

ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach

Dr Benjamin Quinn interviews Craig Bartholomew about his and Bruce Ashford's forthcoming *The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).

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BQ: *How and why did you and Bruce decide to write this volume?*

CB: In Canada, several years ago, from time to time we would gather a group of scholar friends simply to chat and think together. At one particular weekend we reflected on the state of systematic theology today. It seemed to us that we were seeing a lot of work on theology and ..., but little constructive dogmatics akin to that of the major theologians of the previous era.

For example, many books have appeared opening up a dialogue between creation and science, but few substantial theologies of creation. In this volume we deliberately avoid making the dialogue with science our agenda, aiming instead to develop a constructive doctrine of creation for today. Only in the final chapter do we interact with science amidst several other areas such as time, the self,

philosophy, etc. This is not to suggest that the creation-science dialogue is unimportant, but it is to suggest that we first need a robust doctrine of creation.

That got us thinking about doing something in the area of theology. We also thought that far too much contemporary theology is very thin when it comes to deep engagement with Scripture. All in all we discerned a need for constructive – note the word in the subtitle - systematic theology rigorously engaged with the Bible. From these discussions I developed a proposal for a new dogmatics, and this went to and was agreed by IVP Academic, USA, much to our delight.

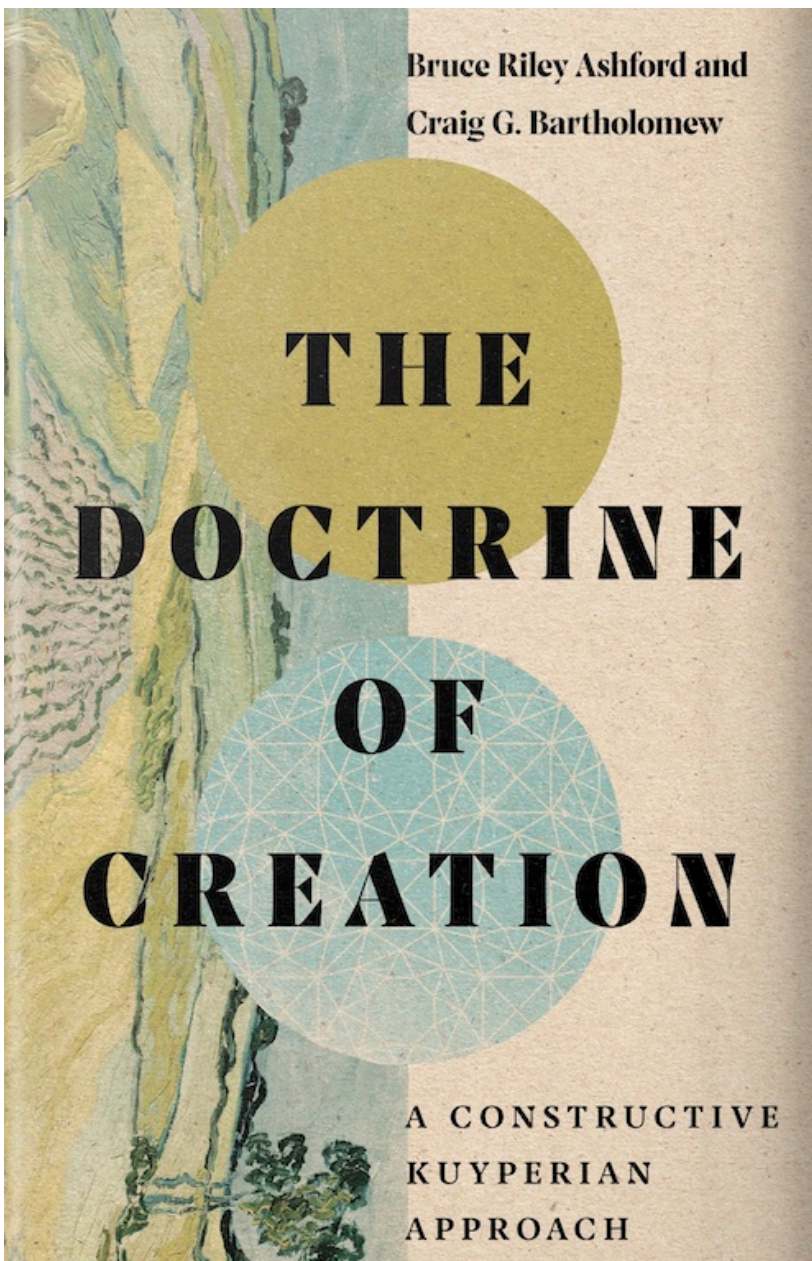
BQ: *Will this be the beginning of a series on dogmatics?*

CB: I hope so! But not all by us. The initial proposal was for a multi-authored series of volumes in the Kuyperian tradition covering the major loci. However, there has been quite a lot of water under the

bridge since then, and our current arrangement is that we will see how this first volume does. If it does well then it will become the first volume in a Dogmatics Series.

BQ: *Why did you begin with the doctrine of creation instead of another locus of doctrine?*

CB: The doctrine of God is the primary locus of Christian theology. However, fast on its heels comes the doctrine of creation. Amidst the privatisation of religion endemic to modernity and the sacred/secular dualism that continues to bedevil far too much Evangelicalism, there is often a rush to the cross and the resurrection which bypasses creation. We affirm the utter centrality of Christ, but the failure to develop a robust doctrine of creation has been profoundly damaging to the church's witness



amidst modernity and skewed our understanding of the Christ event. Creation is the first and foundational act of the great drama of Scripture and Bruce and I were drawn to attend to this locus.

Furthermore, as the subtitle indicates, we work consciously in the Kuyperian tradition – that of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, J. H. Bavinck, and many others – and one of its great strengths is its attention to creation and its insight into how creation colours all the major areas of Christian belief, doctrine, and practice. Thus, both in terms of the strength of the Kuyperian tradition and in terms of the needs of our day, it seemed obvious to us that we would work together on this wonderful doctrine.

BQ: *You engage quite a lot with Karl Barth and 20th century French thinkers (e.g. Henri de Lubac). Why so much engagement with these authors? Especially, de Lubac?*

CB: A good question. I think a distinctive of this volume is our engagement with Scripture throughout. In my early training I was exposed to the work of the Reformed theologian John Murray, who would invariably begin his work with exegesis. That model has stuck with me. Given the current state of biblical studies – with the lingering, fragmenting effect of historical criticism, albeit with its many gifts – doing theology in deep engagement with Scripture is exceptionally hard work. And then so much theology – however good – fails to engage with Scripture.

Not surprisingly, therefore, we are drawn to theologians who engage deeply with Scripture while doing rigorous theology. In this respect Barth towers above other theologians.

Like many Reformed Evangelicals, at seminary I imbibed the view that Barth was liberal and to be avoided. I think this view was mediated to us through Cornelius Van Til's critique of Barth. It was not until years later that I *actually read Barth*, and his work blew me away. Almost single-handedly he brought down the liberal theological edifice of his day. And, as his theological system takes hold, he does more, far more, exegesis. In one volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, for example, there are some one hundred pages of small font, rich theological exegesis of Genesis 1:1-2:4a. Sadly, biblical scholars rarely refer to it, and I am not aware of contemporary Barthians who do similar exegetical work.

Neither Bruce nor I are Barthians. There are substantial areas in which we disagree with him. However, we find him an exhilarating dialogue partner and have learnt so much from him. Indeed, our style of doing theology in this book with small font sections throughout is modelled on his.

Bruce and I are both committed Evangelicals. Bruce is a Southern Baptist and I am an Anglican. It is probably good that we did not try to tackle the doctrine of the church together! We are also Kuyperians. However, we are Christians first and foremost, and part of that “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” and we revel in the feast that the tradition of the church makes available to us. Our commitment to Christ does not, for us, mean that we can only engage with our fellow Evangelicals, vital as this is. For us it is our very Evangelicalism that opens up a space for the widest engagement with good work wherever we find it. And that certainly includes the best of Catholic theology and

philosophy. *Ressourcement* theologians like de Lubac, Danielou, and Balthasar have long been on my radar screen as important dialogue partners. And, in my opinion, the most exciting Christian philosophy being done today is that of the French Catholic phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste and Emmanuel Falque.

Our particular engagement with de Lubac – which is more limited than your question suggests – emerged through Bruce’s exploration of John Milbank’s work and the Radical Orthodoxy movement. Milbank is influenced by de Lubac, and the *Ressourcement* movement, of which de Lubac was part, developed a fascinating critique of the Aristotelianism of the Thomist tradition, all of which is of great interest to us.

BQ: *There is a strong emphasis on the relationship between creation and eschatology in your volume. How do you understand continuity versus discontinuity between the here-and-now and the new creation?*

CB: Indeed. There is a dynamic to creation that moves it forward. And creation, is, as one author points out, the very stuff of redemption. Despite our rebellion, God remains committed to his good purposes for his creation. Salvation is certainly individual – but it is also cosmic. The major theme of Jesus’s teaching and preaching is the kingdom of God, which is all about God acting decisively to bring all of creation under his reign and to lead it to the destiny he always had in mind for it. Lacking a robust doctrine of creation, the view took hold in the early twentieth century that the kingdom is about God’s reign, and not his realm. This is a false dichotomy. The creation is his realm, and the goal of history is that day of the new heavens and the new earth, a renewed creation without sin and evil. In my view there will be continuity and discontinuity between now and then, and it is not always easy to be precise about the differences. However, the great need of our day is to recover belief in the continuity – it is this creation with all its God-given dimensions that will be renewed so that our service of God in all areas of life is of eternal significance.

BQ: *What key distinctives do you hope your volume will offer to the broader conversation on the doctrine of creation?*

CB: Of course, we hope it will contribute in many ways. We hope it will lead to a recovery of a rich, biblical view of creation and confidence in it where these are lacking. As Calvin said of his *Institutes*, we hope that this work will enable ordinary Christians and scholars to read their Bibles better. Of course, we recognize the many limits of our work, and we hope that new generations of scholars will do far better work of this sort. And, of course, we hope that this will be the first volume in a Dogmatics Series, one which will show how the doctrine of creation permeates the other loci. And we hope, ironically, that by not starting with science, we have laid a foundation for rigorous engagement with science.

The doctrine of creation is one of faith and worship. This work will have been worthwhile if it helps readers to rediscover the richness of the doctrine of creation, and if at times they feel compelled to

stop and worship. Such worship, they will then discover, leads to serving Christ and attending to him in all areas of life. Gerard Manly Hopkins understood the doctrine of creation when he said that Christ plays in ten thousand places. We need to be attentive to his play, and to join him in it. In the process we will discover, with Irenaeus, that the glory of God is the human person – us – fully alive.

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