

Reflections on Teaching Creation at RBC

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Over the course of the past few weeks RBC has been faced with a challenge that we believe the ministers of CMC need to know about. A few voices within our constituency have openly expressed concern about RBC's failure to teach the Genesis account of creation in the only form which they consider acceptable. While there are many facets to this issue, one of the questions at its heart is the question of what we can say with certainty regarding the age of the earth.

First, some history and some background. Since its beginnings in 1952, Rosedale Bible College has been a place where the authority of Scripture is upheld and where instructors accept and teach the Bible as the inspired and inerrant word of God, the foundation upon which we base our theology and our lives. RBC has been such a place for fifty years, and we still are.

The understanding of Scripture as God's divine revelation has many implications. For example, we accept the miracles as they are taught. We believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead. And that understanding has also meant that we take the Genesis account of creation at face value. When Genesis tells us that "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," we believe it and teach it.

For fifty years now we have taught the creation story. And for fifty years, we've managed to avoid having divisive debates about the details of that story, debates that have divided other parts of the body of Christ. We've recognized that even conservative evangelical Christians have held a variety of views regarding the details, and we've intentionally left some of those questions open. Given the current climate in some parts of the Christian community with respect to this topic, that's getting harder to do.

When I studied the book of Genesis at RBC with Willard Mayer in the mid 1970's, we discussed the Gap Theory as one possible way that the Genesis chronology might have played out. The Gap Theory proposes that God created the world a very long time ago (Gen. 1:1), and continued the project a very long while later with the processes described in Gen.1:2 and following. That chronological gap would help explain why the world looks very old but why humans and the animals appear to have shown up much more recently. With the way these things got taught in the 1970's, no one was compelled to believe the Gap Theory, though it was clear that Willard was quite attached to it. It was one plausible way of answering some of the many questions that arise when Christians who believe the Bible encounter the observations of modern science.

When I was in high school I accompanied my father to Columbus to hear Duane Gish speak. Gish was the author of a book entitled *Evolution: The Fossils Say No!*, in which he helpfully described the ways in which the fossil record fails so dramatically to correspond to the predictions of early Darwinians. Gish's book influenced my thinking significantly as a young Christian who was also a student of science; he helped me to understand that when science addresses questions of ultimate origins it is venturing outside the territory which can be empirically studied and tested. When I read Gish it was clear to me that the enemy of Christian faith was an evolutionary view of origins that had no room for God. There have been significant changes since the 1970's.

What has changed is that during the past decade or so a group of Christian writers and speakers has emerged that have increasingly identified the enemy not only as scientists who don't believe in God, but also as any Christians who don't insist on a reading of the Genesis account that sees the earth as only six thousand years old. For example, when Ken Ham spoke at the annual conference of CMC in Greenwood a decade ago, he

argued publically that anyone who views the Gap Theory as a plausible explanation does not take the Bible seriously. He also specifically named James Dobson as a Christian leader who cannot be trusted because Dobson thinks the earth might be a lot older than six thousand years.

The most problematic thing about Ham's teaching is not the young-earth interpretation of Genesis; that interpretation has been common in the history of the church and is, in fact, the view preferred by some instructors at RBC. What is troubling is the insistence that anyone who disagrees with the young-earth perspective is compromised and not to be trusted. One helpful insight from Ham has been his suggestion that Christians confronted with evolutionary theory presented as fact simply pose the question "Were you there?" His point, of course, is that scientists should be modest enough to acknowledge when they are claiming more than they really know. Teachers like Ham would do well to also remember that question when considering the age of the earth.

Our hope at RBC is that this issue will not become a source of division within our constituency. We're confident that it doesn't need to. We've taught eschatology at RBC for years without insisting on only one interpretation. We've watched Christians divide bitterly over the timing of the rapture, but we have not joined them. We've watched Christians break fellowship over the mode of baptism, but we've not joined them. We've heard arguments about whether or not the King James Version is the only one God blesses, but, thankfully, we've not joined them.

In all of these arguments it's easy to frame the discussion in terms of loyalty to Scripture, and many people have. If you don't baptize by immersion you don't really believe the Bible. If you don't teach the pre-tribulation premillennial rapture of the church, you don't really believe the Bible. And now, if we don't insist that the world is only six thousand years old, we don't really believe the Bible.

For fifty years we've taught passionately that God created the world. We've taught the creation account in full agreement with the CMC statement of theology, which says this:

Creation is a good and supernatural work of God, who is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. Creation is the explanation of the origin and existence of all things, including the material universe, the spiritual cosmos, and those beings which by free will rebelled against God and chose an attitude and condition of evil.

That's what we still teach.

At RBC we are committed to teaching creation in a way that increases students' confidence in the God of creation. We have never taught any form of evolution and we are not doing so now. We don't want to be a place where young-earth views are belittled. But neither do we want to be a school where old-earth views are rejected without a hearing. What we want to be is a college where students and faculty members can honestly consider the range of possibilities that lie within the context of a deep commitment to Biblical authority.

Every group of Christians will make decisions about where to draw theological lines. At RBC we understand that, and we have, in fact, spent time in the past year working at some internal theological definition ourselves. But our hope is that an insistence on a particular view regarding the age of the earth does not become divisive.

Our highest priority as an institution that exists to teach the Bible is to be faithful to God's divine revelation. We welcome your questions and further interaction on this topic. After all, we are your school.