

A Response to “The Creation Account & Florida College”

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To the readers of *Gospel Anchor*, *Gospel Truths*, *Truth Magazine* and *Watchman Magazine*:

Writers and signers of the recent “open letter” concerning “The creation account & Florida College” (hereinafter, “THE SIXTY-SEVEN”) have “offered” the pages of these magazines “for a written discussion of this issue.” One would hope that publications whose editors are anxious to provide space for a debate would at least extend the fraternal courtesy of publishing a response balanced and appropriate to the original letter.

Before addressing the contents of the letter, I want to commend THE SIXTY-SEVEN where I may. They appear to have made a sincere effort to avoid innuendo and hearsay. Any of these “primary” recipients may correct me, but I cannot see that anyone’s position has been misrepresented, with one minor exception: I do not believe it is accurate to call Hugh Ross a “theistic evolutionist.” I also appreciate that the letter was motivated by concern for a doctrine which THE SIXTY-SEVEN feel to be in error. Finally, I am very happy to see a call for discussion and study of this matter.

Unfortunately, the framework for the discussion proposed by THE SIXTY-SEVEN ought to be completely unacceptable to any foe of sectarianism.

Please consider the following statement from the “open letter”:

... instead of responding to brother Roberts’ materials and condemning the errors present therein, subsequent “defenses” have either pretended not to notice what was circulated on the campus to those in attendance, or else have attempted to justify his invitation to speak on the reasoning that this matter is very difficult to settle and ought not to be seen as a reason for breaking fellowship between brethren. On the latter point, we most assuredly disagree.

Unless I misunderstand, THE SIXTY-SEVEN “most assuredly” view disagreement on the interpretation of Genesis as “a reason for breaking fellowship between brethren.” Those addressed in this letter will make up their own minds, but I cannot see why anyone who values unity would participate in a discussion initiated for the express purpose of dividing brethren over an issue which has nothing to do with obedience to the gospel message, the imitation of Christ or the ministry of the New Testament church.

Concerning the interpretation of Genesis 1-2, THE SIXTY-SEVEN assert:

“It [incorrect interpretation of this text] is an error which, in our estimation, undercuts the very foundation of our faith.”

“The issues involved in this discussion are not a joke, but are matters dealing with fundamental principles of faith and biblical interpretation.”

“This discussion centers on the very heart of biblical hermeneutics and miraculous action.”

“These issues are serious and involve foundational principles regarding our faith. We do not consider them to be mere ‘matters of opinion.’”

"If we cannot agree on the first chapter of the Bible, how can we expect to find agreement on anything else in the Old Book?"

In contrast to all of which, the scripture states:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures ... **(1Corinthians 15:1-4)**.

The apostolic message gives a special position ("first importance") to the incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, baptismal submission to and disciplinary imitation of Christ. It gives no such place to the creation account in Genesis 1-2, the creation account in Psalm 33 or the creation account in Job 38. To the New Testament requirements for salvation and fraternity, THE SIXTY-SEVEN have, with absolutely no authority from scripture, added the acceptance of their interpretation of Genesis 1-2. They are hoist by their own petard, to wit:

Since that is the "doctrine of Christ" on the matter, one going beyond that doctrine or found receiving the teacher who goes beyond that doctrine is clearly condemned as being a participant in evil and devoid of God's fellowship and sanction (2 John 9-11).

"If we cannot agree on the first chapter of the Bible, how can we expect to find agreement on anything else in the Old Book?" they ask. One might as well ask, "If we cannot agree on the holy kiss," or "If we cannot agree on the covering of the head," or "If we cannot agree on baptism for the dead ...". Are the texts which deal with those matters *less-inspired* than the first chapter of the Bible? THE SIXTY-SEVEN expect that we will give *them* the right to decide on what matters we will be divided and on what matters we will tolerate dissent in order to remain united.

Indeed, THE SIXTY-SEVEN must find it incomprehensible that many of the "pillars" within the "Restoration Movement" during the 19th and 20th centuries rejected the dogmatism that THE SIXTY-SEVEN find indispensable. It is interesting that, amidst all the references to the speeches and presentations at Florida College within the "open letter," one finds no mention of the presentation of Dr. Steve Wolfgang. Brother Wolfgang demonstrated that leading "Restoration" figures, from Alexander Campbell through Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb, W.W. Otey and James D. Bales, both took and tolerated various positions on the interpretation of Genesis 1-2. Yet THE SIXTY-SEVEN are appalled that Ferrell Jenkins should characterize the interpretation of Genesis 1-2 as "so difficult that I may not be able to draw the same conclusion you've drawn." Other baptized believers who have demonstrated themselves to be as careful in their handling of the scriptures and as sincere in their desire to please God as any of THE SIXTY-SEVEN have managed to disagree on the age of the earth without sundering fellowship. What insight did they lack that THE SIXTY-SEVEN have found?

But concerning insights, and the lack thereof, I turn my attention to specific assertions found within the "open letter."

1. Age or hermeneutics?

"This discussion centers on the very heart of biblical hermeneutics and miraculous action."

I beg to differ; biblical hermeneutics and miraculous action are *not* at the center of this discussion. No breaking of fellowship would be threatened if the issue were merely whether the sun and stars were actually created on the first day or the fourth day. It is the matter of whether the Genesis account may be reconciled with billions of years of cosmic history which is at the very heart of this discussion, and surely THE SIXTY-SEVEN will be willing to admit as much.

2. The "instantaneous" works of God

... suppose that one concluded the man of Mark 2 was healed by Christ over a period of 20 years through the natural laws which Christ decreed on the occasion recorded. If one so affirmed, would we be ready to accept that explanation as being in accordance with the Scripture? Obviously not. But why not? We would no doubt answer that such is a denial of the clear affirmation of the inspired record that the miracle was (a) *instantaneous*, and (b) *could not be explained by natural law*. Brethren, if that reply is proper with regard to the miracle of Mark 2, the same principles must apply with respect to every miracle. Surely that includes the "grand daddy" of all miracles, the **Creation** itself. All other miracles pale in comparison!

As I am sympathetic to and supportive of the work of preachers, it pains me exceedingly to see THE SIXTY-SEVEN PREACHERS begin their letter with such a pathetic argument. Not all works of God are miraculous, and not all miracles are instantaneous. Consider:

"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us that we may live in his presence ..." (**Hosea 6:1-2**).

When the people returned to the Lord, as prophesied (in fact, as *miraculously decreed*), He did restore them on "the third day" (which phrase, by the way, is *yom shelishi*, identical in the Hebrew to the phrase found in Genesis 1:13). That restoration third day was not twenty-four hours, and that restoration was not instantaneous, though it did involve miraculous intervention: the prophecy of Zechariah and the proclamation of Cyrus, who had been named as God's chosen one by Isaiah more than 150 years before! The virgin birth of Christ was an act of God which was not instantaneous and which involved a combination of the miraculous and the natural. But even if we found that every other miracle met the two criteria proposed by THE SIXTY-SEVEN, their characterization of the creation—"All other miracles pale in comparison!"—would stand! Indeed, there is no other miracle comparable to the creation, which suggests that we exercise caution when we attempt to draw analogies between the creation and other works of God.

3. "The thin entering wedge"

It is our conviction that if the concepts mentioned above are accepted or tolerated among us, the stage will have been set for an ever progressing acceptance of an evolutionary explanation for all things. We are convinced that when one accepts the

basic principles of biblical interpretation undergirding such theories, there is no convenient or proper stopping point in their application.

I understand and sympathize with this concern. But there are two balancing issues to keep in mind. First, it does the cause of truth no good to deny a position simply because of where it *might* lead. If, indeed, there is no "convenient" stopping point between a more-risky but also more-plausible stance and some stance which we abhor, we will simply have to think and study harder to make the distinction between what is true-but-risky and what is untrue-and-fatal. Second, and to the matter at hand, there is widespread and growing agreement among theistic-minded and even agnostic scientists that there is a significant and defensible difference between acceptance of the antiquity of creation and surrender to the notion that "mankind is the result of a random and purposeless process which did not have him in mind."

4. The preclusion of other interpretations

The psalmist declared that, "*By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth*" (Psa. 33:6). Did God speak His will and then let the natural forces take over and accomplish it through natural, uniformitarian change over billions of years? No! The following words of the psalmist preclude such an interpretation: "*For He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast*" (Psa. 33:9).

THE SIXTY-SEVEN must have assumed that the rest of us would not bother to read Psalm 33:7: "He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses." The only kind of interpretation precluded in Psalm 33 is one that takes a literal-scientific meaning as the only possibility.

5. "The beginning of creation"

Remember also that Jesus asserted man and woman were created "*from the beginning of the creation*" (Mark 10:6). If brother Roberts and those of like mind are correct, then man and woman were created far closer to our end of time than "*the beginning of creation.*" Whom will you believe? Brother Roberts' teaching is in clear contrast to the word of God. Jesus taught the doctrine of creation as literally true even as stated in Genesis 1 and 2.

Most Bible students will probably remember that the "literal truth" about the creation of man and woman is that it took place not at the beginning of the creation—on day one—but as the very last act of creation—on day six. If we can learn anything about the creation story from what Jesus said, it is that the Author of creation Himself made accurate statements about creation which were not literally the same as statements made in Genesis 1.

6. Preach to the lost instead

Those present at brother Jenkins' class were urged not to be "dogmatic" about the issues involved and to accept brethren who came to differing conclusions. They were further urged not to concentrate so much on these matters and get busy trying to reach the lost. However, we would inquire of brother Jenkins why there was no rebuke of brethren for teaching that the Earth evolved over billions of years from the Big Bang rather than trying to reach the lost? The fact is that such teaching is fundamentally flawed and opposed to efforts to reach the lost. It is an abdication of the Bible ground affirming the miraculous and instantaneous creation of the physical world, and a denial

of the fundamental principles of proper hermeneutics. If such teaching is encouraged or even tolerated at Florida College, it is our view that eventually we will have **many more lost souls** to reach, not less.

As I have already noted, the age of the earth has nothing to do with justification, sanctification or the work of the church. Perhaps THE SIXTY-SEVEN can be troubled to explain to us how teaching that the earth is 4.5 billion years old will prevent someone from becoming a Christian, because I cannot see the connection, nor could the Restoration lights quoted by Dr. Wolfgang, nor can many people I know who devoutly believe in a young earth but refuse to make this matter a test of fellowship. On the other hand, I know of people who would be unwilling to listen to the gospel message if they were told that "the foundational principle" of that message is that the universe is no more than 7,000 years old. Perhaps, too, THE SIXTY-SEVEN can enlighten us on the "positive" contribution that devoting theirs' and others' attention and the space in their publications to this issue will make to evangelizing the lost. And perhaps they can explain how a divided brotherhood, which they have stated they are willing to see their efforts produce, can help the world to believe that the Creator sent His Son.

7. Dealing with the findings of science

Brother Hill Roberts leads the "Lord I Believe" seminars which have been held in various parts of the country, and in numerous congregations. There is much that is valuable and true that is taught by brother Roberts in his presentations. His refutation of biological evolution is excellent, and his technical expertise has often been applauded. However, there is also a good deal which he teaches that is not true to the Bible.

Here is the nub of the issue: if one is going to use the evidence from nature to prove that there is a God and that He is responsible for both the "animate and inanimate" creations, one cannot honestly ignore the evidence, from that same nature, of the antiquity of the earth. Brother Roberts cannot present an "excellent refutation of biological evolution" without reference to the natural sciences, and "his technical expertise" and credibility as a scientist depend on his having the integrity to acknowledge that those natural sciences provide abundant evidence of great age.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot have it both ways. Either we must leave the misrepresentations and distortions of materialistic scientists *completely unanswered*, and that battle *un-fought*, or we must deal with all the testimony of nature, both that which we find appealing and that which we find profoundly uncomfortable. Nature tells us that it had a beginning and an Author. Nature also *seems* to be telling us that it has been around for a long time. If we cover our ears to the second message, those to whom we present the first message will be justified in calling us hypocrites and in covering their ears to it. The most comfortable position most of us can take, without intellectual dishonesty, is agnosticism with respect to the age of the creation. Given that age-agnosticism must acknowledge the *possibility* of antiquity, it would be an unacceptable stance to THE SIXTY-SEVEN.

I make these statements as one who is extremely reluctant to accept the strength of the evidence for a very old earth. I wish I could say that young-earth science has a case which is as strong as the case for antiquity. It does not. In the speech which THE SIXTY-SEVEN chose to ignore, Dr. Wolfgang quoted the young-earth scientist Kurt Wise: *no one has ever arrived at a young-earth position from examination of the creation itself.*

The creation, with its abundant evidence of antiquity, speaks to Bible-believers too! A scientist, particularly a scientist like Hill Roberts who is performing—what I presume THE SIXTY-SEVEN would agree to be—the valuable service of fighting the anti-Christian philosophies of scientism and evolutionism, cannot ignore or even neglect to present this evidence without cutting the ground from beneath his own feet.

And the irony—the almost tragic irony, under the circumstances of this disputation—is that the doctrine of the existence of God, as attested by the creation itself, is held in higher regard today among professional scientists than at any time since the end of the 19th century. When even agnostics like Fred Hoyle are being convinced by the evidence from nature of “a superintellect,” THE SIXTY-SEVEN are prepared to drive a wedge between themselves and brethren who feel compelled to take that powerful natural evidence seriously.

Is not the God Who wrote the Bible the same God Who created the cosmos? Is not the function of the creation to glorify its Creator (Psalm 148)? Does not Paul assert (Romans chapter one) that the creation testifies to the glory of its Creator even *apart from the written word*? Is glorification of God by the creation made impossible if the creation seems to be billions of years old instead of thousands of years old?

Where does this situation leave those of us who continue to believe that we find an inspired and accurate divine revelation in the Bible? If we concede that the creation *might* be billions of years old, must we deny the accuracy of scripture? Some of us are trying to answer the difficult question: “*If* the universe appears to be billions of years old, what might the God Who created that universe—as the universe itself tells us with increasing clarity that He did—what *might* that God have meant by what He revealed in Genesis 1-2?” We would be grateful for the help of any Bible student in addressing that question. It does not appear that THE SIXTY-SEVEN will give us any such help.

May the Holy Spirit of God help us understand His revelation, and protect the unity of the body of the Son in the bond of His peace.

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