

## Christian Responsibility and Environmental Ethics

### Brief overview of the complex issues surrounding climate change

Our planet is warming at a rate that concerns scientists. Tree rings, ocean sediments, coral reefs, and layers of sedimentary rock provide ancient, or paleoclimate, evidence revealing that current warming is occurring roughly ten times faster than the average rate of ice-age-recovery warming. There is scientific consensus that this warming rate has been accelerated by human activities, including burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and anything that releases carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

### Evidence of this rapid change include:

- A global temperature rise of 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century.
- The ocean has absorbed a lot of this heat, causing the top 2,300 feet of the ocean warming more than 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit since 1969.
- Ice sheets are shrinking. The rate of Antarctica ice mass loss has tripled in the last decade
- Decreased snow cover in the northern hemisphere within the past five decades
- Global sea level has risen about 8 inches in the last century. The rate in the last two decades is nearly double that of the last century and is accelerating slightly every year.
- The number of extreme weather events has been increasing. Since 1950, the number of record high temperature events in the United States has been increasing, while the record low temperature events have been decreasing. The U.S. has also witnessed increasing numbers of intense rainfall events.
- Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30 percent as humans emit more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and more is absorbed into the oceans. The amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the upper layer of the oceans is increasing by about 2 billion tons per year.

### Predicted effects of this rapid change include:

- Temperatures will continue to rise, causing more droughts and heat waves
- Agriculture and ecosystems will be affected as frost-free season and growing season lengthen
- Changes in precipitation patterns, including an increase in heavy rain events
- Hurricanes will become stronger and more intense
- Sea level is projected to rise another 1 to 4 feet by 2100 due to melting land ice and the expansion of seawater as it warms.
- NASA reports that specific changes to the Midwestern United States will include: Extreme heat, heavy downpours and flooding will affect infrastructure, health, agriculture, forestry, transportation, air and water quality, and more. Climate change will also exacerbate a range of risks to the Great Lakes.

### Ways to mitigate the progression of climate change include:

- Reducing sources of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere
  - Using renewable energy sources
    - Solar
    - Wind

- Nuclear
  - Hydroelectric
- Consuming less animal products
- Building more infrastructure for public transportation
- Reducing overall waste, including food waste
- Enhancing or protecting the ‘sinks’ that store these gases
  - Forests
  - Ocean
  - Soil

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Have you heard any of the information discussed above before today? Is there a particular section (overview, evidence, predicted effects, mitigation) with information that sticks out to you?
2. What are your initial thoughts about how Christians or Christian doctrine should interact with these issues?

### **Overview- Different Ecological Ethical views of Christians regarding creation<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Anthropocentric Views**

*These ecological ethical frameworks are centered around human relationships with the environment and how humans can serve God through this relationship. These views offer more value to human life and flourishing than other members of creation.*

#### **Example: Stewardship**

This view reads the creation story with the perspective from Genesis 2, seeing humans as commanded to serve and keep the land. Stewardship recognizes human dependence on the land, but maintains that humans have an active role in keeping God’s will. While this view does make Christians seem more connected to nature it relies primarily on human agency and solution to make change.

#### **Theocentric Views**

*These ecological ethical frameworks are concerned with divine power, and God’s will and agency through creation. Christians with this view rely on God’s power more than human agency.*

#### **Example: Sacramentalism**

This view holds that all things on the earth have their origin and sustenance through God. Sacramentalists believe that the physical world plays a role in religious experience and see the physical realm as part of God’s body. While this view can be embodied easily as Christian experience in the physical world, it can overly-romanticize the natural world, ignoring some of its harmful effects.

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found about these eco-theological views can be found in Kiara Jorgenson’s forthcoming book, *Ecology of Vocation*. Another resource is [this page](#), which lists books and articles under categories or branches of Christian eco-theological thought.

## **Biocentric Views**

*These ecological ethical frameworks extend the moral value of humans to all aspects of creation. Christians with this view would be equally concerned about how decisions would affect ecosystems, animals, plants, and humans.*

### Example: Process Theology

This view sees the universe as part of Godself, understanding that creation evolves under the force of God and that all life is interconnected. Christians who practice Process Theology see any form of life as being valuable just because it exists. While this view cares for creation by valuing the autonomy of all life, it isn't unique to Christian doctrine and can be easily applied to other faith frameworks.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. Do you gravitate towards one ecological ethical view? Why or why not?
2. Should Christians consider these frameworks when addressing an issue like climate change?
3. How does your understanding of your faith influence the way you approach climate change?

### **Final Questions:**

1. What have you learned about the climate crisis during this discussion? Have any of your beliefs or attitudes about environmental issues changed as a result of this discussion?
2. Is there one view within the types of ecological ethics that you feel illustrates Lutheran faith, or the particular cares and missions of this congregation? Why?
3. How has your view of your relationship to creation changed based on our discussion today? If it hasn't changed, what do you continue to believe about your relationship with creation?
4. Do you think Christians ought to take action against climate change? Why or why not?
  - How does our congregation fit into movements surrounding environmental ethics?
5. Based on what you discussed today, how can you take action as an individual or as a congregation?
  - Can you commit to taking steps?