



## DISCUSSION BRIEFS

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

#### 7. Our local opportunity to serve God at work

*A twofold calling in the workplace*

Last time we described the activity of the universal church in the context of the current period of salvation history between Christ's ascension and his second coming. Accordingly, we live in the overlap of *this present age* - corresponding to the first creation - and *the age to come*, corresponding to the new creation, and inaugurated in Christ's resurrection body. Following the pattern of salvation history - both linear and cyclical - the church now inhabits her own cycle within the story. She was sent *from Christ* down the mountain of his ascension, back into the world in this age, so that she might return *to Christ* again in the age to come, bringing the nations within her.

We saw that the church's entrance at this point recapitulates both Adam's and Jesus' first entrances into the world. As to the former, as we have a *comprehensive* concern as humans for all creation. As to the latter, following Jesus' earthly ministry, we have a *particular* concern to bring the gospel to fallen humanity. In both these mandates we are located between Christ and the rest of creation, and we have two orientations: *from Christ toward creation*, representing Christ's kingly authority (whether in royal stewardship doing good for the earth in this age, or as his ambassadors declaring the gospel and appealing to people to 'be reconciled to God'); and *from creation to Christ*, bringing the priestly return of creation's thanksgiving - including that of a reconciled humanity incorporated into the church - the promised worship of all nations for the age to come.

The unity of our overall movement is not only eschatological but it is also *doxological*. As in the case of the eternal Son, the act of creation, and the original roles of Adam and Christ, so now we too display God's glory, so that all the glory should ultimately return to him. Sharing this same currency, our words and deeds can interpret one another and each leads to the other: our gospel message results in changed lives and good works, while our good works also provide the plausibility structure for our gospel message.

How do these universal principles help us more locally?

#### 1. The local church: sending and gathering

The circular eschatological movement of the universal church is patterned locally: Christians are sent from the weekly gathering of the local church to go out into the world, in order to gather once again on the next 'Lord's day'.

As we are gathered, the church pictures the community of the age to come - which it already is. Similarly, the authority of its leaders is not over the things of this age - as if the local church wields the sword or farms the land - but their concern is with our connection to Christ who is in the age to come: his word to us, our prayer to him, and the pictorial means of our fellowship with him: baptism and the Lord's supper. However, the local church's prophetic influence extends well beyond its gathering because Christ's word - which it teaches - is no more limited than Christ's authority over everything in heaven and earth. So when Scripture is taught from week to week, Christians are being shaped as to how to live under Christ's Lordship in his world as a 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet. 2:9) - both as they are sent out for their kingly service as his stewards and ambassadors, and as they bring the returns of creation's praises back with them again for gathered worship.

#### 2. Our twofold orientation during the week

##### *a. Royal servants working under temporal authority*

Christ's word sends us out into the creation over which he is King. However, as he has not yet returned, and the current mode of his rule is reconciliation, he patiently permits the existing authority structures of this age to remain: rulers, employers and family authorities (cf. 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7; Col. 3:17-4:1). As Christ taught Peter to pay the temple tax 'lest we should offend them' even though, strictly, 'the sons are free' (Matt. 17:26-27), so Christians should voluntarily submit to earthly authorities.

As we serve Christ through serving temporal authorities (Col 3:23-4) we gain an excellent reputation for doing good (Rom. 13, 1 Pet. 2:15). Such reasoning implies a significant overall alignment of interests. By Christ's resurrection, Christians participate in his restored royal stewardship over creation: we are to be divine agents for creation's flourishing. Similarly, even fallen humanity has an ongoing concern with the earth, if only for its harvest. Of course, our submission to them remains subject to Christ's higher Lordship if there should ever be a conflict (Acts 5:29, 1 Pet. 2:13). But the givenness of the created order, and the continuity between the doctrines of creation and redemption which we have observed previously, means that, whether unbelieving employers like to admit it or not, employees will generally become more effective workers once they become Christians. This is not only a matter of increased honesty and diligence, but also of greater insight and wisdom, as a result of Scripture's teaching on the way that creation can be ordered for its flourishing. As Christians therefore, we must ask: what is the good that my

employer or project seeks to achieve, and how can I best serve that goal, as my Christian contribution to creation?

Properly speaking, the aim of work - and hence of our employer - is *to impact creation in this age*. In the case of the civil authority, the employer's goal is to implement justice; in the case of a farmer, the goal is to cultivate the land. These aims accord with the first orientation of Adam's position over the earth: a royal stewardship *from God toward creation*. In neither case is the employee paid to direct attention to Jesus who is in the age to come. Unless we are employed by the church, our employer's goal will not be to preach the gospel to sinners. So one aspect of our submission to the temporal authorities is to recognise that we are not being employed to come into the office with the divine authority of a royal command: 'be reconciled to God!' Even outside our working hours - such as in our lunch breaks or in other social times - it is unlikely that such an authoritative approach will be appropriate in the sphere of the workplace. We are to act with wisdom toward those who are outside and to show grace in our conversation (Col. 4:5-6). As a result, as far as the workplace is concerned, our royal authority is most likely to be reserved for our good works toward God's creation, and not for our proclamation.

### **b. Bringing glory and people to Christ using our words**

If Christ's delayed return has implications for the way we are sent *from him* into the workplace, his current absence also has implications for the way we return *to him* from the workplace, in our priestly orientation, bringing him the glory from creation and the worship of all nations. In particular, the absence of Christ's physical body clarifies that there are certain things that can *only* be done verbally.

First, Christ's absence impacts the way we fulfil our human responsibility to bring creation's glory back to God. For Adam and Eve this was always (to risk anachronism) a 'public' role as humanity represented the rest of creation and audibly verbalised its praises. Today, with Christ being absent, it is very clear that we cannot physically carry material offerings from the earth to him. Instead, we must give a special accent to *the verbal articulation and explication of creation's glory* so that it is understood as pointing back to him in praise, thanks and honour. Crediting God for his creation in this way can still be public even if it is not done formally as part of our paid employment. This is because our paid employment is not the sum total of our public lives. Even at work we talk with colleagues about our attitudes and pastimes, and we also interact with colleagues when travelling to or from meetings or seminars. Given that our public context will be in the hearing of unbelievers, our verbal exposition of creation's praise will necessarily also function 'pre-evangelistically.' As we express our overwhelming thanks to God upon the recognition of some facet of his creation, and eagerly explain it to others with a view to their shared admiration, this worship will certainly pique the interest of unbelievers. This is a good thing, and

we might even create such 'opportunity' through free public lectures or events, for instance (Col. 4:5).

The second implication of Christ's absence concerns the difference between what is 'pre-evangelistic' and 'evangelistic'. Our personal salvation depends on our joining the person of Christ. How is he presented to us? Creation has always declared the glory of God as its source and ultimate end, and in that sense it has always been modelled on the role of the eternal Son. But the incarnation would not have been necessary if he already subsisted in the beauty of creation. Likewise nothing we do outwardly by the bodies of this age can join us to Christ who is in the age to come. Salvation is not by works: he cannot be grasped materially nor is he presented to us by the means of this age. The most beautiful vista or eloquent work of art may rightly stir our longing, pointing us in the right direction, but it cannot actually bring Christ to us as creation's goal. Instead, Christ is presented verbally in the gospel message so that by the Spirit we can grasp his person by faith (Rom. 10:14, cf. 2 Cor. 4-5). Evangelistic words present the person of Christ as the object of faith through the gospel.

Such a presentation of Christ need not be awkward or arbitrary, however. After all, Christ is the one in whom, through whom and *to whom* are all things. So we can introduce him naturally as the true (though often subversive) fulfilment of what this fallen creation - including our own field of work - is pointing toward. This natural follow-through coheres well with our priestly calling, after Christ's own example. We can come alongside our colleagues, as one of them, and seek to bring them with us on our own return, from creation back toward God. Ultimately we trust this will mean winsomely bringing them with us into the church gathering itself - perhaps using Christ's own words when he adopted the same mode: 'come, and you will see'. (Jn. 1:39, 43, 49).

### **Conclusion**

Under Christ's Lordship, between the gatherings of the local church, Christians have a twofold opportunity to serve God in the context of the work we do in his world:

- **From Christ to our field:** we bring a divine contribution to creation in this age, wisely applying Scripture to be more effective pursuing what is good;
- **From our field to Christ:** we praise God as we explain the way our field itself points to his glory, and by drawing alongside our colleagues we seek to bring them with us all the way to Christ as we point them to him in the gospel, the church and the age to come.

### **Discuss**

1. Is it hard to serve Christ by serving your colleagues?
2. What are your public opportunities to praise God for your field?