

All Saints' School of Theology: The Fall

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Introduction

A very significant doctrine!

- Status of marriage and other social norms and institutions
- The financial crisis and the question of regulation
- Making sense of the internet
- Theories of the atonement
- Strategies for evangelism
- The nature of Christian maturity and spirituality

Creation and fall as two golden strands through the biblical story

Making sense of the ruined building

Reflective aside

Doctrine

Proof-texting

Biblical theology

The key texts

Not Gen 3 alone but Gen 3–11

Lesslie Newbigin *A Walk Through the Bible* rediscovers a narrative unity within Genesis (and the rest of the Bible!)

Walter Brueggemann 'these are the most important chapters in the whole Bible'

Brueggemann *Genesis* p 12: 'All political and philosophical questions (ie issues of meaning and power) are subordinate to this fundamental issue of the relation between creator and creation.'

Contrast 'Jesus is the answer—now what is the question?'

New four 'spiritual laws'

Eucharistic prayer in Anglican Communion Service

p 18: 'It is by speaking and hearing that interaction takes place'

Compare Gen 11.7 with Deut 6.6 'Hear' *shema*

'Sovereign speech is not coercive but evocative...his word has the authority of suffering compassion...'

Reflective aside: reading in a post-critical era

Truth and facticity

Primeval history and world history

Believing and interpreting

Scene 1: Gen 3.1–13

Beware of using this text for things it was not written about

Over-interpretation

the text is not concerned with such abstract concepts as 'how evil/death/sexual rivalry came into the world'

not so much a focus on death as on the problem of an anxiety-ridden life

Tree of life—see Prov 3.18 (wisdom), 11.30 (righteousness), 13.12 (satisfied desire), 15.4 (healing tongue)

Also Rev 2.7 and ch 22—fellowship with God?

Tree of good and evil—a semitic phrase meaning 'everything' (compare 'great and small')

The Man and Woman were given three things:

- Vocation—to till and to keep
- Permission—to enjoy the garden and its produce
- Prohibition—not to eat from the tree

But now

- The given becomes an option—compare
 - farming and breeding methods
 - Money lending
 - Post-modern constructions of identity
- God becomes an object of discussion (theology in place of obedience!)
- A boundary (death) becomes a threat

And as a result:

- The prohibition is violated
- The permission is perverted
- The vocation is neglected

Reflective aside: seeing the fall in the world part 1

The news media seem quite good at pointing up aspects of life where prohibitions are violated. Has this been an unbalanced pre-occupation of the church?

Where do you see the 'perversion of permission' at work in the lives of individuals and communities today? In what ways is this addressed in the ministry of Jesus?

Where do you see the neglect of God's vocation in the contemporary world? In what ways does the good news of Jesus speak in to this?

Does the placing of boundaries by God limit human initiative? Where is initiative to be exercised?

Consequences:

- 'There is no escape from that wise passion' (Brueggemann p 49)
- the conversation becomes a pitiful trial
- 'I heard...I was afraid...I was naked...I hid...I ate...I ate...' **sIn**
- Luther: '*cor curvum in se*' the heart turned in on itself
- Anxiety arising from unbounded freedom (Brueggemann)

BUT the surprise is not the sentence, but that there is life

'When the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures' and he provides for them.

Scene 2: Gen 4.1–16

Focus of the story here is the destiny of the murderer rather than the horror of the crime

Division of vocations: 'keep and till' now becomes a keeper and a tiller

'Cain' means to 'get' or 'create'

'Abel' has the same sounds as 'vanity', 'breath', 'nothingness' (Ecclesiastes)

No reason is given for the acceptance of the one, the refusal of the other (*contra* Kidner)

Key verse: 4.7

- Sin is like wild beast ready to pounce—not merely a question of breaking rules
 - Compare Romans 7
 - Different category of thinking from that of 'original sin'
 - How does this make us think of freedom from sin?
- 'it desires' same word as woman's desire for her man 3.16
- 'you will master it' echoes of Gen 1
 - future as an imperative, holding out hope

'The acknowledgement of guilt and the reality of grace come together'

Scene 3: Gen 6.5–9

6.5 God 'saw' (compare Gen 1)

6.6 God 'grieved', felt emotional pain (connection with 5.29)

parallel with 3.16 again

'not an angry tyrant, but a troubled parent' (Brueggemann)

Note the symmetry in judgement—the earth is 'ruined' so God will 'ruin' in judgement

Scene 4: Gen 11.1–9

Symmetry at beginning and end 'earth' and 'speech' ('tongue')

Three themes:

- Unity in defiance of allegiance to God
- Scattering as judgement—though note the ambiguity of 'scattering'
- Unity in covenant allegiance to God

Postscript: What the fall is not about

Human finitude

Interpretation

Theological questions

The nature of sin – e.g. is it fundamentally rooted in pride (Augustine)? Or disobedience? (Calvin) Or something else?

What impact did the fall have upon human beings and their relationship with God – how drastic was it? This is as much a question about the sovereignty and priority of divine grace. Contrast, e.g. Irenaeus or Origen and Augustine or Calvin, esp on how badly vitiated the human intellect and will are.

Related to this – to what extent does salvation therefore depend on God's sovereign decision to save – and does this apply to individuals, or to the human race at large? Contrast Augustine, Calvin and Barth.

The issue of how Adam's sin affects us – are we guilty of it (original sin)? Is it inherited or learnt, or does Adam stand for something about the human condition (as a 'concrete universal' – so Ricoeur)

Why did we fall? Is it a surd (Augustine), or should it be understood in terms of the vulnerability of immature human beings (Irenaeus and others)

Why did God allow humans to fall away from him? Does it go hand in hand with human responsibility and freedom? A risk God takes? Did God make provision for it – but why allow it at all? Did God intend this for a greater good (the 'happy fault' of Augustine and Aquinas)?

What view of history and materiality goes with this – e.g. to what extent is history and matter good in itself or ordered to assist our redemption, and how have time and materiality been affected by the fall (cf. to what extent is the fall cosmic in scope – Rom 8 etc), contrast Origen (on some readings) with Irenaeus, the Cappadocians, Augustine, Calvin...

Are natural disasters a consequence of the fall or part of the cosmos as created – part of its risk-laden nature?

What is evil and what are its origins? Is evil another principle besides God (so the Manichees), or does it name the privation of the good (so most of the Fathers, Aquinas, etc) – see also Barth's account of Evil as the Nihil... Do we need an account of radical evil to do justice to the phenomenon of human evil (so Kant), esp in the twentieth century (so some recent French philosophers), and how adequate are these philosophical approaches theologically?

Does theology need an account of tragedy?

Is 'the fall' the most helpful language for talking about the originary event of human alienation from God (and one another)? Does it sound a bit Gnostic?