

Westminster Theological Seminary and the Days of Creation

The Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) voted on March 1, 1999 to affirm that the Faculty understands the following to be an accurate description of the continuity between the seminary's present position on the days of creation and historic Reformed teaching on this subject.

As in the past, in recent years it has been claimed that, in expounding the biblical teaching on creation, to hold anything other than that God created the world in six days, each of 24 hours duration, is (a) to depart from theological orthodoxy and (b) to interpret Scripture in the light of secular science in general and evolutionistic philosophy in particular.

With the founders of the institution, faculty members at Westminster Theological Seminary pledge:

(1) I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; and (2) I do solemnly and *ex animo* adopt, receive, and subscribe to the Westminster *Confession of Faith* and Catechisms... as the confession of my faith, or as a summary and just exhibition of that system of doctrine and religious belief which is contained in Holy Scripture... and promise and engage not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict or contravene, either directly or impliedly, any element in that system of doctrine . . .

Committed, as the Seminary is, to the inerrancy of Scripture and standing in the Augustinian and Reformed theological tradition, the precise chronological duration of the six days of creation has never been regarded by the Seminary's Board or Faculty as a matter on which *the Scriptures themselves* speak with decisive clarity. The Seminary has always held that an exegetical judgement on this precise issue has never of itself been regarded as a test of Christian orthodoxy or confessional fidelity, until some have sought to make it such in the modern period. In effect, to hold such a position would be to disenfranchise from Augustinian and Reformed orthodoxy some who have, in fact, by God's grace, served as its greatest defenders and pillars.

Augustine, himself, as is well known, states in connection with the days of Genesis 1, "What kind of days these were it is extremely difficult, *or perhaps impossible for us* to conceive."⁽¹⁾

Anselm may be read to follow this lead in his supposition that "the 'days' of Moses' account ... are not to be equated with the days in which we live."⁽²⁾

The Reformers, it is true, seem to have generally interpreted the days as "ordinary" days of 24 hours in duration.⁽³⁾ Yet this position, consciously distanced, as we will see, from Augustine's and Anselm's view of instantaneous creation, never seems to have been regarded as a test of orthodoxy in the reformed churches.

A striking illustration of the way in which biblical scholars wrestled with this issue is found in the work of John Colet, who, at the end of the 15th century, held to a position approximating to a day-age or even framework interpretation of the days of Genesis. Interestingly, he held that Genesis 1 was written in "the manner of a popular poet" [*more poetae alicuius popularis*]. In the Augustinian tradition, Colet views the precise meaning of the days of Genesis 1 as so difficult to untangle that he writes (tongue in cheek): "nothing could be more like night than these Mosaic days."⁽⁴⁾ In addition, he argued that the function of Genesis 1 is precisely not scientific but intended to portray the mystery of creation to the children of Israel in the days of Moses.

In the current debate among Presbyterians subscribing to the *Westminster Standards* attention has focused especially on the phrase, "... (with)in the space of six days ..." (Confession of Faith, 4:1; Larger Catechism, 15; Shorter Catechism, 9). Some insist that its inclusion is manifestly

intended to exclude anything but the six 24 hour day view. Others maintain that at this point the *Standards* are simply paraphrasing the language of Scripture and do not address the question of the length of the days. Although the latter view is closer to the truth, as will be shown presently, both need to be called into question, in light of the likely background of the phrase.

The paraphrase view is doubtful because if the *Standards* had intended simply to utilize biblical language, "in six days" would have sufficed and been a more natural choice. The words "the space of," as the other view above recognizes, seem deliberately chosen as an interpretive or clarifying addition that functions both to affirm and to exclude or negate.

But what is the affirmation/exclusion in view? That question is crucial for the current debate, and the answer is surely the affirmation that the work of creation involved duration, to the specific exclusion of the view, going back at least to Augustine, that it was instantaneous.⁽⁶⁾

A clear antecedent to the language of the *Standards* is present in Calvin's comments on the reference to the first day in Genesis 1:5. "Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction." "Let us rather conclude," he continues, "that God himself took *the space of six days [sex dierum spatium]*, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men." Our capacity is in fact our incapacity, "our excessive dullness" and "the vanity of our minds" that renders us inattentive to "the infinite glory of God" and "his greatness" as the creator. "For the correction of this fault, God applied the most suitable remedy when he distributed the creation of the world into successive portions [*in certos gradus*], that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he had laid his hand upon us, to pause and reflect."⁽⁶⁾

To cite another example, quite similar in effect and virtually contemporary to the time the *Standards* were written, in his *Medulla theologiae* William Ames asserts in proposition 28 of the chapter on creation: "But the Creation of these parts of the world, was not altogether and in one moment, but it was finished by parts succeeding one another, *in the space of six days [sex dierum interstitiis]*."⁽⁷⁾

In view of such examples it seems fair to maintain that the phrase in question in the *Standards* functions to oppose the error, longstanding at that time, of instantaneous creation. Though the framers of the *Standards* for the most part held personally to the 24 hour day view, that view, to the exclusion of all others, is *not* the point of their confessional affirmation. That affirmation, as particularly the inclusion of "the space of" shows, intends not somehow to *limit* but rather, over against the instantaneous creation view, to *emphasize* the duration of the creation days.

Even though Calvin, Ames, and the authors of the Westminster *Standards*, with few exceptions, if any, undoubtedly understood the days to be ordinary days, there is no ground for supposing that they intended to exclude any and all other views, in particular the view that the days may be longer. Such views are outside their purview; their concern, in fact, moves in the opposite direction, against the instantaneous view that denies any length.

This point bears emphasizing within the context of the current debate about the days of Genesis. To establish that the *Standards* mandate the six 24 hour days view requires more than demonstrating that the Divines, perhaps even to a man, held that the days were ordinary days. To demonstrate that of itself establishes nothing. What needs also to be shown, which we believe cannot be shown, is that they intended to exclude the views that the days are longer in some respect or that they represent a literary framework.

It is perfectly appropriate to suppose that, transposed into the setting of subsequent debates about the length of the days, the framers would be the first to insist upon settling that question by the exegesis of Genesis 1 and other biblical passages. Their confession requires that of all who embrace it as their own (see Confession of Faith, 1:10).

Within churches subscribing to the *Standards* today, therefore, the phrase in question does not foreclose discussion of the nature and length of the Genesis days and related issues, but leaves those open questions to be settled, if possible, by what Scripture teaches.

The 19th century Princetonians, who regarded themselves as upholders of Reformed orthodoxy and of the Westminster *Standards*, expressed broad views of Genesis 1 which have frequently been discussed. In particular, neither Charles Hodge, nor his son, A. A. Hodge, nor B. B. Warfield regarded the six 24 hour day view of creation as exegetically required by a careful reading of Genesis 1. The Princeton tradition refrained from dogmatic insistence on a single necessary meaning for "day" (*yôm*) in Genesis 1.

Westminster Theological Seminary has always seen itself as continuing to honor the Princeton legacy. This was confirmed by the founder of the institution, Dr. J. Gresham Machen, when he stated in connection with the days of Genesis 1: "It is certainly not necessary to think that the six days spoken of in that first chapter of the Bible are intended to be six days of twenty four hours each. We may think of them rather as very long periods of time."⁽⁹⁾

Professor Edward J. Young, often regarded as the epitome of conservative exegetical orthodoxy in this matter, while holding that a chronological sequence is taught by Genesis 1, nevertheless made abundantly clear that chronological sequence should not be equated with or confused with chronological *duration*:

"But then there arises the question as to the length of these days. That is a question which is difficult to answer. Indications are not lacking that they may have been longer than the days we now know, but the Scripture itself does not speak as clearly as one might like."⁽⁹⁾

In adopting this view, Young followed his own teacher, O. T. Allis.

The current faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary is profoundly conscious of the inroads of secularism and of the endemic influence of evolutionism. It is conscious, too, of the perennial dangers of regarding the current opinions of secular science as canonical for Christian belief. But to assume that Scripture yields more clearly-defined information with respect to creation than its exegesis may allow, or worse, to demand that it does, is to mold Scripture to our own concerns and fears rather than to come to it as our "guide and teacher" (Calvin).⁽¹⁰⁾

The Westminster Confession's doctrine of the clarity of Scripture (1:7) goes hand in hand with its inspiration, infallibility, and authority. Yet it implies that not all parts of the Scriptures are equally clear or full. Here we must follow Calvin's great motto that where God makes an end of teaching, we should make an end of trying to be wise.⁽¹¹⁾ With Augustine and E. J. Young, the revered teacher of our senior faculty members, we recognize that the exegetical question of the length of the days of Genesis 1 may be an issue which cannot be, and therefore is not intended by God to be, answered in dogmatic terms. To insist that it must comes dangerously close to demanding from God revelation which he has not been pleased to bestow upon us, and responding to a threat to the biblical world view with weapons that are not crafted from the words which have proceeded out of the mouth of God.

In this context the members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary remain committed to the pursuit of the most accurate understanding of the text of Holy Scripture and the confessional standards of the institution, as they also remain committed to the utter trustworthiness of every word of God the Creator and Redeemer.

Notes:

1. *The City of God*, Book 11, chap.7, emphasis added.
2. *Cur Deus Homo*, 18.
3. Cf. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, on 1: 14.

4. See F. Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers* (London, 1887), pp. 46-60 for a detailed account, including citations.
5. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book 4, chaps. 20, 26-27, 33-34.
6. *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, p.78, emphasis added; Latin: *Calvin Opera*, 23:18.
7. 1642 ed., p. 34, emphasis added; Latin: 1628 ed., p. 35.
8. *The Christian View of Man* (1937; Eerdmans reprint; Grand Rapids, 1947), p. 131.
9. *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 3 (ed. P. E. Hughes; Wilmington, DE, 1972), p. 242.
10. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:6, title.
11. *Institutes*, 3:21:3.

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