



DISCUSSION BRIEFS

Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

6. The Mission of the Universal Church

From Christ to the world, and back to Christ again

In our fourth category - the 'two Adams' - we saw that our redemption turns on becoming united by faith to Christ who is the last Adam. This is not only the ground of our justification but also our sanctification. The public implications of this connection became apparent as we reviewed the continuity of salvation history. Positioned within Christ we already share the restoration of Adam's royal rule, and furthermore, understanding Christ as the Davidic king helps us to see what it means for us to do good for the benefit of all creation.

But what about evangelism? Isn't there a different sense in which our union with Christ plays out? If we are to follow the example of his coming into the world, then aren't we called to focus our attention only on sinful humanity, being 'fishers of men'? Christ hasn't yet returned in judgment, so shouldn't we urgently share the gospel?

On the face of it, we seem to have two conflicting implications of our union with Christ, providing two competing visions of the 'mission of the church'. One suggests that we now rule in a recapitulation of Adam's first exaltation over the earth, and the other suggests that we serve in an echo of Jesus' humble descent to it. One is a broader concern with creation as a whole, and the other is a focussed concern with fallen humanity. So which is it? What is Christ's body doing on the earth, when Christ himself is in heaven? We will see that a full account of the *mission* of the church demands a prior understanding of the *age*, or epoch, of the church. So, to begin: what is the 'church age'?

Defining the church age

Last time we saw that an 'already-and-not-yet' cyclical dynamic to God's promise fulfilment has always been a feature of salvation history. So what is unique about a so-called 'church age'?

While there have been many repeated patterns before us in biblical history, creation's story still turns on only two figures - the first Adam and the last Adam, Christ. These, in turn, define two epochs, or ages: that of the first creation and that of the new creation. Each of these began with respective Adamic bodies as the archetypes of their descendants - Adam's natural body for Humanity 1.0, and Christ's glorified resurrection body for Humanity 2.0. So the strange thing about our current situation is that although

Christ's resurrection has already inaugurated the age to come, everyone else still retains their original bodies. The rest of the new creation hasn't yet arrived, and we are still living on this earth which labours under the curse. So although we are being renewed on the inside by the resurrection power of Christ's Spirit, our physical bodies will continue to die before he returns (2 Cor. 4-5).

This means that we can begin to define the church age more precisely. With reference to Christ, it is the period between his resurrection and return, in which there is an *overlap* of two ages. We are living both 'in this present age' (the age of the first creation which is now fallen) and also in the 'coming age' (the age of the new creation, by virtue of our having already been joined by the Spirit to the resurrected Christ and sharing in his status at God's right hand).

In this way the church age differs from the period of the Old Testament. Certainly, both periods experience some of God's promises being *already* fulfilled, and others being *not yet* fulfilled. However, as far as the promise of a 'coming age' is concerned - which is by definition a description of time - *the same promise* must be considered as *both* having already been fulfilled and not yet having been fulfilled. This paradox is as profound as the reality of our real union with Christ during our physical absence from him. If we are ruling with Christ, why are we not present with Christ? Why do we not have our new bodies already?

Our gospel mission: gathering the worship of all nations

This is indeed the surprise of the New Testament: Christ's expected arrival takes place in two comings. The connection between Daniel 7:13-14 and Matthew 28:16-20 makes this clear. Christ identified himself as the 'son of man' who in Daniel's vision was given all authority and dominion, and whom all the nations worshipped. But the paradox of Christ's first coming was that 'the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28). Still, at his resurrection and ascension, when he announces that 'all authority in heaven and earth' has *already* been given to him (Matt. 28:18), it looks as though the prophecy is fulfilled. However, as the allusion continues, the worship of 'all nations' is not a description of what Christ currently enjoys, but it is a description of what the church is sent to bring about (28:19). So although the disciples did indeed gather to worship Christ on the mountain of his ascension (28:17), these eleven did not constitute all nations. In a surprising continuity of the cumulative and cyclical character of salvation history, the

church becomes at once both the fulfilment of the promise and also the means of its future fulfilment, which will be completed at the 'end of the age' (Matt. 28:20).

This temporary church age, which is the overlap of the ages, between Christ's first and second comings, is unique as the time in which the worship of the nations will be won in fulfilment of God's promise. The pursuit of such worship is why Paul preaches the gospel (Rom. 15:16, cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). The reason Christ delays his return in judgment is because 'he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.' (2 Pet. 3:9). This means we do indeed take up the baton from Jesus' first coming to the earth and continue that mission - going to sinners as his royal ambassadors urging them to 'be reconciled to God!' (2 Cor. 5:18-21). In the process it means that we ourselves follow his example of humility and suffering, which themselves correspond with the gospel message of Christ's death and resurrection (2 Cor. 4ff). Nonetheless, just as we anticipate our new bodies, the church age will soon come to an end - and so there is an urgency to our mission: 'now is the day of God's salvation'. (2 Cor. 6:2). This is an urgent mission that we all share because we all inhabit the church age within Christ's body. In Christ we cannot opt out of this mission any more than we can opt out of today's date. The same head who restored our work sent us on his mission.

The church's mission: a full account of our activities?

The activity which explains the church age as a unique and temporary time in history is our preaching of the gospel in order to bring the worship of the nations to Christ. There is a newness to this mandate which derives from the surprise that Christ is coming again, and the separation of his comings makes the space for the church to imitate the humility of his first coming to the world as she descends the mountain of his ascension.

However, this is not an exhaustive account of the church and its activities on the earth. In our union with the last Adam and his everlasting Davidic rule, we have seen that we already have a restored and permanent responsibility to do good in the service of creation. This original mandate is restored *de facto* in the restoration of humanity through Christ's resurrection and our connection to him as king. Given who we are in him, this is what we will now do in any event. So if *such* a church is sent into the world at all then that sending automatically entails our being sent as humans to do good, or who will do good, for God's glory. As a new start, as a restored humanity, our being placed back in the world unmistakably recapitulates Adam's first coming to it.

The reconciliation of a twofold mission

How might we reconcile these two aspects of the church's mandated activity in the world - our renewed human responsibility toward creation generally following Adam's original role, and our new gospel and more specific

responsibility toward fallen humanity in imitation of Jesus' first coming? Are they not so distinct as to be as diametrically contrasted like heaven and earth? After all, Adam was created from the dust of the *earth* and his royal stewardship corresponded with his bodily exaltation from it. Conversely, the Son's mission began in *heaven* and the mode of his appeal to sinners corresponded with the humble descent of his incarnation.

On the contrary, the fact that the church's sending - in union with Christ - *de facto* combines both of these beginnings is a sign of the progress of salvation history on its way to the union of heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1-8). By the resurrection of our head, the last Adam, God's people have been lifted from the earth's dust to God's throne, and our original position is restored and exceeded. But, though born in this glory, the church is *sent back down* the mountain of his ascension, sent away from Christ, as if from the age to come backward into this present evil age, echoing his humility.

So despite these two perspectives, there is, in reality, only one eschatological movement of Christ's body, the universal church, between the ages: *from Christ* into the world, and from the world back *to Christ* in the age to come. The unity of this movement incorporates both her broader Adamic mission and her narrower gospel mission. In both the currency of her mission is the same: both models recapitulate the role of the eternal Son as God's self-communication, radiating his glory, just as his act of creation then ensured that creation itself - as now the church - exists *from God* and *to God*. In both aspects of her mission she is positioned between God and the rest of creation, and, in both, her role is characterised by Christ's work of reconciliation (cf. Col. 1:20-22). Our participation in his work takes place in one of two ways: either as Christ's new creation glory is *actually brought* to people's hearts through our verbal witness (2 Cor. 4:4-6, 5:17), or as it is *pictured* through our good works reordering creation by the fruit of his Spirit and so imaging Christ's future rule on the earth - when he brings everything into unity under him (Matt. 5:1-16, Titus 2:14, Eph. 1:10). Since both our words and our actions speak of Christ's glory, they each reinforce one another, so Paul writes: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do all to the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31, cf. Col. 3:17).

Of course, there remains a sense of tension, as we experience both the reality of Christ's death and the power of his resurrection life - and this both/and corresponds with our temporary position in both the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the church age (2 Cor. 4; Phil. 3:10). Next time we will focus our attention from this universal age of the church to our more local opportunities for serving God where he has placed us in the workplace.

Discuss

1. Why might we overlook the urgency of evangelism?
2. How might your academic work aid your witness?