

How should Christians respond to climate change?

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Around the globe, the weather is constantly changing. Temperatures fall and rise, winds change and carry clouds which form and expire in rain, hail or snow. These irregular and unpredictable movements harmonise with the regular rhythms of day and night, of tides and of seasons in a seamless whole, the *climate*. Over longer periods, this tireless progression of regular and irregular changes is altered by changes in factors such as the chemistry of our atmosphere, the shape of continents, ocean circulation and solar output [1]. Throughout the Earth's history, these climatic changes have led to the migration, extinction and adaptation of species. Conversely, in the past few hundred years, our own species' unprecedented use of fossil fuels for energy generation has caused changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere at much faster rates than before, which is driving changes to the Earth's climate.

For Christians, the world is not just a system of chemical and physical processes, but is created by God, "maker of Heaven and Earth" (Ps 146:6). The natural world has intrinsic value to God. After creating it, He "saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Creation's intrinsic value and dependence on its creator and sustainer is seen elsewhere in scripture. God created the natural world in wisdom (Ps 104:24) and He cares for it and enriches it abundantly (Ps 65:9). Nature responds, and the land itself is "satisfied by the fruits of His work" (Ps 104:13) with the meadows and valleys shouting for joy and singing (Ps 65:13), even revealing His glory (Ps 8:1). Climate change threatens to destroy this richness by increasing many species' extinction risk, reducing biodiversity and causing the destruction of fragile habitats.

This destruction has an additional sting in its effects on our brothers and sisters and on our neighbours. Jesus makes all other human beings our neighbours (Luke 10:30-37) and members of His family (Matt 25:40). He requires that we love all others as ourselves (Luke 10:29) and that whatever we've failed to do for the least of God's family, we've failed to do for Him (Matt 25:45). Since climate change is expected to disproportionately affect the world's poor (both alive and yet to be born) through food shortages, extreme weather and conflict [4], then through failure to act on the knowledge of our destructive behaviour is a sin. This can be thought of as *social sin*, "a sin against love of neighbour, [which] in the law of Christ it is all the more serious in that it involves the Second Commandment, which is 'like unto the first'" (Pope John Paul II, [2]).

How then should we respond? First, we need to identify the problem. This isn't just that the climate is changing, but that humans continue to choose to act in ways that treat our relationship with the planet as a secondary concern. Sometimes this may be complicated by conflict between ecological imperatives and other social goods [5], but in general this means that climate change isn't just an ecological, economic, scientific or technological problem but a moral one, caused and worsened by millions of individual choices to value comfort and convenience over the good of our neighbours and common home. It is a problem of collective human sin, of seeing ourselves as the Earth's lords and masters rather than God (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* [3]).

The good news is that by dying on the cross, God forgives our sins (Eph 1:7). The gravity of all our sins, has been lifted and "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5). In order to be followers of Christ, we must address this problem of sin (Rom 6:21). Here the conception of social sin as being the global consequence of individual sin [2] is particularly important and leads us away from seeing climate change as too big for us to solve and back towards individual responsibility. We must address first our own part in the problem and then the problems of wider society (Matt 7:3-5).

Individually, it is important that we turn away from sin (Rom 6) and towards God. We are called to be disciples of Christ and to obey His teaching. If this sounds difficult, then we can consider Jesus' response to His disciples' reaction to the difficulty of entering the Kingdom of Heaven, that "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). In this case, our individual responsibility can only be addressed with God's help through prayer and through returning to Him

and acknowledging our sin in repentance. As well as repentance, we are able to hold the infinitely tricky moral, social, technological and economic problems of climate change to God in intercessory and contemplative prayer, by praying for our own part in the problem, those who are and will be affected by the consequences and for the natural world itself. Repentance and prayer don't happen alone. We should also be prepared to make practical changes to the way we live, to use less and live more efficiently and to be properly informed about the scientific and political/economic dimensions of climate change. As members of congregations and of our wider communities, we must discuss and raise awareness of our relationship with the climate in our churches and communities and support and lobby for campaigns to effect change at a national or global level.

In summary, although climate change is complex and has ecological, economic, technological and social aspects, it also has a moral dimension. Climate change has been driven via governments and corporations by our individual choices. Since these choices worsen God's world and the lives of His people, they are grave sins and, in so far as they are our choices, totally our responsibility. God responds to our failings through forgiveness through Jesus Christ and we are called to draw closer to Him in prayer and repentance. This drawing closer leads us back to individual and collective action.

[1] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/earth/cause-ice-age.html>

[2] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (December 2, 1984), n. 16

[3] Pope Francis, "Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home." Encyclical Letter. (August 10 2015)

[4] The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/31/climate-change-poor-suffer-most-un-report>

[5] Climate Change Working Group III: Mitigation of Climate Change 2.1.3
https://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg3/en/ch2s2-1-3.html