



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Seven Theological Categories For Relating the Gospel and Academic Work

1. The Eternal Son

Love, Knowledge, and the Christian Scholar

Our first biblical category toward relating Christianity and scholarship is that of the eternal Son of God. Here we'll appreciate his significance by tracing the relationship between the themes of knowledge and love.

The New Testament teaches that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are "hidden in Christ" (Col. 2:3).ⁱ This isn't a doubtful teaching arising from one contested text. Three parallel, high profile, carefully structured, systematic-theological passages from three different inspired authors all make the same point (Col. 1:15-20, John 1:1-18, Heb. 1:1-4). Creation and redemption, and everything within them, find their integration in Christ - specifically considered as he is the eternal Son of God within the Trinity.ⁱⁱ

The Trinity can feel like an abstract and inaccessible topic. As a practical entry point to our study of the eternal Son, let's consider the following question, addressed to us as those who work within academia. Does the development of your scholarly work have any implications for the development of your character? More specifically: does your growth in *knowledge* carry any necessary implications for your growth in *love*?

Separating knowledge and love

Our cultural context may encourage us to think that *knowing* and *loving* are not inherently related. For instance, in modernity's fact-value dichotomy, valueless facts (corresponding to our knowledge) are seen as objective "things that just are; they are neither good nor bad in themselves" in contrast to factless values (corresponding to our loves) which are subjective and "not justified by the way things are."ⁱⁱⁱ

This particularly modern way to separate knowledge and love can be diagnosed critically by a little intellectual history. Christian philosopher Chris Watkin has summarised how early modern thinkers in the early 1600s - such as Bacon and Descartes - rejected a fundamental feature of the pre-modern intellectual paradigm: Aristotle's account of "final causes". Aristotle

had held that things themselves had inherent purposes or "ends" in relation to what was naturally good. So when pre-modern scholars learned "facts" about the world they also believed they were learning about "values". However, Watkin points out that the "good" according to Aristotle was rooted entirely within nature, rather than originating in its Creator. All human paradigms have their strengths and weaknesses. The decline of the Aristotelian paradigm allowed for the emergence of the empirical scientific method, many of whose practical gains have been obvious. But a baby can also be lost when discarding bathwater. As Watkin has noted: "the modern world...rejects Aristotelian final causes and, along with them, any notion of things in the world being good or bad in themselves."^{iv} So now everything is just neutral "stuff", and our values must be entirely subjective. Accordingly, our knowledge need not affect our loves.

Intellectual history: searching for our roots

This vignette reminds us that we often make sense of ideas (or critique them) by locating them within a pre-existing conversation. Indeed, one of the most rewarding and frustrating experiences for the research student is the pursuit and clarification of such an intellectual genealogy, and this is often how we define the topics of our theses.

The significance of intellectual history was familiar to Paul. In Colossians 2:8, he warned, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ." We are not autonomous thinkers, but we are going to be "rooted" somewhere (cf. 2:7). Reminding us of Watkin's analysis of Aristotle, the basic distinction here is between our philosophy being rooted in "the elements of this world" (to translate literally), or rooted in Christ.

But how can "Christ" be a "root" for our thinking? Wasn't Jesus of Nazareth himself located geographically, historically and culturally? He was, but his humanity is not the whole story. The Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3), and "in whom all things hold together" (1:17), was "*before all things*" in relationship

with God the Father as “*the Son he loves*” (1:17, 13). In contrast to the human traditions framed solely within the limited system of “nature”, we have a root who preceded it and generated it. The reason we can *value* Christ as our root is because he really *is* the root of everything. So when we consider our view of the world, and the genealogy of its ideas, Paul says it is foundational that we consider the eternal Son of God.

The Son: knowledge and love in God

Who is this Son of God whom the Father loves? John tells us that he is the one who gives us the knowledge of God: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” (Jn 1:18). John says the Son is qualified to make God known to us because he is God himself, eternally begotten from God, loved by the Father and likewise in a permanent orientation of love toward him. In this relationship of love, the Father, Son and Spirit enjoy perfect mutual knowledge (Matt 11:27, 1 Cor 2:11). As far as the “beloved Son” is concerned (Matt 3:17), he has always been God’s “image” (Col. 1:15), his “exact representation” (Heb. 1:3), his “Word” (Jn 1:1), or, the “logos”. This indicates that God’s rational self-communication outside of the Godhead flows from his meaningful communication within the Godhead, in which the Son himself plays a special role. It also indicates that this meaningful communication within the Godhead - turning in some way on the eternal begetting of the Son - comprises both knowledge and love. Before the beginning, in the darkness of this mystery, these categories are wholly entwined.

As far as the Son’s redeeming work toward us is concerned, he draws us into the same relationship of love and knowledge with the Father that he himself enjoys. According to John’s prologue, the Word’s work to make God known is secured as we become “children of God” (Jn 1:1,12-13). At his victorious ascension he returns “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). For him and so for us, eternal life is to know God and his love (17:3, 23-24). It is impossible to conceive of a “fact-value” dichotomy when the object of our attention is God himself, whose life is both being and goodness itself.

Knowing and loving God’s creatures

In our consideration of the Son of God based on three parallel texts (Jn 1:1-18, Col. 1:15-20, and Heb. 1:1-4), we have briefly considered the way knowledge and love

are entwined within the doctrines of the *Trinity* and *redemption*. Sandwiched between these is the last remaining theme which our texts integrate by means of the Son: the doctrine of *creation*. Should we expect to find knowledge and love entwined here also?

Modernity would view “the Trinity” and “redemption” as religious themes which inhabit their own thought world, to be handled separately from our scholarly engagement with the visible world around us. Why should “religious” patterns of knowledge and love continue to apply when our attention turns away from God and turns toward the real world? When we study God’s creation, is God still in view in some way? To address this question directly we must consider our next foundational category: the Creator-creation relationship.

For now, however, we will conclude with a teaser, courtesy of Augustine’s interest in “rational love” - the love of appreciation, where we stand at an observer’s distance from a painting to admire it.^v O’Donovan summarises Augustine’s critique of the recurring mistake in this field: “To love man ‘in himself’ is to admit the false belief that he is a self-standing, independent being. It is to see him as though he were his own source of value and to set him in the place of the one who is in fact his source of value. To love him ‘in God’ is to recognise that his real nature can be grasped only by reference to his Creator.”

Discuss

1. What is your area of study, and why did you choose it? Did your choice emerge more from what you *loved* or what you *knew*? How did that choice relate to your faith?
2. Do the themes in today’s Conversation Starter highlight any dichotomies in our own lives? For instance, do we see our research as the place to grow in *knowledge*, and our “Christian life” as the way we grow in *love*? How might our research fuel our loves, and our faith encourage the pursuit of knowledge?

ⁱ This paragraph summarises the conclusion of our introductory Conversation Starter: ‘Categories to Begin With’.

ⁱⁱ For our Further Reading, see ‘Who Created? Thinking through the Trinity’, in Chris Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017) 14-45. Watkin argues that, far from being an intellectual embarrassment, the Trinity provides Christians with the best philosophical basis for engaging with the culture’s big questions.

ⁱⁱⁱ This helpful summary is taken from Watkin *Thinking Through Creation*, 71.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Oliver O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1980), 29-32