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Some Notes on the Biblical Doctrine of the World

R. C. CHALMERS

IN THE Bible the term "world" (*kosmos*) is used in three senses, with many variations. First, the world stands for all created reality, the whole universe "the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 2:1). Second, the term world is also used to denote all people on the earth (John 3:16). Third, world is a word which depicts human nature apart from God, or in opposition to God (1 John 5:19). These three uses of the term, therefore, may serve as an outline for our consideration of the biblical doctrine of the world under the following heads: Creation, Man (anthropology), and Salvation (soteriology and eschatology).

I. CREATION

Emil Brunner believes that a study of the biblical doctrine of creation should begin "with the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and some other passages of the New Testament, and not with the first chapter of Genesis" (*Dogmatics*, II,¹ p. 6.). The reason for this selection is that Christ is the key to the biblical doctrine of creation—a position with which Karl Barth is in full accord.² When we begin with the Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," we begin not with God incognito but with the Father who is known through his Son, Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, who became flesh for us men and our salvation. In other words, the first statement of the Creed, as well as the second, is Christological in its reference.

Before proceeding further we should note what is meant by the phrase "the Word of God." In the Old Testament we often come across "the Word of the Lord." This Word is not a proposition. It is that strange, mysterious power of God revealing the divine will to men. The Word of God is active and dynamic. "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). When God speaks, something happens (Ps. 33:9).

In the New Testament the Word of God has reference sometimes to

1. London: Lutterworth Press, 1952.

2. Karl Barth's massive four Parts (books) in Volume Three of his *Church Dogmatics*, dealing with the Doctrine of Creation, have to do respectively with "The Work of Creation," "The Creature" (Man), "The Creator and His Creature" (Providence), and "God's Commandment" (Ethics) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958-1961).

the Scriptures, sometimes to preaching, sometimes to the gospel itself, but its chief reference is to Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate. It is this Christological interpretation of the Word, powerful and personal, redemptive and communicative, that is predominant in the New Testament. It is by means of the Word that God conveys his revelation to men. And it is through the saving activity of the Word that people are brought from darkness to light. "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

The New Testament makes plain that God's work in creation was executed by the Divine Word, Jesus Christ. "By him were all things created that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16). The Epistle to the Hebrews states that "the worlds were framed by the word of God" (Heb. 11:2). These epistles confirm the affirmation in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel: "All things were made by him [the Word]; and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3).

When we discern that creation is the work of the Word of God we are at once ushered into the arena of revelation and consequently of faith. To grasp the doctrine of creation—or more exactly, the doctrine of God, the Creator—we require something other than the powers of natural reason. We need the insight which comes from faith in Jesus Christ. "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God" (Heb. 11:3) and through no other means. "Credo ut intelligam" is a dictum that is relevant here as in the apprehension of divine truth in other areas of thought.

Barth tells us that when we place the revelation of Jesus Christ at the heart of the doctrine of creation we are at once led into a covenant theology in which the teaching of divine election is of unique importance. "The covenant is as old as creation," writes Barth. "When the existence of creation begins, God's dealing with man also begins. . . . The covenant is not only quite as old as creation, it is older than it. Before the world was . . . God willed to hold communion with man" (*Dogmatics in Outline*,³ p. 63). Creation, according to Barth, is "the external basis" of the covenant, while the covenant is "the internal basis" of creation. Within the scope of Christian truth creation and covenant are, therefore, inseparable.

When we speak of covenant we are led to think also of the doctrine of grace. Creation is the work of grace, a work which has come from God, not as effect from cause, but as his free gift, an expression of his love. Creation is the offspring of the Father's love. God willed freely in love to create that which can respond to him and have communion with him as a free, personal spirit.

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3. London: S.C.M. Press, 1949.

good" (Gen. 1:31). This implies that there is no place for any sort of dualism in the biblical view of creation. God alone is the Lord of all creation, visible and invisible, of earth and heaven. Matter as well as spirit is subject to his reign. Hence there is no ground for gnostic concepts, which regard matter as evil and spirit as good, in the Christian doctrine of the world.

The stories of Genesis 1 and 2 are sometimes referred to as "meaningful myths." Barth regards these stories as "saga" because they have historical significance, even though they cannot be explained by ordinary historical criteria.

Does this mean that Barth would have us believe these pictures in Genesis 1 and 2 to be scientifically accurate accounts of creation's dawn? By no means. He regards "Christian faith" as "fundamentally free in regard to all world-pictures. . . . As Christians we must not let ourselves be taken captive either by an ancient picture . . . or one newly arisen and beginning to be dominant" (*Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 59).

Undoubtedly the biblical writers shared the cosmology of ancient times which pictured the earth as a flat disk, with a dome, or firmament, above it. There were waters supposed to be above the firmament which descended in rain when God "opened the windows of heaven." Within, or underneath, the firmament were the sun, moon, and stars. There were also "waters under the earth" which gushed forth in springs and fountains. Devout Jews, too, believed that Jerusalem was the centre of the earth.

Modern science has given us a very different picture of the world, one in which we view this round earth as a speck in the vastness of cosmic space. Science unfolds to us the story of creation as it is seen by means of scientific instruments and by the use of scientific categories. But the modern scientific picture of the world, or scientific cosmology, in no way invalidates the truth of the biblical affirmation that creation *in toto* is the work of God the Father Almighty. The immensity, complexity, order, and grandeur of the universe made known to us by modern science speak to the believer of the splendour and greatness of God who fashioned it in love.

Some people find in the opening verses of Genesis a picture of primeval chaos out of which God brought order. However, it has been the teaching of the Church that before creation, and apart from God, there was nothing. Creation is *ex nihilo*. Chaos and disorder are subsequent to the establishment of creation and order by God. Chaos and disorder are the "dark shadow" or the negative aspect of God's order. Evil remains a mystery, an "unnecessary necessity." But there is no biblical teaching which would lead us to think of the Devil as God's "opposite number," some power equal to that of God, so that victory for him is in doubt. In spite of the evil and chaos in his world, God remains the Lord, as the resurrection of Christ testifies, according to St. Paul (Eph. 1: 10, 20).

Calvin insisted that the world was the "theatre" or "mirror" of God's glory. It belonged to the *opera Dei*, along with Providence and Redemption. In fact it is in and through creation that God's providential rule is manifest and his redemption in Christ Jesus is carried through to its triumphant conclusion.

God is the living God. Therefore, creation is not something over and done with forever. God created, he is creating, and he will create. These are three aspects of the doctrine of creation. God is active in his world, bringing good out of evil, making crosses into thrones of his glory, and upholding all things "by the Word of his power." Our very existence, as Calvin wrote, is "a subsistence" in God. Apart from God's creative hand there would be no world, only a void.

The doctrine of God, the Creator, has several implications for the Christian's view of the world. For one thing, the Christian must not succumb either to optimism or to pessimism, using these terms in their secular sense. For instance, Barth has criticized Leibnitz for his optimistic statement that this is "the best of all possible worlds." Such optimism, or idealism, is naïve, because it makes no reference to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. It does not take account of the darker things in this world. On the other hand, to become a Schopenhauer in outlook, viewing the world with abject pessimism, is also unwarranted because God is the Lord not only of the light but also of the darkness (see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, pp. 119-132).

Again, God wills to be in relation to his world. Such a statement is implicit in his very will to bring into existence something other than himself. He created the world in love for love's sake in order that there would be an object of his love outside the Godhead. Therefore, since God willed eternally to create a world we can be certain that at no time will he decide to break off his covenant relationship with creation, let everything "drift," give the world "up to Satan," or abdicate the throne of the universe. His predestinating grace reminds us that "from all eternity" God has determined to be wedded to his world, for better, for worse, until the end when the Son shall deliver up the Kingdom to the Father and he shall reign for ever and ever.

Further, because God created the world, sustains it, and directs it, creation at every stage of its existence is dependent on him for its life and power. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). What we speak of as "natural law" has a supernatural source. Man and his world are not autonomous but theonomous. They are not self-existent but dependent on their Maker and Provider. It is this belief which lies at the basis of Christian humility and the grace of gratitude.

There is another truth stressed about creation in Bible, whether of the physical world or of man, and that is that it is creaturely; that creation is temporal while God is eternal (e.g., Isa. 40:8; 2 Cor. 4:15). There is an affinity between God and that which he has made but there is also

a tremendous distinction and it is to be seen in the creatureliness of creation and the eternity of God. Nothing that is material, or has physical existence, can endure. Only that which is of God, who is Spirit, abides forever. As creation had a beginning, so, too, it will have an end (*finis*). "Here we have no continuing city" (Heb. 13:14). The mortality of man and all creation, this "thralldom of decay," is evident to the biblical writers. "As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth; for the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Ps. 103:15, 16). This is all the more reason why man should trust in "the mercy of the Lord" which is "from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him."

From the biblical point of view, therefore, creation can only be understood in terms of Jesus Christ. He, the living Word of God, reveals to believers that creation is God's handiwork. He makes clear to his faithful children the truth about the world, that it is not "on its own"; that instead of being subject to "blind forces" the world is in the control of one who marks the sparrow's fall and clothes the lilies of the field in the garments of beauty.

As we look at creation have we, then, some ground for hope? Is there some basis for our faith that in the end everything in the universe will proclaim the Father's praise? I believe that the answer is to be found in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, who forgives, dies, rises, ascends, and will return. He is the one *elpis* of the New Testament. "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Cor. 1:20). Christ, the divine Word, is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending, the first and the last. In him we see the meaning of creation. Through him we find God's purpose for the world. And by him we discern the goal toward which creation is being directed—the Kingdom of God. So we can affirm with Browning's Pippa that "All's right with the world," not because of some propitious social circumstances (Pippa lived in poverty), but because the world is controlled and supported by God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

II. MAN (ANTHROPOLOGY)

"Because man . . . is the creature whose relation to God is revealed to us in the Word of God, he is the central object of the theological doctrine of creation," writes Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, III/2, p. 3). Thus Barth begins not with man in abstraction but with man in relation to God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the God-man. Here is another line of evidence to support Barth's Christomonism, as it has been described somewhat disparagingly. However, we believe that since God became man in Christ Jesus there is no other way for a Christian to view man than through the mind of Christ. In Christ we see "the humanity of God."

The Bible does not think of God alone but always in relation to his

creation. And this *analogia relationis* is especially seen when we consider the biblical view of man. The Psalmist does not ask, "What is man?" but rather, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:4). Here is the "I-Thou" relationship stated boldly and concretely. God treats man as a person with whom he can enter into communion in a personal manner. Since God is love and wills to love that which he has created, he can only do so supremely when his creatures are capable of responding to him in love.

The Bible tells us that man is made in God's image. This image must not be conceived as a natural endowment, a "something" which man possesses in his own right. Rather the *imago Dei* exists only in relationship to that which it images, namely, God, as seen in Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth stresses this existential relationship in the *imago Dei* by pointing out, to begin with, that man is created in relationship since God created him in his own image as male and female, not as a solitary creature. Moreover, Barth claims that this *analogia* relationship (quite distinct from *analogia entis*) refers back to the triune nature of God. "As the Father of the Son and the Son of the Father He is Himself I and Thou, confronting Himself and yet always one and the same in the Holy Ghost. God created man in His own image, in correspondence with His own being and essence" (*Church Dogmatics*, III/2, p. 324).

Further, since Jesus Christ is "the express image of God's person," (Heb. 1:3), who is also "real man," or the "representative person," so it is in and through him, and him alone, that man finds his true humanity and through him that the *imago Dei* relationship with the Father is maintained. Thus, again we see that the *imago Dei* tells us that man is God's creature, dependent on his Creator for life and all things. In other words, if man were not created in God's image he would not be man.

When God created man, and gave him dominion over many earthly things, he limited himself in love. God did so for the purpose of giving man a certain measure of freedom. This is a limited freedom, since man is a finite creature. But it is, nevertheless, a real freedom, that is, freedom to obey God's will and purpose for himself; freedom to attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, which is Christian maturity. Only in freedom can man make a true personal response in love to his Creator. This is the liberty of the sons of God who live by faith in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, since man the creature was created by God, man's history is meaningful to God. This we also learn through the God-man, Christ Jesus, who tabernacled among men, who entered into history, who "dated" history B.C. and A.D., and who unfolded God's purpose to man in history. He has made us realize that the glorious consummation of his Kingdom is not the annulment but the transformation of history when there shall be "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). History is God's testing ground for humanity; the sphere in which God wills to "try

the saints" and to manifest his love to them in ways of mercy and of judgment. In history Christians behold God's providential ordering of their lives in that community of faith and hope and love, the Church, the body of Christ.

But there is a dark side to man's existence. Human history is not only the scene where God's providence is evident; it is also the place where man has rebelled against God. Man used "the dread gift of free-will" to say "No" to his Maker. He turned his gift of freedom against the author of freedom and consequently became enslaved. So the human predicament is that man finds himself in the bondage of self-will. Thus man sins and comes short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Man has departed from God's way and has chosen his own path. Consequently man has become a lost soul.

The Christian has no reason to look askance at psychology, philosophy, and modern medicine, or to despise the contribution they have made to a better understanding of human nature. But the various sciences—social, physical, and medical—can only bring us information about man that is partial, circumscribed, and inadequate for a full understanding of human nature. It is only when we see man from the standpoint of faith, which is total in its reference, only when we view man as he appears before his Creator, that we can behold him in his glory and his shame.

We must look at human sin, therefore, not in the abstract but in terms of God's relationship to man in Christ Jesus. Sin is a religious word. It has no meaning apart from divine grace. Sin must always be considered within the context of grace. When we see sin this light, which means in the light of the cross of Christ, we see its heinousness, on the one hand, and the means whereby sin can be overcome, on the other hand. It is at Calvary that we are able to discern the truth of St. Paul's words: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). Man in sin is in a state of disgrace. But the glory of the gospel is that the Holy Spirit seeks for sinful man to restore him to a state of grace. God does not give man up to the consequences of his own sin. His love never lets man go. This is one aspect of the truth of his covenant with man. Thus even as a sinner man remains God's creature, the object of his pursuing love.

Sin corrupts the whole personality. Because sin is so pervasive, creating a condition of sinfulness within the soul, it perverts all that is high and holy in human life. It turns man away from God. Consequently God's work of grace must minister to the whole man. His love transforms the faithful in body and mind and soul.

Contrary to secular opinion, the Christian concept of sin does not lead to a pessimistic view of human life. Rather it points to the high dignity of man, made in God's image, a height from which man has fallen, or is falling, but he never falls out of God's love and care. Sin negatively reveals man as God's creature who is under divine judgment, knowing only the

reality of his wrath, but a judgment which is for the purpose of bringing man to repentance and faith and true life in God. "Man's unhappiness comes of his greatness." Because man can sin and thus depart from God he is seen to be in a unique relationship to God. Indeed, man is the crown of creation since he is the special object of the Father's redemptive love. In other words, the Christian view of man is undergirded by an ultimate and divine optimism because we cannot speak of man's sin without also referring to God's grace which overcomes sin and grants to man the gift of eternal life.

III. SALVATION (SOTERIOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY)

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him," according to the First Epistle of John. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2:15, 16). All Johannine literature makes plain that there is opposition between God and the world, so that the world is under God's judgment (John 9:39; 15:18, etc.). There is a basic alienation between the world and its Maker, a fundamental rift in the very heart of things. The devil is even referred to as "the prince of this world" (John 16:11). Does not this sort of language savour of gnosticism? Does it not say to us that between God and his creation there is "a great gulf fixed"?

On the contrary, Johannine literature has as its background the struggle of the early Church with gnosticism. This literature begins with the basic premise that "the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). There is no natural opposition between God and the world of matter because God created matter and incarnated himself in matter. The world, therefore, is not incurably evil, though at present an interloper appears to have turned it toward ungodly ends.

We know that the world is not incurably evil because God sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world (John 4:42). The alienation between God and the world has been overcome by Christ's accomplished reconciliation. The gulf has been bridged by the Son of God. The dethroned powers in this world may work their will for a time but their future destruction is certain because they have been dethroned by him who has taken captivity captive, has triumphed over all evil, and lives as Lord of the world. D-day is the promise of V-day. Thus grace has triumphed—and will triumph completely—according to the biblical view of the world. To use the pictures of the Book of Revelation, the legions of Satan make war against the Lord, but Satan and his hosts are defeated by him who is "King of kings, and Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:16).

A question sometimes asked is: Will salvation be cosmic in its reference? Is it salvation only for man, or does it embrace the whole universe?

There are passages in Scripture which strongly suggest that by the "fall" the whole of creation was made "subject to vanity" and "the bondage of corruption." The very fact of death seems to be connected, in the mind of St. Paul, with sin. Death is the wages paid by sin (Rom. 6:23). It is rather speculative and unbiblical to speak about a "primordial fall." But the universal range of redemption in the biblical view of the world implies that the corruption of sin extends beyond the bounds of human life. Is not cosmic redemption, affecting even the animal world, the message of the four beasts in heaven in Revelation 4? Dr. Donald W. Richardson states that "four is the cosmic number; and the four living creatures of verses 6-8 are the symbol of all creation redeemed, transformed, perfected, and brought under obedience to God's will and manifesting his glory" (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*,⁴ p. 70). The six wings possessed by each beast symbolize "the perfection of their equipment for the service of God." In other words, the seer of Patmos looks into the far future by faith and beholds all creation praising God.

Christ, the Word, who brought creation into existence is also the one who recreates the world by his power (2 Cor. 5:17). And while the renewal of man is central in this reality of the new creation which Christ brings, nevertheless the inference is that he reconciles "all things to himself" (Col. 1:20), "whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven." He is the cosmic Christ whose redemptive sway is not confined to human life but embraces the whole of creation.

Moreover, is not such cosmic redemption implicit in the message of the prophets? Proto-Isaiah writes of that Messianic age when "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isa. 11:6), inferring that the enmity in the animal world will be healed by God's anointed. At that coming day "the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose" (Isa. 35:1). The same message is to be found in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 55:12, 13), Hosea (2:18-23), Joel (3:18), and Amos (9:13). And it is this message that is fulfilled by the glorious consummation wrought by Christ's victory, so that "the former things" of strife, sorrow, and pain "are passed away" (Rev. 21:4). Christ makes "all things new." He is the Mediator of the new covenant and the new creation. He vindicates the purpose of God by making it possible for God to dwell with his people in a world cleansed from sin, when "God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

Thus soteriology leads into eschatology. The doctrine of salvation becomes inseparable from the doctrine of last things. The Christian life is linked indissolubly with the Christian goal. Further, Christ's salvation is all-inclusive because it redeems the entire creation. The whole world will find new life through him.

One thing is certain: Christians now have a foretaste of the consummation of the Kingdom. They are now delivered from this present evil age and

4. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1939.

transported to "the age to come." Christ has destroyed the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8), so that "now are we the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). This beatific vision is the desire of the saints.

Christ is not of this world (John 17:16). His origin is from above. Even so, according to Johannine teaching (John 17:14), the Church lives in this world but its source and sustenance come from above, from beyond this temporal scene. The Church consists of the pilgrim people of God. It is a holy nation, dwelling for a season in the midst of this world with its sin and suffering, but looking forward in hope to that glorious consummation for which we pray, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Thus it would appear that Barth is correct in the order he follows in setting forth the various aspects of the doctrine of creation. God's Commandment is derived from the doctrine of God, the Creator, and Providence. Christian ethics is seen to be one part of Christian theology. The obedience of the Christian man is not isolated from his faith in God who does all things well. Christian ethics is called to make clear the action of a believer who lives in eschatological expectation and who waits in faith for the coming of that day when the "kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

While Christians live in this world they are cautioned not to be of this world. The Church's members are "called out" (*ekklēsia*) of this world to serve God in the world. "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world," said Christ, "but that thou shouldst keep them from evil" (John 17:15). The Church, therefore, is a colony of heaven in the midst of time; a building of God in an evil age; a *civitas Dei* witnessing in faith and hope and love in the *civitas terrena*.

Further, the witness of the Church in the world must be similar to the witness of God in the world. Jesus Christ is "the faithful and true witness" for him in this present time. Jesus Christ looks to his Church to make a testimony for him in the spirit of service and sacrifice. Like her Lord, the Church, too, must give herself as "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The Church, therefore, is the servant of the Word of God and is called to obey the Word, to be a channel of the Word, and to testify to the truth of the Word in the world.

Thus the sum of the whole matter concerning the doctrine of creation is that within creation God calls forth a people for his own glory, the Church, which manifests both the creating and recreating power of the Word of God. Moreover, even as the Word of God was the one by whom God "made the worlds" (Heb. 1:2), so by this living Word he sustains the world, and by his victorious Word he will consummate his own purpose of love in that Kingdom that shall know no end. Therefore, the Christian doctrine of the world is inseparable from the doctrine of the Word of God.