**MARTIN LUTHER’S VIEW ON CREATION**

With the 500th anniversary of the Reformation coming upon us in 2017 and great changes in the earth’s climate also upon us, many of us might be wondering what Martin Luther had to say about God’s creation, and if his words might be able to give us some guidance in the 21st century. Unlike many other theologians, however, Luther was an occasional writer. Occasional in this case does not mean he wrote seldom—we have many, many of his works to prove otherwise! Occasional means that Luther wrote when the occasion of a question presented itself. Since climate change and humanity’s effect on creation was not an occasion that presented itself in the 16th century, we must comb through what Luther did write to get an understanding of how he viewed God’s creation of which we are a part and with which we are surrounded.

The first place that we can go is to the Small Catechism and the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, CREATOR of heaven and earth.” In his explanation to the creed, Luther writes, “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists.” He goes on to say that God daily and abundantly provides everything we need to live, protects us against all danger and evil, and that God does this only out of God’s divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on our part. In return, our duty is to thank and praise, serve and obey God.[[1]](#endnote-1) We can infer from this that Luther regarded the creation as something that God has provided to sustain us as human beings, and for which we owe gratitude to God.

The next place that we can go to determine Luther’s view on creation is the Large Catechism, which is like the “teacher’s manual” for the Small Catechism. In the Large Catechism, he expounds further on his explanation to the First Article of the Creed. Again Luther speaks of how God has given the creation to help sustain us, and how, without God, none of us could exist on our own. But, lest we think that Luther believed that we could use these gifts that God gives us however we want, he also writes this: “For if we believed it [the meaning of the First Article] with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator.”[[2]](#endnote-2). We can see from this that Luther viewed the gifts of Creation that God gives us as exactly that: gifts, and that we are to be good stewards of those gifts, always remembering that God is the one who gave them to us.

While Luther’s main themes in regard to the creation are that all created things are God’s gifts and that we are to gratefully receive those gifts and use them in service to our neighbor, he never thought what so many people today think: that we can see God in nature and worship God in this way. Instead, Luther says, God gives life through nature, but God does this “in disguise”. Therefore, all we see are what in Latin is called *larvae Dei*, or “masks of God”. In other words, faith, which is given to us by the Holy Spirit, sees that the created things around us are not God, but that they are created. These things, however, can point to the love that God has for us, and that God which is behind these created things is what our faith puts its trust upon. [[3]](#endnote-3)

This is not to say, however, that God is something apart from God’s creation. On the contrary, Luther saw God at work through the world, continuing the creation, and giving us good gifts through nature, which we are to use to help our neighbor. Luther also saw that nature can teach us something, so that we might be more believing and trusting. One example comes from Scripture, in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” *Matthew 6:26, 28-29.[[4]](#endnote-4)* From this verse, we can learn to look at nature around us, and through faith, recognize that God has given us these gifts to learn from: if God takes care of the creation around us, then how much more does God take care of us.

Luther had a wonderful regard for and curiosity about nature. For instance, in his *Lectures on Genesis*, when Luther is commenting on how God created the world, he speaks of how mice are produced by “decay,” that is, garbage, rather than the normal reproductive means that animals use. Even though he was wrong about how mice reproduce, this shows a keen skill of observation on Luther’s part. And, even though mice were considered vermin, Luther says, “Therefore the mouse, too, is a divine creature . . . But for its kind it has a very beautiful form—such pretty feet and such delicate hair that it is clear that it was created by the Word of God with a definite plan in view.”[[5]](#endnote-5) While he had great admiration for the God’s works of creation, however, he never saw the creation as an end in itself. Rather, he saw it as God’s gracious gift to us that we are to use in service to our neighbor, and he saw this gift as something that points to God’s love for us, and as something that we can observe and faithfully grasp how much God loves us. While we might wish that Luther had taken a stronger stance on how we ourselves are part of God’s creation and interconnected with it, we can still appreciate his regard for nature as a gift, how life itself is an unconditional gift to us, and how we should be good stewards of God’s gifts to us.

1. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 433. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gustaf Wingren, "The Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix but the First Article," *Word & World* 4, no. 4 (1984):363-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Martin Luther et al., *Luther's Works*, American ed., vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)