



## DISCUSSION BRIEFS

### Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

#### 3. Biblical Drama: Creation, Fall, Redemption

*Working hopefully, within the unity of the Bible's story*

Have you noticed the connection between fulfillment in your work and hopefulness as you work? We enjoy our research as we pursue some question to its answer, a tool to its application, or an idea to its expression. We find fulfillment when we think of our work as *going somewhere*. There is a direction of movement - an internal narrative to the pursuit of our work.

But *is* our academic work really going anywhere? If its internal dynamic is part of a bigger story then we have a warrant to find purpose in our work. If it isn't, then we enjoy its internal narrative as a distraction - just as we enter a fictional drama, suspending our disbelief, to escape the reality of our lives. The 'bigger story' is told in the Bible, and it teaches that our work takes place within God's creation. So our question is whether God's creation has a continuing role throughout the Bible's story.

#### God's Creation: the beginning of a story

We saw last time how the biblical drama opens spectacularly. The act of creation was God's meaningful self-communication. Creation and its goodness originates *from him*, not itself. It is a gift which speaks of its giver, calling us to relationship with him as creation's origin and goal. Consequently everything - including our academic discipline - carries a Godward dynamic. It comes to us already 'formatted' as a signpost to its ultimate end. Creaturely worship is not back to ourselves as creatures, but *to him* our Creator. So, contrary to the pride and scepticism entailed within (post-)modernity, our human privilege is to receive and work within a knowable field, and to use our linguistic capacity to verbalise its praises back to God in return. We saw that this 'doctrine of creation' - its God-given goodness, purpose and direction - contrasts starkly with a modern paradigm of an indifferent nature and the dichotomies of sacred vs secular, and facts vs values.

#### Fall: does 'creation' survive?

But can this positive analysis survive the fall, which immediately follows creation? Has sin killed God's creation, after just two chapters? If so, it would be like a drama which opens with a famous actress only for her to be killed off in the second scene. We'd have to realise it

was just a cameo role: despite the start it was going to be a different story to the one we expected. Of course, currently the earth is still in *existence*. The issue is whether the fall has erased its creaturely *format*, such that the stuff of the universe is no longer creaturely: good and purposeful, with its own dynamic properly oriented back toward the God from whom it came.

It would be easy to envisage a kind of 'Christian modernism' in which something almost identical to the sacred/secular divide re-enters the church through an interpretation of the fall which is more shaped by modernity than by Scripture. Here, the fall would totally override the original goodness of creation. We would default to the assumption that the world around us is just material 'stuff'. Being fallen, this creation would become 'secular' to us. It would no longer be a concern for our spiritual lives, whose focus would turn to private matters of personal forgiveness and individual piety. Under this model, creation would be a foil introduced at the start and then immediately killed off in order to highlight how 'sacred' goodness consists in the rejection of the material creation and the pursuit of a heavenly spiritual future. The story would have turned out to be very different to how it started: not about our relationship to God as creatures within his creation, but about our departure from that creation.

What would that model mean for the Christian pursuing a research career? Such residual work within creation would become a *mere utility* - a means to the end of a different story - one which is diverging away from creation and leaving all such work behind. Such a utility might be the practical task of putting bread on the tables of those who are heading to heaven, or who are bringing others to heaven. But if so, Christian fee-earners should certainly be redirected away from academia to more lucrative vocations! Or the utility of our work may be that it offers evangelistic opportunities. But what about the motivation for Christians to engage with the work itself, beyond talking to their colleagues at the proverbial water-cooler? This would be all the more challenging for an individual research career - where there may be fewer meetings with colleagues at the water-cooler, and where a genuine interest in the work itself is likely to be a precursor to any significant bridge-building.

#### Sin: anti-God, anti-creation

Scripture teaches that by God's grace, the fall did not erase the creation as creation. It is still to be understood with reference to its original purpose in relation to God. It was

after the fall that the Psalmist wrote ‘the heavens declare the glory of God’ (Ps. 19). Likewise Paul refers to creation’s ongoing witness: ‘...his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made...’ (Rom. 1:20). The same is true of humanity itself. We retain the image of God, defaced though it may be, and this remains the reason why murder is wrong, and why we remain those who are purposed to fill the earth after the Creator’s first example (Gen. 9:1-7). The curse on the earth may have caused painful toil, but it remains good to work and ‘everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving’ (1 Tim 4:3-5). The dynamic of creation remains: a good creation is still received *from God*, for which we give thanks *to God*.

This does not make the fall any less serious. Quite the contrary. As the original dynamic of creation persists, so the original dynamic of human sin persists. Although creation still communicates God, the essence of sin is to ‘suppress the truth’ (Rom 1:18). So while as dependent creatures we remain *from God*, in our sin we seek to *redirect* reality as if it is not also *to God*: ‘although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools...they exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.’ (Rom. 1:21-25). Redirecting our creaturely return we are now ‘turned in on ourselves.’<sup>1</sup>

So the legacy of the fall is not that creation ceased to be creation. The fall takes place within the ongoing story of divine self-communication. In turning against God, humanity inevitably turns against the creation which speaks of him. It is why, as ‘enemies of God in your minds’ (Col. 1:21), there is an intellectual effect of sin, as we turn to folly (Rom 1:22, Ps. 14:1). Consciously or otherwise, we seek in vain to deny the true nature of God and his creation.<sup>2</sup> As a result, sin organically brings with it an intellectual instability and inconsistency in respect of reality.<sup>3</sup> As far as creation is concerned, the fall does not bring about a static *non*-creation of meaningless matter, but a dynamic of *anti*-creation. If creation is the Creator’s self-communication, sin is its *contradiction*.

### God communicates in response

God will not permit a lie to be the last word. God’s answer to sin is a judgment true to the offence: if we will be anti-life, he will give us death. To make this judgment clear God has ensured that the condition of creation itself now reflects the human story: in applying his curse he has

subjected its ongoing Godward dynamic to ‘frustration’ (Rom 8:20). But the same text says he has done so ‘*in hope*’ - anticipating the overcoming of death in the bodily redemption (resurrection and glorification) of the children of God. We will inherit the creation similarly renewed - purified by a fire akin to its own death - to reign over it forever: God’s erstwhile enemies reconciled and re-oriented in worship toward his face (2 Pet 3:10-13, Rev. 22:3-5).<sup>4</sup>

This redemption comes about because God’s response to the fall is not only to give a truthful judgment to sin. He also contradicts that contradiction by the super-communication of himself: not only in truth, here also in grace, God’s final word is his own Son. The Word, who first created, himself became flesh and dwelt among us revealing his glory (Jn 1:1-18). The Holy Spirit shows Christ to us and in us: the firstfruit of the new creation which will be completed when Christ is finally revealed at his second coming, but which begins in us as we are made his children. This gospel story of God’s gracious response to sin is thus continuous with the first creation: they are both the story of his self-communication. But it is also unlike that first creation: this time he gives us all his fullness in the person and face of Christ himself, and he does so in a way that is suited to overcome our blindness and suppression of his truth (2 Cor 4:4-6).

### Hopefulness in our work

As we work within God’s creation we are doing what humans were designed and redeemed to do. To locate the role and value of our work within this story more adequately we will need to examine the remainder of our seven categories. For now it is already clear that our redemption is not a separate story taking us away from our creaturely existence - the incarnation, cross and resurrection demonstrating that God has not abandoned creation, but is reconciling it back to himself. Christ’s work - including as a carpenter - showed us what God is like. We can trust that our own work plays its part in the story as God displays his glory, and creation moves toward its God-given goal.

### Discuss

1. Have you ever felt a tension between enjoying your work while questioning its ultimate value?
2. How does creation-fall-redemption illuminate your work’s goodness, challenge, and direction?

<sup>1</sup> This phrase, ‘*incurvatus in se*’, is taken from Luther’s popularisation of Augustine’s account of sin.

<sup>2</sup> For more on humanity’s suppression of God’s revelation of himself, see the excerpts from Augustine’s *Of True Religion* in our [Further Reading](#).

<sup>3</sup> On the impact of the fall for our scholarly work, see Stephen Moroney’s article in the [Further Reading](#).

<sup>4</sup> For an elegant summary of creation-fall-redemption, see Athanasius’ *On The Incarnation of the Word of God* (excerpt) in the [Further Reading](#).