

# Theological Implications of an Evolving Creation

*Keith B. Miller*

The creation-evolution debate has sapped vital energy from the Christian community. Instead of building the kingdom of God, it has, I believe, been both destructive to the unity of the body of Christ and a distraction from its God-given mission. That mission is to live as God's image bearers, exercising stewardship over His creation, and proclaiming His message of reconciliation to the 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. [1] 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, I will deal 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. [2] According to this view God is continuously active in His creation through the processes that we investigate with our sciences.

## **Integrity of God's creation**

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 the 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?

God's creation, as a revelation to His creatures of who He is, should provide an accurate record of God's creative activity: of the way the universe actually was and is. Progressive change through time, whether in cosmology, geology, or biology is the overwhelming conclusion from a reading of the creation record. Placed within this context, any "creation with age" scenario is untenable.

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 backward 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." [3] 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.

### **Enormity of God's creation**

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. 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?

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 at a time when the universe was perceived to be much smaller, 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.

### **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 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.

God is immanent in creation--He is intimately and actively involved in what we perceive as "natural" and "law-governed" processes. 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 (see Job and Psalm 104). God is no less involved in the normal events of our world than He is in the supernatural. Though the western church in this scientific age may verbally assent to this understanding of God's providence, for most Christians today I fear 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 writing of scripture.

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. Scripture presents just such a view. Behind all natural causes is the omnipotent hand of God (see Amos 4:6ff). 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. All events, even random ones, are under the direct control of God (see I Kings 22:17-38). Such a dualistic understanding is, in fact, the fundamental basis for our confidence in prayer. 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.

### **God's creative activity as a process**

God's activity is typically progressive in time, and potentially understandable in terms of cause-and-effect sequences of physical or historical events. 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. 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?

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. [4] 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." (Philip. 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.

### **Inherent goodness of God's creation**

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 also implies the existence of physical death and pain before the Fall. This conclusion is inescapable. How then 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 (see Job 38:25-27; 39-41). 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. 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. 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 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. 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.

### **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 (Gen 2:7,9,19). 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. [5]

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. [6]

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. [7] 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.

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 benevolent king who rescues the oppressed and has compassion on the needy, weak, and afflicted (Psalm 72:2-4, 12-14). [8] 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 (Philip. 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. Christ calls us to take up *our* cross, to deny ourselves and live sacrificially in the service of others. In his book *Imaging God*, 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?" [9] 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 worldview 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-human species), or pantheism (which provides no basis for human involvement in the care of creation). [10] 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.

## Notes

[1] See Chapter 10 of Hummel, Charles E., 1986, *The Galileo Connection*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

[2] Wilcox, David L., 1986, A taxonomy of Creation, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 38, p.244-250; Moltmann, Jürgen, 1981, *God in Creation*, Harper & Row.

[3] Menninga, Clarence, 1988, Creation, time and "apparent age", *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 40, p.160-162.

[4] Murphy, George L., 1987, The paradox of mediated creation ex nihilo, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 39, p.221-226.

[5] Murphy, George L., 1986, A theological argument for evolution, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 38, p.19-26.

[6] 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: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

[7] See discussion on the image of God in Von Rad, Gerhard, 1961, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

[8] See Wenham, Gordon J., 1987, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, p.33.

[9] Hall, Douglas J., 1986, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p.194.

[10] 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* 43, p.174-184.