

Voices: Christians and climate change

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You may have read the recent United Nations [report](#) that more than 1 million species of plants and animals face the risk of extinction in the coming decades. This catastrophic state of affairs is the direct result of human action. Our increasingly destructive and exploitative consumption of the planet's natural resources is taking its toll.

As if this were not enough, climate change as a whole is getting worse. Global temperatures continue to rise, weather patterns have begun to change, and glaciers and arctic ice are melting.

These changes to the Earth's ecosystem will have [devastating consequences](#) not only for generations to come but for our own generation as well. And to be clear: Climate change is almost certainly [our fault](#). Human activity most likely is fueling this destruction of our planet.

Although discussion of climate change in the United States has become a politically charged partisan issue, it should not be. This is a matter of scientific fact, not political opinion. We do not get to vote on whether climate change is real or whether it is our fault. This is not only a matter of scientific fact, however. It also is a matter of Christian concern.

Humans and creation

At the very beginning of the Bible, God tasked humanity with ruling "over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Genesis 1:26). One of the first commands God gives to newly created

humanity is to “subdue” the earth and “rule over” it (Genesis 1:28).

This is certainly a position of privilege, but it also is one of immense responsibility demonstrated in God’s wrath toward rulers who abuse and exploit (Jeremiah 23:1-4; Ezekiel 34; etc.). By contrast, godly rulers serve others, care for others and put others’ interests before their own (Mark 10:42-45; 1 Peter 5:1-5; etc.)

It would make no sense for God to curse rulers who harm their human subjects yet bless rulers who harm the rest of creation. Humanity exists not to dominate and use the rest of nature, but to watch over it and care for it.

The horrific damage humans have done to creation is a testimony against us. It stems from humanity’s sinful rebellion against God (Romans 8:19-22). All of creation belongs to God (Psalm 89:11). He has given us authority to watch over creation and tend it in his name (Genesis 2:15), but we have failed.

Israel, land and animals

When God rescued the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and made them his covenant people, he gave them very explicit instructions about the land he would give them as a gift. Since the land belongs ultimately to God and is part of the covenant, Israel had several responsibilities to maintain it.

For example, God commanded the Israelites to give the land a “sabbath rest” every seven years to replenish itself (Leviticus 25:4-7). The sabbath, given to Israel so they may have regular time of rest and relaxation, also was extended to the land itself.

In Deuteronomy 25:4, God said the Israelite must not “muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” The hardworking animal must be allowed to partake in the fruit of its labor, even if it might come at some cost to the owner.

When the prophets railed against Israel and Judah for their apostasy, the prophets said the people's sin defiled and damaged the land and the animals (Jeremiah 12:4; Hosea 4:1-3; etc.) When God sent Assyria and Babylon to conquer Israel and Judah as punishment, their abuse of the land and its animals was a major part of the problem.

The New Testament on creation care

While the Old Testament provides us with important paradigms and themes informing our approach to caring for God's creation, what about the New Testament? Isn't the New Testament mainly about the salvation of souls and going to heaven, not environmentalism?

Not exactly. Look again at Romans 8. Although all of creation, including humanity, is under the travails of sin in this present age, creation looks forward to redemption and restoration. Our eschatological hope is not to fly away as disembodied spirits, but to be resurrected bodies within the new heaven and the new earth (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

A frequent mistake we make when considering these ideas is to assume the new body, new heaven and new earth come after the old has been thrown away, but that is not what the Bible teaches. The new heaven, new earth and everything that comes with them is the result of *this* creation being redeemed, purified and transformed.

The New Testament does not reject or ignore God's concern for creation but subsumes it under the redemptive work of Christ. Jesus is making *all things* new, not just human spirits (Revelation 21:5).

Christians' responsibility for creation

If Jesus is the one making all things new, and he is the one who will redeem all creation at the end of time, why worry about climate change? God will make it all better. What do we have to do with it?

Quite a bit, actually. The Bible presents God's redemptive action as something necessarily entailing human participation. Although God takes the initiative, God provides the power and God secures its completion, the redemption of all things still involves us. We work with God. We do not sit lazily on the sidelines.

In 1 Corinthians 15:58, Paul had just finished detailing the resurrection hope to his readers. He then encouraged them: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Our eschatological hope should encourage us to faithful labor, not complacency.

We as Christians ought to mourn and condemn the horrific damage we are doing to creation. We must also place our hope in Christ as the one who is undoing the damage and will one day undo it fully. In the meantime, we must work faithfully to protect and care for God's creation.

For further reading:

Richter, Sandra. "A Biblical Theology of Creation Care." *The Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 67-76.

Wright, N. T. "Jesus is Coming—Plant a Tree!" Pages 83-107 in *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015.

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