

*The Whole Counsel of God*  
**Study 3**

**GOD IN RELATION TO THE WORLD:  
THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION**

(G. T. Tabert)

***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”***

***(Gen 1.1)***

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him,  
and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.***

***(Jn 1.1-3)***

The first expression used in the Bible for creation looks at creation from the point of view of time—in the beginning. The word, beginning, does not simply refer to the first event in the past. Rather, it refers to that which is at the head of all subsequent history. It refers to the start for all that follows. This presses an important point for our study of the biblical doctrine of creation. Creation is not simply about what happened in the distant past. It is about how the world was set up as the stage on which God works out his relationship with mankind. How the world was created determines its permanent structure and function. The doctrine of creation, therefore, presents the foundational truths on which all other truths are built. In our study, we will keep this in mind. Each aspect of creation, which the Bible presents, is a structural element for our faith and life. In studying the doctrine of creation, we are considering the way the world is set up and the nature of its relationship with God the creator.

**The two views of the beginning**

The Bible takes us back to the beginning at two levels and makes us see creation from two vantage points. The first view is presented in Genesis 1. Here we see the divine work of creation from within the creation. Creation has two sides to it, time and space. The Bible first takes up the time dimension, and takes us back to the beginning of all time. Here we must take note of what Gen 1.1 does and does not do. It takes us to the beginning of time but it does not take us to what is before time. The human mind understands that if God created in the beginning, he was there before the beginning as its cause, but the revelation of Genesis 1 does not let us see God prior to that beginning. The creation account only lets us see God in the act of creating and as he relates to the world in bringing it into being. This vision of God is relative. We do not see God in himself but only in relation to the world. We only have him revealed as creator in his relation to the creation.

In the person of Christ, we are given another view of God and creation. This time we see God prior to creation as he is related in himself eternally and as he moves out from within his eternal relationship to create and establish his relation to the world. John 1.1-3, cited above, gives us this view. John’s first words, “In the beginning,” tie into the opening phrase of the Bible. But, John does not follow Gen 1.1 and trace God’s works from this beginning. Rather, he lifts the eyes of faith to see behind the beginning to get a view of God’s eternal existence. He signals this with the verb, *was*. John points to what *was* in the beginning: the Word *was* with God and *was* God. Notice, the Word is not seen in vv 1 and 2 in his function between God and the world. This is first presented in v 3 where the work of creation is introduced. In vv 1 and 2 John presents the Word in relation to God, and this is the first and eternal relationship. From the point of view of God’s eternal relationship within himself, we are given to see how God relates out of himself to the world.

In Rev 3.14 the Lord Jesus Christ takes up the word, *the beginning*, and moves it behind the temporal beginning of Gen 1.1 and Jn 1.1. He calls himself “the Beginning of the creation of God.” This is parallel to

Paul's statement in Col 1.18 that Jesus is the beginning. He is the origin and source of the first creation (Rev 3.14) and of the new creation (Col 1.18). In his person, he is the beginning of the beginning in Gen 1.1. The Son of God is the eternal beginning, the source, behind the temporal beginning from which all that occurs in time moves out.

The difference in perspective that we have noticed between Gen 1.1 and Jn 1.1 marks the difference between the Old and New Testaments. The reference point for the OT is creation. In Genesis we see God moving out from his work of creating. The reference point for what God does in Christ (i.e., the NT revelation) is "before the world was" (Jn 17.5) and "before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17.24; Eph 1.3; 1Pt 1.20; Rev 13.18). In the Son of God, God is revealed as he is in himself prior to his relationship with creation and mankind, and in this revelation we are given to know the purpose of God that is formed in his own eternal being rather than what is based on his relationship with us as the creator to the creature.

Each of the two views of creation is important for faith and for our understanding of creation. The first view, set in Genesis 1, gives us what we call a *worldview*. A worldview is a view of the world as a whole from our human point of view within the world. We find ourselves within the world looking up, and at first we grasp the reality and truth of God in his relation to and role in the world. At this level, our understanding of God is tied up with our being in the world and our understanding of the world as God's creation.

The view that we receive of creation through the person of Christ is not a worldview. It is not a view of the world from a point of view within the world. Instead, it is a God-view. In Christ God is revealed as he is outside of world and prior to the creation. The Son of God being fully God shows us what God is from the point of view of God rather than what he is seen to be from the point of view of the creature. This full revelation of God opens up to us a view of creation from above creation.

A complete doctrine of creation must present the truths opened up by the two perspectives on the beginning. The first perspective from within creation shows us how we are to see all that is in our world within our relationship with God as the creator. Here the alignment of faith is set. But, the knowledge we gain from within creation is incomplete. The knowledge of God as creator leaves us with only a relative knowledge of God, and it does not offer the solution to the problem of sin and the world's alienation from God. The full revelation of God and the solution to the problems of sin and of the separation of the creature from God are given in Christ. This full revelation of God offers a total view of God's relationship with creation. The first perspective gives us the doctrine on the details of God's relationship with the world, and the second gives the final and comprehensive doctrine of creation.

We will follow the order of revelation in the Bible, and begin with the first view of creation set in Genesis.

## **A. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND CREATION**

The OT set the main issue between the nations and God as the problem of idolatry and this theme is taken up in the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 17). The concerns are the glory of God as the creator in contrast to the nature of the creature and how man conceives of and relates to the divine being. This set of concerns points to the first truth in the doctrine of creation.

The concern with God's position and nature apart from all creatures is sounded in the first two of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..." (Ex 20.3-5). Isaiah pressed the same issue with his questions, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?" (Ish 40.18). Paul proclaimed to the Gentiles, "...we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man" (Acts 17.29). He put the charge against the nations this way: they "exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom 1.23).

Heaven's message in response to the world's final act of idolatry in worshipping the image of the beast is the proclamation of an eternal gospel "to those who live on the earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people;" and this gospel says, "Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and seas and springs of water" (Rev 14.6-7). This message is an eternal gospel for it is the one message that has ever resounded from heaven to earth. As the Psalmist declared, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of his hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world" (Ps 19.1-4). Paul points to the fact that this declaration of the divine glory spans all time when he says, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen...so that they are without excuse" (Rom 1.20).

The great concern of the scriptures, of the Law, the prophets, the Psalms and the gospel make us hear where the accent falls in the first line of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The heavens and the earth are not described in this line. What is declared is the glory of God—he is the creator of all so that all else is simply his creation. This was a powerful declaration in the ancient world dominated by the idea that the forces of nature and the heavenly lights (sun, moon and stars) were gods. The first part of the doctrine of creation is the glory of the creator.

## **1. Proclaiming the divine nature**

The attributes of the creator define the Godhead or the divine nature (Rom 1.20). When preaching to the Athenians, Paul announced his subject as follows: "Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17.23). By the word, *what*, Paul referred to the divine nature (see v 29). The problem of the Gentiles was that they worshipped the divine nature (of which they were aware) in ignorance of the truth of that nature. To correct this, Paul defined the divine nature as the nature of the creator. This makes an important point for our study. Creation defines to all what the divine nature is, and the good news of Jesus Christ takes this up.

### **a. The divine nature and the relationship between God and mankind**

The ignorance of the Gentiles which Paul addresses in Acts 17.22-31 is not a total lack of the correct notion of God. Paul quoted one of their own poets as expressing a correct idea about the deity's relation to mankind (v 28). The ignorance was in their worship or in the way they related to the deity. They related to the divine nature as if it was a creaturely nature. To know God in the Bible is not the same as to have a correct notion about him. Rather to know God is to relate to him in a way that is true to what it means for God to be God, and this is where the human race is chronically ignorant and errant.

Paul points out three truths about the creator, taken from the OT, which the Gentiles contradicted in the way they worshipped deity. The first is that God "made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth" (v 24). This truth is brought against the idea that God dwells in temples made by human hands. Solomon pressed this point in his dedication of the temple (1Kings 8.27). The temple was not to be regarded as the place where God dwells. Isaiah presses the same point against the Jews' idea of building a temple for God (Isa 66.1-2). Stephen raised it in his message convicting the Jews of stubborn resistance to God (Acts 7.49-51). God the creator cannot be localized and given a creaturely dwelling.

The second point Paul makes about the creator is that God "gives to all people life and breath and all things" (v 25). This precludes the notion that God is to be served by human hands as if he needed anything. God as creator is ever giving and providing for our needs. He is never in a position of dependence on the services of his creatures. Psalm 50 presses this point against Israel, the people who are bound to God by covenant. People cannot worship God by supplying him. Rather they are to glorify God by calling on him in their need and letting him deliver them. In this way they honour him (Ps 50.15). To offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving is to honour God (v 23).

The third point that Paul presses is God's relationship with all of mankind (vv 26-29). This is the main point of Paul's message for it addresses the failure of the nations. They failed to relate to God within the relationship into which God placed all people. God is the creator of all people and the Lord over history who determines the times (history) and places of all nations. He has laid on all people the burden to seek him. People are to find God in his nearness to each person, and this is established in the kinship between God and mankind (Acts 17.27-28). This relationship is one of offspring. Paul uses the Greek word *genos* which means kind or offspring, and this term refers to the fact that man has been given a nature that is derived from God and so is made for a fellowship with God. This answers to the image of God in Gen 1.26-27. The balance of the relationship is to be carefully heeded. Man is God's offspring, and this means that man is not to think that the divine nature is like a material image formed by the art and thought of man. Man as the image of God is to find God in his created kinship with God, and he is not to set up the contact point in an image that he makes of God.

In addressing the human contact with God, Paul is working with themes developed in the OT. The polemic against making images is found in Ish 40.18-20 and 46.5-7 along with other passages. The OT makes it clear that God made man in his image and according to his likeness, but man is not to make an image of God. This points to a major theme that runs through the OT. Mankind strayed from its relationship with God, and God re-established and fixed this relationship with his covenants. In these covenants man is to respond to and reflect God. God is to be worshipped within such a spiritual relationship rather than in a physical form created and set up by human beings.

#### **b. The divine nature and the good news**

Paul's objective in his rehearsal of the truth of the creator is to explain his proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17.18), which the Athenians understood in terms of their polytheism as the message of two gods, a male god named Jesus and his consort named Resurrection (a feminine noun in Greek). Paul had to place Jesus and the resurrection in the context of monotheism and that means in the framework of the biblical doctrine of creation. He set up this framework in vv 24-30, which we have reviewed. Then in vv 30-31 he explains the good news in terms of the themes that define what it means for God to be God as the creator. We will now point out the way the gospel ties into the themes of the glory of the creator to see how the truth of God in Christ is anchored in the doctrine of creation.

The first thread Paul takes up is the theme of God's government over history, determining the times and habitations of all peoples that all should seek him (vv 26-29). As the sovereign over history, God overlooked the former times of ignorance and arrests all in the historical "now" of v 30 in view of the fact that he has fixed the day of the judgment of world (vv 30-31a). Calling *all men in every place* to repent, God is acting in a way that is true to his place as creator who gives life to *all* (v 25) and as the maker of *all nations* wherever their boundaries happen to be (v 26). In judging the world, God will act in his capacity of the Lord of the earth (v 24).

The fact that God relates to the world in a Man, Jesus, answers to the theme that the contact between God and the world must be found in mankind's kinship with God (v 28). In that man, Jesus, the righteousness by which God will judge the world is established. Righteousness is the act of carrying out the right relationship between God and the world that has sinned against him. This right relationship is established in the resurrection of Jesus. The theme of resurrection answers to the theme of God being the one who gives life to all (v 25). In the face of universal separation from God and death, this attribute of the creator is manifested in God becoming the source of resurrection life through the man who carries out the relationship between God and the world.

#### **c. The themes that cover the whole doctrine of creation**

Paul's gospel message provides a grid for our study of the doctrine of creation. The first major theme is the glory of the creator and the work of creation. This theme leads over to a second one: the ongoing work of God in governing his creation in human history. The third theme is the divine-human relationship set up in

creation, which is fulfilled in our relationship with God through Christ. We will use these three themes as the reference points for our study of the doctrine of creation.

Paul's gospel message connects the two roles of God as creator and redeemer. His connection is well established in the OT, especially by Isaiah. This prophet points to creation for the vision of the sovereignty and omnipotence of God, and then uses these divine attributes to present God's work within history as the redeemer (Ish 40.12-31; 44.24; 48.12-19; 54.5). The connection between God as creator and redeemer is worked out in many Psalms (eg., Psalms 90 and 93) and underlies the whole Bible. The person and work of Christ is presented in the same pattern in Jn 1.1-18, Col 1.15-23 and Heb 1.1-4. Creation defines the Godhead or divine nature, and the divine attributes are displayed in God's work as redeemer. This makes the doctrine of creation the foundation of our understanding of redemption. We will keep this in mind in our study.

We noticed that Paul took the truths of the creator that he brought against pagan idolatry from the OT. The sin of the human race is the chronic failure to relate to God in his glory as the creator and to set up an object of worship that shares a creaturely nature with mankind. This problem is grossly and openly displayed in raw paganism, but it is not limited to pagans. The OT scriptures point out that the wrong way of aligning to God was also threatened to take over the Jews' monotheistic worship. The first and persistent challenge for all people is to relate to God in his glory as the creator in contrast to the creation. The fact that we by faith have full and direct contact with God through the risen Lord should forever remove any need for a physical point of contact set up by human effort. The hour has come in which we worship God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4.23-24), but alas Christians have shown a chronic tendency to revert to relating to God in the material nature and realm (Gal 4.1-11; Col 2.16-3.4). Listen to Paul's rebuke to the Galatian Christians, "However, at the time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" (Gal 4.8-9). The Galatians were not turning back to explicit idolatry, but they were reverting to relating to the divine in a way that went against the true knowledge of God as made known in the gospel. There was a vital link between their legalism and the old idolatry. Christians find themselves struggling to maintain the right orientation to God in his glory as presented in the biblical doctrine of creation.

Creation has proven to be an arena for the discipline of faith: from within the physical creation we must relate to God in a spiritual rather than a physical relationship. We relate to him in his nature in contrast to creation, and in the way we act in the physical world we must be governed by this God rather than by the impact of the visible world upon us. We will bring each theme of the doctrine of creation into this arena of spiritual discipline.

## **2. The foundation for our knowledge of God set in creation**

Paul expounds his gospel in Romans, and again he begins with creation. Through creation the knowledge of the creator is made available to all (Rom 1.19-20). What is made evident to all is the invisible attributes of the creator, that is, his eternal power and divine nature (v 20).

### **a. The knowledge about God given through creation (Rom 1.20)**

The first thing that creation does is to set the structure of our knowledge of God. Paul opens this up in Rom 1.20 as follows, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

The key to understanding what Paul is saying lies in the paradox he presents. He says that "the invisible attributes...have been clearly seen." How do we see the invisible? Paul gives the answer. They are seen "being understood through what has been made." With the eye we see the visible things that God made, but the attributes of the creator are not seen by the physical eye. What the eye does not see, the mind sees. The eyes see the things that appear in our vision: the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the animals, etc. But,

seeing with the eye is only receiving information into our minds, and the mind only grasps what we see by arriving at an understanding of them. We often go through the experience of this twofold seeing. Our eye sees something while the mind does not recognize or understand it. It is strange or weird to us. Then, we observe the thing more closely, analysing it with the mind until we see it. Through the mind we are penetrating to see what the eye does not see. In this discipline of observing, we are engaging with the world at two levels, the visible and the invisible reality that makes what we see what it is.

Paul points out that the mind looks at things as having been made. He says that the invisible attributes “have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.” Here Paul touches on the nature of all rational understanding of the things that we see. We understand and explain a thing in our world by translating what we see into terms of how it came about and how it is logically built up. In this mental grasp of what we see, the mind sees everything as having been made, and through this the mind sees the attributes that define the creator: the attributes of eternal power and divine nature. It is important to notice that Paul does not say that the mind’s eye sees God but that it sees the invisible attributes of the creator. What Paul is saying can be verified. No person has seen God, and God is unlike anything we can see. Yet, wherever we go in the world, when we talk about the creator all know what we are talking about. Whether people believe in God or not, their mind does see the attributes of the creator. All people must labour under the burden of the perception of the essential attributes of the creator pressed on their minds.

Atheists and agnostics have argued that the more science succeeds in gaining a rational understanding of the universe, the more belief in God is refuted. The assumption in this is that God is only needed to account for what does not make sense to us. This assumption totally misses the point. The mind recognizes the attributes of God through the logic of understanding creation. The more we see that the universe can be rationally understood, the more the conviction is verified that the universe is rationally structured. The success of science shows that the visible world must be understood from the invisible reality that the mind alone sees. While the eye looks at things, appearances, the mind engages with the reality of the creator of all things. We will later return to this theme.

#### **b. The discipline of knowledge**

The perception of the attributes of the creator does not leave us with a lofty idea. It makes us aware of our relationship with the creator and imposes on us a relational obligation toward God. The knowledge of God calls us to glorify God as God and to give thanks (v 21). To glorify God as God is to ascribe to him as the creator the divine glory of being the invisible eternal power in contrast to the visible creation. To give thanks is to receive all that we have as from God. Through this worship, we do not relate to the things we see, but through the visible creation we relate to God. By acknowledging God in his glory, we relate to the incorruptible God, and in this relationship God will give us glory, the freedom from corruption in immortality and eternal life (Rom 2.7).

When people neglect to ascribe to God the glory of the creator and to give thanks, they become futile in their speculations (Rom 1.21). What the eye sees still must be understood, but now the meaning of things is turned out of people’s own imaginations and thoughts. They no longer see things as created by the one God and go about making up what things are. People’s foolish hearts (in which the thoughts and motives of life are formed) are darkened (v 21), and they profess themselves to be wise (v 22). Here lies the new source of “truth” for them: it is in their own hearts that they set themselves up to be the source of truth. They define the truth from within themselves, rather than seeing all in light of the creator. From this changed point of view, people relate only to what their eyes see, the physical world, and define their truth by their own impressions and thoughts. The result is that they see the divine nature, of which they still are aware, as having the corruptible nature of the creature. Then they take their own identity and the way they live from the corruptible nature they have deified, and so they are given over to self-degradation (vv 23ff.).

#### **c. Sorting out foundational issues**

What we have been considering from Romans 1 points to the foundational issues that must be sorted out in our thinking. First, we must distinguish the invisible attributes of the creator that the mind sees from the

visible things that the physical eye sees. We must acknowledge the invisible as the divine and turn away from the visible as that which will control our thoughts and our life. This points to the first principle of faith. Faith relates to the unseen (Heb 11.1, 27). Paul said, “For we walk by faith and not by sight” (2Cor 5.7). The risen Lord pronounced the blessing on him who does not see and believes and not on him who sees and believes (Jn 20.29). Peter describes the Christians’ faith as believing in him whom they have not seen (1Pt 1.8). Notice, in these passages, faith is put in contrast to sight. By faith we overcome the way the visible presses in on us to determine what we will believe, to define what we are and to govern the way we walk. This tension of believing in the invisible God in a visible world is set in the foundation of our existence, i.e., in creation.

In Romans 1, Paul points to a second issue that must be sorted out. The invisible God as the object of worship is set in contrast to the self which presumes to be wise. As we must sort out the difference between the divine and the visible, we must also ascribe to the creator all wisdom and not to ourselves. God set this issue before Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by means of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They were not to take for themselves the role of determining what is good and evil by exercising their power in the realm of the visible and tangible. They were to leave it with the creator to determine right and wrong and good and bad.

The issues set in creation for how man is to relate to God are taken up in the truth of justification by faith. Paul presents this in the example of Abraham in Rom 4.17-25. God as the object of faith is defined by the divine attributes: “...God, who gives life to the dead and calls the things that do not exist as existing” (v 17). God’s promise placed Abraham into the conflict between what he saw in himself and Sarah, on the one hand, and the invisible God, on the other. He had to turn from what was visible (which dictated that the promise of God was not naturally possible) and exercise faith in God. Paul describes this act of faith as “giving glory to God” (v 20). With this phrase, Paul connects with the theme of glorifying God as God in Rom 1.21. The glory of the creator is now seen, not in creation, but in the work of bringing eternal life into a world under death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 4.24). The revelation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ is far above the knowledge of God in creation, but the issues of the glory of God and the need for man to respond to God by ascribing to him his glory as God remain the same. Creation is the foundation on which we stand and it defines the foundational issues in our relationship with God.

The gospel sets before us the first truth in the doctrine of creation. Before we are brought to consider how God created the world, we are made to see how creation sets our alignment to God. This truth touches on the discipline of how we are to order our thoughts in relation to God and the world around us. The visible reality presses in on us through our senses and stimulates us. This just happens to us. But, we are not to be shaped and governed in our conscious life by this. We must rise above it to relate to God in his nature in contrast to the creature. This is not something that happens to us through the senses. It engages our mind and will. It is about a spiritual relationship. If we miss this feature of the doctrine of creation, all further understanding of creation will in the end prove to be in vain.

## **B. GOD’S WORK OF CREATION**

The first truth of creation is that the glory of the creator stands in contrast to the nature of his creation. Then in light of the truth of God, we must see creation and understand its nature and how God relates to it. All this is set in how God created the world. Now we turn to this side of the doctrine of creation.

### **1. Creation *ex nihilo***

The first truth of the world is stated in Gen 1.1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The heavens and the earth is a phrase that takes in the totality of our world. We commonly express this with the word, universe. The universe has its beginning in creation, and before this beginning only God existed. Psalm 90.2 gives expression to this when it says to God: “Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.” This is a confession of faith declaring that God alone is eternal.

The truth that faith grasps seems straightforward until it is challenged by the philosophical mind. Thinkers in analysing the reality they see in our world have made a difference between the numerous forms that make up the visible universe and the substance or matter that is shaped into the forms. The suggestion is made that creation which brought about the world is only the shaping of matter into the world we see but not the creation of the matter itself. According to one view, matter is seen as existing alongside of God, with God only giving it shape. Another view is that the substance or energy that underlies everything emanated out of God. For the probing human mind, the truth of faith that God alone is eternal and all else was made by him is not straightforward.

The expression, creation *ex nihilo*, has been used to distinguish the biblical doctrine of creation from the ideas that we have outlined. The expression simply means creation out of nothing. All that is meant by this is that God did not create the world out of anything that existed before creation. He did not work with pre-existent material in creating the world. God brought into being what did not exist. The question is, how does the Bible teach this specific point?

**a. The biblical basis for creation ex nihilo**

At the outset, we must take note of the fact that the Bible was not written by philosophers and does not take up philosophical issues. The philosophical mindset wants to understand the world in itself, but this is alien to the outlook of scripture. The prophets, wise men and Psalmists of the Bible only viewed things in relation to God and never contemplated things apart from the fear of the LORD. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the biblical writers stay true to this. We see this on the subject of creation. There is no consideration of the world in of itself. It is only seen in relation to God and in light of God. In this view of the fear of the LORD, God is seen as having created the universe as a whole, so that all things besides God are created and had a beginning. No distinction is made between the form and the underlying reality. What was created was not, and it came into being in its entirety through God's act of creation. God brought into being things that did not exist. The scriptures from beginning to end breathe this faith. But, the question still remains as to whether or not the scriptures explicitly teach this.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has been challenged by biblical scholars on the basis of a particular way of reading Genesis 1. It has been commonly understood that Gen 1.1 declares the creation of the universe in its entirety in an absolute way. But, it has been argued that Gen 1.1 is only a heading for the creation account in Gen 1.2-2.3 so that the creation narrative really begins with Gen 1.2. This would mean that the chaos of Gen 1.2 existed before God's work of creation in the beginning. In the six days of creation, God created out of what was there. If the statement that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth is limited to the work of the six days, then there would be no creation *ex nihilo*.

The scholars that deny creation *ex nihilo* in Genesis 1 are making the mistake of imposing onto the biblical text issues that never occurred to divinely inspired mind writing the creation account. They are bringing in philosophical questions and holding the biblical language to a philosophical standard that is alien to the spirit of the text. We must understand the biblical language in the spirit of biblical faith and within the purpose of the sacred text. In biblical language, the statement that God created the heavens and the earth is a total statement and takes in all aspects of heaven and earth. Genesis 1.2 only introduces the work of creation in its unfolding through the work week of the six days. It does not limit the declaration of v 1. There are other scriptures that get behind the chaos of v 2 and show that God did create this earth that was without form and void wrapped in darkness.

In Job 38.4-7 God begins his review of creation with the building metaphor of laying the foundation of the earth (v 4) and laying its cornerstone (v 6). This refers to the creator's work in preparation for building the earth and so reaches back further than Gen 1.2. The text moves forward to the watery chaos in Job 38.8-11. God speaks of the time the sea was given birth like water bursting forth from the womb (v 8). At this time he covered the chaotic sea with a cloud and wrapped it in darkness. Here we have the scene in Gen 1.2: the earth was without form and void and darkness covered the deep (i.e., the waters). In Job 38.10-11 God goes on to the work of the second and third days of creation: the setting of a limit to the waters.

Psalm 104.5-9 is parallel to Job 38.4-11. The first step in creation is God's act of establishing the earth on its foundations (v 5). The second is that God covered this earth with the deep as with a garment so that the water stood above the mountains (v 6). Here we have the deep of Gen 1.2. The next step is that God pushed the water back and made the mountains appear (vv 7-9) and this answers to days 2 and 3 in the Genesis 1.

There is one other passage in the OT that gets behind Gen 1.2, and that is Prov 8.22-31. The point being made here is that wisdom was with God before anything was created. Wisdom is given a twofold relationship to creation. It was with the Lord *before* his works of old (i.e., creation, v 22) and *from* the earliest times of earth (v 23). The negative statements of vv 24-26 take up the theme of being there *before* things were created, and the positive ones of vv 27-29 take up the time *from* the earliest times of earth. Now look at how wisdom's existence *before* creation is presented. The first reference is, "When there were no depths..." (v 24). This is where the Genesis account begins its narrative. The world's existence began with being covered with the deep, the primordial ocean. Proverbs goes back to this first state of the world and speaks of a time before it. That means that there was a time when it was not. Only God is eternal and wisdom was ever with him.

The scriptures that get behind the chaos out of which God built the ordered world show that in biblical faith the earth of Gen 1.2 is included within the statement of Gen 1.1. Genesis 1 does not specify how this earth covered in water came about because this account has a different focus. The focus is not set on what lies behind the original state of the earth but on the completeness of creation built out of the chaos. We will pick this theme up later.

#### **b. The way the truth is presented in the Bible**

The Bible does not work with the idea of nothingness. There is real wisdom in this. The idea of nothingness is very difficult and creates its own serious problems. When we form a concept of nothingness, we make it something. If the Bible spoke of nothingness, it would suggest that there was a void that existed alongside of God, and this is not the case. God alone existed eternally and besides him not one thing existed eternally, neither something nor emptiness. The idea of nothingness was developed in Eastern philosophy and there we see the danger in using this notion. In India, nothingness became the great idea in the minds of the philosophers that even absorbed the notion of the existence of deity.

We must appreciate how the Bible presents the truth. The positive truth of God in relation to the world defines the truth about the world. God alone is eternal and he created all. Everything that is created is not divine and does not share in God's eternal existence. In biblical faith there is no aspect of creation that stands outside of this relationship with God. The two facts that define divine nature off from all creatures are that God is eternal and that he is the creator of all (Ps 90.2; Neh 9.6; Rom 1.20). If there was something eternal alongside of God so that God did not created it, then God would not be God over it.

The expression, creation *ex nihilo*, is a statement against any notion that God created the world out of some pre-existing material or reality. If we state the truth involved in this in positive biblical terms, we would simply say that God alone is eternal and every other being was created by God as that which was not before it was brought into being by God's act of creation.

#### **c. The practical bearing of the truth**

The truth of creation *ex nihilo* has a practical bearing. We will first look at its negative side, i.e., the denial that there is any eternal matter or reality in universe. This aspect of the biblical doctrine of creation removes certain notions that persist in the human mind and can continue to lurk in the recesses of the mind of those who believe in the God of scripture. The denial asserts that it is an absolute fact that nothing exists alongside of God that is not God's creation and so is not under his sovereign control. There is no dualism in which evil spirits and matter exist outside of God's sovereignty. God is God over all, and we must relate to him in his full rights and power as creator. The human mind also tends in the opposite direction to see some divine eternal reality at the bottom of all things. This involves a deification of creation and leads to the

religious attitude of relating to creation as to God. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* affirms that there is nothing divine or eternal about the nature of the created universe. We must ever see all created things in contrast to the nature of God.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is a negative affirmation that God alone is eternal, and this is an anchor for faith. We have cited Ps 90.2 as a biblical confession that God alone is eternal in contrast to the world. This is not an abstract statement made for its own sake. It is part of a Psalm in which faith contemplates our temporal passing existence on earth in view of the fact that God alone is eternal. This sets the view of faith on God as the only one to whom we must look. We find a similar mediation in Ps 102.23-28. Here the bearing on the doctrine of creation for the nature of the universe is considered. The created world stands in contrast to the creator, for what is created perishes and wears out, but God the eternal is ever the same and his years will not come to an end. Faith sees God as the eternal in contrast to the temporal creation and so only has its hope in him.

Paul makes an application of the idea of creation *ex nihilo* to our faith in Rom 4.17. He describes God as the object of faith, before whom Abraham as the type of the believer stood, as follows: "...God, who gives life to the dead and calls as existing those things that do not exist." God changed the patriarch's name to Abraham while he was barren at the age of 99. He was not a biological father and in himself could not be one, but God named him the father of many nations. Thus God called Abraham what he was not, and called what does not exist as existing. This God does in justifying us. He calls the godless righteous (Rom 4.5). What we are not and cannot be from ourselves, God declares us to be, and what he declares this we are. God does not form righteousness out of our own nature. No, in making us righteous and alive, he brings into being what is not. This is the great challenge of faith for the natural man. By nature, we can only conceive of being what we are out of ourselves and by our doing. It is hard for us to accept that we are before God what we are not in ourselves but what we are by God's word. From our side, what we are before God in grace is *ex nihilo*, i.e., out of nothing in ourselves. It is all by God's doing.

## **2. Creation by the word**

Genesis 1 is an account of the work of the creator. It presents God in his work period, the creation week. In this vision of God at work, a distinctive feature of God's action is put into the foreground: God creates by his word. God is introduced in his action with the simple line: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1.3). What we see here is stated as a principle of the divine work in the Psalms. Psalm 33.8-9 says, "Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For *He spoke, and it was done*; He commanded and it stood fast." Psalm 148.1-4 calls all creatures in heaven to praise the LORD and then gives the reason as follows: "Let them praise the name of the LORD, for *He commanded and they were created*. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which will not pass away" (vv 5-6). God is seen to be God in the fact that he created by his word.

### **a. Word and wisdom in creation**

What does creation by the word mean for our understanding of the world? Word is not mere sound. A mere sound would be energy, and we saw when discussing creation *ex nihilo*, that the world was not created by energy emanating out of God. Word is intelligent and rational thought that is communicated. In Genesis 1 we see God inputting the information into the world by which it is ordered and built up into the complex, rational and good thing that it is. Because of this, creation communicates knowledge to all people in all languages (Ps 19.1-4).

The biblical truth of creation by word adds to what we have already seen about the perception of the divine attributes through creation. The mind grasps what is in our world by understanding it as intelligently constructed in rational categories or words. All rational understanding of the world is, therefore, based on the logic of creation by word. The deeper we probe with scientific understanding, the more we confirm that the universe is a rational construct at all levels of its reality.

The parallel to the creator's word in Genesis 1 is wisdom in Proverbs 1 to 8. "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens" (Prov 3.19). Wisdom was with God as he created the world (Prov 8.22-31). Wisdom is given to people (Prov 2.6) and enables people to succeed in the world. Through wisdom man has a fellowship with the creator. Human experience of successfully understanding the world and living in it by wisdom is a verification of the principle of creation as presented in the Bible. We can only connect effectively with creation by gaining a participation in the wisdom by which the world was created.

The wisdom that we see behind the universe is not something that the eye can see. Only the mind can see it, and it points to God as Spirit with whom the human mind is to have fellowship in things that are invisible and define all things that are visible. We must regard the visible things in light of the invisible. This is built into creation, and we must follow this through in the way we relate to God and live in the world. This is what wisdom means for us.

Both the word and wisdom which brought about the creation with intelligent structure and design communicate a relationship from God to us. The human mind is struck with the sense of the divine through the wisdom communicated to it through creation. The relationship between God and man communicated in the creative word and wisdom really consists in the Son of God, the eternal Word and the Wisdom of God.

#### **b. The creative power of the divine word**

The distinctive characteristic of God seen in creation by the word is not limited to the divine work of creating the world. It is the way God always works. Creative agency and power is a feature of God's word at all times. In Ish 55.11 God says of his word through the prophet, "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

The apostle saw the creative word of God in the gospel he preached. He said, "for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1Thess 2.13). The human word is information that the audience must take up and work with, but the divine word is the power that performs its work. Paul says that the word performs its works in those who believe. The condition of faith marks the key difference between the word of God to us and that spoken in creation. Physical matter is not living and could not hear and believe. We have a spirit, and we hear and believe. But, the faith itself is brought about by the word of Christ (Rom 10.17). The word of God ever has the active role even where the creature's will is involved.

#### **c. Faith and the principle of creation by the word**

Hebrews 11.3 points out what creation by the word means for faith: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible." The author of Hebrews is taking his audience, in chapter 11, on a tour through the OT to show what is done by faith. In v 3 he begins with Genesis 1. The opening chapter of the Bible makes us understand by faith that the world was created by the word of God, and this is the foundation for all who lived and triumphed by faith.

The truth that the world was created by the word of God is made known to us by the word of God in scripture. This truth is not left as a mere, abstract dogmatic fact. What we read from scripture, faith applies to our understanding of the world in which we live. Faith is ever practical and applies the truth to experience. Abstract faith is dead. Genesis 1 teaches us that the world was made by the word of God and faith draws the inference "...that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible." This inference connects with what faith is said to be in v 1. Faith is "the conviction of things not seen." Faith does not look to visible reality as the cause or source of things. In everything it looks to the invisible God who works through his word. This is foundational for the exercise of faith by all heroes of faith. They all turned away

from being governed by what is seen and acted only upon the word of God. If God created the world by his word, then his word which is heard and not the world which is seen is to be the basis for life.

The principle that God created by the word precludes any notion that nature or the cosmos had developed from within itself. This notion marked the pagan myths of the birth of the world. In these myths, the divine nature and power are seen as being within nature, and the world that we see was a development from within itself. In scientific thinking, the idea of spirit is removed from our understanding of nature, but the principle of the universe developing from within is retained in the principle of evolution. In evolutionary thinking, the universe develops from within so that, to use the language of Heb 11.3, what is seen was made out of things which are visible. Genesis 1 contradicts this principle. Not only did God create the material out of which the world was shaped, but nature itself does not have the capacity to evolve or develop from the chaos to the cosmos, the ordered universe. In fact, one level of creation as seen in one creation day's work does not develop or generate the higher level of the next day of creation. Creation only happens by the word of God.

The fact that nature does not have the divine power of creation is also seen in our spiritual life. We cannot raise ourselves to being justified by our works or to being spiritual in the flesh. God only works through his word, and the Spirit only puts that into effect within us what is spoken to us by the word of God. This brings us to the next feature of the biblical doctrine of creation.

### **3. The role of the Spirit**

To gain a full understanding of the nature of creation, we must see the role of the Spirit of God. He is introduced in Gen 1.2 before we see God speaking and creating. Gen 1.2 presents the conditions in which God works. There are two negative conditions. They are: the earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the deep, i.e., the chaotic waters. These are the two conditions which God overcomes in his work of creation. There is a third positive condition added to the negative one—the Spirit moved over the surface of the waters. The first two negative conditions are the opposite of the created heaven and earth. The third is the positive condition that makes creation by God's word possible. This is very significant for understanding creation. We have seen that the earth, the chaos, does not have the capacity to develop an ordered cosmos out of itself. The order must be imparted by the word of God. Now we learn that the earth or matter does not have the capacity to receive the word. This must be done by the Spirit who moves over the chaotic earth and receives the word to put it into effect. This agrees with the OT view that the Spirit is the divine agent within creation ever working immediately on the creature (Jb 26.13; 33.4; Ps 104.30). The Spirit is present within creation and is the power of God that is immediately experienced, but he is not the Spirit of nature. Such an idea would be pagan, for in paganism the divine is the power of nature. The Spirit moves within creation, but he is the Spirit of God who is above and in contrast to creation. The Spirit ties all creative agency and power to God in heaven and sets it off from the world.

Creation by the word and the Spirit agrees with creation *ex nihilo*. Matter does not have an existence independent of God. So, we see in Genesis 1 that the chaos, the unformed matter, does not have independence from God and cannot withstand him in any way. God is God over it. "Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in the earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps 135.6). At the same time, there is nothing divine about the material God works with. It has no capacity of self development or to put the word of God into effect. All is done by the Spirit who is the Spirit of God. There is no divine principle in nature.

The Spirit's role seen in creation continues in the work of God throughout history. People in the OT who acted with special divine power did so by the Spirit coming upon them. The LORD says, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zech 4.6). As the Spirit moved over the face of the waters in Gen 1.2, so the Spirit convicts the world and gives the divine witness to Christ (Jn 15.26-27 and 16.5-11). The flesh can not bring about the new birth. As Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, You must be born again" (Jn 3.6-7). Just like the chaos of Gen 1.2 could not receive God's word and raise itself up to God's created order, so is the flesh. "The mind set on the flesh is death...because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not

subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8.7-8). Only by the Spirit can we receive the word and please God (Rom 8.6). Just as the Spirit received and put into effect the creator’s word in Genesis 1, so now the Spirit only works through the hearing of faith (Gal 3.1-5) which come from the word of Christ (Rom 10.17 and Gal 3.1). Paul stresses in Gal 3.1-5 that the Spirit is not received and does not work by the works of the law which are the performance of the flesh.

The parallel between the Spirit’s role in creation as seen in Gen 1.2 and in salvation must be held with one major difference. The primordial chaos had no will of its own. It had no spirit in it and was not alive. So, it was passive before God. It had no power to develop itself, and it had no power to resist. It yielded passively to the word of God by the power of the Spirit. God’s work in us is different. We have a will. The will of the flesh resists and is hostile to God. This means that the Spirit is engaged in a conflict of desires with the flesh (Gal 5.17). With this difference, the parallel with Gen 1.2 stands. As Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing” (Jn 6.63). In us the Spirit does not simply put God’s will into effect in a straightforward manner. His work must be done through obedience. The new creation is parallel to the first one, but it is much profounder and deeper since it must work on and through the human will. Through this we are engaged to align ourselves by the way things were established in creation. We must turn away from the flesh that is oriented towards the material and yield to the Spirit by the word of God and so relate to God in contrast to creation and in his rule over it.

#### **4. Completed creation**

The creation account of Genesis 1 closes in Gen 2.1-3 with the emphasis on the completion of creation. In fact, this achievement of completeness is the theme of the whole creation account. There are two types of completion. The first is the completeness of the universe as a whole. This is indicated by the expression in Gen 1.1, “the heavens and the earth,” which refers to the whole universe. The completion of creation is stated in 2.1 as follows: “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts.” That which fills the heavens and earth is now included in the description of the world as a completed whole. There is a second type of completeness and that is indicated by the mention of the seventh day in Gen 2.2. The number seven symbolizes completeness of a series of events. We will now take a closer look at the theme of completeness.

##### **a. The completeness of the cosmos**

To express this idea of the completeness of the creation we can use the word *cosmos*. This word comes from the Greek word for the world and has the basic meaning of an order or arrangement. When used for the world, this word expressed the idea that the world is an ordered whole or a complete arrangement. Biblical Hebrew does not have a word that is equivalent to the Greek word *cosmos*, but the idea of cosmos is presented in the structure of Genesis 1. The creation account presents the world as being created as an integrated whole.

Gen 1.2 defines two issues negatively: 1) form and void and 2) darkness. These two sides are taken up in the creation. The creation of light on the first day and of the lights in heaven on the fourth day takes up the problem of darkness. The creation of heaven, sea and earth on days two and three and of the creatures that fill them on days five and six overcomes the state of being without form and empty. The two dimensions of our world are time and space. Time is brought about and regulated through the creation of light and lights on the first and fourth days, and the spatial side is created on days two and three and days five and six. We can lay it out as follows:

The basic order is given in 2.1: heaven and earth (days 1 to 3) and all their hosts (days 4-6).

- 1) The creation of the heavens and the earth
- Time: Light (day 1)
- Space: Sea and Heaven above (day 2)
- Earth (day 3)

2) The creation of their hosts

Time: Lights as heavenly hosts (day 4)

Space: Fish of the sea and birds of the sky (day 5) answering to sea and sky on day 2.

Land creatures: animals and man (day 6) answering to the creation of earth on day 3.

In each day a double creation takes place, placing things into a pattern of pairs.

1) Light and darkness, day and night.

2) Sea and sky

3) Earth and plant life

4) Sun for the day and moon and stars for the night

5) Fish and birds

6) Animals and man

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> days receive two separate acts of the divine word.

Day three: decree for dry land and then for plants.

Day six: decree for animals and the divine counsel for the creation of man.

Plants turn the minerals of earth into food for animal life. They mark a transition from the inorganic creation to animal life. Man is set off for a higher life still. He is made in the image of God to rule. Creation is thus integrated. The earth arises out of the water. Plants come out of the earth and provide the link between the mineral and the animate creation. The animate creation is made out of the inanimate, but in man the animate creation is raised above all as the image of God, and through this man is set over creation to rule it.

In the creation of mankind, the creation is completed. Each level of the creation is called good by God, but only after man was created is all called very good. In man creation reaches its perfection. Perfection is only found in God-likeness being placed over all.

#### **b. Completeness of the divine work**

There are two types of time indicated in Genesis 1. The first is time as it is built by God into the world. This is brought about by the creation of light. The creation of light on the first day brought about the alteration of day and night and set the basic measure of time, the day. The creation of the sun and moon (and stars) regulates time in the world and brings in the larger measures of time such as seasons and years.

The second type of time is not the rhythm of time in the world but the pattern of time set by God's work. This measure of time is that of the pattern of work from beginning to consummation. We use this concept of time when we speak of history. We see that the changes in world events mark historical ages and development.

The time that is built into the universe (the work of days 1 and 4) are repetitive and cyclical. One day follows the other, and in its physical aspect each new one is like the previous one. The seasons and years go around in cycles. Here there is no direction. Ecclesiastes begins its reflection on the futility of all things in the world by taking note of this cyclical nature of the world. The time brought about by God's work is different. It is linear. God works towards a goal, and the working time reaches an end. The cosmos itself does not achieve any goal. It is only a platform on which God works and establishes his relationship with mankind. It is in this history of salvation that God brings about linear time.

**c. The significance of the completeness of creation**

*i. Creation time is finished*

The theme of the seven days presents the truth that the divine work of creating new aspects of the universe is complete. It does not continue. This stands in contrast to the principle of evolution which works with the idea of an endless and ceaseless development. Evolution knows no Sabbath. The law of evolution is simply the activity of evolving and changing. It knows no goal and no rest. Creation, in contrast, is linear. God has a goal and works toward completion and rest. This is taken up in the theme of the divine work of salvation. God works out salvation through history, and there is a salvation history. In this the people of God are drawn into participation with God, and the theme of the Sabbath set in creation is brought in. "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4.9).

Human observation corroborates the theme of the completeness of creation. The processes of shaping the basic structure of earth and bringing about species are over. Scientists do not observe new thresholds of existence coming about. The world only develops within the thresholds set in creation. Further development is not creation but history, whether it be natural or human history.

*ii. The world is a finished product*

The world as created lacks nothing that is needed for God's purposes in history. With the creation of man the highest possible level of physical existence was created, and there can be no higher attainment in the physical world. All that remains is for man to reach the goal that God set for him, but this is not a matter of the creation of the world but the history in it.

God created all for man, and he made it to continue through time. We see this in God's creative word. In the work of the first three days, God adds to creative decrees the word of naming the spheres created. By this, God shows that what these are to man as seen in the way man names them in his language is what they are identified to be by God. In the work of the second set of three days, God ordains the ongoing function and perpetuation of his creation. God created the sun and moon for the ongoing regulation of time as man experiences it. He decrees plant life with its perpetuation in seeds, and blesses animal life and human life with the power of procreation. Creation was set up to be what it is to man.

*iii. A matter of perspective*

Genesis 1 is designed to present a view of the completed creation, but we are not to take this as giving us a complete view of creation. We have already seen when discussing the creation of the chaotic earth that Genesis 1 does not show us everything about the creation of the primordial earth. When God answered Job in Job 38 to 41, the creator convicted Job of the fact that there are real mysteries of creation which have not been disclosed to mankind, and this has a practical bearing on our experience. Our perspective of the way the world is governed is highly limited. We do not see things the way God sees them, and this is imprinted on creation. There is a side to all of God's ways (and we see this in the universe and history) that makes us look as small and insignificant and leaves us in the dark to grope about and try and figure things out. Genesis 1 shows us the ultimate truth: God spoke and it was done. It also shows that God created a complete world. But, it is not designed to say that there is nothing more to creation than what has been stated and can be seen without naked eye.

In Genesis 1 all is seen as it leads up to the creation of man in whom creation is completed. Also, the world is seen from the point of view of man, for this is the point of view that is important for the history of salvation. The world was created to be the stage on which man was to live, be tried and be redeemed. The revelation of God to man throughout the Bible takes up the reference points as the creator set our perspective. Heaven is above and this points man to look up and see the idea of the realm of God that is over all the earth. The earth on which man lives is below, and this gives man his reference point. The sun, moon and stars function as the lights in the heavens that regulate time for earth. The animals are below man to bring out his place as ruler. All is given from man's perspective for all was created for man. All things

have their purpose in what they are to man, and the creation account shows that indeed God created it to be so.

In Genesis 1 the scriptures give us a view that exalts man in and over creation. The Spirit who inspired the Holy Scriptures also makes us aware of another perspective from which we are made to see the puniness and apparent insignificance of man. In Genesis 1 we see the heavens from the point of view of man on earth, but in Psalm 8 man is viewed from the point of view of heaven. In the heavens the splendour of God is displayed. The vastness of the night sky makes the Psalmist ask, "What is man that You take thought of him?" Isaiah 40.12-31 presses this further. God's sovereignty is not measured by earth but in light of the vast starry heavens which he rules, and in light of this the nations look like a drop in the bucket and a speck of dust on the scales (Ish 40.15). The overpowering sense that God's view of creation is way beyond the perspective of man on earth is pressed by God in Job 38-41.

God pressed the questions about the mysteries of the creation on Job, and man has pressed on in seeking to penetrate into the universe. Science has indeed opened up a view of the vastness of the universe. In the OT the heavens reflect the vastness of God, and the larger the universe out there appears, the more we are struck with the idea of vastness which speaks to faith of the immensity of God. God created the universe with its overwhelming greatness to reflect his greatness in comparison with man and his little world. But, this does not take away from the view of the complete world presented in Genesis 1. The world as it is seen by every humble man on planet earth (rather than as it is known by God in heaven) remains the theatre in which God reveals himself and man is saved and comes to know God. The perspective of the universe that science takes does not see the little planet earth and man as they function in God's purposes in the universe. For this we must turn to Genesis 1.

## **C. GOD'S ONGOING WORK IN CREATION**

When creation was completed, the work of creating ceased and God rested. But, this does not mean that God disengaged with creation so that the world could continue on its own. It may be natural for modern people in an age of technology to think that God created the world like a machine that would function on its own without his continual presence and working. In fact such a view was the child of modern rationalism, and it is called deism, but this view is contrary to the outlook we find in the Bible.

### **1. The role of God's word and Spirit**

To understand God's ongoing role in maintaining the universe, we must look at the role of the word and the Spirit again. God created by his word, and this word is the decree that both brought the world into being and upholds it. Psalm 33.9 says, "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded and *it stood fast*." Psalm 148.5-6 declares, "For He commanded and they were created. He has also *established them forever and ever*; He has made a decree which *will not pass away*." The word by which he created also gives the world its continuing stability. Jeremiah 33.20-25 likens the creational decree that fixed the regularity of day and night and the fixed pattern (statutes) of heaven and earth to a covenant (cp., Jer 31.35-36; Ps 89.37; Ish 54.9-10). A covenant is a word that is given to fix the permanent nature of a relationship, but the one who gave the word is ever involved. He must continuously uphold the covenant. So, God is ever actively involved in the decree that secures the regularity of the world. Hebrews 1.3 states this truth of the ongoing role of the word of God in upholding creation. The Son through whom God made the world "upholds all things by the word of His power."

We have seen that in creation matter cannot of itself receive and put into effect the word of the creator. It is the Spirit of God who is the presence and power of God in creation and who carries out the word of God. We must apply this to our understanding of the ongoing role of God's word in holding all things together. It is not just that God by his word continuously upholds the created order but also that the Spirit pervades and works in creation. Job said, "The Spirit of God made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33.4). This ongoing creative role of the Spirit is stated in Ps 104.29-30. Of animals it says, "You take away their spirit, they expire, and return to the dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You

renew the face of the ground.” The Hebrew word translated with “created” is *bara*, which is used for the divine act of creation in Gen 1.1. God does not create a new species of animals in his providence. Rather, he only brings forth a new specimen of the creature he made in creation. Yet, this work of renewal is seen as an act of God’s creative power. We see this continual work of the creator in the birth of a human being. David depicts God’s work in forming him in his mother’s womb in Ps 139.13-16. God is directly at work in bringing about a person as his work. This work of the creator is hidden from human view, and it is analogous to “the activity of God who makes all things” (Eccl 11.5).

## **2. Important distinctions**

Genesis 1 presents how God brought what was not into existence. This is the original creation. In this work, God established the relationship between himself and the creatures he made, and the creatures are upheld and sustained in this relationship. Thus God by his powerful word and in the Spirit is ever operative in creation. The great and important difference between the original creation and the ongoing activity of the creator is that after the completion of creation, new entities are not made. Rather, God now upholds and renews all.

The truth of God’s ongoing involvement in creation leads to his role in governing the world. After the work of creation, this divine government is the great theme of scripture. Psalm 95.3-5 declared the LORD to be a great king on the basis of being the creator. The divine kingship begins with the absolute authority to direct all of creation, in all details, but it extends to his power to rule over all human affairs and direct history. This vision of God as king takes over the vision of the Bible.

The themes of God’s role in upholding the creation and of his government of the world are brought together in our word, providence. This word is used to cover whatever happens in the direction of our world beyond human control. But, God’s government is not limited to the areas outside of human activity. All of our activity happens within his work of sustaining and governing the whole world. God’s sphere and ours do not stand side by side, one area being God’s and the other being ours. Rather, God’s sphere is above and over all as the heavens are over the earth; and just as all that is done on earth happens under heaven, so all that we do happens under his rule. This raises the big questions of God’s sovereignty and human will and of the enigmas we face in the way God governs the world. To deal with these questions is to move beyond the subject of creation, though God’s ways here are only an extension of his role as creator.

## **3. Challenges**

The ongoing role of God presents real challenges to the way we naturally think and live. Let us take up some of these.

### **a. God and the scientific approach to the world**

The biblical view of the creator’s role in the world challenges the way we have been trained or programmed to think in the name of science. We commonly think of the regularity of nature and the consistency of the order of things as the result of natural laws. These laws are conceived of as being inherent in things. Here our thinking comes up against scripture.

We need to clarify the status of natural laws. All that we can see is the regularity in the sequence of events, and the natural laws are only statements of this regularity which we can express in mathematical terms. We can predict what the outcomes of sequences of events will be. But, what the cause of this amazing and profound regularity is lies outside of the field of vision of the human eye. The human mind, alienated from God, has always wanted to attribute the powers that control events to nature itself. The pagan gods were no more than the forces of nature understood as spirits who have a will and mind of their own. The Bible stripped nature of such divine forces and located the mind and will that governs all above nature in God. This set the basis for seeing the universe as a grand system that is intelligently designed by a supremely

wise and consistent God, and this confidence provided for the development of modern science within those nations that had their thinking conditioned by the biblical view of God and creation. However, the human tendency to see the world in and of itself quickly reasserted itself, and the forces or laws that govern the world were again attributed to the physical reality. Here we come up against the Bible and the truth of God again. In the Bible, the world and all that is in it is never seen as existing and functioning in and of themselves. Everything is seen in relation to God the creator. What we see as natural laws is really due to the power and persistence of the creator's decree and the fact that the Spirit only puts into effect God's word. There is no conflict or contradiction built into the creative decree, and there is no self-willed and arbitrary action in the Spirit as we find in the gods of pagan mythology. God's word and Spirit make for the amazingly wonderful and consistent universe that science studies.

God created things and ordained them to function in a certain way, and so it is. The decree of the creator stands behind the laws that we see in the regularity of movement and function. This means that we do not relate to the material thing with its laws; rather through the thing observed and handled we relate to the creator by his decree. This way of looking at things has a real practical effect and value. The secular person will simply relate to things and their laws. This is devoid of any spiritual relationship or moral law. The believer sees all things in relation to God and will handle them for their proper function within his relationship with God. This is wisdom. In the view of the Bible, the scientific expertise in manipulating the material world devoid of all spiritual and moral law would not be seen as wisdom but as mere cunning—the cunning of a fool that will do him in. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and wisdom is the insight and ability to handle all for its proper function in man's relationship with God.

We should notice one more side of the doctrine we are looking at. The modern idea of natural law has the effect of locking the creator out of the creation. If a miracle happens, it is seen as breaking natural laws, and that is why miracles are so difficult to accept into the supposed scientific outlook. But, God never created the world to make the world independent of him or to lock himself out of his creation. Rather, he created the world in such a way that all is tied into a relationship of immediate dependence on him. We might think (within a mix of scientific and Christian worldviews) that things work on their own if all is regular and normal and that God's immediate action only comes in when a miracle happens. This is not true. The regular running of the world is as much the result of God's will and action as a miracle.

In Jesus' outlook, God the Father causes the sun to rise and sends rain as well as working the miracles. There is, however, a major difference. God causes the sun to rise and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous and so independent of human faith, whereas his special works are done only through faith in the recipient. We saw that providence works by God's word, and the faith by which special works are wrought is also brought about by the word of God. From the point of view of human observation, there is a stark difference between God's regular providence and his special works, but on God's side he does not change. All was created and is governed according to who he is and in his relationship with mankind.

## **b. God and faith**

Both the doctrines of God's original work of creation and of his ongoing role in creation concern our faith. The truth of God the creator must shape our faith, and the truth of God's providence must govern our faith.

Jesus taught in Matt 6.19-34 that the truth of God's ongoing involvement in creation is to govern our faith. The disciple who knows God as his Father is not to worry about the physical provisions of life. Gentiles who do not know God and worship idols worry. The disciple is to believe in the providence of God, and be controlled by the truth that God will govern the universe as his Father and for his good. This sets the disciple free to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Jesus declares the disciples who worry to be, "Men of little faith" (Matt 6.30; 8.26; 14.31). They believe in God for the great spiritual realities such as forgiveness and the kingdom of God. But, faith in God only for the great spiritual issues is little faith. Faith in the God of providence within the area of the little material things of life is great faith.

The non-Christian must first come to faith on the basis of the truth of God set in creation, but once he comes to faith in God as creator, he must develop faith in the God of providence, and this will challenge

him on all the hard and little concrete matters of life. It is in this area that we experience our great trials and learn to grow in faith. For the pagan, the doctrine of God the creator is the great rebuke. For the Christian, the doctrine of God's providence poses the greatest challenge. Little faith has settled on God the creator in his great and divine glory but does not settle on God the provider in the realm of the material world.

### **A note on God and the concept of evolution**

Throughout our discussion, we have set the biblical principles of creation in contrast to evolution. The discussion of the fossil record and other scientific evidence used in support of the theory of evolution is beyond the scope of this study. We can only speak in terms of the principle of creation, and on this point the concept of evolution is contrary to the biblical truth of creation. The idea of theistic evolution has been coined to bring the biblical belief in God together with the theory of evolution. I once discussed this matter with a professor in a well known theological college. He objected to the term, theistic evolution, on the grounds that it put God in the adjective (theistic) and so made God qualify evolution. He proposed to give God the major part by representing him in the noun and calling it evolutionary theism. This is a nice word play. It may sound pious but it is seriously flawed. It makes evolution qualify and define God. To define God and his ways by a naturalistic understanding of the world and by a principle of development in nature amounts to idolatry. We must understand God only as he reveals himself. In biblical revelation, God is related to the world only by creation, and the biblical principle of creation is the opposite of the principle of evolution. The principle of evolution is development from within, while the principle of biblical creation is that things are brought into being from outside of the world by the word of God.

This discussion brings us back to the first truth of the doctrine of creation. Creation is first of all about the divine nature in contrast to the nature of creation. To be true to God, we must hold to the divine nature as defined by the work of creation. Any shift from this, even in a form of a type of monotheism, is fatal.

## **D. THE SON OF GOD AND CREATION**

So far we have developed the doctrine of creation from the OT. Here creation is seen for how the relationship between God and creation is structured. The themes involved are taken up in the NT and applied to the relationship that we have with God through Christ, but the revelation of God in Christ does more. It brings in a whole new view of God and of his relation to creation. In Christ we see God as he exists in the relationships within the Godhead and this opens up the view of God as related eternally within himself. From this revelation, we are given to see creation from the point of view of God above the created order. This view opens up a complete panoramic view of God's relationship with creation. We will complete our study by taking note of how this higher view of creation fills out and completes the doctrine of creation.

Paul presents Christ's full divine position over the whole of creation in Col 1.15-20. We have already taken a close look at this passage of scripture in our study on the truth of the trinity in the NT (study 2, pp 12-15) and seen that here Paul is presenting the full deity of Christ in terms of his role in the work of the creation and reconciliation of all things. Now we will look at the total view of creation presented.

### **1. The first relationship (v 15)**

The Son of God is presented as "the firstborn of all creation." This does not mean that he was created first. Verse 16 shows that he is the first born because all things were created through him. The firstborn son is the one in whom the father-son relationship is established. Initially he is the sole heir of the father. He holds the relationship of heir at first all by himself. Others are only given a relationship in his relationship with the father and only receive a share in what is his.

As the one through whom all things were created, the Son stands on the divine side in the relationship between creator and creature. He is in an eternal relationship with God. What this means for the doctrine of creation is profound. God did not become related when he created the world. Rather, he is eternally related

in himself and his relationship with creation is the outworking of the eternal relationship within the Godhead. The Son's position as the firstborn of all creation also has profound implications for the creature's position before God. A creature cannot have anything that does not belong to the Son within the Godhead. Angels or human beings are only given a share in what rightly belongs to the Son.

## **2. The creation of all things (v 16)**

God the Father created all things through the Son. Paul makes the *all* absolute by including things both in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible and specifying those angelic orders that share in heavenly and divine authority. Paul's statement is sweeping, and this confirms and clarifies in a final way the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. There is no being in heaven on earth that shares in the eternal and divine status of the Godhead. All came into being, and none existed eternally. All were made through the Son. This truth of creation is not limited to the material creation. It is true of the highest orders of being in heaven. Angels who have a spirit nature like God are creations just as much as the material world. When it comes to the contrast between the God and the world, angels stand on the same side as the lowest form of physical creation. In their status as creatures, they are infinitely removed from the glory of God as creator. The doctrine of the trinity seals the truth that no being outside of God shares in the divine nature as seen in the work of creation.

In the OT we only see God creating by means of his spoken word. Through this we see how God relates to that which is outside of him. The NT revelation of God as a trinity shows us the reality in God behind this. His words are only the expression of his Word (Jn 1.1-3). God is related within himself, and creation is only an outworking of that relationship to display its full glory.

## **3. The goal of all things (v 16)**

A question that plagues the human mind is, "Why did God create?" The Bible affirms that God did all for his glory. The knowledge of the glory of the creator in contrast to creation calls us to glorify God as God and to not to worship and serve the creature (Rom 1.20-21, 25). The worship in heaven acknowledges this goal of creation with the declaration, "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created" (Rev 4.11). Paul says in worship, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11.36). God declares that he has created for his glory (Ish 43.7). In the end, God will be all in all (1Cor 15.28).

The doctrine that God has done all for his own glory causes the human mind to raise an objection. Does this not make God selfish? Does God make all to exist for himself? The charge of selfishness reflects our own selfishness and does not touch the truth about God. The very nature of creation points out that God could only create for himself. When God created, there was no one else to consider but himself. Also, by creating he gave us our being and glory and took nothing from us. Yet, we still have the nagging thought that if all is for God's glory then all is for the divine self. Here the truth of the trinity comes in as the final answer. God does not exist as a solitary self, outside of a relationship of love. God exists in an eternal relationship of love in which he acts for another. God the Father created all things through the Son and for the Son. The other side of this is that the Son carries out his role from the Father and for the Father. Since there is no separate and isolated self within the Godhead, there can be no selfishness. All of God's acts are relational and so selfless in giving.

Angels and human beings were created as intelligent beings with a personal nature like God's. In the fallen angels and fallen man, we see the self awareness essential to personhood degrade into selfishness. But, this is a deep break from the truth of what we were created for. God created us within his relationship with the Son to consciously and willingly participate in and reflect the relational ideal set in the relationship of the Son to the Father.

## **4. Ongoing role of the creator (v 17)**

The Son's role does not stop with creation (v 16). After the work of creation, all things are held together in the Son (v 17). This points us to the theme of providence. In the OT we learn of God's ongoing work in relation to creation so that creation is kept in immediate dependence on him. In Christ we see what is behind this. The relationship in which the universe is upheld is in the Son. This leads to a profound vision of the continuation of the universe. All is maintained and functions within the Father's relationship with the Son to realize the purposes of that relationship.

## **5. The reconciliation of creation to God (v 20)**

Paul's statement that it was the Father's purpose to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth in Christ adds an important point to the doctrine of creation. The creation in its full scope of things in heaven and on earth has one end—to be reconciled to God.

The theme of the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven brings out an important dimension of creation. Christians are more ready to speak of the redemption of creation. The word redemption refers to the liberation from bondage to evil, and we feel the need for this redemption (Rom 8.18-27). Reconciliation is about something that is higher and invisible. It is about relationship. The fact that the universe has the goal of being reconciled brings out the first truth of creation. In the Bible creation is first of all about the relationship between God and the universe.

The basis of the reconciliation of creation is the peace that was made through the blood of Christ's cross. This points to mankind's sin as the cause for the alienation of the whole creation on earth and in heaven from God. In the divine counsel of Gen 1.26, God placed man over creation (Psalm 8). When man was separated from God due to his sin, the creation was joined in the alienation. The OT lets us see how the physical world was involved in the fall of mankind, but now in Col 1.20 we see that things in heaven were also involved. In our next study, we will look at the angelic creation, and there we will see that the angelic order was created to serve within God's relationship with mankind. The sphere of heavenly authority over the earth, which was to serve the purposes of God for man, was alienated from God due to human sin and has been held by spirits that are hostile to God and mankind. God's work in reconciling man to himself is the work of bringing all in heaven and on earth to God so that all will realize its role in God's purpose in Christ.

The theme of reconciliation puts the focus on creation's relationship with God. As we have surveyed the biblical doctrine of creation, the focus has always been on this. All is about the relationship between God and creation, and this must be realized in man who is in creation as a physical creature and is placed over it as the image of God. When man lives in a right relationship with God, then all that is under him and in his hand reaches its proper goal of being for the praise and glory of God. When man is "alienated and hostile in his mind, engaged in evil deeds" (Col 1.21), then all that is in his hands is turned against its proper relation to God. The believer who has been personally reconciled to God already returns to God that which he made for his own glory. But, only when the sons of God will be revealed in creation, when Christ comes again, will creation be liberated from its subjection to futility under the reign of sin (Rom 8.18-25).

## **The whole counsel of God**

This study is part of a larger series of studies on the whole counsel of God. The reconciliation of creation ties the doctrine of creation into the whole counsel of God. It is not the case that God set out with creation as Plan A of the relationship of creator and creature. Then when this failed he brought out a second or backup plan, the Plan B. Rather, the answer to the problem of the alienation of creation from God lay behind the work of creation. Mankind failed in relation to God, and this brought all, including the relationship of creator and creature, to ruin. But, behind God's relationship with mankind was the way he was related in himself in the Father-Son relationship. The failure in mankind's relationship with God only pressed the issue in human experience that God's relationship must be in God and carried through fully by God.

The revelation of God in Christ shows that God only ever had one plan, and that is his eternal counsel formed within the triune Godhead. Creation was only a subordinate part of this great plan. So, we are to view the world in which we live as the stage that God set up to work out his eternal purpose in Christ, and in this purpose we live on earth to enter an eternal relationship with God within the Son's relationship with the Father. This gives creation an eternal significance that it could never have in its own created nature. Our stay on earth is short and in itself vanity, as is noted in the OT. But, since it is part of the eternal purpose of God, this little time on earth produces a vast and eternal glory yet to be revealed. In itself, the time-space existence is futile, but in the Son all bears the weight of an eternal glory.

## **APPENDIX: Integration in worship**

The following song, *Creator, Redeemer*, incorporates some of the themes touched on in Study 3. In the person of the Son, God acts as both creator and redeemer.

### **CREATOR, REDEEMER**

**Son of the Father, all his he gives to you;  
Fountain of life, you brought creation to view,  
Extending your design,  
Your heart, your will, your mind,  
That we might live the life of God you give.**

**Lord of humanity fallen now in sin,  
Turned to ourselves, mankind has died from within;  
Descending from the heights,  
You yielded up your life,  
But you arose, the reign of death is now closed.**

**Creator, Redeemer,  
We bow our hearts before you,  
You love and restore us to your image divine.  
Creator, Redeemer,  
We live again by your might  
To walk in ever more light eternally.**

**God of the ages, so faithful to your plan,  
Glorified now, fulfill your purpose for man;  
We know that you alone  
Can change our heart of stone,  
We turn to you to be your people true.**

The first verse addresses Jesus Christ as Son of the Father. So we begin with God as he is in himself, marked by the Father-Son relationship in which the Son receives all from the Father. This internal dynamic of giving and receiving is in turn given expression in the act of creation which flows from the person of the Son. The ultimate expression of this is the creation of man in the image of God as it is held by the Son. As created man, we were given the very heart, will and mind of the Son in order to receive and know the ways of God (as the Son does with respect to the Father). In this relationship we were to live out the life of God in our created sphere.

Instead of continuing to relate to the world only as God's creation and to his glory, man looked to himself and his own perception of the world for meaning and direction. The act of turning inward was sin and resulted in death as God said it would. Now the Son must act as Lord, carrying out what it means for God to be God in relation to a fallen world. This meant he had to become the source of life (as God must ever be) to those under the sentence of death. He had to restore the dead to the original divine purpose of living the life of God in creation. This act of redemption required the one who created, who was the source of life, to enter death to create anew out of death. In his resurrection, death's reign was broken.

Christ the Son and Lord is both Creator and Redeemer (chorus) because only in him does God carry out these, his defining works. As we bow to him in repentance and faith we experience his love and are permanently restored in him to the image of God.

As Lord, Christ carries out the roll of God in time – through the ages (verse 3). As a glorified man he fulfills God's purpose for man. That is made a reality in us as we look to him to change and remake our hearts to no longer resist God and his will but rather desire, embrace and love God and his will. Through this we become God's people.

**A. van Ameyde**