

Biologos

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March 28, 2018

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Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here, and to be able to join in the very interesting and valuable work that Biologos does. It is a difficult task to speak about a subject that covers millions and millions of years in the 25 minutes I have been allotted. I'll not take precious minutes to express the obvious fact that I am pleased to be here, not to express the other equally obvious fact that I am not certain I belong in this learned gathering. But even so, I am looking forward to the rest of the time we shall be able to spend in conversation, discussion, and exploration.

There are few Christian doctrines that have been more discussed and more misinterpreted than the doctrine of creation. There is no other doctrine that has been used as much as this one as a weapon by theological imperialists to suppress scientific inquiry. And there is also no other doctrine that has been more assailed by scientific imperialists.

As a theologian, let me first of all deal very briefly with what I have just called theological imperialism. Some time ago it was customary to refer to theology as "the queen of the sciences." As such, theology claimed to have the right to judge and direct every other form of knowledge and exploration. The error was not so much in the claim itself as it was in forgetting that if theology is a queen it must reflect the nature of the king whom it serves. This is a king

who rules by love and service, by giving himself up for the benefit of others. If theology is to serve that king, whatever authority it has it must exert in love, humility, and service.

Now back to the doctrine of creation. Creation is not primarily nor exclusively about Genesis. Indeed, Irenaeus, one of the most prominent early Christian theologians, never referred to the records in Genesis as “the story of creation,” but rather as “the story of the beginning of creation.” Creation is not completed. God is Creator not only at the beginning of things, but also to their end. In discussing creation, sound Christian theology must not limit itself to the stories in Genesis. When we speak of the Christian doctrine of creation, we are speaking of all that exists from beginning to end, both in terms of time and in terms of space.

As a way to open conversation, I shall try to outline three main points about the doctrine of creation: first, what it tells us about God; second, what it tells us about creation itself; and third, how it responds to the most fundamental of all questions, “Why?”

First, the doctrine of creation is an important word on the love of God. It is traditional to refer to God as a parent. That metaphor is most often used to refer to God as the loving provider of all things and protector against all evil. But we tend to forget another important element in a parent’s love. When responsible parents decide to have a child, they have decided to create someone who is not themselves. While this new person will somehow be like them, it will certainly be a different person. It will not only be capable of rebellion and disobedience; it will

certainly rebel and disobey. And yet we decide to create this new person. We do this because we already love this child, and are ready to keep on loving it despite any possible rebelliousness or disobedience. Likewise, creation is an act of love. The God whom we worship is loving enough to create us after the divine image even knowing that we will rebel and disobey. This is the first and most important consideration regarding the doctrine of creation.

Secondly, the doctrine of creation also tells us something important about the created world. It is a world that is loved by God. When Christianity first appeared in the world, there were many religions and philosophies that saw the physical world as an impediment in the pursuit of spiritual reality. Throughout the history of the church, there have been many who have tended in that direction. In the pews of our churches there are still many who believe that the spiritual is important, but the physical is not. Some have even used the Bible to prove this point. For instance, in the third century the famous theologian and philosopher Origen, recognizing that there are in the first chapters of Genesis two parallel but different stories of creation, decided that the first had to do with an original purely spiritual creation, and that the second with a physical creation that God made as a temporary abode for higher spiritual beings. This is why in the first story God simply says “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” and then, “male and female he created them,” while in the second story God makes the man out of dirt, and the woman out of the man’s rib.

The doctrine of creation, properly understood, precludes such notions. Scripture clearly tells us that whatever God creates is good – no matter whether it is a physical or a spiritual creation. Scripture clearly says that “God so loved the world.” It does not say that God so loved the spiritual world, or that God so loved our souls. Redemption is not just about spiritual creation. No matter how difficult it may be for us to conceive of this, redemption is the goal of all creation, and not just of spiritual creation.

In practical terms, this means that the doctrine of creation is not only a reminder of God’s love, but also a call to love what God loves and to care for what God cares for. In the Genesis account, we are told that humankind was created to tend to the garden and to till the earth. This is still the responsibility of all humans in this small speck of the universe that we call Earth. No matter how small that speck may be, and how small each of us may be within it, the doctrine of creation reminds us that, because we bear the image of God, we have a responsibility that far surpasses the limits of our apparent smallness. If astronomy might make us think that we are less than insects in a vast universe, that same astronomy also reminds us that we are the astronomers.

Thirdly, we come to the most important question, both for science and for theology: “Why?” When science studies a phenomenon, it asks why. When theology looks at any event it also asks why. In the last few centuries science has made tremendous strides in explaining the *why* of all sorts of phenomena. Why do gases expand as they heat? Because electrons... Why are there

dominant traits in the process of heredity? Because chromosomes... Why does diabetes affect eyesight? Because sugar... All of these are valuable and fundamental explanations. They are the foundation of much that we are able to do today, hopefully for good, but unfortunately too often also for evil.

Throughout history, and even long before the emergence of modern science, humans have asked *why* things happen. Why does a volcano erupt? Because the gods are angry. Why are our crops so abundant this year? Because we sacrificed to the earth before we planted. Thus, it is not just a trait of science, but a common human urge, to find out the “why” of things, and to respond in terms of a “because.”

However, when we ask “Why?” there is also another sort of answer. All the answers I have just mentioned, some right and some not, are “because.” But throughout history, and even today in most of our daily life, things are explained not only in terms of their “because,” but also in terms of their “so that.” If we ask a medical student *why* she is reading a book on anatomy, she may well respond that she is doing so *because* her professor so instructed. But she may also tell us that she is reading it *so that* she can become a physician. I am here today not just *because* a plane brought me, but also *so that* I could speak to you.

This can also be expressed in more technical terms. What we today would call “causes,” the “because” of things, philosophers and theologians through the ages would call “efficient

causes.” The other reason why things happen, the “*so thats*” that makes them happen, they would call “final”, or “teleological,” causes. When medieval philosophers, for instance, declared that God is the “final cause” of all things, they did not mean that if we go back far enough in the sequence of efficient causes we will find God. They did believe that. But what they meant by affirming that God is the “final cause” of all things was that all things find their purpose in God. In the last few centuries the final causes have been reserved for everyday life, and generally excluded from systematic reasoning. This is largely due to the enormous success of the physical sciences – and what the physical sciences study is precisely the efficient causes of phenomena. Still, even the most rational physical scientist makes constant daily decisions on the basis of a *so that* – that is to say, for a “final cause.”

Does a billiard ball fall into a pocket *because* another ball hit it – that is, moved by an efficient cause –, or does the first ball hit it *so that* it will fall into the pocket – that is, moved by a final cause? Probably both. Both are perfectly logical and absolutely necessary explanations. Without a *because*, the game could not be played; and without a *so that*, it would not be worth playing! Without a *because*, we would not know how to determine our actions, how to eat or how to stay alive; and without a *so that*, life becomes a mechanized burden. Without a logical series of “because” behind every event, scientists could not do their work. Without a “so that” – even and unrecognized “so that” – there would be no reason to do it.

In Scripture, things happen both *because* and *so that*. Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt *because* his brothers were jealous of him. But he was also sold into slavery in Egypt *so that* he might save his brothers from famine.

The doctrine of creation is not just about *because*; it is also about *so that*. Unfortunately, too often believers have used the doctrine of creation to invade a field of scientific inquiry that explains the *because* of things. They have claimed, for instance, that evolution must be wrong because the doctrine of creation says that the world was made in six days. They have dared to contradict what scientists and scholars have discovered through years of patient exploration by the simple expedient of quoting a Bible verse. And, equally unfortunately, too often science has been employed to claim that there is no *so that*, no purpose, in the world it studies, on the flimsy argument that the scientific method does not allow for such a thing. But the truth is that the Bible does not give us particular guidance as to the efficient causes of phenomena. And pure science can neither affirm nor deny the existence of final causes in creation. Anyone who claims that there is scientific proof that there are no final causes turns out to be as imperialistic as the inquisitors who rejected the discoveries of Galileo because their theology had no place for them.

While the doctrine of creation has often been linked to the six days of creation, the truth is that even a rapid reading of the first two chapters of Genesis shows that such a claim does violence not only to science, but also to Genesis itself. In the first chapter of Genesis we find a narrative

built around seven days, six for creation and one for rest. In this story, humankind is created on the sixth day, after everything else, including the animals, has been created. In the second chapter there is no mention of days, and the order of creation is different, for here God first makes the man, then the animals, and finally the woman to be his ideal companion and counterpart. What many enemies of evolution claim to be the biblical story they are defending, is actually their own creation out of two different stories. Quite often in seeking to harmonize the two stories they miss their central affirmations – but that is a matter for another occasion. The point is that the supposedly biblical defense against the also supposed attacks of evolution is not biblical.

Likewise, and largely in response to such pseudo-biblical attacks, many scientists claim that the efficient causes of phenomena that they study are all there is, and that any notion of a purpose or a “so that” in human life or in the universe itself is illogical. In so doing, they go far beyond the limits of a truly scientific method, as if something that cannot be proved by a particular method must therefore be false. Thus, if the conservative Christian who rejects science because it does not agree with what the Bible says is as irrationally stubborn as the inquisitors who condemned Galileo, the anti-religious scientist who rejects faith simply because it cannot be proven by the same methods by which one can prove that water freezes when it is cold is as naïve as a Russian cosmonaut some years ago who open returning from his actually very small voyage beyond the atmosphere of the earth claimed that he had been in the sky and had not seen God.

In brief, the doctrine of creation that we must rediscover and reaffirm is not merely a way to explain the beginning of things. It is a way to express first of all the love of God; secondly, as a consequence of that love, the value of all created reality; and finally, on the basis of the first two, the conviction that there is a purpose, a final cause not only for human life, but for the entire created universe.

Thank you. I am looking forward to our further conversation on these topics, knowing that it will certainly be a *creative* conversation.

