WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

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Category: Observations

Just in case you haven't noticed, we are coming up to Christmas. For a few weeks, the attention of the Christian world will be drawn to the incarnation of Jesus Christ; God taking on human flesh and living on with us on our planet.

However, what we sometimes forget (or at least don't reflect on) is that the Incarnation is for eternity; not just for Christmas.Â When the Son took on human nature, it wasn't like putting on a uniform to go to work. Jesus didn't become a man for thirty years or so and then head back to heaven, slip off his humanity, and settled back into the old routine with the satisfaction of a job well done.

In Jesus, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, divinity and humanity are united for eternity. Heaven and earth meet and are inextricably linked in Jesus Christ.

And this is just the start. The final scene of the Bible does not depict humans being carried off to heaven to escape a burning earth as popular imagination would have us believe. What we actually read is that the Holy City, the New Jerusalem will come down to earth and that God will live with his people. A new heaven and a new earth will be united for eternity.

If you aren't happy with what I've said so far, please go away and readÂ Surprised by HopeÂ by Tom Wright and then pick a fight with him. Meanwhile, I want to pick up on one theme that all of this raises - and for this, I can't pass responsibility on to the good bishop/professor.

In Jesus and in the eschatological picture that the Bible paints heaven and earth are united. There is no sacred and secular divide. The physical and spiritual are completely intertwined.Â This is easy to say, but it is profoundly counter-cultural in the Western world, including in Christian circles.

In this area, there are two profound philosophical influences which bounce off each other and which impact the way in which we think about the world. The first is Plato, a Greek philosopher who lived around 400 years before Jesus. One of the central ideas of Plato's thought is that the world that we perceive with our senses is merely a shadow of the deeper reality that lies behind it. It's a small step from this to say that the physical world is bad and the real (or spiritual) world is good. In the early years of Christianity, this sort of thinking led some people to deny that Jesus was fully divine - how could a spiritual God unite himself to the evil physical world? Though we don't often refer back to Plato, his thinking has percolated down through theÂ centuries and has become part of the cultural background to our lives.

A more recent influence than Plato, is the 18th century Enlightenment. One of the features of the Enlightenment was the view that truth needed to be tested.Â If you can measure or somehow verify something it can be viewed as objective truth; things that can't be verified are put on one side as being matters of speculation and opinion. Immediately, this sets up a divide between the physical sciences (measurable and provable) and religion (not measurable or provable).

In their different ways, Plato and the Enlightenment reinforce the concept that there is a clear divide between the sacred and secular, the physical and the spiritual. Science is fact and religion is a

matter of opinion or private belief. This is the world that we live in today - even if we are not consciously aware of it.

Living within this culture, the Christian response has often been to respond with the tools that the culture provides us with. There are plenty of books which seek to demonstrate that Christianity is provable, that the Bible is scientifically reliable. The idea is to show that Christian faith belongs in the provable, verifiable domain, not in the realm of speculation. This is perfectly valid approach to mission in our context; but the Incarnation of Jesus points to a much deeper reality.

In Jesus, heaven and earth meet and the whole notion of a sacred and secular divide becomes pointless.Â The divide between the physical and spiritual, which is so engrained in our thinking, is blown away by the reality of the incarnation.

Sometimes you come across the smug statement; "We don't have souls. We are souls, we have bodies." This gives us the picture of disembodied souls spending eternity in a perfect, blessed spiritual existence. The irony of this sort of view is that the only one with a body would actually be Jesus - which is a bit odd. According to the Bible, we are souls and bodies and in eternity both will be renewed.

When we get to grips with the notion that the physical and spiritual are not divided in the way that our culture has taught us, it helps us see some things in Scripture in a new way.

Let's take the question of whether we are saved by faith or works (and I realise that I'm on dodgy ground here). We tend to draw a clear distinction between faith (spiritual) and works (physical). We then struggle to reconcile Paul's statement that we are saved by faith, with Jesus dividing the sheep and goats according to their works. The point here is that works and faith are so closely intertwined that they can't really be distinguished. Works are both a demonstration of consequence of faith and our faith grows as we serve God through our actions. Yes, we are saved by faith - absolutely - but if there are no works, then there is no faith. The two can never be separated.

A similar question is raised with relationship to mission. People spend ages getting their knickers in a twist about the relationship of evangelism and social action in Christian mission. The problem is that this splitting apart evangelism and social action is a symptom of the enlightenment mindset, rather than anything we find in Scripture. In a world where heaven and earth, the physical and spiritual are united through the incarnation the question of the priority of the one over the other just doesn't arise. Like Jesus, we have to announce the kingdom in word and deed.

TheÂ inaugurated changes that have to reshape our thinking from the ground up.

I am fully aware that I've simplified a lot of things here. Please feel free to accuse me of dumbing down - I prefer to think of it as popularising.