

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation

Lecture 3

Creatio ex Nihilo in the New Testament

We've been looking at the scriptural data concerning *creatio ex nihilo*, and we saw that the Old Testament teaches the doctrine that God is the almighty creator of everything that exists other than God. We find this same doctrine repeated in the New Testament.

For example, in Romans 11:36, Paul, after quoting from Isaiah 40:13-14, declares, "for from him and through him and to him are all things." Here Paul says that all of reality finds its source in God. It is sustained by God and exists for God. God is the source, the sustainer, and the goal of all reality outside himself.

In Romans 4:17, Paul speaks of the God of Abraham as the one, "who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist." That second phrase, I think, is so striking – God is the one who calls into existence things that do not exist. That is a statement of creation out of nothing.

Also, we find this doctrine in Hebrews 11:3. The author of this epistle says, "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear." The wording there is very interesting; it's rather awkward. The writer wants to affirm that God has created everything, and yet there is no stuff out of which God created all things. So, in effect, what he is saying is God has created all things but he did not create things out of things that appear and thus implies creation out of nothing.

In Revelation 4:11 we read that the beatified in heaven are said to sing to God these words: "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created." So the New Testament, like the Old Testament, thinks of God as the creator of everything that exists apart from himself.

But undoubtedly the most notable contribution of the New Testament to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is that it ascribes creation out of nothing to the pre-incarnate person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the Father's agent in creating the world. This is something genuinely new to the Old Testament doctrine.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul says, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Here Paul says that God the Father is the source and the goal of all reality apart from himself, and that Christ is the one through whom all these things exist so he is the Father's agent in creation. In fact, Christ's role as

the creator of everything other than God implies that he is himself God; that he is God since he is the creator of everything else.

John 1:1-3 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” Here John echoes the words of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning” was now the Word, the Word by which God creates, and he identifies this Word as God himself and then later in the chapter as Jesus Christ as the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. So the pre-incarnate Christ is with the Father in the beginning and is himself God, the creator of everything that exists other than God.

Also in Colossians 1:16-17, Paul says, “for in him [that is, Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” So this is again a picture of the cosmic Christ, the creator and the sustainer of all reality apart from God.

Similarly, in the epistle to the Hebrews once again – Hebrews 1:2-3 – we find this same doctrine. The author says, “but in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” So, according to the author to the Hebrews, Christ is God’s agent in creating the world. He reflects the glory and the nature of God and brings the universe into existence and sustains the universe in being.

The similarity of these three chapters (Colossians 1, John 1, and Hebrews 1), all from different authors but teaching the same doctrine, shows that this understanding of the cosmic Christ was prominent in the theology of the primitive Christian church. The New Testament authors not only understood the Old Testament to be teaching *creatio ex nihilo* but they went further in identifying the pre-incarnate Christ as the principal agent of creation – remarkable!

START DISCUSSION

Student: While a lot of people would be willing to grant *creatio ex nihilo* (maybe with the exceptions of perhaps Mormons), I think there’s a lot of disagreement with respect to how that plays out – a sort of model of what that looks like. So my question is: do you think God has a substance that has causal powers? That’s meant to evoke a question that sort of maybe steps on the toes of friends who are classical theists. And do you have a preferred model of divine causal interaction?

Dr. Craig: It’s not just Mormons that would deny *creatio ex nihilo*. This is also denied by process theologians who are increasingly prominent today. Process theologians think that

the world is the body of God; that God is the soul of the world, as it were. The relationship between our soul and our body is similar to God's relationship to the world. And so for these thinkers the world is coeternal with God and uncreated. So it's very important to defend the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. I don't think there is any sort of particular model of causation by which God brings the universe into being because this is unique. All we can say is, I think, in classical terms that God is the efficient cause of creation. He's obviously not the material cause – the universe is not made out of God. He's not merely the final cause in the sense of a goal toward which the universe tends. But he's thought of to be the efficient cause of the universe. He produces it in being; he brings it into being. But I don't think there can be any sort of mechanism by means of that. It's a sheer act of the will. Some philosophers have compared God's action in the world to basic actions in my body. For example, when I will to lift my arm, it's not as though I will other things as intermediate steps to do that. It's a kind of basic action that is produced by my willing. I would say something like that is true also with God's relationship to the world. Creation is what we would call a basic action that is just the result of God's volition. He wills it to happen and there's an exercise of his causal power, and it does happen. But there isn't any kind of mechanism or linkage between the two.

Student: I think that God's causal activities is communication. He spoke it into existence. He could have thought it into existence, but the same thing would have happened. But he emphasizes communication, not only because he has it within himself, but that's the purpose to us – communication.

Dr. Craig: Given that God doesn't have vocal cords and makes audible sounds, I kind of liked the idea that you suggested about producing things by sheer thought. That is a kind of word – a kind of communication – but it doesn't need to be an audible utterance. When God existed alone and there was no other reality other than him and he says, *Let there be*, I don't think we need to imagine actual audible sounds. Indeed, how could there be? There was no air to carry the sound waves! It would be more like my ability to, by thinking, create a world in my imagination. Like when you dream, you create a whole dream world populated by people who do things and interact. These seem to be quite autonomous – don't they? – in dreams, especially nightmares when things are going wrong. These are produced immediately by your mental powers. Now, I hesitate to use the analogy because immediately someone will say, *Oh, you mean then the world is unreal; it's just like a dream in the mind of God*. No, no. That's not what one is suggesting. But it's an analogy to the way in which thought can be productive of effects.

Student: I think the same thing is with word. I mean, we could think something, and then we can say it. But here I think the fact that he delineated it that way as a concept is for us.

Dr. Craig: If we're prudent, we very often think before we speak, don't we? We think of what we're going to say rather than just blurting it out. In that case there really is kind of thought that precedes the actual utterance, and that thought would be primary, I think. Those are interesting thoughts.

Student: Can we say that since God is spirit, and Christ is the manifestation of that spirit linking the spirit and the material (or the mortal), can we say that even if the Word that he spoke was what the New Testament referred, that Christ created all this?

Dr. Craig: Oh, I do think that the New Testament authors in speaking of Christ as the Word are reflecting Genesis 1 where you have God's creation by his word where God says, *Let there be*. But the difference here is that, for someone like John in the prologue of the Gospel of John, the Word is a person. This Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. This is not just a thought or an utterance. But he makes it an actual person distinct from the Father. I thought you were going to go in the direction of the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit, and I would just refer back to our lectures on the Trinity where I don't think we can think of Christ as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit because he's very clear about distinguishing himself from the Holy Spirit. Remember his sayings to the disciples that, *It's to your advantage that I go away because if I don't go away the Spirit will not come to you, but if I go I will send him to you*. And he's speaking of the Holy Spirit there in the third person. So I think that the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity prevents us from conflating the Spirit with Christ in any way. I mentioned that the church fathers often liked to identify the Spirit with the Wisdom of God in the same way that the New Testament authors identified Christ with the Word of God. Remember Wisdom appears in Proverbs 8 as there in the beginning with God (*He created me before he created the depths and the mountains and so forth*). Very often the church fathers will speak of the Son and the Spirit as the Word and the Wisdom of the Father, but now, as I say, personified and not just as properties or attributes.

Student: I don't mean to equate Christ and Spirit because the Holy Spirit is still spirit – I mean spiritual. What I'm trying to say is that Christ is the link between the spirit and the mortal. It is in that sense he created the world because he manifests all that God had thought about and designed.

Dr. Craig: We have seen that Christ is in a sense the mediator of creation and that he is the one who creates the physical universe. But I wouldn't want to say anything that would imply that the Holy Spirit is not equally active in the world today. According to the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the one who regenerates us, who fills us, who gifts us, who guides us. The Holy Spirit is also active in the world today in the absence of Jesus. Jesus has ascended to the Father. He says, *I'm going away but I'll send the Spirit in my place*. So I wouldn't want us to think that the Holy Spirit only acts through the

medium of the second person of the Trinity. It seems to me that he's very active in the world today, and indeed in a sense stands in for Christ until the second coming of Christ.

Student: The Spirit is active, but human spirit is dead unless Christ comes and revives it. So the human spirit is void of its effect until Christ makes it alive.

Dr. Craig: All right. Now, there's truth in what you're saying – that the human spirit is dead apart from Christ. But who is the person who makes us alive spiritually? Romans 8:9 and following says, “you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.” You'll notice there the way the Holy Spirit and Christ becomes so closely identified that Paul will speak first of the Spirit of God then the Spirit of Christ and then finally just Christ. When we say “receive Christ” or “Christ comes into you” I think more technically we should say it is the Holy Spirit who comes into you, regenerates you, and fills you. He's the primary person. But because he is standing in for Christ and continuing the ministry of Christ in his absence, one can speak of Christ being in you because the Holy Spirit is standing in for Christ now and points us to Christ. But don't in any way depreciate the work of the Holy Spirit or the importance of his role in our world or in our lives.

Student: Am I incorrect in thinking that as Christ is God's agent of creation, and when it says in Scripture that God said, *Let there be light*, (and he said, *Let there be light*), or when it says, *In the beginning was the Word*, I've always kind of thought of the vocalization (not really a vocalization, but the words that are said or those terms that are used) were speaking as Christ. In other words, Christ is the agent. So when he said, *Let there be light*, it is emphasizing Christ as the agent by using terms that refer to words said. Is that accurate?

Dr. Craig: I don't want to try to read things into Genesis that aren't there. In the same way that it's wrong to try to read modern science back into Genesis, it's wrong to read New Testament doctrine and revelation back into Genesis that hadn't been revealed at that time. The whole idea of progressive revelation is that God's mysteries are unfolded over time and there are certain things that Paul talks about as mysteries – secrets – that have been kept by God until they're fully revealed through his apostles and through Christ. I think the Trinitarian persons would be one of these. So while we do want to say from a New Testament perspective that Christ is the agent of creation – yes, he was involved – let's just be careful not to read back into Genesis that when it says, *God said*, “*Let there be light*,” that the author is referring to or thinking of Christ.

Student: But couldn't that be . . . I'm just asking . . . couldn't that be as we get further revelation we can think back to the Old. I'm not saying read into it, but is it more and

more being revealed? Because in Genesis, Christ hadn't . . . Jesus hadn't been born. So to say that would not have been appropriate at the time. But as time progressed it seems to me it further explains Genesis.

Dr. Craig: Just so long as you're not claiming to give the interpretation of Genesis 1 as opposed to a later reflection upon it. That's certainly legitimate that, in light of Christ, we now reflect upon the creation event and Christ's role in it, and we will build a theology that will include Christ as God's agent of creation. That's quite right. But that's different from interpreting the text which, as you say, needs to be understood as the person who wrote it and the audience for whom he wrote how they would have understood it.

END DISCUSSION

Let me close this section on the biblical data by summarizing.

The biblical conception of God's relation to the world is therefore one of Creator to creature. Dualistic conceptions of God whereby God is confronted with an uncreated, eternally existing material which he then fashions into a cosmos are alien to the biblical writers. They think of God rather as all-powerful and the source of all reality outside of himself. He speaks and the universe springs into being created out of nothing through his incomparable power. "Before" the creation, if we can speak of that in quotation marks (causally before, not chronologically before), only God existed. There is a state of affairs in the actual world which is God existing alone without creation. We learn from the New Testament that creation results from his Word who is the pre-incarnate Christ. So it's not only inadequate to think of creation as a kind of mere fashioning of a pre-existent material, it's also inadequate to think of creation in terms of conserving or preserving something in being. The biblical doctrine of creation is inherently bound up with temporal considerations, and it implies that the universe began to exist at a time in the finite past at which it sprang into being from nothing by God's almighty Word. So creation is more than just fashioning, but it's also more than just conserving. It involves the idea of bringing something into existence out of nothing.

When we meet next time we will attempt to define more precisely in light of this biblical data exactly what is meant by *creatio ex nihilo*.¹

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