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Back to the Beginning Creation Shapes the Entire Story

Charles P. Arand

Do people, both inside the church and outside the church, hear our story as going something like this? “God created the world and he created Adam and Eve. They sinned. God then sent his Son into the world to save us. We now look forward to leaving this earth behind and going to heaven.” If so, is it possible that they have come to hear it unintentionally as an escapist narrative in which the impression is given that we don’t really belong here? The earth is not our home. And so we look to a day when we are taken off this earth and leave it behind.

But might we be missing (or at least not emphasizing) the important place of creation within the story? For Christianity, the story and doctrine of creation serves more than as background scenery or a stage for the story of redemption. It is integral to the whole story.¹ The opening chapter of the Bible introduces us to the essential characters, elements, and themes that shape the entire story that follows. I would like to highlight four significant moments in the Genesis account: 1) the creation of the cosmos out of nothing; 2) the creation of life on earth; 3) the creation of humans as stewards of life on earth; and 4) the establishment of sabbath joy.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gn 1:1). This verse summarizes everything that happens in Genesis 1.² Now, to say that God created the heavens and the earth is to say that God created everything from the smallest quark to the largest galaxy. Nothing exists outside of God that he has not made. For this reason, the early church confessed that God created everything out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*).

This confession provides us with the most basic ontological distinction that can be made. Where Platonism arranges reality into spiritual-material categories, the Bible organizes reality into the categories of Creator-creation. The distinction between Creator and creatures is a far more fundamental distinction than any distinction between us and other creatures.³ This has several far-reaching consequences.

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The Creator Is, by Definition, God

The Creator-creature distinction is key for confessing what makes God . . . God. So throughout the Scriptures, there is one thing and one thing only that would go on a job resume or job description to qualify one to be God. It goes something like this. “If you created everything that exists, then the job is yours. If you did not create everything that exists, then you need not apply!” Why?

To say that God created everything “out of nothing” means that God did not create out of pre-existing materials external to himself (as for example, an artist who works with watercolors or oils) as if the universe existed eternally alongside him.⁴ Nor did God create out of any internal need as if he needed the world to complete himself.⁵ Both of these examples make God dependent in some sense upon the world. But *creatio ex nihilo* affirms that God is not dependent upon the cosmos; the cosmos is dependent upon God.⁶ In other words, God created the world freely, “out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy.”⁷

This distinction of Creator-creature becomes key for confessing the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed. The debate with Arius centered on the question of whether or not the pre-incarnate Son of God was the Creator or a creature. The Creed took its cue from 1 Corinthians 8 by confessing “one Lord Jesus Christ . . . through whom all things are made.”⁸ The Nicene Creed then draws on Basil the Great’s work, *On the Holy Spirit*, to confess the Spirit as Creator, namely, the “Lord and giver of life.”⁹

So how does God create? By speaking. This speaking, for Luther, enables one to confess both God’s distinction from the world as well as God’s immanence within the world.

God creates by speaking a performative word that calls into existence those things that did not exist (Rom 4:17). “As the Creator, God’s effective word, which calls the creature into being, both says what it creates and creates what it says.”¹⁰ Thus, Luther suggests that God has his own grammar. “He does not speak grammatical words; He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God.” As a result, when God says “let there be light” light comes into existence. Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God, in fact, only one single syllable or letter in comparison with the entire creation.”¹¹

God does not speak a creative word only once and then stand aloof from his creation as if he were an absentee father. Instead, God continues to engage his creation by speaking to his creation. “Let the earth sprout forth. . . . Be fruitful and multiply.”¹² In a sense, He places his word of blessing into creation as its creative power. One might say that God’s promise is contained in “*seed and root*.”¹³ Or as Luther puts it, “The Word is present in the very body of the hen and in all living creatures; the heat with which the hen keeps her eggs warm is the result of the divine Word”¹⁴ And that promise remains effective to this day.¹⁵

In speaking to his creation, God places his word into his creatures and enlists them as the instruments through which he works.¹⁶ He does this work “in, with, and under” his creatures. Creatures become the gloves on God’s hands (*larvae dei*). In a sense, God enlists his creatures as “junior” partners. And so God works through earth to bring forth life (vegetation). He works through creatures to bring forth successive generations.

As God works through his creation, he voluntarily limits himself (or allows his will to be resistible when working through means) so as to allow each creature to contribute to life in God’s creation. He invites them to participate in—and even contribute to—his ongoing creative activity. So, for example, when two people choose to marry, their choice of each other and their respective DNA contribute to bring forth a unique child. The same applies to every other creature on earth. And in this way more creativity emerges within creation.

And God keeps on speaking all the way through the Bible. Whenever God utters a word of judgment, creation comes undone. Conversely, the word of forgiveness becomes the power of the new creation (“where there is forgiveness there is life and salvation”). The word of justification creates a new reality. The word of blessing in the Lord’s Supper continues to be effective to this day.¹⁷

We Are, by Definition, Creatures

If creation “out of nothing” defines God as God, it also says something about creation. The Christian confession declares that creation is not God and neither are we—contrary to other ancient and modern accounts of origins. The ancient Gnostics maintained that the physical creation came into existence as the result of a fall by a lower level deity known as Sophia. Today eco-feminist accounts suggest that we were born out of the body of God with the result that we are in some way divine ourselves.¹⁸ But we are neither accidental mistakes nor divine beings.

In the Large Catechism Luther asks, what does it mean to confess that God is the Creator? He unexpectedly answers that it means to confess that we are creatures!¹⁹ To be a creature, a human creature, is fundamental to my entire existence. It constitutes my first and core identity.²⁰ And this does not demean us. To the contrary, Luther contends, “It is a great honor to be called a creature. It is a costly, great thing, so it is yet here a much higher and greater thing to be God’s work and creature.”²¹ I am a human creature who in Christ has now also become a child of God. So, what does it mean to be a creature of God?

First and foremost, to confess our creatureliness is to confess that we are by definition contingent and dependent upon God. None of us has life of ourselves. Creation is not “a *self*-sustaining biosystem.”²² We have to look outside ourselves for life. And so Luther assumes that as creatures we cannot live without trust in a god. Thus the question of the first commandment is not, “will we have a god?” But “who or what is your God?” The Creator-creature distinction provides the basis for the first commandment, which essentially says, “don’t confuse the creation with the Creator!”

Second, as a creature we are accountable to God. We did not set up the world to run according to our notions. Instead, we find ourselves in a world that we did not create. And since this is God's world, we as creatures are accountable to the Creator. Perhaps one of the reasons that it is difficult to speak of the law of God and the wrath of God today, is that we no longer see ourselves as creatures and thus no longer see ourselves as accountable for our handling of his creation.²³

Isn't this emphasis on creatureliness not a theme that runs throughout the entire story down to the present day? Isn't the storyline of Scripture about human creatures who do not want to be creatures? They do not want to live dependent upon the gifts of God or live in dependence upon him. Early on, we wanted to rise above our creatureliness, to transcend our creatureliness and thus to become like God. That would put us in control.²⁴ And to that end, human creatures rejected their Creator...ultimately putting the Creator to death on the cross.²⁵

Salvation is thus not about God delivering us from our creatureliness. To the contrary, Christ restores us to our creatureliness. By contrast, some religions (e.g., Mormonism) promise a salvation that transcends our creatureliness, to somehow make us little gods or make us divine. But in the case of Jesus, the Creator became a male human creature to restore our creatureliness. And he rose and ascended and sits at the right hand of God both as God and as a human creature.

And so as Lutherans we confess that we are justified by *faith* alone. What does that mean other than that the gospel restores us to our creatureliness? To be saved by faith, to live by faith, restores us to that relationship for which God first created us. It is a relationship in which God as Creator and redeemer gives life to us and as creatures we receive that life from God. As James Nestingen has put it, "To be glad and content to be a creature—that is redemption!"²⁶

Lord and Giver of Life

"The earth was without form and void" (Gn 1:2).²⁷ Genesis 1 not only speaks to the absolutely unique work of God in creating everything out of nothing. It also devotes considerable space to describing how God gave form and shape to the earth and then how God filled the earth with living creatures. That is to say, God who is life itself, now gives life to his creation. For this is what God does. He gives life.²⁸ And thus the earth becomes home to life . . . a magnificent abundance and array of life!

God's Life-Supporting Planet

In the first three days of creation, God prepares the earth as a planet on which life could flourish. In doing so, God creates the conditions and supplies the provisions for the earth to become what some scientists call the "Goldilocks planet."²⁹ That is to say, it is just right for life! And that life defines and distinguishes our planet from every other planet in the solar system not to mention the larger universe. Among these provisions, Genesis mentions the sky (atmosphere), the water (hydrosphere), the land (lithosphere), and the sun and moon. Science can help us appreciate the importance of these for life on earth.³⁰

Consider the sun. Its relation to the earth makes it just right for life to thrive. The sun is not too large and not too small. It is not too bright and not too dim. The sun is not too close and not too distant. And thus the earth is not too hot (unlike Mercury and Venus) and not too cold (unlike Mars) for life. The earth resides in what some scientists call the “habitable zone.” And in that zone, the sun provides just the right amount of energy to support life on earth. The moon in turn helps to stabilize the tilt of the earth’s axis at 23.5 degrees (Mars has more wobble) relative to the sun thus contributing to the regularity of our seasons and a relatively stable climate.

Consider the atmosphere, which appears as little more than a “thin blue line” when viewed from space. It contains just the right ingredients for life on earth (twenty-one percent oxygen and seventy-eight percent nitrogen with the remaining one percent containing trace elements of carbon dioxide, methane, neon, nitrous oxide). In addition it acts as an insulating blanket as its water vapor and carbon dioxide keep the planet warm while avoiding the temperature swings of Mercury (-173 to 427 degrees Celsius). It also protects the earth by disintegrating meteors hurtling toward earth as well as by blocking harmful UV radiation of the sun. Finally, this life-sustaining atmosphere does not dissipate into space because the earth is the right size for gravity to hold it in place (unlike Mercury) while its active core generates a magnetic field that keeps the atmosphere from being stripped away by the solar wind (unlike Mars).

Consider water. If anything stands out when we see pictures of the earth from space, it is that the earth is a blue planet, a water planet. And there is perhaps nothing more essential to life than water. It is “the principal constituent of all living organisms.”³¹ We are ninety percent water when born and seventy percent water as adults. In fact, one might say with Vladimir Vernadsky some one hundred years ago that “Life” is “animated water.”³² And it is not just that water is found in a few places on earth. Liquid water is everywhere. Powered by radiation from the sun water evaporates into the atmosphere as vapor where it warms the planet. After cooling and condensing, it is drawn by gravity back down to the earth in the form of either snow or rain. As snow it deflects heat back into space and as liquid in the oceans and lakes it moderates the temperature of the land it borders.

Consider land. The earth has just the right proportion of surface area to its volume so as not to lose the heat from its molten core into space. And on this earth God provides a thin layer of topsoil that is the “fertile substrate for the initiation and maintenance of life.”³³ Rain contributes to the weathering of rocks by which minerals enter the ground to become the ingredients of cells and life. Soil enables the rain that falls to seep into underground aquifers that feed streams. It allows for plants to anchor themselves while providing the nutrients for feeding plants. It also “acts as our earth’s primary cleansing and recycling medium, in effect as a ‘living filter’ that renders toxins and pathogens harmless and transforms them into nutrients.”³⁴

Abundance and Variety of Life!

God did not create the earth to be void of life. He “formed it to be inhabited!” (Isaiah 45:18). And so upon preparing the conditions and places for life, God summons

life to come forth from the earth itself. God speaks: “Let the earth sprout . . . let the waters bring forth . . . let the land bring forth” And what happens? A profusion of life springs forth!³⁵ God makes the earth rambunctiously and exuberantly pro-life!³⁶ And that life spreads out to cover the planet and inhabit all its spaces. The waters “swarm” and the air “teems” with living creatures of every conceivable kind.

And what was the result of God calling life forth from the earth? A dizzying number and array of creatures. How many different types of creatures did he bring forth? Consider these numbers of species that are estimated to live on earth:

Vertebrates: 5506 species of mammals; 10,065 birds; 9831 reptiles; 7044 amphibians; 32,700 fishes;

Invertebrates: 1,000,000 insects; 85,000 mollusks; 47,000 crustaceans; 2175 corals; 102,248 arachnids; 4 horseshoe crabs;

Plants: 268,000 flowering plants; 16,236 mosses; 12,000 ferns and allies; 1052 gymnosperms; 4242 green algae; 6144 red algae;

Fungi & Protists: 17,000 lichens; 31,496 mushrooms; 3127 brown algae.

Altogether, scientists estimate that there are between one million and ten million species of living creatures on earth today.³⁷ Altogether, they make the earth a spectacle of life.

Note how God brings forth all of these creatures in a way that complements or “fits” the places from which he calls them and for which he makes them. Psalm 104 brings this out particularly well. Storks and fir trees belong together. High mountains and wild goats belong together. Cranes and marshes belong together. Lions and savannas belong together. Whales and oceans belong together. They belong together in that they have been given abilities by God that enable them to live in those places and in turn those places provide support for their lives. One cannot think of one without the other.

We cannot assume that God made all of these creatures simply for our purposes since Adam and Eve did not need them for food or clothing prior to the fall.³⁸ Instead, God gave them their own value and integrity. He gave them their own places to live on earth.³⁹ And he provides for them (Ps 147:8–9; Ps 104:21, 27). A striking example of this is found in Job 38–41 where God shows Job how he cares for the wild creatures that live apart from human culture. God sends rain in the wilderness where no human dwells (Job 38:25–27; cf Ps 147:8). And he feeds the young ravens when they “cry to God for help, and wander about for lack of food (Job 38:41).⁴⁰

God did not just provide for the mere existence or minimal survival of his creatures. He aimed for the exuberance of life. As the psalmist puts it, “You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for

joy” (Ps 65:11–13). He intended for whales to frolic in the ocean, cranes to dance on marshes, and for horses to stomp their hooves.

And today? Creation is not as God had made it. Since the fall, life is a struggle. Every creature struggles to live and not die. But God is a God of life. He does not discard his creation away and start over from scratch. He will not let go of life on earth. And so, God makes a covenant of life (three times in Genesis 9 and again in Hosea 2:18–20) with every living creature, “the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth.”⁴¹

And so, God continues to be active in his creation. Bayer points out that for Luther, God is not an idle, inactive God (*deus otiosus*) who rests his hands in his lap twiddling his fingers. To the contrary, God is the ever active God (*deus actuosissimus*).⁴² And so in between creation and the new creation God continually “counterpunches” sin and its effects. He persistently renews life daily and yearly in the midst of its “perpetual perishing.”⁴³ He continually opens new pathways for life with every new birth and every crocus that pokes through the winter snows. Life continues to come forth. As Luther puts it, “to create is always to make a new thing” (*creare semper novum facere*).⁴⁴

Ultimately, however, God does not just thwart death, he defeats death and brings forth eternal life in the creaturely body of his incarnate Son. That is the message of the resurrection. So just as “the wages of sin is death” so “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.”⁴⁵ Forgiveness becomes the power of new life. Guilt brings the curse and with it death. But forgiveness undoes the curse and brings life. But both occur within the larger narrative of God’s gift of life or bestowal of life upon his creation from the garden to the garden city (Genesis 1 to Revelation 21–22).

Stewards of Life on Earth

“Let us make man in our image . . . and let them have dominion over . . .” (Gen 1:26). The next significant moment that captures our attention in Genesis 1 is the creation of humans. Genesis’ account of our creation informs us of what we are and who we are. It shows us that our first and primary identity consists in being creatures of God. More specifically, we are human creatures enlisted by God to look after life on earth.

Made from the Earth for Life on the Earth

The first thing we might say about God’s human creatures is that *God made us from the earth for life on the earth*. We belong here. In this regard we are not unique, for we share this characteristic with every other creature on earth. That is to say, we are embodied and embedded creatures on earth.

God did not create us as disembodied spirits like the angels. God made *Adam* from the *adamah*. To borrow from St. Augustine, “our bodies are the earth we carry.” We are embodied creatures and our bodies bind us to the earth. Air flows through us as we inhale and exhale. We drink and perspire water. We ingest the earth with the food we eat. We are so bound to the earth that when we travel into outer space, what must we bring with us? Portions of the earth: air, water, and food. Without them we die. God made us living creatures. To be alive (to have *nefesh*⁴⁶) in the Old Testament means to be animated, namely, to move across space. We are thus animated bodies. In

the Old Testament, plants (unlike humans and animals) are not considered “living” as they were not perceived to move across space.

Embodied creatures need places to live and move. Thus we are also embedded creatures. God embedded us on the earth among other creatures in particular places at particular times. Consider how important places are in the Bible. The garden of Eden was home for Adam and Eve. And then they lost their home. The people of Israel spent years wandering in the wilderness longing for a new home . . . the promised land. And ultimately, the Old Testament speaks of a future home, a new Jerusalem. And so we move from the garden of Genesis 2 to the garden city of Revelation 21–22.

Places are important, for they are where we live out our lives in the midst of God’s other creatures. Wendell Berry thus defines life as all that happens to us over time in particular places.⁴⁷ These places define the uniqueness of individual creatures. We move through these places and live in them. In them we experience the seasons of creation, the rhythms of daily life, and the passage of years. It is here, that we live with mates, have young ones, feed them, and make our homes. Life is a “storied residence.”⁴⁸

Made from the Earth to Look after Life on the Earth

Not only are we made from the earth for life on the earth. But we have been made in the image of God and given the task of looking out for life on earth. In this regard, we are unique among— all the creatures on earth. We might say in Lutheran terms that this was and remains our first vocation. For it is the first commission that God gave to newly created Adam and Eve.

Although Genesis 1:26–28 remains an infamous passage in some environmental circles⁴⁹ we need not shy away from the language of dominion or rule. It does not mean that everything exists for us to use however we please. Instead, dominion appears to be connected with the image of God. In other words, our dominion should mirror God’s own character and dominion over creation—and by extension, Christ’s own reign over creation. And when God rules, it is for the benefit of the ruled. Psalm 72 supplies a good example in which everything flourishes under the rule of a righteous king.⁵⁰

This means that before the fall, Adam and Eve were to tend the garden so that it would continue to flourish. And Noah provides an example of dominion in a post-Fall world when he is instructed to take animals into the ark and “keep them alive with you” (Gn 6:19). Indeed, James Limburg suggests out that the animal list in Genesis 6:19–20, 7:14, 21, 8:17 recalls the listing in Genesis 1:26–28. He argues that dominion here means to “rescue them, to nurture them, and finally to set them free to roam upon the earth.”⁵¹

So although God made us from the earth along with other creatures, he also made us unique as humans in two further ways. First, other creatures are mostly confined to their places and niches. Humans are not. We live in mountains, deserts, forests, and cities. Second, other creatures can only look after their own lives. God gave us the capacity to look out for other creatures. He gave us the capacity to extend our concerns beyond human concerns so as to embrace the needs of the nonhuman world as well.

But being made in the image of God also suggests that God gave us the ability to create as a reflection of his creativity. Of course, we do not create out of nothing.

Instead, we rework that which has already been made. Adam cultivates the garden... hence the word, "culture." Culture is the reworking of creation.⁵² It would come to entail the development of art, music, and tools (what we might call technology). But even here, the development of culture does not take place apart from nature (though we might use it to escape nature). Instead it takes place within nature and is dependent upon nature.

Of course, human history is replete with examples of how humans became puffed up with their own accomplishments. It has happened repeatedly from the tower of Babel down through human history to the present age. Today it is said that we now live in the "age of humans" (the anthropocene epoch).⁵³ We want to be in control. We seek to free ourselves from a perceived "crippling dependency" upon God, his creation, and our frail bodies.⁵⁴ But it is not without consequences for other creatures and for us.

One of those consequences involves pushing other species into extinction through either overhunting or habitat destruction. Henry Beetle Hough, reflected on the significance of extinction with regard to the Heath Hen in Martha's Vineyard in 1933, "There is no survivor, there is no future, there is no life to be created in this form again. We are looking upon the uttermost finality which can be written, glimpsing the darkness which will not know another ray of light. We are in touch with the reality of extinction."⁵⁵ Rolston puts it more succinctly, "When humans extinguish species, they stop the story."⁵⁶

But there are consequences for us as well. The very earth that gave us life now deals death. Adam sins and the *adamah* gets cursed. Pope John II warned,

Man thinks he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.⁵⁷

And civilizations have fallen as the earth refuses to yield its bounty do to over erosion of its soil due to deforestation, or desertification, or over salinization of the soil.⁵⁸

Ultimately, we cannot fix ourselves or the creation. Only Christ can restore us and his earth. And he has done so and will do so. In the meantime, we find ourselves dealing with a "world of wounds."⁵⁹ We no longer exercise the dominion of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Our dominion is by "industry and skill" and "cunning and deceit."⁶⁰ Even our best efforts to protect and restore fall short. Wendell Berry expresses well our situation today when he says, "An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars."⁶¹

As Christians we care for a groaning creation. In fact, Robert Saler suggests that "*Every act of care is an act of care for the dying*, and this applies as much to the earth and its creatures as it does to the various people for whom we care (and to whom we must one day say goodbye)." He continues, "It is an act of care that affirms the value of life

even in the face of that life's inevitable end." And in this it becomes "a divine act of rebellion against death's reality." But it is also an act of trust for it renounces "control over outcomes. It is to refuse to tie the value of an act of care—whether for a child, a tree, or an ocean—to its efficacy in conserving the cared-for thing."⁶²

God's Rest and Delight

"And he rested on the seventh day" (Gn 2:2). God completes his work of creation in the final act of the Genesis 1.⁶³ Where verse one opened by speaking of God creating heaven and earth, Genesis 2:1 caps the seven days by noting that God created heaven and earth *and all its host*, that is, everything in the earth. God's work culminates in rest on the seventh day. David Adams calls this state of rest, "the *telos*, or goal of God's creative activity." In other words, the movement toward the seventh day "reveals God's intention that this state of rest should characterize all that he had made, and should be the on-going experience of his creation"⁶⁴

So what characterizes the day of rest? Luther notes that God rested, that is to say, he was satisfied with all he had made.⁶⁵ God rested and was refreshed (Ex 31:17). One might suggest that God rejoiced in his work. The seventh day would provide the basis for setting aside a day to celebrate God's creative activity (Ex 20) and the redemptive activity (Dt 5). It also "anticipates the end-time restoration of creation to the state of rest that characterized it as the completion of God's creative activity"⁶⁶ (Heb 4).

God's Delight

So God rests on the seventh day for he is satisfied with his work. We could see this coming. Five times over the course of the preceding days, God expressed his approval by declaring that what he had made was good. The sixth time, he declared it to be "very good." God likes what he sees. Adams notes that Genesis uses the word "good" to characterize the state of rest for the physical world.⁶⁷

Now we often take God's verdict to mean that the creation was perfect. And it was. But we need to be careful how we use the word "perfect." At times, we may use it in a Platonic sense to mean that it is static and unchanging. Nothing needs to be added. For Plato, change implies imperfection. It means that something is either moving toward perfection or away from perfection.⁶⁸ But in God's creation, perfection does not exclude change. After all, we have already seen that God gave the commission to be fruitful and multiply to all of his creatures and certainly dominion entailed change including the development of culture.

Now, we may intend to say that the creation was without flaw or sin or evil. Nothing was there to mar the creation. And that is certainly true. But there is more to it. God's affirmation "connotes 'goodness' in the sense of a thing that has been brought to completion and which functions as it was intended to function."⁶⁹ Good should thus be taken in a broader sense to include beauty and harmony (*shalom*). Everything is and functions as God envisioned. Psalm 104 offers a good picture of that harmony as lions hunt by night and humans farm by day.

This goodness of creation reflected the goodness of God. The early church quickly recognized this connection. Their confession of the goodness of God's creation ran counter to the way in which many people in the first few centuries viewed the world in which they lived. For few if anyone considered this physical world to be good. The Platonists considered it to be chaotic and inferior to the immaterial world. The Gnostics considered the world to be a dungeon and our bodies as tombs.

But do we live in ways that confess the goodness of creation? At times we may speak about the corruption of the world in ways that may obscure the goodness of God's world. Here article one of the Formula of Concord is particularly helpful. It maintains the the goodness of God's work while rejecting the corruption that suffuses it. And because God valued it, he set out to reclaim it. The Son of God took on a human body. And Christ's saving work comes to us in elements of creation delivered by human creatures. God will finally raise up our bodies on the last day for life in a new creation.

So when God declares his world to be very good, he expresses his delight with it. It expresses the prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 104, "may you rejoice in all your works!"

Creation's Praise

Not only does God rest and rejoice over his creation, but he invites us to do the same. The sabbath provides time to celebrate God's amazing achievement of bringing forth a wondrous creation.

For Luther, "to sanctify means to set aside for sacred purposes or for the worship of God,"⁷⁰ namely, to "thank and praise" God. Elizabeth Achtemeier suggests that creation's praise functions as an echo of God's love. In other words, God says "It is very good! Creation then rises up and sings, "yes, life is very good indeed."⁷¹ And creation now does that with regard not only to God's original work of creation, but with regard to God's new work of creation from the cross and the tomb.

So how does the wider creation praise God? In light of Psalm 148, other creatures praise God by being what God had made them to be. Birds by being birds. Trees by being trees. As humans, we put creation's praise into words. To borrow from my colleague, Paul Raabe, "We glorify God by extolling his works!"⁷² This is what the Psalmists do. First they issue a summons to praise God and then they give the reasons for that praise by recounting God's works.⁷³ Thus the Sabbath becomes a day to tell stories of what God has done, to speak of the wonders of God, and to put into song what God has done. It is time to celebrate his accomplishment of creating this earth and the creatures that fill it.

Setting time aside to celebrate God's creation both expresses a creaturely faith that acknowledges the rule of God and is in turn strengthened by God's creative work. It provides opportunity for us to slow down and even stop. For it takes time to watch attentively and observe what God has done. This takes place in two ways.

First, we must attend to the word of God. For it is the word that gives us the lens to see creation as the amazing work of God. It equipped Irenaeus and Tertullian to see the wonders of creation as marvelous miracles—as great as anything else that God

would do in the future, including the resurrection.⁷⁴ Luther expresses himself in similar (if hyperbolic) terms when speaking about the creation of birds on the fourth day. “These things are written down and must be carefully learned that we may learn to be filled with wonderment at the power of the Divine Majesty and from those wonderful deeds build up our faith. Nothing—even raising the dead—is comparable to the wonderful work of producing a bird out of water.”⁷⁵

Second, the word of God sends us into the creation with the encouragement to pay attention to God’s handiwork all around us and not race through life with blinders on our eyes. The Old Testament writers give ample evidence of firsthand knowledge of many of the creatures and wonders about which they wrote. Luther encourages us to do the same:

We do not wonder at these things, because through our daily association with them we have lost our wonderment. But if anyone believes them and regards them more attentively, he is compelled to wonder at them, and his wonderment gradually strengthens his faith. (LW 1:49)

Basil the Great provides an excellent example of firsthand knowledge of God’s creation as he extols the wonders of trees in their roots and bark. He writes, “I have seen these wonders myself and I have admired the wisdom of God in all things.”⁷⁶ More recently, the famous French ocean explorer (and Roman Catholic) Jacques Cousteau put it well when he said that we explore to give witness to the miracle of life.⁷⁷

Conclusion

So creation is more than a stage or scenery for God’s story. It is integral to the entire story. After all, the entire story is about God’s relationship to his creation, especially to those extraordinary creatures that he had formed from the ground to look after and cultivate his creation. It is about how those remarkable creatures turned a garden filled with life into a wasteland of death. And it is about how God entered his creation, became a human creature, restored his human creatures by his death and resurrection, and thus will renew his creation. And all of this, according to Colossians 1:15–20 is made through Christ and for Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Gustav Wingren makes the important point that the Genesis comes before Exodus and the first article before the second article for a reason. They are foundational and foundations come first. He rejected attempts to make the question of knowledge central, which centers the story on us rather than on God. See Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, trans. Ross McKenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961; Wipf and Stock, 2003). See also Mark P. Surburg, “Good stuff! The material creation and the Christian faith.” *Concordia Journal* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 245–262.

² See David L. Adams, “Some Reflections on the Historicity of the Biblical Creation Account,” (a paper presented at the Dies Academicus of the Lutherischen Theologische Hochschule, Oberursel, Germany, Nov. 7, 2013).

³ See Jaroslav Pelikan, “Doctrine of creation in Lutheran Confessional Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26, no. 8 (August 1, 1955): 573.

⁴ Adams has a very good discussion on the Babylonian and Egyptian mythologies in “Some Reflections,” 5–15. This is true as well of Platonism in which the world is fashioned out of preexisting materials.

⁵ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nature, God & Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) cites a line from the play, “Green Pastures,” in which God is portrayed as saying, “I’m lonely; I’ll make me a world,” 28. Achtemeier also points out that panentheism sees God as somehow creating the world and working with the world in order to complete himself, almost a necessary form of self-expression, 28–29.

⁶ See Jaroslav Pelikan’s “Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 32, no. 2 (March 1990): 10–16. There he makes the point that the fathers were concerned to stress that creation dependent upon God in order to reject the idea that matter existed alongside God from eternity.

⁷ Bayer notes that Luther’s statement is a “precise interpretation of the creation formula ‘out of nothing’.” See, Oswald Bayer, Christine Helmer, and Richard H. Bliese, “I Believe That God Has Created Me With All That Exists: An Example of Catechetical-Systematics,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1994): 155.

⁸ Richard Bauckham refers to these verses in 1 Corinthians as Paul’s Christian interpretation of the Shema, in *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). The Formula of Concord speaks of Christ as the “almighty Lord, our Creator and redeemer” Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VIII.44 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 600.

⁹ David Maxwell suggests that Nicaea hardened the Creator-creature distinction. “Platonic Participation and the Doctrine of Creation in Cyril of Alexandria’s Commentary on John” (unpublished paper presented at the Fourth Annual Symposium in Honor of Fr. Florovsky, Princeton, NJ).

¹⁰ Johannes Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (March 2002): 5.

¹¹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5,” *Luther’s Works 1*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 21–22, 49.

¹² Bayer develops the idea of God’s address to creation. See especially his section, “Creation: Establishment and Preservation of Community,” *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 95–119.

¹³ Holmes Rolston III. “The Pasqueflower,” *Natural History: Magazine of the American Museum of Natural History* 88, no. 4 (April 1979): 8.

¹⁴ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1:53.

¹⁵ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1:75. Luther also wrote with regard to giving birth that it does not take place apart from the word, “For when God once said (Gn 1:28): ‘Be fruitful,’ that Word is effective to this day and preserves nature in a miraculous way.” So the birth of a baby today is as miraculous as was the birth of Isaac. “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 4:4. And again, “For the growth of the fruits of the field and the preservation of various kinds, this is as great as the multiplication of the loaves in the wilderness.” *LW* 4:5. See also C. S. Lewis, “Look down into every bay and almost every river. This swarming, undulating fecundity shows He is still at work thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,” *Miracles* (London: Fontana Books, 1960), 138.

¹⁶ “Our parents and all authorities—as well as anyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings.” See Large Catechism 1.26 in Kolb-Wengert, 389.

¹⁷ “For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ, which he spoke in the first institution of the Supper, were not only effective in the first Supper; they remain so.” Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VIII.75 in Kolb-Wengert, 606.

¹⁸ As an example, see Sally McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Large Catechism II.13 in Kolb-Wengert, 432. See also Henrich Holze, “Luther’s Concept of Creation: Five Remarks on His Interpretation of the First Article in the Large Catechism (1529),” in *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation (Svenska kyrkans forskningsråd och författarna)*, 1995), 23–48.

²⁰ And so the First Article teaches that “we should know and learn where we come from, what we are, and to whom we belong” (WA 45, 12, 16–17). Pelikan argues, “The fundamental category in the Biblical doctrine of man is the category ‘creature’ . . . It’s “picture of man as sinner . . . must portray him as a fallen creature.” Jaroslav Pelikan, “Doctrine of creation in Lutheran confessional theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26, no. 8 (August 1955): 569.

²¹ WA 45, 15, 1–2.

²² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 109.

²³ Hence Luther points out that if we truly believed the first article, it would “humble and terrify all of

us” Why? Because we daily misuse it as if it belonged to us and fail to acknowledge that we receive it from God. Large Catechism II.22 in Kolb-Wengert, 433.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer picks up on this thought nicely. “It [humanity] now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own Creator . . . Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Bonhoeffer also argues that disobedience is too weak a word. What takes place is “rebellion” (120). See also Oswald Bayer, who speaks of the “absurd desire of humans to become self-Creators” in “Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings,” *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (April 2004): 275–290.

²⁵ Erik Herrmann (personal conversation) also points out that in dying for our sin, Christ the Creator restores our creatureliness.

²⁶ James Nestingen (personal conversation).

²⁷ David Adams has a good insight as to water. “Water is the only thing known to ancient man that has substance but no inherent form. Thus water quite naturally comes to represent chaos, i.e., unformed matter.” “Some Reflections,” 8.

²⁸ David Maxwell points out that for the early church fathers, life was a divine attribute and gift. Creatures do not have life in and of themselves. They receive life only as they participate in God’s life. See “Platonic Participation and the Doctrine of Creation in Cyril of Alexandria’s Commentary on John.” See also Wingren’s chapter on “The Creator and Life,” in *Creation and Law*, 18–31.

²⁹ Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008). See also, Peter D. Ward and Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life Is Uncommon in the Universe* (New York: Copernicus SpringerVerlag, 2000).

³⁰ What is presented in the following paragraphs (unless otherwise noted) is dependent upon information about the earth in comparison with other planets in the solar system provided by Brian Cox, *Wonders of the Solar System* (New York: Harper Design, 2013).

³¹ Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of the Soil* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 32.

³² Hillel, quoted on p. 32.

³³ Hillel, 23.

³⁴ Hillel, 24.

³⁵ Holmes Rolston III. “The Bible and Ecology,” *Interpretation: Journal of Bible and Theology* 50 (1996): 16–26. “Preaching on the wonder of creation,” *Journal For Preachers* 34, no. 4 (January 2011): 39–46. Rolston notes how “the earth produces by itself” Mk 4:28.

³⁶ Rolston frequently speaks of the world as prolife in the sense of it being oriented to generating life. See e.g., Holmes Rolston III, “Creation: God and Endangered Species,” *Biodiversity and Landscapes: Paradox of Humanity*, eds. Ke Chung Kim and Robert D. Weaver (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47–60. See also, “Human Uniqueness and Human Responsibility,” *Science and Religion: a Critical Survey* (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), xi–xlv.

³⁷ IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Redlist, 2013. http://cmsdocs.s3.amazonaws.com/summarystats/2013_2_RL_Stats_Table1.pdf

³⁸ Interestingly, Luther speculates that our bodies would have been far more durable if the practice of eating meat had not been introduced after the flood. In other words, “a diet of herbs rather than of meat would be far finer today.” “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1:36.

³⁹ Claus Westermann argues that “A God who is understood only as the God of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible.” *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 176.

⁴⁰ James Limburg has a helpful discussion in which he points out that it was often thought that their crying was because their parents had abandoned them “Quoth the Raven: Psalm 147 and the Environment,” *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, eds. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 105. See also Psalm 147:9 and Luke 12:24.

⁴¹ See Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004) in which he explores descriptions of the age to come.

⁴² Bayer, “An Example of Catechetical-Systematics,” 147. See also Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 200–201. *LW* 33:233, 178.

⁴³ A fortuitous expression of Holmes Rolston III. “Perpetual Perishing, Perpetual Renewal,” *The Northern Review* 28 (Winter 2006): 111.

⁴⁴ WA 1, 563, 6ff. Beintker points out that Luther “was a decided advocate for the thesis of a *creatio continua*.” Michael Beintker, “Das Schöpfercredo in Luthers Kleinem Katechismus,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Religionsphilosophie* 31 (January 1989): 5.

⁴⁵ Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, in Kolb-Wengert, 362.

⁴⁶ Hans Schwarz provides a helpful overview in *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 5–8.

⁴⁷ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 40. See also, “Is Life a Miracle?” *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2003), 184–186.

⁴⁸ Holmes Rolston III. “Down to Earth: Persons in Place in Natural History” in *Philosophy and Geography III: Philosophies of Place*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 285–296.

⁴⁹ Thomas A. Sanction writes, “The idea of dominion could be interpreted as an invitation to use nature as a convenience. Thus the spread of Christianity, which is generally considered to have paved the way for the development of technology, may at the same time have carried the seeds of the wanton exploitation of nature that has often accompanied technological progress,” *Time* 133 (January 2, 1989): 29–30. Wallace Stegner: “Our sanction to be a weed species living at the expense of every other species and of earth itself can be found in the injunction God gave to newly created Adam and Even in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” Wallace Stegner, “It All Began with Conservation,” *Smithsonian* 21 (April 1990): 35.

⁵⁰ The Formula of Concord identifies the image of God as original righteousness, that is to be conformed to God’s intentions for us. In this case, looking after the earth would be one key purpose for being originally created in God’s image.

⁵¹ James Limburg, “The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1–11 and the Care of the Earth,” *Word & World* 11 (March 1, 1991): 128.

⁵² Robert Rosin notes, “Broadly put, culture is anything not naturally biological, anything people create as they freely interact with their natural environment and each other.” Again, high culture is “something not natural or biological but developed out of reflection, used in shaping a view of life and transmitted to subsequent generations who maintained it because it proved useful.” See Robert Rosin, “Christians and Culture: Finding Place in Clio’s Mansions,” in *Christ and Culture: The Church in Post-Christian(?) America* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1996), 57–96.

⁵³ Mark Lynas argues that we are in charge, so we better get used to it and figure out how we should manage the planet in *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2011). Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen are credited with coining and popularizing the term the anthropocene to describe how humans are the dominant force for shaping the planet today.

⁵⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 149.

⁵⁵ J. J. McCoy, *The Hunt for Whooping Cranes: A Natural History Detective Story* (Forest Dale, VT: Paul S. Eriksson, 1966), viii.

⁵⁶ Holmes Rolston III, “On Behalf of Bioexhuberance.” *Garden* 11, no. 4 (July/August 1987): 32.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* Section 37, 1991. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html

⁵⁸ See Hillel’s account of its impact on past civilizations, *Out of the Earth*, 55–134.

⁵⁹ Aldo Leopold, *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold*, ed. Luna B. Leopold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 165.

⁶⁰ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1:67.

⁶¹ Wendell Berry, “Damage,” *What Are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry* (Farrar: North Point Press, 1990), 7.

⁶² See Robert C. Saler, “The Earth, the Road, and the Tomb: The Mortality of the Earth and Care for Creation,” *The Cresset* 77, No. 3 (Lent 2013): 50–52.

⁶³ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1, 75.

⁶⁴ Adams, 20.

⁶⁵ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *LW* 1:75

⁶⁶ Adams, 20.

⁶⁷ Adams notes that it consists of “three closely-related blessings: fecundity (fruitfulness), security, and the rule of God,” 20.

⁶⁸ For a good overview of Platonism, Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985).

⁶⁹ Adams, 20.

⁷⁰ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *LW* 1:79

⁷¹ Achtemeier, *God, Nature, Pulpit*, 42.

⁷² Personal conversation.

⁷³ See Roger Sorrell's analysis of Francis of Assisi's canticle in *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118–124.

⁷⁴ For example, Irenaeus exclaims, "Surely it is much more difficult and incredible, from non-existent bones, and nerves, and veins, and the rest of man's organization, to bring it about that all this should be, and to make man an animated and rational creature, than to reintegrate again that which had been created and then afterward decomposed into earth" (commenting on Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones). Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 5.3.2. In Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 529. Likewise, Tertullian: "On this principle, you may be quite sure that the restoration of the flesh is easier than its first formation." Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," 11. In Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 553.

⁷⁵ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *LW* 1:49.

⁷⁶ Basil the Great, "On the Hexameron," in *Saint Basil Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1963), 3–150.

⁷⁷ Jacques Cousteau's *The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus: Exploring and Conserving Our Natural World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 39. "We never attempted to decipher the meaning of life; we wanted only to testify to the miracle of life."