



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 3 [MB Confession of Faith]

Creation and Humanity

PASTORAL APPLICATION

A basic need in life is to know where we are from, why we are here, and where we are going. These essential issues are addressed in Article 3 of the confession. Questions regarding the origin of life, our relationship to the environment, and God's unfolding plan for His creation are all part of this discussion. Article 3 gives us a biblical framework for understanding our part in the universe.

Scripture and Science

To state that God is the Creator of the universe tells us where we come from. While many study the planets, stars, and furthest reaches of space to try to discover the origins of the physical universe and life, Scripture tells us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Our universe did not evolve by chance. We are not part of a random and chaotic accident. Rather, we are part of God's design. God is the one to whom we owe our existence.

Robert Jastrow, an internationally known astronomer and authority on life in the cosmos, makes the following comment:

It is not a matter of another year, another decade of work, another measurement, or another theory; at this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For scientists who have lived by their faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. They have scaled the mountains of ignorance; they are about to conquer the highest peak; as they pull themselves over the final rock, they are greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries (115–116).

This raises the question of how theology relates to science. The church has been wrestling with this issue since the time of Galileo. Today we are aware of the debate between creation and evolution. One view, known as "biblical creationism," seeks to counter scientific theories of evolution. It mines the Genesis account for scientific data more than recognizing its theological intent. Scripture does teach that God created the heavens and the earth and that human beings are unique among God's creation. Exactly how God accomplished this is not altogether clear. Some in our churches understand Scripture to teach that God created the universe in six 24-hour days no more than 10,000 years ago. Others leave room for God to have used longer periods of time, including an evolving process of creation that incorporates some of the findings of modern science. We should allow for differences in our views of creation and exercise mutual respect for one another. To pit an interpretation of Genesis against the findings of science or to label people as either biblical creationists or evolutionary atheists does not serve us well.

A more helpful approach is to allow biblical teaching and scientific inquiry to inform each other. John C. Polkinghorne is a Cambridge physicist who is both a renowned scientist and an Anglican clergyman. In his book *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, Polkinghorne articulates a faith which is strengthened rather than threatened by scientific inquiry. He is able to affirm God as Creator and embrace a scientific view of the universe which is fluid, flexible, and open to divine providence. Polkinghorne leaves the process God used in creating the universe open to scientific investigation. In his mind creation remains a mystery worth exploring. We must be careful in our preaching and teaching about creation to affirm only what the Bible says. Scripture and science need not be antagonistic.



God and Creation

The trend in our postmodern culture is to move from a mechanistic to a more “spiritual” view of the universe. Movies such as *Star Wars* and *The Lion King* obscure the distinction between God and nature. God is reduced to an “impersonal life force” or nature is deified as a “circle of life.” This relates to the issue of worship. God is replaced by nature as the ultimate reality. The result is that creation is worshipped instead of the Creator—an act Paul attributes to human disobedience (Rom. 1:25).

Excessive concern for the environment can also lead to nature worship. In addressing past neglect of the environment, the temptation in our culture is to “spiritualize” nature, granting it divine status. Such feelings can take on an aura of worship. Divine reality is said to be found in nature itself. Any distinction between God and creation is lost.

Such a position is problematic for at least two reasons. First, its attempt to rescue nature without reference to God rings hollow. No one cares more for creation than God its Creator. Any concern for the environment must remain grounded in God’s love and care for His universe. To worship creation at the expense of the Creator undermines the very foundation of environmental concern. Second, creation itself recognizes its dependent relationship to God and gives Him glory as Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Ps. 19:1-6; 24:1-2; 104). As God’s creatures, we are to follow creation’s lead in worshiping God instead of nature.

There are also implications for congregational worship. We should encourage outdoor worship settings in God’s creation. Church camps, summer worship services in the park, and outdoor baptisms can all enhance our praise to God. However, when some propose that experiencing God in the beauty of nature is an acceptable alternative to gathering regularly with God’s people for worship, we should raise the question of where our worship is focused. While we appreciate God’s creation and marvel at God’s handiwork, our worship is to be directed not to creation but to God the Creator.

Humanity and Creation

How do we as human beings relate to creation? There are two extremes to avoid. One is to consider human beings as merely one life form among others with no more significance than the grass, the trees, or the animals. Compare, for instance, the degree of public interest in saving threatened animal species to the plight of starving children. There is a bumper sticker that says, “Save a whale; Harpoon a human.” For many, animal rights have become more important than human rights.

Scripture teaches that human beings are unique among God’s creation. Only people are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27). This sets us apart from all of creation. Psalm 8 speaks about our significance in relation to the vast expanse of the universe and the animals, birds, and fish which inhabit our planet. We are made just a little less than God (Ps. 8:5). God has crowned us with glory and honor beyond that of other life. Although all life is valued, no life is more valuable than human life. People who are more committed to the health of their pets than the well-being of their fellow human beings distort the value of human life. What we believe about human life has implications for ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and genetic research. (See article 14, “Sanctity of Life.”)

There is a second extreme to avoid. It advocates that our superior position over the rest of creation gives us the right to use or abuse it at will. Exercising dominion over the earth becomes a license to dominate, deface, and destroy. A commercial for an oil company stated, “Nature is tough, but we are tougher.” This attitude treats the earth as a commodity which can be bought and sold, exploited and abused, consumed and discarded.

Concern for the environment in recent decades has corrected much of this attitude, but many churches tend to lag behind in this area. A survey taken to determine attitudes toward the animal world, for instance, revealed that the more frequently a person attended religious services, the greater the person’s tendency was to hold domineering or oppressive attitudes toward nature (Granberg-Michaelson, 2–3). What could account for this?

One reason may be a reluctance to be identified with extreme environmentalist agendas. Another reason may be an inadequate view of the future. If God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:11-13; Rev. 21:1-5), why preserve the present environment? A gospel song puts it this way,



“This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through.”

Such a cavalier attitude toward creation fails to recognize two things. One is God’s ultimate intention in reconciling all things in Christ, which includes God’s creation and God’s creatures (Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:19-20). A second is God’s continual mandate to care for His creation in light of His restorative goal for the universe (Gen. 1:28; 2:15; Ps. 8:6).

Scripture teaches that environmental responsibility is a Christian mandate. Of all people, Christians should be the most responsible when it comes to the environment. Why? Partly because of our call to care for others by addressing, for example, the threat of pollution, the need for sustainable development, the concern for global survival, and so on. But the ultimate reason for environmental responsibility is that Christians understand what it means to have a personal relationship with the Creator—the one who made us, who made the world, and who cares for all His creatures and His creation. If we love and respect our Creator, we will care for His creation. This includes a conscious effort to reduce consumption, respect natural resources, and recycle materials in our homes, workplaces, and churches.

Humanity and Creativity

God created us in His image. He placed within us a desire to build, to plant, to imagine, and to create. Our expressions of morality, sexuality, and creativity all reflect God’s image. Although marred by the fall, human life is still full of God-given possibility and potential.

The church has an opportunity and an obligation to encourage a full expression of God’s creative gifts among its people. Our congregations are noted for excellent preachers, teachers, and musicians. What about artists, poets, carpenters, and chefs? There are many more creative gifts we can celebrate in the church. Arts and craft festivals, drama and dance presentations, fashion shows, food fairs, and flower displays are all ways to reflect God’s creativity.

God also created us as male and female to display His likeness. This includes the active participation of both men’s and women’s gifts in various areas of service. God grants gifts irrespective of gender. God’s image is distorted when men and women are discouraged from developing and using their creative gifts.

God has given us the freedom to express our human creativity in ways which bring Him glory. We reflect God’s image when we work together in creative harmony as responsible creatures in God’s world.

Bibliography

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