

THE CRC AND HUMAN ORIGINS SINCE SYNOD 2010
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ABSTRACT: This presentation explains the position of the CRC on human origins as modified by the Synod of 2010. (I was an advisor at Synod and advocated for its decision.) Synod 2010 removed the declaration of Synod 1991 that “the uniqueness of humans as image bearers of God rules out the espousal of all theorizing that posits the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race.” But it reaffirmed the other five declarations of 1991, including permissible approaches to Genesis and doctrinal conclusions that are required. Consequently, the CRC position is now open to espousal of evolutionary theories of human ancestors that are consistent with these hermeneutical and doctrinal positions. The presentation outlines some limits and possibilities of the CRC position in relation to current scientific, philosophical, theological, and exegetical views. There will be time for discussion.

I. Introduction

- A. Confessional subscription is required of Calvin faculty; there is confusion about human origins
- B. The content of confessional subscription is sometimes specified by synodical decisions
- C. My position and vantage point
- D. Brief history of synodical decisions on human origins: 1972, 1988, 1991, 2010
- E. Positions never endorsed by the CRCNA: literalistic exegesis of Genesis, recent creationism, rejection of evolutionary biology, pre-fall cosmic paradise, SuperAdam and SuperEve, talking snakes

II. Synod 1991

- A. Adopted study committee recommendations A-E
- B. Adopted minority report statement F
- C. Encouraged scholars to continue reflection and discussion
- D. Problems with statement F

III. Synod 2010

- A. Overture to remove statement F
- B. The decision: F is no longer in effect; the grounds reaffirm A-E and VI.J of the 1991 Report

IV. What the Decision of 2010 Means

- A. Observation: The decision could have been more precise in terms of academic categories. But its grounds are clear and make the position clear, especially when read in context of previous decisions.
- B. Hermeneutics of Genesis: historical as well as literary, symbolic, and engaged with ancient near-eastern religion
- C. Historical Adam and Eve: parents of all humans
- D. Image of God
 - 1. humans are unique in status and in the way God created us
 - 2. broad (functional) and narrow (“true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness?”)
- E. Focal Issue: unique creation and evolutionary forebears
 - 1. Position affirmed: God created humans in a unique or special way, but he may have done so from non-human evolutionary forebears, i.e. hominids. Examples given at Synod: Warfield, John Paul II, F. Collins. Note: Synod did not affirm evolution but only its possible role.

2. Position rejected: Theistic evolution ("naturalistic evolution," "uniformitarianism," "non-interventionism") as a complete account of human origins.

Grounds: a) It conflicts with the unique manner of human creation
b) It fails to explain or implicitly conflicts with the created nature of our first parents--not naturally mortal or dispositionally sinful, though perhaps immature. [Note: The separable human soul is another problem for a completely evolutionary account, but it was not raised.]

3. My analysis: The 1991 Report questions "uniformitarian" views, and declaration E rejects "naturalistic evolutionism" and any theory which makes humans "nothing more than the end product of a natural process," but it does not reject biological evolution as part of how God created humans. Declaration F states that unique creation rules out evolution completely. Synod 2010 split the difference: special creation and possibly evolution, but not merely (theistic) evolution.

F. The Fall: When tempted, our first parents freely, knowingly, and culpably chose not to love and obey God. Their sin alienated them from God and justly resulted in spiritual and physical death for humanity.

G. Promise of redemption: the "seed of the woman:" Jesus is a descendant of Adam and Eve

V. The Current Position of the CRCNA

A. Augustinian-Reformed meta-narrative, including a single first couple; open on many particulars of exegesis and doctrine

B. Special creation of humans, possibly from hominids

C. All humans are spiritually-biologically related, including Jesus Christ: solidarity in Adam's creation and fall, solidarity in redemption through Christ

D. Encouragement to keep thinking about this issue.

E. Requirement to relate the "two books" of revelation rightly: Scripture is the first and final authority on everything it teaches. Science may occasion reconsideration of what Scripture teaches. But Reformed hermeneutics has the final word: biblical teaching cannot be altered to accommodate science.

F. Admonition to evaluate critically the assumptions or "control beliefs" of all methods and conclusions: traditional exegesis and doctrine, modern revisionist exegesis and doctrine, philosophy, and science.

VI. Final Observation

Our campus dialogue is very important for the CRCNA as well as the College. It has raised significant questions and proposed thoughtful and creative answers, some of them beyond what Synod has explicitly considered. The CRCNA has more to ponder, and the College discussion has been helpful and fruitful as well as challenging. Future Synods may be flexible on some issues, but I don't think that the CRCNA should or will budge on the basic Augustinian-Reformed view of the biblical narrative of the creation and fall of humanity. As a result, some broadly Christian readings of Scripture and views of human origins will remain incompatible with confessional subscription.

Acts of Synod 2010

ARTICLE 53

(The report of Advisory Committee 9 is continued from Article 22.)

Advisory Committee 9, Migration of Workers, Rev. Michael F. Abma reporting, presents the following:

Response to Overture 18: Remove Declaration F of the 1991 Decision on Creation and Science (majority report)

A. *Materials*: Overture 18, pp. 697-700

B. *Observations*

Synod 1991 adopted Declarations A-E, which were unanimously recommended by the Committee to Study Creation and Science (Report 28). Following is the final form of Declaration E, which Synod 1991 adopted:

The church confesses that humanity is uniquely created in the image of God and rejects all theorizing that tends either to minimize or to obliterate this created uniqueness. We reject, therefore, atheistic and naturalistic evolutionism, which denies the creative activity of God, disputes the existence of purpose in the created order, and reduces humanity to being nothing more than the end product of a natural process.

(*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 766)

Declaration F was adopted by Synod 1991 as a minority recommendation. It states:

The church declares, moreover, that the clear teaching of Scripture and our confessions on the uniqueness of human beings as imagebearers of God rules out the espousal of all theorizing that posits the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race.

(*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 767)

Unease with Declaration F resulted in Synod 1991 adding the following two notes to this Declaration (see *Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 767):

Note 1: Of course, private research, theorizing, and discussion are not addressed by this declaration.

Note 2: Declaration F is not intended and may not be used to limit further investigation and discussion on the origin of humanity.

The advisory committee reminds synod that Report 28 noted the following:

That there are strict limitations on the extent to which the Genesis text can be reinterpreted within the Reformed tradition. However stylized, literary, or symbolic the stories of Genesis may be, they are clearly meant to refer to real events. Especially in God's acts of creation, Adam and Eve as first parents, the fall of humanity into sin, and the giving of the so-called "mother promise" (Gen. 3:15), the reality of the events described is of foundational importance for the entire history of redemption.

(Report 28, VI, J, *Agenda for Synod 1991*, p. 403)

C. *Recommendations*

1. That synod not accede to the request in Overture 18 to remove Declaration F from the Synod of 1991 decision on creation and science.

Ground: A succeeding synod cannot rescind or remove a decision taken by a previous synod. It may alter the stand of a previous synod; it may reach a conclusion which is at variance with a conclusion reached by an earlier synod. But it may not annul or rescind it (see *Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure*, p. 110).

2. That synod accede to the request in Overture 18 to declare that Declaration F of Synod 1991 no longer be part of the CRCNA's official position statement on creation and science.

Grounds:

- a. Declaration F, with its accompanying notes, appears contradictory and confusing.
- b. The church should not bind the consciences of its members beyond what is the clear and indubitable teaching of Scripture and the creeds.
- c. The remaining Declarations of Synod 1991 (namely A-E, and particularly Declaration E), as well as Section VI, J, of Report 28, sufficiently safeguard the church's confession with respect to the uniqueness of humanity as imagebearers of God.

Note: According to the Rules of Synodical Procedure, the minority report re the issue of the response to Overture 18 is presented as information by Rev. Jack DeJong.

Acts of Synod 1991

3. That synod call the attention of the church to the nine points of Summary Conclusions (Section VIII, A-I), noting also the tenth point (VIII, J), on which there is not unanimity.

—Adopted

4. That synod adopt the following Declarations as affirmations that add nothing new to the church's confessions but simply articulate in the context of the present debate what is central to the church's confession on these matters.

a. The church confesses that both general and special revelation, *each in its own unique way*, address us with full divine authority. We affirm, therefore, that the whole of life must be lived in obedience to God and in subjection to his Word, that faith and life must be of one piece. This is true as much of science as it is of personal relationships, business practices, or politics. We reject any view of the Christian faith which limits its scope or any view of science which in principle excludes from its practice the influence of faith and the light of Scripture. On the contrary, we actively encourage the kind of Christian scholarship which challenges the secular assumptions of the academic mainstream by advocating the integration of Christian faith and learning.

b. The church wishes to honor its commitment to the freedom of exegesis by not imposing upon its members an authorized interpretation of specific passages in Scripture, insisting only that such exegetical freedom be carried on within the limits of the analogy of Scripture and the confessional guidelines of its creeds.

c. The church wishes also to respect the freedom of science by not canonizing certain hypotheses, models, or paradigms proposed by the sciences while rejecting others, insisting only that all such theorizing be subject to the teaching of Scripture and the confessions.

d. The church confesses the unity of the human race both in creation and the fall and the unity of renewed humanity in Jesus Christ. God made from one all nations of the earth (Acts 17:26), and through this same one, sin entered the world so that all have sinned (Rom. 5:18-19). All those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ now reign in life (Rom. 5:17) and have become the one new humanity (Eph. 2:15). The church rejects all theorizing that undercuts or denies this biblical teaching of creation, sin, and redemption.

e. The church confesses that humanity is uniquely created in the image of God and rejects all theorizing that tends either to minimize or to obliterate this created uniqueness. We reject, therefore, atheistic and naturalistic evolutionism, which denies the creative activity of God, disputes the existence of purpose in the created order, and reduces humanity to being nothing more than the end product of a natural process.

—Adopted

A motion carries to consider Declaration F (a minority recommendation):

F. The church declares, moreover, that the clear teaching of Scripture and of our confessions on the uniqueness of human beings as imagebearers of God rules out all theories that posit the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race (cf. V, C, 2).

A motion carries to table consideration of Declaration F (a minority recommendation) to consider F of Minority Report I.

F. The church declares, moreover, that the clear teaching of Scripture and of our confessions on the uniqueness of human beings as imagebearers of God rules out the espousal of all theorizing that posits the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race.*

Note: Of course, private research, theorizing, and discussion are not addressed by this declaration. *

Some points of the pastoral advice are helpful on how such activities should be carried out.

—*Adopted*

The following register their negative votes: John Boonstra (B.C. North-West), Keith Bulthuis (Red Mesa), Jason Chen (Pella), Roger De Groot (Chicago South), Charles Fennema (Quinte), Harry Groenewold (Alberta North), Henry Lunshof (Toronto), Carl Kloosterman (Red Mesa), Roger Timmerman (Thornapple Valley), Clair Vander Neut (Central California), Stanley Ver Heul (Greater Los Angeles), Simon Wolfert (Toronto).

The following register their negative votes with statements:

James Dekker (Alberta North): "This decision encourages mental reservation as a tenable Reformed position. Unless many invoke such a reservation, they will open themselves to the specter of ecclesiastical inquisition."

Clarence Menninga (Grand Rapids East): "I consider the approved Recommendation F to be unnecessarily restrictive of scholars who wish to investigate the history of the human race."

Thomas Niehof (Minnesota North): "I wish to register my negative vote. Though the recommendation makes reference to the Scripture it profoundly *fails* to deal with the Scripture passages that teach us what the image of God actually is."

Gordon Pols (Alberta North): "We err in binding conscience on a matter where Scripture and the creeds do not."

Wietse Posthumus (Toronto): "This decision is wrong. It binds the conscience in the extreme and restrains the very thought processes involved in scientific theorizing. In so doing we risk turning our back on what God may reveal through general revelation. Then we would not only insult the scientific community but God as well."

George Vander Weit (Lake Erie): "The Word of God, not the peace of the church, is our only rule for faith and life."

**On Thursday morning (Art. 93) synod added the following to the note under Declaration F (Minority Report I): Declaration F is not intended and may not be used to limit further investigation and discussion on the origin of humanity.