

# Deep Time and the Christian Worldview

A review of *A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture* by Keith A. Mathison

*So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place... II Peter 1:19a*

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## Introduction: A New Book from Ligonier

Dr. R.C. Sproul is one of the foremost theologians of our generation and has provided answers to many difficult questions over a long, fruitful career. But now he has a question: *How should Christians respond to secular natural history?* A serious question for more than two centuries, Dr. Sproul's best answer is "I don't know," and Dr. Keith Mathison (2013) argues that this position is a virtue.

We disagree. This indecision is surprising from a teacher of the church because secular natural history is intrinsic to secularism—today's manifestation of the war against truth, seen in the venom and vigor with which secularists use evolution and deep time to attack Christianity. Secular prehistory is not found in Scripture, and absent pressure to compromise, the church has overwhelmingly affirmed a young Earth and global flood. A causal, historical progression has been noted by many: deep time to Darwinism, Darwinism to social Darwinism, social Darwinism to a host of other pathologies, with the end being a weakened church. Looking back up that slippery slope, we find no trace of Genesis in the mythology that teaches that matter and energy have been evolving for nearly 14 billion years, with Earth present for the last 4.6 billion, life for 3.8 billion, man for 2.5 million, and civilization for a few thousand. For some strange reason, the Bible says nothing about it.

Because secular natural history presents itself as "science," and because real science was the child of Christianity, many Christians have mistakenly bowed to the conclusions of specialists. In doing so, they have ignored: (1) the hearts of these men, (2) their worldview, and (3) the consensus of church history. We will examine these, what Dr. Sproul said, what Dr. Mathison added, and pray that God makes truth clear.

## Links between Deep Time and Naturalism

First, a point of semantic confusion needs to be clarified. Christians reject "philosophical naturalism." But some re-open the door by accepting the secular ploy that "methodological naturalism" is fundamental to science. It is not, as is shown by its total lack of mention by the fathers of modern science, predominantly Christian (Stark, 2003), and by its contradiction of the doctrine of providence (Reed and Williams, 2011). Any view that assumes God absent so that nature can remain pristinely "natural" is contrary to the biblical understanding of providence. However, when we speak of "naturalism" below, we refer mainly to the secular *worldview*.

### ***Link 1: Character of the Advocates of Deep Time***

Jesus said in Matthew 7:18 that a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Following his logic, we look at the hearts of the people who introduced and have consistently advocated deep time. If deep time is an idea of worldly men who oppose God, then it has an ultimate evil purpose. That may sound “old-fashioned” and jarring in a “scientific” discussion, but it is biblically true. Who were the proponents of deep time?

They are not clear to most, because the very history of deep time has been distorted. Only in recent years have scholars (e.g., Rudwick, 2005; 2008) moved beyond the simplistic empiricist mythology of 20th century schoolbooks. Many theologians think that deep time was the empirical product of thousands of geologists looking at thousands of outcrops and seeing the obvious. But deep time was instead assumed by secular savants far back in the 1700s, long before today’s evidence was found. In fact, the 18th century “proofs” of deep time—eroded valleys, volcanic eruptions, and the quantity of sedimentary rock—are no longer valid (Reed, 2011; 2012; Reed and Oard, 2012). But few have gone back and revisited the original conclusion. When a conclusion stays the same and the evidence keeps changing, the fallacy of begging the question cannot be far off.

Almost all of the pioneers of deep time were antagonistic to biblical Christianity (Mortenson, 2004; 2006). The unbelievers of the 18th century may have been more understated and courteous than today’s militant atheists, but they still opposed God. They included atheists, deists, and heretics such as Buffon, Lamarck, Hutton, Playfair, Werner, Cuvier and Lyell. Their work (particularly Lyell’s) was fundamentally deceptive. The intrinsic deception, combined with Jesus’ warning about trees and fruit, are sufficient to question whether their work was from God.

An early example was Buffon’s *Histoire naturel* (1749). It presented a past radically different from Genesis. Origins were explained scientifically, not theology, since past events were determined by physical causes. Continental naturalists of the following decades reinforced ideas of both physical explanation of the past and an extended prehistory, until fundamental Christian doctrine had been displaced:

If the succession of worlds is established in the system of nature, it is in vain to look for anything higher in the origin of the earth. The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end (Hutton, 1788, p. 304).

Hutton rejected the Bible’s linear time, advocating an eternal cyclicity instead (Gould, 1987), thanks to his overt deism. Soon after came Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-33). Lyell was outspoken in his opposition to biblical Christianity and about his desire to undercut Genesis.

These men opened the door for Darwin. In turn, his disciples carried evolution into every sphere of life. As Sir Julian Huxley (1955, p. 272) said:

The concept of evolution was soon extended into other than biological fields. Inorganic subjects such as the life-history of stars and the formation of the chemical elements on the one hand, and on the other had subjects like linguistics, social anthropology, and comparative law and religion, began to be studied from an evolutionary angle, until today we are enabled to see evolution as a universal and all-pervading process.

Deep time is both a logical and historical prerequisite to evolution, as has been noted by innumerable scholars. In addition, modern atheists like Asimov, Gould, Sagan, Dawkins, and Myers unabashedly trace their atheism to evolution and deep time.

### ***Link 2: Which Worldview is the Home of Deep Time?***

The second link is between deep time and naturalism. If we look at its basic elements of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of history, it clearly requires deep time. In naturalism, ultimate reality is matter and energy. It only makes sense that our knowledge of that reality come from science—a view called positivism. But how can science be extrapolated into the past? Secularists employ a philosophy of history called uniformitarianism, which posits a uniformity of cosmological, geological, and biological processes through time sufficient to carry science into the past. But its slow, low-energy processes require billions of years to account for the complexity and volume of the rock and fossil records (Reed, 2010; 2013). That is why uniformitarianism was called the “fundamental principle of geology” (Challinor, 1968, p. 331). Materialism, positivism, and uniformitarianism are logically linked (Figure 1). Since deep time is inherent to uniformitarianism, it is thus an essential part of naturalism. Note that it is not essential to biblical Christianity, which relies on revelation to tell us about the past, and recognizes the events of Creation and the Flood as shaping the rock and fossil records.

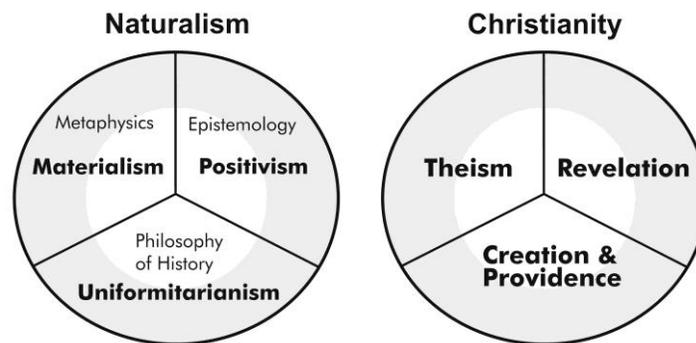


Figure 1. Naturalism and Christianity are contrary and competing worldviews. Deep time is necessary for naturalism to provide time for evolution. Its role in naturalism should be a red flag to Christians.

### ***Link 3: Historical Context***

If Christian old-earth views are derivative of secular natural history, then there are only two real choices for Dr. Sproul. Christians should first look to Scripture, and then look at how other Christians interpret it. The best way to avoid bias in the latter situation is to look at interpretation before the issue was raised. When we do, we see a monolithic consensus in the church before about 1800. In the past two centuries, there has been much confusion. Dr. Sproul thinks this means that theologians have advanced their theology. Another possibility is that theologians have been deceived.

Before 1800, Christians knew the earth was thousands of years old; its divinely-guided history punctuated by incredible miracles, including a global flood (Mortenson and Ury, 2008). Even Augustine, who thought the creation happened instantaneously, affirmed a young earth and global flood. So did Aquinas. So did Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers. So did the Westminster divines. But with the advent of uniformitarian geology, that view came under attack by secular intellectuals who had purposed to undermine the church (Mortenson, 2006; Stark, 2003), and modern theologians buckled under that pressure.

Secularists covered their philosophy with science (Glover, 1984; Stark, 2003), and so many Christians accepted deep time and evolution. A timeline of the past 200 years would show a consistent lag between secular ideas and Christian accommodation. Many Christians are content to allow secular history as long as it has a divine first cause. Novel explanations of Genesis remain a cottage industry, each driven by the “latest finding” of science. Over time, many denominations accepted deep time and evolution under the guise of “tolerance,” only to learn that tolerance for secularists is a one-way street (Bergman, 2008). In that context, the PCA and OPC declarations touted by Dr. Mathison take on a different meaning.

But God keeps faith. Shortly after the Darwinian Centennial in 1959, *The Genesis Flood* was published, igniting the modern creation movement. In the face of intellectual unanimity by secular and religious elites, a small group of Christians—most of them professional scientists and engineers—reasserted the historical validity of Genesis and started noting the many problems with the dominant evolutionary view and its theological variations. This enraged the secular intelligentsia, but resonated with many Christians. In the confusion, other Christians have looked to their leaders for answers. Dr. Sproul should show no surprise at this question; it has been before his eyes for decades. It is surprising that such an incisive intellect would remain hanging between two opinions.

Equally frustrating is Mathison’s (2013) defense. Focusing on simple truths known and appreciated by Christians, it ignores widely discussed spiritual and intellectual battles. Origins and earth history are at the heart of questions that are dividing the visible church and are an arena of conflict with culture. Thus, Reformed agnosticism is not the answer. Let’s examine Dr. Sproul’s statement in detail, and then Dr. Mathison’s commentary.

## Critique of Sproul

Since Dr. Mathison’s book is a defense of Dr. Sproul’s brief statement, let us first examine his words in some detail. Dr. Sproul begins:

*Not for some people. For some, it’s an all-or-nothing issue. 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.*

**Point 1.** Who are those for whom Dr. Sproul believes this is an “all or nothing issue”?

Neither Dr. Sproul nor Dr. Mathison is explicit, but in the intramural context of the question (theology conference) and in Dr. Mathison’s later praise of the agnostic position, both appear to be referring to young-earth creationists. There are only two views among Christians: (1) the young-earth position of a few thousand years, and (2) the affirmation of the secular age of over 4.6 billion years. So the options are limited.

In Christianity, “all or nothing” implies heaven or hell. Leading creationists have repeatedly stated that belief in an old Earth or evolution does not preclude salvation. The issue for them is instead the danger of error in the church and the Scripture’s authority.

**Point 2.** Who are those for whom this really is “all or nothing”?

Some people do see this issue as “all or nothing.” They are the secularists attacking Christianity, who are infuriated when Christians respond, especially when they have the temerity to use reason and science. One only need read the works of the various “new atheists” and those who proudly call themselves “anti-creationists.” As Dr. Sproul taught us long ago, Christians must recognize where the fight is hottest in their day and jump in.

**Point 3.** Does the Bible tell us the date of Creation?

As a systematic theologian, Dr. Sproul understands how Scripture often teaches by inference, as taught in the Westminster Confession I-VI. So while the Bible does not provide a verse saying, “God created in 4004 BC”, it does teach a young Earth by good and necessary consequence, and does so with such clarity that theologians—from Augustine to Calvin—all agreed that it was only a few thousand years old. Luther calculated a biblical chronology (Creation = 3,961 BC), as did his disciple, Melancthon (3,964 BC). Calvin’s sermons on Genesis (McGregor, 2009) make it clear where he stood: “...the world was created six thousand years ago...” (p. 8) and “So let us know that this Flood, although a terrible example of God’s wrath, occurred throughout the whole world...” (p. 571). Newton believed in a young earth, and calculated a chronology (4,000 BC). People who dismiss Ussher as a crank fail to understand that his peers considered his chronology superior to those of men like Luther and Newton. Most chronologies are in close agreement, and there are obvious reasons for those that are outliers. For example, for those using the Masoretic text, the results cluster with remarkable precision around Ussher’s 4004 BC date. Of the 34 chronologies listed by Jones (2005), 30 used the Masoretic text. Of these, 27 returned a date of creation within a century of Ussher. If all of these preeminent theologians (and scientists like Newton and Kepler) were off by six orders of magnitude, how did they err? Why did theologians not discover these “errors” until after the introduction of uniformitarian geohistory and evolutionary biohistory?

**Point 4.** “Hints” of a young Earth?

The Bible provides more than “hints” about Earth’s origin and history. First, the Bible provides no “hint” of deep time. Even old-earth Christians recognize that their view is not derived from the plain reading of Genesis (e.g., Young and Stearley, 2008). The Bible has no place for those billions of years. Almost all scholars place Abraham around 2,000 BC. Exodus 20:11 confirms that God created the cosmos in six days, and the words of Jesus in Mark 10:6 tie mankind to the beginning of creation. Genesis provides genealogies with exact, double-precision chronological information, suggesting a continuous sequence, reinforced by Jude 14. This leaves the time between Enoch and Abraham to accommodate more than two million years of human evolution—an impossible task. Any other chronology is extrabiblical by definition.

**Point 5.** The Information outside the Bible

To offset this clear Scriptural data, Dr. Sproul says that: (1) the expanding universe, (2) “astronomical dating”, and (3) “other factors outside the church” lead him to “wonder” about the biblical text. Dr. Sproul should examine the consequences of deep time. An old Earth means Genesis 1-11 has been mistranslated for nearly two thousand years. There was no Creation Week per Exodus 20:11, and so the origin of the seven-day week is unknown. If the Flood was local, God has failed to keep his word about never bringing another. Deep time means death and suffering

before the Fall (the fossil record), despite Romans 5. Jesus and his apostles were wrong when they described the people and events of these narratives. These are all unacceptable theological positions that stem from this extra-biblical information.

From a purely scientific point of view, how is an expanding universe a clock, unless assumptions are made about the validity of the big bang theory and uniformitarianism? Uniformitarianism requires uniformity, which in turn requires a strict continuity of material cause and effect. That position was shattered by the big bang, and Christians have known for millennia that causal continuity resides in God's will. Thus, the basis for an expanding universe dating the cosmos also fails. If continuity of cause and effect do not reside in God, providence is wrong too (Reed, 2011; Reed and Williams, 2011; 2012). What does Dr. Sproul mean by "astronomical dating?" Does he mean the inferred ages of starlight based on its transit from distant stars? Or does he refer to the stratigraphic methods of cyclostratigraphy and astrochronology? These have both been addressed by creationists (Hartnett, 2003; Humphries, 1996; Reed, 2013). Dabney (1878, reprinted 1996, p. 256) spoke to this mindset:

I repeat, if any part of the Bible must wait to have its real meaning imposed upon it by another, and a human science, that part is at least meaningless and worthless to our souls. It must expound itself independently; making other sciences ancillary, and not dominant over it.

Dr. Sproul continues:

*I believe firmly that all truth is God's truth, and I believe that God has not given revelation only in sacred Scripture. Scripture itself tells us that God reveals Himself in nature, which we call natural revelation. I once asked a seminary class, a conservative group, "How many of you believe that God's revelation in Scripture is infallible?" They all raised their hands. I then asked, "And how many of you believe that God's revelation in nature is infallible?" No one raised his hand. It's the same God giving the revelation. But they were concerned that not every scientific theory is compatible with the Word of God.*

#### **Point 6.** Role of natural revelation

The two main issues here are the relative roles of general and special revelation, and their treatment by fallen men. First, the Westminster Confession I-IX and I-X tell us that Scripture interprets itself and that the supreme judge of truth in Christianity is the Spirit speaking through the Bible, not science. Second, God reveals Himself and His glory in creation and providence (Romans 1:19-20), but men repress that knowledge and exchanges it for lies (Romans 1:21-23) to the extent that Paul cautions us to let God be true even if every man disagrees (Romans 3:4). A scientific degree does not confer spiritual neutrality.

Science is Christian, but one must discern science from the secular propaganda (Stark, 2003). No branch of human knowledge is infallible and even science cannot correct fallen human nature. That is why science under secularism is in decline (Economist, 2013).

Dr. Sproul continues:

*That's true, but historically, the church's understanding of the special revelation of the Bible has been corrected by students of natural revelation. One example is the Copernican revolution. Both John Calvin and Martin Luther rejected Nicolaus Copernicus as a heretic in the sixteenth century [because he said the sun, not the earth, is at the center of the solar system]. However, I don't know anyone in orthodox Christianity today who is pleading for geocentricity.*

**Point 7.** Do scientists *correct* the church's understanding of the Bible?

Historically, theologians have affirmed that the Bible was clearer than general revelation, following a host of passages like I Corinthians 1:25-29 and II Peter 1:19. We assert that science cannot "correct" the clear teaching of Scripture. Despite secular distortions of the meaning of the Copernican revolution, the real success of the Newtonian synthesis was in ridding Christianity of an ancient holdover of the Greek worldview, not a distinctly Christian proposition.

In contrast today, scientists are not trying to expunge an alien worldview from Christianity; they consider Christianity itself as the alien worldview. Science can help theologians understand the world, and enrich biblical knowledge, but we believe that Scriptural and theological disputes are solved by Scripture and theology. Furthermore, if theologians want to use science, they must be able to distinguish demonstrable empirical truth from secular lies masquerading as science, and from questionable or false theories. For example, would Dr. Sproul classify the rants of Dawkins as "natural revelation"?

**Point 8.** Is it normative for science to inform theology in the face of Scriptural teaching?

If science routinely helps correct the "church's understanding" of the Bible, we request more and clearer examples. We assert it is not normative and that the Copernican illustration is misleading; the issues surrounding geocentrism and heliocentrism are less applicable to deep time than Dr. Sproul realizes. For example, current history of science suggests that there was no Copernican "revolution." Heliocentrism was a gradual outgrowth of Christian learning beginning in the medieval university system. The fact that Luther and Calvin followed the best science of their time in this dispute demonstrates instead the danger of theologians allowing scientific speculations to drive their theology. The reason that no one today is "pleading" for geocentrism is because Christian scientists corrected the mistakes of theologians who affirmed Ptolemy's cosmos.

If the same is true of secular natural history, Dr. Sproul need explain how deep time and evolution "correct" the church's misunderstanding of Genesis? The atheist proponents of these positions think they negate the Bible, not correct it.

Dr. Sproul continues:

*In that case, the church has said, "We misinterpreted the teaching of the Bible with respect to the solar system, and thank you scientists for correcting our misunderstanding." So I think that we can learn from nonbelieving scientists who are studying natural revelation. They may get a better sense of the truth from their study of natural revelation than I get from ignoring natural revelation. I have a high view of natural revelation.*

**Point 9.** The "church" and "science" were not competing entities in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

It is an error to see "science" through the lens of Enlightenment secularists. They maliciously and erroneously created a "war" between "religion" and "science" that did not exist (Stark, 2003). Science evolved in the medieval Roman Catholic universities with the support of the church. It has taken centuries of distortion to convince the public otherwise. Fortunately, modern historians are correcting and decrying the 19th and 20th century secular mythology. Even atheist Stephan Jay Gould (1987, p. 67) called that effort in the history of geology an "empiricist myth."

**Point 10.** Believers then; unbelievers now.

The leading scientists of the Copernican Revolution were Christians, not unbelievers. In fact, as Stark (2003; 2005), Hooykaas (1999), Glover (1984), and many others have demonstrated, science was born and raised in Christian Europe. Therefore, the debate between Copernicans and Ptolemaists was largely between Christians. That is not true today; leading scientists are devotees of naturalism and are hostile to Christianity:

Scientists therefore have no alternative but to ignore claims of the existence of supernatural forces and causes. This exclusion is a basic position that must be stoutly adhered to by scientists or their entire system of evaluating and processing information will collapse (Strahler, 1999, p. 4).

This is not natural revelation.

Furthermore, the structure of the solar system can be observed. No one but God has seen the past, and He said the heavens and earth were created in six days (Exodus 20:11) and destroyed by a flood (II Peter 3:6). Secular epistemology excludes revelation, just as secular history excludes Creation and Providence.

Dr. Sproul continues:

*However, 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. I have to repeat, I may have mistaken interpretations of the Word of God. But I believe both spheres are spheres of God's revelation, and that truth has to be compatible. So, if a theory of science—natural revelation—is in conflict with a theological theory, here's what I know for sure—someone is wrong.*

#### **Point 11.** Priority of Bible

This is the point of creationists. Evolution contradicts the Bible. The big bang contradicts the Bible. Uniformitarian geohistory contradicts the Bible. So does deep time.

#### **Point 12.** Are scientific theories natural revelation?

If revelation is, by definition, truth, and if scientific theories are, by definition, tentative and subject to rejection or revision, then the two cannot be identical. Furthermore, whether forensic speculation about the past qualifies as a scientific theory in the way Dr. Sproul implies is an entire issue in and of itself.

#### **Point 13.** Are creationist views of origins and earth history “theological theories”?

Creationists claim their view of Creation and the Flood are simply the result of applying a normative hermeneutic to Genesis. The real debate, then, is over exegesis, not “theological theorizing.” Dr. Mathison (2013) does not address this issue. Language equating scientific theorizing (even dressed up as “natural revelation”) to exegesis only muddies the waters.

Dr. Sproul continues:

*I don't leap to the conclusion that it has to be the scientist. It may be the theologian. But neither do I leap to the conclusion that it has to be the theologian. It could well be the scientist. We have fallible human beings interpreting infallible natural revelation, and fallible human beings interpreting infallible special revelation.*

**Point 14.** Are scientists and exegetes doing the same thing?

It is true all men are fallible. It is true that revelation is not. Yet this comparison ignores the clarity and depth of Scripture, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit to preserve God's truth. If scientists have special insight that drive Dr. Sproul's interpretation, why not also philosophers, professors of literature, or gender studies specialists? What's so special about scientists? Scripture stands as God's word or it does not. Implying that it can be made to mean what it does not say because of fallibility of interpretation opens the door to relativism.

Dr. Sproul concludes:

*That's a long way to say I don't know how old the earth is.*

**Point 15.** He should.

Dr. Sproul speaks as if Earth's age is a sterile, abstract issue. It is not, as demonstrated by the binary choice offered—over four billion years of secular natural history or the few thousand of creationism. But Genesis 1:1 stipulates a beginning, focused on the creation of man. Secular time stipulates a lengthy prehistory before man. In that sense, Buffon's few million years were just as damaging as the latest date from the International Commission on Stratigraphy.

## **Critique of Mathison**

### **His Target Audience**

Mathison's (2013) book is easier to understand if we grasp his target audience, and thus his purpose. Although he does not say, it can be inferred because his main point is an argument for the wisdom of not knowing Earth's age. Thus, it must have been written to convince those who claim that they do: (1) secular unbelievers (~ 4.5 billion), (2) churchmen who agree, or (3) young-earth creationists (<10,000). There are no other options. Given the theological context, Dr. Mathison was probably not writing for unbelievers. So the book was either written to creationists or to churchmen who assert an old age. Since the book argues for the necessity of allowing science to influence theology, and since churchmen advocating an old age already do so, the target audience would seem to be creationists.

That is understandable given the rising lay popularity of creationism in conservative wings of the church. It came as a surprise to theologians and has continued to be viewed with suspicion, perhaps because its advocates are typically scientists and engineers. But its popularity among rank and file Christians has proven problematic for theological leaders who affirm an old Earth, evolution, and the big bang.

### **Mathison's Argument**

Dr. Mathison needs a better argument to convince Christians of the virtues of Dr. Sproul's agnosticism. His case boils down to this: science has the potential to someday present concrete evidence of an old Earth that will be consistent with the Bible. Since science can and should influence our interpretation of Scripture, we should patiently wait and see if that evidence appears.

But the “evidence” for an old Earth has been presented and discussed for more than two hundred years. What more is needed? Dr. Sproul is waiting for a “silver bullet” that exists only in his imagination. The need is for decisiveness. Furthermore, with all due respect to the theological acumen of Drs. Sproul and Mathison, would they understand such data if they saw it? That would appear to require more knowledge about cosmology and geology than they possess. Secularists are already confident they know the dates (Gradstein et al., 2012).

Dr. Mathison argues for the importance of general revelation in Romans 1:19-20, but does not address the following verses, which warn of worldly people twisting the truth to justify their immorality. What better description of the modern evolutionary social sciences could one find? Also of interest are passages like II Peter 2:1-4 and many parallel passages (Jude, John’s epistles, Revelation) that warn of a coming tidal wave of false teaching in the church. If the preaching of the Apostles was not sufficient to prevent the spread of heresy, we should no more today. With the biblical doctrine of Creation, either the creationists or the churchmen affirming deep time are wrong, and are thus false teachers. That is the hard, but biblical, truth that Drs. Sproul and Mathison avoid.

### **Copernicus as a Cautionary Tale**

Drs. Mathison and Sproul see Copernicus as a cautionary tale, teaching Christians to tread on eggshells around science, since Luther and Calvin were wrong about geocentrism. But Dr. Mathison misses key parts of that story, as well as the limits of the analogy. Most people have been miseducated about Copernicus by secular propaganda, just as they have about Galileo’s “persecution” for his scientific beliefs, and about the “persecution” of his successors—brave scientists like Hutton, Lyell, and Darwin, who risked life and limb to bring the light of empirical truth in the face of opposition from stubborn, superstitious, and darkly powerful clerics. We are also taught that learning and technology were set back for a thousand years by the Christian “dark ages,” and that Christians believed in a flat Earth while theologians debated the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin.

These secular myths are evaporating under the light of scholarship. Sociologist Rodney Stark (2003; 2005) has convincingly shown that scientific, cultural, and technological progress in the “dark ages” far exceeded that of the “golden age” of Greece and Rome. Historian Jeffrey Burton Russell (1997) proved the flat earth story a complete fabrication. No one has ever found historical evidence of theologians discussing angels and pins, and the development of the Newtonian synthesis was eagerly embraced by Christians.

The story of Copernicus is not immune from secular mythmaking (Faulkner, 2001; Grigg, 1997; Schirmacher, 2000). First, was there a “revolution”? Ideas published by Copernicus were part of a development that predated him by as much as two centuries and continued for another two before culminating in the Newtonian synthesis. Second, the scientists involved were either Christians or men working inside the Christian worldview. Their work was supported by Christian universities and the church. Kepler and Newton did not see their work diminishing Christianity or science. On the contrary, they clearly said that science was a means of increasing God’s glory. Third (and ironically), the switch to the heliocentric view did not happen because of definitive scientific observation; those merely confirmed it after everyone had already converted. Virtually no one remained committed to geocentrism by 1650, but the only telescopic datum that had any bearing on the issue was the discovery that Venus underwent phases visible from Earth. This contradicted the original Ptolemaic

model, but not the modified geocentric model of Tycho Brahe. The first direct data to support the heliocentric theory was the discovery of aberration of starlight in 1725; by then it was a moot point.

Furthermore, the analogy is a poor one for the current conflict with secular natural history because orbital mechanics can be observed and confirmed and unique past events cannot. Deep time and evolution represent the invasion of Christianity by naturalism. The Ptolemaic view never directly attacked Christianity, but naturalism has, as illustrated by statements made by Charles Lyell (1881) in an 1830 letter to George Scrope:

If we don't irritate, which I fear that we may (though mere history), we shall carry all with us. If you don't triumph over them, but compliment the liberality and candour of the present age, the bishops and enlightened saints will join us in despising both the ancient and modern physico-theologians. It is just the time to strike, so rejoice that, sinner as you are, the Q.R. is open to you. P.S. ... I conceived the idea five or six years ago [1824–25], that if ever the Mosaic geology could be set down without giving offence, it would be in an historical sketch, and you must abstract mine, in order to have as little to say as possible yourself. Let them feel it, and point the moral.

Lyell was a Unitarian; Hutton, an ardent deist. Many of the early geologists were self-professed enemies of Christ. Noted historian of geology, Martin J.S. Rudwick (2005, p. 276) tells us that Genesis was viewed by 18th and 19th century intellectuals as "...ancient Jewish history, often scorned and dismissed by savants hostile to religion..." Mortenson (2006, p. 16) discusses the development of deep time, noting that "...the heart of the debates about the age of the earth and about how to correctly interpret the geological record is a massive worldview conflict."

Dr. Mathison's analogy also fails in his implied definition of "science." It is not some neutral, objective bringer of truth for "natural theology." Science is a method that helps minimize subjectivity because human opinion so often prevails. But any discipline will reflect the worldview of its practitioners. In the 17th century that was Christianity. Today, it is naturalism. Deep time is a historical/philosophical construct cloaked in deception; Lyell hid his gradualist view of history in his actualistic method. This is not an accusation by creationists; it was the conclusion of Marxist and atheist Stephen Jay Gould (1987).

The analogy also ignores the relative importance and impact of heliocentrism and deep time. Section I-VII of the Westminster Confession states:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

In other words, important doctrines are clear; less important doctrines are less clear. Orbital mechanics are less important than our understanding of Adam, his fall, and God's judgment in the Flood. This is borne out by the quantity and clarity of Scripture references supposedly supporting geocentrism and those discussing Creation, the Fall, and the Flood.

Another difference is in the exegesis of the passages themselves. As Faulkner (2001) showed, the passages supporting geocentrism are not clear, nor do they provide a historical narrative demonstrating these orbital mechanics. Yet those passages about Creation and the Flood are. Boyd

(2005), in a statistical analysis, showed a >99% statistical probability that Genesis 1:1-2:3, often presented as poetic or “semi-narrative”, or “ahistorical,” is Hebrew historical narrative.

Though a Christian can believe in an old Earth, that belief is inconsistent because it violates the hermeneutic affirmed by the Reformers. That opening has been detrimental to the authority of Scripture in other areas; rarely are biblical reasons offered for any view in our culture. Instead, science is offered to justify everything from Marxism to gay marriage. If creationists are wrong to link secular natural history to cultural decline (Morris, 2000; Ham, 1987), we would be interested Dr. Mathison explaining how the clear progression misses the point.

Copernicus is not a cautionary tale against creationism. It is instead a cautionary tale against the uncritical acceptance of ideas from alien worldviews. In the case of Copernicus, it was the Ptolemaic universe of the ancient Greeks. Today, it is the deep time of naturalism.

### **A Simplistic View of Science**

The heart of Mathison’s (2013) argument is that scientific discoveries can and should influence our interpretation of Scripture. This is an important point, and needs to be examined carefully. Its first problem comes from defining “science” in a very general and uncritical sense. Secularists like to claim that science is an infallible, neutral, and objective method of determining truth. In the late 19th century, positivists even tried to make science the explicit benchmark of truth. In a strictly academic sense, they failed, because their assertion was self-refuting. But this “positivist” view of science lingers on a subjective emotive level.

Science has been subverted by naturalism and atheism, and secular propaganda has caused many to forget that it was born Christian (Glover, 1984). Drs. Sproul and Mathison imply that science is independent of the human heart and can successfully be done by anyone, producing valid “natural revelation.” But the reality is that secularism, with its abandonment of absolute truth and ethics, is diminishing science. Many philosophers of science are rejecting the outmoded Victorian view of science implied in Dr. Mathison’s discussion. Philosopher Larry Laudan (1983), among others, argued that the traditional demarcation criteria (by which we differentiate science from other disciplines) were dead. And yet, being able to say that evolution is “science” and that creationism is “religion” was the basis for the rulings in the famous Creation Trials of the 1980s. If we cannot tell the difference between science and football strategy, for example, then the “science” envisioned by Dr. Mathison is a mirage.

Most people think of science in terms of the scientific method. But philosophers have not been able to overcome Hume’s argument against induction: that empirical truth can never be absolute, because exceptions might appear. Philosopher Carol Cleland (2013) uses the illustration that “all swans are white.” This was thought to be true for centuries until black swans were discovered in Australia. Philosopher Karl Popper tried to address this problem, recasting scientific justification in terms of the falsification, not the positive proof, of theories. But his view has been widely rejected, especially after historian of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) pointed out that scientists do not actually do their work in that manner. Some (e.g., Bauer, 1994) have even argued that there is no such thing as the “scientific method.” Without a foundation of absolute truth, science founders. Thus, it is hard to picture its tentative ideas as infallible natural revelation. It is more likely that science helps us see truth naturally revealed, but that science and natural revelation are not one and the same.

Furthermore, the idea that science can be used to discern the past is less certain. Henry Gee, a senior editor of *Nature* magazine said of historical hypotheses, "...they can never be tested by experiment, and so they are unscientific." (1999, p. 5). Likewise, philosopher Mortimer Adler (1993, p. 15) noted: Similarly, when scientists (such as geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionists) sometimes attempt to establish the spatial and temporal determinants of particular past events or to describe a particular sequence of such events, they cease to be engaged in scientific inquiry and become engaged in historical research, sometimes called natural history. Though both history and science are investigative modes of inquiry that submit their conclusions to the test of experience (i.e., the data obtained by investigation), history by its method can answer questions that science cannot answer; and science by its method can answer questions that history cannot answer.

If natural history is not the same kind of knowledge as experimental science, if the debate of Earth's past is important, and if there is a worldview conflict involved, then Dr. Mathison's argument misses the point. Ironically, the use of science in secular natural history, in the context of naturalism, is self-refuting because secularists use Christian axioms to attack Christianity (Lisle, 2009; 2010; Reed, 2001).

### **Theological Alternatives**

All non-traditional theological approaches to earth history are accommodationist at heart. They assume secular natural history is right, and try to find ways to make it "fit" Genesis. Originally, they tried to insert long gaps into Genesis 1 or make the creation days long periods of time. Neither worked. For example, if the days were "long," and we are still in the seventh day (as is often assumed by those who hold this position), then the six days of Genesis 1 must total 13.8 billion years, the "scientific" age of universe. Since there is no textual reason for the days being different lengths, each would be 2.3 billion years long. But the events described in those days cannot fit the events or timing of secular natural history. For example, assuming the day-age theory, the famous "Cambrian explosion" of primitive life forms would not have occurred until the last few hours of the sixth day, after the chapter tells us that many complex life forms had already been created! It is no coincidence that the advocates of the "day-age" theory never specify the length of each "day."

As the problems in these theories came to light, an alternative became popular in conservative Reformed circles. It is the "framework hypothesis." It assumes that the creation account is "semi-historical," and indefinite as to time. But in addition to Boyd's (2005) work, this position faces notable problems: (1) it finds no antecedent in church history, (2) it was explicitly proposed to bring Genesis 1 and 2 into line with secular natural history, contrary to Article XII of the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, and (3) it has been ably refuted on its own merits (e.g., Batten et al., 2007; Pipa, 1999).

Another problem, often ignored by most theologians who focus on Genesis 1 and 2, is the conflict between "science" and Genesis 7 and 8. Deistic or theistic geologists might shrug at the idea of an old creation, but modern geology was built on the conscious rejection of the Genesis Flood, dating back to before 1800, when Christian naturalist Jean Andre de Luc, who affirmed the Flood, was, in the words of historian Martin J.S. Rudwick (2005, p. 153), "a minority within a minority."

But Christians cannot ignore the Flood. Its historicity, cast of characters, and global extent are affirmed elsewhere in the Bible, most notably by Jesus and his Apostles. Theologians supporting an

old age for Earth are surrendering these passages too. Many theologians fail to understand that the rock and fossil records can only be interpreted in terms of the Flood or in terms of uniformitarian geology. It is a binary choice: the two positions are not compatible, and creationists have shown that diluvial interpretations can explain the geological data (e.g., Oard and Reed, 2009).

The correlation between the sudden influx of new theological theories and the introduction of uniformitarian geology and evolutionary biology is sufficiently suspicious in its timing. But the direct attribution of the new theories to the “facts of science” makes it clear that the church veered away from its historical tradition in response to ideas of secularist thinkers.

## **An Answer for Dr. Sproul**

Mathison (2013) praises Dr. Sproul for refusing to commit to an answer. As shown above, his defense of that agnostic approach is weak. We would like to offer Dr. Sproul, Dr. Mathison, and others who agree with them a few reasons for affirming the historical position of the Christian church—that of a young earth, created by God’s miraculous power, governed by His intricate providence, and visited by His awesome judgment in a global flood.

### **Positive Reasons:**

- Bible’s History is self-contained from beginning to end; no room for evolution or deep time
- Creation and providence focus on man; no reason for lengthy prehistory
- Genesis 1-11 is historical narrative
- OT repeatedly affirms Creation and Flood (e.g., Exodus 20:11)
- NT repeatedly affirms Creation and Flood (e.g., II Peter 3)
- Monolithic position of Church, including Reformers, before 1800
- Position of Westminster Confession of Faith
- Flood explains Rock and Fossil Records

### **Negative Reasons**

- Old Earth is linked to naturalism
- Old Earth view has weakened the church
- Old Earth view requires death before Fall
- Old Earth view places Scripture under science
- Old Earth view leads to evolution and materialism

Many other reasons and arguments could be cited. We encourage Dr. Mathison and Dr. Sproul to examine the burgeoning creationist literature. Many articles pertinent to this subject can be found in the Creation Research Society Quarterly, the Journal of Creation, the Answers Research Journal, and ICR’s Acts and Facts.

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