

Theological Significance of Creation

Lutherans affirm God as creator of the entire universe, of all that exists. Someone reading this is likely to ask, "Does that mean that Lutherans are creationists?" My understanding of creationists is that they are persons who advance the creation account as a scientific theory or at least as a theory to rival scientific theories. Lutherans, by and large, are quite content to let scientists do their best work to answer the questions science can answer. It is very possible for a Lutheran astrophysicist to advance some version of the big bang theory and for a Lutheran biologist to argue some version of the evolutionary theory. As a scientist she ought to pursue the best account that science has to offer. She certainly should not want to reject a scientific account just because it is not the same as a biblical account. Lutherans, generally, do not think that the bible is an authoritative scientific text. They do not think that it is a task of theology to come up with cosmological accounts to rival the best that science has to offer.

Christians who are inclined to read the Bible as an authoritative scientific text do so, usually, out of two assumptions: (a) they want to honor the Bible, to affirm its truth, and (b) they think that scientific truth is the only kind worth bothering about. From these two assumptions flows their conclusion that we should read the Bible as an authoritative scientific text and affirm it as an alternative scientific view. If the creation accounts in Genesis are not scientific, they reason, what good are they? Isn't the only truth worth asserting scientific truth?

Lutherans do not draw the aforementioned conclusion largely because they do not make the second assumption mentioned above. They do not make that assumption for two reasons:

First, Lutherans are not inclined to enshrine science (or any discipline for that matter) as *the* paradigm of knowing. This does not mean that Lutherans think science is worthless. Far from it. Some very eminent scientists have been Lutherans, and Lutheran colleges and universities generally make great efforts to have excellent science faculty and facilities. For Lutherans, science is a perfectly appropriate human response to the created universe. We do God's creation honor by trying to understand it.

For Lutherans science is an extremely valuable but limited enterprise. Scientists pursue specific kinds of inquiries, based, like all human endeavours, on certain assumptions, shaped by particular kinds of tools, molded by human agendas and the institutions that embody them. Lutherans would be inclined to say that we should pursue science in the best ways we know how. Having done that, we should be critical of our means of knowing and modest about what we have come to understand in the process. When asked whether creationism should be taught in science classes in the public schools, I responded, "No, I don't think so. I think in science classes we should teach the best science we know. And we should teach it critically, admitting what we know, what we do not know, what we assume, and what we conclude on those bases. Where there is more than one theory that is viable we ought to admit that and explain the grounds for preferring one theory to another."

The second reason Lutherans are not inclined to accept the creationist premise is because we think that the affirmation of creation is a richer and deeper concept than any scientific theory. For lack of a better term, I would say that *when we affirm God as creator of all things we are making an ontological claim, a claim about the fundamental nature of reality and our relation to it*. What, exactly, are we affirming? The following seven things are at least part of the meaning of affirming God's creative work. They only begin to show how many dimensions this one theological idea has.

When we affirm creation we affirm:

1. *That the world is real and important, a manifestation of the ultimate, God.* Some religions and philosophies have seen the world as an illusion; some see life in it as ultimately meaningless. People who affirm God's creation cannot see it that way. We take the world seriously. We are caught by the wonder of it. We want to scale its heights and plumb its depths. The ordinary is intimately and essentially connected to the ultimate. The world is not God, but it is good; it is good in its finitude. It is ours to wonder at and care for. Those who affirm creation are thereby called to affirm the world and find their rightful place in it. To persons who affirm God's creative act the universe is not vast, meaningless emptiness. We may wonder at its vastness, but for us its vastness unlocks a depth of meaning, not a depth of meaninglessness.
2. *That the world is good, loved by God, God's domain of creativity.* Some religions and philosophers have seen the world as basically an evil place, a place to be rescued from, a place opposed to God. There is ample evidence in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that this is not the dominant biblical view, even though there are some passages, influenced by Gnostic thought, that point in that direction. The creation narrative is punctuated with the line, "And God saw that it was good." John 3:16 begins with the assertion, "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son." This attests to God embracing the world in spite of its fallenness. So it is fitting for those of us who affirm the creation to enjoy it, savor it, celebrate it, give deep thanks for it. We sing, we dance, we explore, and often we are awed into silence. These are all ways in which we, as the psalm says, "taste and see how gracious the Lord is." Some have viewed the world as meaningless chaos, some have imagined it as meaningless repetition, and some have seen it as a battleground of opposing forces; the Genesis account envisions the world as divine creativity, a work of depth, of beauty, of awe.
3. *That the world is God's; it is not the possession of humans.* Human beings are created beings like all the others. We have a kind of creatureliness that we forget at our peril. We are but one part of a larger community of creatures. The creation and our fellow creatures are not ours to destroy, but ours to enjoy. The wanton wasting of creation simply to suit our own agenda is blasphemy. It claims as ours what is only ours to use and enjoy. We would not destroy a friend's vacation home if allowed to use it. Yet too many of us are ready to destroy the world without any sense that we have to answer for it. Affirming creation puts us in our place as part of, not apart from, the natural world.
4. *That humans are fundamentally of-the-earth.* The Genesis narratives relate that humans are created from mud, the only of all the creatures of which this is said. The name they are given, *adamah*, means "from the earth." Interestingly, there is also an etymological connection between the Latin-English word "human" and a word for fertile ground, "humus." Wendell Berry has commented that Genesis gives the following "recipe" for making humans: mud plus God's breath. What does this account communicate to us? I would suggest at least two things: It reminds us of our finitude – that the earth was here before us and will be here after us, and that our lives are basically "dust to dust." It reminds us to be humble (once again a humus-related word), or in the words of the Shaker hymn, "to come down where we ought to be."
5. *That all humans, the Genesis accounts tell us, come from a single set of parents.* This implies that the differences between people (race, caste, class nationality) that we are tempted to place so much importance on are not part of the created order. Fundamentally humans are one family, we are all children of God, and any differences between us must be justified (if at all) by some other explanation than, "That's how God made it." Some creation accounts establish castes; some establish a king as the god

incarnate. The Judeo-Christian creation account tells us that the basic equality is the default setting for the human situation.

6. *That we are created and called to be in conversation with God.* The Genesis narratives, in fact the whole of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, show us that to be human is to be in the presence of God. God calls us, and one way or another we answer, even when our answer is to hide. The Psalms illustrate the wide variety of forms that conversation took in the life of the Hebrew people. There are psalms of joy and praise, psalms of doubt and questioning, psalms of abandonment and lamentation, even psalms of accusation, putting to God hard questions that had to be voiced.

The Genesis account tells us that humans are created in God's image. Over the ages there have been many interpretations of what that means. Some have said it is human reason, or human creativity, or human freedom, or some other human gift that makes us image God. My own interpretation is that all of these things may play a role, but that we image God by virtue of our mutuality, our being-with, our being-in-conversation.

7. *That God calls us to be human stewards of the creation.* God calls us, because of our special gifts, to be stewards of creation. We are God's delegated caretakers. For this role we have been given certain gifts. We are responsible because we are, of all creatures, response-able, called to conversation with God. And perhaps we are stewards because we are, of all creatures, of-the-earth.

It should be clear from the above discussion that the affirmation of creation is much more than a cosmological theory. It addresses so many more concerns. It explains to us where we are, who we are, what our orientation is, how the world is to be regarded, how we are related to each other, how we are related to the Creator. I do not know of any scientific account that does that. Science, appropriately, has a different focus. Our affirmation of creation has the power to inform our lives. It makes clear that we are called to be in the world in particular ways, and not others. We are here to manifest wonder and care, to savor and plumb, to be a part of creation, earth-born siblings to all humans, responsible stewards in conversation with God.