

Ecclesial Unity and Creation Doctrine

By William VanDoodewaard

One of the great challenges in evangelical and Reformed churches in creation-evolution debates is the problem of church unity. Concern over ecclesiastical division is real. Many evangelicals prefer not to hold a strong position on creation because of it. Non-creationists often say that creation is a secondary matter that we can disagree about. Creationists see it as the beginning of everything; error here erodes all that comes after. Particular understanding of aspects of creation may not be essential to salvation, but are nonetheless significant to our faith. As evident in the more recent history of Presbyterianism in North America, there are varied views on where boundary lines should be drawn in relation to ordinations, confessional subscription, and local church membership.¹ With these realities, how can local churches and denominations faithfully navigate deeply held differences, including determined ambivalence? How can we avoid splitting churches over genuinely unimportant matters, as has occurred at times in Protestantism? Beginning with the doctrine of the unity of the church, this article explores how to navigate

issues of creation doctrine in relation to both ecclesial unity and a confessional commitment to the whole of Scripture as God's Word.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, became incarnate, lived, suffered, died and rose so that all Christians, through union with him, would be restored to communion with the Triune God, in one body, the church. Michael Horton helpfully reflects "the church has its origin in the decision of the Triune God and is created by God's Word ... it is born 'from above.'"² In His marvelous High Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus prays for His redeemed, "I ask ... that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us.... The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as you loved Me"

THE AUTHOR: William VanDoodewaard (PhD, University of Aberdeen), is Academic Dean and Professor of Church History at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is the author of *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics, and Human Origins* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2015) and other scholarly books and articles. He lives in Greenville with his wife Rebecca and their children.

1. This is evidenced in recent decades in several confessional Presbyterian denominations. In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) case of Ruling Elder Terry Gray in Michigan, Gray held that the record of natural history should allow for the possibility that Adam and Eve were created through a process involving primate ancestors. Charges were brought against Gray at the Presbytery level; Gray then appealed to the General Assembly, which denied his appeal. Terry Gray, "A Letter to the Committee of Five in Response to the First Draft of the Charges, March 14, 1994," Documents Related to the Evolution Trial in the OPC at The American Scientific Affiliation, http://www.asa3.org/gray/evolution_trial/response_to_PM-Wcharges.html. See also Terry Gray, "Excerpts from the Minutes of

the 63rd General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," Documents Related to the Evolution Trial in the OPC at The American Scientific Affiliation, http://www.asa3.org/gray/evolution_trial/general_assembly_actions.html#anchor8409563. It also became evident in subsequent OPC and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) General Assemblies, as issues of both the days of creation and theistic evolution were addressed: Presbyterian Church of America, *Report of the Creation Study Committee to the 28th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 2302–91; Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation to the 71st General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, pp. 1601–1740. For a narrative history of views among Presbyterians in the 1990's-early 2000's see William VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics and Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), pp. 208–49.

2. Michael Horton, "The Church" in Michael Allen and Scott Swain eds., *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 313.

(John 17:20–23).³ In keeping with Triune unity, Jesus' prayer is that His people, in their union with God in Him, would also experience the blessedness of unity with each other. His prayer finds its early answer as the disciples gather with Him post-resurrection, and as they continued to come together as a body after His ascension, as when the day of Pentecost arrived (Acts 1:4–2:1).

The New Testament narrates the advance of the gospel and growth of the church from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and beyond. As it does we see repeated indicators of the pattern of continued commitment to the divine plan of Christian unity—whether in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), or the love offering of the Mediterranean churches for the impoverished Jerusalem Church (2 Cor. 9). The apostle Paul celebrates Christ's redemptive work “creating in himself one new man”: a church in which all Christians are “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God ... a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:15–22). Christians are to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” understanding that there is “one body” (Eph. 4:1–4) of the church in Christ. In the epistle to the Philippians, Paul urges the church at Philippi, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). In his God-given vision of heaven, the apostle John sees one church in perfect unity, “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10).

3. All Scripture references are from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

4. Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Five: Ecclesiology, The Means of Grace, Eschatology*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), p. 3.

5. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 79.

6. Clement of Rome, 1 *Clement*, 34.7 in Michael Holmes, ed. and trans. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 91.

7. Cyprian, “Epistle XLIII. To the Roman Confessors, That They Should Return to Unity” in *The Epistles of Cyprian in The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 321. See also Mark Edwards, “Early Ecclesiology in the West” in Paul Avis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 169–70.

8. Cyprian, “Treatise I. On the Unity of the Church” in *The Epistles of Cyprian in The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 423–4.

Reflecting on Scripture's teaching in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Geerhardus Vos reminds us that the unity of the church is rooted in the reality that “the individual believer cannot remain by himself ... the work of the application of the merits of the Mediator has a communal side.... Believers were all reckoned in Christ, regenerated by the Spirit of Christ; they were all implanted into Christ in order to form one body.”⁴ Edmund Clowney states “we are to be one because we serve one God.”⁵ This unity of believers in Christ is a reality that every Christian should long to see more and more fully expressed.

The desire for this unity is evident from the early church to today. Clement of Rome encouraged the early church to be “gathered together in harmony, crying out to [the Lord] earnestly, with one mouth, so that we may come to share in his great and glorious promises.”⁶ Several generations later, Cyprian lamented the division of the church into separated bodies in his day, arising from divergence on how to deal with those repenting after lapsing under persecution. “I find that you there, contrary to ecclesiastical order, contrary to evangelical law, contrary to the unity of the Catholic institution, had consented that another bishop should be made. That is what is neither right nor allowable to be done; that another church should be set up; that Christ's members should be torn asunder; that the one mind and body of the Lord's flock should be lacerated by a divided emulation ... think not that you are thus maintaining the Gospel of Christ when you separate yourselves from the flock of Christ, and from his peace and concord.”⁷ Cyprian went on to say,

who, then, is so wicked and faithless, who is so insane with the madness of discord, as to believe that the unity of God can be divided, or to dare to tear the garment of the Lord, the Church of Christ? He Himself warns us in His Gospel, “There shall be one flock and one shepherd.” [John 10:16] Does anyone believe that there can be many shepherds in one place, or many flocks? The Apostle Paul urges this same unity: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree with each other and avoid schisms. Be united in the same mind and in the same judgment.” [1 Cor. 1:10.] And again, he says, “Bearing with one another in love, labor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” [Eph. 4:3].⁸

While the history of the church bears testimony to many divisions, the call to church unity continues through the reading, preaching and teaching of the

Scriptures to the present—and is seen in Christian testimony to it.

WHAT ABOUT DOCTRINAL AND PRACTICAL DIVERGENCES?

Just as Scripture clearly indicates the call to Christian unity, it also displays fractures: occasions of division due to divergence within the church, or from the church. In Galatians 2:11–14, the apostle Paul relates an occasion, likely one that led up to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where there was division in the church because of the introduction of error: Peter and others (fellow Christians to Paul) were succumbing to the influence of the circumcision party, undermining the gospel. Through the council at Jerusalem, the church pursued and regained unity in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:28 Paul reflects by the Spirit that for those in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”

Not long after the Jerusalem Council, we see another example of division within the life of the church. Acts 15 records Paul and Barnabas parting ways over a practical disagreement as to whether Mark suitably meets biblical qualifications for missionary service—a breach that is healed some time later, likely through Mark’s evident growth to a place of such service (cf. Col. 4:10–11). In Acts 18 we read of a case of doctrinal error that could have led to division, but did not. Apollos preached eloquently and sincerely in Ephesus, but with incomplete, and as such, misconstrued doctrine. Priscilla and Aquila “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:24–28), proactively strengthening both the ministry and unity of the church.

Scripture not only relates cases of restored unity after division, but also makes plain there are cases of both unwarranted and warranted division. In 1 Corinthians 1 we read of unwarranted division in the church over pulpit favorites when all those who ministered the Word were ministering faithfully (1 Cor. 1:10–17). In 1 Corinthians 5 we read of a case of a man’s sexual immorality, from whom the Corinthian congregation failed to separate itself (1 Cor. 5:1–13). Paul’s exhortation by the Spirit is that separation through discipline is warranted and necessary in this latter situation. The Corinthians listened and acted in disciplinary division, which in time led to repentance, and an ensuing ministry of restoration and reunion of this man to the church body (2 Cor. 2:5–11).

In other biblical situations of divergence of

professing Christians from Christian doctrine and life, division or separation is commended with the awareness that reunion may never occur. The doctrine of the circumcision party in Galatia was contrary to the gospel of Christ; the apostle Paul describes it as “deserting Christ” and “turning to a different gospel” which warrants being “accursed” (Galatians 1:6–9). The testimony of the New Testament is that while the Jerusalem Council brought a restoration of unity for many, not all of the circumcision party returned to faithful gospel commitment in unity with the church (cf. Titus 1:10).

In the epistle to the Philippians, there are those Paul describes with tears who “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18–19). Peter reminds the New Testament church that just as there were false prophets among the people in the Old Testament era, so there “will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies ... bringing upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1). Jude speaks of these false teachers as “scoffers, following their own ungodly passions. It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 18–19). The ascended Christ rebukes the church at Thyatira for tolerating “that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality ...”; he declares that he will separate her and her followers from his church through his judgements (Rev. 2:20).

Scripture testifies to the unity of the church in Christ, along with both right and wrong cases of division. Undoubtedly our calling is to pursue growth in unity which only divides when, how, and in the degree that is consistent with Christ’s call to do so. Faithful Christian unity in communion with God is a beautiful reality: “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity ... it is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1–3).

“THEOLOGICAL TRIAGE”

So how do we discern when division is needed, and when it is illegitimate? Reflecting on Scripture, confessional and evangelical Protestant theologians have sought to answer these questions, while avoiding errors of ecumenism or separatism that fail to cohere with the Word that defines both the church and her unity. More recent evangelical Protestant reflection

has followed a model of “theological triage”, as initially outlined by Albert Mohler, and further elucidated and applied by Gavin Ortlund in his *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*.⁹ Mohler speaks of first, second, and third order doctrines; Ortlund develops this further into four categories:

First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself. Second-rank doctrines are urgent for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of local church, denomination, and/or ministry. Third-rank doctrines are important to Christian theology, but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians. Fourth-rank doctrines are unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.¹⁰

Ortlund helpfully cites the concern of theologians ranging from John Calvin and Francis Turretin to Gresham Machen that Christians avoid unnecessary division as he makes the case for wise distinctions of theological importance in relation to the unity of the church.

While including careful nuance that “non-essential” (to salvation and Christian fellowship) doctrine retains significance, the lingering question remains, when reading Ortlund, whether there is in reality a category of biblical doctrines that are “unimportant” to gospel witness and ministry collaboration. Added to this is the challenge that his categorical approach can be applied in very different ways between different Christians: one person’s fourth-rank doctrine may well be another’s second-rank doctrine. Turning to theologians Ortlund cites proves helpful in working towards a more holistic

answer to the need for “theological triage” in ministry that is committed to the unity of the church.

Turretin speaks of distinguishing “fundamental and non-fundamental articles” by considering three areas.¹¹ First, the nature and condition of doctrines (for example are these doctrines “containing necessary causes and conditions of salvation?”).¹² Second, he defines fundamental doctrines as those that are “derived from the declaration of Scripture”, and are “necessary and saving” while “ignorance or denial” of them is spiritually deadly.¹³ Third, Turretin argues that the Apostles Creed provides a “mark of fundamental doctrines” though he notes “we must however be careful” as it is a brief and limited summary of doctrine.¹⁴ Ortlund’s approach has much in common with Turretin here.

Turretin’s statement that fundamental doctrines are shown to be fundamental by the teaching of Scripture provides further direction towards a more holistic model of theological triage.¹⁵ His foundational description of how fundamental doctrines are discerned flows from his subsequent reflection on the authority of the Scriptures:

The Scriptures are inspired of God as the primary foundation of faith. The authority of Scripture is nothing else than the right and dignity of the sacred books, on account of which they are most worthy of faith with regard to those things which they propose to be believed and of our obedience in those things they command us to omit or to do. The divine and infallible truth of these books (which have God for their author) is the foundation because he has the highest right to bind men to faith and duty.¹⁶

Turretin’s reflection on the authority of Scripture as a whole stands in line with the testimony of Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant confessions of faith and catechisms, created to unify churches through shared statements of biblical doctrine in the face of doctrinal division and tumult. The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) states that while God reveals himself through His creation and providence, “He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.”¹⁷ Everything that Scripture reveals is necessary for us to know and believe.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) summarizes it this way: “the Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”¹⁸ The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647) expands on this noting that

9. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” Albert Mohler (blog), last modified July 12, 2005; Mohler, *The Disappearance of God: Dangerous Beliefs in the New Spiritual Openness* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2009), pp. 1–8; Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), pp. 1–152.

10. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), p. 19. Kindle Edition. Later in the volume Ortlund weights the four categories as going from essential, to urgent, important, and indifferent, p. 47.

11. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.52.

12. Turretin, p. 52.

13. Turretin, p. 52.

14. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.53.

15. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.54.

16. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.62.

17. Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 2.

18. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 3.

the Scriptures show themselves to be the Word of God “by their majesty and purity, by the consent [agreement] of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God.”¹⁹ The Westminster statements confess that divine revelation presents a unity of truth. A repeated theme of the era of Reformation to post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy is the commitment to the fact that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), and as such is the Word that reveals and provides the discernment of necessary truth, along with the interconnection and order of these truths. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) puts it this way:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.... The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.²⁰

Ortlund shares these commitments regarding the inspiration, authority, order and unity of Scripture, yet they also provide ground for helpful nuance and revision of his four categories of theological triage.²¹ They raise a question that crosses the bounds of the categories of “theological triage”: if all Scripture is divine revelation (as it is) and an individual Christian, or a church, knows a “lesser doctrine” to be true, can they in good conscience let it go by allowing teaching to the contrary, where they have been granted a role or place in determining the bounds of ecclesial teaching? Or to put it in other words, is there any doctrine taught by Scripture that is unimportant to gospel witness and ministry collaboration, as Ortlund describes his “fourth-rank” category? From the testimony of the Reformed confessions this can only be said in an ultimate sense of a doctrine, or perhaps practice, which is not actually taught by Scripture, and falls into a category of adiaphora. This, however, does not negate the reality, which Ortlund and others have sought to elucidate, that within biblical doctrine there is an order or weight of doctrine, which corresponds to an order or weight of error: “all heresies are errors, but not all errors are heresy.”²²

In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin puts forward this premise in relation to doctrine and church unity, “[We ought not to grant] ... that the church

exists where God’s Word is not found. For this is the abiding mark with which the Lord has sealed His own: “everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” [John 18:37]. Likewise: “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep, and they know Me” [John 10:14]. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” [John 10:27] ... Paul reminds us that the church was founded not upon men’s judgments, not upon priesthods, but upon the teaching of apostles and prophets [Eph. 2:20] ... To sum up, since the Church is Christ’s Kingdom, and he reigns by His Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words [cf. Jer.7:4] by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from His scepter, that is His most holy Word?” (4.2.4.)²³

How did Calvin apply this in his own ministry? While holding firmly to biblical truth, he realized that there were matters in the life of the church, where confused and errant opinions did not “harm the sum of religion” nor cause “loss of salvation.”²⁴ “Fault may creep into the administration of doctrine or sacraments but this ought not so estrange us from communion within the church.”²⁵ Incorrect doctrine could range in severity from heresy (precluding the possibility of salvation) to error of various degrees. Lesser errors “do not break the unity of the faith.”²⁶ Living in unity in the church meant assisting the weak and bearing with the ignorant, while continuing to pursue Reformation according to the whole of Scripture: “I would not support even the slightest errors with the thought of fostering them through flattery and connivance ... but we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church.”²⁷ Calvin encouraged John Knox to be patient with the ceremonies taking place in worship during his tumultuous time in Frankfurt. He encouraged English Christians to be patient with episcopacy, and held that individual believers, for the sake of the unity of the church, should honor their ordained leaders, even as they prayed for greater reformation of the church. Calvin writes to Farel that “there are many things which we must endure,

19. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 4.

20. Westminster Confession of Faith, “Of the Holy Scripture” 1.6, 1.10.

21. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, pp. 75–79.

22. Mark Jones, “When Calling Someone a Heretic...” *Reformation21.org*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/error-versus-heresy.php>.

23. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.2.4.

24. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

25. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

27. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

because it is not in our power to correct them.”²⁸ Overall it seems Calvin believed that

Those attempting to reform their church and country could tolerate more than those who had already attained a reformed church . . . it would be unacceptable for the church in Geneva (which had done away with certain ceremonies) to allow that which he encouraged refugees in Wesel [a city dominated by Lutherans] to tolerate.²⁹

While there is no doubt, as Ortlund helpfully reminds us, that a sense of the ranking of doctrinal importance is essential to a patient and faithful ministry that cherishes the unity of the church, Calvin, Turretin, and Protestant confessions on the nature of divine revelation, priorities of doctrine, and ministry, challenge the idea of “fourth-rank” doctrines that are truly unimportant. If the doctrines are biblical doctrines, a lower order, along with contextual ministry circumstances, can rightly call us to focus on greater priorities, yet, they remain God-given truths we also desire to see growth in, and prevent regress from.³⁰ A model of triage which takes this wider scope into fuller consideration can be expressed as follows:

28. John Calvin, “Letter to Farel, Geneva, 19th July 1553” in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 7.419.

29. Timothy Pierce, “Unity and Schism: Calvin’s Thoughts on the Unity of the Church.” Unpublished manuscript, 2023.

30. The Scottish Presbyterian theologian James Durham (1622–58) provides a detailed attempt in his work *Concerning Scandal* to assess varieties of error in the life of the church, and provide a general template for Christian response to error. Durham helpfully notes not only distinctions in degree of error, but also distinctions between individuals in error: some may hold to error because of weakness and confusion in understanding, where others may not only hold, but actively teach an error in knowing opposition to the truth. Durham warns against both an “unlimited toleration of all errors” and “an indifferent, rigid, equal pursuing, or not enduring everything that is an error.” James Durham, “Concerning Doctrinal Scandals,” in *Concerning Scandal*, ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 1990), pp. 163–4.

31. The first two points are identical to Ortlund’s, the third is modified. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, p. 19.

32. Further resources in this area include David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: The Covenant Foundation, 2001), pp. 1–321; William Dunlop and James Buchanan, *The Uses of Creeds and Confessions of Faith* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1857), pp. 17–195; James Bannerman, “Scripture Principles on the Lawfulness and Duty of Union Between Separate Churches” in *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), pp. 857–69.

- First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself. One cannot be a Christian without commitment to them.
- Second-rank doctrines are urgent for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of local church, denomination, and/or ministry.
- Third-rank doctrines are important to Christian theology, but in general not enough to justify separation or division among Christians. Understanding of third-rank doctrines is not required for church membership. However, depending on its nature, teaching contrary to these doctrines may be ecclesially precluded in some church contexts, and could warrant action leading to discipline in a local church or denomination.³¹
- All ranks of doctrine taught by Scripture are to be believed, cherished, and promoted, whatever level of importance any particular doctrine may have internal to the system of truth revealed in Scripture (cf. Matt. 6:17–19; Rev. 22:18–19). Other doctrines or practices, which are not taught by Scripture explicitly or implicitly, and are not contrary to Scripture, are adiaphorous, and as such unimportant to gospel witness and collaboration.

Factors of consideration in applying this holistic understanding of theological triage include the present contextual distinction between the relationships and roles of individuals, and the level of responsibility this creates in pursuing truth and addressing error within the life of the church in its entirety. This includes ecclesiastical distinction in relationship between fellow Christians from different denominations who share substantial Christian doctrine, yet differ in important areas (ie. Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, etc.), to distinctions in ecclesiastical roles within a denomination. Those ordained to preach, teach and shepherd bear a greater weight of doctrinal responsibility and expectation than those occupying the general office of believer.³² Exegesis, hermeneutical understanding, and an awareness of the understanding of Scripture in the history of the church are foundational tools in pursuing unity in truth and love.

UNDERSTANDING HIERARCHY AND CONNECTIVITY IN CREATION DOCTRINE

So how can we best pursue unity in the church in relation to the doctrine of creation? We can find good answers through applying this modified form of “theological triage” to key facets of creation doctrine, enabling a positive understanding of primary to lesser

truths without a loss of the importance of any divinely revealed truth. To do so the remainder of this article will consider three areas: (1) creation *ex nihilo* as a free act of the Triune God, (2) the special creation of humanity, and (3) the days and duration or age of creation. These areas do not exhaustively cover the doctrine of creation, but they do provide a beginning point for reflection and include some of the more contentious matters in recent church history. Beyond the scope of the article is the reality that practical application of pursuing and maintaining doctrinal understanding and commitment to creation doctrine will vary contextually, though in every case it must be undergirded by love for truth, unity, and spiritual vitality in Christ. Glorifying God through delight in and commitment to his Word goes hand in hand with steadfast, wise, and patient love for the church and her individual members.

Creation ex nihilo as a free act of the Triune God

Creation *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) as a free act of the Triune God is a foundational Christian doctrine of primary significance. God does not reveal himself in Genesis 1 as “a cosmic sculptor who, in human fashion, with preexisting material produces a work of art, but as One who merely by speaking, by uttering a word of power, calls all things into being.”³³ Scripture, in the Old and New Testaments, plainly testifies to the reality that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), from nothing. Psalm 33 tells us “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). The apostle John states: “All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). Paul declares that “His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). In Colossians he states, “by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through Him and for Him ... and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15–17). Hebrews notes: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb. 11:3).

The ancient creeds of the church, including the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, reaffirm this truth: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible ... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God... by whom all things were made ... and I believe

in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life.”³⁴ Gregg Allison, reflecting on creedal history, explains:

Explicit in this credo is monotheism, divine omnipotence, and creation of all that exists (outside of God, of course), specifically in the present world but not limited to it... It is this belief that the church from its earliest days has confessed as being the truth in regard to creation.³⁵

Augustine puts it this way: God is “the Creator of all existences but Himself ... no created thing is co-eternal with the Creator.”³⁶

Creation *ex nihilo* as a free act of the Triune God is crucial to both the core and the whole of Christian theology. It is an inextricable corollary of the biblical doctrine of God. God “is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice and truth.”³⁷ God’s creation is finite, temporal, and changeable. God is independent, self-sustaining, ruling over all creation. Creation is dependent on, sustained by, governed by God. Apart from God’s decree and act of creation, along with His sustaining providence, all created things would be non-existent: “He brought the entire world out of non-being into a being that is distinct from His own being.”³⁸ At the same time, “in His simplicity and entire sufficiency the [Triune] God would be wholly Himself” were there no creation.³⁹ God’s act of creation is a free act: “He did not create in response to inner need or outer constraint and could, without loss of perfection, refrain from creating.”⁴⁰ Herman Bavinck states, “true religion distinguishes itself from all other religions by the fact that it construes the relation between God and the world, including man, as that between the Creator and His creature. The idea of an existence apart from and independent of God occurs nowhere in Scripture.”⁴¹ Creation *ex nihilo* is inseparably linked with the biblical

33. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker 2004), 2.417.

34. The quote is from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381).

35. Gregg R. Allison, “Theistic Evolution is Incompatible with Historical Christian Doctrine” in *Theistic Evolution* eds. J.P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, Ann K. Gauger, and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), p. 928.

36. Augustine, *The City of God* trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), pp. 349, 398.

37. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 4.

38. Bavinck, 2.416.

39. John Webster, “Creation out of Nothing” in *Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), p. 131.

40. Webster, “Creation out of Nothing,” p. 139.

41. Bavinck, 2.407.

Creator/creature distinction. Alternatives range from atheism to dualism to pantheism, possibilities including a range of gods who are fundamentally unlike the God of the Bible. Patristic theologians understood this, affirming “creation *ex nihilo* ... against the Platonic idea of the eternity of matter” as well as against the polytheistic construals of origins.⁴² Wayne Grudem helpfully sums one alternative: “were we to deny creation out of nothing, we would have to say some matter has always existed and that it is eternal like God. This idea would challenge God’s independence, his sovereignty, and the fact that worship is due to Him alone.”⁴³ Another alternative, which posits that creation is an emanation of the Divine Being, results in a similar divinization of creation. The spiritual alternatives to creation *ex nihilo* as a free act of the Triune God are summed up well in the epistle to the Romans:

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.... For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking ... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! (Rom. 1:19–25)

Knowing God as the One who created all things out of nothing is a gospel doctrine, essential to salvation. It is essential to the identity of God, creation in general, and ourselves. It is essential to biblical categories of sin and salvation in Christ. As such this doctrine is essential to Christian unity. Those in error here must be loved and encouraged to a Christian faith in the God who is “the Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible”, as they do not yet have faith in the God who is or as He is.

The special creation of humanity

A second area of creation doctrine which provides clear boundary markers for ecclesial unity is the area of the creation of humanity, the theology of human origins. Depending on the nature of the variances or errors within this area of doctrine, differences expressed have implications ranging from first to second-rank doctrine, using the model of theological triage presented in this article.

In the past decade the doctrine of human origins has received substantial attention and debate. A traditional “literal” understanding of human origins holds to God’s special, temporally immediate creation of Adam and Eve, Adam from the dust of the ground, and Eve from Adam’s rib, within the span of the sixth day, and apart from any evolutionary biological processes (Genesis 1:26–31, 2:7, 2:21–23).⁴⁴ Why and how this doctrine should remain a demarcation line for ecclesial unity becomes clear after a consideration of its theological implications in contrast to theistic evolutionary alternatives. These implications include a Christian doctrine of man, ethics of human life, marriage and sexuality, the unity of the human race, and the relationship of the doctrines of man, sin, and Christ and salvation.

The traditional approach to the Genesis 1 and 2 account of the creation of Adam and Eve harmonizes with historic Christian understanding of the doctrine of man. While there have been many debates through

42. Allison, pp. 929–30.

43. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 264.

44. The use of “temporally immediate” in relation to the creation of the first couple does not necessitate an *ex nihilo* act and reflects the fact that God used existing, nonliving matter, “the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7) in Adam’s case and Adam’s rib in Eve’s case, in creating them. John Murray correctly notes that Reformation and post-Reformation theologians helpfully used the term “immediate” as a theological term in describing creation *ex nihilo* and “mediate” in describing “a creative action of God, using preexisting material”—speaking of the creation of the soul of man as “immediate” and the body of man as “mediate.” While this was functional in the context of a popular conception of a young earth and a creation week of six generally ordinary days, the functionality of the term “mediate” diminished as its semantic range changed with the increasing acceptance of old earth and evolutionary hypotheses. Charles Hodge’s adjusted use of the term “mediate” as including God’s activity in the course of ordinary providence was commonplace in the nineteenth century and was often synthesized with evolutionary process to form a theistic evolution. B. B. Warfield notes the latter in his essay “Creation, Evolution, and Mediate Creation.” While Warfield’s argument for returning to the earlier definition of “mediate” creation is helpful in relation to the mode of creation, it nonetheless fails to eliminate the possibility of a theistic evolutionary model under supernatural influence when moved into an old earth context. The introduction of the common philosophical concept of temporal immediacy proves helpful here, just as Tertullian’s introduction of a new use for the term “trinity” proved helpful to patristic theology. John Murray, “Immediate and Mediate Creation,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 17, no. 1 (November 1954): 22–43; Charles Hodge, “Mediate and Immediate Creation,” in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:556–74; B. B. Warfield, “Creation, Evolution, and Mediate Creation,” in *B. B. Warfield: Evolution, Science and Scripture—Selected Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 204–5. For a history of biblical interpretation on human origins see VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam: Genesis, Hermeneutics and Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), pp. 1–359.

church history regarding the nature of the image of God in man and the nature of the soul, this approach provides clear foundation and rationale for the image of God in man and his “reasonable and immortal soul.”⁴⁵ Man is a special creation, unique from the rest of creation, not only by virtue of relationship with God, but also because he is made a “living being” in a distinct new creation act of God (Genesis 2:7).⁴⁶

Genesis 1:30 states that the beasts, birds, and creeping things have “the breath of life.” While there is a shared physical reality here between humanity and animals, the activity of Genesis 1:26–28 and Genesis 2:7 and following indicates a significant creational differentiation between humanity and animals. Animals were formed or “brought forth” by God’s creative spoken word. But there is a uniqueness both in the decision to “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” and the recounting of God’s creating man in His own image by forming Adam out of the dust (cf., 1 Cor. 15:45–49). The latter, bearing similarity to the intimate activity of a potter working with clay (cf., Isa. 64:8), is a description immediately followed in the Genesis 2 narrative by the action of breathing “into his nostrils the breath of life” as the culminating activity in the creation of Adam as a “living being.”⁴⁷

God places Adam into a garden cultured and cultivated as a crowning beauty of vegetation and abundant fruitfulness. The emphasis is on God’s special, direct, intimate creative activity—using materials normally incapable of producing human life. This text, along with the rest of Scripture, affirms the uniqueness of humanity as an intentionally separate, unique creation of God, in His image. Where each animal is created “according to its kind” (Gen. 1:25), God states, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This is further emphasized in the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28–30 as God places man as a steward over the rest of creation. Connected with the reality of the temporally immediate creation of Adam and Eve in a mature state apart from evolutionary origins, is the reality that they were fully human, fully God’s image-bearers from the moment of receiving life. This stands in harmony with the wider doctrine of man in Scripture in relation to ethics of life: Adam and Eve’s offspring are seen as coming into living existence at the point of conception (cf., Gen. 4:1, 17), a point clearly reiterated in the Mosaic law (Ex. 21:22–25).

Evolutionary biological models of human origins, while diverse, all posit an inherent and essential connection of humanity in origin to animals and the rest of creation.⁴⁸ In the cases of more conservative models,

this may be modified by any or all of the following factors: (1) the special creation of Eve; (2) the imparting of a soul, and/or conferral of the image of God, at a distinct point in time; and (3) the selection of a specific pair of hominids to become the first humans—though the latter is at times viewed as occurring through the gift of a spiritual relationship rather than any facet of ontological origin. More radical theistic evolutionary models tend to militate against the inclusion of any of these as modifying factors to a human pair or group. The latter propose an evolution of religiosity: through an evolutionary process or processes concurrent with evolution, man enters into conscious relationship with God. Some theistic evolutionary human origin proponents reject a body-soul distinction, and with it the doctrine of an intermediate state between death and the final judgment, clearly moving into the realm of denial of first-rank or primary doctrines of Christianity. Though beyond the scope of this article, among the significant problems for evolutionary biological models of human origins is the doctrine of sin in relation to the fall in Genesis 3.⁴⁹

45. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 17.

46. Most translations take the Hebrew (*nepesh*) and translate it as “soul” or “being.” The English Standard Version translates it as “creature,” which I believe is a weaker choice in this context. While it is rightly noted by a number of commentators and Hebraists that the text is not indicating the imparting of a soul into an as of yet lifeless body, the text is indicating that God here uniquely “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” which at that moment made Adam “a living soul.” I differ here from Bruce Waltke’s application of the semantic uses and range of *nepesh* to Genesis 2:7 in his entry, “napash/nepesh” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:590, and instead follow John Calvin’s comments on Genesis 2:7 in his *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, p. 112. Keil and Delitzsch also provide helpful commentary on the textual and theological issues in *Biblical Commentary on The Old Testament*, pp. 78–80.

47. John Murray argues similarly to Keil and Delitzsch but interestingly cites the Hebrew term for “living soul” as “living creature” in Genesis 2:7 and notes that it is similar to that used in the creation accounts of other creatures in Genesis 1. Murray argues that the content of Genesis 2:7, including the moment and circumstance of becoming a “living creature” rules out the possibility that any part of Adam, including his body, could have been a living creature prior to that point. Murray, “The Origins of Man,” 2:3–13.

48. Comparing the theological implications of human origins according to the traditional “literal” understanding versus alternative models can be challenging because of the diversity and fluidity of views which posit Adam and Eve were created at least in part via evolutionary biological processes (EBP). At times, even individual proponents will suggest varying dates and hypotheses for what they believe may have occurred—because any certitude is unverifiable. Even with these challenges, a basic taxonomy, proves helpful. See VanDoodewaard, “What Difference Does It Make” in *The Quest for the Historical Adam*, pp. 282–312.

49. See “The Goodness of Creation” and “In Adam’s Fall We Sinned

Despite the variety among theistic evolutionary models, all diminish the inherent distinctiveness of man from the rest of God's creation, particularly through their partial or complete denial of Genesis 2:7 as a literal reality. Adam is not an entirely new and distinct creation; the formulation of this is connected to the degree of potential implications for what it means to be an image-bearer; as a result it also has direct connection to our understanding of the incarnation—raising the question whether Christ's humanity in his incarnation was the same as, or more evolved than Adam and Eve's. The question of the consistency of the totality of human being over time versus evolutionary development of human being over time rises into the realm of first-rank doctrine, as the latter begs the question as to whether Hebrews 2:17 is correct: "therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect." If, as Scripture indicates, Christ and Adam are similar in every respect in their humanity, sin excepted, then the evolutionary process of human development must have ceased—a tenet not only unlikely to find warm reception in the corridors of scientific naturalism, but one contrary to the writings of many theistic evolutionists. An Adam and Eve loosened from traditional reading of Scripture on their origin become malleable to the whims of the theologian—depending on the extent to which he constrains himself to wider scriptural doctrine. The latter will impact the degree to which he moves from second-rank to first-rank errors.

The lack of a temporally immediate, special creation of Adam and Eve also serves to erode a first-rank area of the biblical ethic of human life: "you shall not murder" (Ex. 20:14). If Adam and/or Eve were at one point hominid and then became human, then they were not fully human for the totality of their existence but became human at the point of their being endowed with a soul or upon becoming image-bearers. In positing this, evolutionary models present a weakening of, or contradiction to scriptural testimony to the sanctity of human life from its first origin, in part

by necessitating that animal and hominid suffering, violence, and death are part of the "good" and "very good" realities of God's creation prior to Adam and Eve's fall into sin and the ensuing curse on man and creation. Further, according to evolutionary models, it is an open question, unaddressed by Scripture, at what point hominids became human; by implication, it can remain an open question at what point a fetus—or even a born infant—becomes human. If our ancestors, under divine sovereignty, became human at some point after they began living, why should it be any different for an embryo which has not yet developed to a mature human form? This stands in stark contrast to the literal view's necessary implication: human life begins at the moment of conception for Adam and Eve's descendants, just as it began at the first moment of life for our first parents. The potential impact of the weakness of evolutionary views is in one case expressed by Francis Collins's arguments for the legitimacy of embryonic stem cell research.⁵⁰

The literal understanding of the Genesis 2 account of Adam and Eve's creation, particularly the account of God's creation of Eve from Adam to be his wife as the first pair of humans, is the God-given origin of and paradigm for marriage as a union of male and female, husband and wife. This creation ordinance of marriage with its description of monogamous, heterosexual marital intimacy and desire is described as very good and sinless—made by God. A complementarian view of marriage, with its distinct roles of husband and wife, finds its foundation in the creation of Eve from, for, and with Adam.⁵¹ In its description of marriage and the family unit, Genesis 2:24–25 establishes patterns as literal and normative by virtue of the special, immediate creative action of God. They stand as an expansion and implication of what is revealed in Genesis 1:27.

All of the evolutionary models, even those that posit Adam and Eve as the sole pair for hominid-to-human transition and the head of all humanity, weaken the created normativity of complementarian roles, heterosexual desire, and monogamous marital intimacy. Animal sexual behaviors are widely varied in the present state of creation. If suffering, violence, and death are normative realities of a pre-fall creation in the evolutionary models, why should one assume that present patterns of animal sexuality are less than "good" and "very good"? While the Genesis 1 paradigm of "male" and "female" and reproductive patterns may be assumed as God's general intent through ordinary, providential guidance of the evolutionary process, there is no ground in a nonliteral early Genesis to

All?" in VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam*, pp. 300–305; Hans Madueme, "Some Reflections on Enns and the Evolution of Adam: A Review Essay" *Themelios* 37, no.2 (July 2012): 283–4.

50. Peter J. Boyer, "The Covenant," *The New Yorker* (September 6, 2010), http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/06/100906fa_fact_boyer; Francis Collins, "Statement by NIH Director Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D., on Supreme Court's decision regarding stem cell case," *National Institutes of Health*, January 7, 2013, http://www.nih.gov/about/director/01072013_stemcell_statement.htm.

51. "The Danvers Statement," *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1987, <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/>.

argue that hominids, or in the case of the more radical evolutionary models, humans, are innately structured for sexual relations limited to monogamous marriage. The more conservative theistic evolutionary models, while retaining a better ontology of aspects of man as God's image-bearer, suffer from the same weakness as they posit a physical continuity from hominid to human.

The most that can be argued in the evolutionary models is that when Adam and Eve become human and the image-bearers of God, they are brought together by God and instructed toward a monogamous marital sexuality. Extramarital, homosexual, bisexual, and polyamorous sexual desires within these models of origins may be construed as innate to original humanity, and not inherently sinful; the same is true in relation to transgenderism.⁵² Aside from complementarian roles, which might best be viewed as in the range of second-rank doctrine, all of these aspects of biblical doctrine on marriage and sexuality tend to the range of first-rank doctrine (cf. Rev. 3:14–16, 20–23).⁵³ These reasons, along with profound implications for the doctrine of sin and salvation, mean that a special creation of Adam and Eve apart from evolutionary biological ancestry is a non-negotiable line for ecclesial unity.⁵⁴ This does not mean that Christians who wrestle with confusion in some aspects of these areas cannot be accepted into church membership, but it does mean that church leadership, discipline, and teaching must remain consistently committed to this aspect of the Christian faith, as revealed in the Scriptures.

The days and duration or age of creation

A third area of creation doctrine which provides helpful ground for the application of the model of theological triage presented in this article is the matter of the days and duration or age of creation. In the six twenty-four-hour day view ("six-day view"), God creates time, initially demarcating it in a supernatural act (light and dark, evening and morning, before the creation of the Sun, moon, and stars), and then continues his works of creation, ordered within time, over the successive days. The short space of time of creation displays his infinite, perfect power, wisdom and knowledge through acts that can be only His, creating a mature creation, which then acts according to principles of multiplication and fruitfulness. While this creation is relatively recent, it is mature, created with inherent "age"; the time frames preclude evolutionary biological origins of at least the "kinds" of creatures, and of humanity. Man is part of,

and lives within a creation which is a close display, in time and proximity, of God's supernatural creation power and wisdom.

Areas of doctrinal divergence that may arise with diverging views on the days of the Genesis creation account include:

- whether there is a historical narrative of the creation of time, including the creation of days as a division or measure of time;
- the order of the acts of creation;
- the duration of the days or period of creation, which may include the allowance of vast time for alternate modes of creation (whether old earth creationism, with supernatural decree/sudden acts punctuating a long period of time up to billions of years or more, or theistic evolution, with providentially superintended evolutionary processes over a long period of time up to billions of years or more).
- hermeneutical method, and its implication for the interpretation of both early Genesis and other parts of Scripture.

From one vantage, whether or not the six days described in Genesis 1 were of the same or similar duration to our own in itself seems well-suited to location in the category of a third-rank doctrine: one which has significance in its connections, and may have implications into second-, and even first-rank doctrine, but should not itself be an area of ecclesial division. Gavin Ortlund makes a strong case for this in his application of theological triage: "think of it like this: if you accept only twenty-four-hour day interpretations of Genesis 1 within your church or theological circle, then the following Christians become unacceptable to you: Augustine, Charles Spurgeon,

52. Joan Roughgarden, *What Jesus and Darwin Have in Common: Evolution and Christian Faith* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006), pp. 115–24. Calvin College, a strong center of theistic evolutionary approaches to human origins, reflects a collegial environment with some movement in this direction. Christian Bell, "Calvin College Statement about Homosexuality Draws Fire," *The Banner*, January 18, 2011, <http://www.thebanner.org/news/2011/01/calvin-college-statement-about-homosexuality-draws-fire>. See also "FAQs about Calvin College, LGBT Students, and Homosexuality," *Calvin College*, <http://www.calvin.edu/student-life/ss/faq.html>.

53. In some cases it may be that confusion, lack of biblical instruction and internal theological coherence, or backsliding into sin, may mean that someone is a Christian but in a state of contradiction and sin (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1–5, 2 Cor. 2:5–11), in which case the genuineness of their Christianity will be proved through repentance.

54. Richard D. Phillips, ed., *God, Adam, and You: Biblical Creation Defended and Applied* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2015), pp. 85–124.

B.B. Warfield, and Carl Henry. Does this seem right?”⁵⁵ Theodore Cabal and Peter Rasor make a similar case in their *Controversy of the Ages*, arguing that to require evangelical leaders to hold to a young earth creation, versus allowing a range of young earth to old earth creation views within the church, would be an act of divisiveness.⁵⁶ Both Ortlund, and Cabal and Rasor, however, color their positions with overly negative language to alternatives. By comparison, Presbyterians and Baptists hold to differences in whom ought to be baptized, which preclude full ecclesial unity, yet this ecclesial division does not mean that they view one another as “unacceptable” or “divisive” as Christians. In most cases they are grateful for one another as fellow Christians, and work together as much as they are able, though they are each convicted the other is wrong in what they view as an area of second-rank doctrines.

How can the differences on the days and duration or age of creation be wisely “ranked” and navigated within the church? From the vantage of holding the model of theological triage presented in this article, and believing sound exegesis of Genesis 1–2 presents six days similar to our own in duration, an initial question is to assess whether or not a particular church or denomination has an existing stated commitment to a six-day view of creation. This question is in part what roiled denominations like the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in the 1990s: do the confessional statements (the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms) state that creation took place “in” or “within the space of six days”, understood as six days corresponding to our own in length?⁵⁷ Both the PCA and OPC creation committee reports of this time concluded by recommending the allowance of a range of views of interpretation of the days, while requiring commitment to the historicity and inerrancy of the text of Scripture; both reports were also received by their respective ecclesial assemblies. Within Presbyterian polity the reception of committee reports by an assembly does not in itself change a confessional standard or ecclesial polity—a reality which essentially allowed local churches and presbyteries

to operate from more narrowly to as widely as the reports recommended. This would mean that in one presbytery a candidate for ministry might be granted an exception to a six-day view, with the mindset that he could teach his exception, in another he might be received for ministry with the exception, but not be allowed to teach a non-six-day view, and in another he might be rejected if taking exception. Some held that no exception was needed for differences on the days of Genesis 1 in light of the reports. The institutional unity of both denominations was preserved, though internal differences in commitment and application remained.

The Presbyterian context highlights some important considerations. Even where most would agree that the definition of the days in itself is a third-rank doctrine, if it is nonetheless true that the teaching of Genesis is a six-day creation, could a local church, or presbytery in good conscience allow or encourage teaching to the contrary (cf. Matt. 6:17–19; Rev. 22:18–19)? While, if a third-rank doctrine, they ought to be able to welcome Christians who differ on the days of creation as church members, should they grant the ability to positively teach a contrary view? A presbytery or session should not allow teaching to the contrary of what it is convinced Scripture plainly teaches. At the same time, another presbytery or session might conclude that in this area they and others have not come to clarity as a body on what Scripture teaches on the days of creation, and may not be able to in the foreseeable future due to other, more pressing needs. In this case they ought to grant a liberty of expressed views within parameters that do not contradict biblical doctrine more widely. In both cases they ought to act with patience, charity, and desire for a growing ecclesial unity in the local and wider church.

One of the challenges of theological triage with the days of creation is that the days are connected to more than the days. The extent of differences and their implications can range substantially under this category. At a minimum there is a third-rank divergence on whether the creation days were like ours in duration. For those who reject the six days of ordinary duration view, the alternatives include judging the creation account to be expressing an errant primitive understanding of cosmic origins, or viewing it as a literary device where the creation week is a poetic or analogical structure, or figurative of something else. The errancy route immediately moves the issue of the days into a first-rank doctrinal issue: the foundation of the doctrine of Scripture as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God is under immediate denial.

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55. Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, p. 143.

56. Theodore J. Cabal and Peter J. Rasor II, *Controversy of the Ages: Why Christians Should Not Divide Over the Age of the Earth* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), p. 216. Kindle Edition.

57. VanDoodewaard, *The Quest for the Historical Adam*, pp. 74–84, 223–226; Presbyterian Church in America, *Report of the Creation Study Committee to the 28th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 2302–91; Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *Report of the Committee to Study the Views of Creation to the 71st General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, pp. 1601–1740.

The History of the Formation of the Standing Judicial Commission. Continued from Page 74.

Second, the first fifty years of the PCA has been one of growth and development. The ethos that gave birth to the PCA is in some ways still present. However, the denomination has changed since those early days. This is apparent in the way the Assembly handles judicial cases. The Assembly originally handled all matters directly, excusing commissioners from the floor to go act as committees, reporting back to the Assembly with recommendations. After a decade of growth and the process of Joining and Receiving, the Assembly sensed that it needed another mechanism to handle the growing number of cases. Hence, today we have the SJC and the Committee on Constitutional Business to assist the Assembly. The development of the SJC mirrors the growth and evolution of the denomination as a whole: going from a regional denomination with no regular judicial cases to a national denomination with a much larger, regular load of judicial cases.

Third, the formation of the SJC was a complicated and messy process. The Ad-Interim Committee that recommended the formation of a permanent judicial commission had several reports returned to it for further work, had new members added to it by the Stated Clerk, and had numerous minority reports for almost all of its significant recommendations. In hindsight, the wisdom of both the majority and the minority reports are apparent. The Minority was correct that the formation of the SJC would lead to a change in the culture and ethos of the denomination. The formation of the SJC was a by-product of larger issues of identity that the denomination was grappling with in the 1980s. The Majority proved to be correct in saying that a denomination the size of the PCA could not keep up with the number of complex cases coming before it. That simply would not have been sustainable with the number of cases the SJC has to handle each year. The conflict between the Majority and the Minority arguably made the formation of the SJC a better reflection of both the PCA's historic commitment to non-hierarchical Presbyterianism and the fact that the growth of the denomination necessitated more efficient mechanisms for the work of the Assembly.

Finally, the history of the SJC in the last twenty-five years

shows that the concerns of the Minority regarding the Assembly's ability to debate the actions of the SJC were well founded. The issue has been most acute regarding instances where presbyteries invoke BCO 34-1, asking the SJC to assume original jurisdiction over teaching elders in cases relating to doctrine. Arguably, the most contentious judicial case involving 34-1 that came to the floor of the Assembly was the John Wood Case. The Wood case was a very rare instance where the Assembly overrode the SJC, instructing them to take up the 34-1 requests and investigate the accusations of women preaching.⁷⁷ In other contentious matters, then Assembly's inability to deliberate upon and reverse SJC decisions (except where a sufficient number of dissenting members may file a minority report) has been problematic. One thinks of the Peter Leithart and Greg Johnson cases. In Leithart's case, the SJC argued that they could not retry the charges against Leithart, even though there was clear evidence of a strong presumption of guilt and problems with the prosecution of the case. A request for the Assembly to have the case reheard by the SJC from Iliana Presbytery was ruled out of order. The Assembly was not allowed to debate the merits of the case and an objection by a member of the Assembly was ruled out of order because the Assembly cannot debate SJC cases.⁷⁸ The case of Greg Johnson contained a highly complex set of issues in which the SJC decided not to try Johnson for his views on gender and sexuality. The Minority of the SJC was one vote short of being able to file a minority report, which would have allowed the Assembly to debate the merits of the case.⁷⁹ These cases demonstrate a fact that all churchmen learn: the process of discipline is complicated, complex, and often convoluted. The Assembly delegating its authority to a commission to handle discipline, particularly in doctrinal cases, without retaining the ability to debate and review cases at will is, as Knight and Ferg argued, problematic. Perhaps the next fifty years will see the BCO continue to evolve by allowing the Assembly to debate cases handled by the SJC when important or novel doctrinal issues are at stake.

Ecclesial Unity and Creation Doctrine. Continued from Page 162.

If the text of Genesis on the days of creation is held as inerrant, divine revelation, but the days as a literary device, there is a two-fold divergence from a six-day view: (1) the durational markers have been removed, (2) a different literary/genre hermeneutic is employed. Removing the durational marker opens the possibility of allowance for either old-earth creationism (an ancient initial creation, with punctuated occasions of special creation across the ages) or old-earth theistic evolution. In relation to the adoption of an alternative literary/genre hermeneutic, the answer of the question of how and where in Genesis a hermeneutical transition takes place

77. The Presbyterian Church in America, *The Minutes of the Twenty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Christian Education and Publication, 2000), p. 275.

78. The Presbyterian Church in America, *The Minutes of the Forty-First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Christian Education and Publication, 2013), pp. 39, 83 (footnote 4), pp. 583–614.

79. The Presbyterian Church in America, *The Minutes of the Forty-Ninth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, vol. II* (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Christian Education and Publication, 2022), pp. 730–822.

to historical narrative, and whether the same hermeneutical principles apply to other parts of Scripture, could move into second- or first-rank doctrinal divergences.⁵⁸

FAITHFULNESS AND PATIENCE

In the epistle to the Romans, the inspired apostle Paul gives a statement of core Christian confession for salvation: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Yet, the testimony of Scripture to which a Christian will and must be committed to is certainly far wider and greater than this. Even where we say that one *can* be a Christian with minimal, core belief, this does not negate saying that a Christian *must* hold to a much larger sphere of belief, as he or she comes to read, hear, and learn more of the Scriptures. Even Paul’s basic statement in Romans 10:9, while in one way simple, is at the same time profoundly rich and deep theologically in the truth it states—and it is inseparably connected to the galaxy of truth revealed in the whole of the Scriptures. Christians are whole-Bible people: we are to believe all that God has revealed in His Word (2 Pet. 1:21). At the same time, we are sinful, weak, and fallible in this present world, and we need the teaching of the Word and Spirit to come to clearer and more full understanding of and commitment to the Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully reminds Christians that “particular churches are more or less pure ... [and] the purest churches under heaven are subject to both mixture and error.”⁵⁹

This article has argued that there are clear lines in creation understanding where biblical doctrine may be so violated that ecclesial unity is an impossibility; at the same time there are areas where errors and diverging understanding do not rise to this level. We must exercise wise patience, lovingly praying and working together for a greater clarity and unity in biblical understanding, while remaining watchful and active against the erosive reality and implications of error. We can do so with confident dependence on the God who has given us His Word, knowing He preserves His church, and delights to lead His children “into all truth” (John 16:13). ■

Psallo: Psalm 115:1–9. Continued from Page 303.

Hear the inspired Word of the Lord in a few other selected passages of Holy Scripture, pertaining to this temptation:

“It is not good to eat much honey: so for men to search their own glory is not glory.” “Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips.” “For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.” “Though while he lived he blessed his soul: and men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself.”⁵

These and many other Scriptures point us away from the spirit of the age and remind us that the standard of goodness, holiness, truth, justice, etc., is that which God Himself is and does—and that all [others] have sinned and fall short of *His glory*.⁶ When we call upon the Lord to vindicate His Name, ask Him to advance His cause among us, as an application of these requests we call upon Him to humble us and to give repentance from our natural pride and self-advancement. Our Lord Jesus will speak of this to His opponents, those who doubted of His Messiahship. He tells them, “I am come in my Father’s name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that *cometh* from God only?”⁷ Here our Lord makes clear the principle that if we honor ourselves and seek to receive honor from men, as the Scribes the Pharisees, we impoverish ourselves of the honor that comes from God only. He will promote this thought in the Sermon on the Mount, speaking of alms-giving, prayer, and fasting in such a way so as to be seen of men, seeking our own glory. His sentence upon that procedure is “they have their reward.”⁸ That is, they sought the recognition of others, and that is all they received, including all its worthlessness. Immediately following that instruction, He declares, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth,” including the treasure of the esteem of men.⁹ Our day presents a tremendous opportunity, and with it great temptation, to “come in our own name,” “seek honor from men,” or to “be seen of men.” This Psalm is an inoculation against this spirit of our age, laying our honor in the dust, and seeking rather the glory of God, reminding us that this kind of earthly honor accompanies those who, as it is written in Psalm 49, are laid like sheep in the grave.¹⁰

5. Proverbs 25:27. Proverbs 27:2. 2 Corinthians 10:18. Psalm 49:18.

6. Romans 3:23.

7. John 5:43–44.

8. Matthew 6:1–18.

9. Matthew 6:19.

10. The entire Psalm is of great use in this regard, but especially when the Psalmist (as descendant of the Levite Korah who sought a glory and honor outside of his place) relates that man who is had in such earthly honor is as the beast which perishes. See Psalm 49:18–20.

58. VanDoodewaard, “Hermeneutics and the Quest for the Historical Adam” in *The Quest for the Historical Adam*, pp. 277–80.

59. Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.4–5.