

Climate change 1: steadying ourselves

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The impacts of greenhouse gas emissions will disproportionately affect those societies who have contributed the least to the problem. Low-lying Pacific states, collectively responsible for fewer than 0.6% of the world's emissions, face dispossession. Yet the worst offenders, including Australia and the United States, continue to pollute at historically high levels. Justice demands that wealthy polluters should end their reliance on fossil fuels, and embrace a future based on a fair share of resource use for all. (*Climate Action Network*)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Fourth Assessment Report, *The Physical Science Basis of Climate Change*, on 2nd February, 2007. The report represents the views of almost 2500 experts from around the world. Over one-hundred Australian scientists contributed.

The report describes scientific progress since the Panel's third report six years ago. The Panel believes it now has a more accurate understanding of the nature and causes of climate change, and is better able to make accurate projections about its future. In the judgment of the IPCC, 'warming of the climate system is now unequivocal,' and it predicts temperature rises of between 1.1° to 6.4° C by 2100 and sea level rises of between 18-58 cm by the end of the century. Hot extremes, heat waves and heavy precipitation events will continue to become more frequent, and an increase in intense tropical cyclones will continue.

The IPCC now has no doubt that human activity is the 'smoking gun': it has 'very high confidence that the globally averaged net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming' (pp 3,4) It is data like this that leads to a moral judgment such as that of the Climate Action Network, quoted above.

That such a high-ranking international body is now speaking in these terms is, for most people, saddening and worrying. Few of us have much grasp of the scientific details of the case for climate change; we cannot easily follow the spin-off arguments about emissions trading schemes, alternative energy sources, and the economic consequences of making changes; and we have little power over the solutions. We can easily feel helpless and a little depressed over the whole of the subject of climate change.

Therefore we aim to produce several briefings on it throughout the year. We will try to nibble our way through the various issues under discussion. Like most people, we are not experts; but we want to try to understand who is saying and doing what, and why.

Until recently, the Prime Minister has been described as a sceptic on climate change, and his government has been reluctant to accept scientific arguments for it. 'In our responses to the challenge of climate change we do not intend to embrace every gloomy prediction about the future of the planet. ... [W]e intend to respond ... in a way that does not damage the Australian economy or destroy the jobs of hard-working Australian coalminers' (Howard as quoted by Katherine Murphy). But in the face of increasingly compelling scientific evidence, Howard now describes himself as a climate change 'realist'. The unfolding drama of the forthcoming election will be whether this change can translate into policies that satisfy both green concerns and economic responsibility.

Indeed, the response of the major parties to the issue of climate change will be decisive in terms of their political survivability. For one commentator, politicians would 'like us to believe that this crisis can be fixed with a silver bullet (such as nuclear power or carbon sequestration) [but] many of us are deeply skeptical that any one dimensional approach will provide the solution' (Janet Hartz-Karp). That assessment is almost certainly true: the 'trick' will be for society to progress along many interlocking fronts so as to serve the best interests of as many people and groups as possible.

In the USA, Christian opinion over climate change has been divided, with some urging for greater care toward God's creation while more conservative others warn of the consequences for the poor if too radical a change is made to current industry and trade practices. We also plan to examine this disagreement in future. We suspect the Christian community in Australia is similarly divided. Our position begins with these provisional suggestions:

1. There do not seem to be strong reasons to doubt the IPCC finding that it is happening, that it is serious, and that human activity has been a cause if not the central cause.
2. Even if climate change is not happening or is not human-induced (as some still argue), we would err on the side of caution and do everything possible to protect those in regions who will be disastrously affected by climate change, such as the islanders noted above.
3. Simply that our neighbour is worried is due cause to think and act seriously. In this instance, 'our neighbour' includes our children, who are growing up in fear of this spectre in the same way that many adults once endured the fear of nuclear annihilation.
4. Yet Christians hold out to the world a joyful hope in the Lord Christ, who does not abandon his world and who continues to uphold it daily. Human folly can do much damage, but God keeps caring for his world despite us, and keeps giving skilled people to help us. Many moments in the biblical story include God or Jesus saying, 'do not be afraid'. There are good reasons to think that God still wants us to trust him through this crisis, and not to be afraid.

Whether you think the problem has been overstated, or that it is serious and pressing, the pressure for change is unlikely to be a passing fad. Extensive consideration, argument and disagreement is inevitable. Suggestions and solutions will be tried and will fail. This matter is on the agenda for the foreseeable future. We see no reason why Christians, confident in God and with love for their neighbours, wouldn't participate in what lies ahead.

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Sources/Further Reading:

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