



## Driving to the Root

**A**s a historian, I often caution my students about the difficulty of proving things, historically. It is a truism among historians that causality is a very difficult, if not impossible thing to determine without major leaps of faith. To give an example: What was the cause of the American Civil War (1861–65)? Over the last 150 years literally thousands of gallons of ink have been devoted to answering this question, and myriad solutions have been suggested. But frankly, a final, universally recognized proposal has never been reached. Many different answers have been suggested, often depending on one's position in space and time, yet the best we can really say is that the causes of that bitter conflict were extremely complex.

This issue is on the topic of the care of creation, and many find the most pressing current concern to be climate change and human contributions to it. These are major issues and will require the best thinking and action we can give them. We can also take heart from the fact that human beings have been able, in the last century or so to successfully address many challenges in this area. The choking and deadly, London-style smogs of the past are generally gone with the ending of coal-burning for heating. Notable successes have happened in clean water, protection and restoration of endangered species, the banning of harmful chemicals such as DDT, and others. The banning of CFCs has gone a long way to diminishing the ozone hole at the poles. Yet, the solutions to environmental issues can sometimes create further problems. One of the major environmental concerns around the year 1900 was the issue of horse manure and the carcasses of dead horses, thousands of tons of which clogged American cities annually.

The solution to these problems was (you guessed it) horseless vehicles and the internal combustion engine!

Some scholars have pointed to Christian theology as an issue behind the degradation of creation, especially its anthropocentric nature, with human beings as masters of the created world, which is for human usage. Others cite Christian apocalypticism, and the idea therein that the world is slated to end in a catastrophe anyways, so why bother to seek to preserve it. There may be an element of truth here (again, causality is difficult to prove). But it seems that many other parts of the world, where Christian theology does not hold sway, also contribute to climate change. Others suggest that modernity is to be blamed, but again this is hard to prove. It is a fallacy to suggest that humans of an earlier age “lived in harmony with nature” and that we have regressed from this. The environmental impact of prior peoples was mitigated by the fact that there were just far fewer of them than there are now.

But to be bold, in terms of human behaviors, a chief problem here is human greed, something magnified by our current ability to consume ever more of the world’s goods. But what is behind greed? What motivates greed and the driving need to acquire more and more things? Humans seem to have an almost innate need to measure their self-worth by the measurement of possessions—the more we have, the better we feel about ourselves. But the problem goes deeper than greed, which is, in the end, a symptom, not a cause. Behind greed is fear. Fear of not being able to control the world around us, fear of our own mortality, fear of meaninglessness and the unknown. And so we surround ourselves with what we desperately hope are enough possessions to keep us safe, and to give our lives meaning (which of course, they cannot). Greed and fear are universal, primal experiences, felt by all people, religious or not.

Jesus dealt with these problem all the time; one of his key phrases was the admonition “Fear not.” In a parable, Jesus spoke of a farmer who sought to defend himself by the acquisition of large amounts of things. In this parable (Luke 12:16–23) God says to this farmer:

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

As a comment Jesus added, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” The fear and meaninglessness of life cannot be solved through human means; only in a trusting relationship with God can these primal motivations be addressed.

Of course it is too simplistic to suggest that the solution to climate change is trust and faith in God (although it would be a very good start!) But without understanding the root of what drives human greed and fear as the motivations to overconsumption, then the solutions to climate change (and so many other or our world’s problem) will fall short unless we can address their human root causes.⊕

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