



# Gavin Ortlund: Which Hills to Die On?

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One of the most controversial issues in the church today, at least in my context in the United States, concerns the interpretation of the days of creation in Genesis 1. A Christian radio host once told me there were three topics the station knew would get calls when addressed, no matter what perspective was offered: racism, Donald Trump, and creation.

Al Mohler, who has been instrumental in popularizing the notion of "[theological triage](#)," is an outspoken proponent of a young-earth creationist view. Nonetheless, Mohler identifies the debate over the creation days as a third-rank doctrine, stating that he not only has many friends who hold to the contrary position, but he hires them as faculty.<sup>1</sup> Here, I offer brief remarks in agreement with Mohler's ranking of this debate.

## A Historical Perspective on Genesis 1

Like the millennial debate, different views on Genesis 1 are less practically relevant to the organization of a local church, or its worship, evangelism, or witness to the gospel than a number of other doctrines are. Now, of course, some young-earth-creationists dispute this claim. Some even argue that interpreting the days of Genesis 1 as something other than 24-hour days undermines the gospel itself, effectively making this issue a first-rank doctrine. First, some argue that if we "compromise" on a literal reading of the first chapter of the Bible, why won't we compromise elsewhere? Second, some claim that allowing for animal death prior to the human fall makes God the author of evil. Proponents of this view are quite outspoken, and it has become widely embraced in many American evangelical churches.

On both of these points, history can once again provide some perspective. The creation days have not always been so divisive, even since Darwin. In evangelical circles, particularly American evangelical circles since the 1960s, the bandwidth of what is acceptable has developed in a somewhat eccentric, parochial way.

For instance, many conservative Protestant Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had no hesitation seeking to reconcile Genesis 1 with geological data indicating an older earth and older universe. Many prominent critics of theological liberalism, such as J. Gresham Machen, and defenders of an orthodox view of Scripture, such as B.B. Warfield, affirmed an older earth and an older universe, and had trouble reconciling this with Genesis 1. The same can be said of an enormous variety of Christian leaders from diverse places and traditions, from the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, to the Scottish churchman Thomas Chalmers, to the Reformed Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, to evangelical leaders in the United States like Carl Henry or in Britain like John Stott—and on and on we could go.<sup>2</sup>

Take Charles Spurgeon as an example. In a sermon on the Holy Spirit, preached on June 17, 1855, four years prior to the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, Spurgeon quoted Genesis 1:2 and then claimed:

*"We do not know how remote the period of the creation of this globe may be—certainly many millions of years before the time of Adam. Our planet has passed through various stages of existence, and different kinds of creatures have lived on its surface, all of which have been fashioned by God."<sup>3</sup>*

Spurgeon proceeded to describe the Spirit's role in bringing order out of chaos in the process of creation, quoting a John Milton poem to highlight the Spirit's power in this role. In a sermon a few months later, he claimed, "we have discovered that thousands of years before that God was preparing chaotic matter to make it a fit abode for man, putting races of creatures upon it who might die and leave behind the marks of His handiwork and marvelous skill before He tried His hand on man."<sup>4</sup> What is most striking, perhaps, is not so much Spurgeon's affirmation of millions of years before Adam, but his apparent lack of

1. This comment was made during a discussion with C. John Collins on the question, "Does Scripture Speak Definitively to the Age of the Universe?", held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in February 2017. See <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/genesis-the-age-of-the-earth-does-scripture-speak-definitively-on-the-age-of-the-universe>, accessed April 15, 2019.

2. For further reading, see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (1992; expanded edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and *Darwin, Creation, and the Fall: Theological Challenges*, eds. R.J. Berry and T.A. Noble (Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos, 2009).

3. Charles Spurgeon, *Sermon 30, "The Power of the Holy Ghost," in The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 1, 88.

anxiety or difficulty in accepting this notion without much argumentation or concern, in the context of a sermon.

## Is Young Earth Creationism the “Traditional” View?

Things have changed since Spurgeon’s day. Views on creation have grown more polarized as the “creation-evolution” debate has become a more publicly visible flashpoint in American culture through events such as the Scopes trial in the 1920s, and particularly since the launching of the “young-earth creationist” movement in 1961 with the publication of John Whitcomb and Henry Morris’ *The Genesis Flood*.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this, young-earth creationism was not insisted on by most Christians, or widely perceived as the “conservative” or default Christian view. The Scofield Reference Bible (enormously popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) had advocated for the Gap theory, a species of old-earth creationism. William Jennings Bryan (who represented the prosecution at the Scopes trial) held to a Day Age view; this too is an old-earth creationist interpretation of Genesis 1.<sup>6</sup> Such views were common enough that, strikingly, the conservative evangelical publisher Moody Press could even decline to publish *The Genesis Flood* out of concern that “firm insistence on six literal days could offend their constituency.”<sup>7</sup> As Tim Keller summarizes:

“Despite widespread impression to the contrary, both inside and outside the church, modern Creation Science was not the traditional response of conservative and evangelical Protestants in the nineteenth century when Darwin’s theory first became known.... R. A. Torrey, the fundamentalist editor of *The Fundamentals* (published from 1910-1915, which gave definition to the term ‘fundamentalist’), said that it was possible ‘to believe thoroughly in the infallibility of the Bible and still be an evolutionist of a certain type....’ The man who defined the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, B.B. Warfield of Princeton (d. 1921) believed that God may have used something like evolution to bring about life-forms.”<sup>8</sup>

## Augustine’s “Literal” Reading of Genesis

Additionally, it is not just in the modern era that Christians have read Genesis 1 differently. Many Christians in the early church, far before any pressure from scientific discovery of the age of the universe, held that the days of Genesis 1 were not 24-hour periods of time. Saint Augustine, for example, in the fourth and fifth centuries, wrote several different commentaries on Genesis. In his final effort, a “literal” commentary on Genesis, he emphasized the difficulty of this question:

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4. Charles Spurgeon, Sermon 41-42, “Unconditional Election,” in *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 1, 122.
  5. John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).
  6. The Gap Theory, popularized by Thomas Chalmers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, affirms a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, while the Day Age view sees the “days” as long epochs of time.
  7. Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, “Introduction,” in *Four Views on the Historical Adam*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 19
  8. Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 262.

“it is indeed an arduous and extremely difficult task for us to get through to what the writer meant with these six days, however concentrated our attention and lively our minds.”<sup>9</sup>

Augustine’s struggle with Genesis 1 stands contrary to those who claim that the interpretation of the text is a matter of obviousness or common sense. Ultimately, concerning the relation of 24-hour days as we know them to the “days” of Genesis 1, Augustine affirms that “we must be in no doubt that they are not at all like them, but very, very dissimilar.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine understood the depiction of God’s work of creation in seven days as an accommodation to human understanding, drawing a comparison between divine creation and a human week of work. Augustine came to this view for a variety of textual reasons, including the problem of light coming in day 1 prior to the luminaries in day 4, the problem of dischronology introduced in Genesis 2:4-6, and the presentation of God’s rest on day 7.<sup>11</sup>

Early Christians held similarly different intuitions about animal death compared to many American evangelicals. Augustine, responding to the criticisms of God’s creation by the Manichaeans, vigorously defended the goodness of animal and plant death before the fall:

“it is ridiculous to condemn the faults of beasts and of trees, and other such mortal and mutable things as are void of intelligence, sensation, or life, even though these faults should destroy their corruptible nature; for these creatures received, at their Creator’s will, an existence fitting them.”<sup>12</sup>

Both Ambrose and Basil, in their famous treatment of the creation days, emphasized God’s wisdom in creating carnivorous animals. Basil, for instance, warned against rash judgments about how God created the animal kingdom: “let nobody accuse the Creator of having produced venomous animals, destroyers and enemies of our life. Else let them consider it a crime in the schoolmaster when he disciplines the restlessness of youth by the use of the rod and whip to maintain order.”<sup>13</sup> In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas maintained that “the nature of animals was not changed by man’s sin, as if those whose nature now it is to devour the flesh of others, would then have lived on herbs, like the lion and falcon.”<sup>14</sup>

## Context for Modern Readers

This historical backdrop provides some context for our current debates about creation. It also helps us to appreciate that many of those who affirm a “historical” reading of Genesis 1 do not interpret the days as 24-hour periods of time. The issue is *how* Genesis 1 is narrating history. Virtually all commentators recognize differences of language and style between Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the rest of

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9. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.1.1, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2002), 241.
  10. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.27.44, 267.
  11. I unpack Augustine’s views further in my *Retrieving Augustine’s Doctrine of Creation: Ancient Wisdom for Current Controversy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).
  12. Augustine, *The City of God* 12.4, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 383.
  13. Basil, *Hexaemeron* 9.5, in Basil, *Letters and Selected Works*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Blomfield Jackson (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 8; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 (1895)), 105.
  14. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 96, Art. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1948), 486.

Genesis—as well as between the more compressed, pictorial narrative of Genesis 1-11 and the subsequent narrative of Genesis 12-50.<sup>15</sup> The Bible uses diverse literary genres to convey historical events, and many historical passages employ stylized, symbolic, or elevated language.

David's poetic descriptions of salvation in Psalm 18, the night visions of Zechariah 1-6, Deborah and Barak's song in Judges 5, and John's apocalyptic visions in Revelation are all concerned with events that happen in history. But it would be hermeneutically careless to read these passages in the same way we read, say, the Gospels, which are widely considered in the genre of ancient biography. We should work hard to identify and understand the literary character of each particular passage in which the Bible narrates historical events, including Genesis 1.<sup>16</sup>

Much more needs to be said about the creation debate, but hopefully what is said here will at least encourage more humility and openness in the process. Think of it like this: if you make only 24-hour day interpretations of Genesis 1 acceptable within your church or theological circle, then the following Christians become unacceptable to you: Augustine, Charles Spurgeon, B.B. Warfield, and Carl Henry. Does this seem right? This is exactly the kind of situation in which theological triage would urge caution.

We can happily co-exist within the church amid differences on this issue. Our unity in the gospel is not at stake. Instead, we should put more focus on the aspects of the doctrine of creation that Christians have classically emphasized, and that are distinctive to a broadly Judeo-Christian worldview, such as the doctrine that the world was made from nothing, or the historicity of the fall, or the claim that human beings are made in God's image. These are better hills to die on.

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15. For an eloquent expression of this point, see J. I. Packer, "Hermeneutics and Genesis 1-11," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 44.1 (2001).

16. As a good resource, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 5; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

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