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The Church's response to the coming 'crisis of sustainability'

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The level and types of human activity on planet Earth need large-scale and immediate change. In this article secular debates are considered in the light of various theological principles—our mandate from God at creation, hope, Sabbath, simplicity and community—to show that the church has a relevant voice. Proposals are then made for constructive actions the church can and should take.

Introduction

It is becoming painfully clear to anyone who looks into the matter that the way humanity is treating planet Earth cannot be continued indefinitely. Few are unaware that we are imposing stresses on our environment far beyond its ability to repair itself, through climate change, species extinction, extraction from water aquifers, and in many other respects. Less familiar, but equally problematic, is that there are finite supplies of many resources we need to maintain modern life, such as oil, gas, coal and many minerals. With the cheapest and best quality sources now gone, the cost of production is inevitably going to rise.

These dangers, agreed on by the great majority of scientists who work in the relevant fields, are no longer only in the realms of the long-term future but are becoming ones that need addressing urgently. It seems the Earth is creaking at the seams and it almost feels like a race to see what blows first, and with what damage – most likely to those already the poorest in the world.

Yet even with all this knowledge, there seems a strong reluctance amongst those of us in the developed world to take any meaningful action to change our communal behaviour. It seems that nothing less than a new phase in human civilisation is required, but even contemplating it is often resisted. The question must be asked: how the church can play its part in speaking the truths that need to be told to our culture? It has done so at times historically: what challenges and opportunities exist today?

Before summoning the courage to speak, we first need to discern carefully what should be said. That requires reflection on how to apply our theology to situations barely imaginable at the time the Bible was written. In our first section we consider some relevant theological principles and ask what positions seem to follow from them in the various debates proceeding in the wider world. In the second section, we make some suggestions as to the church's practical role.

Engaging with the secular debate is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, all of us are dependent on the same set of scientific and other facts, and in many areas we will come to similar conclusions despite our different starting point – something familiar to Christian ethicists. Second, as we will see, the scale of the issues is sufficiently large that not even the entire global church could attempt to adequately address them alone. It necessitates us to go to the heart of our society, and there to meet with other groups addressing the same issues, to find as much common ground as possible.

Theological principles and secular debates

We do need to acknowledge that the church itself has theological divisions regarding how we should relate to the non-human world. Probably the largest revolves around the question of what God's original mandate to Adam and Eve actually was. Much attention has focussed on the meaning of words in two key phrases: 'Let us make mankind in our image... so that they may rule over [the natural world]' (Gen. 1:26) and 'the Lord put [Adam] in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it' (Gen. 2:15). These two injunctions are not ultimately contradictory, but have been seized upon by theologians as implying a tension between 'dominion' and 'stewardship'. They raise the question of what limits, if any, God intends to put on the human mastery over creation?

Interestingly, a parallel range of opinions is found in the secular debate. At one end, it is argued that the planet is there for us to use as we see fit, lacking any inherent value. This view is represented in traditional neo-classical economics where environmental matters are seen as 'externalities' with no monetary value, and so only considered, if at all, as an extraneous factor. Some Christians seem to defend this view when they argue that God in his love will give us inexhaustible bounty, which means that conserving nature has little importance. At the other extreme of the secular debate, preserving the natural world intact is seen to be of such high importance that it outweighs even human desires and needs.

Determining the correct position in general, or even in a particular case of environmental protection, is hard. Richard Bauckham, however, helpfully identifies some key principles. If we are to rule, our ruling should be like that of God, based on a relationship with nature, on love and respect for it, and with one eye on the needs of the future. There is thus a need to put limits on how we treat God's bounty. Nevertheless it is a bounty put there for our wise use and enjoyment.[1] In particular it would seem hard to argue against the benefits to human life we have received from technological and medical advances, and rises in the standard of living. God has made us creative and curious, and in many respects we have used this for the common good.

But this point cannot be applied directly to resolving our present crisis. Some do argue that further advances in science and technology will provide sufficient energy and resources for us to continue our present way of life, others that we can realise this goal with sufficient collective willpower.[2] Others, however, forecast imminent economic collapse[3] or at least a long decline which will reverse both economic and technological advances, thus forcing us to relearn the skills of past centuries.[4]

A Christian theology of hope provides challenges to all these positions. As Bob White and Jonathan Moo have argued, biblical hope can never be extinguished. Giving up completely is not an option but hope must also be rooted in realism and in a recognition of human sin. We cannot have hope purely in ourselves, or in technology. While our ingenuity has brought us great gains, it has also brought great side-effects, not least the very crisis we are now trying to solve.[5]

Biblical hope is also closely connected with two other biblical concepts. One is repentance (the often-quoted verse Jeremiah 29:11, declaring that God '... plans to prosper you and not to harm you…' comes with the condition, '... when you seek me with all your heart'). Hope is often also linked with a period of trouble before the end goal is reached (e.g. 2 Cor. 4). We must hold hope, repentance and suffering firmly together in our understanding of what it means to follow Christ in our environmental practices today.

So we must continue to be hopeful, even though we cannot rule out severe crises ahead—faith in God did survive the biblical Exile and the persecution of the early church. Yet we must be honest that however important and helpful technocratic solutions may be, it is a change of heart that we really need.

Recovering Sabbath, simplicity and community

This change of heart should first of all imply reaffirming the values of the human relationship with creation, then reaching a realistic and

honest assessment of what is possible for us to do with the limits of the planet we live on. That much may be common sense, but there are two more distinctively Christian principles that should also be brought in.

The first is the idea of Sabbath. In particular we need to grasp the biblical truth that when humans rest, those parts of the natural world humans enjoy experience rest as well—a notion supported by associated Old Testament laws. This theme of Sabbath conveys a clear sense that there should be limits to the human use of resources: just because we can do something, does not mean we should.

The second is that of simple living, involving a basic change in our attitude to money and possessions (e.g. Matt. 6:19-24). Jesus's stark warnings about putting our trust in material things are more applicable than ever, and seem borne out by recent research that claims that, beyond a certain point, happiness does not increase with wealth, despite what current economic orthodoxy, and indeed most people, actually believe.[6]

In the current secular debates as to whether everything can or should be monetised, as to whether we need other measures of human welfare than GDP, and whether there should be limits to consumerism, it thus seems clear where the balance of Christian thought should lie. But once again we should avoid the opposite extreme. Although the view is perhaps more a parody, those who seem to delight in living on as little as possible stand against the fact that we have been given creation to enjoy. Obsessive minimalism seems to reject God's blessing.

Expressing such views needs to be done with considerably pastoral sensitivity. Though many of the UK population could easily manage with less income and less outgoings than at present, some struggle to make ends meet. Considerably more perceive themselves to be poor due to their inability to afford the aspirational lifestyle portrayed as societally normative, even though their living standards might considerably exceed those of previous generations or in other parts of the world. We must therefore challenge these societal norms as much as the individuals under their sway.

However we define 'poor', we are called to follow Jesus's example to have a heart for those lacking basic needs or on the margins of the community. Again, Christian theology provides a contrast to what is seen more generally. An increasingly economically-driven society tends to see people more as statistics or economic units than as individuals. This seems accepted by most when accompanied by a promise of higher living standards. If, as projected, this bargain comes to be reneged upon, there will be an increasing number of dissatisfied people, seeking practical, emotional and even spiritual help from other sources.

Might such sources include the local church? There are at least some signs of hope here. Many in the sustainability movement agree that it is no longer feasible to see society as a set of autonomous, geographically-independent, individuals and argue that we must re-learn the idea that it is composed of interlocking families and local communities. For example, transporting goods or people over long distances is energy-intensive, so that as much must be done locally as possible. In addition, assuming that we want continued access to a wide range of manufactured goods, such goods will have to be reused or shared around as needed. All of these require the recovery of strong local communities.

This, of course, is very much implied in a Christian vision: God created us for relationship with other humans just as much as with the natural world. The church has the potential to be the focus of rebuilding local links that have been lost, alongside other community groups also working for sustainability.

Opportunities for service

Armed with these theological principles, what can the church do with them? There seem to be three major needs that the church can fulfil.

The first is psychological. In the UK we have had decades of relative stability, of steady increases in living standards, of moving to an increasingly technological way of living cut off from the

natural world, of greater individual freedom, of the need not to rely on others, and of our identities largely being defined by what we own and can do. Most of these trends are likely to slow down or go into reverse in the decades ahead. By choice, or perhaps more likely out of necessity, people will be losing the kind of future they expected, felt promised by society, or perhaps felt entitled to. Adjusting to this requires a kind of paradigm shift in how we see ourselves, one which even those at the forefront of sustainability awareness acknowledge is difficult. Christians themselves already understand that the transformation of lifestyle required by conversion to Christ is far from easy, even given the willingness to be open to the resources of God's grace.

The church can also stand ready to provide practical assistance to those who find difficulty adjusting to new circumstances. Churches are already performing some of the roles which seem likely to be needed – offering advice on finance, setting up food banks or co-operatives and so on, but only in a localised and patchy way at present. Efforts are likely also to be needed to support work with climate and economic refugees around the world. All these will stretch the church's resources at a time when church members have less to give themselves.

There is a yet a third need, and that is to speak prophetically about the truth of our present situation and to proclaim hope for a better future. The church does have history in doing this, such as in the campaign to abolish the slave trade, and more recently on the issues of trade justice and third world debt. But although we wish to change the whole world, the first word of the prophets was addressed to the covenant people themselves. Regrettably many Christians are as much caught up in our current socio-economic system as those outside. To speak with credibility in the public realm, and for its offers of assistance to be accepted, the entire church needs to take the challenge of sustainability seriously. It cannot be viewed as a hobby for a minority of enthusiasts, but must be recognised as one of the essential challenges to Christian discipleship in our time.

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1. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 26ff.
2. Representative of these positions are Mark Lynas, *The God Species* (Fourth Estate, 2011); and Lester Brown, most recently *World on the Edge* (Norton, 2011).
3. Many Peak Oil writers, notably Nicole "Stoneleigh" Foss, writing at 'The Automatic Earth', http://theautomaticearth.blogspot.com/.
4. For instance, John Michael Greer, *The Long Descent* (New Society Publishers, 2008), and many involved in the Transition Town movement.
5. Bob White and Jonathan Moo, 'Environmental Apocalypse and Christian Hope', *Ethics in Brief* 17.1 (2011).
6. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

For further reading:

- 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.
- Mark Powley, *Consumer Detox: Less Stuff, More Life*, Zondervan, 2010.
- Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, Green Books, 2008.

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