

Theological Implications of an Evolving Creation

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Insights into God's character and our creaturely responsibility are drawn from the scriptural account of the creation and from its preserved record on Earth. A "continuous creation" perspective has been taken that assumes a long physical and biological history of the Earth in which humankind has made only a very recent appearance. God is understood as intimately and actively involved in "natural, law-governed" processes, and nothing in creation is surrendered to a purely natural realm independent of God. The progressive, historical nature of God's creative activity is consistent with his redemptive work in the world and his sanctifying activity in us. The immense period of time during which life on earth evolved reinforces the inherent value of all life, which was created for God's pleasure and declared to be good. Our unique position as God's image bearers, possessing at once kinship with the non-human creation and with God, is the basis of a dominion over creation based on sacrificial service.

Much time, energy, and paper has been devoted to debate within the Christian community over how the Genesis creation accounts should be properly understood. One result of this debate has tragically been to divide and polarize the Church and divert its attention from its God-given mission to live as God's image bearers, exercising stewardship over his creation, and proclaiming his message of reconciliation to the world. There has similarly been a tendency to alienate the scientific community and ignore the implications of its growing understanding of the physical and biological world.

In the debate over the proper understanding of the Genesis account, most attention has seemed to focus on the scientific merits of various creation scenarios. What has largely been lacking in these debates is a consideration of the theological implications of these various interpretations for our understanding of the character of God, the relationship of God to his creation, and the relationship of us to the rest of creation. After all, it is to these basic issues that the Genesis account is primarily, if not exclusively, addressed. In addition, much of

the resistance to evolutionary cosmologies among evangelical Christians is a perceived conflict with the fundamental doctrines of the faith. For these reasons, this paper deals directly with the theological implications of what I prefer to call the continuous creation view.

The term "continuous creationist" has been used by both Wilcox and Moltmann as a useful label for a fully theistic view of creation involving a long uninterrupted creative history.¹ My particular view is based upon the following propositional statements: 1) The intent of Genesis is not to provide information on the mechanism, sequence, or timing of God's creative activity. Rather, the intent is to proclaim the creator God over against the polytheism and idolatry of surrounding cultures.² 2) Scripture attests to God's direct involvement in the creation and continuing sustenance of the physical universe. 3) The physical universe provides a true and potentially understandable record of its creation. 4) The study of the universe has revealed its great age and immense expanse. 5) Science, especially biology and geology, is revealing a dynamic and progres-

sively unfolding physical and biological history of the Earth. This creative history includes human origins, which were confined to only the final moments of Earth history, and were inseparably connected to the creative processes operative in the rest of the physical universe.

This paper is an attempt to explore some of the theological implications of the continuous creation position outlined above. No attempt will be made here to defend or justify this position; it is simply presented as my beginning assumption. I am concerned that the Church will remain preoccupied with debating the scientific or scriptural merits of particular interpretations of Genesis without ever engaging the central issues about which the Genesis account is concerned. It is my hope that this paper will stimulate other Christians to consider the relevance of their own particular understanding of creation to their conception of God's character and his purpose for us and the rest of creation. Scientifically informed Christians need to begin to grapple with the increasingly pressing issues of resource depletion, environmental stewardship, and the appropriate use of technology before they lose their opportunity to have a voice.

The Integrity of God's Creation

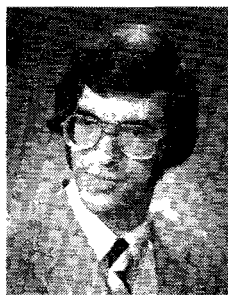
One of the fundamental assumptions of the continuous creation view outlined above is the integrity of God's creation — that is, the testimony of God's creation is true. This can be expressed in essentially the same terms as that of scriptural inerrancy — properly interpreted, the record of God's creative activity preserved in nature is true ("inerrant"). Worded in this way, emphasis is placed on the complementarity of the revelation of God's words and the revelation of God's works.³ They are equally true expressions of the mind and character of God. As a result, the understanding of God, ourselves and the rest of creation obtained from the study of these two revelations must ultimately harmonize.

The truths revealed by nature and scripture should inform each other, and any conclusion drawn from one cannot contravene that of the other.

Scripture attests to the truth of God's general revelation in creation. Creation is understood in scripture as the physical manifestation of the word of God — "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33: 9).⁴ Creation was a source of revelation on the character of God for the writers of both the Old and New Testaments. According to David, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (Psalm 19:1-2). Even more forcefully, Paul rests human accountability toward God on the universal proclamation of his creation — "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

I believe it is very important to recognize the works of God in the natural realm, his creation, as a source of truth about the Creator. Faith in a rational orderly God whose created works are orderly and comprehensible to those creatures in whom he invested his image is foundational to a Christian's practice of modern science. If the natural world does not contain a reliable record of its past history, on what basis can it be studied and to what purpose? Even more significantly, what would such a world communicate about the character of its Creator? Some argue that the geologic record was created by God as a test of our faith, and bears no relation to the true history of the Earth. The question, however, is not one of "faith testing," but of deception. God may, and does, command our obedience in the absence of knowledge, but I do not believe he ever gives us false information.

God's creation, as a revelation to his creatures of who he is, should provide an accurate record of



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God's creative activity: of the way the universe actually was and is. Placed within this context, any "creation with age" scenario is untenable. I must dismiss the suggestion that God created stars with their light already reaching the Earth, or that the Earth records an apparent geologic history which never existed. Similarly, I cannot accept that God would have created organisms with apparent evolutionary relationships that have no existence in reality. Progressive change through time, whether in cosmology, geology, or biology is the overwhelming conclusion from a reading of the creation record. Such an understanding of God's creative activity eliminates entirely the problem of creation with age.

The rejection of apparent age does not imply the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. That is precisely the dilemma which our present understanding of the history of the universe resolves. God created the universe from nothing, but that creation was progressive and of long duration rather than immediate and instantaneous. If all the physical universe can be traced back in time to a time zero, there is no false appearance of age. The universe is precisely as old as it appears. Before the beginning there was nothing but God. That may be a problem for the scientific community, but certainly not for biblical theists.

The integrity of creation upholds the trustworthiness of God's character. The God revealed in nature is the same God who has revealed himself in scripture and in human flesh — that is, the God of history and the God of truth.

A true and potentially comprehensible record of creation affirms the meaning of both natural history and human history. Christianity is fundamentally a historical religion, and our understanding of God is based on his historical interaction with his people. Human history flows backwards seamlessly into natural history, and anything which brings into question the validity of the latter threatens also our confidence in the former. As stated by Menninga, "... if we accept the concept of 'apparent age,' we are left with no assurance of the reality of any history whatever."⁵ The integrity of creation upholds the trustworthiness of God's character. The God revealed in nature is the same God who has revealed

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The Enormity of God's Creation

The scientific enterprise has vastly expanded our view of the universe. In contrast to the world of the ancients, the cosmos we now inhabit stretches out in space to unimaginable distances and is populated by innumerable other worlds. Earth orbits an enormous sphere of incandescent gas on which rage magnetic storms that dwarf Earth in size. But our sun is only a rather average star, one of millions of stars in a rather average galaxy, which is one of billions in the universe. We share the universe with a bewildering array of other celestial bodies including newly forming stars in vast clouds of interstellar dust, stellar nebulae, neutron stars, pulsars, black holes, quasars, and exploding and colliding galaxies. The formation of these fascinating objects is imbedded in a cosmic history that stretches back in time perhaps 15 billion years. Over that vast time stars have formed, burned, and died, producing in the process the elements of which Earth and its living biosphere are composed.

Earth history, about 4.6 billion years, though only a fraction of cosmic history, remains beyond human comprehension. This history is also a highly dynamic one, more so than was appreciated even a generation ago. The Earth's crust has been in continual motion with the opening and closing of ocean basins and the collision and rifting of continents. Mountains the height of the Himalayas have been uplifted, eroded to sea level and uplifted again. The oceans have risen to flood the continents, retreated and flooded again to form repeated cycles of terrestrial and marine sedimentation. Global climate has varied considerably with at least five major periods of extensive continental glaciation. Superimposed on this complex array of physical and environmental change is the unfolding evolutionary history of life extending back over 3 billion years.

Our continually developing scientific understanding of cosmic history, rather than being seen as reducing God to some distant and irrelevant "first cause," should produce awe at God's incalculable power and wisdom. It adds a dimension to God as Creator and Lord of heaven and earth which could not even have been imagined by previous generations. The God whom we worship exerts his creative power over distances so great that light requires billions of years to traverse them, and the God to whom we pray has actively molded and directed his creation for billions of years. When God sought

to communicate his transcendence, power and authority to Job (Job 38-41), he instructed Job to contemplate the created universe. When we contemplate the universe today should we not, even more than Job, be overwhelmed by God's greatness?

One particularly subtle and destructive tendency we all have is to reduce our image of God to something easily comprehensible and manageable. We want to put our God in a box, where he is predictable and operates within well-defined boundaries. Our God is often much too small and we much too large. In his book *Your God is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips states that to see the size of God is to

... see the immensely broad sweep of the Creator's activity, the astonishing complexity of his mental processes which science laboriously uncovers, the vast sea of what we can only call "God" in a small corner of which man lives and moves and has his being.⁶

For all those who recognize a Creator, one look at the vastness and complexity of the universe should shatter any illusions that God can ever be enclosed by the constructs of our minds.

The incomprehensible vastness of the universe, while forcing us to face our smallness, also emphasizes God's grace in making us his image bearers and calling us into fellowship with himself.

The immensity of the universe in space and time emphasizes, in the most striking way, humankind's creatureliness and smallness. In comparison to the physical universe which science seeks to know, we are utterly insignificant. Though living within a universe much smaller than ours, David could say "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4). Yet David did not stop there but continued: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet..." The incomprehensible vastness of the universe, while forcing us to face our smallness, also emphasizes God's grace in making us his image bearers and calling us into fellowship with himself. Beyond all expectation and

possibility, God has chosen to love us and identify with us.

The Immanence of God's Creative Activity

A common, unstated, but implicit assumption which pervades the "creation/evolution debate" on both sides is that creation was an unique activity of God at the beginning of time. However, creation is not merely a past historical event, but a present and continuing reality! Scripture is firm in its declaration that all things are brought into existence and sustained by God's present creative activity. God is as much the author and creator of life (and of all physical reality) today as he was in the beginning. Scripture makes no substantive distinction between God's creative activity and his present sustaining of the universe. God gives life to all the creatures of Earth as a creative act: "When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:29-30). Every creature, every human being is individually created by God. "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). It is this recognition that all life is dependent on the continuing creative power of God which has been somehow forgotten in the intensity of the creation/evolution debate.

God is immanent in creation—he is intimately and actively involved in what we perceive as "natural" and "law-governed" processes. The book of Job and Psalm 104 beautifully and forcefully communicate this immanence of God. Nature is not understood in scripture as something autonomous and independent of God's direct providential control. The sun rises and sets, the clouds bring rain to the Earth, and the hawk takes flight at God's command. God is no less involved in the normal events of our world than he is in the supernatural. As David Wilcox has stated:

Anyone who is a fully biblical theist must consider ordinary processes controlled by natural law to be as completely and deliberately the wonderful acts of God as any miracle, equally contingent upon his free and unhindered will.⁷

Santmire has referred to this thoroughly orthodox understanding of God's providence as "omni-miraculous."⁸ Though the western church in this scientific age may verbally assent to this understanding of God's providence, I fear that for most Christians

today it has little apparent significance or relevance. We have split the world into the physical and spiritual, the normal and the extraordinary, and then relegated God to the latter. No such dichotomy is apparent in the writings of scripture.

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A biblical view of creation goes beyond God's continuous directing involvement in creation to his active upholding of creation, of reality itself, both physical and spiritual.

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

Nothing can claim co-eternity with God: he is the sole source of all reality. Though God is immanent in creation, he is not part of creation, but fundamentally distinct from it — he is transcendent.⁹ Immanence without transcendence is pantheistic — and conversely, transcendence without immanence is deistic. These are two of the great errors of our time, and all times. It is the combination of these attributes which yields a biblical understanding of the Creator and God of history. God does not simply manipulate creation as though he were part of it, but upholds its very existence. Aquinas expressed this idea:

We are not to suppose that the existence of things is caused by God in the same way as the existence of a house is caused by its builder. When the builder departs, the house still remains standing ... But God is, directly, by himself, the cause of the very existence, and communicates existence to all things just as the sun communicates light to the air and to whatever else is illuminated by the sun.¹⁰

Similarly, Langdon Gilkey states:

...without the continuing power of God, each creature would lapse back into the non-being whence it came. Were God to cease to be in things, they would simply cease to be ... For this reason, the concept of God's continuing creation of the world in each succeeding moment of its passage is the ground for the further doctrine of God's providential

rule over each aspect of creation and each moment of its duration.¹¹

The recognition of God's providential control over all of creation leads inescapably to a dualistic understanding of causation. A "natural" or scientific explanation of events, no matter how complete, does not negate God's complete control over those same events. There are thus two independent causal explanations that can be given for any physical or historical event.¹² Scripture presents just such a view. Behind all natural causes is the omnipotent hand of God. Rain or drought, plague or harvest, victory or defeat are all attributed to God's purposive action (see Amos 4:6 ff). The redemptive history of God's people is presented both as a series of cause-and-effect historical events, and as a direct manifestation of divine power. The death of Ahab by a randomly shot arrow (I Kings 22:17-38) is particularly illustrative. All events, even random ones, are under the direct control of God. Such a dualistic understanding is, in fact, the fundamental basis for our confidence in prayer. For example, though the formation of rain can be described as a consequence of a series of proximate "natural" causes, we can still pray for rain to end a drought, recognizing God's control and authority over those natural processes. It is peculiar that we implicitly recognize in our prayer what we otherwise frequently deny — that is, God's action is expressed in the everyday events of our world and our lives. We have bought into the "wisdom" of our time, cloaked in scientific authority, which states that natural causation excludes the divine. In this, the Church needs to find its prophetic voice.

The Progressive Nature of God's Creative Activity

The view that God's creative activity is instantaneous and transcends "natural" processes often springs from the larger view that God's power is evidenced only in the supernatural. This is often a subtle unspoken assumption which causes people to cling to the inexplicable and miraculous as evidence of God's reality. Mysteries of the natural world are seen as marks of the Creator's hand, while well understood natural processes are dismissed as not requiring the divine. This perspective is, interestingly, common to both the Christian and scientific communities. The result is a "God of the gaps" in human knowledge — God is seen where science and our own understanding fail. As our scientific knowledge grows larger, God's realm is correspondingly reduced. Faith is placed in a position of constant retreat from the "advance" of science, and continual

conflict is assured. This is a totally unnecessary state of affairs, since the action of secondary causes and divine action and control are not mutually exclusive.

The Creator gives his creation the freedom to participate in the accomplishment of his will, while he remains providentially in control and the sole source of power for this activity.

We find in scripture that God not only acts in the normal or "natural" events of our world, but also that he typically accomplishes his will through chains of secondary causes. In other words, God's activity is typically progressive in time, and potentially understandable in terms of cause-and-effect sequences of physical or historical events. The historical activity of God with his people is just that — history, with accounts of the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms, of alliances made and broken, of loyalty and treason, of bold acts of faith and great acts of wickedness, of prophetic voices heeded and ignored. But scripture views none of this history as occurring without the direct providential control of a God in whose hand the nations are but a drop in the bucket.

God's revelation of his character and his plan of redemption was a gradual one — first to Abram, then through Moses and the prophets to the nation of Israel, then through his own incarnation and the indwelling of his Holy Spirit to the world. Our own conforming to Christ's image is a process, even a painful one, not an instantaneous state achieved upon our conversion. God seems generally to deal through time more often than he accomplishes his will by "miraculous" intervention. He even commissioned us, his sin-warped creatures, to be the agents of his redemptive work. Efficiency is clearly not a priority in God's redemptive activity; why should we require it of his creative activity?

Even miraculous acts of God are often not without actual or potential physical description and explanation.¹³ Many acts of God are understood as miraculous not because they break the continuity of cause-and-effect relationships but because of their spiritual context. They fulfill prophetic proclamations (Moses announcing the coming plagues to Pharaoh — Exodus chapters 7-11), occur in response

to prayers of faith (Elijah praying for rain — I Kings 18), or demonstrate the authority of the Word of God (Jesus calming the storm — Mark 4:35-41). The incarnation itself, though clearly a miracle of the greatest dimension, involved natural processes. Jesus developed from a single cell in his mother's womb as any human infant, and after his birth he continued to "grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). That the infinite omnipotent God would subject himself to the process of growth and development seems more incredible to me than that he would use processes of gradual change in his creative activity.

Christians with a high view of scripture should not fear the involvement of secondary causes in God's creative acts. In fact, a progressive creative history involving secondary causes seems to me most consistent with God's providence and immanence in creation, as well as his transcendence over it. God is the source of all created reality but has given the physical universe a role in its own creation. George Murphy has spoken of this as "mediated creation *ex nihilo*," in which "God is the sole creator, but the whole material world has been produced mediately."¹⁴ God thus affirms his creation, not only in its existence but in its dynamic activity. In a similar fashion God calls us to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13). The Creator gives his creation the freedom to participate in the accomplishment of his will, while he remains providentially in control and the sole source of power for this activity.

The Inherent Goodness of God's Creation

In the Genesis account, God looked upon what he had made and saw that it was good (Gen. 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25). As expressed by the authors of *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*,

These verses in Genesis 1 make clear that the goodness of creation is a goodness in the things themselves, not in their usefulness to humans — who are not even mentioned until the end of the chapter. To say that the goodness of creation is only a goodness of utility, because it can be used by the one creature made in God's image, is to miss most of the force of the boisterous and blossoming complexity of life which Genesis 1 suggests.¹⁵

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should provide a powerful motivation for environmental activism within the evangelical Christian community. That this is largely not the case suggests that the message of creation's inherent goodness has yet to be fully apprehended.

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God loves and sustains all his creation, which exists for his pleasure and glory. In declaring his glory to Job, God asks rhetorically, "Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? ... Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?" (Job 38:25-27, 39-41). Here, as in the rest of Job, God glories in those aspects of his creation over which humans have no control, or about which they have no understanding. These exist for the praise of his glory alone, not for any human utilitarian purpose. The Psalms are likewise filled with images of all creation — the seas, the mountains, the hills, and all that is in them — giving praise to God (see Psalm 96, 98). This perspective is not unique to the ancient Hebrews, for Christ himself taught of the Father's love and care for all creation in his parables. Christ's argument for God's care of us would have no force if God did not really care for sparrows or lilies (Matthew 6:26-30; 10:29-31).

The developing modern understanding of the Earth and the cosmos gives added force and meaning to God's care and love of the non-human universe. A universe that extends in space for billions of light years, is a universe upon which only God can look and declare, "It is good." Innumerable worlds orbiting distant suns in our galaxy and countless others display their created beauty for God's pleasure and glory alone. The recognition of a creation history stretching back into the far distant past also emphasizes the inherent goodness of creation. Our present world is the culmination of billions of years of

creative activity by God. A bewildering array of animals and plants have come into existence and passed into extinction during the long history of life on Earth. These creations of God were good and pleasing to God for their own sake — the appearance of humanity being a far distant event. Creation is indeed good, not because of some actual or potential usefulness to us, but because God made it so.

An ancient Earth with a long biological history implies the existence of physical death and pain before the Fall. This conclusion is inescapable. If the Fall did not bring death to the non-human world, then how are we to understand its effects on creation? I believe that the message of Genesis 3 is that the Fall destroyed the relationship of humans with the rest of nature, not that it fundamentally altered nature itself. The whole context of the creation account is a relational one — between God, his creation, and his image bearers. As Blocher states,

It is permissible to think that the disruption affects that relationship before anything else, beginning with the weakening and disorder of man himself If man obeyed God, he would be the means of blessing to the Earth; but in his insatiable greed, in his short-sighted selfishness, he pollutes and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert.¹⁶

We are the agents of nature's corruption.¹⁷ The creation waits in eager expectation for our redemption (Romans 8: 18-23), for the restoration of its broken relationship with its divinely appointed steward.

It must first be realized that the creation God affirms in scripture is the present creation, not a pre-fall paradise.

Recognizing the consequences of human sin, the question remains: How can the presence of death and pain in the created world be reconciled with God's affirmation of the goodness of creation? It must first be realized that the creation God affirms in scripture is the present creation, not a pre-fall paradise. We are called to observe and ponder the creation surrounding us, and to respond with praise and glory to God. It is our familiar world with its lions, jackals and birds of prey to which scripture points us. Secondly, the study of nature reveals that death is woven into the very fabric of creation. Much of the amazing biological diversity of this planet is represented by carnivores and scavengers. This is especially true in the oceans, where nearly all mac-

rosopic organisms are carnivores. Ecosystems are built upon the flow of energy and matter through the food chain from plant to herbivore to carnivore. Through death and decay the elements necessary to life are recycled within ecosystems. Without death the divine blessing of fruitfulness would rapidly become a curse as available resources became exhausted. Continued reproduction is impossible in the absence of death. In short, death is essential for the continuation of life.

Death and pain need not be understood as satanic corruptions of the created order. Rather they reflect the nature of a God who has suffered and died for the life of his creatures.

The activities of reproduction, raising young, capturing prey, and defending against predators govern not only animal behavior and species interactions, but also their anatomy and physiology. Animals are *designed* for these very purposes.¹⁸ The speed of the antelope and the fluid motion of a pursuing cheetah, the tender care of young in a herd of elephants, the beauty of an eagle as it plucks a fish from the water, the amazing protective camouflage of a walking-stick insect, the deceptive lures of the angler fish, the beauty of a spider web — all these call forth our wonder. Much of our marvel of creation is also in the intricate network of relationships between organisms which fit them into an incredibly well balanced system, a system where pain and death are inextricable parts. The beauty and goodness of the whole may seem to be at odds with the pain and suffering embedded within it. Perhaps we err in trying to impose our vision of goodness upon God. In this regard, William Dumbrell states "...our 'very good' world of Gen 1:31 was one in which the possibility of pain and suffering in the non-human world existed. Gen 1 thus is best viewed as presenting to us a picture of a world which corresponded *absolutely* to divine intention, but to which our abstract notion of perfection is not happily applied."¹⁹

Death and pain need not be understood as satanic corruptions of the created order. Rather they reflect the nature of a God who has suffered and died for the life of his creatures. Life from death — this is the biblical pattern and the pattern of creation. There is congruity here, not irreconcilable contrast. In the

natural world life is created out of death. Life springs from the material of the dead, the Earth itself is formed of material created in the cataclysms of exploding stars. The image of resurrection is everywhere to be seen, and Murphy has captured its meaning in his term "chiasmic cosmology." He states,

The multitude of death and resurrection types which are seen throughout the world of natural phenomena are then seen to be signs that the Crucified is the One through whom all things were made. On the other hand, the splendor of the galaxies flung across the universe, and the intricate biochemical bases of life, remind us that it is their Creator who is the Crucified. The cross and resurrection of Christ are the meta-sense of the world.²⁰

That the God who became flesh and died for the life of his creatures should so design the world from its inception seems to me the most perfect of cosmic metaphors.

The Image of God in Creation

We are the image of God in creation — that is why the command against making graven images is so powerful. We stand in a unique position within creation — as God's representative, as his viceroy over the Earth. I believe that the basis for that unique position is our dual nature. We have at once a kinship with the rest of creation and with the Creator.

Genesis describes the origin of humankind in precisely the same manner as that of all other living things. In chapter 2, verse 7 it states "the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life..." Notice the wording in the following creative acts of God: "out of the ground the Lord God made to grow..." (v. 9), and "out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast..." (v. 19). The origin of our physical nature is not different from that of other creatures — we are made of the same stuff. If God used and providentially controlled evolutionary mechanisms in the creation of plants and animals, I see no reason to reject an evolutionary origin for humankind. In fact, the testimony of both scripture and nature is that we share a oneness with the rest of creation. Our physical natures are inseparably connected to the rest of life on Earth.²¹

Resistance to the acceptance of an evolutionary origin for the human species perhaps is due in part to pride. In denying our physical relatedness to the rest of creation, we are resisting the fact that we

are dust. What are we saying about our understanding of the natural world, and of God, if the suggestion of our genetic continuity with the rest of creation is considered incompatible with our position as God's image bearers? It may be that we have forgotten the goodness of creation, and the farreaching implications of the incarnation. God in Christ radically identified with his creation, he took upon himself human flesh and with that the substance of all creation. While we strive to forget our earthiness, God embraces it. Murphy emphasizes this point, and sees in it a powerful way of understanding the global significance of redemption in Christ. He states,

God took on human nature to redeem it. And because humanity carries links of many kinds, embryological, structural, genetic and molecular, to the animals and plants of the earth, and indeed to the very dust of which we are made, God has assumed all that in the Incarnation.²²

By taking upon himself the dust of the Earth, he is able to redeem the whole creation. "All things" are to be reconciled in Christ (Col. 1:20).

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While Genesis roots our physical origin in the stuff of the Earth, it also places us firmly in a unique position before God and creation. The error is to attribute unique status to our physical nature, as though our exalted position is founded on something other than God's grace. I believe that it is our relationship to God more than anything else which distinguishes us. From the dust of the Earth God had raised up a creature and imparted to it a spiritually conscious soul. By this act of grace God elevated humanity to a special position of conscious and willing fellowship with himself.²³ This view is similar to that recently expressed by Clouser, who states:

For it is clear in [the Genesis] account that what defines a human is being in the image of God, and that an essential part of that image is the capacity

for fellowship with God. In short, humans are essentially *religious* beings. They are beings created for the very purpose of entering into covenant fellowship with their Divine Creator.²⁴

This is not to say, however, that our physical bodies have nothing to do with being images of God. On the contrary, it is only as integrated physical and spiritual beings that we can properly image God to the rest of creation.

Our physical unity with the natural world is as vital to our appointed role as image bearers as is our spiritual apprehension of the divine.

An inseparable part of being created as images of God in the world is the authority delegated to us by God. We have been chosen out of creation as God's representatives, his stewards.²⁵ God commissioned us to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). Adam was placed in the garden "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). Our ability to exercise this divine commission to rule and care for creation is, I believe, based on our dual nature. Our physical unity with the natural world is as vital to our appointed role as image bearers as is our spiritual apprehension of the divine. As the authors of *Earthkeeping* state,

...in Genesis 1 and 2 humans are described as *being* two different kinds of things: *a part of* nature and *apart from* nature; likewise, they are described as *doing* two different things: *ruling* nature and *serving* nature one way to harmonize this apparent paradox is to recognize that it is only by virtue of human separation from nature that they can serve, and that it is the ability to be consciously a part of nature which enables them to be its legitimate master.²⁶

An understanding of the meaning of our dominion as images of God must be based on scripture. The Church, however, has too frequently adopted the world's view of dominion—that is, demonstrated power and self-interested exploitation. We have too often treated creation as an enemy requiring forceful control or an inexhaustible resource to be used for our pleasure. The biblical view of dominion, in stark contrast, is one of sacrificial service. The Old Testament model of rulership is that of a be-

nevolent king who rescues the oppressed and has compassion on the needy, weak, and afflicted (Psalm 72:2-4, 12-14).²⁷ As Christians, our model must be that of Christ, into whose image we are to be conformed (II Cor. 3:18). And Christ exercised his divine authority as a servant, in compassion and humility.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:5-8).

This is the model of dominion that we have for our rule over the non-human creation!

The application of Christ-like rule to our dominion over the rest of creation is truly radical, for it opposes the human-centeredness and materialism of our society. In his book *Imaging God*, Douglas Hall states,

As [Christ] represents for us a transvaluation of almost every other value our frenetic society teaches us to cherish — the values of possessing things, of achieving mastery, of acquiring preeminence among our peers, of winning — so with the same disconcerting logic he pulls us back from the false ambition of being nature's "lords and possessors."²⁸

The implications of the cross extend far beyond the forgiveness made available to us in Christ's substitutionary death. Christ calls us to take up our cross, to deny ourselves and live sacrificially in the service of others. Douglas Hall asks,

What can the powerful of this world make of the dominion of a weeping Lord, a shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, a donkey-riding king mocked, judged, and executed by the powers that were? And what would it mean for us to image the dominion of such a "king" in our life with the inarticulate creation?²⁹

This question calls out for a response by the Church.

The recognition of our position as God's image bearers should make the Church a powerful force for environmental stewardship, yet the Church has remained largely silent. At the same time, the environmental movement is left without a philosophical foundation for its environmental concern. Outside of the biblical world view there is very little upon which to base an environmental ethic. Arguments for species preservation and environmental conservation ultimately devolve into utilitarian arguments (which give no intrinsic value to non-hu-

man species), or pantheism (which provides no basis for human involvement in the care of creation).³⁰ The answer lies in the goodness of a creation that declares God's glory, and in the service of his image bearers, appointed to rule it in sacrificial love. □

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has grown out of several years of personal meditation and discussions with thoughtful Christians, most of whom have differed with me on certain issues. I am very grateful for the support and challenge provided by fellow Christian graduate students at the University of Rochester as my thoughts on science/theology issues matured. The critical input of pastors and elders at several churches where I have worshipped has given me greater clarity of thought and communication. The comments of an anonymous reviewer are also gratefully acknowledged. I am especially indebted to my wife, Ruth Douglas Miller, who has been my greatest source of encouragement and my most thorough critic.

NOTES

- 1 Wilcox, David L., 1986, "A Taxonomy of Creation," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, v. 38, pp. 244-250. Moltmann, Jürgen, 1981, *God in Creation*, Harper & Row, 320 pp.
- 2 Charles Hummel makes this point beautifully.
Genesis 1 achieves a radical and comprehensive affirmation of monotheism versus every kind of false religion (polytheism, idolatry, animism, pantheism and syncretism); superstition (astrology and magic); and philosophy (materialism, ethical dualism, naturalism, and nihilism). That is a remarkable achievement for so short an account (about 900 words) written in everyday language and understood by people in a variety of cultures for more than three thousand years.
(C.E. Hummel, 1986, *The Galileo Connection*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 216-217.)
- 3 To argue for the revelation of God through his works is not to say that particular features of creation provide specific illustrations of divine attributes or specific guidance for human behavior. Virtually any human behavior or philosophy can be justified by appeal to natural phenomena. We cannot pick and choose specific observations of the natural world to defend our theology. However, creation in its entire integrated wholeness must reflect something of the character of the One who continually sustains it by his creative power.
- 4 This passage and all subsequent scriptural quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.
- 5 Menninga, Clarence, 1988, "Creation, Time and 'Apparent Age'", *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, v. 40, pp. 160-162.
- 6 Phillips, J.B., 1961, *Your God is Too Small*, New York: Macmillan, p. 64.
- 7 Wilcox, David L., *op. cit.*, p. 250.
- 8 Santmire, H. Paul, 1985, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 267 pp. Santmire uses this term to describe Augustine's view of nature; Augustine stated:
For who is there that considers the works of God, whereby this whole world is governed and regulated who is not overwhelmed with miracles? If he considers the vigorous power of a single grain of any seed whatever, it is a mighty thing, it inspires him with awe (p. 63).
- 9 Luther has expressed this immanence and transcendence of God as follows:
God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and he fills all, but without his being encompassed

- and surrounded by it. He is at the same time outside and above all creatures. (Quoted in Santmire, *op. cit.*, p. 129.)
- 10 Quoted in Santmire, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
 - 11 Gilkey, L., 1959, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 378 pp.
 - 12 Thomas Burke, in a paper entitled "The Nature of God and Divine Causality" presented at the 1991 ASA Annual Meeting, argues that such a dual causation is a necessary consequence of a transcendent creator God.
 - 13 In the same paper cited above, Burke argues that God's activity in the world cannot be confirmed by scientific investigation because God is not a material being and does not act upon creation in a material manner.
 Rather, God's action will supervene upon the action taking place in the universe so that from the perspective of an observer within it a complete materialistic story can be told of those events. If God is providential in the traditional Christian sense, this must be the way things are, for he actually is constantly ruling over his creation. Miracles, then, will not be interruptions in the course of nature, the creation of gaps in the material sequence of events which composes the space-time continuum, but, as the New Testament expresses it, "signs" and "wonders" which cause men and women of faith to recognize God's salvific action "in" history, stand in awe of his majesty and grace, and respond in faith to his mercy and love.
 - 14 Murphy, George L., 1987, "The Paradox of Mediated Creation *ex nihilo*," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, v. 39, pp. 221-226.
 - 15 Wilkinson, Loren (ed.), 1980, *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., p. 206.
 - 16 Blocher, Henri, 1984, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 183-184.
 - 17 John Wenham makes this point when he states,
 It has been the sin of man, more than any other factor, which has sown discord in the world of nature, not only causing animal suffering and the destruction of plant life, but which now patently threatens mankind with self-destruction. Man's rape of the earth is a hideous and frightening story. Man was intended to live in partnership with the rest of creation, giving to it what he had to give and receiving from it what it had to give in return. But instead of trying humbly to learn God's laws and obey them, he arrogantly set out to exploit the world and to exploit his fellow-man.
 Wenham, John W., 1974, *The Goodness of God*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 204-205.
 - 18 The term "design" has deliberately been used here in connection with evolutionary origins. This is not to imply that evolutionary processes anticipate the future needs of organisms, or design them for some purpose or toward some goal. Rather, it is to emphasize the active involvement of God in the evolutionary process. God is the designer — evolutionary mechanisms, even random ones, are his instruments.
 - 19 Dumbrell, William J., 1985, "Genesis 1-3, Ecology, and the Dominion of Man," *Cruix*, v. 21 (no. 4), pp. 16-26.
 - 20 Murphy, George L., *op. cit.*, p. 225.
 - 21 Murphy, George L., 1986, "A Theological Argument for Evolution," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, v. 38, pp. 19-26. Murphy emphasizes the significance of our evolutionary relationship with the rest of creation for the incarnation. In taking up human flesh, God also took upon himself all creation. In the cross Christ redeems not only us but all of creation.
 - 22 Murphy, George L., 1986, *The Trademark of God*, Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, p. 95.
 - 23 Such an understanding of human origins is not new. The biologist and Presbyterian theologian George Macloskie stated at the turn of the century, "Evolution, if proven as to man, will be held by the biblicist to be a part, the naturalistic part, of the total work of his making, the other part being his endowment miraculously with a spiritual nature, so that he was created in the image of God." Quoted in Livingstone, David N., 1987, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 210 pp.
 - 24 Clouser, Roy A., 1991, "Genesis on the Origin of the Human Race," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, v. 43, pp. 2-13. See also the brief but thoughtful discussion of human beginnings in the introduction of Derek Kidner's 1967 book, *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary* published by InterVarsity Press.
 - 25 Von Rad points out,
 The close relation of the term for God's image with that for the commission to exercise dominion emerges quite clearly when we have understood *selem* as a plastic image. Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth (pp. 57-58).
 From Von Rad, Gerhard, 1961, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 434 pp.
 - 26 Wilkinson, Loren, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-211.
 - 27 See Wenham, Gordon J., 1987, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Waco, Texas: Word Books Publishing, p. 33.
 - 28 Hall, Douglas J., 1986, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 193.
 - 29 Hall, Douglas J., *ibid.*, p. 194.
 - 30 See Van Dyke, Fred G., 1991, "Ecology and the Christian Mind: Christians and the Environment in a New Decade," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, v. 43, pp. 174-184.

Prayer for Today

Dear God:

Today we pledge our thoughts and deeds
 to do Thy will, with our best self attuned to Thee.
 Please grant us wisdom to succeed!
 So let us say "Amen."

Arnold E. Reif