

The Christian and **CLIMATE CHANGE**



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Published by the Church at
North Road Chapel, Bideford

www.northroadchapel.org

First Edition Printed 2020

All Biblical quotations are taken from the
Authorised Version of the Holy Scriptures

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EX39 2NW

THE CHRISTIAN AND CLIMATE CHANGE

“Cursed is the ground for thy sake” (Genesis 3:17)

The past half-century has witnessed the dramatic rise of a new religious system. This movement has its own code of right and wrong, and associated doctrines of guilt and redemption. It has its venerated texts, its prophets and exemplars, its preachers and teachers. It has many adherents: from the nominal, through the active, to the extremist and radical. Many gatherings and conferences are maintained, at local, national and international levels, for like-minded persons to assemble together, and further their cause. It blends with its teachings a heady mixture of science, philosophy, humanism, paganism and pantheism. Eschatology (‘the study of last things’) is its principal dogma – it has a very clear concept of the end of the world. In view of this, it also has its own Soteriology (doctrine of salvation) and propounds an extensive system of ‘salvation by works’, for individual and global deliverance from the coming catastrophe. It is a proselytising religion, anxious to broadcast its message, widen its congregation, and obtain political influence; and also unafraid of resorting to illegal or violent means in pursuit of its aims.

The movement in question is commonly called ‘**Environmentalism**’; and while its advocates would hotly deny any religious connotations or associations, one only needs to examine the manifestos and policy statements of major ‘green’ organisations to observe the similarities. They do not hesitate to describe themselves as ‘ideologies’ or ‘social movements’, and speak freely of their ‘beliefs’. Their language closely resembles that of a statement of faith, an ecclesiastical affirmation or creed. But this is a system entirely devoid of God, and based instead upon evolutionary principles. For many in the present day, it provides a popular surrogate for true religion; and in numerous points it comes into open conflict with the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Almost as worrying as the rise of this new sect are the responses of God's professed people in reaction to it. The diversity of 'Christian' opinions expressed fall into two broad categories.

On the one hand, there are those who have embraced the message of Environmentalism wholesale, and adopted its precepts without hesitation. To such persons we feel bound to point out some of its more glaring errors. The so-called 'forces of nature', and the scientific laws that underpin them, are all still subject to the sovereign control of Almighty God (cf Job 37, 38). The human race will not become extinct by reason of climatic or meteorological changes. The world will not end by any means other than God's Divine prerogative, or at any time other than that of His appointing (cf Mark 13:32). Its termination will not be hastened, nor deferred, one moment by man's activities. The Bible plainly states that at the Saviour's Second Advent, when He returns to make an end of all things, and rolls up the present material creation like a discarded garment (cf Psalm 102:25-26), there will be a remnant of humanity, "*which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord*". There is a measure of comfort to be derived from these words (cf 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).

At the opposite extreme are those Christians who take the line of complete denial, and refuse to accept anything that is said by the scientific community in respect of the state of the planet – or more particularly – to deny that any of the observed changes to the environment could possibly be caused by the behaviour and practices of men. This position is also erroneous, and needs to be addressed in the light of God's Word – perhaps more urgently, because of its growing popularity among supposedly orthodox Christians. It is hardly commendable for professed believers to be found alongside those wilfully ignorant scoffers who protest that: "*all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation*" (cf 2 Peter 3:4-5). The facts of the matter are quite the reverse. 'Man-made climate change' has a long and troubling history, well documented in the Bible.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

There are plenty of instances in the record of Scripture where the activities of man are seen to negatively impact the natural world. There is the case of the Philistines who blocked up wells, preventing irrigation of the land and watering of sheep and cattle, forcing Isaac to move his herds to other places (cf Genesis 26:12-17). Among the violent outrages perpetrated by Abimelech the wicked son of Gideon was the ‘sowing with salt’ of the ruins of Shechem, so that even the vegetation would be destroyed (cf Judges 9:45). When the Israelites overthrew Moab, it is told how, “*they beat down the cities, and on every good piece of land cast every man his stone, and filled it; and they stopped all the wells of water, and felled all the good trees*” (cf 2 Kings 3:25) preventing cultivation of the ground or the gathering of a fruit harvest for years to come. Other passages describe the intentional damming or diverting of rivers, sometimes used as a military strategy to inflict drought upon an enemy: “*And they shall turn the rivers far away; and the brooks of defence shall be emptied and dried up: the reeds and flags shall wither. The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and every thing sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more*” (Isaiah 19:5-7). Those who suggest that the environment is somehow impervious to the ravages of man are patently wrong. Biblical and secular history are full of evidence to the contrary. Man has proved capable of permanently and irreversibly destroying his body, his fellow man, and his own eternal soul, by sinful devices. He is more than able to wreak havoc upon the planet itself.

However, there is another more serious aspect to man-made climate change which both the environmentalist and the ‘denier’ fail to register; namely – **the judgmental purposes of God**. What if the Lord, in consequence of the wickedness of man, should determine to bring deleterious changes to pass in the earth – either punitively, to penalise sin; or preventatively, to limit and curtail iniquity? The Lord would be within His Divine rights, and in conformity with His own Word, were He to act in this fashion. As the Hebrews of old were warned: “*if ye shall*

despise My statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments... I also will do this unto you... ye shall sow your seed in vain... I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass... your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits” (Leviticus 26:15-16, 19-20); *“The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed”* (Deuteronomy 28:24). These verses speak of adverse climatic changes, Divinely wrought, but instigated because of the sinfulness of man. The Scriptures are replete with examples both at a local and a global level.

THE DAYS OF ADAM

The world in which we now live is not the world as God created it. Indeed, imagination fails to comprehend a perfect, sinless creation from which death and decay, harm and hurt, were entirely absent. But the Divine assessment of ‘very good’ (cf Genesis 1:31) applied only for a limited time. Adam – who stood as federal head of the whole material creation – fell into sin; the consequences of which were huge and terrible. Of greatest moment were the spiritual implications for his soul: in that day he became dead in trespasses and sins, and condemned all his descendants to the same condition. From that instant also, his physical body was under the penalty of mortality and death, and began to age and die. However, the repercussions went much further, as the Apostle describes: *“For the creature [creation] was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same ... For we know that the **whole creation** groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now”* (Romans 8:20, 22).

Unwittingly, unwillingly, the whole created world was made subject to sin and the ‘bondage of corruption’. Immeasurable and irreversible changes were effected around the entire planet, of which the springing forth of thorns and thistles were one of the most apparent (cf Genesis 3:18). Dying flora and fauna must also have quickly become evident: *“By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin”* (Romans 5:12); death

passed upon all created things; death reigned from the time of Adam's sin, even over the animal and vegetable species, that could not be said to have 'sinned after the similitude his transgression' (cf Romans 5:14). The motivating cause, the responsibility, is clear – God said unto Adam: “*cursed is the ground for thy sake*” (Genesis 3:17). Here is man-made environmental change on an awful scale.

THE DAYS OF NOAH

In the millennium that followed the sad events of Eden, the world was grievously afflicted by the effects of the Fall, but still a very different place from that with which we are familiar today. Life expectancies were vast, human productivity and capability was equally great, and 'biodiversity' – the number and variety of species in existence on earth – was at an all-time high. However, another change was about to come. Sin had not remained stationary in that period, but waxed worse and worse: “*And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth*” (Genesis 6:5, 11-12). In consequence of which came the Flood.

Forty days of rain, the complete inundation of all land masses, and a year of prevailing waters, effected a radical transformation upon the globe. “*All the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened*” (Genesis 7:11); “*And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth*” (Genesis 7:23). This was 'mass extinction' on a scale unthought of by secular biologists – innumerable creatures perished, and afterwards, human life expectancy fell to a modest 120 years (cf Genesis 6:3). The earth would never be the same again. Its shape and form were utterly changed, with 70% of its surface remaining covered in water.

What, or who, was the cause of these dire events? God makes it clear when He says, in the same language as in Eden, that the curse of the Flood came, “*for man’s sake*” (Genesis 8:21); they brought it upon themselves. “*Hast thou marked the old way which wicked men have trodden? Which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overflowed with a flood*” (Job 22:15-16).

THE DAYS OF LOT

The Scriptures describe, in Genesis 13, one of the beauty-spots of earth, famed for its luxuriant verdure which abundantly supplied numerous city-states: “*And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where . . . even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar*” (Genesis 13:10). Within a short space of time a dreadful transformation occurred, and the region became: “*the breeding of nettles, and saltpits, and a perpetual desolation*” (Zephaniah 2:9). Geographically, it corresponds to the area known today as the Dead Sea basin – aptly so named – being almost totally devoid of life, and physically the lowest tract of land on earth, at 400 metres below sea-level. Here, the prosperous towns of Sodom, and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim once stood. Now, “*the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein*” (Deuteronomy 29:23).

Why did God precipitate such a cataclysm upon the land? “*Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah [was] great, and because their sin [was] very grievous*” (Genesis 18:20); because, “*the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly*” (Genesis 13:13). There was the gross immorality with which the place became synonymous (cf Jude 7) and other, oft-overlooked companion vices: “*this was the iniquity of . . . Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her . . . neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy*” (Ezekiel 16:49). Once again, sinful humanity is found to be the root cause.

THE DAY OF THE LORD

The contemplation of the Lord's former judgments naturally leads to a consideration of judgment to come. "*As it was in the days of Noah... Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot... Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed*" (Luke 17:26, 28, 30). It is not within the scope of this article to attempt a thorough exegesis of the allegorical visions of Revelation. However, if anything is to be understood from that book, it surely is this: that before the end of time, conditions upon Earth will severely deteriorate, especially in the natural world; including grass and trees, seas and rivers (cf Revelation 8).

The parallels drawn to the Flood are solemnising and instructive: "*by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men*" (2 Peter 3:5-7). In the case of that former destruction, the way of effecting it was already present. The antediluvian globe seems to have originally possessed great bodies of subterranean and atmospheric water (cf Genesis 1:6-7, 2:6, 7:11, 8:2) and by means of bringing both these volumes violently to the surface, God inundated the planet. 'In the same way', says Peter, 'there are reserves of fire kept in store for a future judgment'. This should give every human being pause for thought concerning the fragility of their existence, 'standing above fire and beneath fire'. They live upon a perilously thin film of ground, a few miles deep, floating uneasily upon molten rock of incredible temperatures, which occasionally breaks out in volcanoes and earthquakes. And above is the Sun, many times hotter, casting upon the Earth every hour more energy than its populace consumes in a year, its otherwise devastating effects mitigated only by the invisible thickness of atmosphere. The instruments of God's wrath are already on hand. "*Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be?*" (2 Peter 3:11).

THE NATURE OF JUDGMENT

As is often the case, two extremes are to be guarded against. For Christians to read ‘judgment’ into each and every turn of the weather, meteorological phenomena or natural disasters, is an erroneous course. The Lord may send such circumstances for a variety of reasons: “*He causeth it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy*” (Job 37:13). To imagine that those most immediately affected are the deserving targets of special retribution, is also wrong: “*Suppose ye that these... were sinners above all... because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” (Luke 13:2-3).

Conversely, to shut one’s eyes, refuse to acknowledge the sovereign hand of God, and fail to heed the warnings sounded by these events, is folly in the extreme. “*All these are the beginning of sorrows*” (Matthew 24:8). It is a master-stroke of Devil to deceive men into thinking that there is nothing going on, and no such thing as Divine judgment. “*They have belied the Lord, and said, It is not He; neither shall evil come upon us; neither shall we see sword nor famine*” (Jeremiah 5:12). The Adversary’s next ploy, should this deception fail, is to convince men that whatever is happening, they are not the ones to blame; that the solemn message is not to them. This mindset is evident everywhere.

If God should choose to manifest His judgments through changes in climate, Christians cannot expect to be exempted from its effects. The punitive three-year drought and famine sent in the time of Elijah not only affected the idolatrous majority in Israel, but also the Lord’s servant himself, a widow in Zarephath, godly Micaiah, the prophets in hiding, and perhaps 7,000 others who had not succumbed to Baalism. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to note how these persons were spared; not from, but through, the midst of these afflictions. As Noah and Lot also proved: “*The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations*” (2 Peter 2:9). “*Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all*” (Psalm 34:19).

TWO ERRORS REFUTED

Amongst those supposed Christians who continue to deny that human activities may have a damaging effect upon the planet, two portions of Scripture are commonly wrested from their context and used as a defence. One is the Lord's words spoken to Adam: "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth*" (Genesis 1:28). This, it is claimed, gives authorisation for modern man to do as he pleases, exploiting earth's resources – animal, vegetable and mineral – even to their complete consumption or eradication. This faulty interpretation fails to give the words any proper definition, limitation or extent. It fails to recognise that this instruction was given in man's innocency, before the Fall and the entrance of sin. It fails to hold in balance the other directive, that man was 'to dress and to keep' the land he was given. It ignores when the Lord says: "*I am God, even thy God... every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are Mine... for the world is Mine, and the fulness thereof*" (Psalm 50:7, 10-12). The earth is the Lord's. Man is but a short-lived tenant. Let him behave accordingly.

Another misused verse is this, given to Noah: "*While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease*" (Genesis 8:22). These words had a very particular relevance: God was promising not to bring again global destruction, and a suspension of natural cycles, as had been the case during the Flood. The earth would not cease to rotate on its axis, or stop orbiting the sun; the physical laws of cold and heat would not be revoked. To take it as a guarantee of world-wide, perpetually favourable climate is evidently wrong; the waste-howling wildernesses of Saharan desert, the barren regions of the poles, the countless droughts and floods, failed harvests and famines of history all prove otherwise. This covenant is also given a time-limit: 'while the earth remaineth'. It will not continue for ever.

A CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE

It is sad to reflect that many of the instructions and recommendations being promulgated by the Environmental Movement would not be necessary, if the Church had been more faithful in preaching and practising the truth of the Bible. Certain ecological problems might not even have arisen. For the Scriptures are not silent on such matters; but instead of honestly declaring and applying its precepts, Christianity (usually in an unbiblical collusion with the state, and national interests) has often wrongfully defended mass industrialisation, exploitative practices and wanton consumerism. God's Word might not speak explicitly of the conservation of resources, waste reduction or recycling – but it goes to a deeper and more fundamental level, condemning covetousness, greed, the pursuit of mammon and the heaping up of earthly treasures. This needs to be taught and practically applied from the pulpit.

Contained within the Old Testament Law, once appointed for the Hebrews, are numerous details that indicate the mind of God towards His material creation, and the responsibilities of man in this connection. The principles that they illustrate are worthy of continued emulation. For example, this rule was given for the conduct of siege warfare: “*When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege: Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat*” (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). There was not to be complete deforestation, even in a legitimate campaign.

The principles of husbandry and crop-rotation are also prescribed. Fruit trees were not to be harvested until the fourth year, and used for human consumption only in the fifth (cf Leviticus 19-23:25). All agriculture was suspended every seventh year so that the land could have a ‘sabbath’ and lie fallow; only that which self-seeded or propagated could be eaten

(cf Exodus 23:10-11, Leviticus 25:3-7). Even under normal circumstances, field margins were not to be reaped, and harvesting techniques were conservative: “*And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God*” (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Laws relating to animal life show a similar concern. The weekly sabbath applied also to draught animals and beasts of burden (cf Deuteronomy 5:14); those used for threshing purposes were not to be muzzled but permitted to feed of the grain (cf Deuteronomy 25:4); an animal that suffered an accident was to be immediately assisted (cf Luke 14:5); those that strayed swiftly returned, and any that struggled under a load at once relieved, regardless of their provenance (cf Exodus 23:4-5). Due care was even to be exercised in the case of wildfowl used for food. A parent bird was not to be taken simultaneously with its young, or eggs (cf Deuteronomy 22:6-7). All this legislation was given in illustration of the same basic principle: “*A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast*” (Proverbs 12:10). Animal welfare is commensurate with righteousness.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Surely the foremost example and last word upon the subject should be the nature and works of God Himself, in Whose image man is made, and Whom Christians are taught to emulate: “*Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children*” (Ephesians 5:1). The Lord did not bring His creation into being, and thereafter ‘leave it to its own devices’, or abandon it to the mercy of physical laws and biological imperatives. He remains intimately involved: “*The eyes of all wait upon Thee; and Thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing*” (Psalm 145:16-17). It is God Who, with utmost care, clothes the flowers and grass of the field (cf Matthew 6:30) and witnesses the fall of the least sparrow (cf Matthew 10:29).

The Book of Jonah displays the operation of this Providence in remarkable ways, and also gives a profound application for our instruction. Five times God's hand is seen, working through the material creation, and animal kingdom. "*The Lord sent out a great wind into the sea*" (Jonah 1:4), which overtook the disobedient runaway prophet aboard ship, and caused him to be thrown overboard. Furthermore, "*the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah*" (Jonah 1:17), whereby he was miraculously saved, and delivered again to land. Some time later, having preached the Word in Nineveh with convicting and converting effect, Jonah sat disconsolately upon a nearby vantage point, hoping that the Lord would still send destruction upon the formerly wicked city. But He did not. "*The Lord God prepared a gourd*" (Jonah 4:6) under whose spreading leaves the prophet sheltered from the sun. Then, "*God prepared a worm*" which devoured the gourd; and in quick succession, "*God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah*" (v. 7-8). The prophet protested angrily at the workings of Divine sovereignty, and his hopes, first raised, then dashed. "*Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?*" (v. 10-11).

The message of God's object lesson is this: to be concerned more for the welfare of a plant, and the state of the weather, than for the salvation of souls and their deliverance from wrath to come, is a reprehensible reversal of priorities. Let the Lord's people give first attention to that which is of utmost importance. But those who know and fear the judgments of God will not neglect its implications for the natural world. Even the Ninevite herds were of concern to the Lord. May His supreme example inspire, instruct and identify true Christians today.

R. J. Steward

CHRIST THE CREATOR

We must not forget that even the lower orders of Creation were made by Christ and for Him. They were needed by man – and man was necessary to the completeness of Christ’s plan of Salvation – so the lower forms of creatures are links in the chain that could not be spared. There is a wonderful sympathy between the various portions of Creation, as the Apostle Paul tells us, “*For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body*” (Romans 8:22-23). Treat all creatures kindly, then, as far as you can, for the great Creator’s sake. I would not have a sparrow needlessly killed, nor even a worm trod on that might be spared. My Lord and Master made them all – and when I look at them, I see traces of His wonderful wisdom and power! And when I see how bountifully He provides for them, I note the tokens of His goodness and care. He opens His hands and satisfies the desire of every living thing! There is not a little bird that picks up a seed by the roadside that was not created by Christ and for Him! And, perhaps, answers its end better than some of you who lift your brows to yonder heaven only to defy your Maker! There is not an animal upon the common, nor a lion in the forest, nor a fish in the sea, nor a fowl in the air that was not made by Him – and that does not in some way promote His glory...

Try, beloved friends, wherever you are, to see all things in the light of Christ. I think this will teach you not to look with scorn upon any of the things that are around you. See how the Lord Jesus has purged all things for His people so that they shall no longer be common or unclean. That lovely river, those fertile valleys, that dense forest, yonder snow-clad Alps and everything else that Christ has created... sun, moon and stars all shine to His praise and glory!

C. H. Spurgeon (1834 – 1892)

