

The Centre and the Circumference

by Al Wolters

There is a kind of fireworks which is like a rocket: it first shoots high into the night air, and then, when it has reached the top of its trajectory, explodes into a dazzling pattern of shooting stars which lights up the entire landscape. Suddenly night is banished, and the dimly discerned outlines of hills, trees and buildings are sharply etched in the brilliant glare of the shower of light raining down from heaven.

I like to think of Scripture as being comparable to that kind of fireworks. The long centuries of God's revelation to his Old Testament people are like the period in which the rocket rises, symbolic of the preparation and promise of the full manifestation of God's glory in the fulness of time. The few decades covered by the New Testament are like the explosion and shower of sparks, God's glory revealed in the manger, the cross and the empty tomb, driving darkness away and brilliantly illuminating the world in which we live, so that henceforth we are enabled to live our life in the light of heaven.

I like the image because it illustrates two fundamental points about Scripture: it is centered in the person of Jesus Christ, and it brings light and perspective for the entire world. To give a new twist to an old phrase, we can say that Christ and creation are the centre and the circumference of the "hermeneutic circle". That is to say, any view of Bible-interpretation, any hermeneutics, which does not make Christ the central point of reference and does not see the entire created order as involved in this central focus, is likely to lead to a reading of Scripture which is seriously askew. The same point can be made by saying that the Scriptures make manifest the coming of the Kingdom, and can be understood properly only if we realize throughout that Christ is its King and the entire creation its domain. Or again: the Word of God written is always and everywhere a message of salvation - salvation *in* Christ and *for* the whole cosmos.

It is no doubt a telltale mark of our technocratic society that a display of pyrotechnics should come to mind as an illustration of the Christ-centredness of Scripture. The Bible itself, in Revelation 12, uses the image of a pregnant woman. The woman is the nation of Israel, Yahweh's faithless covenant partner, who for centuries has been pregnant with the promised Messiah. The child is finally born in Bethlehem, narrowly escaping the



onslaught of the dragon who has bedeviled the woman since Paradise. The entire Bible is the story of the birth of this Child, and of his mission to destroy the dragon and all his works. Therein lies the unity of the Scriptures and the overriding context in which they demand to be read. The story of Joseph, for example, or of the sun standing still at Gibeon, or of Esther, must be read as instances of God protecting the pregnant woman from the attacks of the dragon, in order that the Child might be born and the dragon defeated, once and for all. The Scriptures must be read *Christocentrically*, in all their parts. That is the first point to be made.

The second point is equally important, namely that salvation in Jesus Christ means re-creation, the restoration of God's creation as it was originally meant to be. The whole point of Christ's mission is that He should save the world, lift the curse which rests on it because of the Fall, in order to renew it into the Kingdom of God. The Scriptures therefore, *in* pointing to Christ, point to the renewal of creation in Him. This is a point which needs some clarification.

Creation, of course, does not just refer to physical reality. All the structures and patterns of society, all the capacities and possibilities of culture, all the relationships and attitudes of our personal lives, exist by virtue of God's creative power. Language, sports, art, the family, commerce and friendship are as much part of the created order as stars and lakes, plants and animals. All the everyday activities of our ordinary lives are made possible and upheld by the Creator's almighty power. In creating the world He established the laws and standards by which all these creaturely spheres should function, and calls them to serve Him by functioning in accordance with his creational intent. The gospel of Jesus Christ means good news for this whole range of creaturely reality. Just as all our natural lives (and there really is no part of our lives which is not "natural" in this sense of plain, ordinary, everyday created reality) is infected by man's rebellion, his refusal to live by the standards God has established, so all of our natural lives are reclaimed and renewed by Christ, that is, brought into conformity again with those standards. In fact, the Bible teaches that the whole creation groans in travail, and that "all things" are reconciled in Christ. Salvation in Christ, the overriding concern of the Scriptures, means renewed conformity to creational law.

It is for this reason that the Bible contains so much in the way of laws, commandments and imperatives. These are all pointers to the specifics of the redeemed life, a spelling out of the meaning of creational law for specific times and places. The Mosaic law is God's authorized concretization of his will for creational life in the case of Israel (in Palestine, before Christ). The Sermon on the Mount affirms the Old Testament law by penetrating to its deepest creational meaning, the way things were meant to be 'in the beginning'; the admonitions of the prophets are a call to live our lives as new creatures in Christ, delivered from the bondage of sin which had corrupted creation. It is in this sense that the Scriptures can be said to be the "republication" of the word or law of creation. That is why the Mosaic legislation has not lost its significance for the people of God today, since it teaches such enduring principles as justice and stewardship and respect, and shows how they can be implemented in a concrete societal setting. None of the commandments of Scripture are irrelevant to the New Testament community of believers; all of them point to the renewal for which Christ came, i.e. the renewal of his Father's world.

There is another reason why the theme of creation is important in interpreting the Bible. It is this, that the range of applicability of the message of Scripture is not restricted to any marked off sector of creational life (our private or church life, for example), but that it is relevant, directly and immediately, to all of it. The message of Scripture must resonate in the whole house of creation, with all its many rooms (journalism, business, music, politics, education, labor, entertainment - you name it), and not be muffled by one or two heavily soundproofed rooms marked "organized religion" and "relationships (personal)". The whole spectrum of the manysplendored gifts of God's creation must be drawn into the great covenantal intercourse of Yahweh with his people. "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer", as Paul writes to Timothy. Our word of thanksgiving and prayer is answered by God's word of promise and blessing, and our creatureliness, the God-given warp and woof of our daily lives (Paul mentions eating and being married) is sanctified, made holy, transformed to reflect the glory of God. Roman paganism may jail apostles, and modern humanism may construct soundproofed rooms or padded cells, but the Word of God is not bound. The scope of the Scriptures is unrestricted.

This emphasis also delivers us from biblicism. It is not necessary to find specific texts on writing poetry or filmmaking or teaching school in order to apply the gospel of atonement for sin and the restoration of creation to those areas. The task then becomes to look at those creational realities through the glasses of Scripture, discerning the creational law revealed in experience in the light of the creational law revealed in the Scriptures, and thus working as agents of Christ's reconciliation in these areas, where the reality of sin and the necessity of salvation are as real as anywhere else in God's creation.

It strikes me that the two principles we have mentioned, the Christocentric focus and the orientation to creation, are crucial for a hermeneutic of Scripture which does justice to its self-proclaimed unity and universality, and which offers fruitful perspectives for a deepening understanding of the riches of Scripture for contemporary believers. In a word, we must learn to read the Scriptures in their entirety as a witness to the cosmic Christ, directly related to the living Lord whom we serve and the realities of our experience. Both that Lord and those realities are contemporary, so that the gospel which puts us in touch with them is in no need of being "made" relevant or up-to-date.

Two final comments may be useful in rounding off our discussion. The first is that there is no tension between centre and circumference, even though they are contrasted as concentration and expansion. In fact it is precisely in their "soteriological concentration" that the Scriptures achieve their "universal range and scope." The focus on the individual person of Christ is like the eye of the needle through which we gain access to the universal significance of his work. It is a great mistake to conceive of Christ-centeredness as being in conflict with christian cultural action. There can be no Kingdom activity without Christ, in whom, as it were, that Kingdom is personified.

The second comment is closely related. One might say that the road to creation is only via the cross. The restoration of creation depends entirely on the atonement for sin which makes that restoration possible. When we say "cross," we say sin and grace, guilt and punishment, wrath and propitiation. These are not part of God's design for creation; they are the result of man's spoiling of creation and God's dealing with that sin, in

forgiveness and judgement. To the extent that the Scriptures deal with these realities - and it is clear that they are filled with references to them - it is not accurate to say that the Bible is the republication of the creation word or law. If we had only the republished creation law, the Scriptures would not be the book of comfort and admonition, hope and encouragement that it now is. It is only because it points throughout to the cross, which is not part of the creational scheme of things, that it is possible for us to live by the creation law again. The Scriptures may be said to be the account of the struggle and sacrifice involved in reestablishing obedience in creation.

Al Wolters is Senior Member in History of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies.