

# The Creation

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The doctrine of the creation is one of the most distinctive teachings of the Christian faith. It is easy to forget this in a day and age when Biblical creation is written off as mythological and a form of scientific evolutionism, which in essence is not unlike a number of ancient myths, is generally regarded as the truth, at least for practical purposes. Students of intellectual history have been known to maintain, with considerable justice, that the advance of evolutionary theories in the nineteenth century was one of the main causes of the widespread abandonment of Christianity which in our own time has reached all levels of the population. It has also become apparent in very recent years that attempts to combat evolutionism will meet implacable resistance from those who fear that a return to creationism will be the beginning of a religious revival which they desperately do not want.

In discussing this doctrine we must not fall into the trap of pretending to be amateur scientists, foreclosing all experiment by dogmatic pronouncements which may lack any real rapport with other disciplines, and we must equally avoid the dangers of prophecy. We do not know how scientific opinion will change, and it would be most unwise to assume that it must inevitably move back to a position with which Christians can easily live. That may happen, but it is not guaranteed, and in any case, our faith cannot rest on the vagaries of human theories and research which is never unbiased.

The Christian faith can only come from the Bible, and it is to the teaching of Scripture that our first obedience is due. There are many passages which mention or assume a doctrine of creation, but the most significant are Genesis 1-3; John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:15-17. The New Testament passages are both intensely Christological in their emphasis, a point which cannot be overlooked. It is a great pity that debates about the subject, even among Christians, have concentrated on the longer Genesis passage and ignored the New Testament, since it is the latter which offers us an indispensable hermeneutical principle for understanding the former.

The first point which emerges in studying the doctrine of creation is the *sovereignty of God*. Nowhere is there any suggestion either that God was under some form of compulsion or subject to some kind of limitation in his creating work. This sounds simple to us, but it was not obvious to the Early Christians, nor is it at all clear to modern agnostics who speak of a process of "chance and necessity". There was no primordial matter or energy on which God worked; even the structure and disposition of the atoms are what they are because of his free decision. This is important because failure to stress this point can easily lead to a kind of dualism, in which the material world claims some sort of autonomy over against God. The Thomist idea of *grace*, operating on and perfecting *nature* (as an opposing principal) is but one manifestation of this tendency even within a Christian world view. It is a trap which we can easily fall into, but it must be spotted and avoided at all costs.

Another point, not unrelated to the first, is that God created everything *ex nihilo* — out of nothing, and *not* out

Dr Gerald Bray's latest book, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Here he continues his series of surveys of Biblical doctrines.



of himself. It is a widely held belief, which may be found in many guises ranging all the way from Hinduism to Process Theology, that the creation is an emanation from God. Even Christians like Origen believed that the human soul was a part of the divine nature which had separated from God at the beginning of time. This separation compromised and eventually corrupted the soul's divine nature, but it did not destroy it. Likewise we may find that a modern Process Theologian might hold that created beings are subject to entropy as they leave the source of their energy which is "God", and that it is this which constitutes sin and separation from the divine. Pantheism, or the more refined panentheism, is by no means dead in modern theology, and the possibility of its resurrection in the guise of an "integrating principle" to bind together the diverse fields of modern science must be taken seriously and resisted.

The third point is that creation is subject to a dispensation which we call the *time-space framework*. This is not spelled out in the Bible in so many words, but it is implicit in the scheme of creation given in Genesis 1. What is important for our purposes is that this framework is a dispensation which is not intrinsic to the essence of the created order. The Early Church Fathers could not imagine created reality outside space and time, which is one of the reasons why they had so much trouble with the idea that the Son of God was eternally begotten. (In Greek, begotten = *gennētos* and created = *genetos*, so the two concepts were easily merged in practice). In Christology the problem was solved by emphasizing that the Son of God is *begotten*, *not created* but the problem remains when we consider the eternal life of the believer. Is it necessary for us to be transformed into uncreated beings in order to have fellowship in eternity with God, or can a created being transcend time and space yet still remain a creature? If we hold to the latter view, then it is obvious that the space-time framework is not definitive for a doctrine of creation.

This realisation leads us on to the next point, which has not been sufficiently considered in debate. This is that once creation is separated from time and space, *evolutionism becomes impossible*. This is simply because the kind of development which it posits can only take place within a time and space framework. This does not preclude

the possibility that within this framework there may well have been and may yet be a number of changes to the known order of things. We cannot say what mutations and adaptations there may be, or may have been *within* the created order, but we can say that whatever forms of evolution may have occurred in the past, they have not been constitutive of that order. This is an extremely important point, because it allows for the possibility of change without destroying the principle of creation.

We are committed, on the basis of Genesis 1, to the belief that God gave the world an order and a purpose which he made known according to the different species of living things. There have obviously been variations within each species, including mankind, but these have not altered the underlying sameness and compatibility. There is no fundamental difference between a headhunter in New Guinea and a scientist in Western Europe, in spite of the very different conditions to which they have had to adapt. If the human race really responded to the challenges of its environment by a kind of evolutionary selection this basic sameness would be quite inexplicable. But if man as a species is stable, then everything is clear.

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What a scientist can discover is the process of change which created things have undergone. What he cannot know is *why* they were created as they are or what they were destined for. Aetiology and teleology are both, in the final analysis, outside his ken. To put it another way, a scientist can take us from beta to psi, but the Alpha and the Omega escape him, and if he is wise he will recognise the fact.

Mention of the Alpha and the Omega brings us back naturally to Jesus Christ, who as the New Testament reminds us, is the creator and redeemer of all things. This is a very important point, because it reminds us that redemption cannot be isolated from, or set up in opposition to, the creation. It is perfectly true that we cannot hope to discover God by our own efforts, and to that extent a natural theology is quite impossible. But it goes completely against the Scriptures to push that observation to the Puritan or Barthian extreme, which denies the fundamental goodness of the creation, or its place in the plan of God as revealed to us in Christ. He is the Lord of all not merely because he has won the victory over the powers of sin and death, but because he made everything in the first place!

This belief is of central importance when we come to consider the attitude of the Christian to the created order. Too often this has been one of rejection, and certain forms of Protestantism have done great harm to the Church and to the Gospel witness because of their exaggerated withdrawal from anything which might tend to corrupt them. We must admit this characteristic failing and put it right, not by an indiscriminate acceptance of everything the world has to offer (it must be noted in this connection that permissiveness and puritanism are merely opposite sides of the same coin — lack of discrimination), but by a

responsible appropriation of the created order under the Lordship of Christ.

The Bible does not give us a detailed philosophical system by which this is to be done, and it is a great pity that men and women with a vision for creation have sometimes thought that it does. In the created order Christians share a common heritage with unbelievers; the difference is that we use it — or should use it — differently, and for another purpose. We cannot honestly say that a road sweeper or a carpenter — or for that matter a scientist or a theologian — will make a better job of his work because he is a believer, nor can we be sure that faith will produce a whole new dimension of creativity in him. It would be nice if that were so in practice, but it is not. The difference between a believer and an unbeliever is found first of all at the level of obedience — the Christian does his work to the glory of God, not to gain the praise of men. (Colossians 3:23).

But *within* this context of obedience we have every right to expect that genius will emerge and be creative, and that this creation in the image of God will take root and flourish. Similarly we can admit that genius may blossom and flourish in a heathen environment, but in that case its end will be confusion and destruction. It may not happen immediately, but the Christian believes that every human endeavour which raises itself up against God will ultimately perish. The patriarchs did not have the technical knowledge needed to build the tower of Babel, nor could the apostles rival the achievements of the greatest Greeks and Romans. Yet today their message lives on when Babylon and Athens lie in ruins, or have been submerged by another civilisation. We have no right to be proud of this, since our inheritance belongs to Christ, and not to ourselves, but it is something we must always remind ourselves of.

The last point we must bear in mind is one which stands in close relationship to what has gone before. It is that the Christian Gospel is the promise of a *new creation in Christ*. It is fashionable nowadays to dissociate the new creation as much as possible from the old, in line with the tendency to regard the redemption as something quite different from creation. This tendency is understandable, especially when we read that "the old heaven and the old earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1) but it is subtly mistaken. The new creation has a deep and primordial link with the old, which cannot be understated or ignored.

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It is a relationship which we see worked out at different levels in the Bible and in Christian experience. First there is the converted Christian, the new creation in Christ, who is nevertheless only the first-fruits. Then there is the resurrected Christian, with a new body which is related to the old as a plant is related to the seed which gave it birth (see I Corinthians 15:36-54). Placed side by side, there is no visible link between them, yet the one is inconceivable without the other. Lastly, there is the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21, different, certainly from what we have now, but still recognisable according to the same categories of thought. In all the change there is yet a continuity, so that even the temporal, imperfect, material world speaks to us in some measure of the heavenly glory of God.