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The Significance of the Doctrine of Creation to Christian Thought and Ministry: Some Preliminary Considerations[1]

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Although there is much disagreement over the topic of origins, there is also much common ground within the Christian tradition over the significance of the doctrine of creation. This article seeks to elucidate that common ground and its pastoral implications.

Introduction

Dr Edward Fudge, in the course of his doctoral studies in the Midwestern United States, relates how he had the opportunity to study the Book of Genesis in two different seminaries; one took a literal approach, the other a non-literal approach to the creation texts. He pointed out that although the two different seminaries could not have been more different in their approaches, in terms of deriving the core meaning of the texts, they were more or less identical.

The purpose of this article is to consider the core meaning of the Biblical doctrine of creation and to draw out some implications for Christian thought and practical ministry today.

The Significance of the Doctrine of Creation to Christian Thought

There are three areas we will touch upon.

1. The place of the doctrine in distinguishing worldviews

Worldviews form conceptual maps which enable us to try and make some sense of the world and to orientate ourselves aright through life. A worldview is essentially a belief system. W.V.O. Quine referred to beliefs as 'a complicated, interconnected web of ideas.'[2]

Any worldview of value will seek to address 4 basic questions:

1. Where do I come from? (The question of origins)
2. Who am I? (The question of significance)
3. Why is the world in such a mess? (The question of evil)
4. Is there a future? (The question of purpose)

[1] This article was originally given as an address at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois.

[2] Bryan Magee, 'The Ideas of Quine,' in *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Modern Philosophy* (London: BBC, 1978), pp. 170–179.

It is of little use having a worldview or faith position which misses out on any of these questions by ignoring the hard bits of reality, such as the existence of suffering. Our map must have a good 'fit' with our experience of the world. To use the words of one Gestalt therapist, it must 'gobble up experience,' that is, it must cover reality and not leave out the rough edges of human experience. An example of a failure in this regard would be the way in which Christian Science considers the problem of suffering to be in effect illusory, a product of the 'mortal mind.'[3]

Although such questions can be distinguished, they are interrelated. This is seen most obviously in the fact that our understanding of human significance is inextricably linked to questions of origins and purpose (cosmogony and teleology).

Generally speaking, we are faced with 5 worldviews in terms of God's relation to the cosmos.

1.WYSIWYG: 'What You See Is What You Get' or, to give it its more formal title, *Naturalistic Materialism*, which is well represented by the atheism of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. This is an essentially reductionistic philosophy such that any spiritual dimension is not simply explained but explained away in terms of its alleged materialistic components. Accordingly, we have this description by Dawkins of what it *means* to be a human being:

> We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA… Flowers are for the same thing as everything else in the living kingdoms, for spreading 'copy me' programmes about, written in DNA language. That is EXACTLY what we are for. We are machines for propagating DNA, and the propagation of DNA is self-sustaining process. It is every living object's *sole reason for living*.[4]

This is a classic case of *ontological reductionism*.[5]

2. Deism/Gnosticism: The common characteristic here is that there is an essential disjunction between the Creator and the creation. In Deism, God is viewed as a remote 'First Cause': while he may be considered a personal deity, there is no effective personal relationship with the creation. Gnosticism, in its variety of forms is fundamentally dualistic whereby God is construed as a Demiurge and the material creation evil which requires some intermediaries to bring the creation into being in order to preserve the 'Otherness' and Ineffability of the Creator.

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[3] See Melvin Tinker, 'Reasonable Belief? Providing some of the groundwork for an effective Christian Apologetic,' Churchman, 125/4 (2011), pp. 343–358.

[4] Richard Dawkins, 'The Ultra Violet Garden,' Royal Institute Christmas Lecture No 4, 1991.

[5] See Donald M. MacKay, 'Man as Mechanism,' in M. Tinker ed., *The Open Mind and Other Essays* (Leicester: IVP, 1988) for an effective exposé of this logical fallacy.

3. Pantheism: While there is a great range in Hinduism, with early stages being essentially polytheistic, the highest and most influential stage is monistic. This appears in the ninth philosophy of Shankara through to the nineteenth century version of Vivekananda. Here the relationship between God and the world is likened to that of a dream to the dreamer. What we experience as the phenomenal world is *maya*, illusion. This is not to say 'creation' has no reality, it is just the reality of a dream, a phenomenon of the dreamer, indeed, almost an epiphenomenon. In this way the world and 'god' can be seen as one—monism—and so everything ('pan') is 'god' (theism).[6]

4. Panentheism: This is the view that God is in all things, but not necessarily identical with them. Martin Buber could be considered a panentheist,[7] as indeed, Bishop J.A.T. Robinson.[8] The adherents of Process Theology also hold to a panentheistic conception of the relation between God and his creation, and so according to one of its major proponents, Charles Hartshorne, 'God literally contains the universe.'[9] A case could be made for placing the openness view of 'relational theism' within this category driven by the perceived need to do justice to God's love which, it is argued, involves risk. Accordingly, God himself must suffer change by virtue of what his creatures will and do.[10]

5. Theism: This is the belief that 'the ultimate ground of things is a single supreme reality which is the source of everything other than itself but which does not depend on them for its existence. This reality is complete and perfect and, as a consequence, deserves unqualified worship.'[11] Such a deity, while being transcendent from that which he has created, is also immanent within it.

But what is it that distinguishes *Christian* theism's view of creation? This leads on to the next point:

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[6] In the seventeeth century, Baruch Spinoza put forward his own version of pantheism, 'God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things.' *Ethics,* Part I, Proposition vxiii. It is often referred to as *monadology.*

[7] Martin Buber, *'I and Thou,'* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1958).

[8] 'The most appropriate model—perhaps the only appropriate model today—for a satisfactory theology of the Incarnation is a panentheistic one.' J.A.T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 145.

[9] Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale, 1948), p. 90.

[10] See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Love of God,' in *First Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), p. 88.

[11] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: IVP, 1974), p. 55.

2. The importance of utilising all the different literary genres in the canon and the *sensus plenior* of Scripture in developing a fully-orbed biblical doctrine of creation

Whether it is internal family disputes between evangelicals—such as between young earthists ('Creationists') and theistic evolutionists—or between Christians and the New Atheism, the debates tend to focus on the first two chapters of Genesis almost to the exclusion of any other material, as well as neglecting the hermeneutical principle of reading the Old Testament in light of the New. The result has been a rather narrow, and to some degree, shallow, concern with *material origins*. But that is just one aspect of the biblical data, albeit an important aspect, such that Colin Gunton argues that the teaching of *creation ex nihilo* is unique, 'one of the most momentous developments in all the history of Christian thought.'[12] This we see in the opening verse of Gen 1:1, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

But even within the first chapter of Genesis there are clear indications that purpose or teleology is in the foreground. This is true whether one adopts a literalist Young Earth approach; a literary-cultural standpoint;[13] or, as represented by John H. Walton,[14] the 'cosmic temple inauguration' view, where existence is linked to function, in contrast to the post-Enlightenment paradigm which sees existence being linked to matter. This comes out in the climax of creation, the making of men and women in God's image in order to rule and relate as God's vice-regents, with the man being represented as the priest-king and so in some measure reflecting God's glory in the world (a theme found in Psalm 8 for example). It is here especially in the relation between man and woman that Barth understood the notion of the *imago dei*.[15] The purposive role of creation

[12] Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 65–66.

[13] Melvin Tinker, *Reclaiming Genesis* (Oxford: Monarch, 2010).

[14] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2009). See also, Melvin Tinker, 'Clearing Away Conceptual Fog: Genesis, Creation and Evolution.' *Churchman* 126/2 (2012), pp. 103–114.

[15] The Ancient Near Eastern texts referred to by Walton and others underscore the king as being made in the image of the gods in order to rule. That is what is to the fore in Gen 1:26–28. It is also taken up in Ps 8, which in the NT is applied to its fulfilment in Jesus, 'the image of God,' in Heb 2:5ff., 1 Cor 15:25ff., and Matt 21:16, all of which have a decidedly Messianic ring to them. Mankind has been placed to have dominion over creation and in Gen 2 Adam is presented as a priest-king and the Garden his is a royal sanctuary. Of course, in order to function in this way man must have certain attributes such as reason, moral understanding, creativity and so on, but the text does not provide sufficient basis to draw the conclusion that it is these attributes which constitute man being made in God's image. From the text's viewpoint, the image is construed relationally with human beings lovingly ruling under God, being properly related to him, each other and

was something which was taken up by Calvin and the idea of creation being the 'theatre of God's glory.'[16]

What is it about God that the creation accounts reveal?

In Gen 1 God presents himself as the unique, personal, absolute, sovereign God who, by his royal decreeing Word, brings a world into being, ordering things 'just so' with the result that they are good, or 'fit for purpose' as we might say.[17] As such, God is transcendent and 'Wholly Other' to his creation, but he is also immanent and intimately involved with, in and through what he has made. This is indicated, for example, by the wonderful imagery of the '*ruach adonai*' hovering over the formless void; and the evocative picture of intimacy of the Lord God breathing life into Adam (2:7) and forming the woman in the Garden. But other aspects of God's relation to his world are brought out elsewhere. For example, the *continuous* involvement and provision of God as we see in Ps 104; the universal revelation of his glory in Ps 19, and his utter sovereignty and inscrutability in Job 38.[18] Thus already theism is significantly marked off from WYSYWIG, Deism, Pantheism and Panentheism. But what has been said so far goes little beyond theism in general; what about *Christian* theism in particular?

In the second century, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (130–200 AD) sought to refute Valentinian Gnosticism which asserted an essential duality (consisting of the Inexpressible and Silence) with a series of emanations or demiurges bringing about the creation. Integral to Irenaeus' refutation was the doctrine of the Trinity. His central point was that God did not require any intermediaries to achieve his work of creation since this was accomplished through his 'two hands,' the Son and the Holy Spirit.[19] The creation itself is conceived as an act of love, not of necessity, as this is not, to borrow Karl Barth's phrase, a 'lonely God.' Irenaeus arrived at this

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creation. The Fall disrupts this and Christ restores it. Even the Fall, as recorded in Gen 3 is primarily represented in relational terms. The focus is primarily relational. One can, in terms of biblical theology, trace a direct link from Adam being Priest-King to Israel being a priestly-royal nation until we find the complete fulfilment in Christ.

[16] 'After the world was created, man was placed in it as in a theatre, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author.' John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, (Calvin's Commentaries I; trans. John King; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 1: p. 64.

[17] See William Dumbrell, 'Life and Death in God's Creative Purposes: Genesis 1–13' in B.G. Webb ed., *The Ethics of Life and Death,* Explorations 4 (Lancer, 1990).

[18] See Richard E. Averbeck, 'Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,' in J. Daryl Charles ed., *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2013).

[19] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4:20. 1 (PG 7: 1032) as translated in Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1996).

position not by focusing on Gen 1 and 2 alone, but by allowing the whole of Scripture to speak in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ.[20]

Similarly, Colin Gunton has argued that we need a theological interpretation of creation which integrates the *whole* Scriptural witness.[21] Thus, taking into account the *sensus plenior,* which includes John 1, Col 1:15ff; Heb 1:1–3 and much of the Book of Revelation, it is possible to revisit Gen 1:1–2 and 1:27ff to see what was implicit from the beginning, namely, the Trinitarian nature of God who is Creator, the God who is in relationship, the God who creates heaven and earth, whose Spirit hovers over the chaos and whose Word issues the command 'let there be.' The plurality within the oneness of God can then be seen to be expressed in the unique deliberation, 'Let us make man in *our* own image.'

In his paper 'The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment'[22] Robert Letham writes: 'Man exists as a duality, the one in relation to the other…as for God himself…the context points to his own intrinsic relationality. The plural occurs on three occasions in v. 26, yet God is also singular in v. 27. God is placed in parallel with man, made in his image as male and female, who is described both in the singular and plural. Behind it all is the distinction God/Spirit of God/speech of God in vv. 1–3…This relationality will in the development of biblical revelation eventually be disclosed as taking the form of triunity.'

Herman Bavinck has argued that it is not possible to conceive of *this* creation occurring (as opposed to the speculative Multiuniverse theories)[23] *apart* from its Maker being relational and this coheres with the fuller revelation of his Trinitarian nature: 'without generation (the Son by the Father) creation would not be possible. If in an absolute sense God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able in a relative sense to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.'[24]

It is at this point that we can pick up the Christological aspects of the doctrine. Again, following through the principle of the *sensus plenior*, Athanasius speaks of creation being *in Christ*: 'The Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things that are, owe their being to his will and power, and that it is through him that all things are moved, and through

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[20] See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), pp. 90–97.

[21] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, pp. 62–64.

[22] Robert Letham, 'The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 52:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 65–78.

[23] For an incisive critique of 'Multiuniverse' theories, see Keith Ward, *Why There is Almost Certainly a God: Doubting Dawkins* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), pp. 54–75.

[24] Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, (ed. J. Vriend and J. Bolt; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 39–45.

him that they receive their being.'[25] And so as Paul unites creation and redemption in Col 1:15ff., Christ is to be seen as the mediator of *creation* as well as redemption.

This helps us hold on to three important principles:

First, creation has a *personal* origination and goal—and both are Christ, 'all things were created by him and for him.' Here the creation is the theatre of God's glory as embodied in the incarnated, crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus. And so the big 4 questions of origin, identity, evil and purpose cannot be answered apart from their relation to him.[26]

Second, creation is not just a distant 'past' event, which deism would have us believe, and which Young Earthists could skew our thinking into focusing upon. Creation is *ongoing,* having a future destiny, with Christ 'sustaining all thing by his powerful word' (Heb 1:2). Thus God entering his 'rest' on Day 7 is not a movement into inactivity and certainly not signifying his absence (*deus otiosus*), but indicating control since all the functionaries are now in place for God's kingly rule to be exercised.[27] This is the new state of stability with the *whole cosmos* being God's temple—sacred space—from which and over which he exercises his loving rule (cf. Ps 132:7–8 and Christ's position in Heb 1:3, seated at the right hand of God). The rule of God is now to be conceived as part of the *mediatorial* kingship of Christ (Heb 2:5–9, thus fulfilling Ps 8) and which was being displayed in the earthly ministry of Christ as we see in the 'apprentice Son' of John 5:16–23, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.'

Third, redemption is not to be separated off from creation, there is an unbreakable unity, and the eschatological dimension is crucial to its fulfilment with a new heaven and earth and the resurrection of physical bodies (Rev 21; 1 Cor 15; 2 Pet 3:13). This, together with the incarnation, underscores over and against Gnosticism both ancient and modern, that 'matter matters.' Here again is Athanasius: 'We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the self-same Word, who made it in the beginning. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation; for the Father has employed the same agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word who made it first.'[28]

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[25] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1998), section 1 (also 3, 12, 14).

[26] Similarly Letham, 'Since the Triune God created the universe, we cannot understand it apart from the historical reality of the incarnation in Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Trinity who made it.' *The Holy Trinity* p. 431.

[27] See Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1.*

[28] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation,* section 4.

Robert Letham draws attention to the doctrine of the creation mediatorship of Christ as having important bearings on the continuing relevance of his work. He writes:

> How, it can be asked, can something done so many years ago be of effect for the human race in an ongoing sense? How relevant to us today is the atoning death of Christ 2,000 years ago?…On the one hand, there is the huge historical and cultural gap between now and then. How can it be bridged? On the other hand, how can our situations now and in the future be eternally effected by only one person living somewhere else? Here, as Colin Gunton has helpfully indicated, the creation mediatorship of Christ assures us that the historical gap between then and now is no barrier. Christ himself has cosmos-wide significance in his own right. He made the universe. He is Lord of space and time.[29]

3. The role of natural revelation and natural theology

There is a tendency for some English modern day evangelicals to confuse natural revelation with natural theology and because there is a certain animus towards the latter, there is a suspicion with regards the former. As a consequence, in some quarters, ministers are simply exhorted to 'preach the word.' Related to this, not only is there a suspicion towards the significance of natural revelation in particular but towards apologetics in general. This, we believe, is seriously mistaken.

It might be helpful if we begin by distinguishing between natural theology and natural revelation.[30]

Natural Theology (or Rational Theology) refers to the procedure of establishing or making probable, certain theological propositions about the existence and character of God from premises which are non-theological in character. Thus we have Anselm's 'Ontological Argument,' Aquinas's 'Five Ways' and 'Paley's Argument from Design.'[31] All of these have been shown to be of dubious value philosophically and limited apologetically in their pure form. However, there has been a more serious attempt by Professor Alister McGrath to revive natural theology, as for

[29] Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 206.

[30] Michael Sudduth makes a distinction between natural religion and natural theology. Natural religion is immediate, intuitive and innate in character, whereas natural theology is discursive and argumentative. His main thesis is that natural theology with its discursive argumentation for the existence and nature of God is not inconsistent with the Reformed emphasis of the universality of the *sensus divinitatis,* nor with the noetic effects of sin. *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[31] For a helpful discussion on the differences and relative merits and demerits see Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1982).

example, in his 2009 Gifford Lectures and the 2010 Hulsean lectures.[32] What McGrath is presenting is the case that the universe does seem to exhibit an anthropological principle and that, when you consider the various interpretative frameworks on offer, the Christian worldview has the best conceptual fit accompanied by great explanatory power. Here McGrath is implementing Anselm's dictum of *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) and is not rationalistic at all, but it does involve extended argumentation.

Natural Revelation (or General Revelation) is somewhat different and it is here that the Biblical doctrine of creation plays a significant role.

Psalm 19 brings into focus for us the nature of this natural or general revelation: vv. 1–4, '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. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' Here we are presented with paradox: wordless words, voiceless voices. So what is happening? There are two things about the skies which commend them for special meditation. First, their universal access. The skies are available to everyone, everywhere. Second, their universal grandeur, the glory of a star studded night or, as we see later in the Psalm, the rising of the sun like a bridegroom. We are provoked to ask: what is it about God that is being communicated through what he has made? Might not the experience be likened to an encounter with a painting? When we come across a work of art the experience we have is *immediate*. What is more, there is a dual aspect to this experience: In the first instance we have *knowledge* that it is a painting. For example we don't mistake the portrait for the person himself, and of course there is the understanding that there is an artist who has produced it. Second, there is a *reaction* to what we see, we think or say, 'this is beautiful or amazing' or it is 'ugly and disturbing.' Therefore, may not the psalmist be claiming something similar in relation to God's heavens, 'The heavens *declare* the glory of God, the skies *proclaim* his handiwork'? Taking this in reverse order, we 'know' this is a handiwork of a *God*, just as we 'know' a painting is the handiwork of a painter. This awareness is not deduced by philosophical reasoning, it is more intuitive, part of the *sensus divinitatis* with which we are all endowed, a kind of 'tacit knowledge,' to use the term of Michael Polanyi. Secondly, it declares something of God's *glory,* that is, a derived glory; the greater glory belongs to the one who made it. This is effectively Paul's argument in Rom 1:19–20. And so surely

[32] See A.E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith and How we Make Sense of Things* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

if the apostle Paul is happy to use this as part of his apologetic armoury, so should we. In summary, the characteristic features of natural revelation proper is that it is *immediate,* 'speaking' through nature or conscience and *universal,* available to everyone, everywhere.

Calvin in his commentary on Genesis takes the same line that it was Moses' intention to 'render God, as it were visible by his works'; He 'clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world.'; The world is 'a mirror in which we ought to behold God.'[33] In both his special revelation in Genesis and his general revelation in nature, Calvin believed that God was accommodating himself, speaking to us in baby talk (*balbutire*, 'prattling'). The climax of this divine accommodation was, of course, the incarnation (Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:15ff).

But can natural revelation take us beyond mere theism? Is there any way in which creation can be conceived as *Vestigia Trinitatis,* such that, to use Calvin's imagery, it acts as a mirror or window (*eikon*, image) which reflects the Trinitarian nature of God? In other words, could this be included in the 'invisible nature' (*aorata autou*) and 'eternal power and deity' (*dunamis kai theotes*) of which Paul speaks in Rom 1:20?

Robert Letham argues that God's 'unity in diversity and diversity in unity are clearly displayed throughout the universe. The relationality of the cosmos points unmistakably to its relational Creator.'[34] It is dubious however, that such a confident statement can be made within the framework of natural revelation *per se,* as if one can 'read off' a Trinitarian understanding of the divine nature from creation in the same way that one might 'read off' a powerful creator from a vast creation. There is a fundamental epistemological problem inherent in this position, namely, that one is trying to explain one mystery (the Trinity) by another mystery (unity in diversity and diversity in unity in creation) and no matter how many mysteries are added together they do not make for clarity! However, adopting McGrath's approach in his Gifford lectures, one could conceivably argue that the Trinitarian understanding of God which has been revealed to us in Scripture is the *best* explanation for the phenomena we encounter of the universe being *this* way. It may be that Cornelius van Til was claiming too much in regarding the whole world as a *vestigium trinitatis* in this regard,[35] but one could appreciate a more moderate apologetic approach as providing a reasonable account to the problem which he saw as eluding secular philosophers such that the world is one and many *because* it reflects the unity in diversity of

[33] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis,* 1: pp. 58–62.

[34] Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 437.

[35] See Rousas John Rushdoony, 'The One and Many Problem: The Contribution of Van Til,' in E.R. Geehan ed., Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussion on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1971), especially pp. 343–347.

the Maker. This also has considerable apologetic merit over and against the two extremes of modernism and post-modernism, whereby the former sought to establish unity at the expense of diversity and the latter extolling diversity by sacrificing unity (and prior to these of course, the debate between the realists, reducing particulars to universal concepts and the nominalists doing the reverse.)

The Significance of the Doctrine of Creation to Christian Ministry

We highlight three points.

1. It provides a basis for confidence in proclaiming God's Word. In both creation and redemption God's word is instrumental, the content of that word is Christ who is the Word and it is with the same Spirit who hovered over the deep to bring form out of the void in the old creation that he brings about his new creations in Christ. Because the world is objectively there, we can speak of truth and *the* truth. Real communication is possible because human beings are made in God's image who, within his own being, is relational and relates to his world meaningfully by speaking. Our Christian belief is therefore not be privatised or relativised ('true' for me or just the sharing of another story), but is to be seen as universal and absolute (true for all). Because of natural revelation we have a firm epistemological basis for us as we reach out to the pagan world with the gospel for we have the universe and conscience on our side. We therefore shouldn't be apologetic in our Apologetic! What is more, since God is Creator of all, all are accountable to him. He is the unbeliever's God whether he recognises it or not, for he made him and so has 'owners rights' over him which means all humans are responsible to him (Acts 17: 24–31). Because Jesus is Lord of creation, Christians as his ambassadors have every right (duty) to speak his word to them (Matt 28:18–20).

2. It provides sufficient grounding for meaningful prayer. As the personal God who is active in his world, God through prayer 'bestows upon us the dignity of causality' (Pascal) and so prayer becomes, in his hands, a secondary cause for bringing about his purposes in the world. As the sovereign transcendent God, he has absolute discretion in his response to our prayers, thus 'thy will be done' is not a cop out but the proper response to our Creator-Redeemer. We can rest assured in God's providence, a message church members so need to hear. There is no need to abandon the ship of traditional theism in order to search out a panentheist alternative to do justice to the notion of God relating

personally to his creatures,[36] for within the traditional theistic framework prayer is rendered meaningful.[37]

3. In our pastoral dealings with people we are to exhort them to avoid pietistic withdrawal on the one hand and materialistic idolatry on the other. Because the material world is good and all things are to be received with thanksgiving we are to be grateful creatures enjoying and using God's gifts as good stewards. But we also recognise that what can be seen is not the 'be all and end all' but the theatre of *God's* glory, and so what is good should not be turned into ends or become the main focus of our time and energies. In short, it should not become an idol, where we worship the creature rather than the Creator. This is where John Piper's warning to Christians is helpful: 'The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie.'[38] The creation should cause us to draw closer to the Creator whose face we see in Jesus Christ.

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[36] Philip Clayton, 'Case for Christian Panentheism.' *Dialog* 37 (1998), pp. 201–208.
[37] See Melvin Tinker, *Intended for Good: The Providence of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012), Chapters 2, 3 and 6.
[38] John Piper, *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* (Leicester: IVP, 1997), p. 14.