



A TALKING POINTS BOOK BY
DAVE GOBBETT



THE ENVIRONMENT


thegoodbook
COMPANY

*To Sally,
who opened my eyes a little wider to the
beauty of God's creation.*

Environment

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INTRODUCTION

TALKING POINTS

The world is changing at an astonishing speed.

And not just politics, technology and communication but our whole culture, morality and attitudes. Christians living in Western culture have enjoyed the benefit of being in a world which largely shared our assumptions about what is fundamentally right and wrong. We can no longer assume that this is the case.

In two short generations we have moved to a widespread adoption of liberal values, many of which are in conflict with the teaching of the Bible. Increasingly, believers are finding themselves to be the misunderstood minority and feeling at odds with where the world seems to be heading.

But let's not be short-sighted: some of this change has been good. Christians have often failed to discern the difference between our own cultural values and those that are demanded by Scripture. We are as prone to bigotry as others. We have much to repent of in our attitudes towards, for example, the freedom and role of women in society and our lack

of compassion and understanding towards those who have wrestled with same-sex attraction, for example.

Sometimes it's easier to protest and rage against the tide of history than to go back to our Bibles and think carefully about what God is saying—holding up society's views, and our own, to the truth-revealing mirror that is God's word.

At our best, we Christians have been in the forefront of social reform. Think of the great 19th-century reformers of the slave trade, prisons and poverty: William Wilberforce, Elizabeth Fry and Lord Shaftesbury. But too often, we now find ourselves on the back foot, unable to articulate a clear response to a pressing question of our day. And even when we have understood God's mind on a particular issue, we have struggled to apply it compassionately in our speech and in our relationships. Christians are called to be wise and gentle, even when the temptation is to call out injustices and be rightly angry. The way to approach these issues is to prayerfully and humbly seek to understand our culture and discern the times.

This short series of books is an attempt to help ordinary Christians think constructively about a range of issues—moral, ethical and cultural—that run against the grain for those who name Christ as Lord. We want to stimulate believers to talk with each other as we search the Scriptures together. The aim is to help us think biblically, constructively and

compassionately, and not to feel intimidated when we are challenged or questioned, or, perhaps worse, remain silent. This book will lend perspective and offers some biblical guidance on following God and loving people as God loves us.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT...

In such a short book, we cannot hope to answer all the questions you may have about how to think about the environment. Nor can we address the many scientific and political debates that are at play, or all the practical decisions that may be facing you personally.

Nor does this book present a thorough treatment of all the Bible has to say on these questions. If that is what you are hungry for, there will be other, longer, and perhaps more technical books that will help you dig deeper.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS...

Rather, our aim is to give you an accessible introduction to the many questions that surround the conversation about the environment, as we hold our questions up to the big story of the Bible: the story of creation, fall, redemption and eternity.

But we also hope that this book takes us beyond the issues facing our planet—to a greater worship of

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the God who made it and a deeper love for those who inhabit it. You may be gravely concerned about the environment; or you may be more sceptical. Whatever your situation, we hope this book will be a first step towards understanding the landscape of this issue, and an encouragement to know and share the love and hope we have in Christ.

Tim Thornborough

Series Editor | June 2022

environment

[uhn-vai-ruh-muhnt]

noun: **environment**

1. The surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates.
2. The natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity.

synonyms: nature, the world, the earth
“the impact of pesticides on the environment”

[Source: Google definitions]

*“My name is Greta Thunberg. I am 16 years old.
I come from Sweden. And I want you to panic.
I want you to act as if your house was on fire.
Because it is ... Our civilization is so fragile it is
almost like a castle built in the sand. The facade is
so beautiful but the foundations are far from solid.
We have been cutting so many corners. Yesterday
the world watched with despair and enormous
sorrow how Notre-Dame burned in Paris. Some
buildings are more than just buildings. But Notre-
Dame will be rebuilt. I hope that its foundations
are strong. I hope that our foundations are even
stronger. But I fear they are not.”*

**Greta Thunberg, European Parliament,
Strasbourg, 16th April 2019
No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference,
p 45-46.**

GREETING GRETA

CHAPTER ONE

When *Time* magazine chose Greta Thunberg as their person of the year for 2019, it was hard to argue with. The Swedish teenager—whose meteoric rise has seen her address everyone from presidents to popes to the United Nations General Assembly—is a modern-day sensation. More than that, the concerns which she champions look set to shape both our political agendas and our consumer choices for decades to come.

But how have we got here? Where has environmentalism come from? And what should Christians make of it all?

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF GREEN

As a cultural phenomenon, the environmental movement is a relatively recent one. Hot on the heels of the Industrial Revolution, hints of a so-called

“Green Romanticism” can be found in the writing of 19th-century poets William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose works drew attention to the beauty and importance of nature.¹ Towards the middle of the 20th century, pollution became a growing concern, along with the damage that “acid rain” was causing, leading to the forming of pressure groups (for example, Friends of the Earth in 1969 and Greenpeace in 1971) and political parties (The Green Party of England and Wales in 1990). In 1985 the big news story was the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer, due to the excessive use of chloro-fluorocarbons or CFCs in appliances such as fridges and air-conditioning units. Concepts such as the “greenhouse effect” and “global warming” entered the mainstream. In 2006 awareness was raised still further by the release of former US Vice President Al Gore’s documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Bible-believing Christians can often be slow out of the blocks when it comes to engaging with cultural issues, but as early as 1970 the respected evangelical leader Francis Schaeffer wrote the landmark book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, urging Christians to take seriously their stewardship of creation. In the years that followed, organisations like those

1 Lisa Ottum, *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics* (New Hampshire Historical Society, 2016).

associated with *A Rocha* (founded in 1983) have sprung up, which engage in scientific research, environmental education, and community-based conservation projects around the world.²

For the last 25 years, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has organised several significant conferences. In 1997 the Kyoto Protocol was adopted by 192 nations, with the general aim of reducing global greenhouse-gas emissions. This in turn was succeeded, in 2015, by the Paris Agreement, which put specific numbers on paper: namely, a commitment to limiting global temperature rises to less than 2°C, and ideally 1.5°C. In 2021 COP26 gathered in Glasgow, and 151 nations committed to reducing their use of coal, supporting developing countries, and devising plans to slash carbon emissions by 2030 with the stated aim of reaching “net zero” by 2050.

Maybe this all sounds a bit jargony. Perhaps some quick-fire facts and figures will bring things closer to home.

- **The planet is warming.** It took many thousands of years for the earth’s temperature to increase by 0.5°C; it has gone up by a further 1°C in the last 100 years alone. This has resulted in melting

2 Pronounced “Ah-Rosher”, from the Portuguese for “The Rock”. See <https://www.arocha.org/en/> (accessed 28 March 2022).

ice caps and rising sea levels. By 2100, it is estimated that the world's oceans will have risen by one metre (3.3'). This threatens to devastate whole countries like Bangladesh, where currently 10 million people live below the "one-metre contour".³

- **Biodiversity is plummeting.** Around 1.2 million species of plants and animals have been identified by scientists. This vast diversity of living things that call our planet home is not an irrelevance or a luxury, but together with our land, water and air, creates a rich ecosystem that enables sustainable life. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, one in four species is at risk of extinction, with a 70% decline in the populations of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians since 1970.⁴
- **There is widespread deforestation.** The Amazonian rainforest contains a bewildering half of the world's the living species and acts as an enormous carbon sponge, absorbing vast quantities of CO² and converting it into oxygen. However, between 2001 and 2019, Brazil lost to deforestation

3 <https://www.science.org/content/article/sea-levels-rise-bangladeshi-islanders-must-decide-between-keeping-water-out-or-letting> (accessed 28 March 2022).

4 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-58859105> (accessed 28 March 2022).

140 million acres (57 million hectares)—an area larger than the state of California. Throughout 2019 alone, an entire football-field’s worth of rainforest was lost to the planet every six seconds.⁵

- **Plastic pollution continues to blight our oceans.** Every minute of every day, the equivalent to a lorry load of plastic is dumped into the sea. And if the current rate continues, by 2050 there will be more plastic in the earth’s seas, by weight, than fish.⁶
- **The quality of the earth’s soil is deteriorating.** This is the result of aggressive agricultural practices—such as allowing water run-off, the use of nitrogen fertilizers and over-grazing—combined with extreme weather events.⁷ The processes that generate the kind of high-quality topsoil that is needed to grow vegetation take centuries, but the world is churning through that soil at a phenomenal rate.⁸

I wonder how you respond to reading all of that? Still sitting comfortably?

5 <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/blog/data-and-research/global-tree-cover-loss-data-2019/> (accessed 20 March 2022).

6 <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/ocean-plastic-fish-climate-crisis-sea-study-a9635241.html> (accessed 28 March 2022).

7 Stephen Emmott, *10 Billion* (Penguin, 2013), p 124.

8 <https://www.bbc.com/future/ bespoke/ follow-the-food/ why-soil-is-disappearing-from-farms/> (accessed 28 March 2022).

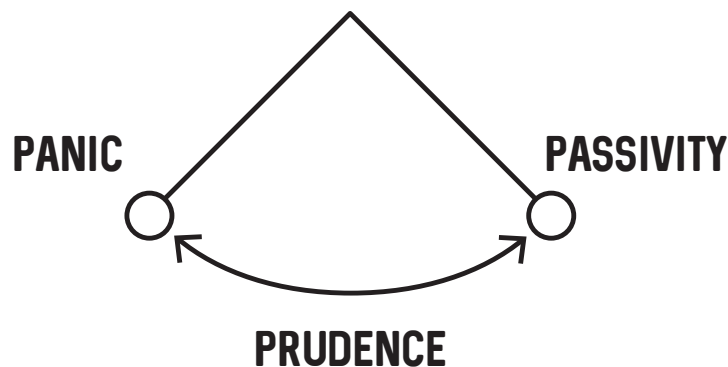
THE CLIMATE PENDULUM

When it comes to thinking about the environment as a Christian, there are two equal and opposite reactions to be aware of. The first reaction is the **panicked response**. This is where all things green become all that matters. It's the reaction that results in people gluing themselves to public buildings or blocking ambulances from travelling down the road. It's the urgent reaction modelled by scientists Dr Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky in the Netflix sensation *Don't Look Up*. Mindy and Dibiasky are so convinced of and worried about a pending global disaster (spoiler alert: a comet is due to hit earth and wipe out all life within six months—in the movie, I hasten to add) that they go on a giant media tour, desperate to wake the world up from its complacency.

Even if we're not about to jump on a tour bus, we might find ourselves feeling increasingly anxious, not to mention powerless, at the thought of an imminent climate-change tsunami. We're in make-or-break territory. Change or die. The very survival of the planet, indeed of all of humanity—especially the next generation, if not our own—is at stake. Something needs to be done, and it needs to be done now.

The other reaction is the **passive response**. When anything environmental gets raised, we simply

shrug our shoulders or keep our head down maybe even roll our eyes—but basically we just carry on with life as it is. Life becomes like an in-real-time “green screen”, where, just as with that fancy video-editing software, everything green mysteriously disappears. We might react this way for a number of reasons. Perhaps we’ve grown weary of all the alarmist rhetoric we see on the news, and so-called “climate-change fatigue” has caused us to mentally disengage from the topic. Or maybe we were never really engaged in the first place—we’ve got bigger problems to contend with. Or perhaps we’ve done our research and feel justified in our climate scepticism. After all, while it’s almost undeniable that the climate is changing in some ways, the extent, the causes (specifically how much humans are to blame) and the solutions (how far the responsibility to reverse climate change lies with us) are far more contested. Maybe all this talk about climate change is just the latest “tree-hugging” fad.



Or perhaps you find your inner climate pendulum swinging between both of these reactions, depending on what day of the week it is! Frankly, you don't know what to think from a Christian point of view when it comes to the environment—still less *what to do*.

I want to suggest a third reaction. The approach we'll take in this book is what we might call the **prudent response**. Here we'll try to avoid the extremes of panic and passivity by carefully digging into the topic from a whole-Bible perspective.

It must be said from the outset that Christians *can* and *will* legitimately disagree on many of the issues at play. We might land in different places on the exact causes of global warming, or on how to interpret the statistics, or on the role that governments should play in response, as well as on the many trade-offs that exist when it comes to formulating legislation (between, say, the cost of sustainable food production and the challenge of feeding a family on a low income). The cost of net zero is not cheap, but neither is the cost of doing nothing at all.

So, while we can debate the pros and cons of particular policies, the underlying principle of this book will be that, whether we lean to the left or to the right politically, Bible Christians need to take the environment seriously, in Bible ways.

And guess what? I believe that doing so is easier, and more important for the gospel, than you may think.