

# CHAPTER 3

## God created and creates

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Belief in a creator is not unique to the biblical material and is seen in different ways in many religions. Paul indicated this, for example, in his speech to the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17: 22-28). Some form of creator is also common to Australian Indigenous spirituality. However, the biblical material emphasises that all life and all existence begin with God who created and creates. Creation is the result of the will of God, the ever-living creator, and emphasises that we are completely dependent on God for our existence. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). While creation is most often related to God the Father, the Bible speaks of all three persons of the trinity being involved in creation: all things were created through the Son (Jn 1:1-4, 10) and the Holy Spirit is confessed as the life-giver through whom creation came into existence.

However, creation is not simply God's action in the past. God continues to create. Luther captured this continuing creation of God in his explanation to the first article of the creed (SC Creed 2: Kolb and Wengert: 354-355):

*I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done*

*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*

God's continuing creation therefore assures us that every individual life has meaning and purpose.

Creation theology therefore reflects these two different aspects, original creation and continuing creation. Often these are represented in theological writing by two Latin tags:

- *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) refers to the beginning of creation as, for example, in Genesis 1 and 2, Psalm 104, or Job 38. It corresponds to original creation.
- *creatio continua* (continuing creation) refers to God's ongoing work of creation in preserving the world and everything that lives in it.

These two aspects of creation theology are complementary ways of describing God's work of creation and should not be seen in any way in conflict with each other. Ultimately the doctrine of creation does not have its focus on origins as such but on faith in the creator and his ongoing relationship with what he has created as Luther reflected in the explanation of the Creed given above.

Creation theology also involves a future dimension in which believers already share. This is the 'new creation' which has been initiated through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In this way creation and redemption [the saving work of Jesus Christ] belong together, and redemption is really the renewal of creation. This 'new creation' will be fully revealed at the end of time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, created by God who in Christ makes all things new (Rev 21:1,5).

### **Biblical sources**

Consideration of creation theology often concentrates on the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. While these are important sources, they are not the only ones and probably not the earliest ones in the oral tradition behind the biblical material. For example, the Psalms contain numerous references to creation, particularly Psalm 104, but also Psalms 8:3-9; 19:1-6; 33:6-9; 95:1-7a; 136:1-9; 139:13-16. Proverbs speaks about the creation of the world through 'wisdom' (Prov 8:22-31). Job 38-41 provides another perspective on original creation. The prophets refer to

creation, for example Isa 44:24-28; 45:9-13; Jer 27:5; 32:17 as they urge the people of Israel to remain faithful to God their maker.

The New Testament provides frequent references to theology of creation. Again the triune God is presented as the one who creates and cares for all things: Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Eph 3:9; Mt 6:25-34; 10:29-31; Heb 11:3; Rev 4:11 There are numerous references to the relationship between Jesus Christ and creation (John 1:1-4, 10; Col 1:15-16), especially between the saving work of Jesus Christ and the 'new creation' (Rom 8:18-25; Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:15-20).

## Original creation [*creatio ex nihilo*']

As we have already indicated, creation theology is concerned with the beginnings of the universe. It is not hard to believe that some supreme power created all things. The beauty and order of the universe can lead to that conclusion. But even the most advanced study of the universe cannot tell us **who** its creator is or **why** the universe has been created. The creator can be known only because he has made himself known to us in his word — especially through the Word who became a human being, God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us that the creator of the universe is not some impersonal force, but God, the wise and loving heavenly Father. What makes Christian teaching about creation different from any other is that Christians view the creation of the universe with the eyes of faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit working through the biblical witness reveals to us that Jesus is the focus also of the creation story (Jn 1:2, Col 1:15-17, Heb 1:2).

The Bible does not answer all questions about the creation of the universe. That is not its purpose. It is the legitimate domain of science to investigate questions of origin. The Bible is more concerned to lead people to know the creator and the relationship between the creator and his creation than it is to teach them to know everything about the creation.

### Major emphases of the bible concerning original creation

- God created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The universe is not eternal, matter is not eternal (Heb 11:3). In order to explain sin, suffering and natural disasters, some people have taught that God

created the world out of pre-existing material which was flawed. However, on the basis of the Bible, the church has concluded that God made the world out of nothing. Evil, as will be discussed in the next chapter, has a different origin.

- Creation is the result of God's deliberate decision and action. Creation is a free act of God's will. In a number of religions and philosophies, for example the Babylonian creation myths, creation is seen as a struggle between a 'good god' and an 'evil god'. The ancient Greeks thought of the creation of the cosmos as the activity of an inferior god, a *demiurge*, and they thought that the immortal soul was imprisoned in a frail and faulty body, awaiting release from this bondage by death. The biblical teaching counters such views. There is no dualism: God is the creator of all things.
- God is not part of his creation nor is creation an extension of God [as in *pantheism*]. A clear distinction is made between God the creator and creation. While God may be revealed in creation (eg Ps 19:1), God is never one with, nor part of his creation, except when God deliberately became part of creation in Jesus Christ. This means that any worship of creation is idolatry, worshipping the creation rather than the creator (Rom 1:25).
- God created all things by his word. He spoke creation into existence through his powerful, performative, and creative word (Ps 33:6-9). 'God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen 1:3). The Bible does not offer scientific explanations of the 'how' of creation; it simply tells us that God is the creator. The universe is God's (Ps 24:1-2).
- God created in an orderly way. Genesis 1 brings out the 'rhythm' and orderliness of God's creative work as God created order out of chaos. In each stage of creation, God speaks, another stage of creation is completed, and God sees that his creation is good.
- God's creation is good. There was perfect harmony in God's creation. When God looked at all he had created, everything was just the way he intended it to be (Gen 1:31). God is not responsible for the disharmony, disorder and evil we observe and experience now. However, even after sin marred what God originally created, it is still 'good'. Certainly God's good creation can be abused and perverted

and we see the effects of sin, for example, in the destructive fury of nature, but faith in God still allows believers to see the goodness of creation and the gifts God gives in creation. It is important not to develop dualistic thinking which sees creation as totally corrupt and no longer the means through which God continues to care for all which he created and through which people can enjoy the gifts of creation. God invites us to share in the joy and wonder of creation (Ps 8, 104, 136:1-9). However, just as in the beginning everything was precisely as God had planned it, so believers look forward to the end of time when all things will be restored to their original perfection in the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1,5).

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*Students in Lutheran schools need to be encouraged to look beyond the impact of sin on God's good creation and celebrate and enjoy that creation using the gifts and opportunities which they are given. Students need to be stimulated to proclaim their response to God's good creation through drama, music, painting, dance, poetry, photography, creative writing, and any other creative and artistic means of expression. Schools need to ensure that such avenues are not reduced by other pressures within the total school curriculum.*

*One aspect of God's good creation which may need special and careful treatment in Lutheran schools is the area of human sexuality. Sexuality is one of God's good gifts and needs to be seen as such in its God-given function and not misused, denigrated or 'worshipped' as often happens in society. Too often students develop their attitudes to sexuality from the media and internet and are subject to peer pressure through the social media. Parents may appreciate opportunities through the school to discuss ways to handle education in appropriate sexual attitudes.*

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- God looks after the universe he created. God set up the laws of nature (day and night, the seasons, the laws of physics, etc) by which the universe continues to exist in an orderly way. God is not limited by these laws, however. God continues to work within his creation and he may use his power to bring about 'supernatural', miraculous events. This understanding of God's involvement in creation differs

from that of *deism* which sees God as a kind of ‘clockmaker’ who created the world, set it in motion according to particular laws, but now remains aloof from creation, observing it only at a distance. It also differs from the view that God is simply there to fill in the gaps [the ‘God of the gaps’] which our reason and science cannot fill. The danger with this view is that as our understanding of creation expands, God is pushed further and further into the background. He is no longer seen as involved actively in it.

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*Students and staff in Lutheran schools will be challenged by a number of differing views about creation and the origin of the universe. It is critical here that the temptation to try to read the Bible as a text of biology, geology, palaeontology, genetics, or any other of the disciplines of science is avoided. The long running debate between evolution and creation continues to have an impact in some Lutheran schools. More recently Lutheran schools have been influenced by issues such as ‘creationism’ [reading the Bible, especially the first 2 chapters of Genesis as a scientific document and asserting that creation happened at about 4000 BC] and ‘intelligent design’ [that the existence of God can be ‘proved’ on the basis of the intricate design of the universe and the intricate web of life].*

*The doctrine of original creation opens up the study of that creation for the Lutheran school curriculum. Recognising creation as the work of the creator God encourages and requires Lutheran schools to wonder at, celebrate and enjoy that creation and to explore it and examine the pattern, design and causality within God’s creation. At the same time Lutheran schools must guard against trying to use archaeology, biology, genetics astronomy and other disciplines of science to try to ‘prove’ the historical accuracy of the Bible. The truth of the Bible is not open to that type of ‘proof’ since its truth rests on faith.*

*Some comments on creation and the theory of evolution:*

- *since both theology and natural science seek to explore the truth in relation to the origin of the universe, and since both*

*seek to take reality seriously, ultimately they need not be in conflict: this can only happen, however, if both theology and science remain open to the insights gained by the other; this will not occur if either theology or science take an absolute view whereby one is considered right and the other wrong*

- *science is a gift of God which works with physical, measurable data: to use science to discredit God or usurp the place of God, is false science. However, it is important here to distinguish between the areas of faith and reason.*
- *in relation to the origin of the universe, revelation concentrates on the questions of 'who' and 'why' whereas science operates with the questions of 'what', 'how' and 'when'.*
- *in relation to the theory of evolution, it is important to recognise that there are in fact numerous theories: for example, 'theistic evolution' holds that things did develop from a previous state or form, but that this process is under the impetus and guidance of God: 'atheistic evolution' claims that this process is entirely due to random forces without the need for any God, while 'special creation', on the other hand, posits that everything was suddenly and directly created by God.*
- *on the basis of revelation, Christians may hold views such as 'theistic evolution' or 'special creation': however this will mean affirming the scriptural teachings of God as the creator of all life, that human beings are a special creation of God made in the 'image of God' and that the fall into sin is an episode in history.*
- *'creation science' takes an absolute and literalist view of Genesis 1; it therefore turns the creation account into scientific 'fact'. This is inconsistent with a Lutheran approach to the interpretation of Scripture: it shifts the focus of Scripture from the person and work of Jesus Christ to scientific theory.*
- *the debate about creation and evolution can place the emphasis of creation theology on 'original creation' at the expense of 'continuing creation'.*

- *evolutionary theology can be incorrectly applied to other areas such as politics and social theory. This can lead to dangerous views which see people who are regarded as physically, mentally, racially or economically ‘inferior’ as being expendable. These views can have an impact in discussions about abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering or ethnic cleansing.*
  - *a misapplication of evolutionary theory in some circles can lead to the notion that human society is continually evolving and improving towards some state of ‘utopia’. However, despite such ‘improvements’ in technological development, improved medical conditions, rising standards of living, a realistic assessment of the state of the world could lead to a very different conclusion.*
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## Human beings are God’s special creation

Whatever understanding we may have of the process of creation, the Bible emphasises that human beings are a special creation of God (Ps 8:4-6). In fact, they are seen as the climax or crown of God’s creative work (Gen 1:26-30), the result of a specific decision by the creator God. Even though God cares for all of creation, including the sparrows (Mt 10:29), human beings are unique and different from all other living things which God created. Genesis 2:7 speaks about the special creation of human beings: God formed the person from the dust of the ground and breathed God’s breath [in Hebrew the word ‘*ruach*’ can be translated as ‘breath’, ‘spirit’ or ‘wind’] into the person who became a living person. Therefore a human being is both dust [at one with the earth from which the person was taken, which is shared with all creation, and to which the person will one day return] and God’s breath [spirit]. This means that human beings have a ‘vertical’ relationship with God, and a ‘horizontal’ relationship with the rest of creation. God is the author of human life. The gift of life rests with God who gives life and takes life.

While the Bible speaks of the human being as ‘dust’ and ‘breath/spirit’, the Bible emphasises the unity of the individual persons. When the New Testament speaks of body, soul, and spirit, it is not implying that human beings are made of three parts. [Greek philosophical thinking,



which influenced some early Christian thinking, tended to draw a sharp distinction between ‘body’ and ‘soul’ with the ‘soul’ imprisoned in the ‘body’.] Rather body, soul, and spirit are three different ways of looking at human beings. Instead of saying we *have* a body, we *have* a soul, or we *have* a spirit, it is better to say that we *are* body, we *are* soul, or we *are* spirit (1 Thess 5:23). It is important that we recognise that the body is part of God’s ‘good’ creation (Gen 1:31) and should be respected and treated as such. The body is the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ and St Paul urges Christians to ‘glorify God in your body’ (1 Cor 6: 19-20). The body will rise again at the end of time (Phil 3:20-21; 1 Cor 15:35-57).

Because human beings contain the spirit/breath of God, they are spiritual beings. The life of every human being is sacred, and God demands that we value every human life as he does. This affects the way we consider all stages of human life, from conception to death.

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*Understanding human beings as the special creation of God provides important insights in a number of issues and situations which arise in the Lutheran school. For example, seeing human beings as dust and breath links individuals closely with all of creation and provides a vital link between the welfare of human beings and the welfare of the rest of creation. [The close link between human beings and the land in aboriginal spirituality is an important insight here.] Seeing life as the breath of God in human beings emphasises the spiritual dimension in each individual and the recognition that an individual is not simply a ‘biological accident’. It stresses the sanctity of life which needs to be considered when dealing with ethical issues such as euthanasia, abortion, and stem cell research.*

*The biblical emphasis on the importance of the body needs emphasis when dealing with matters of sexuality, obesity, alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm and body image. Students need support and guidance to see themselves as body, soul and spirit. Pedagogy needs to allow students to understand themselves as whole individuals integrating mind, emotions, attitudes, skills and behaviour.*

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### **Created in the ‘image of God’**

Genesis 1:26-28 emphasises the uniqueness of human beings in another way. Male and female human beings were created ‘in the image of God’ (Gen 1:27). While there is considerable debate amongst biblical scholars about how to interpret these words, there is general agreement that it does not mean that humans look like God [who is spirit] nor that it is seen in capacities such as reason, speech, or intelligence which can be seen to distinguish humans from the animal world.

From a biblical perspective, ‘image of God’ indicates that human beings are created for fellowship with God, to be able to relate to God and live in conscious relationship with him. They are able to know God, believe in God, love and obey God. Human beings are really only fully human when they are in fellowship with God as God created them to be. Even though Christians recognise that through the advent of sin the image of God is now deeply fractured and the original sinlessness, goodness and holiness has been lost, Christians understand that the image of God is gradually being restored in them by the power of the Holy Spirit as they grow in holiness (Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10).

The question is sometimes asked whether the advent of sin has led to the total loss of ‘the image of God’. Clearly sin has had an impact on the relationship between human beings and God. However, the Bible still refers to the image of God in human beings (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9). The New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ as the perfect image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:3). And it says that those who are in Christ are being transformed by the Spirit from one degree of glory to another (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), until such time as the transformation is complete (1 Cor 15:49), and believers conform totally to God’s perfect image in the new heaven and the new earth.

The ‘image of God’ is recognised in the responsibility which God has placed on human beings to be his representatives [‘stewards’] on earth to take care of creation on his behalf (Gen 1:28). In doing this they are accountable to God for the way in which they represent God and manage the earth. They are to take care of creation (Gen 2:15) and not to exploit, misuse or abuse it. Human beings also have the power to procreate, becoming partners with God in the creation of new life.

*This role of stewardship and responsibility for creation on behalf of God is a critical area for Lutheran schools. It provides a focus which will be developed further as other aspects of theology are considered. It challenges Lutheran schools to provide a perspective of creation which goes beyond an individualistic, materialistic, consumerist approach to the gifts, opportunities and responsibilities within creation. It offers important insights for an appreciation of the inter-relatedness of human beings with the whole of creation and the development of sensitivity to ecological considerations.*

*Being created in the 'image of God' emphasises God's mandate that human beings are to be careful and responsible stewards of all that God has created. Lutheran schools should therefore be leaders in learning and teaching about such issues as ecology, care for the environment, social justice, global perspectives, distribution of wealth, and similar concerns. It is relevant to all members of the Lutheran school community whether or not they recognise God as creator. All human beings, as part of the human family, are responsible for the care and protection of the environment and its resources and for meeting the needs of all people. Learning and teaching in this area should go beyond simply an awareness of these matters. It should promote lively participation in activities which develop responsible stewardship in the local and global community as is seen in the current emphasis in Lutheran schools on 'service learning'. In all of these situations the focus must remain on God's actions and purposes and not simply on human intentions.*

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The 'image of God' can also be seen in the human conscience (Rom 2:14-15): people being aware of what is right and what is wrong, and recognising the voice of their conscience as they respond to various circumstances. The impact of the 'image of God' is apparent when people, however vaguely, are aware of the existence and presence of a 'god' to whom they are in some sense answerable (Acts 17: 27-28). Consequences of this were considered in chapter 1.

## Created as unique individuals

Theology of creation teaches that each person is created as a unique individual with distinctive characteristics, gifts and abilities, strengths and weaknesses (cf Luther's explanation to the first article of the Apostles Creed). No two human beings are identical. Each person, therefore, has individual worth and value in the eyes of God. They are valued for who they are, and not because of 'their utility' (Christenson: 70). Human worth is not diminished by illness, handicap, age, or failure of any kind; nor does it have anything to do with race, colour, gender, distinctive characteristics and abilities, or anything else that distinguishes one human being from another. All people are of equal worth because 'God does not show favouritism' (Acts 10:34 NIV). Since God sees each individual with worth and dignity, each person can develop realistic self-awareness, self-identity and self-acceptance through interaction with others.

This value of the individual rests not only on God's creative work but also on the fact that Jesus has died for each person and that the Holy Spirit offers faith to each individual and lives within each believer.

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*Recognition of the individuality and uniqueness of each individual within the Lutheran school context provides an important perspective for much of what happens in the school. It must be reflected throughout the policy, pedagogy, relationships and everything which the school does. All persons within the Lutheran school community need to be affirmed of their value in the eyes of God and of the school community. This will apply to students with 'special needs' and those who experience bullying or other forms of exclusion within the school context. It has much to say about how particularly 'gifted' students are treated.*

*Recognising the uniqueness and individual worth and dignity of all students, staff, parents and anyone else associated with the school community provides the basic motivation for fostering and developing caring relationships for all individuals. This reflects the Christian belief that all people are precious and loved by God. Even though individuals differ greatly and within a school context there will be those who may seem difficult, frustrating and disruptive*

*at times, care must be taken so that personal reactions and judgements do not preclude certain individuals from appropriate caring relationships. All within the Lutheran school context need consideration, affirmation, guidance and attention.*

*These theological insights have significant implications for the pedagogy practised within the school so that it addresses individual student needs and recognises the various learning styles and the so-called different 'intelligences'. These insights need careful consideration in the construction and implementation of an inclusive total school curriculum recognising the range of opportunities within the school community. The school enrolment policy needs to be viewed in this inclusive light.*

*Students in Lutheran schools will require guidance in learning how to deal with pressures which come from peers, parents, schools, churches, the media, advertising, and other external influences. The impact of social media and the extent to which they are part of the school environment and pedagogy will require careful analysis when considering the worth and value of individuals and the interpersonal relationships which are considered in the next subsection.*

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### **Created for relationship**

While theology of creation emphasises the importance of each person, it stresses that individuals are created for inter-dependence rather than for independence.

As has been discussed earlier, God exists in relationship. While we cannot understand the mystery of the trinity, it reveals to us that God is three persons who are in constant relationship with each other. Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together in love, because God is love and love comes from God (1 Jn 4:7-12). Because God exists in relationship, human beings who were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26) are created for relationship.

The story of creation (Gen 2:14b-25) shows how highly God values relationships. God is concerned that Adam should not be alone but have a companion, 'a helper as his partner' (Gen 2:18). God goes to great lengths to ensure Adam finally has another person with whom

to share in relationship. Paradise is represented as the place of perfect relationships between God and human beings, human beings and the whole of the created world, and human beings with each other and within themselves. Before the advent of sin to distort and destroy those relationships, nothing disturbed them.

Human beings relate to each other at various levels. Each person is related to every other member of the human family, but God has placed us in a closer relationship with some people than with others. Relationships also change: for example parent/child relationships, friendships, work relationships. The closer the relationship, the greater the mutual benefits, but also the responsibilities.

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*The fostering of positive relationships between all individuals in the Lutheran school is fundamental to establishing and maintaining the school as a caring, supporting community. This provides the basis for pastoral care and for dealing with situations where relationships break down between individuals or within the community. This will be explored more fully in chapter 4.*

*This aspect of interdependence raises again the question of appropriate pedagogies in Lutheran schools. How is competition handled in the classroom? Can those students who are differently gifted interact appropriately in the classroom? Are there subtle, or not so subtle, examples of victimisation or even bullying in the classroom?*

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## God's continuing creation [*creatio continua*']

The Bible emphasises that God has not withdrawn from creation. He continues to work in it and preserve it also using human beings as his agents. The theology of creation does not see God as a clockmaker ['deism'] who set the world into motion and now allows it to run by itself. Continuing creation recognises how God continues to provide for, sustain, and take care of his creation.

God cares for all people, not only those who believe in him. All people are his children since he has created them. He makes his sun rise on the evil as well as the good, and sends the rain on the just and the unjust

(Mt 5:45). Jesus says that God knows even the number of hairs on our head (Mt 10:30). This care of God is extended to all of his creation (Ps 104: 27-30; 145: 15-16). God even looks after the sparrows and the wild flowers in the field, and so Jesus urges his followers to trust in his care, and not to be concerned or to worry about anything (Mt 6:25-34).

Although God can intervene in his creation in a miraculous or supernatural way to carry out his purposes in the world (Ex 16: 4; Jn 2:1-11) and can work through the ministry of angels (Ps 91: 11-12; 34:7; Mt 18:10; Heb 1:14) in taking care of his creation, God works through various avenues which he has incorporated into his creation. Thus God works through the laws of nature whereby the seasons come and go and he sustains life through the earth, the air and the oceans which provide food, water, clothing, energy, and other necessities of life. God works through means such as medical science and the advances of technology which human beings develop through their God-given gift of reason. He works through the structures and the customs, traditions, legislation and law enforcement procedures within society which enable people to live together happily, peacefully, safely and productively. Here God also operates with the law written on human hearts to which conscience bears witness (Rom 2:15).

As has been mentioned previously, God has made human beings the caretakers of creation (Gen 2:15). They work on his behalf through the structures in society which are known as the 'orders of creation'. There are basically four such structures in which human beings participate in society: the home [marriage and the family], the work place [which may or may not be paid employment], community life [including the formal relationships of the political and social structures or the more informal relationships of neighbourly contact and associations for specific purposes] and the congregation (Kolb: 77-78). The implications of this responsibility on behalf of God will be more fully explored in the next section on 'vocation'.

The theology of continuing creation recognises that God is present in disasters and tragedy. When evil seems to triumph, it looks as if God is no longer in control, even though God assures us that he can use even evil for his own purposes (Is 45:7). This is an important aspect of theology which will be explored in the next chapter when dealing with the impact of sin in the world.

## Vocation

An important extension of the teaching of ‘continuing creation’ is the doctrine of ‘vocation’. This was one of the important theological insights which received special attention at the time of the reformation and one which Luther and the other reformers saw as vital for the church in their day. To some extent the doctrine of vocation slid into the background until more recently when it has been recognised again as central to the understanding of the way God works in the world. It is crucial for an understanding of the purpose and role of Lutheran schools.

### Luther’s theological insights

Luther reacted to the medieval concept of ‘vocation’ which he regarded as too narrow. At this time in the church ‘vocation’ [which comes from the Latin word ‘*vocatio*’ meaning ‘to call’] was used primarily to refer to full-time vocations in the church such as priests, monks and nuns. These were regarded as having a superior status over people engaged in all other forms of work or employment which were regarded as ‘secular’. Luther removed this distinction and saw all people as doing God’s work as a calling from God to serve the needs of others (Christenson: 49-50). He saw God as operating through people in both the world and the church and could therefore say:

*when a maid milks the cows or a hired man hoes the field – provided that they are believers, namely that they conclude that this kind of life is pleasing to God and was instituted by God – they serve God more than all the monks and nuns, who cannot be sure about their kind of life. (LW 3:321)*

Vocation relates to God’s continuing creation and preservation of the world as he uses human beings as stewards within creation to carry out his purposes. It provides a way of looking at the total life of a person and is much broader than ‘occupation’ or ‘profession’. God carries out his purposes through all people, but only some see this as a response to God’s calling (1 Cor 1:26-27; Eph 4:1). It is seeing service to God through the serving of others in the roles into which we have been placed. From this perspective, only someone who recognises the call of God in their life sees their life as ‘vocation’.

Luther developed the term ‘masks of God’ (LW 7:184) to refer to the way God works through people to carry out his work in the world (Veith:



91-96). Luther draws here on the practice in the ancient Greek theatre where actors portrayed characters by using various masks [male actors could even represent women in this way since all actors were male]. The actor was in effect operating through the mask projecting the character to the audience while he remained hidden behind the mask. In the same way God works behind the scenes in caring for the creation. Human beings, God's 'masks', become the hands and feet of God. God could provide food by dropping it from heaven as he did with manna in the desert (Ex 16:35), but he chooses to use farmers, fishermen, bakers and fruit growers as his masks to provide food: he protects people and their property through judges and the police: he maintains peace and good order through the government: he heals people through doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Luther could go so far as to say: 'God Himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid' (Veith 94). The Christian recognises God behind the mask, but the unbeliever sees only the mask.

### **The 'orders of creation'**

Individuals find themselves living and operating within the 'orders of creation' [home, work place, community life and congregation] as God works through these structures. [Luther referred to these 'orders' with the German word '*Stand*' which is often translated as 'station' or 'estate'.] Contrary to the thinking at the time of Luther, no 'station' is higher or lower, more important or less important, than any other because all have as their goal to serve the other 'stations'. Together they are all necessary for human life. Luther said, 'For a good building we need not only hewn facings but also backing stones' (LW 46: 231).

These 'orders of creation' or 'stations' are the areas of responsibility in which people carry out their 'calling' [Luther used the term '*Beruf*']. Thus a person may at the same time have responsibilities as a husband or wife, a mother or father, a son or daughter, a sister or brother, an employee or employer, a member of a sporting club, a participant in a social club, a church youth group leader, a member of a congregational committee, and so on. These responsibilities may be paid employment or volunteer service and they will change from time to time. Seen in this light, even times when a person is unemployed or has been made redundant are still situations in which a person is 'in vocation' as they serve in their various relationships. Everyone, therefore, has a number

of areas of responsibility in which they carry out their 'vocation'. These areas will change as a person goes through life and as situations in which they find themselves change and new opportunities present themselves. Luther expressed it in this way (LW 46:250):

*It is not God's will that only those who are born kings, princes, lords, and nobles should exercise rule and lordship. He wills to have beggars among them also, lest they think it is nobility of birth rather than God alone who makes lords and rulers. (LW 46:250).*

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*The use of the term 'vocation' can sometimes mean little more than 'occupation' when it is used in Lutheran schools in terms such as 'vocational guidance'. The impression is often given that students are preparing for their vocation through their schooling and that their 'vocation' is some time in the future. Students need to be helped to see that they are living in vocation during their school years. They have responsibilities in their families and homes as sons or daughters, sisters or brothers: they have responsibilities as participants in various social groups, clubs or sporting teams. Above all, being a good student, playing their role in the school community and serving in that community while developing their gifts is an essential part of their vocation. In this regard, students may require assistance to develop a healthy balance between the many responsibilities which they may have also in out-of-school activities and which can rob them of 'down time' for simply relaxation and recuperation. Homework and school extra-curricular activities many need to be monitored.*

*Lutheran schools need to be aware of promoting a hierarchy of professions and making judgements on the value of individuals according to their professions. This is where expressions such as 'she is **just** a mother at home', or 'he is **just** a cleaner', devalue the important responsibilities which these people have and ignore all of the other areas of responsibility in which a particular person carries out their vocation. Schools need to help students prepare for periods of unemployment, or delays in finding regularly paid work, recognising the value of volunteerism as they prepare students for life as lifelong learners.*

*Developing an understanding of the theology of vocation is critical in pre-service and in-service programs for teachers. Teachers need to reflect on their own understanding of 'vocation' and how this relates to their various areas of responsibility*

*One of the difficulties of living in vocation is to maintain a balance between the various areas of responsibility which an individual has. In Lutheran schools it is important that the demands of the school do not place undue pressure on the other areas of responsibility which a teacher fulfils. Teachers may need help to avoid becoming 'workaholics' or losing the joy in vocation by seeing their responsibilities only from the perspective of 'a sense of duty'. A healthy life-work balance is vital and may be a concern for pastoral care.*

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### **Vocation as service to others**

God's purpose in vocation is to serve the needs of his creation through his 'masks'. Christians recognise that because God in Christ has served them, they are called by God to give glory to him by living out their vocation for the benefit of others. In this way Christians see that they are 'bearing good fruit' or 'doing good works' for the benefit of others (Eph 2:10). Vocation in this way links faith with daily life and carries worship out from the church and into the community (Rom 12:1-8).

In doing this, Christians recognise that God has given them gifts and abilities for service. These gifts are not simply for their own benefit or enjoyment, or to amass wealth and power for themselves, but for service to others. The recognition of these gifts and abilities, and the development of them, provide options for service to others. Luther saw it as particularly important that parents should assist their children to prepare for service in the world. 'Because it is God's will', said Luther, 'parents should send their children to school, and prepare them for the Lord God so that he may use them for the service of others' (LW 40: 314).

The parable of the 'talents' (Mt 25:14-30) provides a salutary warning against individuals devaluing, despising or failing to use the gifts and abilities God has given to them. Whether individuals feel that they have been entrusted by God with much or with little, the critical response is to be trustworthy and faithful with what one has been given. Greater

talents require greater responsibility. Another helpful parable follows on from the parable of the ‘talents’ (Mt 25:31-46), the parable of the last judgement. Here the emphasis is on service [or lack of service] to others as service [or lack of service] to Jesus Christ himself (Mt 23:40), even though the people involved are unaware that this is actually what is happening. Service to God is through service to others, especially those in need.

Sometimes individuals can make inappropriate decisions in identifying areas of responsibility for which they believe God has particularly gifted them and into which he has called them to serve. This can happen when they have unrealistic perceptions of their gifts, abilities and skills. It can be a stressful situation which needs to be addressed (Veith 103-108).

While the primary responsibility of vocation is to function as God’s masks in the world, vocation provides an opportunity for Christians to witness to their faith and its impact on their lives in their various areas of service. Thus, for example, in the *Small Catechism*, Luther placed the responsibility for the teaching of the Christian faith on ‘the head of the house’. (Kolb and Wengert: 351).

Vocation as service to others shows itself in the practice of prayer. In certain circumstances, prayer may be the only option to serve another person, but it is a very powerful and effective one. Christians recognise that when bringing someone and their needs to God in prayer, they are working together with Jesus Christ who intercedes on their behalf (1 Jn 2:1; Heb 4:14-16; 7:25) and with the Holy Spirit who prays for them even when they are uncertain or unable to pray themselves (Rom 8:26-27).

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*Vocation as service to others with the abilities and opportunities God has given presents a challenge for students and teachers in a consumerist, materialistic and acquisitive society. The attitude of ‘me first’ is difficult to counter, especially when some parents select Lutheran schools in the hope that they will assist their children to ‘get ahead’ in the world at the expense of others.*

*Students will need guidance in realistically assessing their gifts and talents so that they will make realistic decisions about possible avenues of service. Some may need to recognise that ‘from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required’ (Lk 12: 48b).*

*Teachers may need to evaluate their own approach to service and to accept challenges to other avenues which may present themselves in the school context or even question whether teaching is a place of responsibility in which they have been called to serve. The institution of Lutheran school requires critique to ensure that it is serving the people in its community and not its own ends as an institution (Christenson: 129).*

*The current emphasis on ‘service learning’ in Lutheran schools provides important opportunities for exploring vocation as service to others. This material provided on the LEA website includes material for those who see themselves as serving God through serving others as well as those who may see other motivation for acts of service. However, God can carry out his purposes through all people, whether they recognise him or not.*

*Viewing the educational process from the perspective of vocation provides important insights into the connection between learning and service.*

*‘Inquiry, knowing and learning continually shaped by the question, “How does this serve the needs of the world?” will be appreciatively different from knowing not accompanied by such a question. . . . Learning shaped by the idea of vocation will be closely connected to service. Theory must be critiqued by a doing that serves’ (Christenson: 126-129).*

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### **Vocation as a response to salvation**

Christians see their service in vocation as a response to God’s greatest act of service – salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a response to salvation and does not earn or contribute to it. Salvation is by grace. It is a free gift given through faith in Jesus Christ.

However, while justification has nothing to do with ‘good works’, vocation certainly involves ‘good works’ which God has prepared for people to do (Eph 2:8-10). Christians see vocation as doing God’s work because God is working through them. In the *Augsburg Confession* we read (AC 7,1-2; Kolb and Wengert: 41):

*this faith is bound to yield good fruits and ... it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not that we trust in these works to merit justification before God. For forgiveness of sins and justification are taken hold of by faith, as the saying of Christ also testifies [Luke 17:10]: "When you have done all [things] ... say, 'We are worthless slaves.'" [see also AC 20; Kolb and Wengert: 53-57].*

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*While the relationship between faith and good works will be considered in relation to a number of areas of theology, it will be important to try to help students see the response of service to others as a result of God's grace and not as a way to try to earn God's favour. 'We love because he first loved us' (1 Jn 4:19). Care will be required in trying to motivate students appropriately in 'service learning' so that students do not consider completing some service project as gaining credit with God. The motivation for service of students who do not share in the Christian faith becomes an issue here. However, discussion about service may become an opportunity for helping such students to gain insight into a Christian approach to service as well as encouraging them to serve their fellow human beings on the basis of their own motivation.*

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### **'Carrying the cross' in vocation**

The areas of responsibility in which we carry out our vocation are the arenas in which Christians are called to 'carry the cross' (Mt 16:24; 1 Pet 2:21). It is just in these areas of responsibility, our 'stations' in life, where we experience difficulties, frustrations, conflicts, disappointments and even tragedies. This is where Christians can experience their greatest temptations and struggles with sin and with failure to do what they believe God is asking them to do (Veith: 111-114). This can affect all areas of their vocation, in the home, the workplace, the congregation, in social contexts. Difficulties in vocation can lead people to the temptation to abandon their vocation as marriages break up, children rebel against their parents, conflict arises in the workplace, individuals lose confidence in their God-given talents, tensions arise between pastor and congregational members. We may struggle at times to love and serve the neighbour God has placed there for us to serve following the example of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37).

‘Carrying the cross’ in our vocation is not to look for, or to glorify, suffering, or seek human approval for what we are doing. Nor can it be used in any way to justify abuse or inflicting suffering on others. Christians can see suffering as helping to deal with sin in their lives and to become more fruitful in their service to God in their vocation (Jn 15:2). It helps them to grow in hope and certainty in their faith. These difficulties urge Christians to pray for help, support and guidance as they deal with these ‘crosses’. Further development of this aspect of vocation is provided in considering ‘discipleship’ in chapter 7.

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*While Lutheran schools strive to be examples of caring and supportive environments demonstrating loving concern for all in the community and being active in service to one another, students, teachers and staff will certainly experience times of ‘carrying the cross’ in the school community. This is where a sensitive and comprehensive pastoral care program is vital. It is important that ‘while all must carry their own loads’ (Gal 6:5) Christians are called to ‘bear one another’s burdens, and in this way fulfil the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2).*

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## Jesus Christ and the new creation

God Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all involved in original creation. This creation was ‘good’ the way God intended it to be. However, sin came into the picture and destroyed that original harmony between God and all of his creation.

Because of the broken relationships brought about by sin, Jesus Christ through ‘whom all things were made’ (Nicene Creed: cf Jn 1:2 ) became part of his own creation and suffered with humanity and with the whole of creation: ‘the Word became a human being’ (Jn 1:14). Through his miracles, Jesus demonstrated his creative power over creation in stilling the storm, raising the dead, healing the sick, the lame, the blind and those possessed by evil spirits. Jesus provides redemption for all broken relationships and in him a new creation has become a reality (Col 1: 15-20). In Christ, as God’s new creation (2 Cor 5:17), Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live as God’s people in the world

(Eph 2:10). Through his death and resurrection, Christ initiated a new kingdom which is a foretaste of the end of time when there will be a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-4). Through faith in Christ, sins are forgiven and finally God's people will be reunited with God in heaven.

However, the Bible teaches that until the end of this age all creation will 'groan' under the weight of the problems caused by sin (Rom 8:19-25) including human abuse and misuse of creation. But in Christ, Christians look forward to the new creation. In the intervening time between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his return at the end of time, Christians recognise their responsibility to care for and protect the creation while they already anticipate the peace, joy and freedom of the new heaven and new earth (Rom 8:37-39; Col 3:1-4). The story of God and his creation looks both forwards and backwards. It begins with God's 'good' creation, and ends with the new creation. All of history is under the sovereign purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the creator and redeemer, who is 'the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Rev 22:13; 1:8; 1:17).

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*While Lutheran schools remain realistic to the impact of sin in the world, they should be communities of hope. Celebrating the victory of Jesus Christ over sin, death and the devil, gives Lutheran schools the responsibility to help students see beyond the cynicism and pessimism which are often apparent in society and work towards being a positive influence in the world. 'The object of human work is not perfection, but modest accomplishment. Perfectionism and cynicism are closely related' (Christenson: 132).*

*From this perspective, Lutheran schools can help students develop a conscience for society which helps them to react appropriately to issues of social justice locally and globally.*

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