

Chapter Five

Gospel and Creed

based on

***A Theology of Deep Incarnation
and Reconciliation***

The Gospel:

We proclaim that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message intended for all creation.

We recognise a deep incarnation—God joins the biological web of life.

We affirm Jesus Christ as the crucified God who suffers in and with creation.

We confess that the crucified and risen Jesus is the cosmic Christ who reconciles and restores all things in creation.

Creed:

The Creed affirms our belief that the Gospel of Christ, crucified and risen to reconcile and restore all things, is also the Gospel of Christ for creation.

Chapter Five

Gospel and Creed: A Theology of Deep Incarnation and Reconciliation

Introduction

Christ is the crux of our theology and our worship. It is vital therefore that we are clear, as we celebrate a Season of Creation, how Christ is related to creation. Who is the Christ we worship? A spiritual being detached from Earth, residing in heaven and liberated from the burden of the material world? Or a living presence who is somehow revealed in, with and under the substances from which all creatures emerge?

Also central to our worship is the proclamation of the Gospel to all in need. Those who join us in worship come to hear the assurance of the good news that in Christ we are reconciled to God and through Christ we are healed. We are conscious in The Season of Creation that those worshipping with us are our kin in creation. Is the message we proclaim also good news for our friends in the forest or indeed the forest itself? Is the Gospel message also intended for creation?

Deep Incarnation

We begin our reading of the Gospel with the incarnation. The classic text of John 1.14 reads:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

The first significant feature of the incarnation announced here is that God, the creating Word, becomes flesh. God becomes flesh, the Creator becomes clay, the Word becomes Earth. The Word incarnate (*logos ensarkos*) has all the elements of a human body.

Jesus breathes the same air as all the living creatures on Earth, eats food grown from the same ground and drinks water from the same raindrops. The natural biological processes of human flesh are true of the man Jesus. Jesus smells, tastes and feels in the same way that all humans do. In Jesus, God joins the web of life, becomes part of Earth's biology.

A second significant feature is the reference to God's glory, the very glory we discussed earlier (Chapter One) in connection with our theology of sanctuary. The glory is the visible presence of God that once filled the temple and according to Isaiah fills all of Earth. Earth is a sanctuary where God's glory dwells or tabernacles.

Now that same glory ‘dwells’, or as the original Greek implies, ‘tabernacles’ in a human abode as the glory of God once tabernacled in the wilderness. The very presence of God that fills Earth fills Jesus. Our immanent God who fills all creation may be seen in creation, but this God is revealed in a definitive way in Jesus Christ. As Rasmussen writes,

Jesus is not a fleeting docetic visitor, not a ghostly bearer of gnostic truth, but mortal, real flesh and blood from the countryside. Joseph tickles his bare bellybutton and covers his bare bottom; Mary puts his hungry mouth to her breast. He is, to be sure, not the exclusive revelation of the ubiquitous immanence of God. All creation manifests God, but he is the most compelling and definitive revelation, says Luther. Thus while “God is (always) in the facts themselves,” including the facts of nature, the facts are best ‘read’ via God in Jesus. (p. 47)

Through Jesus, the God immanent in creation is more fully revealed. That revelation, however, not only unveils a deeper dimension of God. It also reveals a deeper dimension of creation. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, reveals creation as an expression of God that is something more than a great and mighty Creator. In Jesus we also meet creation as the revelation of a suffering God. Creation participates in the way of the cross.

The incarnation means that the Creator becomes a creature, the God whose presence permeates Earth becomes a human born of Earth. As Iraneaus and other theologians have long recognised, this action of God means that God becomes incarnate in humanity not simply in a Jew from Galilee. Just as Adam represents all humanity, so Jesus Christ, the second Adam, represents all humanity.

If we recognise Earth as a living organism, can we also say God became ‘incarnate’ in Earth? Does Jesus the creature represent all creation? The answer, I believe, is yes! Jesus, as animated dust from the ground, is that piece of Earth where God’s presence is concentrated in the incarnation. God becomes flesh, clay, Earth.

Just as Luther says in the sacrament, ‘God is wholly in the grain and the grain is holy in God’ (Rasmussen, 1992, 42), we can say of the incarnation, ‘God is wholly in that piece of Earth called Jesus and that piece of Earth, that is holy in God, represents all Earth’. (Habel, 1996, 14)

This incarnation may be called a deep incarnation. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate in flesh from Earth. Jesus is the presence of God incarnate in Earth, a planet in the depths of the cosmos. As Niels Gregersen writes,

In this context, the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or “deep” incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, the system of nature. Understood in this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God’s redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as the victims of social competition. (2001, 205)

Or as James Nash maintains,

The very nature of being human is to exist as *imago mundi*, a reflection of embodiment of the biophysical world....The Greek theologians were fond of saying that humans are the microcosm that represents the macrocosm, past and present...Humans exist in nature and as part of nature. The atoms in human bodies were once part of other creatures, including the original organisms....We are embodiments of biotic history on this planet...representatives of Earth, interdependent parts of nature---and this totality is what God became immersed in through association with the Representative of Humanity in the Incarnation (108-109).

This Incarnation confers dignity not only on humankind, but on everything and everyone, past and present, with which humankind is united in interdependence—corporeality, materiality, indeed, the whole of the earthly and heavenly. It sanctifies the biophysical world, making all things meaningful and worthy and valuable in the divine scheme. It justifies “biophilia”, the affirmation with and affection for the diversity of life forms. (109)

It is this God in this piece of Earth, this God immersed in our biology, this God incarnate deep in creation, that we know as Jesus Christ, the Crucified One. The Gospel is a message that embraces creation through this deep incarnation.

The Cross in Creation

The theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) highlights the truth that while God may be revealed through creation in general, the depth of God’s nature is both hidden and revealed through the cross. God not only creates, God also suffers. And the suffering God in creation is known through the way of the cross, not the grandeur of nature.

A key tenet of the theology of the cross is that the God of the cross is hidden—except to the eyes of faith (*deus absconditus*). It is through the shame and ignominy of the cross that the invisible God is made visible, the hidden Redeemer is revealed. Efforts to discern this essential character of the immanent God through an intellectual contemplation of creation alone is futile. The profound nature of God as the one who suffers *pro nobis* remains hidden and is only fully known through the eyes of faith.

To claim to discover the essential nature of God directly through the mighty works of creation or marvellous deeds in human lives is arrogant. These sources, according to Luther, may lead to a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*), a preoccupation with the capacity of sinful humans to know the eternal God on their own terms. For Luther this amounts to self-glorification.

The cross is the supreme revelation of who God is and what God is about. Strange as it may seem God has chosen this scandalous—and veiled—way to be known. As Rasmussen says,

The cross is not only indirect exposure of God, it is God's presence *sub contrario*—under the opposite. This is not only the 'rearward parts' of God (Ex. 33.23). But it is the indecent exposure and scandal of God who is crucified as well as hidden (*Deus crucifixus et absconditus*). God is concealed in a vilified and broken human being, Jesus is God made poor and abused. (p. 47)

Human reason tends to favour theologies of glory in which God's power and might triumph gloriously. The God of suffering love revealed in Jesus Christ lives as a servant and dies a shameful death on a cross. Yet this is the very God whose presence fills Earth.

In the Old Testament, God's people often celebrated God as the one who thundered forth from the heavens, appeared in the storm and rode on the wings of the wind (Ps. 104.1-4). This same God was recognised in spectacular acts of judgement that destroyed both nations and domains of Earth. Everything from total floods to devastating droughts were evidence of the nature of God, the mighty Lord over creation (Pss 29; 18.6-15).

Through the cross, the true nature of this God has been revealed as the one suffering both with God's people and with creation. Beneath the Earth that trembled at the appearance of God in the storm, was a God suffering with the victim of the onslaught. The cross reveals to us that the God whose presence fills Earth is the suffering God known to us at Calvary.

It is with this God that we connect through the cross, through creation and through the Eucharist in The Season of Creation.

Radical Reconciliation

The God whose presence fills Earth and who suffers with creation is also the God who through Christ is restoring creation and reconciling the alienated parties in creation. The integrity of creation has been violated by invasive acts of human domination; the interconnected life systems of Earth have been severed by savage acts of human greed. Alienation between humans and creation has a cumulative effect that creates conflicts in creation.

These destructive forces not only separate humans from Earth as their home, but also lead to the disintegration of those bonds that hold together the intricate ecosystem in the forest garden of life called Earth. Human sin affects more than humans; it causes many inter-related parts of life to be at odds with each other and ultimately with God's design.

How is reconciliation and restoration of creation achieved? As we discussed earlier (Chapter Four), there is a trinity of empathy longing for the renewal of creation. Sensitive humans, creation itself and the Spirit of God, all three are groaning in anticipation of a restored creation, born of this creation (Rom. 8.18-28). In what work of God is this restoration grounded?

There is a tendency among some writers to see the cosmic Christ as the primary symbol that provides hope for the future of the planet and the liberation of Earth. Already in the 1960s Joseph Sittler spoke of the 'rhetoric of cosmic extension' as the means of connecting nature and grace, creation and redemption. The cosmic Christ is the agent who reconciles all things to God. In summarising the theology of Colossians 1, Sittler writes,

The writer...affirms the grace of God the Creator, the incarnated grace of God the Redeemer and the present working of God the Sanctifier, enfolds within his vision of the new evolution, a "horizon" of meaning and hope that cannot stop short of "all things". (1972, 42)

Writers like Paul Collins link the cosmic Christ with the process of the cosmos coming to be, with a new 'cosmic consciousness' in creation. The connection made by writers between this cosmic Christ force at work in the world and the historical Jesus who suffers and dies is, according to Collins, 'an awkward link'—so awkward in fact that the cross becomes secondary in much ecotheology. (Collins, 1995, 240)

In our Christian worship, however, a theology of the cross and a suffering God are foundational. It is also clear from Paul (Phil. 2.6-11) that the exaltation of Christ as a cosmic presence happens by way of an 'emptying' that results in death—an ignominious death on a cross. All knees may one day bow, but they bow to the crucified Jesus. Even for Christ, there is no glory except via suffering.

Ultimately all reconciliation is achieved through God's suffering on the cross. This reconciliation brings peace between God and humans (2 Cor. 5.18) as well as between human communities in conflict (Eph. 2.14-16). Of special significance here is the message of Paul that this reconciliation extends to 'all things'. God reconciles 'all things' to God's self whether they are in heaven or on Earth (Eph. 1.20). All alienation in creation is being overcome. This work of God is a radical reconciliation, a deep healing that reaches into all corners of the cosmos.

How? By a spectacular cosmic conquest? No! Peace is made 'through the blood of the cross.' Peace is effected through the God who suffers on the cross and with creation.

Embodied in that piece of Earth called Jesus Christ, God bonds with Earth in the battle against those forces of sin and evil that destroy peace and perpetuate alienation. In Christ, then, Earth too suffers and bears the cross. The land too is crucified with the incarnate God. God thereby liberates Earth.

The sin that Christ overcomes is not merely the personal wrong of individual humans, but the massive corporate sin and environmental injustice perpetrated against our planet. Christ is the 'lamb of God' who not only takes away my sins, but as our liturgy says, 'the sins of the whole world'. And those sins include our crimes against creation. In short, God incarnate also dies for Earth. Earth and its human inhabitants are one. (Habel, 1996, 15)

All the forces alienation, no matter how deep or how destructive, are ultimately negated so that reconciliation is possible between all creation and the Creator as well as between the domains of creation. God has reconciled 'all things' in the cosmos to God's self. This is indeed a radical reconciliation, a deep healing, good news for creation.

If this healing process of God is alive today, then struggle, suffering and the cross of Christ continue to be the vehicle for reconciliation, for reconnecting the alienated and disconnected pieces of God's world. God's wounded planet will not be healed by God waving some grand cosmic wand that removes all ills and immediately turns people into friends of Earth. Only by taking up the cross will the suffering turn into healing and the broken be mended.

The God who in Jesus Christ is emptied of power, becomes a human being and suffers with creation is also the God who rises, restores and fills creation with new life. The cosmic Christ is the same as the crucified Christ. As Paul clearly enunciates in Philippians (2.6-11), the sequence of divine restoration is from the incarnation via the cross to reconciliation, healing and renewal. The God who becomes part of the biology of Earth is also the God who fills this Earth with new life, a deep biology.

The incarnate Christ becomes the risen Christ, the one who is already at work transforming the cosmos, restoring creation, reconciling all things. The resurrection is more than the rising of an individual human from the grave; it is the rising of creation, the creation in which God became incarnate. Christ rises with creation, with the Earth that he embraced in his body and in his grave. Or in the words of Denis Edwards,

In the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth becomes the Cosmic Christ. The risen Christ is the power of the divine at the heart of the creation, but this divine power is now mediated through the humanity of Jesus, the first fruits of creation. A sentence of Rahner's which I have already mentioned perfectly capture these ideas: "When the vessel of his body was shattered in death, Christ was poured out over all the cosmos; he actually became, in his very humanity, what he always had been in his dignity, the innermost centre of creation" (Edwards, 1991, 131)

Paul introduces us to the cosmic Christ in texts such as Ephesians 1 where Paul speaks of Christ as one who fulfils God's plan 'to gather all things together in him, things in heaven and things on Earth' (1.10). This passage, together with Colossians 1.15-20, points to the assurance that Jesus is not only the Word of God made flesh, but also the Wisdom of God.

The Wisdom Connection

An appreciation of the Wisdom of God is helpful as we celebrate Jesus as the one who 'gathers all things' (Eph. 1.10), 'is the head of all things' (Eph. 1.23), 'fills all in all' (Eph. 1.23), 'creates all things' (Col. 1.15), 'holds all things together' (Col. 1.17), 'reconciles all things' (Col. 1.20), 'sustains all things' (Heb. 1.3), and is the heir of all things (Heb. 1.10).

In the Old Testament the word of God is the divine impulse or power that creates and brings into being. The Spirit of God is the impulse or power of God that animates and renews life. The Wisdom of God is a third expression of God that reveals another mystery of God's presence in creation.

Perhaps the best way to introduce Wisdom is to consider Job 28 where God, the great Sage, is portrayed as finding or discovering Wisdom. The text begins with humans seeking wisdom but ends with God finding it. The question before those on this expedition to find Wisdom is simply:

But Wisdom, where can she be found?
Where is the place (*maqom*) of discernment?
No mortal knows her way (*derek*)!
She cannot be found in the land of the living. (28.12-13)

Or in the language of a later verse,

But Wisdom, where does she originate?
Where is the place (*maqom*) of discernment?
She is hidden from the eyes of all living,
Concealed even from the birds of the sky. (28.20-21).

These summary lines connect with a number of key concepts of wisdom literature. First, Wisdom, like every other component of creation is presumed to have a *locus* in the order of things, a place (*maqom*) that needs to be determined to understand Wisdom. In addition Wisdom has its own way or code (*derek*) like other categories of creation. However, the 'seeing' or cognitive capacity of humans—or of any other living creatures—is apparently inadequate to discover her distinctive 'way'. (Habel, 2003)

That raises the question of whether the 'way' of Wisdom is like the 'way' or code of other components of creation, or whether the 'way' of wisdom is of another order, deeper, more mysterious than other codes of creation.

Verses 23-27 are some of the most extraordinary passages in the portfolio of Wisdom literature. God, the Sage, pursues research that humans cannot match. The summary claim in verse 23 announces that God had the cognitive capacity (*bin*) to identify the way (*derek*) of Wisdom and to discover her place (*maqom*) in the domains of creation. The verses that follow outline how God achieved that remarkable feat.

God discerned her way (*derek*),
God came to know her place (*maqom*),
For God looked to the ends of Earth
And saw everything under the skies. (28.23-24)

First, God looks to the ends of Earth. Step One is for God to exercise the skill of visual perception, surveying all the domains of Earth, from one end to another. God has the capacity to view all creation. God ‘sees’ (*ra’a*) everything under the skies, everything. God can attend to all the components of creation. God’s capacity to discern and discriminate is not limited like that of humans.

At this point it is significant to recognise the domains that God explores to discover Wisdom—namely the domains of Earth. The realms under analysis are those ‘under the skies/heaven’. Wisdom is not in some inaccessible celestial realm. Wisdom is not far away beyond the domains of Earth. Wisdom is not with God in heaven. Wisdom is in Earth, in creation.

Second, a particular time is identified when God made this discovery, namely, when God was at work creating the domains of Earth. In the act of creating the domains of nature, God discovers Wisdom. The way that God searches Earth for Wisdom differs radically from the way of humans when they penetrate the landscape. God the Sage is like an artist, discovering something—Wisdom—in the very process of creating.

A significant feature of this portrait of God searching for Wisdom lies not in the listing of the domains themselves, but in that dimension of these domains where Wisdom was located.

When God determined the **weight** of the wind,
And meted out the waters by **measure**,
When God made a **rule** (*choq*) for the rain,
And a **way** (*derek*) for the thunderstorm,
Then God saw her and appraised her,
Established her and probed her. (28.25-27)

The terms ‘way’ (*derek*) and ‘rule’ (*choq*) immediately suggest that God is capable of identifying the code, the distinctive inner characteristic of a given phenomenon, whether it be the way of the thunderstorm, the wind or the seas. God does not simply see the storm; God isolates the ‘way’, that mysterious dimension that makes a storm a storm. In discerning the ‘way’ of things in the creating process, God acquires Wisdom. Wisdom, it seems, is there for God to discover deep in the codes of creation.

God finds wisdom in the real world, in the mysterious impulses of the components of creation to fulfil their functions in the ecosystem called Earth. Wisdom is not merely an idea or capacity of God. Wisdom is a spiritual force at work in creation.

Wisdom is here not some form of advanced cognitive capacity or a sifted and judicious understanding of past knowledge and experience. Wisdom is connected with creation and to be found in Earth. It is Earth that God surveys and probes, not the recesses of the divine mind. Wisdom is linked to a particular dimension of the phenomena of Earth, a hidden code/way/law imbedded in the natural order of things.

Wisdom is not outside of Earth but within Earth. Creation is the home of wisdom. Earth is the privileged locus of a mysterious inner code. And God becomes a sage by discovering Wisdom when creating this universe.

Wisdom, it seems, is not so much the power that creates the cosmos, but the blueprint, the design, the code, the force that holds it all together. Wisdom is the web of creation with all its mysterious ways and systems that hold 'holds all things together'.

The message of Colossians One is that Jesus Christ is this Wisdom incarnate. This is the Wisdom that was present at creation and holds creation together. This is the Wisdom in the risen Jesus who now gathers the broken parts of the cosmos and binds them together according to God's plan or design.

Paul Collins explicates the significance of the ancient hymn to Jesus Christ as incarnate Wisdom found in Colossians One. Collins quotes a famous speech of Joseph Sittler at the General assembly of the World Council of Churches in at New Delhi in 1961 where he stated,

These verses sing out their triumphant and alluring music between two huge and steady poles—"Christ" and "all things"...Christ comes to all things, not as a stranger, for he is the first born of all creation, and in him all things were created. He is not only the matrix and prius of all things: he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things: for all things are created through in and for him. Nor are all things a tumbled multitude of facts in an unrelated mass, for in him all things hold together. (Edwards, 1995, 82).

Wisdom is precisely that force that 'holds all things together,' the matrix of the creation, both the design and designer of the cosmos. Christ is this Wisdom incarnate and active in restoring creation. That message is surely Gospel for all creation. Edwards continues,

Colossians will not allow us to contain our theology of redemption within the narrower (although profoundly important) orbit of human sin and forgiveness. It must involve other creatures. The rest of creation cannot be seen merely as the stage on which the drama of redemption is played out. The Colossians hymn insists that the whole universe is caught up in the Christ event. (Edwards, 1995, 82).

The Gospel for Creation

In the so-called lost ending of Mark's Gospel, Jesus exhorts his followers to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to 'the whole creation (*ktisis*)' (Mark 16.15). This passage is usually viewed as a secondary version of the commission of Matt. 28.18-20 to 'make disciples of all nations'. In the context of the preceding discussion, it is time we took seriously preaching the Gospel to all creation. In The Season of Creation it is indeed appropriate to make this Gospel an integral part to our message.

The essentials of that good news for all creation, and all of us as part of creation, may be summarised as follows:

The incarnation is deeper than we have often thought. In Jesus Christ, the Word of God becomes incarnate in a piece of Earth, a biological unit that is interconnected with all life past and present on this planet.

This God, incarnate in creation, experiences a normal biological life cycle, suffers as a human being and dies an ignominious death on a cross.

This incarnate deity suffers not only for the sins humans have committed against God, but also suffers with, for and as part of creation which has become alienated because of human acts of violence.

The suffering of this deity on Earth, was the hidden power of God at work reconciling all things to God in heaven and Earth.

As the risen incarnate God, Jesus Christ revealed the fullness of God's Wisdom, the cosmic force that restores and holds all things together in the universe.

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