

## SESSION 6: A Spreading Goodness

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 22-23:

WCF	WLC	WSC
4	15-17	9-10

### Introduction

In our last session, we looked at what our standards teach about the eternal plan of God. Shorter Catechism #8 tells us that “God executeth his decrees in the works of creation and providence.” It is to the first of these that we now turn.

### Supernaturalism

The fourth chapter of the WCF deals with the doctrine of creation – both of the universe in general, and of man in particular. WSC 9 confesses, “The work of creation is, God’s making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.” Notice how much is said here:

1. *All things* includes both the material world and all living things. WCF 4.1 expands this to include “all things... whether visible or invisible” – including the angels (WLC 16).
2. *Of nothing* (Latin: *ex nihilo*) affirms that God did not begin with pre-existing material. As biblical scholar Meredith Kline has noted, this stands in stark contrast to all other ancient mythological accounts of the world’s origin:  
  
The Genesis account itself does not make even a poetic use of the conflict theme current in extra-biblical cosmogony, the theme of slaying of the chaos monster by the hero-god as the means of founding the world order.... the Bible demythologizes the myth.... Not even in figurative imagery is there a suggestion of the use of the vast carcass of a vanquished deity as the material for man’s world, as in the case of Marduk’s cosmogonic conquest of Tiamat in the Mesopotamian tradition.<sup>50</sup>
3. *By the word of his power* insists God’s mere word was sufficiently potent to create.
4. *All very good* affirms that evil and sin were not original to the created order.

These statements preclude any sort of materialist, naturalistic view of cosmic or human origins. Though we may disagree on some details, Christians must be thorough-going supernaturalists.

### Order, Wonder, Creator

Among believers, perhaps the most hotly contested expression is the phrase “in the space of six days.” Does this mean six literal days of ordinary length, or can non-literal views be accepted? Though the question is not unimportant, its emphasis runs the risk of obscuring three primary purposes of the Genesis account, which is to *underline the order of creation, depict the wonder of creation, and reveal our Creator*. The order can be seen in creation’s structure:<sup>51</sup>

	<i>Form</i>		<i>Fullness</i>
<b>Day 1</b>	Light and dark	<b>Day 4</b>	Lights of day and night
<b>Day 2</b>	Sea and sky	<b>Day 5</b>	Creatures of water and air
<b>Day 3</b>	Fertile earth	<b>Day 6</b>	Creatures of the land
<b>Day 7</b>	<b>Rest (Sabbath)</b>		

<sup>50</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 27-29.

<sup>51</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, vol. 1 in *Tyndale OT Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 50.

The wonder of the creation is seen in its comprehensiveness:<sup>52</sup>

1. Day 1 (Gen 1.3-5): God makes light, the source of life and truth (cf. Jn 1.4, 2Cor 4.6).
2. Day 2 (vv. 6-8): God makes seas below and above – the clouds are oceans of the skies.
3. Day 3 (vv. 9-13): God makes land and vegetation – self-perpetuating life.
4. Day 4 (vv.14-19): God makes sun, moon, and stars – the glories of outer space.
5. Day 5 (vv. 20-23): God makes sea and sky creatures – from leviathan to the lightning bug.
6. Day 6 (vv. 24-31): God makes land animals, and finally his own image-bearers.

In showing us the order and wonder of creation, the Genesis account reveals our true Creator. Remembering that Genesis was penned by Moses during the Exodus – when the people of God were being led out after 400 years of captivity in a pagan culture – we can see how the text reveals the true God as both Creator and Redeemer. Kline comments:

While the account is indeed a revelation concerning the actual origins of the world, it is primarily a self-disclosure of the Creator himself, an apocalypse of Elohim. Unveiling the cosmic beginnings, it reveals there the glory of the eternal Elohim, the almighty Maker of the heavens and the earth.<sup>53</sup>

The remarkable combination of the name Yahweh with Elohim in the account of the pre-Fall history in Genesis 2 and 3 is designed as a pointed declaration that Yahweh, the Lord of redemptive history, is Elohim, the Creator-God of Genesis 1.<sup>54</sup>

Further proof of this theological purpose is found in the curiously understated way in which Genesis treats of the creation of sun, moon, and stars: “And God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars,” (Genesis 4.16). The *ESV Study Bible* draws out the importance of this deliberate understatement:

By referring to them as the greater light and lesser light (v. 16), the text avoids using terms that were also proper names for pagan deities linked to the sun and the moon. Chapter 1 deliberately undermines pagan ideas regarding nature’s being controlled by different deities. (To the ancient pagans of the Near East, the gods were personified in various elements of nature. Thus, in Egyptian texts, the gods Ra and Thoth are personified in the sun and the moon, respectively.)<sup>55</sup>

In other words, it is as Kline said: the biblical account of creation “demythologizes the myth” of Egypt for a people being rescued from a house of physical and spiritual bondage.

### **A Call to Worship**

Before going any further, it is worth pausing to think about the how the realities of creation and redemption call us to worship. Puritan Richard Sibbes expressed it beautifully:

If God had not a communicative, spreading goodness, he would never have created the world. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were happy in themselves, and enjoyed one another before the world was. But that God delights to communicate and spread his goodness, there had never been a creation nor a redemption... Oh that we had hearts to make way for such a goodness as God would cast into us, if we were as we should be... Such a goodness is in God as in a fountain, or in the breast that loves to ease itself of milk.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 51-57.

<sup>53</sup> Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>55</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 50.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 6 (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 113.

## The Imago Dei

What does it mean to say that God made humans “after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness?” Herman Bavinck taught that God’s image manifested itself in five distinct areas of human nature:<sup>57</sup>

1. *The human essence.* “[Man] has a spirit (*pneuma*), which was from the beginning organized into a soul (*psychē*).” These terms describe the same essence from different directions, not unlike how we describe light as ‘wave’ and ‘particle’:

Man is “spirit” because he did not, like the animals, come forth from the earth, but had the breath of life breathed into him by God... he received his life-principle from God... because he has a spirit of his own, distinct from the Spirit of God... and because as such he is akin to the angels, can also think spiritual or heavenly things, and if necessary also exist without a body. But man is “soul,” because from the very beginning the spiritual component in him (unlike that of the angels) is adapted to and organized for a body and is bound, also for his intellectual and spiritual life, to the sensory and external faculties; because he can rise to the higher faculties only from a substratum of the lower ones; and hence, because he is a sentient and material being and as such is related to the animals.

2. *Human faculties.* “While the spirit is the principle and the soul the subject of life in man, the heart, according to Scripture, is the *organ* of man’s life” – which then subdivides into the mind and the will:

From the heart flow “the springs of life” (Prov 4.23). This life, which originates in the heart, then splits into two streams. On the one hand, we must distinguish the life that embraces all impressions, awarenesses, perceptions, observations, thoughts, knowledge, and wisdom. Especially in its higher forms, this central organ of this life is the *mind (nous)*. This life further embodies itself in words and language. On the other hand, the heart is the seat of all the emotions, passions, urges, inclinations, attachments, desires, and decisions of the will, which have to be led by the mind (*nous*) and express themselves in action.

3. *Human virtue.* “The image of God manifests itself in the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness with which humanity was created from the start”:

Man was not created as a neutral being with morally indifferent powers and potentialities, but immediately physically and ethically mature, with knowledge in the mind, righteousness in the will, holiness in the heart... limited and capable of growth... not for a second conceivable without communion with God.

4. *The human body.* “Man has a ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*), but that ‘spirit’ is psychically organized and must, by virtue of its nature, inhabit a body. It is the essence of humanity to be corporeal and sentient.” This means:

The body is not a prison, but a marvelous piece of art from the hand of God Almighty, and just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul... so integrally and essentially a part of our humanity that, though violently torn from the soul by sin, it will be reunited with it in the resurrection of the dead. The nature of the union of the soul with the body... is so intimate that one nature, one person, one self is the subject of both and of all their activities. It is always the same soul that peers through the eyes, thinks through the brain, grasps with the hands, and walks with the feet.

5. *Human habitation.* The fact that man was originally placed in a perfect paradise signifies that “holiness and blessedness belong together”:

The ethical dimension and the physical dimension, the moral and the natural order in the world, being and appearance, spirit and matter – these many not be opposites. Congruent with a fallen humanity, therefore, is an earth that lies under a curse; a place of darkness therefore awaits the wicked in the hereafter; the righteous will one day walk in the light of God’s countenance; the not-yet-fallen but still earthy man makes his home in a paradise.

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<sup>57</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 554-562.

### “In the Space of Six Days”

Having placed the account of creation in its proper historical, theological, and doxological context, we are now in a place to consider the phrase, “in the space of six days.” Though many in our day insist that this phrase was intended to promote a literal interpretation of the days of creation and preclude all other positions, the reality is more nuanced. OPC minister Chad Van Dixhoorn, the world’s leading scholar on the history of the Westminster Assembly writes:

We are told that this world was made ‘in the space of six days; and all very good’. Some of the members of the assembly preferred to state that a little more precisely, saying that God made the world in six twenty-four hour days. But it has always been hard to consider how long a day is, and what a day means, without the presence of a sun or moon. In the end, for some reason, the Westminster assembly decided not to elaborate on the words of Scripture. In spite of the way in which some members specified in their own writings how long those days were, the assembly instead chose to highlight the conclusion of Scripture: that all of God’s creation was ‘very good’.<sup>58</sup>

On the interpretation of length of the days of creation, the OPC permits its ordained officers to embrace either literal or non-literal views, so long as they affirm and articulate certain key points:<sup>59</sup>

1. Creation *ex nihilo*
2. The federal headship of Adam
3. The covenant of works
4. The doctrine of the Sabbath
5. The sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture
6. The historicity of the creation account
7. The priority of special over general revelation
8. Confessional hermeneutical principles
9. Refutation of the errors of the theory of evolution
10. Affirmation of the covenantal structure of the plan of redemption found in Genesis 1-3

### Scripture and Science

A discussion of the length of the days of creation raises an important question: *what is the proper way to conceive of the relationship between Scripture and science – between what we read in Genesis and what scientists derive from observation?* There are four possible answers to this question:

	Incompatible	Compatible
<b>Non-Christian</b>	<p><u>“Hard” Atheism</u></p> <p>The results of modern science demonstrate that biblical claims about the creation of the universe and humanity are completely untenable.</p>	<p><u>“Soft” Atheism / Agnosticism</u></p> <p>The Bible was not intended as a scientific text, but as the “origin story” of the Hebrews. Its claims should be treated as mythological rather than scientific.</p>
<b>Christian</b>	<p><u>Separatist Fundamentalism</u></p> <p>Since at least the days of Charles Darwin, science has more or less categorically sold out to the world and therefore should be regarded with suspicion.</p>	<p><u>Evangelical Concordism</u></p> <p>All truth is God’s truth, therefore there can be no conflict between faithful biblical interpretation and rational scientific inquiry. Believers should engage in the scientific enterprise.*</p> <p><i>*Results in a spectrum of opinion (see below).</i></p>

<sup>58</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 61-62.

<sup>59</sup> “Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation,” <http://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html> (accessed December 5, 2016).

## Evangelical Concordism – Two Sample Positions

Among people committed to the authority of Scripture, opinions range from young-earth “creation science” to “theistic evolution.” Between these positions, there are numerous hybrids. As a demonstration of this spectrum, it is worth considering two sample positions.

### Created Age

Although not inclined to argue with others who affirm the essentials outlined above, the present author tends toward a view that interprets the days of Genesis as days of ordinary length. This position draws its strength from the natural reading of the Genesis text, as well as from the fourth commandment (Ex 20.8-11) – which appears to assume a natural reading of Genesis 1 as the basis for the Sabbath commandment. Beyond the text of Scripture, the use of a seven-day week from antiquity – even in ancient pagan cultures – seems a compelling external validation.

This position, however, must face the question of how to deal with observable geological age. It does so by making a distinction between *duration* (length of existence measured in actual chronological time) and *maturation* (state of maturity measured by expected chronological requirements). Ever since God created the universe, including time, these two factors always correspond. The present writer is both thirty-five years *old* and physically thirty-five years *mature*.

Yet at the beginning of creation – when time itself was created – this position holds that these two factors may have differed significantly. Adam may have been thirty-five years mature when he was only a single minute old. Trees in the Garden of Eden would have had rings. This is not “apparent age,” but *created age*. Mountains in the world would have been *created* millions of years old.

This position faces the criticism that it tends to make God into a deceiver. Why did God make the world look old, if it really wasn't? This position makes two answers. First, it points to the fact that God revealed from antiquity a creation account (in Genesis) that, if believed, would make the objection vanish. Second, it suggests that by creating a natural order with built-in history, God provides the data necessary for mankind to learn how that order would subsequently reproduce. By comparing the number of rings in a big tree versus a small tree, man could come to learn how long it would take to grow either.

### Fabricators or Worshipers

Biblical scholar Derek Kidner favors a more theistic evolutionary approach. On this position, a distinction is made between *homo faber* (man as a maker of tools) and *homo divinus* (man as God's image-bearer). Superintending over an evolutionary process, God prepared an intelligent species from which he selected Adam:

Nothing requires that the creature into which God breathed human life should not have been of a species prepared in every way for humanity, with already a long history of practical intelligence, artistic sensibility and the capacity for awe and reflection. On this view, Adam, the first true man, will have had as contemporaries many creatures of comparable intelligence, widely distributed over the world.<sup>60</sup>

How does this position explain the creation of Eve? What happens to the other ‘pre-Adamites’?

One might conjecture that they were destined to die out... or to perish in the Flood, leaving Adam's lineal descendants, through Noah, in sole possession.... Yet it is at least conceivable that after the special creation of Eve, which established the first human pair as God's vice-

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<sup>60</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 28-29.

regents (Gen 1.27-28) and clinched the fact that there is no natural bridge from animal to man, God may have now conferred his image on Adam's collaterals, to bring them into the same realm of being. Adam's 'federal' headship of humanity extended, if that was the case, outwards to his contemporaries as well as onwards to his offspring, and his disobedience disinherited both alike.<sup>61</sup>

This position draws its strength internally by emphasizing the contextual historical, theological, and doxological purposes of the Genesis account. It draws external support from the present majority consensus in the natural sciences regarding the age of the universe. It faces the criticism that it allows the imperfect observations of natural science to govern our interpretation of Scripture – to which it responds that it is simply trying to account for the observable facts (natural revelation).

Ironically, this position also faces the criticism that it tends to make God into a deceiver. Why did God speak of days of creation, if he really meant prolonged periods of time? Kidner answers that the use of 'days' to describe creation is intended to give us theological perspective:

The prologue is over in a page; there are a thousand to follow. If every generation has needed this emphasis, perhaps none has had greater need of it than the age of scientific knowledge. The scientific account of the universe, realistic and indispensable as it is, overwhelms us with statistics that reduce our apparent significance to vanishing-point. Not the prologue, but the human story itself, is now the single page in a thousand, and the whole terrestrial volume is lost among uncatalogued millions. In face of these immensities we should not dare to set store on our own time and place, but for the divine word which orientates us and reveals the true proportion. Through the apparent naïvety of this earth-centred and history-centred account God says to each generation, whether it is burdened with the weight of factual knowledge which our own possesses, or with the misleading fantasies of the ancient religions, 'Stand here, on this earth and in this present, to get the meaning of the whole. See this world as my gift and charge to you, with the sun, moon and stars as its lamps and timekeepers, and its creatures under your care. See the present age as the time to which My creative work was moving, and the unconscious aeons before it as "but a few days", like the years which Jacob gave for Rachel.'<sup>62</sup>

The point in exploring these two positions is not to advocate for either. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that men with shared evangelical convictions may differ in interpreting the text.

### Important Questions

1. Why is it essential to insist on that God created all things *ex nihilo*?
2. Why is it necessary to insist on the unity of the human race in Adam?
3. If the interpretation of the length of creation days is debatable, why is it still important to insist on the fundamental historicity of the Genesis account?
4. How have Western culture wars – particularly in the United States – 'weaponized' the debate over the length of the days of creation?

### Additional Resources

OPC, "Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation" ([www.opc.org/GA/creation.html](http://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html))

### For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 24-26, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
5	18-19	11

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57.