

PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO EVOLUTION

Presented at the 100th Centennial of the Scopes Trial, Dayton, Tennessee

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Good afternoon. As I stand here in this very courtroom where John Scopes was tried one hundred years ago, I'm struck by the weight of history of this place. This room witnessed a defining moment in American Christianity's relationship with science—a moment whose reverberations we still feel today.

I stand here charged with an overwhelming task: provide an overview of how Christians have responded to evolution since the gavel fell in this room in 1925. By necessity I will be presenting a history that can't touch on every source of influence or provide all the different interpretations. I will be limiting the scope of my comments to protestant responses to evolution and more specifically conservative protestant denominations and institutions.

In preparing to come here I realized I had my own misconceptions about the debate over origins from the late 1800s and early 1900s and learned so much from dedicated authors who have written so much about this time including several other speakers here with us today. Some of those works are listed on the slide shown here and the handout provided. I can only hope that what I present is a helpful addition to the conversation and will stimulate you to dig deeper and learn more.

Please note that I have provided a handout with important terms and references and I have included a link to an extended transcript of this talk which includes details I will not be able to elaborate in our time together.

A. Personal Story: Three Generations of Engagement

Let me begin with a personal story that spans three generations. Both of my grandfather studied under J. Gresham Machen at Princeton Seminary in the 1920s—the very years when the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was tearing American Protestantism apart. Machen, the well-known defender of orthodox Christianity, was invited by William Jennings Bryan to testify right here as an expert witness.

Before we survey a century of Christian engagement with evolution, I want you to know who is speaking to you. I am the product of multiple generations of theological wrestling. My grandfathers studied under J. Gresham Machen, my father's father at his last years at Princeton Seminary and my mother's father with him at his first years at Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia which Machen was instrumental in starting.

Both of my grandfathers were instilled with a tradition of rigorous theological training that prized both biblical fidelity and intellectual curiosity of not only scriptures but God's other revelation—the creation itself. My father carried forward that tradition. A chemistry major at Calvin College he then went to Westminster Theological Seminary. Eventually, he accepted his first call to a church in Grand Junction Colorado where I then grew up with marine fossils in my backyard and dinosaur fossils at the other end of town and developed a deep appreciation for nature hiking, camping from my father. My father had to navigate the age of the earth question and changes in the denomination that he served. He saw them develop a position statement on geological and biological origins for the denomination because of the dissension that these topics have created.

Today, here I stand—a third generation—as both a Reformed Christian and a graduate of Calvin College in science. I am now a professional biologist, and I am still navigating these same waters of my forefathers, still feeling the tension of competing interpretations of the Bible and nature.

B. Machen and the Missed Opportunity

So, what is the connection to our topic and why spend so much time on this? Gresham Machen embodies the complex topic I have been tasked to explore today. When William Jennings Bryan invited him to testify here in Dayton as an expert witness for the prosecution, Machen declined.

Why did Machen refuse to come to Dayton? His reasons reveal a crucial missed opportunity in American Christianity and the science-faith conversation generally. First, he recognized his limitations—his expertise lay in New Testament studies, not in Old Testament interpretation or biology. He was being asked for political reasons – he was respected so could be used by the prosecution to sound more respectable. But more importantly, Machen believed evolution was, in his words, a "side issue" compared to the theological battles he was fighting against liberalism.

Like his Princeton Seminary predecessor B.B. Warfield and most protestant Christians of his day, modernists or fundamentalists, Machen wasn't a young-earth creationist. He likely followed the Princeton tradition that accepted the possibility of common ancestry for all living things—with the notable exception of humanity's spiritual nature and possible animal ancestry of his bodily nature. This represented a third way, not just on the topic of evolution but a willingness to engage with new discoveries in scholarly fashion and that way was about to be obliterated by the polarization this trial would create.

While both men, Bryan and Machen, opposed religious liberalism, their approaches and views differed. Bryan was a populist evangelical, deeply critical of the academy which included the seminaries of the day, and believed Darwinism was the source of declining morality and

liberalism. Parenthetically, protestant modernist where also concerned about the effects of Darwinism, especially Darwinism on the culture of the day as Dr. Ted Davis has recently explored in his 2024 book “*Protestant Modernist Pamphlets: Science and Religion in the Scopes Era*” (2024).

Machen, on the other hand, was a scholar, committed to demonstrating the historical and intellectual basis of Christianity and saw scientific inquiry not necessarily as a threat but as a way to verify Christian claims. He was vehemently opposed to the liberalism that was sweeping through Christian denominations, but he didn’t necessarily believe that all evolutionary ideas should be swept under the rug along with that liberalism.

Machen, though a staunch defender of Christian orthodoxy could not be typecast in the stereotype of a fundamentalist. In many ways he foreshadowed the eventual split of evangelicals from fundamentalists that he unfortunately would not live to see. In Machen’s works it is evident that cultural issues of the day, such as the evolution of man and prohibition, he saw as being used as political weapons in a larger cultural war over who controls education, a battle that has not let up to the present day. For Machen these topics did deserve serious dialogue in the church, but he believed they should not be central focal points upon which institutions should divide, or votes should be cast.

The upshot of this intro is that you should be aware of who is talking to you—someone caught between worlds, much like Machen was a century ago. Someone who is caught today literally between a speaker before me and one after me that have come to very different understandings about origins.

My thesis:

The century following the Scopes Trial reveals that Christian responses to evolution have been characterized not by simple opposition or acceptance, but by dynamic institutional struggles over cultural engagement, shifting hermeneutical approaches, and persistent attempts to engage scientific discoveries while maintaining biblical fidelity—patterns that continue to shape evangelical identity today.”

Next, we'll explore how Christian responses to evolution have and haven't changed over these hundred years—from some openness, albeit with many caveats, to bitter division, and perhaps, toward a time of more productive dialogue.

I. Pre-Scopes Christian Thought on Evolution

To understand what was lost in the 1925 bottleneck of thought, we must first understand what existed before. The late 19th and early 20th century Christian response to evolution was far more varied than the black-and-white narrative that emerged from this very courtroom whether the event here caused that to become the view or were a reflection of where the modernist/fundamentalist debate was going anyway.

A. 19th Century Openness and Alternatives

Several influential theologians and scientists, including B. B. Warfield, Asa Gray, James Orr, George Frederick Wright, and Henry Drummond, sought to reconcile evolutionary thought with Christian doctrine, maintaining that divine creation and evolutionary processes were not necessarily in conflict. B. B. Warfield, a staunch defender of biblical authority, viewed evolution as a possible tool of divine providence, provided it upheld humanity's unique spiritual and moral status. This is seen in his 1895 paper "The Present-Day Conception of Evolution": *"I do not think that there is any general statement in the Bible or any part of the account of creation, either as given in Genesis 1 and 2 or elsewhere alluded to, that need be opposed to evolution."*

Similarly, Asa Gray, a Harvard botanist and early advocate of Darwinism, saw no contradiction between natural selection and divine guidance, arguing that evolution could be part of God's intentional design rather than a purely mechanistic process. James Orr, a Scottish theologian and contributor to *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915), also promoted a mediating position, maintaining that evolutionary theory could align with Christian faith as long as divine purpose remained central

This "theistic evolution," to use the word for the first time, was readily accommodated into the modernist/liberal movements in many denominations but was also part of many orthodox denominations at least among the theological academia and many clergy.

B. The Nature of Late 19th Century "Evolution"

Here's what modern audiences often miss: "evolution" in 1900 wasn't what we mean today. The scientific community embraced a variety of mechanisms: **Neo-Lamarckism**: The inheritance of acquired characteristics, which seemed to preserve purpose and progress. **Orthogenesis**: Evolution driven by internal forces toward predetermined goals. **Vitalism**: Life forces guiding development. **Mutation theory**: Large-scale changes creating new species instantly

Natural selection was just one idea among many, and often not the dominant one. This diversity of mechanisms made it easier for Christians to accept some form of evolution—they could choose versions that preserved divine guidance and purpose and seemed to avoid the anti-design elements of "Darwinian" evolution.

For Reformed theologians at Princeton especially, this fit well with their doctrine of providence. God didn't just create and walk away—He continuously upheld and directed all things. Evolution could be seen as God's ordinary providence in action, no different from how He governed the movements of planets or the growth of plants. It also fit a general notation of the time—the beginning of the 20th century—that society also in a state of progressive improvement and that the world was being guided by God to achieve his goal and aims.

Returning to B.B. Warfield who is living in an environment with these swirling ideas about the mechanisms of evolution. Consider this longer quote from a lecture given in 1888 we can see a more detailed version of what a theistic approach to evolution looked like at this time.

"I do not think that there is any general statement in the Bible or any part of the account of creation, either as given in Genesis 1 and 2 or elsewhere alluded to, that need be opposed to evolution.

There is no necessary antagonism of Christianity to evolution, provided that we do not hold to too extreme a form of evolution. To adopt any form that does not permit God freely to work apart from law and which does not allow miraculous intervention (in the giving of the soul, in creating Eve, etc.) will entail a great reconstruction of Christian doctrine, and a very great lowering of the detailed authority of the Bible. But if we condition the theory by allowing the constant oversight of God in the whole process, and his occasional supernatural interference for the production of new beginnings by an actual output of creative force, producing something new, i.e., something not included even in posse [potentially] in the preceding conditions, we may hold to the modified theory of evolution and be Christians in the ordinary orthodox sense."

It is difficult to know just what "occasional supernatural interference" meant. Just how often could this occur and under what circumstances? Depending on the response, Warfield's "theistic evolution" could look similar to today's Intelligent Design or even Progressive Creationism positions.

C. The Fundamentals and the Big Tent

This brings us to a surprising fact that challenges some of our modern assumptions. "The Fundamentals"—those famous pamphlets that gave fundamentalism its name—included essays by theistic evolutionists (broadly defined)!

B.B. Warfield contributed. So did James Orr, a Scottish theologian, who explicitly accepted evolutionary theory. The early fundamentalist movement drew its battle lines not around evolution but around the supernatural—the virgin birth, the resurrection, the miracles of Christ. Many fundamentalists accepted an old earth interpreting the text of Genesis using either the Gap Theory or Day-Age interpretation. Today most Christians view these frameworks for

bringing a deep time, biblical interpretation and sometimes evolutionary theory and theology together as simplistic responses to complex problems—I'm referring to the Gap Theory in particular.

By the 1920s, evolutionary ideas—in some form—had penetrated many of the institutions of American Christianity. The real division wasn't over common descent but over human origins—did humans share physical ancestry with animals, or were we specially created?

But this theological discussion was largely confined to seminaries and educated clergy. The average churchgoer had absorbed the general idea of evolution but lacked the theological framework to distinguish between mechanism and materialism, between God working through natural processes and God being replaced by them.

This gap between scholarly conservative theological engagement and popular understanding would prove fatal when William Jennings Bryan arrived in Dayton, transforming a local legal dispute into a national referendum on Christianity and science.

Which brings us back to this very room, where the sometimes-careful distinctions of a generation of Christian scholars would be swept away in the tide of cultural warfare...

II. Scopes Trial and the Shaping of a Public Narrative

The Warfare Model Takes Hold

Before we examine what unfolded in this courtroom in 1925, we must understand the intellectual framework that made the trial's binary narrative seem not only natural but inevitable. The theological engagement with evolution that we explored in the previous section was swimming against an increasingly powerful cultural current—one that insisted science and religion were locked in perpetual warfare.

This current had been gathering force since Andrew Dickson White, Cornell University's first president, published his influential two-volume work *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* in 1896. White's chronicle purported to show how science had gradually emancipated itself from the dead hand of theological interference across every field of human inquiry. From astronomy to anatomy, from geology to geography, White presented a narrative of scientific progress triumphing over religious obscurantism.

White's "warfare model" was not merely an academic exercise. It became a powerful lens through which educated Americans understood the relationship between scientific and religious claims. By 1925, a generation of journalists, educators, and public intellectuals had internalized White's framework. When they looked at disputes over evolution, they saw not the complex theological negotiations that Princeton scholars had been conducting for decades, but rather the latest chapter in science's inevitable victory over superstition.

Historians today recognize significant limitations in his approach, but that his warfare framework became so dominant that it crowded out alternative ways of understanding science-religion interactions. The distinctions that theologians like B.B. Warfield had drawn between evolution as scientific theory and Darwinism as philosophical materialism became invisible within White's paradigm. Either you were on the side of science (and thus progress, reason, and modernity) or you were on the side of religion (and thus tradition, faith, and the past).

This intellectual framework helps explain why the Scopes Trial was almost inevitably framed as "Reason versus Religion" rather than as a complex debate involving multiple Christian perspectives on how to integrate scientific and theological insights. White's warfare model had prepared the American public to see any conflict over evolution in precisely these binary terms.

As we will see, this framework profoundly shaped not only how the trial was covered by the media, but how the participants themselves understood their roles. Bryan and Darrow were not simply legal adversaries; they were, in the public imagination, representatives of two incompatible worldviews whose conflict could only end with the victory of one over the other.

A. The Narrowing of Christian Voices

Now we come to the events that unfolded in this very room one hundred years ago. What happened here represents a profound narrowing of the more diverse theological diversity we just explored in the previous section. The engagement with evolution that characterized late 19th and early 20th century Christianity—was about to be reduced to a simple binary.

The trial that began here in July 1925 was not simply a legal proceeding. It was a cultural collision that would fundamentally reshape how Americans understood the relationship between Christianity and science, forcing a false choice between positions that many Christians had never viewed as mutually exclusive.

To appreciate what was lost, we must recognize what was absent from this courtroom. Missing were the voices of Christians who has a commitment to both biblical authority and intellectual rigor. The distinctions between evolution as a scientific theory and Darwinism as a philosophical worldview—distinctions that had enabled many orthodox Christians to accept aspects of evolutionary science while maintaining traditional theology—found no expression in the proceedings.

B. The Protagonists and Their Limitations

The trial's protagonists represented more than legal positions; they embodied competing worldviews. But in their very prominence, they obscured the middle positions that many Christians actually held. William Jennings Bryan championed populist, old-earth fundamentalism—he was not, we must remember, a young-earth creationist. His opposition to

evolution stemmed largely from his concern about its social implications rather than purely scientific objections.

Bryan's fears were not entirely unfounded. He had witnessed evolution being weaponized for social Darwinism, eugenics, and militarism. In his booklet *The Menace of Darwinism* (1921) which comes from his larger work *In His Image* (1922), he articulated his particular concern about theistic evolution, describing it as "an anesthetic which deadens the pain while the patient's religion is being gradually removed" (Bryan, 1922, p. 18). He viewed it as "a way-station on the highway that leads from Christian faith to No-God-Land."

This perspective reveals the complexity of Bryan's position, which has often been oversimplified in historical memory. He argued that "theistic evolutionists, who travel with the atheists to the beginning of life and then assume the existence of God as Creator of life" were actually "more dangerous to Christian faith than the atheist, because, while claiming to believe in a Creator, he puts God so far away that consciousness of God's presence loses its power to comfort" (Bryan, 1921, pp. 18-19).

The trial emerged from deep cultural anxieties about modernity itself. Rural America felt under siege—traditional values threatened by urbanization, immigration, and modernist ideas. The Butler Act, prohibiting the teaching of human evolution in Tennessee schools, was not merely about science education. It represented broader concerns about identity, morality, and the future of Christian civilization in an increasingly secular age.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this sounds a lot like the conversations we are having today in America.

C. The Missing Voices and Lost Nuance

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Scopes Trial was not the positions taken by either side, but the voices that were never heard. The trial presented Americans with a false dichotomy: choose between Bryan's populist fundamentalism or Darrow's secular modernism. Missing entirely was the tradition of careful theological scholarship that had been developing for over half a century.

Consider what was absent from these proceedings. There was no representation of the Princeton Seminary tradition that had produced scholars like Charles Hodge, who distinguished between evolution as a scientific theory and Darwinism as an atheistic philosophy. Hodge's nuanced position—rejecting unguided natural selection while remaining open to evolution under divine providence—found no voice in this courtroom.

B.B. Warfield's theology, which maintained that "there is no general statement in the Bible or any part of the account of creation, either as given in Genesis 1 and 2 or elsewhere alluded to, that need be opposed to evolution," was not represented (Warfield, 1915, p. 238). The exegetical

work that had allowed many orthodox Christians to embrace both biblical authority and evolutionary science was simply ignored.

The various forms of "evolution" that existed in 1925—from neo-Lamarckism to orthogenesis to theistic evolution—were flattened into a single concept that could be easily attacked or defended. The scientific complexity that scholars like Asa Gray had navigated with theological sophistication was reduced to slogans suitable for newspaper headlines.

D. The Trial's Immediate Aftermath and Cultural Impact

The media narrative that emerged—Reason versus Religion—would prove more influential than the actual legal outcome. This "conflict thesis," later immortalized in plays like *Inherit the Wind* (1955), established a false dichotomy that obscured the diverse theological positions many Christians actually held. The subtle distinctions of Princeton theologians were lost in the theatrical confrontation that captivated the nation.

When Darrow cross-examined Bryan here in this courthouse, the exchange crystallized popular perceptions of an insurmountable divide between religious faith and scientific inquiry. Under the blazing Tennessee sun on the courthouse lawn, Darrow grilled Bryan about biblical literalism. Did Jonah really live in a whale? Were the six days of creation literal 24-hour periods? Bryan's admission that the days might have been longer periods seemed to satisfy neither fundamentalists—which included the nascent sparks of literal-day creationism that were rapidly growing—nor modernists.

Bryan's struggles to defend a literal reading of Genesis became, in the public imagination, evidence of religion's intellectual bankruptcy. What the spectacle failed to convey was that many thoughtful Christians had already developed theologically diverse yet orthodox approaches to these very questions—approaches that neither required abandoning biblical authority nor rejecting scientific evidence.

E. Institutional Casualties

Scopes was convicted and fined \$100, but the real damage extended far beyond the courtroom. The trial's aftermath witnessed a systematic retreat of evolution from American education. Textbook publishers quietly removed evolution from biology texts, with the word itself disappearing and being replaced by euphemisms like "development" and "change over time." Evolution went underground in American education for several decades.

Even Clarence Darrow recognized the paradox of his supposed victory. Returning for the tenth anniversary in 1935 and observing a new church rising on Main Street, he remarked with evident disappointment: "We didn't do so much good after all" (Larson, 1997). The trial that was

supposed to represent reason's triumph over superstition had instead deepened the very divide it purported to bridge.

The institutional casualties mounted in the years following the trial. Princeton Seminary, that bastion of Reformed orthodoxy where Warfield had taught evolution's compatibility with orthodox faith, was reorganized in 1929. The old guard, including J. Gresham Machen, left to found Westminster Seminary. The middle ground—that space where rigorous theology could engage seriously with scientific discovery—was vanishing.

F. A Personal Reflection on Lost Opportunities

Standing here a century later, I feel the weight of what was lost in this very room. The Princeton tradition that my grandfathers inherited (that commitment to both intellectual rigor and theological orthodoxy) was swept away by this cultural tsunami. The careful, scholarly engagement with science that had characterized the best of Christian thought gave way to the polarized positions that would define the next century of debate.

I wonder what might have been different if J. Gresham Machen had accepted Bryan's invitation to testify as an expert witness. Would anything have changed? Would the presence of more sophisticated theological voices have altered the narrative that emerged from these proceedings? I suspect not—and we do not get do-overs in history. But we can learn from what was lost.

The tragedy was not that Christians disagreed about origins. Christian theology has always grappled with complex questions, and disagreement within orthodoxy is neither new nor necessarily problematic. The tragedy was that a publicity stunt in a small Tennessee town would define the terms of engagement for a century. A growing dialogue that had included sophisticated theological reflection on evolution and faith gave way to culture war. Nuance surrendered to slogans.

Even today, both young-earth creationists and those comfortable with evolutionary theory might be surprised by how little their current positions resemble what their predecessors believed in 1925. Young-earth creationists would likely find themselves uncomfortable with some of Bryan's specific views and his fusion of faith with populist politics. Those comfortable with evolution today would similarly find significant differences between contemporary theistic evolution and what passed for evolutionary thought a century ago.

III. From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism: The Second Divide-

The aftermath of Scopes contributed to the catalyzation of not one, but two major realignments in American Protestantism. The first split we have already seen was between liberalism and fundamentalism, had been brewing since the late 19th century. But the second split—between

fundamentalism and the emerging evangelical movement in the 1940s—would prove equally consequential for how Christians approached evolution. A new generation dissatisfied with aspects of fundamentalism emerged who rejected both modernist theology and fundamentalists anti-intellectualism.

These "new evangelicals" or "neo-evangelicals" shared fundamentalism's theological convictions but not its cultural separatism and anti-intellectual tendencies. Carl Henry's 1947 manifesto *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* captured their critique: fundamentalism had become so focused on fighting modernism that it has abandoned cultural engagement and intellectual rigor.

A. Dividing Conservative American Protestantism 1940 to 1960

These "new evangelicals" or "neo-evangelicals" shared fundamentalism's theological convictions but not its cultural separatism and anti-intellectual tendencies. Carl Henry's 1947 manifesto *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* captured their critique: fundamentalism had become so focused on fighting modernism and the degradation of society that it abandoned broader cultural engagement and intellectual rigor.

Let's see how the origins and life of Christian institutions tell the story:

1942: National Association of Evangelicals Around the same time a new umbrella organization, the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), formed. Led by its first president Harold John Ockenga, the NAE offered a middle way between rigid fundamentalism and liberal modernism. By uniting some Baptists, Wesleyans, Pentecostals, and Reformed groups, it created space for theological discussion without immediately rejecting scientific discoveries and insights. Unity around essentials, freedom on secondary issues (including origins) was a central theme.

1947: Fuller Seminary The establishment of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, combined with Carl Henry's influential book "The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism," embodied the neo-evangelical vision. Fuller combined rigorous academic standards with evangelical convictions, encouraging critical engagement with biblical scholarship, philosophy, and natural sciences. Some of this even came later to coopt some aspects of higher criticism that had been one of the fault lines in the modernist-fundamentalist division.

1947: Evangelical Theological Society was founded in 1947 as a professional society for theologians and pastors. It began with a singular doctrinal statement: "The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs." Society meetings over the years have featured debates on age of the earth and historical Adam.

1956: Christianity Today The founding of Christianity Today in 1956 provided an intellectual forum that could critically examine cultural trends and engage with scientific discussions. While

not championing evolution, its editorial stance allowed for considering scientific findings and their theological implications.

Billy Graham's 1957 New York crusade symbolized evangelicalism's willingness to engage mainstream culture. When Graham reportedly said "whichever way God did it makes no difference," he reflected a new evangelical confidence that orthodox faith could thrive in conversation with the modern world rather than in opposition to it.

By 1960, much, but not all, evangelicalism had established an identity that affirmed biblical inspiration without insisting on literal six-day creation. This hermeneutical openness included willingness to consider ancient Near Eastern contexts, literary criticism, and various interpretive possibilities for Genesis—providing the groundwork for future discussions of theistic evolution.

The institutional milestones we've traced—the NAE's inclusive posture, Fuller Seminary's academic ambitions, Henry's theological vision, and Christianity Today's editorial voice—all contributed to a new evangelical identity that valued thoughtful engagement over polemical isolation. While theistic evolution was not yet mainstream within evangelicalism, the conditions necessary for greater acceptance were being laid.

1941: American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) In 1941, the American Scientific Affiliation was founded, bringing together scientists who professed Christian faith for real dialogue. The ASA's early membership represented a remarkable diversity, from young-earth creationists to theistic evolutionists. Their statement of faith affirmed biblical authority but took no position on the age of the earth or the mechanism of creation.

Young-earth creationists presented alongside old-earth creationists and even theistic evolutionists. They published rigorous papers, held conferences, created networks. This was the evangelical mind at work—faith seeking understanding.

We will come back to the fate of this organization momentarily.

Institutional Trajectories: These institutional developments reveal a recurring pattern in American religious organizations that extends far beyond the specific question of evolution. Religious institutions tend to follow one of two predictable trajectories over time. The first pattern begins with broad-tent coalitions that emphasize unity around core doctrinal essentials while allowing diversity on secondary issues. However, as these organizations mature, internal tensions often emerge when particular constituencies feel that certain doctrines cannot be compromised. This dynamic typically leads to institutional fracturing, with splinter groups forming new organizations characterized by more restrictive doctrinal boundaries and heightened theological specificity.

The second pattern operates in reverse: organizations founded on very conservative principles with strong doctrinal unity may gradually drift toward theological liberalism over successive generations. This institutional "creep" often occurs as leadership changes, academic pressures mount, and cultural accommodation increases. When this liberalization becomes pronounced, traditionalist groups within the organization frequently splinter off to form new institutions designed to recapture and preserve the original doctrinal commitments.

Both trajectories reflect the persistent tension between institutional stability and theological integrity that characterizes American religious life.

B. Progressive Creationism (1950s to Present)

Progressive Creationism emerged during this period of evangelical openness as a sophisticated theological response to mounting geological and astronomical evidence for an ancient earth. Pioneered by figures like Bernard Ramm in his influential 1954 work *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, Progressive Creationism represented the intellectual confidence of the new evangelical movement—maintaining high biblical authority while engaging seriously with scientific discoveries. Unlike the rigid six-day literalism of fundamentalism, progressive creationists accepted deep geological time and proposed that God created through a series of special interventions over vast epochs, creating increasingly complex life forms culminating in humanity. This position allowed evangelicals to acknowledge the fossil record and earth's antiquity while preserving belief in direct divine creative acts (interruptions of normal providence), particularly for complex organisms and human beings.

Progressive Creationism's approach to evolutionary theory was one of selective acceptance—embracing the evidence for deep time and some natural processes while rejecting universal common descent. Adherents argued that God employed both natural mechanisms and supernatural intervention, creating new "kinds" of organisms at strategic points throughout earth's history. This position dominated much of evangelical academia through the 1950s, providing intellectual respectability for conservative Christians in university settings. However, Progressive Creationism's influence waned dramatically after 1961 with the publication of *The Genesis Flood*, which reinvigorated young-earth perspectives and positioned them as the "truly biblical" alternative. Today, while some evangelicals still hold some form of progressive creationist views, most notably Hugh Ross and the organization he began, *Reasons to Believe* (1986) which espouses a day-age interpretation of Genesis and many aspects of the progressive creationism (also called Old-Earth Creationism), the position lacks the institutional support it once enjoyed, overshadowed by the continued polarization between young-earth creationism and evolutionary creation in contemporary discussions.

IV. 1960 to 2000: The Rise of Young-Earth Creationism and a New Antievolution Wave

The Watershed Moment of 1961

Then came 1961, a year that would fundamentally alter the landscape of Christian engagement with science. John Whitcomb and Henry Morris published *The Genesis Flood*, transforming what had been a relatively marginal position within conservative Christianity into a movement that would capture the imagination of millions. This was not merely another book about biblical interpretation—it was a manifesto that reframed the entire discussion by wrapping young-earth creationism in the language of modern science.

What makes this moment so significant is not that it introduced young-earth views to Christianity—such perspectives had always existed. Rather, *The Genesis Flood* accomplished something unprecedented: **it convinced a broad evangelical audience that accepting an old earth was tantamount to compromising biblical authority.** As you will learn in the next talk, this was certainly not the beginning of modern young-earth creationism, but it certainly marks the expansion of creationism into the consciousness of a much broader Christian audience, spreading rapidly into many fundamentalist and evangelical denominations over the following four decades.

The Collapse of Unity and Diversity

The effect was dramatic, particularly within the American Scientific Affiliation. ASA members who embraced *The Genesis Flood* grew increasingly frustrated with the organization's openness to old-earth views and evolutionary perspectives. The theological framework that had allowed figures like B.B. Warfield to distinguish between evolution as a process and evolution as a worldview seemed like dangerous compromise. In 1963, the Creation Research Society split off from the ASA, representing those who favored strictly literalist interpretations of Genesis.

This institutional fracture reveals something profound about what was happening to American evangelicalism. The ASA remained committed to intellectual openness, maintaining that scientific inquiry and Christian faith need not be adversarial. But they were increasingly swimming against a cultural tide that demanded clear boundaries and unambiguous positions. The third way, or middle ground if you prefer, that Princeton theologians and others had so carefully cultivated—the space where one could be both rigorously orthodox and scientifically engaged—was collapsing under the weight of institutional pressure.

The Age of the Earth as Cultural Battleground

From 1961 to the 1980s, the age of the earth became a defining issue among conservative evangelical denominations. This focus was strategically brilliant: if the world were young, then no serious discussion of evolution made much sense. The geological timescales required for

evolutionary processes simply would not exist. Morris and Whitcomb had effectively shifted the debate from the mechanism of creation to its chronology, forcing Christians to choose between scientific consensus and what was presented as biblical fidelity.

The consequences of this shift cannot be overstated. Where earlier generations of Christians had begun to wrestle with complex questions about divine action, natural law, and biblical interpretation, a new generation was again being offered a stark binary: **young earth equals faithful Christian, old earth equals compromise with secular humanism**. The parallels with the early 1900s cannot be ignored. It was the same sentiment that Bryan expressed about theistic evolution – *it is the weigh station on the way to no-God land*.

Even as young-earth creationists gained in influence, they gradually turned their attention from defending a young earth to critiquing evolutionary theory more broadly. The focus shifted from positive arguments for recent creation to negative arguments against common descent, particularly human evolution. This tactical evolution had profound implications for how evangelical institutions approached science education and pastoral training.

Personal Institutional Witness

My own experience with two conservative Presbyterian denominations illustrates this broader transformation. Both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) were forced into extensive debates about Genesis and creation throughout the 1990s. Each denomination ultimately established study commissions to examine the range of acceptable creation interpretations. Both concluded that diversity of views regarding the age of the earth was acceptable within their confessional boundaries—a significant concession to the older, more nuanced tradition. However, both placed strict limits on the extent to which common ancestry evolution could be endorsed, and both took their strongest stance against any suggestion of animal ancestry for humans.

My father's experience within the OPC provides a particularly illuminating window into these institutional changes across five decades. In the 1970s, he could comfortably maintain old-earth creationist views without facing questions about his orthodoxy. However, the growing influence of young-earth creationism during the 1980s meant that many pastoral candidates with views identical to his were being rejected during presbytery examinations, not for theological heterodoxy, but for their positions on creation—which to the young-earth creationist contingent was theologically heterodox. The denomination had not officially changed its doctrinal standards, but the interpretive culture had shifted dramatically.

This pattern repeated itself across numerous evangelical institutions. The 2004 OPC creation report, which recommended allowing greater diversity of interpretations of Genesis, represented an attempt to reclaim some of the lost theological breadth. Yet a strong contingent of young-

earth creationists remained influential within the denomination, ensuring that the conversation would continue to be marked by tension rather than resolution even to this day.

The Intelligent Design Alternative and Its Limitations

As young-earth creationism institutionalized through organizations like the Institute for Creation Research and Answers in Genesis, another approach emerged in the early 1990s that would also affect evangelical thinking about evolution. The Intelligent Design movement, pioneered by figures like Phillip Johnson and Michael Behe, offered what appeared to be a "third way" that critiqued materialist evolution without requiring commitment to young-earth chronology or the dramatic geological paradigm shifts it demanded.

Unlike creation science, ID focused on detecting design in biological complexity rather than defending biblical literalism. This strategic approach allowed it to gain hearings in academic contexts where young-earth arguments had been summarily dismissed. For many evangelicals, ID provided what sounded like a scientifically respectable way to resist purely naturalistic accounts of life's origin and development. I expect last 19th century conservative Christians would have found many of the tenets of ID attractive.

Yet ID also complicated the landscape in unexpected ways. While it attracted support from both young-earth creationists and some theistic evolutionists, it ultimately satisfied neither group completely. Young-earth advocates appreciated the critique of Darwinism but noted that ID didn't necessarily support a literalistic biblical chronology. Theistic evolutionists, meanwhile, argued that ID's focus on detecting discrete supernatural interventions missed the likely reality of God working predominantly through natural (providential) processes rather than providing scientific evidence of God's action in historical events.

I am necessarily grossly oversimplifying the many responses but the bottom line is that the movement gained considerable attention for more than a decade, achieving its greatest visibility through attempts to integrate intelligent design into school curricula as an alternative to evolutionary theory. However, its last significant legal effort failed decisively in the 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* case. Since that time, ID has published a number of popular books but has not made any significant new inroads in the science and religion discussion, though it continues to influence popular evangelical thinking about evolution in some evangelical and fundamentalists circles.

The Institutional Legacy of Division

This institutional history matters profoundly because it shapes our present moment. Every Christian organization dealing with origins questions today inherits this legacy of division. The difficult middle ground of allowing diverse interpretations that attempt to maintain theological

orthodoxy while allowing space for members and institutions to earnestly examine new evidence and ideas struggles to find institutional homes and sustained funding.

We have arrived at our current moment—churches splitting over creation views, seminary professors signing detailed statements on Genesis interpretation, Christian schools choosing curricula based on origins positions. The very thing that earlier figures like Machen had tried to avoid—making evolution a central battleground for Christian orthodoxy—had come to pass.

But the story isn't over. Even as these divisions deepened, new voices emerged in the 21st century, attempting once again to bridge the divide...

V. Bridging Science and Faith in the Twenty-First Century

The Origins of BioLogos and Contemporary Evolutionary Creation

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented expansion in Christian discussions of evolutionary theory, particularly regarding human origins. This period has necessitated substantive theological reflection on doctrines that evolutionary science challenges.

Three theological challenges persist at the forefront of these discussions. **Theodicy** poses fundamental questions: if God employed evolutionary processes in creation, how do Christians reconcile the extensive suffering and extinction evident in the fossil record with divine benevolence? **Human uniqueness** raises hermeneutical concerns: how do Christians understand the *imago Dei* if scientific evidence demonstrates our shared common ancestry with other primates? **Original sin** presents doctrinal complexities: without a historical Fall involving the first human pair, how do Christians explain universal human sinfulness and the need for redemption?

These discussions have permeated denominational statements, academic conferences, and study groups, generating extensive scholarly literature and ongoing debates that continue to shape contemporary Christianity.

A. Francis Collins and the BioLogos Vision

The completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003 provided unprecedented insights into human genetic composition, revealing our deep biological connections to all life while simultaneously raising profound questions about human uniqueness and divine image-bearing. At the center of this scientific and theological transformation stood Francis Collins—former atheist, distinguished genome scientist who directed the Human Genome Project, and committed Christian convert.

Collins's 2006 publication *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* provided influential personal testimony of a scientist's faith journey, demonstrating that rigorous scientific training and devout Christian faith could not only coexist but mutually enrich each

other (Collins, 2006). The book became a cultural phenomenon, achieving bestseller status and giving many evangelicals intellectual permission to consider evolutionary theory seriously. Here was no liberal theologian or secular scientist, but a world-class researcher who maintained personal devotional practices, participated actively in Christian worship, and accepted evolution as God's method of creation.

Collins introduced the new term "BioLogos"—derived from the Greek *bios* (life) and *logos* (word)—conceptualizing life as emerging through the Word of God, with evolutionary processes serving as God's creative language. In 2007, supported by funding from the Templeton Foundation, he established the BioLogos Foundation to promote this integration of evolutionary science and Christian faith.

BioLogos represented a departure in the evangelical landscape. Unlike the American Scientific Affiliation's primarily academic focus, BioLogos deliberately targeted pastors, educators, and parents—the church's grassroots constituency. The organization produced accessible digital content, including videos, curricula, and blog posts, while organizing conferences that brought together scientists, theologians, and pastors focused on biological sciences and faith integration. Only in recent years has BioLogos expanded its mission to address broader science-faith questions beyond evolution.

B. Expanding the Evangelical Dialogue

This movement attracted influential theological allies, extending far beyond scientific circles. N.T. Wright, a widely respected biblical scholar, endorsed evolutionary creation as compatible with orthodox Christian theology. Presbyterian Church of America pastor Tim Kellor from the late 20th century Princeton tradition engaged in discussions about evolutionary creation. Alister McGrath, possessing doctorates in both molecular biology and theology, provided theological frameworks for understanding divine action within evolutionary processes. John Walton, Wheaton College professor, contributed a perspective on Genesis interpretation through his ancient Near Eastern scholarship, arguing that Genesis addresses functional rather than material origins.

The movement's terminology reflected deeper theological concerns. "Theistic evolution" linguistically prioritized evolution, with God functioning as a qualifying adjective. "Evolutionary creation" deliberately reversed this hierarchy—creation serves as the primary noun, with evolution merely describing the type of creative process. While critics, sometimes including myself, were skeptical of the uniqueness of the terms thinking this was just semantics designed to escape the deistic and modernist associations that had burdened theistic evolution, adherents argued it represented a fundamental theological shift: God as primary cause working through secondary natural causes.

Contemporary evolutionary creationists showed considerable diversity in their understanding of divine action within creation. Some embrace "front-loaded" creation models, proposing that God established initial conditions that inevitably produce biological complexity through natural processes. Others maintain ongoing divine intervention undetectable by scientific methodology. Still others explore sophisticated models of divine cooperation with creation's inherent freedom and capacity for self-organization.

The question of Human origins remains the most challenging issue for evolutionary creationists and theistic evolutionists. Dennis Venema and Scot McKnight's *Adam and the Genome* (2017) presented genetic evidence indicating that humanity descended from a population rather than a single pair of individuals. Joshua Swamidass, in *The Genealogical Adam and Eve* (2019), proposed a "genealogical first pair" model—distinguishing between genetic ancestry and genealogical ancestry to suggest that Adam and Eve could serve as universal genealogical ancestors without being humanity's sole genetic progenitors. These scholarly contributions and many others demonstrate how the conversation has evolved far beyond simple acceptance or rejection of evolutionary theory.

C. The Ham-Nye Debate: A Digital-Age Echo of 1925

The persistence of creation-evolution debates became strikingly apparent on February 4, 2014, when Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis challenged Bill Nye "The Science Guy" to debate "Is Creation a Viable Model of Origins?" at Ham's Creation Museum in Kentucky. The parallels to the Scopes Trial were remarkable: a celebrity scientist (Nye) confronting a populist defender of biblical creation (Ham), with massive media attention—over 3 million viewers watched live online, making it the top trending topic on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter simultaneously.

Yet the differences proved equally significant. While William Jennings Bryan in 1925 advocated old-earth creationism and focused on evolution's social implications, Ham defended young-earth creationism using arguments about DNA information and distinguishing between "observational" and "historical" science. Nye possessed far more scientific evidence than Clarence Darrow could have imagined in 1925—complete genome sequences, transitional fossils, and documented speciation events. The debate occurred not in a legal courtroom but in a privately funded museum, reflecting how fundamentalists had constructed parallel institutions following their post-Scopes retreat from mainstream academia.

The aftermath revealed both continuity and change in public opinion. Online polls showed 92% of respondents favoring Nye scientifically, yet Gallup surveys indicated that 40-47% of Americans still believed "God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years"—remarkably similar to 1925 attitudes. Critics argued that Nye had legitimized Ham's position simply by engaging in formal debate, echoing concerns that the Scopes Trial had inadvertently elevated fundamentalism's public profile.

D. Current Landscape and Challenges

By 2025, the landscape reveals both significant progress and persistent challenges. Empirical studies indicate growing acceptance of evolutionary theory among younger evangelicals, yet institutional resistance remains formidable. Many evangelical colleges maintain doctrinal statements explicitly rejecting evolutionary perspectives, illustrating how creation views continue serving as theological boundary markers in evangelical education.

The generational impact appears substantial. BioLogos resources appear in Christian college curricula, substantial literature and other media are widely available for public consumption support any number of viewpoints. However, resistance to evolution remains substantial from organizations like Answers in Genesis, which regularly critique "compromising" Christians who accept evolution.

VI. 2025 and Beyond: What Have We Learned?

One hundred years later I must ask, what has really changed? The similarities are, well, sobering.

We still see deep polarization between "science" and "faith" camps. Media sensationalism still drives our narratives—though now it's Twitter or X wars instead of newspaper headlines. Political exploitation of this divide continues. Identity markers still trump thoughtful engagement. And yes, we're still fighting state battles over science education standards.

Table 1: Christian Cultural Engagement: 1925 vs. 2025 Comparison

Category	1925 Features	2025 Features
Cultural Battlegrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evolution vs. Creation Modernism vs. Fundamentalism; Prohibition enforcement Who controls education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evolution vs Creation Gender/sexuality issues Religious liberty vs. pluralism Artificial intelligence/biotechnology Political nationalism
Institutional Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public schools dominant Denominational Seminaries centralize doctrinal oversight Limited lay theological participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional fragmentation into multiple competing organizations (BioLogos, AiG, Discovery Institute, ASA, Reasons to Believe) Greater educational diversity (Christian schools, homeschooling, secular universities) Democratization of authority where anyone can be theologian online Celebrity pastors with platform-based influence
Theological Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modernism vs Fundamentalism Limited access to scholarly works Professional gatekeeping with Seminary- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple frameworks (Progressive creation, evolutionary creation, intelligent design, young earth) Massive theological libraries and digital access

Category	1925 Features	2025 Features
Political Engagement	controlled discourse	Populist theology with substantial lay leaders and engagement
	Old-earth creationism dominant	
	Prohibition primary focus but human evolution is a flashpoint as well	Court battles, legislative lobbying, presidential politics
	Protestant cultural dominance assumed	Christianity as one voice among many
	State-by-state education battles	National scope of cultural issues
	Individual moral behavior emphasis	Institutional transformation sought

The comparison between 1925 and 2025 reveals both striking continuities and significant transformations in how Christians engage with cultural issues. While the evolution versus creation debate remains a persistent battleground across both eras, the scope of contested issues has expanded considerably. Where 1925 Christians primarily grappled with evolution, modernism versus fundamentalism, prohibition enforcement, and educational control, contemporary believers navigate additional complex terrain including gender and sexuality issues, religious liberty versus pluralism concerns, artificial intelligence and biotechnology ethics, and political nationalism. This expansion reflects the increasing complexity of modern society and the multiplication of issues requiring theological reflection and cultural engagement.

The institutional landscape has undergone dramatic restructuring over the past century. The 1925 Christian community operated within a relatively centralized authority structure dominated by public schools and denominational seminaries that controlled doctrinal oversight, with more limited opportunities for lay theological participation. By contrast, the 2025 environment exhibits significant institutional fragmentation, with multiple competing organizations such as BioLogos, Answers in Genesis, the Discovery Institute, and others vying for influence. This decentralization has coincided with greater educational diversity through Christian schools, homeschooling, and secular universities, alongside a democratization of theological authority where digital platforms enable broader participation in theological discourse, though often under the influence of celebrity pastors with platform-based authority.

The political dimensions of Christian engagement have similarly changed. Political involvement has expanded from primarily individual moral behavior emphasis and state-level educational battles to comprehensive institutional transformation efforts conducted through court battles, legislative lobbying, and presidential politics, reflecting Christianity's transition from assumed cultural dominance to functioning as one voice among many in an increasingly pluralistic society.

One topic that is certain to continue to challenge evangelical Christianity: Evolution—especially human evolution. It will continue to elicit strong emotional reactions and play a role in political and cultural divisions.

At the 200th Anniversary...

In our present climate I'm not too optimistic that we will fare any better than our predecessors, but the next century demands that we wrestle with more light and less heat than our predecessors. In this historic room where positions hardened into battle lines, let us commit to something better.

I expect that at the 200th anniversary, many of the same words that I have just said will be spoken again with equal conviction. The dialogue between science and faith isn't ending—it continues to evolve. Each generation must wrestle with questions of origins, who we are, and how we share those stories with each other.

The trial is over. The conversation continues. How will you contribute?

Thank you.

Joel Duff, 7-17-25, Dayton TN

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