

GOD'S
GOOD
WORLD

RECLAIMING THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

Jonathan R. Wilson


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Introduction

Climate change. Economics. Sexuality. Justice. Gene therapy. Bioethics. Famine. Energy use. Diminishing oil supplies. Alternative energy. Violence. Evolution. Torture. Incarceration. Ecology. And so much more.

All of these are urgent concerns for those of us alive in the early decades of the twenty-first century, not only for ourselves but also for those who will come after us. Books on these topics pour out from publishers, articles on these issues appear on the front pages of newspapers, and conversations fill the blogosphere. For Christians, all these concerns relate to our beliefs about “creation.” But when we look for guidance from our doctrine of creation, we find relatively few resources. Yes, we have a lot of books on these urgent issues. But we are missing “basic research” on the doctrine of creation. Our situation is like that of a medical team trying to treat a patient who is experiencing multiple organ failure without knowing what is causing the failures. Or perhaps the team knows that something called a “virus” is attacking the patient, but the team does not know which virus is attacking, much less how it works.

In our circumstances, we are not helped by the familiar debates over “creation.” It does not help us make our way through this world and the urgent issues of our times to know how long ago “this world” was made. Or how long God took to make it. Or precisely what means God used to bring the world into being. These questions may be fascinating puzzles for some people, but answers to them do not constitute a doctrine of creation that articulates our convictions about God’s world, who this God is, how we find life, and the purpose of creation that teaches us the way of life.

We are poor in resources for a doctrine of creation that could guide our life today because Christian theology began to abandon the doctrine of creation about 250 years ago. We have not totally neglected the doctrine—there have

been some bright spots in the last three centuries. Nevertheless, compared to other doctrines, the doctrine of creation has been neglected; the result is an atrophied doctrine. This is what happened: as the sciences developed in the age of modernity, theologians began to think that they could not compete with the explanatory power and “control of nature” exhibited and promised by the sciences. Instead of rethinking the doctrine of creation, most theologians recast Christian convictions in terms of the inner life of humans or of salvation history (Ger., *Heilsgeschichte*). These defensive moves insulated Christian faith and belief from the realm of the sciences by locating Christian teaching within the heart or in a special strand of history that was not subject to “critical history.”

The actual history of the development (or lack of development) of a doctrine of creation is more complex than I have presented it here. But the central point is that with the rise of the sciences, theology largely abandoned the doctrine of creation and left the field to the sciences. We need a thorough historical account of this abandonment of the doctrine and its consequences.¹ However, I do not have the temperament or training to provide such an account. Instead I will presume the rightness of my general claim about the neglect of the doctrine of creation, consider the consequences of that neglect, and offer an account that seeks to correct this neglect and contribute to its recovery.

A mature, robust understanding of creation is essential to growth in Christian discipleship and witness to the gospel. We have seldom had an account of creation integrated with the gospel. For many strands within the Christian tradition, the good news of Jesus Christ is the good news of redemption. “Creation” names the setting in which the work of redemption takes place, but “creation” itself is not part of that redemptive action. Some may talk about “soul-winning” and going to heaven when we die. For others, “redemption” is the work going on in the world to make peoples’ lives better. In this

1. I am imagining someone with the theological acumen, tenacity, and attention to detail who will do for the doctrine of creation what Michael Buckley does for the doctrine of God in his book, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. A. Funkensteen tells part of the story in *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*, which focuses on outcomes in the sciences more than in theology. Two recent authors tell this story in ways that illuminate the loss of the doctrine of creation, though they do not cast their work in such terms. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self* and esp. his *Secular Age*. See also the older work of Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. For a descriptive history from the classical period to Vatican I with a focus on the Catholic tradition, see Scheffczyk, *Creation and Providence*. For a detailed study of a critical period, see Cashdollar, *Transformation of Theology*. For a brief and insightful survey, see Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 11–51, and with a slightly different focus, 52–80. In the latter chapter, Marlow examines the divide between “nature” and “history,” which has had such deleterious effects, and argues for the recovery of “creational theology.”

understanding, there is no reference to the world as God's creation, and very little is done to link the person and work of Jesus Christ to this "redemption," which is supposed to be accomplished by political, economic, and social power.

In light of the urgent need for a robust, mature Christian doctrine of creation, I offer this book as a contribution. It does not conform neatly to a familiar, agreed-upon consensus about which topics or scheme should be followed by a doctrine of creation. One reason is that there really is no agreed-upon scheme such as we have with other doctrines. For example, a presentation of the doctrine of God typically covers a familiar set of topics, such as the existence of God, the attributes of God, the trinity, and so on; some theologians may rearrange these topics or drop some altogether, but if they do so they will also usually explain their decisions.

No such consensus about topics and their arrangement exists for the doctrine of creation. Some topics regularly occur in treatments of the doctrine of creation—such as creation out of nothing, time, space, humankind—but we have so few recent treatments and have so neglected older treatments that we have no firm consensus. In my presentation, I follow a set of topics and an order that I judge to be most significant for recovering the doctrine of creation today.

In particular, I emphasize the necessity of always keeping creation and redemption together in our thinking, teaching, and living. To state briefly the necessity of holding creation and redemption together: without creation, there is nothing to redeem; the work of redemption is empty of content. Without redemption, there is no creation; there is only chaos, emptiness, meaninglessness.

This may strike some readers as overblown and even mistaken. After all, do not Genesis 1 and other Scripture passages give us a basis for a doctrine of creation apart from redemption? And if not these Scriptures, then surely the existence of the world itself provides us with material for a doctrine of creation, even if that doctrine might be tentative and incomplete? We have instances of attempts to build a doctrine of creation on these bases. However, neither the biblical passages nor the world as we have it provides a solid basis for these attempts.

The attempt to build a doctrine of creation from select Scripture passages without reference to redemption fails to recognize that all these passages arise from a people who are being redeemed. As I argue at length in later chapters, the story of creation in Genesis 1–3 is a story revealed to and canonized by the people of Israel as they are being redeemed by God. In other words, they did not first have a doctrine of creation to which was added a doctrine of redemption. Nor did they first have a doctrine of creation that was then supplanted by a doctrine (or the reality of) redemption. Rather, the people who became Israel were caught up in God's redemptive work and then came to realize that

the very act of redemption revealed to them that this Redeemer-God is also Creator-God. Their doctrine of creation (taught in story form) is what must be true of this world given the God who reveals Godself in the particular way of redemption that makes them a people. In the New Testament, this togetherness of creation and redemption is revealed climactically in the many confessions about creation and redemption in Jesus Christ (John 1; Eph. 1; Col. 1; Heb. 1; Rev. 1). Thus, another way of saying that we must hold creation and redemption together in our thinking, teaching, and living is to say that our doctrine of creation must be christological.² This same christological focus for creation marks the doctrinal heritage of the early church. For example, at the beginning of his classic text *On The Incarnation*, Athanasius announces:

We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact you must grasp is this: *the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word who made it in the beginning*. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation; for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it at the first.³

Many of us may be made uncomfortable by the recognition that the doctrine of creation does not provide Christians with a place where we and followers of other ways of “life” and “truth” can find a common, neutral meeting ground. At the same time that it does not provide us with neutral public space, this recognition of the christological claims on creation does require us to bear witness to the good news of the kingdom of God in Christ in public, in the places where we share common concerns with others who do not know that “all things have been created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). The difficulty of observing both of these truths has often caused us to slide one way or the other. On the one hand, we may seek to participate in public witness on the basis of creation disconnected from Christ. In so doing, we fail in our mission to bear witness to Christ. On the other hand, we may disconnect our understanding of Christ from creation in such a way that our witness to Christ does not lay claim to the world but retreats to soul-winning or drawing “believers” into a protected enclave that hides from the world.

In addition to holding creation and redemption together, we must also be thoroughly and thoughtfully trinitarian in our doctrine of creation. The twentieth century brought a resurgence of the doctrine of the trinity, and

2. My teacher and friend Loren Wilkinson is completing a book on Christ and creation that will contribute greatly to this necessity.

3. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chap. 1, § 1. Emphasis added.

recognition that this doctrine is the “basic grammar” of Christian faith and life. We fall into all kinds of errors if we cease to be trinitarian in our doctrine of creation. On a few occasions in modern times when a Christian doctrine of creation has been proposed, those proposals have been weak and unsustainable because they have not been sufficiently trinitarian. This failure leaves gaps in our doctrine of the trinity that may lead Christians to turn elsewhere in their search for a satisfactory doctrine of creation. Many unpersuasive and heretical doctrines of creation have slipped into our thinking and living by our failure to be vigilantly trinitarian.

These two necessities—the togetherness of creation and redemption, and the trinitarian grammar of creation—set the context for the rest of a doctrine of creation. Regardless of where we place other topics and how we discuss them, they must always be considered in light of these two necessities.

The doctrine of creation, therefore, is primarily about not the nature of creation but the God who creates. And the God who creates cannot be known apart from knowing God as the one who redeems. Moreover, the doctrine of creation is primarily not about origin but end. By *end* of creation, I mean not its cessation or eradication but its purpose, aim, or, as I will later explain at length, the *telos* of creation. We could also describe this end as the *eschaton* of creation if we carefully rescue the language of eschatology from date-setting and fear-mongering and locate it properly in the *eschaton*, who is Jesus Christ. (Remember that the book of Revelation, which is the source of so much tragically misleading and heretical eschatology, begins with the vision of the risen Lord Jesus, who is “the First and the Last,” the one in whom is found the meaning of all history and thus also all creation.)

On the basis of what I have written so far, you should be prepared for the relative neglect and even absence of some topics that have come to occupy our arguments and even wars over “creation,” both those internal to Christianity and those external. As my argument and exposition unfolds, I inevitably address some of the concerns that drive our talk about “creation.” But this is not a book about “creation and evolution,” “science and faith,” “science and theology,” or “science and religion.” Nor is this a book about Christianity and the environment or care for creation. Finally, this book devotes very little space to controversies over the age of the earth, the days of Genesis 1, or the processes by which God creates.

Some of these *are* topics that I address briefly or provide a basis for addressing. In fact, I have written this book because so many issues that challenge us to be faithful in our witness to the gospel depend on a robust, mature doctrine of creation. But I also think that because we have neglected the doctrine of creation, we get lured into arguing about the wrong issues, or arguing about

them in the wrong ways, or arguing about them in ways that betray the good news of Jesus Christ.

This book is about the God who is life, who gives life, and who redeems life. This God of life is the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Out of the inexhaustible life of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, this one God gives life to that which is not God. This continuing work of God, from its origin to its fulfillment, is God's work of creation. The doctrine of creation, then, bears witness to Life, to the God who is Life, and to the joyous, hopeful, loving way of Christ, which is the life of the world.⁴

Reading This Book

This book opens with three chapters that seek to diagnose the deficiencies in church, academy, and society resulting from our neglect of the doctrine of creation. The deficiencies that I identify in these chapters are nearly interchangeable. That is, the life of church, academy, and society are sufficiently intertwined such that a deficiency in one of them is a deficiency affecting all of them. Nevertheless, I have tried to organize my diagnoses so that they make sense and build on one another.

As I investigate church, academy, and society and make my diagnoses, I am already anticipating the doctrine of creation that comprises the four chapters of part 2. This anticipation reflects two judgments. First, any process of diagnosis is already the work of theology. One cannot engage in diagnosis—or “cultural critique,” to use another description—without already doing the work of theology. Second, my anticipation of a doctrine of creation in these first chapters reflects my judgment that we need to rethink what a doctrine of creation calls us to in life and witness. Our arguments about “creation” have become so ensnared in issues and ways of arguing that actually obscure a *doctrine* of creation that we need a radical change in our thinking; that is, we need to go back to the roots of the doctrine of creation.

In part 1, therefore, I seek to reset our thinking about the doctrine of creation and our expectations of what the doctrine provides us for thinking, living, and witnessing as followers of Jesus Christ.

In part 2, I develop a doctrine of creation. This development is not a linear, progressive building of the doctrine; instead, the development is an interweaving of themes throughout the four chapters. When I began writing this book, I described the work in these chapters as a mosaic. I imagined the various

4. I long—and pray—for E. O. Wilson to believe that his “biophilia” grows from the roots of the life of the world in the God who is Life. See Wilson, *Biophilia* and *Creation*.

chapters providing tiles that would eventually all fit together into a relatively coherent portrait of a doctrine of creation. That description may still be helpful, but it does not quite convey the way in which each chapter covers some of the same ground as other chapters but from a different perspective. Or better yet, each chapter tells the same story but adds different details and different perspectives that make the story fuller and more persuasive.

The first two chapters of this section tell the story of creation in its fullest reality and provide the narrative setting for the next two chapters. In these first two chapters, the focus is on God: the story of God's work of redeeming creation and the story of this work as the work of the one God—Father, Son, and Spirit. It is essential to begin with God because throughout much of the modern history of the doctrine of creation we have begun with creation and tried to work our way to God. (The exceptions to this observation are important teachers from whom we have much to learn, as I will note in the following chapters.)

In the last two chapters of part 2, I turn to creation and Scripture to test the doctrine that I have developed in the previous chapters. This "assaying" of the truth of the previous chapters also provides an opportunity to tell the story of creation three more times, as we test the veracity of the earlier narratives and discover more about God's work of creation. That is, just as we may uncover new insights with each retelling of a significant period of our lives, so with the "retelling" of the doctrine of creation in these two chapters we will deepen our doctrine of creation as we retell the story of the redemption of creation by the one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—as the story of creation itself, as well as the story of Scripture.

In the eight chapters of part 3, I offer short reflections that plant this doctrine of creation in the soil of our lives. In these chapters, I seek to show how the doctrine of creation developed in part 2 may correct the deficiencies identified in part 1. The chapters in part 3 do not correspond neatly to the diagnosis in part 1 or to the development in part 2, but they do add another layer of exploration and persuasion to the earlier chapters.

Although these short chapters may be less specific than some readers will expect, faithful life and witness grow out of the work of the Holy Spirit in actual communities of discipleship to Jesus Christ. Such communities grow in maturity as they bring the gifts of community members together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit around specific questions of faithfulness for their community in their context. Or to return to my gardening analogy, we have to take into consideration local soil conditions, elevation, climate, water, sunshine, and more to successfully grow the same plants in different settings.

As you read this book, you may notice that I refer to other works for additional guidance. I do not agree with all these authors, nor do they agree with one another. It is sometimes popular in academe to label thinkers “lumpers” and “splitters,” to refer to those who emphasize the similarities in thinkers and those who emphasize the differences, respectively. It may appear that I am a lumper, and something of a careless and unperceptive lumper at that, because I throw together thinkers who clearly differ greatly from one another. My reasoning about these matters, however, follows a different line. I refer to a wide and disparate range of thinkers not because I think that we can lump them all together but because the good news of the redemption of creation is so great and awesome that no one thinker or way of thinking can capture it. Our task is to enter into the revealed mystery of the good news of Jesus Christ and bear witness to it. This good news is cosmic in scope and utterly unimaginable apart from the story of Israel and the coming of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that anything goes; there are boundaries. But within those boundaries, we need the discernment of one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our task is not to capture this reality in our words, sentences, concepts, propositions, expositions, and arguments, but rather to bear witness to the reality of the redemption of creation that captures us by God’s grace.

As you read this book, you will note some peculiarities in my terminology. In most instances when I quote Scripture that includes the Hebrew “Tetragrammaton” (Heb., *YHWH*), which has often been represented in our English Bibles by LORD, I translate the Hebrew as “I AM.” At the appropriate time, I explain this practice. I have adopted it under the influence of Bruce Waltke as a faithful rendering of the Hebrew that conveys the power of the name and the life of God. In reference to the part of Christian Scripture that we normally refer to as the “Old Testament,” I will often use the term “Tanak.” “Tanak” is an acronym that takes the first Hebrew letter for the three divisions of Torah, Prophets (*nebi'im*), and Writings (*kethubim*). Using this term reduces the mistaken inference that “Old” Testament denotes something that is outmoded or passé. The oft-used alternative, “Hebrew Bible,” is too neutral and descriptive a term for a body of writings that is canonical for followers of Christ. Finally, as you read some parts of this book, you will find regular cross-references to other parts of the book. This risks becoming annoying, but I have followed this practice to indicate that the argument and exposition circles itself in different ways.

As readers engage with this book on their own and in communities of discipleship, Bible study groups, and classrooms, they may draw on study resources and guides that can be found linked to my website: www.jonathanwilson.com/godsworld. The topic of this book and its argument invite

us to join together to explore God's work of creation in light of God's work of redemption. Since we cannot all meet in one physical space to do so, the exchange of "letters" by electronic means can supplement the conversations that we may have in our local communities.

Writing This Book

I have been working on this book ever since my grade 10 biology class with Mr. Cox at Glenciff High School, in Nashville, Tennessee. Prior to that class, I had been an indifferent student. Mr. Cox woke me from my intellectual slumbers to the joy of the flora and fauna of this planet. Somewhere in the midst of this awakening, I discovered the, then relatively new, field of ecology. I was enchanted. Since Mr. Cox had been educated many years earlier, he sent me across the hall to a younger biology teacher, Mr. Beasley, who simply directed me to a few books. That was all I needed. Over the next two and a half years, I filled several spiral-bound notebooks with a study of "The Ecology of Mill Creek." (Sometime after I left home, these notebooks disappeared during one of my parents' many moves.) At the same time, I decided that I wanted to be a "big-game biologist." I wrote to the Universities of Montana and Wyoming for their catalogs. My teachers sent home information about summer science camps.

However, in the fundamentalist southern culture in which we lived and through which we knew the gospel, the quickest way to lose one's faith was to study the sciences. My parents resisted my interest in studying science at a "secular" university. We were part of the movement that saw Bible colleges as the only proper place to pursue higher education. I was given many books that grew out of the Creation Research Society and the Institute for Creation Research. All of this eventually wore me down, and I submitted to my parents and my community and attended our denominational Bible college.

During this time, "creation" turned into a *theological* problem for me. I began to try to understand the controversies and conflicts in theological terms rather than simply cultural or even scientific terms. Along the way I began to encounter creative thinking about creation, especially at Regent College and Duke University. At Regent, W. J. Martin, D. J. Wiseman, Bruce Waltke, and especially James Houston began to demonstrate faithful alternatives to the well-established positions and arguments that seemed to dominate. Loren Wilkinson led the way in introducing "earthkeeping" to the evangelical tradition. At Duke, Tom Langford led a lively seminar in which we read Jürgen Moltmann's *God in Creation* and Richard Rorty's *Consequences of*

*Pragmatism.*⁵ Then, once I began to pay attention, the doctrine of creation or, more accurately, hints of the doctrine and longings for the doctrine, seemed to be everywhere. I did not realize it at the time, but my Duke dissertation on Julian Hartt lodged in my thinking a considerable amount of material for a doctrine of creation.

For a brief time after I began teaching undergraduates at Westmont College, my attention was diverted from the doctrine of creation by more tyrannical urgent matters, like trying to captivate first-year college students with the joy of Christian doctrine in a required class and meeting the publishing expectations of the college and the department. I knew that the doctrine of creation was a long-term project. The project claimed my attention once again as I developed faculty friendships at Westmont and began to realize that my students had been taught no effective doctrine of creation in their churches. As a consequence, they were at the mercy of every ideology that sought to control them and suck life from them. This ideological vulnerability is apparent in political and economic realms as well as in my students' submission of their bodies to the deadly, life-destroying stories of our society.

Gradually, the outline of this book began to come into focus. I began working on little pieces of it and wrote many unpublished pages as I sought to bring clarity to my intuitions. When I moved from Westmont to Acadia Divinity College at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, I was given more opportunity to develop my thinking through my service on the Executive Committee of the Arthur Irving Academy for the Environment and many conversations there. When I moved from Acadia to Carey Theological College at the University of British Columbia, I continued with that development in occasional conversations with other faculty at UBC and Regent College. I was especially helped by regular conversations with Jeremy Kidwell and Matt Humphrey, both of whom have made significant contributions to this book.

As the book developed in my thinking and teaching, the audience for the book began to come into focus. I had initially thought of the book as a "university press" book that would enter into conversation primarily with other theologians. However, over time, through the counsel of friends and my own reflection, I came to see the book's audience as leaders and teachers of congregations. These leaders and potential leaders of the church are the people to reach if I hope to reintroduce and reinvigorate theological work so that we can recover a robust, mature doctrine of creation. The way that I present a doctrine of creation represents a change from the familiar debates and

5. See Langford, *Reflections on Grace*, 63–80, for Langford's moving account of "Grace and Creation," which my own account echoes and amplifies in many ways.

conflicts. Therefore, it presents a bit of a challenge to readers, who will need to be patient and ready to engage less familiar topics and ways of teaching a doctrine of creation.

As I wrote this book, I kept in mind the enormous amount of reading that I have done over the years as my thinking took shape. However, this is not a book about books. Readers who are expecting to read my analysis of other doctrines of creation will be disappointed. There are many instructive treatments of the doctrine in the premodern period and a few in the modern period. The Eastern Orthodox tradition represents another significant resource. And the multitude of recent books on the issues that touch on the doctrine of creation provide a wealth of resources for a book about these books. I have read widely and persistently in these sources. However, the audience for this book and the style of book that I have chosen to write have led me to severely curtail my interaction with these other books. Even so, the footnoting is fairly extensive at times.

In addition to footnoting sources, influences, and resources for further reading, I want to note four books that were constant companions, though I do not always agree with them in details: J. Houston, *The Creator*; T. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*; and N. Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*. For the most part, these books confirmed for me the thinking about creation that I have been engaged in for many years. They could serve as collateral reading for this book.⁶

Finally, this book has profited from the gifts of many friends. Chapters 1 and 2 were first presented as the Grenz Lectures in 2007. I am grateful for the remarks of the respondents to those lectures, Tama Ward-Balisky and Loren Wilkinson. Those lectures also spurred friendships with Jeremy Kidwell and Matt Humphrey, who met with me for many conversations that improved my argument and exposition. I have been encouraged by many others who have seen outlines and heard brief expositions of the book or portions of it. I have

6. I have also been stimulated by Alister McGrath's *Scientific Theology* (3 vols.), and though I have been critical of them, they still represent a monumental achievement. Moreover, I am eager to see his promised *Scientific Dogmatics*, given the preview of that work in *The Order of Things*, chapter 10. Two large and significant works were published in time for me to take them into account, though I have not fully absorbed them into this book: Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (2 vols.) and Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea*. As far as I can tell from Kelsey's volumes, his Warfield lectures, and interviews, his doctrine of creation is quite similar to mine in substance and concern, though he distinguishes the stories of creation, consummation, and reconciliation. Cunningham's book is a massive display of erudition and theological acumen but is also, I suspect, more valuable to the specialist than to the audience for which I am writing. I should also note that in the process of writing this book, I rediscovered Francis Schaeffer's 1970 book, *Pollution and the Death of Man*. I know that I read this book in the 1970s, but I do not recall it as I do my reading of other Schaeffer books.

been helped by several people who have read and commented on portions of the manuscript: Matt Humphrey, Marianne Meye Thompson, Marcus Tso, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Bruce Hindmarsh. Several friends have read the entire manuscript and contributed significantly to its improvement: Jeremy Kidwell, Scott Kohler, Myrnal and Dave Hawes, Ian Campbell, and Tremper Longman. I am indebted to Philip Rolnick for his extraordinarily careful and insightful comments on the manuscript. I cannot overstate the significance of Phil's friendship, which began with many late-night theological walks around Holly Hill Apartments during our graduate-school days at Duke. It was a delight to "gopenize" this manuscript with him. In the later stages of editing this book I discovered the art of Joy Banks, which often "says" what I am trying to say more perceptively and pungently. I am grateful for her contribution.

To everyone at Baker Academic who contributed to the life of this book, thank you. I am especially indebted to the copy editors at Baker for pressing me to rethink several passages. I am deeply grateful for friendships that arise in the context of doing good work together. To my colleagues at Carey Theological College—faculty, staff, students—thank you for the life that we share together. I am grateful also for the flexibility of Carey's Board of Governors, President Brian Stelck, and Vice President Academic Barbara Mutch in rescheduling my sabbatical leave.

As I noted above, this book began to take shape many years ago. The completion of it has taken place in the twenty-two months following my wife Marti's death on September 16, 2010. Marti was—and is—my muse. I am so grateful for our rich life together. It has been wonderful to love and be loved by Marti in the love of God. I am filled with gratitude by the ways in which I know God's presence and love, as well as Marti's, even in her physical absence.

Part 1

Imagine a group of adventurers who have decided to abandon their experienced guide and find their own way through territory unknown to them. They are so confident and occupied with their journey that they do not realize that they are lost and doomed. Some of them, however, begin to suspect that something is not right. Their guide does not abandon them but continues to plead with them to listen to her instruction and follow her path. The first thing that this group of believers must do is learn from their guide where they are and what dangers they are facing because they have strayed from the path that has already been marked for them and for which the guide has all resources that are necessary.



"Waiting"

1

Missing Creation in the Church

If people are missing an essential ingredient in their diet, we see signs of that deficiency in their bodies.¹ A deficiency of vitamin C results in scurvy; a deficiency of protein may result in kwashiorkor; a deficiency of iron results in anemia. People suffering from one of these deficiencies and consequent conditions may even appear to be generally healthy for a while. But there may be times when physical stress brings on subtle indications of underlying poor health, which may also make them susceptible to other diseases that affect their health and lead to death, not from the underlying condition, but from another medical problem to which their poor health makes them unusually vulnerable. In every case, the underlying deficiency and consequent condition prevents flourishing and shortens lives.

What diseases can we identify in the church that result from a theological deficiency in the doctrine of creation? The remainder of this chapter is devoted to answering that question. If you are still not persuaded by my brief argument in the previous chapter that theology has neglected the doctrine of creation, the present chapter is further indirect evidence in support of that claim. I aim

1. An earlier version of this chapter was delivered as part 1 of the Grenz Lectures, First Baptist Church, Vancouver, BC, March 11, 2007. For comments and conversation that have improved this chapter, I am grateful to Tama Ward Balisky, who responded to the lecture that evening, and to Jeremy Kidwell and Matt Humphrey, who have continued the conversation over several years.

to increase the credibility of my claim by an account of the weaknesses and diseases that the church suffers as a result of this deficiency.

Note that from this point onward, I refer more simply to “creation” rather than the “doctrine of creation.” This abbreviated terminology may cause some momentary confusion because “creation” may be used to refer both to the created order and also to the doctrine.

Church Pathologies

Gnosticism

The most common way of identifying the pathology that results from this neglect of creation is to use the term “gnosticism,” which describes an ancient way of thinking and living that the church has identified as heresy. In recent years, this term has entered into the public stream and muddied the waters considerably. To discuss gnosticism in relation to creation, I must first clear up some of those muddy waters.

Gnosticism refers to an ancient school of thought that seems to have had a significant presence among some communities that claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. These gnostic communities were sufficiently developed to produce their own accounts of who Jesus is and what he taught in such documents as the Gospel of Thomas. These texts have become well known through the work of the Jesus Seminar and Elaine Pagels, among others. These scholars often portray the gnostics as an oppressed minority in the church who were the victims of party politics and the orthodox corruption of Scripture, to use Bart Ehrman’s deliriously market-driven title.²

But the vision of the world and life that undergirds gnosticism is seldom addressed in the media coverage of these scholars and their texts. In gnosticism the world is divided into good and evil. Spirit is good; matter is evil. Matter is not fallen from a good state and therefore capable of redemption. Matter is evil from the beginning; it always has been and always will be. Redemption is not possible for matter because matter never was and never can be good. You and I suffer as we do because we are good spirits trapped in evil matter. Our salvation depends on the escape of our spirits from the trap of matter. (This belief is quite different from “materialism,” which values matter and the

2. See Funk and Hoover, *Five Gospels*, a product of the Jesus Seminar that places the gnostic Gospel of Thomas alongside the four canonical gospels; Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*; and Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Among many excellent refutations of these attempts to rehabilitate gnosticism, see Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*. Also of great help theologically is Allison, *Cruelty of Heresy*. On the gnostic impulse throughout history, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*.

material world above “spirit.”) Gnosticism denigrates the material creation and exalts the eternal “spirit.”³

Disembodiment

In neglecting the doctrine of creation, theology has contributed to the church’s development of a low-grade gnostic infection that weakens many parts of the church’s life. One of the first areas of weakness that I discovered is our theology of the body: not our theology of the church as the body of Christ, but our theology of the *human* body. My undergraduate students at Westmont College taught me this. As I tried to help them through extremely difficult questions of body image often manifested in anorexia, bulimia, steroid use, obsessive exercising, immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, self-mutilation, and more, I realized that they had no way of connecting their bodies to their faith.

I at least grew up with rules about my body. I knew not to drink, smoke, or have intercourse before marriage. But even my tradition had no theology that explained or made sense of these rules. It was simply a matter of identity. If I was a Christian, I didn’t do these things. Why not? Because I was a Christian. Why doesn’t a Christian do these things? If the conversation got this far, the answer was, “Because your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.” So even here, there is no theology of the body. That is, the rules aren’t really about my body and its worth; rather, the rules are about the presence of the Holy Spirit in my body. It is not that these things are bad for my body, but that they are offensive to the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit did not reside in my body, I would have no reason to avoid these “pleasures.” The primary function of the Holy Spirit, it appeared, was to narrow the list of pleasures that I was allowed.⁴

We need more. Without a theology of the body, my students—and the rest of us—are weakened and vulnerable to anyone who has a corrupt theology of the body. Those who want to sell us all manner of things to improve our bodies are teaching us a theology of the body; those who tell us that our bodies are beyond improvement are teaching us a theology of the body; those who tell us that extending our bodily lives is the priority for personal and social planning have a theology of the body; those who ask us to use our bodies to serve the corporation, the state, or the cause of democracy have a theology of the body.⁵

The Christian church desperately needs a robust theology of the body. God made our bodies and declared them good. God created them for sexual

3. As a complement to this discussion, see Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 59–62.

4. Thomas Howard tells a story similar to mine in *Christ the Tiger*.

5. See the profound explorations of this dynamic in Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*.

reproduction and for work. The pain and toil that we experience today, the burden of Brother Ass in the colorful phrase of Saint Francis, is not original or essential to our bodies; it is the consequence of our fall. Our bodies are being redeemed by the power of the incarnation—God in the flesh. And one day we will have imperishable, sinless bodies in a new creation. This is the merest sketch of an outline of a theology of the body.⁶

Ironically, the church's neglect to develop a theology of the body has led not to a neglect of our bodies but to an almost obsessive concern for them. Much more needs to be done—both constructively, in articulating a theology of the body, and polemically, in attacking the devastating errors in the church and society. The absence of a theology of the body indicates an area of disease in the church resulting from the neglect of the doctrine of creation and cries out for nourishment.

Truncated Salvation

Closely related to this pathological condition of the church's theology of the body is the church's doctrine of salvation. Do we need to be saved? Absolutely. Is God in Christ our only hope of salvation? Yes, without qualification. But in our time, two further questions press hard upon us. One is most pertinent to my theme—what is salvation? As I noted earlier, gnostics believe that salvation is the release of our spirits from their imprisonment in these evil bodies. That belief is very close and often identical to the doctrine of salvation taught in churches that would otherwise abjure heresy in themselves and abhor it in others. In other words, in many of our churches we have become functionally and practically gnostic.

With the glamorization of gnosticism, some traditions toward the liberal end of the theological spectrum have begun to drift toward this heresy. But historically, traditions toward the conservative end of the spectrum have inadvertently taught a doctrine of salvation that promises freedom from our bodies and escape from the world. There is biblical precedent for this language, but in the Scripture this language comes within the context of a larger celebration of the goodness of God's creative work. So at the same time that Paul warns about "sins of the flesh" (Col. 2:11 KJV), he also celebrates the goodness of all food and the freedom of marital sex. At the same time that John warns us

6. See chap. 14, and esp. footnote 2, for more on these issues that are swirling around us today. My concern is not to resolve or even enter into these debates but to provide a narrative account of embodiment that participates in the redemption of creation. In this way, "the redemption of our bodies" is an integral part of our salvation. This is one of the points where we need a more robust doctrine of creation.

to “love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15 KJV), he expects us to do good with the worldly goods that we have. Since we lack a robust doctrine of creation, we have fallen into error by interpreting “flesh” in Paul to refer simply to our bodies. We have also missed the nuances of John’s references to the world.

Sarx

To make clear Paul’s use of the word “flesh” in a number of troubling passages, it is helpful to return to the Greek word *sarx*, which is usually translated “flesh.”⁷ In many passages in Paul’s letters, *sarx* is not the body but a power that stands over against God’s work for the flourishing of creation to which we mistakenly submit our bodies and other aspects of our humanity.⁸ *Sarx* is the anti-God, anti-human power that distorts our body image, seduces us with counterfeit pleasures, promises us life, and then crushes us in death. When we understand “flesh” as *sarx*, then we can see that “the flesh” is not our bodily life from which we need to break free into a contrasting “spiritual” life. Rather “the spiritual life” is our bodily life now under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit rather than under the guidance of *sarx*.

With this understanding, we can now locate properly the language of salvation, especially its propositions. It is proper to say that we are saved from sin and death and Satan. It is also proper to say that we are saved from *sarx*. But it is a grave theological error to equate any of these with creation or our bodies. Sin, death, Satan, and *sarx* corrupt creation—including our bodies and our spirits—but they are not necessary, essential, eternal characteristics of creation. So salvation is salvation *from*—salvation from sin, death, and Satan. God in Christ has taken our very bodies back from sin, death, and Satan.⁹

Salvation is also salvation *for*—salvation for life. And the form of life for us is creation. Therefore, to have a real doctrine of salvation we need a real doctrine of creation and vice versa. Julian Hartt, from whom I have learned so much, calls this necessity the dialectic of the kingdom: the doctrines of creation and redemption in mutual illumination, correction, and witness. Without this (non-Hegelian!) dialectic, he says, these two realms dissolve into unreality in our understanding.¹⁰

7. English translations of the NT vary in how they translate *sarx*.

8. This way of understanding *sarx* crystallized for me as I read J. Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” in his *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 89–110.

9. This need for correction is helpfully identified in several essays in Stackhouse, *What Does It Mean to Be Saved?*

10. Hartt, *Christian Critique of American Culture*, pp. 75–98. See my elaboration of this in chap. 4.

Alternative Creation Stories

At this point, I must bring into focus a very different consequence of the theological neglect of creation on our doctrine of salvation. For some parts of the church, the absence of a robust doctrine of creation results in a doctrine of the redemption of creation that draws its meaning and sensibilities from accounts of creation outside the Christian tradition. In these parts of the church, there is a profoundly appropriate sense that this world is the realm of salvation. But because theology does not provide a doctrine of creation dialectically related to redemption, these parts of the church turn elsewhere for a doctrine of the redemption of creation. They find it variously in particular accounts of evolution, in *techne* (supposed human mastery of the world), in Gaia, and in other doctrines of salvation.

There is another layer to this corruption of the doctrine of salvation as a consequence of the neglect of creation. This layer is manifested in the seemingly endless debate over evangelism and social action. In some parts of the church, this debate has been decided, and energy has been directed toward one of the options. In other parts, the debate and tension can be debilitating. In still others, there is a balance in practice that lacks a foundation in vision. In very few is there a robust vision and practice guided and energized by a cogent dialectic of creation and redemption.

Church Health

Integral Mission

Such a dialectic is immediately before us. If God's work in Christ is the salvation of this creation, then the church's witness to this work in Christ must be whole. It is not a matter of evangelism as saving people for eternity and social action as caring for their bodies until they die. It is rather a matter of witnessing to God's whole work in Christ for the salvation of the cosmos. So caring for the whole person is the work of the church in witness to Christ.¹¹

Justice and Care for Creation

If we locate our understanding of the church's witness in a robust doctrine of creation, then we will find inescapable the conviction that the church's mission

11. See my brief treatment of this issue in *Why Church Matters*, chap. 6. See also Stearns, *Hole in Our Gospel*, which is a passionate call to correct this deficiency in practice. In the present book, I hope to provide a doctrinal corrective to this same deficiency.

is to work for justice as our witness to and participation in God's redemption of creation. When people are oppressed, marginalized, impoverished, mocked, treated unjustly, or debilitated by illness or injury, creation is not right. We must avoid "justice without eschatology"—that is, the belief that we can achieve God's justice apart from God's acting to consummate creation in redemption. But at the same time, we must bear witness to and participate in that coming work of God as people called to bring this good news to all creation. To bear witness and participate faithfully, we must abandon the dichotomy between so-called evangelism and so-called social action. We must instead bear witness to God's redemption of creation in word and deed—by caring for all creation, the whole person and the whole world.

This leads us naturally to the church's care for creation. One of the greatest tragedies of theology's neglect of creation has been the church's complicity in the destruction of the natural world and thus also of conditions that contribute to the flourishing of life. An even greater tragedy—let's use the church's language—an even greater *sin* has been the voices in the church that have resisted and mocked the passion for life that leads to care for creation. How far have we, the church, moved from the biblical prophets and the Christian tradition, that many of our leaders could mock God, who creates and who redeems that creation? *Nostra culpa*.

There have been voices crying out on behalf of creation along the way. And today more voices have joined them. But the need for repentance—a change of mind and life—is still great among us. Often Christians seem to be committed to good environmental practices for pragmatic or self-serving reasons. We may cautiously support this commitment if it brings people into right practices that may lead them into more mature convictions and character and deeper practices. A more robust doctrine of creation may provide just such a maturing and deepening influence.

With a more robust doctrine of creation as the ground of our care for creation, we will learn first to recognize that we do not have "an environment"; rather we are a part of creation. When we recognize that we are part of creation, we will also be carried beyond our relationship to the rest of creation. To be "creation" is to be related to the Creator. Care for creation, then, is an act of obedience and praise for our Creator God—Father, Son, and Spirit—in relation to whom we have life. We may be tempted to say that it is more terrifying to think of answering to the Creator for what we have done with creation than it is to face the natural consequences of what we have done and persist in doing. But it would be a mistake to make that distinction. In the prophetic tradition of the Bible, these disasters themselves are God's judgment on our greed, rapacity, and violence (Isa. 17–19; 24; Jer. 4:19–34).

If we had a more robust doctrine of creation, we would also recognize that the God who is Creator favors justice because justice is the world rightly aligned with God's love for life. The prophets of Israel consistently proclaimed God's judgment upon Israel because the people of God fell into the false belief that God had chosen them simply to bless them. But that is not the purpose of God's call; rather it is to gather a people who bear witness to God's passion for life, which is sustained by justice.¹² If we had this understanding of justice rooted in a robust doctrine of creation, we would be deeply and repentantly committed to living generously and mercifully rather than "living" fearfully, anxiously, and vengefully.¹³

Spiritual Conflict

All these weaknesses and errors are seriously debilitating to the life and witness of the church as well as damaging to God's world. But today there is a greater danger that we need to expose, confess, and turn from, without diminishing these threats that I have already identified. I suspect that this danger is always with us, but we are especially vulnerable to it when our doctrine of creation is weakened.

Here is my deepest concern briefly put: without a robust doctrine of creation, the church has little understanding of and grounding for our life in this world. When this condition prevails, the life of the church is directed toward "otherworldliness" and a tepid form of gnosticism takes hold. And it is just tepid enough for us not to realize that it has taken hold. It bathes us in a lukewarm Christianity that leaves us relatively comfortable.

This otherworldliness manifests itself in an understanding of the "spiritual life" that has many reassuring and comforting dimensions. It can offer practices of prayer, Bible study, Christian scholarship, and witness that seem quite impressive in their widespread acceptance and practice. But none of this is grounded in God's redemption of creation. We are called to participate in the redemption of creation in this world, not to escape into another world.

12. In the following chapter, I add shalom to this account.

13. A corollary to the scarcity of theological disputation on the doctrine of creation is the paucity of theological disputation on the biblical and theological doctrine of justice. Given the importance of justice in Scripture, we should expect an ongoing, lively debate about the biblical teaching. What we have instead is a fairly lively interaction with philosophical conceptions of justice by Christian philosophers and theological ethicists, but very little properly *theological* disputation—that is, argument that takes the character, work, and will of God as determinative. We need a theological equivalent to Wolterstorff, *Justice*. The debates among Bible scholars over "justification" in Paul may ultimately lead to a larger engagement with the question of justice for all creation.

When we lack this teleological perspective on the redemption of creation, we become vulnerable to other ideologies and claims on our lives in this world. We are creatures of this world, and we have to live in this world. When our life in Christ is not grounded in this world—to which he came and to which he will return, I remind you—then our life in this world becomes terrifyingly vulnerable to other powers. As an illustration, think of the church in Germany and the terrible willingness of the German Christian movement to endorse a theology of blood and soil—an alternative doctrine of creation that is deeply implicated in the Holocaust.¹⁴

Then think today of the church and its lack of a robust doctrine of creation. What ideologies are seeking to co-opt our life in this world? What ideologies have already co-opted our this-worldly life? Today we may see this demonstrated especially among conservative Christians in the United States. This is partly because they have a bit more cohesiveness and political connections than other Christians. So they may be easily co-opted for this-worldly programs that are not rooted in Christian convictions. But we may also identify in the recent past an occasion of similar co-optation in the ideological support that mainline Christianity gave to the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century. We are all vulnerable to other claims on our this-worldly existence when we are not grounded in a robust Christian doctrine of creation.¹⁵

Church as Culture

In order to bring our existence in this world under the discipline of God's love in Christ, which is the life of the world, the church must understand itself as culture.¹⁶ The way that we use the stuff of creation for our life as church is training us in this-worldly existence. And most of that existence seems so natural and commonplace that we take it for granted.

The ways that we use the stuff of creation in architecture, music, paintings, food, money, books, cars, water, and more reflect our convictions about creation and teach us convictions for thinking about and living in creation.

14. This I think is the place to locate Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for religionless Christianity and a worldly Christianity. Bonhoeffer's call for a religionless Christianity is directed toward the "religious Christianity" in both conservative and liberal forms. Conservative "religious Christianity" falls into piety that seeks to escape this world. Liberal "religious Christianity" assimilates to the world. In contrast, "religionless Christianity" is a "worldly Christianity" immersed in the redemption of creation and thus also fully immersed in the world that God is redeeming as creation. See chaps. 8 and 9.

15. For a theologically and liturgically grounded exposé of this vulnerability, see Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*.

16. See Clapp, *Peculiar People*; Harvey, *Can These Bones Live?*

If we see the things of this world merely as instrumental to the salvation of spirit or saving souls, then we have truncated the good news of Jesus Christ. That is, if we see music or banners or other visual presentations merely as a means to move people more effectively to faith in Christ, then we are unfaithful to the gospel. There is a fine balance to observe here. Since creation is fallen from the good, it has become the world that must be and is being redeemed. Therefore, we must not be naive or undisciplined in our cultivation of church culture. At the same time, however, creation is not *instrumental* to salvation in Christ; it is the very *substance* of salvation in Christ. It is not enough that we have the arts in the life of the church; we must have them in the life of the church in the right way: as our celebration of and participation in the reconciliation of all things visible and invisible to God through Christ. The stuff of creation is what God the Son redeems through his becoming flesh, bearing our sin, enduring death, and rising to life. When we have a truncated doctrine of creation, we have a truncated understanding of salvation. With a more robust doctrine of creation, we may enter more fully into the life of the redeemed as witnesses to and servants of the only hope of all creation.

One implication of my argument is that we need to work harder at recovering the createdness of life and our faith. This means adopting, recovering, and deepening practices in the church that will reshape our thinking and living into a fuller recognition of the redemption of creation. There are far-reaching actions that most of our churches must take both to develop practices and to ground them in a trinitarian, redemptive doctrine of creation.

Two Practices

Two crucial practices are immediately among us in the central sacraments of the church. In baptism and the Eucharist, the stuff of creation bears witness to God's grace in life because God's redemption of creation makes the stuff of creation sacramental. In baptism, the water necessary to our bodily life and to creation witnesses to the washing of our sin, the outpouring of the Spirit, and, for this convinced Baptist, the raising of this body to new life in Christ. Note that it is what we do to *our bodies* that identifies and unites us with the Messiah here and now. "Therefore . . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1 NRSV). In order to develop a more robust doctrine of creation, we need to think from this practice into creational life.

In the Eucharist, the stuff of creation—bread and wine—becomes for us a witness to our participation in the redemption of creation. This bread and wine, as signs of the body and blood of Christ, remember the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ as our salvation. And the Eucharist

makes that salvation material; it is located in the redemption of creation. In the Eucharist, the Word who is Creator and who became flesh, the Word who is the life of the world, is our life. We learn here in the bread and the wine that our very life is his gift to us, that our coherence is his gift to us, that our redemption from sin and our life beyond death is his gift to us.

But baptism and the Eucharist must not be merely activities of the church. We have been doing these things for a long time, and they have not led us to recognize or correct our teaching and practices. Our neglect of the doctrine of creation and of the redemption of creation has sadly but easily coincided with our continuing celebration of baptism and the Eucharist. What we must recover is the *practice* of baptism and the Eucharist. By practice I mean that these must be firmly, intentionally, and continually rooted in the story of God's redemption of creation. They must be welcomed and acknowledged as part of our participation now in the telos of new creation. As we *practice* baptism and the Eucharist, we are led more deeply into the story of the redemption of creation, we learn more fully the meaning of the telos of new creation, and we more fully participate in Christ. Learning this, we continue on to our mission in the world.¹⁷

17. This last paragraph is my inadequate way of restating the brilliant teaching of Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, esp. chap. 2, "The Eucharist."