

CREDO - I BELIEVE!

4. Creation and Providence:

Introduction (2 MINUTES)

In this session we will look at how the Bible describes what God has done in creating the world and consider how God is still at work in the world. The next session will give further reflection to the consequences of these beliefs: the question of suffering, evil and the effectiveness of prayer.

Creation

Starter: (5 MINS)

The old chestnut: If God created the world, who created God?

How would you respond?

Science offers many explanations for the creation of the universe and human life within it. Some scientists believe that religion was invented to plug the 'gaps' in our knowledge by ascribing mysterious phenomena to God. Now we more fully understand our natural world there is no need to believe in the 'God of the gaps'. Discuss!

Bible Passages (10 MINS)

The opening sentence of the Bible makes it clear that God is creator: 'In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth'. Genesis 1.1

Look up the following bible passages for further affirmations of God as creator:

Isaiah 40.28; 42.5; Psalm 136. 1-5

Creation occurs by God's word: Genesis 1.3; Psalm 33.9. God's Word is also identified in the New Testament with Jesus Christ who existed eternally with God – see John 1.1-3. The Spirit also plays a role in creation e.g. Genesis 1.2, Job 33.4

Christian Tradition (10 minutes)

Christian belief stood in opposition to other contemporary views of the origin of the world. The Greek Philosopher Plato believed the world was made by a demiurge who shaped the world out of chaos as he viewed 'eternal ideas' above him. This gave rise to a dualistic split between the spiritual and the physical and the eternal and the temporal. Gnosticism similarly taught that matter was evil and that 'God' is good. God would not create an evil material world and so the Demiurge did. Both ideas saw a split between the spiritual and the material. Pantheism was the opposite extreme: God and the world are identical. God is in all and all is God.

Christian belief rejected these views asserting that God had pronounced creation 'good' (Genesis 1.25, 31). There are no two rival 'gods' with equal powers. The material world is not evil.

Nor on the other hand is the world a part of God. God is different from creation in that God is God and creation depends on its creator. God is over and beyond creation (transcendent). Yet God is also at work in and with the creation, (immanent); for example His Spirit lives within Christians.

God created out of nothing (Latin: *ex nihilo*). God did not create out of something that already existed, even in chaotic form. In the beginning was only God. God created in freedom.

Are some of these views (that the material world is evil, that God is the sum of the parts of creation) still around in our society?

What are the consequences of the Christian belief in God as our creator to issues such as the existence of evil, meaning and purpose, care for the environment?

Reformed Emphases (10 mins)

The Reformed theologians and confessions upheld these views of God as Creator of all. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, in its first question asks what is humanity's 'chief end' or purpose. The answer is that our chief end is 'to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever'. **What does this response show?**

Providence

What is God's relationship with the world? Is God detached from this world or active within it?

Biblical bases:

Both Old and New Testaments show us a God who is thoroughly involved in creation. God sustains and upholds creation and sustains us within it: **for example read Psalm 121.**

God not only sustains and upholds but also guides both individuals and nations. For example, the story of Joseph (Genesis 50.20), Abraham (Genesis 22.7-14), Moses and the exodus from slavery (Micah 6.4).

In the New Testament Jesus assured his disciples that God's care is real and personal and nothing is of too small a concern to God (Matthew 10.29-31; 6.26-28). God supplies our needs: Philippians 4.19

According to the New Testament God's plan and purpose find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. God has brought salvation through him (Acts 2.23; 4.28). In Jesus, God has made known the mystery of his divine will and we have also obtained an inheritance. (Ephesians 1.9-11). God's purposes are for salvation (Romans 8.23-39), and lead to the ultimate divine reign (Rev 11.15)

Christian tradition

The doctrine of providence, which looks at how God works within human history, has typically been seen as having three parts:

God preserves the creation: without God the created order would collapse into nothingness. No part of creation is self-sufficient: Acts 17.28

God co-operates with all created beings: Humanity can freely choose which direction to go in. God is able to work with all lesser powers or persons to accomplish the divine purposes. E.g. Romans 8.28

God governs or guides all things towards the fulfilment of God's ultimate purposes: The eye of God is not only over history but that the hand of God is in history.

Another way to look at providence is to distinguish between two aspects.

God's general providence is God's overall rule in the universe as a whole. For example the laws of nature enable the universe to exist in an orderly way.

God's special providence is when God is personally involved within the created order and especially with human beings through answered prayer, deliverance, provision, guidance etc.

Have you sensed God's hand at work in your life?

Is there a contradiction between the freedom of humanity and the sovereign rule of God?

Oppositions to Providence

1 *God is remote;* Deism believed that God had set the laws of nature in place but is not personally involved in creation, like a watchmaker who winds up the watch and leaves it all alone.

2. *God is all/all is God:* Pantheism again – it believes that to speak of providence is simply to speak of the course of nature. The natural and the supernatural are identified as identical

3. *Determinism/fate:* Stoic philosophers believed that the whole universe was determined by blind fate. Nothing happens by 'chance' – one must accept one's fate and acquiesce to whatever occurs in life.

Are these viewpoints still around in today's culture? How are each of these viewpoints at odds with the Christian doctrine of providence?

CONCLUSION (1 MIN)

Have a time of prayer for the needs of the group and the needs of the world.

Study based on Donald K. McKim's book, 'Introducing the Reformed Faith' (pub. WJK 2001)