

God Creates the World (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

The first thing the Bible tells us is that God is a creator. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, NRSV alternate reading). God speaks, and things come into being that were not there before, beginning with the universe itself. Creation is solely an act of God. It is neither an accident, nor a mistake, nor the product of an inferior deity, but the self-expression of God.

God works to create the world (Genesis 1:1-25)

God brings the material world into being (Genesis 1:1-2)

Genesis continues by emphasizing the materiality of the world. “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1-2). The nascent creation, though still “formless,” has the material dimensions of space (“the deep”) and matter (“waters”), and God is fully engaged with this materiality (“a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”) Later, in chapter 2 we even see God working the dirt of his creation. “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7). Throughout chapters 1 and 2, we see God engrossed in the physicality of his creation.

Any theology of work must begin with a theology of creation. Do we regard the material world, the stuff that we work with, as God’s first-rate stuff, imbued with lasting value? Or do we dismiss it as a temporary job site, a testing ground, a sinking ship from which we must escape to get to God’s true location in an immaterial “heaven.” Genesis argues against any notion that the material world is any less important to God than the spiritual world. Or putting it more precisely, in Genesis there is no sharp distinction between the material and the spiritual. The *ruah* of God in Genesis 1:2 is simultaneously “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit” (see footnote b in the NRSV or compare NRSV, NASB, NIV and KJV.) “The heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:2 and 2:1) are not two separate realms, but a Hebrew merism meaning “the universe”^[1] in the same way that the English merism “kith and kin” means “relatives.”

Most significantly, the Bible ends where it begins, on earth. Humanity does not depart the earth to join God in heaven. Instead, God perfects his kingdom on earth and calls into being “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2). God’s dwelling with humanity is here, in the renewed creation. “See, the home of God is among mortals” (Rev. 21:3). This is why Jesus told his disciples to pray in the words, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). During the time between Genesis 2 and Revelation 21, the earth is corrupted,

broken, out of kilter, and filled with people and forces that work against God's purposes. (More on this in Genesis 3 and following.) Not everything in the world goes according to God's design. But the world is still God's creation, which he calls "good." For more on the new heaven and new earth, see "Revelation 17-22" in *Revelation and Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

Many Christians who work mostly with material objects say it seems that their work matters less to the church—and even to God—than work centering on people, ideas or religion. A sermon praising good work is more likely to use the example of a missionary, social worker or teacher, than a miner, auto mechanic, or chemist. Fellow Christians are more likely to recognize a call to become a minister or doctor than a call to become an inventory manager or sculptor. But does this have any biblical basis? Leaving aside the fact that working with people is working with material objects, it is wise to remember that God gave people the tasks both of working with people (Genesis 2:18) and working with things (Gen. 2:15). God seems to take the creation very seriously indeed.

God's creation takes work (Genesis 1:3-25; 2:7)

Creating a world is work. In Genesis 1 the power of God's work is undeniable. God speaks worlds into existence, and step by step we see the primordial example of the right use of power. Note the order of creation. The first three of God's creative acts separate the formless chaos into realms of heavens (or sky), water, and land. On day 1, God creates light and separates it from darkness, forming day and night (Gen. 1:3-5). On day 2, he separates the waters and creates the sky (Gen. 1:6-8). On the first part of day 3, he separates dry land from the sea (Gen. 1:9-10). All are essential to the survival of what follows. Next, God begins filling the realms he has created. On the remainder of day 3, he creates plant life (Gen. 1:11-13). On day 4 he creates the sun, moon and stars (Gen. 1:14-19) in the sky. The terms "greater light" and "lesser light," are used rather than the names "sun" and "moon," thus discouraging the worship of these created objects and reminding us that we are still in danger of worshiping the creation instead of the Creator. The lights are beautiful in themselves and also essential for plant life, with its need for sunshine, nighttime and seasons. On day 5, God fills the water and sky with fish and birds that could not have survived without the plant life created earlier (Gen. 1:20-23). Finally on day 6, he creates the animals (Gen. 1:24-25) and—the apex of creation—humanity to populate the land (Gen. 1:26-31).^[2]

In chapter 1, God accomplishes all his work by speaking. "God said..." and everything happened. This lets us know that God's power is more than sufficient to create and maintain the creation. We need not worry that God is running out of gas or that the creation is in a precarious state of existence. God's creation is robust, its existence secure. God does not need help from anyone or anything to create or maintain the world. No battle with the forces of chaos threatens to undo the creation. Later when God chooses to share creative responsibility with human beings, we know that this is God's choice, not a

necessity. Whatever people may do to mar the creation or render the earth unfit for life's fullness, God has infinitely greater power to redeem and restore.

The display of God's infinite power in the text does *not* mean that God's creation is not work, any more than writing a computer program or acting in a play is not work. If the transcendent majesty of God's work in Genesis 1 nonetheless tempts us to think it is not actually work, Genesis 2 leaves us no doubt. God works immanently with his hands to sculpt human bodies (Gen. 2:7, 21), dig a garden (Gen. 2:8) plant an orchard (Gen. 2:9), and—a bit later—tailor “garments of skin” (Gen. 3:21). These are only the beginnings of God's physical work in a Bible full of divine labor.^[3]

Creation is of God, but is not identical with God (Genesis 1:11)

God is the source of everything in creation. Yet creation is not identical with God. God gives his creation what Colin Gunton calls *Selbständigkeit* or a “proper independence.” This is not the absolute independence imagined by the atheists or Deists, but rather the meaningful existence of the creation as distinct from God himself. This is best captured in the description of God's creation of the plants. “God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so” (Gen. 1:11). God creates everything; but he also literally sows the seed for the perpetuation of creation through the ages. The creation is forever dependent on God, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), yet it remains distinct. This gives our work a beauty and value above the value of a ticking clock or a prancing puppet. Our work has its source in God, yet it also has its own weight and dignity.

God sees that his work is good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)

Against any dualistic notion that heaven is good, while earth is bad, Genesis declares on each day of creation that “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). On the sixth day, with the creation of humanity, God saw that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). People—the agents through whom sin is soon to enter God's creation—are nonetheless “very good.” There is simply no support in Genesis for the notion, which somehow entered Christian imagination, that the world is irredeemably evil and the only salvation is an escape into an immaterial spiritual world, much less for the notion that while we are on earth we should spend our time in “spiritual” tasks rather than “material” ones. There is no divorce of the spiritual from the material in God's good world.

God works relationally (Genesis 1:26a)

Even before God creates people, he speaks in the plural, “Let *us* make humankind in our image” (Gen.

1:26). While scholars differ whether “us” refers to a divine assembly of angelic beings or to a unique plurality-in-unity of God, either view implies that God is inherently relational.^[4] It’s difficult to be sure exactly what the ancient Israelites would have understood the plural to mean here. For our purposes it seems best to follow the traditional Christian interpretation that it refers to the Trinity. In any case, we know from the New Testament that God is indeed in relationship with himself — and with his creation— in a Trinity of love. In John’s gospel we learn that the Son—“the word made flesh” (John 1:14) —is present and active in creation from the beginning.

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:1-4)

Thus Christians acknowledge our Trinitarian God, the unique Three-Persons-in-One-Being, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all personally active in creation.

God limits his work (Genesis 2:1-3)

At the end of six days, God’s creation of the world is finished. This doesn’t mean that God ceases working, for as Jesus said, “my father is still working” (John 5:17). Nor does it mean that the creation is complete, for as we will see, God leaves plenty of work for people to do to bring the creation further along. But chaos had been turned into an inhabitable environment, now supporting plants, fish, birds, animals and human beings.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the *work* that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done (Genesis 1:31-2:2).

God crowns his six days of work with a day of rest. While creating humanity was the climax of God’s creative work, resting on the seventh day was the climax of God’s creative week. Why does God rest? The majesty of God’s creation by word alone in chapter 1 makes it clear that God is not tired. He doesn’t *need* to rest. But he chooses to limit his creation in time as well as in space. The universe is not infinite. It has a beginning, attested by Genesis, which science has learned how to observe in light of the big bang. Whether it has an end in time is not unambiguously clear, in either the Bible or science, but God gives time a limit *within* the world as we know it. As long as time is running, God blesses six days for work and one for rest. This is a limit that God himself observes, and it later becomes his

command to people, as well (Exodus 20:8-11).

ENDNOTES

- [1] Gordon J. Wenham, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 15.
- [2] For a helpful discussion of the interpretation of the "Days" of creation, see Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 74-78.
- [3] For a long list of the many kinds of work God does in the Bible, see R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 18-123 and Robert Banks, *God the Worker* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1992).
- [4] Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 64-5.