

January 22, 2006

The Theology of Tinkertoys

Colossians 1:18–22

I've been thinking a lot recently about light subjects like the nature of authentic connections and relationships and God's design for the universe. I want to share an insight with you about what the scriptures seem to tell us about the nature of these things by using a medium that might be a little easier for us to grasp – Tinkertoys. Maybe as a child you played with Tinkertoys? Tinkertoys provide a tremendous visual for us as we talk about relationships and connection and God's design for the universe.

The Beginning

Now, if we're going to talk about God's design for the universe we've got to go back to the beginning of the construction process, back to the beginning where there is nothing. In the beginning, in Genesis 1-2, we find God creating and connecting things together. From nothing, we find God making protons, neutrons, and electrons and connecting them into atoms, connecting atoms together to make molecules of all sorts of substances. We find God connecting the universe together with stars, planets, moons. We find God connecting molecules together to make plants and fish, birds and animals, and taking molecules of dust, connecting them together and make a human being, filled with the breath of life. We find God making a woman and connecting her with the man, because it isn't good for man to be disconnected and alone.

When the seventh day comes – and the dust settles, we find God at rest and everything that he has made is connected together and in harmony. God is connected to creation as it displays and declares his glory and majesty. God is connected to the people he has made as he comes and walks in the evening with them through the garden. The people he has made are connected to the rest of creation as they are charged with being stewards of it, and creation provides their food without toil. And the people are connected to each other in the truest sense as they do not hide from one another and enjoy the company of one another.

We see that God's original design is connection, relationship, each part has its place in the whole, all bringing pleasure to God, for it is very good, excellent in every way.

Things Fall Apart – Disconnection

But then we get to Genesis 3, and things begin to fall apart. The man and the woman are tempted, they sin, and it results in insecurity, covering up, blame, guilt, shame, fear of God, disconnection. Sin results in disconnection – and death is the ultimate form of disconnection, from each other, from creation, and from God.

Pastor and author Rob Bell writes that the biggest truth of this story isn't that it happened, but that it happens.¹ It happens all the time doesn't it? Sin happens. There is blame and fingerpointing. People lose trust. We feel a little less secure about a relationship. Our guard comes up. We feel embarrassed and ashamed. We hide our sin because we fear what other people will think. I can't let them know that about me – what will they think? And we tell ourselves and everyone else that we're fine when we're not. If I don't let them get close enough, they won't find out. We withdraw from one another. And what happens? Friendships drift apart. Marriages fail. Parents and children and siblings lose trust in each other. We begin to believe lies about God – “He can't still love me.” “I can't be forgiven for that.”

And ultimately, no matter how hard we work at our relationships and strive to stay connected, the day comes when we die are disconnected from one another in the ultimate sense. Relationship and connection is ended. Maybe there's a sense in which this is the reason that we have a tendency to fear death - because outside of Christ, it is total disconnection from God and from everything that we are connected to.

Disconnection is a lot like a Tinkertoy on its own – solo – single - alone. It doesn't make much sense by itself, does it? Just a wheel, designed to be connected with other pieces. Or just a rod, designed to connect wheels together.

People deal with their disconnection in many different ways. We might try to cover it up with substitutes for real connection, like achievements or addictions. We might try to keep ourselves so busy that we don't have time to think about being connected. We might try to put up a façade that we don't need to be connected. I am a rock. I am an island. I don't need anybody else. But deep down inside, we long for connection. We might withdraw into ourselves – into depression - and dwell on our lack of connection.

No matter how we choose to deal with it, we can't hide from it. In the end, disconnection is painful, it's lonely, it's living death. Disconnection is like a Tinkertoy all by itself – it doesn't make sense, it isn't fulfilled in meaning or purpose. The only way to address our disconnection is to become connected.

Reconnecting and Reconciliation

The good news is that God in Christ is at work reconnecting things. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he writes a remarkably vivid account of God's connected design and his mission to reconnect it – soak this in:

¹ Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis, p 58.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.

Christ is the one through whom God is creating and connecting things even in the beginning – and he holds it ALL together – even from the beginning. Paul continues:

Christ is the head of the church, which is his body. He is the first of all who will rise from the dead, so he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ,²⁰ and by him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of his blood on the cross. This includes you who were once so far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault².

In Christ, EVERYTHING is being reconciled to God. Every person, every rock, every tree, every molecule, every atom is being reconnected to God. The Greek word here is □ **ποκαταλλάσσω** (a-po-ka-ta-LAS-so), which means to reconcile completely, restore an original state of harmony, or make right. Even though the pieces of his original design have been pulled apart by sin, God is reconnecting the disconnected pieces.

Peace is made with everything by his blood on the cross – no longer is there a need for fear. No longer does sin keep us from God's presence. No longer do we need to wonder what does God think of me? No longer do we need to hide our failures, no longer do we need to worry about rejection. In Christ, we are called friends of God who we have been brought into the very presence of God – holy and blameless before him without a single fault.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes something that is just remarkable: *So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*³

I find that mindblowing – there is no more condemnation – what do I have to be afraid of? And a few verses later, Paul writes something just as amazing:

² Colossians 1:15-22, New Living Translation.

³ Romans 8:1, New Living Translation.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away.³⁹ Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁴

That we cannot ever be disconnected from the love of God – nothing – and Paul lists the biggest and baddest things he can think – can disconnect us from God's love. The offer of reconciliation and restoration has been extended by God and will not be rescinded and cannot be stopped. God is putting things back together, starting with reconnecting you and me to himself.

In Christ, God is reconnecting everything - with the promise of Christ's resurrection and new life, the disconnection of death only constitutes a temporary and physical separation from connection and relationship. As followers of Christ, we are united in his body – and scripture does not speak of Christ's body being bound by time and space, so if we are united in Christ – in an almost mystical sense, we are united and connected to all the believers who have come before us and all the believers who will come after us.

Reconnecting with Others

Additionally, in Christ, people can be reconciled to one another. There is hope for our strained and broken relationships, the friendships where we have held back because of fear, insecurity, and pain.

Because we are blameless before God, and we are filled with the love of Christ, we have no need to fear rejection or feel insecure in the presence of others who are in Christ. The perfect love of Christ is unconditional and casts out fear. In Christ, I can let you see who I am sins, burdens, issues, stuff, struggles, and all because I know that as we stand in the presence of God together – we are the same – holy and blameless, and I have no need to fear. In fact, we are commanded to do so: *Dear brothers and sisters, if another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.⁵*

However that isn't how we always behave in the church is it? Dietrich Bonehoeffer writes: *"It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer and all*

⁴Romans 8:38-39, New Living Translation.

⁵Galatians 6:1-2, New Living Translation.

*their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is we are sinners.*⁶

What is Bonhoeffer saying here? That Christians can worship, pray, and fellowship together and still be disconnected because even though they do these things together, they don't allow others to see their sins, or if I can add, they don't let others see their burdens, their issues, their stuff, or their struggles, because they fear that if they do, they will be ostracized or devalued. So rather than trusting in the love of Christ we'll be accepted by those around us, we give into the fear that we won't be loved and we remain disconnected. However, reconciliation and reconnection requires risk. There's a risk we have to take if we want to be connected.

There is a second issue here as well. We are called to create an atmosphere and community culture that is so full of the love of Christ that people lose their fear and feel that they can share their sins/burdens/issues/stuff/struggles/whatever without shame. (There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus, why would we think it is acceptable for us to condemn or make someone feel condemned?)

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Reconciliation and reconnection do not end with our reconnection. Because we are connected to Christ and thus to God, we are then connected and a part of what God is doing in the world, correct? Which means that we too, have a role to play in getting the world back together. Paul writes to the Corinthians: *All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.*⁷

The ministry of reconciliation is ours. We are Christ's body and thus we called to join him in reconnecting things, making things right, and restoring harmony. We are called to help people connect to God. We're called to help people connect with one another and to themselves. We're called to do justice and restore harmony and connection with everything around us (a side of reconciliation that we aren't going to get into today).

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, P 86

⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:18, New Living Translation.

Which brings us to some questions for reflection and consideration: What is God calling you to do to bring reconciliation? Maybe for you it's as simple as beginning to build or deepen a relationship or friendship. Or maybe it's sharing the hope of reconnection with someone who feels lost and disconnected. Or maybe it's being willing to share your burdens, your stuff to build trust with a person who might be afraid to share their burdens and their stuff?

Who is God calling you to connect with? Who do you know that needs to be connected to God?

God's design is for connection and in Christ he is seeking to reconnect everything back together. You might say that before us we see a huge floor covered with Tinkertoys and God is calling us to get down on the floor and start putting some pieces together.

One Last Thought

One last thought I want to leave you with. Maybe you've had a worship experience that was incredibly transcendent – almost seemingly timeless and sublime because of its connection to God. This experience may have been in a formal worship service, or maybe just one of those moments where you see a sunset or some other awe inspiring thing, and you find yourself in awe of God – saying “God, you are good.”

Perhaps we are never more connected than when we worship, when we are centered and keenly aware of God's presence and God's goodness.

We often think of worship as beginning at 8:30 or at 11, but in Revelation, we get a picture of this massive heavenly worship service that is going 24/7 forever and ever. Maybe worship doesn't begin at 8:30 or at 11, or when we see a beautiful sunset, maybe it's more correct to say that at 8:30 or at 11, we joined in the eternal, heavenly worship service with all the saints from ages past and ages to come.