

NO ADAM, NO GOSPEL

Adam and
the History
of Redemption

RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR.



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THE ISSUE

“All mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression.” Some readers will recognize this language from answer 16 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (as well as Larger Catechism 22). It expresses a central truth of Scripture and reflects what for centuries has been the well-nigh universal confession of the church. Non-Christians have of course rejected this truth for a long time. But more recently scientists, biblical scholars, and others who consider themselves evangelical or even Reformed Christians are increasingly calling into question the common descent of all human beings from Adam. Moreover they are persuaded that their doubts about this truth should be accepted as compatible with their Christian commitment.

Every Christian truly submitted to the Bible’s authority needs to be alert to this relatively recent development. Despite what others may tell us, we need to be clear about the consequences of these doubts and denials. No matter how well intended, they undermine the gospel and will lead to its eventual loss. The truth of the gospel stands or falls with the historicity of Adam as the first human being from whom all other human beings descend.

That does not overstate. Sometimes it’s said that the Bible and Christianity are about salvation, not creation. That way of putting it is misleading at best. What Scripture affirms about creation, especially the origin of humanity, is central to its teaching about salvation. If it is not true that all human beings descend from Adam, then the entire history of redemption taught in Scripture unravels. The result is no redemptive *history*

in any credible or coherent sense and so the loss of *redemptive* history in any meaningful sense.

SCIENTIFIC AND BIBLICAL OBJECTIONS

The reasons given for this recent questioning of the church's historic confession concerning the origin and descent of humanity are of two sorts: scientific and biblical. Accumulating results in several fields—primarily paleontology, archaeology, anthropology and, especially in the past couple of decades, genetics—allegedly make it virtually certain that all human beings have not descended from an original pair. The claim that everyone living today has the same “first parents” is deemed no longer credible.

These scientific findings, in turn, have prompted reconsideration of Scripture, principally Genesis 2–4. They are perceived as forcing us to acknowledge that on a literal reading of these chapters some details simply do not cohere with the view that all human beings descend from Adam and Eve.

My concern in this booklet is not with these scientific claims, at least not directly. Rather, it is with the biblical and theological views usually associated with them, including implications and conclusions drawn for interpreting Scripture. This focus doesn't mean to suggest that these claims can be easily dismissed or simply ignored. But evaluating them in a scientifically responsible fashion is beyond my competence, as it is for most Christians. I highly regard those who are knowledgeable and have expertise in scientific areas like those mentioned above. And there is presently an urgent need, as never before, for Christians both qualified in these and other fields and with a sound and committed understanding of requisite biblical teaching.¹

1. For a helpful survey and assessment of some aspects of the scientific side of the issues involved, see Vern S. Poythress, “Adam Versus Claims from Genetics,” *West-*

SCRIPTURE AND SCIENCE

Where I am confident is that the biblical and theological considerations that I sketch here provide such teaching, teaching mandatory for any constructive Christian interest or direct involvement in scientific inquiry into matters like the origin of humanity. Those with the doubts we are considering often plead for a cooperative effort among scientists in various fields like those already noted and theologians, in honestly considering the available scientific evidence in a way that also maintains required biblical doctrine. That is surely a laudable goal. But when I ask myself what such collaboration looks like for theologians, I'm left with the answer that I make not only my best but also necessary contribution by being resolutely insistent on the comments that follow, unless it can be pointed out where they are wrong. I'm also bound to ask scientists who are committed to a divinely guided ("theistic") macroevolutionary model for understanding ourselves and the universe whether they do not need to reconsider at least aspects of that model.

The view that questions that Adam is the first human being from whom all others descend is itself questionable in its general approach to Scripture. This is so in at least two respects, both of which reflect adversely on the clarity of Scripture. First, scientific findings are being given priority in the sense that they are seen as necessitating a rejection and consequent reinterpretation of what has heretofore been considered certain as well as basic biblical teaching. In that regard let's not suppose that we are faced here with yet one more "Galileo moment," as it has been put, where

minster Theological Journal 75 (2013): 65–82; see also Vern S. Poythress, "Evaluating the Claims of Scientists," *New Horizons* 33, no. 3 (March 2012): 6–8; and pertinent chapters in Norman C. Nevin, ed., *Should Christians Embrace Evolution? Biblical and Scientific Responses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

Christians need to adjust their thinking and get on board with the results of science. Plainly at issue here is not an aspect of our ever-revisable and often changing understanding of the physical workings of ourselves, our environment, and the universe at large, but perennial and unchanging matters basic to who we are as human beings—what it means to be created in God’s image and the kind of relationship with him that entails.

Certainly God’s saving revelation culminating in Christ, sufficiently and authoritatively inscripturated for us, cannot be understood by itself, apart from his self-revelation in nature. Both creation, “a most beautiful book” (Belgic Confession, article 2), and Scripture are necessary for knowing and living before God and with others. But the reciprocal relationship that marks these two “books” and their study is asymmetrical. Scripture, not nature, always has priority in the sense that in it God reveals himself, as the Belgic Confession also says, “more clearly and openly,” particularly on matters basic to our identity as human beings and our relationship to him.

In Calvin’s graphic image, Scripture provides the “spectacles” that enable human beings to read aright the whole of created reality, including themselves as his image bearers, as a self-revelation of God (*Institutes* 1.6.1; 1.14.1). As a general rule, then, the special sciences in their study of general revelation must always defer to inscripturated special revelation, and where Scripture speaks incontrovertibly on a matter, if science reaches contrary findings, it should be prepared to question them, no matter how apparently certain those findings. The view that holds that we can no longer confess that Scripture teaches the descent of all human beings from Adam has effectively reversed this rule. Scripture is being made to yield to science.

This leads, second, to observe that this view is also defective in maintaining that Scripture is unclear and less than certain

about the origin and descent of humanity. Focusing primarily on problems in Genesis 2–4 is myopic. Scripture is self-interpreting in the sense that this passage, like any other, is to be understood in light of the Bible as a whole, and any passage with admitted difficulties, like this one, is to be interpreted in light of other places that speak more clearly (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9).

As a sound general rule, then, within the unfolding history of God’s special revelation consummated in Christ and recorded for the church in the completed canon of Scripture, the Old Testament is to be read in light of the New. Any passage is always to be read and understood from the vantage point provided by the completed history of special revelation, from the perspective of God’s final, “last days” speech “in the Son” (Heb. 1:2). Specifically, in the overall profile of biblical revelation, it has been given to Paul, as an apostle of Christ, to speak about the origin of humanity in a way that has a clear and decisive bearing on the matters we are considering. That happens principally in two places: Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49.

ADAM AND CHRIST

The central interest in both passages is clearly Christ, his person and work. In both two more things are equally plain: (1) a *sweeping historical outlook* on Christ and the salvation he has accomplished, and (2) within this historical outlook and fundamental to it, a *contrast with Adam*. In 1 Corinthians 15:44b–49 this perspective is the most comprehensive possible, covering nothing less than the whole of human history from its beginning to its end, from the original creation to its consummation. Accordingly, in verse 45 Adam as he was by virtue of his creation and before the fall (Adam in Genesis 2) is contrasted with Christ, “the last Adam” as he now is resulting from his resurrection. In Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 the

Doubts and denials swarm the biblical teaching that humans descend from an original pair, Adam and Eve. Some even claim that these doubts are compatible with Christian commitment. But is that possible? Richard Gaffin shows how these denials undermine the entire history of redemption taught in Scripture. When we remove Adam and Eve from history, we are left with no *redemptive* history. Gaffin reminds us that with no Adam there is no gospel.

“In Scripture, who we were in Adam is decisive for who we are now as human beings made in the image of God and for who we shall become as redeemed believers in Christ. Dick Gaffin draws out the serious theological implications that necessarily flow from the denial of a historic Adam as the primordial ancestor of humanity.”

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OLD TESTAMENT

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