

Feature Article, The Baptist Times, December 17, 2009

Copenhagen, and all that

David Golding considers the case against climate change

It came like a bolt from the blue when, after campaigning on global poverty for nearly ten years, I had the chance to read up on climate science. I read that global warming, "largely caused by a rise in greenhouse gas emissions from human activities, may already be responsible for an increase in drought and famine, in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries since 1996" (Lord Robert May, then President of the Royal Society).

In other words, the burning of fossil fuels – oil, gas, coal - by the rich countries is already doing terrible damage to the world's poor.

I was and am just staggered at the scale of the problem, the urgency of the matter, and the dread consequences should we fail to rise to the challenge.

That's the reason I now try to address some of the issues encountered by Christian climate campaigners.

There have been warmer and colder periods before, and recent temperature rises are part of a natural cycle.

Underlying this objection is the idea that human beings cannot possibly have a significant impact on the planet. This is demonstrably false – ice cores from glaciers going back a thousand years show that the level of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere remained almost constant from until we started to burn fossil fuels during the industrial revolution, since when it has increased by nearly 40%.

There have indeed been changes in the global temperature throughout history - and the various factors involved have been studied by climate scientists in exquisite detail. However, natural factors alone would, since the middle of the century, have led to a stable temperature, or even a slight decline. We can only account for the extraordinary rise recorded during the last 50 years by factoring in the increased levels of greenhouse gases.

There is no real consensus that the climate is changing or that humans are in part responsible; scientists are just following the crowd.

These assertions are a travesty of the truth. There hasn't been a 'crowd to follow' – political leaders and the general public alike have had to be dragged kicking and screaming to take the matter seriously!

The strength of the scientific consensus was demonstrated most clearly on June 7, 2005, when the national academies of science of all the G8 countries, and those of China, India and Brazil, stated that, "There is now strong evidence that significant global warming is occurring... It is likely that most of the recent warming... can be attributed to human activities... The scientific understanding of climate change is now sufficiently clear... It is vital that all nations... contribute to substantial reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions."

The evidence was also endorsed this year by 20 Nobel Prize winners at the St James's Palace Symposium (26th-28th May, 2009). These are some of the world's greatest scientific minds and, after looking at the evidence and conferring together, they concluded that "Political leaders cannot possibly ask for a more robust, evidence-based call for action".

The mechanism by which emissions contribute to climate change is not clearly understood, and we shouldn't take such costly steps until we're sure of what we're doing.

On the contrary, according to Sir John Houghton FRS, "No other scientific topic has been so thoroughly researched and reviewed." The 'greenhouse effect' of CO₂, etc., has been known for over a hundred years and can be readily demonstrated in the laboratory.

The climate is naturally stable, and will self-compensate for fluctuations like the ones observed in recent years.

This is nothing more than wishful thinking, without basis in earth history and climate science. On the contrary, "We are getting almost to the point of irreversible meltdown, and will pass it soon if we are not careful" (Sir John Houghton FRS, 2006). What worries scientists is that we will reach 'tipping points', where global warming becomes irreversible and self-accelerating, and 'runaway' climate change takes hold.

Even if human activity is having an effect on the climate, reducing emissions will have a minimal impact compared with the cost of doing so – volcanoes emit more CO₂ than we do

The level of CO₂ in the atmosphere showed no change from about AD 1,000, until we started to use coal, oil and gas in the 18th Century, after which it rose steadily! Are we to believe the volcanoes just happened to wake up at that particular time?

Temperature rises can easily be accounted for by sunspot activity.

On the contrary, "Change in solar activity... cannot, on its own, account for all the changes in global average temperature we have seen in the 20th Century... There is even evidence of a detectable decline – and so this cannot account for the

recent rises we have seen in global temperatures” (The Royal Society’s Climate Change Advisory Group, 2007). Furthermore, research published just this year demonstrates that the effect of sunspot activity on cosmic rays is too weak to affect cloud cover (and hence warming) by a factor of one hundred.

Efforts to combat climate change will hit poor people hardest because energy will become less affordable

This argument fails to take in the enormity of the threat posed by climate change to humanity, and to the world’s poor in particular. Lord Nicholas Stern states that without radical action we would be facing “massive rises in sea level, whole areas devastated by hurricanes and others turned into uninhabitable desert, forcing billions of [the poorest and most vulnerable] people to leave their homelands.”

The hacked emails from East Anglia University’s Climatic Research Unit are evidence of a cover-up

Anyone who thinks the emails make even the smallest possible dent in the scientific case for human-induced climate change is living in a fantasy world. At worst, it’s a case of individual professional misconduct, but the independent enquiry will probably reveal just some very foolish, intemperate expressions of frustration to trusted confidantes.

Concern for the environment sound awfully like a ‘New Morality’

The suspicion and hostility with which environmental concern is viewed by many Christians is unjustified. What we are dealing with here is not a new morality, but the application of the old, God-given morality to a new situation, which we have brought about by our carelessness and greed.

Genesis 2, 15, says that “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” As a leading evangelical theologian, Chris Wright, puts it: “Creation care is an urgent issue in today’s world... Only a wilful blindness worse than any proverbial ostrich’s head in the sand can ignore the facts of environmental destruction... To be unconcerned about it is to be either desperately ignorant or irresponsibly callous.”

Belief that human-induced cataclysmic global warming runs counter to God’s promise that ‘seed-time and harvest shall not fail’

It is grossly irreligious to take this wonderful promise of God’s faithfulness to imply that He will invariably shield us from harm if we wantonly pillage his creation. Indeed, the Bible clearly teaches otherwise: “Her rich men are violent, her people are liars... Therefore you will plant but not harvest” (Micah, 6, 12-15, etc.). We must combine the promises of God’s Word with its warnings.

What I have written will doubtless fall on many deaf ears. However, to anyone who's unsure about climate change, I'd say this: "Surely it's better to be safe than sorry!" Would you take your grandchildren on a plane if you knew it had a one-in-two chance of crashing?

But think of the gamble we'd be taking if we ignore scientific advice! We'd be risking bequeathing to our children and grandchildren a veritable hell on earth. And most able scientists say the evidence is overwhelming."

A joint editorial by 56 newspapers in 45 countries on 7th December lay out the stark choice we face: to be the generation "that saw a challenge and rose to it, or one so stupid that we saw calamity coming but did nothing to avert it."

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows", says Galations 6, 7, and what haunts me is the thought that we (I include myself) have been "sowing the wind", and that the world's poor – and my grandchildren – will "reap the whirlwind". Please Lord, forgive us and grant us true repentance.

Publisher's Note: David Golding was one of three Baptist representatives on the commission on climate change set up by the Joint Public Issues team, and whose report, "Hope in God's future, Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change", was recently published. [Go to http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources/resource_downloads/482.pdf] He is a Visiting Fellow in Marine Science & Technology and Honorary Chaplain at Newcastle University, and Development Coordinator, Make Poverty History North East.