

Christ and Creation

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The relationships between God, Christ and Creation are significant and multi-faceted, and reflect varied aspects of the person and work of Christ, and varied perspectives on creation. These relationships inter-relate, and form a coherent history and narrative. Our survey covers: Christ and creation; Christ and humanity; Christ and incarnation; Christ and miracles; Christ and transfiguration; Christ and atonement; and Christ, resurrection and return.¹

These themes help us respond to Christ with faith, praise, obedience, hope, and joy.

God, Christ, and creation

John Calvin taught the intimate connection between God the creator and sustainer of the universe.

[God] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe...he shows his glory to us, whenever we and wherever we cast our gaze....this skilful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God...²

As Zachman has shown, Calvin saw the universe in three powerful images: the theatre of God's glory, the living image of God, and the garment of God.³ Calvin rejected the error which tied God too closely to the world and fell into determinism, as he rejected the error of separating God too far from the creation.⁴ For the universe is constantly sustained by the direct work of God: 'as soon as the Lord takes away his Spirit all things return to their dust and vanish away'.⁵

So for Calvin we meet God in his creation.

O, if we were only truly committed to God! I assure you: all the elements would sing to us and we, we would get to hear in this world a melody made in heaven, so utterly beautiful.⁶

Similarly Thomas Traherne had a sophisticated theology of God and the creation.

The Image of God is the most Perfect Creature. Since there cannot be two GODs the utmost Endeavor of Almighty Power is the Image of GOD. It is no Blasphemy to say that GOD cannot make a GOD: the Greatest Thing that He can make is His Image: A most Perfect Creature, to enjoy the most perfect Treasures, in the most perfect Maner.⁷

He knew that God was Trinity.

Since as thou, O Father, enjoyest all things,
In creating us to Glory;
Thine eternal Son enjoyth all things
In Redeeming them for us;
And us for them;
And by the joy that he taketh
In seeing us attain
The End of our Redemption.
Yes since the Holy Ghost, by Goodness,
Enjoyeth all Things
In his elect People...⁸

And he celebrated the creation of God's good works, and their redemption through Christ.

To him that sitteth upon the Throne,
Because he created them.
To the Lamb for evermore,
Because he purchased them for us.

That we shall hear all Creatures,
In Heaven and Earth,
So praising thee...⁹

We find the same awareness in Rowan Williams:

It [the creation] depends on him moment by moment, carried along on the current of his activity. Behind and beneath everything we encounter is this action. We may look at something that seems unmoving and unchanging like the pillars of a cathedral or the peaks of a mountain, but what is within and beyond it is an intense energy and movement.¹⁰

Similarly, Lossky wrote these words:

The created universe... appears as an entirely new being, as creation fresh from the hands of the God of Genesis, 'who saw that it was good', a created universe willed by God and the joy of His Wisdom, 'a harmonious ordinance', 'a marvellously composed hymn to the power of the Almighty', as St Gregory of Nyssa says.¹¹

What sins do we commit in regard to God's creation? We may selfishly use the creation, damage its integrity, reduce its usefulness, and fail to 'serve the land' [Gen 2:15, 4:2, my tr.¹²]. We may ignore or neglect the creation, and fail to see its wonder and delight, and fail to receive it as the good gift of God. We may worship or serve the creation, and fail to worship and serve God its creator, receiving the gift, but not the giver. We may misuse it by destroying it, or by worshipping it. When we misuse the creation, we damage the creation, we damage ourselves, and we sin against God and Christ, from whom and by whom all creation exists.

Christ and humanity

Humanity is made in the image of God, to reflect the character of God, to represent God, to work for God, to serve God's purposes, and to love God. As the universe is the work of God, his theatre, image and garment, humanity should respect the universe, and care for it. Calvin wrote:

Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect...let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things he possesses.¹³

For Calvin, the glory of humanity lies in the capacities and gifts given to us by God.

For the invention of arts, and of other things which serve to the common use and conveniences of life, is a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation....the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused throughout the whole human race.¹⁴

And again,

For astronomy is very pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God.¹⁵

For all gifts such as justice, liberal and manual arts, philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, mathematics, and artistry come from the Spirit of God.

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonour the Spirit of God.¹⁶

Whereas Adam was 'the man from dust', Christ is 'the man from heaven' [1 Cor 15:47].

So Christ is the fulfilment or apotheosis of humanity, who came to be and to do all that

humanity was intended to be and do, to repair and recreate all that humanity damaged, and to bring salvation and healing to humanity and to the creation. So, 'as we have born the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven' [1 Cor 15:49]. All that is wonderful about humanity in the plan of God is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In *The Discarded Image*,¹⁷ C. S. Lewis showed the immense contrast between the ways in which a person in Medieval Europe thought about the universe, and the ways modern people of the West think about the universe. He pictured a Medieval person going out to look at the stars on a cloudless night. Though that person would have thought that the earth was the geographical centre of the universe, looking at the stars he or she would have felt as if they were looking into the centre of reality, to God's heaven, looking from the outside into the centre. A modern Western person knows that the earth is not the centre of the universe, yet, when looking 'up' at the stars, feels that the earth is the centre, and that the stars are 'out there.' So although we know that we do not live in a geocentric, earth-centred universe, we frequently act as if we are the centre of the universe. We have replaced God.

Yet humanity is also distorted by sin, and this distortion brings futility to the relationship between humanity and the creation, and also distorts the creation itself: 'cursed is the ground because of you; you are dust, and to dust you shall return' [Gen 3:17-19].

The curse found in Genesis 3 is reflected in the theme of futility in Ecclesiastes and Romans 8. It pervades human life, and also the creation. So our groaning resonates with the groaning of the creation:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,

groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies [Rom 8:22,23].

And Hebrews gives a Christological perspective on both humanity and creation:

But someone has testified somewhere, ‘What is a human that you are mindful him, or the son of man, that you care for him? ...you have crowned him with glory and honour, subjecting all things under his feet.’ Now in subjecting all things to him, God left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we do see Jesus...now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone [Heb 2:6-9 my translation¹⁸].

Christ and incarnation

There could be no more powerfully close connection between God and creation than the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, his taking ordinary human flesh in Mary’s womb, his birth, his suffering, his death and his resurrection and glorification. It was not that God came disguised as a human, in the likeness of a human, or just in a human body. Christ was ‘God from God, light from light, true God of true God...of the same substance as the Father.’ In Christ, the creator assumed the creation, the Word, who was ‘with God’, and who ‘was God’, ‘became flesh’, not by giving up being the Word, but by adding humanity, by incarnation [Jn 1:1-14].¹⁹

In a desire to focus on this mystery of the Incarnation some speak as if there was no significant connection between God and the creation until the incarnation, that the Word became incarnate in alien territory, and established divine-earthly contact for the first time. Of course this view ignores the doctrine of God the creator and sustainer of the universe. As John wrote of the eternal Word: ‘All things came into being through

him...He was in the world, and the world was made through him' [Jn 1:3,10]. It was the creator Word who became incarnate, who became flesh.

In his incarnation, Christ the Word revealed humanity, as well as divinity. He was 'the image of the invisible God,' [Col 1:15], the perfect example of a human made in God's image. And as humanity has a responsibility for the welfare of creation, so Christ, as 'the firstborn of all creation' [Col 1:15], demonstrated that responsibility uniquely, representatively, comprehensively, and effectively [Col 1:15-20].

Christ was the Word made ephemeral flesh, the Son incarnate in dusty, earthy humanity. So the incarnate Christ, through whom all was made, in whom all things hold together, will take the creation from 'groaning' to 'glory' [Rom. 8: 18-23].²⁰ Christ not only fulfils the redemptive gifts of the first age of salvation of the Old Testament in his death and resurrection, he also comes 'to fulfil the first creation by its renewal,' for he is 'the mighty perfecter of creation'.²¹

Christ and miracles

Christ's miracles of healing and deliverance, and his nature miracles, were signs of God's presence in him.

The glory of God, who is the Creator of the world of the elements and who ruled over the waters from the very beginning, is made known in the figure of Jesus and in his activity...With unparalleled sovereignty in the midst of a mediocre and ailing world he brings to men the great health of God.²²

The point is not just that the miracles happened: it is also that God is personally present in Christ doing these miracles. God was personally present to do the miracles of the Bible, and he was personally and substantially present in the incarnate Son in the

miracles of Jesus Christ. For God who created and sustains the creation is personally present in Christ bringing health, freedom, and signs of the renewal of the creation, which will finally be fulfilled when Christ comes again to the earth. The miracles of Christ are signs of the future cosmic rebirth and resurrection, as the resurrection of Christ is the first fruits of his resurrection and rebirth.

Christ and transfiguration

We find the same trajectory in the narrative of the transfiguration of Christ, or his 'glorification'.²³ For the sight of the transfiguration of Christ, reinforced by the words of God addressed to the disciples, is both a revelation of divinity and of transformed humanity. The glory is divine glory, but it is also human glory, which anticipates the work of the Spirit in believers, as, seeing the glory of the Lord, they are changed into his likeness 'from one degree of glory to another', by the work of the Spirit [2 Cor. 3:18]. And this transformation of believers anticipates both our final transformation, and also the transformation of the universe, as we have seen. In the words of Joseph Hall, of the 17th Century,

Christ is our head, we are his members; as we all were in the first Adam, both innocent and sinning; so are we in the second Adam...shining in Tabor...We are not so sure of death, as of transfiguration; all the days of our appointed time we will wait, therefore, until the days of our changing shall come.²⁴

And again,

He that would not have his transfiguration spoken of till he were raised, would have it spoken of all the world over now that he is raised and ascended, that by his momentary glory we may judge of the eternal.²⁵

As A. M. Ramsey pointed out, it was the transfiguration of the humanity of Christ which was the great sign of hope for the whole creation.

He who is transfigured is the Son of Man; and, as He discloses on mount Hermon another world, He reveals that no part of created things and no moment of created time lies outside the power of the Spirit, who is Lord, to change from glory into glory.²⁶

In terms of real connection with the creation, the earthy historicity of these events is essential. If the incarnation is historical reality, then the miracles, transfiguration, death, resurrection and ascension must also be historical realities.

Christ and atonement

Contemporary statements on creation often focus on God's providential care, on the incarnation, on the resurrection of Christ, on the Holy Spirit, and on human responsibility. They often neglect the atoning death of Christ.

Yet this connection is clearly see in Colossians 1, in which the celebration of Christ in creation and in recreation concludes with these words: 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' [Col 1:19,20]. The words, 'making peace through the blood of his cross' are curiously deleted from the Canticle for the Saturday Morning Office in *A Prayer Book For Australia*, as they are often curiously absent from some discussions of Christ and creation. Other New Testament texts on the restoration of the creation also flows out of the atonement [Rom 3:21-31, 8: 18-25, and Rev 5, 21,22].

As we have seen Traherne celebrated joy in the creation. He also recognised the reality of sin and of the atoning death of Christ within that creation. He knew the glory of God in the glory of the universe, but also knew the dark side of human sinfulness, and the need for atonement.

He recognised sin:

I cannot meet with Sin, but it Kils me, and tis only by Jesus Christ that I can Kill it, and Escape...One Sin is a Dreadfull Stumbling Block in the Way to Heaven. It breeds a long Parenthesis in the fruition of our Joys...There is no Calamity but Sin alone.²⁷

He recognized the power of Christ's atoning death to deal with sin:

Is not my Saviour Dead!

His Blood, thy Bane; my Balsam Bliss, Joy, Wine;

Shall Thee Destroy; Heal, Feed, make me Divine.²⁸

He wrote of the death of Christ in these terms:

an Atonement is the Propiciation or Satisfaction which is made to Divine Justice...or the Sacrifice which is offered & accepted in his Steed.²⁹

Denise Inge comments on Taherne's writing,

While the cosmic Christ model of redemption fits neatly with an affirmative view of creation it does not adequately answer questions of sacrifice, atonement, and payment for sin.³⁰

This focus on atonement through the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins is crucial in any discussion of the creation and the environment. For we live in a society in which enhanced environmental awareness means that our society is most aware of environmental responsibility and environmental sins. It is not enough for us to do our best to repair the immense damage we have caused, though we should work to do this.

Humanity needs the forgiveness of God through the atoning death of Christ for its sins against God's creation and environment. For sins against God in regard to the environment are some of the blatant sins of selfishness and injustice in our world today. We only have good news for the corrupted environment through the death of Christ, and we only honour Christ if we honour his saving death. We need the atonement, and so does the creation. Whether we abuse the creation by trashing it or worshipping it, we need God's forgiveness through Christ's atoning death. For the cursing of the earth in Genesis 3, the result of Adam's sin, is echoed in the curse on the people of God for their disobedience and breaking of law and covenant [Deut 27,28]. Our only hope is the death of Christ. So Paul claimed that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"' [Gal 3:13]. As N. T. Wright commented,

Because the Messiah represents Israel, he is able to take on himself Israel's curse and exhaust it...The crucifixion of the Messiah is...the *quintessence* of the curse of exile, and its climactic act.³¹

This curse was represented in the crucifixion by darkness over the whole land. Morna Hooker wrote:

The darkness which fell over the whole land...is a sign of the terrible nature of what is taking place...The darkness symbolises the judgement that comes on the land of Israel with the rejection of Israel's king.³²

In that atoning death Christ endured the curse of God, making peace by the blood of the cross. As John Donne preached,

The Crosse, to which a bitter curse was nailed by Moses, from the beginning, he that is hanged is, [not onely accursed of God as our Translation hath it], but he is

the curse of God, [as it is in the Original] not accursed, but a curse; not a simple curse, but a curse of God.³³

For, as we have seen, Christ reconciled all things by ‘making peace through the blood of his cross’ [Col 1:20]. We need peace with God, not only with creation: that peace is only found through the blood of Christ’s cross.

Christ and resurrection and return

There are many versions of future hope. For many, the future is spiritualised and dematerialised; and some evangelical, existential or mystic theologies render the creation redundant. For some, the future judgement will be so severe that nothing will survive. Our view of eschatology often influences our view of the resurrection of Christ. A spiritualised eschatology is frequently reflected in a spiritualised resurrection. For the resurrection of Christ is the first-fruits of the resurrection, and also of the cosmic renewal [Ephes 1:20-23]. It does seem odd to insist on the physicality of the incarnation, but not to insist on the physicality of the resurrection and of eschatology. These are on the same theological trajectory from creation to new creation. In the words of Emil Brunner,

‘The end of the ways of God is corporeality’...Creation is not an error, not something which must vanish when God shall be all in all...humanity, as perfected in the world of the resurrection, should include the aspect of corporeality through the paradoxical idea of the spiritual body.³⁴

N. T. Wright observed,

The created order, which God has begun to redeem in the resurrection of Jesus, is a world in which heaven and earth are designed, not to be separated, but to come together. In that coming together, the ‘very good’ which God spoke over creation at the beginning will be enhanced, not abolished.³⁵

This follows Calvin's opinion. He commented that 'the elements of the world...will be consumed in order to receive a new quality while their substance remains the same.'³⁶ For as all things were created in Christ, so too all things will be restored in Christ.³⁷ So he wrote of the creation as sustained by hope:

The whole machinery of the world would fall out of gear at almost every moment and all its parts fail in the sorrowful confusion which followed the fall of Adam, were they not borne up from elsewhere by some hidden support...because He has given them a hope of a better condition, they sustain themselves with this, and postpone their longing until the incorruption that has been promised them is revealed.³⁸

Conclusion

We have seen a trajectory from creation to new creation, of God's constant care for and involvement in his universe, of the significance of humanity within the creation, and of the fulfilment of humanity in Christ, his earthy incarnation, his miracles, transfiguration, atoning death, resurrection, and the final consummation of the creation at his return.

We have learnt to see God's glory in the creation, to hear the song of creation, to resonate with the groaning of the creation and of humanity, to trust in Christ the revelation of God and of humanity, to hope in the power of his atoning death, to discern in his resurrection the great sign and cause of hope, and to wait in faith for the renewal of all things in Christ. As we see, hear, resonate, trust, hope, discern, and wait, we worship Christ as cosmic Saviour and Lord, and receive all his gifts with faith and praise, to the glory of God.

Questions.

- i. What are the characteristic sins of Western Christians in relation to Christ and creation?
- ii. In what ways does this chapter challenge our view of Christ as being too small, too limited, too unclear, or too narrow?
- iii. How might we develop and practice a Biblical spirituality of Christ and creation, individually and corporately?
- iv. How should faith in Christ lead to a global ethic of responsibility for our neighbours and the world we share?

¹ I am grateful to other members of the Doctrine Commission for their helpful responses to earlier versions of this paper.

² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vols. 1 and 2, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, from 1.5.1, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1960, p. 52,53.

³ Ronald Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2006, pp. 234-238.

⁴ Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 1991, pp. 16-21.

⁵ John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, [on Genesis 2:15], tr. John King, Banner of Truth Trust, London [1847] reprint 1965, p. 74.

⁶ Calvin's Lecture on Jeremiah 5:25, as cited in Marijn de Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation: Calvin's Theology according to his Institutes*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh and New York, 2001, p.208.

⁷ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, ed. H. M. Margiliouth, Volume I, [The Third Century, 61], Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, p. 146. I have retained original spellings.

⁸ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, ed. H. M. Margiliouth, Volume II, [Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of God's Ways, lines 218-227], Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, pp. 262,263.

⁹ Traherne, Volume II, [Thanksgivings for the Glory of God's Works, 175], pp. 248,9

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2007, p. 36.

¹¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clarke, Cambridge and London, 1973, p. 95. See also the article by Duncan Reid.

¹² I use the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

¹³ Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, pp. 217, 218.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 86.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 52,53.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964, p. 119.

¹⁸ I have retained 'human' and 'son of man' from Psalm 8, to show the Christological argument of Hebrews

¹⁹ See also the article by Dorothy Lee.

²⁰ See also the article by Mark Thompson on hopeful groaning.

²¹ Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapid 1982, pp. 184,194. See also the article by Heather Thomson.

²² Gerhard Gloege, *The Day of his Coming: The Man in the Gospels*, SCM Press, London, 1963, pp. 151,154.

²³ Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1949, p. 101.

²⁴ Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passage of the Old and New Testaments*, no date, Google Book Search, http://google.com/books?id=l8-pGIhF_W8C, p 518, [accessed 19 January 2010]

²⁵ Hall, *Contemplations*, p 512.

²⁶ Ramsey, p. 147

²⁷ Traherne, Volume I, p. 141.

²⁸ Traherne, p. 140.

²⁹ Denise Inge, ed., *Happiness and Holiness; Thomas Traherne and His Writings*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008, p. 166. See also her summary of Traherne's views on pp. 147-150, 164

³⁰ Inge, p. 147

³¹ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, p. 151.

³² Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Black New Testament Commentaries, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1991, pp. 375,376.

³³ John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. M. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, University of California Press, Berkeley, Volumes I – X, 1953-1962, Vol. IV, p. 296.

³⁴ Emil Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1972, pp. 203,204,

³⁵ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, London, 2007, p. 271.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 12, tr. W. B. Johnston, [on 2 Peter 3:10], Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1963, p. 365.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, revised translation, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, pp. 261,262.

³⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans and Thessalonians*, tr. R. Mackenzie, Calvin New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 8, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], p. 173. See also the article by Glenn Davies.