

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 2 – 2009

**Divine Sovereignty and the
Reformed Doctrine of Creation**

Dr. S. Brian Stratton¹
Alma College²

Introduction

A. The Doctrine of Creation in the Early Church

B. The Reformers on Creation

1. Zwingli

2. Calvin

C. Modern and Contemporary Reformed Theologians on Creation

1. Schleiermacher

2. Barth

3. Moltmann

4. Torrance

Conclusion

Introduction

Reformed theology is meant to be a catholic theology in that it is a theology meant for the whole church and consistent with the great stream of historic Christian orthodoxy expressed in the earliest creeds and confessions; however, Reformed theology also has had its distinctive marks, themes, and emphases. One of the most important features of Reformed theology is the emphasis on the sovereignty of God, a theme which plays a role in forming the understanding of each of the *loci* of systematic theology. The consensus of theologians of the early church understood God to create the world *ex nihilo*, and Reformed theologians have remained consistent with this vital doctrine and expanded it in creative and enriching ways. This is not surprising, for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is faithful to scripture, is the understanding of creation which best demonstrates the

¹ His books

² School

sovereignty of God, and is the best fit for understanding God's action as free and gracious enabling us to see the consistency in God's acts of creation and salvation. This paper will survey and examine the contributions important representative Reformed theologians to the development of the early church's understanding of God as the Sovereign Creator *ex nihilo*.

A. The Doctrine of Creation in the Early Church

Creatio ex nihilo as a doctrine did not itself emerge *creatio ex nihilo*.³ Early Christian theologians drew upon two primary sources: (1) the Bible, and (2) Hellenic culture, especially Greek philosophy. Christian theologians held the Bible clearly taught the world had a beginning and as such was neither eternal nor ultimate.⁴ God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, is everlasting, without beginning or end, and ontologically distinct from the universe. God is neither part of the world nor is the world part of God; creation depends on God for its existence. The Church Fathers are all insistent that God is not a creature. The ontological distinction between God and the world is expressed at times by Christian theologians as the difference between a necessary being and contingent beings. Contingent beings, which begin and end, depend on necessary being, which is eternal, for their creation and dependent existence. God is thus the source for all that exists and without God existence is impossible. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* best preserves the crucial distinction between God and the world which is lost in a conception like Plato's where a demiurge merely orders preexistent matter. Eternal matter or preexistent chaos would clearly call into question God's ontological status as the Creator of all that is. Coherence with the idea of a

³ This section is indebted to the excellent account of the development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as a critical conversation between the Bible and Greek philosophy found in Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

⁴ Gerhard May has challenged that Genesis teaches *creation ex nihilo*. See his *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. B. Worrall (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994). May's point is that *creation ex nihilo* was formulated post-biblically and is not the demanded reading of Genesis. May is correct the doctrine became fully formed later and disagreements among the Fathers can be seen. However, the later formulation of the belief does not mean it is not a biblical idea; indeed many Old Testament scholars have defended it is the reading of Genesis most congruent with the Hebrew frame of mind. For a good discussion of the issues, scholarship, and an answer to May see Paul Copan, "Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* A Post Biblical Invention: An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal in *Trinity Journal* 17:1 (Spring 1996), 77-93. Even May admits *creation ex nihilo* "corresponds factually with the OT proclamation of creation" (p. xi).

genuine Creator as conceived by Christians precludes other eternals.⁵ *Creatio ex nihilo* is thus the best way to think of the sovereignty of God in bringing into being the created order.

The ontological difference between God and the world maintained in *creation ex nihilo* is even more completely expressed in the idea that God created freely. God was under no compulsion, either external or internal, to create the world. Nothing was external to God until God created so nothing external could compel God. God is complete in essence, inherently full, inexhaustibly rich, perfect, and lacking nothing, so there would be no internal instability or desire for completion to compel God to create as in Plotinus. God as Creator acts with freedom and the creation is an act of sheer generosity. The fact of our existence is the free gracious gift of God. The ontological relation between God and the world in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* ensures the total dependence of the world on God in a real way and underscores the idea that creation is a gift. This is not only consistent with but goes a long way toward securing that the sovereignty of God is preserved and not compromised in creation theology.

B. The Reformers on Creation

Though the Reformers clearly believed it permissible and even necessary to challenge existing formulations of Christian doctrine at their time the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was accepted by both Zwingli and Calvin. The doctrine is supplemented with the idea of *creation continua* or God's continued activity in creation in the forms of *conservatio*, *sustentatio*, and *preservation* or God's work to preserve and uphold what God has created. God continues to see that the world is maintained, order prevails, and life is sustained over and above each species' divinely given ability to propagate itself. The contingency of the world in both its origin and its dependence for existence are stressed with great force.

⁵ It is important to note that what is stressed here is an ontological dependence on the Creator which is consistent in the Fathers. They are divided as to whether the creation took place in time or not and some of the Fathers rely more heavily on the Platonic conception than others. It is clear, however, *creatio ex nihilo* does emerge as by far the preferred understanding and reading of Genesis.

1. Zwingli

Zwingli's affirmation of the ontological distinction between God and the world is advanced with both philosophical and scriptural arguments in his sermon "On the Providence of God":

Having learned [in the arguments previously advanced] ... that to have had a beginning is of the nature of the finite, and never to have had a beginning is of the nature of the infinite, that, accordingly there is only one single being that is infinite and, properly speaking, eternal, and having seen the universe is finite and created, and not eternal [therefore] the philosophers should open their eyes and see that the universe is finite and created and not eternal. Whether [the universe] be enduring, this is not the place to discuss, because we are seeking [here] for the beginnings, not the endings, of things, and because the divine scriptures satisfy the faithful upon this point, namely that the world shall pass away. Since then ...the universe had a beginning it is evident that our mother earth is not of eternal existence for lasting by nature, unless ...you [erroneously] understand nature to be the deity....Nor does the earth come from itself. It must have been come into being and have been produced out of nothing.⁶

Zwingli continues in his sermon to develop his doctrine of the sovereignty of God in creation to include an understanding of God's providence. Zwingli's work includes the theological idea of *creatio continua*, or the ongoing activity of God within creation as described above, but he does not develop this point as carefully as later theologians such as Calvin. Unfortunately, Zwingli's thinking on providence is not as nuanced as it should be, for in his denial of secondary causes he runs the risk of leaving God as the author of sin.⁷ However, Zwingli does insist the providence of God applies to all aspects of the created order, subhuman and well as human, and it is clear he does think the existence of the world, like human salvation, is a free gift which is the result of the gracious sovereignty of God.⁸ Despite an inability to develop a proper treatment of causality within the created order, Zwingli is consistent in holding both a theology of

⁶ Huldrych Zwingli, "On the Providence of God," in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldrych Zwingli*, Vol. 2, edited by Samuel Jackson and William Hinke (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1922), 140-141. Hereafter OPG.

⁷ See Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1919, 370 and Reinhold Seeburg and Charles Hay, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publications Society, 1905), 313. For a defense of Zwingli against this charge based on his other writings see W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Stephens sees the sermon as primarily a polemical work and therefore needing balance from the rest of Zwingli's corpus.

⁸ OPG, 136-169.

creation and a soteriology which is dependent on the sovereign activity of God.

2. Calvin

Calvin's theology endorses *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* as does Zwingli but develops both ideas in creative ways. Calvin delights in the works of God in the "most beautiful theater" of creation and insists it important to understand the history of creation:

From this history we shall learn that God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing...seek a fuller understanding of this passage from Moses and from those others who have faithfully and diligently recorded the narrative of Creation [Gen. 1 and 2].⁹

Moreover, to make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.¹⁰

For Calvin, creation and providence are joined and both are demonstrations of God's sovereign power. However, Calvin tries to be more careful than Zwingli in his treatment of secondary causes in the natural world.¹¹ The created order is not to be confused with its Creator, but there are spiritual lessons to be learned from creation.¹² Calvin links understanding how God created and provided for human beings with what we can expect from God, namely our salvation and the other benefits God bestows:

There remains the second part of the rule, more closely related to the faith. It is to recognize that God has destined all things for our good and salvation but at the same time to feel his power and grace in ourselves and in the great benefits he has conferred upon us, and so bestir ourselves to trust, invoke, praise, and love him. Indeed as I pointed out a little before, God himself has shown by the order of Creation that he created all things for man's sake...

To conclude once for all, whenever we call God the Creator of heaven and earth, let us at the same time bear in mind that the dispensation of all those things

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, Ed. John McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 179-180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹¹ For a good discussion of Calvin's views see Davis Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007). Whether or not Calvin is entirely successful in his effort is another matter.

¹² *Ibid.*, 56-58.

which he has made is in his own hand and power and that we are indeed his children, whom he has received into his faithful protection to nourish and educate. We are therefore to await the fullness of all good things from him alone and to trust completely that he will never leave us destitute of what we need for salvation, and to hang our hopes on none but him! We are therefore, also, to petition him for whatever we desire; and we are to recognize as a blessing from him, and thankfully to acknowledge, every benefit that falls to our share. So, invited by the great sweetness of his beneficence and goodness, let us study to love and serve him with all our heart.¹³

It is clear from the passage above that for Calvin a proper understanding of God's sovereignty over creation is not an isolated doctrine of little relevance to theology but is importantly related to soteriology and how one is to live the Christian life. From how God provides for us in creation we can begin to understand grace. Calvin's linkages enable us to see how the Reformed understanding of salvation through God's sovereign, free, and gracious act is systematically most coherent when coupled with the ontological distinction between God and the world preserved by *creatio ex nihilo*.

C. Modern and Contemporary Reformed Theologians on Creation

Commitment to *creatio ex nihilo* as the understanding of God's act of creation has remained dominant in Reformed theology and has been established as orthodoxy in confessions.¹⁴ However, Reformed thinking on creation has not remained stagnant. It would be impossible to treat all the theologians from Calvin to the present but fortunately this is not necessary, for many thinkers were content to repeat what had come before in Calvin, to make only minor developments, or to clarify creation doctrine in light of the problems of their day. While many of these efforts are interesting in themselves and worthy of attention, this section is limited to prominent theologians who arguably have been the most influential on setting new directions in thinking about the Reformed doctrine of creation.

¹³ Ibid, 181-182.

¹⁴ God is affirmed as the maker of all things in Calvin's Geneva Catechism (1541), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and explicitly stated as the maker of all out of nothing in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

1. Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher, often dubbed the “father of modern theology,” is a controversial figure within Reformed theology with both ardent admirers and severe detractors. His thought has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways, and some readers may find his inclusion in this paper odd for some interpreters think he rejected the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*.¹⁵ However, this is not the case, and while Schleiermacher’s work does have some difficulties, his contributions should not be overlooked.

In Schleiermacher’s discussion of creation *The Christian Faith*¹⁶ he does not reject *creation ex nihilo*. In order to understand Schleiermacher’s position it is helpful to clarify two species of the doctrine of creation included in the idea of *ex nihilo: creatio continua* and *creatio originans*. The former has been discussed above; the latter refers to God’s initial act of bringing the universe into existence. It is *originans* that Schleiermacher questions, and he prefers to abandon the latter and instead treat creation as the former. He is insistent on the world’s absolute dependence upon God, that God is the sole originator of all that is, that God’s action is consistent in creation and redemption, and that God’s creation of the world is absolutely free and not dependent on conditions which arise from the world.¹⁷ It is Schleiermacher’s view that *originans* compromises these three important truths about the Creator as well as his own stress on the feeling of “absolute dependence” as the key data of religious experience and it slights God’s ongoing activity in the world. It is also too entangled with a “Mosaic” description which he cannot take literally.¹⁸ As to the phrase “out of nothing” Schleiermacher holds it properly expresses the ontological uniqueness of God, but he feels it may be taken as too Aristotelian or too anthropomorphic. Nevertheless, he holds the expression is harmless if everything that is a part of the processes of nature is

¹⁵ See John Thiel, *God and World in Schleiermacher’s Dialektik and Glaubenslehre: Criticism and Methodology of Dogmatics* (Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1981) page 182 where Thiel claims Schleiermacher “annuls even the possibility of thinking about God without or apart from the world. The radical difficulty ... with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is that it is unthinkable.”

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and James Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 142-156.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 151.

strictly separated from the first beginning of things, and creation is thus raised above mere formation.¹⁹

In other words, *ex nihilo* is fine as long as it is *continua* (or “preservation” to use Schleiermacher’s actual term) and not *originans*.

Schleiermacher’s position is not without its problems. His claim *originans* precludes or compromises *continua* is not convincing since there is no reason one should entail the other; indeed one could easily affirm both and hold them as complementary. His insistence that the question of whether or not it is possible or necessary to conceive of God as existing apart from created things is a matter of indifference since it has no bearing on the feeling of absolute dependence²⁰ is suspect, for God’s being able to exist apart from creation would seem to be necessary for the ontological uniqueness of God which Schleiermacher wants to preserve. The adequacy of treating religious experience as the feeling of absolute dependence and using it for a norm to evaluate theology is also questionable, for four reasons: (1) one could challenge whether the feeling of absolute dependence is an accurate description of the whole of or primary feature of religious experience, especially Christian religious experience, (2) religious experience, though important, has not been the preferred norm of Reformed theology which is Scripture, (3) the idea of feeling absolute dependence is too vague since human beings are absolutely dependent for their existence on any number of finite things (food and oxygen, for example) which do not seem to need any longing for the infinite, and (4) it does not carefully distinguish between cognitive and noncognitive feelings.

Despite these limitations Schleiermacher’s work remains important for the Reformed doctrine of creation due to his tremendous influence on those coming after him. Many Reformed theologians, while disagreeing with much of his theology, have followed his emphasis on *continua* as the primary way of thinking about creation rather than how the world came to be.²¹ Schleiermacher’s insistence that the doctrine of creation should not be based on a literal reading of

¹⁹ Ibid, 153.

²⁰ Ibid, 155.

²¹ Niebuhr, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Brunner just to name a few.

Genesis is also commendable, especially in an age of modern science. And finally, his insistence on creation and redemption as free and gracious acts of God resonates well with the Reformed tradition.

2. Barth

After the somewhat unsatisfactory efforts of Schleiermacher it is a pleasure to turn to one of the most influential and important theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth. Barth's treatment is one of the most thorough and comprehensive efforts by any modern theologian, and he brilliantly addresses the leading themes of a Reformed doctrine of creation. Barth was an unequivocal supporter of *creatio ex nihilo* as the following quote demonstrates:

The statement: "God is the Creator of the World" has in the main a double content: it speaks of the *freedom* of God (one could also say: of His *holiness*) over against the world, and of His *relationship* (one could also say: of His *love*) to the world.

I. With the proposition: God is the Creator! We acknowledge that the relationship of God and world is fundamentally and in all its implications not one of equilibrium or of parity, but that in this relationship God has the absolute *primacy*. This is no mere matter of course, but rather a mystery, which all along the line determines the meaning and form of this relationship: that there is a reality at all differentiated from the reality of God, a being beside the divine Being. There is that. There are heaven and earth, and between the two, between angel and animal, man. But quite apart from the explicit proposition about Creation, for Scripturally based thinking there follows from the fact that their being is so closely related to the Being of God, this: that their being can only be one that is radically dependent on the Being of God, therefore one that is radically relative and without independence, dust, a drop in the bucket, clay in the hand of the potter – mere figures of speech which far from saying too much, say decidedly much too little. Heaven and earth are what they are *through* God and *only* through God. This brings us to the true thought of creation.

Heaven and earth are *not themselves* God, are not anything in the nature of a divine generation or emanation, are not, as the Gnostics or mystics would again and again have it, in some direct or indirect way, identical with the Son or the Word of God. In opposition to what even Christian theologians have on occasion taught, the world must not be understood as eternal. It has, and with it time and space have, a *beginning*. Their infinity is not only limited by the finite as such. Rather, their infinity is, *along with* everything finite, limited and encompassed by God's eternity and omnipotence, i.e., by God's lordship over time and space, in which it itself does not share. Therefore the creation of the world is not a movement of God in Himself, but a free *opus ad extra*, finding its necessity only in His love, but again not casting any doubt on His self-sufficiency: the world cannot exist without God, but if God were not love (as such inconceivable!), He could exist very well without the world. "An all this

out of pure paternal, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine,” as Luther says, speaking not yet of our salvation, but of our creation.

Again heaven and earth are not God’s work in the sense that God created them according to some *ideas* in themselves given and true, or out of some *material* already existing, or by means of some *instrument* apt in itself for that purpose, Creation in the Bible sense means: Creation solely on the basis of God’s own wisdom. It means, *creatio ex nihilo* (Rom. Iv.17). It means, creation by the word, which is indeed the eternal Son and therefore God Himself. If that is so, if there is no question of an identity of the created world with God, no question of its existing under any circumstances as a legitimate possibility (i.e., apart from sin) in formal or material independence over against God, then it necessarily follows that the *meaning* and the *end* of the world of His creation is not to be sought in itself, that the purpose and destiny of this world could only be to serve God as the world’s Creator and indeed to serve as the “theater of His glory” (Calvin). From God’s creating the world it follows that He created it for *this* purpose and this destiny and therefore *good*. Here we must of course acknowledge anew the primacy of God and must therefore in our estimate of the “goodness” of this world hold to the judgment of God. He knows what serves His glory. We must believe that the world as He created it is appointed to serve His glory, and we must not allow ourselves to be misled here by our feelings and reflections over good and evil, however justified. No doubt it is scriptural to say that the world was created for man’s sake. But yet only because man was in a pre-eminent sense created for the service of God, created to be the “image of God,” not only as theatre, but as active and passive bearer of that glory. It is the concrete content of faith in God the Creator that the world is “good” for man in and for this service of God. How should man have to decide and decree what is “good”? He has just got to *believe* that God has created the world and him himself really *good*.²²

Barth stresses creation is the result of a free act and decision of God, links the idea of creation with covenant, and sets creation in a thoroughly Trinitarian context, showing how creation cannot be separated from redemption. In addition, Barth emphasizes God’s act is ongoing, including providence and preservation under the sovereignty of God.²³

For the most part, Barth’s treatment of creation is a strong reaffirmation and restatement of the Reformed doctrine of creation with many fruitful insights for ongoing theological reflection. Two limitations of his work should be mentioned, however. First Barth’s

²² Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 30-33.

²³ See especially Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume 3/part 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 27-28, 42-43, and § 41

commitment to Trinitarian and Christological thinking about creation is admirable, but it could be argued he pays insufficient attention to the Holy Spirit, a weakness noted and addressed by Jürgen Moltmann who will be discussed in the following section. And second, Barth pays little attention to or shows any interest in the natural sciences and what they might say about the natural world and this omission simply cannot be tolerated in any theology of creation which takes modern thought seriously and is to be relevant to the contemporary world. The final figure to be discussed, Thomas F. Torrance, remedies this deficiency by modifying and developing Barth's theology in new and creative ways.

3. Moltmann

After Karl Barth Jürgen Moltmann is perhaps the best known and most influential and best known Reformed theologian of our time. Like Barth, Moltmann endorses *creatio ex nihilo*. In his exegesis of Genesis 1:1 Moltmann notes that creation out of nothing is “unquestionably an apt paraphrase” of what Scripture means by “creation.”²⁴ Creation is an act of divine freedom:

To say that God “created” the world indicates God's self-distinction from that world, and emphasizes that God desired it ... It is the specific outcome of his decision of will. Since they are the result of God's creative activity, heaven and earth are ...contingent.²⁵

In addition, the Hebrew word used for creation, *bārā'*, is used “exclusively as a term for the divine bringing forth.”²⁶ The lack of the use of the accusative or an object with the term indicates no material out of which something is made and reveals “the divine creativity has no conditions or premises.”²⁷ Creation is something absolutely new, neither potentially inherent nor present in anything else.

Moltmann adds to the work of Barth an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation. Creation is “by the Word” and also “in the

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 74.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 72-73.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

Spirit.”²⁸ Moltmann draws upon Calvin for this insight, for in Calvin, “it is the Spirit who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and earth.”²⁹ Moltmann contends that it is the indwelling of God’s Spirit present and at work in the creation which can empower theology to develop a full and rich conception of the eschatological fulfillment of creation as well as an ecological sense of what it means for us to be good stewards of the world.³⁰ He also links creation and redemption as this intriguing passage interpreting creation in light of the cross of Christ illustrates:

If God’s creativity goes back to a creative resolve, this already implies the Creator’s openness for redeeming suffering and his readiness for his own self-humiliation. Because of the self-isolation of his creatures through sin and the consequence of sin, death, God’s adherence to his resolve *to create* also means a resolve *to save*. *Creatio ex nihilo* in the beginning is the preparation and promise of the redeeming *annihilatio nihili*, from which the eternal being of creation proceeds. The creation of the world is itself a promise of resurrection, and the overcoming of death in the victory of eternal life (1 Cor. 15:26, 55-57). So the resurrection and the kingdom of glory are the fulfillment of the promise which creation itself represents.

This brings us to a final interpretation of the statement about the *creatio ex nihilo* from the standpoint of the cross of Christ. If God creates his creation out of nothing, if he affirms it and is faithful to it in spite of sin, and if he desires its salvation, then in the sending and surrender of his own Son he exposes himself to the annihilating Nothingness, so that he may overcome it in himself and through himself, and in that way give his creation existence, salvation, and liberty. In this sense, by yielding up the Son to death in God-forsakenness on the cross, and by surrendering him to hell, the eternal God enters the Nothingness out of which he created the world. God enters that “primordial space” which he himself conceded through his initial self-limitation. He pervades the space of God-forsakenness with his presence. It is the presence of his self-humiliating, suffering love for his creation, in which he experiences death itself. That is why God’s presence in the crucified Christ gives creation eternal life, and does not annihilate it. In the path of the Son into self-emptying and bondage, to the point of the death he died, and in the path of his exaltation and glorification by the whole creation, God becomes omnipresent. By entering into the God-forsakenness of sin and death (which is Nothingness), God overcomes it and makes it part of eternal life: “If I make my bed in hell, thou art there” (Ps. 139:8).

²⁸ Ibid, 9.

²⁹ Institutes, 138.

³⁰ *God in Creation*, 5-7, 274-296, 310-312.

In the light of the cross of Christ, *creatio ex nihilo* means forgiveness of sins through Christ's suffering, justification of the godless through Christ's death, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal life through the lordship of the Lamb.

In the light of creation, the cross of Christ means the true consolation of the universe. Because from the very beginning the Creator is prepared to suffer in this way for his creation, his creation endures to eternity. The cross is the mystery of creation and the promise of its future.³¹

For Moltmann, the suffering and redemptive love of God, especially as seen in the cross of Christ, becomes the lens through which we are to view God's creative act and his insight brings a remarkable consistency to systematic theology. Providence and preservation should be understood in this light as well, and the eschatological redemption of the world will take place due to God's sovereignty over creation.

Moltmann's theology of creation has much to commend it. He creatively handles the Reformed theological tradition rediscovering the importance of the Spirit, emphasizes the need to be good stewards of the world God has given us, and uses *ex nihilo* to affirm the sovereignty of God in both creation and redemption. However, there is a problematic aspect to his thought. Moltmann opts for a pantheistic, rather than a traditional Reformed theistic, conception of understanding of the relationship between God and the world.³² By making the world a part of God Moltmann compromises the ontological uniqueness of God which is so well preserved by the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* and in effect undermines the soundness of his exegesis of Genesis One.³³ In fairness to Moltmann, he is trying to avoid an overemphasis on the transcendence of God which tends toward deism, but it is not necessary to embrace pantheism to do this, and in fact Moltmann's understanding of God does not seem to require it. A solution more consistent with Scripture is to treat the interrelationship of God and the world within a Trinitarian conception of God which balances God's transcendence with the equally

³¹ Ibid, 90-91.

³² See the latter part of God in Creation, especially 318-320.

³³ For a good discussion see Allan J. Torrance, "Creatio ex Nihilo and the Spatio-Temporal Dimensions with Special Reference to Jürgen Moltmann and D. C. Williams," in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 83-103.

important scriptural concept of God's immanence.³⁴ Rejection of Moltmann's panentheism does not require a wholesale rejection of his theology; however, and the many valid insights of his position should be retained. The aloof, distant, monarchial God which rightly concerns Moltmann should be avoided, but it is by viewing God as *God-in-relation*, a leading theme of theologian Thomas Torrance, which marks the better way forward.

4. Torrance

Thomas Torrance's is not as well known nor is his influence as great as that of Moltmann's but hopefully this situation will be remedied over time. Torrance is an insightful interpreter of Barth but has made valuable contributions to theology in his own right, particularly in his theology's engagement of modern science. Torrance is in many ways an evangelist to the world of modern science, and his work exhibits many of the most prominent themes of Reformed theology.

Torrance affirms the sovereignty of God over creation and endorses *creatio ex nihilo*:

The creation of the universe out of nothing does not mean the creation of the universe out of something that is nothing, but out of nothing at all. It is not created out of anything – it came into being through the absolute fiat of God's Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into being.³⁵

This was not an emanation from God but “a unique positive act in which God freely brings into being another reality utterly different from his own transcendent reality.”³⁶ Furthermore, this reality is still contingent on God's free activity, “existing and continuously existing under the affirming and sustaining power of his sovereign will as the Lord God Almighty.”³⁷ There is no need to be concerned about the blurring of ontological distinctions in Torrance's work.

One of the leading themes of Torrance's work on creation is the concept of the contingency of the natural world. The world may not

³⁴ See Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 141.

³⁵ Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 207.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

have been, but is as it is due to the will of God. Torrance draws upon the insights of modern science, particularly Einstein's Theories of Relativity, to illustrate the contingency of the world from a scientific point of view and considers contingency theologically as well to form a unity of understanding. For Torrance creation cannot be understood apart from the eternal reality or Word in the eternal being of God choosing to make knowledge possible. It is the *homoousion*, or the divine Logos being of one substance with God and with humanity (and thus the created order) that bridges the gap between knowing and being. God's plan for redemption through the Incarnation means the Creation is understandable due to the embedding of rationality in the created order:

The full concept of contingency of the creation carries with it the idea that God is related to the universe, neither arbitrarily or necessarily, but through the freedom of his grace and will, when out of sheer love he created the universe and grounded it in his own transcendent Logos or Rationality.³⁸

For Torrance, *creatio ex nihilo* means the ordering of the universe reflects the divine rationality and it is God's gracious act which empowers us to understand the world due to its grounding in the divine order. Indeed, the grounding of contingent order in divine order enables Torrance to discover a fiduciary component is present in all knowing; theology is not unique in requiring faith to go about its task of being true to the reality of the object under investigation.³⁹ While each science has its own unique features, there are common features to all knowing. By bringing the doctrines of Incarnation and Creation together Torrance is able to unify and make many new connections among the loci of systematic theology for Creation, Redemption, and even Prolegomena or Methodology become a whole. Torrance achieves an impressive synthesis of science and systematic theology, but he is clear that theology is an ongoing process and must continue to strive for a deeper understanding of God and the natural world.⁴⁰

³⁸ Thomas Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 105

³⁹ See Thomas Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) and *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ One theologian continuing in the legacy of Barth and Torrance is Alister McGrath whose three volume *A Scientific Theology* published by Eerdmans is well worth reading.

Conclusion

As the treatment above shows, the Reformed theological tradition's understanding of the sovereignty of God over creation has a remarkable amount of unity about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as well as willingness to explore new insights and ideas as the need arises. Of course, many fine theologians deserving of treatment had to be omitted due to constraints of space, but the reader is encouraged to seek out the work of Frances Hutcheson, Jonathan Edwards, George Hendry, Dan Migliore, and Colin Gunton as well others mentioned in the text above and new work being produced today. It is hoped and expected that the rich vitality of Reformed theology will continue to be both faithful to its past as well as creative in developing new insights which enable us to confess the faith today.

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti