

The disconcerting arrival of COVID-19 has provoked a number of theological questions. Perhaps the most interesting and important question is this: Is God responsible for COVID-19? Inherent to this question is the notion of God's judgment: that is, is COVID-19 the result of God's punishment on rampant human sinfulness?

From what I can see there have been two basic answers put forward in response to this question, neither of which is especially good or helpful. One answer posits the following response: "No! God is not responsible for COVID-19 and to suggest as much is ridiculous." The other answer says something like this: "Yes! Sin is out of control; it is no surprise then that God is punishing us with this disease."

The simplistic, matter-of-fact nature of these answers is indicative of a deeper problem: namely, **the absence of any knowledge of the doctrine of creation.**

As I've written elsewhere, theology matters. And the importance of (good) theology becomes particularly acute in times of crisis, when people are forced to make sense of their lives and the world around them in ways that align with their convictions. Thinking Christianly about the world is imperative to being Christian (2 Cor. 10:5; cf. Phil. 2:5). We sign-up for it, so to speak, at our baptism. But one's thinking is only as good as the people one chooses to think *with* -- whether those people are located in one's community, on the pages of one's books, or in the voices of one's media. Thinking has a *with*-ness character to it that precludes isolation.

For Christians, therefore, a failure to think rightly about COVID-19 in the context of the doctrine of creation is presumably a failure of the churches in their theological orbit. For better or worse the church is the doctrinal anchor of most Christians. As such, the way Christians think theologically is significantly shaped by the church(es) they are aligned with. Poor theological reasoning like we see above does not happen in a vacuum; it is, rather, a result of overly simplistic or sordid theology coming from churches, which in turn gets spread around like an infectious disease. Bad theology is to the soul what COVID-19 is to the body: both are widely contagious and, left untreated, devastating to one's health.

As the world is put back on its heels and searches for ways to think about this crisis, Christians owe it to their neighbors -- and themselves -- to offer better answers to the pressing questions surrounding God's action in and relationship to creation.

To that end, I have cobbled together some unpolished thoughts on the matter that I hope will be helpful to some of you who are working to sort this out. The question of God's relationship to creation is enormous, and enormously complex, to be sure. It has occupied every serious Christian theologian since the time of St. Paul. Plato and Aristotle wrote about it, too. With that in mind, the scope of what you'll find below is not exhaustive by any standard. What I'm offering instead is a sketch of one aspect of

the doctrine of creation -- namely, causality -- to guide your thinking through the morass of false answers currently pervading our culture.

## II

That God created all that is *ex nihilo* – out of nothing – is a solid pillar of Christian orthodoxy beyond dispute. Since creation came from nothing, and thus has no ability to exist on its own, it could easily return to nothing. Nothingness always lurks in the background of existence. We must remember that creation is not necessary; it does not have to exist. “The fact that it does exist,” says John Zizioulas, “is the result of God’s good and free will.”

The opening chapters of Genesis have been rehearsed enough we often fail to read them with the seriousness they deserve. After all, it is not unimportant that God, Creator and Sustainer of 100 billion galaxies, casts His gaze on Adam and charges him in the garden of Eden “to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Nor is it trivial that God tasks Adam to name “every living creature” (2:19). Whether these events are “literal” or “historical” or not is beside the point. The significance of Genesis 1 and 2 lies in the fact that God has endowed humans with the requisite freedom to steward God’s good creation toward its appointed end, which is back to Godself.

Creation is a gratuitous gift of the Triune God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Receiving it as such, the only proper response for us is to give it back to God in a humble posture of joy and thanksgiving. Eucharistic, then, is the right paradigm for understanding creation.

On this score, humans are analogous to priests who offer the sacrament of creation to God in worship. Here a double movement comes to the fore. Ascending, the bread and the wine gather up the bountiful goodness of creation to the joyful delight of the Trinity; descending, Christ is readily present to creation by the Spirit in the loaf and the cup, filling the theater of the cosmos with the glory of God. In this lively exchange the ordinary stuff of the earth – grain and grapes, water and soil – become conduits of divine encounter with the Incarnate Christ, who is the sustenance of all that is.

What’s more, the Eucharist is not merely the paradigm of creation’s past or present; it is also the portent of creation’s future. Thus the act of Eucharist is eschatological. It brings the reality of God’s future to the present. This is one reason why the bodily resurrection of Christ is essential for thinking about creation. Christ’s resurrected flesh – whatever “substance” that might be – is fitted for a deeper dimension of reality than we currently experience, that is, the new heavens and the new earth so eloquently described at the close of John’s apocalypse (Rev. 21-22). Christ’s flesh is *really* real, whereas our created flesh and the stuff from which it is made, is less real. Grasping for a familiar image, we might say the contrast between creation as it is now and what it will be when it reaches its end in Christ, is comparable to a faded picture taken with an old Polaroid camera verses the incandescent vibrancy of a picture taken with a new digital lens. Both devices

take pictures, of course; but only the digital camera has the ability to make images come to life.

So: God creates all that exists by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and sustains it by His Word. But within creation God makes room for creatures to move around. This is an important point that should not be missed. As God's priestly creatures we are given freedom to either offer creation back to God as Eucharist or to turn it against God for our own distorted ends. That first act of freedom is a sign of shalom; the second act, however, is a sign of violence and distrust. It should come as no surprise that when we abdicate our priestly role, catastrophe ensues. Hence why St. Paul writes that "the whole creation has been groaning with labor pains" (Rom. 8:22). Creation was not made to be bent back on itself but rather fulfilled in the flesh of Christ.

### III

By all credible accounts COVID-19 got its ill-fated start in a "wet market" in Wuhan, China. (For an interesting if not disturbing history of China's precarious "wet market" industry, go here.) At this point, the general consensus among epidemiologists is that COVID-19 owes its existence to the disease-ridden blood of a bat. You see, it is the common practice of "wet markets" to commingle wild animals in tight, extraordinarily unclean spaces for the purpose of selling their meat and entrails to consumers. As one columnist for National Review describes it:

Wet markets are found the world over, typically open-air sites selling fresh meat, seafood, and produce. The meats often are butchered and trimmed on-site. Markets in China have come in for justifiable condemnation because of the way they've evolved, commingling traditional livestock with a wide variety of wild animals, including exotic and endangered species. Many are quite unsanitary, with blood, entrails, excrement, and other waste creating the conditions for disease that migrates from animals to people through virus, bacteria, and other forms of transmission. Such 'zoonotic diseases' that have emerged from China and other regions of the world include Ebola, HIV, bird flu, swine flu, and SARS.

Here is a clear instance of creation being turned back on itself to devastating effect. And as the author rightly notes, this specious practice is not exclusive to China. In one way or another every nation or people-group is guilty of manipulating the gift of creation to service its greed.

At this point we need to get into the theological weeds to see how the doctrine of creation helps us better understand the effects of COVID-19. Specifically, we need to address God's involvement in the matter by looking at the twin ideas of primary and secondary causation. This part of the essay is technical, to be sure; but it is also integral to the architecture of our argument. In some cases, simplicity is not a virtue. If we desire

to move passed the erroneous answers mentioned above, if we really desire to help others think theologically about the crisis of COVID-19, then some complex reasoning is in order.

### **Primary Causation**

Let's begin with primary causation. Put simply, God is the primary cause of all that is. Remember, the first rule of the doctrine of creation is that God made all that is *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. As great and vast and awe-inspiring as the universe is, it does not possess the power to will its own existence. Nor does it have to exist at all. Every-thing that is – from an infinitesimally small atom, to the expansive border of the universe, to angelic beings – exists because God allows it and sustains it as such.

Don't allow the technical nature of this characterization of God to fool you into thinking that He stands aloof from creation. God is Wholly Other than creation. He is not part of the metaphysical furniture of the universe, as Stanley Hauerwas says. But the fact that anything exists instead of nothing is an irreducible sign of God's goodness and grace. That God is Triune means the primary cause of creation is nothing other than love.

### **Secondary Causation**

If God is the primary cause of all that is, then it stands to reason that secondary causation is not ascribed to God but to creation. Creation is not static. In wisdom God designed it in such a way that it has potential and capacity for change.

For example, a seed I put in the ground has the *potential* to change according to its nature. Now, we don't say God is directly making a flower grow out of a seed. The elements of nature are doing that work. Instead it is more accurate to say: God wills such a world to exist that a seed is transformed into a flower by putting it in the ground, giving it water, and access to sunlight. This is a simple illustration but hopefully it suffices to make the point. In one important sense it's true that myself and the ecosystem I inhabit are the cause of this flower. In another sense, however, it's also true that God is the *ultimate cause* of this flower. It is God, after all, who creates and sustains the kind of universe which makes the planting and growth of flowers possible in the first place.

My participation in God's creation is not insignificant. Indeed, I have the freedom to plant or not to plant flowers. Creation, moreover, has the potential to thwart my freedom at every turn. Perhaps the soil in which I placed the seed is too acidic and thus never allows my flower to take root. Or perhaps a torrential rainstorm blows in, drowning the seed. Thinking about it long enough, I'm sure we could posit a hundred different scenarios just on the matter of planting a single flower. In every instance, though, the effects of primary and secondary causation are in force. So to suggest that the life or death of this flower lies solely with God, or me, or nature, or whatever is too

simplistic and myopic. It fails to account for the complex, dynamic interplay between God and creation.

### **COVID-19 and Creation**

Now that these definitions are in place, we come to the problem of COVID-19 and its location in the doctrine of creation. Looking back, we can see the broad lineaments of our argument go as follows:

- God is the primary cause of all that is
- God creates in freedom and freely loves what God has created
- Everything that exists is contingent on the wisdom, will, and love of God
- God made creation in such a way as to have potential and capacity for change
- Humans are the climax of God's creative act and are endowed with freedom
- As such, humans have the potential to effect secondary causes within creation
- Humans may freely offer creation back to God as gift or bend it back on itself
- If the former act, then shalom
- If the latter act, then destruction

To state the obvious, then, COVID-19 is the direct effect of secondary causes. It was the willful, unimpaired act of human beings coupled with the potentiality of creation that gave rise to this revolting disease. God is implicated in the affair only insofar as it is His creation that's striking back - "groaning," to use St. Paul's word - against the violable harm done to it by human hands. Did God send COVID-19 like a pestilence to punish human sinfulness? No, not directly. The burden of guilt for this crisis lies solely on the backs of sinful humans who've forsaken their priestly calling to steward creation as gift.

But to think God's judgment is completely absent from the matter is a serious mistake. God's good creation was not made to suffer violence. Although it was not God's idea to create COVID-19 (quite the opposite, in fact), he is allowing the secondary effects of creation to run their deadly course as a means of His judgment.

Indeed, this is a trial of our own making. Our only recourse is to pray with the psalmist: "Our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he have mercy upon us." (Ps. 123:2b)