenting on the IPCC science report in August 2021, put it: we are as “guilty as hell of the climate crimes of humanity.”³³

Christian churches, organisations and ministries have overwhelmingly and seemingly uncritically adopted this narrative. Most denominations, well-known Christian mission agencies, such as Tear Fund and YWAM,³⁴ as well as Christian environmental organisations, like A Rocha³⁵ and John Ray Initiative,³⁶ are not only providing information, but also acting as advocates for the the prevailing climate-change orthodoxy and global climate-change agenda. In the run up to COP 26, they are not just informing people as to what the Conference is about, but also acting as ‘evangelists’ for the agenda the Conference is seeking to advance. Climate change seems to have taken churches and Christian ministries by storm. Many, it seems, have much more enthusiasm for the ‘gospel of net zero’ than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The abstract of John Ray Initiative’s recent Briefing Paper, ‘Green Gospel: Christian Responses to the Challenge of the Climate Crisis’, provides an excellent summary of the majority Christian position: “There is widespread acceptance that the world is facing a climate crisis, caused by the burning of fossil fuels. The Christian response, although initially slow, has gained pace over the last decade and the importance of faith communities in raising awareness and encouraging action was recognised by 2015, when COP21 took place in Paris. Approaching the next major conference, COP26, and in light of the Pope’s 2015 environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, the activities of a number of Christian organisations are set alongside the Pope’s teaching. As with the pandemic still claiming lives around the world, only global collaboration can ultimately solve the climate crisis.”³⁷

However, as I suggest above, we need to approach these issues with caution. If we are to promote a cause, we need to fully comprehend its goals! If we are to present things

³³ <https://amp.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/ipcc-reports-verdict-on-climate-crimes-of-humanity-guilty-as-hell>

³⁴ <https://www.tearfund.org/campaigns/reboot-campaign/prayer-for-the-climate>; <https://ywamcop26.org/>

³⁵ <https://www.arocha.org/en/work/climate-action/>

³⁶ <https://jri.org.uk/>

³⁷ https://jri.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/BP44_GreenGospel_Bull.pdf

as truth, then we need to be 100% sure they are true, because we will have to give account. More than ever, we need to ‘walk circumspectly’ and ‘test all things’.

Further out on the ‘we’re all doomed’ side are narratives that, similarly, recognise humanity as the problem, but take a more passive view. The problem will be solved ultimately by nature, by evolution, by the earth itself. A species that destroys its environment will ultimately destroy themselves. Gaia, metaphorically or actually, will tolerate a painful parasite only for so long, and will eventually eliminate it. “The human age has caused so much damage that Earth might not be able to support humanity in the not so distant future”.³⁸

On the ‘don’t panic’ wing, the most prevalent alternative to the orthodoxy position accepts the scientific (IPCC) ‘consensus’, but not the proposed solutions. Many in this camp believe that while climate change is real and serious, humanity has solved such problems before, through technology and innovation, and can do so again. They also believe that the mitigation strategies at the centre of the UN and COP26 agenda are both unworkable and would do far more harm than good. In preference to mitigation, they favour adaptation.

One of the most prominent figures in this grouping is Bjorn Lomborg. Author of the ‘Skeptical Environmentalist’ in 2001,³⁹ the subtitle of his most recent book, ‘False Alarm’, sums up his stance: “how climate change panic costs us trillions, hurts the poor and fails to fix the planet”.⁴⁰ One of his central arguments is that economic development makes people more resilient to both perturbations and shocks and pervasive change and trends, and this should be prioritised. The best way to help the poor is to make them richer. He blames the media and environmental campaigners and politicians for overhyping the likely effects of climate change often presenting scientific research without crucial context.

Lomborg and others in this camp are more optimistic and more pro-human than those in the mainstream. Humanity is the problem, but also the solution. We have solved problems like this before and we will do so again.

There are Christian individuals and groups who share this position, more in the US than in the UK, for example, the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation,⁴¹ which “proudly marries Christian doctrine with a free-market approach to climate change

³⁸ <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/planet-earth/state-of-the-planet/the-end-of-the-world/story>

³⁹ <https://www.lomborg.com/skeptical-environmentalist>

⁴⁰ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/False-Alarm-Climate-Change-Trillions/dp/1541647467>

⁴¹ <https://cornwallalliance.org/>

policy”.⁴² In my view, there are aspects of their arguments that are positive and compelling, and I am surprised that Christian aid and development agencies like Tear Fund have not, it seems, given them any serious consideration.

Further out on the ‘don’t panic’ side are proponents of alternative scientific views. These argue that the IPCC’s models depend on certain critical and questionable assumptions, and that factoring in different assumptions or invoking different mechanisms produces radically different outcomes. Young Earth Creationists, for example, point out the dependence of the mainstream scientific models on assumptions about the age of the earth and the occurrence of multiple ice ages.⁴³

In an open letter in September 2021 to the Archbishop of Canterbury following publication of his ‘Joint message for the Protection of Creation’ (which seems to have disappeared from the Archbishop’s website), Philip Foster, an Anglican vicar, who also holds a degree in natural science (and is not a Young Earth Creationist) described climate activists as ‘false prophets’ and ‘scaremongers’ who Jesus would have driven out of the temple. He backs up this view by robust questioning of the science behind predictions of sea level rises and extreme weather events, and also comments that the damage caused by recent forest fires arose primarily from environmental regulations that prevented customary controlled burning to prevent fire spreading.⁴⁴

I am not, here, advocating any one of these viewpoints. But we need to acknowledge that they exist, and that the ‘other’ might be partly right and certainly must be given a hearing. We must “test all things” (1 Thessalonians 5:21), part of which means understanding the agenda behind the agenda, the subtext behind the text. As I said above, if we are to promote any cause, we need fully to understand its arguments and comprehend its goals; we should not be too quick to join *any* faction (John 2:24-25).⁴⁵

‘Following the science’

‘Climate Change’ started with ‘science’. As I recount above, as climate science developed and became more persuasive, it influenced (or was co-opted to support) the

⁴² <https://www.instituteforenergyresearch.org/climate-change/a-rebuttal-to-katharine-hayhoe-on-climate-science-and-christianity/>

⁴³ eg <https://www.icr.org/article/climate-alarmism-age-earth>; <https://store.icr.org/the-climate-change-conflict-keeping-cool-over-glob.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.conservativewoman.co.uk/climate-calamity-an-open-letter-to-justin-welby/>

⁴⁵ I also believe that understanding the anatomy of these different positions, and bringing a theological and biblical critique to them, is in itself revealing of our current social and cultural condition in the Western world, and the churches’ and Christians place in it.

political agenda. It is only relatively recently that *current* observed climate events have been attributed to anthropogenic climate change.

Today's climate-change agenda is, therefore, ostensibly grounded in 'science'; it is 'following the science', and is 'united behind the science'.⁴⁶

This deification of science should in itself should concern believers and sound warning bells, regardless of its application or veracity. Science helps us to understand how creation works, and in this case, how we have might have affected the earth. Indeed, it can be argued that 'science' as we know it is a 'Christian' project. However, we are not to 'follow the science', but rather follow the Lord and be guided by His Spirit and His word.

Further, just as the earth's atmosphere is extremely complex, so is the science behind it. The IPCC's models and its voluminous output are beyond most people's time and grasp, even that of scientists (even that of climate scientists, who like most scientists tend to be specialists in one part of their discipline). And scientists, even 'mainstream' scientists, do not always fully agree. History has shown us, anyway, that science proceeds through a process of paradigms and paradigm shifts, and sometimes the minority, the dissenters, have turned out to be right.

Most of us, understandably, cannot easily work these things out for ourselves. We decide, rather, on the basis of which 'authorities' we trust, we trust the 'experts', go with the flow of our peer group, 'follow the herd', judge things by 'preference' or what 'feels right', and so on. Some believe the majority is usually or always right; others are instinctively suspicious of the majority opinion - Mark Twain is reported as writing, "whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to reform (or pause and reflect)"!⁴⁷

As a consequence of this, many Christians will uncritically accept a view if it is promoted by a Christian leader or an organisation they believe in, respect and trust. This, therefore, puts a special responsibility on those in leadership and on Christian churches and organisations with influence - who, I suggest, need to especially 'careful how they walk'.

Justice

God shows no partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17; Luke 20:21; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11) and enjoins His people not to (Leviticus 19:15; 1 Timothy 5:21). Yet, the Bible reveals God as having a special concern and blessing for the poor and the oppressed (1 Samuel 2:8;

⁴⁶ As Greta Thunberg's anorak urges! <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/homenews/19503975.biden-pope-greta-coming-glasgows-cop26/>

⁴⁷ www.twainquotes.com/Majority.html

Isaiah 61: 1; Matthew 5: 3; Luke 1:52-53). This apparent contradiction is resolved by arguing that it is “precisely because God is not biased, God pays special attention to the poor”.⁴⁸ In other words, it is a matter of distributive justice.

That climate change is a justice issue is central to the advocacy of many Christian and indeed secular agencies concerned with social justice, aid and development. For example, in its leaflet on the ‘Climate Emergency’, Tear Fund notes, “the poorest 3.5 billion people are responsible for just 10% of emissions, but these same people are already facing the worst impacts of climate change. In 2016, world hunger increase for the first time in more than a decade. It has continued to increase every year since, because of climate change and conflict, with climate change exacerbating the risk of conflict. Our reliance on fossil fuels is pushing our global neighbours deeper into poverty.”⁴⁹

Leaving aside the question as to whether or not and the extent to which these recent phenomena are due to anthropogenic climate change, as against, this view needs to be set against the arguments (as above) that attempting to address climate change through mitigation will not help the world's poor quickly enough, but may in fact make their circumstances worse. Building resilience might better be achieved through economic development, adaptation and innovation.

Distributive justice can also be applied to future generations, ie intergenerational justice (although some ethicists balk at the idea of extending moral consideration to people who do not exist). Nevertheless, the Earth's environment is part of our legacy for our children and our children's children, and we surely need to do the best we can to pass it on in good heart.

Wisdom

While the pontifications of the great and the good at events like COP26 or the volumes of verbiage emitted by the IPCC and government departments may seem remote and irrelevant to many, local, practical environmental projects and solutions are often much more accessible. And, although these might be predicated on a ‘climate emergency’, ie a future expectation, these projects are often good things to do now even if things turned out differently in the future.

Our concern about climate change is based on predictions. And predictions can be wrong. The future does not send us any signals; we only have signals from the present

⁴⁸ Mott, S & Sider, R J. 2000. Economic justice: a biblical paradigm. Transformation 17:2, 50–63

⁴⁹ <https://www.tearfund.org/-/media/tearfund/files/campaigns/reboot-campaign/climate-factsheet-2021.pdf>

about what we think might happen and beyond the short term, such signals are unreliable.⁵⁰ We only live now! The future only exists for us when it becomes the present.

As American environmentalist, Wendell Berry, said, “All we can do to prepare rightly for tomorrow is to do the right thing today. We do not need to plan or devise a world of the future; if we take care of the world of the present, the future will have received full justice from us. A good future is implicit in soils, forests, grasslands, marshes, deserts, mountains, rivers and oceans that we have now, and in the good things of human culture that we have now; the only valued futurology available to us is to take care of those things. We have no need to contrive and dabble the future of the human race; we have the same pressing need that we've always had – to love, care for and teach our children”.

This focus on the immediate and the practical is central to biblical wisdom. Jesus said, “do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things” (Matthew 6:34). As well as warning against presumptuous planning for the future, James urges us to be doers and not just hearers of God’s word and to demonstrate our faith with good works and practical love (James 1:22-27). John calls us to “love not in word or talk, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Care for creation

At the heart of most Christian responses to climate change is the call to care for God's creation. Few Christians who have studied these things disagree about our call to care for creation. The issue is how does this apply to the specific case of climate change.

In the first creation account in Genesis 1, we read how God, after he had created the animals, created people in His image and likeness, to be ‘godlike’, and to rule over His creation as His representatives. God gives humanity dominion over the rest of his creation (Genesis 1:28), but dominion is not domination or exploitation, but wise and gentle oversight as God's viceroy, ultimately accountable to him.

Like the animals we are God’s creatures, but unlike the animals we are conscious of time, have the capacity for freedom, autonomy, reason and are creative (only humans do art for art’s sake; spiders make webs to catch flies).

In the second creation account in Genesis 2, we read how the Lord God puts the man and woman He has created in a garden. In the garden, humanity is *with* the animals (Genesis 2:18-21), *works* to tend and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15), and offers *worship* as priests on behalf of Creation.

50 Foster, J (2008) *The Sustainability Mirage. Illusion and Reality in the Coming War on Climate Change*. London: Earthscan.

The last of these is not explicit in the Genesis account, but it is implied in the way in which Genesis 1-3 presents the cosmos as one huge temple, the Garden of Eden as the Holy of Holies, and the human person as made for worship.⁵¹

These three 'ws', *with* the animals, *work* and *worship*, provide three understandings of our relationship and responsibility for creation.⁵² The second, work, which gives rise to the idea of stewardship, is perhaps the most easily grasped and the most practical. God is Himself a gardener, as Psalm 65 puts it, 'tending the earth and watering it' (Psalm 65:9-10). Human beings, made in God's image, are to be partners in working in the garden; God is the gardener, we are his under-gardeners! And we shall have to give account of our stewardship. This is humanity's first calling.

'The earth mourns'

For some, a landscape depleted of grazing livestock and replete with dark conifer plantations, as implied in the government's Net Zero Strategy, might be enough to make them feel the earth is mourning. But the issue goes, of course, much deeper than that.

The idyllic account of God and the man and woman in the Garden of Eden ends sadly, with the incident with the snake and the fruit.

As a result of their disobedience our first parents are exiled from the garden (for their own good), and disharmony and distortion enters into relationships: between God and man; among people; and with and in Creation itself. This is known as the Fall.

As God says to Adam, 'cursed is the ground because of you'. Paul in Romans said the creation has been 'subjected to futility'. The author of Psalm 74 wrote – 'look on all that you have made, it is full of darkness and violence inhabits the earth'. Nature may be beautiful and bountiful, but it is also red in tooth and claw.

In the books of the Bible that follow Genesis, we see how as a result of the ejection from the Garden humanity's calling is shaped by commandments, including commandments to exercise restraint in the treatment of creation itself (notably the Sabbath & Jubilee principles). The Law given to OT Israel made it possible to recover in part what was lost in Eden.

Just as a right relationship between people and God, between neighbours, and between people and the land brings peace to creation itself, so the breaking of relationships brings sorrow into the creation itself. Covenant breakers curse creation.

⁵¹ It is also reflected in the architecture of cathedrals and churches, at least mediaeval ones.

⁵² ie ecojustice, stewardship, and creation's integrity (roughly corresponding to Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox theologies).

Hosea (4:1-3) in a recapitulation of the Fall, shows how the breaking of the covenant and commandment reverses creation itself, and the 'land mourns and the beasts, birds and fish are taken away'. In an apocalyptic vision, Isaiah (24) describes how "the earth mourns and fades away" and "is also polluted under its inhabitants" (Isaiah 24:4-5).

Whatever the truth about climate change, global pollution should not surprise us too much; it is what humanity independent or in rebellion from God does. Just as humanity, made in God's image, is capable of great creativity, so fallen humanity is also capable of great destruction (Revelation 11:17-18).

'Seed time and harvest'

In the first era of human history following humanity's injection from the Garden of Eden, wickedness got to the point where God purposed to destroy man from the face of the earth (Genesis 6:7) with the Flood. Nevertheless, He did not destroy all of humanity, but rescued 'righteous Noah and seven others' (2 Peter 2:5).

After the flood, God pledged never again to "curse the ground for man's sake nor destroy every living thing" as he had done through the Flood, promising, "while the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease" (Genesis 8:21-22).

This promise, with its implication that not only the order of the day, the seasons and the weather, but also farming and food production, will continue, should surely temper excessive fears of imminent destruction and extinction due to climate change.

'The land is defiled'

The passage from Isaiah 24 I refer to above, describes how the earth is "polluted under its inhabitants". Although we instinctively understand this in terms of environmental pollution, ie the result of human mismanagement and exploitation, the word, which is better and more frequently translated as 'defiled', refers rather to moral pollution.

The Isaiah passage goes on to explain that the defiling of the earth is the outcome of "transgressing the laws, changing the ordinance and breaking the everlasting covenant" (Isiah 24:5). Similarly, the environmental degradation described in Hosea 4 is the outcome of sin, especially idolatry, homicide and sexual immorality.

This relationship between heinous sins and the defiling of the land, with its ecological consequences, is a recurrent theme in OT scripture, especially in Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. "You have polluted the land with your prostitutions and

your wickedness”, warned Jeremiah, “therefore the showers have been withheld and there has been no latter rain” (Jeremiah 3:2-3). Earlier in the same oracle, the Lord says I, “I brought you into a bountiful country, to eat its fruit and its goodness, but when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage and abomination”. These passages, and indeed the whole of the oracle, are disturbingly contemporary as we ponder our present environmental and moral crisis.

Moral impurity repels the divine presence. As US theologian, Walter Brueggemann, puts it, “the Holy God of Israel will not and cannot stay in a place that is defiled”. Where land has been defiled, “Yahweh refuses to stay in such a place or to grant blessings of fertility in such a context”.⁵³ And, as OT scholar, Christine Hayes, describes, “land that is repeatedly defiled, the holy land of God that is repeatedly defiled by sexual transgressions, for example, cannot be purified. Eventually it will simply ‘vomit out’, the biblical text says, it will simply ‘vomit out’ those who dwell in it. This is a reference to exile.”⁵⁴ There is a disconcerting parallel between this biblical understanding and the Gaia theory above.

I cannot imagine the delegates at COP26 entertaining the idea that climate change is the result of idolatry, homicide and sexual immorality more than environmental and resource mismanagement! Even the Pope made no mention of such things in his ‘Thought for the Day’! Nevertheless, the biblical theme of defilement of land and the earth merits further reflection.

‘The kings of the earth assemble’

While the climate-change agenda is based on science, it is also a political, economic, cultural, social, ideological and religious phenomenon. Understanding it in this way is surely part of revealing the beneath-the-surface agenda, of understanding the true ‘nature of the beast’.

Regardless of the truth about climate change, it is also a powerful tool in the hands of the ‘powers that be’. In a similar way to the use of other claimed ‘existential threats’, it risks being used to advance an agenda of surveillance and control. Power is its own motivation.

Canadian psychologist, Jordan Peterson comments⁵⁵ (from about 28:20 mins): “I happen to believe, firmly, that global, and even national, attempts to deal with climate change are going to cause way more trouble than accumulated carbon dioxide, not

⁵³ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Land-Revised-Overtures-Biblical-Theology/dp/0800634624>

⁵⁴ <https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-9>

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4zZ2ker1il>

because accumulated carbon dioxide isn't somewhat of a threat, but when it becomes a global planetary threat that's a crisis, well then it's a justification for virtually any political action. So look out man... because of the dangers of systems".

We should not be too surprised about this. Many sober, cogent Christian and secular commentators have for some time been warning us of the impending 'fall' of Western Christian-consensus civilisation and a coming 'soft' totalitarianism.⁵⁶ Back in 1984, the well-known US theologian, Francis Schaeffer, in his remarkably prophetic last book, the *Great Evangelical Disaster*, wrote: "when the memory of the Christian consensus which gave us freedom within the biblical form is ... forgotten, a manipulating authoritarianism will ... fill the vacuum, [which] will gradually force four-month society so that it will not go into chaos – and most people would accept it". When truth perishes (Isaiah 59:14), then, as Nietzsche wrote, all that is left is the 'will to power'.

There is much in the COP26 agenda to applaud and affirm, that seems good, right, reasonable, even urgent - not only its concern for the earth's environment, but also its concern for the poor. Christians do not need to sign up to the whole package to support and pray for these things.

However, it is also an assembling of the 'kings of the earth' to 'take counsel together' (Psalm 2:2), a gathering of the nations to 'make a name for themselves' (Genesis 11:4). And, unless the 'kings' acknowledge the King, unless they 'kiss the Son' (Psalm 2:12), there is always the risk that they will instead 'plot a vain thing' or build a tower of Babel.

'A hope and a future'

The climate-change agenda, and environmentalism in general, especially in its contemporary form, is deeply permeated with despair and pessimism, even nihilism. I believe that the Bible and Christian faith offer an antidote to this. Unlike contemporary environmentalists, whose only hope is in humanity getting its act together, we have a message of hope - for both humanity and the earth (eg Romans 8:21) - which depends ultimately not on human endeavour, but on God's mercy and love.⁵⁷

By His atoning death at the Cross, Jesus overcome sin, death and the devil, mended the broken relationship between humanity and God, and opened the way to life for people and for the earth itself. Writing to the Colossians, Paul describes how, "it pleased the Father that in him [Jesus] all the fullness should dwell and by Him to reconcile all

⁵⁶ eg see Rod Dreher's, 'Live not by lies' (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Live-Not-Lies-Christian-Dissidents/dp/0593087399>) and [this article \(https://thebonhoefferproject.com/weeklycolumn/softtotalitarianism\)](https://thebonhoefferproject.com/weeklycolumn/softtotalitarianism)

⁵⁷ See my recent [presentation here](#).

things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

His resurrection inaugurated a process that culminates in the liberation and transformation of the whole of creation (Romans 8:21), “new heavens and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:13).

And Creation is eagerly expecting this transformation. Romans 8: 19-21 says, “creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

So, the future of creation is tied up with the children of God, those who believe in Jesus, who through repentance and faith have entered into a restored relationship with God. They are part of God’s rescue plan for the earth. They are a sign of hope.

Birth pangs

So how and when does this all happen? The final link in the story is the promised return of Jesus to the earth, not as a baby in a manger, but as a victorious king. The study of Jesus’ return is known as ‘eschatology’

The Christian message of salvation is known as the Gospel, which translates the Greek word *evangelion*. Both literally mean ‘good news’. For the individual, the good news is that all who repent and believe in Jesus shall have eternal life. For creation, it is the promise of liberation and transformation.

However, in New Testament times, *evangelion* was used of an announcement by a messenger of the coming of a victorious potentate, like the Emperor. The messenger says who he is, what he has achieved, what he expects of the people, and what by implication befalls those who do not welcome and accept him.

So the Gospel is not primarily an offer, but an announcement. Jesus is coming, get ready, this is how you need to get ready, and this what happens if you are not ready. Hence, eschatology is not an add-on to the Gospel message, but its essence.

A Christian and biblical perspective on climate change must ultimately be framed in the context of Gospel eschatology.⁵⁸ As Jesus, Paul and John warned us, before Jesus returns there will be great turbulence and upheavals in the natural world and in human society, so we should not be too surprised at what is happening just now. These are just the beginning of the 'birth pangs' (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8) of an 'old' creation anticipating the delivery of a 'new' creation liberated from corruption (Romans 8:21-22).

The climate change emergency discourse offers little hope for the future of the earth or humanity, as it depends on human effort alone. But in Christ, we are not doomed and neither is the earth; certainly, we shall need give account of our stewardship of God's earth and there is every need to take responsibility (and I would argue for Christians to take greater responsibility), but no need to panic. Instead, when we see all these things, including turbulence in nature itself, because, as Jesus said, when you see these things happening, look up for our redemption and the redemption of the earth itself draws near (Luke 21:28).

⁵⁸ Eschatology is both the 'elephant in the room' and the 'missing link as regards Christians and climate change! None of the Christian resources on COP26 or the environment I explored in preparing this article explicitly declare their eschatological positions. Eschatology is, however, often implicit (although I do wonder whether it is fully understood), running as a subterranean current through much of the content and rhetoric. We tend not to want to go there, because we know it might divide us. However, eschatology has a significant influence on our environmental theology and recognising this does help understand where commentators are coming from (and going to). Christian environmentalists need to be a bit more upfront about eschatology.