

Faith in Action

What can Christians offer to climate activism?

Matt Carmichael

The logo consists of the letters 'SCM' in a white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid orange circle. The circle is positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.

SCM

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A few years ago I attended an event at the Baptist Church where I was baptised in my teens. It was organised by Christians Against Climate Change, and they'd invited one of my heroes – a climate scientist, Prof John Houghton, who in the 1990s persuaded leaders of the evangelical right wing in America of the reality of climate change (for a while) – quite a feat! So I was excited.

By the end I was deflated and disillusioned. The talks and the workshops were fine – what people said was true. It was what they didn't say that troubled me. Because this was a conference for Christians, yet in the whole day, not one person – invited speaker or participant – mentioned anything Christians might have to offer in the battle to save our world from overheating. It could have been any secular conference anywhere.

I went along that day full of hope, because I knew that communities of faith have something, a spark, that is absolutely crucial for addressing climate change as well as our many other problems. What I discovered was that the Christians who attended, presumably wanting to make the world a better place, had no idea how that spark is relevant.

So at the end of that climate change conference I stood up and said to the gathered people that as a seasoned climate campaigner I was disappointed in the day. Not because there wasn't a lot of good content, but because the radical and rapid changes we need in society to address climate change require a change of lifestyle. No-one had even mentioned it, and no-one had suggested that Christians might have anything distinctive to offer.

We can't carry on shopping, competing and trying to look good in a desperate search for acceptance and love. If we do that it's game over, no technology is ever going to stave off climate meltdown, because we can never get enough!

But if you say to people, "Stop buying so much, stop flying aeroplanes everywhere, stop throwing things away that are perfectly good, or hoarding things you never use in storage facilities, stop driving cars and ride bikes and use buses instead – stop, stop, stop," it doesn't work.

This terrifies the secular media and mainstream politicians, so the key climate change debate – how we in the rich world can dramatically cut our consumption – is studiously avoided.

There are two reasons why asking people to stop consuming doesn't work.

The first is that we can't stop because underlying all that consumption and hyperactivity is a desperate search for love and acceptance. When we don't know deep in our hearts that we are loved and accepted just as we are, we become trapped in a tragic and futile effort to prove that we are worth something. We have to continually seek recognition from others of our value, by driving the big car or jetting off to the luxury resort. Buses and domestic holidays just don't cut the ego-boosting mustard.

The second reason is that you can't tell people to stop doing everything without offering something better.

People of faith who have found an eternal source of love and acceptance can address those issues in a distinctive way that others cannot. We can offer something better. We can offer a life lived adventurously in the service of love, a life of meeting real needs, not manufactured desires, free from that lonely scramble for attention, recognition and basic respect. It becomes possible to live very simply, sharing what we have, making time to care, to listen, to heal, to protect, to empower and nurture. The path of love in action is unquestionably, inherently meaningful in ways that can't be measured.

I finished my little talk, my heartfelt plea for those Christians to recognise that they were in fact, the answer, that the kingdom of God was at hand, right there, in their hearts. I looked around, and apart from one or two, there were blank faces and looks of total bewilderment. I walked away with a heavy heart.

Brexit isn't the answer to our problems, love is. Technology isn't the answer, love is. Economic growth isn't the answer. A better kind of disposable coffee cup isn't the answer...

The real answers to the dissatisfaction playing out in political earthquakes across the globe today depend upon a fundamental shift in our values away from consumption,

towards more rewarding relationships with nature, with God, and with one another. Root our lives, technologies and politics in these deeper relationships, and we can build the kingdom of heaven together.

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