

Transcending the World as it is Cosmic Reconstruction According to a Vision Receiving the New World in Christ as Gift And Letting Life Become Possible

One intriguing perspective on the gifts which enable life is that of a cosmic change and reconstruction which become transparent in a number of New Testament passages central to our understanding of Christ.

How to live life is a primary question. In the realities of life we often encounter more than we can manage. Thus we seek help from the God who transcends life but engages life and question whether the difficulties and tragedies of life are intended by God or rather the product of oppositional forces.

Much of the New Testament material presents what Christ has done as changing the way the cosmos is viewed, understanding the human struggle as not just dealing with individual failure and sin. Human existence then becomes more manageable, less determined by failure and its judgment. Life's possibilities then become more manageable, partially in terms of the way Christ has restructured the understanding of life, but also in ongoing companionship with Him and each other in the course and journey of life.

The world is described by a cosmic story: its origins, its history, the directions of its dynamics, and the participation of its inhabitants. Genesis 1 describes history in terms of origins from primary elements of darkness, light, sky, earth, God's creation of living creatures and humankind, male/female both in the image of God; and all was good and humans remained with the task of completion of creation, being only a little lower than God (Ps. 8:5). While in Gen. 1 the world is seen as good as God calls it into being and blesses it, in Gen. 2-3 there is presented the struggle with the elements of creation not only expressed in the natural world but in man's search for identity and companionship (woman originates from man). They struggle to cope with a world of oppositional forces (e.g. the serpent) experiencing the tragedies of their own story, and a desire for resolution through knowledge of good and evil, which ultimately leads to seeking the tree of life, overcoming death and all limits. Ideal Eden is now lost. A little later in Genesis 6 the Fall of the angels is described who have intercourse with human females and in later Judaism Satan, the head of forces opposed to God, is described as a fallen angel. While in Gen. 2-3 creation seems much like the tragic world of the present, in Genesis 1 creation was very good and humans were made in God's image (both male and female) though creation was yet to be completed.

Genesis 1 and 2-3 are really two differing stories which have been put together for a more complete description of the world with which one has to deal. One then could use one of them (the Prologue of John is based on Gen. 1, as may be Psalm 8) or any combination. Gradually Genesis 2-3 and the Fall came to be the clue to the tragedies of life for much of Judaism and early Christianity and the uniqueness of Genesis 1 seems forgotten. To this came to be added the story of Moses and the Law which is to provide assistance to cope with the cosmos and the demands of life, and then there is the story of Abraham (e.g. Romans 4) who through faith before the time of the Law can appropriate the possibilities God offers and becomes a primary paradigm of life, anticipating justification by faith in Christ.

But how does all this operate? Creation, Abraham and Moses are a long time before Christ and us. The actions of Christ are a long time before us. And we live in the here and now seeking to

cope with life now, yet all of these stories affect us. The transformation of life, creation and persons is made possible by what Christ has done two thousand years ago, not only removing the Mosaic Law as a determinant of what one is but changing the conditions of existence and placing all into the stream of Christ's reality. But the way this is often viewed by Christians is that the world is still constituted by sinners who must realize their sinfulness and seek forgiveness or they are lost -- lost until saved.

The impact of the transformation of the cosmos and the availability of the ultimate source of life (Christ) is not grasped. Thus we discover how valuable it is that in the Moravian Church Christ has been understood not just as Savior when we confess, but as both Creator of the world and Companion and Guide in life here and now, bringing us what we need but of which we may not yet even be aware or able to verbalize. Recently I attended an Easter Play where at the conclusion the pastor invited people to confess their sin and accept salvation. The benefits of Christ's action are seen to only come to persons individually in the present and they must accept that not only they but all are sinners in themselves. Thus humans are negatively perceived, except as they are redeemable in the here and now. And the world remains the problematic place it has always been (at least since the Fall of Adam) until the final redemption at the end of time which will change the conditions of the Cosmos but only after final judgment when for many there will be no value in it. Though this negativism can hurt the sharing of Christ and the Gospel, often we have been able to transcend this by sharing the positive more than the negative.

I would like to indicate that Paul understood that the conditions for existence really changed long ago with the death of Christ on the cross and the making available of the resources of Christ and companionship with him. For example, whatever the Law meant before Christ it is no longer God's primary way of dealing with human difficulties. In fact, the death of Christ freed us from the Law and made available the resources for life released by Christ and found in Christ. This means that we are born into a world with new potential and what Christianity has to offer is this new world inhabited by a real Christ. Hopefully even in the midst of a very problematic world this means there is great potential – which is to be found in Christ and his use of us as vehicles for his purpose, just as in the world in which he historically lived he was vehicle for God's love and purpose. The kingdom of God is really the presence and reality of God in the lives of persons as in the life of Christ.

Because of the complexity of the Pauline passages to which I would like to direct you (in Galatians and Colossians) I have made excerpts and comments below which focus on their themes so that hopefully the ideas would be more accessible. Central is a realization of how Jews and Greco-Romans sought to understand and cope with their world by various myths or systems of thought and to discover how Christ and the Christ event freed them from the determinants of the cosmos and rooted them in the ultimates of spiritual reality. In Christ all was solved because in him all resources for coping were available and the penalties of sin and failure were prepaid. The difference between most Christian handling of this and the understanding evident in the texts is that the texts do not speak of handling the Law, sin and elementals (Greco-Roman cosmic structures) in the present but accept that Christ has already freed us from them in his life and death so that life, rather than the Law and elementals (the structures humanity has placed into the cosmos), being our issue. Our issue is then to become rooted in the reality of Christ who took upon himself all of the issues which needed care and to live into the life and resources available through him. Thus sin and Law are already handled. Even if one lived as a Jew committed to the Law's structure of the world, in Christ's death this and all other structures of the world have been removed while contemporary life issues and Christ's life for us should be our present focus.

It is interesting that in the early church, towards the latter part of the first century, after the Pauline period and its perspectives, Matthew's Gospel comes into being, presenting a Christianity similar to the structures of a Jewish Essene community. In chapters 5-7 Jesus presents the Sermon on the Mount from a Mount to parallel the giving of the Law to Moses, having come not to abolish but fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to remove one letter from them. The righteousness of this Christian community is to be greater than the scribes and Pharisees, to deal with both the sinfulness of feeling and action. Ultimately you are to be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. Moses is rethroned in a Christian way and Peter becomes the Rock upon whom the Church will be built. Now we know why Paul had to grasp the meaning of the death of Christ before he could become free of the Law. Life could not move on without dealing with the Law and removing it as a determinant of life though still useful in various ways. Though not all of Matthew presents Matthew's perspective, for Matthew used Mark and other traditions, we are sometimes confused by Matthew because it is the first Gospel we meet.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE JEWISH WORLD

GALATIANS

Within the New Testament materials, as previously indicated, there are several creation narratives in which Christ is both creator of the original world and the new. John 1:1-18 is perhaps the one with which we are most familiar, but Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews also express this. The creation of our original world is not the only determinant of its character, but there were forces and traditions which in the course of history structured and controlled life between the times of its original creation and its ultimate destiny. The world then needs restoration to original creation's intent, but also needs transformation which overcomes the various intermediate traditions which originated in history and structure life for us. A primary example of the need to deal with the intermediate traditions is the Jewish Law, traditionally assigned to the period of Moses and interpreted over the centuries. In the Greco-Roman world there are the elementals, cosmic powers and philosophies. In spite of the profound significance of the Jewish Law, it could be regarded as a temporary measure to assist with the problems of life and Abraham's faith becomes an important model of faith prior to the Law. Jesus' death is portrayed as bringing upon him all of the penalties due to the Law so that the possibility of original (or advanced) creation is restored – but not just restored. **What happens in Jesus puts the world back in touch with the original dynamics of its origin and we are clothed by Christ (language used in Baptism) and live from his Spirit.**

In the discussion of Galatians and Colossians below it becomes clear how the Christ event transforms the Cosmos and transcends the older religious and philosophical traditions within the world. Thus the world is seen and lived in a new way. This is the primary gift of the Gospel which the church has to share with the world. Life is constituted by being in Christ who is connected with its origin and destiny. We do not have to understand all this, but to surrender ourselves to the reality and person of Jesus who makes the difference and as our Companion will lead us to what is necessary for understanding.

It also should also be remembered that there are two additional primary structures of the world apparent and especially dealt with in Jesus' ministry: the personal demonic which intervenes in life with intent and the human predicament apparent in illness and its biological, psychological and spiritual causes. However, I cannot give space to discussing this here. In I Peter 3 Christ not only overcomes the traditions about the cosmos, but suffered and died, made a proclamation to the spirits in prison (the souls of those in the underworld kept there until the resurrection) and then goes to heaven, the right hand of God, where the spiritual powers of heaven become subject to him. Here Jesus transforms the cosmos by entering not only its traditions but its multidimensions.

In Gal. 1:6ff Paul was sent on mission by no other than Christ and God the Father (note that his religious experiences in I Cor. 15:3-11 and II Cor. 12:1-10 are the basis of his being). God and Christ set us free from the present evil age. There is no other Gospel than Christ and this is not of human origin but divine.

1:13 Regarding his earlier life in Judaism, Paul comments that he was advanced in and zealous for the traditions, but when God revealed the Gospel as not of human origin, he did not go back to Jerusalem (to his old religious sources), but to Arabia and Damascus – then after 3 yrs to Jerusalem, Syria and Cilicia -- separating himself from the geographic locations of the Law's origin.

2:1 After 14 yrs. Paul went again to Jerusalem to review his Gospel before church leaders, and the grace given Paul was basically recognized.

2:11 But when Peter came Peter joined others in returning to the Law, at least the dietary law. Yet Paul became justified not by Law but by faith in Jesus, and in Paul's view none were justified by works of Law.

2:19 Through the Law Paul says he died to the Law that he might live to God – “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” We need to appreciate the dimensions of saying, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

2:21 Paul does not nullify the grace of God. If justification comes by Law, Christ died for nothing.

3:1 Foolish Galatians, before your eyes Christ was crucified. The Spirit did not come through the Law but by believing what you heard.

3:6 This is really the way of Abraham and his faith; believers are descendents of Abraham and thus the Gospel has precedence.

3:10 Those who rely on works of Law are under a curse, the judgment of the Law; the righteous will live by faith.

3:13 Christ in his crucifixion saved us from the Law's curse by becoming a curse (everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed) -- and so we receive in Christ the results of the promise made to Abraham.

3:19 Why the Law? It was added because of transgressions to control the problems of human existence.

3:21-22 If a law could have solved things and given people life, it would have been this one, but Scripture/the Law imprisoned all under sin. Of course, the purpose of this is so that what was promised by Christ might be given those who have faith.

3:23 Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded by the Law as a disciplinarian. But now in Christ you are children of God through faith and you have clothed yourself with Christ and there are no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All distinctions have disappeared and humanity has become ONE in Christ and has become Abe's offspring.

4:1 When we were minors we were under guardianship of elemental cosmic structures. But when fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born under the Law to redeem those under the Law. Adopted as children, the Spirit of God's Son is sent into our hearts, and we cry Abba, Father. Now you are an heir through God. Previously you were enslaved, but like with Abraham's two wives, while one bore children for slavery one bore the children of promise.

COLOSSIANS

STRUCTURE OF THE GENTILE WORLD

Because of Paul's background in both the Jewish and Greco Roman worlds, he dealt with the way in which the structures of both worlds were affected by what Christ has done. Not only did the Law pass away, by which Jews were freed from their traditional structures, but the Greco

Roman world was freed and principalities, powers, and elementals no longer had power over them. All power was to be found in Christ by whom life was to be empowered and structured.

1:11 The Father has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, rescuing us from the power of darkness, transferring us into the kingdom of his Son.

1:15 Christ is the image of God, all things created through him, he is before all things and in him all things cohere. He is the head of the Church. Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things in heaven and earth, making peace through the blood of his cross. You who were once estranged and hostile in mind he has reconciled through his death to present you holy and blameless before God: this is the Gospel proclaimed to every creature, of which Gospel Paul is servant.

1:24 Paul completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body the Church. He is to make fully known the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you. For this he toils and struggles.

2:8 Let no one captivate you regarding philosophy, empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ. In him the fullness of deity dwells. In him you were circumcised, putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when buried with him in Baptism you were raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with him when he forgave all our trespasses, erasing the record which stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them. Therefore don't let anyone condemn you regarding food, self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking and not holding fast to God.

2:20 If with Christ you died to the Elemental Spirits of the universe, why live as still belonging to the world? Why submit to regulations regarding things that perish?

3:1 If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above – for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Then put to death what is earthly in you. You have stripped off the old self and clothed yourself with the new, being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all and all human distinctions pass away.

[It is important to note that the material in Colossians precedes the presentation of the Code of Ethical Household Behavior in this epistle. Thus the cosmic reconstruction in Christ sets the context for ethics and its possibilities.]