

Theological Dimensions of the Christian Doctrine of Creation

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Seventh-day Adventists are rightly interested in the doctrine of creation because of their interest in the *end* of the world. By the very nature of life and time, the assertion of an end implies concern with a beginning. We cannot have an end without a beginning. The fact that Omega is Omega is meaningless unless we recognize the significance of Alpha as being Alpha. To deny a beginning under God is really to negate the possibility of an end under him.

It is Christ who declares himself to be both Alpha and Omega, both “the beginning and the end” (Revelation 21:6; 22:13). In this declaration we are pointed to the basis that distinguishes our whole Christian approach to the question of time and our understanding of creation: *Jesus Christ*. Just as no doctrine can be truly Christian unless it is based in Jesus Christ, so the Christian understanding of creation must turn on our faith in the act of God in him, and our concept of the meaning of creation can be Christian only as it is illumined by our understanding of the plan of salvation. We come, then, to our first basic premise regarding the theology of creation:

Jesus Christ is the basis, the center, and the key to the doctrine of creation.

Emil Brunner stated: “The emphasis on the story of Creation at the beginning of the Bible has constantly led theologians to forsake the rule which they would otherwise follow, namely, that the basis of *all* Christian articles of faith is the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. So when we begin to study the subject of Creation in the Bible, we ought to start with the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and some other passages of the *New Testament*, and not with the first chapter of Genesis.”¹

The fact that many strictly *theological* references in the New Testament

connect creation with the work of Christ indicates that we should begin our understanding of the doctrine of creation with Christ. John 1:3: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." Colossians 1:16, 17: "For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth . . . all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Hebrews 1:2: "But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."

If we really take seriously the New Testament conviction that Christ is the center and central focus of history — that he is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), that he is indeed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, that in him "all things hold together," that history both before and since the Cross has meaning theologically only in terms of what Christ is and has consummated for us — we come, then, to our second premise:

The whole history of redemption, as told in the Old Testament, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The testimony of New Testament writings supports this second premise: "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9); "This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:11); "The Gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Romans 1:1, 2); "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44, where the technical Jewish terminology for the whole Old Testament is used); "I have not come to abolish [the law and the prophets] but to fulfil them" (Matthew 5:17). The meaning is that Christ is not simply a fulfillment of isolated prophecies (such as Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 7:14, Daniel 9:26), but in a real sense he is the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament: "The law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms." This idea is particularly important when we consider the narrative portions of the Old Testament — even (perhaps we should say, especially) the genealogies, for these establish the continuity, the historical integrity of the Chosen People. This fact is strikingly illustrated by the first chapter of the New Testament, which is a genealogy! Both Matthew and Luke employ such structures to demonstrate that Jesus is the culmination of Old Testament history.

However, to say that Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament history

of redemption is only one aspect of a larger picture — that the whole history of Israel *as the covenant people* is a promise and a prefiguring of Christ. This must be seen with eyes of faith in the light of the covenant. The basic promise of the covenant with Israel as God's chosen was made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1, 2; 15:1-6; 17:1-21), but it was at Sinai that the covenant became operative with Israel as a nation. "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (Exodus 19:3-8). The positive and negative aspects of this covenant are spelled out with special clarity in Deuteronomy 29 and 30:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess [Deuteronomy 30:15-18].

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul; then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you [Deuteronomy 30:1-3].

Here the pattern is: (a) if you are faithful to the covenant, you will prosper; (b) if you are unfaithful, you will be punished by the heathen around you; (c) but even then, if you repent, you will be restored. This rhythm becomes the pattern for the writing of the whole history of Israel. It is evident in the successive periods of servitude and freedom narrated in Judges, in the history of Saul and David, and especially in the vicissitudes of the Divided Kingdoms. But its crescendo comes in the mighty epic of the Babylonian captivity and the restoration.

So pronounced is this rhythm that scholars often speak of the books of Samuel and Kings as the Deuteronomic history (cf. 2 Kings 23:25-27). Perhaps even more significantly, from ancient times the Jews spoke of these books not as historical books but as "the former prophets," because the books tell in narrative form essentially the same message that the prophets of Israel proclaim with their constant condemnation of faithlessness, their predictions of doom, and their promises nevertheless of forgiveness and restoration (Isaiah 1-30, Jeremiah and Hosea, Isaiah 40-66, Zechariah).

As seen in the light of the covenant, from the standpoint of this rhythm, the entire history of Israel is the history of redemption, and is a prefiguring and a promise and a prophecy of the experience of every Christian, who finds both judgment and the grace of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Therefore we can see Christ as the fulfillment and the real meaning of the whole Old Testament.

Now we have said (1) that Christ is the center and meaning of history, and (2) that the whole history of Israel is fulfilled in him. But what is the relation of this concept to creation? Creation was not the creation just of the Chosen People, but of the world. Creation was *before* sin. How then can creation be seen as related to the history of redemption, and especially to Christ, who is the Saviour? Where is the theological possibility of the New Testament assertion that Christ is both Saviour and Creator?

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Looked at from the central theme of the Old Testament — the covenant focusing on Christ to come — the Genesis creation story is clearly the setting: the overture to the drama that is to be played out in the history of the covenant people. The story of creation is not told merely for its own sake. It is told for the sake of the narrative of salvation that is to follow. Just here the truly significant difference between the Babylonian and Canaanite myths of creation and the biblical narrative of creation becomes evident. The old Semitic myths are *cosmogonies*: that is, they are narratives whose primary intent is to explain how the world and mankind came to be. They are concerned first of all with the question "How did the world get here?" The question is asked not so much from a desire for factual information (which desire by itself was largely foreign to the Semitic mind) as from a desire for understanding. Characteristically of Semitic thought patterns, this understanding was conveyed not by philosophical language, but by the telling of a myth.

Now the great difference between myth-telling and the biblical account of creation lies in the fact that the primary concern of the Genesis story is not to answer the question of origins, but to assert the primacy, the uniqueness of the Lord, who is the covenant God of Israel. The Genesis account is a testimony to the realization that if the covenant relation with God is really what Israel believed it to be, the author must be the creator of heaven and earth. The Israelites never wrote a formal creed; but if they had, its first article assuredly would not have read, "I believe in Jehovah the creator, and he is our God." It would rather have followed the thought order in the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord (Jehovah) your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . . In six days the Lord made heaven and

earth" (Exodus 20:2, 11). The Israelite did not base his covenant relation with the Lord on belief in the Lord as Creator; but he based his belief in the Lord as creator on his covenant relation.

That is, the creation story in Genesis performs a function different from that of the pagan myths of creation. It is intended as an integral part of the history of the Chosen People. It is a logically necessary overture to the story of redemption. (The much debated question of whether Genesis 1 is poetry or prose is probably largely irrelevant to our understanding of its meaning.) But the relation of the Genesis story to the subsequent history of redemption means that its full comprehension is possible only in the light of that history, and particularly as it climaxes in Jesus Christ. Thus Karl Barth declared: "But according to this witness [that is, Genesis 1] the purpose and therefore the meaning of creation is to make possible the history of God's covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of this history."²

Next, in John 1 we have the primary Christian interpretation of the doctrine of creation.

In the beginning. These are the words of Genesis 1:1; without question John had this verse in mind when he wrote. It is futile to ask whether he refers to the beginning of creation week or to some more remote time, as he is not concerned with that distinction. In view of the verses that follow, he is simply saying: "Before anything that has been created existed, the Word was existing." These words, then, like Genesis 1:1, are an assertion of the primacy of the Lord over all creation.

The Word. In Greek the Word is, of course, the *Logos*. The *Logos* was an old and important concept in Greek philosophy, where, though varying from one philosopher to another in details, it represented the general notion of the mind which shaped the inanimate stuff of the universe into an ordered cosmos. John borrowed the term, but his use can never be understood on the basis of Greek philosophy alone. We must go rather to the Old Testament, and especially to Genesis 1. The *Logos* of John 1:1 finds an echo in the oft-repeated *wayyō'mer elōhîm*, "and God said," of Genesis 1 (cf. Psalm 33:6, 9). It is in this context that the great difference between the *Logos* of philosophy and that of John becomes apparent: the Greek *Logos* is only a demiurge, a world-architect working with eternally existing matter. He stands alongside his "creation:" in the ultimate sense he is neither "over" it nor "before" it. But John's *Logos* is very God in that he was "in the beginning" and has absolute priority. John's wording was an

impossible assertion for Greek thought, where there was neither a beginning nor an end. But to the Christian mind this word implies both the primacy and the uniqueness of God as he stands at the beginning. And the fact that he stands at the beginning means that he stands also at the end and that therefore his kingdom is the goal of creation.³

All things were made by him. This statement, in the context of verse 1, is an assertion of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, "creation from nothing." The assertion that in creation "God was not indebted to pre-existing matter" is a denial of any kind of philosophical position that would place God on balance with the universe.⁴ Also it is a denial of any position that would identify God with the universe, as in pantheism. Finally, it rules out any attempt to explain evil and imperfection in the world by positing, in Gnostic dualistic fashion, the presence of a negative, second factor in creation.⁵

On the positive side, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* means that human existence and the existence of the world is a real, objective existence, over against God. Only in the light of this "over-againstness," this objectification of the world as creature and creation, is it possible to speak realistically of divine grace. "Creation from nothing" also emphasizes that the world is bounded by time and space, that it has a real beginning and, therefore, also a real end, and, in view of this, that history must be taken seriously.⁶

And the Word became flesh. Here John identifies the divine, creator-Word with Jesus Christ, the incarnate. Hence we must now ask as to the theological relationship between creation and the incarnation. Of this, Langdon Gilkey said: "The identity of God the Creator and God the Redeemer, of the almighty power of existence with the love of Christ, is the theological axis of the Gospel of good news."⁷ This recognition binds together the Old Testament and the New Testament and makes the story of redemption as seen in Israel's history relevant to the Gospel. The God of the Covenant people was *Yabweh sidqênû*, "The Lord our righteousness," and he it is "who was made flesh and dwelt among us," and "to all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God" (verse 12). "This theological conjunction is perhaps the most fundamental affirmation of the Old and the New Testaments."⁸

It is precisely the recognition of this fact, throughout Christian history, that has made the doctrine of the deity of Christ so vital to a sound theology. This is why Arianism, which places Christ on a lower level than the Father, introduces a fatal imbalance into our understanding of the Old and New Testaments — the Law and the Gospel. Only the confession that Creator and Redeemer are *one* can throw the light of the Cross on the Old Testa-

ment and can grant in turn the essential perspective of the history of redemption to the act of God in Jesus Christ. Only this confession — that the Word who made all things is also the Word who gives us power to become children of God — can make possible the understanding of an old covenant and a new. Only this confession can see a union between the power of him who creates and the love of him who saves by re-creation.

Yet another important verse in the New Testament regarding creation is Hebrews 11:3: “By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” In this verse we are told that “*by faith* we understand” creation. Only through eyes of faith can the things of which we have spoken here be understood. As Barth said: “The insight that man owes his existence and form, together with all the reality distinct from God, to God’s creation, is achieved only in the reception and answer of the divine selfwitness, that is, only in faith in Jesus Christ, i.e., in the knowledge of the unity of Creator and creature actualized in Him, and in the life in the present mediated by Him, under the right and in the experience of the goodness of the Creator towards His creature.”¹⁰

Only in confrontation by God in Christ and only in commitment to him through faith does the meaning of creation come clear. Only in the experience of re-creation in Christ can we truly confess that we believe in God the Father almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. Theologically we arrive at the certainty of creation because we believe in Jesus Christ, and not vice versa. And only in this certainty that Christ is indeed the Alpha, the beginning, can we confess that he is also the end, and pray, “Even so come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).¹¹

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (volume two of three volumes entitled *Dogmatics*. Translated by Olive Wyon. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), p. 6.
- 2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (volume three of four volumes, part one. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), p. 42.
- 3 Brunner, p. 14.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* (volume eight of nine volumes. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1904), pp. 258-259.
- 5 Compare Isaiah 45:7; Brunner, p. 10; this concept is also the implication of the recurrent phrase in Genesis 1, “God saw that it was good.”
- 6 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1959), p. 55.

- 7 Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth, a Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), p. 210.
- 8 Gilkey, loc. cit.
- 9 Gilkey, p. 211.
- 10 Barth, p. 3.
- 11 Quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version with the exception of the quotation from the King James Version in the closing sentence of the article.

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