



DISCUSSION BRIEFS

Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

4. Two Adams

Relating Christ's work and our work

When we examined our previous category in this series of seven, namely, the biblical drama of 'creation - fall - redemption', we saw that sin and the fall did not destroy the creaturely nature of reality. The stuff of our daily work still exists as it is *from God* and as it points back *to God* - with an inbuilt purpose, meaning and direction. What's more, 'redemption' tells us - amongst other things! - that there *is* a future to human work: a glorified humanity will be working within a renewed creation under Christ.

Our overall task in this series, however, is to understand the practical relationship between *the gospel* and academia. So the general theme of 'redemption' requires further specificity - and that same specificity will allow us to ask clearer questions about the role of Christians at work today. We will see that the Bible provides particularity to the storyline of redemptive history through the way it all turns on the comparison of two individual humans: Adam and Christ. Clarity about humanity will give clarity to the gospel, and *vice-versa*, because everything is from the eternal Son.

Why does the category of 'redemption' need specificity?

First, the idea of salvation is not unique to Christianity. A longing for a future free from past and present problems is embedded within all of us. Part of what it means to be human in a fallen world is the deep-rooted sense of not being as we should be. An optimistic humanism might agree with us that the future will see the ongoing work of a perfected humanity within the universe - but will say it is to be achieved through the progress of science and the continued evolution of our species. Similarly, more explicitly religious teaching can still be 'false teaching' which offers what the New Testament calls 'a different gospel'. The concern in Galatians is to oppose a distorted Christianity: an account of our redemption which is not by grace alone through faith alone. Without *that* kind of union with Christ, we are without Christ altogether - and it is to be questioned whether such a position should retain the description of 'Christian' (Gal. 1:6-10, 5:4-5, cf. Rom. 4:5).¹

Second, even within a Christian account of creation-fall-redemption, the question remains as to how we locate ourselves on the timeline. If our only two specific markers

are the earth's curse behind us, and the earth's renewal in front of us, how do we make sense of our role in the middle?

We can illustrate the need for further clarity by comparing two inductive arguments about our work: (1) "If we know the earth is currently cursed, shouldn't Christians deprioritise working within it, focus our efforts on getting souls saved for the future, and leave our nets to become 'fishers of men'?" (2) "Since the earth will be renewed, and we ourselves are already being restored from the effects of the fall, shouldn't we demonstrate our faith by doing good works even more effectively?"

Both these arguments - looking back and looking forward - appeal to the same timeline. But they also both find themselves appealing to more particular assumptions about our current state as *humans*. The first rightly assumes that humans are more than our bodies and have souls in need of reconciliation to God; the second rightly assumes that our future is a restoration of Adam's original creation: that humans were, and always will be, designed to do good on the earth.

Drawing these themes together it is clear that to make sense of our place in redemptive history we need to know more of what it means for us to be related to Christ, and what it means to be related to Adam. We will find that these two historical questions are triangulated by their respective connections to the Son of God in eternity.

Adam, Christ, and the eternal Son

Through this series of categories, our anchor text has been Colossians 1:15-20 (paralleled by Jn. 1:1-14 and Heb. 1:1-4). Paul describes the eternally beloved Son of God within the Trinity as supreme in 'all things'. These 'all things' are viewed in the two halves of the text's drama: in creation and redemption respectively. But now we can also see a further level of specificity within this text, and which runs through both creation and redemption. Paul's allusions to Genesis relate the Son of God to *humanity*. First, as the Son is the model (or, 'archetype') on which humanity was designed at first and represented by Adam in the *image* of God. Second, as the Son's own incarnation and resurrection makes him the *beginning* of the new humanity - the glorious fulfilment (and 'antitype') of that which the first humanity in Adam failed to be.

¹ For Further Reading on how our salvation centres on our union with Christ, see Todd Billings, [Redemption Applied: Union with Christ](#), from ch. 32, *OHRT* (2020).

The eternal Son and the role of the 'first Adam'

The Son within the Trinity has always been the 'image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15), and so was the eternal archetype for the creation of humanity in the 'image of God' (Gen. 1:26-27). Humankind is therefore the pinnacle - the best and stand-out example - of the common principle of creation generally. All things were created 'in him' - that is, in reference to, framed by, and modelled on the Son as the one who communicates God's glory (Col. 1:16, cf. Ps. 19).

For humans this honour is intimately connected to our role, or *position*. Though made of dust we have been placed between God and the rest of the creation: under God, but over the rest of his works (Ps. 8). This intermediate location entails an inherent and twofold role for humanity. The first perspective is from *God* toward *creation*: representing God to the earth, and bringing God's royal dominion to bear. The second orientation is from *creation* back toward *God*: representing creation in verbalising its thanks and worship to the Creator in priestly praise. These two orientations of humanity's role are consistent with the general principle of the doctrine of creation which we saw in our treatment of the second category in this series of seven: that the existence of creation is to be understood as it is ultimately *from God* and therefore pointing back *to God* (Rom. 11:36).

Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection

As the fall of humanity was the cause of creation's curse (Gen. 3:14-19), so the redemption of humanity will likewise permit the redemption of all things (cf. Rom. 8:18-25). Underlining this pivotal position of humanity in respect of creation, the mission of the Son in his first coming to the earth was focussed not on the wider creation but on the reconciliation and renewal of sinful humanity in respect of God (Luke 19:10, 2 Cor. 5:19, 1 Tim. 1:15).

Christ's arrival as a human was both like, and unlike, Adam's installation on the earth. The historic incarnation was *not* the exaltation of dust to royalty over creation. On the contrary, it was the arrival of *deity humbling himself* to become a human for humans, to live a perfect life of obedience under God's law, obedient even to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:6-8; Gal. 4:4-5). However, Christ's first coming *was* like that of Adam: he was a real *human*. He had the same body we share, experienced the same temptations and sufferings, and was subject to the same demand for obedience in which Adam had so badly failed (Rom. 5:12-21, Heb. 2:5-18). Christ's authentic humanity is also what makes the resurrection so precious to his fellow humans. He has trail-blazed a path through death on behalf of his people, showing that for us the 'natural' human body (the same as Adam's which we were all given at first) will be followed by its upgrade as a glorified body. So Christ is the 'last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45).

For Christ, the glorification of his humanity included his ascension to God's right hand. Now indeed he is exalted from the dust of the grave to receive authority over everything - in a wonderful and much greater echo of Adam's original position over God's creation (Matt. 28:18, Phil. 2:9). After having come 'from God' in grace as a servant-king, he returned 'to God' on our behalf, our high priest, so that he entered God's holy presence permanently representing his people who would follow him there (Heb. 9:11-12:2).

The patterns connecting the eternal Son, Adam and Christ show how the common theme of representative headship unites the Bible's teaching on all of the following: the Son over all things, the role of humanity generally in respect of the rest of creation, the result of Adam's disobedience as it brought death to all his descendants and God's curse on the earth, and the result of Christ's obedience and resurrection as it brings the same life to all his people and ultimately the renewal of the whole creation. Both Adam and Christ are treated as representative heads of humanity, but where one failed and brought us death, the other was victorious and brought us resurrection life. These are Paul's explicit comparisons between the 'two Adams' (Rom. 5, 1 Cor. 15).

Implications for relating the gospel and academia

Against other accounts of redemption, the *Christian* account turns on the gospel: our being transferred from membership of Adam's family to membership of Christ's family. Pictured by baptism, we die to the old, and we are raised into the new. We are united to Christ and his redemption not by our work, culture, or anything within this fallen creation - but on our part by faith alone and on Christ's as his Spirit really joins us to him (Gal. 3:1-6, 1 Cor. 6:17, 15:45). The greater renewal of our original humanity is the result of Christ's resurrection - whose effects are both *future*, as we await similar new bodies, and *present*, as we are already fully justified within Christ's own vindication and experience transformation from the inside. Of these, the *positional* result is the already-completed result: we are already deemed to share Christ's present status, and he is at God's right hand over the earth (Eph. 2:6, Col. 3:1-4).

But what is our role *today* with respect to our work? If as believers we are already *positioned* within Christ the last Adam, doesn't it mean we are likewise already restored to Adam's *role* of royal rule over creation? Conversely, if, as we are in Christ, we are to follow the example of his first coming into the world, aren't we called to focus our attention only on sinful humanity, being 'fishers of men'? To help us address this paradox, our next category to consider is the 'already-and-not-yet' character of redemptive history.

Discuss

1. Why must the general category of '*redemption*' have a particular, biblical and *Christian* definition?
2. How does Christ's work relate to our work?