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OUR RELATION TO GOD

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The subject of our relation with God is a large theme. Indeed, it includes the whole of religion. But we may begin to consider the subject at the point where the Bible starts, in Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth".

Creation is a difficult concept, in fact when we begin to try to think it out, it baffles the mind. For example, did God bring the world into being as a total entity? or did He begin at an initial point and develop it stage by stage to the present? At first, the former concept seems the more difficult, that God should bring everything into being in its final form. Thus, in the story of Genesis, if the trees of Eden had been sawn through, would they have shown rings which indicate years of growth they never had? Because of the difficulty of this concept of an ideal history which is built into creation, some Christian Scientists have thought it

simpler to think that creation consisted of bringing things to their present shape by way of a process of development. But the problem of thought is not overcome in this way. Even if God had begun by creating simply a single electron, it would have had velocity and direction at the moment of its creation, so presenting an ideal history of movement from a place from which it never came, in the same way as the trees of Eden would have had rings to represent years which they had never experienced.

As we look back at the concept of creation from our viewpoint within the ongoing course of nature we find the concept baffling but the alternative of denying the fact of creation is equally baffling to the mind. We have experience of a real world, which is in existence, and yet in which everything is dependent on something that went before it. It is even more difficult for the mind to conceive of an endless series of dependencies

going back into eternity and never having a beginning, than to conceive of creation taking place. The fact is that our mind is not equipped to deal with these ultimates. However, God has addressed us in our situation, and in this way He has introduced something new to our experience. God speaks, so that we now know Him in a way that we could never have arrived at by our mental processes had He not taken the initiative and introduced this new element to our experience by addressing us. He has brought us into His presence by speaking to us, and it is at this point we must begin the consideration of our relationship with Him.

His opening word brings before us the fact that He is Creator and we creation. There is no greater distance between any two concepts which the mind can hold than between the concept of Creator and the concept of His creation. The disparity between these two concepts is wider than between any other



possible concepts, so that the first element of our relationship to God which creation brings before us is the majesty of God. The Bible testified to the majesty of God, "O Lord my God, thou art very great, thou art clothed with honour and majesty" (Ps. 104:1). The prophet Isaiah in his vision of God says "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up" (Is. 6:1) and in chapter 40 asks in God's name "To whom then will you liken me that I should be equal to Him saith the Holy One?"

Genesis 1 describes creation as a result of the Word of God. We read: "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light", and in Psalm 148 "He commanded and they were created" Cp. Psalm 33:6,9. This language of command is of course metaphorical, and is used to indicate that God is King in His relationship to His creation, completely sovereign over every aspect of it. Of Nebuchadnezzar it was said "Whom he would he slew and whom he would he put

down". The king's word was absolute and effective. God is sovereign, and this is expressed in the creation narrative by describing all creation to have come into being as the result of His word. The Bible makes quite clear that God's sovereignty should be the acknowledgment of Him as God. We should glorify Him (Rom. 1), we should hallow His name. To acknowledge His Godhead will involve our submission of our wills to His will. And yet human life is characterised by the fact that we follow the devices and desires of our own hearts. This is hopelessly out of accord with reality, because God is sovereign. He is our creator and we should be seeking His will and striving to conform to His purposes. An attitude of obedience and humility before Him should characterise our relationship to God. We should humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (I Pet. 5).

The creation account in Genesis 1 brings before us God

not only as sovereign Creator but also as a good Creator. We read "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light, and God saw the light that it was good", and after each act of creation there is the same comment that what God had created was good, and all is summed up by the phrase that God saw the whole of creation that it was very good. The goodness of God is reflected in the character of the created world and we can experience a little of this even in the present sinful state of creation. For example, the world is beautiful and there are very many real, natural pleasures with which we are surrounded. As the Garden of Eden narrative puts it, God put man into an environment where "Every tree is pleasant to the sight and good for food". God's goodness is over all his works (Ps. 145) and a psalm such as the creation psalm (104) describes in detail God's goodness in His providential oversight of nature. Our own creation is a blessing which we receive from God. St.



Paul reminded his hearers in Asia Minor "God has not left himself without witness in that He did good and gave us fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with joy and gladness" (Acts 14).

In the presence of the goodness of our Creator our response should be that of thanksgiving.

The goodness of God is not affected by the presence of sin. He is still good towards His creation. "He is kind towards the unthankful and evil" (Lk. 6:35). "He makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). In the presence of sin the goodness of God takes the form of longsuffering. God's longsuffering does not mean that the sinner will be let off his sin, for as God reminded Moses "In the day that I visit I will visit their sins upon them" (Ex. 32:34). But in His longsuffering, God endures a rebellious creation in order to provide a place for repentance. St. Paul reminds



us that we ought not to despise the longsuffering of God, for to do so is only to store up for oneself wrath in the day of wrath and display of the righteous judgment of God who will render to every man according to his works (Rom. 2:4-6). But rather we should use God's longsuffering for the purpose for which it is given, namely that we should repent in our attitude towards Him. We all need deep and fundamental repentance in our attitude towards God. This is true of the best of us. We all have too slender a concept of God's majesty, our humility is too shallow, our thankfulness too ephemeral. We may not be aware of it any more than was Job. He was a good man, one whom God Himself was able to describe as upright and perfect. He was a religious man and a man of faith who devoted himself to sharing his riches with those in less fortunate circumstances to himself (Job 31). He had a true concept of his relationship to God, but it was inadequate. When God spoke to him

and revealed to him the greatness of His majesty as Creator of the world and the supreme dispenser of all the events that take place within it, Job caught a glimpse of his real relationship to God and in chapter 40, verse 4, he said "Behold I am of small account. What shall I answer Thee?" and as God spoke to him further revealing His majesty and His sovereignty Job answered (chapter 42:2) "I know Thou canst do all things and no purpose of Thine can be restrained. I am one who hides counsel without knowledge. I have uttered that which I understood not; things too wonderful for me that I knew not... I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee: therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes".

The knowledge of our relationship to God not only involves us in constant acknowledgement of His majesty and in the glorifying of Him as we humble ourselves before Him; it not only involves us in a profound thankfulness to Him from

whom we have received everything, but it also brings us to the position with Job of permanent and profound repentance for the shallowness of our attitudes and the self-centredness of our purposes. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts; and with Job we should say "Now I see Thee, therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes".

It is at this point that the Bible begins in the unfolding of our relationship with God. It begins in chapter 1 of Genesis with God the Creator.



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