Editorial: Thinking Theologically about Vocation and Work

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Christians are rightly interested in the doctrine of salvation and God's glorious work of grace in Christ Jesus. However, a crucial theological truth to remember is that the Bible's view of salvation is first grounded in the doctrine of creation. It is not a trivial point to observe that the Bible's storyline begins in creation and for good reasons. Apart from what is described in the opening chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Bible's story makes little sense, including God's plan of redemption. Specifically, creation establishes two foundational truths: first, who God is, and second, who we are as God's creatures and image-bearers. Let us look at these truths in turn and apply them to the theme of this issue of *SBJT*, namely a Christian view of vocation and work.

First and most significantly, creation identifies the God of Scripture

as our triune Creator-Covenant God. From Genesis 1:1 on, we learn that God is the uncreated, independent, self-sufficient, all-powerful Lord who created the universe and governs it by his word (Gen 1-2; Ps 50:12-14; 93:2; Acts 17:24-25). This truth gives rise to the governing category central to all Christian theology: the Creator-creature distinction. God alone is God; all else is creation that depends upon God for its existence. As a result, God deserves our worship, love, loyalty, and obedience. But it is also important to add that God's transcendent lordship does not entail a remote deity since Scripture simultaneously stresses God's immanence. God is also the Covenant Lord who is fully present in this world and involved with his creatures: he freely, sovereignly, and purposefully sustains and governs all things to their purposed end (Ps 139:1-10; Acts 17:28; Eph 1:11; 4:6). As Creator and Covenant Lord, God sovereignly rules over his creation perfectly and personally, and in his rule, God loves, commands, comforts, punishes, and rewards, all according to the personal, covenant relationships that he establishes with his creation, starting in creation and culminating in the inauguration of a new covenant. Indeed, as we progress through redemptive-history, God discloses himself not merely as uni-personal but as tri-personal, a being-in-relation, a unity of three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

Second, creation also identifies humans as creatures *and* image-bearers, which is a staggering truth to grasp. Why? Because in relationship to the triune God, Scripture declares that humans are unique, significant, and divinely purposed to know God and to rule creation under God's Lordship (Gen 1:26-28). Of no other creature is this role and task given, but only to humans as God's image-bearers (*imago dei*). Although there is dispute over the exact meaning of the *imago dei,* there is a clear understanding of the terms "image" (*selem*) and "likeness" (*demut*) in their historic background. In the ancient world, the concept of the "image of the god" conveys the idea of a physical representation of the "god," which underscores how Adam, and the entire human race, are viewed as vice-regents who are to rule and function in the place of God, as God's representatives, as God's servant priest-kings. However, unlike the ancient Near East, where this concept is applied only to the king, Scripture teaches that the entire human race, under the headship of Adam, was created to be "king" over all creation, thus emphasizing the dual relationship of Adam and the hu-

man race to God and to the created order. This is borne out in Genesis 1:26c, where it is best translated as a purpose clause: "... in order that they [human beings] may have dominion," i.e., function in a kingly and royal way. This does not entail that dominion is the definition of the image; instead it is a consequence of the image.

A crucial text which supports this point is Psalm 8, which describes humans in royal terms. Significantly, this text is developed in Hebrews 2:5–18 where it is applied to Christ, who is not only the true "image of God" as the divine Son (see Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3) but also the one who is the "image of God" in that he assumes our humanity, identifies with us, and fulfills the role of Adam by winning for us our salvation as the obedient Son. In these ways, "image" and "likeness" are terms that signify our uniqueness, our dignity before God, and the representative role we play for the entire creation as God's servant priest-kings. This entails that God deals with creation on the basis of how he deals with human beings, and all of this implies a unique, covenantal relation as mediated through Adam as our representative head.

Why are these truths important, especially in thinking rightly about vocation and work? From a biblical view, it is impossible to think about what vocation is and the dignity and value of work apart from God and our creation. As God's image-bearers, in and through Adam, we were given the mandate to rule over the world by putting all things under our feet for God's glory, and to establish the pattern of God's kingdom in this world where everything that God has made stands in right relationship to him as God intended. It is due to our creation that all human beings have a vocation which is central to who we are as image-bearers before God and each other. Work, then, is not the consequence of human sin but the purpose of our creation. Work and vocation is intrinsic to who we are as God's image-bearers.

No doubt, our work is affected by sin (Gen 3; Rom 8:18-25). Ultimately due to Adam's disobedience as our covenant head, we do not fulfill the purpose of our existence (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Instead of putting everything under our feet, eventually the earth puts us six feet under! Adam's sin and our sin brings distortion to God's good creation that requires God to act in grace to redeem us. In Adam, unless God acts in grace and power, the original creation stands under divine judgment.

However, thankfully, God has chosen to act on our behalf, which he has done in God the Son who has assumed our humanity, lived our life as the last Adam, died our death, and thus reversed the effects of sin and death for us by his cross and resurrection. Yet, it is the doctrine of that is foundational to a Christian view of vocation and work. Redemption confirms this truth, and in Christ we are not only forgiven of our sin but also restored to the purpose of our creation, namely to put everything under our feet for God's glory (Heb 2:5-18).

Today, these truths are vital for the Church to understand, proclaim, and live out. Surrounded by alternative worldviews that offer no basis for human dignity, vocation, and work, Christians must recapture the biblical vision of who humans are as creatures and image-bearers. Our society is facing a serious identity crisis regarding who humans are which is ultimately due to our refusing to view ourselves in relationship to God our Creator and Lord. As a result, in a sad irony, humans who have sought to assert our rebellion against God and to insist on our independence from God have lost the very rationale for our existence. For these reasons and many more, we are focusing this issue of *SBJT* on a Christian view of vocation and work. Most of the papers, delivered in November, 2017 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at our Commonweal Conference, offer historical reflections with the goal of retrieving the best from Christian theology for us today. It is my prayer that these articles on vocation and work will not only remind us of the great wisdom of the past for our present-day, but also lead us back to Scripture to discover anew our high calling as redeemed creatures and image-bearers in Christ Jesus. As the Church, may we begin to live out now what our triune God created us to be, as we await the return of our Lord and the fullness of the new creation, where we will enjoy God's presence forever and thus completely fulfill the purpose of our creation.