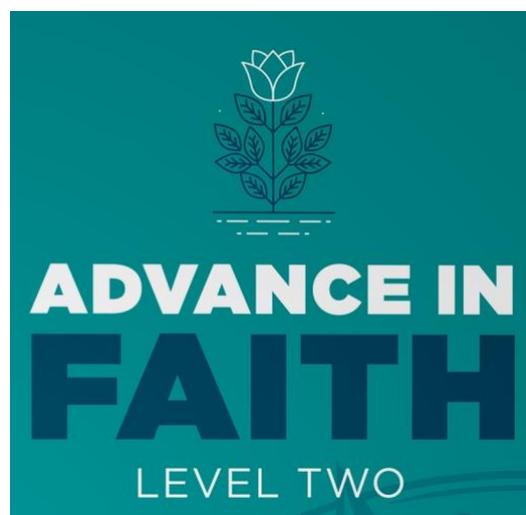


# Earth Matters

## Christian Faith and the Future of the Planet

### Week 4 The Bigger Picture



## Introduction

The purpose of this session is:

- *To explore the spiritual, cultural, structural and systemic issues that need to be addressed in order to make meaningful changes to how we manage the environment as those mandated by God to steward creation.*

While personal, practical and individual lifestyle changes are crucial to effective creation care and addressing the ecological concerns of our day, the scope and scale of the challenge requires a much deeper and broader understanding of the root causes. There are systemic, structural, political, cultural and even spiritual forces at work in our world that are a significant part of the problem.

***"I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." - Gus Speth<sup>1</sup>***

Factors that contribute to the size and complexity of the environmental challenges we face would include, but are not limited to:

### 1. Consumer-orientated society / Instant gratification culture

***"In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, I think it is very probable that the most important event these historians will see is not technology, it is not the Internet, it is not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time (and I mean that literally-for the first time), substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And let me say, we are totally unprepared for it." <sup>2</sup>***

A consumer-orientated society revolves around the purchasing of goods and services, many (if not most) of which are not really essential. It is at its heart a materialist and a hedonist (pleasure-loving) society, which appears to believe that the most important things in life are material possessions and/or purchased pleasures and whose trend-setters are those who have a lot and/or spend a lot. A consumer-orientated society is also an instant gratification society: Not only do I *want it* (consumerism), but I want it now! (instant gratification).

Contemporary consumer society is a product of the Industrial Revolution of the 1700-1800's, where the basically agrarian (farming) societies of Europe and North America became city-and-factory dominated societies. The invention of manufacturing machines and production lines led to a profusion of goods that people could buy. As more of the world was explored, more resources became available to feed these factories with raw material. At the same time the increase in human life spans and in basic education for larger parts of national populations led to a more prosperous society. The combinations of plenty of manufactured goods, an educated, prosperous and healthy society and increased leisure time produced the consumer-orientated society in which we live today.

<sup>1</sup> Gus Speth, Dean of Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies during a radio interview in 2013  
<https://ncipl.org/environmental-crisis-not-environmental-spiritual/>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Drucker in *Harvard Business Review* article: "Managing Oneself", Oct. 2007

***What are the characteristics of a consumer-orientated society?***

- Consumer society maintains a market-driven economy in which there is artificially created demand for consumer items. Advertising declares: “You owe it to yourself”. The average person is then pressured to buy things they really don’t need or want.
- Proliferation (more of everything), diversification (more kinds of everything) and customisation (personalised versions of everything) are used to create an ever-widening market and artificial demand, adding to the choice-anxiety experienced by many consumers.
- A “hopping-and-shopping” mentality is evident among citizens of a consumer-orientated society. Life becomes a long procession of visiting marketing centres for the latest products. This is evident when a new shopping mall opens or a new chain-store or fast-food outlet arrives in the country. “Everyone is going there...!”
- People who buy into the values of this sort of society often become obsessed with “keeping up with the Jones”. A competitive lifestyle must be followed at any cost, no matter what. In this sort of culture, one’s self-worth can easily become attached to / determined by your car, your house, your clothes or some other consumer-durable.
- Consumers are also pressured into being “in” and “with it” - never out of step with the latest fashions. Peer pressure is manipulated by marketers very successfully: no-one wants to be caught wearing fashions, driving cars, taking holidays, followings hobbies (the list is endless!!) that are not “in”. Unfortunately, what was “in” yesterday may well be “out” today!
- This society usually perpetuates a lifestyle / culture of debt - acquire now, pay later. This policy is not just followed for essential and very costly items (property and transport) but also for non-essentials which prevailing fashion assures us we cannot live without - after all, everyone else has one... and you owe it to yourself.

***What are the characteristics of an instant gratification society?***

“I want it, and I want it *now!*” This society is a society that struggles to wait, that cannot concentrate for any significant length of time and that has not learned how to endure. It is essentially an impatient society and one marked by the following characteristics:

- The marketing of quick or instant items, remedies or achievements. No longer do you need to wait a long time for the coffee to brew, for the food to cook or for your savings to accumulate. You need not work for years on that achievement such as degree - this society says you can “have it now!” In terms of consumer society, the slogan is: “Live now, pay later!”
- There is a high demand for immediate results or sensations. Video and cyber (computer) culture have added to this demand - why listen to a story or read a book, when you can experience it all in graphic video on your TV or computer screen... right now?
- In this society there are increasingly short attention spans and online information is consumed in increasingly shorter sound-bytes.

- The value of perseverance and endurance is lost in this context. This is made evident by haste with which many people enter and exit marriage, employment, college and university, etc. This is often a “drop-out” society in which there are many who rarely have the patience or endurance to complete what they have started.

As human beings living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are consuming more than ever before, and our prolific levels of consumption are impacting the environment in a deeply negative way:

- Increased artificial demand for unrenovable resources.
- Increased pollution and waste (Throw-away society).
- Increased pressure for low-cost production that exploits the poorest and most vulnerable.
- Increased destruction of natural habitat for mining, agriculture, livestock farming, etc.

### ***The Story of Stuff***

In 2007 an initiative called ‘The Story of Stuff’ was launched to bring awareness to the macro issues driving the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century. The project’s journey began with a 20-minute online movie about the way we make, use and throw away all the stuff in our lives. Eleven years later, a movement of over a million changemakers worldwide has arisen, working to build a more healthy and just planet. The Story of Stuff serves as a helpful introduction to the large-scale nature and type of underlying issues that are driving the current environmental concerns.

Video 1: The Story of Stuff (22minutes)      Video 2: The Story of Change (6 minutes)

### **Other factors affecting how we currently manage our natural resources include:**

- **Keynesian Economics**

John Maynard Keynes argued that there was no guarantee that the goods produced by individuals would be met with adequate effective demand, and periods of high unemployment could be expected, especially when an economy was contracting in size. He believed the economy would be unable to maintain itself at full employment automatically and that it was necessary for the government to step in and put purchasing power into the hands of the working population through government spending. These government interventions were designed to create demand and keep the wheels of production, consumption and economic progress moving.

- **Fossil Fuel / Hydrocarbon dependent industry**

The vast majority of our industry and economy is dependent on electricity generated by coal-fired plants and fossil fuels like oil. The fuel is cheap but dirty. Cleaner alternative, renewable sources of energy are readily available but costly to produce. The entire system of energy generation and supply needs to be rebuilt in order to access the abundant supply of natural, renewable, energy sources available to us (solar, wind, hydro-electric, etc.).

- **Trade Imbalances in the developing world**

Industries heavily subsidised by the governments in the western developed world put pressure on producers and exporters in the developing world resulting in limited access to overseas markets and ongoing generational poverty.

- **Population Dynamics**

While the size of the human population (7.5 billion) isn't in itself a problem, our patterns of behaviour are. Demographic momentum in the developing world, high levels of unnecessary consumption, city-based concentration and technological advancement are all population-related issues affecting the environment in negative ways.

- **Extreme Global Poverty**

The parts of the world most affected by poverty are often the most affected by environmental degradation. Poverty exacerbates the problem which usually manifests as resource depletion, desertification, deforestation, loss of habitat, pollution, sickness and disease and water scarcity.

Clearly the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century carry enormous implications for the church of tomorrow. Not only are these issues reshaping our socio-political landscape but they are redefining both morality and economic priority making the influence of the church in the years to come dependent on its ability to adapt and respond to these new realities.

In highlighting the unique challenges of preaching to a post-modern audience, Graham Johnston points out that for the twenty-first century listener, a disregard for the environment will be viewed as '*callous indifference to all people, both present and future*'. He maintains that by addressing environmental concerns with earnest, the church can restore some sense of connectedness between God, the people and His created world. Consequently, a clear and practical environmental ethic will be essential to the effectiveness of the church's witness in the years to come and unless those gifted and mandated by God to lead His people take the initiative and lead by example, their words will be lost on a generation deaf to modernist eschatological deferments and a spirituality limited to the needs and concerns of the human soul.

As Joseph Sittler said in the last lines of his somewhat prophetic essay *Evangelism and the Care of the Earth*:

***'If in piety the church says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1), and in fact is no different in thought and action from the general community, who will be drawn to her word and worship to "come and see" that her work or salvation has any meaning? Witness in saying is irony and bitterness if there be no witness in doing.'***

John Stott adds:

***'Christian people should surely have been in the vanguard of the movement for environmental responsibility because of our doctrines of creation and stewardship. Did God make the world? Does he sustain it? Has he committed its resources to our care? His personal care for his own creation should be sufficient to inspire us to be equally concerned'***.

In his '*apologia for earth-care*', Steven Bouma-Prediger asks the fundamental question, '*So why care for the earth?*' His ten-point answer provides a valuable summary of our motivation:

- Because our own existence is imperilled
- Because we owe it to our children
- Because an earth-friendly life-style is more enjoyable
- Because various forms of oppression are of a piece

- Because certain non-human creatures are entitled to our care
- Because the earth is valuable for its own sake
- Because it is in the best interests of the entire earth community
- Because God says so
- Because we are God's image-bearers
- Because grace begets gratitude and gratitude care

As individual Christians and corporate communities of faith, we have both the means and the motivation to lead the way in addressing the environmental concerns of our time and remain true to our mandate to proclaim 'good news' (*euangelion*) to *all creation* (Mark 16:15). A Government White Paper compiled in 1990 which laid out official policy for the environment and served as the formal statement of the UK's position to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992), provides a thought-provoking conclusion:

***'Ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, we have had an almost boundless faith in our own intelligence and in the benign consequences of our actions. Whatever the discoveries of science, whatever the rates at which we destroyed other species, whatever the changes we made to our seas and landscapes, we have believed that the world would remain much the same as in all its fundamentals. We now know that this is no longer true ... Increasingly we understand that the ways we produce energy, use natural resources and produce waste threaten to change fundamentally the balance of our natural environment. We may not be seeing the end of Nature, but Nature is certainly under threat ... The starting point [for action] ... is the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental policies. Mankind has always been capable of great good and great evil. That is certainly true of our role as custodians of the planet.'***

## Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. In what way do you think your own consumption levels might be contributing to the environmental challenges our planet faces?
2. Should the church be involved in addressing the political, structural, systemic and cultural issues that affect the environment or should we only be addressing the spiritual issues?
3. Now that you have a clearer sense of the underlying causes of some of the environmental challenges we face, what do you think needs to change? What would be the most immediate changes you would like to make or see made?

## Memory Verse

**Mark 16:15**

***"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation".***