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*to*  
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*and*  
SCRIPTURE

FOREWORD BY R.C. SPROUL

BY KEITH A. MATHISON

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES  
*Renew your Mind.*

# A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture

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# FOREWORD

July 25, 2013

All truth meets at the top. This is so because all truth is God's truth. It is not only His truth because He possesses it and He yields sovereign control over it, but also because He is the source and fountainhead of all truth. He is the source of all truth not only because all truth derives from Him but because He is the necessary condition for all apprehension of truth.

As creatures we are endowed and equipped for the discovery of an intelligible understanding of truth by the means of reason and sense perception. These given abilities compose the essence of the classic scientific method. Sense perception aids in the collection of data, experimentation and examination. Reason gives the ability to make sense of what the senses perceive. The material and the formal are married. Though they must be distinguished, they must never be separated. The formal and the material are mutually dependent upon each other.

In Christian epistemology it is averred that neither the mind alone, nor the senses alone—or even both together—are able to yield truth. An analogy may be seen with the importance of light as a necessary medium of sight. Our optic system may function at its fullest capacity and at the same time be utterly useless in the dark. Without the medium of light we are as the blind, groping and probing, but seeing nothing.

Thomas Aquinas quoted Augustine favorably from the latter's *Soliloq.6*:

the most certain sciences are like things lit up by the sun so that they may be seen. But it is God who gives the light. Reason is in our minds as sight in our eyes, and the eyes of the mind are the senses of the soul. Now, however pure it be, bodily sense cannot see any visible thing without the light of the sun. Hence, however perfect be the human mind, it cannot by reasoning know any truth without the light of God, which belongs to the aid of grace.

Aquinas added, “if a man is to know any truth whatsoever he needs divine help ... the natural light bestowed on the mind as God's light, by which we are enlightened to know such things as belong to natural knowledge.”  
*Q.109.Art.1*

In a word, what both Augustine and Aquinas affirmed is that the necessary condition for all science (knowledge) is divine revelation.

In Theology we distinguish between special and general (or natural) revelation. Special revelation is that revelation God provides basically in Sacred Scripture. But that same Scripture affirms that God also provides a general revelation in nature.

It must be affirmed that all revelation that comes from God is, by the nature of the case, infallible. God, being omniscient and holy, is inherently incapable of error or evil deceit. What He reveals is always and everywhere, true. Indeed, truth itself may be defined as that which corresponds to reality as perceived by God. This correspondence view of truth rests on the certainty of God's perfect and comprehensive perception of reality.

Whatever mode God uses to convey His revelation carries a revelation that is infallible. Both the written Word of Scripture and His general revelation are infallible. It is the same God who reveals in both modes. Scripture is no more infallible than natural revelation nor natural revelation more infallible than Scripture.

Natural revelation not only reveals God ... it reveals nature as well, as both Augustine and Aquinas affirmed.

In the Middle Ages, with the rediscovery of ancient philosophy (especially that of Aristotle), Muslim philosophers sought a synthesis between Islamic religion and philosophy. They developed the view of *Integral Aristotelianism*. They sought to find resolution between reason and faith, between religion and science. Their solution was the invention of the theory *Double Truths*. In this theory it was affirmed that an idea may be true in religion and at the same time false in science; or true in faith and at the same time false in reason.

It was against this double truth theory that Aquinas raised his protest. In modern terms the double truth theory would allow someone to affirm the origin of human life by divine purposive creation and at the same time affirm that life emerged by accident from cosmic slime. It's like believing in creation on Monday, Wednesday and Friday—and in macro evolution on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, (followed by rest on Sunday).

In contrast to the double truth theory, Aquinas argued for *mixed articles*. Mixed articles are those articles that can be known either by nature or by grace (by the Bible or a study of science). At this point Aquinas was championing the coherence between general and special revelation. To affirm contradiction between them is to destroy either or both.

I am grateful for Keith Mathison's treatment of these matters in this book—not only for his kind defense of my position (which is not original with me) but for his lucid exposition of the issues faced today in apparent conflicts

between religion and science. Keith provides the necessary foundation for resolving these issues.

R.C. Sproul  
Orlando 2013

# INTRODUCTION

“How old is the universe?”

During a question-and-answer session at the 2012 Ligonier Ministries National Conference, the speakers were asked this question in connection with the ongoing debate between Christians who think the universe is less than ten thousand years old and those who think it is much older. Dr. R. C. Sproul, founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, took about five minutes to answer the question, and what he said in that brief period should be heard by every Reformed Christian who is interested in this subject, and especially by those who are discussing and debating it.

When asked whether the debate over the age of the universe is an intramural discussion, Dr. Sproul responded:

Not for some people. For some, it's an all-or-nothing issue. When people ask me how old the earth is, I tell them “I don't know.” I'll tell you why I don't. In the first place, the Bible does not give us a date of creation. It gives us hints that seem to indicate, in many cases, a young earth. At the same time, we hear about an expanding universe, astronomical dating, and other factors coming from outside the church that make me wonder.

I believe firmly that all truth is God's truth, and I believe that God has not given revelation only in sacred Scripture. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals Himself in nature, which we call natural revelation. I once asked a seminary class, a conservative group, “How many of you believe that God's revelation in Scripture is infallible?” They all raised their hands. I then asked, “And how many of you believe that God's revelation in nature is infallible?” No one raised his hand. It's the same God giving the revelation. But they were concerned that not every scientific theory is compatible with the Word of God.

That's true, but historically, the church's understanding of the special revelation of the Bible has been corrected by students of natural revelation. One example is the Copernican revolution. Both John Calvin and Martin Luther rejected Nicolaus Copernicus as a heretic in the sixteenth century [because he said the sun, not the earth, is at the center of the solar system]. However, I don't know anyone in orthodox Christianity today who is pleading for geocentricity. In that case, the church has



said, “We misinterpreted the teaching of the Bible with respect to the solar system, and thank you scientists for correcting our misunderstanding.” So I think that we can learn from *nonbelieving* scientists who are studying natural revelation. They may get a better sense of the truth from their study of natural revelation than I get from ignoring natural revelation. I have a high view of natural revelation.

However, if something can be shown to be definitively taught in the Bible without question, and someone gives me a theory that he thinks is based on natural revelation but that contradicts the Word of God, I’m going to stand with the Word of God a hundred times out of a hundred. I have to repeat, I may have mistaken interpretations of the Word of God. But I believe both spheres are spheres of God’s revelation, and that truth has to be compatible. So, if a theory of science—natural revelation—is in conflict with a theological theory, here’s what I know for sure—someone is wrong.

I don’t leap to the conclusion that it has to be the scientist. It may be the theologian. But neither do I leap to the conclusion that it has to be the theologian. It could well be the scientist. We have fallible human beings interpreting infallible natural revelation, and fallible human beings interpreting infallible special revelation.

That’s a long way to say I don’t know how old the earth is.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of what Dr. Sproul said in this response lies in the fact that he reminded us of certain issues that are necessary to a proper approach to this question, issues that are routinely mishandled, neglected, or simply ignored. For example, he reminded us of the source of both natural (or general) revelation and special revelation, the difference between God’s revelation (general or special) and our interpretation of that revelation, and the fallibility of our interpretations of both kinds of revelation. In doing so, he reminded us of several aspects of a distinctively Reformed approach to questions of science and Scripture that have been largely forgotten in the debates of the last several decades.

A Reformed approach to the question of the age of the universe that takes these issues into account is missing from much of the contemporary discussion. In the following chapters, we will look at these issues in more detail in order to see what light they might shed on this difficult question.



## ALL TRUTH IS GOD'S TRUTH

In the introduction, I asserted that Dr. Sproul's response to a question about the age of the universe at Ligonier's 2012 National Conference should be heard by every Reformed Christian interested in the topic. Why? Because Dr. Sproul's answer took into account issues that are usually mishandled or ignored altogether.

Dr. Sproul and the other panelists were asked about the age of the universe and specifically whether it is an intramural discussion. Dr. Sproul began his response with the following words:

Not for some people. For some, it's an all-or-nothing issue. When people ask me how old the earth is, I tell them "I don't know." I'll tell you why I don't. In the first place, the Bible does not give us a date of creation. It gives us hints that seem to indicate, in many cases, a young earth. At the same time, we hear about an expanding universe, astronomical dating, and other factors coming from outside the church that make me wonder. I believe firmly that all truth is God's truth....

Dr. Sproul's statement that "All truth is God's truth" was an important one that is questioned by many today. There are those with a postmodern mindset who question it because they doubt the very existence of objective truth, but postmodernism is not our present concern. We are concerned with those who grant the existence of objective truth but who also question this statement because of a suspicion that it might contradict the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* or that it might in some other way be "non-Reformed."

We will address the issue of God's revelation (general and special) in the next chapter. Here, I simply want to ask whether the basic idea "All truth is God's truth" is something that a Reformed Christian should affirm. The idea was clearly expressed before the time of the Reformation. Augustine, the greatest theologian of the first millennium, expresses it in several places. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, for example, he writes, "Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to

his Master.”<sup>2</sup> The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas developed the idea in more detail in his theological and philosophical works. The idea, then, was obviously held by the most important pre-Reformation theologians.

But what about the Reformation itself? Was this idea rejected at that time? No. John Calvin picked up where Augustine and Aquinas left off. In his commentary on Titus 1:12, for example, Calvin states: “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.”<sup>3</sup> He expands on this idea in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard *the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth*, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.<sup>4</sup>

So, is the statement “All truth is God’s truth” non-Reformed? Only if Calvin is “non-Reformed.” Calvin was able to assert “All truth is God’s truth” while also asserting the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, because the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* does not say that all truths are found in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, in a nutshell, asserts that Scripture is our sole source of normative, infallible apostolic revelation, and that “all things *necessary* for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible with enough clarity that the ordinary believer can find them there and understand.”<sup>6</sup> Truths that are not found in the Bible (e.g. the date of your birth, the structure of protein molecules) are not necessary for salvation.

Closer to our own day, the Dutch Reformed systematic theologian Herman Bavinck wrote the following:

He [God] is the truth in its absolute fullness. He, therefore, is the primary, the original truth, *the source of all truth*, the truth in all truth. He is the ground of the truth—of the true being—of all things, of their knowability and conceivability, the ideal and archetype of all truth, of all ethical being, of all the rules and laws, in light of which the nature and manifestation of all things should be judged and on which they should be modeled. God is the source and origin of the knowledge of truth in all areas of life.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident, then, that the general idea “All truth is God’s truth” is not foreign to Reformed theology. But why not? It is beyond the scope of this small book to delve into the philosophical discussions regarding the different theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, etc.). Because this book is addressed to Reformed Christians who, by and large, adhere to the correspondence concept of truth, and because my intent is to keep it as simple and straightforward as possible, we will assume the correspondence theory of truth for the remainder of this work.<sup>8</sup>

The statement “All truth is God’s truth” is consistent with Reformed theology because if something is true, it is because it has been revealed by God, because it is an accurate understanding of the nature of something created by God, or because it is an accurate description of something decreed by God. In other words, a God-centered view of truth demands that we affirm that all truth is God’s truth. That which is true is true because God said it, created it, or decreed it.

Regarding the first part of this statement, God is a God who reveals. God Himself is true and cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). Therefore, all that He reveals, whether through general revelation in His creation or through special revelation in Scripture, is necessarily true.

Second, God is the One who creates (Gen. 1:1). He is the Maker of heaven and earth, and all that is within them (Acts 14:15). This fact is closely related to the first, because God reveals certain things about Himself through creation (e.g. Rom. 1:18–20). In order for us to correctly see that revelation about God in His creation, we have to accurately grasp the nature of what He has created. If we misread what is actually there, we will misrepresent God.

It is also worth observing that God’s creation is real and not an illusion, and God created man with the ability to learn about and have true knowledge of what He created. As Calvin noted, this ability was impacted by the fall, but it was not completely destroyed. Scripture regularly assumes man has the ability to learn about creation. Proverbs is probably the most obvious example of this, because Proverbs expects man to draw true conclusions about God and reality based on his observations of creation. Created things are what they are because God created them a certain way rather than another. When we learn something about creation that corresponds with what God actually made, we have learned something true. God is the source of these truths by virtue of the fact that He is the Creator.

Finally, God has decreed whatsoever comes to pass, and this is the basis of historical truths. When we learn something about history that is in accordance with what actually happened, we have learned something true to

the extent that our knowledge corresponds with what actually happened, and what actually happened only happened, ultimately, because God decreed it.

The assertion “All truth is God’s truth” is not somehow less than Reformed. On the contrary, it is the only statement a consistently Reformed Christian can make.

## GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

Following his statement about the nature of truth, Dr. Sproul continued his response by making a very important point about general and special revelation. He said:

I believe firmly that all truth is God's truth, and I believe that God has not given revelation only in sacred Scripture. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals Himself in nature, which we call natural revelation. I once asked a seminary class, a conservative group, "How many of you believe that God's revelation in Scripture is infallible?" They all raised their hands. I then asked, "And how many of you believe that God's revelation in nature is infallible?" No one raised his hand. It's the same God giving the revelation.

A Reformed approach to science and Scripture requires a Reformed understanding of revelation. The word *revelation* denotes a "revealing." In Christian theology, it refers to God's act of communication to man or to the content of that communication. Historically, theologians have distinguished kinds of revelation. Many medieval theologians described the difference using the terms *natural* and *supernatural* revelation. The distinction had nothing to do with the source or origin of the revelation. Theologians who made this distinction believed that all revelation was supernatural in origin because God was its source. Instead, this distinction had to do with the *mode* of revelation. God communicated natural revelation through so-called "natural" phenomena (His created works), while He communicated supernatural revelation through special divine intervention (dreams, visions, etc.).

### ***General Revelation***

A more common distinction among Reformed theologians is the distinction between *general* revelation and *special* revelation. Article 2 of the Belgic

Confession (on the means by which we know God) states the distinction in the following words:

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to *see clearly the invisible things of God*, even *his everlasting power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation. (Emphasis added)

This distinction between general and special revelation focuses more on the extent and purpose of revelation.<sup>9</sup> General revelation is so called because it has a general content and is revealed to a general audience. Through general revelation to all men, God communicates His existence, His power, and His glory, leaving men without excuse for failing to honor Him and serve Him.

A further distinction that must be made is the distinction between immediate and mediate general revelation. Immediate general revelation occurs without an intermediating agency. Mediate general revelation occurs through an intermediating agency. John Calvin described immediate general revelation this way:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*divinitatis sensum*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, God has revealed Himself by directly implanting knowledge about Himself in all men.

In a later chapter, Calvin described the mediate general revelation that God accomplishes through His created works:

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God [cf. John 17:3]. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole

workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.<sup>11</sup>

God, then, reveals Himself through His works. Here, Calvin is simply restating what the psalmist said in Psalm 19:1–2:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

The Apostle Paul elaborates on this idea in Romans 1:19–20:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

As John Murray explains: “We must not tone down the teaching of the apostle in this passage. It is a clear declaration to the effect that the visible creation as God’s handiwork makes manifest the invisible perfections of God as its Creator, that from the things which are perceptible to the senses cognition of these invisible perfections is derived, and that thus a clear apprehension of God’s perfections may be gained from his observable handiwork.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Special Revelation***

General revelation, whether immediate or mediate, is directed to all men. It is, however, “not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation” (Westminster Confession of Faith, I.1). General revelation does not reveal Jesus Christ or His work of redemption for sinners. Thus, there is a need for what is called “special revelation.” Special revelation is the revelation of the way of salvation.

One of the most important biblical texts describing God’s special revelation is Hebrews 1:1–2, which reads, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” In times past, before the completion of Scripture, God revealed His redemptive work through the prophets by means of dreams, visions, and theophanies. But now special revelation has received



its permanent form in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (WCF, I.1).

Recall that Dr. Sproul asked his seminary class, “How many of you believe that God’s revelation in Scripture is infallible?” All of the students raised their hands. Then Dr. Sproul asked, “And how many of you believe that God’s revelation in nature is infallible?” This time, no one raised his hand. As we will see in our next chapter, the reason for the different responses had to do with the students’ proper concern to recognize that Scripture is a higher authority than scientific theories. That, however, was not what Dr. Sproul asked, and therein lies the rub in many contemporary discussions of this issue—we end up talking past each other because we are not listening carefully. Dr. Sproul asked his students a question regarding something God does. Despite the misgivings of his students, the answer Dr. Sproul gave is correct. God’s revelation in creation is equally as infallible as His revelation in Scripture, because in both cases, it is God who is doing the revealing, and God is *always* infallible. God cannot err in His work of revealing Himself. The question the students *thought* Dr. Sproul was asking is an extremely important question, but it cannot be answered adequately until Dr. Sproul’s original question is answered correctly.

In our next chapter, we will examine what may be the most important point Dr. Sproul raised in connection with the contemporary discussions, and that is the difference between God’s infallible revelation (general and special) and our fallible interpretation of that revelation (general and special). In connection with this topic, we will need to look at Dr. Sproul’s commentary on Article XII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in order to understand the difference between scientific theories that contradict an interpretation of Scripture as opposed to theories that contradict an actual teaching of Scripture.



## INTERPRETING GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

In the previous chapter, we looked at the Reformed distinction between general and special revelation. In this chapter, we begin looking at another crucial distinction that is regularly overlooked in discussions of science and Scripture, namely, the distinction between God's infallible revelation and our fallible *interpretation* of that revelation.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Dr. Sproul's students all affirmed that God's special revelation is infallible, but they were not ready to affirm that God's general revelation is infallible. We have already explained why we must affirm that both kinds of revelation are infallible. Here we need to look more closely at why Dr. Sproul's students were reluctant to affirm the same. In his response, Dr. Sproul said:

They were concerned that not every scientific theory is compatible with the Word of God. That's true, but historically, the church's understanding of the special revelation of the Bible has been corrected by students of natural revelation. One example is the Copernican revolution.

Dr. Sproul explained that his students were hesitant to affirm the infallibility of general revelation because they rightly believed that not every scientific theory is compatible with the Word of God. This is certainly true, but as we have already seen, this is not the question Dr. Sproul asked. Scientific theories are not the same thing as general revelation. General revelation (like special revelation) refers to an infallible action of God (or to the content revealed through that action). Scientific theories are the fallible interpretations of what Christians know to be God's created works.

Two issues in Dr. Sproul's response must be addressed. First, since general and special revelation both proceed from God, they cannot ultimately conflict. We will address this issue more fully in a later chapter. The second issue, which we will look at here, is the idea that a misinterpretation of one

kind of revelation can be corrected by a right interpretation of the other kind of revelation. Few Christians would disagree with the idea that a right interpretation of Scripture (special revelation) can correct a misinterpretation of general revelation, but is the converse true as well? Can a right interpretation of general revelation correct a misinterpretation of special revelation? Does such an idea conflict with our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture?

### ***Article XII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy***

Since Dr. Sproul specifically mentioned how certain interpretations of general revelation have helped the church correct misinterpretations of special revelation, it will be helpful to look briefly at Article XII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and Dr. Sproul's commentary on it because a misunderstanding of this article has led to some confusion on this issue. Article XII of the Chicago Statement reads:

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.<sup>13</sup>

The denial section of this article is primarily directed toward those who would limit biblical inerrancy to spiritual matters and who would exclude biblical teaching related to matters touching on history or science. For the purposes of our discussion, the correct understanding of the second denial is important. In his commentary on this article, Dr. Sproul writes:

It is important to note that the second denial, that scientific hypotheses about earth history may not be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on matters such as the creation and the flood, does not carry with it the implication that scientific hypotheses or scientific research are useless to the student of the Bible or that science never has anything to contribute to an understanding of biblical material. It merely denies that the *actual* teaching of Scripture can be overturned by teachings from external sources.<sup>14</sup>

The word *actual* in the last sentence is significant. As Dr. Sproul reminds

us, scientific discoveries in the late medieval period forced the church to reexamine its interpretation of Scripture regarding geocentricity:

The advances of science helped the church to correct an earlier misinterpretation of Scripture. To say that science cannot overturn the teaching of Scripture is not to say that science cannot aid the church in understanding Scripture, or even correct false inferences drawn from Scripture or actual misinterpretations of the Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Sproul is making the simple point that while science cannot overturn an *actual* teaching of Scripture, it can sometimes correct a misinterpretation of Scripture. The church, for example, assumed for centuries that the Bible taught egocentricity—the idea that the sun, moon, planets, and stars revolve around a stationary earth. Careful observations of the earth, sun, moon, and stars eventually proved that the sun is at the center of our solar system, that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun, and that the moon revolves around the earth. Did such observations prove that the Bible was in error? No. These discoveries of how God had actually created things merely demonstrated that a particular interpretation of the Bible was in error.

Dr. Sproul is not saying anything new or strange here. Charles Hodge, the giant of nineteenth-century Reformed theology, said much the same:

It is admitted that theologians are not infallible, in the interpretation of Scripture. It may, therefore, happen in the future, as it has in the past, that interpretations of the Bible, long confidently received, must be modified or abandoned, to bring revelation into harmony with what God teaches in his works. This change of view as to the true meaning of the Bible may be a painful trial to the Church, but it does not in the least impair the authority of the Scriptures. They remain infallible; we are merely convicted of having mistaken their meaning.<sup>16</sup>

The Reformed churches have long held that synods and councils are fallible. As the Westminster Confession explains: “All synods and councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred” (XXXI:4). The same is true of individual Christians. We are fallible as well; we may err and have erred in our individual interpretations of Scripture. Unless a person believes that he or she is an infallible interpreter of Scripture, this is a reality that must be kept in mind.

When we forget the distinction between what God is saying in Scripture

and our own fallible interpretations of His Word, we run the risk of subtly replacing God's Word with our word.

### ***We Believe the Bible and You Do Not***

As an example, consider the following statement by the great Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics*: "The difference between the Lutheran Church and the Reformed in the doctrine of Baptism is fully and adequately defined by saying that the former believes God's Word regarding Baptism, the latter not."<sup>17</sup> The problem with this assertion should be obvious (at least to those who are not Lutheran). Pieper considers the difference between the Lutheran church and the Reformed church on this subject to be a result of the Reformed church's refusal to believe the Bible. Historically, the Lutherans have made the same assertion in connection with the words of institution in the Lord's Supper. In his debates with the Lutheran Joachim Westphal, John Calvin was almost driven to distraction by Westphal's repeated claim that Jesus' words "This is my body" allowed of no interpretation. One either believed them or one disbelieved them, according to Westphal.

During my final months at Dallas Theological Seminary, when I was slowly transitioning out of dispensational premillennialism toward Reformed theology, I was repeatedly informed that the only reason I was not a premillennialist was that I didn't believe the Bible (specifically Rev. 20). My friends there could not grasp the fact that my difference with them was a difference of interpretation, not a difference over the authority of God's Word.

Reformed Christians rightly reject the claim that the only reason we do not accept the Lutheran doctrine of baptism or the dispensationalist understanding of the millennium is that we do not believe the Bible. These are disagreements over interpretations of God's Word, not denials of its authority.

In the final words of his commentary on Article XII of the Chicago Statement, Dr. Sproul explains how the distinction between Scripture and interpretations of Scripture applies to biblical passages that have a bearing on scientific issues:

Questions of the extent of the flood or the literary genre of the earlier chapters of Genesis are not answered by this statement. Questions of biblical interpretation that touch on the field of hermeneutics remain for further investigation and discussion. What the Scriptures actually teach about creation and the flood is not spelled out by this article; but it does spell out that whatever

the Bible teaches about creation and the flood cannot be negated by secular theories.<sup>18</sup>

In short, while scientific theories can help the church correct wrong interpretations of Scripture, they cannot negate what the Scriptures actually teach. Scripture teaches clearly, for example, that Jesus rose from the dead. Any scientific theory that denies the possibility of resurrection from the dead, therefore, is necessarily wrong. Scripture teaches that God is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is within them. Any scientific theory that claims natural phenomena arose from purely materialistic causes is necessarily wrong.

Dr. Sproul illustrates his point about the fallibility of our interpretations by reminding us of how Martin Luther and Calvin responded to the new astronomical theories of the sixteenth century. In our next chapter, we will look at these responses in more detail in order to discover what we might learn from the mistakes of others.

## LUTHER, CALVIN, AND COPERNICUS

In the previous chapter, we looked at the distinction between God’s infallible revelation and our fallible interpretation of that revelation. In this chapter, we will look at the thoughts of Martin Luther and John Calvin concerning certain astronomical ideas that were introduced during their lifetimes in order to see what we might learn that will help us navigate scientific questions of our own day.

After stating that the church’s understanding of special revelation had been corrected by students of natural revelation, Dr. Sproul illustrated his point with a reference to the introduction of new astronomical ideas in the sixteenth century.

Both John Calvin and Martin Luther rejected Nicolaus Copernicus as a heretic in the sixteenth century [because he said the sun, not the earth, is at the center of the solar system]. However, I don’t know anyone in orthodox Christianity today who is pleading for geocentricity. In that case, the church has said, “We misinterpreted the teaching of the Bible with respect to the solar system, and thank you scientists for correcting our misunderstanding.” So I think that we can learn from *nonbelieving* scientists who are studying natural revelation. They may get a better sense of the truth from their study of natural revelation than I get from ignoring natural revelation. I have a high view of natural revelation.

In this section of his response, Dr. Sproul reminded us that Christians in the past believed erroneous ideas about the nature of God’s creation because they thought those ideas were taught in Scripture. He specifically mentioned geocentricity—the idea that the sun, moon, and stars all revolve around a stationary earth.

This understanding of the universe had been articulated most thoroughly

by Ptolemy (ca. AD 90–ca. 168) and had been accepted by Christians for fifteen hundred years because they believed it was taught in passages such as Joshua 10:12–14 and the many passages that refer to the sun’s rising or setting. Like most Christians (and scientists) of their day, Luther and Calvin believed geocentrism to be a true description of God’s creation.

The heliocentric views of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) began to circulate in scholarly circles in the 1530s, although his book was not published until 1543. His views were not accepted for many years—even among other astronomers. As Davis A. Young observes in his recent book on Calvin’s views of the created order, “Widespread acceptance of the Copernican universe came only after discoveries made by Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), who held positions in mathematics at the Universities of Pisa and Padua; formulation of the laws of planetary motion by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who taught mathematics in Graz, Prague, and Linz; and the physical explanation of planetary motion in terms of inertia and gravitation by Isaac Newton (1642–1727), professor of mathematics at Cambridge.”<sup>19</sup> In short, the ideas of Copernicus were not accepted overnight, and they were certainly not widely accepted during the lifetimes of Luther and Calvin.

But did Luther and Calvin know of Copernicus’ theory, and if so, how did the Reformers respond? There is some dispute regarding the answer to these questions. The answers seem somewhat clearer with Luther. In the *Table Talk* (collections of Luther’s comments on a variety of topics), we read of the following discussion (dated June 4, 1539) regarding these new ideas:

There was mention of a certain new astrologer who wanted to prove that the earth moves and not the sky, the sun, and the moon. This would be as if somebody were riding on a cart or in a ship and imagined that he was standing still while the earth and the trees were moving. [Luther remarked:] “So it goes now. Whoever wants to be clever must agree with nothing that others esteem. He must do something of his own. This is what that fellow does who wishes to turn the whole of astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth [Josh. 10:12].”<sup>20</sup>

There is some dispute as to whether Luther’s words were quoted exactly as he said them, but this version of the *Table Talk* is generally considered to be the most accurate.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether his student recorded his words precisely, it is still clear from his lectures on Genesis that Luther held to the geocentric theory that was the prevailing view of his day.<sup>22</sup>



Furthermore, while some scholars deny that Luther placed his interpretation of Scripture over against the theory of Copernicus, this statement in the *Table Talk* is not the only place where a conflict between Luther's views and the views of scientists occurred. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, for example, Luther writes the following regarding the sun and stars: "Indeed, it is more likely that the bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and that they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire, to shed light at night, each according to its endowment and its creation."<sup>23</sup>

This, too, was not an uncommon view during the early sixteenth century. Luther adds the observation that there were waters above this firmament where the sun and stars were fastened. Regarding the waters above the firmament, Luther writes:

We Christians must be different from the philosophers [i.e. scientists] in the way we think about the causes of these things. And if some are beyond our comprehension (like those before us concerning the waters above the heavens), we must believe them and admit our lack of knowledge rather than either wickedly deny them or presumptuously interpret them in conformity with our understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Here Luther suggests that it is wicked to deny that there are literal waters above the firmament to which the sun and stars are fastened. Why did he believe this was an undeniable fact? He believed Scripture taught it clearly in Genesis 1. The problem arose when it was discovered over time that the sun and stars are not fastened to a firmament and that there are no waters being held back by this firmament. If Scripture did *actually* teach the existence of such things, that would leave two options: either the new discoveries were misinterpretations of general revelation or Scripture was wrong. Since Luther believed Scripture clearly taught the existence of waters above the firmament, he believed the scientists were proposing an idea that would require him to say that the Scriptures were in error. Luther apparently believed that was the only choice, and if that was the only choice, it was one he had to reject. It did not seem to occur to him that the Scriptures might not actually teach that view. It did not occur to him that the conflict could be between a correct interpretation of God's creation and his fallible interpretation of Scripture.

Calvin's precise view of Copernicus is more difficult to determine and has long been debated. Part of the difficulty involved with discerning his view is due to a quotation that has been wrongly attributed to him by numerous scholars, ranging from Bertrand Russell to Thomas Kuhn. They have asserted that Calvin condemned Copernicus with these words: "Who will venture to

place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?” The problem is that those words are found nowhere in Calvin’s writings.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the statement has been repeated so often that it is accepted as a matter of historical fact.

However, even though Calvin did not make the oft-quoted statement about Copernicus cited above, a statement he made in a sermon on 1 Corinthians is relevant. There, Calvin warns against those who say “that the sun does not move and that it is the earth that moves.”<sup>26</sup> He describes those who hold this view as “stark raving mad” and as “possessed” by the Devil.<sup>27</sup> It is not clear that he is basing this warning on his interpretation of any particular passage of Scripture, and there is ongoing debate about how this statement coincides with Calvin’s other statements regarding general and special revelation, but at the very least, the statement does indicate that geocentricity was firmly established in Calvin’s mind as the true explanation of the nature of God’s creation.

There are not many within orthodox Christianity today who are pleading for geocentricity, but there are some. There are websites, books, and articles that defend this view. Proponents argue that other Christians, including young-earth creationists, have compromised and capitulated to non-believing scientists instead of submitting to the authority of Scripture.

Geocentricity, however, is not the issue. The main point Dr. Sproul was making by pointing out these past mistakes Christians have made in the interpretation of general and special revelation was to remind us of the possibility of contemporary mistakes. Theologians and biblical scholars have not developed the attribute of infallibility since the time of Luther and Calvin.

Dr. Sproul also reminded us that students of special revelation can learn from students of general revelation. But this reminder raises even more important questions regarding matters such as the impact of the fall on man’s ability to understand God’s general and special revelation, the distinction between human understanding of earthly things and of heavenly things, and the so-called “wisdom of the world.” In our next chapter, we will begin to examine these issues.

## EARTHLY THINGS AND HEAVENLY THINGS

In the previous chapters, we have discussed Dr. R.C. Sproul's answer to a question about the age of the universe during a question-and-answer session at Ligonier Ministries' 2012 National Conference. In the last chapter, we looked at the geocentricity of Martin Luther and John Calvin in order to expand on Dr. Sproul's point regarding past mistakes Christians have made in their understanding of God's creation. Dr. Sproul argued that the church was able to learn from nonbelieving scientists who studied God's created works. For Reformed Christians, this raises several questions related to the fall and its impact on human reasoning.

It is important to look at these questions because some have suggested that those, such as Dr. Sproul, who stand in the tradition of the Princeton theologians do not take the impact of the fall on the human mind as seriously as they should. This suggestion is false, as several recent books have demonstrated.<sup>28</sup> But how can one affirm on the one hand that the fall has defiled the human mind and affirm on the other hand that the church can learn from unbelievers about God's created works? Before we look at the answer to this question, it is necessary to offer a brief summary of the Reformed view of reason and revelation before and after the fall. The objective here is not to address every related issue (there are many). It is merely to summarize some of the most fundamental points.

### ***Revelation and Reason before the Fall***

Man was created in the image of God, and before the fall, "God's image was visible in the light of the mind, in the uprightness of the heart, and in the soundness of all the parts."<sup>29</sup> He was, as Charles Hodge explains, "originally created in a state of maturity and perfection."<sup>30</sup> Man's reason, will, and emotions were uncorrupted by sin and functioned correctly.

Regarding general revelation before the fall, Calvin helpfully explains its original purpose. He writes, "The natural order was that the frame of the

universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity.”<sup>31</sup> Before the fall, then, God’s revelation was able to accomplish its original purpose because man’s reasoning faculties, his ability to receive what was revealed, had not been distorted by sin.

### ***Revelation and Reason after the Fall***

Our first parents sinned against God, and as a result they were “wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body” (Westminster Confession of Faith, VI.2). This is a description of total depravity. Theologians sometimes speak of “the noetic effects of sin” to describe the defilement of one of these faculties, the human mind. It is important to note that while these faculties, including the mind, were corrupted and deformed in the fall, they were not annihilated or destroyed.<sup>32</sup> God graciously prevented human beings from becoming completely irrational beasts.<sup>33</sup>

Although creation itself was cursed as a result of man’s sin (Gen. 3:17), God’s infallible revelation of Himself continued. Paul, for example, explains that God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, *ever since the creation of the world*, in the things that have been made. So [unbelieving men] are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20, emphasis added). It is precisely because continuing revelation remains clear that unbelievers are deemed to have no excuse for rejecting God.<sup>34</sup>

How, then, does a Reformed believer simultaneously affirm the fallenness of the mind, the curse on creation, and the ability of unbelievers to understand something of the created world? He can do this because the kinds of understanding or knowledge that are being discussed are carefully distinguished. Calvin offers another helpful insight at this point.

### ***The Twofold Knowledge of God***

It is important to recall that Calvin’s *Institutes* is largely structured around the idea of the twofold knowledge of God. Book One is titled “The Knowledge of God the Creator.” Book Two is titled “The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ.” If certain Calvin scholars are correct, and Books Three and Four are actually subsumed under the topic of the knowledge of God the Redeemer, then the entirety of the *Institutes* is structured around this idea of the twofold knowledge of God.<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of whether most or all of the *Institutes* is structured around this theme, Calvin clearly teaches that our sources for knowledge of God the Creator are both general and special revelation. Our source for knowledge of

God the Redeemer in Christ, on the other hand, is special revelation alone. General revelation, as we have already seen, is insufficient for knowledge of redemption. Furthermore, what knowledge of God there is in general revelation is suppressed and distorted by the unbeliever. According to Calvin, anyone who would come to a true knowledge of God the Creator requires Scripture. Calvin compares Scripture to spectacles that enable us to see the revelation of God in creation clearly.<sup>36</sup> The important point to notice here is that this entire discussion so far concerns knowledge of God.

### ***Heavenly Things and Earthly Things***

We have already looked at several important theological distinctions in this book. Calvin makes another that sheds significant light on the question now before us. He distinguishes between knowledge of heavenly things and knowledge of earthly things. The fullest discussion of this distinction is found in the *Institutes*, II.2.12–21. Calvin also uses it in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:20, when he addresses the so-called “wisdom of the world.”

Calvin begins his discussion in Book II.2.12. He begins this section by agreeing with Augustine’s assertion that man’s spiritual gifts were “stripped” from him by sin while his natural gifts were corrupted. One of these natural gifts is “understanding,” which has been weakened and corrupted. But this weakness, according to Calvin, is not the same as annihilation, which would reduce man to the same level as brute beasts. Regarding “understanding,” he says, “When we so condemn human understanding for its perpetual blindness as to leave it no perception of any object whatever, we not only go against God’s Word, but also run counter to the experience of common sense.”<sup>37</sup> Human understanding, then, has not been completely destroyed. It has, however, been weakened.

While a weakened human understanding stumbles around, “its efforts do not always become so worthless as to have no effect, *especially when it turns its attention to things below*.”<sup>38</sup> Here, Calvin hints at the distinction that clarifies much of his thinking on this subject. He then explains himself more fully: “to perceive more clearly how far the mind can proceed in any matter according to the degree of its ability, we must here set forth a distinction. This, then, is the distinction: that there is one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly.”<sup>39</sup> “Earthly things” are those that do not pertain to God or His kingdom. Among these things, Calvin includes government, household management, mechanical skills, and the liberal arts and sciences. Among the “heavenly things” are the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the kingdom.<sup>40</sup>

According to Calvin, despite the fall, unbelievers can come to a

knowledge of earthly things, and he provides numerous examples. Regarding knowledge of the sciences, he writes, “Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2:14] calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of *inferior things*.”<sup>41</sup> In the next section, he continues along the same lines: “But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.”<sup>42</sup> As grateful as Calvin is for the knowledge that can be gained in this way, however, he understands that the knowledge of earthly things that unbelievers have is true only so far. It is “an unstable and transitory thing in God’s sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it.”<sup>43</sup>

In the following sections, Calvin turns his attention to what human reason can know of heavenly things (“God’s kingdom and spiritual insight”). He explains: “This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God; (2) knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. In the first two points—and especially in the second—the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!”<sup>44</sup> He adds, “Human reason, therefore, neither approaches, nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us.”<sup>45</sup> So, while unbelievers can come to some accurate understanding of earthly things, they cannot do so in connection with heavenly things.<sup>46</sup>

### ***The Wisdom of the World***

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:20, Calvin comments on what Paul refers to as the “wisdom of the world.” His use of the distinction between knowledge of earthly and heavenly things helps us understand how learning from the knowledge of unbelievers in some areas does not entail capitulating to the wisdom of the world. He first explains what we have already mentioned above, namely, that whatever knowledge unbelievers have of earthly things is ultimately vain if not grounded in Christian faith. It may be true as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Calvin then makes his main point. He argues that Paul is not condemning man’s reasoning or his ability to understand earthly things. He is declaring “that all of this is of no avail for acquiring spiritual wisdom” (i.e. knowledge of heavenly things).<sup>47</sup>

Calvin’s distinction concerning the ability of unbelievers to come to some accurate knowledge of earthly things but little to no knowledge of heavenly things is based on Scripture itself. All of Scripture assumes that man’s reason retained some functionality after the fall. He is still distinguished from

irrational beasts and can still understand the created world accurately enough to live and function. He can tell the difference between a tree and a cow. He can learn to cook, farm, build, and govern by accurate observation of the world. Jesus Himself pointed to the ability of unbelievers to properly understand something about the natural world in His controversy with the Pharisees and Sadducees: “He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times’” (Matt 16:2–3). Unbelievers can come to some knowledge of “earthly things” from observation of God’s creation. When it comes to the knowledge of heavenly things, however, unbelievers are blind.

In our next chapter, we will look more closely at how Dr. Sproul suggests Christians should respond when there is an apparent conflict between Scripture and science.



## WHEN SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE CONFLICT

What should Christians do when science and Scripture seem to conflict? In his concluding remarks, Dr. Sproul made the following important statements:

However, if something can be shown to be definitively taught in the Bible without question, and someone gives me a theory that he thinks is based on natural revelation but that contradicts the Word of God, I'm going to stand with the Word of God a hundred times out of a hundred. I have to repeat, I may have mistaken interpretations of the Word of God.

The Reformed doctrine of Scripture includes a belief in its inspiration, inerrancy, and absolute authority, and Dr. Sproul's words here are a crucial reminder of these truths. If a scientific theory or hypothesis contradicts an *actual* teaching of Scripture, that scientific theory or hypothesis is necessarily wrong. Scripture teaches, for example, that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and all that is within them. Any scientific theory that ascribes the existence of all things to purely materialistic forces is therefore wrong.

The key issue, however, as Dr. Sproul reminds us here, is remembering the difference between the infallible Word of God and our fallible interpretations of that Word. Before we can determine whether or not a true contradiction exists between the Word of God and any scientific theory or hypothesis, we have to be sure that we have interpreted the Word of God correctly. Once we have established the actual teaching of Scripture, we have a certain touchstone.

Dr. Sproul continued:

But I believe both spheres are spheres of God's revelation, and that truth has to be compatible. So, if a theory of science—natural revelation—is in conflict with a theological theory, here's what I know for sure—someone is wrong.



In a previous chapter, we discussed Dr. Sproul's assertion that all truth is God's truth. One of the most important results of understanding this fact is the knowledge that ultimately there cannot be any real contradiction between what Scripture *actually* teaches and what is *actually* true about the way God created the universe and all that is in it. It is encouraging to know that when Scripture is properly interpreted and God's creation is properly interpreted, there is no contradiction. This means that Christians have absolutely nothing to fear ultimately from scientific research. If scientists discover something about God's creation that is actually true, it will not and cannot ultimately contradict the Scriptures when they are properly interpreted. If there is a contradiction with properly interpreted Scripture, then we know that the "discovery" in question is a scientific misinterpretation of God's creation.

In other words, if all truth has its source in God and if all truth is unified, then one thing we know to be a fact is that if there is a contradiction between an interpretation of Scripture and an interpretation of what God has created, then one or both of those interpretations is incorrect. They cannot both be correct. As Dr. Sproul said, "someone is wrong."

He continued:

I don't leap to the conclusion that it has to be the scientist. It may be the theologian. But neither do I leap to the conclusion that it has to be the theologian. It could well be the scientist. We have fallible human beings interpreting infallible natural revelation, and fallible human beings interpreting infallible special revelation.

Dr. Sproul made a very important point here because many people involved in discussions about Scripture and science hastily jump to one of two conclusions. Many scientists jump to the conclusion that if somebody is wrong, it *has* to be the student of God's special revelation—the theologian or biblical scholar. This is unwarranted because, like all human beings, scientists are fallible. History is replete with scientific theories and practices that have now been discarded (e.g. the aether, phlogiston, and bodily humours). No one I know wishes, for example, to be treated by doctors holding to the "assured results" of eighteenth-century medical science. Science is, by definition, a self-correcting enterprise, which means that science is, by definition, fallible. If it were not fallible, there would be no need for correction.

Many Christians, however, often jump to the opposite premature conclusion that if somebody is wrong, it *has* to be the student of God's creation—the scientist. This was the mistake of those who hastily dismissed the heliocentric view of the solar system because of the belief that it

contradicted the Word of God. Jumping to the conclusion that if someone is wrong it *has* to be the scientist is unwarranted because neither synods, councils, theologians, nor Internet bloggers are infallible interpreters of Scripture. Christians can make and have made mistakes in their interpretation of Scripture. As Dr. Sproul rightly noted, “we have fallible human beings interpreting infallible natural revelation, and fallible human beings interpreting infallible special revelation.” So, as Dr. Sproul reminded us, we don’t automatically jump to one conclusion or the other. Both scientists and theologians are fallible.

Dr. Sproul’s response is important because a consistent and continuing failure to keep all of these things in mind has led to one problem after another in the church. On the one hand, we find numerous Christians making premature concessions to scientific speculations that are in their infancy and that may be rejected in the light of more research. There are Christian physicists, for example, who are already asserting that we must accept the concept of a multiverse. To the best of my knowledge, however, the multiverse concept remains a hypothesis. In fact, those who accept the general idea of a multiverse appear to be debating numerous multiverse hypotheses at this time. There is also debate over whether such hypotheses are even testable. So, why should Christians accept this concept as if it were an established fact? A cursory survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian journals and apologetics textbooks should make any Christian a bit wary of making premature concessions to scientific theories and hypotheses. These works are full of references by Christian ministers and theologians to “facts” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science—“facts” that have since been rejected. We need to learn from their mistakes.

On the other hand, some Christians reject conclusions drawn from observations of God’s creation that have been repeatedly tested and confirmed in every way imaginable for centuries. This rejection happens, as we have noted, because of a perceived contradiction between the scientific concept in question and the Word of God. All true Christians rightly uphold the absolute authority of God’s Word. However, if Christians fail to consider the possibility mentioned by Dr. Sproul above (the possibility that the contradiction *may* be due to a misinterpretation of God’s Word rather than to a misinterpretation of God’s creation), they can end up placing their own word in the place of God’s Word and rejecting something that is actually true about God’s creation. We have to remember that not only synods and councils, but theologians and we ourselves can and have erred. We are not infallible in our interpretation of Scripture.

What, then, should Christians do when they encounter a scientific theory

that appears to conflict with Scripture? From Dr. Sproul's response, we can glean several points. First, we can relax and not be afraid that the scientific theory in question is going to disprove Christianity. God is the source of all truth, and ultimately there will be no real conflict between what God reveals in Scripture and what is true about His created works. Second, we can remember that God is the ultimate authority, so if there is a real conflict between the scientific theory in question and the *actual* teaching of Scripture, the scientific theory is wrong. Third, we can recognize that our goal is to discover the truth in order that we might not bear false testimony regarding God or His created works. In order to do so, we must recognize that the perceived conflict may be due to a misinterpretation of creation, a misinterpretation of Scripture, or a misinterpretation of both. This means we need to do thorough examinations of both the scientific theory and the biblical exegesis to discover the source of the conflict. We must make sure we are dealing with the actual teaching of Scripture as opposed to a mistaken interpretation of Scripture. And we must examine the evidence for the scientific theory in question to discover whether we are dealing with something that is true about God's creation or something that is merely speculation. All of this hard work takes time, and that means we must not jump to hasty conclusions.

These concepts are not as controversial when we are referring to issues such as geocentrism. They become much more difficult when we attempt to apply them to scientific issues of our own day. In our final chapter, we will look more closely at Dr. Sproul's answer to the controversial question about the age of the universe.



## THE AGE OF THE UNIVERSE AND GENESIS 1

In this book, we have discussed a number of foundational theological issues that reflect Dr. Sproul's distinctively Reformed approach to the question of the age of the universe, an approach based on the thinking of Reformed theologians from John Calvin to B. B. Warfield. In this final chapter, we turn to Dr. Sproul's answer to the specific question that elicited his lengthy response:

When people ask me how old the earth is, I tell them "I don't know." I'll tell you why I don't. In the first place, the Bible does not give us a date of creation. It gives us hints that seem to indicate, in many cases, a young earth. At the same time, we hear about an expanding universe, astronomical dating, and other factors coming from outside the church that make me wonder.

Then, at the end of his response, he emphasized again, "That's a long way to say I don't know how old the earth is."

I suspect that some conference attendees were disappointed when they heard this answer. Some probably expected Dr. Sproul to proclaim dogmatically one way or the other. A large number, however, applauded. I believe they recognized the wise humility evidenced in this answer. Dr. Sproul recognizes the kind of harm Christians can do and have done to the church by hastily jumping to wrong conclusions about general revelation and science. When Christians declared to the world that geocentrism was clearly and definitely taught in Scripture, all they did was convince those who had carefully studied the evidence that Scripture must be in error. They created a false dilemma.

This problem is not new. Augustine, the greatest theologian in the first millennium of church history, also encountered this problem and addressed it in words that have been quoted often:

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.<sup>48</sup>

Augustine's comments emphasize the importance of Christians exercising caution and humility—particularly regarding subjects about which we have little or no firsthand knowledge or expertise. As he explains, if we misinterpret Scripture on such subjects and then proclaim to others who know something about those subjects that our misinterpretation is the sure Word of God, we bring disgrace on Christ and His church, and we place unnecessary stumbling blocks before unbelievers to whom we are presenting the good news. It is far wiser to say, with Dr. Sproul, "I don't know," than to assert falsehoods to be the teaching of Holy Scripture.

It is also wiser to say, “I don’t know,” than to make ultimatums that may be based on misinterpretations of Scripture and/or God’s created works. I have encountered Christians who have said that they would renounce Christianity if they were convinced that the earth moves around the sun because it would mean that the Bible is not true. I have also encountered Christians who have argued that any believer who is convinced that the universe is billions of years old should abandon Christianity because it would mean that the Bible is not true. No. As Dr. Sproul implied, such apparent problems merely mean that particular interpretations of Scripture are mistaken. They say absolutely nothing about the truth of God’s Word itself. If the universe turns out to be six thousand years old, that fact will not ultimately conflict with what Scripture *actually* teaches. If the universe turns out to be billions of years old, that fact will not ultimately conflict with what Scripture *actually* teaches.<sup>49</sup> We do not need to renounce Christianity in either case. Only if Christ is not risen from the dead is our faith in vain (1 Cor. 15:14).

What about the age of the universe then? If students of general revelation (i.e. scientists) contribute to our understanding of special revelation as Dr. Sproul explained, then those of us who do not have the training to expertly evaluate the evidence ourselves are dependent to one degree or another on those who are trained in order to help us understand the evidence for and against the different claims. A problem arises, however, when different Christians look to different specialists who present us with conflicting conclusions. Christians who have equal commitments to the authority of Scripture come to different conclusions about the evidence. This then affects our reading of special revelation.

The different conclusions to which Christians have come regarding the evidence for the age of the universe has led to an ongoing debate in the church about the interpretation of the nature and length of the days of Genesis 1. Just as those who were convinced that the evidence supported heliocentrism were forced to take a second look at Joshua 10 and other passages, so too have those who were convinced that the evidence supported an older universe been forced to take another look at Genesis 1. This has led to much discussion and debate—some of it quite rancorous.

This debate has played out in several Reformed denominations. In 2000, for example, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) issued a lengthy report on the subject.<sup>50</sup> This was followed by a similar report from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 2004.<sup>51</sup> Both reports concluded that several views of the nature and length of the days of creation are within the bounds of biblical and confessional orthodoxy. Both reports were commended to the

various presbyteries and churches within the respective denominations for their study and consideration. Both of these reports are well worth reading for their overview of the issues and arguments involved.

The debate over the age of the universe and the days of Genesis has also played out as numerous books have been written in the last century and a half by Reformed theologians presenting evidence for one view or another.<sup>52</sup> The Calendar Day view was held by Reformed theologians such as Robert L. Dabney and Louis Berkhof.<sup>53</sup> It has recently been defended by Douglas F. Kelly, James B. Jordan, Joseph Pipa, and David Hall.<sup>54</sup> The Day Age view was held by Reformed theologians such as Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and E. J. Young.<sup>55</sup> More recently, this view has been defended by Francis Schaeffer and James Montgomery Boice.<sup>56</sup> The Framework view has been defended by Reformed theologians such as Meredith Kline, Mark Futato, and Henri Blocher.<sup>57</sup> A version of the Analogical Day view was held by William G. T. Shedd.<sup>58</sup> More recently, this view has been defended by Reformed theologians such as C. John Collins and W. Robert Godfrey.<sup>59</sup> In short, Reformed Christians are still sorting through the issues.

During a period of time when Reformed believers are attempting to work through and evaluate all the evidence, a measure of grace, humility, and patience would seem to be advisable. The Ligonier Ministries teaching fellows<sup>60</sup> are an outstanding example of this attitude. More than one view of the age of the universe and the days of Genesis 1 is held among them without strife and enmity, and without charges of compromise on the one hand or obscurantism on the other. This is due to the fact that these men understand the implications of what Dr. Sproul said in the response we have been examining in these chapters. Would that more Christians would take Dr. Sproul's wise words to heart.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 A video clip of Dr. Sproul's response is available at <http://vimeo.com/41386833> (accessed June 26, 2012). The written transcript of Dr. Sproul's remarks presented here has been lightly edited.
- 2 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 18. This work is found in Vol. 2 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (1886–1889; repr. Peabody, Mass: Hendrikson, 1994).
- 3 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols. (repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 21:300–1.
- 4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II.2.15, emphasis added.
- 5 W. Robert Godfrey, "What Do We Mean by *Sola Scriptura*?" in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Don Kistler (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2009), 2.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 2:209–10, emphasis added.
- 8 The correspondence theory of truth asserts that a true proposition is one that corresponds to fact—to some aspect of reality. Aristotle summed up the concept in a well-known definition: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics*, 4.1011b [Tredennick, LCL ]).
- 9 Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 128.
- 10 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.3.1.
- 11 Ibid., I.5.1.
- 12 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 40.
- 13 Cited in R.C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2005), 183.
- 14 Ibid., 152, emphasis added.



15 Ibid., 153.

16 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 [1872–73]), 1:59.

17 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–53), 3:269.

18 Sproul, *Scripture Alone*, 154.

19 Davis A. Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 28.

20 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, *Table Talk*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 358–9.

21 B.A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (London: T&T Clark, 1982), 168.

22 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, *Lectures on Genesis*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 44.

23 Ibid., 42.

24 Ibid., 30.

25 For an overview of how this quote found its way into the scholarly literature, see Young, *Calvin and the Natural World*, 43–49.

26 Cited in Herman Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 452.

27 Cited in Young, *Calvin and the Natural World*, 47.

28 Several important recent works have begun to answer this criticism with specific reference to the Princeton theologians and, by extension, those who followed them. See, for example, Paul Kjoos Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2010); Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); David P. Smith, *B.B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2011).

29 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.4.

30 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 [1872–73]), 2:92.

31 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.6.1.

32 Ibid., I.15.4.

33 See Anthony Hoekema's discussion of “common grace” in his *Created in*

*God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 189–202.

34 Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.1.

35 Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 41–9.

36 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.1.

37 *Ibid.*, II.2.12.

38 *Ibid.*, II.2.13, emphasis added.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, II.2.15, emphasis added.

42 *Ibid.*, II.2.16.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, II.2.18.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Calvin does sometimes hint at a very limited insight into spiritual things by unbelievers, but this topic is beyond the scope of the present work.

47 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols. (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 20:8.

48 Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*: 1.19.39, trans. J.H. Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers*, Newman Press, 1982, Vol. 41.

49 And if the universe turns out to be both because of aspects of God's creation having to do with relativity and time, that will not ultimately conflict with what Scripture *actually* teaches.

50 Available online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/creation/report.html>

51 Available online at <http://opc.org/GA/CreationReport.pdf>

52 Three of the views of the days of Genesis were defended in David G. Hagopian, ed. *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation* (Mission Viejo, Calif.: Crux Press, 2001).

53 Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Co. of St. Louis, 1878), 254–6; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 154–5.

54 Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change, Genesis 1.1–2.4 in the Light of*

*Changing Scientific Paradigms* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1997); James B. Jordan, *Creation in Six Days: A Defense of the Traditional Reading of Genesis One* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999); Joseph A. Pipa and David W. Hall, eds., *Did God Create in Six Days?* (Greenville, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian Press and Kuyper Institute, 1999).

55 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 1:570–71; B. B. Warfield, *Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingstone (Grand Rapids: Baker: 2000), 145; J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1965), 115; E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 169–70.

56 Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1972); James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Vol. 1: Creation and Fall* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982, 1998).

57 Meredith Kline, “Because It Had Not Rained,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1958) 146–57; Mark Futato, “Because It Had Rained: A Study of Gen 2:5–7 with Implications for Gen 2:4–25 and Gen 1:1–2:3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1998) 1–21; Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning, The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984).

58 William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003), 374.

59 C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2006); W. Robert Godfrey, *God’s Pattern for Creation: A Covenantal Reading of Genesis 1* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003).

60 Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson, Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, Dr. Steven J. Lawson, and Dr. R.C. Sproul Jr.