

“The Dissent of Man: Evangelicals and Evolution Nine Decades After Scopes”

Kyle R. Greenwood

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ABSTRACT:

When Charles Darwin first published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, evangelicals met his theory of gradation by natural selection with mixed reviews. Over fifty years later evangelicals remained unsettled on the effects of Darwin’s evolutionary theory on Christian anthropology. The diversity of opinions within evangelicalism were no more apparent than with the publication of *The Fundamentals* in 1917. While one of the purposes of the four-volume collection of essays was “to combat the inroads of liberalism,” the inclusion of three distinct viewpoints on evolution demonstrates that in the first quarter of the twentieth century evolutionary theory and evangelical theology were not yet seen as competing worldviews. This all changed drastically, however, in 1925 as a consequence of the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial. Although William Jennings Bryan successfully prosecuted John Scopes for violating Tennessee’s Butler Act which prohibited the teaching of evolution in public school, defense attorney Clarence Darrow deftly shifted the focus of the trial from Scopes to the compatibility of the Bible with Science. The Scopes Trial became a watershed moment whereby evolutionary theory came to be seen as conflicting with evangelicalism.

SCOPES MONKEY TRIAL OF 1925

The year 1925 marks a watershed year for evangelicalism. In that year William Jennings Bryan, a devout Christian, populist politician and three-time Democratic candidate for president, was instrumental in passing legislation in fifteen states outlawing the teaching of evolution in public schools. In March of that year Tennessee passed the Butler Act, named for the bill’s sponsor John Butler, banning the teaching of evolution throughout the state. The tiny hamlet of Dayton soon found itself at the center of an international speculate when substitute biology teacher and part-time football coach John Scopes had agreed to test the new law with the financial and legal backing of the ACLU. On May 7, Scopes was formally arrested for violating

the new law. After Bryan joined the prosecution team, the nation’s leading defense attorney Clarence Darrow eagerly entered the fray, setting the stage for the “trial of the century.”

The trial of *Tennessee v. Scopes*, more commonly known as the “Scopes Monkey Trial” commenced July 10 of that same year and adjourned less than two weeks later on July 21. Although the court’s objective was to determine guilt or innocence of John Scopes, Darrow and Bryan were intent on trying a very different sort of case—the reliability of the Bible in matters of science. The lead defense attorney Darrow was outwardly antagonistic towards religious thought, and his sights were set on undermining religious fundamentalism.

Using his expert trial skills, Darrow was further able to corner Bryan into pitting science against the Bible. Before Bryan was able to deliver his impassioned closing comments, Darrow requested that the jury return a guilty verdict with the hope of eventually gaining a larger audience with the Tennessee Supreme Court via appeal. After a mere nine minutes of deliberation, the jury found John Scopes guilty of violating the state law and fined the defendant \$100, the lowest possible fine for the infraction. Although the Tennessee Supreme Court did indeed reverse the guilty verdict, it was not in the way Darrow had hoped. Instead, the court ruled that the jury, not Judge Raulston, should have set the fine. The court subsequently dismissed the case, noting, “Nothing is to be gained by prolonging the life of this bizarre case.”¹

While there are many factors that led to the current rift between evangelicals and evolutionary theory,² the Scopes trial plays prominently among them. Fifteen years prior to *Tennessee v. Scopes*, two Christian oil magnates commissioned scores of leading evangelical Bible scholars to write ninety essays “to set forth the fundamentals of the Christian faith” and “to combat the inroads of liberalism.”³ Over the next six years these essays, filling twelve volumes,

were distributed free of charge to pastors, missionaries and churches. In 1917, the essays were published in four volumes as *The Fundamentals*. Highly acclaimed scholars wrote on topics such as historical criticism, the existence of God, the inspiration of Scripture, sin, atonement, evangelism, prayer, and the deity of Christ, to name a few.

The issue of human origins also received considerable attention, covering the full spectrum of positions on human origins deemed acceptable within evangelical theology. At one end of the spectrum was Dyson Hague’s “The Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis.”⁴ At the other end of the spectrum was James Orr’s “Science and Christian Faith.”⁵ George F. Wright offered a middle position with his essay, “The Passing of Evolution.”⁶ On the one hand, the inclusion of such a wide range of views within *The Fundamentals* demonstrated the unsettled nature of the discussion nearly half a century after Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.⁷ On the

¹ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1998), 221.

² See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 109-45.

³ R. A. Torrey, and A. C. Dixon (eds), *The Fundamentals: The Famous Sourcebook of Foundational Biblical Truths* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990); Originally published as *The Fundamentals*, 4 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1917).

⁴ Dyson Hague, “The Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis,” in *The Fundamentals*, pp. 101-14.

⁵ James Orr, “Science and Christian Faith,” in *The Fundamentals*, pp. 125-134.

⁶ George F. Wright, “The Passing of Evolution,” in *The Fundamentals*, pp. 613-625.

⁷ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859). Darwin released a revised edition in 1860 [Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (2nd ed.; London: John Murray, 1860)], in which he attempted to make more explicit his conviction that natural selection was not at odds with creation or religious inclinations. Appealing to ecclesiastical support for his defense, he notes that a “celebrated author and divine has written to me that ‘he has gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to

other hand, the breadth of acceptable positions within fundamentalist evangelicalism demonstrates that the discussion was welcome.

For Hague, the only appropriate way to read the first chapters of Genesis is as a straight-forward account of historical events. Allowing any latitude on the matter of evolution would undermine the entire rationale for moral existence.

A lowered anthropology always means a lowered theology, for if man was not a direct creation of God, if he was a mere indirect development, through slow and painful process, of no one knows what, or how, or why, or when, or where, the main spring of moral accountability is gone. The fatalistic conception of man's personal and moral life is the deadly gift of naturalistic evolution to our age.⁸

To concede to Darwin is to concede that human existence is meaningless, that the fall of humanity was fictional, and the Incarnation was unnecessary.

In contrast to Hague, James Orr's chief concern was that a dichotomy was unnecessarily emerging between science and biblical faith. Orr found parallels between evangelical responses to evolution and the Inquisition of Galileo in 1633, noting that it “is an unhappy illustration of how the best

believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of His laws” (p. 481). Darwin hoped to situate his discoveries in a context in which those who held to a high view of Scripture could also accept his observations of the natural world. The sixth and final edition of Darwin's work (1872) was simply titled *The Origin of Species*.

⁸ Hague, “Doctrinal Value of the First Chapters of Genesis,” p. 112.

of men can at times err in matters which they imperfectly understand, or where their prejudices and traditional ideas are affected.⁹ For Orr, the laws of nature are an expression of God's providential sovereignty, rather than evidence against it. He closes his essay by appealing to God's two books of revelation: Scripture and nature, each of which enlightening the other, neither of which contradicting the other.

In “The Passing of Evolution,” George Wright contended that Darwin's theory and Genesis were hardly at odds with one another, accepting that God had created each living thing “with the marvelous capacity for variation which we know they possess.”¹⁰ Wright was not concerned about any detrimental effects of evolutionary theory on evangelical theology, commenting that if it were proved true, it would only strengthen the argument for a Designer. Wright's contribution is especially notable given his long journey away from his renown as a “Christian Darwinist” decades before. While he had grown weary of neo-Darwinian claims that mocked creation by divine fiat, he remained comfortable with the term evolution when properly used.¹¹

Perhaps the most vocal advocate for integrating evolutionary theory with evangelical theology was Benjamin B. Warfield, one of the most influential and enduring biblical scholars in American

⁹ Orr, “Science and Christian Faith,” p. 126.

¹⁰ Wright, “The Passing of Evolution,” p. 616.

¹¹ For a fuller account of Wright's intellectual journey with evolution, see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 20–53.

Calvinism. Most noted for his work on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy,¹² Warfield also wrote extensively on a biblical response to Darwinism. As a breeder of livestock, Warfield's father relied on breeding methods that drew heavily on Darwin's theory of natural selection.¹³ As an ardent proponent of biblical inerrancy, B. B. was compelled by life circumstances to determine the level of compatibility between evolution and evangelical doctrine. In his seminal essay on the topic, Warfield employed the term "mediate creation," a term he borrowed from Augustus Strong¹⁴ to mean that God did not create *immediately* (at once), but *mediately* (over time).¹⁵ Warfield finds in mediate creation a more robust view of God, who did not just create once in the original composition of material substance, but continues to create anew "whenever and wherever during the course of God's providential government anything comes into being for the production of which natural causes are inadequate."¹⁶ So long as the term is rightly

understood as God's providential hand in the formation of new creatures, "the Christian man has as such no quarrel with evolution."¹⁷

As amicable as the discussion seemed to be just a decade prior to the Scopes Monkey Trial, there were other forces at play that would eventually come to a head with the proceedings of 1925. Around the same time *The Fundamentals* were being produced, dispensationalism emerged as an influential theological framework within evangelicalism. Invigorated and cauterized by the publication of the KJV Scofield Study Bible (1909), the dispensationalist movement infiltrated the ranks of evangelicalism, particularly those outside of the mainline denominations. While dispensationalism came to mean many things to many people, at its core lay a hermeneutic of literalism, requiring readers of Scripture to ignore issues of genre, nuance, or polyvalent readings of the text.¹⁸ This simplistic approach to Scripture is what made Bryan such an easy target for Darrow. Bryan's testimony on the witness stand had canonized an anti-intellectual approach to Scripture, formally pitting intellectual inquiry against faithful biblical interpretation.

Another fundamentalist force came by way of Seventh Day Adventist George McCready Price whose writings were heavily influenced by the teachings of the movement's prophet-like leader Ellen G.

¹² Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Scribners, 1912); *Ibid.*, *Inspiration and the Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); *Ibid.*, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956); Archibald A. Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *The Presbyterian Review* 6 (April 1881), pp. 225–60; Mark A. Noll, and David N. Livingstone, eds, *B. B. Warfield: Evolution, Science, and Scripture, Selected Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000).

¹³ William Warfield, *The Theory and Practice of Cattle-Breeding* (Chicago, J. H. Sanders, 1889).

¹⁴ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 5th ed. (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1896).

¹⁵ B. B. Warfield, "Creation, Evolution, and Mediate Creation," *The Bible Student* (1901), pp. 1–8; reprinted in Noll and Livingstone, *B. B. Warfield*, pp. 197–210.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁸ See Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 114–45.

White.¹⁹ In order to justify the core Seventh Day Adventist doctrine of Sabbath rest, the days of Genesis were interpreted as literal 24-hour solar days. Also, in keeping with White’s belief that the end of the world was imminent, she preached that the earth must also be a mere 6,000 years old. White’s teachings were an affront to the day-age and gap theories commonly accepted by evangelicals wishing to reconcile Genesis 1 with the latest geological findings. In *The New Geology* published in 1923, using logic and amateur geology Price laid out a compelling argument for a young earth, in which “flood geology” or “catastrophism” accounted for the apparent old age of the earth despite its relative youth. In fact, it was Price’s work that heavily influenced William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes trial, though Price was incensed at how poorly Bryan had communicated his theory. The fact that Price was never formally trained in geology or paleontology did not prevent him from making bold—and erroneous—claims about the nature of the field. Having been dismissed by the professional scientific societies, Price turned his writing attention to Christian publications like *Moody Monthly*, *Sunday School Times*, and *Christian Faith and Life*. As a champion against evolutionary theory, Price successfully convinced impressive numbers of evangelicals towards his flood geology.

Not everyone was impressed with Price’s conclusions, especially a core group of Christian scientists who were concerned

with the implications of his views on unbelieving intellectuals. In 1941 five Christian scientists founded the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA). Their mission was to engage evolutionary theory and assess its merits in light of biblical authority. Their statement of faith was simple and straightforward:

I believe in the whole Bible as originally given, to be the inspired word of God, the only unerring guide of faith and conduct. Since God is the Author of this Book, as well as the Creator and Sustainer of the physical world about us, I cannot conceive of discrepancies between statements in the Bible and the real facts of science.²⁰

From 1941 to 1961 membership swelled to 860. Although the ASA tended towards civil dialogue with supporters of flood geology, one of its early members took great exception to the pseudoscience propagated by its proponents. A. Laurence Kulp had earned doctorates in physical chemistry (Princeton, 1945) and geology (Columbia, 1947), became one of the leading experts in carbon-14 dating, and was the first to apply the technique to geological dating.²¹ In an article for the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, Kulp utterly dismantled Price’s flood geology, concluding “that this unscientific theory of flood geology has done and will do considerable harm to the strong propagation of the gospel among educated people.”²² Kulp’s

²⁰ Ibid., 159.

²¹ Ibid., 163.

²² A. Laurence Kulp, “Deluge Geology,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 2 (1950): 1–15, esp. 15.

¹⁹ For a more detailed sketch of Price’s history with young earth creationism, see Numbers, *The Creationists*, 72–101.

antagonism towards flood geology and strong influence within the ASA made amicable relations between the ASA and flood geologists no longer feasible.

In the wake of Kulp's critiques of flood geology, a new wave of evangelical thought emerged that sought to treat both Scripture and science according to their own aims. In 1954 Bernard Ramm wrote *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, in which he argued for the concordance of modern science with biblical truth. He writes,

Almighty God is Creator, World Ground, and Omnipotent Sustainer. In his mind the entire plan of creation was formed with man as the climax. Over the millions of years of geologic history the earth is prepared for man's dwelling, or as it has been put by others, the cosmos was pregnant with man...From time to time the great creative acts, *de novo*, took place. The complexity of animal forms increased. Finally...he whom all creation anticipated is made, MAN, in whom alone is the breath of God.²³

Ramm concluded by admitting that “[m]ost evangelicals are opposed to evolution,”²⁴ but he wished to emphasize that the “Bible does not teach final scientific theory, but teaches final theological truth.”²⁵ Despite evangelicals' aversion to evolution, Ramm sought to disavow evangelicals from an unnecessary wedding of biblical truth and anti-intellectualism, noting “that men whose orthodoxy is unimpeachable have accepted

some form of theistic evolution or at least were tolerant toward evolution theistically conceived.”²⁶ Ramm's views were refreshing for evangelicals looking for a way to reconcile special revelation with general revelation. Perhaps the most prominent endorsement of Ramm's book was Billy Graham, who saw in *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* a way to move forward on the doctrine of biblical inspiration.²⁷

Two decades after the formation of the ASA, Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb penned the single-most influential book in the saga of evangelicals and evolution. Henry Morris was a highly intelligent professor of hydraulic engineering. John Whitcomb graduated with honors from Princeton University before earning his PhD from Grace Theological Seminary. In many ways *The Genesis Flood* rehashed the same arguments first made by George McCready Price.²⁸ With Whitcomb's knowledge of Scripture and Morris's expertise in earth science, the pair offered a convincing explanation of flood geology that accounted for a 6,000-year-old earth and disallowed any version of evolution, theistic or otherwise. At the core of their argument, however, lay a complete distrust of so-called secular or evolutionary scientists. In the book's forward John McCampbell, geologist at the University of Southwestern Louisiana,

²⁶ Ibid., 347–48.

²⁷ George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), 158.

²⁸ John C. Whitcomb, and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).

²³ Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1954), 227–28.

²⁴ Ibid., 347.

²⁵ Ibid., 348.

set the scene for ideological conflict between the “Biblical teachings” and “the more inquisitive and rationalistic spirit among scholars.”²⁹ The only scientists evangelicals should or could trust are those whose assumptions begin with the Bible, not the natural world. Using a dubious methodology,³⁰ Morris and Whitcomb not only succeeded in casting a pall of suspicion over the entire scientific community, but also in staking out new grounds on acceptable biblical interpretation. For Morris and Whitcomb, only a hermeneutic based on young earth catastrophism treated seriously “the testimony of God’s infallible Word.”³¹

EVANGELICALS AND EVOLUTION NINE DECADES AFTER SCOPES

Nine decades have passed since “the trial of the century.” In the years since, evangelicals have remained in a love-hate relationship with the sciences. On the one hand, the sciences have resulted in better quality and duration of lives, and have opened our eyes to the wonder and splendor of God’s creation. On the other hand, science as an academic field of inquiry is often viewed suspiciously by evangelicals as a secular gatekeeper intent on insisting upon naturalistic presuppositions. The tensions have mounted to the point that in some

cases Christian scientists are reluctant to admit that they are Christians to their professional colleagues, and hesitant to admit that they are scientists to their fellow parishioners.³² Christian scientists note that the situation is bad for society, as well as for the Christian witness. Christian theologians and Bible scholars recoil at the naïve and simplistic readings of Scripture that have potentially detrimental effects on Christian faith and practice, as well as a weakened Christian testimony of the gospel.

In 1988, Stanley Rice took exception with his fellow evangelicals for their unfounded dogmatism in young earth creationism. As a biology professor at the evangelical King’s College (then in Briarcliffe, NY, now in New York City), Rice studied fifteen years’ worth of essays in *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, concluding that young earth creationists supplement the biblical text as frequently as they claim to treat it honestly.

The young-Earth creationists, therefore, do not subscribe to the motto of those true, humble literalists who say, “Speak where the Bible speaks, and keep silence where it keeps silence.” Instead, they want to help the Bible out. This seems to occur for two reasons. Some extrabiblical beliefs are necessary in order to rescue biblical literalism and bring it into line with modern scientific knowledge. Because these beliefs are necessary corollaries of biblical literalism, they have achieved a

²⁹ Morris and Whitcomb, *Genesis Flood*, xv, xvi.

³⁰ For a critique of the Morris and Whitcomb’s methodology, see David R. Montgomery, *The Rocks Don’t Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah’s Flood* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012), 225–46.

³¹ Morris and Whitcomb, *Genesis Flood*, 489.

³² A 2014 survey conducted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science revealed that although the tension between science and religion is lessening, less than half of evangelicals believed that “science and religion were in a collaborative relationship.” <http://www.aaas.org/news/religious-and-scientific-communities-may-be-less-combative-commonly-portrayed>.

doctrinal status among the scientific creationists and are given nearly equal credence with scripture itself. In other cases, the extrabiblical emendations are wholly unnecessary flights of fancy, upon which many creationists place as much emphasis as upon scripture itself.³³

Rice's frustration in creation-science interpretations of Scripture rests on the implications for science and Scripture. "The impression is created that these gigantic sagas are not only true science but straight two-hundred-proof Christianity. In this way, despite their zeal to defend the Bible, these creationists are bringing harm upon it."³⁴ While claiming to be biblical literalists, Rice demonstrated how creation-scientists augment the biblical text with extraneous material to support their young earth presuppositions.

To be sure, scientists can be just as driven by ulterior motives or prejudices as defenders of Scripture. We have seen that borne out over the decades with the revelation of deceitful and deceptive reporting on the so-called Piltdown Man, the Cardiff Giant, and Andrew Wakefield's infamous study fraudulently linking the MMR vaccine to autism. According to Marcus and Oransky, "Every day, on average, a scientific paper is retracted because of misconduct. Two percent of scientists admit to tinkering with their data in some kind of improper way."³⁵ These acts

of duplicity propel the popular perception that scientists belong to an elite guild that protects its own, conducting its corrupt "research" under the guise of science with the objective of misleading and misdirecting the populace on scientific truth. Evangelicals already skeptical of secular scientific studies are fed these missteps as symptomatic of the entire enterprise, without giving pause to the fact that it is, in fact, fellow scientists who eventually and ultimately expose the frauds.

The continued antagonism between evangelicals and the scientific community is more acute in the specific issue of evolution. Rather than becoming more open to the hermeneutical approach of Orr, Hodge, Warfield and Wright, many evangelical institutions are digging in their heels against the impending "inroads of liberalism," siding instead with Hague, and, most curiously, George McCready Price. In the summer of 2015 Bethel College (Indiana) formally adopted the "Educational Philosophy Statement on Origins," which contains a notable emendation from Bethel's prior position: "We believe that the first man, Adam, was created by an immediate act of God and not by a process of evolution."³⁶ Bethel's new stance does not forbid the instruction of evolution in the classroom, but it does prohibit any faculty from actively supporting any professional

³³ Stanley Rice, "Scientific Creationism: Adding Imagination to Scripture," *Creation/Science* 8 (1988): 25-36, esp. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵ Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, "What's Behind Big Science Frauds?" *The New York Times*, May 22,

2015; <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/23/opinion/whats-behind-big-science-frauds.html>. Marcus and Oransky do not say, however, at what stage an article is retracted, whether it is during the peer-review process or after it has been published.

³⁶ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/13/bethel-indiana-faculty-members-can-no-longer-take-leadership-roles-groups-differ>

society that promotes evolutionary theory. In other words, science faculty at Bethel have effectively been cut off from academic inquiry and exchange within their discipline. Earlier in the spring of the same year the prolific theologian Thomas Oord was removed from his longstanding tenure at Northwest Nazarene University in Idaho due to his conviction that evolution and evangelical faith are, in fact, compatible with each other.³⁷ In the summer prior, Bryan College (named after William Jennings Bryan), located in Dayton, Tennessee (home of the Scopes Monkey Trial), “clarified” its statement of faith about human origins to read, “We believe that all humanity is descended from Adam and Eve. They are historical persons created by God in a special formative act, and not from previously existing life forms.”³⁸ For Bryan College, God’s creative act cannot and did not involve any evolutionary processes, whether God initiated those processes or not. From the looks of things, the state of the conversation in evangelicalism about human origins has not evolved much, if at all, in the ninety-one years since Scopes.

EVANGELICALS AND EVOLUTION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The present clash between faith and science is not a new phenomenon. Although biblical

cosmology was essentially ancient Near Eastern cosmology, biblical exegetes often interpreted biblical texts related to cosmology in light of the innovations of both Aristotle and Copernicus.³⁹ Aristotelian cosmology was not only adapted, but often adopted by Christian exegetes such as Aquinas, as well as in popular theology as in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The regrettable narrative concerning Galileo and Copernican cosmology is so well known it has been woven into the very fabric of the science-faith dialogue. Catholics opposed Copernicanism because it undermined the Holy See’s status as the divine authority as the center of the cosmos. For Protestants, however, “the main point of contention was its apparent violence against the ‘plain-sense’ meaning of Scripture.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the Copernican system gave way to Newtonian physics, and the Big Bang theory ultimately dispelled any notion of a “center” of the universe. If the church has been able to wrestle with changes in our understanding of cosmology in the face of contradictory biblical testimony, why does there remain such a tension between evangelicals and evolution?

As contemporaries of Copernicus—whose *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* was published in 1543—both Martin Luther and John Calvin were firmly entrenched in Aristotelian cosmology. In fact, despite the irrefutable empirical

³⁷ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/09/theologian-whose-views-evolution-differed-his-church-loses-tenured-job>

³⁸ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/06/professors-and-students-bryan-college-protest-changes-statement-faith>

³⁹ Kyle Greenwood, *Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible Between the Ancient World and Modern Science* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

observations of Galileo and precise mathematical calculations of Kepler, Aristotelian cosmology thrived for another century and a half. It was not until Newton published his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) that Aristotelianism was finally overturned. Even still, it took the Vatican another 350 years to offer a formal apology for its treatment of Galileo. As Thomas Kuhn has helped us recognize, revolutionary paradigm shifts take time to infiltrate the populous.⁴¹ In light of historical precedent, it is to be expected that after a mere nine decades since Scopes a consensus in evangelicalism on evolutionary theory remains elusive.

While a consensus within evangelicalism may not be immediately forthcoming, it is noteworthy that in the past decade especially the atmosphere seems ripe for the conversation.⁴² But who should be the

conversation partners, and whose voice should carry the most weight in these conversations? Both Luther and Calvin grappled with the relationship of science and Scripture. While neither was willing to relent on the authority of Scripture, both recognized that Scripture does not address all matters of natural science. In his discussion on the greater light and lesser light in Genesis 1, for examples, Calvin writes,

Astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God.⁴³

⁴¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 150.

⁴² See, for example, Charles Halton (ed.), *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither? Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Hans Madueme, and Michael Reeves (eds), *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); Matthew Barrett, and Ardel B. Caneday (eds), *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013); J. Daryl Charles (ed), *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013); Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012); Johnny V. Miller, and John M. Soden, *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2012); C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Are and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Mary Katherine Birge, Brian G. Henning, et. al, *Genesis, Evolution, and the Search for a Reasoned Faith* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011); Seth D. Postell, *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1-3 as the*

For Calvin, as was the case with Luther, the observational sciences played an important role in understanding the nature of God's creation.

Holmes Rolston III is one of the most highly engaged figures in this conversation in modern times. He was awarded the Templeton Prize in Religion (2003) and has

Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Richard F. Carlson, and Tremper Longman III, *Science, Creation, and the Bible: Reconciling Rival Theories or Origins* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010).

⁴³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. J. King, Calvin's Commentaries 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 86-87.

presented the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1997–1998.⁴⁴ In his *Science & Religion*, Rolston unapologetically states that, “Science is the most powerful analytic tool yet developed, especially in its accounts of nature.”⁴⁵ But, he rightly notes, science only has the capacity to be analytical about the natural world. It is incapable of resolving the ethical components of life, such as how to value nature, how to guide the human experience, and how to engage history.

Beyond Rolston’s ethical considerations, evangelicals have a stake in the grander consideration of theology, the relationship of the Creator with creation. Because of the intimate relationship of the Creator with creation, our scriptures expectedly interact and intersect with the natural world. As such, evangelicals often feel threatened or become nervous when scientists infringe on biblical territory. This is especially true of non-believing scientists, but is also true of evangelical scientists whose foray into Scripture puts them at odds with over-protective biblicists. But, the dichotomy between evolution and evangelicalism is as false as the dichotomy between modern medicine and biblical medicine (Lev 13:45–46; Is 38:21; Lk 10:34; 1 Tim 5:23), or Newtonian physics ($F_g = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$) and biblical physics (Job 26:7; 38:4; Ps 102:25; 104:5; Is 48:13). Rather, as Rolston has acutely articulated, this dichotomy is

unfounded for two reasons. “First, any causes such as are alleged in biochemistry, are not so mechanical as to require the devaluing or desacralizing of life. Furthermore, any noncauses, such as the randomness alleged in evolutionary theory, are neither so confirmed nor so compelling as to prohibit assigning meaningfulness to the arrival of life.”⁴⁶ For Rolston, then, there is room for the divine in evolutionary theory on two counts: evolutionary theory is limited to the natural realm and humans are more than natural creatures; and, evolutionary theory has yet to be fully explained.

Scientific discoveries are moving at break-neck speeds. Today’s mystery is tomorrow’s innovation. What if the apparent random noncauses are found to be purposed causes? What if evolutionary theory moves one step away from a tautology,⁴⁷ and another step closer to verifiable truth? In fact, with the successful mapping of the human genome, evangelical geneticist Francis S. Collins, has stated unequivocally, “Evolution, as a mechanism, can and must be true.”⁴⁸

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga offers another way forward by discussing evolution in terms of God’s omnipotence, rather than his mystery. In God’s omnipotence he established natural laws to provide order and constancy to our cosmos, such as the laws of thermodynamics, laws of

⁴⁴ His Gifford Lectures have been published as *Genes, Genesis, and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999).

⁴⁵ Holmes Rolston III, *Science & Religion: A Critical Survey* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2006), 343.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123–24.

⁴⁷ Robert H. Peters, “Predictable Problems with Tautology in Evolution and Ecology,” *American Naturalist* 110 (1978): 759–61.

⁴⁸ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 107.

motion, law of universal gravity, and the law of the conservation of energy. Plantinga defines these natural laws as “necessary truths in that there is nothing we or other creatures can do to render them false.”⁴⁹ None of these laws are “biblical,” in that we cannot find evidence for their existence within the pages of Scripture. In fact, in the case of some natural laws, it was long deemed that some of them contradicted Scripture. However, their absence from Scripture does not negate their presence in nature. Rather, Plantinga notes three ways in which natural science and theism are compatible.⁵⁰ First, for the scientific method to work, nature must abide by a set of constants, governing principles that comport with a rational Being who set those laws in motion. Next, not only must there be static laws in place, but scientists must acknowledge their existence, lending credence to the doctrine of the image of God. Finally, theism provides the rationale for understanding the necessity and requisite nature of these laws.

In essence, Plantinga is restating James Orr’s thesis from a century earlier, but in a more technically sophisticated and philosophical manner. “The World is God’s world,” Orr said. “[I]t is established by his decree; he has given to every creature its nature, its bounds, its limits; all things continue according to his ordinances.”⁵¹ If God is the one who has been revealed in Scripture, then there cannot be a conflict

between faith and science, or between nature and Scripture. All laws are God’s laws, and all truth is God’s truth. Or, in the words of Augustine, “[w]herever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.”⁵² John Calvin echoes Augustine’s sentiments in his commentary on Titus: “All truth is from God; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it; for it has come from God.”⁵³ Evolution is not a Christian doctrine, but neither is gravity nor Einstein’s theory of relativity. The fact that they are not Christian doctrines does not necessitate that they be removed from the Christian lexicon.

If evangelicals are secure in their doctrine of divine providence, an approach to the challenge of evolution should not be one of isolationism and retreat, but invigoration and engagement. In his primer on the doctrine of creation, David Fergusson exhorts evangelicals to embrace the approach of Charles Hodge and Robert Flint whose aptitude in both the biblical literature and the sciences enabled them to understand the complexities of the issues, rather than responding reflexively to the potential threat to their theological systems. Fergusson reminds us of three important lessons to be learned from evangelical engagement with evolutionary theory. First, as Rolston argued, “a greater degree of independence between scientific and theological work can now be

⁴⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Science, Religion, & Naturalism: Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011), 281.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 282–84.

⁵¹ Orr, “Science and Christian Faith,” 128.

⁵² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II.18.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; CCEL, 1981), 247–50 (online edition, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.pdf>)

acknowledged.”⁵⁴ Second, “it showed the Bible and Christian tradition capable of providing resources for dealing with a new set of problems, in some cases resources that had been overlooked by earlier generations.”⁵⁵ Third, in the years immediately following the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, “Christian theology proved itself to be in a state neither of ignorance nor fear of what scientists were discovering about the age of the universe and the emergence of life forms on earth.”⁵⁶ Fergusson reminds us that the trepidation evangelicals have with evolution has not always been present, and was virtually non-existent among the best and brightest theological minds closest to the historical scene.⁵⁷ If our doctrines of providence and creation are grounded in a firm commitment to God as Creator and sustainer as revealed in Scripture, evangelicals should delight in discovering the creative nature of our God whenever and however he reveals himself in nature, whether those truths are discovered by Copernicus, Newton, Einstein, or Darwin.

Kyle R. Greenwood

Kyle R. Greenwood (PhD Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion) is Associate Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Language, Colorado Christian University. He is the author of Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible Between the Ancient World and Modern Science (IVP Academic, 2015) and the editor of Since the Beginning: Interpreting Genesis 1–2 Through the Ages (Baker Academic, forthcoming).

⁵⁴ David Fergusson, *Creation*, Guides to Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 89.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁷ Conor Cunningham goes so far to say that “Darwin’s idea will emerge as ‘pious’ because it allows us to test the relative ‘orthodoxy’ of our faith” with respect to traditional Christianity as opposed to modern categories. [Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), xvi.]

