

Environmental Apocalypse and Christian Hope

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In an age when many have begun to consider widespread environmental collapse inevitable, the certain hope held out in the Christian gospel rules out both complacency and despair. Scripture's vision of a future for all of creation that is secure in Christ and given by God's grace challenges Christians to a radical environmental ethos that is marked by wisdom, self-sacrifice, perseverance, love and joy.

Introduction

Planet Earth is becoming ever more crowded at a rate approaching a quarter of a million people every day. At the same time we are taking more and more resources from it. Every year we each demand more energy, more food, more travel, more electronic gizmos, more things generally. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that we are consuming resources at an unsustainable rate. We've already used around half the earth's total oil reserves, and at current rates the rest will last only a few decades more. We are changing the Earth's climate at a rate unprecedented in its history, with uncertain but potentially alarming outcomes for humanity. We are destroying habitats and entire species at such a rapid pace that biologists talk of a sixth great extinction: the last one, 65 million years ago, was caused by an asteroid; this time, we're the cause. We are polluting the land, sea and air. In places such as the Indian subcontinent, even something as basic to life as fresh water may be in short supply within a few decades; it has been estimated that by 2030, nearly half of the world's population will be living in areas of high water stress.¹

These are not just the gloomy prognostications of a few green activists or apocalyptic-minded extremists. A sober assessment of the scientific evidence by the then President of the Royal Society, Sir Martin Rees, concluded that humanity has only a 50:50 chance of surviving this century.² Numerous scientific assessments of different aspects of the state of our planet reach similar conclusions: drastic action is needed to stem the downward spiral.³ As Martin Rees puts it, '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.'⁴ Yet even though many in the high income countries now recognise that their profligate consumption and use of fossil fuels are causing dramatic changes to the earth that already harm, and sometimes end the lives of others, they remain extremely reluctant to make even minor changes to their own habits and lifestyles.

Given the way things are going, the outlook for our future is dark and foreboding. It is unsurprising that some of those most aware of the challenges we face have already begun to suggest that it's too late. With resignation or despair, they suggest that environmental collapse of one sort or another is now inevitable.⁵ Yet for Christians, our orientation towards the future is founded on hope. Hope not just that things can be better, but that in the fullness of time they most definitely will be better. In this article, we reflect on the role of biblical hope in an age of environmental crisis and ask what difference it makes to how we respond to the challenges facing

us if we take seriously the picture of the future that Scripture paints for us.

Hope for the future

'The future is not a gift; it's an achievement.'⁶ So runs the secular argument: if we treat the future as a gift, we have no reason to work to make it better. Some Christian thinkers perceive this danger in our own tradition. In an address calling upon Christians to take up their responsibility to care for the earth, Archbishop Rowan Williams warns against the folly of treating God's faithfulness like a 'safety net that guarantees a happy ending in this world'. Such a view of the future, he observes, makes us prone to ignore the consequences of our sins against others and against the environment too.⁷ Better, perhaps, to follow the advice of theologian Kathryn Tanner and give up talk of the future altogether; we might instead look simply for the possibility of grace breaking into present life.⁸

After all, Christians have plenty of reasons to engage seriously with the environmental challenges facing us even if we were to conclude that Scripture has nothing to say about the future of life on earth. It is increasingly clear that loving our human 'neighbours' requires caring for the environment in which they live; and, for Christians, the inherent value of non-human creation itself is established in God's pronouncements in Genesis that all that he has made is 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). If God values what he has made, then we ought to value it too.

Nevertheless, to stop with the affirmation of creation's 'goodness' in Genesis 1 is to ignore what the rest of Scripture says about the ways in which creation itself is caught up in the drama of fall and redemption. To emphasise only the love command, central as it is to Christian ethics, is to forget that faith and hope also remain necessary in this age of seeing 'through a glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12–13). The Christian doctrines of final judgement, resurrection and new creation are deeply embedded in the story that the Bible tells us about God and his relationship to creation. Moreover, these are not merely abstract 'doctrines' but are the very

elements that comprise the story embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Christ himself.

The gospel, creation and the future

Christian ethics, including the ethics of how we care for the earth, ultimately derive from reflection upon what it means for us today to live as citizens who are 'worthy of the gospel of Christ' (Phil. 1:27), a gospel that is shot through with hope for both the present and the future. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has defeated the powers of sin and death and inaugurated his restored rule over all of his creation. This is good news for all people, who are offered forgiveness of sins and new life in the Spirit, enabled to live as God's children under the Lordship of Christ. This is good news for the whole earth, because it reveals the way in which a world wracked by sin and corruption is renewed and restored to its creator. It is also good news that leads to action. To be given the gift of adoption as a child of God ought to result in nothing less than a life that is transformed in its relations to others and to the rest of creation. It should be a life now lived not for one's self but for others in the way of Christ—the way of the cross. All of a groaning creation yearns for the revealing of such 'children of God', because its freedom too is found in their redemption (Rom. 8:19–22).

When the gospel was proclaimed in the first century, it overturned idolatry of all sorts and challenged any temptation to buy into the propaganda of the Roman Empire, with its own 'gospel' of peace. This was a 'peace' bought with war and violence, and its bearer was not Christ but the emperor. Today, the same gospel demands that we do not buy into the competing claims of our own societies if we are to honour Christ alone as Lord. For those of us in the so-called 'developed world', the gospel challenges any attempt to find our salvation, identity and security in consumerism, in accumulation of wealth or in our worship of individual 'freedom' to do whatever we want – a freedom that so often is borrowed at the expense of others. Since it is God alone who saves, the Christian gospel challenges too any notion that we are the ultimate saviours of the planet, that

we are the measure of all things, that in the end it is all up to us. In the end, as in the beginning, the gospel tells us, it is all up to God in Christ.

Two dangers and how to avoid them

There are two apparently opposite dangers to avoid as we seek to discern and apply the Bible's teaching about the gospel and the future. The first is to assume that biblical hope is of the pie-in-the-sky, bye-and-bye variety that limits concern with this world and shuts down engagement with the difficulties and challenges inherent to living here today. Such otherworldly hope presents us with dreams conveniently unrelated to our everyday life. It tends to be based on a view of the gospel as something all about me, as something that speaks only to my own existential crisis or answers only to my individual plight. It represents an attempt to reduce the good news about Jesus to a story about me and God, rather than a story about God in Christ that is for and about the whole world.

The opposite error is, however, equally seductive. This is to give up on biblical hope in the face of its despisers, to suppress the reality of our need for God's mercy and to assume that Christian faith can be reduced to a pattern of living in the present that gives no consideration to the future. This excises the central message of the gospel while trying to keep what we deem to be the moral or practical benefits of a 'Christian worldview'. Ironically, the failure of this approach is again precisely in its focus on ourselves rather than on God in Christ. It presumes that we are capable of solving the fundamental problems of the world by ourselves, that we have no need of a Saviour but only of a moral exemplar. The biblical perspective is far bleaker with regard to our human nature, far more honest about our sinfulness and brokenness. But it is also far more radical in its challenge and promise of transformation and renewal that begins now and points us toward the future. Its vision is further-reaching and is all-encompassing in its hope for a new creation toward which we must indeed work but which finally is given only by the grace of God himself.

If we place all of our faith in ourselves and imbue our own plans for the future with an ultimacy that they cannot bear, we perpetuate the same ideology that is responsible for many of the environmental problems that we face in the first place; and our efforts are likely to end only in frustration, disappointment and despair. Pursuing either of these distorted versions of Christian hope leads us astray from the gospel proclaimed to us in Scripture. We do better to centre our thinking on the cross and resurrection of Christ. The cross reminds us of the cruciform life to which we are now called; the resurrection confirms and displays to us God's purposes for all of his creation.

Radical hope

If the future is finally a gift of God, we must reject the fears that prevent us from contemplating radical changes in our individual lives and in our wider societies. In Christ, we accept a gift and a promise that ought to transform and enable us to follow in the sacrificial way of the cross. 'Do not be afraid, little flock,' Jesus says, 'for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms' (Luke 12:32-33). Such a hope encourages persistent commitment to virtue through all circumstances, even when things look bleak or when the actions of all of those around us would seem to render the actions of one individual ineffective.

The cosmic scope of biblical hope meanwhile confirms the value within God's purposes of the creation itself, a creation whose fate is linked to ours and for whose care we bear much responsibility. This requires wisdom in our study and application of science, and it requires humility too. If God in Christ is the true owner, it must be only in fear and trembling that we seek to care effectively for his earth. Such humility must not be twisted into an abdication of our responsibility or a wilful ignorance of the global consequences of our collective actions; but it will derive in no small measure from awareness of our complicity in ways of living that are unsustainable and deprive life from others. Christian creation care will not be guilt-driven but nor can it be arrogant, for it proceeds

from a recognition of our limitations and failures. It puts its trust not in ourselves but in the God who by his grace provides the results.

If biblical hope makes strong demands upon those who would seek to live in its light, there is also a promise of joy for those who await and work toward the new creation. Not only are we enabled to discern the true source of life and love and happiness and so are freed from our slavery to materialism, but we are given 'times of refreshing from the Lord' (Acts 3:19), glimpses of the glorious future even now as we yearn and pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

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1. The estimate of 47% is given in the *OECD Environment Outlook to 2030* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008).
 2. Martin Rees, *Our Final Century* (London: Arrow Books, 2004).
 3. For further information on these topics see 'Species Extinction and Human Population', www.whole-systems.org/extinctions.html (accessed 27 July 2011); Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010); Johan Rockström and others, 'A safe operating space for humanity', *Nature* 461 (2009): 473–475; John Houghton, *Global Warming, The Complete Briefing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Global Environment Outlook 4 (GEO 4)* (United Nations Environment Programme, 2007), <http://www.unep.org/geo/GEO4.asp> (accessed 27 July 2011); James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Allen Lane, 2006); Dale Allen Pfeiffer, *Eating Fossil Fuels: oil, food and the coming crisis in agriculture* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2006); E. O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002).
 4. Martin Rees, *Anniversary Address 2006* (London: The Royal Society, 2006).
 5. There are plenty of others who prefer not to look at the evidence too closely; and some who would deny the severity of the crisis. There have even been concerted attempts to suppress information that might get in the way of business as usual, as in the well-documented campaign by a handful of oil companies to discredit climate science (a campaign deliberately modelled on the tobacco industry's attempt to discredit medical findings about the effects of tobacco use) – see James J. McCarthy, 'Climate science and its distortion and denial by the misinformation industry' in *Creation in Crisis*, ed. R. S. White (London: SPCK, 2009), 34–52; James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore, *Climate Cover-Up* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009); Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).
 6. This quote from Harry Lauder was made popular by Robert F. Kennedy and was repeated by President Barack Obama in his 2011 State of the Union Address.
 7. Rowan Williams, 'Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment', Ebor Lecture given at York Minster, 25 March 2009.
 8. Kathryn Tanner, 'Eschatology without a Future?' in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 222–237.

For further reading:

- Hilary Marlow, *The Earth is the Lord's: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*, Grove Books, 2008.
- Robert S. White (ed.), *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability*, SPCK, 2009.
- Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, Baylor University Press / Darton Longman and Todd, 2010.
- Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed., Baker Academic, 2010

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