

Presbyterianism and Science

American Presbyterianism, Geology, and the Days of Creation

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American Presbyterianism, Geology, and the Days of Creation¹

I. Introduction

As we look at this topic, we see that it entails several complex subjects. First of all, we have American Presbyterianism, which in itself is a broad topic about which one could speak for quite some time. Secondly, geology is a complicated and, some would say, speculative, science. And thirdly, much ink has been spilled on how to interpret the days of creation. Now, put all of these subjects together and try to make sense of them, and we see that we may very well have a daunting task in front of us.

However, I do believe that it is useful and, from both an historical and a theological perspective, quite important to see how these somewhat diverse subjects intersect and relate. The implications are far-reaching because of the foundational nature of Genesis 1 for our interpretation of the Bible, and also because of the interplay between natural and special revelation as well as the ramifications for epistemology (or, discerning how we know anything for certain).

As noted, we will be concentrating on Presbyterianism in this country. At the same time, we will of necessity also look at Scottish Presbyterianism (and, for that matter, at British Protestantism in general), for there was a trans-Atlantic dimension to the influence of geology on theology. And, as far as this discussion goes, the historical and theological differences between Scottish and American Presbyterianism do not appear to have any direct bearing on the matter before us.

II. Traditional Interpretations of Genesis 1

As people of the Book—i.e., the Bible—we naturally turn to Scripture first and foremost. As we interpret Scripture, we realize that we stand in a long line of interpreters who have wrestled with the text, and who often have insights far exceeding our own. It is useful, therefore, to see what the early Protestant interpretations were of Genesis 1, particularly with respect to the days of creation.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin held to a “literal” six-day creation. Luther criticized some of St. Augustine’s allegorical interpretations. Calvin clearly believed that the earth was only about six thousand years old, and that its creation had occurred in the space of six days.²

III. Protestant Science

¹ Much of the material in this paper appeared in “American Presbyterianism, Geology, and the Days of Creation.” *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 4 (2008), pp. 3-16.

² Terry Mortenson, *British scriptural geologists in the first half of the nineteenth century*, part 1: Historical Setting.

Many historians, both secular and religious, have traced the rise of modern science to Protestantism. The Protestant Reformation thus is seen to have had not simply spiritual consequences, but to have helped effect a revolutionary view of the world itself.

The Reformation furthered a move toward experimental science, and it did so by grounding it upon the Bible and the new inductive approach regarding Biblical interpretation. The Protestant Reformers rejected scholastic theology's speculation, and went instead to the Source itself, viz., Scripture. Instead of numerous meanings to each text, the Reformers said that there is only one basic meaning to each text, and it can be determined by means of what we call grammatico-historical exegesis. That is to say, by looking at the "evidence" of the text, the true Biblical interpreter will read out of that text what God intends to reveal. This is in contrast to eisegesis, in which the interpreter reads into the text what he wants to find.

Protestant scientists advocated a similar approach to the "second book" of God's revelation, viz., natural revelation. Both of these "books"—the book of Scripture and the book of nature—were said to give true revelation from God. And both were properly interpreted not by speculation, but by an inductive approach. In terms of nature (or, we might say, in terms of science), this meant a reliance upon experimentation and therefore upon the proper conclusions drawn from the empirical data.

The history of science, then, should not be viewed as in a vacuum. There were tremendous cultural and societal upheavals which accompanied both the religious reformation and the scientific revolution. The Marxist historian Christopher Hill described seventeenth century Britain with the famous phrase (which formed the title for one of his books), "the world turned upside down." It was in that context that monumental strides were being made in numerous scientific fields, including chemistry and physics. It was during this time that Francis Lord Bacon particularly developed the inductivist approach to science. Today, we honor his insights with the term, "Baconian inductivism."

Of course, the Protestant fondness for science occurred in an atmosphere which still breathed a Christian worldview. Most European scientists were at least nominally Christian, and therefore had a respect for Holy Scripture. However, even in the sixteenth and certainly in the seventeenth centuries, there were scientists who rejected the normativity of Scripture. In extreme forms, the new scientific view embraced paganism; in others, atheism.

By the nineteenth century, the forces of German rationalistic attacks upon Scripture combined with the philosophy of Kant and others, to erode much support for a Christian approach to science. The church, which had for a long time viewed science as a handmaid, was going to be faced with what historians have referred to as the "warfare" between science and religion.

This war between scientists and Scripture would affect all fields of science: astronomy, biology, chemistry, medicine, physics, etc. It was just as the science of geology was coming into its own, just as it was earning respectability, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that this war became pronounced. Even at that, however, the tremendous respect which Protestant churchmen had for science—one might say the tremendous deference which they paid to science—led most of them to seek accommodation with the budding science of geology. Rather than rejecting its message, most of the Protestant churchmen reinterpreted the Bible, especially with regard to the days of creation.

IV. Rise of the Science of Geology

As we have already mentioned, the science of geology was rising to the fore around the turn of the nineteenth century. There were at least two geological issues which impinge on the teaching of Scripture. The first is the age of the earth. The other is the universal flood.

By the 1820s, most geologists had adopted an old-Earth approach; however, they also still held to catastrophism, specifically, the Noahic flood. But that changed when Charles Lyell published his three-volume *Principles of Geology* between 1830 and 1833. In that masterful work, Lyell set forth a radical uniformitarianism, which purportedly explained all of the geological phenomena by means of long-age processes.³ It was in this context that Presbyterian churchmen wrestled with how to reconcile the views of geologists with the teachings of the Bible.

V. Early Presbyterian Reactions to Geology and Its Alleged Findings

One of the most influential churchmen in nineteenth century American Presbyterianism was Samuel Miller. A pastor in New York City, Miller was appointed as the second professor at Princeton Theological Seminary a year after it started in 1812.

A decade prior to his appointment to Princeton, some of Miller's writings were gathered into a book entitled, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century. Part First; In Two Volumes: Containing a Sketch of the Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature, During That Period*, published in 1803.⁴ He began his thirty-three page discussion of geology by stating: "In the investigation of the natural history of the Earth, little progress had been made prior to the commencement of the eighteenth century." He ascribed the great progress in geological understanding in the 1700s to a greater understanding of mineralogy, which branch of learning is "the alphabet, by the principles and combinations of which the great volume of geological science must be formed." Both chemists and mineralogists, as well as "the observations of intelligent travellers," all

³ Ibid.

⁴ Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century. Part First; In Two Volumes: Containing a Sketch of the Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature, During That Period* (New-York: T. and J. Swords, 1803).

contributed to geological knowledge. “And, although modern times have produced many visionary theories, and crude conjectures on this subject, they have also given birth to some important acquisitions, and much correct philosophy, which will be highly prized by all who study the history and structure of our globe.”⁵

Miller then dealt with three geological theories which were proposed in Great Britain at the close of the seventeenth century. Miller described this first theory as an “elegant romance,” the product of a man whose work displayed “much learning, and a most vigorous imagination.”⁶ The second theory that “was soon found to contradict some of the plainest and most unquestionable facts which geologists observed.”⁷ The third theory of the late 1600s was from a Mr. William Whiston, who “supposed the earth, in the beginning, to be an uninhabitable *Comet*,” and that the universal flood was caused by another comet, whose atmosphere and tail might have engulfed the earth for a considerable time, eventually producing “violent and long continued rains.”⁸

Samuel Miller dismissed these three theories as being “fanciful and untenable,” and wrote that they “served little other purpose than to amuse the curious, and excite to new, and, for the most part, unsuccessful modes of speculation on this interesting branch of natural history. These plans . . . rather resembled philosophical dreams, than the conceptions of waking and sober reason. Their authors, in forming them, have been too often guided by imagination more than judgment; and have laboured rather to support a favourite hypothesis, than to consult the voice of authentic history, or patiently to examine the materials and structure of the fabric which they undertook to describe.”⁹

It is evident that the venerable churchman was willing to examine all of these theories in light of Scripture; and, having done so, often to have found them wanting as having violated divine revelation.

Miller went on to describe other geological views, this time from the eighteenth century. Some of these theories he described without particular comment as to their consistency with divine revelation; some he described as being hostile to revelation; while others he obviously believed were consistent with the Biblical account.

Miller summed up his overview of geology in these words: “But although there has been, in modern times, . . . a wonderful variety of fanciful productions, under the name of geological theories, we are by no means to imagine that little has been usefully done in this department of natural history. Amidst all the splendid rubbish with which it has been incumbered, some precious treasures have been brought to light. Amidst the speculations

⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 158-59.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 159-61.

⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

which have *darkened counsel*, large additions have been made to our knowledge of this important subject.”¹⁰

Miller then enumerated where the progress had been made. First, there has been much practical knowledge gleaned by mineralogists, miners, and chemical experimenters, through their “accurate observations.”¹¹ Secondly, “many facts have been brought to light, showing the *probability*, and even *certainty*” of the Noahic flood.¹² And thirdly, Miller believed that modern geology has confirmed the Genesis account, including not only the Great Flood, but also that the earth is not of great antiquity.

For Miller, then, there was no question as to the primacy of Scripture over natural revelation and the interpretation which men may place on it. All theories must therefore yield to God’s infallible Word. There is another point as well, viz., that the more that true science is done, the greater confirmation we have that natural history conforms to the Biblical account.

About the same time that Miller published this work, Thomas Chalmers, a noted Scottish churchman, weighed in with his own perspective. In 1843, Chalmers would lead the Great Disruption in the Church of Scotland, leading to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. In 1804, as a young minister, he postulated the “gap theory” in a sermon to his congregation.¹³

In an 1833 book, Chalmers attacked the validity of the findings of geology, especially since geologists, despite all their brilliance, have contradicted themselves. However, in the second place, Chalmers was willing to concede that the earth may be much older than is commonly assumed under what has been called “the Mosaical antiquity of the world.” Chalmers was even willing to posit that the description of Creation in Genesis might be something other than creation ex nihilo. He certainly was willing to advocate what has been known as the “gap theory”—that is, the notion that between verse 1 and verse 2 of Genesis 1, there may have been a gap of millions of years, during which time the geological ages could have occurred.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 184.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 184-85.

¹² Ibid., p. 186.

¹³ Terry Mortenson, op. cit.

¹⁴ Thomas Chalmers, *The Works of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., Minister of the Tron Church, Glasgow* (Philadelphia: A. Towar and Hogan & Thompson, 1833), pp. 45-48. For a general overview of the Protestant positions on the question of geology and Genesis, see Nicolaas A. Rupke, “Geology and Paleontology,” in Gary B. Ferngren, ed., *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 179ff. See also John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 234-38, for a discussion of how Buffon’s *Epochs of nature* (published 1778) tried to harmonize his views with the Biblical account.

VI. Situation at Mid-19th Century

By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was widespread acceptance of the alleged findings of geology—a geology which had increasingly rejected the Biblical approach to the history of the earth.¹⁵

One can see this acquiescence in ministers, in church-related schools, and in pious scientists.

This leads us to ask the question, Why? Why is it that staunch Presbyterians and other Calvinists were so willing to abandon what had been regarded as bedrock truth as found in Genesis 1?

One of the factors is that of the problem of the fossils, coupled with uniformitarian principles which prescribed gradual change of the creation.¹⁶

Terry Mortenson has suggested that the effects of the Industrial Revolution also helped to break down consensus, even as it fostered and celebrated the role of science in society.¹⁷

Another part of the answer may be the influx of ideas that began to question the nature of Scripture, thus casting doubt on the “literal” truth of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Although many people who adopted old-earth theories still held to the inspiration of Scripture, nevertheless, there was a desire to manifest “reasonableness” so as not to look foolish before a watching world.

¹⁵ See Charles Coulston Gillespie, *Genesis and Geology: The Impact of Scientific Discoveries upon Religious Beliefs in the Decades before Darwin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Ronald L. Numbers says that many conservative Christians “undoubtedly clung to the traditional view that God created the heave and the earth in six literal days about six thousand years ago.” He also quotes an American observer in the middle of the nineteenth century who “estimated that perhaps ‘one half of the Christian public’ still adhered to this position.” See Numbers, “Creating Creationism: Meanings and Uses since the Age of Agassiz,” in David N. Livingstone, D. G. Hart, and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 236.

¹⁶ See John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 213. Dillenberger has suggested that “developments in both geology and biology” were not as readily accepted as the new astronomical views, because of the appearance to many “as another step by which God was being pushed out of the created order. . . . It was not that He could be excluded. No one could prove that. But for all practical purposes, He seemed unnecessary; and that was most damaging” (p. 216).

¹⁷ Mortenson, *op. cit.*

And still another part of the answer is the relationship between general and special revelation, and the increasing acceptability of interpreting Holy Writ in light of science or the discoveries of man.

David Calhoun, in his treatment of Princeton Theological Seminary, has noted that Charles Hodge championed this view. “As science advanced the knowledge of the universe Charles Hodge demonstrated an openness to a new understanding of what the Bible teaches.” Dr. Calhoun continues: “Furthermore, Hodge was willing to concede that if the idea of a long earth history could be established, the first chapter of Genesis could be interpreted accordingly.” Dr. Calhoun also noted that in 1863, Hodge “repeated his view of the harmony between Scripture and science. ‘Nature is as truly a revelation of God as the Bible,’ Hodge wrote, ‘and we only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God when we interpret the Bible by science.’ According to Hodge, Christians must avoid ‘a twofold evil’—neither formulating scientific theories that ignore scriptural truth, nor persisting in scriptural interpretations that conflict with well-established scientific truth. Hodge was quite willing for biblical interpretation to proceed under the guidance of proven scientific findings—although he made it abundantly clear that the theologian had every right to demand that alleged ‘facts’ be verified beyond the possibility of doubt in view of the fluctuations in scientific theory from age to age and place to place.”¹⁸

The theologians, as represented by Charles Hodge, were joined by evangelical scientists in fostering a reconciliation between Genesis and geology. In the view of Rodney Stiling, professional scientists, such as Benjamin Silliman and his son-in-law, James Dwight Dana, had not only the academic credentials, but also the spiritual credentials, in order to effect revolution. These were “reconcilers” whose “new views” “became dominant in countless American Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, commentaries, and apologetics works in the latter half of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth. The views of the deliberate and dedicated ‘Christian’ Geologists thus simply overwhelmed and drowned out those of the uncompromising and at times seemingly unfriendly ‘Scriptural’ Geologists.”¹⁹

However, this general acceptance of having to re-interpret the Bible to fit the latest scientific theories did not go unchallenged. One of the brilliant Southern Presbyterian theologians, on the eve of the War for Southern Independence, sounded a cautionary note.

A native Virginian, Robert Lewis Dabney had a distinguished career, which ranged from being a pastor to being an assistant to Stonewall Jackson during, as we say in the South, the late unpleasantness. Dabney was a patriot, a professor, and a prophet (in the sense of being insightful and also not being bashful about forthtelling the truth).

¹⁸ David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary, Vol. I, Faith and Learning:1812-1868* (London: Banner of Truth, 1994), pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ Rodney L. Stiling, “Scriptural Geology in America,” in Livingstone, Hart, and Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective*, p. 187.

The premier Southern Presbyterian magazine at this time was the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, which had been publishing since the 1840s. In a July 1861 article entitled, “Geology and the Bible,” Dabney protested that geologists had often evidenced an “arrogant and offensive spirit” in presuming that their new science has made a definite case for the antiquity of the earth. It is especially presumptuous for them to think that clergymen, just because they have objections to some of these new alleged findings, are somehow less intelligent than a “crowd of London mechanics” to whom a geologist is making a one night lecture in the hopes of convincing them of the seven geologic ages.

Dabney insisted that the burden of proof rested with the geologist who was asserting an hypothesis hostile to the Mosaic record. “We are not bound to retreat until he has constructed an absolutely exclusive demonstration of his hypothesis; until he has shown, by strict scientific proofs, not only that his hypothesis *may be* the true one, but that it *alone can be* the true one; that it is impossible any other can exclude it.” Dabney then pointed out various examples of uncertainty in the work of geologists.

The author invoked Lord Bacon in proving that an application of inferences “can never raise more than a meager probability of the correctness of its conclusions, where it is not supported by some better canon of induction.” Dabney wrote: “As to the origin and history of nature in the past, [reasonings] are valid no farther back than we can be assured of the absence of the supernatural; and we know not how such assurance can be gained by us, save by the testimony of human experience, or of inspiration. This conclusion does, indeed, curb the arrogance of human science, but it does not affect in the least any part of its legitimate dominions, or of its practical value to mankind. It does, indeed, disable us from determining the age, date, and origin of the structures nature presents to us, but it does not prevent our discovering the laws of those structures; and the latter is the discovery to which the whole utility of science belongs.”

Dabney concluded: “Once admit a Creator and a creation, and the validity of all inferences from the seeming analogies of nature, as to origin of things, is vitiated the moment we pass back of the authentic light of historical testimony. Once admit a Creator and a creation, and nothing is gained, in logic, by attempting to push back the creative act.”

Dabney’s perspective would not go unchallenged. James Woodrow, who was destined to be one of Dabney’s antagonists over several decades of doctrinal dispute, championed what he considered to be the cause of science.

Woodrow was a noted Southern Presbyterian scientist, minister, and seminary professor. He was the uncle of another famous Woodrow—Woodrow Wilson. In the 1870s and 1880s, he would become embroiled in the evolution controversy, as he was finally forced to reveal publicly that he believed that the evolution of Adam’s body was probably true. That controversy was more than a decade away. However, the genesis for that conflict can be discerned in the debate over geology.

In April 1863, Woodrow responded to Dabney with an article entitled, “Geology and Its Assailants.” This difference of perspective led to an exchange of articles between Dabney and Woodrow in the 1870s in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*.

If Woodrow was right in his views, then the door would be open for biological evolution, not to mention all kinds of other instances where “science” could influence the church’s view of creation. Thus geology was the first battleground in the war between two different views of science—a war that would culminate in the nineteenth century in the fight over evolution.

VII. Interest in Geology in Presbyterian Circles

Interest in geology remained strong in Presbyterian circles throughout the nineteenth century. One of the popular periodicals in nineteenth century Presbyterianism was the *Christian Observer*—a publication which is still publishing today, as the oldest such periodical. A perusal of numerous articles which appeared in the *Christian Observer* over a period of many years in the late nineteenth century leads to several conclusions.

One, geology remained a greatly controverted topic for discussion. Two, there was a tremendous amount of scientific interest not only among the clergy, but also amongst the laity. Remember, these articles, many of which dealt with very technical scientific terms and matters, appeared in the popular church press. Three, most Southern Presbyterian writers on the subject willingly accepted a belief in the great antiquity of the earth. Four, their acceptance of this view was because of the seeming facts of geology, the rejection of which, they felt, would be unscientific and would subject them and the church to ridicule and scorn. Five, the methodology of trying to reconcile Genesis and geology varied from the theory that there were many creations or beginnings before the Genesis account, to the theory that much time elapsed between the first two verses of Genesis, to the thesis that “day” really meant “age.” Six, the widespread acceptance of the world’s great age did not lead most of these churchmen to accept evolution. Seven, they utilized their geologic positions for apologetic purposes, both in trying to defend the faith and in reaching out evangelistically.

VIII. The 20th and 21st Centuries

As the church entered the twentieth century, she faced modernist attacks not only from outside, but from within. Increasingly, churchmen abandoned the fundamental or foundational doctrines of the Christian faith.

In such a milieu, the issue of the length of the days of creation, not to mention numerous other doctrines, paled in comparison to the life-and-death issues of the nature of Scripture and the gospel itself. Accordingly, as Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants went through the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, there was not much discussion on the days of creation—a topic, after all, which most folks thought had been settled long ago.

Furthermore, especially after the expulsion of the leading conservatives by the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1936, and the full triumph of higher-critical views of Scripture, the issue of the days of creation would seem like a quaint topic, at best.

As the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (founded 1936) took its place among the manifestations of Christ's Bride, it is clear that the issue of the length of the days of creation was a non-issue. People with both a day-age view and a literal view were welcomed into the OPC's ministerial ranks.

Within a couple of decades, Meredith Kline, an OPC minister serving as a seminary professor, popularized within OPC circles what is known as the "framework hypothesis." Basically, Professor Kline has advocated the view that the days of Genesis 1 are not to be taken literally, but rather are a poetic device in order to put forth God's creative acts.

In 1937, a split occurred in the denomination which became known as the OPC, when a group of men and churches left in order to form the Bible Presbyterian Church. The BPC itself suffered a schism in 1956; both groups retained "Bible Presbyterian Church" in their names, but the majority changed its name to Evangelical Presbyterian Church in 1961. Four years later, this denomination merged with the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod, to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES).

The RPCES, particularly through its professors at the denominational Covenant Theological Seminary, had been largely influenced by the day-age view. R. Laird Harris and others championed the position that the days of creation were eons of time, rather than literal days.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), a denomination often known by the nickname "Covenanter," wrestled with the doctrine of creation. The RPCNA Synod decided in 2002 that "Current studies on the 'original intent' of the Confession on the creation days support the view that 'days of ordinary length' are meant in the expression 'in the space of six days.'" However, the Synod also said "that variant views are held within the church, and have hitherto not been the ground of either denying ordination or instituting discipline."²⁰

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was formed in 1973, mostly by people seceding from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), or Southern Presbyterian Church. At her first General Assembly, the PCA gave a rationale for its ecclesiastical separation. Among the items mentioned was the acceptance of evolution. However, not mentioned was the issue of the length of the days of creation.

²⁰ "Report of the Committee to Study the Confessional Position on the Six Days of Creation."

It is probable that the vast majority of the laity, as well as the vast majority of the ministers and other officers, held to a “literal” six-day creation. On the other hand, there was no test of orthodoxy on the point.

The fact that this issue was not viewed as a test of orthodoxy was highlighted by the “joining and receiving” effected between the PCA and the RPCES in 1982. In the discussions leading up to the union, the day-age positions by prominent RPCES ministers—which positions were in print and should have been known by those charged with investigating the compatibility of the two churches—did not merit a mention.

At the 1998 Assembly, a complaint against New Jersey Presbytery was adjudicated. The complaint argued that the Presbytery, in stating that “the 24-hour-day interpretation” is not “the only possible interpretation” of Genesis, had denied “the plain and ordinary sense of the creation account as revealed in Genesis One,” viz., the literal 24-hour view.

The Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) was greatly divided on the issue. The majority voted to deny the complaint as it held that “New Jersey Presbytery acted within its constitutional authority.” A minority report stated: “The language of the Confession, our constitutional standard, is quite clear and the original meaning of ‘day’ as a 24-hour day is even admitted by the act of New Jersey Presbytery.”

The General Assembly sat for an hour, listening to the majority and the minority present their sides. The court then voted, by about a two-to-one margin, to approve the majority report, thereby denying the complaint.²¹

It bears noting that this Assembly was held in downtown St. Louis, a few blocks from Busch Stadium during a time when Mark McGwire, who played baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals, was lighting up the scoreboard with home runs. During the presentation of the minority report, the Rev. David Hall offered “two hard-to-get Cardinals tickets” to anyone who could produce one member of the Westminster Assembly who held to a view other than creation in six calendar days. (The tickets were never claimed.)

The controversy generated by this case prompted the same General Assembly (1998) to erect a Creation Study Committee (CSC). The Committee was charged with studying “the exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological interpretations of Genesis 1-3 and *the original intent of the Westminster standards’ phrase ‘in the space of six days.’*”²²

²¹ *M26GA*, pp. 103ff. The minority report also noted a point essentially overlooked by the majority, viz., that the Presbytery’s Resolution allowed for biological evolution (although not for human evolution).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 191. This action came in response to an overture from Central Carolina Presbytery. The words in italics were added by amendment upon motion from the floor. The main motion carried, 521-371. Also before the Assembly was an overture from Westminster Presbytery, which likewise called for a study committee on creation; Westminster’s overture, however, also explicitly rejected views other than creation in six 24-hour periods (see below).

In the meantime, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's first annual spring theology conference, held in March 1999, dealt with the subject, "Did God Create in Six Days?" A couple of hundred people packed into the seminary's chapel to hear presentations of the four major views—six calendar days, day-age, framework hypothesis, and analogical day. The analogical day position was a relatively new one in conservative Presbyterian circles, having recently been championed by Dr. Jack Collins, a professor at the PCA's Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis. This position says that the days "are God's work-days, which are analogous, and not necessarily identical, to our work days, structured for the purpose of setting a pattern for our own rhythm of rest and work." Furthermore, "The six 'days' represent periods of God's historical supernatural activity of preparing and populating the earth as a place for humans to live, love, work, and worship." The analogical day position says: "These days are 'broadly consecutive': that is, they are taken as successive periods of unspecified length, but one allows for the possibility that parts of the days may overlap, or that there might be logical rather than chronological criteria for grouping some events in a particular 'day.'" For the proponents of this position, "Length of time, either for the creation week, or before it or since it, is irrelevant to the communicative purpose of the account."²³

The Creation Study Committee gave a preliminary report to the 1999 General Assembly. At that same meeting, Dr. Joseph Pipa, President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, offered a personal resolution which was adopted by the General Assembly in modified form. The resolution specifically acknowledged that in 1970, the Presbytery of Central Mississippi of the Southern Presbyterian Church (the bulk of which became the PCA's Presbytery of Mississippi Valley) recognized "different interpretations of the word 'day' and do not feel that one interpretation is to be insisted on upon the exclusion of all others." The resolution made several declarations, including: "That Genesis 1 and 2 is an historic, self-consistent, and true account of God's creation of the universe and mankind in six days"; "That Genesis 1 and 2 do not represent a mythical account of creation without reality in space and time"; and "That the eight fiat acts of Genesis 1 were discrete, supernatural acts, and describe the creation of all kinds."²⁴

The Creation Study Committee gave its final report at the 2000 General Assembly. Besides laying out the four major views current in the Reformed world—calendar day, day-age, framework hypothesis, and analogical day—the Committee recommended that its report be distributed to all sessions and presbyteries of the PCA, and made available to others who requested it, for study. The Committee also recommended that "the Assembly declare its sense that in order to permit careful and prayerful contemplation of this matter, no further action of any kind with respect to this report be taken by the General Assembly for a period of at least two years."

Instead, upon amendment from the floor, the following was adopted: "That since historically in Reformed theology there has been a diversity of views of the creation days

²³ This summary may be found in *M28GA*, p. 169.

²⁴ *M27GA*, pp. 96-97, 179-80.

among highly respected theologians, and, since the PCA has from its inception allowed a diversity, that the Assembly affirm that such diversity as covered in this report is acceptable as long as the full historicity of the creation account is accepted.”²⁵

However, the General Assembly action has not deterred Westminster Presbytery (upper east Tennessee and southwestern Virginia) from maintaining its position, not only that literal days are intended by the Confessional teaching, but also that no one who takes an exception to the Standards on this point will be admitted to the Presbytery. In point of fact, the action by Westminster Presbytery was in accord with the action of the 2001 PCA General Assembly, whose Bills and Overtures Committee stated: “It is the prerogative of the lower courts to determine if a man’s view is an exception to the standards.”²⁶

IX. The Critical Issues

We trust that this lecture has proven to be of some interest. But the question remains, Is it merely a matter of intellectual curiosity, or is it a matter of prime importance how the church deals with these issues?

We would suggest that it is a matter of prime importance, and that in several respects.

First, we are dealing with the very first chapter of the Bible, and therefore the most foundational of concepts. Apart from God being the Creator, we cannot understand or appreciate the gospel. Has He therefore revealed truly and clearly what transpired at the beginning? Is the account in Genesis fully historical and historically accurate? If the account of Genesis 1 is not fully historical, what does that do to other accounts in Scripture? Can we rely on them as being true history? Does God’s special written revelation need to be interpreted by means of natural revelation? Is it proper to do so?

Those who have witnessed the theological and spiritual disintegration of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) in the late twentieth century may be aware of the fact that once a church admits the validity of natural revelation interpreting special revelation, there is no stopping place on the way to a full-blown rationalism and ultimately liberalism. The acceptance of women’s ordination, and most particularly the advocacy of homosexuality within the CRCNA, have come about because of a different hermeneutic, one which calls for factors outside of Holy Writ being able to bear upon ethical matters.

The relationship between geology and the days of creation is a subset of the relationship between science and Scripture, which, in turn, is a subset of the relationship between natural revelation as a whole and special revelation. How one conceives of those relationships is of crucial significance with regard to what one will believe and how one will act.

²⁵ *M28GA*, pp. 119ff.

²⁶ *M29GA*, pp. 193ff.

X. Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this material. The first is that historically there has been a tremendous amount of interest in science among Presbyterians, and that that interest has stemmed from two convictions: one, that all of created reality forms natural revelation which truly reveals something of God and His workings in the world, all for His glory; and two, that science is a handmaid to religion, particularly with respect to apologetics, supporting and bolstering the claims of Christ.

A second conclusion is that the Scottish Common Sense Realism, which was the dominant philosophy among Presbyterians, had become Scottish Common Sense Rationalism. The difference can be perceived by looking at the different approaches fostered by Samuel Miller, on the one hand, and Charles Hodge on the other. Hodge was willing to interpret Scripture by means of nature. Miller found various scientific theories wanting, in light of Scripture.

Parenthetically, we wonder if Samuel Miller's no-nonsense, bold declamation of some of the geological speculations as being "splendid rubbish" and consisting of "false theories" and "specious inferences" would be well-received in contemporary evangelical circles. Somehow, it just doesn't seem "loving." And it certainly is not politic, not to mention politically correct. Today, we are witnessing evangelicals tip-toe around, not wanting to give offense to a skeptical and unbelieving world, and willing therefore to engage in discussion about outlandish theories, which discussion only serves to give those speculations credibility. However, Miller impresses us as someone who is so in tune with the glory of God and His Word, that he was willing to declaim theories which reflected man's rebellion against divine revelation. Indeed, to use language that has become utilized particularly in Van Tillian apologetics, Miller was willing to answer the fool according to his folly, as well as not to answer the fool according to his folly.

The relationship between natural and special revelation is thus perhaps the key in understanding how geology impacts Presbyterian views of the days of creation. In other words, is it appropriate for geology to interpret Holy Writ?

The view of historian James R. Moore is that Francis Lord Bacon's two books approach was actually a political-type compromise—a consensus that was destroyed when geologists started to question traditional interpretation of the history of the earth. Between 1830 and 1860, the Baconian compromise was put in jeopardy, and there was a rift between Scriptural geologists who believed that Genesis interprets nature, and harmonizers, who believed that nature interprets Genesis.²⁷

But how is it, then, that both proponents and opponents of the attempted harmonization between geology and Genesis could appeal to Lord Bacon? To some extent, the reason is because each side took something from Bacon. The harmonizers believed that natural

²⁷ Moore, "Geologists and Interpreters of Genesis in the Nineteenth Century," pp. 322ff.

revelation could shed light on Scripture. The exegetes argued that what was being promulgated did not constitute a true induction, in that it was speculative and not genuinely based on experimentation.

In 2001, the PCA General Assembly answered in the negative an overture from North Georgia Presbytery which would have urged presbyteries, sessions, and church members “to explore ways by which the scientific evidence of general revelation can be objectively studied and validated so that the church can move toward a unified understanding of how God created the universe and brought the earth into existence.” Among the grounds cited by the Bills and Overtures Committee was the following: “Using general revelation to determine doctrine is contrary to *WCF* I.6.”²⁸

Of course, not all of those who would identify themselves as conservative American Presbyterians would agree with the stance of that General Assembly’s Bills & Overtures Committee. In the on-going discussion of the days of creation in denominations such as the OPC and PCA, perhaps the issue that will most determine the outcome, not only of this discussion but of other matters as well, will be which approach these churches take on the relation between natural and special revelation; or whether, in the final analysis, geology really has anything to do with Genesis 1 after all.²⁹

Woodrow Wilson’s Strange Uncle:
The Case of James Woodrow, Calvinist, Inerrantist, Evolutionist

The doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility are absolutely essential for a correct understanding of God’s will and God’s creation. And yet, simply being committed to divine authorship of Scripture, or believing in inerrancy, is not adequate to prevent heterodoxy—a point which is seen in the life of a Southern Presbyterian scientist, minister, and seminary professor by the name of James Woodrow. The controversy which he engendered is relevant for the church today, in that the relationship between science and Scripture, or between natural and special revelation, continues to be a challenge.

²⁸ *M29GA*, p. 198.

²⁹ Davis Young has suggested a new paradigm for the relationship between geology and Genesis. See his “Scripture in the Hands of Geologists (Part One)” *Westminster Theological Journal* XLIX, no. 1 (spring 1987), pp. 1-34, and “Scripture in the Hands of Geologists (Part Two),” *Westminster Theological Journal* XLIX, no. 2 (fall 1987), pp. 257-304.

James Woodrow was born in 1828 in Carlisle, England. The Woodrow lineage, featuring Reformed ministers as far back as the early Reformation period, is traced back to Scotland. It is from this rugged stock that James Woodrow came.

In 1836, when James was just a boy, the Woodrows emigrated to Canada, and a year later, settled in Chillicothe, Ohio, where his father assumed the Presbyterian pastorate. James graduated valedictorian at Jefferson College (now Washington and Jefferson) in Western Pennsylvania. In 1852, he became Chair of Natural Sciences at Oglethorpe University in Georgia. He did graduate work at Harvard (where he studied under the noted naturalist, Louis Agassiz) and at Germany's Heidelberg University, from which, in 1856, he received highest honors—*summa cum laude superato*.

James Woodrow was offered a full professorship at Heidelberg, but instead he determined to return to his “own country” and resume his duties at Oglethorpe. He also during this time began to preach, as a layman, at Presbyterian churches in small Georgia towns not far from Milledgeville, where the college was located.

One of his biographers notes: “In these sermons given at the beginning of his ministry, James Woodrow was preaching Jesus Christ alone as the means of salvation. All of his sermons are richly interspersed with quotations from the Scriptures.”³⁰ The professor was soon ordained to the ministry.

In 1860, Dr. Woodrow was elected to hold the new Perkins Professorship of Natural Science in Its Relations to Revealed Religion at Columbia Theological Seminary (then located in the state capital of South Carolina). Named after a Mississippi judge who donated the money, this was the nation's first chair in a theological seminary dedicated to this subject. Four reasons were set forth in the Synod of Mississippi for the establishment of this chair. One, students in college and university were not able to devote sufficient study to the burgeoning field of the natural; this meant that young pastors were not equipped to deal with skeptics who were conversant in science. Two, a genuine appreciation of science would keep young zealots from defending the Bible against supposed attacks by true science. Three, natural science is the systematic way of looking at nature, which is God's first revelation to man. Four, natural science can aid immensely in the study of Scripture.

The nexus between natural and special revelation would be the issue which would generate great controversy, and which would, in many ways, define Woodrow's legacy. In his inaugural address as the Perkins Chair, he anticipated that controversy, as he indicated his intention to focus his energies on the harmony between natural theology and revelation.³¹ He would show that objections to the Bible arise either from a spurious science or from incorrect interpretations of the Scriptures. Some of the most prominent questions regarding the alleged antagonism between revelation and science were the

³⁰ Fred Kingsley Elder, *Woodrow: Apostle of Freedom* (Two Harbors, Minn.: Bunchberry Press, 1996), 29.

³¹ Much of the phraseology in this paper is from this author's doctoral dissertation; see also William Childs Robinson, *Columbia Theological Seminary and the Southern Presbyterian Church: A Study in Church History, Presbyterian Polity, Missionary Enterprise, and Religious Thought* (Decatur, Ga.: Dennis Lindsey Printing Co., 1931); and Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*.

following: the earth's age; the prevalence of death prior to Adam's fall; the extent of the flood; polygenesis; and the antiquity of man.

According to Woodrow, there must be full academic freedom to explore the relationship between revelation and natural science. He affirmed his belief in the Bible as the actual word of God and therefore unequivocally true.

Among the items he found as definitely true were the geological teachings regarding the earth's great age and gradualism. He found definitely false (or at least unproven) the undermining of the unity of the human race. One of the undecided issues was that of the nature and extent of Noah's flood.

He suggested that conflicts between science and religion were heightened because of people regarding the Bible as a scientific textbook, and because of their thinking that phenomenological language should be taken in a strict scientific sense—something which afflicts especially the less-educated classes. Woodrow celebrated the free inquiry after truth. He concluded by appealing to the Triune God to assist him in his endeavor.

This 1860 address serves as a backdrop for a debate between Woodrow and a noted theologian from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Robert Lewis Dabney. In 1861, Dabney penned an article for the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, entitled, "Geology and the Bible." Dabney contended that the proper role of science is not that of "determining the age, date, and origin of the structures nature presents to us," but is rather that of "discovering the laws of those structures." He concluded: "Once admit a Creator and a creation, and the validity of all inferences from the seeming analogies of nature, as to origin of things, is vitiated the moment we pass back of the authentic light of historical testimony. Once admit a Creator and a creation, and nothing is gained, in logic, by attempting to push back the creative act."

Dabney's position was, of course, absolutely correct, and it fit with the traditional Protestant science marked by Baconian inductivism. James Woodrow would also want to be known as a protégé of Lord Bacon. However, he used the Baconian perspective of "two books" of God's revelation—viz., natural revelation and special revelation—in such a way as to put them on a par with one another as to their ability to inform with regard to truth. That approach in essence allowed Scripture to be displaced by natural science.

In April 1863—in the midst of that late unpleasantness—Woodrow responded to Dabney with an article entitled, "Geology and Its Assailants." The difference of perspective led to an exchange of articles between Dabney and Woodrow in the 1870s in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. In a letter to Dabney, Woodrow put the crux of the matter this way: "Dr. Dabney insisting that the *absence* of the supernatural must be proved before the law of uniformity [i.e., causality] may be applied; we insisting that the *presence* of the supernatural must be proved before we are debarred from applying it. We maintain that the former principle leads inevitably to universal skepticism, and that the latter leads inevitably to the knowledge of the truth."

If Woodrow was right in his views, then the door would be open for biological evolution, not to mention all kinds of other instances where "science" could influence the church's view of creation. Thus geology was the first battleground in the war between two different views of science—a war that would culminate in the nineteenth century in the fight over evolution.

The controversy over evolution began in the late 1870s, when rumors started to fly about the church regarding that which Dr. Woodrow was teaching in the seminary.

Finally, in spring 1884, at the urging—more like insistence—of the Board of Directors, Woodrow gave his views at the seminary’s Alumni Association meeting.

In this address,³² Professor Woodrow indicated that he had moved from believing that evolution was probably not true, to believing that it probably was true. He asserted that such questions as the age of the earth; the flatness or roundness of the earth; is it at the center of the universe or on its edge; one creation or many; the extent of the Noahic flood; and the creation of species mediately or immediately, are of no consequence regarding religious and moral truth. Evolution refers only to method, not origin. Science should not deal with sources, and religion not with method or mode.

Woodrow alleged that the language of Genesis was not explicit and may admit of different interpretations. Even man’s creation from “dust” does not tell which kind of dust—the term refers only to pre-existing material. The soul of man was immediately created. And, “in the circumstantial account of the creation of the first woman there are what seem to be insurmountable obstacles in way of fully applying the doctrine of descent.” In other words, although Adam’s body probably evolved from lower primates, the specific account of Genesis 2 meant that Eve’s body had to be created immediately and without descent.

This speech, which was later published, sparked a firestorm of controversy which rocked the Southern Presbyterian Church throughout the rest of the decade. The immediate discussion in the church publications was put by the *Southern Presbyterian* (a paper controlled by Woodrow) this way: “Does the Bible certainly teach that the dust of which Adam’s body was made was inorganic matter?” Woodrow’s critics “are certain that it does so teach,” while Woodrow “thinks that probably it does not.”

The discussion necessarily engaged the church in its official capacity. Woodrow was a prominent minister and scholar; moreover, he held an endowed chair in one of the denominational seminaries. Would he be allowed to continue teaching there? Could the institution, already on shaky financial ground, afford to have such a controversial professor on its faculty?

The Board of Columbia Theological Seminary seemingly put to rest the issue on September 17, 1884, when it voted, 8-3, that it agreed with the professor on his statement of the relation between natural science and the Bible; and that, while not agreeing with his belief regarding the probable way in which Adam’s body was created, there was nothing with his carefully-delineated views on evolution that was incompatible with the faith. The Board also at this time put on the record its sense of the wisdom of the synods in establishing the Perkins Professorship and “of the importance of such instruction as it afforded, that our ministry might be the better prepared to resist the objections of infidel scientists and defend the Scriptures against their insidious charges.”

However, the three dissenters issued a protest for the record as follows:

1. Evolution is an unproved hypothesis, and the Seminary is not the place for such teachings.
2. Belief in Evolution changes the interpretation of many passages of Scripture from that now received by the church.

³² James Woodrow, *Evolution. An Address Delivered May 7th, 1884, Before the Alumni Association of the Columbia Theological Seminary* (Columbia, S.C.: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1884), 4-30.

3. The view that the body of Adam was evolved from lower animals, and not formed by a supernatural act of God is dangerous and hurtful.

4. The theory that Adam's body was formed by the natural law of evolution while Eve's was created by a supernatural act of God is contrary to our Confession of Faith as that Confession of Faith has been and is interpreted by our Church.

5. The advocacy of views which have received neither the endorsement of the Board nor that of the Synods having control of the Seminary; which have not been established by science; which have no authority from the Word of God, which tend to unsettle the received interpretation of many passages of Scripture, and to destroy the confidence of the Church in her doctrinal standards; which have already produced so much evil, and which will injure our Seminary and may rend our church ought not to be allowed.

This intra-Board debate presaged the larger debate within the four synods which controlled the Seminary, and, indeed, within the Southern Presbyterian Church as a whole.

Numerous synods and presbyteries across Dixie adopted resolutions, usually by overwhelming margins, denouncing the Board's action. But the decisive actions would be taken in the four controlling synods: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and South Georgia and Florida. In October 1884, the synod for the Palmetto State witnessed a fascinating debate, lasting five days—a debate which, according to a Congressman who was present, had never been equaled on the floor of the United States Senate for “ability, dignity, and force.” Although there would be several speakers on each side, the two chief antagonists would be Woodrow himself, and John Lafayette Girardeau, a Woodrow colleague at Columbia Seminary. The Synod of South Carolina's Committee on the Theological Seminary brought in majority and minority reports. Three members wanted to sustain the Board of Directors; two committee members were in opposition, and recommended that the Board's action be reversed and that the teaching of evolution as being probably true be forbidden since it was “contrary to the interpretation of the Scriptures by our church and to her prevailing and recognized views.”

In his apologia, Dr. Woodrow professed allegiance to the “absolute truthfulness” of every “single word in the blessed Bible.” He also contended that he had faithfully carried out the original mandate given him as the Perkins Professor, as confirmed by the Board, 8-3. Woodrow argued in accordance with the doctrine of the spirituality of the church—that doctrine that had been of special importance to the Southern Presbyterians, who contended that the 1861 Presbyterian General Assembly had erred by requiring allegiance to the Federal government in Washington, D.C. He stated that the Church may not teach anything other than what Christ has commanded—i.e., the Bible. The Church may do many things in order to carry out the Great Commission, including the efficient preparation of preachers of the gospel, which may include instruction in the physical sciences. Or, the Church may, as at Davidson College, teach the subjects of political economy and chemistry. But, once the Church has selected whom it judges to be competent instructors in these fields, it may not then oversee their work and judge whether they are teaching good politics or good science. In other words, the Church as the Church is not competent to go beyond the confines of Scripture and determine the validity of the findings made in general revelation.

Woodrow argued that evolution addresses only the process of creation: “a description of a mode according to which changes take place, not a description of the power which

produces the changes.” To say that “God made me” is not to say that God made each individual immediately; rather, we are all the product of natural generation. Woodrow could find no clear statement as to the mode of the creation of Adam’s body, while he did see that how Eve’s body was made is perspicuously set forth.

Using Luther-like rhetoric, he stated, “With regard to the charges against me, if any man can prove that they are true by the word of God, I will repent and recant; but until then, here I stand, I cannot otherwise; God help me. Amen.’ And so stand I.” But he also castigated those synods who were crying the loudest against him, which allowed the teaching of evolution in their universities.

Woodrow quoted at length from the 1633 decision of the Tribunal of the Supreme Inquisition against Galileo Galilei. In a sparring match with a member of the South Carolina Synod, Woodrow retorted that at least Galileo had the benefit of being tried in ecclesiastical courts according to the Church’s laws.

Woodrow reiterated that the Church must confine her authoritative teaching to the gospel. Only when science contradicts Scripture must the Church deal with scientific matters.

Woodrow concluded by appealing once again for the Church not to be entangled with scientific questions, about which she has not the authority or competence to speak. Indeed, the Church, according to Woodrow, has often in the past been wrong about such things as the inhabitability of the torrid zone, the sphericity of the earth, heliocentricity, and the age of the earth. Rather, the Church must not “place deadly stumbling blocks in the path of those who are seeking the way of life in the Holy Word.” He proclaimed:

For the sake of the intelligent ingenuous youth of the land, for the sake of the greater multitude who will look to them as their guides, that you may not drive to eternal death those whom you would fain win to eternal blessedness, I beseech you that you will not tell them in Christ’s name that if they accept the teachings of God’s works, they can have no share in the unspeakable blessings offered in God’s word. By your love for the souls of your fellow-men, by your loyalty to the King and Lord of the Church and your desire to obey him by keeping within the limits which he has prescribed to you, as you would glorify him as his representatives by bringing souls into his kingdom, I beseech you as his representatives do not commit him to what he has not commanded, but preach the word, and the word alone.

The drama intensified as John Lafayette Girardeau took the floor. For him, the issue at stake was not whether evolution contradicted the Bible in an absolute sense; for, according to the Huguenot, it would not be judicious for a church court to dogmatize regarding that. Rather, the question was with regard to Woodrow’s hypothesis and the Bible as interpreted by the Southern Presbyterian Church—that is, “The Bible as it is to us.” The church must not allow “a disproved assumption of science” to take precedence over a contradictory interpretation of Scripture by the church, for that “gives the advantage to science.” Building on this issue, Girardeau laid down as a basic proposition the notion that no unproved scientific hypothesis should be taught in a theological seminary, the basic purpose of which is “to teach the church’s interpretation of the word

of God.” A professor, as an ordained teaching elder, had access to the church courts, which are the proper forum for proposing and debating changes to the ecclesiastical constitution.

After several days of debate, the Synod rejected both the minority and majority reports by identical counts of 42 to 50. It then adopted, by a vote of 50 to 45, this resolution: “That in the judgment of this Synod the teaching of Evolution in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, except in a purely expository manner, without intention of inculcating its truth is hereby disapproved.”

Voting against Woodrow’s views were the other three controlling synods: Georgia (almost three-to-one), Alabama (two-to-one), and South Georgia and Florida (about three-to-two). The four synods had also replaced Woodrow supporters on the Board, with men who opposed his position. The majority of eight had become a minority of three. On December 10, 1884, the new Board asked for Woodrow’s resignation. He declined to resign, and declined to appear before the Board to explain his declination. Even though two pro-Woodrow professors themselves resigned, Woodrow refused to vacate his post, citing, among other things, the binding covenant among the four controlling synods that a professor could only be suspended pending the outcome of a trial, thus making the effort to have him removed illegitimate.

In the meantime, Woodrow demanded that Augusta Presbytery take up his request for the clearing of his name. In April 1886, the Presbytery exonerated him from any charge of heresy, and thus found no basis for proceeding to trial. However, William Adams, a member of the Presbytery, pressed charges against Woodrow: first, for inculcating doctrines in conflict with the Scriptures as interpreted by the Confession of Faith; and secondly, for inculcating dangerous doctrines which were designed toward unsettling the church’s mind regarding the authority and accuracy of the Bible as the infallible rule of faith.

Eight presbyteries overtured the 1886 General Assembly on the subject of evolution. The Southern Presbyterian Assembly, by the count of 137-13, affirmed that “Adam and Eve were created, body and soul, by immediate acts of Almighty power, thereby preserving a perfect race unity”; that “Adam’s body was directly fashioned by Almighty God, without any natural human parentage of any kind, out of matter previously created from nothing”; and “that any doctrine at variance therewith is a dangerous error, inasmuch as in the methods of interpreting Scriptures it must demand, and, in the consequence which by fair implication it will involve, it will lead to the denial of doctrines fundamental to the faith.” The Assembly also voted (65-25) to recommend that the four synods which controlled Columbia Seminary dismiss James Woodrow.

After the General Assembly meeting, Augusta Presbytery held a trial of the professor. The court concluded by a margin of 14 to 9 that he was not guilty of teaching doctrines contrary to the received orthodoxy, and by a vote of 17 to 6 that he was not guilty of teaching things that were dangerous and that were calculated to unsettle the mind of the church. The minority in the Presbytery gave notice of complaint to the Synod of Georgia. In November 1886, that Synod, by a three-to-one margin (45 to 15), sustained the complaint against Woodrow’s acquittal on the first charge. The verdict was thereby annulled; and Woodrow gave notice of taking the matter to the General Assembly.

Because of ill-health, Woodrow was not able to present his case to the 1887 Assembly. In 1888, the General Assembly, after lengthy debate, voted 109 to 34 not to sustain Woodrow's complaint, and adopted the following statement:

It is the judgment of this General Assembly that Adam's body was directly fashioned by Almighty God of the dust of the ground, without any natural animal parentage of any kind. The wisdom of God prompted him to reveal the fact, while the inscrutable *mode* of his action therein he has not revealed. Therefore the Church does not propose to touch, handle, or conclude any question of science which belongs to God's Kingdom of nature. She must, by her divine constitution, see that these questions are not thrust upon her to break the silence of Scripture and supplement it by any scientific hypothesis concerning the mode of God's being or acts in creation which are inscrutable to us.

In the meantime, Woodrow was finally forced from his professorship at Columbia Seminary in 1887.

In taking an overview of this whole affair, we see that, in some sense, the Southern Presbyterian Church had to choose between two types of science; and it is tempting to say that the General Assembly condemned this professor's views because they were viewed as being bad science. It is much more on target, however, to say that it was both because of the perception of danger in consequent developments, and because of the rationalism already inherent in Woodrow's system, that the Church stood against his views.

Unlike assertions to the contrary, the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterians who accepted evolution did not do so because of a commitment to higher criticism. As we have seen, they steadfastly claimed a belief in the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of Holy Scripture.

This does not mean, however, that they were sufficiently correct in their views on the Bible. The key issue was not Bibliology, but hermeneutics. Increasingly, those who advocated evolution—or at least did not perceive any inconsistency between it and the Bible—rejected traditional interpretations of the Word of God in order to try to accommodate the Bible to science. For example, the word “dust” was said to incorporate the possibility that it was inorganic dust out of which Adam was formed.

Even though there was no repudiation of the historic Christian view of Scripture in the 19th century in the Southern Presbyterian Church, the fight over evolution paved the way for more bizarre interpretations of the Bible and, ultimately, to an acceptance of the critical perspective. This was accomplished especially because of the failure of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to exercise full discipline against evolutionists.

We may speculate somewhat as to why the Southern Church did not depose Dr. Woodrow from the ministry. One reason may be because of a fear of splitting the denomination, given not only the professor's standing but also the fact that he did have some significant support. Another reason, because of the Southern Presbyterian commitment to the “spirituality” of the church (in opposition to the Northern Church having engaged in political matters), may be that of sensitivity to the argument that science was not a sphere in which the church should intrude. Whatever the reason, James Woodrow remained a minister in good standing in the Southern Presbyterian Church.

The Synod of South Carolina elected him as Moderator in 1901. However, that body rejected a motion that his retiring moderator's sermon the next year be printed—a very unusual happenstance—probably because of a possible reference to the old controversy, and even more likely because of his seeming to recognize the Roman Catholic Church as a key part of the visible church.

In 1969, the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly repudiated the anti-evolution positions taken by the Assemblies of 1886, 1888, 1889, and 1924, as it “concluded that the true relation between the evolutionary theory and the Bible is that of non-contradiction.” Woodrow's view regarding evolution thus triumphed in the Southern Presbyterian Church, but at a price not even he would have been willing to pay; for it gained victory only after the rejection of Scripture as the actual Word of God, coupled with a totally different type of theology, had gained the ascendancy.

The Southern Presbyterian Church was not as influenced by higher criticism as was its Northern counterpart, and that denial of Scriptural inerrancy led to a greater acceptance of evolution in the North than in Dixie. Nevertheless, Darwinism eventually became the dominant view in the Southern Church, and at least one reason for that development was the rejection of the sufficiency and supremacy of Scripture.