

Fall 2017 Luther Series 2  
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church  
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### Luther's Doctrine of Creation

Usually, when we think of the doctrine of creation, we think in terms of the origin of all things. Genesis begins with the words, "In the beginning..." So does the gospel of John, and why John begins in this way will be part of how we explain what it means to call God our "creator."

In the first story of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4b), the author emphasizes that all things were created by God. There was nothing before God's creative act, as if God created order out of a mass of preexisting matter. Rather, God created everything that exists in space and time out of nothing. And in the process of creating, he ordered everything according to his purpose. Everything that exists is to have its own place in the whole, and all work together for the purpose of sustaining life.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the rise of the physical sciences, and when major discoveries wee made regarding the laws that govern events in the physical world (such as the law of gravity), a group of folks known as "Deists" formulated the idea that God created everything such that it was capable of continuing on without the ongoing influence of God. Creation was thought of as a watch and God the watchmaker. After a watch is made, it functions on its own without the need of the watchmaker's intervention. Similarly, nature was thought of as a system that was governed by natural laws—laws that could be measured using mathematical equations and that could be discovered and understood through the scientific method. In other words, after God created the universe, there was nothing more for him to do.

This idea does not square with the biblical witness. God's creative activity is not limited to the point in which time, space, and everything within them come into being in the first place. Rather, God is involved in creation both in the sense of providing for our needs in an ongoing basis and in the sense of preservation and recreation. For example, in Luther's explanation of the first article of the Creed, he emphasizes that God continues to provide for all our needs on an ongoing basis. This is not to say that god violates the laws that govern nature. But it is to say that through his word, God continues to provide for us according to his will and purpose. Paul said, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." "All things" here includes the created order.

For example, in the story of Joseph, God sends first a time where the earth is very productive. Then he sends a time of drought. With Moses, he parts the sea. Jesus stills a storm. In all these events, it is possible that a scientist could have been able to explain the phenomena had he been there. Times of drought and plenty are not unusual. Neither is it unusual that a strong wind dries up a portion of a body of water. Storms come and go.

However, in a way that we cannot detect or measure, God's word is involved in the where and the when of the events as secondary cause of events.

This means that, while God cannot be described as being a part of creation, as if creation and god's being could be identified with one another, nevertheless, God is involved in the ongoing preservation of creation and he has a goal and purpose to his involvement. God's activity in creation can only be detected through the events of creation itself. We cannot see or understand how God is involved. But that he is involved can be perceived through the eyes of faith as God fulfills his promises through events in the natural order.

Another point that Luther emphasizes concerning what we see in creation is the fact that God gives unconditionally. In Ecclesiastes, the author says, "God sends rain on the just and the unjust alike." In other words, creation, according to God's word and promises, is an arena [through/in] which we see God's generosity to all creatures by providing for them. \* All that we have has ultimately come from God because through his preserving activity, we are provided for. It's not an accident that we have all that we need for the preservation and nourishment of our lives and the lives of all creatures. Again, we cannot detect or measure God's activity in creation. However, through the eyes of faith, by believing in God's promises, we can be assured of God's presence in creation seeing to it that we are provided for.

Luther also points out that God's creation of all life, and human life in particular, happens apart from any merit on our part. It is an expression of God's free goodness and love. He both creates and preserves out of his free decision to do so. This confers a dignity to all people irrespective of who they are, and it includes all people whether disabled, weak, demented, or in any way impaired. God expects that all people will therefore be treated with dignity.

This point is related to that part of the creation story where God says he gives human beings "Dominion" in creation. "Dominion" does not mean that we can do whatever we want with God's creation. The creation belongs to God, not us. We are a part of it, not its creator. Therefore, what we are talking about here is stewardship. God has made us such that we have the ability to understand how things work in creation. We can produce crops. We can raise livestock. We can build. And we can reproduce. However, all these things—the creation and our ability to exercise some degree of control, are gifts from God. They are a trust from God to us. And we are to exercise our "dominion" in a way that is constant with God's purpose in giving these gifts and with the knowledge that God sees his creation as being "very good."

To exploit creation out of greed, or to use it for personal gain without thought of the consequences of our behavior on others—this would be an abuse of creation. And, with time, there will be consequences for us if we abuse the good gifts of God. God's will is for everyone to be provided for. God's will is for us to care for one another and all God's creatures. To abuse God's gifts is an affront to God and demonstrates a lack of gratitude on our part. For Luther, creation is continually dependent upon God. His preservation and ongoing sustaining is effective in the fact that all creatures have the ability to reproduce. In

creation, new beginnings are happening all the time, and these are signs of God's ongoing preservation of [all persons] in creation. \*

Another important aspect of the story of creation is the fact that God is apart from and not to be identified with any created object. God is transcendent to creation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons. This is made clear in the commandments where God forbids the people to make "a graven image." It is not possible to make an image of God because God does not exist within the time and space of creation. Rather, he is external and everywhere present at the same time. Any image of God would limit God. Recall, his name is "I am who I am." That is, we will know God by what God does. We will never see God, but we will be witnesses to what he does. Therefore, any attempt to conceive of God, or to make an image or create a concept of God apart from God's self revelation is to make an idol. Idolatry is the most common sin of humankind. We seek our own happiness and fulfillment as creatures in things that are not God. When we do that, we distort the image of God in us. We were made for fellowship and communion with God. This is how we become the people we were meant to be. The image of God in us can be restored only through our faith in and love for God above all things in creation.

One of the questions that has been asked again and again in Christian theology and philosophy is what the origin of evil is. Evil is a threat to God's creatures because evil can be identified as the power of "non-being." That is, the influence of evil is the destruction of what God has made. St. Augustine pointed out that evil is not something God made. Rather, evil is that which results in the destruction of what God has made. Evil is not a thing. Evil is a lack so that the existence of a thing is threatened with going out of existence. If God created all things "good," he not only is not responsible for evil, he will be active in its elimination. And this brings us to the related topic of re-creation—which is also a part of God's preservation of creation.

When a fire destroys an entire ecosystem, in its wake, new life springs up such that a recreation takes place. The fire resulted in the previous ecosystem's death. It no longer exists. But in its wake, another rises up from the ashes. In fact, the ashes supply the nutrients for the recreation. Creation operates such that new life always rises up in the face of death. Here again is a sign of God's goodness.

In the case of human beings: for our individual redemption, God becomes involved personally. The initial clear sign of this is in the ministry of Jesus. During his ministry, he heals the sick, restores the disabled, evacuates evil spirits, and even raises the dead. Here we see demonstrated God's determination to defeat evil and the death it causes through recreation. And so, the decisive event in this redemptive activity of God is seen in the biblical story of salvation, and finally culminating in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Because we were created to be in fellowship with God, and because--out of pride—a determination to make something out of ourselves apart from and independent from God, we are now slaves to [ ] (turning away from God) and its consequence, death. This \* has an ongoing influence on our lives. Seeking satisfaction, happiness, and fulfillment in things other than God makes us "curved in on ourselves." We become slaves to a will that

leads us to seek God in idols such as wealth, life styles, popularity, and power. Acquiring these things becomes the meaning of our lives, and others are used in order that we might receive these things. Other human beings become objects that are valued only because they may aid us in our quest for these things. That's what Luther means by being "curved in on ourselves." The result is non-being—death—because no created object can give us new life. We are bound to the moral life we have and when it ends, that's it. There is not thing thereafter except nothingness.

God's will, however, is for this not to happen. He therefore designed a plan to redeem human life. That plan is recorded in scripture. The whole point of this history is to provide for the redemption of the whole creation from sin and death. In other words, all of history is headed for what scripture calls "the Kingdom of God"—an eternal kingdom where there will be no more evil, sin, or death.

That this will happen has already been made a fact. It's not a maybe. It's not in some way doubtful or uncertain. It is a fact. And the reason we know this is so is because Jesus, our savior, has already defeated sin and death. There is nothing left to do in order to assure us that the future belongs to the kingdom of God. It's a done deal.

Therefore, the only question is: do we want to participate in this kingdom? Do we want this kingdom to be our future, our hope, our destiny? If so, all that is required is that we participate or share in the ongoing life of Jesus Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit. All we have to do is say "Yes, this is going to be the meaning and substance of my life," or, "No, I would prefer to live in a palace with servants and all the money I need to entertain myself for however many years I have on this planet." If we chose the latter, when the party is over, we die, and as we brought nothing with us into this life, so we will take nothing with us when we die. The result? Nothingness. Extinction. Nonbeing.

However, should we choose the former, that means we will need to seek, knock, and ask for a share in the life of the only person who has defeated evil, sin, and death. We will need to come into communion—spiritual communion—with the presence of our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ as he is made present for us in the Holy Spirit. We have no control over the Spirit of life. We cannot climb into heaven and grab hold of him. We cannot earn or work for this gift as if it were a payment for our meritorious behavior. It's like the wind. It comes when it so chooses, and that's that.

At the same time, when Jesus spoke to his disciples on prayer, he said, or rather promised, that the Heavenly Father would give the Holy Spirit to all who asked for it.

But what is necessary for us to receive the Holy Spirit—the Spirit that brings us [ ] \* fellowship with Christ such that we receive the redemption he [ ] \* on our behalf? This is a process that is never over until the Kingdom comes. We need to have an attitude of repentance—a daily turning away from sinful pride and idolatry, and turning toward the presence of a gracious God. We need to be humbled from our belief and desire to be in control of our destiny (if we ever are!!), and from the freedom to choose idols over God as the source of our joy in life. That part of us needs to die. During this process, the death of

the old self, whose destiny is death anyway, will make room for the rising of a new self. This starts out as a spiritual resurrection in the present. When Christ lives in us, we receive from him divine love, strength, and hope so that we can prevail over temptations and suffering, a part of life in this world until the day we die. As we gain through faith and trust in Christ, this means opening our hearts to his presence as it comes to us through hearing the word of God—a greater and greater share in and participation in the life of the present Christ, we are thereby in the process of redemption.

Throughout our life, we will experience the effects of sin and death by having to endure times of depression and darkness, fear and worry, anxiety and despair. The presence of these things does not mean that you are faithless or lost to Christ. These are experiences that are inevitable as we undergo what Jesus called “birth from above.” If these things are signs of the death of the old self, the birth of the new is also in process. If they are signs of the fact that we ignore or disregard the presence and priority of God, then they are signs of our ultimate destruction. We are empty and helpless without God. Nothing else can fill the spiritual void. But whenever we turn to God with a heart that longs for him, we will become participants in God’s work of recreation. We will become new creatures, fit for the Kingdom of God.

Finally, it is important to point out that Luther believed in the creation of three divinely ordained states for the preservation and recreation of all he [God] has made.

First, in terms of preservation, God ordained both the household and the secular state.

The household is for the birth of new life and the nurture of that life. Parents are called to “be fruitful and multiply” in order to preserve the human race. And it’s the job of every one to participate in the local economy in order that the household may earn what it needs for sustenance. (Genesis 1:28-29)

The state is the political realm ordained to keep order, establish justice, and keep the peace. This “order of creation” was made necessary due to sin. It is the job of the state to maintain order by curbing sinful behavior and punishing those who break the laws the state is responsible to enforce. In this realm, the use of force is authorized if necessary in order to protect others.

The Church was established as that order responsible for seeing to it that God’s word is proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered. The Church never uses force or violence but relies solely on the word of God. When asked how he accomplished the Reformation, Luther said, “I didn’t do anything. The Word did it all.” The Church has no power over what the word accomplishes. Only the Holy Spirit can implant the Word in human hearts. But the Church is responsible for staying faithful to the word as handed down by Jesus and the apostles.