

“Created Out of Nothing”

An Exposition of the Belgic Confession – Article Twelve

Article 12: The Creation of All Things

We believe that the Father created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing, when it seemed good to him,¹ by his Word—that is to say, by his Son. He has given all creatures their being, form, and appearance, and their various functions for serving their Creator. Even now he also sustains and governs them all, according to his eternal providence, and by his infinite power, that they may serve man, in order that man may serve God.

He has also created the angels good, that they might be his messengers and serve his elect.² Some of them have fallen from the excellence in which God created them into eternal perdition³; and the others have persisted and remained in their original state, by the grace of God. The devils and evil spirits are so corrupt that they are enemies of God and of everything good.⁴ They lie in wait for the church and every member of it like thieves, with all their power, to destroy and spoil everything by their deceptions.⁵ So then, by their own wickedness they are condemned to everlasting damnation, daily awaiting their torments.⁶

For that reason we detest the error of the Sadducees, who deny that there are spirits and angels,⁷ and also the error of the Manicheans, who say that the devils originated by themselves, being evil by nature, without having been corrupted.

¹ Gen 1:1, 2:3; Is 40:26; Jer 32:17; Col 1:15-16; 1 Tim 4:3; Heb 11:3; Rev 4:11 ² Ps 103:20-21; Mt 4:11; Heb 1:14 ³ Jn 8:44; 2 Pt 2:4; Jude 6 ⁴ Gen 3:1-5; 1 Pt 5:8 ⁵ Eph 6:12; Rev 12:4, 13-17, 20:7-9 ⁶ Mt 8:29, 25:41; Rev 20:10 ⁷ Acts 23:8

One of the basic affirmations of Christian theology is that God created all things out of nothing. This includes the creation of things visible and invisible. It is clearly taught in Scripture that God does not create all things and then step back as a dispassionate observer, watching the created order run its course. This is the error of the deists. God creates all things, and he ordains the ends for which they have been created. He also sustains and upholds the things he has created so that they fulfill the ends for which they were created. This is what we mean when we speak of the doctrines of creation and providence and reveals these two topics to be inextricably linked.

Given the alarming increase in pagan conceptions of the world and creation found in American religion and culture—that God is in some way identified with the creation itself, that God is somehow a part of the world (pantheism)—this is yet another truth which is important for us to believe and confess before the unbelieving world around us. We now move from a discussion of the Trinity and the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit (articles eight through eleven), to a discussion in articles twelve and thirteen of the work of the Triune God in creating and sustaining all things. As we saw when we discussed the Trinity and the unique properties of each of the divine persons of the Godhead, all three members of the Godhead are said to participate in the creation of all things.

Both creation and providence are activities of the Triune God. These important doctrines remind us that since the Triune God created all things, the Christian view of God, creation, and providence is markedly different from all other monotheistic religions (Islam and Judaism), as well as from Eastern religions, new age religions, and paganism. Christians reject the very idea of “mother nature.” We do not worship the creation, nor do we regard trees and animals as manifestations of the sacred. The same holds for places—there is no “holy ground,” on the earth. Nor is God to be directly identified with that which he has made because all things are supposedly one in him. No, because God created all things, he is distinct from creation and must not be confused with it. Herman Bavinck contends the Creator-creature distinction is the “starting point of true religion.”¹ Created things have value because God created them and because he defines their purposes and goals—not because God can be directly identified with the world he has made as pantheists and earth-worshippers teach.

Our confession treats God’s creation of all things visible and invisible by making four main points in article twelve. First, our confession speaks of the fact of the creation of all things visible. We believe and confess that God created all things from nothing, something which is old hat to us, but a point increasingly rejected by those around us. Second, our confession details the fact that God ordains the purpose for all things he creates, as well as sustains them. Third, our confession speaks of the creation of all things invisible (the spiritual world and the angels) before concluding with a discussion of the fall of the angels and the role of demons.

The first issue addressed by our confession is the fact that God created all things out of nothing. This establishes both the creator-creature distinction (that God is distinct from his creation) and the essential goodness of matter, a point which differentiates Christianity from virtually all forms of paganism and new age thinking.

Article twelve of our confession opens with the assertion: “We believe that the Father created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing, when it seemed good to him, by his Word—that is to say, by his Son.” The biblical evidence for the fact that God created all things is voluminous. We have already addressed a number of these passages previously, especially when we dealt with those articles dealing with the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In Genesis 1:1-2, God is said to be before the creation of all things—i.e., meaning that God alone is eternal and matter is not. In Colossians 1:15-16, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ created all things, as does John in the opening chapter of his gospel. As we saw when we covered the deity of the Holy Spirit, according to Genesis 1:1-2, the Spirit of God was also involved in the creation of all things. This is why we must believe and confess that the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) created all things and that all things exist for his glory.

Furthermore, we believe and confess that the Triune God created all things from nothing (*ex nihilo*) and that according to the creation account—the six days of creation in Genesis 1—all things were created according to God’s purpose and design, capped off by the seventh day of Sabbath rest, in which God is enthroned to rule over and govern all that he has made.² The maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit* (“from nothing, nothing comes”) certainly applies in this situation. To put it in the most basic of terms, if matter is not eternal then there must be a creator. To take this one step further, the creation account repeatedly speaks of the fact that “*and God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good*” (i.e., Genesis

¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.406.

² M. G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 22-25.

1:31). The fact that the days of creation show design and purpose only serve to bear this point out. God created all things from nothing, arranged them according to his purposes—which gives creation its meaning and purpose—before pronouncing a divine benediction upon his handiwork. God saw that his creation was good. We must not worship the sun, moon, stars, nor any creature. Nor should we confuse God with his creation, a point made plain in the first two of the Ten Commandments.

It must also be said that God created all things freely—as it seemed good to him without any external necessity or compulsion. God would still be God had he not created anything. The creation is not a part of God (pantheism) and the universe does not emanate from his being as taught by the Manicheans, who are condemned later in this article for a related error. In fact, just the opposite is the case. As we read in our New Testament lesson, the author to the Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 11:1-3.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Everything that now exists, exists because God created the universe from nothing.³ God creates at his very command, as seen in the creation account—God spoke and it was so—as well as in Psalm 33:8-9, where we read; “*let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.*” Were it not for God’s decree and spoken command, nothing that now is would be. All would remain formless and void (Genesis 1:2).

That God creates freely and out of nothing is also taught in a passage such as Isaiah 40:21-31, which is worth reading:

Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

God does not create because he has to, as though he were dependent upon the creation in any sense. Given the inter-Trinitarian affection and bond among the members of the eternal Trinity, the Triune God

³ See the discussion of the distinction between mediate and immediate creation, in Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 100-101.

was not lonely. He did not create us to keep him company—a well intended, but quite unbiblical sentiment. No, God creates all things because he has decreed to do so to bring him glory. But even as he has created all things, he has also ordained that creation will fulfill his purposes. This leads to a second main point made in our confession;

God creates all things out of nothing, and he ordains the purpose for which he creates them.

Our confession simply states, “[God] has given all creatures their being, form, and appearance, and their various functions for serving their Creator.” From the creation account and the orderliness and purpose seen in the days of creation, it is clear that all things are created to serve their creator. God creates the various realms mentioned in the creation account (water, sky, and land) and the various creatures (fish, birds, and animals) which fill them.⁴ All of this reflects the order and design God gives to the world which he has made, and which he pronounces to be good.

But the high point of the creation account is God forming Adam from the dust of the ground (Genesis 1:26-31), so that he might rule over creation as God’s vice-regent.⁵ In Proverbs 16:4, we read: “*the LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.*” The ultimate purpose of creation (and its various realms and creatures, along with Adam who was to rule in God’s name) is to bring the Creator that glory due him, since the glory of what God creates, in some sense, reflects the intrinsic glory of its creator. The great paradox is that it is in the glorifying of God that God’s creatures find true happiness because they fulfill the true purpose for which they have been created. Nothing is more unfulfilling than not living according to that purpose for which we have been created. When the natural order of things is out of wack, we are utterly miserable.

Sadly, it is human sinfulness which obscures the point that God gives meaning and purpose to all that he has made and that true happiness can only be found when we realize this to be the case. Because we are fallen and sinful, we inevitably focus upon our own sinful and self-centered interests, and not upon the ultimate interests of the creator.⁶ Through the lens of our sinful hearts we see creation as something we can either exploit for personal gain, or something we can worship instead of bowing the knee before a holy God. After all, mother earth does not hold us to account for our sins! It is not an accident that those who worship and serve created things have neither doctrines of sin nor redemption. There is no need of such things. The hymn writer (Babcock) has it correct, “This Is My Father’s World.” As Francis Schaeffer used to say, God made the world that we live in, so that we cannot make our own world and then live in it without creating all kinds of intellectual and practical tensions.⁷ Schaeffer was right—the essence of idolatry is that we attempt to create our own reality, when we must live in the reality created by God.

The point is that God does not exist for our sake but we exist for his. That may come as a shock to those who think of God’s primary purpose as meeting felt needs. God tells us of this through the prophet

⁴ Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 157.

⁵ M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 29.

⁶ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 101.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer, “The God Who is There,” in The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, Vol. 1 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 129-135.

(Isaiah 43:7) “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” The reason that creatures do not give the creator his proper glory is because of human sin, not because of some defect in creation, or because creation is an end in itself. The New Testament makes plain in several places that Jesus Christ comes not only to return sinners to God’s favor but that his redemptive work extends far beyond the salvation of our souls. As Paul states in Colossians 1:19-20; “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” This means that God will not only redeem us as individuals, he will redeem all of creation when he redeems Adam’s fallen race. He will purge every hint and trace of sin from his universe. He will make all things new. He will save us, and he will redeem all of creation.

This second section of our confession includes the following assertion: “Even now he also sustains and governs them all, according to his eternal providence, and by his infinite power, that they may serve man, in order that man may serve God.” Since these brief comments are unpacked in much more detail in Article Thirteen, we will take up the subject of providence. But we now turn our attention to the third point made by our confession.

Not only did God create all things visible, God also creates all things invisible, including the spiritual world and the angels.

Article Twelve of our confession addresses God’s creation of all things invisible with the brief but direct affirmation, “He has also created the angels good, that they might be his messengers and serve his elect.” From the moment we make mention of the subject of angels, we also need to issue several very important qualifications. The first qualification is that we must take this subject seriously, because even though unseen, the Bible does speak of a spiritual world of invisible spiritual beings, identified as angels. The second qualification is that there is so much Christian and pagan mythology regarding angels that in many cases, much of what people (even Christians) believe about angels is patently unbiblical. Therefore, it would be a good thing to simply go back and summarize what the Bible says about angels.⁸

The first thing we must say is that angels are created beings. In Psalm 148:2, 5, the Psalmist declares, “Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! . . . Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created.” Likewise, in Colossians 1:16, Paul speaks directly to the fact that Jesus created all things, including the angels. “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Thus angels are creatures, like us, created by God. The difference between men and angels brings us to a second point.

Angels are spiritual beings (i. e., immaterial). According to the testimony of Luke 24:39, angels do not have bodies (flesh and bone). According to Matthew 22:30, angels cannot marry nor reproduce as do humans. Paul says that angels are invisible (Colossians 1:16), and while theologians have debated the relationship of angels to time and space, we can say they can appear to men, and while possessing a freer relationship to time and space than we do (because we are material), angels are not omnipresent. As

⁸ See, for example, the discussion in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 141-149.

creatures they have locality and are described as moving from place to place.⁹ Unlike humans who are limited by time and space, angels know no such limits. But as creatures, angels are likewise finite beings and they too operate according to God's design, purpose and decree.

Third, angels are also rational and intelligent creatures. They have wisdom and knowledge—which according to Matthew 24:36 is probably greater than our own. We read in Luke 15:10, that they rejoice when sinners repent. We read in Hebrews 1:6 that they worship God, and in 1 Peter 1:12 that they eagerly watch as the course of redemptive history unfolds. The vast number of them are described as “holy angels,” a reference to those angels who remained loyal to their creator, rather than follow Satan in his rebellion against God. In Matthew 25:31, we are told that certain angels form a mighty army to accomplish God's purposes at our Lord's return. We are told that the saints in heaven (who have died or have been martyred) will become like the angels—that is, existing as spirits, conscious and yet without bodies (Luke 21:34 ff.). But unlike the angels, our bodies will be raised from the dead in the general resurrection at the end of the age, and we will be restored to our true form and purpose, as a psychosomatic unity of body and soul, albeit in a glorified condition with sin no longer a possibility.

The Bible also refers to different orders of angels.¹⁰ There are cherubim, who reveal the glory and power of God. There are the seraphim, mentioned in Isaiah 6, who guard the holiness of God and there are the Archangels, two of whom, Gabriel and Michael, serve as warriors and mediate divine revelation throughout critical moments in redemptive history. The ordinary function of angels is to praise God day and night, probably through song as we see in Revelation 5:11. The Bible nowhere teaches that God assigns each one of us an angel to guard us (a personal guardian angel), although Matthew 18:10 does speak in a very general way of angels watching over little ones.¹¹ But this statement by Matthew is a far cry from the notion of guardian angels as commonly believed, and which has become part and parcel of Christian mythology.

Our confession addresses two other false view of angels at the end of Article Twelve. “For that reason we detest the error of the Sadducees, who deny that there are spirits and angels,⁷ and also the error of the Manicheans, who say that the devils originated by themselves, being evil by nature, without having been corrupted..” The two extremes are the view of the Sadducees, who were the theological liberals of their day and who denied that existence of angels altogether, and there is the view of the Manichees, who taught that demons were created evil. The problem is that there is nothing in creation (whether that be the visible, material world, or the spiritual world), which was created evil. Rather, there are demons because a number of angels fell into sin, even as Adam rebelled against God, plunging the human race into sin and bringing us under the curse of death.

That not all of the angels remained loyal to their creator and a number of them followed Lucifer (now called Satan or the devil) when he rebelled against God, brings us to the final point of our confession.

A number of angels followed Lucifer, fell into sin, and we now speak of them as demons.

If we must exercise great caution when speaking of angels, we must be equally cautious (if not more so)

⁹ See the discussion in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 144.

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 146-147.

¹¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 147.

when speaking of demons and Satan. Far too many of us have learned our theology of Satan and demons from the movie *The Exorcist* and other forms of science fiction and not from the pages of Holy Scripture, which our confessions summarizes as follows: “The devils and evil spirits are so corrupt that they are enemies of God and of everything good. They lie in wait for the church and every member of it like thieves, with all their power, to destroy and spoil everything by their deceptions. So then, by their own wickedness they are condemned to everlasting damnation, daily awaiting their torments.”

While the Bible does not tell us much about the fall of Satan nor the way in which those angels who followed him became demons, in 1 Timothy 3:6, it is inferred that pride led to their fall. We do know about the fate of some of these angels who fell away, since in Jude 6, we learn that “*the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.*” Likewise in 2 Peter 2:4, Peter writes “*for if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.*” God will not spare the wicked from the day of judgment, even though he will spare the righteous. In Matthew 8:29, the demons themselves indicate that they are quite aware of the fate that will befall them on the day of judgment. “*And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”*”

What we do know then is that certain angels followed the devil in his rebellion and have already been bound (probably not in a literal sense, but as John says of Satan, they are bound through the preaching of the gospel as is taught in Revelation 20:3). We do know that the fate of fallen angels is certain and that demons cannot torment Christians by possessing them, they cannot cause us to sin, nor do they move stuff around in our houses at night. Satan and his demons do not put evil thoughts in our minds, either. If you have any evil thoughts, they are entirely self-generated. When you sin, you cannot say, “the Devil made me do it.” You are plenty sinful on your own. You don’t need the devil to sin.

As Donald Grey Barnhouse so aptly put it, “Satan’s purpose is not to make good men bad, nor bad men worse, but to make people good without Jesus Christ.” Satan attacks the church not by causing its members to be demon-possessed or to blaspheme at the sight of a crucifix, but he attacks the church by distorting, denying, or attacking the gospel. As Jesus puts it in John 8:44 when speaking to the Pharisees,

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Thus Satan and those demons who followed him will attack the church whenever and wherever it preaches the gospel. Satan hates the message of Christ crucified for sinners. The devil will oppose the gospel through the creation of heresy and schism, and it is not a matter if this will happen, but when. This is what our confession is getting at when it mentions that Satan and his minions lie in wait to destroy the church.

Having covered the four points addressed by our confession, the application we must draw from this article should be clear:

First, since God created all things from nothing, God cannot be confused with or identified with created things. This is why idolatry and paganism are such serious errors. We must worship the creator, not the creation.

Second, God pronounced his benediction upon creation, declaring the world and its creatures to be “good.” Creation has value because God created it and gives it its purpose and value, not because creation is divine, or part of God. The earth is not our mother. This is our father’s world.

Third, God sustains and upholds all that he creates. While we speak of creation as something in the past, we must not forget that providence is in one sense the extension of God’s creation into the present as he preserves and upholds that which he has made. God does not create and then step back. He is as much involved in the world now as at the moment he created it.

Fourth, angels are every bit as real as the ground we walk on. But because they are unseen, we must guard against the temptation to think of them in unbiblical terms—cute little things with wings and pink cheeks. Angels are spiritual beings, who when they manifest themselves to humanity, bring terror. God has ordained their purpose and function every bit as much as he has ours.

Fifth, demons are fallen angels. They are bound by the preaching of the gospel and know that their destruction is certain. Along with their master, the devil, they wage war on the truth and are the ultimate source of all heresy and false doctrine. Demons cannot possess Christians, nor cause us to sin, nor put evil thought in our minds. They are subject to the power of Jesus Christ as manifest in the gospel. We oppose them with the truth that Jesus died for our sins, that he was raised for our justification, and therefore the guilt and power of sin over us has been broken. The creator is also our redeemer.

The Christian conception of creation stands in stark contrast to those who believe that matter is eternal, or that creation is itself a manifestation of the divine. God stands apart from creation and he gives the world he has made its order and purpose. Given the rise of “secular” religions and the resurgence of ancient paganism, it is imperative that we believe and confess that “we believe that the Father created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing, when it seemed good to him,¹ by his Word—that is to say, by his Son. He has given all creatures their being, form, and appearance, and their various functions for serving their Creator. Even now he also sustains and governs them all, according to his eternal providence, and by his infinite power, that they may serve man, in order that man may serve God.”

We serve God because this is what we were created to do. In serving God through faith in Jesus Christ, we will find that joy and happiness which God ordained for us to enjoy. For our creator is also our redeemer.