

CREATION AND INTELLIGENT DESIGN: A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

When Christians discuss creation and evolution, the age of the earth, and more recently “Intelligent Design”, it is not surprising that much attention has been paid to the early chapters of Genesis. The purpose of this article is to consider briefly the relationship of God to the material world as presented in the whole bible, and to see whether the New Testament and the teaching of Christ himself can help us to come to a more accurate understanding of God’s mind and will for us.

Divine involvement?

Today the universe is widely considered to run “automatically” according to the laws of physics. The atheist may consider that this excludes the possibility of a real God who is involved in creation and in our lives, while many others simply run their lives without thinking of God (“practical atheism”).

Those who would invoke God (or a god) do generally claim that he created the universe (even if there is a wide variety of suggested methods and timing). But there is much less agreement about divine involvement after creation. Some consider that there is little or no divine involvement subsequently – this is deism. But others, including many Christians, consider that while the universe does largely run “automatically” (at least since the Fall, in Genesis 3), God can and does intervene from time to time.

The Judaeo-Christian Worldview

This concept of an essentially autonomous universe has its origins in the Enlightenment, not in the bible, and is epitomised perhaps by the work of Isaac Newton. It is quite contrary to the traditional Judaeo-Christian worldview as revealed in scripture, in which God not only created the universe (Genesis 1; Psalm 19; John 1) but also is upholding it and sustaining it every

moment (Colossians 1v.17; Hebrews 1v.3). If he chose to make the world with definite predictable features then that is his prerogative; indeed he expects us to make use of our knowledge to make predictions (see e.g. Matthew 16vv.2-3).

This emphasis on God's sustaining and upholding of creation is somewhat neglected in bible teaching today, and so might sound strange, but a moment's thought shows that this is in practice the basis of how we run our lives as Christians. We don't see anything inconsistent in making use of the regularity and reliability of time, for example, or the seasons, or gravity, and also in praying to God and expecting him to act. There are over a billion Christians in the world, and so God hears billions of prayers every day and answers them as he sees fit, often with clear and definite results for good – yet usually without any hint of deviations from “natural” scientific laws.

One important consequence of God's sustaining power is that, to God, there is no such thing as “chance”, as he is intimately involved in everything that happens. To ascribe something to “chance”, as if it was in contrast to the work of God (as some people do for evolution), is in effect to say that one does not believe in a God who acts. On the other hand there is randomness, which serves us very well and is an important component of God's world. The molecules that make up air move around randomly, with all sorts of useful outcomes – each breath we take contains the same proportion of oxygen, and air pressure is, overall, highly predictable and reliable.

Christ and the physical world

The New Testament makes it clear that Christ was involved in the act of creation – all of it – and that it was by him and for him (John 1vv.3,10; Colossians 1v.16). Indeed, the purpose of the whole bible – Old Testament and New – is to give testimony of him (John 5vv.39,46). The whole purpose of creation is to give glory to God (Isaiah 43vv.6-7; Habakkuk 2v.14; John 17v.24) and that Christ will be its head (Ephesians 1v.10).

Christ demonstrated his mastery over the physical world in a huge variety of ways – turning water into wine, using one boy’s lunch to feed thousands, turning a storm into a flat calm by uttering a command, walking on water, knowing just where shoals of fish were that the fishermen could not see – and by healing all kinds of disease and even raising the dead (old and young). When John the Baptist was in prison and was worried that he might have been pointing to the wrong person, he sent his followers to Jesus. In reply our Lord pointed to his own healing miracles as well as his preaching (Matthew 11vv.2-6).

Even after seeing these miracles some Pharisees and religious teachers asked for a “sign” (Matthew 12v.38). This brought forth from Jesus one of his fiercest criticisms of the religious leaders: “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12vv.39-40, NIV). And he repeated this warning in Matthew 16vv.1-4, emphasising its importance and seriousness.

The one and only big sign

This sign, namely Christ’s own death and resurrection, was clearly intended to be the one sign that people would see, and should be challenged to face up to. When it happened, it not only confirmed God’s power at work in Christ, but most importantly it confirmed the message that he taught, of his own death in our place, receiving the punishment due to us and deserved by us, so that we can have peace with God. Indeed, the sign even demonstrated this, as we are reminded when we share the Lord’s supper.

Where does this lead us?

Firstly, we are not to desire, seek or expect any other “sign” or proof of God’s existence, power and intervention in the world. This is certainly not to say that

God will never do other miraculous things as and when he chooses, but they will be bonuses and blessings. Since the central point of “Intelligent Design” is to seek proof of an “Intelligence” in creation that is not explicable by natural science, it would seem to be included in Christ’s condemnation.

Secondly, any other “sign” could take our eyes off the real purpose (and challenge) of the true and amazing death and resurrection of Christ. Paul, writing to the Colossian Christians (Colossians 1v.18) said: “He is the beginning and the first-born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy”.

Thirdly, in the light of these revealed principles and priorities, it would be consistent if God chose to create the universe and everything in it (and these clearly are exciting and mind-grabbing topics) using humble natural physical processes. (Evolution by natural selection is far and away the most successful theory to account for the evidence that is presently available.)

So what?

The challenge facing all people is to respond to Christ, to his love as shown in his death for us. We do this by faith, putting our trust in him, and this will be demonstrated by changes in the way we live our lives. Considered in the light of this, it seems impudent (to put it mildly) to seek proof of God’s hand in calling us into being. As Christ himself said (quoting from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6v.16): “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4v.7; Luke 4v.12). The context is worth noting.

Further reading

Can we believe Genesis today? Ernest Lucas, IVP.

Rebuilding the matrix. Denis Alexander, Lion.

The message of creation (The Bible Speaks Today series), David Wilkinson, IVP.