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Creation: Good and Fallen (chap. 7)

Providence: Limited and Detailed (chap. 8)

While the connection between the topics of these chapters may not be readily apparent, they are actually complementary discussions. You see, while a discussion about creation often delves into how to understand the biblical narrative in light of science, what is more pertinent to the conversation is the nature of the created world and God's interaction therein, both of which relate to the topic of God's providence (that is, God's sovereignty or rule over all things). Both topics relate directly to the kind of role God has chosen to play in the course of history, and so while we will touch upon ideas about how creation came to be, the focus in both chapters is rightly placed upon God's creating, sustaining, and redemptive actions in the world.

Let's begin by asking what is the essential (dogma) Christian understanding of creation? Olson summarizes it as follows, "Christian belief about creation regards the universe as *good but not God* and *good but fallen under a curse*," which may be expanded into four basic tenets: (1) "God is the source of all that there is;" (2) "Creatures are dependent and yet real and good;" (3) "God creates in freedom and with purpose;" (4) "Creation is fallen under a curse and needs supernatural healing" (157). These are the central Christian affirmations regarding the created world, and a wide diversity of perspectives is found as people seek to explain exactly what these statements mean, and how they interact with one another. Again, you'll notice that the core beliefs have nothing to do with the popular debates over the age of the earth, the time it took for God to create the world, the process God used to create, and so on and so forth. This is important to keep in mind, because it is so easy to get side-tracked over matters that are non-essential doctrines at best and fruitless, divisive opinions at worst. And given the conflict-ridden nature of these matters, here more than ever we must remember to approach those of differing perspectives with charity and love, recognizing that while we may strongly disagree over how we are to understand and relate the Bible to science, it is not a "make or break" issue regarding our Christian faith. We may shake our heads at the "backwardness" or the "progressiveness" of others, but we can come together around a centralizing core of Christian beliefs about creation that does not even touch upon the matters that so often divide us. That being said, let's look briefly at each of these four statements regarding creation.

First, "God is the source of all that is." This is one of the most basic affirmations for Christians expressed in all of the major creeds of the Church, and often formulated as *creatio ex nihilo* or creation from or out of nothing. In the language of Genesis, "God said let there be...and there was." Now, it should be noted that the term is not used in the Bible, but as Olson reveals, the concept arose in the early centuries AD in response to Gnostic ideas suggesting "that God created the universe out of himself using his own divine substance" (159). The Bible clearly reveals that God is involved in, yet distinct from, the world, and when it was suggested that the created order was someone a part of God, early Christian leaders formulated the term *creatio ex nihilo* in order to affirm that God is the source of all creation while noting a distinction between Creator and creation. This was necessary in order to distinguish the Christian understanding from perspectives in which creation was portrayed as divine.

This brings us to our second affirmation, "creatures are dependent yet real and good." Put another way, God has established things in such a way that there is freedom within certain limits for his creation. The Christian perspective rejects the fatalistic mindset that "what will be will be," believing that creation has potentiality. This means that though we are dependent because we are created by God, we also have a measured independence. In other words, for us to be real and relational there had to be the possibility of a choice to reject good and choose evil. It is this freedom within limits that helps explain how a world created by God and declared good has come to be filled with so many evil, sinful, and demeaning elements.

Third, "God creates in freedom and with purpose." This statement recalls our conversation about God's greatness (transcendence) and goodness (immanence). As Olson put it, "the confession that God creates freely is the only confession consistent with God's transcendence (greatness), and the confession that God creates with purpose is the only confession consistent with God's personal presence (goodness)" (162). In other words, if God *had* to create the world then God's existence would somehow be connected to the existence of the cosmos, which would call into question God's transcendent greatness. And if God created the world *without* any purpose and meaning, it would bring into question God's immanent goodness.

Finally, we come to the affirmation, “creation is fallen under a curse and needs spiritual healing.” “The Fall” of humanity—as well as the created order—is found in Genesis 3, imaging creation’s rebellion against the Creator, which has led to sin, evil, pain and suffering. This statement, in many ways, encapsulates the entire biblical narrative, as we find the good and sovereign God working to bring healing and redemption to a world that continually exercises its freedom to choose a way that leads to destruction rather than a way that leads to reconciliation. This raises the issue of the so-called “problem of evil,” and various theological opinions have been set forth in response. For me, the only option in keeping with my understanding of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ is that God created the world good, but in order for creatures to truly be free there had to be the possibility (not the necessity) of sin and evil. Put another way, for creatures not to be mindless drones there must be a real choice between choosing good (God’s way) and choosing evil (not God’s way). This does not make God the author or cause of sin and evil, it is simply a necessary possibility in a world where creatures are both dependent upon God (created by God) and independent of God (having the possibility and viable option of choosing to reject the creator).

Before moving on to views of the interaction of the divine within the created order (a.k.a. providence), I want to summarize three Christian and three non-Christian formulations of the creation account in Genesis 1-2, which Olson describes in chapter 7. Again, these matters far too often dominate discussions about creation, when they really matter very little and, as we have seen, in no way influence the essential Christian affirmations regarding creation. Nevertheless, the popularity of the topic requires that we at least touch on the basic contours of the debate, which devolve into three broad categories.

(1) *Theistic Evolution* – In Olson’s words, “Theistic evolutionists believe that the biblical narratives of creation are to be taken seriously but not literally. In other words, they express theological truths, such as God is the Creator, through metaphor, poetry, myth, and saga....Theistic evolutionists see no necessary conflict between Christianity...and neo-Darwinism *so long as* the latter does not require naturalism and the former does not require a literal interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis” (170).

(2) *Young Earth Creationism* – This view dates back to the 17th century when an Irish Anglican Bishop named James Usher declared that based on his reading of the genealogies in the OT narrative the earth was created in 4004 BC, thus making the earth a mere 6,000 years old. From the time of the publication his assertions were called into question by scientific data that showed rock formations to be millions not thousands of years old, yet the idea has proved persistent, and many Christians continue to hold this view even today by offering a wide variety of “answers” as to why the earth “appears” to be very old yet is, in reality, very young.

(3) *Progressive Creationism* – Those who hold this view feel that neither of the above approaches is appropriate, and seek a more mediating position. This alternative posits “belief in a combination of ancient creation, evolutionary development of life, and special acts of God at certain thresholds within the history of creation” (171).

What is important to remember (whichever option you think most accurate) is that, as Olson concludes, “it is very unfortunate that questions of *how* and *when* God created have come to dominate Christian discussion of the doctrine of creation” because “all three views...are consistent with historic Christian belief insofar as they acknowledge that *God is the Creator ex nihilo of all reality outside himself* and that *creation is good but not God*” (172). In place of these divisive debates over non-essential, tertiary matters, Olson rightly suggests that we focus on the unifying core of beliefs about the nature and purpose of creation, which would lead to constructive dialogue regarding ecological and environmental matters regarding God’s good creation. In Olson’s words, “Christians hold in common a heritage of a worldview that esteems the natural world highly while viewing it as less than God...This vision of creation gives value to the world and hope for its eventual redemption; it motivates those who are grasped by [this vision] to work toward the healing of creation from all the corrupts while at the same time acknowledging its ontological (not spatial) distance from deity” (175).

This brings us to the three of alternative views of creation, which do not affirm the Christian consensus of one God creating all that is and declaring it good—dualism, monism, and naturalism.

Dualism includes any idea that posits the existence of two eternal, equally powerful, opposing entities that influence and govern the world. This notion is prevalent in extra-biblical creation narratives such as the Babylonian creation account known as the *Enuma Elish*, which depicts the creation of the world as the result of a battle between deities, one of whom is killed and her body is melded into creation. The problem with dualism is that it posits at least two gods, and usually portrays the physical/material world as the realm of sin and evil. This is clearly at odds with the one almighty maker creator of an originally good heaven and earth posited in the biblical narrative.

Monism includes any idea that “reduces all of reality to one substance—usually a spiritual substance identified with God or the divine” (165). In other words, it suggests that the created order is eternal, having been formed from divine substance, and therefore, indistinguishable from the divine. This view finds many expressions, one of the most well-known is *pantheism*, which basically says that the created world is God and God is the created world. Olson points out the biblical problems with this perspective saying, “all forms of monism...detract from God’s transcendence and commit the sin of idolatry with regard to creation, making it possible if not necessary to worship and serve created things rather than the Creator (Rom 1.25)...The world...is good because God created it with purpose and out of love, not because it is God or an extension of God” (166).

Finally, *naturalism* includes any idea that “creation is rooted in chance” or that “the universe is the ultimate accident” (167). This view is far too often linked directly with scientific data and discovery in more conservative theological circles, and that is a grave mistake that leads many to experience great cognitive dissonance in their encounters with scientific discoveries because science is equated with naturalism. The reality is that Christian faith has no conflicts with scientific data and discovery. For example, naturalism looks at the scientific data regarding the universe’s origins and concludes that it is all random chance. Christianity looks at the same data and concludes that however and whenever it all happened, it is the work of God almighty, maker of heaven and earth. In other words, naturalism, like Christianity, is a religious belief based on an interpretation of raw, scientific data about the age of the earth, the process of development, etc. As Olson put it, “once one sees that naturalism is a philosophy and that science does not depend on it to do its work,” you can move beyond the conflict-oriented approach to faith and science. For example, “the problem with evolution, from a Christian point of view, is not that it is necessarily incompatible with Christian belief in God as the Creator. Rather, the problem...is that it is so often linked with naturalism in the minds of those who promote it, as well as in the minds (and writings) of those who reject it” (167, 168).

This brings us, at last, to a discussion God’s providence; that is, God’s involvement in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world that was created good, and yet is clearly in need of healing. We’ll begin with three alternative views (fatalism, deism, and process pantheism) and contrast these with three Christian perspectives (meticulous providence, limited providence, and open theism).

First, let’s set forth the dogma, or essential Christian affirmation, regarding God’s providence. In Olson’s words it is simply this: “God is in charge, and purposefully, powerfully guides nature and history such that his will always ultimately triumphs in and through (and sometimes in spite of) [nature and history]” (178). This is the consensus belief throughout church history, yet, as we will see, the various Christian expositions of what it means for God to be “in charge, purposefully and powerfully guiding history” can starkly contrast. Let’s begin with three alternative views.

Fatalism is the perspective that “denies intelligent design (planning, purpose, involvement) within and behind history. To fatalists, nature and history...are ruled by blind forces that exclude not only contingency but also meaning and purpose” (186). It’s the notion that “what will be will be” and we may as well just accept it because we can’t change anything and there is no greater meaning or purpose behind anything that happens anyway. As we will see, this is quite close to meticulous providence, differing primarily in the fact that fatalists remove meaning and purpose from events by removing God from the equation.

Deism is a perspective that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment, and “relegate[s] providence to a general realm” by understanding God’s involvement in the world “as the divinely-established network of natural laws that govern both nature and history. For most deists [in contrast to fatalists], both nature and history are full of meaning and purpose, but God is neither immanent (personally present and directly involved) nor intervening” (187-188). Deists believe in a higher power (God) that designed the world and set it into motion, but deny that God can or does intervene in world events, thus removing the possibility of “miracles” from the equation because these divinely-established laws of nature govern events and cannot be transgressed. Olson compares this view of God to a clockmaker who created the machinery and mechanisms and then sits back as a detached observer.

Finally, *process panentheism* (otherwise known as “process theology”) suggests that “God and the creation are co-eternal, reciprocally related, interdependent realities” (188). Put another way, God is in and needs the world just as much as the world is in and needs God. Process panentheists believe that you cannot fully separate or distinguish God from the world, because one cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, God’s sovereignty is limited to divine persuasion of events because God cannot act unilaterally to bring anything to fruition apart from the created order. God is intimately immanent in creation, yet God loses all sense of transcendence other than being distinct from the world by being eternal. This differs from pantheism in which God is the world and the world is God, but is similar to pantheism in that the world is necessary for God’s existence and development, and vice versa.

In contrast to fatalism, deism, and process panentheism, Christian thinkers have set forth three primary perspectives on God’s providence)with great variation within each(: *meticulous providence*, *limited providence*, and *open theism*.

Let’s begin with the perspective known as *meticulous providence*, espoused by older theologians such as Augustine, John Calvin, Thomas Aquinas, and theologians of more recent fame such as J.I. Packer, Bruce Ware and John Piper. As Olson summarizes it, “the essence of the model is absolute, meticulous planning, willing and controlling by God such that there is in nature no ‘maverick molecule’)contingency, chaos(and in history no ‘divine risk.’ Whatever happens]and everything that happens[in nature and history is completely, exhaustively willed by God and not merely permitted by God”)190-191(. In other words, God directly or indirectly causes)and, thus, is responsible for(every single thing that happens in all of history)good and evil(. God may not act unilaterally to bring about every event, but God controls all events to the point that God “renders certain” every action of every creature on earth. Therefore, everything that happens—from the greatest good to the most horrendous evil—is “God’s will.” As Olson put it, “everything in]the world[is exactly as God wants it to be,” because “if God is in control, so the argument goes, then how can anything—down to the least puff of existence—escape his control?”)191, 192(. The biggest dilemma faced by this perspective is that it seems to make God the cause or author of sin, evil, suffering and pain. If everything that happens is God’s will, isn’t God the reason for all of the hell that we presently experience on earth? If so, how does this fit with the biblical portrait of God as one who hates sin and evil and is working to reconcile all creation to himself and to one another in a new divine order known as the Kingdom of God—where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, where death will reign no more, and where wars will cease as former enemies interact in harmonious peace?

The second perspective, known as *limited providence*, has been held by most of the early church theologians prior to St. Augustine, by Jacob Arminius and his followers, and more recently by the well known author C.S. Lewis. In Olson’s words, “this view believes that God *could* control nature and history meticulously but chooses not to... God restrains himself for the sake of a certain, limited degree of autonomy of both nature and human agency. Limited providence regards God as presently sovereign in both nature and history *de jure*)by right(but not yet sovereign *de facto*)in actuality(; only in the future when his kingdom fully arrives, will God be sovereign *de facto* as well as *de jure*” (193). The primary difference between this view and that of meticulous providence is the contingency available because of divine restraint. The view of God that emerges from meticulous providence is often that of a deity who is unrestrained, limitless power, and who cannot be limited even by the deity’s own choosing. Limited providence recognizes that given the present state of the world—with all the sin and evil and pain and suffering and war and devastation—God had to have set up the system in such a way that things may happen that God does not will or wish to happen. In other words, God limited himself in creating the world to the point that the course of nature and history could proceed contrary to his will and desire to a large extent, while allowing

God the power to intervene unilaterally at times as well as enabling God to ensure that God's ultimate ends of a redeemed heaven and earth)where harmony, mutuality, cooperation, fellowship, and love reign once again(will triumph. Limited providence, in contrast to meticulous providence, does not leave one to wonder how God can be the cause or author of sin and evil, because they can be explained by humanity having the freedom to choose good or evil, and choosing evil. God knew in giving creation a measured freedom of choice—that is, the freedom to choose between two equally available and competing options—that we might choose the path that has led to our present situation, but God also knew that without such a choice there was no possibility of relationship. C.S. Lewis put it well:

]God[has provided a rich, beautiful world for people to live in. He has given them intelligence to show them how it can be used, and conscience to show them how it ought to be used... And, having done all this, He then sees all His plans spoiled—just as our little plans are spoiled—by the crookedness of the people themselves... You may say it is very different for God because He could, if He pleased, alter people's characters, and we can't. But this difference doesn't go quite as deep as we may at first think. God has made it a rule for Himself that He won't alter people's characters by force. He can and will alter them—only if the people will let Him. In that way He has really and truly limited His power. Sometimes we wonder why He has done so, or even wish that He hadn't. But apparently He thinks it worth doing. He would rather have a world of free beings, with all its risks, than a world of people who did right like machines because they couldn't do anything else. The more we succeed in imagining what a world of perfect automatic beings would be like, the more, I think, we shall see His wisdom.¹

This brings us to our final perspective known as *open theism* or *openness theology*, espoused by more recent theologians such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Greg Boyd. As Olson describes it, “according to open theism, God does not know with absolute certainty all that the future holds, but he is able to predict events and respond in such a way that his ultimate and final will for the future is never thwarted... In open theism God is omnipotent and interactive and assumes that his will for history will be accomplished...]Those who hold this view[are attempting to develop a new view that returns to the biblical narrative of a God fully and personally interactive with humanity who remains always the one in charge even if not in control”)195(.

Perhaps these views will become clear by way of comparison and contrast. Proponents of both meticulous and limited providence believe that God is above time in the sense that all events—past, present, and future—are “now” for God. That is, God sees all events in all of history at once. It is often called “foreknowledge,” which gives the impression that God looks ahead and sees the future, but when you look more closely what is most often being said is that all moments exist as present to God. Therefore, our present)from God's perspective(is simply ahead of our past and behind our future in a panoramic picture of history, because God sees all moments at once. It's all very confusing when you really start trying to grasp the concept, and most often it is simply stated that God knows all events in all of history from before the time God chose to create the world. Open theists, contrary to what its opponents often say, do not deny that God knows all things. The difference lies in the content of God's knowledge, because open theists believe that in creating the world God enters into time—that is, God experiences duration as we do—and therefore experiences past, present, and future in a way analogous to the created world. Moreover, since God created the world free within limits, it means that the future is a mixture of possibility and actuality. The other perspectives see the future as already decided)at least in so far as God foreknows every event that will transpire, therefore making the future completely settled and unchangeable(. Open theists, assuming that freedom of choice means the possibility of choosing at least two competing options, suggest that the future cannot be wholly settled)as proponents of the other views claim(, but that it must contain both actuality and possibility. In other words, God knows all the events that will transpire as well as all the events that may transpire, and works all of them into his plan and purposes of redemption. Again, the difference is not that open theists deny God's omnipotence, but that they redefine the future as possibility)open(and actuality)settled(, whereas the other two models see the future as wholly settled insofar as God knows exactly what will transpire in every event.

In the end, whichever perspective one settles upon, we can all come together in agreement around the confession that God is at work in the world, acting with, through, and sometimes in spite of human agents to make all things new and healed and redeemed.

¹ *God in the Dock*, “The Trouble with ‘X’...,” 152-153.