

A Brief Theological Reflection on Climate Action

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It should be noted that climate change is not an issue directly discussed in the bible and it was not an issue for the bible writers. This is not uncommon, being true of many contemporary issues, so the question becomes one of which biblical principles are of most relevance to our concerns. The bible's teaching on creation immediately comes to mind.

1. A work of God

Genesis 1 describes the creation of the earth and everything in it as the outworking of God's intent and power. As such, it belongs to him.

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 ESV)

¹ The earth is the LORD'S and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein... (Psalm 24:1 ESV)

The creation was "very good" in the sense that it perfectly expressed the intent of its creator, who is the source of all goodness.

³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." (Luke 18:19 ESV)

Human beings, as part of God's creation, are dependent beings, and our role within it is defined by our Creator. "Dominion" suggests that we have a position of priority or precedence within the created order and "image" speaks to our function within it.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28 ESV)

2. Bearing the “image of God”

Human beings are only truly “good” to the extent that they fulfil their created function as “God’s image bearers.” While the “image of God” is a multifaceted concept, the practical consequence of bearing “God’s image” is that humanity stands as the representative of the invisible and spiritual God in the visible and material world. We are at our closest to “God’s image” when we are thinking the thoughts of God and acting as he would act, although we only ever do this imperfectly. The only perfect and uncorrupted expression of “God’s image” is found in Jesus Christ. “He is the image of the invisible God... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:15, 19). Thus, the “image of God” is most visible within us when we are imitating Christ. The created world is the stage on which we live out our created purpose as “image bearers.”

3. God’s purpose for his creation

What are the thoughts of the Creator regarding the purpose of the created world? First, he intends that it should provide for the physical needs of all of humanity, regardless of their standing with him.

²⁹ And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.” (Genesis 1:29 ESV)

⁴⁵ ...For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:45 ESV)

Second, it serves to reveal the existence of the Creator to those within the creation with the spiritual and rational capacity to comprehend him.

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1 ESV)

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made... (Romans 1:19-20 ESV)

Third, he has delegated to humanity the authority to subdue the earth. “Subdue” has the meaning of bringing the world it into submission and controlling and directing it towards a purpose. While the language of Genesis 1 grants this authority to all humanity, its exercise is only legitimate when used to bring things into conformity with the will of the Creator.

Unfortunately, the language of subjugation carries negative connotations because of human abuses of power and illegitimate rule. These lie behind the climate crisis we are presently experiencing. We feel uncomfortable applying the language of subjugation to Christ's ministry because of these same abuses. However, the Apostle Paul felt no such constraints when using the language of subjugation to describe the purpose of Christ's resurrection.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28 ESV)

Subjugation is legitimate and "good" when we seek to subjugate the world to the purposes of its creator. Indeed, that is our function. At the heart of God's purpose for the created world, which is, in turn, the goal of our "bearing his image," is that all things might be "put in subjection" under his Son. When this is complete, all human abuse and illegitimate rule over the created world will end.

4. Longing for a new creation

We do not live in the world of Genesis 1 and 2. In the idealised world of the Garden of Eden, "image bearing" was a matter of going along with the natural order, enjoying God's provision, and "walking with God in the cool of the evening." Outside of the Garden, where we now live, life is characterised by disorder, the struggle to survive, and disconnection from God expressing itself in illegitimate rule divorced from the purposes of the Creator. Our present climate crisis is one aspect of this and a consequence of human sin.

¹⁶ To the woman [God] said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." ¹⁷ And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the

sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return..."
(Geneses 3:16-19 ESV)

Christ's death and resurrection also belong to life in the world outside of the Garden. These are God's ultimate solution to the problems of disorder, struggle, and disconnection. Our purpose as "image bearers" in the world outside of the Garden is not to recreate Eden. There is no going back. While, as human beings, we have some limited capacity to mitigate or restrain the effects of sin, we can never eliminate them. Rather, we should be working towards the fulfilment of the new creation goal of God, that we can each stand confident before Christ on the day of judgment.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God... (2 Corinthians 5:17-18 ESV)

¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. (1 John 4:14-17 ESV)

5. Responding to climate change

What conclusions can we draw from this discussion?

Taking action to minimise the impact of climate change is not a uniquely Christian virtue. Common sense and self-interest have motivated many to take action to address this issue that threatens all of humanity.

What distinguishes our response, as Christians, is that we are motivated by more than just pragmatic self-interest. Ours is a biblically principled pragmatism that expresses the God-given purpose that we have as "God's image bearers." Our actions should seek to further God's purposes for this world.

- First, we value the created world because we acknowledge, respect, and honour the one who created it (Genesis 1:1).
- Second, we nurture and protect the created world so that it can fulfill its intended purpose of providing for the material needs of all people as we await the day when Christ's rule will be complete (Genesis 1:29).

- Third, we preserve the created world so as not to hinder its capacity to communicate divine truth to humankind (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19-20).
- Fourth, we care for the created world as an act of practical love towards others flowing from the presence of God, who is love, abiding in us (1 John 4:16-17).
- Fifth, as bearers of the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26), we long for all things in this world to reach God’s desired end, that is, to be placed “in subjection under [Christ], that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:25-28) and that we can each stand confident before Christ on the day of his return (1 John 4:17).

In the midst of our current climate crisis, what are we doing to address this fifth challenge? It is not our place to condemn those who have brought us to this point. Indeed, we share culpability and forgiveness speaks more powerfully than condemnation. That being said, we cannot ignore illegitimate rule and the abuse of divinely delegated authority where we find it. We must accept personal responsibility for our own contribution to climate change and call on those individuals, organisations, and governments who are abusing God’s creation to repent and “sin no more” (John 8:11). More than anything, this present crisis brings home the fragility of our world, our utter dependence on God, and reminds us that the only certain future we have is Christ’s future. If we are not proclaiming this core message, anything else we do is ultimately futile.