

A Response to Phil Jump by Gary Cundill

Phil Jump's latest column ('Who are the real activists'; FiBQ 20:2) provided a crucial counterpoint to the spotlights that are often flatteringly shone on climate activists. The single-mindedness of a Greta Thunberg can certainly be admired, and the derring-do of Greenpeace's members in the Arctic can likewise be inspiring. In contrast, the slow work by scientists and engineers to mitigate the impact of dirty industries doesn't make for screaming headlines that sell papers or web page views.

I must confess that I do form part of the choir that is particularly likely to enjoy Phil's singing. Marching in the streets holding a placard would have to rate as one of my least favourite things to do on a pleasant weekday morning. Even worse, I have spent most of my working life in companies that manufacture steel, chemicals and explosives, processes that are significant contributors to climate change.

But back to Phil's column. Enjoying it as I did (having my own prejudices gently stroked does wonders for my mood), I was left a little unsatisfied, mulling the question 'So what's the Christian then to do?' Projections of the likely impact of a warming planet on vulnerable populations have begun to read like some of the less cheerful passages in the book of Revelation. Rises in sea level causing massive flooding of densely populated deltas; desertification resulting in widespread and worsening famine conditions; warming conditions allowing the spread of diseases among unprepared groups of people.

A good place to start answering that question is probably 2 Peter. Having told his readers that serious trouble is coming down the track, he calls them to lives of holiness and godliness (3:11), to be at peace without spot or blemish (3:14), and to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, our lord, saviour

and messiah. Plenty to be getting on with, I would suggest. But where does this leave activism, whether inside companies or out?

First, and in full agreement with Phil, Christians carry a responsibility in this area. Global warming is taking place, a primary reason for this is humankind's actions, and the consequence of this will be misery for many, and in particular some of the earth's most vulnerable communities. The Christian is called to love and do good to all (Luke 6:27; Romans 2:7; 1 Timothy 6:18;). Attempting to mitigate current and future suffering of vulnerable communities must surely fall into the 'good' category. And we are, of course, cautioned not to neglect doing good (Hebrews 13:16).

Second, how might this responsibility ensue in practical action? Prayer, of course, and this is perfectly practical action and, in my own case, action not taken sufficiently often and seriously enough. Phil aptly reminds us that we must always be careful not to find ourselves on the wrong side of blunt James, cautioning us that merely pronouncing a blessing on the suffering doesn't let us off the hook (2:15-16).


It is here that Phil's guidance comes in particularly useful. I recall John Stott pointing out that the salt Jesus spoke of while preaching on the mountain served not merely to flavour food, but to preserve it. If the salt isn't deployed as intended we shouldn't be surprised if our world is as rank as a piece of rotten meat. Phil is entirely correct that perhaps the most valuable work that can be done to mitigate climate change is that which takes place inside organisations, by men and women seeking new technologies and applications and ways of doing things that are less damaging to the planet. Christians in these organisations can

use their skills and expertise to do good to vulnerable people that they'll never meet.

But not all of us find ourselves in those parts of the meat, and I would like to suggest to Phil that activism remains an important Christian duty. It is in some ways a prophetic activity, involving speaking truth to power. And it is an important mechanism to enable the work of the internal activists that Phil so rightly lauds, by changing the society in which that work is carried out.

How does a company's chief executive decide what to do? For many the answer would be 'Do whatever maximises shareholder return'. And for this we often pillory Milton Friedman, the most well-known exponent of this idea in the 1970s. But Friedman had a sometimes-forgotten caveat to his view on shareholder return, which he said was to take place only within the rules of the game. It is precisely here that activism can play a role.

It is unkind to say that politicians choose a course of action by licking a thumb and holding it up to see which way the wind is blowing. Nonetheless, a government which sees that civil society is expecting it to tighten regulation in order to mitigate climate impact may well take action to increase its chances in the next polls. Likewise, a captain of industry wandering into the golf club does not want its patrons looking askance at him as the representative of a noxious industry.

Activists can change the rules of the game, both the formal ones of regulation and the informal but often powerfully influential rules of social mores. Better rules can raise the profiles, prospects and impacts of Phil's internal activists (I rather favour the term insurgents). Both entail the doing of good, and there is room for Christians in both roles, I would suggest. 



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