

Sola Scriptura and Two Books of Revelation

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The first great credo of the Reformation asserted was *Sola Scriptura*, formulated by Martin Luther and seen in action in his challenge to the Catholic Church at the Diet of Worms (1521). Luther's life is legendary. There have been two films on his life (*Martin Luther* [1953] and *Luther* [2003]). In addition there have been three made for TV films as well as a short German TV series based on his life. Luther's most well-known articulation of the *Sola Scriptura* principle came at the Diet of Worms in 1521 which was convened and presided over personally by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. At the Diet the authorities demanded that Luther recant his teachings. In answer he replied:

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason— I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other— my *conscience is captive to the Word of God*. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.” The earliest printed version added the words: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”¹

While Luther did not here use the actual term *Sola Scriptura* he was clearly appealing to the concept. Thus concept was later codified as one of the four great *Solas* of Protestantism. Protestantism became known by the great *solas* of the Reformation: *sola fide*—salvation is obtained through faith alone apart from works; *sola gratia*—salvation is only by free grace of God in Jesus Christ apart from human works of righteousness; *solus Christus*—Christ alone is the source of salvation; and *sola scriptura*—the Scripture alone, as the Word of God, is the infallible, final, and binding authority upon the believer as opposed to popes and councils.²

Protestants elevated the Scriptures to the place of primacy in the church: the sermon replaced the Mass as the central point of the service, and an open Bible replaced the altar in the churches. Yet Protestants did see value in other authorities. In Puritan Massachusetts there was regular and, by contemporary standards, lengthy exposition of the Word by the preacher. While the Puritans believed in the perspicuity of Scripture—that is, that the central message of Scripture is plain enough for a child to grasp—they also believed that its depths could not be plumbed by the most mature saint. Since this was the case, the Puritans deplored the “dumb reading” of Scripture in worship, insisting that the Word be explained and interpreted to the congregation. The beginnings of a significant shift in attitude could be seen around the time of the Second Great Awakening. With the birth of new denominations and the rise of the democratic mind-set, there was among conservative evangelical believers a reassertion of the unique, sole, and final authority of the Bible in a way heretofore unknown. The Stonites—followers of Barton Stone, one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church)—insisted that they had “no creed but the Bible.” This same attitude was later seen in such groups as the Baptists. Whereas during the Puritan period the Baptists had been responsible for

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand - A Life Of Martin Luther* (Kindle Locations 2509-2513). Read Books Ltd.. Kindle Edition. Italics added.

such theological masterpieces as The New Hampshire Confession, they too adopted what I would call a “primitivist mentality,” ignoring more than eighteen centuries of history and tradition when they attempted to anchor all understanding directly in the Scriptures. Other groups adopted this attitude as well. Among the smaller but highly influential groups that adopted the “Bible alone” mentality with an accompanying “plain sense of the text” hermeneutic and a disdain for scholarship was the Plymouth Brethren, whose influence spread through its dispensational perspective throughout American evangelicalism. As this attitude took root, the Reformation doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture was transformed into a doctrine that affirmed something quite different and in many senses opposed to the traditional Protestant, specifically that *the Bible’s meaning is plain for all*. For example, R. A. Torrey insisted that “in ninety-nine out of one hundred cases the meaning the plain man gets out of the Bible is the correct one.”³ The net effect of this concept was to let the Enlightenment definition of knowledge as objective, unconditioned, and universal in through the back door.⁴ In other words, the anti-Christian epistemology of the Enlightenment was almost universally applied to the text of Scripture, by those who most loudly claimed to uphold its authority. When we look beneath the surface of the words that are used and examine the Protestant traditions, we find that despite the rhetoric, there is always more than Scripture that has gone into the theological equation. While the “more” has varied somewhat in the ways it has been expressed, there has been a remarkable consistency from a conceptual perspective.

Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette observed that nineteenth-century American Protestants tended “to ignore developments which had taken place in Christianity in the Old World after the first century.”⁵ A common but thoroughly erroneous assumption was (and is) that theology is simply built on the Bible, or that our system of theological understanding is simply “the Bible’s own view of itself.” In some camps, the cry “No creed but the Bible” has in effect cut groups off from their heritage as Christians and evangelicals. Yet this implies that the Holy Spirit has taught the church nothing over the past twenty centuries. This mentality that the Bible alone is the authority for and source of theology has sometimes had a divisive result that has seen groups split over differences in their understanding of Scripture—often without any benchmark or guiding principle other than a commitment to biblical authority.⁶ The “Bible alone” mentality has often been accompanied by a naive biblicism that assumes that the text has a “plain meaning” and that denies, usually implicitly, that all reading of the biblical text involves interpretation. Contemporary Evangelical church historian Nathan Hatch has observed that the populist religion of the early American nation was also true almost all evangelicals: “in a culture that mounted a frontal assault on tradition, mediating elites, and institutions, the Bible very easily became . . . ‘A book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men in their own way.’”⁷

³ *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister McGrath, s.v. “Dispensationalism” (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁴ See Trevor Hart’s, *Faith Thinking*, chapter 2 “Admiring the View from Nowhere” 48-70, for an accessible discussion about the epistemology of the Enlightenment (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995).

⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), 4:428.

⁶ The functional position of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture is symptomatic of this mentality. When Scripture was stripped of any interpretive tradition, any threat that arose with reference to the Bible’s utter truthfulness ultimately became a threat to Christianity itself.

⁷ Quoted by Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 97.

Evangelicals affirm as a first principle that truth exists and that God has given it to us in the Scriptures. Yet we have historically failed to come to grips with the fact that the church has since the earliest Christian centuries recognized *two books of revelation*, the *book of Scripture* and the *book of nature*, and that since God is the author of both, there must be a mutual relationship, an interdependence between them. We need to understand the nature of the interrelationship between these two books written by God and their implications.

Theologians have generally divided revelation into two broad categories, *general* and *special* revelation. It is a given that revelation is the source of theology. Yet the issue is more complex than simply asserting that Scripture unfolds for us the full nature of reality or simply making a facile identification of Scripture with the totality of divine revelation. From the second century the Church has recognized that there are two books of revelation: Scripture and nature, or the created order. In fact we see an appeal to the created order as a true revelation of God even in the so-called “nature psalms.”

In the contemporary atmosphere where science and theology are pitted against one another and are often viewed by viewed as antagonistic toward one another between members of each side of the debate, the history of theology tells quite a different story. Beginning in the second century and throughout the ancient church up through the Reformation and beyond the predominant understanding of the relationship between science and theology was understood under the rubric of God’s “Two Books of Revelation.”⁸

To survey this in a little more detail we look first at four significant the Fathers of the church (c A.D. 150- C. 600) who were significant in the development of theological understanding, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine.

Justin Martyr (100–165): Justin was a mid-second century (100–165) apologist for the Christian faith who wrote several apologies (defenses) for the Christian faith. He defended Christianity against the charges of the Jews, the heretic Marcion, and the political persecution of Christians by Rome. Of particular note is his defense of the goodness of creation as opposed to the emerging “Christian” versions of Gnosticism as well as the teachings of Marcion who proclaimed that the material world was created by an evil god and was thus to be rejected and escaped from. Justin also was the first to develop the concept of the *Logos* (Word) as presented in John 1, identifying the Logos with Yahweh as well as linking the Logos with the Stoic philosophical concept of the logos which taught that the logos was the presence of divine rationality that both gives order to creation and animates it. Significantly both ideas are found in the Apostle’s presentation in John 1. Middle Platonism, too, endorsed a logos idea in their explanation of reality.

But contrary to the apostle John’s presentation, the *logos* of Middle Platonism was conceived as a kind of intermediary between God and the world. According to Middle Platonism, God is a purely self-sufficient, impassable, and transcendentally spiritual reality and is therefore neither concerned with nor involved in the material world. The *logos*, then, was that (impersonal) ordering principle emanating from God which formed the world as we know it out of pre-

⁸ See the eight part series at Biologos.com on “The Church Fathers and Two Books Theology” Blog Series: <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/series/the-church-fathers-and-two-books-theology#sthash.9M9CQA3Q.dpuf> (Accessed April 23, 2016).

existing formless matter, or chaos. It was both God and not-God at the same time—a kind of extension of the fullness of God into the material world that exerted God’s divine power and influence within the world, while also maintaining God’s fundamental transcendence over and distance from the world.⁹

In identifying Jesus as *the Logos*, Justin incorporates these Middle-Platonic ideas into nascent concept of *the Logos* as presented in John one. Justin did not explicitly develop the “Two Books” concept rather he laid a key piece of the foundation for the doctrine. His *Logos Christology* envisioned *the Logos* as the divine rationality immanent in creation implicitly endorsing both the study of Scripture and creation as two prongs of a larger combined enterprise both prongs of which bear witness to Jesus Christ the eternal Logos of God.

Irenaeus (ca. 125-202) Bishop of Lyons further develops the concept that would coalesce into the “two books” of revelation teaching. In fact Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* gives us the most complete view of late second century view of Gnosticism available to us. While there were almost as many gnostic systems as there were gnostic writers, Irenaeus understood that they all partook of similar presuppositions. So rather than try to refute the different gnostic systems he wrote five books against the particularly influential Valentinian sect of Gnosticism reasoning that to refute one system was to refute them all. He attacked Valentinus for his teaching that the material world was evil and that the goal of life was to escape the evil created realm and attain pure spiritual existence. Likewise Valentinus taught that Jesus was a spiritual being. He only appeared to have physical flesh. To use contemporary idiom, Jesus was something like a hologram. He to be appeared solid but in reality he had no physical substance. Some of the gnostic writings that have been discovered during the past century describe a Jesus who left no footprints on the sand as he walked on the beach. Irenaeus responded to this concept of an immaterial spiritual Jesus by insisting in his true humanity and pointing to the gospels received by the church. Gnosticism was not a single religion but a constellation of spiritual/religious teachings whose seemingly innumerable manifestations featured certain common threads; in this and other ways, Gnosticism resembled the modern New Age movement. The term “gnostic” was coined by historians from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge,” to describe this religious mindset and its teaching, but Gnosticism is not simply a cognitive or intellectual understanding of esoteric ideas. It speaks rather of an experiential, mystical knowledge. Generally the Gnostics saw God as absolutely unknowable within himself. Some said God was so transcendent that he was beyond being itself, and could have no direct communication with the world; any communication had to be mediated through a hierarchy of quasi-divine aeons.¹⁰ The Gnostics mirrored the pagan Greek *mystery religions* that sprang up in the early Christian centuries. The goal of these religions was spiritual experience of the divine. Similarly the Gnostics sought escape from the body in order to experience union with God apart from the shackles of the flesh, and their teachings and rites helped lead to such experiences. Like their Docetic predecessors the Gnostics denied the reality of the Incarnation. They were exclusive and esoteric¹¹ and looked down on those outside their number, insisting that Jesus had passed his

⁹ Mark Mann, “The Church Fathers and Two Books of Theology: Justin Martyr” <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/justin-martyr-and-the-two-books-part-2#sthash.eskTpCbH.dpuf> (accessed April 24, 2016).

¹⁰ An aeon was a divine power or nature emanating from the Supreme Being and playing various roles in the operation of the universe.

¹¹ I.e., restricted to the select few who have special knowledge or interest.

secret message on to a small, select group who were “spiritual” as opposed to the unworthy masses. In its Christian versions, it focused on Jesus Christ as a messenger from the transcendent, unknown, and unknowable God, a representative who could not be touched by the evil of the material world. [The] radical dualism made Gnostics regard the biblical account of the acts of God in history, or of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Son of God in space and time, as myths. Instead of merely rejecting them, however, they sought to make spiritual sense of those myths for themselves by giving them a “gnostic” or “high-flown philosophical” interpretation.¹²

The early church fathers saw that this teaching utterly undermined the gospel of Christ and replaced it with a *mythology* that gave rise to spiritual elitism and pride. In fact, the Gnostics used the term “catholic” derisively of the ancient church because it preached to all, regarding the ministry of the gospel as universal and the love of God as unbounded. The term *mythology* is proper here because the dualism espoused by the Gnostics cut humanity off from any true knowledge of God as he is in himself and replaced it with fantastic speculations.¹³

Origen (185—254): While Origen did not explicitly identify creation as a kind of book, it is also clear that he is not far off. For Origen, as for Justin and Irenaeus, creation was brought into being by and through the divine Logos, the preincarnate Jesus Christ, and therefore fully expresses the goodness and love of God. But, Origen pushes this point perhaps even further than his predecessors. The sole purpose of creation is to reveal God's plan for salvation and to draw rational creatures to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Scripture and creation have the same central purpose: to reveal to us the God who became flesh in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, then, what they tell us about God is fully commensurate, and insofar as they might seem to be in conflict, it is because we are reading one or the other incorrectly.¹⁴

Augustine: Augustine (354-430) stands as the church father of the greatest overall influence in later development of theology. He is universally understood to be the father of all Western Theology, both Catholic and Protestant. It is he that gives the first formal articulation of two books of revelation, scripture and the created order. A couple of quotes serve to illustrate this. While much could be said about him and the massive influence he wields to this day, these brief quotes summarize his understanding for the relationship and interrelationship between the self-revelation of God in creation and scripture. He states:

“In your great wisdom you, who are our God, speak to us of these things in your Book, the firmament made by you.”¹⁵

¹² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 1980), 38.

¹³ Irenaeus' greatest work *Against the Heresies (Adversus Haereses)* provides an exhaustive exposition of one form of Gnosticism, Valentinian Gnosticism. Rather than surveying the various gnostic systems. He was convinced that to refute one of the systems was to refute them all since they all “drank from the same well.” In this work he gives copious illustration of gnostic speculations.

¹⁴ See more at: <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/the-church-fathers-and-the-two-books-origen-of-alexandria-part-2#sthash.MfmqeBBI.dpuf>

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, tr R.S.Pine-Coffin (New York, Penguin, 1961), 18.

“It is the divine page that you must listen to; it is the book of the universe that you must observe. The pages of Scripture can only be read by those who know how to read and write, while everyone, even the illiterate, can read the book of the universe.”¹⁶

“Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?”¹⁷

To delve a bit deeper into Augustine’s contribution. Augustine was a revered bishop, scholar, biblical exegete and theologian. He was thoroughly conversant with the philosophical issues that the early church fathers contended with, as well he was an exegete, a pastor, and a theologian who set the course of Christian theology for the next 700 years. His place in the history of Christian theology is second only behind that of the Apostle Paul. As a youth Augustine rejected the naïve and simple faith of his mother, Monica. Looking for answers to the deep questions about life and creation, good and evil he joined Manichaeism, a dualistic Persian religion which promised to synthesize Christ’s “true” teachings with classical wisdom. After 9 years he left the sect because it could not answer his questions. He left his native North Africa and traveled to Milan. At this time he was a teacher of rhetoric. Still an opponent of Christianity who was trying to improve his rhetorical craft he went to hear to hear Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan—the greatest public speaker of the day. Whereas Monica’s faith was simplistic and naïve, Ambrose’s explanation of the Scriptures was deep and intelligible. Ultimately Augustine was converted under Ambrose’s preaching and became a priest, and then bishop. His monumental treatise *The City of God* provided the blueprint for relationship between the secular and sacred (church and state) for nearly a thousand years. It was the most read book during the medieval period. It is scarcely possible to overestimate Augustine’s influence. But it is his work a biblical interpreter that concerns us here.

In his treatise *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* he develops his understanding of the “Two Books of Revelation,” creation and scripture. Augustine understood that God was one and the creator of all as well as the one who inspired the Scriptures (he was in fact the first in the history of the church to formally articulate a doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture). But he did not pit the scriptures against what could be gleaned from creation. In this treatise he lays down principles for interpretation and harmonization of what scripture says and what is to be gleaned from the created order.

- ***The Unity of Truth.*** There cannot be one truth for scripture/theology and another for creation/philosophy. God is the source of all truth. Disagreements between the conclusion of faith and reason must be resolved. (This proposition implicitly denies the mentality that asserts “everyone is entitled to his own opinion “ mentality. Or to put this another way individuals are not entitled to their own facts! Such an assertion is an intellectually lazy cop-out) God is one, so his truth must be one as well. But while truth is one it is not always easy to discover what truth is. The search for unity of truth involves diligence, patience and humility—and a recognition that we may not have enough information to ultimately determine the truth or falsity of various truth claims.

¹⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 45, 7: PL 36, 518

¹⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, book 16.

- ***The Doctrine of the Two Books***

Augustine is clear that God reveals himself in two different ways, and that we can look at both books to learn about God. Since both books have the same author there cannot be any contradictions between them. Nature and Scripture cannot contradict one another.

- **Both of the books require careful interpretations.** Interpretation of both nature and the Bible must be diligent and careful. Augustine contemplated the reliability of our senses to accurately report good information. He recognized that our minds may be mistaken in the way they interpret the information that comes through the senses. Things are not always what they seem. Reality (i.e. the truth of the way things are) may be more difficult to ascertain than what simple sensory experience leads us to believe. Reading the book of nature can be difficult. *Rational analysis is required!* This is something with which every scientist would agree. But this is not a one-sided affair. Augustine understood that a proper understanding of Scripture is *even more difficult* than a proper understanding of nature.

The reason for this is several-fold. Biblical passages can have several meanings (or layers of meanings) at the same time, e.g. literal, allegorical, moral. *Augustine saw the literal meaning as the most difficult to ascertain.* “Literal” has never in the history of the interpretation meant “the surface meaning” i.e. naïve literalism. (This concept did not gain favor until the 19th century in America). Any passage must be interpreted in such a way that it relates to the topic that it seems to be describing and assigns meanings to the individual words so that the passage makes sense with reference to other sources of knowledge. Take, for example Genesis 1. The literal sense must communicate something that has to do with the creation of the world. There must be a connection between the text and the obvious subject. Augustine worked for years on the literal interpretation of Genesis 1. Interpretation is hard work. It must resolve details in the text. For example, the order of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 are different. A correct interpretation must agree with *reason* and information available from other sources. The interpreter must believe that there is some truth being communicated and that *reason* can allow the interpreter to correctly get at that truth. The following principles of exegesis became general principles for Christian theology

- Bible has an ultimate author often obscure behind the human words of the writers—scripture is inspired not dictated.
- Biblical expressions are accommodated to their audience. We should not expect scripture to speak in words that the original readers would not understand. An accurate interpretation is to the purpose of the passage under consideration.
- Some interpretations can be held only provisionally due to the difficulty of the passage under consideration.

Often it is easier to prove natural and philosophical propositions than to interpret some specific biblical passages. This is because experiments can test natural hypotheses. No such direct recourse is available in biblical interpretation.

Interpretation of biblical passages are limited by current state of demonstrable knowledge. Augustine warned about being ignorant of the state of scientific knowledge.

“Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.”¹⁸

Augustine considered theology to be more important than natural philosophy (science). Natural philosophy was a handmaiden to theology. Science was ancillary but could help in ascertaining the true faith. But scientific knowledge is indispensable for those who want to do correct biblical exegesis.

Augustine puts a premium on reason—reason makes humans superior to all other living things. Reason is not to be rejected—we could not even believe if we did not have a soul endowed with reason. But in so saying, he does not deny the necessity of faith. It was he who said “believe so that you may understand.” Faith increases understanding. It is not opposed to reason. Rather the two work in concert with one another and as they work together they are self-correcting.

The Protestant Reformers. In the medieval period Thomas Aquinas picks up on this theme of the two books, but it is left to the Reformers to develop it more fully. The Reformers themselves, and particularly John Calvin recognized two books of revelation—the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Both of these books spoke divine revelation and could not contradict each other. In general discussions, one often finds the distinction that general revelation is addressed to man as man and is thus non-redemptive, while special revelation, the Bible, is addressed to man as sinner, its goal being salvific. Or to put this another way the book of nature witnesses to God as the powerful and majestic creator of all and of human dependence upon Him (this reflects Acts 17 & Romans 1:20), while the book of scripture addresses mankind in his fallen condition and provides the way for restoration to fellowship with Him. While Calvin develops the two books theme at length in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* his understanding actually is codified in the Belgic Confession (1561) written two years before the Geneva reformer died. Article 2 states:

¹⁸ Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis” ch 39. <http://www.christianmind.org/history/Augustine1.htm> accessed June 2, 2016.

We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse. Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God's glory and for our salvation.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century the "two books" concept became increasingly prominent in the development of natural theology in English speaking world. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the father of the empirical inductive scientific method endorsed the study of both the "book of God's works" and the "book of God's words" in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605). He introduced methodical observation of facts as a means of studying and interpreting natural phenomena. This new method of discovery, became a scientific substitute for the then dominant systems of thought, which relied all too often on fanciful guessing and particularly the appeal to the authority of Aristotle to establish truths of science¹⁹ As the father of the empirical inductive scientific method he argued that only by careful and observations of nature accompanied by a skeptical mindset, i.e. skepticism of received untested "common knowledge" and lore, could accurate conclusions about nature be trusted. From the time of its implementation the Baconian method early on bore fruitful conclusions. But it has been surpassed and is now understood as being *passé*. Scientists no longer seeks only to describe nature accurately, they seek to understand its deep structures. It seeks to penetrate the deep structures of reality and discover not just the *how* but also the *why* of them.

Bacon himself urged the study both of the "book of God's Word" and the "book of God's works" in his own work *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). Seventy years later Robert Boyle contended, "as the two great books, of nature and of Scripture, have the same offer, so the study of the latter does not all hinder an inquisitive man's delight in the study of the former."²⁰ Likewise, Sir Thomas Brown (1643) declared, "There are two books from whence I collect my divinity, besides that written one of God, another of his servant, nature, that universal and publick manuscript, that lies expanded unto the eyes of all. Those that never saw him in the one have discovered him in the other."²¹

To move forward into the 19th century we find the massive figure of William Paley whose *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) dominated the English discussions of natural theology for over 50 years and was in fact read by Charles Darwin.²²

While it is common to assume that Darwin's theory of biological evolution was met with immediate and implacable hostility from the conservative Christian community, such is simply not the case. When his theory of biological evolution was put forth, many conservative

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. Baconian Method <http://www.britannica.com/science/Baconian-method>, accessed April 30, 2016.

²⁰ Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 141.

²¹ Sir Thomas Brown, *Religio Medici* (Oxford: J. Vincent, 1831), 31.

²² See McGrath's discussion of Paley, *Science & Religion and Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 99-102.

evangelical Christians, including scientists, exegetes, and theologians, far from universally decrying Darwinism as simply atheism,²³ saw the hypothesis as a viable explanation of the means God may have used to accomplish his task of creation.²⁴

Evangelical science during the nineteenth century followed in the footsteps of the Reformers and Puritans. It saw two books of divine revelation, the written word—the Scriptures—and the book of nature, discovered by scientific inquiry. Since God was the author of both books, it was impossible for the two to be in conflict. While the Bible provided the overarching framework for interpreting life and creation, this book of nature informed the theologians and biblical interpreters in their labors and conclusions.²⁵

As early as 1812, Archibald Alexander, the first professor of Princeton Seminary, declared in his inaugural address, “Natural history, chemistry, and geology have sometimes been of important *service assisting the Biblical student to solve difficulties contained in Scripture*; or in enabling him to repel the assaults of adversaries which were made under the cover of these sciences.”²⁶ Charles Hodge took the arguments even further in his journal, the *Biblical Repository and Princeton Review*. An 1863 article by Joseph Clark, a conservative Presbyterian, recognized the necessity for the Christian scientist to pursue inductive conclusions without pre-commitments to the “teachings” thought to be found in the Scriptures. Clark argued that earlier Christians had concluded that the Bible taught a “flat earth” and that this interpretation had been abandoned in light of scientific discovery.²⁷ Importantly, he insisted that this kind of adjustment in no way undermined the authority of Scripture or its divine inspiration.²⁸ While not all agreed with Clark and he received criticism even in the press, Hodge was even more adamant in a response to criticism of Clark’s position.

Nature is as truly a revelation of God as the Bible; and we only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God when we interpret the Bible by science. As this principle is undeniably true, it is admitted and acted on by those who, through inattention to the meaning of terms, in words deny it. When the Bible speaks of the foundations, or pillars of the earth, or of the solid heavens, or the motion of the sun, do not you and every other sane man, interpret this language by the facts of science? . . . Shall we go on to interpret the Bible so as to make it teach the falsehood that the sun moves around the earth, or

²³ This was the conclusion of Charles Hodge from a philosophical perspective, but his successors at Princeton, particularly B. B. Warfield, the architect of the modern doctrine of inerrancy, disagreed and saw evolution as a means by which God had brought creation to its present state

²⁴ David Livingston’s *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) is an admirable study documenting the support for Darwin’s theory among even the Princetonians.

²⁵ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 182.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, italics added.

²⁷ In point of fact, the “flat earth” understanding was never widely held by Christians. This was a caricature propagated by the opponents of Christianity in favor of the emerging science (Jeffrey Burton Russell, “The Myth of the Flat Earth,” for the American Scientific Affiliation Conference, August 4, 1997, at Westmont College [id-www.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/RUSSELL/FlatEarth.html]). The fact that as early as 1863 this myth was accepted as true in the conservative Christian community is very telling as to how rapidly it made its way into the popular psyche.

²⁸ Hodge defended the position taken by Clark, saying that it was all but self-evident that the tested conclusions of the scientific enterprise should be brought to bear in the interpretation of Scripture.

shall we interpret it by science, and make the two harmonize?²⁹

A host of evangelical scientists and theologians adopted the position advocated by Hodge, yet they by no means agreed with one another on specific issues. Despite heated disagreements, however, there was a common understanding that proper biblical interpretation and theology could not be done without input from the best scientific findings available.³⁰

At conservative Princeton, President James McCosh (1811-1894), and the great B.B. Warfield, the architect of the modern doctrine of inerrancy scientific concept of an old earth as well as the theory of evolution, although Warfield had problems with Darwin's articulation of the process. Presciently he boldly proclaimed "The question of the antiquity of man has of itself no theological significance. It is to theology, as such, a matter of entire indifference how long man has existed on earth."³¹

Yet with the rise of fundamentalism early in the twentieth century, the presupposition of the necessity of scientific input and assistance in proper biblical interpretation was sacrificed on the altar of biblical authority. Surprisingly, science was not a problem with the original Fundamentalists as the movement arose in the first two decades of the 20th century. As fundamentalism progressively disengaged from culture, it became increasingly obscurantist and increasingly skeptical of the academy which had adopted higher critical methods the study of scripture. Fundamentalists progressively withdrew from larger society and its secular conclusions and founded their own colleges and seminaries that were not polluted by the "infidelity" inherent in the modern understanding of the world. It was within the context of fundamentalism that the Reformation credo of *sola scriptura* was transformed into *nuda scriptura*.³² And pitted the Bible interpreted with a "plain meaning" hermeneutic over and against all human authorities and wisdom, especially the pronouncements of science. Indeed ignorance of history and previous discoveries became a badge of honor. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Seminary had no formal theological education. He was only a devout and earnest student of the Bible. Of his lack of theological and historical understanding he stated, "the very fact that I did not study prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with prejudice mind and to be concerned with only what the Bible actually teaches"³³

The Rise of Scientific Creationism

²⁹ Charles Hodge, "The Bible and Science," *New York Observer*, March 26, 1863, 98 – 99. Quoted in Noll, *Scandal*, 183 – 84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185

³¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Works of B.B. Warfield*, v. 9, Studies in Theology, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 235.

³² *Sola scriptura* had from its inception meant that the Bible was the final authority in matters of faith and practice. Fundamentalism, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, made Scripture the only authority. And in some cases, it taught that the Bible was over and against all human authorities and wisdom, especially the pronouncements of science.

³³ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 128 .See Chafer *Systematic Theology* 8:5 –6.

The mid-to-late twentieth century saw the rise of a controversy that in many ways parallels the Roman Catholic Church's seventeenth-century confrontation with Galileo. This time, however, the antagonist in the controversy is not a long-established tradition with official conciliar church sanction. Rather, it is a position that is out of harmony with historic Protestantism and propagated by those of an essentially fundamentalist persuasion: scientific creationism. The term as used by its adherents does not simply have reference to God as the ultimate creator of all who may have used various means to accomplish his creative activity. Rather, as they normally use it, the term refers to a literal surface reading of the text of Genesis 1 through the eyes of Baconian inductivism to conclude that the earth was created recently (on the scale of thousands of years ago) and in six literal, twenty-four-hour days, rather than in the ancient past (billions of years ago). While having no historic formal authority, those espousing the scientific creationist position have spread their doctrine as the only orthodox Christian position, so that in a majority of evangelical and fundamental churches, the average layperson has no idea that any other position is held by evangelical scholars and theologians.

The roots of modern creation science in America³⁴ are to be found in the teachings of George McCready Price, a Seventh-day Adventist who in 1923 published *The New Geology*, arguing that a simple "literal" reading of the book of Genesis revealed that God created the cosmos in six literal twenty-four-hour days between six and eight thousand years ago. The present state of the earth was to be explained by a worldwide flood in the time of Noah. This book at first had little influence outside Adventist circles. But in the early 1940s, some "flood geologists" began to promote their agenda, without measurable success.

Then, in the late 1950s, John C. Whitcomb, Old Testament professor at Grace Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana, and Henry M. Morris, a hydraulic engineer, both reacted negatively to Bernard Ramm's landmark book *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Eerdmans, 1954). In this work, Ramm confronted the fundamentalists' naive Baconian hermeneutics and their failure to read the Scriptures in light of their historical and cultural background. Whitcomb and Morris joined forces to pen *The Genesis Flood* (1961), in which they adopted Price's logic and argumentation wholesale but gave it a much more sophisticated theological and scientific expression. The book was an immediate success and then spawned over the years the Creation Research Society, the Institute for Creation Research, and other organizations committed to the position in the United States and Great Britain.

Modern American Fundamentalists and their Evangelical cousins have departed from the historic Christian understanding of the "Two Books" of divine revelation. And in so doing have fallen into anti-intellectual and reason denying obscurantism.

A subtle swipe at this obscurantism can be found on the movie *Contact* where the major character at one point states: "[A]ll I'm saying is, this message was written in the language of science – mathematics -- and was clearly intended to be received by scientists. If it had been

³⁴ Christians have held a literal understanding of the Genesis account for centuries. While there were in Britain "scriptural geologists" who held a version of what might be termed "scientific creationism" in the early nineteenth century, the twentieth-century adoption of this position has not been tied to the earlier British understanding.

religious in nature it should have taken the form of a burning bush, or a booming voice from the sky...³⁵ While we may smile or roll our eyes at this statement, it in fact contains a profound truth. T.F. Torrance, the greatest English speaking theologian of the 20th century insisted that the job of the scientist was to be a priest of creation³⁶ who unlocked its unfathomable mysteries and opened the way for mankind to see and praise the creator. The creation is indeed a book that reveals the creator and its unlocking by the scientists have opened another avenue to offer up praise to God.

³⁵ *Contact*, Shooting script <https://sfy.ru/?script=contact> accessed April 23 2016.

³⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980) 1-15.