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How Do We Do Our Science as Reformed Christians? The Debate Continues



by John Zwart

Recent issues of *Pro Rege* have featured a series of articles and letters to the editor¹⁻⁴ regarding science and Christian faith. In the first of these, Dordt University Professor of Business Administration Sacha Walicord and student Ben Hayes lay out reasons for what they describe as the great false dilemma between science and a plain reading of Scripture. Stating that this false dilemma is due to faulty presuppositions by Christian scientists, they write, “The problems with many Christians today is not one of outright denying the truths of Scripture, but of trying to accommodate secular interpretation of reality over against Biblical truth”⁵; and “If something interpreted from general revelation

seems to conflict with Scripture, we must always give the written Word priority—because we always use it as the ultimate standard of reasoning.”⁶

The responses to this article display heated language at a level which is unusual in the pages of this journal. In a letter to the editor, Arnold Sikkema expresses dismay that the article was published in *Pro Rege*. He argues that a “plain reading of scripture” is not possible since everyone interprets Scripture’s words. He raises a concern that quotations from Jason Lisle imply that Lisle’s writing aligns with that of other Reformed writers mentioned in the paper.

Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke’s article reacts to the tone of Sikkema’s letter and expands on the points made in the original article. However, Klautke includes such statements as “Does Dr. Sikkema not know the difference between “*natural*” and “*naturalistic*”?”⁸ and “... we have already learned that Dr. Sikkema does not like “*plain reading*” too much—obviously not only when it comes to the Word of God.”⁹

In his response to Sikkema, Walicord states that Sikkema asserts “that there are much smarter people than I who could much better debate the issue at hand.”¹⁰ Sikkema does not say that there are people smarter than Walicord. What Sikkema actually writes is that he wished student co-author Ben Hayes had been “afforded expert direction by a qualified scholar of science and faith in any of the various Dordt departments where such matters are rigorously attended.”¹¹ I take this to mean working with someone having expertise in the sciences, not

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a statement about Walicord's intelligence.

So why these strong reactions? One reason is likely the background of young-earth creationism. The original article refers to the need to use the plain words of Scripture, which is not an uncommon phrase in young-earth creationist writings. The article does not point out that Jason Lisle also writes from a young-earth creationist perspective. As Lisle and co-author Tim Chaffey have written, it is only because of "the hermeneutical considerations suggested by science that they [old earth creationists] will not accept the plain words of scripture. This is a dangerous approach to the Bible"....¹²

There is a long history of antagonism between young-earth creationists and those with other Christian understandings of how God created (such as old-earth creationism). I am saddened by the ill-will so often displayed in this debate. It is a poor witness to the non-Christian world and is likely one of the reasons why young people are leaving the church in such high numbers. Shouldn't disagreements between Christians be handled with respect for each other?

My intent in this article is not merely to raise concerns about intemperate language. Nor is it to address the other authors point by point. Instead, I want to consider the methodology of doing science from the Reformed Christian perspective proposed by Walicord and Hayes to see how well their method works in practice. I believe all authors in these four articles would agree that we should use Calvin's *spectacles of scripture* in all that we do, including our science. But what does this mean when we see a discrepancy between the plain words of Scripture and what science seems to be telling us about God's creation?

The key distinction between Sikkema and the other authors is the role of presuppositions. Sikkema argues that presuppositions can color the way we read the Bible as well as how we do science. The others object to this. Walicord and Hayes do recognize that there can be differences in interpre-

tation among Christians in reading certain biblical passages. They say, "We are told that because Scripture allows for different interpretations, we must look to general revelation to find Scripture's intended meaning. But such a notion is nothing less than preposterous."¹³ But, they do not provide guidance as to how, in a God-honoring way, we should grapple with differences in interpretation when they arise. Klautke states, "...we would do well not to despise his [God's] revelation or try to level it to our so-called scientific context."¹⁴ But again, what do we do when we run into apparent contradictions?

Rather than considering young-earth creationism to explore this question, let us consider an (historically) important different question. In the time of Galileo, the controversial topic in the science-versus-Christianity debate was the question of whether the universe was geocentric or heliocentric. While the historical argument with Galileo included far more than a consideration of what the Bible has to say, biblical interpretation certainly

was part of the discussion. So, what are the plain words of Scripture on this question of geocentrism versus heliocentrism? They are clearly geocentric. We see the words "the world is firmly established; it cannot be moved" in Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, and I Chronicles 16:30 (here and elsewhere quotations are from the NIV). Psalm 104:5 puts it as, "He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved." A stationary earth is a basic assumption of geocentrism. In Joshua 10:12-14 we read about God's lengthening the day so that Israel's battle could continue, with the words "So the sun stood still The sun stopped in the middle of the day and delayed going down about a full day." This language indicates that the sun moves, not the earth. In other places (e.g. I Chronicles 18:34, Psalm 50:1 and others) we read about sunrise and sunset, both words implying that the sun moves rather than the earth.

If so many places in Scripture use geocentric

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language, does this mean that young-earth creationists are also geocentrists? While there are a few biblical literalists today who insist on geocentrism, most young-earth creationists accept heliocentrism. As young-earth creationist Jason Lisle states it,

There are today some very well-meaning Christians who reject heliocentrism and embrace a form of geocentrism because they think the Bible teaches the latter. While this is not a heretical view by any means, it is unscriptural and it is rather embarrassing to other Christians who understand that such a view is (1) not anywhere taught in Scripture, and (2) easily refuted by logic and empirical evidence.¹⁵

In response to modern geocentrist Gerardus Bouw's use of the argument based on the words of the book of Joshua discussed above, Lisle uses the ideas of relative motion and reference frames from Newtonian physics to say,

Since all motion is relative to a specified reference frame, Joshua's command makes perfect sense in light of his position on the surface of the earth. Again, modern astronomers do this all the time. We say things like, "What time does Saturn rise tonight?" or "The sun sets early this time of year." In no way are we suggesting that the earth does not rotate relative to the rest of the universe. Neither does scripture.¹⁶

According to Lisle, scientific evidence helps us understand that the words of Scripture should be understood in a non-literal way in terms of the geocentrism vs heliocentrism argument. This application is certainly problematical in the view of Walicord and Hayes as well as Klautke.

What do Reformed thinkers have to say on this subject? I do not want to get into a debate about defining who can be considered a Reformed scholar or not. In my world of physics some articles discuss *arguing from first principles* or *taking a first principles approach*, where one begins with the fundamentals. In a similar vein, let us go to the source of Reformed principles to see what John Calvin himself has to say about how we should read the words of the Bible.

First, some historical context. Calvin lived during the generation between Copernicus and

Galileo. He accepted the science of his day, including geocentrism. We should not look to Calvin for the final say on what scientific understanding is acceptable, but we can look for guiding principles about Scripture and science. For those wanting to know more of Calvin's understanding of science than I provide here, I recommend Davis Young's book *John Calvin and the Natural World*,¹⁷ which has been reviewed in *Pro Rege*.¹⁸

In Psalm 19:4b-6 we read, "In the heavens he has pitched a tent for sun It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat." This language is inconsistent with the geocentric science known to Calvin. In his commentary on this passage, Calvin explains that this passage is not intended to teach science:

The other planets, it is true, have also their motions, and as it were the appointed places within which they run their race, and the firmament, by its own revolution, draws with it all the fixed stars, but it would have been lost time for David to have attempted to teach the secrets of astronomy to the rude and unlearned¹⁹

In the commentary on Psalm 136:7 where we read "[Give thanks to the Lord] who made the great lights—the sun to govern the day and the moon and stars to govern the night," Calvin says,

The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and other Prophets of popular language, that none might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity, as we will see men sometimes very readily pretend an incapacity to understand, when anything deep or recondite is submitted to their notice. Accordingly, as Saturn though bigger than the moon is not so to the eye owing to his greater distance, the Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned.²⁰

Or consider the following discussion of Genesis 1:15, where the creation of the sun and moon is related (again calling them the "two great lights, the greater to rule the day, the lesser to rule the night"):

It is well again to repeat what I have said before, that it is not here philosophically discussed, how great the sun is in heaven, and how great, or how little, is the moon; but how much light comes to us from them. For here Moses addresses himself to our senses, that the knowledge of the gifts of God which we enjoy may not glide away. Therefore, in order to apprehend the meaning of Moses, it is to no purpose to soar above the heavens; let us only open our eyes to behold this light which God enkindles for us in the earth. By this method (as I have before observed) the dishonesty of those men is sufficiently rebuked, who censure Moses for not speaking with greater exactness. For as it became a theologian, he had respect to us, rather than to the stars.²¹

It should be noted that *philosophy* here includes natural philosophy, or as we call it, the natural sciences. Continuing with his commentary on Genesis 1:16, Calvin writes.

I have said, that Moses does not here subtly descant, as a philosopher, on the secrets of nature, as may be seen in these words. First, he assigns a place in the expanse of heaven to the planets and the stars; but astronomers make a distinction of spheres, and, at the same time, teach that the fixed stars have their proper place in the firmament. Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not

only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God.²²

This passage illustrates the key point in Calvin's view of biblical passages that refer to the heavens. His approach to biblical discussion of astronomical observation is to explain it in terms of *accommodation*.²³ Calvin's accommodation principle explains that biblical passages use everyday language rather than scientific terminology or models. This is not trying to accommodate a "secular interpretation of reality over biblical truth,"²⁴ as Walicord and Hayes describe it, but rather refers to God using common language to accommodate the limited understanding of readers of his word. The plain words of Scripture are not necessarily the literal words of Scripture.

We need to humbly recognize that we interpret Scripture and can use our God-given insights into the structure of the creation, including those from the sciences, to understand parts of it. That does not mean that we simply ignore Scripture's words when we have a conflict, nor do we only consider the literal

words of Scripture, but rather that we need to carefully, prayerfully, and thoughtfully look for what God wants us to understand.

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Endnotes

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