

# AN ANALYSIS OF BERNARD RAMM'S INFLUENCE ON YOUNG EARTH CREATIONISM

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## INTRODUCTION

Bernard Ramm (1916-1992) was a respected Baptist theologian whose ideas continue to influence the science / faith discussion. His best-known work, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* <sup>1</sup> was written in 1954. This book is a critique of individuals Ramm characterized as hyper-orthodox – individuals whose negative appraisal of science, particularly biological science, was, in Ramm's opinion, a serious liability to the church. Ramm was a so-called new evangelical, part of a group within evangelical Christianity advocating responsible scholarship and positive relationships with those who understood things differently. During the 1940's and 50's the American Scientific Affiliation was a focal point for discussion of the theory of evolution among evangelicals. Bernard Ramm had a significant and enduring impact on the ASA. Many evangelicals are unaware of the fact that Billy Graham supported Ramm. Rev. Graham called for a view of biblical inspiration “along the line of the recent book by Bernard Ramm.” <sup>2</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, the majority of evangelicals were willing to consider what science had to say. In the 1920's, a major summary of evangelical doctrine called *The Fundamentals*, Part IV, left open the possibility of theistic evolution. <sup>3</sup> Organized creationism was not a major force at that time. But things were about to change. And Bernard Ramm's book would be a major catalyst. In our day, many evangelicals do not know that young earth creationism represents a departure from a long-standing Christian practice of taking science seriously. As we will see, Ramm's views were outside the boundaries of evangelical orthodoxy and eventually prompted a vigorous response. From the early days of the scientific revolution until today, science has been subject to criticism by various groups and individuals. Christians were part of this process but rarely considered science as a whole to be an enemy of their faith. Copernicanism was problematic at first, but was eventually accommodated. Aspects of science that initially caused concern to the church included surgery (said to mutilate the body), vaccination (the work of the devil and blasphemy against God), painkillers and anesthesia (considered ways of avoiding the curse of the Fall). <sup>4</sup> The vaccination issue, of course, lives on, albeit for very different reasons.

## NOBLE AND IGNOBLE

Ramm was a conciliator who advised Christians to be charitable in their dealings with one another and with those outside the church as well. He advocated respectful conversation. *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* describes two very different approaches to science, one Ramm labelled noble and the other ignoble. <sup>5</sup> The ignoble approach, as Ramm described it, is hyper-critical, self-assured, self-righteous, ill-informed, spoiling for a fight. A well-known example of young earth creationism's combative approach is Ken Ham and his organization *Answers in Genesis*. But berating people doesn't work. It only encourages individuals to hold on to their views even more tightly. No one appreciates having their intelligence impugned. Ham's aggressive negativism towards science and its practitioners builds walls of resentment. Ramm's irenic approach, on the other hand, builds bridges.

## HISTORY OF YOUNG EARTH CREATIONISM

The roots of young earth creationism (YEC) can be traced back to Seventh-Day Adventist prophet Ellen G. White (1827-1915). In 1874, White had a vision which, she claimed, revealed the true impact on the earth's geology of Noah's flood. Fossil evidence found today, White argued, is the result of the flood.<sup>6</sup> Following White, another Adventist, Canadian-born, self-taught geologist George McCready Price (1870-1963) popularized White's claims, which came to be known as flood geology. Price spent the majority of his adult life promoting White's speculations. Largely due to Price's zeal, the so-called gap theory,<sup>7</sup> which had been the dominant theory with regard to the age of the earth among evangelicals, was quickly replaced. Flood geology remains a core concept of young earth creationism today. Because of his departure from traditional evangelical beliefs about creation and the flood, Ramm was considered a false teacher by many evangelicals. Ramm's position was, from today's perspective, best described as hybrid or eclectic. Some of his views agreed with young earth creationism, others with theistic evolution and still others, with intelligent design (ID).

## PROGRESSIVE CREATIONISM

Bernard Ramm was not a theistic evolutionist or, as some use the term today, evolutionary creationist. He was a proponent of progressive creationism. He believed that creation took place by means of many separate interventions by God and that this sequence of events took place over a very long period of time. Ramm argued that the fossil record shows evidence of jumps and saltations. He believed in an initial instantaneous creation but made room for a series of successive creations through time. Ramm believed that these interventions were miraculous works of God. He claimed that this guiding force was programmed in advance, a point of view called orthogenesis. Ramm's progressive creationism, however, failed to win the support of the majority of evangelical scientists.<sup>8</sup> Progressive creationism is a major component of contemporary intelligent design creationism. Berkeley lawyer Philip Johnson played an important role in the formation of ID. Johnson argued that a creative intelligence caused the right mutations to arrive right on schedule. Johnson, like Ramm before him, claimed that "the single greatest problem which the fossil record poses for Darwinism was the Cambrian explosion."<sup>9</sup> Thirty-five years before, Ramm had made the point that the sudden appearance of animal forms in the Cambrian argued strongly for God's creative intervention.

Ramm anticipated another core concept of ID, labeled irreducible complexity by Michael Behe.<sup>10</sup> Behe argued that organisms are composed of numerous subsystems far too complex to have developed through natural selection alone. Ramm anticipated still another ID concept called the anthropic principle. The strong form of the anthropic principle asks the question why the fundamental physical constants of the universe are just right for life to exist on earth, and not just for life, but for conscious life as well. The weak form of the anthropic principle is less specific, dealing with conditions being just right for life in a generic sense. Ramm argued that "... conditions necessary for life are not accidental, but purposed."<sup>11</sup>

Ramm argued, as do numerous contemporary young earth creationists, that there are no transitional forms among fossil discoveries. And again, along with today's young earth creationists, Ramm claimed that the Scriptures possess scientific credibility. He also argued that the Scriptures contain no scientific errors because God kept the authors from making them.<sup>12</sup> Ramm, as I say, was not a theistic evolutionist. He explicitly denied the possibility of evolution by natural selection. Ramm did, however, advocate some views characteristic of theistic evolution. He argued, for instance, that the descriptions of the natural realm in the Scriptures are phenomenological. In other words, those descriptions pertain

to appearances, using common-sense logic to explain them. With theistic evolutionists, Ramm rejected the claim that there was no death before the fall into sin. And he raised a few eyebrows in the evangelical community when he argued that Noah's flood was local, not global.<sup>13</sup>

## STRONG CRITICISM

Despite a few points of agreement, Ramm was strongly critical of the young earth creationists of his day, both for the content of their arguments and for the methods they used to communicate them. Here are a few examples drawn from *The Christian View*.

- *Slipshod Christianity rests smugly in dogmatic theology with a contemptible estimation of science.*<sup>14</sup>
- *Sad has been the history of the evil that good Christian men have done in regard to science.*<sup>15</sup>
- *Pedantic hyper-orthodoxy must not be allowed to speak for all evangelical Christians.*<sup>16</sup>
- *Narrow-minded enemies of science have buried the noble tradition.*<sup>17</sup>

Ramm argued that pointing out weaknesses in someone else's theory does not make one's own theory automatically correct. He added fuel to the fire when he said that a perspective which needs to be supported by threats and intimidation is sure to fail. He made the point that this kind of behavior unwittingly gives ammunition to the enemies of Christianity. Ramm argued that spiritual qualifications do not exempt a person from learning science.

All-or-nothing thinking is not limited to YEC. Scientists like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Jerry Coyne, and the late Christopher Hitchens, the so-called new atheists, share a perspective called scientism, claiming that science is the only legitimate method of ascertaining truth. The new atheists use science to attack faith and religion. But, often, their criticisms are simplistic and ill-informed. When scientists like Dawkins step outside mainstream scientific methodology and hold forth on issues of religion, they have entered the realm of philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

*The Christian View of Science and Scripture* is strongly critical of McCready Price and his flood geology. Ramm's critique elicited a strong pushback, and prompted Henry Morris and John Whitcomb to publish what would become one of YEC's most influential books. Ramm's criticisms led to an equal and opposite response. *The Genesis Flood* changed the landscape, and certainly not in the way Ramm had hoped. Evangelical theologian John Whitcomb was particularly incensed by Ramm's criticisms. As far as Whitcomb was concerned, Ramm's efforts were accommodationism pure and simple – capitulation to atheistic science, a capitulation which would sound the death knell of traditional evangelical theology. Whitcomb lined the margins of Ramm's book with critical comments that were to become seed thoughts for *The Genesis Flood*. Whitcomb, being a theologian, was advised by the ASA to find a scientific co-author for his proposed book. He chose Henry Morris (1918-2006). *The Genesis Flood* made assent to young earth creationism a litmus test of evangelical orthodoxy – a litmus test which stands largely unchanged to this day.<sup>19</sup>

*The Genesis Flood*<sup>20</sup> is essentially two long arguments. It is, first of all, a spirited defense of flood geology. And, secondly, it is highly critical of Bernard Ramm (there are forty references to Ramm in the index. Interestingly, Morris and Whitcomb chose to downplay their debt to Adventists White and Price. Largely due to this one book, an entire generation of evangelicals fell under the spell of flood

geology. Advocates intimated that should anyone disagree with what they had to say those individuals would be disagreeing with the Bible's inspiration and authority. Surprisingly, Moody Press declined to publish *The Genesis Flood*, arguing that the day-age interpretation was the predominant view at that time and felt that individuals were not inclined to change their minds. <sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Bernard Ramm unintentionally provoked creationists into mounting a massive campaign in defense of their views. And that campaign has been remarkably successful. *The Genesis Flood*, with its proprietary interpretation of Scripture's creation accounts, opened the door to pseudoscience or outright science denial. Ironically, the point of view that Ramm called "ignoble" continued with business as usual. With the publication of *The Christian View*, the ignoble point of view received an invaluable gift – an enemy to attack, a point of view to denigrate. It gave advocates of young earth creationism a reason to promote flood geology as a God-given defense of scripture's inspiration and authority. Karl Giberson summarizes the current state of affairs,

Evolutionists have won the academies; creationists have won the grass roots and have created a sheltered subculture. <sup>22</sup>

Despite these setbacks, Ramm did achieve some successes. *The Christian View* paved the way for the majority of Christian biologists to accept evolution. In addition, the majority of mainline denominations, including the Roman Catholic church, have no problem with theistic evolution. Ramm opened the door for Christian reconciliation with evolution but stopped short, himself, of stepping through the doorway. It is critical that the church engage with science. Christian leaders must allow their students to wrestle with these issues. An intelligent faith makes room for science and doesn't hold forth in areas outside of its expertise. Ramm said:

All the criticism I ever received was worth it, just to know that there would never be a student of mine who, after studying with me... lost his faith because I never allowed him to wrestle [with the issues]. <sup>23</sup>

And this, a brief but powerful statement of his purpose in writing, suitable words for an inspirational wall plaque:

We are not interested in being popular but in being fair and factual. <sup>24</sup>

Bernard Ramm didn't hesitate to color outside the lines, as it were. *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, with its non-traditional ideas, became well-known in the evangelical world. Many were influenced by his ideas -- those who shared his views, and those who did not. With increased visibility came a certain notoriety. Once ideas are published, they are set free and cannot be re-captured by the author. Ramm's experience reminds us that ideas matter and ideas have consequences, many of them unintended. Many of Ramm's ideas, especially his call for respectful conversation, are more important than ever.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Ramm, B. L. (1954). *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- <sup>2</sup> Numbers, R. (2006). *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design. Expanded Edition*. London: Harvard University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Ramm, *ibid.*, p. 200.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> Giberson, K., & Artigas, M. (2007). *Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists vs. God and Religion*. Oxford University Press. p. 100.
- <sup>7</sup> The Gap Theory proposes that the days of creation were literal 24-hour day, with a time gap of unknown length between two separate creations, recorded in Genesis 1:1, and Genesis 1:2-31. Some proponents claim that a race of humans existed before Adam, but was destroyed before God re-created the world in six days. Gap creationism rejects the theory of evolution.
- <sup>8</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists. ibid.*, p. 211.
- <sup>9</sup> Johnson, P. (1991). *Darwin on Trial*. Lanham, MD: Regnery Gateway. p. 54.
- <sup>10</sup> Behe, M. (1998). *Darwin's Black Box; The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*. New York: Touchstone.
- <sup>11</sup> Ramm, *ibid.*, p. 56.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 162.
- <sup>14</sup> Dawson, J. (1877). *The Origin of the World According to Revelation and Science*.
- <sup>15</sup> Ramm, *ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>17</sup> Numbers, *ibid.*, p. 210.
- <sup>18</sup> Giberson, & Artigas, *Oracles of Science: ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Giberson, K. (2008). *Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*. New York: HarperOne. p. 138.
- <sup>20</sup> Morris, H. M., & Whitcomb, J. (1961). *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications*. Phillipsburg, NJ.: P and R Publishing.
- <sup>21</sup> Numbers, *ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>22</sup> Giberson, *Saving Darwin: ibid.*, p. 141.
- <sup>23</sup> Applegate, K., & Stump, J. (2016). *How I Changed My Mind About Evolution: Evangelicals Reflect on Faith and Science. Kindle Edition*. Downer's Grove, IL.: IVP Academic. loc. 2349.
- <sup>24</sup> Ramm, *The Christian View ibid.*, p. 219.

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