

The God of the Bible

Genesis 1

By [Dr. Peter Jones](#)

Dr. Peter Jones is no stranger to many of you. He was supported as a missionary by this congregation for many years during his service in Aix-en-Provence, and has been back in the United States for a number of years teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, and has now, when other men might be thinking of retirement, taken on a work of global missions, in which he engages this growing, encroaching global pagan culture with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, dependent upon the inerrant, infallible, authoritative and effective word of God; and showing us what God teaches in His word so beautifully and powerfully speaks to an error which is captivating our own times. So, Dr. Jones, I'd like to ask you to bring God's word to us. Welcome, my dear friend and brother.

What a privilege, a pleasure, to occupy this pulpit tonight and share this service with a man I greatly respect. Ligon, God's hand is upon you, and has been using you. Ligon is part of my Board, and so I'm very privileged to have fellowship with him. And thank you all for those many years of support as you stood with us when we went off to France. I think I had a full head of hair when we left....

I would like you to turn with me to two passages of Scripture. I want to read the first eight verses of Genesis 1, and then I would like to read from the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, chapter one, fifteen through twenty. So, first of all, Genesis 1:1-8. Please give attention to the public reading of God's inspired and holy word.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters

which were above the expanse, and it was so. And God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

And now in Colossians, chapter one, from verse fifteen:

And He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross...

Thus far the reading of God's word. Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I wonder what doctrine you believe is the one under attack in our time. Clearly the doctrine of Scripture has been often under attack. I've got a feeling that Dr. Duncan would say it's the doctrine of justification by faith, since he has become one of the great experts in the new perspective on Paul, and we listen with rapt attention to his lectures.

But I would like to suggest to you that the doctrine under attack that is perhaps the most fundamental doctrine of the entire list of Christian doctrines, is the doctrine of God. And the reason why this is so is because people will never understand our soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, if they don't understand our doctrine of theology, the doctrine of God.

I find it fascinating that the Bible does not begin, "In the beginning, Christ died for our sins." Rather, it begins with a massive cosmological statement, a massive programmatic declaration to the pagan cultures of Canaan and Egypt that there actually is a Creator of heaven and earth. And of course the church from the earliest times confessed that doctrine. I wonder how many of you begin your personal testimony with that. And yet more and more it seems to me we need to begin where the Bible begins to teach us about the Lord.

Why is that so? Well, because of course in our time there is a competing doctrine of the divine. We are told that we now live in a Confusion Gap: the world is falling apart, but Humpty Dumpty will be put together again by a new consensus, a new view of the world, a unifying and all-inclusive sort of theology that will bring

everything together. But, you know, this Utopian vision of tomorrow will not be built on the God of Genesis 1:1.

I was intrigued to find a statement by Robert Mueller, the once assistant general secretary of the United Nations, who said categorically, “There is no ‘In the beginning God created...’ at the United Nations.” In other words, that vision that will found the world of tomorrow and often pushed by the United Nations and the spirituality that surrounds that movement, will not be the spirituality and the theology of the Bible.

We see this doctrine of God being undermined in the churches. Bishop Spong says, “We can no longer envision God as a being supreme, supernatural in power, external to life somewhere beyond us.” And we are often hearing people like Wiccans who talk about a new vision rooted in the religion and magic of the goddess, to bring forth a new vision of our culture.

It seems to me that we are faced in our time as never before with two mutually exclusive views of God. And while this material might be in a certain sense known to you in this wonderful, historic flagship church, and I pray that God will continue to use it this way, I'd like you to think of what I'm saying in the light of the present cultural context, and how we might bring a word that meets the alternate spirituality that surrounds us and will indeed perhaps dominate us and our children in the days to come.

So I want you to look with me at what Genesis 1:1 implies to us and teaches about God. And there are three things that I want to underline: The When; The Who; and The How.

I. What Genesis teaches about God — The When

The “When,” of course, is in the beginning. “In the beginning God created the heavens and earth.” Notice that this is the beginning of the cosmos. It is not the beginning of God. And it's very interesting, you see, that as we look at the person of God and then we look at the creation, we look at two really separate forms of existence. The creation has a beginning, and God does not.

Here is what is so mysterious and majestic about the Lord. “He has made everything beautiful in its time...,” says Ecclesiastes 3:1, “...also He has put eternity into man's heart so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” What a wonderful thing, though, that there is a beginning; because, of course, a beginning implies that there was meaning, and that there was an ending; that history has sense, and it's because of the doctrine of God. That's the “When.”

II. What Genesis teaches about God — The Who

The “Who” is of course God, the Creator of heaven and earth. In many ways I was brought to the Reformed faith later on in life - I always have been a slow learner—wasn't raised in a Reformed home - by reading Francis Schaeffer, and I still recommend the reading of Francis Schaeffer. One of his early books was entitled, *The God Who is There*. I never quite understood what that title meant. It was sort of like ‘everywhere you go, there you are.’ And so it didn't make much sense to me until I began to read in the modern pagan literature things like this from Joseph Campbell, who was, of course, guru to George Lucas:

“In religions where the God or Creator is the Mother, the world is her body. There is nowhere else. There is no ‘there’. God is everywhere and nowhere.”

That's the pagan God. But Schaeffer was right to say *The God Who is There*.

Now, where is this ‘there’? Let's look at some of the implications of this text for our understanding of God. First of all and rather obviously, He is the Creator. God through Isaiah asks, “To whom will you compare Me? Or who is My equal”, says the Holy One. ‘Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created these things?’” You see, the affirmation here is that God is the Creator, and that He is different than the creation. God is not the creation; He is different from the creation, as a watchmaker is different from the watch.

How important to make that affirmation in our day. What a wonderful knowledge that the Bible gives us of a God who is there, and yet who is different than us. You know, this is unique in Scripture in the ancient world; even a liberal German Old Testament, Klaus Westermann, in his commentary on Genesis admits this when he says,

“What distinguishes the Genesis account of creation among the many creation stories of the ancient Near East is that [listen to this] for Genesis there can only be one Creator, and that all else that is or can be can never be anything but a creature.”

And Westermann says that was unique in the ancient world. No other religion said that. Of course, now we have modern theologians telling us that for Christianity to survive we have to ditch the very thing that is unique to the Christian faith. I would suspect their motivations here.

Of course God is the unique Creator; He is therefore holy. I don't know what you think of when you think of the word “holy”. It seems rather obvious, if it means moral purity that God would be holy. But of course the essential meaning of ‘holy’ is to be set apart, to have a special place and a special function; thus, the utensils in the temple were holy not because they were morally superior or even were better metal, but because they had a specific and precise role to play. And

of course that's what we mean when we say God is holy. "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool." God is holy because He occupies a different place. He has his own place. That's why Jesus tells us to begin our praying by saying, "Our Father, who is in heaven, holy is Your name." You see, paganism is fundamentally unholy because it affirms that God and creation are the very same thing, whereas Scripture forces us to look at the reality of God as separate from ourselves. And in that is great glory. Isaiah looks to that demonstration of the glory of God in the temple.

I've got to tell you this. I attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, and there were all kinds of 'holy' men. There were 125 different religions, 8,000 delegates, all kinds of different colored dresses and clothes and funny hats and everything else, and for seven days I sat and listened to all kinds of teaching sessions and so on in Chicago. And I have to tell you that I still feel it: the dominant emotion that I had during those seven days was utter *boredom*. Boredom! I tell you what: Isaiah wasn't bored!

"I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. And the seraphim were calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is full of His glory!"

God is the Creator; God is holy; God is unique. "To whom will you compare Me, or who is My equal?" says the Lord. "To whom will you compare Me? To whom will you liken Me, that we may be compared?" There is no comparative form; there are no polytheisms; there are no 'many gods': there is one God, and of course this is the basis of the Second Commandment. God is unique, and therefore we cannot find in the created order anything that would correspond to the essence of God, and so, to do so is to profane Him. Therefore God, you see, is jealous; not because He's insecure, but because He knows the truth about himself as unique and He knows that that is what His creatures must understand. "I am God, and there is no other."

Well, not only is God the Creator, holy and unique. God is transcendent. I pile on these terms, but they are magnificent terms. You know what *transcendence* means: it means *to go beyond what we might understand*. J. Gresham Machen, the founder of the Westminster Movement (in which I have found myself a number of years, thank the Lord), in the 1920's had this amazing perspective and ability to see forward as he defined the essence of liberalism. Remember, his book was entitled, *Christianity and Liberalism*. The liberals did not like that title! They would have enjoyed "Liberal Christianity"; or "Orthodox Christianity and Liberal Christianity." But Machen sort of gave them an 'in your face' title: *Christianity and Liberalism*. Listen to what he said about the essence of liberalism—and it hasn't changed but has become in fact much clearer:

"The truth is that liberalism has lost sight of the very center and core of the Christian teaching. One attribute of God is absolutely fundamental to the Bible in

order to render intelligible all the rest. That attribute is the awful transcendence of God. It is true indeed that not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him, but He is eminent in the world not because He is identified with the world, but because He is the free Creator and upholder of it. Between the creature and the Creator a great gulf is fixed.”

This might sound like dry theology, and especially now as I tell you I am going to move into the incommunicable attributes of God. Are you ready?

But why all of a sudden is this important for us? Well, I would suggest to you that in our time your children are being told—and I see it, I saw it in a newspaper the other day—little first graders are on the floor in their schools around where I live, meditating. It seems to me that our generation is being told that in some mysterious way they are divine, they share in the divine power. “The force” is all around them. And the incommunicable attributes of God prove once and for all that you will never be divine, and God will always be God.

What are these incommunicable attributes? If any of you think you have any of these, see me at the end! God has no beginning. Creation does. Now you see, if you want to be divine you have to start off with no beginning, so most of you, I think, are automatically excluded. God is independent. We are dependent. God has the attribute of eternity. We are temporal. God is immutable. We are changing. God is omniscient. We don't know that much! God is all-knowing; we are not. God knows things before they happen; we do not. God's presence is felt in every nook and cranny of the universe. We are limited in space and time.

You see, there's the person of God in the Bible that cannot be confused with the creation He makes. And that is such an important message to bring in our time. But you may be thinking, “Well, if God is so transcendent then He is so far away from us. Surely these pagans will certainly opt for the God who is close at hand and everywhere around.” And many of them do. But you see, that god, the divine force, is impersonal. And God, because He is separate from us, is personal. And indeed, that's the only way, in a sense, I feel, that one can be personal, is to occupy a center of personality and be different than other persons; and so we can only have a personal relationship with God if God is there, if God is separate from us.

There are fascinating implications. God didn't create you because He was cosmically lonely and needed to lift the boredom of being alone. Because of course the God of the Bible is triune. The Trinity comes into play as we consider the God of paganism, which is this impersonal force, and all of a sudden we can understand why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important, you see, because God is the very center of personhood and has for all eternity had a personal relationship within the persons of the Trinity. And we derive personhood from Him. This, of course, is why Christians pray and pagans meditate. We pray to the God who is there. We engage in a rational discourse with a person, albeit divine.

Pagans meditate upon themselves.

Another difference I find which is fascinating is that only those who share this doctrine of God can actually praise. We are made to praise, but we're made to praise someone other than ourselves; and of course, if God is within, then you're endlessly praising yourself, and that isn't praise. And so the spirituality of the Bible based upon this view of God is fundamentally different from the spirituality of paganism, even if we find this kind of spirituality seeping into our churches in this day and age.

Well, finally, of course, and I don't need to draw this point out because it seems so obvious: this God is sovereign. God chose to create us; He didn't ask our opinion or permission. And the God who chose to create is also the One who brings about redemption in His sovereign and good purpose. This is the God of the Bible.

III. The How

But I have a final point, and I have about six minutes to make it in. And it is "The How." How does God create? The "When" was in the beginning; the "Who" is the transcendent Lord, Creator of heaven and earth; the "How" is how God creates.

It is fascinating, it seems to me, that this understanding of God infuses the very manner in which God Himself makes the world. The imprint that God puts on the world actually affirms His very nature.

How do I show that? Well, did you notice in those few verses I read that as God makes the world there is a process of creation, as He separates things? He separates the waters. He separates the day from the night. It's as if God is sanctifying what He makes by giving things their just and rightful places. Oh, how much we need to celebrate this understanding of the way God makes the world, made the world, as we try to figure out for ourselves who we are and what is our rightful place in His creation. God separates things out. He defines them according to their kind; He gives them names, because, of course, He is seeking to give to everything its holy function. Creation is a holy thing. And in our day and age, of course, when we are living in a time of unholiness, when people don't know what sex they are, what gender they are, and feel quite happy to discover and rediscover and redefine who they are, they are of course contravening these structures of holiness that the Lord has given to us for our good.

I spoke yesterday at Belhaven concerning homosexuality and its integral place in pagan theology and spirituality. And because, you see, God in that system is diffuse, the goal of pagan spirituality is to eliminate all the distinctions; to rise above them in the joining of the opposites gives you this sense of power over yourself and over the creation.

Well, we need to understand how we can reply to this redesigning of the world on the basis of pagan thinking. And it is as God, you see, creates the world with distinctions for the profound reason, I believe, of showing to us that fundamental distinction that in paganism must go, and that is the distinction of the creature and the Creator, so that all the distinctions we know and live in actually rise and bring praise and glory to God as the distinct God and Creator. And that's the view of God that is being erased from the public memory in our time.

But God creates twice. He not only creates the first time in creation, but He recreates. And as we have caught something of the wonder and nobility of the person of God as the Creator, how wonderful it is to sense the great condescension of such a God who comes into creation; takes on the form of a human being; who dies on the cross to bear the sins of the creation that refuses to recognize Him as distinct from the creation; and reconciles all things to Himself through the blood of His cross. Jesus Christ is the firstborn of creation, and the firstborn of the dead, that amazing miracle where God shows us that He has not forgotten creation by raising the dead body of Jesus from the tomb. God's second work of creation not only erases the stain of sin, but transforms the original creation in ways that we cannot even imagine. This is the greatness of our Lord. He brings to His creation the ultimate word of final and wonderful transformation.

I would encourage you, as you are called upon to live in this very confusing world, to seek to understand the debate, the conflict going on in our time between two fundamental notions of God. They cannot coexist together. They are indeed mutually exclusive, and we need to find ways of expressing that. We need to express that through who we are as we accept the holy estates that God has granted to us. You women need to be real women, and enjoy being women. And we need to be good men who know what it means to be manly in this world...and all the other things that go with being creatures.

But it seems to me that one of the things that we can do which is wonderful, is ...you know, redemption is actually our reconciliation with the Creator. We are not Gnostics. We are reintroduced to the God who made the world good, and we need to be those who enjoy the creation that God has made. We need to be those who know how to exploit it, we need to be those who know how to understand its beauty, draw it out in poetry, art...and really bring about a cultural reformation if we can. Obviously, it won't be the final word, but as our culture implodes, it's to us to speak a word to this God, the great Creator.

Oh, well, don't you say that surely that is in the past? That now we know God the Redeemer, and I know Jesus and I'm going to heaven. I'm getting on that choo-choo train and I'm going as quickly as I can to heaven. Remember: redemption is reconciliation with the Creator. And you know what? When you get off that choo-choo train in heaven, you will discover the twenty-four elders who will be singing

day and night,

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being.”

“Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow. Praise Him, all creatures here below. Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

“For all flesh is grass. The grass withers, but the word of the Lord endures forever. Amen.”

Our heavenly Father, we thank You that You are God, and that no one else is God. And we thank You that You brought this world into being for Your own glory. And we pray, O Lord, that as we who trust in Your Son, our Savior, Your divine Messiah, the One that You have given to save us from our sins, we pray that we would faithfully listen to His word. For You have told us that in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. And we thank You for the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that we would faithfully bear witness to Him in this world that seeks to wipe out the distinction between the Creator and His creation. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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