

1 CHAPTER

The Great Web of Humanity

I am not a painter and do not understand how an artist works to bring color and form to life on a canvas—how it is conceived in one’s mind and then brought into existence. But I count a number of artists and art curators among my family and friends and have come to appreciate the power of art to create a response in us, to tell a story or evoke an emotion, and to say something about life and the world in which we live. When visiting an art gallery, I can ask questions about a painting, the artist, and the context in which it was created and seek to understand what it means.

Neither am I a scientist. I do not understand how God created the world in a physical sense, and I tend to get bored with the seemingly endless creation-versus-evolution arguments. But as someone who seeks to follow this Creator God, I am increasingly interested in how creationism impacts the intentionality of our existence as we live in this world and with our fellow creatures.

It is “by faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God’s command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen” (Hebrews 11:3). But sometimes our focus on defending a science of creation has come without, or even at the expense of, a deeper engagement with a

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theology of creationism. As one contemporary theologian has expressed it, “Even the liveliest arguments that come close to the doctrine of creation—the battle over ‘evolution’—do not reflect the presence or development of a mature conversation about the doctrine of creation. Rather, they illustrate my concern that we have not had a lengthy theological debate on the doctrine of creation to draw from when we find ourselves addressing the pressing issues of our time.”¹ It seems we have sometimes failed to do the work and accept the calling that comes with a deeper focus on creationism and what it means for who we are, what our world was meant to be, and how we care for the world and for other people who are equally created in the image of God. In turn, when we have done this work, we come to appreciate our belief in creation in fresh ways and as all the more important and meaningful.

“In the image of God . . .”

Our first instinct is to see the “image of God” as reflecting the significance of human beings (Genesis 1:27). Instead, we should begin by noticing the intimacy with which God created. God spoke; God breathed; God formed the works of His fingers as an artist (see Psalm 8:3):

The LORD merely spoke,
and the heavens were created.
He breathed the word,
and all the stars were born (Psalm 33:6).

God is deeply and personally engaged in both the act of creation and its continuing form and function. This affirms the goodness of the physical materiality of the world and the wholistic nature of human beings. We are not spiritual souls imprisoned in bodies in a merely physical world. We are God-created, physical, and spiritual beings in a God-breathed, good world.

As such, human beings have a special place in Creation, and more attention is given to their creation in Genesis 1 and 2

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than to the rest of the story. The first “definition” of what it means to be human includes being created in the image of God and placed in relationship with Creation (see Genesis 1:26).² From a theological perspective, this “image of God” is the primary grounds for what are recognized as human rights. Each of us—every person we meet, work with, connect with, or influence—has an inherent and unique value as the craftsmanship and image bearer of our common Creator. While we may have many superficial differences, “the rich and poor have this in common: the LORD made them both” (Proverbs 22:2). Creationism is important to who we are as human beings in relation to God and in relation to our fellow human beings, fellow creatures, and all creation.

The “oughtness” of creation

We also discover from the story of Creation that God had—and has—a clear intention for our world. Our world was created with purpose. Embedded in an understanding of the work of creation is an insight into this objective. When we talk about justice from the perspective of the Christian faith, this original intention is what we are appealing to. While we recognize the fallenness of our world, we seek to live in accord with God’s design for humanity’s well-being in a flourishing environment.

As we seek to work out what this means for our lives, our communities, and our world, we begin with this universal value of justice. As two writers put it, “Truth corresponds to what is; justice to what ought to be.”³ The work of justice is working back toward the “oughtness” of creation—God’s original intention for our world and its people. As we explore these themes in the Bible, we also discover parallels in God’s plan for the future of His people and our planet as well as in our present. The Bible’s repeated calls to “do justice” are recollections to God and His intentions for what it means to be created in His image.

Caring creationism

The obvious but too often unfulfilled expectation of creationism, and the ordained human role within creation, is to care

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for God's good creation: "The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it" (Genesis 2:15). The first man and the first woman were to be comanagers and subcreators of the newly formed world. By extension, this is the continuing vocation of all people and particularly the work of those who worship the Creator and call others to join in such worship (Revelation 14:6, 7).

The earth is still the Lord's, and we are still called to be stewards of the good things of the world on His behalf and for the benefit of all our fellow creatures (see Psalm 24:1). A useful analogy can be drawn from texts such as Proverbs 14:31—"Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him"—that those who would worship God ought to express this by caring for creation itself. And, in reverse, those who would destroy and exploit creation dishonor the Creator in doing so.

But as environmental exploitation and destruction have grown in our consciousness and in their impact on our planet and its most vulnerable people, we have seen only limited responses from the perspective of faith. "The scriptural view that the whole of creation belongs to God and that our role within the creation is limited, but also ennobled, to that of the steward or servant seems to make little practical difference in the way many people order their lives."⁴ Sadly for our faithful witness and for the good of creation, this human call has been distorted, disregarded, or even flouted. As creation is degraded, the visibility of God in the world around us is increasingly obscured, and the conditions and possibilities of human life are diminished for many members of our human family (Romans 1:20).

The ethic of creationism

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright argues that there is a strong "creational base" for the Bible's social ethics. Commenting on the explicit statement of Proverbs 14:31, among other verses, he points out that "the poor should be treated with the dignity that reflects the fact that they too are created

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by the same God. Indeed, what we do to or for them we do to or for God (in a remarkable anticipation of the teaching of Jesus)⁵—referring, of course, to Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46; see especially verse 40).

Both of these passages express the link in positive and negative senses. In oppressing and exploiting those who are weak and vulnerable, we actively deny our mutual Creator and thus disavow substantive belief in creationism. On the other hand, helping the poor honors—even worships—the Creator and, as such, is a marker of true belief in creationism.

These are only two among many Bible references that link creationism with concern for the oppressed and vulnerable (particularly Psalm 146:6, 7). As such, creationism is a foundational principle of faithful justice doing: “Exploiting one created in God’s image as a mere means to an end is the penultimate sin against God’s law, following only the sin of failing to acknowledge and worship God alone as God.” But these two preeminent sins are more interrelated than we often assume: “If we refuse to respect the life of one created in God’s image, we will not reverence the one in whose image she is created.”⁶ In short, working for justice, caring for the poor, and relieving the oppressed are key ways we faithfully respond to the doctrine of creation.

Even after sin entered the world, when God questioned Cain about his sin, his reply was ironic and rhetorical: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9, KJV). But God’s answer, implied by His initial question, is “Yes, absolutely, you are your brother’s keeper.”

Every person we meet is one of God’s children, created in His image, and part of the network of relationships that connects us all in God’s creation, fractured and broken as it is. Ellen White put it nicely: “We are all woven together in the web of humanity. The evil that befalls any part of the great human brotherhood brings peril to all.”⁷ Interestingly, this argument is not only a warning; it is also formulated as an opportunity for mutual blessing. Ellen White wrote on another occasion that “we are all woven together in the great web of

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humanity, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves.”⁸

Like it or not, we have a God-given responsibility to God and to each other (Matthew 22:37–39). Throughout the Bible, the claims of God as our Creator are recurring. Among the many implications of this responsibility are primary motivations for caring about others, for being concerned about the less fortunate, and for pursuing justice. God as our Creator is a claim that demands all parts of our lives, including our worship, our service, and our care for others. And as difficult, frustrating, and inconvenient as it may be, we are our “brother’s keeper.”

People matter

Considered in light of God’s creativity and love expressed in the life of each person, human suffering, exploitation, and oppression matter. Poor, oppressed, and hurting people are an affront to God’s intention for how our world ought to be; their suffering is a source of anguish to His loving heart. This is wrong. We can no longer shrug our shoulders and move on or change the channel. In a world of rampant violence, inhumanity, and injustice, ignorance and apathy are sins—not excuses.

Injustice matters to God and must matter to us. We must seek to advance and defend human rights, dignities, and freedoms wherever we have influence and opportunity. As a church, we have been consistent and bold defenders of religious liberty, and at times, this has included defending the freedom of belief for those who believe differently from us. But in “the great web of humanity,” all human rights, dignities, and freedoms matter because all people matter.

Of history and hope

While traveling for work a few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Park. Within view of downtown Atlanta, Georgia, the site encompasses the house in which King was born, the church in which he grew up and later pastored, and the graves of King and his

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wife. The site's Visitor Center also hosts a museum devoted to King's life and work in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As a longtime admirer of King's work and message, my visit on that morning was inspiring.

As I moved through the museum's exhibits, I was reminded of the sad history of slavery and segregation in the American South. I was also reminded of the history of the civil rights struggle: the marches, the bombings, the speeches and sermons, the role that churches played, and the significance of seeking to bring change through nonviolence. I was moved to hear the "I Have a Dream" speech yet again, soon after its fiftieth anniversary. And I again felt the chill of the news of King's assassination and the deaths of many others in the long-running movement for the recognition of their equal humanity and rights.

But the moment that affected me most deeply was unexpected—as such moments often are. After working my way through the museum as well as observing the reactions of some of the other visitors, I needed to use the restroom and followed the signs to the back of the Visitor Center. Pausing to wash my hands, I noticed an older black man who was also washing his hands at the other end of the row of washbasins. As I caught his eye in the wall-length mirror, I was hit with the realization that in his lifetime, in his memory, the two of us sharing this space would have been considered wrong, even illegal or criminal—and not only in Atlanta in the 1960s but in other parts of the world more recently.

I was temporarily stunned. I shook the water from my hands, tried unsuccessfully to catch his eye again, and left, humbled by the simplicity and profundity of what so many people have struggled to recognize. Justice is as simple as sharing a space as equals while washing our hands and as all-encompassingly important as respecting our foundational nature as God-created, God-loved human beings.

Faithful echoes

In words displayed at the museum in Atlanta, which closely

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echo Ellen White's formulation of this concept of justice and human connectedness, Martin Luther King preached: "In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."⁹ Of course, both Ellen White and Martin Luther King Jr. echoed the teachings of Jesus in their writing and their lives, which is why they were champions of justice, urging action on behalf of the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, and the discriminated. They both understood something of how God created us and our world to be—and sought to live out this truth and call others to recognize this "oughtness" in God's creation.

And as believers in this all-loving Creator, so will we. Whatever the scientific arguments, this is what our faith in creationism means.

1. Jonathan R. Wilson, *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 16.

2. Portions of this paragraph have been adapted from the author's previously published material.

3. Ken Wytsma and D. R. Jacobsen, *Pursuing Justice: The Call to Live and Die for Bigger Things* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 8.

4. Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14, 15.

5. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 106.

6. Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 485.

7. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1905), 345.

8. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1958), 534, 535.

9. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press gift ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 69.