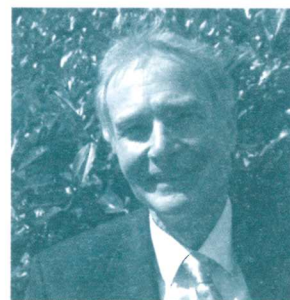


GUEST EDITORIAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE BIBLE

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THE THREAT POSED BY CLIMATE CHANGE IS INCREASINGLY IN THE NEWS. The issue is even now becoming a focus of attention for churches alongside more traditional avenues of social engagement.¹ But it is not the only concern that faces the planet. There is also the severe decline in the diversity of biological species, the widespread degradation of soils, water and air, the growing breakdown of the ecological systems that enable the planet to function and the inexorable increase in the numbers of people that this fragile planet is being asked to sustain.

Climate change is now strongly linked to the issue of global poverty.² But the effects of the other concerns will also make harder the achievement of social justice, in all its dimensions, across the world. There are those who believe that the implementation of sustainable development is the only way in which life as we know it and want it can be sustained into the future. This edition of *The Bible in TransMission* seeks to explore parts of the sustainable development concept and its connection with ideas that run through the Bible.

What precisely is 'sustainable development'? John Houghton observes that there are many definitions. Governments (regional, national, local) non-governmental organisations, multinational companies, industrial sectors, academia and individuals have all come up with their own interpretation of what it might mean.

It was first defined by the World Commission on the Environment, a body set up by the United Nations in 1983. The Commission, under the chair of former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, expressed it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.³ It has, however, frequently been modified, lengthened and shortened to take account of political or business stance⁴ or to capture easy headlines.⁵

Its roots, however, are earlier. In 1974 the World Council of Churches convened a conference to look at the place of science and technology in human development.⁶ The fear amongst church leaders from poor countries was that growing environmentalism in rich ones would be used to prevent their own peoples from climbing out of poverty. Influenced by these leaders the conference coined the phrase 'a sustainable society'; one that in the long term and in a global sense was just and equitable whilst at the same time took great care of the local and global environment. Dresner

points out that few are aware of the churches' involvement in these seeds that fed into the emerging sustainable development debate.⁷

But there is a deeper root here. Combining justice for humans, other species and the natural order has a long biblical thread. God looked upon his creation and was pleased with what he saw (Gen 1.4 and others).⁸ The Torah sets out several times how humans should relate to each other, how their material wealth should be handled and acknowledged and their business conducted (e.g. Deut 8.18; Lev 25). The Psalmist declares that the whole of creation belongs to the Lord (Ps 24.1). Prophets rage about social injustice and corrupt business practices and foresee terrible fates ahead (e.g. Amos 5—7). The creator grieves over what has been done to his creation (the cosmos) and gives Jesus to be its saviour (Jn 3.16; Col 1.15—20). The gospels and letters remind us of our obligations to share what we have and the consequences of not doing so (Mt 25; 1 Tim 6.17—19). And at the end there is the promise that all is not without hope but will be redeemed and made right (Rev 21.1—7; also Is 35).

Given this heritage then, what problem would the implementation of sustainable development address?

The world is out of balance. Across the globe there are huge discrepancies in the quality of life, material wealth, health, employment, educational opportunity, gender and age equality, fundamental freedoms and justice, to name but a few. In addition, the world's people, predominantly the richer of these, are drawing down the planet's natural resource capability at a rate 20 per cent greater than it can be replenished.⁹ This situation is unsustainable. The challenge is to be able to provide a decent and just standard of living for the billions who live on a pittance in desperate conditions and to do this whilst at the same time not destroying the fundamental ecological systems that keep the planet in a healthy state. It is a considerable challenge.

For a concise examination of three theological approaches that Christians can apply to the environment read Jane William's article. She explores the views of: (a) God controlling all; (b) our responsibility as stewards; and (c) the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of God's original creative purposes. She concludes that our response to creation reflects what we might believe of the creator and indeed what we believe he might expect from us.

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NOTES

1 See *Climate Change: An Evangelical Call for Action*: (January 2006). A statement signed by 86 USA church leaders available online at www.christiansandclimate.org/pub/statement-booklet.pdf.

2 See, for example, 'Global Warming: A World in Crisis', *Christian Aid News*; Summer 2006, pp. 17–21.

3 See World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 45.

4 See, for example, the UK government's first definition in the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Environment, *A Better Quality of Life: A Strategy for Sustainable Development for the United Kingdom* (CM 4345; London: The Stationery Office, 999), modified in 2005 more closely to the original *Securing the Future: Delivering UK Sustainable Development Strategy* (CM 6467; London: The Stationery Office, 2005), p. 16; or any multinational company website.

5 For example, Rt Hon John Gummer MP, Secretary of State for the environment 1993–97: 'Not cheating on our children.'

6 *Report of the Ecumenical Study Conference on Science and Technology for Human Development* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974).

7 S Dresner, *The Principles of Sustainability* (London: Earthscan, 2002).

8 Throughout this article God is referred to by the male gender. This is only shorthand and does not imply that God can be so rigidly defined.

9 See World Wide Fund For Nature (formerly World Wildlife Fund), *Living Planet Report 2004* (Gland: WWF, 2004), available online at www.wwf.org.uk/filelibrary/pdf/lpr2004.pdf.

10 J Porritt, *Capitalism: As If the World Matters* (London: Earthscan, 2002), p. 11.

11 Al Gore was being interviewed on Radio 4's *The Today Programme* (22 June 2006). His book and film have the same title, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. The book is published by Rodale Press, 2006.

► For a different journey through the Bible, read Sam Berry's article. He concludes, 'the seemingly inescapable inference ... is that environmental care is embedded in the heart of biblical faith'. He also suggests that modern-day Christianity tends to be characterised by other issues. Berry does, however, bring the focus back to sustainable development, pointing out that the alleviation of poverty and environmental conservation are inseparable.

The challenge, as Berry notes, becomes impossible unless we grapple with climate change. John Houghton makes us face up to this. What is it? What will it do, particularly to the poorer nations? What can and should we do about it? A seemingly impossible task, he writes, but adds that we are not alone. 'Our partner is no other than God himself.' But there is also a chill. 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Lk 12.48).

Ian Hore-Lacy might indeed see God as our partner when he discusses stewardship and energy sustainability. Already the creator has supplied abundant coal, oil and gas but we need to limit their future use, as Houghton points out. Hore-Lacy agrees that wind, wave and the sun are potential sources to meet the energy gap that is surely to develop. However, he also argues that uranium is as much a gift of God as are milk, honey, iron and copper (Deut 8.9).

Substantially more nuclear power will be required if the world's peoples are not to go short of energy. It is a contentious issue to which Christians will need to give Spirit-filled rational and careful thought.

Edward Echlin challenges us on a broader front with action at the practical level. There is something here for us all to do. There is something too for local churches. Echlin's work is rooted in a spiritual understanding of Jesus in relation to his environment. Many of Jesus' teachings are illustrated by references to nature; few from his pre-ministry trade and even one of these has environmental credentials (Lk 6.48–49; 14.28–30).

John Guillebaud asks whether control of population growth would be part of good Christian stewardship. He argues that the effect of improved technology on environmental impact has its limits and it is a forlorn hope to expect affluence to be constrained. This, in his view, leaves effective but voluntary control of population growth as the only viable exit strategy from the impending crisis. He notes that this is a taboo subject, especially within the Church. Guillebaud adds though that this policy should be in addition to other

interventions such as the achievement of social justice, fairer trade, poverty relief, better education and care for the young.

All of these contributions make for interesting reading. They pose challenges to the Christian community. Other aspects could have been touched upon, like the emergence of the idea that spiritual values, or their lack in rich nations, are part of the problem. There is a sense that in an Enlightenment-defined world we have cut ourselves off from our spiritual roots and it is only when we reconnect to them that there is the possibility that we will begin to live on this planet 'as if we intended to go on living here forever'.¹⁰ The Bible, of course, has much to say about this spiritual realm and what might be accomplished by a life filled by the Spirit (e.g. Gal 5.22–25).

Al Gore, former Vice-President of the USA, speaking about his recently released book and film on climate change,¹¹ said that 'he grew out of the faith community'. There he learnt, 'If you hold to my teaching ... you will know the truth and the truth will set you free' (Jn 8.32). These are familiar words within Bible Society. As Christians therefore it is possible that if we obey the teaching of Jesus then sustainable development will become both understandable and achievable. ■