

Why Confessional Lutherans Believe that Genesis 1-3 Describes Real History

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Two Views of Human Origins

It is obvious that the theory of evolution totally dominates scientific thinking today. Very few scientists believe the account of creation in Genesis 1-3. In fact, most of them would ridicule it as unbelievably naive. Almost all science books present the theory that man evolved from lower life forms as a proven fact. This rejection of creation is not very surprising since sinners have been in rebellion against their Creator ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. They have even been suppressing the knowledge of the Creator which is revealed in nature (Romans 1:18-25).

What is surprising, however, is that so many Christian churches today deny the Bible's account of creation. Even many Lutherans have chosen to follow the world's theory of evolution, rather than believe the account of the origin of mankind which is given in Scripture. The *Evangelical Catechism* used in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America says:

The fact that two different stories of creation (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2) were allowed to stand together in the Bible suggests that the question of how God created the world is not a vital question for faith. The Bible does not require us to have a particular theory of creation. None of the biblical creation stories are historical reports. Instead they talk about the relationship between God, human beings, and the world, using language of symbols and image. Adam and Eve, though personified as individuals in the story, are not necessarily individual persons, but representatives of humanity...The creation of a woman from the rib of the man is not meant to be taken literally. The narrator is making the point that human beings can enter relationships which have no parallel in the animal world.

In contrast to such views the Wisconsin Synod's doctrinal statement *This We Believe* says:

We believe that the universe, the world, and man came into existence in the beginning when God created heaven and earth and all creatures (Genesis 1, 2). Further testimony of this event is found in other passages of the Old and New Testaments (for example, Exodus 20:11, Hebrews 11:3). All this happened in the course of six normal days by the power of God's almighty word when He said, "Let there be." We believe that the Bible presents a true and historical account of Creation.

We reject the theories of evolution as an explanation of the origin of the universe and man, and all attempts to interpret the Scriptural account of Creation so as to harmonize such theories. We reject the interpretations that reduce the first chapters of Genesis to a narration of symbolical myths and to poetic accounts that are without factual historical content.

Why This Difference?

Why this great difference of belief among Lutherans? The major factor that creates this difference is two different approaches to Scripture. The historical-grammatical approach to Scripture which the WELS follows leads us to the conclusion that the creation accounts in Genesis are real history. The historical-critical method allows Bible scholars to re-interpret the creation stories in Genesis as myths which teach truths about human

relationships, but which are not a description of real events. We will evaluate which of these two approaches is more faithful to Scripture by turning to the creation account of Genesis and letting it speak for itself.

According to the historical-grammatical method of interpreting the Bible, we determine whether we are to understand a section of the Bible literally or figuratively by looking at its context. For example, we believe that the stories about Jesus' miracles describe real, historical events because the Gospels describe these actions were performed in specific times and places for real people. On the other hand, we recognize that Jesus' parables may not be reporting events that actually occurred, since they are stories told to illustrate a point and the Gospels themselves often provide the interpretation for these stories (for example, Matthew 13). We believe that Revelation is a book which uses symbols to picture real events, since the book itself says it is using symbols (Revelation 1:2 in Greek), and it also interprets some of the symbols for us (Revelation 1).

History or Myth?

What do we learn when we apply this test to the context of Genesis? We see that Genesis is presented as the first section of the history of God's plan of salvation. The first eleven chapters, which report the early history of the world, lead directly into the early history of Israel as reported in Genesis 12-50. The other books of the Pentateuch and the other historical books of the Old Testament continue this same story. These books trace the story of God's plan of salvation from Eden to Egypt, to Jerusalem, to captivity in Babylon, and back to Jerusalem again. This history of the plan of salvation is then resumed and completed in the Gospels and Acts. Events from Genesis to Acts form one connected history.

The story of Genesis flows as one uninterrupted story from Adam and Eve, through Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel. Nothing in the text indicates that we are to understand any of these characters as mythical or symbolic characters.

The rest of Scripture also understands the events of Genesis 1-3 as real, historical events. These events provide the foundation for many of God's actions in history. The Old Testament Sabbath was a remembrance of God's rest on the seventh day of creation (Exodus 20:11). The New Testament teaching concerning marriage and divorce is based on the assumption that God created marriage just as Genesis 1 and 2 says (Matthew 19 and Ephesians 5). Paul bases his teaching concerning the proper roles for men and women in the church upon the relationship between man and woman which God established at the time of creation (1 Corinthians 11 & 14, 2 Timothy 2). Jesus' genealogy in Luke 3 treats Adam as Jesus' real ancestor. In Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 Paul shows the necessary connection between the sin of the first Adam and the payment for sin which was offered by Christ, the second Adam. According to the New Testament, Psalm 8, which reflects the blessing given to Adam at creation, is fulfilled only in Christ, the second Adam. God's whole plan of salvation through Christ is tied to the historical fact that there was a real Adam and Eve who made Christ's coming necessary. The testimony of Scripture is unanimous in treating Genesis 1-3 as real history.

But if Genesis is the first chapter of human history, what does it say about the beginnings of that history, and what relevance does this have for our evaluation of evolution as a possible explanation of human origins?

Evolution or Creation?

If someone tried to write a creation account for the specific purpose of rejecting evolution as an explanation of human origins, it would be hard to imagine how anyone could do this any more thoroughly than Genesis 1-3 does. Genesis 1-3 rejects evolutionary theory point by point, and it does it repeatedly and emphatically. Let us look at just a few of the main points in Genesis 1-3.

Is death a natural good or an unnatural evil?

Again and again Genesis states that everything God made was good. There was no violence or death in the world. Death came into the world as an unnatural curse on sin. Evolutionists, however, see death as natural. Indeed, death and the survival of the fittest play an essential role in advancing the process of evolution.

Evolution from one kind or creation of many kinds?

Time after time, Genesis says God made living things "after their kind." God drew distinct lines between plants and animals and also between various "kinds" of plants and animals. Even today we observe that plants cannot be crossed with other plants outside their kind. Animals cannot mate outside their own kind. Animals and plants can "evolve" within their kinds. For example, people can develop new traits in a limited range, creating racial and ethnic differences, but they can't be changed into birds. The boundaries between "kinds" are firm. But evolutionist claim that the higher forms of life developed from lower forms of life, even though a change from one kind to another has never been observed in history.

Man or animal?

Evolution says man is not essentially different from the other animals. In fact, according to evolution people share a common ancestry with animals. Genesis, on the other hand, emphatically distinguishes man from the other animals (people and animals may share the name "animal" only in the sense that both have the breath of life—in Latin, anima. Otherwise, human beings are sharply distinguished from animals). Man and woman were created in the image of God; animals were not. Man and woman were moral, spiritual beings who could relate to God through faith and who could rebel against him in sin; animals do not have moral responsibility; they received no moral law. Man and woman were given dominion over the world; animals were not. Adam's distinctness from the animals was emphasized by the fact that he could find no companion among them.

Long process or instantaneous creation?

The theory of evolution stresses that the universe and the life forms which inhabit it developed through slow processes which took millions of year. Genesis repeatedly emphasizes that each step of creation was instantaneous. God said, and it was done!

Days or eons?

One issue which has caused much controversy among Christians is whether the days in Genesis 1 can be long periods of time during which God used slow evolutionary processes to create his world. It is sometimes argued that "day" can refer to a period of time, "in the day of the dinosaurs" or "in the day when God made heaven and earth" (Genesis 2:4). This may be true in many languages, including Hebrew, but the language of Genesis 1 very clearly eliminates this possibility. Six times it says that the days of creation were made up of an evening and a morning, which together made one day. Furthermore, when "days" are numbered, they are regular days not eras. How could the account be any more emphatic in declaring that the days of creation were normal days, not long periods of time?

Can we accept both Genesis and evolution?

It is simply impossible to reconcile evolution and Genesis. Genesis contradicts evolutionary theory at every point of the account. Even if we were to grant that the days of Genesis were long periods of time, how would this help us reconcile evolution and creation? If the "days" were long periods of time, the creation account would then claim that plants existed long before the sun came into being. The account would still claim that animals originated as distinct kinds. It would still claim that man and woman were not derived from lower

animals, but came into being by distinct acts of God. If evolution was operating during the "days" of creation, then death was present in the world before the Fall and it is not a consequence of sin. No, there is no way to reconcile Genesis 1 and 2 with evolution.

Christians who want to find a way of reconciling the Bible and evolution often claim that Genesis does not tell us *how* God created the world, but only *that* God created the world and why he created the world. But if that is true, it certainly is strange that the account in Genesis spends so much time telling us how God created the world. "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Seven times the account reports, "God said, 'Let there be,' ...and it was so." The account reports that by a special act of creation God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. God then made woman from man. The "how" of creation is not unimportant. The fact that God created things from nothing, simply by speaking the word, is a demonstration of his almighty power. This is the same creative power which God uses to create new spiritual life in us who were dead in sin (2 Corinthians 4:6). The fact that God made man in a special way, distinct from the creation of the animals, shows the special place of man in God's creation. The fact that God made woman from man teaches us an important principle about their relationships with each other. The creation account does indeed teach us *that* God made the world. It also teaches us *why* he made the world—his goodness and love. But it also teaches us *how* he made the world and everything in it.

One account or several contradictory accounts?

The creation account in Genesis clearly cannot be reconciled with evolution. Christian evolutionists, however, often try to undermine its clarity by claiming that other creation accounts in Scripture contradict Genesis 1 and 2. The most common dogmatic text used in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America claims that there are fifteen different theologies of creation in the Bible. It claims that a number of different beliefs about creation which arose at different times and which disagree with each other have all been allowed to stand side by side in the Bible. The Genesis account is then treated as just one myth among many myths of the ancient world. According to this view the Genesis creation account was composed in the 5th century B.C. (1000 years after the time of Moses) by an editor who put together several different sources. This account, therefore, has no greater importance than any other mention of creation in the Bible (*Christian Dogmatics, I*, p 275-287). In the manner which is typical of the historical-critical method, critics set one passage of Scripture against another in an attempt to undermine confidence in all of them. We must briefly look at how this approach is applied to the biblical teaching of creation.

The Bible *mentions* creation many times, but there is only one *account* of creation. Genesis 1-2 together form the only account of creation in the Bible. This account forms the basis for all the other references to creation in the Bible. Critics like to treat Genesis 1 and 2 as two independent interpretations of creation which contradict each other. The two chapters, however, are two stages of one report. Genesis 1 serves as the introduction to the whole book of Genesis by briefly summarizing the six days of creation. Genesis 2 begins the first of ten "accounts" (Hebrew—*toledoth*) which make up the book of Genesis. This first "account," made up of chapters 2-4 of Genesis, tells about the creation and development of the human race. Genesis 2, therefore, is simply a more detailed description of the most important point in Genesis 1, namely, the creation of man and woman. This more detailed description of this one key act of creation was needed because the Bible is the story of God's dealing with the human race, not his dealings with stars, plants, or animals. We can't understand the rest of the Bible unless we understand where people came from and how they got into their present condition. After Genesis 2-4 gives us this basic information, Genesis 5:1 begins the second "account" which traces the human race from Adam to Noah. The other eight "accounts" continue the story of salvation up to the time of Israel's entry into Egypt. The rest of the books of the Old Testament carry the story up to the time of Christ.

There are many other mentions of creation in the Bible. None of these passages, however, gives us an account of creation. Most often they praise God for some aspect of his creative work. For example, Psalm 104 praises God for the way in which he created the world for man's use. This psalm follows the same order of the days of creation as Genesis 1 does and shows how the works of each of the six days are useful to mankind. Job

38 is a poetic celebration of the wisdom and power which God displayed when he created the world. Here the various aspects of creation are not arranged in any particular order since chronological order is not necessary to the purpose of this poem. The fact that such hymns which praise God for his creation use poetic or figurative language to describe creation does not make Genesis 1 and 2 a figurative poem any more than the figurative language in Revelation 21 and 22 makes the new heavens and the new earth figurative. A few passages like Psalm 74:13-17 describe acts of creation with language borrowed from mythology. This does not make Genesis 1 and 2 a myth anymore than calling Satan a dragon in Revelation 12 makes 2 Peter 2:4 a myth. A few of the later passages about creation add information which is not explicitly stated in Genesis. For example, John 1 states that Christ was a participant in all of the work of creation. None of this additional information contradicts what is found in Genesis 1 and 2. None of these additional references to creation in the Bible provide any basis for rejecting the historical reliability of Genesis.

What difference does it make?

We have seen that the Bible provides no basis for doubting the historical accuracy of Genesis 1-3. But some Christians claim that maintaining the historic doctrine of creation is not essential for the church. They believe that evolution can be accepted as the true explanation of the origin of the human race without harm to Christian faith. But is this true?

The reason that some Christians reject the historicity of Genesis 1-3 is not any unclarity in the text. What the text says is very clear. The problem is that current science disagrees with Genesis. This leads some people to accept the claims of science rather than the claims of God's Word. To reject the Genesis account of creation is to allow human wisdom to pass judgement on God's Word. This is a sin of idolatry. When we begin to choose which parts of the Bible are reasonable to believe, what doctrine is safe from attack? When the church changes its doctrine of creation to make it acceptable to the world, how can it preserve the doctrine of the cross, which is the greatest offense of all to the world (1 Corinthians 1)?

In fact, recent experience shows that a rejection of the historicity of the creation account leads directly to the undermining and loss of other doctrines of Scripture.

The New Testament teaching of marriage and divorce rests on the assumption that God created marriage just as Genesis says (Matthew 19:4-6 and Ephesians 5:30). When people reject the divine origin of marriage and regard marriage as simply an evolving human institution, is it any wonder that divorce is an epidemic in today's society?

Paul bases his teaching concerning the proper roles for men and women in this life upon the relationship between them which God established at the time of creation (1 Corinthians 11:3-12 & 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:11-14). When the historicity of God's creative acts is discarded, should it be any surprise that society is so confused about the roles of husband and wife in marriage and that there is so much confusion in the church about the ordination of women as pastors?

If the fall into sin is just a myth, then the doctrine of original sin is a myth. The doctrine of original sin states that Adam's one sin was charged to the whole human race (Romans 5:12). We are already guilty when we are born into this world. If there was no fall, God had no right to charge Adam's sin to us. Denying the historicity of Genesis 3 also destroys the doctrine of actual sin, since Genesis 3 establishes the principle that sin is the violation of any command of God.

Jesus' genealogy in Luke 3 treats Adam as Jesus' real ancestor. If we don't believe that God made Adam and Eve by special acts of creation, how long will we believe that the Holy Spirit caused Jesus to be born of the virgin Mary? If there was no Adam, Christ's role as the substitute for the whole human race is a fiction. Romans 5:19 draws a direct parallel between God's charging of Adam's sin to the whole human race and God's crediting of Christ's righteousness to the whole human race. The one act is as real as the other. In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul shows the necessary connection between the sin of the first Adam and the payment for sin which was offered by Christ, the second Adam. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). According to 1 Corinthians 15:27 and Hebrews 3:5-9, Psalm 8 which refers to the blessing given to Adam at

creation, finds its fulfillment only in Christ, the second Adam. God's whole plan of salvation through Christ is tied to the historical fact that there was a real Adam and Eve who made it necessary. A historical understanding of Genesis 1-3 provides the necessary foundation for the whole plan of salvation revealed in Scripture. Whenever the story of the Fall is reduced to a myth which simply symbolizes that there is something bad about human nature, the story of redemption is soon reduced to a myth which shows how people can get back in touch with God, whoever or whatever he (or she) may be. The sad situation in Lutheranism today is clear evidence of the deadly effects which the historical-critical method and the loss of faith in creation, which is a natural result of the historical-critical method, inevitably have on the doctrine of the church.

The doctrine of a special miraculous creation is foolishness to the world. But God has not given us a command to change our teaching to appeal to the world. He has told us to change the world by teaching everything which his Word proclaims.

Proof or Faith?

In conclusion, we ask, "Why must we Lutherans believe that God really created Adam and Eve as Genesis says?" The answer is quite simple: Because God's Word says it is so.

We have only one test for deciding whether we are willing to believe some report from history. That test is, "Do I believe the witnesses who have left us this report? Are they believable or not?" Creation is history not science. That is, creation is not subject to scientific investigation in the strict sense. We can test the scientific statement "water is H₂O by going into the laboratory and taking water apart and getting hydrogen and oxygen. We cannot go into the laboratory and verify the Bible's claim of creation by reproducing the results in a test tube. But evolution is not true science either, because it cannot be verified by experiment. The most that evolution can offer is theories which cannot be tested in a laboratory. Evolution cannot be proved, because no one can go back in history to see if it really happened. Creation cannot be proved (though there is still clear evidence of the creator's hand in the world in spite of the effects of sin). In answering why we confessional Lutherans believe in creation we must fall back on the answer given in Scripture, "By *faith* we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3). Belief in creation is a matter of faith, and "faith is being certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). Belief in creation is a matter of faith—faith worked by the same Word of God and the same spirit who brought us to saving faith in Christ. By faith Lutherans who take God at his Word believe that the universe was formed at God's command.