

What Time Are We In?

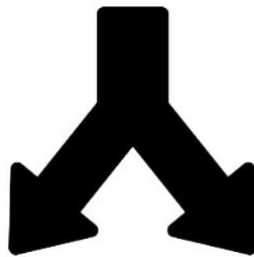
**God, our changing climate,
and implications for faith & mission**

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What time are we in?

Holocene

Holos (ὅλος) is the Greek word for "whole": the geological time of settled global conditions which enabled the growth of human civilisation. Now ended by climate change.



Anthropocene

Greek ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*) meaning 'human': the present time in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities.



Leads to ...

An Uninhabitable Earth

Mass extinctions &
the breakdown of civilisation.

Eschaton

Greek ἔσχατος (*éskhatos*) meaning 'last': the end times.

Also **Apocalypse**

Greek ἀποκάλυψις (*apokálypsis*)
'revelation, disclosure'.



Leads to ...

A Resurrected Earth

Heaven and Earth become one
under the reign of Christ.

Holocene

I would like to draw you a map of where I think the world is at.

We begin here, in the only world you and I and the rest of humanity has ever know is a stable world

Geologists call it the Holocene – the last several thousand years, in which human civilisation has flourished. The era of Biblical history. You may not think that any geological eras existed prior to that, now is not the time to debate. We can all agree that God has – utterly miraculously – enabled the wonder that we call Creation which has been more or less unchanged for all of human history.

Psalm – God set the limits of the sea. Job 38:8-11

Sea level has risen just a little bit (10cm) over my lifetime but really did not change at all since Noah's flood.

The Holocene has been the sweet spot, just warm enough for our Scottish ancestors to survive in the Highlands and just cool enough for rice to grow in Bangladesh. Our faith story has been told against a backdrop of environmental normality. Sure there have been floods and droughts and earthquakes, but after each disaster the environment has settled back to normal.

And so we worship God enriched by the beauty of nature

We trust God partly because of the predictable rhythms of nature. The Jewish festivals, like Matariki, celebrated the patterns of seasons, times to plant and the bounty of harvest.

In my faith formation the environment was seen in the church as an infinite resource for humans to use, and as a rich source of symbolism for the spiritual life. I grew up with stained glass windows which depicted sheep and streams but which blocked the view of the actual environment outside.

We took the world for granted and assumed it would always provide for us, no matter what we took from it or dumped into it.

Anthropocene

I have news for you and the news is bad. The Holocene is now officially over. We have dragged the planet into a new geological era called the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the era of planetary history in which humanity is the dominant creator, not God. In this era, human-made stuff is in every corner of the planet, from the tops of the mountains to the bottom of the deepest sea – bits of plastic are now everywhere. And humans have moved more land and built more stuff out of concrete and steel than all the forces of nature combined. This has drastically reduced the numbers of other living things, destroyed habitats of pretty much every kind of creature other than the ones who like living with human, like cockroaches, and brought countless of God's creatures to the brink of extinction.

Which is all massive enough, but the main problem – the main problem is that we have burned so much fossil fuels, just in my lifetime, that we have cooked the atmosphere. So our children and their children will experience rapidly rising temperatures, which kicks off a bunch of other side effects, most notably sea level rise, intense storms and out-of-control fires.

Last week was officially the hottest week on Planet Earth for the last 10,000 years. right across the Northern Hemisphere many countries had temperatures over 40 degrees. I can't cope with 30 degrees, let alone 40. Parts of China got to 52 degrees, their highest ever recorded temperature. Just last week.

Welcome to the Anthropocene. Our topic today is God in a changing climate. So, where is God in this man-made space? What is God doing in the face of these man-made problems? If God is the one who upheld the improbabilities that enabled the Holocene, where is God now that these perfect conditions for life are collapsing?

Have we humans taken over the job of Creator and rendered God redundant?

Have we pushed our idolatry so far that we are willing to grasp that power, come hell or high water, no matter what the consequences?

Or maybe God has given up on us. Why is God not saving us from ourselves? Why is God not preventing global warming and sea level rise? The Bible promises that God will not let the sea spill over the boundaries he set for it ... so what is going on? Has God quit his job of sustaining and protecting Creation?

This is a massive theological challenge for our time.

You might say – of course not! God is still God! But I can tell you that younger generations are not at all confident that they have any kind of future, let alone one in which God is in charge of things. Why do we struggle to attract young people to faith? Because they are living in the Anthropocene, in which God is failing to sustain the world.

How do we answer this theologically? How is our faith up to this most profound of challenge? What is true of Christ Jesus and his Father the Lord of all Creation and his Spirit who is life and power and hope?

How would you answer a young person who asks you why it seems that God has given up on the world?

The answer is - what is true of God is - that God allows people to experience the consequences of sin.

It's ironic. In the liberal faith of my upbringing, sin was a dirty word. We were all about acceptance and self esteem and nothing which smacked of condemnation was OK.

And now, the secular world has taken up the old Biblical language as the best way to describe what is happening to the world. Scientists have measured and named what they call Planetary boundaries which sustain life – those things which we in the church call the foundations of God's creation. And the scientists have measured the ways that people are "transgressing" these planetary boundaries. And they measure and predict the effects of these transgressions ... on the oceans, on the invisible gasses, on bird migrations and water fall.

Planetary boundaries: <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

The theological question is – why is God allowing the earth to warm up?

My answer is – because God has chosen to allow us to experience the consequences of our own transgression of the limits that God placed within Creation itself.

Up to a point, the oceans can cleanse themselves. Up to a point, the water cycle can continue to function. But push too far and Creation snaps. The systems that God designed crumble and fail.

Basically, it's all our own fault.

Which we recognise as a strong theme in the Bible. Hence the need for prophets. Hence the need for God's Son to die for us on the cross. We do keep stuffing up. The problem is, now we have stuffed up not only human community but the whole planet.

The theological question is – how does the redemptive suffering of Christ on the cross relate to the suffering of the whole earth?

Which is hard for us to answer because we have seen redemption in individual human ways. Christ died for me. Which is absolutely, wonderfully true. But somehow that no longer feels enough.

The missional question is – what do we do about it?

The entire global movement for sustainability is an answer to this question. And Eco Church New Zealand is part of that. We invite your church to become an Eco Church and to embed sustainability practices in your church life, so that you are part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

And we can and should prepare for things to get worse – this is called community based climate adaptation and it is what I am doing day in day out with not for profit organisations. In a minute we are going to turn the page from all these questions and look at practical implications, of how we prepare for mission in a changing climate.

How do we worship in the Anthropocene? We confess our sins – not just our individual sins but our collective sins as a human race. We attend to the transgressions which endanger wildlife and fresh water. We renew our hope as best we can and care for people who suffer, as best we can.

Which is all fine and good, but still I am not fully convinced. Although God has called me to this work I still know that it is not enough. It is not enough hope. It is not enough truth.

I was speaking to a group of elderly ladies last weekend about how to talk to kids about the planet, and I asked them – what is your hope? Most of them expressed hope that good people would do good work and turn things around. They trusted in accountants and lawyers and town planners and, yes, even politicians, to save us from the threats of climate change. I replied that I did not know of any young person who would agree with them. That simply is not enough hope.

I asked them to put their hand up if they hoped that Jesus would return and make all things new. 3 women put up their hand, and they grinned at me. 3 out of 30.

They were leaning forward into another whole reality, which the rest of them could not see or could not hope for.

This has been a strand of Biblical faith from the very beginning, but which the church has pretty much banned on the whole.

Eschaton

In theology we call it the Eschaton. The end times. More commonly it is known as the Apocalypse, which is the biblical vision of an ultimate revealing. Jesus pointed to a time of conflict and suffering, both human and environmental, leading up to his return. The Bible promises quite clearly that in God's time all things will be made new. All things will be gathering to Christ.

My hope is that Christ will return and that in his reign heaven and earth will become one reality. New creation. My work for effective climate action but I actually do not place my hope in that. My hope lies in God, and his resurrection power. I hope for resurrection – not just of me individually but of the whole creation. I believe that the new heaven and the new earth will be a resurrection of the earth itself, and all the creatures that God has made. To even begin to imagine it stretches my imagination beyond the limits of my capacity. But when I ask God what his plan is this is what I hear. All things made new. But ... if only it would come in the twinkling of an eye. But I do not hear God promising an instantaneous divine intervention. I wish he would! Oh, Come, Lord Jesus. Come now! That is not what I hear the prophecy of scripture pointing towards. Jesus said “Woe to those who are pregnant at that time.” Matthew 24 / Mark 13
Pray that it may not be long.
How long, O Lord?

Are you willing to hold the idea that the coming catastrophes of climate change may be the beginning of the ending of the world as we know it?
If so, how do we live in the gap? If the returning of Christ takes decades, or even centuries, how do we thrive as people of the resurrection?
How will God use us in this time of crisis after crisis?

What does the Bible teach about the ending of this age?
How do these teachings speak to current realities?

Friends of mine are radical climate activists and they put up posters saying “No one is coming to save us”. I have told them that actually I find that offensive, because I really do believe that Jesus is coming to save us. But on one level they are right. We cannot assume that the political and economic and social systems that created climate change can rescue us from climate change. We have to seek and stand in the salvation of God and partner with God as he comes to save us.

Implications for mission: Godly readiness for tough times

1. Do a climate risk assessment

for your church: buildings, access, congregation members and wider community.

Also for mission partners.

Resources to access:

- Your city council website
- National Climate Change Risk Assessment: MFE:
<https://environment.govt.nz/publications/national-climate-change-risk-assessment-for-new-zealand-snapshot/>
- Sea level predictions: NIWA: <https://niwa.co.nz/natural-hazards/our-services/extreme-coastal-flood-maps-for-aotearoa-new-zealand>
- SeaRise NZ: <https://www.searise.nz>

2. Make friends with disaster people

In a disaster, friendships matter! Get to know your local Civil Defence people. Talk to your school, marae & community centre about disaster plans.

When your phone doesn't work, who will you find to talk to & how?

Where will people in your community go, and what will be ready for them there?

3. Train your church in crisis skills

We practice getting out in a fire. What other scenarios could we plan & practice for?

How will people support each other and their neighbours?

Deeper than that, what are the spiritual and emotional skills we need to be crisis experts?

Preach and teach on resilience.

Matthew 25: the parable of the bridesmaids. "Be alert, because you don't know either the day or the hour." (v13)

4. Connect with young people around their fears for the future

Listen to understand their anxieties and frustrations.

Create safe open spaces, e.g. climate cafe

Talk about historic faith-based movements for social change and skills for taking action.

Model practical actions to care for the environment, not just tokenistic.

5. Fully commit to only a couple of global mission agencies

We face the massive risk of donor fatigue, with competing demands on missional & giving capacity for increasingly desperate needs internationally.

Which mission agencies are you personally and your congregation going to throw your weight behind?

Use Spirit discernment to identify and promote just a few and ruthlessly ignore the rest.

6. Support Pacific neighbours and refugees

We have a particular responsibility to our Pacific churches.

How can we be good neighbours?

Strengthen your relationship with Pacific ministers in your area.

7. Celebrate good news stories at every possible opportunity!!