

Chapter 2

Creator God

The good news of salvation has a relationship to the idea of a Creator God in such a way that apart from this being, the idea of salvation makes no sense. The notion is rooted in the worldview expressed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and is meaningless to the worldviews of Buddhism, Hinduism, Tao, Shinto, animism, and the various tribal and nature religions of the world. That is, the proclamation of the Christ who came from the Father, died on the cross for sins, and rose from the dead presupposes a created cosmos over which the Creator has control.

The evangelization of Japan has met with little success. A number of factors may account for, or contribute to, this failure. One factor that deserves attention, however, involves the extent to which the proclamation of the gospel message in Japan has taken seriously the radically different worldviews of the messenger and the receiver of the message in Japan. While the West has never been "Christian" in the sense that all those living in the West have a genuine faith in Christ, it has held to a Christian worldview in many respects. In past centuries, even those who rejected Christ operated in a world they conceived of as created.

Since the beginning of the modern mission movement, evangelizing groups in the West have tended to communicate the gospel at home and abroad as an explanation of the doctrine of the atonement. More specifically, it is an explanation of how the vicarious substitutionary death of Christ brings justification. In this tradition, salvation equates with justification as the popular theological understanding, though theologians would acknowledge regeneration, sanctification, adoption, and glorification in the rubric of salvation.

Justification certainly lies at the heart of the gospel message, but it is not necessarily the door through which the gospel most easily travels in cultures that do not have the Christian worldview of

God as Creator. A religion that proclaims justification from sin has little appeal in a culture with no concept of sin. Apart from a Creator God, sin is a meaningless term.

While the experience of the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* may be universal, the understanding of that experience of “The Holy” has received varying interpretations around the world.¹ To communicate the gospel effectively, it helps to understand what the message receiver understands by the term “God.”

On the day of Pentecost, Peter could assume a common worldview with his audience. Though gathered from the far reaches of the empire, the crowd in Jerusalem came to worship the Creator God. They had a common understanding of who God is and what he does. Everyone accepted the Law. While the Sadducees did not accept the Prophets, the Pharisees did, and their influence was probably far greater than the Sadducees among the dispersion Jews who gathered in synagogues to read and study the holy writings far away from Jerusalem. The fact that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah at his inaugural sermon indicates a widespread use of the Prophets in the synagogues (Luke 4:16–21). Within his own culture, Peter could proceed with a straightforward declaration of the gospel in terms of the fulfillment of Scripture (Acts 2:16–21, 25–28, 34–35).

Paul, on the other hand, faced the same problem that has plagued efforts of communicating the gospel across worldviews in modern times. At Antioch of Pisidia, he recited the history of Israel and proclaimed the gospel in terms of the fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 13:16–48), just as Peter had done, for Paul had an audience composed of “Men of Israel . . . Gentiles who worship God” (13:16), or “children of Abraham, and . . . God-fearing Gentiles” (13:26).

When Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra, however, they had to alter the way they presented the gospel. They found themselves in a culture with a different worldview about the nature of deity. When Paul healed a crippled man, the citizens wanted to offer sacrifices to the apostles as the incarnation of Zeus and Hermes. In response to the crowd’s understanding of spiritual reality, Paul and Barnabas presented the gospel in terms of the Creator God:

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn

from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills you hearts with joy. (Acts 14:15–17)

This stress on the Creator God seems to have characterized preaching of the gospel when the worldview of the audience seemed the primary obstacle to hearing the good news.

At Athens, Paul had a more sophisticated apologetic approach as he attempted to build a bridge from the various belief systems current in Athens at the time to the Creator God who will judge the world in justice through One he raised from the dead (Acts 17:16–31). Paul found himself in a culture where rival worldviews already argued for the minds of the populace. The old mythologies with their temples, idols, and style had a traditional following, but philosophies like Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Platonism offered alternative interpretations of reality. None of these rival views had room for a Creator. On the contrary, the prevailing philosophical view was that the material world was evil, the handiwork of a demon—the Demiurge.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Christian worldview that understands all reality as subject to the authority of a Creator is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures—that is, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Old Testament

While the story of God's relationship to people forms the context of knowing God in particular, the story unfolds against a growing backdrop that reveals God as more than merely the family God of Abraham or the national patron deity of a minor Middle Eastern kingdom of brief duration. The one who called Abraham and created Israel was the one who created and now sustains the universe. This is a fundamental understanding of Christian faith apart from which the gospel makes no sense.

Creation psalms. Scholars disagree as to when in the story of salvation the people of Israel first understood their God as the Creator rather than as one of many gods. The debate tends to be carried out in a speculative framework that suggests conclusions that do not logically follow (e.g., if Israel did not understand God as the only God who created all things from nothing until the time of Isaiah, then the creation theme is the contribution of a creative thinker reflecting on their numinal experience rather than an act of revelation by God). Suffice it to say that the theme of creation forms an integrating element for *all* of Hebrew Scripture, not merely in terms of an initial act of God, but also in terms of the continuing implications of that act.

Throughout these texts, the various accounts of creation have a different tone from the mythologies about the origin of things that one finds in the old religions of the rival deities. The Bible pictures an effortless calling into being of things. While it speaks of creation in concrete pictures such as an “expanse” (Gen. 1:6–7) that separates the waters (more literally, a hammered-out brass bowl, like a turkey cover), this literal tone is augmented by the telling of creation in song and poetry rather than prose (e.g., Ps. 104). While Genesis receives the most attention as the account of creation, it is far from the only account.

In the creation account, God is distinguished from a mere nature god who acts out the continuing drama of the seasons and the cycles of planets. God has command over all that the Gentiles had deified. In their songs, the Hebrews distinguished their God, the God of creation, from the deified aspects of creation worshiped by the cultures living around them.

Lord of history. The psalms of creation carry the implication of creation forward from a prehistoric past to the implications for a Creator God in the present moment. Long after the beginning of creation, God continued to be active in his creation. In Psalm 33, after describing how “by the word of the LORD were the heavens made” (v. 6), the psalmist compares the majesty of creation with the futility of any earthly king’s exercise of power. Israel believed that God not only looked down from heaven on all creation,

But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,

to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine. (vv. 18–19)

By virtue of his role as Creator, God relates to the world and the universe as a king might to his kingdom: “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). As King of creation, God exercises authority in all areas of life:

He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of their people.
He settles the barren woman in her home
as a happy mother of children. (113:7–9)

In terms of human history and God’s involvement in the affairs of people, Israel could speak of him as “the King” (145:1).

In the Exodus experience, God had demonstrated his authority over the realm of nature in such a way as to put to shame the Egyptian mythologies of nature. In a typological separating of the waters at the Red Sea, where Israel experienced the authority of God as expressed in the creation psalms (Gen. 1:6; Ps. 33:7; 104:6–9; 148:4), Israel came to know God as more than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was a king who could overthrow Pharaoh effortlessly.

The kingdom of God. At the conclusion of the great psalm of Moses and the Israelites following the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, the implication of God’s sovereignty of nature and the affairs of humanity is summed up with the declaration, “The LORD will reign for ever and ever” (Ex. 15:18). God was able to save Israel from Pharaoh because he had the power and authority to save Israel. In their Savior, Israel found the only worthy King, one who reigned by virtue of his creative power and sustaining authority over all things.

In relating to the Creator as King, Israel entered into a covenant relationship bound by the law of the King. Through the law, Israel came to appreciate the holiness of the Creator:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false. (Ps. 24:3–4)

The necessity of following the Lord exclusively without rivals became the cardinal assumption for the possibility of communion with the Creator. This assumption found first place in the Ten Commandments:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. (Ex. 20:2–3)

Though rooted in God's demonstrated control over all facets of creation from the miraculous birth of a child to aged parents to the plagues that befell Egypt, the idea of God as King takes on specific significance as Israel identified with God as sovereign over them. Israel looked to God as her King, the one who would protect their national integrity and identity as a people (Hab. 3:2–19).

Happiness depended on the active recognition in day-to-day life, however, that the God who created the nation had also created the cosmos (Deut. 32:1–43). God's law reflected his purposes for humankind within the created orders. Violation of the law represented the abandonment of both place and purpose within creation. Israel's experience of God in both rescue and punishment resulted in a heightened sense of the radical distinction between Creator and creation. Failure to honor this distinction leads to the failure of creation to fulfill its purpose and relationship to God.

In describing this distinction between the Creator and creation, the Bible uses such terms as holiness and glory to characterize God while using such terms as sin to characterize humanity.

New Testament

Creation continued as the worldview of the church after the coming of Christ. It forms the basis for the miraculous activity of Christ, not as a violation of the laws of nature, but as a continuation of the Creator's involvement with creation.

Christ and creation. The New Testament places salvation in continuity with the creative act of God. Salvation is a matter of

re-creation by the Creator (2 Cor. 5:17). Salvation, in all its dimensions, is what one might come to expect of the Creator whose creative activity was not limited to a static moment in time, but who “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3).

In emphasizing this continuity with re-creation, the New Testament stresses that Christ served as the agent of both expressions by the Creator. The prologue to the Gospel of John places Christ in the beginning with God as God. Nothing was made without him (John 1:3). John’s Gospel places the message of salvation in the context of a worldview alien to the Hellenistic world for which he wrote. Using such categories as the Greek philosophical idea of the Logos, John laid the necessary groundwork to distinguish Jesus as the Son of God from one of the innumerable mythologies of the pluralistic Roman empire. The old gods had innumerable illegitimate offspring in the national and folk epics of the various regions of the empire. Before presenting any other gospel message, John carefully defined what he meant by “God” and what he meant by “Son of God” (1:1–18).

John is not alone among New Testament witnesses in defining the relationship between Christ as Savior and the reality of a created cosmos. In dealing with people from pagan backgrounds who had entered the church, Paul stressed the foundational importance of the Creator God and the relationship of the Savior to God:

Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

But not everyone knows this. (1 Cor. 8:6–7a)

What the Jerusalem believers would have known as their heritage, Paul had to make explicit as he encountered people who lived their lives according to a different worldview. In explaining the relationship of Christ to God Paul declared,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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.
(Col. 1:15–17)

The re-creation does not make coherent sense apart from a first creation. Paul stressed that the Creator is the one who changes people into his own image (3:10).

Hebrews also stresses the role of Christ in creation, but for a Jewish audience. Rather than explaining an alternative worldview, Hebrews stresses that the gospel of Jesus Christ stands in perfect continuity with the worldview taught by the prophets (Heb. 1:1–3).

Christ and the kingdom. Historically, the idea of the kingdom of God had strong cultural ties to the people of Israel. Even at Jesus' ascension, the apostles had difficulty distinguishing the kingdom of God from the historical/cultural mindset in which the first-century Jewish community held it (Acts 1:6). Kingdom terminology served as a metaphor for a far greater reality. While the term had historical meaning for Israel who had experienced God as King, if in no other way than rebellion, the metaphor did not have the same meaning in Greco-Roman culture.

When Jesus began his public preaching ministry following the arrest of John the Baptist, he “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23). By leaving the text at this point, some expositors have made the hermeneutical error of reducing the gospel to a proclamation of the kingdom of God. This reduction is not necessarily erroneous, except that its proponents tend to set the gospel of the kingdom preached by Jesus in contrast to a gospel created by the early church, and particularly Paul, which (so they claim) focused on Jesus rather than on the kingdom. This line of thought generally reduces Christianity to an ethical system. Such a moralistic approach approximates nothing more than a neolegalism.

This bifurcation of the apostolic preaching from the preaching of Jesus does not take seriously the cultural contexts of the ministries of either Jesus or Paul. The text in Matthew 4 goes on to say that as Jesus was preaching the gospel of the kingdom, he was

healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain,

the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics, and he healed them. (Matt. 4:23b–24)

The kingdom is a metaphor for something greater, and it focuses on the continuing authority and control that the Creator exercises over his creation. In the healings and exorcisms, in the exercise of control over the elements, in the exercise of authority over death, the gospel accounts depict the kingdom as a metaphor for the realm of activity of the Creator. The good news is that the authority and power of the Creator have no limits. The realm of the Creator is from everlasting to everlasting. William J. Abraham and others have argued that the gospel should be understood primarily as the proclamation of the kingdom.²

Purpose. The ancient cultures had a gloomy outlook concerning how the average person fit into the scheme of things. They lived in fear of spiritual beings and languished in dread of their fate, set in the stars, woven into the rope of life, or accounted in some other mythical way. The children of Israel resolved the matter in antiquity. Rather than being subject to the impersonal caprice of blind fate or *karma*, the faithful of Israel saw themselves living in a world ordered by a Creator who had personal concern for people and for what became of them. Rather than relying on a self-existent destiny or purpose that drew people through life, Israel trusted a Creator who had a will for how his creation could perfectly function. Realizing one's purpose came only in relationship with the Creator. Solomon expounded this theme in Ecclesiastes. Having found that all the avenues of fulfillment in life led only to meaninglessness, he declared:

Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them.” (Eccl. 12:1)

Solomon ended his examination of the meaning and purpose of life with this conclusion:

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13–14)

Within the will of the Creator, people may experience meaning, order, and purpose in an otherwise futile existence.

Paul sounds the theme of purpose in his letter to the Ephesians. In the worldview of the Ephesians, purpose and meaning were elusive dreams. In a city where the mystery religions, particularly the nature cult of the great mother Artemis, held sway, people were captive to the endless cycles of nature. Paul explained to the Christians of Asia Minor that before the creation of the world, the Creator willed that those in Christ would enjoy all the spiritual blessings at his disposal. Throughout Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul reiterates the idea of will, purpose, and plan (vv. 5, 9, 11), stressing that purpose comes as a benefit of salvation from the One who has ordered creation from before the beginning of creation.

Paul carries the theme forward as he describes how a sense of purpose extends beyond the initial experience of faith in Christ. Redemption does not come as the end of God's purpose for people, rather, it comes as the beginning of the unfolding of God's purpose. Purpose cannot be fully realized until one has experienced the re-creation of salvation that Christ brings about:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2:10)

Moral demands. The moral demands of God emerge from the relationship of creation to the Creator. The early church appealed to this relationship in calling people to lead holy lives (1 Tim. 6:13–14; 1 Peter 4:19; 2 Peter 3:3–13). The disruption of the right relationship between creation and Creator results in a spiritually deformed, polluted, and depraved creation, which is a distorted picture of its intended purpose (Rom. 1:18–32).

Sovereignty of God. As Israel before her, the early church believed that God demonstrates his sovereignty through creation.

Furthermore, that sovereignty continues over all of creation (Rev. 10:6–7). God not only has a will and purpose for his creation, but he also involves himself in the affairs of creation so as to accomplish his will.

Paul stressed that the advance of the gospel itself, under most adverse circumstances, including his sufferings and those of others, occurred as a result of the “eternal purpose” of God (Eph. 3:11). The book of Acts contains a similar theme in several passages. In his Pentecostal sermon, Peter declared that all that happened to Christ occurred according to “God’s set purpose and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23). In the prayer of the church following the release of Peter and John from prison, believers expressed the conviction that the sufferings of Christ took place not because of the people who did the deed, but because of what God’s “power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (4:28). Foundational to the gospel message is the worldview of a Creator God who orders his creation in a purposeful way toward a good end.

Biblical Implications

While the community of Israel and the early church held to the worldview founded on creation, discussions of creation in Scripture do not, for the most part, serve to explain the question of origins. On the contrary, such references occur almost exclusively to interpret contemporary life. Scripture speaks of creation to explain present existence rather than primordial origins. The reality of a Creator had profound implications for Israel and the early church in terms of present life and future destiny.

HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The idea of a Creator became foundational to Christian faith as it had been for Hebrew faith. In the formulation of the creeds, this element of the gospel served to introduce the faith: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. . . .” This element of the gospel served as the stackpole around which Augustine organized his theological system. The centrality of the Creator God in his thought emerged as a result of his conversion experience. In later centuries other theologians also organized their sys-

tems around the ideas of creation, but these other systems tended to remove theology further and further from the issues of conversion.

Augustine

The form of the *Confessions* reinforces Augustine's cardinal preoccupation throughout his theology, which emerged during the long journey of his conversion. He fixed his thoughts on the Creator and wrote the *Confessions* as a prayer of adoration and thanksgiving while confessing all that he was and all that God had done in saving him. Reflecting on the long conversion process, he confessed God's hand in his life at every turning, and he ascribed to God every good and excellent thing that had come to him. At the same time he praised the wisdom of God in every circumstance, for he concluded that God had "used the error of all who pressed me to learn to turn out to my advantage."³

Augustine lived in an age of cataclysmic change. Christianity continued to spread, but the old paganism persisted alongside the philosophical schools and the recent heresies. Augustine lived in a multicultural world without consensus, where competing worldviews warred with one another. In the midst of this diversity the old Roman political establishment crumbled in an accelerated fashion. Great migrations of people resulted in a succession of frontier battles between the dissipated Roman army and the waves of invaders, which culminated in the psychologically devastating sack of Rome itself by Alaric and his army of Visigoths in 410. In Africa, Augustine himself would die during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals in 430.

Augustine had an interest in religious, spiritual, or metaphysical matters that sought expression in Manichaeism during his school days. The followers of Mani, the founder of the movement, held to a fanciful and elaborate mythological understanding of reality centered in a dualism between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness. Mani mingled elements of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. This syncretistic religion considered the material world the result of a primordial victory of Darkness over Light, which resulted in a mixture of the two. Thus, the Manichaeans devoted themselves to deliverance from the material world in order for the Light of their souls to be liberated from the bondage of the Darkness resulting from imprisonment in a body. They had a hierarchy of the Elect,

who rigorously followed the ascetic rules of Mani, and the Hearers, who did not follow the same rigorous standards of behavior. Since procreation only prolonged the domination of the Light by Darkness, the Manichaeans rejected sexual intercourse. Since a bit of the Light remained captured in all living things, they ate only vegetables to avoid injuring the Light.⁴

Within the worldview of Manichaeism, Augustine could not receive the central tenets of the gospel. The cross had no attraction for him because, as a Manichaean, he believed the crucifixion had no objective reality but served merely as a symbol of human suffering.⁵ He did not see how Christ could deliver him from sin if the cross were a mere “phantom.”⁶ From the perspective of Manichaeism, Augustine could not conceive of the Incarnation. For Christ to be born of Mary, he would “be defiled by the flesh.”⁷ Neither could he gain instruction from Scripture because the Manichaeans rejected the Old Testament. They reasoned that if God created humanity in his image, then the God of the Old Testament must be fleshly and therefore Darkness. Augustine viewed the Scriptures as corrupt and vile for their representation of God.⁸ The worldview of Manichaeism, rooted in its conception of the divine, created a seemingly impenetrable wall that prevented Augustine from grasping the gospel:

When I wanted to think of my God, I knew of no way of doing so except as a physical mass. Nor did I think anything existed which is not material. That was the principal and almost sole cause of my inevitable error.⁹

Because of the Manichaean doctrine of creation, Augustine believed “that it is not we who sin, but some alien nature which sins in us.”¹⁰

As he pursued his education, however, Augustine suffered a conflict between his faith and science. In comparison with the rational explanation of eclipses and equinoxes put forward by the mathematical calculations of the philosophers, the myths of Mani seemed foolish to him.¹¹ As a budding intellectual, Augustine thought the teachings of Mani remarkably presumptuous in their efforts to explain all manner of phenomena from a position of ignorance. Troubled by the inconsistency between Manichaean teaching and philosophical inquiry, Augustine relied on a leading Manichaean

bishop, Faustus, to resolve the difficulty, which he failed to do to Augustine's satisfaction. Instead, Faustus's superficial treatment of the issues rendered Manichaeism all the more unsatisfactory.¹² This intellectual failure of Manichaeism combined with an emotional failure Augustine had experienced at the death of a close friend. In the grief that engulfed him following this death, Augustine found no comfort in the deity of the Manichaeans:

I should have lifted myself to you, Lord, to find a cure. When I thought of you, my mental image was not of anything solid and firm; it was not you but a vain phantom.¹³

During this period of religious and intellectual struggle, Augustine moved from Africa to Rome and thence to Milan in order to advance his career as a teacher and rhetorician. In Milan, he encountered the dynamic preaching of Ambrose. When Ambrose interpreted difficult Old Testament passages figuratively rather than in the literal fashion of the Manichaeans, his interpretations made sense to Augustine.¹⁴ Still, he could not conceive of the God of the Old Testament, so strong had the Manichaean worldview been imprinted on his mind:

If I had been able to conceive of spiritual substance, at once all their imagined inventions would have collapsed and my mind would have rejected them.¹⁵

Through Ambrose, Augustine began to understand that Christians do not believe that God had the form of a human body.

The categories of Platonic thought helped Augustine finally come to an understanding of the God who created all things. If evil did not exist as a separate force antithetical to God, then logically, he reasoned, God must have created evil. Augustine wanted to protect God from that charge. Through Platonic thought he realized that evil does not exist as a substance in its own right but as an absence of God. Since God is good and since he made all things good, "whatever things exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good."¹⁶

Augustine now felt drawn to the beauty of God who had created all things good, yet he found himself "torn away" by the weight of

his own sinfulness, which became apparent as he beheld his Creator.¹⁷ He sought a way to ascend to embrace God, but he met with frustration until he embraced Jesus Christ as the mediator, the one who bridged the gulf between his wretched condition and the Creator.¹⁸ Through reading the writings of the apostles, especially Paul, and through hearing the testimonies of various conversions, Augustine grew convinced intellectually of the truth of Christianity, but he despaired of the breakdown between his mind and his will to act. He found himself both willing and unwilling to become a Christian. While in this state of confusion, he visited a garden in Milan, where he experienced a vision of "Lady Continence," who showed him the young and old who had embraced God, not by their own strength or ability, but because God had made it possible:

Cast yourself upon him, do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you.¹⁹

He then heard a voice chanting from a nearby house, "Pick up and read, pick up and read."²⁰ Remembering the conversion of Antony, who heard the words of Matthew 19:21, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me," Augustine ran to where he had left a portion of Scripture he had been reading. Opening the book, his eyes fell on the text,

Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts. (Rom. 13:13–14)²¹

Aquinas

Aquinas lived in a world largely constructed from the theology of Augustine. The medieval European worldview grew largely out of Augustine's description of the *City of God*. While Augustine argued that the *City of God* is not to be identified with an earthly system, the church endeavored to do so. On the rubble of Rome, the church laid the foundation for the city known as Christendom. The feudal order offered a hierarchy of responsibility and authority that gained its legitimacy from the Creator, who held domination over all things.

This world of order and stability, without rival worldviews, gave Aquinas and the Schoolmen of the high Middle Ages the freedom to pursue questions that did not torment the heart (as with Augustine) as much as they tickled the mind. Still, the intellectual questions of Aquinas and the others ultimately rested on the issues of worldview: What kind of world exists? With the presuppositions that God had created the world, Aquinas developed a theological system organized around what one might know within this orderly created universe and how one might know it. His teleological argument for the existence of God rests on the assumption of this orderliness, reflected and observable in creation.

Aquinas carried forward a new tradition of theological thought that had been advanced by Anselm. In his ontological argument for the existence of God, Anselm made a case for the God of creation as the basis for knowledge. The shift in emphasis from knowledge of God to knowledge made possible because of God helped pave the way for the revolution in scientific thought that came with the Renaissance. In contrast to the worldviews of Buddhism and Hinduism, the worldviews of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism encouraged knowledge about the created order, which was judged as good.

The church of the Middle Ages remained preoccupied with Augustine's priority in theology long after it ceased to be existentially concerned with the question Augustine asked. The natural theology of Aquinas elevated the place of human reason and the value of tradition. As a result, it was not prepared to deal with the questions of Luther, whose own struggle for faith drew him necessarily into a different direction from Augustine. Luther organized his theology around the element of the gospel, which became the bridge of faith for him. Unlike Augustine, who could not accept the deity of Christ and the significance of the cross until he comprehended the Creator, Luther believed it all but lacked faith until he came to rely on the authority of Scripture as God's Word to him.

Governed by the questions of a thousand years earlier, the church did not have a place for a scientific view that did not fit with the philosophical interpretation of the meaning of creation that had grown up during the scholastic period. The church, laboring to preserve the traditional Ptolemaic universe, fell into the same trap as the Manichaeans,

who had teachings to explain what they did not understand. Thus, church and science grew apart from Galileo onward.

Calvin

Though they lived at the same time, Calvin and Luther inhabited different ages and asked different questions. Luther was a medieval monk while Calvin was a Renaissance scholar. In a sense Calvin lived in a world far more like that of Augustine. The old order had begun to unravel. Though the Western world still acknowledged a Creator, the revolution Aquinas had begun was now gaining momentum. Attention focused on the creation rather than the Creator as revolutions occurred in science, art, music, politics, and virtually every field of endeavor. The planet had even turned into a globe. Calvin did not have the same questions as Augustine, but in the disintegration of feudalism, scholasticism, and the well-ordered society that had been Christendom, the Creator God provided the solution to the questions Calvin asked.

Calvin's theological system, akin to that of Augustine, was based on the Creator God who orders the affairs of creation:

My meaning is: we must be persuaded not only that as he once formed the world, so he sustains it by his boundless power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, in particular, rules the human race with justice and judgement, bears with them in mercy, shields them by his protection; but also that not a particle of light, or wisdom, or justice, or power, or rectitude, or genuine truth, will anywhere be found, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause; in this way we must learn to expect and ask all things from him, and thankfully ascribe to him whatever we receive.²²

The sovereignty of the Creator became the central feature of the gospel message proclaimed by Reformed preachers in Europe and on the island of Britain during the cataclysmic changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the theological elaboration of this element of the gospel, the Reformed school of thought stressed "God's free grace in election and predestination" as the essence of the gospel.²³

Deism

From a universe in which God orders every event that transpires, by the early seventeenth century the Western church found itself in a mechanistic universe as far as prevailing science understood reality. Though Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton all confessed the Creator, the mechanical universe that emerged from the implications of their discoveries led to a new view of God. Once again the West found itself in a period of radical change politically, economically, socially, and intellectually. In this ferment one school of thought in the church attempted to respond to the new worldview with *deistic theology*. This theological approach emerged from the question of creation as much as Augustine's view had emerged from the same issue, but the Deists went in a radically different direction. While Augustine was converted from a pagan view of the world to one in which a Creator interacted intimately with creation, the Deists converted Christian theology from a faith in an involved Creator to a view of God compatible with the mechanical scientific views of the day.

In Deism, a transcendent God is totally removed from the world and does not intrude into the natural order. The natural and moral laws comprise all of God that is present in the world. In such a world there is no revelation, miracle, or interference from God. Paley characterized the world as a watch made by God, who wound it up to run and then left.

Process Theology

One of the most recent theological systems to emerge from the issue of creation is *process theology*. With the change from a scientific worldview of mechanism to a scientific worldview of evolution, a new school of thought sought to reconcile Christianity with these prevailing trends. Influenced by non-Christian evolutionary philosophers like Whitehead, the early contributors to what became process theology included Archbishop William Temple of England and Teilhard de Chardin of France.

Temple argued that the fact that Mind emerges at the end of the evolutionary process suggests that Mind was present at the beginning. Temple advanced his theological position largely as an apologetic for the existence of God as

the only ultimate source of the whole World-process. All the more developed religions, which do not deny the reality of matter, have advanced this claim. It is the doctrine of Creation. It is not of direct importance to Religion to assert a date for the act of Creation, or even to assert that it is an act having any date at all; it may be a never-beginning and never-ending activity. But it is of vital importance to Religion to assert that the existence of the world is due to the Will of God.²⁴

From this perspective, Temple argued that purpose runs through creation, for "when Mind expresses itself through process, its activity is called Purpose."²⁵

THE CREATOR GOD AS GOOD NEWS

Over the last two thousand years for the church, and centuries earlier for Israel, the notion of the Creator God has come as good news, as a matter for contemplation, as an intellectual proposition for debate, or as a concept that needed modification. The last three cases tend to arise when the church fails to recognize the constantly contemporary implications of the existence of a Creator. While the truths related to this element of the gospel do not change, the extent to which they address the ultimate question a generation or group of people may be asking varies greatly from time to time and place to place.

While the goodness of a Creator may speak to every generation and culture, the message may be hindered by the way the church formulates the message. Rather than present the Creator as gospel, the church tends to present the Creator as doctrine. Instead of allowing the Creator to address the questions of life being asked at a particular time, the church tends to elaborate answers to questions of another generation or culture. While the truth of the Creator is universal, the questions people ask are not.

Worldview

The questions of many Westerners at the end of the twentieth century have more in common with Augustine than they have with William Temple at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this postmodern world people are increasingly eager to see the spiritual side of reality beyond a scientific face. But what kind of spiritual

reality? Intellectual problems related to faith ultimately go back to the issue of what kind of spiritual reality lies behind the universe. The resurrection is an absurd notion with most worldviews, but it poses no problems in a world ordered by a Creator.

Augustine and C. S. Lewis represent those for whom the understanding of the Creator became the bridge of faith. For them, science and philosophy did not present obstacles to faith; rather, they became the arguments for a world in which faith seemed the only logical alternative. In a world created by God, the Creator makes all knowledge possible.

Ecology and Nature Religion

In the latter twentieth century, the crisis of the environment, produced largely from the human inability to control itself and its scientific breakthroughs, has resulted in a renewal of animism and other forms of nature religion in the West. After a hiatus of fifteen hundred years, the Great Mother cult has reemerged through the combination of ecological concern and feminist theology.²⁶ These matters relate directly to the issues of the Creator God. Rather than deity, the earth is a fragile creation susceptible to great injury.

Under the sovereignty of the Creator, the human race has a stewardship responsibility to God to care for and protect his handiwork. Indeed, "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:22) in consequence of humanity's repudiation of its stewardship relationship to God. Apart from humanity's acceptance of its right relationship to the Creator with all of the moral implications that relationship brings, the rest of creation has no hope.

The credibility of the gospel message for someone concerned about the environment depends on a ministry of ecological concern by the church. If "the earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1), those who claim to believe this assertion should act as stewards rather than as burglars or vandals. Environmentalists who have a sense of the sacredness of the earth often identify that sacredness as being an aspect of the essence of nature rather than as the result of the creation and present involvement of God. The Creator offers hope for the healing of the earth, but he also provides a basis in faith for understanding human responsibility before God for the

stewardship of the earth. From an Asian perspective, Ken Gnanakan has argued that the relationship of Creator to creation is a major feature of the good news in the face of Hindu monism.²⁷

Purpose

The existential philosophers from the time of Kierkegaard have argued that one of the great dreads of existence is the sense of meaninglessness that people suffer. This philosophical approach assumes a universal quest for purpose that may more appropriately be regarded as a feature of a Western mindset. Eastern religions do not, as a rule, offer any sense of purpose. The concept of Nirvana as the highest ideal suggests that the individual is utterly meaningless and without purpose. The concept of Karma argues for a blind, inevitable fatalism.

Existentialists speak of “the givenness of life,” which at one level may seem a despairing way of describing the cynical sense that life is a trap. At a different level, however, givenness implies a giver and suggests that life is a gift. While the quest for purpose may be more culturally restricted than Western thinkers have traditionally thought, for those who do ponder the questions of meaning and purpose, the gospel gives an answer in the good news that a Creator exists who created with purpose.

Grace

Embedded in creation is the idea of grace. In creation God acts graciously, just as in all relationships with creatures God acts and deals graciously. Max Weber coined the phrase “Protestant work ethic” as a device for interpreting Western history since the Reformation. Ironically, the Protestant ethic of the Reformation was not one of work but of grace. The “work” ethic of the West is a vestige of the Old Northern paganism. Valhalla could only be reached by conquest. The gods were not friends, but adversaries.

The old nature gods of European paganism represented the hostility of nature as an enemy to be appeased or defied. The heroes were the ones who struggled and earned all that they had in every sphere of life. The gods could not be trusted, and they were as subject to fate as mortals. In comparison to the behavior of the gods, a European could justify any behavior as it contributed to self-interest.

The old paganism survives in the West, though divorced from the mythological origins. The presence of paganism in the West accounts for a great deal of the repudiation of the Christian faith by those who identify Christianity with Western culture.

The Creator demonstrates his graciousness through creation by sending the sun and the rain for those in right relationship to him and for those in unrighteous relationship to him (Matt. 5:45b). Rather than a hostile adversary, the Creator causes the world to be rejuvenated and restored, usually in spite of the efforts of the human race rather than because of them. The grace of God operates most visibly in the futility and failure of human effort.

Value

Creation introduces the idea of value as an objective public reality rather than as a merely arbitrary, private matter.²⁸ In the growing collapse of the Western cultures in which absolute values no longer have meaning, the Creator offers the point of stability, the perspective from which to consider if anything really matters. The cult of radical subjectivity and radical freedom present in American society and European society in the late twentieth century suggests the same chaotic situation that prevailed during the period of the Judges in Israel: "Everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 17:6b).

In a world without a Creator, one could legitimately say that no absolute values exist. If one examined many cultures phenomenologically, one might conclude that the diversity of values suggests that all values are relative. Behind all values, however, lies the absolute value that order is preferable to chaos. In creation, God first brought order out of chaos (Gen. 1:2-3). Without order, science would be impossible, for experimentation depends on probability and consistency in the behavior of the material universe. Likewise, spiritual chaos produces dysfunction in relationships that can range from interpersonal conflict at the micro level to warfare at the macro level. The Creator can bring order to a chaotic life.

Identity

One of the most important developmental crises of life revolves around the establishment of one's identity. Put simply, the question is "Who am I?" This question finds its answer in relation to the

Creator, though it is treated differently by other religions that do not worship a Creator. In Buddhism and Hinduism the answer to the question begins with the confession that all people are a part of the divine and that ultimately there is no distinction between anything. All is one.

Self-consciousness is generally understood to arise in the differentiation that comes when one is aware of another. To be aware of the other is to be aware of oneself. Ultimately, personal identity can only come through the same kind of experience with God. To be aware of God as the Other, totally different from oneself, gives individuals an awareness of who they really are. Isaiah understood himself as he understood the total otherness of God (Isa. 6:5). Apart from an understanding of one's creatureliness, people who crave identity tend to take steps to create identity. These exercises normally fall within the sphere of idolatry, by creating identity from fame, wealth, intellect, sexual prowess, or the various other means people have for calling attention to themselves. In knowing the Creator, however, people are free to be themselves without having to create a character deserving of attention.

NOTES

1. See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979).

2. William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 17–39. Ben Johnson also stressed this dimension in *Rethinking Evangelism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 115–26.

3. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 15.

4. R. Michael Wilson, "Mani and Manichaeism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 5:149–50.

5. *Confessions*, 82, n. 14.

6. *Ibid.*, 82.

7. *Ibid.*, 86.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 85.

10. Ibid., 84.
11. Ibid., 75.
12. Ibid., 79.
13. Ibid., 56.
14. Ibid., 88.
15. Ibid., 89.
16. Ibid., 126.
17. Ibid., 127.
18. Ibid., 128.
19. Ibid., 151.
20. Ibid., 152.
21. Translation from Augustine's *Confessions*.
22. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 1:40–41.
23. Peter Heylyn, *Cyprianus Anglicus* (London, 1671), 180.
24. Archbishop William Temple, *Natural Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934), 37.
25. Ibid., 219.
26. See Tony Campolo, *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshiping Nature* (Nashville: Nelson, 1992).
27. Ken Gnanakan, "Creator, New Creation, and Ecological Relationships," *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 127–54.
28. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).