Caring for Creation and the Vulnerable

By Frank Holleman

Let's imagine a mission team of 15 people that travels from the Netherlands to Albania. Their return flight from Schiphol to Tirana would emit roughly 10 tonnes of CO2[1], which is more than five times higher than what an average Albanian citizen would cause in an entire year.[2] Scientists calculated that adding 10 tonnes of CO2 to the atmosphere melts around 30 square meters of Arctic sea ice[3]. So while it is difficult to measure all the benefits of that mission trip, we *can* measure some of the environmental damage that is connected to it. The question now is, how much should the church care about melting sea ice?

One consequence of melting sea ice is the potential loss of animals like the polar bear, which has often been the 'mascot' of climate change. As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si*, every animal or plant that goes extinct can no longer give glory to God.

God is renewing creation and building the kingdom of heaven on Earth. This renewal not only targets our personal salvation but covers all of creation. So when we are complicit in forms of ecological destruction, we are not only irresponsible stewards but are actively working against God's kingdom.

Caring for the poor

The consequences of climate change are not only ecological. The white surface of Arctic sea ice reflects sunlight and heat, so as the ice melts, the darker ocean water absorbs more heat, further raising temperatures. This extra warmth speeds up ice loss even more, disrupting weather patterns and increasing extreme climate events around the world.[4] Extreme droughts, heat waves, hurricanes, floods, and other weather-related disasters become more and more likely with climate change. Such events not only kill people directly but can also lead to food shortages and other problems.

The effects of climate change are not something of the future but can already be felt around the globe. But not in fair proportions: most of the effects hit the poorest part of the world that contributed the least to the problem.

For example, in the spring of 2025, coffee prices increased by 40% compared to the previous year due to extreme weather in the producing countries in the tropics. This mostly affects richer, coffee-drinking countries in Europe or the US. Meanwhile, people in Nigeria are not only seeing increased prices for food but also the risk of failed crops and resulting hunger.[5]

Yet it is the 'coffee-drinking' countries that are responsible for most emissions. One study found that 65% of the carbon emissions between 1990-2020 were caused by the wealthiest 10% of people[6], which would include someone with the average salary in the Netherlands. With this

knowledge, Jesus' warning that it's "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" gets a whole new dimension.

How climate change is disproportionately affecting poorer people is captured in a beautiful and heartbreaking passage of a worship song[7], written by a Dutch group *Schrijvers voor Gerechtigheid*:

Come, Jesus, come
You seem far away from us
but it's actually the other way around
Lord, You have never left

Because You live where no one else can survive
You are at home in places without hope
where the earth has nothing left to give
where the sea floods into villages

You are friends with the very poorest|
You sit beside them in the blazing sun
And if we are with them,
then You are with us.

The church has always made it her task to care for the poor and vulnerable. In the era of climate change, this takes on a new meaning.

In summary, environmental topics are relevant for the church not only because we are called to care for *all* of creation, but also because the causes of climate change and its effects are a matter of human injustice that we cannot ignore.

Consumerism

God's creation has enough to offer for everyone if we don't take more than our fair share. This is powerfully illustrated by a study[8] which calculated what kind of material products would be necessary, at a minimum, to live a good life. For example, in the electronics category they budgeted one mobile phone per person and one TV for every household. Every person can also travel 4900-15000 km and buy 4kg of new clothing per year. In this way they also set specific targets for food, healthcare, hygiene, community life, and education. Then they ran the numbers and found that we could supply all of that for 8.5 billion people with only one-third of current production. In other words, a lot of our current economy is producing wasteful luxuries.

This study, together with the previously mentioned one about how most emissions come from a small group of richer people, shows that climate change is primarily an issue of overconsumption, not overpopulation. However, this does not mean that *consumers* carry the main responsibility of the problem. Our current economic system which stimulates overconsumption is a result of various processes of marketing. So here we have to make an

important distinction: not the *consumer* is the problem but consumer*ism*. Not the individual but the system is to blame.

This means we need to embrace a kind of paradox: the environmental crisis is not our fault as individuals but we also cannot continue supporting it. It's a similar way of thinking to the concept that we cannot earn our own salvation but we also cannot continue living in sinful ways.

Consumerism can be defined as the proclamation of a lifestyle that revolves around materialistic goals. It instills in us a desirable image of 'The Good Life' that is mostly in the interest of industry and not our own well-being.

The tricky thing is that we never actively decide to be a consumer. We are sucked into it through clever marketing. Every day we are seduced by countless images and stories of the person we can become if we have shoes from Nike or drink Coca-Cola. In this way, shoes and drinks are elevated to a status symbol. Instead of fulfilling the basic function for which they were originally created. So every time we buy from them, we feed our dreams and desires with *stuff* and get more and more attached to materialistic things. This attachment gets stronger each time, like a muscle being strengthened through the workout of buying stuff.

If consumerism is the unconscious and default setting of our society, we might compare it to the 'Gentile ways' that Paul refers to in Ephesians 4:

> *17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.*

If we translate those words into the 21st century, Paul might have said that the Gentiles follow their greed and have given themselves up to all kinds of cheap deals and consumption. God calls us to live a *holy* life that is different from the sinful ways that surround us. This means saying 'no' to consumerism. But we also need to say 'yes' to something else. We need an alternative version of *The Good Life*. And the answer is Jesus. Paul continues in Ephesians 4:

> *20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

In light of these words, we might say that consumerism is not only causing environmental damage that sabotages God's renewal of creation, but also distances us from God because it distracts us from what matters. Jesus showed us a way of servanthood that is in stark contrast to *consuming*.

If a level of unsustainable consumption stands in our way of God's plan, we might say that bringing our life more in line with a sustainable lifestyle can also strengthen our personal

relationship with God. In this way, sustainability can not only be a 'bonus' for the church that is nice to have once we've covered the core mission of making Christlike disciples. Instead, it is an essential aspect of making Christlike disciples in the era of climate change. In other words, sustainable living can be a form of practicing a holy life.

Practice is an important concept in this context. Discipleship and sanctification is a continuous process that extends way beyond attending church on Sunday. Reading the Bible and praying are essential activities in this but there are also other ways in which we can open ourselves to God's transformative process. Since consumerism stands in the way of God's kingdom and the lifestyle that Jesus demonstrated, sustainable living can be one way of practicing discipleship. This is especially effective if it involves a *daily* habit like riding a bike instead of driving a car, or cooking primarily with vegetables instead of meat. Such daily habits have the potential to continuously reorient our inner compass towards God and away from overconsumption.

Opportunity for mission

In a book about climate communication, author George Marshall spends a chapter on what the climate movement can learn from the church:

> *"If climate change really were a religion, it would be a wretched one, offering guilt and blame and fear but with no recourse to salvation or forgiveness."*

Many presentations and documentaries about the environmental crisis try to activate people by presenting all the terrifying data, but behavior science has already found that this is not effective. Instead, people need a safe space to come to the realization that their current lifestyle is not sustainable. There needs to be a place for grief about what is being lost and forgiveness for past actions. There is a need for patience for ourselves and others when we try but don't succeed. In other words, the world needs the church and its experience and rituals around forgiveness and conversion.

The gospel of Good Friday and forgiveness can play an extremely powerful role but the gospel of the resurrection is just as important. Unfortunately, it is often forgotten in this context. In conversations with concerned Christians, I often hear the same doom and gloom that is found in the wider climate movement. The empowering message of the church is not only that our sins are forgiven but that we are liberated from sin so we can play a role in God's renewal of creation. This message is transformative in the context of climate change: even though I am only a small and imperfect actor in the world, I am called and able to make a difference, in the knowledge that my efforts are not in vain because salvation is ultimately in God's hands.

In conclusion, embracing sustainability is a 21st-century way of practicing a holy life and an opportunity for the church to make itself relevant for a generation that is looking for hope and purpose.

[1] https://co2.myclimate.org/en/flight_calculators/new

[2] https://ourworldindata.org/co2/country/albania

[3] Notz, D., & Stroeve, J. (2016). Observed Arctic sea-ice loss directly follows anthropogenic CO2 emission. Science, 354(6313), 747-750.

[4] https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/six-ways-loss-of-arctic-ice-impacts-everyone

[5] Akinkuolie, T. A., Ogunbode, T. O., & Adekiya, A. O. (2025). Resilience to climate-induced food insecurity in Nigeria: a systematic review of the role of adaptation strategies in flood and drought mitigation. Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, 8, 1490133.

[6] Schöngart, S., Nicholls, Z., Hoffmann, R., Pelz, S., & Schleussner, C. F. (2025). High-income groups disproportionately contribute to climate extremes worldwide. Nature Climate Change, 1-7.

[7] 'Dan bent U bij ons' by Schrijvers voor Gerechtigheid

[8] Hickel, J., & Sullivan, D. (2024). How much growth is required to achieve good lives for all? Insights from needs-based analysis. World Development Perspectives, 35, 100612.