

More Theology for Presbyterians

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Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Creation for Presbyterians

Scripture

Genesis 1; Psalm 19

Main Idea

Confessing God as Creator is an anchor in Christian faith.
Confessing God as Lord and sovereign is a most basic affirmation.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. Distinctions in the “how” and “why” of creation.
2. The “dazzling theater” of creation as motivation for praise.
3. Care for the environment as an expression of Christian stewardship.

Resources Needed

Bibles
Participant’s books
Hymnals

Leader Prep

This session is meant to introduce theological concepts related to the doctrine of creation and to open some directions about what it means to confess God as Creator. An overview is suggested in the introduction. Confessing God as Creator is an “anchor” in Christian faith. Confessing God as “Lord” and “sovereign” is a most basic affirmation. Some discussion of these concepts as foundational can be helpful.

In Gather, have an informal hymn sing. Using the topical index in the hymnal, select and sing a hymn of creation.

In Head, introduce the issue of creation and science. Some group members may struggle with this in relation to the theory of evolution or “creationism,” especially if they have come from conservative or fundamentalist backgrounds. An orientation of the “how” and “why” provinces of science and theology is a helpful way to deal with these intellectual issues. This inevitably opens up issues of the nature of the Bible and its appropriate interpretation. Your group may not find this to be an issue and will readily accept the different focuses of science and religion. If so, then discussion of the importance of “creation out of nothing” can be a fruitful one, to recognize God’s sovereignty and creative power. You might do some extra reading on the meanings of “dualism,” “monism,” and “pantheism” and why the church has rejected them.

In Heart, focus on what creation means to us in terms of the praise of God for the “dazzling theater” around us in the created order. Introduce the meaning for life that comes from recognizing that our lives are created to love and obey God. Provide opportunities for discussing that the “earth is the Lord’s” and that our lives have purpose and meaning as they are grounded in God’s creative acts. Finally, explore the thought that Jesus Christ is the clue to “meaning” for us.

In Hands, explore Christian stewardship of creation. The theological point is that care for the environment is an important Christian responsibility since creation is God’s gift to us—who are created by God.

Leading the Session

Gather

- It is always important to check in on the lives of your group members. If you have not been together before, let group members introduce themselves. Are there joys or concerns, or new people to welcome?
- After listening to joys and concerns, pray the prayer in the participant's book.
- Sing a hymn of creation, such as "For the Beauty of the Earth" or "Earth and All Stars."
- Lead the group in a review of the introduction (participant's book, pp. 5–6). Invite the group to summarize Dr. McKim's views about confessing God as Creator, Lord, and sovereign.

Head

- Ask a volunteer or volunteers to read Genesis 1:1—2:4a, the first creation story recorded in the Bible. Before the reading, point out the form of the passage—the seven-day pattern with a recurring phrase, "And there was evening and there was morning, the (first, second, etc.) day."
- Ask group members to name their thoughts and feelings when they read/hear Genesis 1.
- Introduce the sometimes controversial issue of creation and science. Ask the group if any have struggled with what Dr. McKim calls the "how" and "why" questions of creation. Review the section "Creation and Science."
- Ask: *In what way is Dr. McKim's perspective on science and theology helpful in dealing with issues related to creation? How does Dr. McKim's perspective on the nature of the Bible and its appropriate interpretation for Reformed and Presbyterian Christians help address how to read the creation story?*
- Dr. McKim writes: "One of the essential notes of belief in God the Creator is that God created all things *ex nihilo*, out of nothing." Invite the group members to say why this is an essential belief for us.

- “Creation out of nothing” helps us recognize and acknowledge God’s sovereignty and creative power. Ask: *Why has the church rejected “dualism,” “monism,” and “pantheism”?* *What do you think would be different in the church/the world/your life if the church had accepted any of these false teachings?*

Heart

- Dr. McKim cites John Calvin’s description of creation as a “dazzling theater” around us. Have volunteers read Psalm 19 while the group follows along in their Bibles. Invite the participants to point out aspects of the psalm that reflect the creation as a “dazzling theater.”
- Dr. McKim writes: “Our life is good and purposeful because it is the gift of God.” Ask: *What meaning is given to your life from recognizing that it is a gift from God? That you are created to love and obey God?*
- Discuss the significance of believing that the “earth is the Lord’s.” Ask: *Do you find personal purpose and meaning knowing that you are one of God’s creative acts? That every other person in the world is one of God’s creative acts?*
- Dr. McKim writes: “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.” Ask: *How is Jesus Christ the clue to “meaning” for us creatures of God?*

Hands

- Dr. McKim writes, “Care for the earth is a Christian responsibility for carrying out God’s purposes.”
- Invite the group members to name ways we live out our responsibility for creation, such as recycling, gardening, and advocating for endangered species. Discuss ways the group could actively express the care of creation as an act of gratitude for God’s gift to us.
- Plan a project to engage in care of creation, such as a neighborhood cleanup. Identify a neighborhood park or sidewalk and keep it clean of trash and debris. If people ask you why you’re caring for the park or sidewalk, tell them it is an act of gratitude to God for the gift of creation.

Depart

- Lead a closing prayer based on an excerpt from the *Book of Order*:

Leader: As stewards of God's creation who hold the earth in trust, the people of God are called:

- to use the earth's resources responsibly without plundering, polluting, or destroying . . . (*invite participants to respond with personal prayers*);
- to develop technological methods and processes that work together with the earth's environment to preserve and enhance life . . . (*invite participants to respond with personal prayers*);
- to produce and consume in ways that make available to all people what is sufficient for life . . . (*invite participants to respond with personal prayers*);
- to work for responsible attitudes and practices in procreation and reproduction . . . (*invite participants to respond with personal prayers*);
- to use and shape earth's goods to create beauty, order, health, and peace in ways that reflect God's love for all creatures . . . (*invite participants to respond with personal prayers*).

Leader: In gratitude for the gifts of creation, we pray.

People: Amen.¹

1. *Book of Order*, Part II of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), W-7.5003. Reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

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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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Our Christian faith focuses on the "why"—what we believe that God, who is beyond human observation and experimentation, has said and done.

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.

The divine purpose of love is at the core of creation because God created all things out of nothing.

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.

*In Jesus Christ, God’s
supreme revelation, we see
how to live in praise, thanks,
and service to our creator.*

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.