

More Theology for Presbyterians

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Creation for Presbyterians

Scripture

Genesis 1 The creation of the heavens, the earth, and all things, including humans

Psalms 19 A psalm acknowledging God as creator of all

Prayer

O God our Creator, you have created all things—including us. We thank you. We praise your creative power that called forth the universe and all its wonders. We thank you for giving us this good earth with all its bounties. We bless your name for creating all people, each of us different, yet all living by your Spirit who has given us life. May we see this earth as given to us in trust, and to be enjoyed for your glory. Make us responsible stewards of your good creation. In the name of Jesus, the firstborn of all creation. Amen.

Introduction

The Bible begins with an astonishing declaration! God “created the heavens and the earth” “in the beginning” (Genesis 1:1). Right away, we are introduced to the supreme power behind all that exists. Nothing finds its way into being without owing its origin to God. This is the One of whom the psalmist wrote: “May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion” (Psalm 134:3; cf. 121:2).

God is eternal. God was in the beginning—whenever that was! God’s creative activity marks God as the One who has initiated all things and the One who stands supreme, over and beyond the created order. It is staggering to conceive the great and glorious God who is creator of all. With God, we are in the presence of the One to whom all things—and all people—owe their origins. God existed even before the creation. The psalmist wrote: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Psalm 90:2).

Theologically, our Christian confession that God is Creator has many meanings and implications. We will explore some of these. Primary for us as Reformed and Presbyterian Christians is that God as creator is Lord of all. There is one God, one Lord. Scriptural

affirmations of God as the Lord point us to the sovereignty of God. God has called all things into being and is “the sole, unique, and absolute cause of all that exists” (Genesis 1:2–3; Psalm 33:6; 148:5).¹ God’s will is the ultimate source and ground of all things; “from [God] and through him and to him are all things” (Romans 11:36).

When we say in the Apostles’ Creed that we believe in “God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” we confess our faith in the triune God: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All acts of God are acts of the whole Trinity. So God the Creator means that the three persons of the Godhead participate in God’s creative acts. All do so, fully and equally. It is “God who created all things” (Ephesians 3:9).

Creation and Science

In the past, there have been struggles between science and religion. Many of the struggles have focused on the creation of the earth and humans. Sometimes the Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories have been read as providing an account of *how* creation occurred. Read in this manner, difficulties have emerged. Are the six days of creation in Genesis 1 intended to be literal, twenty-four-hour days? Were all things created instantaneously? If so, what about the theory of evolution? What happens if there are conflicts between the Bible and science?

These questions have to do with how we understand the kind of book the Bible is and how the Bible is to be interpreted.

Here we affirm what the Bible is and what science is. “Science” is an attempt to offer systematic knowledge of the physical or material world. This comes through observation and experimentation, as when we do a chemistry experiment. Science takes place in the human sphere and is limited by what finite humans can do. Science tries to explain and make sense of the world around us. Science deals with the how of things.

Christian faith, however, is based on the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. These biblical accounts were written by people of faith. They believed in the God revealed in Scriptures who called the people of Israel and later the Christian church to be witnesses to what God has done in human history. The psalmist said, “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long” (Psalm 71:15). People of faith give thanks and tell of God’s

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, abr. vol., ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 263.

wonderful deeds (Psalm 9:1). Their confession is theological because they are witnessing to God, the One to whom theology looks. This is the great, eternal God, who has acted in human history and who, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth and all things. God did this by a free act of God's will. As the sovereign Lord of the universe, God stands over and beyond all creation, including humans. The Bible tells who this God is, what God has done, and what God wants humans to be and do. The Bible tells us of divine purposes, the "why" about our world.

When we keep these two perspectives straight, there is no conflict between the biblical confession of God as creator and the approach of science. Science can never tell us about ultimate origins because it can deal only with what limited humans can experiment with and observe—the "how." Our Christian faith focuses on the "why"—what we believe that God, who is beyond human observation and experimentation, has said and done.

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Science can uncover explanations within the human realm; faith takes us beyond the human into the reality of God. The early chapters of Genesis, written in faith, are intended to provide a theological, not a scientific, explanation of creation. They point to the One who originated all things, God the creator. Science can pose that humans emerged through evolution. This is a "how" theory. It does not need to contradict our affirmation of "why": God has created according to God's will.

Out of Nothing

One of the essential notes of belief in God the Creator is that God created all things *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. John Calvin put it simply: "God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing."² This establishes God's creative power to bring forth all things, by the work of God's Word and Spirit. In Genesis 1 we

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.14.20.

find the Spirit of God (NRSV: “a wind from God”; the Hebrew term *ruah* means both “spirit” and “wind”) sweeping over the formless void while creation occurs when God speaks (Genesis 1:1–5).

Theologian Langdon Gilkey helpfully points to three main concepts associated with God’s creation out of nothing. He defines *creation ex nihilo* as meaning that “God brought the finite world into being out of nothing through a ‘purposive’ act of His free will.”³

God is the source of all that there is. All things originate from God. Early Christian theologians rejected the idea that God used some already-present matter with which to create. To say that something other than God was present when God created would be to present a dualism—saying that there are two powers in the universe: God and another god. Instead, God is the sovereign Lord of all. There are not multiple sources of existence—only one: God. God did not simply organize existence; God created all that exists.

Creatures are dependent, yet real and good. The opposite of dualism is monism, the view that there is only one reality (God) and that everything created is made out of God. Pantheism is the view that all is God; and God is all. The church rejects this view since there is a basic distinction between God and the creation. What God created, *ex nihilo*, is separate from God, even as it is dependent on God. Creaturely existence is real in itself. We, as humans, are not the same as God—we are distinct from God. Our existence is real and good since God made us. We depend on God for our existence and our whole life. We rebel against God in our sin. God forgives our sin by grace in Jesus Christ. We are real creatures, created by God out of nothing, and thus have worth and value due to God’s will and power.

God creates freely and with purpose. Creation as solely God’s act means that God in freedom willed to create all things. All things exist because of the will and purposes of God. All things serve God’s will and purposes. God created out of divine love, which is God’s nature (1 John 4:8, 16). The divine purpose of love is at the core of creation because God created all things out of nothing. No wonder Genesis says, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). As part of the good creation, humans are created to live in the relationships God intends.

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3. Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge*, rpt. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 43. Our continuing discussion here reflects Gilkey’s thought, pp. 43–80.

What Creation Means for Us

These theological concepts have practical implications for us as Presbyterian Christians.

Dazzling Theater. The psalmist proclaimed: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). From the perspective of faith, this writer saw God’s glory all around in the natural world. Calvin called the heavens and earth a dazzling theater.⁴ Without faith, we would not recognize the creation as the work of God. Natural theology contends that one can come to the belief that a God exists by viewing nature and reasoning that it must have a cause. Reformed theology has taught that God is, indeed, revealed in nature. We can recognize this natural revelation of God, only after we have already come to believe in God’s special revelation—specifically in Jesus Christ. We know who to thank for creation! Therefore, we can glorify God for the magnificence of the creation—this dazzling theater. Wherever we are, we praise God the creator!

Meaning for Life. God creates humans, in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–28). God creates us to have a relationship of love and trust with the One who gives us the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Our life is good and purposeful because it is the gift of God. We live because God gives us life. We are intended to live in obedience to God, in love for God, and as those who “do everything for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Realizing God is our creator means we will never be separated from God’s creative, loving power (Romans 8:39). Even more, in Jesus Christ, God’s supreme revelation, we see *how to live* in praise, thanks, and service to our creator. Our good lives with God and others have meaning because they are God’s gift. In the embrace of grace, we can carry out God’s will and loving purposes.

Responsibility. We are created not to serve our own purposes, but God’s purposes for us. One purpose is surely to take responsibility for the creation God has given. We are to be good stewards of the good earth. Care for the earth is a Christian responsibility for carrying out God’s purposes.

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4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.8. In other places Calvin calls the creation a “most glorious theater” (1.6.2); “this most beautiful theater” (1.14.20); “this magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles” (2.6.1). Further references could also be cited.

We know God's purposes most fully in Jesus Christ. As Gilkey put it: "It is in Jesus Christ that the purpose of God in creation is revealed to us, and so it is in Him alone that we can discover God's will for our attitudes and our behavior."⁵ The clue to what creation means is to look to Jesus Christ and follow the directions he sets for our lives. Our responsibilities as God's creatures are to live in faith and obedience to our creator. This is the kind of life we see in Jesus Christ. Like him, we can live the command "Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything [in all creation!] together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14).

Spiritual Practice

Find a spot where you can contemplate God's creation and think about what it means that God is the creator of all things. Ask yourself if there are ways you can express your gratitude to God for the creation and for creating your life. Ask yourself in what ways you are carrying out your responsibility to the Creator and the creation.

Questions for Reflection

Consider your views about the relationship of science and faith. In what ways can science be beneficial to faith, and vice versa? In what ways can you help others as they reflect on their views of science and faith?

What are the spiritual benefits of confessing God as the creator of all things? That God has created all things out of nothing? In what ways can these theological insights affect your life?

Contemplate the practical implications of confessing God as Creator. What responsibilities do you feel this places on the church? On you as a Christian? What elements do you see as important for the stewardship of creation?

5. Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, 275.