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Abstract

"Creation is the ultimate act of divine revelation. And that revelation requires both the 'natural' world and the products of human culture. Humans are not (just) the audience to whom God is revealed, we are part of the very picture of revelation itself. Humans are necessarily and essentially part of the created realm."

Posting about the big picture of creation from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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Everything is Related

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Neal DeRoo

Creation is a big word. As Christians, I think sometimes we forget that. We tend to use ‘creation’ in small ways. Perhaps we use it to refer to the non-human realm of the universe, the “natural world” as distinct from the “cultural world” of human interaction. Or maybe we use ‘creation’ to refer to what God did long ago, a particular mighty act which brought this universe into existence; “creation” is an origin story, an account of where things started.

But what if creation is not just a part of the picture? What if it isn’t just about certain kinds of things (natural as opposed to cultural, ecological as opposed to sociological) or a certain part of the story (the beginning)—what if it’s everything? What if it’s all about creation?

Creation is the ultimate act of divine revelation. And that revelation requires both the ‘natural’ world and the products of human culture. Humans are not (just) the audience to whom God is revealed, we are part of the very picture of revelation itself. Humans are necessarily and essentially part of the created realm.

What does this mean? Well, first, creation is not just the stage on which the human drama plays out. Creation is not just the background, setting, or home that gives a place for humans to live, as if the only thing that really matters, in the grand scheme of things, is human culture. Created things are not just set pieces, to be moved around and used as we see fit.

But creation is also not some smooth-running machine into which the monkey wrench of human civilization has unfortunately been thrown. The solution to creation’s problems is not to remove, as much as possible, the human stain from what is otherwise a perfect and unspoiled masterpiece. If creation is not just here to serve our purposes, neither are we, as humans, here merely to serve its purposes or to be wished away if we are unwilling to fall in line with creation’s goals.

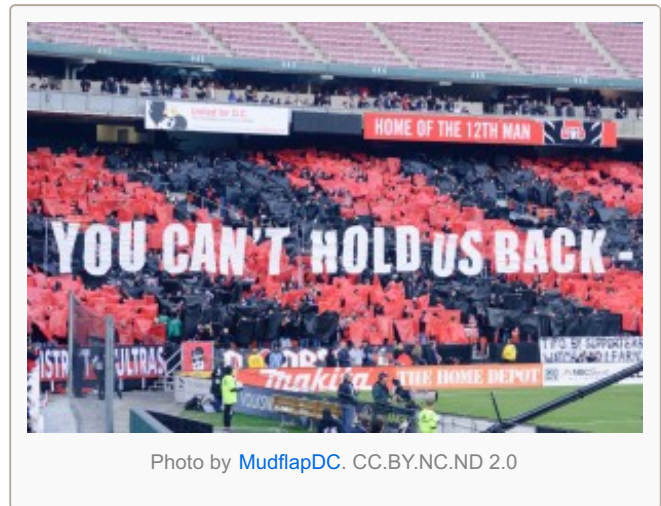
The power of creation to reveal God is found primarily in the whole of creation. We cannot expect to find God in one part of creation or another. If God created the heavens and the earth, and did so to express something of God through that creation, then it must be the entirety of that creation that, taken together, expresses God. If God could be adequately expressed in the heavens alone, why make the earth? If God could be adequately revealed in and to humans alone, why make birds of the air and fish of the sea?

If we want to find and understand God as expressed through the creation God has made, we need to start looking at the full, big picture of that creation. All of it. Not just in some things, rather than other things. Not just in things. But in all things, and in all the various ways of relating between those things. Ultimately, everything that exists does so as part of the grand scheme of creation that God made in order to express something of God’s self. To look at only a part of creation is, necessarily, to miss something of God.

And to see the whole of creation, we must realize that creation is not just about things—it’s also (maybe even primarily) about the way those things relate to each other.¹ Creation is not just stuff, it is an intricate web, a delicate weave. And to weave such a fabric together, you need more than just thread; you also need specific ways of connecting those threads to each other. All creatures are part of this fabric, this weave. We are made to be in relation, not just with the God who created us, but with the other creatures created alongside us. It is in this very web of related creatures that God is revealed to us.

So how do we see the whole web of creation? Insofar as we are a part of creation, we can only ever look to the whole of creation from within, from where we are. And from there, we'll never see the whole in the same way as we could from somewhere outside it. The best we can do is understand the various ways we have of relating to the other parts of creation, and go from there. If I can't see the whole big picture, I can at least try to better understand the part I'm supposed to play in it.

It's like those pictures that large groups of people make in sports stadiums or elsewhere. Each person holds up but one part of the bigger picture. Usually, it's simply a colored board: red or white or black. When each person holds up their board, and the boards have been properly arranged so that each person is where they are supposed to be relative to all the other people, a huge picture is created. The picture can be quite impressive—but only for those who aren't involved in making it. One has to be somewhere else, above and outside the picture itself, to see the big picture.



But how do the people making up the picture know where to stand? It is almost certainly the case that someone has given them a glimpse of what the big picture will look like and has, perhaps, let them see a blueprint or plan of how that big picture is to be implemented. But that big picture is not really that helpful, because knowing the big picture doesn't help me know where to stand, if I can't see the whole thing at one time. If I'm holding up my colored board, my piece of the puzzle, I probably can't even see the role I play in the bigger picture—all I'm going to see is my arms holding something up, and the arms of the people around me, also holding up a board. The boards might even all look the same on the underside. The color on the board is of no use to me in helping me know where to stand.

What would help me know where to be is if I know where I'm supposed to be relative to some other people. Beside this guy, in front of that girl, behind another guy, and so on. The big picture is created by all the smaller pieces being in proper relation to each other.

What if creation works the same way? What if God's purpose for creation is that as a whole it expresses something (only God really knows what, though perhaps he gives us a glimpse of the big picture from time to time, in various ways)? And what if our job, as humans, is to be sure that everything is in proper relationship to everything else, to ensure that the big pictures expresses what it was created to express?

If we are always part of this 'big picture' of creation, then we are always in relation to all the other parts of that picture. If our task is to make sure that the 'big picture' expresses what it should, we have to make sure that all the various parts of that big picture are in proper relation to each other. But since I'm also part of the picture, with my own part to play, I have to start where I am: I have to make sure, first and foremost, that I am in proper relation to the things around me.

Unfortunately, my relationships with other people or other creatures is not as simple as are the relationships of the stadium-goers involved in making the giant picture. They only have to worry about their physical position in comparison to other people's physical position. Our creational life is much more complicated than that. There are all kinds of different ways we have of relating to things, and each way has its own rules and ways of being evaluated. We have to acknowledge and respect the different ways of relating, since a 'bad relationship' might actually have some pretty good ways of relating mixed with some other bad ways of relating, and what we take to be a 'good relationship' might still have one or two bad ways of relating mixed in with it. My relationship to a romantic partner, for example, could make great

economic sense but be morally wrong, or something I'd like to say to my wife could make all kinds of logical sense but be socially or emotionally insensitive.

Being aware of these different modes of relating therefore proves quite helpful in living our complex lives as Christians, that is, as followers of the creator. By being attentive to the different modes of relating, we can make much more refined judgments that, in turn, give us a better sense of how to proceed wisely and faithfully in our everyday lives. This, in turn, helps us get a better sense of our relationships with the things around us, both what is good in those relationships and what might not be so good.

Central to the 'big picture' of creation is the notion that every person is always relating in all these various ways to every creature they encounter. No creature is 'just' a creature; each one plays a part in the fabric of creation. The vast majority of the time we are not consciously aware of all these different relations, and we usually only become aware of them by reflecting on what we do naturally. In our regular, everyday interactions, though, we relate in all these ways, for better or worse, without thinking about it.

Take, for example, the issue of what to eat for dinner. Such a banal, everyday thing seems, on its surface, to be quite simple. It is merely a question of me determining what I feel like eating, what I can afford to eat, and what is available to me to eat. These are all legitimate factors, but in the 'big picture' of creation many other things also come into play in the act of eating: what foods would be more or less conducive to me living a biologically healthier life? Culturally, what have I been brought up to find tasty (or comforting, or exotic, depending on my mood)? What is the social setting in which I eat my food? That is, in my moments of consumption, who do I eat with and how do I eat with them? Is eating an act of individual 'refueling,' a time of communal bonding, or something else? Is my food aesthetically appealing—does it look and taste good? What ecological responsibilities do I have in regards to what I'm eating? Do I have responsibilities to the people who labored to make my food or harvest it? Do I have responsibilities for how the animals that become my food are treated? Am I eating ethically, and who are the ethical parties involved: those who make my food (people only, or animals too?), those I eat with, perhaps even those I choose not to eat with? How do I show my religious beliefs through my eating? Do I pray and give thanks for the food? Do I eat in communion with others?



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Even the simple act of eating, we see, is quite complex. In order to eat in light of the big picture of creation, then, we must try to determine what our proper place is in relation to various kinds of relationships with various different kinds of creatures, near and far. If we want our eating to help express our Creator—if we want to come to know God better through our eating—we have to be cognizant, not just of our relationship to God, but of the fact that God made us always to be in relationship with each other.

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1. This is what the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd is trying to get at with his notion of modal aspects. ↩

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