

BOOK REVIEWS

McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Times Books, 2010. xviii + 253 pp. Hardback, \$24.00.

Bill McKibben, rightly regarded as one of the nation's leading environmentalists, helped launch public discussion of global climate change with the publication of *The End of Nature* (1989) and has subsequently authored more than a dozen books that engage environmental themes. In his latest book, *Eaarth*, McKibben continues this tradition by advancing two claims: (1) we have already altered our planetary home in profound ways and might as well recognize this fact (thus the modified name, *Eaarth*); and (2) we can (and must) learn to live in our challenging new home—and to avoid catastrophe—by redefining the goal and scale of our global economy.

In the author's analysis, the problem and its cause are clear. *Eaarth* represents a warmer, stormier, more extreme, and biologically impoverished world compared to the planet of our birth; and it's a world that *we* have made—the byproduct of modernity's relentless pursuit of economic growth powered by the consumption of fossil fuels (chap. 1). Life on *Eaarth* is tougher and less predictable than in the world of our birth, and transitioning society to these circumstances will be painful. However, McKibben believes that it can be done—but only if we put in place new ways of living that favor maintenance versus perpetual growth as the goal of economic life (chap. 2).

At heart, in McKibben's view, these new ways of living will rescale the focus of our economic activity: from highly interconnected, global commerce critically dependent on giant corporations judged “too big to fail” (recall the bank bailouts in 2008) to more local, loosely connected economies that respond to local needs and offer greater resilience to economic meltdown; no failed community bank will bring down the global economy (chap. 3). Downsizing economic scale will be essential, he argues, in two particularly crucial sectors of the economy, agriculture and energy, where giant corporations and unsustainable practices now dominate (chap. 4).

McKibben ends his book by asking how we can make this transition while retaining the positive contributions of modernity: a liberalized social order in which family background, race, and gender no longer define status, and the capacity to learn about and from the global community. He fingers the Internet as an innovation that arrived just in time to facilitate this transition.

In *Eaarth*, McKibben offers a clear-headed, well-informed, and passionate argument for how we ought to live on our altered planet. He builds this argument in direct, nontechnical prose by skillfully weaving together key statistics with multiple examples to support a few central claims. To give just one example, McKibben supports the claim that small-scale farming can compete with industrial-scale agriculture in productivity per acre by combining statistical analysis from the U. S. Department of Agriculture with

multiple case studies that flesh out productive small-scale farming practices in Indonesia, East Africa, Bangladesh, and elsewhere (168-170).

This style of argumentation gives life to the text for general readers who lack technical background in the relevant fields, but it sometimes invites criticism from the technically inclined. For instance, McKibben cites a pair of devastating, record-breaking rainstorms in his hometown in Vermont, spaced about six weeks apart, to illustrate the claim that global warming (and consequent increased storminess) “is no longer a future threat. . . . It’s our reality” (xiii). However, this claim goes well beyond current climate science, which cannot link particular weather events with global climate change.

The book is heavily referenced. Most references are to nontechnical, public-news sources—perhaps not surprising given that the author is an environmental writer, not a climate scientist, who builds much of his argument through assembled examples. Of potential concern, however, is that he sometimes relies on such sources when documenting technical claims. For example, he relies on an article in *The Wall Street Journal* to document a technical claim about the expected trajectory of ocean acidification (10).

McKibben’s argument closely mirrors scientific consensus on the reality, causes, magnitude, and probable human impact of climate change. However, his prescription for how to respond to the consequent challenges—by downscaling to more local, loosely connected economies that favor maintenance over economic growth—represents a departure from conventional wisdom and raises questions he does not adequately answer. For instance, can we fairly ask the poor nations of the world to forego economic growth when their citizens desperately need an elevated standard of living?

For the record, I believe McKibben’s analysis will ultimately prove correct; economic growth cannot continue indefinitely on a finite planet, and we must learn to live more lightly, simply, and locally on our altered planet. However, I am less certain that now is the time to abandon the power of growth-based markets as we transition to greener ways of living. Interested readers may wish to engage other perspectives, such as that of economist Jeffery Sachs, before reaching a personal conclusion.

The author—a practicing Methodist—does not explicitly draw on biblical or theological themes in building his argument in *Eaarth*, although he does so in other books (notably *The Comforting Whirlwind* [2005], cf. *AUSS* 45 [2007]: 153-154). Nonetheless, I believe *Eaarth* will interest many readers of this journal: the book addresses a timely topic in nontechnical, accessible prose, provides insightful analysis, and proffers a solution that aligns well with biblical principles of community, simplicity, stewardship, and Sabbath rest. It deserves careful reading, reflection, and discussion by all who recognize humanity’s role as stewards of creation.