

Part Five:
Other Dogmatic Studies

Is Creation the Same as Providence?

Part 1

We confess with the church of all ages that God is the Creator of heaven and earth. This confession elicits our admiration and trust in God. The more we know about his creation work, the more we admire and trust the Creator. It boggles the mind to think that God made everything on earth as well as everything that can be seen and perceived outside the earth. The more we contemplate that God, as with his hand, upholds and governs heaven and earth and all creatures, the more we are filled with awe. In these articles we want to investigate only one aspect of this glorious work of God. The question concerns specifically the relation between creation and providence.

Traditionally, creation and providence have been seen as two distinct works of God. Creation is the unique work of God whereby at the beginning of history he made everything—the heavens and the earth, the dry land and the sea, sun, moon and stars, the plants and all kinds of animals, and finally man. Creation was followed by a different work of God, namely, providence. Under God's providence, no new things came into being; rather, God upholds and governs the created things from day to day.

Today, however, not everyone agrees that creation and providence are to be kept apart. Under the weight which the grand scheme of evolution has accumulated in the past century, creation and providence are now often identified. H. J. Van Till describes the advantages of the evolutionary mod-

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el in the following way:

To accept the concept of evolutionary processes does not require the introduction of phenomena that go beyond the ordinary pattern of material behavior. Rather, the concept of evolution represents an extension of our present experience of continuity into the indefinite past (and future?). Furthermore, the concept of evolution removes the arbitrary imposition of discontinuity and incoherence that is demanded by the notion of instantaneous inception.¹

The unusual term “instantaneous inception” must be understood as what used to be called “creation.” This is rejected by the writer as an arbitrary way of explaining the world. Much to be preferred is the evolutionary explanation of the world based on the patterns that can be observed today.

This identification of creation and providence has two results. The first can be seen in the past. It is said that God created the world by means of processes which we still today observe in the world. The processes which still take place today, however, belong to God’s providence. In other words, the creation of the past took place by way of providence. But there is another result with respect to the future. It is quite possible that today’s processes will lead to new types of creatures. In other words, providence leads to new creations. There is no real distinction between creation and providence.

We are, therefore, called to reconsider the traditional distinction between creation and providence. Can this distinction be maintained? Why was this distinction made? What are the arguments brought in against it? The most important question of all is whether Scripture itself makes a distinction between creation and providence.

¹ See H. J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us about the Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 252–253. Van Till thinks that this only makes our admiration of God the Creator greater: “Would it not require far greater creativity to design and direct the dynamic processes that constitute cosmic evolution than simply to mandate the existence of the end product alone?” (see p. 255). Van Till explained some ideas of his book in a more accessible way in two articles in *The Banner* (Sept. 28 and Oct. 5, 1987). The conclusion shows the same identification of creation and providence: “Personally, I am convinced that when we have rightly learned to see God at work as *Creator* in a winter snowstorm, we will then be prepared to see God as work as *Creator* in the multibillion-year formative history of the universe, which is his handiwork, his creation” (emphasis added). A very critical reaction to Van Till’s book was published by L. De Koster in a series of articles in *Christian Renewal* 5.13–6.1 (March 23–September 7, 1987).

The Belgic Confession

First of all, the distinction between creation and providence is firmly established in the Reformed confessions. There are many confessions, of course, but a look in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism will suffice.

The Belgic Confession discusses creation in Article 12 and providence in Article 13. Particularly Article 13 clearly states the difference between the two:

We believe that this good God, after he had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to his holy will he so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without his direction.²

Two differences are mentioned here between creation and providence. There is, first of all, a temporal difference. First God created, and providence comes “after” creation. The second difference concerns the way God acts. Providence is described as different from creating; it is regarded as ruling and governing things previously created.

At first glance, Article 12 is not so clear. This article combines creation and providence:

We believe that the Father through the Word, that is, through his Son, has created out of nothing heaven and earth and all creatures, when it seemed good to him, and that he has given to every creature its being, shape and form, and to each its specific task and function to serve its Creator. He also continues to sustain and govern them according to his eternal providence and by his infinite power in order to serve man, to the end that man may serve his God.

Does this tying together of creation and providence not imply that Article 12 identifies the two?

It is, indeed, remarkable that this article on creation contains a sentence concerning providence.³ On closer inspection, however, Article 12

² I follow the linguistically updated version in use by the Canadian Reformed Churches; see *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1984) 449. See for the original texts, J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 90–91.

³ This sentence does not occur in the Gallican Confession of 1559, which was used as an example in the making of the Belgic Confession. The Gallican Confession clearly separates creation from providence. Creation, with special mention of the angels, is discussed in Art. 7, and providence, with special emphasis on its rela-

makes the same distinction as Article 13. Creation is mentioned as an act of God in the past — “When it seemed good to him.” Providence, however, is presented as God’s continuous work: “He continues to sustain and govern them.” Moreover, when Article 12 says, “He also continues...,” it indicates that providence is a different work, in addition to creation.⁴ There can be no doubt that the Belgic Confession teaches a distinction between creation and providence.

Calvin

Calvin may be considered the theological grandfather of the Belgic Confession and a champion of the Reformed approach. An attempt has been made to show that Calvin did not distinguish sharply between creation and providence. J. H. Stek, using a summarizing article by the famous B. B. Warfield, states:

But the main thrust of his summary of Calvin suggests that the Reformer’s distinction between creation and providence was significantly less sharp than that of the later theologians noted above.⁵

Is it true that Calvin is much different from the Belgic Confession?

In his most comprehensive work, the *Institutes*, the same distinction between creation and providence can be found. This appears first of all in the fact that Calvin discusses creation in book 1, chapter 14, and providence two chapters later. In his discussion of creation Calvin warns against speculation. We have to stick to what God revealed about creation. One of his examples is the creation in six days. He writes:

With the same intent Moses relates that God’s work was completed not in a moment but in six days. For by this circumstance we are drawn away from

tion with evil, is discussed in Art. 8; see for the text of this confession Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 88, 90; or Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; 6th ed.; rev. D. S. Schaff; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 3.363–364. The reason why a sentence on providence was inserted in Art. 12 of the Belgic Confession appears to be that Art. 12 speaks about the function of the creatures to serve the Creator. That led to a brief reference to providence.

⁴ The French has for “also” *maintenant mesmes* (“even now”); see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 12.

⁵ See J. H. Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” in *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World’s Formation* (ed. H. J. Van Till; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 245. It is objectionable that Stek based his representation of Calvin’s view on an article about Calvin, while the *Institutes* is readily available.

all fictions to the one God who distributed his work into six days that we might not find it irksome to occupy our whole life in contemplating it.⁶

Calvin is obviously of the opinion that we have to take the creation story of Genesis 1 as an accurate description of what happened.

In the chapter regarding providence, Calvin clearly distinguishes between creation and providence. He writes:

Moreover, to make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception.⁷

Calvin is obviously reacting against a kind of Deistic view that God having created the world left it alone. For Calvin, it is not even enough to recognize a continuous divine energy which upholds everything; God himself must be recognized as the Upholder: “But faith ought to penetrate more deeply, namely, having found him Creator of all, forthwith to conclude he is also everlasting Governor and Preserver.” This is supported by a quotation from Psalm 33: “Thus David, having briefly stated that the universe was created by God, immediately descends to the uninterrupted course of

⁶ See J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1.161. When Calvin rejects that the world was created in one moment, he goes against a very influential teaching of Augustine, a teacher he greatly admired and even quoted with approval just before this passage. The fact that Augustine considered creation as a momentary action of God may well be the reason why the creation in six days cannot be found in the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century. Calvin’s opposition to Augustine’s view was accepted in Reformed theology, as can be seen in *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (trans. G. W. Williard; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.) 145; *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (ed. H. Bavinck; Leiden: Donner, 1881) 83 (10.3); and F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.; trans. G. M. Giger; ed. J. T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) 1.444ff. While this view was established in the sixteenth century, the six days were confessed in the seventeenth century. It was included in the Irish Articles of 1615, Art. 18, and in the Westminster Confession, which stated in ch. 4.1 that God created the world “in the space of six days” (using the same expression as the Irish Articles and the Synopsis: *sex dierum spatio*). This expression can therefore be taken as a rejection of the spiritualizing exegesis of Augustine.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.1.

his providence.”⁸ Providence, although closely connected with creation, is for Calvin distinguished from this.

The differences are the same as indicated in the Belgic Confession. There is a difference in time: creation is momentary, while providence is continuing. In addition, there is a difference in action: creating is not the same as governing and preserving.⁹

Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks about creation and providence in its explanation of the Apostles’ Creed. At first glance, the questions give the impression that Lord’s Day 9 discusses creation and Lord’s Day 10 providence. That is not completely correct, however. The answer of Lord’s Day 9 already deals with providence (“and who still upholds and governs them by his eternal counsel and providence”) and Lord’s Day 10 comes back to creation (Q. 28: “What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things...?”). Lord’s Days 9 and 10 could be taken as a unity in which it is emphasized that I can fully rely on God the Father, since he is the God of creation and providence. The Heidelberg Catechism does not allow us to separate God’s daily providence from his creation work.

The fact that creation and providence are taken together does not mean, however, that the two are not distinguished. Creation is presented as something in the past (A. 26: “who out of nothing created heaven and earth”; Q. 28: “that God has created all things”) but providence is presented as something that continues today (A. 26: “who still upholds and governs them”; A. 27: “He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures”; Q. 28: “and still upholds them by his providence”).¹⁰ Even more

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.1. Calvin quotes v. 6 for creation, and for providence he refers to vv. 13–14.

⁹ See also Calvin’s commentary on Genesis, e.g. his comments on Gen. 1:31: “*Once more, at the conclusion of the creation, Moses declares that God approved of everything which he had made*”; and on Gen. 2:1: “Moses summarily repeats that in six days the fabric of the heaven and the earth *was completed*. . . . God, therefore, did not cease from the work of the creation of the world till *he had completed it in every part*, so that nothing should be wanting to its suitable abundance,” *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (trans. J. King; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 100, 103, emphasis added.

¹⁰ See *Book of Praise*, 483–484. The difference between creation as concluded action in the past and providence as continued action in the present is underlined by the repeated use of “still” in connection with providence. The original German

importantly, God's actions are described in different words. Creating is not the same as upholding and governing.

Ursinus

Zacharias Ursinus, the defender of the Heidelberg Catechism, mentions as one of the characteristics of God's creation work that he "created the world, not suddenly, nor in a moment of time, but in six days." There is a clear end to God's work of creation, as Ursinus indicates in his translation of Genesis 2:2: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing."¹¹

When Ursinus discusses providence he emphasizes the fact that creation and providence belong together as works of the same God. He contrasts God's work for the world with the building of a ship. The builder transfers the care of a ship to its navigator as soon as it is completed. The Creator, on the other hand, does not leave the world alone but continues to take care of it. At the same time, Ursinus distinguishes the two: "We must hold this as a most certain truth, that as nothing could ever have existed except by the creating power of God, so it is impossible that any thing should exist, even for a moment, without his government and preservation."¹²

We may conclude that the distinction between creation, as an act of God establishing the world in the beginning, and government, as a continuous act of God upholding and leading the world from that moment onward, is firmly entrenched in the Reformed Confessions.

text uses "still" (*noch*) in A. 26 and A. 27, but it is not repeated in Q. 28. The English text follows the early Dutch translation which has "still" in the three instances; see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 164ff. Whatever text is used, there is no doubt that the Heidelberg Catechism makes a clear distinction between creation and providence.

¹¹ *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus*, 145. Again, the point that is discussed is not whether creation took six days or longer, but whether it took six days or was completed in a moment; see above, footnote 6.

¹² *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus*, 147.

Part 2

Continued Creation

In the first article it was shown that the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century distinguish creation as God's completed work in the beginning from providence as God's continuing work today. At this point the question can be raised as to whether this sufficiently represents the opinion of Reformed theology. Several Reformed theologians used the word "creation" for "providence." To give one example, Ursinus, of whom we said that he clearly distinguished creation and providence, spoke of providence as a continuation of creation.¹³ Others went even further by calling providence "continued creation."¹⁴ Do these expressions indicate that no border line between creation and providence was maintained in Reformed theology?

Ursinus and De Moor

Let us look more closely at the examples. Ursinus explains why he spoke of providence as a continuation of the creation: "because the government of the world is the preservation of the things created by God."¹⁵ When Ursinus uses this particular expression, he wants to emphasize that the world is dependent on God, not only for its creation, but also for its preservation. Nothing could have existed without the creating power of God. It is just as impossible that anything exists without God's government and preservation. Ursinus uses this expression to oppose several philosophical schools who say that God is not directly upholding and governing the world.¹⁶ God is as much involved in preserving the world as he was in creating it.

De Moor defends the use of the term "continued creation" by pointing to the fact that the same power of God is at work in both creation and

¹³ *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus*, 147.

¹⁴ B. de Moor, *Commentarius perpetuus in Johannis Marckii Compendium* (7 vols.; Lugduni Batavorum: J. Hasebroek, 1763) 2.423. To give some more examples: Walaeus describes providence as the continuation of the existence of the things themselves; Amesius and Coccejus speak of, as it were, a continued creation; Heidegger calls providence "continued creation"; Van Till says that providence is lasting creation of God; see for these examples, H. Heppe and E. Bizer, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (2nd ed.; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1958) 204, 208.

¹⁵ *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus*, 147.

¹⁶ *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus*, 147. Ursinus mentions the following philosophers: the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Peripatetics (i.e. the followers of Aristotle).

providence.¹⁷ This is, to my view, a statement worthy of consideration. We tend to think that creation shows more of God's power, and that the world now exists more or less on its own strength. But when providence is called "creation," we realize that the same power God used to create is still active in upholding and steering the world. The term "continued creation" makes us more aware of the greatness of God's involvement in this world.

At the same time, however, De Moor does emphasize that creation and providence should not be confused. Creation speaks about what has not yet been created. Through creation all things received their existence. In providence, the creature that has been created receives the continuation of its existence.¹⁸ Neither Ursinus nor De Moor obliterate the distinction between creation and providence by calling providence "continued creation."

Hodge and Bavinck

This expression, "continued creation," was so remarkable that it led to a debate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This discussion began with Charles Hodge. He agrees with the intention of the term, namely, to show that preservation of the world is as much the result of God's immediate power as creation. His objection is that this expression is confusing. Creation means the production of something out of nothing. Preservation, on the other hand, is the upholding in existence of what already exists. Calling preservation "continued creation" is therefore a wrong use of the term. What is worse, it even leads to error. For these reasons, Hodge considers it a dangerous term.¹⁹

Bavinck comes to the defense of this traditional terminology. He defends the term "creation" for providence in an interesting way. According to him, it is based on a biblical way of speaking. Scripture points out the unity of creation and providence by using the same terms for both! To give an example, Psalm 104:30 says: "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." The expression "they are created" obviously refers to what we call providence.²⁰ Previous theolo-

¹⁷ De Moor, *Commentarius perpetuus*, 2.423.

¹⁸ De Moor, *Commentarius perpetuus*, 2.423: "quod cum per *Creationem* accipit suum esse, in *Providentia* ut *jam Existens* consideratur, & per eandem nanciscitur suae *Existentiae* perduratonem."

¹⁹ Ch. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; London and Edinburgh: Nelson and Sons, 1883) 1.579. Hodge discusses this as the second of three opinions that confuse creation and providence (577ff.).

²⁰ Already before this point, H. Bavinck had mentioned several texts: Ps.

gians have spoken about continued creation on the basis of this and other texts.²¹ This does not lead, however, to neglecting the distinction between creation and providence, as Hodge thought. Bavinck, at this point, refers to several texts to prove that God lets the creature act on its own.²² Bavinck's conclusion is that creation and providence are the same for God. He works with the same power both in creation and in providence. They are not different in God since God is eternally the same.²³ This does not mean, however, that the distinction between creation and providence is arbitrary. In creation, God calls into existence the things that do not exist. In providence, God addresses the things which have received their existence. "Creation yields existence, while preservation is persistence in existence."²⁴

Berkouwer

In our century, Berkouwer came back to this discussion between Hodge and Bavinck. He agrees with Hodge that the expression "continued creation" is dangerous. The term seems to imply that the continuity of the world is denied, and it is open to the danger of pantheism.²⁵ Against Bavinck, who defended the term with scriptural references, Berkouwer adduces several data from Scripture. He acknowledges that God's work of sustaining can be expressed with the verb "to create," but he notes that Scripture in connection with creation speaks about the past: "In the begin-

148:5; Isa. 45:7; Amos 4:13; see *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4th ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1928) 2.552 (English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* [4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008] 2.592).

²¹ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2.565 (ET 2.605). Bavinck, after having listed more expressions and texts comes to his conclusion: "So then, providence as an activity of God is as great, all-powerful, and omnipresent as creation; it is a continuous or continued creation. The two are one single act and differ only in structure" (ET 2.606).

²² H. Bavinck mentions Gen. 2:2; Ex. 20:11; 31:17 ("to rest"); Ps. 14:2; 33:13 ("to see"); 33:15 ("to observe"); 130:3 ("to mark"); the text is mistakenly printed as Ps. 103:3 and draws the conclusion that all these expressions presuppose the existence, activity, and freedom of the creature; see *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2.566–567 (ET 2.606–607).

²³ This is a weak argument. It is questionable whether the fact that God is always the same necessarily leads to the conclusion that for God the actions of creation and providence cannot be distinct.

²⁴ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2.568 (ET 2.608).

²⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (original Dutch ed., 1950; trans. L. B. Smedes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 64.

ning you laid the foundations of the earth” (Ps. 102:25).²⁶

He continues by listing texts indicating the stability of creation.²⁷ He also refers to texts in the New Testament that speak of creation as something of the past. To give an example, Mark 10:6 says, “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’”²⁸ On the basis of these texts, Berkouwer concludes that the “Scriptures compel us to make the distinction between creation and sustenance.”²⁹

Some Concluding Remarks

This leads to the conclusion that the expression “continued creation” as used by several Reformed theologians does not mean that Reformed theology thought there was no difference between creation and providence.³⁰

Another question is whether it is a suitable expression. We can make the following remarks:

1. When Reformed theologians used the term “continued creation,” they did not mean “repeated creation.” The expression does not mean that God created over and over again.³¹

2. The striking expression “continued creation” wants to draw attention to the fact that God does not allow creation to exist on its own after he created it. The phrase emphasizes that the same power by which God created the world is active in providence. Used in this way, it is a comforting expression since it shows that God who guides the world and our lives today is the same God who with his power created everything.

3. The term “continued creation” to describe providence has a scriptur-

²⁶ Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 65.

²⁷ Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 66. He mentions the following texts: Isa. 45:12; 40:22; 51:13; Eccl. 1:4; Ps. 89:11; 65:6; Job 37:18; Ps. 93:1. Not all texts function well in a context that wants to emphasize the distinction between creation and providence.

²⁸ Other texts are: Heb. 1:10, 2 Peter 3:4; Matt. 19:4, 8; see Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 66.

²⁹ Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 66.

³⁰ The lecture notes of A. Kuyper show that he, too, emphasized the difference between creation and providence. He developed this in opposition to Deism and Pantheism; see A. Kuyper, *Dictaten dogmatiek* (5 vols.; 2nd ed.; Kampen: Kok, n.d.) vol. 3, part 1.19ff.

³¹ See De Moor (*Commentarius perpetuus*, 2.423), who states this explicitly over against Wittichius.

al foundation. The fact cannot be denied that Scripture uses the word “to create” also for an aspect of God’s continuing work of upholding the world.

4. The word, however, could give the mistaken impression that creation is the same as providence. To prevent this misunderstanding from continuing, it would be wise not to speak of providence as “continued creation.”

5. In connection with our investigation of the difference between creation and providence, the most important conclusion is that Reformed theology, whether accepting or rejecting the term “continued creation,” was unanimous in maintaining that creation is not to be confused with providence.

Part 3

J. H. Stek on Providence

In the two previous parts, it was shown that the distinction between creation and providence is present in the confessions and is expounded by theological studies. After all this, it is a surprise to see a theologian, J. Stek, question the distinction. He knows that he is going against a long and strong tradition. He even acknowledges that the distinction can be found in Scripture. He points to Hebrews 1:2–3.³²

It is a fact that this text makes a distinction between creation and providence. Speaking about the importance of God’s Son, this text says first that he is involved in the work of creation (“his Son...through whom he made the universe,” v. 2), then, that he is involved in providence (“sustaining all things by his powerful word,” v. 3).³³ This is not the only text where creation and providence occur together as two different actions of God. To give an example from the Old Testament, we may note the prayer of the Levites: “You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the

³² Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” 244: “These theologians seem unaware that their sharp distinction between creation and preservation, however conceptually neat and theologically useful, might be a distinction they were sometimes reading back into the Bible. It can hardly be doubted that the distinction itself is present in Scripture (cf. Heb. 1:2–3).”

³³ The difference between creation and providence is not only expressed in the different verbs, but also in the different tenses of the verbs. “Created” is in the aorist indicative, indicating an action in the past; “upholding” is a present participle, indicating continuation. See on this text, e.g. Ph. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 39, 45.

heaven of heavens, with all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve them” (Neh. 9:6 ESV).³⁴ It would seem that the question has been decided before we began. Scripture clearly teaches the distinction between creation and providence.

Why, then, does Dr. Stek question whether the Bible keeps creation and providence distinct? He has two reasons. The first reason is that the term “to create” is not limited to the work of creation. The second, more important reason is the story of creation in Genesis 1. Let us have a closer look at these two reasons.

We have already come across the opinion that the word “to create” is used for more than the creation of things at the beginning of the world. Let us look at some examples. Psalm 104:30 says about the creatures, “When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.” We may think, too, of the well-known text from Ecclesiastes: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth...” (12:1). In texts like these, the words “to create” cannot mean the creation of Genesis 1.³⁵

What does it mean when the Bible says that God “creates” something? The verb is used when God brings about something new. A very clear example is found in Isaiah 48:7: “They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, ‘Yes, I knew of them.’”³⁶

The characteristic of newness is also apparent in the examples given above. Psalm 104:29 says that the creatures die and return to dust when God takes away their breath. Through God’s Spirit, however, they are created; the creatures reappear on earth.³⁷ When Ecclesiastes speaks about the “Creator”

³⁴ Neh. 9:6. Other examples are: Ps. 65:5 and 6; Ps. 104:5–9 and 10–29; Job 38:4–11 and 12–41; Acts. 14:15 and 16–17.

³⁵ See the full list in Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” 246: “Ps. 104:30 (God’s ‘creation’ of each new generation of living things), Ps. 102:18 (the ‘creation’ of each new generation of worshipers), Eccl. 12:1 (God’s ‘creation’ of each individual; cf. Job 10:8–12; 31:15; 33:4; 40:15; Ps. 139:13–15; Prov. 22:2; Isa. 43:7; Mal. 2:10), Isa. 43:1 (God’s ‘creation’ of Israel; cf. v. 15; 27:11; 44:2, 24) and Isa. 54:16 (God’s ‘creation’ of the blacksmith and the destroyer).”

³⁶ See e.g. the article on *bara’* by Th. E. McComisky, in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 127.

³⁷ It is not immediately clear what creatures are meant here. According to J. Ridderbos, there are two possibilities. Verse 30 speaks either about the renewal of plant life in spring, or about new generations of men and animals that replace the generations that succumb; see J. Ridderbos, *De Psalmen* (2 vols.; Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen, Kok, 1958) 2.493.

of man, the writer means God as the one who makes man.³⁸ The word does not speak of the first creation, but of the making of every individual man. Even then it refers to something new that appears on earth.

The extent of the newness of what God creates depends on the context. In the context of Genesis 1, which begins with the earth as being without form and void, the obvious meaning of “to create” is to make something absolutely new. The use of the verb in Genesis 1 supports the view that there is a distinction between creation and providence.³⁹

Stek’s View on Genesis 1

The second and more important point for Stek’s questioning of the distinction between creation and providence is Genesis 1. He thinks that the distinction between creation and providence is questionable because of Genesis 1. The chapter repeatedly uses the expression: “Let there be...” This command cannot be limited to origin. There is not an additional decree: “Let the created be preserved.” In other words, the expression “let there be” must combine creation and providence.⁴⁰

Think of the first command: “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). This decree originates, preserves, and governs light. The decree of God is enduring in its effects. Or think of the word: “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear” (v. 9). This command is not limited to the coming into existence. By this decree the seas are even now kept in place.⁴¹ Thus, Stek’s main argument is that God’s commandments to the earth in the beginning prove that creation is not different from providence.

In answer to this, it could be questioned first of all whether the command “Let there be...” combines creation and preservation. The chapter gives a different impression. The fulfilment of God’s commandment “Let there be light” is indicated with the same verb: “And there was light.” This

³⁸ A very uncommon word is used; see on the word, F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M. G. Easton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 403. The word has, according to Delitzsch, the same meaning as the word “Maker” in Job 35:10; Isa. 54:5; and Ps. 149:2.

³⁹ That “to create” is not exclusively used for the first creation has been noted before; see e.g. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2.565 (ET 2.605); and Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 65. This has never led to the conclusion that creation and providence cannot be kept apart. The word “to create” is not to be confused with the concept of creation.

⁴⁰ See Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” 246.

⁴¹ Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” 247.

clearly refers to creation. The light that was not, is now shining.⁴² That the light was created to stay is obvious and need not be expressed explicitly.

Creation and Providence in Genesis 1

More important is that creation is mentioned separately in this chapter. Look at the creation of the second day. First, there is the command: “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate waters from water” (v. 7). The Bible continues with: “So God made the expanse....” The expression “God made” refers to creation as distinct from providence.

Or consider the fourth day. Here creation and providence are even distinguished explicitly. God first gave the command: “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years” (v. 14). This is followed by a separate mention of creation: “God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars” (v. 16). After that, God assigns places to these creatures: “God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth” (v. 17). Their task of providing light for the earth belongs to God’s government, as a part of God’s providence.

Things are different with respect to the animals, but here, as well, a distinction is made between creation and providence. God gives the command: “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky” (v. 20). When God executes his own decree, the Bible first says: “So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing...” (v. 21). This refers to the beginning, to creation. In verse 22, however, we read: “God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.’” This is part of providence. The continuation of the animals is ensured, not by giving eternal life to the animals but by propagation. A careful reading of the whole chapter reveals that the distinction between creation and providence is present in Genesis 1.

⁴² The commandment is expressed as a jussive of the verb “to be” (i.e. “there must be”). “And there was” is the imperfect of the same verb. Gispen notes that God’s commandment is executed punctually; see W. H. Gispen, *Genesis* (3 vols.; Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1974) 1.48.

Stek's Reason for Equating Creation and Providence

More needs to be said, however. The question cannot be suppressed: why is it so important for Stek to state that the distinction between creation and providence is not indicated in Genesis 1? Since he recognizes the fact that the distinction occurs in the Bible, why does he insist that it is absent in Genesis 1? The reason is that it is important for Stek to see creation and providence as basically the same. If there is no difference between God's action of creation and God's action of providence, then creation takes place according to the same mechanics that are at work in providence.

This is, indeed, the view of Stek. He says that the creation decrees had been at work for billions of years before the universe had the form which the writer of Genesis perceived.⁴³ This immensely long period is needed to make room for a very slow and gradual development that took place under God's creation decrees. In other words, creation is not distinct from providence, but God created the world by means of the processes of providence.⁴⁴ This must be the reason why the distinction between creation and providence has to disappear.

Creation and Providence Cannot be Equated

This view of creation is contrary to Scripture. Scripture shows in three different ways that a clear distinction exists between the processes of beginning and continuation. First of all, this distinction is very clear in the description of the third, fifth, and sixth days. God speaks to the earth that it bring forth vegetation. Out of the earth something new is formed—plants. These plants, however, yield seed, and the fruit trees bear fruit in which is their seed. All seeds are “according to their various kinds.” When the seeds are sown, new plants of the same kind will grow up. No longer will the earth bring forth plants. Instead, the plants will be self-

⁴³ Stek, “What Says the Scripture?” 249: “That the Creator’s creation decrees had been at work for billions of years (as humans count time) before the physical universe had attained the form he perceived and become the arena of human history as he knew it was not known by (or made known to) the writer of this creation narrative. Nor was that his concern (or the concern of the Spirit that ‘moved’ him). Cosmological and geological ‘history’ in the modern scientific sense were not in his purview.”

⁴⁴ Stek does not make clear whether this process still continues. One sentence seems to indicate that it does, when Stek speaks of “a world that every day, in all its order, vitality, and progressive unfolding, incarnates God’s creation words issued ‘in the beginning.’” “What Says the Scripture?” 249.

propagating.⁴⁵ The continuation of the plants differs from the way in which they came into existence.

The same can be observed on the fifth day. The waters bring forth the fish, and at God's word, birds fly in the heavens. Here we notice creation—God made new kinds of beings. From then on, however, the processes of providence will take over: “God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth’” (v. 22). Under God's blessing, fish and birds will multiply themselves.

This is even clearer in the creation of man. Genesis 2 gives more information about man's creation. God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. He also made Eve from a rib of Adam (Gen. 2:7, 22). That was the extraordinary beginning of mankind. God also indicated, however, that the rule for the continuation of mankind would be different: “And God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it...’” (Gen. 1:28). God did not continue forming men from the dust. Instead, the human race would be built from children formed in the womb (Ps. 139). Creation differs from providence.

In the second place, the story of creation in Genesis 1 indicates in yet another way the difference between creation and providence. This chapter begins with the creation of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1). Every new creation begins with: “And God said....” In some cases, the making is included; in other instances, the making is mentioned separately.⁴⁶ However, Genesis 2 explicitly states that this work came to an end: “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array” (Gen. 2:1). On the seventh day, God had finished his work which he had done. The seventh day rece-

⁴⁵ Stek explains the words “Let the land produce vegetation” as follows: “These forms of the creation word for living things are rather a reflex of the common observation that plants and trees spring from the ground and that since at death animals and man return to the dust, they must have come from the dust,” “What Says the Scripture?” 248, note 73. This explanation does injustice to the text. In the first place, it overlooks that the words “let the land produce” are followed by a reference to the seed, showing that there is a difference between the first growth, without seed, and all following growth, from seed. More importantly, he attributes a word of God to the common observation of man. Together with creation as extraordinary work of God, revelation as extraordinary communication from God is not taken into consideration.

⁴⁶ The realization of God's plans is sometimes described as: “God made” (Gen. 1:7, 16, 25), in other cases as: “God created” (Gen. 1:21, 27).

ives a special place “because on it [God] rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Gen. 2:3).⁴⁷

Genesis 2:1 indicates that the period of creating ended with the sixth day, and that it was followed by a period which was different in character. Genesis 1, therefore, not only says that God’s making of his creatures is different from God’s preserving them, but this chapter also says that the first part of God’s work was finished in six days. This first part is the work which God had done in creation. God’s creative activity during the six days is different in character from what he still does.

In the third place, the Scriptures confirm that God’s work of creation is different from what followed. We can think of several indications:

- Scripture repeats the teaching that God ended his creation work on the sixth day (Gen. 2:1) in Exodus 20:11 and 31:17.
- Scripture teaches that God’s creation work belongs to the beginning of the world. Psalm 102:25 says, “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth” (see also Mark 10:6; Heb. 1:10, Matt. 19:4, 8; 24:21; 2 Peter 3:4).⁴⁸
- Scripture emphasizes the extraordinary character of the work of creation. Psalm 33:6 says, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made.” Romans 4:17 says, “God calls into existence the things that do not exist” (RSV). Hebrews 11:3 says, “The universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” God created by speaking.

Conclusion

It can be readily admitted that God’s work of providence did not begin after the six days. God upholds everything. Without him nothing can exist. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This work of upholding and governing all things began right after each thing was created. We can agree with everyone who wants to emphasize that creation cannot be separated from providence.

We have to maintain at the same time, however, that the work of creation differs from the work of government. This distinction, confessed in our Reformed confessions, is clearly taught in Scripture. The distinction

⁴⁷ W. H. Gispen says that the verb, translated as “to rest from,” is used in Hebrew for “to stop with”; see his *Genesis* 1.85–86.

⁴⁸ See Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, 66, who also refers to the expression “from the beginning of creation” in Mark 10:6; Heb. 1:10; 2 Peter 3:4; Matt. 19:4, 8.

between creation and providence is part of our faith and, as such, it must be maintained.

However, this distinction is not important merely for a correct view of the origin of the world. It is also very relevant in the lives of the believers. It is important to maintain that God's creation work at the beginning is different from his everyday work of upholding the created world. The doctrine of creation shows us that God not only works with what is there, but even made what was not there. The doctrine of creation emphasizes that God has done more than the usual and unusual things we experience in this world today. God is not bound to what is there. He can make gnats from the dust of the earth (Ex. 8:16) and children of Abraham from stones (Luke 3:8). We should never limit God to the possibilities of this world. Recognition of the distinction between creation and providence doubles our praise for God's work in the past and increases our trust in God for today.

It is also the basis of our hope for the future. God does not just guide the processes present in the world; in the end, he will make all things new. There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). The God who can create can also re-create the world. That is why we can believe against all hope (Rom. 4:18) and be assured of things hoped for but not seen (Heb. 11:1). Since God is the God of creation, our hope for the new creation is well founded.