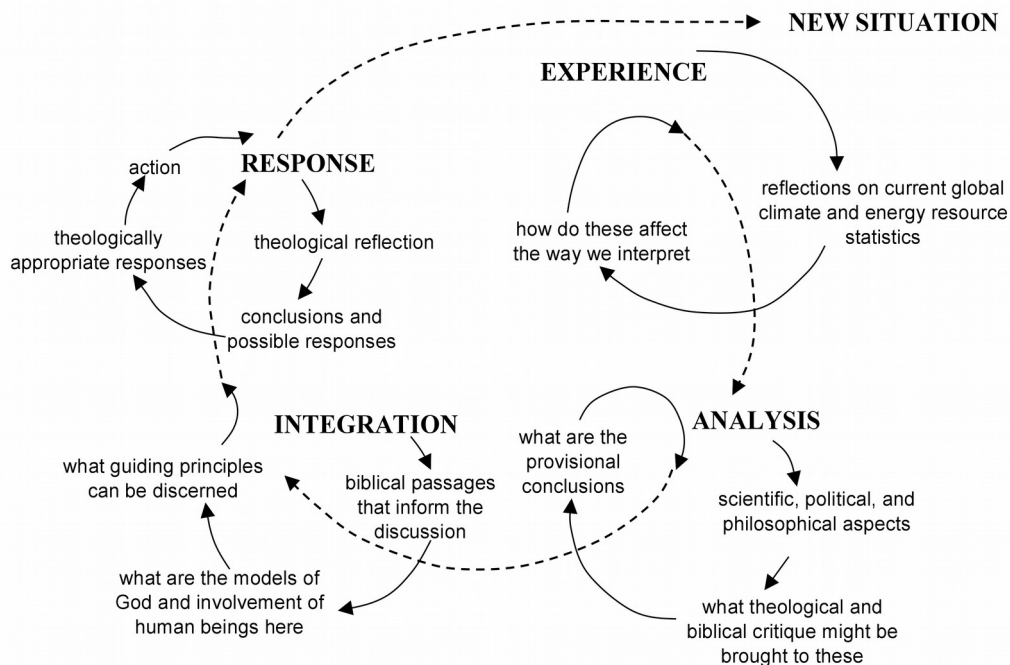


‘Travelling Light’ - a theological reflection on modern transport

by Revd. Dr. John Weaver

Introduction

When asked to explore a theological reflection on modern transport, I decided to use my version of the Learning Cycle.¹



Experience

Why do people travel?

There are many reasons including: migration both economic and environmental; escape as refugees; for commerce, shopping or work; for leisure or pleasure. But why do we travel? Some travel is necessary and some is not; and there may be alternatives to private car travel: walk, cycle, public transport or car share.

What are the various modes of transport?

We can travel on foot, horse, cycle, car, bus, train, canals, boat, and plane. There are different modes of transport and they each have different effects on the environment: footpaths and bridle paths, cycle tracks, roads, railways, canals, and airports.

Travel through history

Travel has been undertaken for many reasons: trade, e.g. Marco Polo; conquest, e.g. the Conquistadors; discovery, e.g. Magellan and Columbus; colonisation, e.g. the British Empire; scientific exploration, e.g. Darwin; for pleasure, e.g. the Grand Tour popular from 1660-1840; and package holidays, e.g. Thomas Cook, 1950s onwards (although established in the mid-19th century). These reasons for travel have been and are or are not important in different ways, and the results have been beneficial and not so beneficial. Even the grand tours have filled our museums, and package holidays have given rest and relief from stress for some.

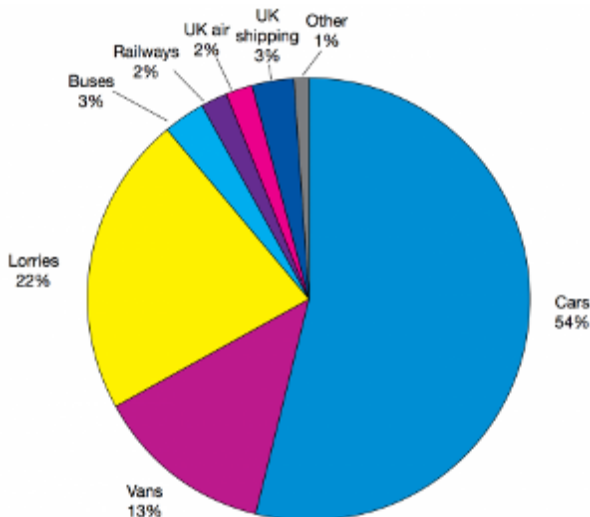
Analysis

How do we begin to analyse these aspects of travel?

We need to distinguish between necessary travel, that needs to be undertaken and self-centred travel, which we want to undertake.

Necessary travel will include: journeys to and from places of employment, but here we might consider where we choose to live and ask do we need to commute? This will involve government housing and transport policies, and other aspects of the economy. Travel is often part of employment for example deliveries. Travel may also be an important aspect of family life, for example taking care of elderly family members. Other less necessary travel can be for entertainment and pleasure, or even to impress others in the case of 'boy racers' or 'girl racers.'

Speed of travel is part of our modern obsession with time. Getting from A to B in as fast a time as possible takes on great importance; it is the tyranny of time. Walking, cycling and public transport tend to come a poor second to driving. We give little consideration to canals and rivers, and aeroplanes are attractive for travelling further afield. Maybe they will come second to rockets in the future. The government is investing in faster roads, widening motorways, and faster rail travel such as the HS2 project. The desire for more exotic foodstuffs from all over the world requires fast delivery and an increase in air freight, which leads to the need for more runway capacity at airports. But how important is speed? With bulk goods forward planning would allow the use of canals.



Percentage of UK Transport CO₂ Emissions²

Emissions from vehicles are an important factor for both CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and air quality in towns and cities. Almost half of UK emissions come from private motor transport and when we add in lorries and vans we reach 89%. Buses, rail, UK air and UK shipping make up the remaining 11%.² If we measure transport in terms of energy efficiency per person per mile travelled then cars and planes are highest consumers of fuel and therefore the highest polluters. Electric trains; buses, trams and hybrid or electric cars are the most efficient; and walking or cycling produce negligible emissions.

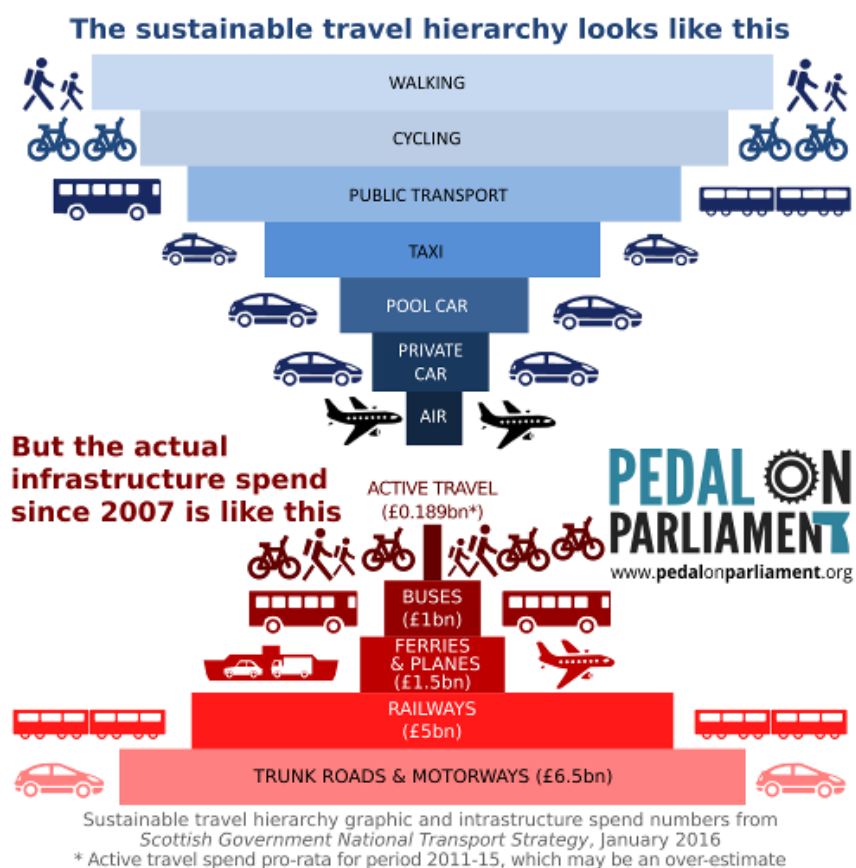
Government policies: we can consider how the Government addresses these statistics, both in terms of public health and their commitment to the reduction of greenhouse gases. There are various transport strategies: European, National, Regional and some that are contracted out. There are policies to address a London centric situation, such as the ‘Northern Powerhouse’. There has also been a move to relocate government offices, and various housing and industrial policies. In an attempt to limit pollution the government has progressively increased fuel taxes and introduced emissions charges and congestion charges.

Various ‘green policies’ have included electrification of the rail network, better public transport in the cities, rural transport subsidies, and cycle routes. But there have also been plans for new runways at major airports, and redevelopment of regional airports.

The Department for Transport states that: safe and dependable transport is essential to UK society and the economy. The government is working to make rail, road, air and water transport more efficient and effective, keep them safe and secure, and reduce greenhouse gas and other emissions.³ They see one issue in the fact that 55% of car journeys are under 5 miles, of which many could be walked, or made by bike or public transport. Making these ways of travel more attractive encourages people to leave the car at home. This reduces their carbon footprint and helps the UK reach its climate change goals. The government gives funding to local transport authorities in England to help them develop their local transport services (although the financial difficulties of many councils may question the viability of this). They want to encourage more people to use buses in busy urban areas through improving the system of local bus subsidy; helping local authorities invest in low carbon buses; and providing free travel for older and disabled people. They also seek to encourage more people to cycle more safely and more often⁴ by funding local authorities through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund.⁵

Alongside these commendable intentions, the Transport Investment Strategy July 2017⁶ focuses on the development of a national transport infrastructure, which includes transformational projects like the A14 trunk road and the HS2 rail line and their preferred scheme for meeting the need for additional airport capacity in the south-east of England in a new north-west runway at Heathrow Airport. Some £61 billion is being allocated over a five year period, which includes a mere extra

£1.1bn for local transport and £220m for national roads to directly tackle congestion and improve local productivity. While focusing on finance and financial returns the strategy document does conclude: that while these decision-making frameworks will help us to create a transport network



that can deliver our aims, we also need to respond with innovation to the challenges and opportunities presented by funding and delivery pressures, environmental factors and the rapid pace of change.

We can question the joined-up thinking between government departments. There seems to be an issue with Government investment, which appears to deny their commitment to addressing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Investment stands in stark contradiction with the levels of sustainability of the various modes of transport. In his JRI blog⁷, Mike Perry observes that fully electric cars (EVs) have come a long way and are now at the point where they are about to seriously change how our society sells, buys and owns cars. He identifies five barriers to EV uptake, which are beginning to disappear: range, performance, choice, cost and charging-infrastructure.

We might also suggest the rehabilitation of the canal system. This 18th-century motorway system of canals and navigable rivers form a major transport network, in need of only piecemeal investment, and with the spare capacity to take away the need for hundreds of thousands of lorry-journeys. In the second half of the 18th century, canals drove the industrial revolution. Today, some authorities want them to drive congestion off the roads. Ten years ago the European Commission proposed a seven-year plan to shift large amounts of freight from roads to inland waterways. A great deal of repair and renewal work is being carried out on our canal system by the Canal and River Trust.⁸ In an age of global warming, individuals and companies need to reduce their carbon footprint. Water transport consumes less of the earth's finite resources such as, fuel, aggregates and land, and is less damaging to the environment in terms of air and land pollution, as well as noise and visual intrusion. With one litre of fuel, water freight can move 127 tonnes over one kilometre, which compares with 97 tonnes by rail and 50 tonnes by road. The Inland Freight Group states that barges like the ones that are used to carry gravel in West London have about the same size engine as a 20 ton lorry and carry the load of three lorries.⁹

We need to encourage the long-term investment into sustainable transport alongside regional planning that encourages a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Integration

Biblical reflection

If we examine travel in biblical history we move from nomadic people groups to city dwellers, from nomadic livestock keepers to commercial traders and empire builders. We find nomadic peoples, migration, refugees of famine, escape from hostile people groups, settlement, invasion and commerce. But travel in the Bible is always seen as being undertaken as part of God's purposes for his people or sometimes as a contradiction of God's will and purposes.

We find that they travelled

- at God's direction, e.g. Abram in Genesis 12;
- in God's providence, e.g. Joseph and his family in Genesis 37-50;
- at God's command, e.g. escaping from Egypt in Exodus 3-18;
- in God's provision and care, e.g. in their wanderings through the wilderness recorded in Deuteronomy;
- to worship God, e.g. Psalms 112-121 the songs of Ascent;
- in the ministry of God, e.g. Luke 9:51ff – Jesus set his path toward Jerusalem;
- and in mission, e.g. the missionary travels of Paul in the Book of Acts.

But not all travel was seen to be in God's perfect will, e.g. the travel of the empire opposed to God for trade, money and power - Pax Romana and the worship of the whore and the beast Revelation 17 & 18. There are lessons to be learnt here; maybe we need to put God back into our transport equation.

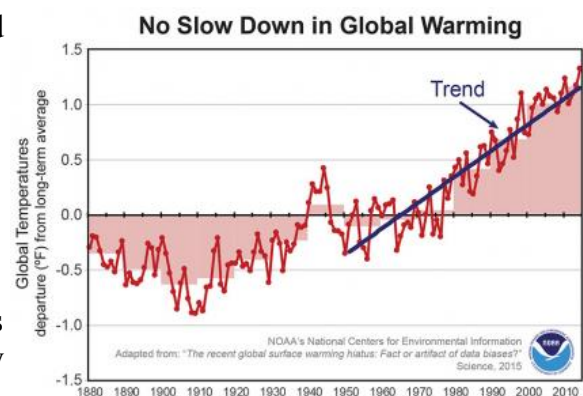
Theological reflection

What motives shape our thinking about travel? Are we serving God and answering the call of Christ expressed as 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). This is a different sort of life, a Christ-like life, a life that is in Christ. It is to deny self – move away from a selfish materialistic life style; take up the cross-shaped life of sacrificial love – sharing God's good gifts of creation with all; and follow Jesus – in his compassion for others and for the world. To deny self is to live more simply, use less of the world's resources; treat the created order with care. To take up the cross is to live sacrificially for the sake of others; give up our greed; sacrifice our wants; and to follow Jesus is to recognise the created world as an expression of God's order and love; see everyone as equally valued by God; take special care of the poor and the outcast; and love our neighbour as ourselves. We are challenged to understand that the whole of creation is brought back into relationship with God through the cross (Colossians 1:15-20). This takes place as human beings find their restored relationship with the Creator, through the cross (Romans 8:18-25). God is deeply and passionately involved in the world; God is no absentee landlord, but indwelling, accompanying, incarnate, and present as Holy Spirit. This understanding will lead us to consider the reasons for our journeys, our methods of transportation, and the effect of our travel on others – including emissions.

Travel is a major effect contributor to global warming, and we know that climate change is having a disproportionate effect on the poorest and less well-off nations of the world. Greenhouse gas emissions are not restricted by political boundaries. Climate change is not an environmental issue but a human issue – it affects the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, our health, our economy, and our world security. We need to recognise how climate change affects every aspect of life for all people, especially the disadvantaged and vulnerable peoples of God's world. The biblical mandate remains that we should care for widows, orphans and strangers. When the lawyer asked Jesus who was his neighbour, Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan with its answer – anyone in need of your love (Luke 10:25-37). In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*,¹⁰ the Pope expresses his concern about our common home and the need for global, sustainable, integral, development. He challenges us to avoid the short-term outlook that has dominated politics, and calls for a new political will. He maintains that we recognise that the destruction and wanton disregard for the environment is both a sin against ourselves and against God. The effects of climate change demonstrate global inequality and injustice, and threaten the breakdown of society. He observes that world leaders fail to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. He concludes that 'In the meantime, economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.' Much of our current transport policy has financial gain and business growth at its heart. The Pope commends to the church new lifestyles, which demonstrate a covenant between humanity and the environment. Furthermore, he challenges us to an ecological conversion whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. He calls us to find joy and peace in a life of simplicity, with love overflowing in our acts of care for creation. Transportation policies and our personal use of transport have to be part of this consideration.

Last Autumn I was asked by Contemporary Christianity in Northern Ireland to reflect on whether or not Jesus would drive a diesel. Maybe a better question is: ‘Would Jesus drive any car if he were living in our world today?’¹¹ Or would he campaign for more public transport and a consideration of the poorest members of the community, for whom any car would be a luxury. The key issue is not only about emissions, although consideration of clean air in our cities is important. At the beginning of this month the German government began legislation to ban all older diesel cars from its cities. In the UK, Oxford City Council have agreed that petrol and diesel cars will be banned from Oxford city centre from 2020 as the city looks to improve air quality; and buses and other council vehicles are set to be replaced by electric vehicles. Transport for London have decided that older vehicles driving in central London now need to meet minimum Euro emission standards or pay an extra daily charge. This is in addition to the Congestion Charge. The T-Charge (officially known as the Emissions Surcharge) operates in the Congestion Charge zone and is part of their commitment to help clean up London’s dangerously polluted air. As Sir John Houghton observed, we know what to do but we lack the will to do it. What shapes my decision on what car to buy or whether to buy one at all? What shapes my thinking about whether or not I need to make a journey and what mode of transport I will use?

The science is unequivocal and the situation the world faces is urgent. Fifteen of the top 16 warmest years since records began have occurred since 2000. The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere has exceeded 400ppm (up from 250ppm in 1750) and the average global surface temperature has risen to 1.01°C above the pre-Industrial temperature c.1750. The scientific evidence is undisputed, and the humanitarian impacts are devastating, especially for the poorer communities in our world, but the political will is overshadowed by the profit motives of global corporations and the desire of political leaders to hold onto power.



It is here that our Christian worldview should come into play with increased concerns for the care of God’s creation, and the marks of justice and fairness in our treatment of the world’s poor. Which of those food stuffs not grown in this country, which are transported from other parts of the world, do I need? But then, what happens to the economies of poorer countries if we stop importing their products – what effect will this have on their local environments? It is more complex than we might think. Nevertheless, I believe that care of creation is a central part of our Christian discipleship. The following passages from scripture will inform our thinking:

- The creation command is to care for creation (Genesis 2:15)
- God’s first covenant is with the whole of creation (Genesis 9:9-11)
- There is damage to creation and to people’s lives when we break the covenant (Isaiah 24:4-6)
- God’s intervention in this world in Christ was to redeem the whole cosmos (John 3:16)
- The call for our discipleship is: to deny self, take up the cross-shaped life of sacrificial love, and follow Christ (Mark 8:34)
- Creation groans as it waits for human beings to become Christ-like in their lives (Romans 8:18-25)
- Our hope is in Christ who is creator and redeemer and who holds the whole of creation together and reconciles all things through the cross (Colossians 1:15-20)

We recognize that the new technologies are part of God's gifts to us, but there are key questions to which we need answers: Are we achieving God's purposes? Do we know what God intends? Are we excluding God from our discussions? We have the scientific understanding and the technological expertise, but how do we judge what is right? The answer is to be found through being attuned to God's wisdom. A world-view that places Christ at the heart of creation gives us a distinctive set of values. The intrinsic value of the whole of creation comes from being created and valued by God. Christ as the redeemer of creation, and the promise that he holds all things together provides a context of hope for the future of the world and affirms that all of creation is interconnected. Christ's roles as supreme over all things and head of the church challenge us to make his Kingdom visible on earth as in heaven.

We find very little to offer us hope in the science; science shows us that we have messed up; we have underestimated the effects of climate change. But we need hope, for if we have no hope we will fail. Our hope does not come from science, but from our faith – the fear is in my head; the hope is in my heart. We read in 2 Timothy 1:7: *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.* God is not the author of fear. Fear paralyses us, but God through his Spirit gives us love, power to get things done, and a sound mind to make good decisions. (I am indebted to Katharine Hayhoe, 'Talking Climate in Texas, and Living to Tell the Tale', Oxford 15th November 2017 for this observation). We are seeing glimpses of hope: the provision of solar energy for the poorest in the world; the fact that China and India are leading the world in renewable energy and the development of batteries for electric cars; and that in the UK we have had a number of days this year (2018) when all our electrical power has come from renewable sources.

Christian truth is to be embodied in the life of the community, but when truth 'dies' the consequences for society and the environment are disastrous. Our true humanity is to be located in Christ, and when we locate ourselves outside Christ we find ourselves in disharmony with God's purpose for the well-being of creation.

Response

For the government – the challenge is for the decisions that are made and what guides, shapes, controls those decisions. To the political, economic and technical aspects of decision making we should add, as of prime importance, the social and environmental effects.

For individuals - How do we decide about how and where we travel? Is our journey necessary? If the distance is short and we are physically able we can walk or cycle if there are cycle routes or use public transport, where this is available. If we do need to drive a car we can look for one with the lowest emissions, maybe a hybrid or electric vehicle.

For the church, for Christians, all decisions we make should be guided by our Christian faith, founded on our ultimate hope which is in God and is eternal, while human hope is temporal and uncertain. Therefore, in our use of earth's God-given resources and our care of God's planet, we should be looking for churches to be a prophetic voice in their communities, where radical Christian discipleship embodies an alternative narrative, which offers hope – expressing an alternative model for all in our society as we pray: 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven'. We can campaign with others about maintaining public transport routes and increasing them; and for clear and safe cycle routes in our towns and cities.

A new situation

Can we envisage a brighter future? We can work for public transport systems that are sufficient for the needs of all communities; investment in sustainable modes of transport; vehicles that produce less emissions to affect air quality in our cities; and as a result less emissions to add to global warming and climate change. As Christians we are called to love God and love neighbour, which will include the example that we present in our ways and means of travel and transport. This will also include our political will in our engagement with politicians, seeking to influence them to make social and environmental considerations a priority in legislation.

Biography

John Weaver was born and brought up in Cardiff. After taking degrees in Geology at Swansea, he taught at the University of Derby. John trained for Baptist ministry in Oxford and was then pastor of Highfield Baptist Church from 1981-1991. From 1992-2001 he taught theology at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and from 2001-2012 served as Principal of South Wales Baptist College. He is a former President of the Baptist Union, and is the Chair of JRI. His main areas of research are: relating faith to life and work; theological reflection; adult education; and the dialogue between science and faith.



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The *JohnRay Initiative* promotes responsible environment stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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