

¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, vol. I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957–1975), 442.

²Article 3: “Creation and Humanity,” *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2000), 35.

³James William McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology Volume 2: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 153.

⁴Pilgram Marpeck, “A Clear and Useful Instruction,” trans. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978; reprinted, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 85.

⁵Francis of Assisi (c. 1225), “All Creatures of Our God and King,” paraphr. and trans. William H. Draper (1919).

and ultimately to God. Humanity has the capacity not only for social relationships, but also for deep fellowship, which is the sharing of ourselves in self-sacrifice and vulnerability for the benefit of others. This is what is intended in God’s words in Genesis 1:26 and presented in more detail in descriptions of Christian community in the New Testament. People reflect God’s image most fully in the context of the fellowship God intended for humans to share with God and with others.

Honouring God’s creative work does not stop, however, with relating well to other human beings. The conviction that God’s creative work is ongoing changes the Christian’s perspective toward the world itself. Creation is a gift that humans are called to steward, and for which God will hold human beings to account. As a result, humans have a responsibility to use created resources in a manner that respects their divine origin, without willfully destroying, abusing or squandering them. A truly Christian view of creation refuses to worship creation, but does care for creation as a way of worshipping the Creator revealed in Scripture. Christians should demonstrate a healthy degree of environmental concern as an important part of their Christian witness. It is difficult to imagine demonstrating reverent worship of God while showing disrespect for God’s world.

Human investigation in the sciences and other areas of inquiry has given tremendous insight into how the world works. As a result, human beings have benefited from scientific advances. Christians recognize, however, that science cannot answer questions of why things are as they are. Only in Christ do humans find ultimate purpose. At the same time, Christians should not assume that science is at odds with biblical revelation. Because God is over all, all creation bears witness to God’s works. Christians believe that the best of human research into the working of creation should help people use natural resources more wisely, and also help deepen the wonder of all individuals for the Creator God.

Human care for creation mandates that Christians respect the sanctity of the human

life that God has created. People are called by God—and enabled by the Holy Spirit to heed that call—to actively care for all other human beings as created in the image of God, and to place the welfare of others ahead of their own. The model for this is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who not only created all that is (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2), but also surrendered himself so that his creation might ultimately be renewed in him.

Conclusion

God intends creation to live in concord with him, singing praises to God. This call extends not only to humans, but also to creation itself—all of it. Repeatedly, biblical passages speak of nature praising God.

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)

As his creation, humans are called to engage the mission of God in word and deed, in order to live out God’s sovereign plan. God’s work brings life, harmony and reconciliation. Human sin has not only broken humanity’s relationship to God; it has also corrupted the natural order so that God’s saving work entails the restoration of creation to what it was intended to be. The Apostle Paul writes that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). Christians attentive to God’s revealed plan in creation are therefore careful stewards of it, and join God in accomplishing his creative work. Then, as agents of God’s work to restore all people and all things to himself in Jesus Christ, we join the ancient hymn writer who penned,

Let all things their Creator bless,
And worship him in humbleness,
O praise him! Alleluia!⁵

Creation: God’s Revelation in Nature

Identity & Doctrine Series



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Faith and Life

Creation: God's Revelation in Nature

Christians have often reflected on the full significance of the Scripture text, “in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day” (Exodus 20:11 NIV). The question of how God created the universe has never been a settled one, and has sometimes overshadowed more important questions about the purpose of God’s creative work. For example, what can Christians learn about God from creation itself? These important questions merit careful reflection.

What Does Scripture Say? Neither Too Much nor Too Little

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In one short sentence, Genesis 1:1 clearly and concisely summarizes the origin of the world. The Genesis account begins by telling its readers that everything in the universe originates in the God whom Scripture will describe in the unfolding story to come. Scripture also relates that observing creation itself yields insight into what God is like (Romans 1:19-20). God’s imprint is all over the universe that God made. Even more, there are echoes of the Trinity in the creation account. God the Father is the Creator. “Jesus Christ is the Word by which God created the world out of nothing.”¹ The Holy Spirit’s presence brings divine agency, order and life to chaotic and lifeless matter.

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith is succinct in its statement about God and the creation of the world.

We believe that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and

they were very good. All of creation expresses God’s sovereign will and design, but remains distinct from the Creator. The universe belongs to God, who takes care and delight in sustaining it. Creation declares God’s wisdom and power, calling all to worship him.²

This statement is as significant for what it does not say as for what it does say. While many Mennonite Brethren have deeply felt convictions about how God brought the world into being, Mennonite Brethren have not felt a need to specify a particular way of interpreting what the Bible means when it states that God created the heavens and the earth.

The point of the biblical texts that speak of creation is threefold. First, they reveal that the author of creation is the God that the Scriptures describe. Second, the purpose of creation is to bear witness to the work of the Creator. Third, the Scriptures reveal the nature of the relationship between God and creation. These considerations guide Christians’ reflection on the significance of the created order.

God’s Creation and God’s Nature

Many Bible scholars have pointed out that the Genesis account of creation gives a Hebrew poetic description of the reality that God created the heavens and the earth by his word. A detailed scientific explanation of how God’s word brought creation into existence is not in view in the biblical narratives of creation. Rather, as scholars have shown, these narratives contrast markedly with ancient Near Eastern myths about cosmic origins. Unlike the deities in other texts who are depicted as giving birth to the material world, the God of the Bible speaks creation into existence. The Bible reveals a divine presence that is both intimate in its closeness and exalted in its transcendence. God is invisible, yet accessible to those who seek him in a faithful response to his self-revelation. Moreover, although God’s wisdom is revealed in the working of the natural order, the depths of God’s wisdom are beyond the reach of human understanding.

From a Christian perspective, the biblical description of God’s creative work is also necessary for understanding human nature. Christians affirm the clear statement of Genesis that God created the heavens and the earth. As the pinnacle of creation, human beings are the deliberate work of God. Human beings are created in the image of God. Atheistic models of evolutionary origins are incompatible with the biblical witness when they fail to account for human beings bearing the image of God.

In terms of the physical world, the Bible tells that God created matter from nothing, and then ordered the chaotic matter into an ordered reality (Genesis 1:1-2; Romans 4:17; Colossians 1:15-16; Hebrews 11:3). Historically, Christian theologians have interpreted this as meaning creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing.³ This point is important for a number of reasons. First, it reminds us that only God is eternal, and that God’s ordered creation serves his plan. Second, in expressing that God has brought creation to be out of nothing, the biblical authors express the power of the Creator God. Third, Scripture reveals that God is distinct from creation, and sovereignly rules over it.

Creation and God’s Plan for the World

In order to develop a biblical theology of creation, one must understand that creation is not simply the one-time action of God in the past. On the contrary, God’s creative work is an ongoing process that serves God’s unfolding plan of salvation. God created the natural world to give glory to himself, but also to bear witness to him. The ongoing work of God in creation serves God’s plan to have an intimate covenantal relationship with human beings.

In accordance with this plan, God is recreating believers in conformity to Christ in a reconciled relationship with himself, with one another and with creation itself (Isaiah 65:25; Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:14). The relational closeness that God desires to have with humans, and desires humans to have with

one another and creation as a result, is modelled on the intimate community that has always existed among Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian fellowship that is the Godhead.

God created the world at least in part to reflect his being to humanity. Psalm 19:1-2 indicates that the natural order is intended to reveal God’s supernatural character.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.

The natural order is able to reveal God to humans through the work of the Holy Spirit. The created world is both a witness to God’s ongoing work in the world, and also the venue for that saving work. This work is epitomized in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, as a human being who bridged the gap between God and humanity in order to make reconciliation possible. In the words of 16th-century Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck, “The Lord Christ became a natural man for natural man in order that, by the natural, the destruction [i.e., crucifixion] of his nature might be translated again into the supernatural and heavenly nature.”⁴ Creation, God’s work in it and our faithful responses are moving in response to God’s plan of reconciliation.

God’s Creative Work and Our Response

God has set human beings apart within creation and given them responsibility to exercise stewardship over creation. Humans have been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), which brings with it special privileges and responsibilities. God has a special relationship with humanity beyond what exists elsewhere in creation. Humans have the opportunity to have a relationship with God, but also the responsibility to respect all other people because they too bear God’s image. As God’s image-bearers, people are therefore morally accountable to one another,