

Reconnecting Our Way to Vocation

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Christian beliefs are sadly too readily disconnected from our post-benediction life. The implications are, not surprisingly, like what we ought to expect from an environment where short-circuited connections are normal. A struggle to imagine how life beyond Sunday matters to God is typical among churches and thus our students at Wheaton. Even if they have an intuitive sense that their lives belong to God and that matters not typically labeled “spiritual” should be part of the entirety of God’s call to them, a biblical/theological understanding tends to be evasive. One contribution to the remedy for this problem is a theology of creation and redemption (linked together) that helps students see that part of the belonging to God’s world and God’s people includes a sense of vocation. With greater awareness of dimensions of ecclesiology, pneumatology and redemption, students can begin to think about their entire lives (work, but not only how they make a living/pursue a career) as saturated with a sense of meaning, significance rooted in a deeper sense of the way that one’s life is connected to God, the church and the world.

I. Connecting Christian Beliefs to Christian Life

It is increasingly easy to have a fragmented existence. Though modern communications technology offers the promise to make us more connected, there are many ways the opposite has occurred, and we are not only more inclined to gravitate to silos but also tempted to fragment our identity via our self-presentation in social media platforms. This fragmentation can contribute to the dissonance Christians experience as they walk through life and attempt to discern what it means to have a life of fidelity to God's call on their lives. One way to begin addressing the fragmentation and move toward a more holistic sense of vocation can be the pursuit of greater connection of our beliefs with Christian practice, or to put it differently, to move toward a greater sense that the entirety of life is connected to and matters to God.

The reputation of doctrine is one of the first aspects to be addressed. It would not be an overstatement to say that doctrine has a public relations problem in some local church contexts. As Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson note in *Who Needs Theology*, there are those who regard theology and doctrine as antagonistic to true faith, where theologians are those who bring more confusion and darkness to faith than light and clarity. Still others use phrases like

"Jesus unites, doctrine divides" to highlight those situations where some Christians magnify aspects of theological minutiae (such as the specific timing of regeneration in relationship to the emergence of saving faith) and focus less on a generous unity in Christian communities. Though there are always such bad examples, what lies beneath these concerns is less an aversion to doctrine than a deep concern about negative postures that sometimes attend zeal for doctrinal depth. To remedy this reputation problem requires first the recognition that the concerns of expressed by those who claim to be resistant to doctrine in fact reveal a deeply theological commitment to Christ and his church. At the very least such persons are asking how we properly understand what it means to be the church (ecclesiology) and how we properly understand and follow Christ (Christology). To move forward it will be necessary to detach words like "theology" and "doctrine" from exclusive associations with academia or special interest groups in lay Christian communities. Reconnecting (or for some, initially connecting) doctrine to life is vital for a truly holistic faith.

A second vital area is to make more explicit the connection between Christian beliefs and practices, to overcome the bifurcation of theology and ethics. This bifurcation can lead to or result from disconnections or the veiling of connections that should be present, in the same way a map could be designed to obscure links and pathways that have always been in place.¹ A personal note: when I was a student in divinity school it seemed strange to me that we had many courses about biblical studies and theological topics but only one course on Christian ethics, and this course seemed disconnected from the other biblical and theological courses. Even more striking was that it seemed as if the information we were learning in the biblical and theological studies courses was primarily about making sure we thought correctly about beliefs with little or no emphasis on how this was related to the way Christians should live. At the time I did not say much about this observation, but now recognize that what I observed could be a significant indicator as to why it is difficult for Bible-believing Christians to have a more integrated sense of their lives.

One way to tell the story of the bifurcation of theology and ethics is to begin by noting that throughout human history there has always been strong evidence of dissonance between

¹ (Grant 2016)

belief and practice (e.g. the history of Israel in Scripture). While acknowledging this may be true, this version of the story goes on to highlight that the separation between proper belief and practice was intensified in the Enlightenment, perhaps particularly after Kant's separation of theological beliefs into a noumenal realm (not accessible by pure reason) and observable practices into a phenomenal realm (accessible to reason). Though many Bible-believing Christians reacted to this separation by seeking to claim that we can understand and apprehend beliefs about God from revelation, a perhaps unwitting result is an emphasis on epistemology, knowing and apprehending proper Christian beliefs, without significant attention to how these beliefs are connected to Christian practices. The point here is not that an epistemological emphasis is bad but that the gravitational pull toward epistemology carries with it the hazard of inattention to establishing a strong connection between Christian beliefs and Christian practices. One way to think of this is to say that Christian practices are connected in random or pragmatic ways to Christian beliefs; Christian ethics does not flow out of beliefs but instead emerges as questions of interest or challenge emerge for each Christian and then an effort is made to see how to respond with life choices through a haphazard search that asks how the Bible might speak to matters such as work, family, politics, etc. To remedy this bifurcation requires that we ask routinely how our beliefs are connected to all aspects of our lives, where we begin thinking about our faith not merely as matters of intellectual assent but also personal practical commitment. One example: if the doctrine of the church leads us to each see ourselves as part of the people God has brought together and called to Himself, we recognize that we have a corporate identity as well an individual identity and that as part of a people my interests are not solely determined by my personal choices but by my connection to the people of God. As part of the people of God we learn what matters in both belief and practice, continually asking not only "who are we?" but also "what do we do as God's people in God's world?"

II. Life after the Benediction

The church gathers for worship each week for fellowship and instruction, in many cases with a strong emphasis on hearing the word of God through preaching (though the other

dimensions of liturgy also convey Scripture). Many of us learn that "church" means much more than what happens on Sunday; it refers to both worship and witness, the former as a reminder and catalyst for the latter. Every church service ends with words of benediction, from as mundane as "see you next week" to direct quotations from Scripture. Formal or informal, the final words of the worship service signal a time to leave the corporate worship space and eventually head back out into the world. Even if the words of benediction do not state it explicitly, we are sent back to our "normal" lives. Here it is important to ask "sent to where and for what?"

There are many Scriptural texts which serve as benedictions, as "good words" to God's people. As one example, in Numbers 6:24-27 (NIV) we read

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

The verse that follows says, "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." These good words to God's people (which now includes Christians) indicate that God goes with those who belong to Him wherever they go and is attentive to and protective of their lives. Beyond this, benedictions such as this one are also significant for identity. Lee Eclov observes "To speak God's benediction over his people, no matter what the occasion, is like saying, "Remember who you are."² If we understand the benediction in this way, it would be hard to imagine our being sent into the world after worship with words that imply, "Go forth into your irrelevant hours of the week until we meet again." Yet one wonders the extent to which benedictions are understood as words of blessing and care for the entirety of our lives. Consider this question: how aware are you that God cares about what we do apart from evangelism and bible study during the week? How readily do you see yourself as God's people sent into God's world with God at your side in all that you do? In my experience as a professor and preacher, I continue to observe that a disconnect can easily emerge between who we are

² Lee Eclov, "The Neglected Power of Blessing: One of the most meaningful things a pastor can do is short, sweet and biblical." <http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/spring/neglected-power-of-blessings.html>

as the community gathered and who we are as the church scattered post-benediction. Worship seen as preparation for weekly witness as God's people in and for His world might be of help here. We can begin to overcome the disconnections within our identity as Christians who worship on Sunday and attend to "everything else" Monday through Saturday when we grow in the recognition that the words of benediction remind us that God goes with us at all times.

III. Expanding the meaning of "Spiritual"

It would not be overstatement to say that many churches have a deficient theology of the third person of the Godhead. Though we are confessionally Trinitarian, we are often practically binitarian, making much of the Father and Son and little of the Holy Spirit. If we are to be truly Trinitarian it requires us to have a higher Pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit). By 'high' Pneumatology I mean nothing more than living up to our confession that each person of the Trinity is truly equal. This has great importance for a more integrated faith. Specifically, a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit contributes to a robust sense of vocation by expanding the way we think of what it means to be "spiritual" people. It is easy to see how the word "spiritual" itself seems disconnected from the more "earthly" dimensions of our lives, but this would be a grave error. It is better to consider what is actually happening when we become more authentically spiritual people. First, this means we are human beings who have been made alive by the Holy Spirit (born again). Humans, though sustained by the Spirit at every moment, are not alive to God and responsive to His design for human life if they are not "spiritually awakened." Humans who are born again are those who have been given a new life that is not merely a promise of future everlasting life. Even now we have the possibility of life with God oriented toward His purposes. The Holy Spirit dwells in humans who are born again; humans made alive by God are "spiritual" in the sense that they are not those who are directed away from "normal" life but instead oriented toward a more truly human existence. This more properly human existence carries with it the possibility of responsiveness to God's call on the entirety of life.

Second, as authentically spiritual people we are actually more rather than less committed to an integrated life in God's world. One characteristic of a fallen and broken world

is the tendency for things to be disconnected. This includes the fracturing of life, disconnected from God's purposes and disoriented in perspective. The gift of new life by the Holy Spirit is the beginning of reconnecting our fractured existence. Put differently, the word "sanctification" is far more than moral improvement; it is the possibility of a trajectory of life where our thoughts and actions resonate with God's plan and purpose for us. When we walk the path of sanctification, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to see the connection of all of our life with God as His holy people. To be God's holy people is to not only be those made alive by Him but those who *belong* to God; the implications of belonging to God certainly include the recognition that every aspect of our life matters. Holy people (i.e. all Christians) ought to see themselves as those who worship God on Sunday and equally those who work, play, and relax with God. Holiness is not an exceptional domain for highly disciplined Christians but instead a fact of what it means to be a person made alive by and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As strange as it may seem, holiness is key to a more integrated life. One need not be Pentecostal to embrace this idea.

IV. Redemption as the Fulfillment of Creation

Some presentations of salvation state or at least suggest that redemption is an escape from creation. While there is good reason to resist versions of salvation that promise us the experience of a realized eschatology, there are equally good reasons to resist versions of salvation that suggest Christ came to take us away from the creation. Christ's incarnation and the fact the "creation" is not to be confused with "world" help us to see that in salvation God reclaims his creation.

When Christians speak of Christ's "incarnation" they refer to the fact the Jesus was a truly human person. Jesus brings about our salvation by identifying with us and becoming one of us (though he is also fully divine). Jesus is not only "in the flesh" from his birth through the crucifixion, but he is resurrected bodily as well. One significant dimension of Christ's bodily resurrection is that it means the material world matters to God. Salvation is not an escape from the created order but God's reclaiming of it. Redemption is not in tension with creation but is instead God's act to set things right and to bring the potential of the created order to fruition.

If we see that Christ's incarnation and bodily resurrection affirm the goodness of the creation, it includes the implication that the attention and effort we put toward life in God's world is not meaningless but instead an important dimension of Christian discipleship.

Similarly, if we correctly understand what Scripture means by "worldliness," we will discover that Christian faithfulness requires attention to life in this world, and we can make strides toward greater integration between our faith and vocation. There are clearly warnings in the Bible against loving "the world." In I John 2:15-17 we are strongly warned against loving the world. A closer look at the text reveals that "loving the world" is not understood in these verses as caring about the creation. All three characteristics of loving the world are matters of distorted desires (lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, the pride of life). This tells us that worldliness is a disposition problem where people have misdirected desires that lead them away from allegiance to God. For certain, when we give attention to our lives outside of typical "spiritual" activities, the prospect of idolatry is present, but this does not imply the impossibility of conducting our post-benediction lives with allegiance to God. Indeed, this presents the opportunity and challenge for Christian institutions to help people see how to practice faithfulness to God in the domains where they spend most hours of the week.

V. Conclusion

The disconnect between faith and life is real, but greater attention to Christian beliefs can show us or remind us that all of our life matters to God. When God calls us, He wants the entirety of our lives, not only one or two hours each week.