

LIVING TOGETHER AS DAUGHTERS AND SONS IN GOD'S ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET WORLD

Joseph Coleson

In this concluding essay of four, a number of theological concepts that may be derived from Genesis chapters 2 and 3 are listed, and a few discussed briefly along with implications in areas of practice. As Creator, God is fully invested in the well-being of his creation, both human and non-human, though God's relationship with humanity in particular is the summum bonum of creation. Our creation in a particular location imparts to us a God-given sense of the sacredness of space, since all space is graced by God's Presence. Work is a good gift of God; to act constructively and creatively is to fulfill our nature as God's image, representative, and steward upon the earth. The highest responsibility of human work is to promote the wellbeing, the shalom, of all God's creative handiwork upon our home planet. Since most societies have been patriarchal, we need the direct witness of the first chapters of Genesis, situated in an authoritative canon, in order to see full gender equality as God's intention. Hierarchy is not an intrinsic value or condition of human culture; it almost always is inimical to human growth to maturity. The early chapters, like all of Scripture, constitute a narrative of God's loving, passionate regard and redemptive purpose for humanity. God is relational; therefore, any and all theology truly derived from Scripture will also be relational. Most human and other suffering in our world is attributable to sinful choices or 'accident.' To learn to refrain from calling most of our suffering 'God's will,' 'God's decree,' or even 'Satan's attacks,' is part of our growth toward maturity. A major task of Christian theology is to rethink God's self-limitation on the use of sovereign power, in the greater interests of relational integrity with humans and, to some extent, with other inhabitants of God's created order.

God is the Maker

Of course, many commentators on Genesis 1 have made this point, but it is evident in chapter 2 also. More important for our purposes here is the contrast between the two portraits of God the Maker in these two chapters. Predominantly, the focus of Genesis 1 is on what most call God's transcendence; in Genesis 2, it is on God's

immanence. It is important to note that this, too, is a bit simplistic, especially for Genesis 1. The making of the *rakia*’ on creation day two (1:7) evokes the everyday work of the bronze- or copper-smith, an image of immanence rather than transcendence. Also, God’s invitation to the seas, skies, and dry land to partner with God in bringing forth both vegetative and animal life hardly conjures a Deity remote and above it all. Perhaps we need to learn to temper our all-or-nothing statements about the nature of God, as well as about much else that we presently see only through a glass, darkly.

Nevertheless, it is accurate to say that the text of Genesis 2 portrays God more intimately than does the text of Genesis 1. In 2:7, God is the consummate Artist/Sculptor, the divine Teacher of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and all the rest. Immediately, in 2:8, God is referenced as Planter, the original Master Gardener. The Surgeon who operates without inflicting pain upon the patient; the Builder of a second *’adam*, so that now we exist as male and female; even the delighted divine Matchmaker - all these images of divine imminence, of an extremely *intimate* imminence, draw the reader in by the end of chapter 2. From these and other images, the reader becomes increasingly convinced that God is invested in this project. This was and is not a diversion. If it were an experiment, we certainly would not have expected God to abandon it and, as the narrative continues, we see that God did not. In another aspect of God’s character as Maker, the continuing narrative of Genesis 3 reveals God as Rescuer/Restorer of God’s good work.

The ‘Adam is God’s *Summum Bonum*

Both Genesis 1 and 2, by means of different narrative strategies, present as a primary *intended* teaching that upon this earth, at least, humans are God’s best-loved and most-valued creation. Of course, this has been a central tenet of Judeo-Christian faith traditions from the beginning; it may hardly seem worth noting. Yet, in today’s so-called post-Christian world, it is a point worth reiterating and pondering anew in response to God’s call to reach and teach, for example, neo-pagans, and thorough-going Darwinists. On another level, though, this is quite a bold statement, and requires qualification at several points. Let me state the first one positively, for maximum clarity. God *does* value *all* God’s creation. The grandeur, the beauty, and the joy, of Genesis 1 proclaim this. The

rest of Scripture, at many places, affirms that creation, altogether and in all its manifold splendours, brings satisfaction and joy to its Maker.

A brief aside, here: Despite our exegesis/discussion of Genesis 2, we do not say that gender is the most important aspect of being human. It is not. Just being human is most important. To be human is to be far more alike, than to be female and male is to be different. That is the point of the phrase '*ezer cenegdo*' upon which we spent much of our time in Genesis 2. Being gendered may come next in discussing what it means to be a human creature, but our gender identity is secondary to our humanity.

We have said that humans are God's best-loved and most-valued creation 'upon this earth.' The Bible contains a number of references to cherubim, seraphim, and other intelligent, seemingly spiritual beings who are not human. With other Christians, Wesleyans believe that these, and any other conceivable orders of intelligent beings, also are God's creations, along with the locales they may inhabit, if any. Realistically, we can say very little about such creatures, before we begin to enter the realm of speculation. What we can say, from Genesis 1-3 and the rest of Scripture, is that upon this earth humans are the crown of God's creation, the goal toward which this creation was tending, the entity which all else exists to support. If relationship with humans were *not* God's goal, the *summum bonum* of creation upon this earth, we no longer would be here. God would have wiped the slate clean, demolished everything on the construction site, and started over, or would have abandoned the project altogether.

We cannot now know much of what the rest of this universe, or other possible universes, may contain of other creations and other creatures. In his space trilogy, C. S. Lewis has given us a plausible scenario; of course, it is fictional, but it also is a vivid and compelling reminder that upon this subject prudence and caution continue to be in order. Near the end of *Perelandra* (the second volume in the trilogy), the *eldila* in attendance upon the coronation of the Venusian 'Adam and Eve' instruct Ransom that creation 'turned a corner' when Maleldil (God) became a man upon Tellus (this Earth). Henceforth, all rational/spiritual creatures are/will be human, since in Jesus Christ God became and continues to be human. Lewis's scenario is a reminder that, whether we look backward or forward along the line of our present temporality, we cannot see very far. On this, as on quite a number of matters, we simply must be content to wait.

Thus, each of us *is*; each has a name by which s/he is known. The first thing we desire when meeting someone for the first time is to announce our name, or to hear it given by a third party. This is so important to most of us, most of the time, that we fail to listen closely enough to retain the other person's name, and have to ask for it again! We can train ourselves to do better, though, and that little foible does function as another evidence of the importance we properly attach to names. We *are*; we exist individually as human beings, and collectively as members of various groups of human beings. '*Ani hayiti; ego eimi*; I am: of course, these assertions belong eternally to God, but God has granted us also one kind of right to them, as God's image-bearers.

Place as Holy/Sacred

Most of us have heard, or used, a version of the saying, 'If everything is special, then nothing is special.' Of course, in some settings and scenarios, this is true. Yet with respect to any position in space that can be called a 'place,' I think it is *not* true. Wherever 'there' is, *God* is, and wherever *God* is, is special, sacred, holy. From that perspective, it is impossible to find an 'unholy' place.

Only God is infinite. When the infinite One made the decision to create, the only possibility for creation was finitude. Perhaps *this* universe of time and space, of matter and energy, was not the only possible choice for a universe. Having made this choice, however, God 'had' to create everything in a definite location. In the universe God *did* create an 'unlocated' creation is a contradiction in terms. Thus, wherever God located a creation or a creature, that location is sacred by virtue of its being the place where God created something 'good.' This is in addition to God's own presence sanctifying every place.

Moreover, all creatures, as finite beings, require the mediation of place if they are to experience anything, including encounter with God or with one another. Our finite nature requires instruction and educational experience in holiness, as in all else, and instruction requires particularity before the finite can move to the universal. By itself, simple aesthetics was reason enough, but for these reasons, also, God planted a garden 'in Eden,' and placed the first humans there (2:8) for them to learn, among other things, the sacredness of place. From there, they could have moved into the broader world,

encountering every place as sacred, because there, too, they would have met God as they had learned to do in the garden.

If our first parents needed to learn the sacredness of place by living in a place made sacred by God's presence, how much more crucial a lesson is that for us, in our bent finitude? We did not lose the idea of sacred space altogether. Cain and Abel offered sacrifices upon an altar at a specific location, as did Noah and his family, later. But soon, altars, groves, and temples abounded across the landscape, sanctified to a host of deities, great and small. God had to start over with Israel at Sinai, teaching them about *one* space sacred to the only true God, before they could begin to grasp that *every* space is sacred because God is everywhere.

We should spend a moment, also, on the nature, the character, of this sacred space. It was beautiful; it was functional; it was joyous; it facilitated relationship. We even may say the garden participated in and reciprocated relationship. If the personification of trees, hills, seas, and waves in the Psalms is more than metaphor, and if Jesus' declaration that the rocks would cry out in exaltation over the coming of their beloved Sovereign is more than hyperbole, we have in such passages hints and echoes of what life was like in the garden, when all nature existed and related in the harmony God intended and designed it for all of nature, including humans.

This sense of the sacredness of place is built into every human, though it is more pronounced in some than in others. Each of us comes from a specific locale, a birthplace. Each belongs to a place, or a series of places, throughout a lifetime. So thoroughly is this true that the second question usually asked when meeting another for the first time is, 'Where are you from?'

Work is Good/Holy/Sacred

Some believe work is one of God's curses upon the human race as part of the punishment for our first parents' transgression. Those sincere in this belief usually reference God's words to the man recorded in Genesis 3:17-19, with its classic phrases, 'in sorrow shalt thou eat of it,' and 'in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,' ending with, 'for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (KJV). They note the unsatisfying, less-than-productive nature of much human labor. More distressing, even, is the destructive 'work' undertaken by too many in this world of bent moral and ethical values. Certainly, none of this is God's intention.

It takes awhile for most of us to notice that Genesis 2:15 ordains work as a good gift of God to the *'adam*, and its fruit as good gifts to all the creation, before ever the humans ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. As a result, we often have been slow to understand that work is *not* a curse; work itself is good, and one of God's 'goods' for the benefit of all creation. The good God does good work. Humans are made in the image of God. Therefore, when we do what God created us to do, humans also do good work.

Again, we see this routinely in our initial social discourse. We ask and are asked, 'What do you do?' To *do* something, to act constructively and creatively, to contribute, is to be human; it is to fulfill our nature as God's image, representative, and steward upon the earth. Wearisome, irksome, anxious toil is another matter. When things do not work in the harmony God intended, much of our work becomes onerous. We may think of a manual-transmission automobile driven at seventy kilometers per hour, in second gear. It is good for neither the car nor the driver; if continued for long, it will destroy the car's engine, its transmission, or both. Similarly, a great deal of the wearisomeness of human toil we may trace to our self-imposed alienation from God, with its inevitable end in alienation from the rest of God's good creation. We often drive ourselves as though we could make up the difference through sheer force of effort, but humans do no better over long distances in second gear, than do automobiles.

Our First Work is to Serve and Protect

Our stewardship responsibility includes watchful awareness of the earth and all it sustains and nurtures within the multitudinous systems of the created order. In any given situation, this may or may not imply the necessity of direct action, but we are responsible to be aware of and promote the wellbeing, the *shalom*, of all God's creative handiwork upon our home planet. All forms of Gnosticism are ruled out. The material creation is God's creation; all God's creation is good. God has provided for the redemption/restoration /renewal of all, as we may discover virtually everywhere in Scripture, if we will but look.

Gender is Important; the Genders are Equal

Much of what we have been discussing *may* be inferred from everyday life, but in any patriarchal (or matriarchal) society, gender equality is not our common experience. Moreover, most societies - throughout history and down to the present - have been patriarchal, whether explicitly or 'only' implicitly. We need the direct witness of an authoritative canon on this issue. That it is addressed in the very first chapters of the Christian canon is neither mistake nor happenstance; it is intentional. I will return to this important theme in the concluding paragraph.

Maturity is God's Ultimate Goal for Us

We define maturity here as intrinsic autonomy in our relationships with each other, thinking and acting always in the integrity of mutual respect and regard, and all under God as benevolent Maker/Provider/Friend. An important goal of God's redemptive purposes is human maturity, individually and communally. An important corollary is that God's creation intentions for human relationship do not include any sort of permanent hierarchy. Hierarchy is not an intrinsic value or condition of a holy human culture; moreover, it almost always is inimical to human growth to maturity. Thus, when hierarchical power arrangements are necessary, they are to be granted only for the achievement of specific goals within specific timeframes, with strict safeguards and limitations on their use. Anything else is an assault on God's desire and design to bring us to full maturity in Christ.

God is Bereft and Grieves the Loss of Fellowship

This is vital if we are to understand anything at all of who God is, and how we are to represent God to each other - to believers and non-believers alike. Wesleyans know, as well as our Reformed brothers and sisters, that God is sovereign. But what good is sovereignty, even to the Sovereign of all, in matters of real relationship, which is to say, of voluntary relationship exercised in and with integrity? Sovereignty cannot *compel* respect or regard, to say nothing of love. If this is true, then the possibility of love also entails the possibility of grief.

Redemption Whispers Everywhere

We are accustomed to reading God's proleptic promise of redemption in the words of the so-called Proto-evangel of 3:15. However, God's redemptive love whispers everywhere in this narrative: the very fact of God's grief at the estrangement caused by the human transgression; God's seeking out the human pair; God's not executing them instantly; God's preparing them with a word about what they soon would face; God's clothing them. Even the expulsion from the garden we must see ultimately as an act of redemptive love. Having learned to read these first chapters as a narrative of God's loving redemption, it is not difficult to read the rest of Scripture, also, as both the promise and the narrative of God's loving, passionate regard.

God is Relational

This, too, we have noted repeatedly. God is involved with us, and with all God's creation, more actively and more intimately than we can dream, until all is revealed. It is not too much to say that every point we have noted from these chapters affirms this, directly or indirectly. God is relational; therefore, any and all theology truly derived from Scripture will also be relational. This is not to say that propositional theology is 'bad.' It is to say that propositions not derived from, or not illuminating, some aspect of God's relational nature - and thus the nature of all creation, derivatively - are not as helpful as they otherwise could be, and may in fact be hurtful.

'Bad' Usually Results from Less-Than-Good Choices

We have asserted that God's words to the woman and the man (Gen 3:16-19) primarily comprise announcements of consequences, rather than arbitrary punishments selected from an array of available choices. This is an early example of the principle that living in the creation God chose to bring into existence entails choices, with consequences. To use a silly example, perhaps God 'could,' but God does not, change water to petrol just because we may wish to save money by pouring water into the petrol tank. To act so foolishly would be to ruin the car's engine, to say nothing of the owner's

reputation for sound judgement. A much more sobering example is the murder of one human by another. As much as we may wish it, God does not change the knife to paper the moment it contacts the murder victim's skin, or the bullet to eiderdown just before its penetration of the skull.

Read carefully and humbly, God's words to our first parents encourage us to resist the easy urge to blame our suffering on God, or even on the Evil One. Most human and other suffering and mischance in our world is, and always has been, attributable to our own or others' sinful choices, to our own or others' ignorant choices, to our own or others' careless or lazy choices, to the circumstance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, which we often call 'accident,' or to some combination of these. To learn to refrain from calling most of our suffering 'God's will,' 'God's decree,' or even 'Satan's attacks,' is part of that growth toward maturity of which we have spoken already.¹

Living Together as Sisters and Brothers

What would it look like, then - how would we experience living together as sisters and brothers in the already-but-not-yet life of the family of God - if we were to take Genesis 1-2 seriously? What if we were to take these chapters as God's intentions for human living, the pattern to which the redemption wrought by Christ ultimately restores us, if indeed it does not surpass it? What if Christians are called to live by Gen 1-2 as much as possible? What if this is one way to express conceptually the real purpose of Christian living, individually and in community? A few thoughts on a single issue must serve as a beginning to what would be possible, could we work to develop the whole.

Genesis 1-3 is about gender equality as much as it is about any other subject. Genesis 1-2 affirms gender equality to be God's creation intention, and Genesis 3 narrates the fracturing of all relationships that caused us to lose that God-intended treasure, along with many others. If this understanding of the text is correct, then the historical Wesleyan affirmation of women's place in ministry also is correct. Where do we need to direct our attention to make sure we are living biblically and 'Wesleyan-ly' in how we do ministry, and encourage women in ministry? How do we counteract

¹ This is not to deny the reality of miracle; however, by definition, miracles are relatively rare.

with and for our people the non-biblical, non-Wesleyan hermeneutic that pervades so much of the various electronic media's teachings on these subjects? As God-called influencers of Wesleyan theology and practice, we are impelled to address these issues.

The biblical mandate for gender equality will also impact the Christian home. The notion that God calls the husband to be the dictator in his home will have to be abandoned - never mind the always-expressed qualification that he is to be a benevolent dictator. The paradigm extends beyond gender relations to all areas of life. Ethnicity, 'race,' class, educational attainment - none of these, and no other criteria, either, can justify permanent, uncircumscribed, unaccountable hierarchy. Power is ceded for specific purposes with specific limitations, specific procedures for accountability, and with strictly defined time limits. Power is like electricity, useful but deadly. Lord Acton spoke truly, 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Even the raising of our children which, in their younger years, requires that we exercise power over them, is for the purpose of helping them to reach their ultimate autonomy, under God. Our perfect model here is God's own self. A major task of Christian theology, at present, is to rethink God's use of - or rather, God's self-limitation on the use of - God's sovereign power, in the greater interests of relationship and relational integrity with humans, and perhaps even, to some extent, with other inhabitants of God's created order.

So much to ponder, so much to say, from these marvelous chapters! So little space and time to record these few initial thoughts! It remains now to thank, once again, my hosts of the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research for their gracious invitation to address the 2010 annual meeting in Melbourne, and for their generous hospitality. Also, thanks to you, the reader, with the prayer that something here may stimulate an insight or a connection, to your blessing and to the good of the family of God, everywhere.