

Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living

By Robert White and Nick Spencer

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I live in the countryside. Sometimes I have visitors from the town, ten miles away. They are often astonished by the peace, as if they have entered a different world. Nature seems to them exotic, almost strange. For them, the supermarket provides the normal mediation with nature. Sheep are joints of meat wrapped in plastic, and chickens enjoy a perfect existence in drawings on egg-boxes. When they think of ‘the environment’, it means ‘an issue’, not what is around them.

When we read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, we similarly see through an invisible glass wall, into a rural world where shepherds and flocks, trees and water, droughts and storms were not picturesque metaphors but the stuff of life. ‘The Environment’ was ‘the world’.

But today we are learning afresh that there is a world out there, and that ‘the environment’ never went away. Behind our television screens there is a real world; and while we watch it on the news, it might just be coming up through our drains and flooding our carpets. The challenge of climate change has reminded us that while everything is on tap, something has to go into the pipe the other end – water, energy, fuel, and there is a cost. Nature is asking for payment, and behind nature is the God of justice who watches our accounting and knows how we gained ‘our’ wealth.

Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living, by Nick Spencer and Bob White, is an ambitious attempt to place our real-world environmental crisis alongside the ancient word of the Bible, and see if there is a fit. Our real world presents a physical crisis and a social-spiritual crisis. In the Bible’s world, physical, social and spiritual crises were often described as one. Is there something we can learn from this?

Bob White is a scientist (professor of geophysics at Cambridge University, and a director of JRI), and Nick Spencer works for the Jubilee Centre, which since 1983 has sought to apply Biblical ethics to public policy. Together they have engaged in the tough work of thinking through bible into practice, not shirking real dilemmas, such as whether the UK should build new Nuclear Power stations. Equally difficult is the question of how we do jump from Isaiah’s words to Israel into decisions about whether to visit our relations in New Zealand. For the fact is that given the reality of climate change, these issues must be faced. Time for ‘life as normal’ has already run out.

The book is structured in three parts, looking at today’s problems, the Bible’s vision, and possible applications. For anyone who feels they have not properly understood global warming, the first chapter, ‘global warming, local causes’ is the clearest of introductions by someone well able to make the science accessible, even enjoyable. ‘Local causes’ are shown to be the activities we are all, normally, engaged in. The second chapter looks at how we live, and it shows that our ‘normality’ has shifted enormously in recent years. For example, ‘while the [UK] population has risen by around 11% since 1971, the total

housing stock has risen by three times that amount'. Behind this is a social story of whether people have the ability to live together, or individually 'need' more space. But this story of many individual 'lifestyle choices' or, as often, divorces and bereavements, also affects the climate, since the average UK household 'emits about 25 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent each year'. Society, of course, is more than just individuals. The social fabric on which individuals thrive has been increasingly dismantled: the local shops where people used to meet have often been closed; large impersonal supermarkets require longer travel and decrease opportunities for social support and interaction. The dominance of the car, which has brought so much comfort and convenience, has also diminished well-being by weakening local ties, reducing face-to-face encounters, and diminishing family time by enabling long commutes.

Therefore before we even look at the Bible's account, we have been prepared to see moral, social and environmental issues as closely linked. The authors begin the Bible section by asking whether Christians should care about the environment. Well, they are hardly going to say no! Christians would have to be very strange animals indeed if they could be presented with the facts about the present and likely effects of climate change and want to do nothing. But 'theological excuses' are not entirely foreign to the Christian community and here the authors have done a good job in blocking most of the exits. There is a particularly careful account of the future world, after Christ returns, and of the value for that future of what we do now. The authors believe that the destruction to be visited on the world, promised in 2 Peter, will be of a 'cleansing' kind, like Noah's flood.

The next two chapters derive from the Bible a vision for sustainability and some principles for putting it into practice. The vision comes from Isaiah, and the practice focuses more on Israel's law, particularly the Jubilee provisions. The vision from Isaiah is helpful in showing that all of creation is in God's redemptive focus, and also that well-being spreads into all aspects of life as we live righteously. There is no division between our private worlds and God's world, the one he created and loved: it is all valuable to him, and he means to mend all of it. Righteousness does not, of course, mean that we suddenly switch from 'people' to 'environment'; the poor also have a stake in the land and fairness is their due. This brings us to the remarkable Jubilee principles which involved cancelling debt: these regarded every Israelite as a valid 'stakeholder' in the community, even those who had fallen on hard times. The laws of Israel were designed to remedy 'social exclusion'. In a book on Climate Change, the point is obvious: just because the West has got rich on cheap fuel does not mean that we 'own' the planet's resources or have any right to exclude others from the benefits.

The final chapters look at practical decision-making in modern Britain. Very often, one wants to know 'what sort of world are you really after?' Here, the authors have helpfully, and bravely, set out a vision for a future society. It is a society not too far off, in which we are still driving, shopping, and being taxed! It is indeed very similar to our own, but it has calmed down a little. It is more local. Relatives live closer, food travels less far, and we do not have such a lust to wander. We holiday in Britain! Our houses are packed with insulation, our farmers grow bio-fuel crops, our business leaders video-conference and there is a 'rural renaissance'. There is a legal framework for business and domestic

carbon quotas and trading. Britain led by the churches, becomes a world leader in sustainable living. Interestingly, there is no mention of a spiritual revival and it seems most of the change is on the back of information and legislation.

This brings us to the chapter in which the possibilities today are worked out. We have been appealed to, and suggestions are made for individual action. But, as a society, we also have to be coerced. All of us will react in different ways to the thought of more expensive fuel, taxation on air travel and other hindrances to the freedoms we have come to expect. The chief issue for the authors is that it is the most vulnerable who will feel the pinch most. Many policy options produce dilemmas. The avoidance of pain always has been the prerogative of the rich, and it is not easy to try to change this. One possibility is Domestic Carbon Quotas, which would allow equal quotas to everyone; and those with spare could sell theirs on the market to those whose households consumed more. The prospects for greater energy efficiency, renewables and other carbon-saving technologies are also described. Many different methods have value, but most have in common that they will not come into being by market forces alone. Leadership is required, but also public consensus and legislation.

We do not have the leisure to sit back and do nothing while the technology (and the theology!) are perfected. There are enough fruitful ideas to be getting on with. But the authors are also aware that in a 'mature democracy' people cannot simply be bullied into responsible living. If a just society cannot be imposed, neither can a sustainable one, though we can head in the right direction. Therefore in their final reflective chapter, the focus moves back to the Bible, from what we cannot do to what we trust God will do.

Here the vision is not so much of the laws that may help preserve society in the face of climate change, as of the hope for renewal in the Christian community. God will make all things new. Christians are not putting their hope in what works, but in God who will make it all work. We should not say this lightly, because for 'God to make things work' is not without the cataclysm of Christ's return. In the meantime, there is a gap. That gap is painful for Christians, seeing the hope, but unable to realise it. But the gap for those outside Christ is far greater, and consists of more than dysfunctional economies, societies and climate. This certainly gives us pause for reflection. If it is true, as the book says, that 'We are not called to conceive, design, build and maintain a better version of the old world but rather to participate in the new one that has been inaugurated at the cross' how much more do we need to let people know, as they face this life's inequities and struggles, that they could have a future in eternity?