

Is there a Reformed approach to science and Scripture?

A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture

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Some books are good. Some are bad. And others are disappointing. In this latter category, I put a new book, *A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture*, by Dr Keith Mathison.¹

Dr R.C. Sproul's *Dust to Glory* DVD presentations (57 lectures in all) are a unique and important survey of the Bible, highlighting particular issues from each section under discussion. In the *Consequence of Ideas* lectures (and book by the same name), Sproul provides a broad survey of Western thought, from Thales through to modern times. This is a difficult and thorny subject area, but Sproul breaks it down into bite-size chunks to make the points very clear. Although limited in its scope, it is a very important summary of Western thought that helps explain our world.

Sproul's venture into apologetics is highlighted by his presentation of the Cosmological Argument in his book, *Not a Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology*. I find this to be a superb presentation and explanation of how to make use of the Cosmological Argument.²

So I critique this current book as an ardent fan of the work of R.C. Sproul. Which is why I find Mathison's book somewhat 'out of character'.

In it, Mathison presents the views of R.C. Sproul on science and Scripture and, in particular, the age of the earth. The origin of the book stems from a

question about the age of the earth asked at the 2012 Ligonier conference and Sproul's answer to that question. Apparently Mathison, or someone else at Ligonier Ministries, felt Sproul's opinion needed defending.

Here is Sproul's short answer to the question concerning the age of the earth: "I don't know".

And that is the subject matter of this free e-book that is not very long. Not surprising that it's short. Just how many words can you write based on 'I don't know'?

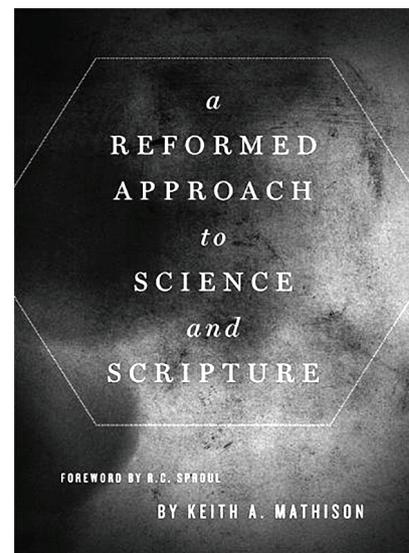
Mathison is keen to paint Sproul as in the Reformed tradition. He presents this book as:

"Dr Sproul's distinctively Reformed approach to the question of the age of the universe, an approach based on the thinking of Reformed theologians from John Calvin to B.B. Warfield."

It appears that means that the "distinctively Reformed approach" is one that says, 'I don't know'. When you read to discover what the Reformed tradition might be, what you get is a list of those who agree with a young earth and another list that disagree with it. The Reformed landscape is no longer uniform on this topic, though as Sproul recognizes, the Westminster Confession of Faith supports a 6-day creation. But now it is a tradition of conflicting opinions. So it is not surprising that Sproul concludes: "I don't know". Perhaps the differences of opinion have confused him.

Standing on the Word of God

Such confusion is surprising, for in his book, *Truths We Confess*, Sproul wrote,



"For most of my teaching career, I considered the framework hypothesis to be a possibility. But I have now changed my mind. I now hold to a literal six-day creation. ... Genesis says that God created the universe and everything in it in six twenty-four hour periods. According to the Reformation hermeneutic, the first option is to follow the plain sense of the text. One must do a great deal of hermeneutical gymnastics to escape the plain meaning of Genesis 1-2."³

It appears, however, that Sproul cannot finally work out who is telling the truth: the scientists or the theologians. He correctly identifies that people often make mistakes, that only God's Word is infallible. But as people often misinterpret God's written revelation, so too they can misinterpret God's revelation of himself in nature. Where we are not in agreement is the *interpretation* of natural revelation concerning the age of the earth.

It is true, of course, that there are conflicting opinions between scientists and theologians. When this occurs someone must be wrong, asserts Sproul. They both could be wrong, but both of them cannot be right. So Sproul correctly concludes that if Scripture is rightly interpreted, then any scientific

observation that contradicts Scripture must be wrong. The key issue, according to Mathison, echoing Sproul, is contained in this example: “Any scientific theory that denies the possibility of resurrection from the dead, therefore, is necessarily wrong.” The Bible trumps everything else. In fact, Sproul assures us:

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

So far, so good. Sproul is quite convinced that creation took only six, literal 24-hour days. Thus, any theory that denies the literal 6-day creation is necessarily wrong.

It would be a huge mistake, therefore, to conclude that Sproul is saying that ‘natural’ revelation takes precedence over the Bible. He stresses the two sources of revelation. What Sproul is not willing to accept, however, are *interpretations* of the natural revelation that create a conflict with correct interpretations of the revelation of Scripture. But I wonder if Sproul has fully appreciated the point he is trying to make.

Consider this: there is the Bible on one hand and nature on the other. An interpretation of nature appears to conflict with an interpretation of the Bible. Which of the two ‘revelations’ is Sproul suggesting should be used to determine the accuracy of the two conflicting views? Sproul is too good a theologian to give away Scripture as the *primary* source of truth. And this is what drives his conclusion that a hundred times out of a hundred he will stand with the Bible. In addition, however, it puts him in full agreement with the creationist movement on this point, since the creation movement is based firmly on the idea that the Bible interprets science.

That leaves the reader with an intriguing question: can science *ever* show an interpretation of the Bible is incorrect? And that question directly confronts us with the whole notion of *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. It has been a long-held view within Christianity that the Bible interprets the Bible.⁴ It has also been a long-held view that while nature teaches us many truths, the only way we can *know* that our truths of nature are actually true, is by the confirmation of Scripture itself. Or, to put this another way, we know science is wrong when it *conflicts* with a correct interpretation of Scripture. In other words, it is the Bible that confirms science and not the other way around. Science without the Bible cannot determine what is true or false about the Bible; but the Bible without science can tell us what is false about science.

What Sproul cannot tell us, unfortunately, is what the Bible might say about the age of the earth. This question apparently has him beat. But if the creation took six literal 24-hour days, then it is tempting to ask, where do the large number of years appear to make up an old earth? After the six days? Before the six days? During the six days? They have to go somewhere, if you’re going to argue for an old earth. Sproul says:

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

But do you see how Sproul has conflated two different issues? In the first he is referencing the Scripture and is happy to accept, if nothing else,

that it contains *hints* that “seem to indicate” a young earth. Then he jumps to the alternative of how science and “other factors coming from outside the church” make him wonder. What in particular does he wonder about? How to interpret the Bible?

But in these few words of Sproul the key issue is identified. It is this: *starting with the Bible alone, no one gets an old earth*. Always, with the Bible alone, it is a young earth. And it is only when ‘outside forces’ come to bear on the Scripture that people give way and declare, ‘I don’t know what the Bible means any more.’

The issue has more implications than the problem of where to fit the millions of years. The millions of years notion, prior to Darwin, came from the idea that the fossil record formed slowly, a philosophy based on explicit denial of the Genesis Flood. Fossils, however, show not only death, but also violence, suffering, and disease (e.g. cancerous tumours). So if the fossils were supposedly formed millions of years ago, these things would have preceded Adam’s sin and the resulting Curse on creation. Yet the biblical record also indicates overwhelmingly that death and suffering came as a result of sin. Yes, even the death and suffering of non-human ‘living creatures’ (*nephesh chayyah*) or ‘soulish’ life forms. Also, the fossil record shows human death, including by sinful means such as cannibalism. This gives some indication of how seriously God views sin. Thus, when Israel was commanded to wipe out the evil nations around her, the instructions sometimes included wiping out animals as well.

Man, in his rebellion against God, is rarely willing to admit that sin is as bad as God says it is. Did God’s declaration about his creation being ‘very good’ include the notion that death, pain and disease was also ‘good’? Not according to the rest of Scripture, where death is seen as an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), an intruder into

a once-perfect world. And now the ‘whole creation groans’ waiting for the final day when everything will be put right and that last enemy, death, will be no more.⁵ This future deathless state (Revelation 21:4) is clearly associated with the removal of the Genesis Curse (Revelation 22:3). Whenever animals feature in association with the idea of future restoration, it alludes to the original Edenic harmony, not violence and carnivory in the animal kingdom.

Sproul, a Reformed theologian, is clearly aware of all this. But it appears he is caught in the junction of the science-theology debate that gained prominence in the Renaissance period.

The scientific ‘revolution’

Since the time of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the relationship between the Bible and science has been in question. Is the Bible a textbook about science? If not, does that mean that scientists may ignore what the Bible says as they make pronouncements about the universe? Bacon was quite adamant that any attempt to build ‘science’ on Greek philosophy or the Bible was an exercise in futility. It was the wrong approach when it came to the Bible. This view led Wieland and Sarfati to make the observation:

“This wilful and untrue presupposition, that the Bible has nothing to teach us about understanding the workings of nature, is the ugly root which has influenced some of the greatest scientific minds from Bacon onwards.”⁶

From the time of Bacon, disputes between ‘religion’ and ‘science’ have appeared from time to time, the most prominent being Darwinian evolution and ‘natural selection’ as the ‘creator’ of a complex universe. Mathison makes reference to the Copernicus issue, which is yet another example of the debate between church and science, although Mathison does not appear to be aware of the criticisms of Copernicus as a result of General Relativity.⁷

Today, almost everywhere, Bacon’s view reigns in both science and church.

Can science, however, explain the age of the earth? Is it within the range of scientific endeavour to explain the origin of the universe, without which the age of the universe clearly remains unknown? If science cannot explain it, does the Bible explain it? If the Bible does not explain it, then we have no answer at all, and Sproul is correct to conclude “I don’t know”. But you cannot read the Bible, as Sproul does, without agreeing with his statement: “It gives us hints that seem to indicate, in many cases, a young earth.” It has long been the view of many Christians and Jews that the chronologies listed in the Bible can be used to reliably determine the age of the earth.⁸ While truth is not determined by majority vote, the conclusion is difficult to avoid: the Bible not only gives us the time-span for creation but provides information that allows us to determine *when* creation took place. We may not know this to the exact day or hour but we do know it is in the thousands of years and not billions.

Sproul, a philosopher and theologian, cannot be unaware of Bacon and the growing secularism in science. Does science provide valid interpretive criteria for the Bible? Not if we hold to the idea of *sola scriptura*. Thus we could paraphrase Sproul and say: “One must do a great deal of hermeneutical gymnastics to escape the plain meaning of the chronologies.”

Mathison’s defence of Sproul is a valiant attempt. And a successful Reformed view of science would be a significant achievement. Abraham Kuyper, in his Stone Lectures of 1898 at Princeton University, argued for a Calvinistic view of science that showed the strong relationship between science and theology.⁹ Unfortunately, however, there is no Reformed view of science any more than there is a Reformed view of music theory. The current Reformed tradition, as with many other church traditions, is identified by its ambiguity

on this issue and a failure to confirm, once and for all, through an update to the Reformed Confessions, what the Bible actually teaches regarding the age of the earth.

Sproul, though, has made it absolutely clear that the Reformed view of the Genesis account is tied to six 24-hour periods. The Reformed view on the *age* of the earth needs to be updated to correspond with this so that a young earth is given equal importance in Reformed dogmatics.

So far, however, one thing is rather obvious. When science is left at the doorway, inside the discussion room there is a unanimous decision for a young earth, not an ‘I don’t know’. Mathison’s suggestion that ‘harm’ is caused by those who claim to know the answer in either direction is not a compelling argument when it comes to the truths of the Bible.

Finally, there can only be one question: What do the Scriptures say? And Sproul has already identified the answer. When theology again finds its proper place in the fields of science, then the age of the earth becomes abundantly clear.

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