DEFINITION

The doctrine of creation states that God, who alone is uncreated and eternal, has formed and given existence to everything outside of himself. He did this from nothing by the word of his power, and all of it was very good.

SUMMARY

Historical Christianity has always believed—as indicated in both The Apostles’ Creed and The Nicene Creed—that God is the creator of the universe. This article will focus on providing an examination of the historic doctrine of creation and many of the relevant theological implications that flow from it. Attention will be given to the main aspects of this doctrine that have been broadly embraced by Christians throughout the centuries rather than to those areas about which Christians have disagreed with one another. In tracing out these main aspects, the following article will start by examining two important phrases from Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God” and “God created the heavens and the earth.” After that, the article will spend time reflecting upon some of the things that those phrases imply theologically, namely, that God is the source and sustainer of everything, that God created everything good, that God invested His creatures with responsibility and significance, that this diversity within creation is reflective of the doctrine of the Trinity, and that God’s creative actions are not identical with those of human beings.

Introduction

It is hard to imagine that there is any topic within Christianity that has been responsible for more debate and disagreement than the doctrine of creation. The question of whether or not God created everything in the universe is a line in the sand, so to speak, that immediately divides everyone in the world into two camps: those who believe in creation and those who don’t.[[1]](#footnote-0)But this question doesn’t just divide the world into two opposing camps, it also raises a number of secondary questions, the answers to which have frequently been the cause of further division and disagreement, especially among believers. Questions pertaining to the length of the creation days, the age of the earth, and the relationship between creation and evolution—just by way of example—have fostered great debate among Christians. These matters have often taken center stage when the doctrine of creation has been discussed and have frequently overshadowed the more fundamental aspects of it. In this article, our main focus will be to examine some of these more fundamental aspects of the doctrine of creation about which there has typically been broad consensus among Christians, as well as many of the theological deductions that flow from them.

“In the beginning, God”

The first four words of the Bible place immediate emphasis upon God. They tell us from the very beginning that before anything else in the universe existed, God already was. Nothing brought him into being. Nothing gave him existence. He was around long before anything else was. He was around long before there was even such a thing as time itself.

God’s name and the way in which it was given to Moses in Exodus 3 both confirm and highlight this independence of being. The name YHWH in verse 15, which is typically translated by the English word “Lord” (in all capital letters), is connected to the “to be” verb in verse 14. In other words, when God gave his name to Moses, he expressed that name in terms of being: “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod. 3:14). This tells us that God is the being one, the one who is. And he gives his name to Moses from the midst of a bush that was burning but not being consumed (3:2-3). In other words, the fire in the bush was not in any way dependent upon the bush for its energy to burn. It was independent, self-existent, and self-sustaining.

This is the picture of God presented to us in the opening words of the creation account. Before anything else existed, God existed. He alone is uncreated and eternal (Psa. 102:25-27; Rev. 1:8). Nothing gave him existence. Instead he gave existence to all things outside of himself.

This means that God did not need to create in order not to be lonely. He did not need to create in order for him to be able to love. He was self-sufficient; he needed nothing outside of himself. For all eternity, he had been enjoying perfect fellowship and perfect love as the three-in-one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creation was an overflow of his perfection not a manifestation of his inherent imperfection or lack.[[2]](#footnote-1)

God created “the heavens and the earth”

When the Bible says that God “created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), it does not mean to suggest that he only created those two things and nothing else. The Bible is here employing a figure of speech called merism, in which two contrasting terms are used to express totality. We do the same thing regularly in our marriage vows when we pledge to love one another “for better or for worse” or “for richer or for poorer.” Our pledge is not just for the two extremes of life but for the extremes and everywhere in between. We are using two contrasting words to express totality. We are promising to love one another all the time, regardless of circumstance. Likewise, when the Bible says that God “created the heavens and the earth,” it is saying that God created the heavens and the earth (the extremes) and everything in between. It is expressing totality. The point is that God has created everything in the universe (cf. Gen. 14:19).[[3]](#footnote-2)

Even though God has created all things, he has not created them all alike in significance or value. The Bible is clear that humankind is the apex of God’s creative work. Human beings were the final creative act of God on the final “day” of creation, created in the image of God and charged with exercising dominion over everything else (Gen. 1:24-8). And while we don’t know exactly what all the image of God entails, it is fairly obvious from Scripture that it at least involves a creative element. In other words, it appears that God has created human beings to mirror His image as creator. To be sure, human beings cannot and do not create in the exact same way that God does—a point to which we will return shortly. But it still remains true that part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that we are made to be vice-creators (Gen. 1:27-8; cf. Gen. 3:7; Gen. 6:14-16; Gen. 8:6; Gen. 11:4; just by way of example).

God is source and sustainer of everything

The fact that God is the only uncreated and eternal being in the universe, who is also creator of all, means that he is the source and sustainer of everything that exists. We not only “have our being” in him, but we “live and move” in him as well (Acts 17:28; cf. Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 3:7). This means that every person in the universe is subject to God and dependent upon him as creator and sustainer. No one is autonomous or independent. We are all derived and dependent creatures. We belong to God, the absolute owner of everything (Gen. 14:19, 22), and that means that we are accountable to him (Rom. 3:19).[[4]](#footnote-3)

It is this aspect of the doctrine of creation that paves the way for the gospel. No doubt this is why Herman Bavinck, Francis Schaeffer, and many others emphasized the importance of the doctrine of creation as, what Bavinck called, the “starting point of true religion.”[[5]](#footnote-4)Without accountability, the need for grace and forgiveness evaporates. No doubt this is also why so many non-Christians seek to undercut or disprove the doctrine of creation. It gives them the freedom to do what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25) without incurring any kind of feelings of guilt.

God created everything good

These initial aspects of the doctrine of creation also mean that good and evil are not competing powers in the universe, as dualistic worldviews might suggest. God is good, and the creation he brings into existence reflects that goodness. Evil—which I take to be an anti-God posture, what the Bible calls ungodliness—was not a part of the original creation in any way. It was introduced into the universe by the very creatures that God made.[[6]](#footnote-5)Evil is, therefore, subject to the sovereignty of God in the same way that those creatures who choose to reject him are as well.

God invested his creatures with responsibility and significance

The fact that God created humankind in his image and invested us with the right to exercise dominion means that we are stewards of his creation and accountable to him for how well we care for what he has made. We are responsible not only for how we personally take care of God’s creation as individuals, but for how everyone else does as well. After all, we are our brother’s keeper (Gen. 4:9; Mal. 2:10).

In addition to being created to be creators, human beings are also equally invested with significance and value. There is no hierarchy among humankind in God’s creation. No one tribe, tongue, or race of people is created to exercise dominion over all others. Every human being is created in God’s image, regardless of what he or she might look like, where he or she might live, or what he or she might do. In this sense, it is proper to speak of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man (Mal. 2:10) in this sense. Every human being receives life from the same “parent.” This means that there is no place in the world for racism or prejudice of any kind based on skin color, hair color, gender, height, weight, ancestry, or anything else that is a part of the created order.

The diversity in creation is suggestive of the Trinity

The human race is incredibly diverse. Differences in physical appearance, gender, mental capability, personality, gifting, and relationship all exist in the human race from the moment of creation. The fact that God has created the entire human race in His own image indicates that his image obviously encompasses the incredible diversity that we see all around us. That is at least suggestive of the diversity, or maybe better, complexity, that exists within God himself. To be sure, the creation account does not make this explicit. But it does make more suggestions in this direction by making special mention of the “Spirit of God” (Gen. 1:2) and by recording the way that God speaks about himself in the plural: “let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added).

This isn’t a full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity. But it is at least a hint in that direction. And it is enough of a hint that we should not be surprised at the full-fledged doctrine. It was foreshadowed in the diversity of the image of God in creation.[[7]](#footnote-6)

God’s creating is not the same as human creating

As mentioned previously, God’s creative action is different from ours. When we make something, we use pre-existing materials to do it. We do not create anything that did not already exist. But when God created the universe, he did not use anything that was pre-existing, because “in the beginning” God alone existed. This means that God created the universe ex nihilo, or out of nothing. He did not use pre-existing material. That is the point of Hebrews 11:3, where the apostle says that “what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” It is the point of Romans 4:17, which tells us that God “calls into existence the things that do not exist.” And it would also seem to be the point of the Hebrew word bārā’ in Genesis 1:1 (translated “created”). This word, when it occurs in the Qal stem, is only and always used of God and the kind of creating that He alone does (see Ex. 34:10).[[8]](#footnote-7)It is never used to describe the secondary creation that human beings carry out by manipulating things that already exist.

If creation is not ex nihilo then a difficult theological issue results: where did the pre-existent material come from? If we say that it was created, then many questions arise: Who created it? When? Why? Was God not able to create it? What is the relationship between this “creator” and the God of the Bible? If we say that the pre-existent material is eternal, then we are saying that a rival god exists who, like the God of the Bible, is eternal and uncreated but who, unlike the God of the Bible, is wholly impersonal and uncommunicative. The Bible’s teaching about the nature of God requires ex nihilo creation. Anything less would undercut the Bible’s picture of God as sovereign, eternal, holy, and free.

God’s act of creating is also different from ours in the way in which it was carried out. God spoke his creation into being (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24, 26; Ps. 33:6; 148:5). He did not put it together by hand or with the use of special tools. He spoke, and it was. This tells us that our God is a communicating God. He is a God who speaks and makes himself known (Rom. 1:18-20). Once we understand this, we should not be surprised that he would later choose to reveal himself specially in the written word and in the person of his Son—the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1-2; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2).

God’s creative work may not be identical with that of human beings, but it clearly sets the pattern for it. Not only is human creativity a product of God’s work in creation, but the weekly cycle of work and rest is as well. This weekly pattern is mirrored in eternity, as human beings work for their lifetimes and then enjoy an eternal Sabbath rest in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of creation, therefore, ultimately points us to that reality and calls us to “strive to enter that rest” by holding fast to Jesus Christ by faith to the end (Heb. 4:9-11).

FURTHER READING

Herman Bavinck, In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology

Henri Blocher, In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis. See a Book Review here.

D. A. Carson, “A Theology of Creation in 12 Points”

D. A. Carson, Video: The God who Made Everything

John D. Currid, A Study Commentary on Genesis

Jonathan Edwards, A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World

Anthony A. Hoekema, Created in God’s Image

Douglas F. Kelly, Creation and Change: Genesis 1.1 – 2.4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms. Also see Blog Comments

Ian A. McFarland, From Nothing: A Theology of Creation. Also Video Interview

Matthew Miller, “The Bible’s Conflict-Free Creation Story”

Guy M. Richard, “Where Did Satan Come From?”

Paul Tripp, “The Doctrine of Creation”

E. J. Young, In the Beginning: Genesis Chapters 1 to 3 and the Authority of Scripture

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https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-doctrine-of-creation/

1. Herman Bavinck calls the doctrine of creation “the starting point of true religion.” It thus divides the world into believers and unbelievers. See Bavinck, In the Beginning, 23. Francis Schaeffer similarly believed that the doctrine of creation was so important for evangelism that, if he had an hour with a non-Christian, he would spend the first fifty-five minutes on the topic of creation and the last five minutes on an actual presentation of the gospel. See Kelly, Creation and Change, 23–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. I am reminded of the words of Jonathan Edwards in which he argues that perfect fullness carries with it the propensity to overflow (see Edwards, End for Which God Created the World, ch. 1.4). Thus creation is not an expression of God’s need but of His perfect fullness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. See Currid, Commentary on Genesis, 1:59. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Paul Tripp helpfully exposes three lies that we live with, each of which he says is resolved in the doctrine of creation: the lies of autonomy, relativity, and self-sufficiency. See his article on "The Doctrine of Creation". [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Bavinck, In the Beginning, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. In my article "Where Did Satan Come From?" I argue that because evil is the absence or rejection of God, it did not have to be created. It is not a substance but an attitude or posture, an anti-God posture. All that is required for evil to exist, therefore, is for creatures to exist who have the freedom to accept or reject God—i.e., who have the freedom to assume an anti-God posture. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ian A. McFarland has a helpful section on the diversity of God’s creation and how that may be reflected within God himself in his book From Nothing, 67–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. See the discussion in Currid, Commentary on Genesis, 1:59; and in Kelly, Creation and Change, 84–86. See also Blocher, vIn the Beginning, 63. While it is true that Genesis 1:27 presents an occasion in which the Qal stem of this verb is used to portray God’s creation of Adam and Eve from what appears to be “pre-existing material”—from dirt in Adam’s case and a rib in Eve’s—it is also true that God Himself created the “pre-existing material” in both cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)