

The Reformers and the Age of the Earth

JANUARY 18, 2019

By John Millam

October 31, 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation. Along with global recognition of its significance, the event also sparked renewed interest in the Reformers' teachings and example, which are still relevant to us today. For example, Dr. Joel R. Beeke considers them in his article, "What Did the Reformers Believe about the Age of the Earth?" His central thesis is that the Reformers held a "literal" interpretation of Genesis that he equates with young-earth creationism; namely, that God created everything in six ordinary (24-hour) days less than 6,000 years ago. Is this accurate? If so, should this idea compel believers to adopt a similar view of the age of the earth?

The Days of Creation Prior to the Reformation

Beeke begins his analysis by examining what the early church fathers taught about the days of creation and the age of the earth. He divides their interpretations into two broad camps, labeling one "literal" and the other "allegorical." For the literal camp, he cites Basil and Ambrose as interpreting the creation days as 24-hour periods. In contrast, Origen and Augustine are described as allegorists because they believed that God created everything instantly. He further extends this analysis through the Middle Ages, mentioning the views of Bede, Peter Lombard, and Bonaventure.

However, an accurate understanding of how the church fathers wrestled with creation and the age of the earth is complex and difficult—far more complicated than what Beeke reports. In fact, a closer look deeply undercuts Beeke's analysis. For extensive documentation, see my five-part series, "Coming to Grips with the Early Church Fathers' Perspective on Genesis."¹ Here are four key conclusions:

1. The early church fathers based their understanding of Genesis on Greek and Latin translations, not the original Hebrew (see part 1).
2. The allegorical interpreters (Origen and Augustine) had specific scriptural reasons for rejecting a calendar-day view of Genesis 1 (see part 2).
3. Even the so-called "literalist" fathers often relied on nonliteral modes of interpretation—such as typology and numerological association—in considering the Old Testament (see part 3). So, we should not assume that the literalists necessarily held to a literal interpretation of Genesis.
4. The notion that the earth must have been less than 6,000 years old was based on a humanly created tradition concerned primarily with eschatology rather than creation (see part 4). This tradition artificially constrained how people understood the days of creation and the age of the earth.

From these points, we recognize that the early church fathers were divided over how to understand the days of creation. Perhaps more importantly, they were not dogmatic in their interpretations. They treated these issues as matters of dialogue and debate, rather than of orthodoxy. (For the related discussion on attempts to determine the age of the earth using the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, see here.)

Views of the Reformers

Beeke spends most of his article documenting the views on the days of creation and the age of the earth of six prominent Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Heinrich Bullinger, and Zacharias Ursinus. He argues that (1) the Reformers

emphasized interpreting Scripture literally, and (2) they held to a calendar-day interpretation with the earth being less than 6,000 years old. From this, he concludes that for the Reformers the “literal historicity of Genesis 1 was not up for debate; ‘to them the six-day creation meant a six-day creation,’ which in turn meant a young earth.”²

A critical flaw in Beeke’s analysis is that the Reformers, like the early church fathers, were largely dependent upon translations of the Old Testament. Nowhere does he demonstrate that the Reformers derived their views based on *the Hebraic understanding* of Genesis. Without that knowledge, referring to their interpretations as literal is very misleading, because understanding the original language and context of Scripture is an important component of literal interpretation.

Rather than proposing a fresh interpretation of Genesis, the Reformers were primarily reacting to the views set down by earlier generations. So, most of the problems associated with the views of the church fathers apply here as well. The main way the Reformers differed from their predecessors is that they rejected an allegorical interpretation—in particular, Augustine’s instantaneous creation view. But simply rejecting allegorical interpretation is not equivalent to requiring a young-earth interpretation.

Finally, Beeke simply presents specific interpretations rather than examining the biblical basis *behind* those interpretations. This approach violates the very spirit of the Reformation, which emphasized going to Scripture itself rather than appealing to the authority of individuals. So, even if he could demonstrate that every single Reformer held to a young-earth interpretation, this result would not be sufficient to claim it as the literal interpretation of Genesis.

Reformation Confessions of Faith

Near the end, Beeke analyzes Lutheran and early Reformed confessions of faith. Various Reformers developed these confessions to lay out their religious convictions and to serve as a common doctrinal standard. They are important for our discussion because they reveal what was considered essential doctrine on which to unite (in contrast to individual interpretations where we may disagree). Although the confessions were primarily focused on theological differences with Catholics, they do have implications for our understanding of creation and the age of the earth.

The most important example is the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), which continues to serve as the confessional declaration for many Presbyterian churches today. The WCF describes God as creating the universe “in the space of six days,” which Beeke claims mandates a belief that the days of creation were 24-hour periods. He traces this wording to the earlier confession of Girolamo Zanchi and to the Irish Articles (influenced by James Ussher).

To address Beeke’s claim, we can examine what all the major Reformation confessions teach about creation. That analysis can be found in my study, “Do Christian Creeds Support a Calendar-Day View of Creation?” Four key conclusions stand out:

1. The only creation-related doctrine that has been consistently taught as a matter of orthodoxy is creation *ex nihilo* (that is, creation “out of nothing”).
2. Dual revelation or “two-books theory” is taught by both the Belgic and French Confessions. This view establishes that there is value in studying the natural world and that science is a reliable ally of the Christian faith.
3. The WCF’s use of “in the space of six days” specifies that the days of creation were real periods of time (rejecting instantaneous creation), but does not specify the duration of those days.
4. The length of the creation days, the extent of Noah’s flood, and the age of the earth were never considered issues of orthodoxy.

Contrary to Beeke's analysis, the Reformation confessions never required adherence to a young-earth interpretation of Scripture.

Back to Genesis

We can draw two conclusions from this discussion. First, we should not uncritically accept the interpretations of Genesis coming from previous generations—not even those of the Reformers. Instead, we need to go back to the text of Genesis to interpret it literally within the original Hebrew language and context.³ Second, the Reformers had strong opinions about how to interpret Genesis, yet they were never dogmatic. They left room for disagreement and dialogue, and we would do well to follow their example.

Endnotes

1. *This series was written in response to statements about the early church fathers by James Mook in Coming to Grips with Genesis, edited by Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury. Mook's claims closely parallel Beeke's, so my analysis applies equally to both works.*
2. *Joel R. Beeke, "What Did the Reformers Believe about the Age of the Earth?" The New Answers Book 4, Answers in Genesis, October 2, 2017, <https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/what-did-reformers-believe-about-age-earth/>.*
3. *A good starting point for study is Reading Genesis Well by C. John Collins. To understand the underlying Hebrew, I recommend Reading Genesis One by Rodney Whitefield.*

[The Reformers and the Age of the Earth \(reasons.org\)](https://www.reasons.org/)