



An Inconvenient Truth

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 TRANSFORMING BUSINESS

The current debate on climate change has become polarised and unfruitful. A thoughtful Christian approach can help break this deadlock by acknowledging the providence of God in the wealth creation made possible by fossil fuels. Proper stewardship of them allows us to develop viable alternatives.

The furore surrounding the stolen University of East Anglia emails and the debacle of the Copenhagen summit both serve to highlight the problems surrounding the Climate Change debate. Despite the protestations of world leaders, the outcome of Copenhagen was below even their most pessimistic expectations and they are now faced with an even greater challenge if they are to achieve the goals they have set themselves.

The lack of agreement in Copenhagen is matched by a continued reluctance among the world's population to make the drastic changes which politicians and scientists warn are necessary to avoid global disaster.

In order to move the debate forward and provoke the appropriate and necessary action, it is essential to look at the reasons for this public inertia. There are five issues which need to be honestly faced:

1. The evidence for global warming caused by human activity is very strong but not incontrovertible. However, climate scientists continue to speak as though there is no doubt at all about the evidence

and often stray into presenting the data in a way that is less than objective. The famous "hockey stick" temperature plot popularised by Al Gore in "An Inconvenient Truth" has now become a notorious example of the way in which data can be presented in support of an already established conclusion. The UEA emails appear to show further evidence of the same behaviour.

2. The implications of any particular increase in global temperatures are not certain. Scientists make predictions based on highly complex numerical simulators which balance many different criteria with a high degree of interdependence. Small changes in assumptions or in the behaviour of one parameter in the model can lead to very different results. The science is too often presented as leading to a single predictable outcome when this is not the case.

3. The language of those advocating the need for change has become increasingly intemperate. Instead of admitting the true levels of uncertainty, the tone has become very belligerent and the use of



- ▶▶ phrases such as “Climate Change Deniers” with its clear parallel to Holocaust denial is distasteful to many.
4. The sight of thousands of politicians, lobbyists and press arriving by plane in Copenhagen to discuss these issues is met with amused scepticism by many people. Yet another television programme featuring a celebrity flying to the Arctic to berate the public about the dangers of climate change looks like downright hypocrisy.
 5. Nevertheless, the title of Al Gore’s film and book was highly appropriate. While there still may be some room for debate about the truth of man-made climate change and its consequences, there is no doubt that it is an inconvenience which most people wish did not exist. There is a massive inertia to overcome if the case for change is to be made effectively. Unfortunately, the current nature of the debate is turning many people off and is becoming a cause for inaction rather than action.



Christians have been warning the world of another Inconvenient Truth for the last two thousand years: the prospect of God’s judgement. This presumably includes our having to give an account for our use or misuse of the earth’s resources. Moreover, a more productive debate about our future use and supply of energy is possible if we learn from the gospel message and seek to stimulate action from a response of gratitude in response to God’s goodness and blessing rather than reverting to a sterile semi-religious fundamentalism.

■ Hydrocarbon fossil fuels, especially crude oil, represent an incredible concentration of energy in a highly portable form. The exploitation of these resources has led to a phase of wealth creation unparalleled in the history of the human race. For Christians, such provision indicates the providence of God, for which we should be thankful and act in stewardship of God’s precious resources. The displacement of fossil fuels by other energy sources is no simple matter. Both the benefits of fossil fuels and the difficulty in replacing them must be acknowledged in order to address these important issues in a balanced and transparent way.

■ The exploitation of fossil fuels has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Although coal drove the Industrial Revolution, it was only in the 20th century that the benefits of oil and gas were fully appreciated. It is over the span of just four or five generations that this immense wealth has been created. Furthermore, the benefits of this wealth have not been adequately shared with the majority of the world’s population. How can Christians help correct this imbalance before these fuels run out?

■ Fossil fuels are a finite resource which will one day run out. While there may be uncertainty around climate change, this statement is axiomatic. Even if the next four generations derive as much benefit as their predecessors, the era





Protests in Copenhagen

March of protesters at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, Copenhagen December 12th, 2009.

▶▶ of fossil fuels will be very short in the timeline of humankind.

■ Those of us who have been blessed with this wonderful gift have a responsibility under God to the residents of the developing world and to future generations in all countries. This responsibility is to use that gift wisely by harnessing the enormous wealth created to develop a sustainable supply of energy.

Although the actions required to address the eventual demise of fossil fuels are similar to those required to address global warming, there are some significant differences.

■ Governments must actively encourage the development of renewable energy sources. The wealth required to be able to pursue these alternative forms of energy has been made possible by the era of fossil fuels, but it will take concerted will

and effort to direct sufficient resources for the technological advances required to harness renewable sources on the scale necessary to address adequately the energy requirements of the whole world.

■ Energy efficiency must be pursued with vigour. We cannot guarantee how quickly renewable energy technologies will be developed nor how much of the world's current and forecast future energy requirements they will meet. In order to deal with this uncertainty, we must continue to find ways to reduce our overall energy requirements. The Christian lifestyle of modest demand, not using wealth to bring status or worldly security, and giving generously to the poor is becoming increasingly *de rigueur*.

■ The world's remaining fossil fuel resources must be fully and efficiently developed. The time and wealth required to develop renewable energy sources can only be provided by the continued employment of oil, gas and coal. Government policies which make the exploration and extraction of these fuels less efficient risk promoting an early and irreversible decline in their production - which will lead to even less resources being available for the development of renewable energy.

The human race has been through many upheavals in its history but the challenges of the coming decades will be as great as any in the past. Whether to stave off the effects of climate change or to adapt to the decline in fossil fuels, a period of major adaptation lies ahead of us. The current debate has become polarised and unfruitful. A thoughtful Christian approach can help break this deadlock by widening the scope of the challenge to the future of fossil fuels and by acknowledging the role of those fuels in the wealth creation necessary to develop renewable energy resources - making it possible to create a new consensus leading to effective action. ■

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