

The Historic, Reformed Stance on Creation

Readers of the *Beacon Lights* are sinner saints living in a fallen world. As such, we constantly encounter philosophies and ideas that are contrary to the truths revealed to us in Scripture. And as saints who have consciously aligned ourselves with a church that confesses historic, Reformed Christianity, we must be aware of these worldviews that inform and influence both religious and secular thought. We must have a firm grasp of the truth that has been revealed to us in the word of God, and we must use this truth to test continually the concepts and thinking that we encounter through the media, our co-workers, and college textbooks and instructors. In this way we will be discerning saints who intentionally and carefully ensure that our thinking is not improperly influenced by un-Scriptural notions.

One worldview that currently enjoys considerable influence within the spheres of both secular and religious thought is that of evolutionism. While the term *evolutionism* is not used by secular institutions or media outlets, those of us within the ranks of conservative Christianity understand this term to denote a materialistic, naturalistic, secular worldview that teaches that all physical existence and history can be correctly understood in the absence of supernatural or spiritual explanations. This is a worldview that is directly antithetical to our biblical, Reformed worldview. Closely related to evolutionism, and one of the driving forces behind this worldview, is the theory of evolution. There are many ideas and definitions that are contained within the term *evolution*. Reformed believers can agree with some of these aspects, such as the fact that the genetic information in living creatures can change in their generations as they adapt to their environment, and that these changes in their genetic information can result in changes to their physical appearance (all of this sovereignly controlled by the Creator, of course). There are also aspects contained within the term evolution with which the Reformed believer cannot agree, such as the belief that all life on earth developed from one common ancestor over vast periods of time (more than 3.5 billion years). This aspect of evolution (the earth's having existed for immense amounts of time) permeates the curricula of most college science courses and is well-known to most individuals, whether they have taken these college courses or not. This notion is not new to our modern society, but has been proposed and accepted within human culture for thousands of years. Further, many Christians have accepted this view of a very old earth by incorporating varying schemes of theistic evolution into their understanding of the creation history in Genesis.

There are several resources that our Father has graciously provided to us, which we may and should use in our efforts to maintain the truth of Scripture as we interact with the various aspects of the theory of evolution. These include the preaching that we receive from week to week, as well as advice from parents, pastors, elders, and fellow saints in our churches. All of these individuals have likely had to interact with the theory of evolution at some point in their lives and so are able to offer valuable insight to us. Other resources that we should not ignore are the Reformers of centuries past, whom God used to re-establish an orthodox understanding of his word, as well as the creeds and confessions

that they and their spiritual descendants formulated and that we confess to be accurate reflections of Scriptural truths.

The canon of Scripture was closed and the early church fathers died almost two thousand years before Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, the book which unified and popularized evolutionary theory. The Reformers lived and the Reformed confessions were formulated hundreds of years before Charles Darwin's writings took hold first of academic society, and then society as a whole. Yet Scripture, the early church, the Reformers, and the confessions all have much to say about how and when this world and all that it contains came into existence. This article can be viewed as a resource for *Beacon Lights* readers who are interested in understanding the stance of Scripture, the creeds, the Reformers, and the Reformed confessions (the historic, Reformed stance!) as they relate to different aspects of the theory of evolution, and specifically the aspect of an earth that is billions of years old.

A note to the reader regarding citations in this article: All citations are freely available via the internet at the websites listed at the end of the article. Take time to read some (or all!) of these citations—it warms the heart to interact with saints of old through their own writings.

Scripture: Scripture is filled with truths that instruct us as to the historical beginnings of the earth and life on earth. Genesis 1 and 2 contain the full historical account of the creation of all things, and the remainder of Genesis contains a multitude of references to the historical events that took place during those six 24-hour days. Scripture explicitly refers to God as the creator of the heavens and earth and all that they contain in over 300 verses from at least 35 books of the Bible¹. In some of these books, such as the Psalms and Isaiah, one can hardly read more than a page or two without being stared in the face by a reference to God as the creator. Often these passages of Scripture not only instruct us that God is creator, but command us to recognize and worship him as such (Psalm 8:3, Psalm 95:6, Ecclesiastes 12:1,6, Colossians 1:16, and many others). In addition to the history recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, other passages teach a literal week as the time in which God created all things (for example, Exodus 20:9–11, Exodus 31:15, Exodus 31:17). This witness from Scripture will not allow us to accept the billions of years of evolution that are taught to be necessary for the development life that we observe today. Even a casual perusal of this list of Scriptures leaves us without a doubt that God created the earth and all of the life that it contains. However, it is a valuable exercise indeed to make a serious study of the list cited below.¹

Creeds and Church Fathers: Recognizing these Scriptures and flowing out of them, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed reflect the fact that Christians in the early centuries after Christ's life on earth were of one mind in their confession of God as the creator of the heaven and the earth.² The early church fathers agreed with these creeds, and believed in a creation history which occurred less than 6,000 years from the time in which they lived (see Basil,³ Ambrose,⁴ and Augustine,⁵ for example).

Reformers of the 16th Century: The doctrine of creation was not a major issue driving the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. However, the Reformers of this time had a passion for the entire word of God, and therefore did produce a significant amount of literature on this subject, specifically on the historical, literal nature of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. The following is a summary of the creation views of two of the most well-known Reformers.

Martin Luther: While Martin Luther never studied evolutionary theory as we know it today, he was familiar with the theories of the origin of life that leading secular philosophers had promoted through the ages. In his commentary on Genesis, Luther discusses the views of Aristotle and Plato, who both maintained an eternal universe. Luther explicitly states that these views cannot be true because Moses instructs us that the world did not exist 6,000 years ago.⁶ Luther recognized the inadequacy of the human mind to comprehend fully the wonders that God spoke during the creation week, yet he argued that the events recorded in Genesis chapter 1 were “the most important,” and were to be read as a literal, historical account of the origins of the universe that took place during a stretch of six 24-hour days.⁷

John Calvin: Calvin followed the example of many psalms in that he places considerable emphasis on the wisdom, power, and majesty of our Creator that we can see in the creation around us and how our response to this must be to worship and praise the Creator. Calvin warns those who remove God from the creation by not acknowledging him as creator or giving him due praise when enjoying the creation that they will one day “feel the force of the expression” contained in Acts 14:17, when God says that he has not left himself without witness.⁸ Like Luther, Calvin was also familiar with the secular theories and philosophies that contradicted a literal reading of Genesis 1 and 2 by promoting long ages of the earth. He calls the view of an immeasurably old earth “folly” and “a common fable among heathens”. He even reprimands a Christian contemporary of his who held this view by calling it “absurd” and a “gross error.”⁹ Against these errors, Calvin writes that the creation account is “history on which the faith of the Church might lean without seeking any other God than Him whom Moses sets forth as the Creator and Architect of the world”^{1.0} It is clear that Calvin firmly believed that God created the heavens and the earth in the space of six literal 24-hour days.^{11,12} Often people who maintain this literal reading of Genesis 1 and 2 are accused of being anti-science. Calvin would have disputed this suggestion. He acknowledged that the science of his day had proved that Saturn was greater in size than the moon, and yet still maintained the truth of Genesis 1:16, which indicates that the sun and the moon are the greatest of the lights in the heavens. He taught that the language of Genesis was written so that “things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand.”¹³ He went on to say that science is not to be “reprobated” or “condemned”, but that the discipline of science is “not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known” because it “unfolds the admirable wisdom of God.”¹³

It is undeniably clear that Luther and Calvin, two of the great leaders of the Protestant Reformation, both stood firm on the issue of Genesis 1 and 2 as a historic account of creation. Along with Luther and

Calvin, the consensus of other Reformers, such as Theodore Beza, Zacharias Ursinus, and Philipp Melancthon, was a literal interpretation of Genesis. Those men who followed the Reformers took the same stance. The Westminster Divines, who are sometimes said to have left the matter up to each individual's interpretation, clearly advocated a literal interpretation, as did the other British Puritans of this time. The views of all of these men are compiled in the book, *Coming to Grips with Genesis, Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*.¹⁴ This is an excellent resource for identifying what these men believed. It contains many citations of primary literature and is well worth reading for all interested in this topic. These Reformers withstood teachings that were contrary to Genesis, were aware of the perceived difficulties of reading Genesis literally (such as the sun being created after plants), and yet stood unanimously firm in their faith that Genesis 1 and 2 are historic accounts of origins. Thus they should remain a valuable resource for us as we face similar teachings today.

Reformed Confessions: Like the teachings of the men who lead the Protestant Reformation and those who followed them, the confessions of the Reformed churches are full of support for a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 as real history. The following is a list of references where the Three Forms of Unity clearly use the creation account as real history.¹⁵

Belgic Confession: Articles 2, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 23.

Heidelberg Catechism: Questions and Answers 6, 7, 9, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 54, 92, 103.

Canons of Dordrecht: Head 1, Articles 1, 7, and Rejection of Errors 5, 8; Head 2, Article 9, and Rejection of Error 5; Heads 3/4, Articles 1, 2, 12, and Rejection of Errors 1, 2.

In addition to these references from the Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms include numerous references to the creation as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2 as being a literal, historical event. Clearly, the saints who fashioned these beloved documents were taking heed to the warning from Scripture and contained in Article 7 of the Belgic Confession, where we are reminded that it is forbidden "to add unto or take away anything from the Word of God".

What can we learn from all of these resources? The testimony of Scripture demands the acknowledgement of God as creator of the heavens, the earth, and all that they contain. This can clearly be found throughout the pages of Bible. The word of God also testifies to the length of time in which all things were created, that of six literal days. The early church fathers recognized this, and taught that earth was not yet 6,000 years old during their time on earth. For those of us who would take on the name "Reformed," we must take heed to the teachings of the Reformers and the Reformed confessions regarding the doctrine of creation. The Reformers were unanimous in their belief that Genesis 1 and 2 record the literal history of the creation of all things, and that this history occurred within the space of six 24-hour days. They clearly teach this in their writings. From these writings we find that they leave no room for incorporating billions of years into schemes of theistic evolution. The beliefs of the Reformers were also clearly maintained by the men who formulated the

Reformed Confessions (both the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards), and these beliefs are reflected in these confessions, which we confess to be accurate expressions of the truths contained in Scripture. Therefore, this stance must also be the confession of all who claim to maintain historic, Reformed Christianity.

1. http://www.gospelway.com/creation/creation_list.php
2. *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. 2005. Protestant Reformed Churches in America. p. 8-11.
3. Basil, *Hexameron*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II, Volume 8*. Phillip Schaff, Henry Wace editors. Hendrickson Publishers, 1994. p. 51-107.
4. Ambrose, *Hexameron*, in *Ambrose, Hexameron, Paradise and Cain and Abel*. Translated by John J. Savage. Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961. p. 3-283.
5. Augustine, *City of God*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series I, Volume 2*. Phillip Schaff, editor. Hendrickson Publishers, 1994. p. 232.
6. Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on The First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*. Translated by Henry Cole. T & T Clark, 1858. p. 24.
7. Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on The First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*. Translated by Henry Cole. T & T Clark, 1858. p. 23-26.
8. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by John King. 1847. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. p. 24-25.
9. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by John King. 1847. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. p. 34.
10. John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1994. p. 141.
11. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by John King. 1847. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. p. 40-45.
12. John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1994. p. 142.
13. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Translated by John King. 1847. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. p. 47.
14. James R. Mook, David W. Hall, in *Coming to Grips with Genesis, Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, Editors. Master Books, 2008. p. 23-78.
15. *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. 2005. Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

Websites for references

References 2, 15: http://www.prc.org/PRC_Confessions_and_Church_Order.pdf

Reference 3: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf208.pdf>

Reference 4:

<http://ia600301.us.archive.org/11/items/fathersofthechur027571mbp/fathersofthechur027571mbp.pdf>

Reference 5: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.pdf>

References 6, 7:

<http://ia600301.us.archive.org/11/items/creationcommenta00luth/creationcommenta00luth.pdf>

References 8, 9, 11, 13: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.pdf>

References 10, 12: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.pdf>

Reference 14: <http://books.google.com/books?id=VvvJPTvvDJcC>