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Climate Change: A Theological Primer

■ By Rev Dr Jarred Jung

Why are we concerned with climate change? I think that a large part of climate change today is man-made climate change as our planet is warming too fast as a result of greenhouse gases. Now, I see the results are coming to fruition and do not think the correlation is just a coincidence.

With the rise of carbon dioxide emitting from things such as vehicles, cars, factories and airplanes, we have more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which leads to rising temperatures. I am not a science or climate change denier. I believe it is a big issue, which is one that Christians, in particular, need to take seriously.

How did we get to this place to where climate change is an issue? By this, I do not mean “why is there global warming?” What is at the root of this need to deal with an issue like man-made climate change? To discuss this, we are going to look at the Bible.



The Bible's story

We are going to look at the big picture of what the Bible is telling us. Even though there is not a chapter and verse in the Bible about air pollution, fossil fuels, renewables or climate change, the Bible does speak to these things.

The Bible's story is the story of God's work in the world. There are four parts to the Bible story — the beginning is called creation, the conflict is the fall, the resolution is found in redemption, and the ending is called consummation.

a) Creation

The Bible opens with this statement: “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*”. (Genesis 1:1 ESV) The Bible starts in the beginning when the world does not exist. But we find that God exists.

Moses wrote the book of Genesis when the Israelites are going to be entering into the promise land where there are other nations, who worship other gods — gods that resemble creatures, men or spiritual beings; gods of stone, wood, gold and silver; and gods that are created. And Israel is going to be tempted to worship these gods. Moses tells them — the God of Israel is not a god made of wood but is the creator of all that is.

We must ask the question: “Who are we in this creation?” “*Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*” (1:26) People are made in God's image, they are made in some way to be a reflection of God to the rest of creation.

“*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.*” (1:26) We see the first appearance of this word “*dominion*”. Now this sounds like a bad word. But as we are going to see, any idea of dominating the creation is a corruption of the Bible's idea of dominion.

“*So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*” (1:27) This is key to answering this question: “Who are we?” People are to relate to the rest of creation as image bearers of God, and reflect Him to the rest of creation.

“*Then 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.”* (1:28) Mankind is not to remain two, they are to multiply and become many. But why does God want more image bearers filling the earth? Because they have a job to do — to fill and subdue the earth, and have dominion over the creation.

Let us look at Genesis 2. “*And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there He put the man whom He had formed.*” (2:8) What was the man’s purpose in the garden? Moses tells us. “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work and keep it.*” (2:15) Adam is to work and keep the garden of Eden. Here, we get a picture of what is meant by dominion. Adam is made not just to exist in a lazy life but rather to manage, steward and nurture the garden. This is Adam’s job. God’s goal for creation is to grow and flourish, and for humanity to develop it. But Adam has another job (2:16-17). To protect the creation, he is given a command, to obey God’s word, lest he die.

At the end of Genesis 2, mankind is placed in a garden where he experiences the joy of creation, work, and the presence of the Lord. Adam and Eve together are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, reflecting God’s image all over the world, developing and nurturing it so that the glory apparent in Eden covers the earth. God has an ending in mind at the beginning, and that ending is achieved via His image bearers. Mankind is set up as a ruler over creation, but humans are never more than a sub-ruler, not the ultimate sovereign. They are to be stewards of God’s creation.

The principles are as follows:

- As Creator, creation belongs to God
- People are stewards
- People are to develop the creation
- People are to seek the flourishing of creation, not its domination

b) The fall

In the next chapter, we find that God has an enemy, who desires to frustrate His plans for creation. That takes us to the fall — the conflict in the story of Scripture.

At the fall, man elevates himself to the place of God, and as a result, his sin impacts everything. This is what we commonly call the curse. When we talk about climate change, and particularly man-made climate change; and any damage that is done by rising sea levels, greater frequency of mosquito-borne tropical diseases, and all the predicted ways that climate change will impact us in negative ways; we can point all of this back to the fall. Furthermore, when we talk about the reasons behind man-made climate change, we have to look at the fall.

Rather than serve as a steward under God, humanity has elevated itself to the place of God. This misplacement has happened in different ways, but I want to highlight three different ways in particular.

• Deism

The first is in a deistic view of the world. God exists but is left out of the world’s picture and is not involved in the world. Man is left to determine reality and morality.

Deism came about in the 1700s in the Western world. At that time at the height of the age of Enlightenment, when scientific exploration advanced, it became more feasible that a world could exist apart from God. For the most part in the 1700s, the idea of no God was still very foreign but deism moved in that way. In essence, deism argues that mankind can mostly exist apart from God’s intervention. This makes sense if you value humanity and its inventions and devalue the supernatural in the way of the Enlightenment. But eventually, deism turns into atheism.

• Atheism

God does not exist. Man is the maker of reality and morality, which is

essentially where we are at today.

In both deism and atheism, mankind is elevated to the place of God, no longer as a steward of God’s creation but as the owner of and king over creation. Creation in this case exists for the sake of mankind to use it as he pleases with no higher authority to instruct mankind how to go about developing the creation.

Man is sovereign and can do whatever he desires with creation. Therefore, we have rampant consumerism, and limitless American-style development or the ultimate value of economic prosperity with no limits, have become the ultimate desire and norm for almost everyone. The fall creates a situation where mankind decides not to manage or steward creation, but rather to exploit creation. This is not the only way that man has decided to usurp God.

• Pantheism

On the opposite side of Deism and Atheism is pantheism.

The creation is god. In pantheism, mankind does not necessarily elevate himself to the position of God, but rather creation apart from mankind is elevated to a position of God.

In a pantheistic worldview:

Man is worshiped as God by mankind (Deism and Atheism)	Creation is worshiped as God by mankind (Pantheism)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewardship is turned to exploitation and failure to fulfil God’s purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man has no right to steward the creation. The creation is god, not man
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mankind is over-valued, creation is under-valued 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation is over-valued, mankind is under-valued

Here we see these two forms — deism’s version of mankind’s relationship to creation, and pantheism’s version of mankind’s relationship to creation.

What are the results? If you believe that mankind is the arbiter of reality, you reinterpret the idea of dominion and ruling. In this situation, this has resulted in an overuse of creation to its detriment in the modern age.

In pantheism’s version, the results are that dominion as stewardship does not exist. If you worship the creation, then there is no principle of stewardship because God is not sovereign over it all. Therefore, the job of humans is to get out of creation’s way, not to develop or oversee it. The creation is over-valued, and mankind is under-valued. Mankind does not have any sort of standing as God’s image bearer to develop creation to God’s glory. These two polar opposites are perhaps the solutions you run into on your social media feeds. This is the world’s view of things such as climate change and the environment. Either you worship humanity as God and exploit the creation and do not care for it, or you worship the creation as God and think that humanity should not exist.

Here is the short answer to how we got here — sin and the fall. The long answer is — through choosing to worship things other than God, through choosing to re-interpret who or what is sovereign, and reinterpret what it means to be human according to our own ways. This has resulted not in the flourishing of creation or mankind, but the exploitation of creation and the de-valuing of mankind.

Let us take this to climate change. From the side where man and creation are worshipped as God by mankind, you have the following:

Man is worshiped as God by mankind	Creation is worshiped as God by mankind
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate change denial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate change apocalypticism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumerism trumps creation care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation worship trumps creation care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploitation ethically appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-humanism ethically appropriate

However, the Bible rejects both of these, and gives a different answer.

c) Redemption

That answer is found in the redemption part of the and accomplished in Jesus. We see in Genesis that God cleanses the earth through the flood, and Noah is left. Noah is given practically the same mandate that God gives to Adam in Genesis 1. But he too failed as the steward of creation.

Then, Abraham is told by God that he will be made into a people that will bless the nations, and be given the land of Canaan. God does not tell Abraham to do it, as He will do it for him. This is a key shift. We know that his offspring are Israel, a people that are brought into the land of Canaan. In Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, we find the laws that are given to Israel — this is how you are to live in the land I am giving you. These laws are sort of a restatement in a way of God’s mandate to Adam. Israel is to do things such as let the land lie fallow. Sabbath is incredibly important, not just for the Israelites but for their land as well. They are not to exploit creation.

They are to steward it according to God’s ways, just like Adam, because Canaan is not their land, it is God’s land. God cares for all people and all of His creation. Of course, we know Israel fails at this. The prophets over and over warn Israel about not keeping Sabbaths. Just as Adam in his failure has to leave the garden, so Israel eventually is taken out of the land of Canaan. It is God’s land, not theirs, and He removes them.

This leads us to Jesus. The creator and king of the earth becomes a man and makes His dwelling among us. He bears the curse of sin in His life all the way to His death, whereby sin is defeated. He is raised from the dead, whereby death is defeated, and He does all of this for the sake of redemption and salvation. Oftentimes, when we speak of salvation, we speak of it purely in the sense of the salvation of the individual soul. What we have to realise is that in the Bible, salvation is much larger than just individual souls. Salvation is the most clearly explained theologically in the book of Romans. But what often gets left out is this.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God”. (Romans 8:18-19). Here, the apostle Paul moves from a focus on humanity to a focus on the creation. The creation is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God. The creation wants to see who the people of God will be. Why is this?

“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, (Romans 8:19) The creation is now cursed and suffers, not of its own will but because of Adam’s sin. Think of anything more appropriate for this verse today than the creation under the curse of sin, literally melting away today because we have rejected our mandate at creation. But what does salvation have to do with this?

“...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God”. (Romans 8:19-20) The creation waits for the fullness of time, when all of God’s children are revealed, when the gathering of God’s people has taken place in full, in order that the creation itself might be set free from the curse.

Christ fulfils the law where we fail, He dies as a propitiation for Adam’s sin, He rises again as the first one to break the curse. Christ saves people from sin, and through Him, saves the creation. Christ is the creator of it all, He is the recreator of it all. The story of Scripture is a creation that is waiting for the people of God to be revealed in full so that it can experience its own redemption, and can be set free from its bondage to corruption. This is a picture of where things are headed. Christ is king over it all, His blood paid for it all, His resurrection began the great undoing of the curse, an undoing that will continue until the curse is finally undone.

Viewing climate change as redeemed people

Where does this leave us today as the people of the risen king? We are to be a kingdom people, a people who are ambassadors for the king. As the king cares about all of it, including creation, so we care about all of it, including creation. We care about the salvation of souls, and we care about things such as climate change. There is nothing that is off-limits to Christ’s kingly claim, and as His ambassadors, this means there is nothing that is off-limits to our redeeming influence.

Yet at the same time, we have to remember that we are not the kings, that He is the king. He brings the kingdom in His timing and His ways. Ultimately, the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come will happen on God’s time.

So, we work patiently on what He works on. We care about what He cares about, broken-hearted by the curse of sin but hopeful that the curse has been broken by Christ and one day, will be broken in full. One day, the creation will be finally released from its bondage to decay and renewed and brought to its consummated point. This can give us some direction in terms of something as destructive as human-created climate change.

How does a redeemed people view this issue of climate change? First, we recognise that God is ultimately king, not humanity, and not creation, and this worldview shift sort of guides us.

God is God, not mankind	God is God, not creation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of human role in climate change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition that earth is on God’s time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From consumerism to stewardship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From creation worship to human-lead stewardship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploitation ethically appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-humanism ethically appropriate

We are not climate deniers. We see the way God’s creation is revealing our over- use and abuse to us. We do not fight and run from science. Because we recognise that the curse is still here, we are not surprised that humanity can create these ecological disasters.

But we are not content to just let it happen, waiting for the end. As the king cares about His creation, so we care about His creation. We recognise the goodness in the created order and our intended role as stewards of the king, not owners of the land. So, we live alternative lives that reject today’s rampant consumerism. We train ourselves to recognise the current drive for never-ending economic prosperity in a world with limited resources. We choose in various ways not to

participate in that. That can be simple everyday things, or for those of you with positions of influence, that can be using your influence in bigger ways. We recognise also that in this sort of exploitation, man-made climate change is an ethical issue. It is not alright to exploit the creation for the dream of never-ending economic gain.

We are not creation worshippers, nor climate change doomsdayers. We recognise that God will bring about His kingdom in His time. We work patiently in the meantime to manifest the kingdom of God to the world in our words and our deeds. We see our job as stewards of the king, who have been given the task of stewarding the earth, and we do this under the king's direction.

Finally, we reject any claims that humanity needs to disappear to solve this crisis. Human existence is not the problem. The problem is human exploitation. Those who say that the solution is to have less children because the earth is overpopulated often do not realise

that the choice of less children is something for the wealthy and most consumeristic people. The have-nots do not have a choice on the matter, and their children tend to consume much less than the few children of the wealthy.

The solution is not less people or no children but it is people who steward the earth. It is children who are taught an alternate way of kingdom living, children who are being conformed to the image of Christ, the ultimate and true image of God. Children who are redeemed image bearers, who do their part and are raised to do their part. Through this, we can take part in Christ's kingdom work here on earth as we await the fulfilment of it all in the end.

(This talk was given at the Spiren meeting on 28 October 2023. Rev Dr Jarred Jung is Professor of Theology at East Asia School of Theology in Singapore)
