

Evolution in Our Reformed Colleges?

Was Adam real? Or was “Adam” merely a literary construct?

Was man formed from the dust of the ground, as a direct creation of God? Or were men the product of millions of years of evolutionary changes?

Was there a literal Fall into sin, which plunged mankind into condemnation? Or was sin and moral evil part of God’s original design?

How about the Flood? A worldwide cataclysm that destroyed all mankind, but for eight souls? Or just a regional event that never reached as far as Egypt?

Such questions should be easy for us and for our children to answer, believing as we do that Scripture is an absolutely true revelation from God.

But what shall we tell our children when they are confronted by Christian professors at Reformed colleges who deny Adam’s historical reality, the literal fall at Eden, original sin, and a worldwide Flood?

Over the past few weeks, I’ve been reading disturbing (but unsurprising) reports about views being advanced a pair of professors at Calvin College. As the school of the CRC, Calvin prides itself on being rooted in the Reformation.

However, two religion professors at Calvin recently made headlines by publishing papers that question some of Christianity’s foundational doctrines. Appearing in the journal *Perspectives on Science & Christian Faith*, the papers addressed theological questions arising from the idea of human evolution.

That’s not an abstract question at Calvin. Visit the school’s website, and you can quickly learn that the Biology Dept. wholeheartedly affirms evolutionary theory. A Biology Dept. statement on the issue says: “The theory of evolution is one of biology’s key unifying principles. ... We believe God brings forth the creation through evolutionary means. While no biological theory is ever beyond revision, we affirm the scientific consensus that life has existed on Earth for billions of years and that it has changed, and continues to change over time.”

Of course, it’s inconsistent to claim evolution for everything *except* mankind. But applying evolution to humanity raises some difficult concerns.

Prof. Daniel Harlow therefore wrote a paper exploring the implications of the idea that “Adam and Eve are strictly literary figures – characters in a divinely inspired story about the imagined past that intends to teach primarily theological, not historical, truths about God, creation and humanity.”

Prof. John Schneider’s paper claimed that the traditional understanding of the Fall doesn’t fit well with modern science. From the scientific perspective, Schneider wrote, it appears “that not just natural evils ... but also the disposition for human moral evils, are practically part of God’s original design.”

Harlow and Schneider are not rogue professors. Harlow noted that he had circulated drafts of his articles to numerous members of Calvin’s faculty, as well as to the provost and academic deans. Schneider had presented much of his research in a proposal that was approved by the college Board of Trustees.

And at least some of the faculty stands behind them. Loren Haarsma – who wrote a book on evolution with his wife, Deborah Haarsma – explains: “The fossil evidence does not point to a single pair of ancestors for the human race. We feel we have to ask these questions because our study of God’s world has forced us to ask these questions.” (Quotes from “Evolution Evidence Conflicts with Confessions” in the January 2011 issue of *The Banner*.)

The issue doesn’t affect only Calvin. The Dordt College Biology Dept. employs Prof. Tony Jelsma, who is not shy about promoting views that challenge the historical accuracy of the Genesis accounts.

In his defense, Jelsma emphatically denies human evolution. Yet he claims that “the literal six day/twenty-four hour interpretation of Genesis 1 is also incorrect” (*Is Creation Science Reformed?*, p.1). Along with this, Jelsma asserts that “the Creation Science model of a catastrophic global Flood and flood geology are not in accordance with Scripture” (Letter in *Christian Renewal*). He advances his views in magazines and on the Internet (www.reformedacademic.blogspot.com) because, “I am genuinely alarmed at the influence that Creation Science has in the conservative Reformed community.”

What about Trinity College in Chicago? I recall well the conversation I had with one of our young adults whose biology teacher at Trinity had no time for any view of science that didn’t wholeheartedly affirm evolution.

Here's the problem: theories like those in question (denying the historicity of Adam, interpreting the Flood as a regional event, and advancing macro-evolution) necessarily submit Scripture to the filter of unbelieving science.

Science itself is not the enemy. Science is merely the careful study of the creation, which God designed to bless His creatures and to reveal His character (Rom. 1:19-20). However, the creation is universally misinterpreted by sinful men (Rom. 1:18,21). If we are to rightly understand the creation, we must submit all that it shows us to the unerring guide of God's Word – "the embodiment of knowledge and truth" (Rom. 2:20) which is "profitable for teaching" (2 Tim. 3:16). This can be done only in complete submission to God, for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). Thus John Calvin equated Scripture to a pair of "spectacles" that allow us to rightly understand the knowledge that the creation sets before us (*Institutes* 1.6.1).

When men teach evolution as the truth, then reinterpret Scripture to fit with that theory (or any other theory which contradicts Scripture), they make the facts of the creation into spectacles that faithlessly twist Scripture.

Of course, such "backward" thinking must be expected when studying at secular universities. Because it *is* expected, our young adults who study at such schools tend to prepare themselves to filter what they are taught, carefully sifting the wheat from the chaff.

But when they attend colleges that claim to be Reformed, they expect that what they hear will accord with Scripture. Imagine the crisis it can prompt when your highly-esteemed professor claims that what you've always heard from the pulpit is "bad theology" which is "not in accordance with Scripture" (Jelsma).

What shall we do about it?

That's the question! Sadly, the humanistic concept of evolution has infiltrated most historically Reformed institutions to some degree. And that leaves us with three options.

First, we must prepare our young people to be discerning scholars. They must learn to use the Bible to evaluate *all* that they hear – whether in college or high school, in the pew, and at the workplace. There is no place in a fallen world where we can accept unthinkingly what we are taught.

Second, we can (and should!) ask carefully what our young people will be taught at the colleges they are considering. When evolution is on the menu, a choice must be made. They can either enter the school understanding that part of what they will be taught will be wrong, or they can look elsewhere. Sadly, the latter option will not lead to an easy search.

And third, those of us who have attended or supported Christian colleges can (and should!) hold our alma maters accountable. We need to learn what they are teaching and challenge teachings that depart from Scripture. If they claim to be Reformed, our schools need to uphold the confessions to which they subscribe. If we remain silent, they won't.

Was Adam real? Was there a literal Fall into sin? Was the Flood universal?

Let us never doubt! And let us teach our children to trust God completely – even when their professors deny what they know to be true. Then they can say with the psalmist, "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation" (Ps. 119:99).