

# **Creation and its Implications for Missions**

## CREATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONS

Fuller Seminary, January, 1989

When Chuck VanEngen asked me to say a few words about the implications of the doctrine of creation for us, my first thought was to say something about the relationship of creation to paleontology. While that is an important topic we need to discuss somewhere, I decided rather to say something about the relationship of the doctrine of creation to our missionary task. I would like to use four sets of words as hooks on which to hang my thoughts.

### HOPE AND ANTICIPATION

The first is hope and anticipation. Art Glasser is right when he says that we as evangelicals too often start our theology of mission with the fall. In that light, looking at the world, or even at the church, we tend to despair.

If we start with the theology of creation, however, **we have hope**. Creation, not the fall, is the paradigm for eternity. There is a fall, yes. In fact, we see the awfulness of the fall better when we see it in the light of God's perfect creation than we do when we compare ourselves with one another. But the big story of Scripture is not the fall. It is creation, and creation restored to its intended perfection.

This means in missions that I must **first see** the world as God intended it to be, not as it now is. When I see a human broken by sin, addicted to alcohol and drugs, and cast away by society, I must first see him or her as create in the image God with all the worth and dignity that entails. When I see a community torn by hatred and competition, I must first see it as God intended it to be - a community of love, cooperation and mutual caring. When I see Los Angeles I must ask what it would look if Christ were the mayor, and all our resources were spent on peace and human development. **Then I have hope for that is what God intended and is working for, not this. And it is that for which we are called to work.**

But creation also speaks of **anticipation**. This fallen world is not the end of the story. Someday the reality will be a new heaven and earth. So when I see a fallen sinner, I must see her or him as one whom Christ desires to save not only from sin, but also to eternal joy and beauty.

### WHOLENESS

The second word is **wholeness**. God created both the heaven and earth. So the physical side of creation is also central to God's purposes. At times we are in danger of a gnosticism that places high value on the spirit and sees the material side of creation as something from which we will someday be delivered. But our bodies are part of God's creative purposes. We are not souls inhabiting bodies. We are body-souls. Without the body or the soul we are not humans. So in missions we cannot separate our ministry to peoples. I minister to them as whole persons, body and soul.

But as John Stott points out, we are more. We are body-souls-in-community. We may be perfectly self-fulfilled, but if we live alone we live in hell. To be recreated in Christ is to join the community of believers. It is important in missions, therefore, that I lead young Christians into relational communities that break down the walls that sin has erected - walls of race, class, competition and self-centeredness.

## LOVE AND RECONCILIATION

The third set of words is **love and reconciliation**. We in America are deeply influenced by a fundamental Indo-European myth that looks at history as a cosmic battle between **order** and **chaos**. In India the battle is between the Pandavas and the Kauravas; in Zoroastrianism between Mazda and Marmaduke; in the movies between the cowboys and Indians, and between detectives and criminals; in the news between good countries and bad ones; on T.V. between Magnum and the thugs, and between Superman or Spiderman and the forces of evil; on Saturday morning cartoons between Underdog and Simon Bar Sinister, and between the Smurfs and the villains; and in the arcades between Pac-Man and Blinky, Pinky and Inky. In the end it is important that **we** win so that we can restore order and control. It is o.k. to use the shady means if we must, because chaos is the greatest of evils. The detective can break into a house without a warrant, the good nation can use war, Superman can tell lies. Once we have won the battle, then we can work on righteousness. The first task is to establish order.

In Christian theology this battle mentality is linked to a theology of creation in which we see creation as a once-for-all act of God at the beginning of time. After that creation is believed to have an autonomous existence of its own. So when sin entered the scene, a battle arose between God and Satan. The test is one of strength. In the end God triumphs over the rebels, and restores justice and righteousness.

If I apply this metaphor to missions, it is important that I as a missionary take a militant stance against those who oppose the gospel. I must see Hindus and Muslims as enemies to be overcome. I must fight the Brahmins in Pedda Danvada who come to one of our village churches, beat the Christians and put crowbars through the feet of the elderly who could not run. In the young church I must make sure that order is preserved. Meeting must begin on time, the hospital must be kept strictly clean, goals must be set and kept in church planting. To this I must keep control, at least until leaders can be trained who can keep things in order.

This metaphor of battle is found in scripture, but let me suggest that there is a much deeper root metaphor of God's relation to his fallen creation. This is the metaphor of the parent and a wayward child. The parents create the child and seek its growth. But they do not try to 'control it', for truly mutual relationships are not based on control. The child rebels and fights the parents, but the parents continue to reach out in love. They continue to sustain the child even in his or her rebellion. They chose to bear the pain of of the rejection of their creation because they hope that one day the child will return. For them to reject the child is to die as a parent.

If I understand the biblical view of creation correctly, God not only created an world of order, he also created - spirit and human - to whom he could relate. True mutual relationships, however, have a measure of chaos in them. Husbands and wives must negotiate decisions. Babies born into a home upset everyones' schedules. In creating beings in his image, therefore, God gave up a measure of his control so that true relationships are possible.

Moreover, God continues to sustain in his providence his whole creation, including those who rebel and war against him. The biblical doctrine of is not a once-for-all event. God continues to create creation. Without his every moment sustainance, this creation and all in it would cease to be. This means that God does not have to defeat those who rebel against him using superior power. He simply has to stop creating them. Their very existence as rebels, in fact the very power they use against God, is God's ongoing gift to them, a testimony of his unchanging love. If he were to stop loving them he would be less than God. Like a suffering parent God reaches out to all of us wayward children, looking not for vengeance, but longing for reconciliation and restored fellowship.

The central battle in scripture, then, is not first for order and control. The greatest evil is not chaos but sin. Chaos in the Bible is not always evil. Chaos is often the potential out of which a higher order emerges. When God created the earth it was tohu va bohu. It was not evil. It was the potential out of which all things were formed. Things are but relationships develop.

If God in his providence continues to create those who rebel against us, including Satan and the demons, and gives them the very strength they use to fight him, the central battle in scripture must not be to vanquish his foes and destroy them. It must lie elsewhere - in God's unchanging love that seeks to reach out in redemption and reconciliation, even to those he knows will never return to him. He must be righteous in his response even when they are free to sin against him. He must reach out even when they strike him. He must sustain them in their rebellion because he is still their parent. Only in this light does the cross make sense as the central battle and crucial victory in the relationship of God and his rebellious creation.

What does this mean for me in missions? First it means I must look at sinners, even the worst of them, with eyes not of confrontation, but of love and reconciliation. No matter what they do, I must reach out to them. I learned this from our Indian church. After the high caste Brahmans beat the Christians in Pedda Danvada, they would not let the Christians to use the village well a half mile outside of town. Many had tried but none had found water near the village. The Christians prayed, took an offering and got a loan, and began to dig a well. Twice they failed. The third time they dug near the church right on the edge of the village, and they struck water. After thanking God for miraculously providing them with water, they sent a delegation to the Brahmans who had beaten them and said, "Why do you send your women a half-mile out of town for water? Come, God has given us all water right here in the village."

Second, it means I must focus in the church on building relationships, and not seek to keep control. I must help young Indian Christians to become

leaders even if sometimes I think they are doing things wrong. The hospital may not be as clean as I want it. The meetings may not start on time. But what is more important is that Christian relationships are being built and that Christians and leaders are growing.

Third, I cannot not use wrong methods to gain the right ends. I cannot use questionable means, even if the goals are right. If I do, I become again the sinner in need of salvation. Righteousness is more important than success.

### CELEBRATION

The final word I think about when I think of the doctrine of creation in relation to missions is **celebration**. As humans we are created in God's image, and in a derivative and secondary sense we 'become creators'. Our creations - our cultures - are tainted with evil because we are sinners. Nevertheless, there shines through them that which is of God and is good. So I can celebrate the good in human cultures. I can enjoy a good performance of a morning raga by Ravi Shankar on the sitar, or of a Beethoven Concerto by Perlman. I can savor a good curry and rice meal at a wedding, and rejoice when a new child born in the village.