

AlbertMohler.com

Getting It Right From the Beginning, Part One

"In the beginning," Scripture says, "God created the heavens and the earth." That first biblical affirmation points to the priority of the doctrine of creation within the system of Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, even the doctrine of creation presupposes a biblical notion of God and the authority of his revelation in Scripture. The Christian believer does not acknowledge the creation and then infer a Creator. Indeed, it is not God who must be explained by the creation, but creation which must be explained by the Creator. Today, Dr. Albert Mohler explores the doctrine of creation, and its crucial relationship to the Christian worldview.

Friday, March 24, 2006

"In the beginning," Scripture says, "God created the heavens and the earth." That first biblical affirmation points to the priority of the doctrine of creation within the system of Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, even the doctrine of creation presupposes a biblical notion of God and the authority of his revelation in Scripture. The Christian believer does not acknowledge the creation and then infer a Creator. Indeed, it is not God who must be explained by the creation, but creation which must be explained by the Creator. Thus, the very first verse of the Bible affirms the cosmos as the free creation of the sovereign God of Scripture—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of creation is the attempt of the Christian believer to come to terms with the relationship between God and the world. As such, it gives proper place to the work of God in creation, points to the nature and purpose of the created world, and distinguishes the Christian theistic worldview from all others.

The starting point of the doctrine of creation is the presupposition of the sovereign God of Scripture. Those first words of Scripture indicate that the central character in the creation narratives is God, not the created order. God acts as the divine Subject, creating a dynamic universe as the object of his love and the theater of his glory. This biblical theism is the foundational affirmation of the doctrine of creation. Creation is inseparable from monotheism.

The most common creed in the Christian church begins with the confession, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." The God of the Bible is not needful of anything outside himself. This self-sufficiency or "aseity" of God precludes any need for creation on God's part. Positively, it affirms the fact that God created the world and all within it out of the freedom of his own sovereign will. With this in view, the divine initiative in creation takes on a powerful meaning. Though needing nothing, God willed not to be alone, but to create a world distinct and other than himself, as the result of his own divine pleasure.

This affirmation places the biblical worldview in opposition to all others. The Israelites were surrounded by pre-biblical religions which placed God over against creation, or suggested a number of gods conspiring to create a universe out of existing chaos and matter. The early Christian church found itself confronted by challenges including Gnosticism, Arianism, and Manichaeism, each positing a worldview in which God was variously placed within creation, over against creation as a dualism, or a scheme in which an evil god created the world in order that a beneficent god might redeem it.

The church quickly affirmed what had been assumed in the Old Testament, that God created the universe out of nothing, that is, out of no pre-existing matter. If the church had allowed an acknowledgement of divine creation as the mere fashioning of existing materials, it would have compromised the nature of God and the biblical testimony. No form of dualism is compatible with biblical theism.

The Hebrew verb used to describe the word of God in creation is distinct from that used to describe the work of a human craftsman in fashioning an artifact. Man may fashion out of what God has created, but only God can truly create.

This is the affirmation of creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—without the use of pre-existing materials. The acknowledgement of God’s creation of the world *ex nihilo* must be central to the Christian affirmation of the doctrine of creation. Some contemporary theological movements have rejected this in favor of an understanding which posits God as the fashioner of pre-existing materials. Any such system presupposes a model of God unworthy of biblical theism. No particle existed prior to God’s creative act.

The biblical portrait of the creating God demonstrates a loving God whose character issues naturally in his creation. The loving character of God is woven into the warp and woof of his creation and the creatures within it. The biblical testimony will allow no distinction between the God who creates and the God who redeems. Isaiah pointedly affirms the identity of the creating God as the one with whom Israel must deal (Isaiah 43:15; 45:7; 40:28). Indeed, creation is a Trinitarian event. The prologue to the Gospel of John proclaims the role of the Son as the divine Word of creation through whom all things were made, and “without whom nothing was made that was made,” (John 1:1-5). In like manner, Paul reminded the Colossians that “all things were created through him and for him,” (Colossians 1:15-17). The creating God is thus both Author and Finisher. The God who created the universe as an exercise of his own glory is the very same God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, which is the living empowerment of the church, was also manifest in creation.

The means of God’s creative activity is not detailed in the biblical creation narratives (Genesis 1-2). The substance of the biblical teaching is God’s creation of the universe and all within it by the power of his Word. The biblical language affirms the creation of the world by divine fiat. That is, by the force of his sovereign will God spoke, light appeared, the firmament was made and the waters separated, the seas were created and dry land appeared, and the whole of God’s creation was accomplished.

The product of God’s creative activity is a universe of seemingly infinite variety, complexity, and mystery. The Genesis creation narratives describe the creation of the world from the most rudimentary distinction between the waters and the dry land, to the pinnacle of creation, man and woman. Genesis 1 moves from the emergence of light through the emergence of dry land, the blossoming of vegetation and the creative abundance of living creatures, to the creation of man and woman.

Of central importance to the interpretation of these verses is the recognition of God’s verdict upon his creation. The pristine energy of light, the dryness of land, the swarms of living creatures, the multiplying birds and fishes are all declared “good” in God’s sight. This critical judgment is an intrinsic part of the biblical worldview. The created order has meaning and value solely because it is the glorious creation of the Lord of the universe. The creation has no inherent meaning within itself. Rather, it is dependent upon the Creator for both preservation and value. Nevertheless, the biblical affirmation is an unqualified judgment of *goodness* as God’s verdict on creation.

Challenges old and new have been raised against this verdict. Gnosticism thought matter to be evil and only mind to be good. Contemporary religious movements, including the eclectic Christian Science movement, have gone so far as to deny the reality of matter. The biblical affirmation is quite to the contrary. Against materialism, the Christian worldview understands matter to have no value in and of itself. But biblical theism affirms the world as the theater of God’s glory. It is creation which is made meaningful by the Creator, not the Creator who derives meaning from the creation.

It is the divine creation of humankind which forms the climax of the biblical creation narratives. The biblical teachings concerning the creation of humans point to the special character of humanity as made in the very image of God. Man, contrary to the claims of secularism, is not the accidental by-product of natural occurrences. Though Scripture does not indicate any scientific means for the creation of man and woman (nor for any other dimension of creation), it makes clear the identity of humanity as a special creation of God by the power of his word and will. Thus, humanity is granted a value inconsistent with a secularist worldview.

Within the scheme of the created order, humanity plays a strategic part. Two biblical themes form the basis for this special role. The first is that of dominion. Humanity, made in the image of God, is to possess and exercise dominion over the remainder of creation. This dominion, or rulership, is exercised by humans in the manipulation of creation to bring about harvest, bounty, energy, and beauty. It is seen in the planting and reaping of crops, the herding of animals, the harnessing of rivers, and the construction of shelter.

This dominion theme must be balanced with the other major theme of humanity’s responsibility within creation. By

God's mandate, humans must exercise their dominion with an understanding of mutuality and responsibility. The biblical notion of dominion is not seen in the rape of the land, but in the careful stewardship of natural resources and the other creatures which share this planet. As the pinnacle of God's creative activity, humans stand responsible for their stewardship of fellow creatures and the earth. Indeed, a helpful corrective which has emerged in contemporary theology is the recognition that the cosmos is neither "mere nature" nor "our world," but is most properly "God's creation." Humans are granted a high degree of delegated agency within God's creation, but it remains fundamentally God's alone. This affirmation underlines the tremendous charge of stewardship to humankind by the Creator.

Creation is not a brute fact without meaning. It derives its meaning from the divine character and will. As the theater of God's redemptive activity, creation is not static, but is moving toward the goal established by the Creator before the foundation of the universe. Creation, like the humans within it, has a future.

Paul describes the creation as in need of redemption from the bondage of decay and travail—the results of the entry of sin into the created order (Romans 8:19-23). The Old Testament speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, which is the eventual purpose of God in reconciliation (Isaiah 66:22). Paul spoke of the dramatic transformation of the believer as a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). The writer of the Apocalypse recorded a vision of a new heaven and a new earth even as the Creator spoke: "Behold, I make all things new," (Revelation 12:1-8). The essential meaning of these affirmations is that God controls the destiny of the universe he created. The cosmos does not exist alongside God as a reality out of control. Rather, it exists as the theater of his redemptive activity, the reach of which includes the entire cosmos.

Thus, the Christian doctrine of creation is directly connected to the doctrine of redemption. For this reason, a failure to affirm the biblical doctrine of creation leads to inevitable compromise on the doctrine of redemption. In reality, we simply cannot minimize the importance of this doctrine, nor can we surrender biblical truth in the face of modern denials. We must get it right from the beginning.

