

*Assessment of Covenant Theology*

**Roger R. Nicole, Ph.D.**  
Professor,  
Reformed Theological Seminary  
Corresponding Editor, *Christianity Today*

Oh Lord, our God, since we are privileged to study Your Word and to seek to understand its light, we pray that You would bless our labors and grant us to accomplish it without haste and without sloth for Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The term *anthropology*, in difference from other parts of the theological course in systematics, is also used by some secular sciences, so that if you go to a university you will find that there is an anthropological department. Theological anthropology and secular anthropology are profoundly different however. In secular anthropology a study is made of humanity, particularly the various physical forms that humanity has taken, their habits, their means of livelihood, their customs, and very often their religious concepts. The term could apply even in a more general sense because *anthropology* means from the Greek, “the study of man.” Man, in this case, is understood to mean human beings, not male individuals. In Greek, you have two words for man, one which relates to human beings and includes men and women; the other which relates to male individuals only. In English the difference is not accentuated in this way and, therefore, when we say “man,” we may very well mean either a male individual or a member of the human race. It is in the latter sense that we use the term in this connection. And the study of human life involves much more than just the study of physical forms or ideas, it involves in part, in sum, everything that relates to humanity. It was the Latin poet Terence who said, “I am a human being and everything that is human concerns me.” That would be the motto of anthropology.

Now theological anthropology proceeds on very different lines. It is a study of what the Bible reveals to us concerning human life, human persons, where they came from, what are their constituent elements, and how they relate to one another according to the plan of God. Scientific anthropology or secular anthropology deals with objects of experience. It goes out to various people to examine them. Theological anthropology goes to the Scripture in

order to discover there what God is telling us. Obviously, what He's telling us as truth corresponds also with what we will find in fact in life. And yet, the source and norm of our ideas is not drawn from some experiences or ideas that we might develop in relationship to humanity, but it is drawn directly from the statements that God Himself has embedded in the Scriptures.

Now particularly in relationship to this situation, we need to recognize that there are various stages in human life which are distinguished in Scripture. First, there is a stage of original creation in which Adam and Eve alone existed as human beings until the time of their fall. This stage is important because it gives us an insight into the very nature of humanity as it came from the hands of God and without any intervention of evil. But after Genesis 1 and 2, which relates to the stage of innocence of original nature and perfection, we have Genesis 3 in which immediately we have the entrance of sin and the rest of the Bible relates, in fact, to the situation of humanity and of sin.

Anthropology in a secular sense is obliged to limit itself to this particular aspect because it does not have concrete examples of the state of perfection on which it could base its conclusions and it is important to understand even theologically what has happened to humanity by virtue of sin. This is one of the reasons why in this course not only do we have the study of man, but also a study of sin and its impact upon human nature. However, God has not allowed humanity to sink into this abyss of misery and corruption, but He has established a marvelous plan of redemption. And so we have a third condition of humanity that we need to consider and that is the state of grace or the human nature under the blessing of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is anticipated in the Old Testament where God had a people that He chose; and it is developed more fully in the New Testament after the coming of Jesus Christ who is the One who established the foundation for the salvation that God intended to impart to His own people. This is therefore a very important aspect in which the Christian reflects what he or she should be at this time pending the final consummation of the age where Jesus Christ will come and redeemed humanity will be transported into the eternal fellowship of God. It is that last expression or situation, which is known as the state of glory, a culmination of God's purpose in which that which was established at the start is now accomplished in its perfect fullness with this difference: that in the state of innocence, Adam and Eve had the possibility of

sinning, while in the state of glory, sin will not be an option any more, but we shall be forever confirmed in holiness and glorify God in that pursuit.

We have, therefore, these fourfold states, which is articulated very well in a rather famous work by Thomas Boston, a Scotch theologian, minister, and evangelist who lived in the eighteenth century and who has a book entitled *The Fourfold State*. These are precisely the states that he articulates in that volume, which is still of interest to this day.

Beginning, therefore, with the other gene of humanity, we have to consider the fact that it is God who has created humanity and He has done so in the way that is described specifically in Genesis 1 and 2. There are other places in Scripture where the truth of creation is asserted, but this passage is particularly important because it outlines the way in which God has accomplished His work, and it sets humanity apart as a very distinct element from other parts of divine creation. The doctrine of creation can properly be considered under the heading of theology or the doctrine of God, because creation is one of the works of God ad extra, that is to say beyond, by the creation of something that is beyond God Himself.

It is important when you consider anthropology from a theological point of view, however, that you should give some attention to the meaning of being created by God and created specifically in His image. We need, therefore, to start our complete study of the doctrine of man by a discussion of creation and its relationship to other concepts which are abroad and in which the origin of humanity would be explained in a different way. In connection with this subject, there are two issues that come to the floor, and the first one is an issue of time. When did humanity appear on the planet Earth? How long ago was it? Do we have any data in Scripture that permit us to identify the time at which Adam and Eve lived on this earth?

And the second question is a question of method. How did God accomplish the creation? Was it by a development that He supervised or was it by a direct intervention in which humanity was produced in a sudden way that cannot be explained in terms of preexisting materials? On both of those issues there have been considerable debate among conservative people. We will consider them briefly now one after the other.

On the issue of time, there appears to be in the Scripture some data of time which might help us to know the exact moment of arrival of Adam on the scene. This could come from figuring back from Abraham, who lived in the vicinity of 2000 BC, and regressing from him, we can go through the genealogies of Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 right down to Adam. These genealogies are written in the following way. We are told Adam, when he was so many years old, begat Seth. All the days after the birth of Seth, Adam lived. And I will read the exact number of years in Genesis 5. Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether Adam lived 930 years and he died.

Now obviously the years in which he lived after begetting Seth are of no consequence for an attempt to examine the time of the appearance of Adam, because from then on Seth takes over so to speak. And it is thought that if we added those various figures, he was so old when he begat the next person we would be able to evaluate the length of years that had elapsed between the time of Adam and finally the time of Abraham. If we add this to the 2000 BC of Abraham and the approximately 2,000 years of our era, then we would get in this manner an estimate of the length of time which has elapsed since the appearance of Adam and therefore have a date to establish the matter.

All this seems rather simple; and it is this proceeding which was used by a famous Irish theologian, Archbishop Ussher, U-S-S-H-E-R, of Ireland, and who established a very learned and long famous chronology of the Bible. There are two difficulties, however, one minor and the other major, with this method of approach. The minor difficulty comes from the fact that the figures which we have in Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 appear in a different form in the Hebrew text that has been kept for us by the Masoretes and in the Septuagint translation, which represents an ancient translation made somehow between the second and the first century before Christ and still another set of figures appears in the Samaritan Pentateuch. There are some correspondences, but basically the figures produce a different number in the end.

The number of years of the Masoretes is the shortest. The Samaritan Pentateuch is somewhat longer, and the Septuagint has a total figure that is in the vicinity of 5600 BC rather than 4000 BC. Now I call this a minor difficulty because, in any case, even if we take the largest figures there, we still reach a place for the appearance of humanity which seems to be considerably posterior to some of the ancient remnants of humanity that we

can find on the surface of the earth. And so that we would have therefore some difficulty in bringing together into one unity the data that the earth produces for us and the affirmations that we find in Scripture.

That something is wrong with some numbers is also apparent from the fact that if you take the various figures, there is a set which would suggest that Methuselah, who was the grandfather of Noah, survived the flood by two years. Now we know from the First Epistle of Peter that there were only eight people in the ark, and we know who those people were. It's Noah and his wife, his three sons and one wife for each of them. And Methuselah was not in it. And so if he survived the flood by two years, he would have a tremendous record of endurance swimming at a very large age. He is in fact the man who already holds the record for long living since he lived 969 years. But that he should have swim for a whole year at the age of 966 would appear to be something that could not be emulated by anyone within ear sight or eyesight. Therefore, I think we have to conclude that in the form of the figures that we have, some errors have crept in. They were not original errors in the text that God Himself inspired. But in the copying some errors have crept in, and we are not in a position to be completely assured about the data that we would develop from this.

Now a more important element, which raises some questions about the figures attained, is that the genealogies of the Semites do not conform to what people in the Western world would ordinarily understand in setting up genealogies. It is apparent from the genealogies of the Bible that quite often there are rungs in the process that have been omitted. This point was examined by an extremely conservative scholar, Dr. W. H. Green of Princeton Theological Seminary, who in 1890 wrote an article in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* (a learned journal which has been in existence since 1843) in which he discusses the system of genealogies that is found among the Semites, using genealogies of the Bible primarily as his example. He makes very convincing evidence that the Hebrews and the Semites in general often omitted rungs in the genealogies that they presented. And this can be seen notably in the genealogy of Jesus that you find in the first chapter of Matthew and with which we are familiar, if only by the fact that we are sometimes annoyed at having to read all those names before we can proceed to the meat of the matter in the gospel of Matthew.

Well, in fact, Matthew 1 contains two genealogies of Jesus, one of which I have learned by heart and the other one which is much more extensive and which contains forty-two rungs that are named specifically. And the first genealogy is found in verse 1. It is simply this: “Genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.” And after that Matthew proceeds. Starting with Abraham, he lists fourteen different genealogies between Abraham and David. Then from David on, he lists fourteen rungs between David and the exile of the Israelites in Babylon; and then starting with the exile, he lists fourteen more generations between that time and the time of Jesus Christ. Now even in the larger genealogy there are some names that are omitted, particularly the names of Kings Joash and Amaziah and Jehoiakim have been omitted between David and the exile, which indicates that Matthew did not make a scruple of listing all the intermediate ancestors of Jesus Christ, but wanted to sum them up under three groups of fourteen among which he chose fourteen significant names that he was desirous, and of the inspiration of the Spirit, to mention.

But the first genealogy is, of course, much shorter since it has only two names of ancestors: David and Abraham. And according to the results of the labors of Dr. Green, one would say that the genealogy of Matthew could have been placed in this way: “Genealogy of Jesus, son of David, son of Abraham.” It could be said Abraham begat David when he was 100 years old. After the birth of David, he lived seventy-five more years and begat sons and daughters. All the days of the life of Abraham were 175 years, and he died. Then we would think David was some forty years old when he begat Jesus of Nazareth. He lived after having begotten Jesus another fifty years. All the days of the life of David were ninety years, and he died. And here just taking the one hundred plus the forty would give the impression that there are just 140 years between Abraham and Jesus, and that would be completely false. But the Hebrew genealogies would bear with this kind of presentation.

And so years are omitted readily in Semitic genealogies, and therefore the expectation that we have one continuous development in years is probably mistaken. The data that we have discovered on the earth—like caverns in the Pyrenees and other data—definitely indicate a more ancient origin in humanity. Now it is true that sometimes scientists have an interest to develop views in which very large spans of time have elapsed because they need a great deal of time to explain the variations which they assume have occurred by a natural process in the forms of



life that are apparent on this earth. But even so, they are not inventing signs of age wholesale and there is some reliability to the measurement of time that has been established, especially in terms of fairly recent time geologically—that is in the last 100,000 years or so.

Therefore, if the genealogies are thought to be a tight presentation in which the amount of time can be measured, we would have difficulty in relating what has been discovered in a reliable manner by our non-prejudiced people and the actual data that the Scripture presents. This is true also in relationship to other evidences of age on this earth. And while it is not my purpose at this point to discuss the creation of the world, of the physical world, and its relationship to the assumed passage of time between the creation and the present day, I would want to indicate that there are a number of evidences which are provided and which would seem to manifest a large age for the physical universe, probably exceeding millions of years, quite possibly in the billions of years.

When one attempts to promote a new or young earth theory, that is, a theory according to which the whole physical universe was produced within a very recent past, let's say less than 10,000 years ago, then very great difficulties arise in connection with the whole science of geology which is not inspired, but in which reliable data nevertheless appear to have been obtained. I do note that when oil companies attempt to discover places on this earth where oil can be found, they address themselves to regular geologists and not to the young earth geologists because they have found that their findings are more reliable than those of people who think that the earth is only a few thousand years old.

The matter of time is not essential in terms of theology anyway. And in connection with a paper of Dr. Green, a very eminent Reformed theologian, B. B. Warfield made the comment in an important article entitled "On the Antiquity and Unity of the Human Race." He made the comment that the antiquity of the human race is not really a theological issue, while the unity of the human race is of very considerable importance theologically as we shall see later on as the course develops.

Now the second issue that needed to be considered in relationship to creation is the method which God used. And here we have had a head-on collision between evangelical thinkers and a great number of scientific scholars who have promoted a theory of evolution. Evolution is the view that the variety of living forms on the

surface of the earth can be explained by a course of development whereby very small measures of changes gradually in original organic substance of very simple form developed and variegated itself to the point of producing ultimately the immense spectrum of the diversity of life, whether it be vegetable life or animal life, on the surface of the earth. When a view like this is accepted, it is implied in most cases that humanity itself is a product of this development. And while scientists are not affirming that humans are descendants of monkeys, they do, however, believe that certain reptiles originated various branches of development and that out of those came on one hand the birds, on another the mammals, and finally, from one section of the mammals (not the section of the monkeys) came forth humanity.

The difference, therefore, is one which relates to the way in which humanity can be explained in its origin. Is it a final result of a long process of development, or is it on the contrary a sudden appearance in which a direct intervention of God is manifest? Some of the discussion on this subject has taken a very emotional character which has not always increased light even though it has increased heat in the debates. And one remembers the Scopes Trial in Tennessee in which a professor was accused to have violated the law of the State of Tennessee by teaching evolution in his high school classes. And he was accused and tried on this point and, in fact, found guilty, but in the process those who were holding to creation were rather sharply ridiculed particularly through the skill of the lawyer that this man Scopes had retained to defend him in this situation.

We need to recognize that the struggle continues to this day and that the theory of evolution, although its scientific basis is somewhat precarious, continues to hold a very great amount of allegiance from the scientific community. One place in particular where a problem arises is for our young people who are having their high school classes in a secular environment. In most cases, the professors that they will have subscribe to an evolutionary view and sometimes may present the data which the evolutionists are advancing as if they were gospel truth and as if there was no possibility of discounting what is presented, short of advocating the powers of the mind and the ability to be a rational being in our day. In this way in a very unfair manner, it seems to me, our young people are pressed into a choice which they are ill-equipped to make: A choice between what has been taught to them in the church and perhaps in the Christian home; a choice between the doctrine of creation as presented in the Bible and, on the



other side, the choice between that and the idea of evolution in which humanity would be pretty much a product of a haphazard development in which no direction would be clearly seen and in which the hand of God, if present at all, would be so remote that it could hardly be discerned in the enormous passage of the millions of years.

Now on that account, it is important that a person who has charge of some young people, a pastor or a teacher, should be equipped to help them to make their choice and to see the propriety of the scriptural data and not to be obliged to surrender either their claim to scientific accuracy and adequacy or, on the other hand, to the actual inspiration and infallibility of the Scripture. It must be noted that the people who are most expert in these matters are much more tentative in the way in which they express themselves. For instance, there are a lot of people who use the term “the fact of evolution” as if the matter was just beyond any kind of discussion as a fact which needs to be recognized as having taken place. Evolution is not a fact; it is a theory. A difference between a theory and a fact is that the fact is an element of immediate evidence about which no question can be raised. A theory is an explanation that is devised by the mind of human beings to give account for a variety of facts which are bound in this way together; and this forms what is called a theory, because then it's not only one or two facts which are related but a number of them and gives in this way a rational explanation of some of the things that occur.

Now evolution is definitely a theory. It is not a fact. A theory is established in order to give an account of the factual presence on the earth of a great variety of living forms. And furthermore, it does base itself on the observation that some of those living forms have elements of similarity that are striking and which could possibly lead to the thought that there is a common ancestry. Meanwhile, the evidence that the evolution is advanced is very precarious. One portion of this evidence involves paleontology, that is the study of ancient things, the study of the earth and the various layers which are found on the surface of it and in which remnants of life, which was existing at various times in the past, are to be discovered. Now it is true that there is a progression at this point and that some of the most ancient forms that are discerned are found in the deepest layers that are found on the

surface of the earth in which there is life at all. But it is also to be noted that the ancestors of all the modern phyla are found in the very earliest stratum in the Cambrian Age in which there is any life at all. So that instead of having a gradual development in which the most primitive forms would have existed for a long time and the more advanced forms would have come very much later, we find that all the most important different forms of life have their origin at a very early point.

Furthermore, it is to be expected if the theory of evolution were correct that then a study of paleontology (and there are literally millions of fossils that have been discovered and unearthed), a study would lead to giving us a ramp in which a gradual progression of animal life would be observed where you would not have any sudden passage from one species to another.

In fact, this is not at all what paleontology provides for us. On the contrary, we find not a ramp, but a stairs. In fact, we find a number of species that are totally extinct, and we find species which are very much like the ones with which we live at present. In fact, some of them without any noticeable difference, like the worms which do not seem to have a great difference in the most ancient times when they are discovered and the time in which we live now. The horse shows over several millions of years certain changes in its stature, particularly the exact form of the jaw and the number of digits that are touching the earth when the horse is standing, but in its size also moves from that of an animal perhaps the size of a rabbit and the kind of size that we know now in the equine species. But what is remarkable is that throughout all these changes there does not seem to be the origination of anything that is not a horse. The horse (the eohippus as it is called) the ancestor of horses appears to have not given rise to any other kind of animals, even over millions of years, but they are all of the same species and the difference in size between an animal of the size of a rabbit and a large animal like a great tractor horse like the Percheron in France is smaller than the difference between the smallest dogs that we know and the Saint Bernard dogs that we have nowadays.

It's interesting to note that even though there is that difference, those animals are very conscious of the fact that even those great and very different forms are still part of their own species. And the behavior of an animal like the Pekingese toward a Saint Bernard

dog is quite different from the behavior it will have toward the cat or toward the rabbit that would more likely to be of its own size.

So the paleontological record, far from giving support to evolution, tends to raise questions about the reality of a development simply by generation in terms of inherent forces. That there is development in the creation is apparent, but it would seem to be more in terms of what Genesis 1 mentions by a direct intervention of God.

Now another line of presentation is that there is similarity in the structure of various animal forms, and that need not to prove descendants. All it proves is that God has a certain pattern, which He was pleased to follow, and it is somewhat as the variation on the theme by Beethoven which somebody else might write. There is still a resemblance to the original pattern but not actually a succession, which speaks of descendants and origin. In terms of embryology, the evidence here has been discarded almost entirely in modern scientific endeavors, and I will proceed to discuss that a little bit more at length in my second lecture.