



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

Introduction: Beginning with Christ

Searching for Categories

Sacred and Secular? Faith and Scholarship? Modernity has taught us to divide the sacred from the secular, and secularism seeks to divide 'faith' or 'religion' from 'public life' including from our academic disciplines and the activity of scholarship.

What categories should frame our response? Should we adopt the categories of modernity? What are Scripture's own categories of analysis? Inevitably we are asking what connections the Bible itself makes between God, his creation, and the gospel. That means we are asking about everything! This isn't a well-focused research topic suited to a successful PhD!

These may indeed be broad questions but they are unavoidable for our topic. So how can we begin? How can we assess the whole sweep of everything, when our entry point must inevitably be particular, limited and time-bound? Yet if we get the entry point wrong, won't that skew the whole project?

Christ as the beginning

God has already provided a beginning for us. Paul wrote of Christ that "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). There is already an entry point for us, "he is the beginning" (1:18), where the whole can be grasped in one particular, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (2:4). If we send our intellectual roots deep into grappling with God's revelation in Christ then there is no need for us to be taken captive by merely human traditions, including its potentially deceptive philosophy and the plausible arguments they generate (2:4,8).

This pedagogical pattern of the incarnation - that a whole can be seen through a particular part - is analogous to similar themes in both literature and divinity. For theologians, the doctrine of the Trinity means that there is nothing of God's nature and deity which is not possessed by each of the three Persons,

who are mutually indwelling. Hence, as Jesus says, if we have seen the Son, we also seen the Father; he is the "image of the invisible God" (John 1:18, 14:9-10; cf. Col. 1:15). For those in literature, it is a familiar authorial device to present the whole within a part. This might be seen in the way a novel contains an episode which acts as an allegorical or emblematic vignette of the whole narrative; or as the final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet summarises its theme; or as tightly constructed prologues hold together the main strands of the thesis which follows.

The Apostolic Witness

But how does 'Christ' help us with our pursuit of biblical categories for 'everything'? If the mind of the secularist divides 'religion' and 'academia', how does a biblical mind make the integrations and distinctions necessary for serving God in the university? Can we find any more practical detail than simply making the overall claim that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in 'Christ'?

Scripture teaches that the word 'Christ' receives definition through the apostolic witness. Further, we find that the New Testament authors often use the 'summarising prologue' device to introduce him. Where Christ's relationship to the cosmos is concerned, three examples, from three different authors and genres, show striking parallels in their approach. These are John's prologue to his gospel (John 1:1-18), Paul's introduction in his letter to the Colossians, deploying a brief hymn or confession form at the outset (Col 1:15-20), and the author to the Hebrews introducing the theme of his sermon at the outset (Hebrews 1:1-4).

From these parallels emerge common themes as we explore how our beginning with Christ can introduce more granular categories for the biblical analysis of 'everything' - including academia.

The Son of God in Creation and Redemption

Literary analysis draws attention to the internal patterns of these texts, and not just how they

summarise or introduce their author's longer text. Internal textual patterns are illuminating because of close connections between form and content.

The composition of Colossians 1:15-20 displays finely-tuned literary structuring. The text has two main sections: creation and new creation (or, redemption), and so encompassing everything in history. As to their content, each of them is concerned with the comprehensive supremacy of the Son of God, who images God to us. As to their form, they each draw on the language of Genesis 1, and each is threaded through with the same pattern of Greek prepositions: in him, through him, and to him. Most significantly of all, the two sections hold together with the phrase 'in him all things hold together'.

All the same themes are displayed in John 1:1-18, and Hebrews 1:1-4. Their subject is the eternal Son of God who is superlative as the invisible God's meaningful self-communication: the Word, or, Logos, the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature. And this self-communicating activity of God through his Son is exemplified in two activities: the Son's relation to the creation in general, and the Son's relation to the work of redemption. So all of creation was made through the Word, and it is all sustained by the word of his power: the 'stuff' of reality sits in the prior informational context of the Creator's communication. Likewise he entered his creation in the flesh, made purification for sin, and has been exalted back to God's side, sitting at his right hand to reign in Lordship over all things and as head of the church. The link between creation and new creation - the central key to the continuity of the story of the cosmos, is the perfect life, atoning death and glorious exaltation of Christ.

Christocentric re-integration

Against the fragmentation and dis-integration inherent within modernity, Christ presents us with a radical re-integration. It is a vision so holistic that it is impossible to think biblically about creation without also thinking biblically about redemption, because they are both primarily about the self-communication of God's goodness and glory through his Son. It is through the apostolic witness that we are introduced to the Son's role in creation. So in our next article we will continue our trail toward biblical categories, and we'll turn our attention more directly to 'the Son' within the Trinity.

Discuss

For now, we might like to discuss:

1. In the context of Colossians, why does Paul want us to be clear that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"? (2:3)
2. In our academic contexts, what might it look like to be taken captive by "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition..."? (2:8)