

**[14-13] On Approving an "Affirmation of Creation—From the Presbytery of Boston.**

**Source:** Presbytery  
**Committee:** [14] Theological Issues and Institutions  
**Event:** 222nd General Assembly (2016)  
**Sponsor:** Boston Presbytery  
**Type:** General Assembly Full Consideration

## Action Summary

**Recommendation****Action**

On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:

Approve as Amended (AA)

On this Item, the Theological Issues and Institutions Committee acted as follows:

Approve as Amended (CA)

## Assembly Action

*On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:*

**Approve as Amended**

Electronic Vote - Plenary  
 Affirmative:305  
 Negative:264  
 Abstaining:

## Committee Recommendation

*On this Item, the Theological Issues and Institutions Committee acted as follows:*

**Approve as Amended**

Counted Vote - Committee  
 Affirmative:47  
 Negative:24  
 Abstaining:2

**Final text:****Final Text:**

1. Amend Recommendation 2., bullet 5 of "Affirmation of Creation" as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with brackets and a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown with brackets and with an underline.]

"• That God has connected all life on Earth in a network of kinship by virtue of [~~descent with modification~~] [biological evolution] from common ancestors;"

2. Amend Recommendation 2., bullet 6 of "Affirmation of Creation" as follows: [Text to be added or inserted is shown with brackets and with an underline.]

"• That, in response to God's call, we Homo sapiens [(modern humans)] emerged[, in our wide diversity and different cultures.] as a species over more than 6 million years of hominin development;"

## Recommendation

The Presbytery of Boston overtures the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to

- 1) approve the following "Affirmation of Creation," and
- 2) distribute it electronically to all councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (synods, presbyteries, sessions) for their study, reflection, and, where possible, their approval.

### Affirmation of Creation

From early in its life the Christian church has affirmed metaphorically that God is the author of two books of revelation: the Book of Scripture (the Old and New Testaments) and the Book of Nature. Because God is the author of both and God neither deceives nor is incoherent, these books cannot in principle be in conflict even though they are expressed through fallible creatures.

However, over the centuries some Christians have sought to deny observations of Nature by reference to Scripture. In the 5th century CE Augustine warned that claims about Nature, contrary to human reason and experience but supposedly derived from Scripture, should be avoided, lest they make Christians seem ignorant and the objects of scornful laughter. Yet we recognize that God has called forth in Homo sapiens an exploratory curiosity and a critical intellect. A fruit of these gifts is our capacity for scientific inquiry.

The results of this inquiry are provisional because they are open to new discoveries and revision. Yet these results are also highly reliable because the Creation itself, through observation and experimentation, attests to them. Scientific inquiry to date has provided descriptions and ever more profound understandings of the scope of God's creation in space and time, of the myriad of creatures that inhabit and have inhabited this Earth, and of the means by which the Creation itself has shared in the work of creation.

In light of these discoveries, today with confidence we can affirm:

- That God has been calling this universe into being for at least 13.8 billion years and continues calling upon the Creation to bring forth new creatures;
- That God's creative call has resulted in virtually countless stars and planetary systems, and new stars and planetary systems are continuing to be created;
- That, in response to God's creative call, the Earth took form at least 4.6 billion years ago;
- That, in response to God's call, living creatures emerged on the Earth at least 3.6 billion years ago;
- That God has connected all life on Earth in a network of kinship by virtue of descent with modification from common ancestors;
- That, in response to God's call, we Homo sapiens emerged as a species over more than 6 million years of hominin development;

- That, since our line of descent split from the line that resulted in our contemporaries, the chimpanzees and bonobos, we Homo sapiens were preceded by at least eighteen already identified hominin species, all of which are now extinct;\*
- That, in the providence of God, we Homo sapiens have come to exercise extraordinary power over other creatures and their habitats, the Earth's geological structures, and the meteorological systems of the Earth;
- That, by virtue of the powers of intellect and creativity called forth in us by God, we bear exceptional responsibility for the future of the Earth and all its constitutive creatures.

This affirmation provides a framework in which we are called to worship God, are called to proclaim the Gospel of Grace, and are called to live as faithful expressions of God's love for the whole Creation.

\*The eighteen identified species are: Sahelanthropus tchadensis, Orrorin tugenensis, Ardipithecus kadabba, Ardipithecus ramidus, Australopithecus anamensis, Australopithecus afarensis, Australopithecus garhi, Australopithecus sediba, Australopithecus africanus, Paranthropus aethiopicus, Paranthropus boisei, Paranthropus robustus, Homo habilis, Homo rudolfensis, Homo erectus, Homo heidelbergensis, Homo neanderthalensis, Homo floresiensis. See <<http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-evolution-timeline-interactive>>.

## Rationale

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19:1–4)

With these words the Psalmist declares that the Creation gives witness to its Creator. This theological sense of nature spurred Christians to study nature as a way of honoring God.

At the beginning of the western scientific revolution in the 16th century Nicolas Copernicus captured this sense when he wrote,

To know the mighty works of God, comprehend His wisdom and majesty and power, to appreciate in degree the wonderful working of His laws, surely all this must be a pleasing and acceptable mode of worship to the Most High to whom ignorance can not be more grateful than knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

In the 20th century Albert Einstein expressed the mutuality between inquiries about nature and religious life when he wrote: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that religion is obligated to tie its theological cart irrevocably to any particular scientific horse. As Presbyterian teaching elder, ethicist, and philosopher Holmes Rolston III notes, "The religion that is married to science today will be a widow tomorrow."<sup>3</sup> Yet he goes on to add this caution, "But the religion that is divorced from science today will leave no offspring tomorrow."<sup>4</sup>

Evidence for this latter effect can be found in the results of the 2011 Barna Group Study that reported that among the reasons given by teens and young adults for their disassociation from churches were that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in” (29 percent) and “Christianity is anti-science” (25 percent).<sup>5</sup>

Yet the idea is not new that a Christian faith, uninformed by a credible understanding of nature, is compromised in its ability to faithfully proclaim the Gospel. Augustine of Hippo perhaps most eloquently expressed this concern in the 5th century when he wrote,

Often a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other parts of the world, about the motions and orbits of the stars and even their sizes and distances, ... and this knowledge he holds with certainty from reason and experience. It is thus offensive and disgraceful for an unbeliever to hear a Christian talk nonsense about such things, claiming that what he is saying is based in Scripture. We should do all that we can to avoid such an embarrassing situation, [which people] see [as] ignorance in the Christian and laugh to scorn....<sup>6</sup>

All Christians affirm that God is Creator. Many, perhaps most Presbyterians, value science as a means to gain appreciation of God’s creation. Scientific inquiry also makes possible insights into nature that enable more effective service to God through service to neighbor. Yet these same scientific discoveries also challenge traditional ways of thinking about God, God’s creation, and God’s creative activity. In 1947 the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin described this challenge.

When we speak of a ‘theology of modern science,’ it obviously does not mean that by itself science can determine an image of God and a religion. But what it does mean, if I am not mistaken, is that, given a certain development of science, certain representations of God and certain forms of worship are ruled out, as *not being homogeneous* with the dimensions of the universe known to our experience. [Emphasis in the original.]<sup>7</sup>

He went on to expand on the importance of homogeneity for the relationship of science and the Christian faith.

This notion of homogeneity is without doubt of central importance in intellectual, moral and mystical life. Even though the various stages of our interior life cannot be expressed strictly in terms of one another, on the other hand they must agree in scale, in nature and tonality. Otherwise it would be impossible to develop a true spiritual unity in ourselves – and that is perhaps the most legitimate, the most imperative and most definitive of the demands made by man of today and man of tomorrow.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Christian churches, and specifically Presbyterians, virtually never publicly acknowledge the significance of even the most basic discoveries that humanity has made through science about the history, structure, and processes of creation for Christian faith and life, and often speak theologically as though they lived in a pre-Copernican cosmos.

Over the past 500 years humankind has gained more depth and breadth of understanding of creation than in all the preceding millennia of human history. Even within those five centuries there have been several revolutions in our understanding of creation. Though the findings of the sciences do not determine the Gospel message, as Augustine noted they do influence how that message can be credibly declared and persuasively received. The first task of an effective contemporary evangelism must begin with an assent to the Creation that God has indeed been calling and is calling into existence. It is for this purpose that the affirmation above has been developed.

#### Endnotes

1. Louis E. Van Norman, *Poland: The Knight Among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908) 290.
2. Albert Einstein, “Religion and Science” *New York Times Magazine* (9 Nov. 1930).

3. Holmes Rolston III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) vi (Preface).
4. Rolston, ix (Preface).
5. Barna Group, "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church." Web. 28 Sep. 2011.
6. Augustine of Hippo. *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim (The Literal Meaning of Genesis)*, I, xix, 39.
7. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 221.
8. *Science and Christ*, 221

## Other Comments

### ACSWP Advice

Item 09-07 from the Presbytery of Boston requests that the 222nd General Assembly (2016) approve, and distribute for study to all councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) an "Affirmation of Creation," which outlines current findings of cosmic and biological evolution as the framework within which we are to understand God's work, respect God's creation, and worship God.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) advises that Item 09-07 should be answered by Item 14-02 "Regarding Endorsing the Clergy Letter Project" and by earlier affirmations such as that at the 214th General Assembly (2002) "that there is no contradiction between an evolutionary theory of human origins and the doctrine of God as Creator" (*Minutes*, 2002, Part I, p. 495).

Item 09-07 presents key items of scientific knowledge of cosmic and biological evolution, and stresses that they are fully compatible with Christian theology, worship, and care for the earth. While supporting the general intent of this item, ACSWP is concerned that the level of technical detail which Item 09-07 presents could fall into the trap that its own rationale mentions, that (per Holmes Rolston III) "religion that is married to science today will be a widow tomorrow." More general statements of compatibility between evolutionary theory and Christian doctrine already exist from earlier General Assemblies, and would be reinforced if this General Assembly decides to approve Item 14-02 and thus sign on to the Clergy Letter Project that affirms "that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist."

### PMA Comment

Item 09-07 asks for the assembly to approve an "Affirmation of Creation" that calls the church to a "credible understanding of nature" without which its ability to "faithfully proclaim the gospel" is compromised.

In 1969, the Presbyterian Church in the United States affirmed "Evolution and the Bible," the statement on evolution that continues to guide the PC(USA) to this day, "Neither Scripture, our Confession of Faith, nor our Catechisms, teach the Creation of man [sic] by the direct and immediate acts of God so as to exclude the possibility of evolution as a scientific theory" (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1969, Part I, p. 59). Approval of "An Affirmation of Creation" would change the assembly's stance on evolution from one of openness and non-contradiction of Christian faith and evolution without favoring any particular account to an affirmation of the current scientific consensus.

Further information on two elements of this overture may be of help: first, the record of affirmation of scientific insights extending back to the PC(USA)'s predecessor denominations; second, an affirmation from our *Book of Confessions* regarding revelation in nature and in Scripture.

1. *Record of Affirmation of Scientific Insights*

The Presbyterian church has a long history of affirmation of scientific insights, particularly in “Evolution and the Bible” (PCUS 1969) and “The Dialogue Between Theology and Science (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1982, Part I, pp. 233–61) and in the Study Catechism (PCUSA 1998).

From “The Dialogue Between Theology and Science”: “Thus, from the very beginning, theology, which speaks of God and creation, and science, which knows the creation and must know it if humankind is to ‘have dominion over it,’ would seem necessary if not indispensable to one another. Such being the case, we might expect that the theological side of us, which understands God’s command, and the scientific side of us, which knows something about birds and fishes and living things and the kind of earth that keeps them alive and keeps us alive by keeping them alive, would have the greatest interest in one another.”

From “The Study Catechism—Full Version”:

Question 27. Does your confession of God as Creator contradict the findings of modern science?

No. My confession of God as Creator answers three questions: Who? How? and Why? It affirms that (a) the triune God, who is self-sufficient, (b) called the world into being out of nothing by the creative power of God’s Word (c) for the sake of sharing love and freedom. Natural science has much to teach us about the particular mechanisms and processes of nature, but it is not in a position to answer these questions about ultimate reality, which point to mysteries that science as such is not equipped to explore. Nothing basic to the Christian faith contradicts the findings of modern science, nor does anything essential to modern science contradict the Christian faith. John 1:1-3 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

## 2. *Revelation in Nature and in Scripture*

The “Affirmation of Creation” reads that “God is the author of two books of revelation: the Book of Scripture (the Old and New Testaments) and the Book of Nature.” The Westminster Confession opens with these words,

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. (*Book of Confessions*, 6.001)

## Concurrence

**Cascades**

**Denver**

**Milwaukee**

**Wabash Valley**

## Additional Resources