

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation
Lecture 8
Continuing Conservation

God is conceived in traditional Christian theology to be the cause of the world not only in his initial act of bringing the world into existence or creating the world but also in his ongoing conservation of the world in being. So today we want to turn to the subject of continuing creation, as it's sometimes called. Let's begin by looking at some biblical data concerning continuing creation.

While divine conservation is not as well attested biblically as creation (which is distinguished by the consistent use of past tense verbs to indicate an action at the beginning of the universe when God brought the world into being), nevertheless there are some important New Testament passages that speak of God's conservation of the creation in being. For example, Colossians 1:16-17. Here Paul says of Christ,

for in him 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.

Notice the contrasting verbs in that sentence – between verbs of creation (*all things were created through Christ and for Christ*), but then in addition to that *all things hold together in him*. The one verb speaks of the creation of the universe initially; the other speaks of God's ongoing preservation of the world in being. The word literally means to con-sist – the world consists in God.

Similarly in the book of Hebrews 1:3, again speaking of Christ, “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” The word there translated “upholding” literally means to carry. God carries or sustains, as it were, the universe in existence.

Finally, in Acts 17:28 we have the words of the apostle Paul as he speaks to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. Paul says, “In him we live and move and have our being.” It's that third verb there that I draw your attention to – we live and move and we have our being in God. The word literally means we exist in God.

So there is New Testament data that God not only created the universe initially but that the universe consists or is sustained by God, that God bears or sustains the universe, and that we exist in God.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I just noticed with the two passages that you quoted they emphasize in human hierarchy or ruling instead of . . . I think it's almost like . . . it says all things in heaven

and earth, power, rulers, and authorities, and instead of creation in material. So it's almost like God entrusts us to rule according to his empowerment.

Dr. Craig: I think the question of the identity of the thrones or dominions or powers and authorities that Paul is talking about there – whether they are earthly powers or spiritual dominions – is an open question. I think he's probably talking about spiritual dominions here. I think, for example, of Ephesians 6:12, “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” I think what Paul is saying in Colossians is that even these invisible realms – these spiritual authorities and so forth – are sustained in being by Christ. Not just the physical world. That would be impressive. But as Paul says: all things, visible and invisible. These, I think, invisible dominions refer to these angelic or spiritual dominions.

END DISCUSSION

Let's go on then to a systematic summary of what is meant by conservation. Creation and conservation have traditionally been classed as two subdivisions of *creatio ex nihilo* because in neither case does God create or conserve the world out of some material thing. The initial creation is very often called *creatio originans*, or originating creation. This would be God's creation at the beginning of the world. Conservation is called *creatio continuans* or continuing creation. That would be God's ongoing conservation of the world in existence.

While this is a very nice and handy rubric, nevertheless I think that when it's pressed for technical precision that it is actually quite misleading. As we've seen, when we say that something is created we are talking about the first time at which a thing comes into existence. So the doctrine of creation implies that things begin to exist at the time that they are created. But then if you think of conservation as a kind of continuing creation, what that would imply is that at every successive moment God creates a new individual at that moment – the first time at which it exists in the place of the thing that existed at the previous time. Thereby you are landed in the crazy doctrine called occasionalism. Occasionalism is the view that God is the only cause in reality. Things that we think are causally connected are merely the occasions upon which God acts to bring about some new effect. So, for example, when you see a wad of cotton exposed to a flame and it turns black and smoldering, on this view the flame does not actually cause the cotton to turn black and smoldering. Rather, the proximity of the flame to the cotton is merely the occasion upon which God makes the cotton black and smoldering. So there really are no secondary causes in the world. God is the only cause there is, and he simply acts on certain occasions to bring about different effects. What occasionalism implies is that nobody persists through time. You never persist from one moment to another. There is a

new creation at every successive moment, and therefore this destroys personal identity and hence personal agency and responsibility. The costs of construing conservation as a type of creation I think are unacceptably high.

If we try to elude this problem by saying *creation doesn't necessarily involve a first time at which something begins to exist* then I think we've really lost something important and essential to the doctrine of creation. As I explained in our lectures on creation, creation involves God's bringing something into being where something comes into being at a time T if that time is the first time at which that thing exists. So I think it's preferable not to classify conservation as a type of creation. It's really quite a distinct operation of God in addition to *creatio ex nihilo* – conservation.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I was just curious as to what theologians came up with this? Maybe Calvin?

Dr. Craig: One might think so, but actually it's Islamic medieval Muslim theologians who wanted Allah to be the absolute and only cause in the universe were occasionalists. It was also adopted by a French philosopher who lived, I think, in the 16th century named Nicolas Malebranche. So in Western philosophy Malebranche would be the primary figure that would be identified with occasionalism, but it was characteristic of medieval Muslim thought because it would exalt Allah as being the only cause of anything that happens.

Student: Is this in direct opposition to the watchmaker where God creates the world and then he just steps back and lets it run by itself? Then technically under that you don't need God anymore – he just needs to start things and then it'll run on its own, whereas this is basically saying if God stepped away from his creation or he ceased to exist then so would everything he created.

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think it is the exact opposite of what you've just described, which is deism. Deism is this sort of absentee God who is responsible for creation of the universe and you might even say conservation I think (I'm not sure that deists would deny conservation), but they certainly don't think that God is active in the world, whereas the occasionalist says that everything that happens in the world is caused by God and God alone – there are no secondary causes.

Student: I wonder how this relates to the tensed theory or nontensed theory of time. It seems that the B-theory (the nontensed) has everything in existence past, present, and future, whereas this has things coming into being constantly. How does that relate?

Dr. Craig: I think that you could be an occasionalist on either theory of time. What you would simply deny is that if you think of events in time like these (say one, two, three, and four) you would simply deny that there is any causal connection between these

events. Rather, God would be the only source of all of the events, and you would not have any causal connection among the events themselves. I think you could hold that on either a tensed theory or a B-theory of time. It would just deny that there is any internal causal connection between these secondary causes.

Student: You said that creation is distinct from this in terms of . . . in what way?

Dr. Craig: That creation, I think, involves something's coming to being at the first time of its existence, whereas conservation doesn't imply that there is a first time at which the thing exists. God could conserve something in being without a beginning or an end so that conservation doesn't have this notion of a beginning of existence that I think is really essential to creation. Is that clear? As I'll say in a moment, God's action in creation and conservation is the same: it is the bestowal of being. It is the giving of existence. Creation and conservation don't differ from each other with respect to God's action. They will differ from each other with respect to the object of that action, as I'll explain in a moment. In creation, the object comes into being, whereas in conservation there doesn't need to be a first moment of existence.

Student: What would an occasionalist say on the nature of the human soul? If the world is being created every instant, does that basically mean that there's an infinite number of copies of me and my soul that are going to exist throughout eternity?

Dr. Craig: It would seem to imply that, yes. You could just keep dividing any temporal interval into more and more brief slices, and unless time is composed of little discrete atoms then that process could go on forever. So between any two moments of time there would be an infinite number of slices and hence an infinite number of persons in between those two times. That's why, as I say, this destroys the idea of personal identity over time.

Student: You mentioned as believing in conservation that there doesn't require creation. But if that were the case . . . something that was conserved would be co-eternal with God if there was no beginning.

Dr. Craig: That's a good point. Do you see what he is saying? If God only conserves the universe in being and never creates it then that would imply that the universe is co-eternal with God in the sense that God never exists alone. Because if it did have a beginning then there would be a moment at which it is created. So a good many theologians who are very reluctant to say anything that might intersect with empirical science lest theology be falsified only affirm a doctrine of conservation of the world in being. I would say among your non-evangelical theologians the doctrine of creation is very, very frequently reduced to conservation – that God sustains the world in being moment by moment.

END DISCUSSION

As I say, we can distinguish conservation from creation not in terms of a difference in God's action or power (which seems to be the same), but rather in terms of the object of his action. For conservation presupposes a subject which God acts upon to cause it to persist from one moment to another. Creation does not presuppose any such object. Rather, in creation the object is constituted by God's action – it comes into being. It is an absolute beginning of existence for that thing. But in conservation there is a subject on which God acts to cause it to persevere to the next moment. So conservation should be understood, I think, in terms of God's preserving some entity E from one moment of existence to another. We can provide this analysis of divine conservation:

God conserves E (where E is any entity that you want to pick) if and only if God acts upon E to bring about E's existing from time T until some later time T' which is later than T through every subinterval of T to T'.

So the divine action itself (that is to say the bestowal of being – the causing of existence) may be the same in both creation and conservation, but in creation it does not presuppose a prior object. And it may be instantaneous simply at a time T, whereas in conservation it does presuppose a prior object and it occurs over an interval of time. So that would be the difference between creation and conservation. Creation doesn't presuppose the existence of an object, but rather it constitutes that object in being. And it can occur in an instant T. But in conservation God acts upon an object to cause it to exist through an interval of time – from one time to the next.

START DISCUSSION

Student: We seem to be talking about physical entities. But what about the soul? When does that begin, and can it be destroyed? Does God allow it to be destroyed, or is it, you know, we go to heaven or hell?

Dr. Craig: This wouldn't be restricted to physical entities. This would apply to angels or souls or any other kind of spiritual realities that you might want to postulate. God would not only create those things initially – bring them into being, *creatio ex nihilo* – but then he would sustain them in being from one moment to the next. So angels will not continue to exist from one moment to another without the upholding conserving power of God.

Student: Along that same lines, I have heard people try to equate God's conservation with physical forces – specifically the strong nuclear force – saying that God is physically holding the protons together within the nucleus. If he were to withhold that then everything would cease to exist.

Dr. Craig: I think that that is a case of the very bad strategy of God-of-the-gaps where you don't understand what holds the atomic nucleus together despite the repulsion of the protons from one another and so you say God holds them together, God is the strong

nuclear force. I think that that is postulating God just as a plug in some supposed gap in scientific knowledge, and that's a mistake. As I said earlier, conservation would apply to non-physical entities like angels and demons and things as well . . . souls. It's not restricted just to things composed of matter.

Student: And not just holding them together, but actually their actual existence as well.

Dr. Craig: Yes. Their being. That's a good point because the other things could still fall apart but the particles would still exist, and here we're talking about sustaining something in being.

Student: I just want to make sure I have distilled this to its simplest form for my simple brain. Conservation means God sustains, not creates, a thing across intervals of time. Creation – God causes a thing; conservation – God sustains a thing.

Dr. Craig: Not exactly. Both of these are causal relations, so you can't say in creation God causes something but in conservation he sustains it. They're both causation. Rather what you want to say is that in creation God brings it into being at a first time of its existence. He constitutes it in being. The difference with conservation would be (as someone else pointed out) it doesn't presuppose a beginning of existence. It could go back forever and at every moment be sustained and held in being by God.

Student: The first question I want to ask is: do they believe in free will?

Dr. Craig: Who is they?

Student: Those people who are claiming this conservation.

Dr. Craig: OK, you are not speaking of the occasionalists then?

Student: People who are claiming those ideas. Do they believe that there's free will?

Dr. Craig: OK, again, I'm not sure whom you mean by “those” in your question. Let me clarify. The occasionalists do not believe in free will. Everything is determined by Allah for the Muslim occasionalists. There is no secondary causes. You don't do anything; you don't bring about anything. For those who believe in the doctrine of conservation such as I've explicated here, certainly many do believe in free will. Roman Catholics believe in free will. Calvinists, I think, don't believe in libertarian free will, but it's not because of their doctrine of conservation. It would be because of their doctrine of divine providence – they want to believe that God unilaterally determines everything that happens. So there's no connection between conservation properly explained and freedom of the will. It's neutral with respect to that.

Student: But if God is the one who decides everything then what is the use of free will?

Dr. Craig: On conservation it doesn't say that God decides everything. You're confusing conservation with determinism. This is just saying that God keeps something in being as long as it exists. Maybe an analogy would be helpful here. Imagine that I'm a magician and I can just say *poof* and a ball pops into existence. That would be creating the ball. But suppose I take a ball in my hand and I keep it in existence over a period of time. That would be conservation. I'm upholding the ball in existence. Someone who walked into the room and saw me holding the ball wouldn't know whether I began to do so a few minutes ago, ten years ago, or whether or not (if I were divine) I was upholding the ball from eternity. That illustration might help you to grasp the difference between creating something and conserving it.

Student: I'm having a difficulty with the idea that something can exist from eternity past but still be a caused thing in the sense of you're saying that on conservationism there is still a causal relationship. But if something has potentially existed alongside God for eternity then is that not like just an abstract object that God did not create that is just there?

Dr. Craig: That forms a wonderful segue to the next paragraph in my lecture which I'm not going to have time to give this morning! So we'll have to talk about it next week. I think that there's a different category that has been overlooked by theologians that would be applicable to God's relationship to any abstract objects that you might want to postulate like numbers, sets, and other mathematical objects. What I'll argue is that they cannot be thought to be conserved in being because these things exist timelessly. They don't exist from time T to T' , and therefore conservation wouldn't be applicable to them any more than creation. There has to be a third category that would apply to how God sustains in being timeless objects like mathematical entities. We'll talk about that next week.¹

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