

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation

Lecture 9

Divine Concurrence

In our last lesson we differentiated carefully between creation and conservation. Creation is the act of God whereby he first brings something into existence. Conservation is the act of God whereby he keeps something in existence from moment to moment.

I argued that the notion of creation inherently involves the idea of a tensed theory of time – sometimes called the A-theory of time – according to which temporal becoming is an objective and real feature of the world. Things really do come into being and go out of being as time passes. By contrast, on the tenseless view of time, time is stretched out like a line and all times (whether past, present, and future to us) are equally real. I said you could compare this B-theory of time to a bologna which is stretched out and can be sliced into temporal slices, and all of these parts are equally real. The whole four-dimensional bologna simply exists tenselessly and things that are in time are located at different slices of this four-dimensional object. So on a B-theory – or tenseless theory – of time the universe never really comes into being. It just has a front edge – a first slice – but it never really comes into existence as a whole. It's as eternal as God is. It would exist timelessly along with God who is outside the four-dimensional spacetime manifold and would be causally operative and connected to everything in it. I argued that a serious biblical doctrine of creation involves a tensed theory of time whereby things come into being and go out of being and is therefore incompatible with this tenseless, or B-theory, of time.

What about conservation? Is it compatible with a B-theory of time? Well, at first blush I think you would say that conservation is compatible with a B-theory of time. It just co-exists along with God, and God is causally related to every part in it. When you reflect on this, however, I think you can see very quickly that this construal would prove to be problematic. Because on the B-theory of time these slices do not endure through time from one moment to the next. Rather, each one is fixed and immovable, so to speak, at its temporal coordinate, and therefore God does not preserve anything through time. Rather, they're just different slices at different times, and those slices are not the same thing. They are different parts which simply exist tenselessly at their temporal coordinates. Moreover, on this theory of time this whole four-dimensional object never comes into being or goes out of being. It just exists alongside of God and therefore isn't preserved over time. Time is an internal dimension of this object, but the object itself doesn't exist over time. Therefore, it seems to me that the very idea of conservation implies a tensed, or A-theory, of time. The conservation of an entity over time is necessary if and only if an A-theory of time is true so that it endures from one moment to another and in the absence of God's conservation would lapse into being. But on a B-theory of time nothing endures from one moment to another, and neither is it possible for something to lapse into

non-existence. Everything just exists at its temporal station. So it seems to me that on the B-theory of time you cannot properly speak of God's conservation either of the world or of things in the world.

This is paradoxical because on a tenseless view of time God is in some sense causing the universe to exist. It is dependent upon him for its being; in some sense then he sustains it. Similarly, if we allow into our ontology (or our view of what exists) timeless entities (say numbers or sets or other mathematical objects), these things exist outside of time and therefore are not conserved in being by God. They do not endure from one moment of time to another because they're simply timeless. Nevertheless, if there were such entities they would have to depend upon God for their being. They cannot exist independently of God. So there is something like conservation or preservation of them in existence but it isn't, properly speaking, conservation because they wouldn't be conserved from one moment to another.

The existence of these sorts of entities seems to require a third category that has been overlooked by classical theology – a sort of static or changeless creation which would be also appropriate to a tenseless theory of time such as we have illustrated on the whiteboard. I want to use the name “sustenance” for this peculiar relation. That's a term of my own invention here. It's not creation; it's not conservation. It's sustenance.

We can define this in the following way.

1. God sustains some entity E if and only if E exists tenselessly at some time T, or E exists timelessly.

and

2. God brings it about that E exists.

According to our analysis, God sustains some event or entity E if and only if E exists tenselessly at a time T or E exists timelessly, and God brings it about that E exists.

This would be, I think, the appropriate way to speak of the dependence of either timeless abstract objects upon God or it would also be the appropriate way to speak of the dependence of the four-dimensional universe as a whole or of its temporal slices on God if a B-theory of time is true. So if one does embrace a B-theory of time, it seems to me that while God doesn't conserve things in existence we can say that he sustains them in existence given this analysis.

START DISCUSSION

Student: In that case, when did God create abstract objects? Or have they always been sustained as part of God's existence?

Dr. Craig: Well, they wouldn't necessarily need to be part of God's existence. This is controversial, right? There's a multiplicity of views. But one view would be that these entities just exist co-eternally with God. They're not the same as God. God is a living concrete entity, and these abstract entities like numbers and sets exist alongside of him, but they don't exist independently of him. They're sustained in being by God timelessly.

Student: So they were like necessary precursors to creation?

Dr. Craig: They would be precursors to physical creation, yes. Because, for example, if God were to create one horse there would already be ("already" in a non-temporal sense) the number 1 in order for there to be one horse. The number 1 has to exist on this view. As you probably may remember from our discussion of divine aseity, I'm an anti-realist about these things personally. I don't think they exist. But this is an open question and it's not one on which Christianity stands or falls. Some people, like my colleague J. P. Moreland for example, believes that these sort of abstract entities exist and depend upon God for their existence. So I think the proper relationship of God to these entities would be sustenance. He sustains them in being even though he doesn't create them or conserves them.

Student: I'm not sure I understand the difference between bringing it about that something exists and creating something.

Dr. Craig: The expression "bringing it about" is meant to be neutral here. We could substitute something like "causes for it." God causes E to exist, but it doesn't necessarily imply the idea of a beginning of existence which is what's entailed in creation, I'm arguing. I'm maintaining that creation involves this idea of something's coming into being, and then I gave an explanation of what it is to come into being. God can cause E to exist without E's coming into being. There doesn't have to be a first moment of its existence, as we were just saying earlier.

Student: Can we say these things are held in existence and conceptually and symbolically in the mind of God just like numbers 1 and 2? The concept of oneness and twoness. Because these things only really have value for us in the physical world so something we can use as a representation.

Dr. Craig: Yes, as I said there's a multiplicity of different views on this, and I was taking in response to the earlier question the strongest view which is called Platonism. Plato believed that these abstract objects exist independently of us, independently of the world. In fact, for Plato these entities are more real than the physical world. He said the physical world and the things in it are like shadows compared to these abstract mathematical and geometrical objects. But as you pointed out, there is a wide range of weaker views that are not as robust as Plato's view. The church fathers and medievals tended to think of these objects as ideas in the mind of God. They took Plato's realm of the Forms and they

moved them into the mind of God as ideas of God. So the number 1, the set of natural numbers, and things of this sort are thoughts in God's mind, not independently existing objects. Then there are other views as well that would say that these are merely pretense. They're like make-believe. We're invited to imagine that they exist and then can explore the logical consequences. There's many, many different views of these. But what I'm simply saying is that if you do believe that these sorts of things exist, they cannot exist independently of God. There has to be some kind of dependence relation. That's what I think sustenance gives you, and sustenance is not only applicable to these entities that exist timelessly but sustenance would also apply to things that exist tenselessly at moments of time. So sustenance would apply both to the B-theory of time as well as to any of these abstract timeless objects you might want to have.

Student: Let me try to explain my question. If you extend a point, it will become a line. And if you extend a line, it's a plane. And if you extend a plane, it becomes a cube – three dimensions. If you extend that then time comes in. That is, if we take it purely empirical – like it's static – and yet because the time creates the changes which we may say intervention of God or intervention of people that the plan grows or things move. The planets rotate or something. So that change – that is an additional force or energy interjected into this empirical extension. So I was just thinking – when you talk about God's sustenance, that's on top of this empirical extension. There are acts of intervention coming in.

Dr. Craig: Oh, yes. Yes, OK. I thought you were going to go in an entirely different direction! But certainly in addition to sustaining the universe in being or conserving it in being there will be special acts of God whereby he intervenes in the series of secondary causes. This is what we'll talk about under divine providence, which is the next section. After we complete our lesson today, God willing, we'll talk about divine providence next week.

Student: I'm new to the class, and I'm trying to make this very simple so that I can understand it. Would I be wrong in saying that these abstract, timeless objects that are existing outside of time are really the context that we look at as laws of mathematics, natural laws, the sort of the context or the constructs that God used in order to put order and structure into his creation?

Dr. Craig: No, but it's close. The number 1, for example, is not a law. Right? The number 1 is just an object. The set of natural numbers is not a law. But the natural laws that govern our universe can be given mathematical formulations so that the laws of nature can be exhibited as mathematical equations or mathematical formulae, and if those exist then you're right they would exist as abstract objects just as much as numbers and sets

and functions and other sorts of things. The laws of nature on this view would be these mathematical propositions or formulae.

END DISCUSSION

Let me move on to our next section. We've been talking about conservation – God's preserving the universe in being over time from one moment to another. This was typically thought to be part of continuing creation, as you may remember, though I criticized that classification. But there was another part of continuing creation in addition to conservation. There is what is called divine concurrence, or in Latin *concursum*. So in addition to *conservatio* you had *concursum*, or in English translation “concurrence.”

According to the doctrine of concurrence, God is the cause of everything that happens in the world. That is not to say that God is the only cause – that would be occasionalism which we talked about last time. Rather, according to concurrence, God concurs with the action of the secondary causes to produce their effects, and in the absence of God's concurrence these secondary causes would be powerless to produce any effects. They would not cause anything. The secondary causes are effective only because God concurs with their operation to produce their effects.

This doctrine was applied by medieval theologians to explain certain biblical miracles. For example, you all remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into that smelting furnace to be incinerated. But instead of perishing in the flames, they were walking around inside the furnace unharmed. These medieval theologians explained this miracle by saying it is not that there was a change in the body of the three children of Israel – it's not that they became like asbestos or some incombustible material. Rather, what God did was he withdrew his concurrence with the flames so that they could not produce their effect and burn up the children of Israel. The children of Israel remained ordinary non-supernatural human flesh and blood, but they were not harmed by the flames because God withdrew his concurrence with the secondary causes so that the effect of burning and charring would not be produced. That would be a vivid illustration of how concurrence works in the world with secondary causes.

One might ask: how does this relate to human free will and determinism? Here we have a difference of opinion between the disciples of Thomas Aquinas and Luis Molina on this question. Aquinas maintained that God acts on the secondary causes to make them produce their effects. So when it comes to the human will, God causes the human will to choose A rather than not-A. God's concurrence acts on the secondary causes to make them produce their effects. Molina, by contrast, championed what he called simultaneous concurrence. That is to say, God acts with the secondary causes to produce their effect. He doesn't act on the secondary cause to make it do something; rather, he acts with the

secondary cause to produce its effect. He compares concurrence to two men pulling a boat up onto the shore with two ropes. Each one is pulling the boat on his own rope, but together the effect of the boat being lifted onto the shore is produced. It is not that one man acts on the other man who then pulls on the boat. It's not like a chain. Rather these are two simultaneous causal actions that unite to produce the common effect. Molina, by holding to simultaneous concurrence, maintains that he is able to preserve human free will because, unlike Thomas Aquinas' view, God doesn't move the human will to choose this or that. Rather, God simply acts with the human will to produce in being what the human will freely chooses. The followers of Molina thought that Aquinas' view led to determinism and the denial of free will, but Molina's doctrine of simultaneous concurrence allows Molina to say that God is the cause of everything that happens but that this is perfectly consistent with human freedom because he acts with the secondary cause to produce the effect, not on the secondary cause to produce the effect.

This is a remarkable doctrine, I'm sure you'll agree. I doubt that probably anyone in this class has even heard of concurrence before. It has been almost totally eclipsed in contemporary theology in discussions of the relation between God and the world. This is ironic because it seems to follow from divine conservation which is the only doctrine of creation that most theologians are willing to embrace today. Just think about it. If God conserves in being some entity E from T to T' (which is a later time than T) then he has to conserve E not just in abstraction but he has to conserve E in its concrete particularity with all of its properties. To give an example. Suppose that the entity E here is a wad of cotton, and suppose that at time T the cotton is brought into proximity with a flame so that the cotton then becomes smoldering and black at T'. It goes from being white and fluffy at T to being black and smoldering at T'. God must not merely conserve E from T to T', he has to conserve that piece of cotton in all of its particularity. For the cotton to exist from T to T', God has to preserve it as a white fluffy piece of cotton at first and then as a black and smoldering piece of cotton. Therefore, in conserving it with all of its properties, conservation requires that God concur with the cotton's being white at T and being black at T'. So concurrence actually seems to follow from the doctrine of conservation which is ironic, as I say, given the fact that most theologians who want a doctrine of creation will agree to conservation, but concurrence never seems to enter the picture.

START DISCUSSION

Student: If God produces . . . if God acts on or in some sense causes everything, then how would we . . . it seems like we would want to avoid saying that if somebody shoots an innocent person that God in some sense killed that person. How would you avoid saying that? Because you want to avoid saying that God is the cause of evil, but at the same time it seems that if he causes everything he at least causes the negative effects.

Dr. Craig: This is a very good question. Obviously, God concurs in being the terrorist and the knife in the terrorist's hand and the knife as it plunges into his victim. On concurrence, God concurs with these secondary causes in producing their effect. That's true. But Molina would say that God is not responsible for the evil of that act because the evil lies not in the physical state of affairs itself. The evil lies in the intention of the agent who carries it out. I think that's right. Plunging a knife into a person's body is not in and of itself morally evil. A surgeon might do that, or someone might do that to protect someone else. The physical state of affairs is really morally neutral. Evil is ascribed to the intentions and the motives of the agent who carries it out. In cases of evil acts, God merely permits the secondary agents to carry out their evil actions and he concurs with their effects, but he does not intend them as they do. God's permission of the event is done only because he knows that ultimately permitting this will allow for his purposes to be achieved. I think Molina has a good answer to this in saying that God can be the physical cause of everything that happens without being morally responsible for evil actions.

Student: I just wanted to follow up on the question that was just asked. Shouldn't we take that all the way back to the beginning? And, if you don't mind, could we maybe briefly go over supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism again? Because that goes all the way back to the beginning of creation. Correct?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Say Eve commits the first sin. God would concur in allowing them to do that. He wouldn't make the fruit turn hard and brittle so that she couldn't bite into it, or he wouldn't make the tree disappear. God concurs with their decisions in allowing them to fall into sin, but he doesn't have the evil intent that Adam and Eve did in choosing to disobey God.

Student: Well, I guess the question is which actually works better. I never have been able to figure that one out – which one of the two actually works better as far as an explanation of how the Fall occurred?

Dr. Craig: Is the alternative you're suggesting that God is the author of evil?

Student: Actually, I don't believe he is, but it's almost hard to . . . philosophically, I don't believe he is. But at the same time, practically speaking, it almost kind of does seem like he is.

Dr. Craig: Well, I think that Molina's distinction can help us to understand the way in which God is the cause of everything that happens. Nothing happens without his direct will or permission, but God is not the author of evil because he doesn't have the evil intentions that these secondary agents do. I think we've got to resist with all our might the notion that God is the author of evil. I would sooner deny concurrence altogether than ascribe to God the source of evil.

Student: I think another way to look at this also is not from a moral point of view but from the idea that God is a God of order. That if God is constantly changing the physical properties of the universe to prevent evil then he has created a universe in which cause and effect does not exist. He created a universe of chaos in which we could not live, we could not learn, we could not really rely on our experiences from one second to the next. While that may prevent evil, I think that would very much contradict God as a God of order.

Dr. Craig: I think you're right, and the point that you are making here is to provide a rationale for concurrence in evil acts. As you say, this does produce an orderly world, not a chaos, in which rational exploration, discovery, science, and rational behavior is meaningful.

Student: I'm not sure I follow how Molina's style of concurrence preserves free will. Because if God were to ever choose to remove his concurrence then the individual then no longer has the free will to do what they want to do. They're trying to pull the boat alone and they can't do it in your example, unless you were to say that God always provides his concurrence to every decision.

Dr. Craig: I don't see how, in the example of Nebuchadnezzar and the children of Israel, that God's removing his concurrence from the flame does anything to remove Nebuchadnezzar's free will. He freely threw the children of Israel into the fire and tried to harm them. So he's responsible to God for that evil intent. But God saved them from his evil intent by withdrawing his concurrence from the flame. So if flames had free will, I think you'd be right. God has withdrawn his concurrence from the flames, and so they can't produce their effect. But flames obviously are not agents. They're just things, and so there's no annulling of their freedom, I think. Think about it.

Student: Along the lines of what someone earlier said, in order to have a lawful universe that we can participate in, God establishes laws that can be used in evil ways. But in order to have a sustainable, lawful universe, and us to have a free will, they also have to be able to be used in the wrong way. So gravity can be a source of a weapon, but it does a lot of other good things like keeping us tacked to the earth. So this is how it has to operate, otherwise you would have to say logically God shouldn't have created at all.

Dr. Craig: Yes, because this makes rational behavior possible including moral choices. I think that's right.

Student: I was wondering if this could help in relation to . . . a lot of people struggle with the concept of where God hardens Pharaoh's heart and that type thing. So, for instance, if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff and someone comes up behind me and pushes me off the cliff, I fall down and die at the bottom of the cliff. Then there's why did I die? Well, first, it's the free will of the person who pushed me off the cliff. But it's also because of

the law of gravity that I died, and it's also because of God's concurrence with the law of gravity that I died. And, yet, when somebody asked "Why did I die?" they're obviously going to blame the free will even if the other two are just as valid of explanations. When it comes to God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh decided to reject God which was a free will decision on his part, however the natural law that follows from that is his heart is hardened. However, who does the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? It is God. But it's simply following the natural law of when man freely rejects God's free will. So it seems like it was God causing evil by hardening Pharaoh's heart; well, no, it's actually he is following the laws he set up which would be maybe part of concurrence but it's still man's free will that chose to reject him.

Dr. Craig: I can see where that would be an application of this. That's not one I had thought of but it's a possible contribution.

Student: I've was still thinking about the question that gentlemen had about the creation and the Fall and all that. The one thing that comes to my mind is, as far as creating and as far as the Fall and whether God caused evil in the world, the way I see it is God created man to be in his own image; such a high level of creation to be in the image of the Living God that we must have free will to worship him freely or else there's no value and that it would be a lower level of being if we didn't have that. I believe that it was necessary that we have that choice – to be able to choose to eat the apple or whatever the fruit is – and to fall into that sin. I would not see that as God causing the evil, but as the ultimate good was that we would then choose to freely worship him and we would be in that level of fellowship that he desired that we would commune with him as he created us for that high level of fellowship. That's more of a comment; you can tell me what you think on that one. But I was going to ask about the thing about the hardening of the heart, as well.

Dr. Craig: All right. Well, in view of the time, let me just comment on your first part of your question. I think free will is absolutely essential if we're to avoid making God the author of evil. I think you're quite right in saying that evil is to be attributed to the free choice of God's creatures to be oriented toward something other than God as the supreme good. The will is turned toward lesser goods rather than to God as the greatest good, and that is evil. That is what evil is – it's a privation of right order in the creaturely will, and that isn't brought about by God. God is all good and he doesn't produce evil, but he does produce a creature which has freedom, and that is a great good because, as you say, that makes our worship and service to God meaningful.

END DISCUSSION

Next time we will turn to the doctrine of divine providence where we will explore ways in which God is active in the world; that is to say, what is God's relationship to these secondary causes that operate in the world and of which we ourselves are a part.¹

¹