

A NEW
CLIMATE
FOR THEOLOGY

*God,
the World, and
Global Warming*

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INTRODUCTION

The recent awakening to the threat of climate change, epitomized by the 2007 United Nations report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is deep and widespread. The shock of realizing that our high-energy consumer lifestyle is sending the earth into potential disaster is a wake-up call. We are approaching the tipping point in global temperature that will change the basic conditions for the flourishing of life. We react in horror to the destruction and death we are bringing on the planet; we say, “No! This need not, must not happen.”

Like many other people, I want to do something about it. I am a Christian theologian; therefore, the task for me is to ask what role theology plays in our “no” to the consequences of global warming. For the past eight years since I wrote *Life Abundant*, I have not known what to do next. In the epilogue to that book, I expressed dismay that the mainline churches are still focused on narrow issues of personal and, for the most part, sexual morality. Homosexuality commands most of the attention. But are these the most pressing issues of our time? As important as sexual issues are, should Christian theologians focus on them at the outset of the twenty-first century? Are there not other issues? Is there not, in fact, another vision of life on earth—a vision that we are called to articulate? Is our planet not in dire straits, and must we not acknowledge this reality and attempt to address it? Is climate change not bringing to a head the issues of justice and sustainability that demand a conversion from our greedy consumer-oriented culture to a vision in which all creatures might flourish? I close *Life Abundant* with the suggestion that the central vision of Christianity demands that we wake up to the destabilizing character of this faith—its insistence, its “wild” notion—that all are invited to the banquet of life.

Is there any hope for us—we middle-class North American Christians? Can we at least be honest, if not good? It might help if we could keep our “wild space” intact. Being a Christian, even a middle-class North American one—as I envision it—involves having a wild space. That wild space is the shocking suggestion—even if only a suspicion—that all really are invited to the banquet, that every creature deserves a place at the table. This is not the hegemonic view of our society or of the church: it is counter-cultural and counter-church. It is a different vision of the good life, but wild as it may seem, it is not necessarily wrong or impossible. Its two key principles are mundane ones: justice and sustainability. Could the wild space become the whole space—the household of planet earth where each of us takes only our share, cleans up after ourselves, and keeps the house in good repair for future dwellers? I do not know, but perhaps we Christians could at least admit what life abundant truly should be, terrifying as it may be.¹

And here we are eight years later, facing a vision of dystopia from global warming that is as far removed as possible from what we want: the vision of the banquet where all are invited to the table, the abundant life of justice and sustainability, the deep desire within each of us—our wild space—that tells us a different world is possible. So what is the “next” thing I must do as a theologian? I want to suggest that theology within the context of climate change must focus on deconstructing and reconstructing two key doctrines: who we are and who God is. The interpretation of the God-world relationship is a critical issue. If theologians, who are some of the keepers and interpreters of this deep knowledge, allow false, inappropriate, unhelpful, and dangerous notions of God and ourselves to continue as our society’s assumptions, we are not doing our job. A primary task of theologians is to guard and encourage right thinking about God and ourselves. This, of course, is but one small task needed for the planetary agenda to change. Other people—doctors, car manufacturers, teachers, parents, corporate leaders, lawyers, politicians, agriculturalists, and so on—also have important offerings to make in our struggle against climate change. The particular task of theologians is prior to our action; it is at

its roots. It is a limited task and mainly a linguistic one: suggesting different language for talking about God and ourselves—with the hope that different action may follow. The limitations of this task and its possibilities are perhaps best seen in the negative: if we do not change our basic assumptions about God and ourselves from an individualistic to a communitarian view, can we expect people to change their behavior? If we know nothing else, do we have a choice?

Given this assignment, I begin in part one with the science of global warming, followed by a chapter on its significance for theology. These two chapters provide the groundwork for the rest of the book. It is critical, I believe, that theology be done within the contemporary scientific worldview; therefore, a careful reading of our empirical situation is the necessary beginning point. It is also important, I think, for theology to attend to the specific task for which it is responsible: *theos-logia*, words about God. To many people, it is not obvious that theology has anything to do with issues such as climate change. Why should it? My answer in chapter 2 is that theology must deal with global warming because one of the basic marks of the church is its ecological catholicity, which must be lived out in a political context. In other words, Christian faith is concerned with a just and sustainable existence for all of God's creation.

Having laid out the contemporary situation we face and theology's role in that situation, we turn in part two to the heart of the matter: Who are we? Who is God? How shall we live? Global warming is the coming to a head of the "ecological turn" that has been part of postmodernity at its best. A vision of the abundant life on planet Earth based on this turn, and the consequent reformulations of the doctrines of human being and of God, has been occurring for the last half century. This vision is widespread in ecofeminism and in process thought, in indigenous peoples' thinking and in liberation theologies, and in many other places. It has also been central to my own work. Climate change names this ecological turn in a negative and frightening way: it tells us loud and clear that our conventional consumer-culture anthropology is false. It also warns Christians that a supernatural, transcendent God is neither faithful to the tradition's incarnationalism nor relevant for our times. Therefore, these central chapters—3, 4, and 5—on ourselves, God, and life in our world are the distillation of my theological work since *Life Abundant*, brought to a head by climate change. What they say is that global warming is the empirical evidence that different ways of envisioning ourselves and God are necessary.

Part three focuses on two current challenges for climate change and the sort of theology I am proposing: service to God and urban ecology. What would the worship of God and service to our neighbor look like in a postmodern, climate-change context? Deconstruction, the literary and philosophical movement associated with Jacques Derrida, puts severe limits on God-talk of any sort, conventional or reconstructive. Would a theology that praises God and has compassion toward others be credible in postmodern thought? Does deconstruction's suspicion of the hidden idolatry and fundamentalism in religious language extend to all theology? Would a sacramental, prophetic theology be permitted, one that sees the glory of God in the world and practices limitation and sacrifice so that others might live? Chapter 6 attempts to make the case that a minimalist theology focusing on praise and compassion would be acceptable to deconstruction as well as sufficient for our context of climate change. Similarly, in chapter 7, we look at another challenge to climate change—the insatiable energy appetite of cities. What kind of theology would be appropriate to deal with the huge energy needs and wants of twenty-first-century cities with populations of twelve million or more? Again, our views of who we are and who God is come into play. The sacramental and prophetic religious impulses that limit God-talk to signs of God in the world and that limit our own use of the world's resources are key insights for a theology of climate change for cities.

Finally, in part four we address the most difficult of all climate change issues: despair and hope. Given the dystopia we may well be facing, we ask in chapter 8 how a different world, one of justice and sustainability for human beings and the planet, is possible. We ask whether our wild space, the longing in each of us for a better world, is just a fantasy, an ungrounded hope. And we consider the necessity of facing reality and not shying away from what science is telling us about the future. Finally, in the last chapter, we press the issue of despair and hope to its foundations—what, if anything, can we hope for? Throughout these concluding chapters we deepen the relationship between God and the world that has been emerging throughout the book: the realization that we live and move and have our being in God. The world is enclosed within God: God is always present in and for the world. Our task is to awaken to and acknowledge who we are: we are reflections of the divine, as is all creation. We are not alone: we live in God along with all other forms of life. Our hope is therefore not in ourselves, but in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”²

In conclusion, Christian theology is the attempt to think about God and the world—who God is and who we are—in light of what the tradition has claimed in the past and what we must say in the present. Every Christian is a theologian; each of us has a theology. That is, each of us has a picture, a set of assumptions, usually not conscious, of how we think God and the world are related. And all of us can and do express through our words and actions who we think God is and who we think we are. These unconscious or implicit theologies are very powerful. They control many of our decisions and actions; we rely on them as justification for what we do personally and as a nation. Theology matters.

Those two words sum up my reason for writing this book. Theology is certainly not the only thing that matters in regard to climate change, but it does play a part. It helps us question our maneuvers of denial and attempts at self-justification. It also gives us permission and/or the obligation to act in very different ways, depending on our assumptions about God and ourselves. Theology matters.