

# — THE ABI REPORT —

*Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church*

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## Bruce Waltke's Comments Create A Firestorm

by Dave James

*Bruce Waltke is one of the most well-known Old Testament scholars in the Reformed tradition of this generation. Known by many as a conservative, his comments made in a recently-released 2009 interview may have created one of the most significant theological firestorms to sweep through the evangelical community in recent memory.*

### "Bruce Waltke: Why Must the Church Accept Evolution?"

On March 24, the *Science and Sacred* blog of the *Biologos Forum* posted a 2009 interview in which Dr. Waltke made definitive statements defending theistic evolution, while simultaneously marginalizing and potentially alienating all who still hold to a literal six-day-creation view of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> In the video titled *Bruce Waltke: Why Must the Church Accept Evolution?* Dr. Waltke makes the following statement:

*...if the data is overwhelmingly in favor of evolution, to deny that reality will make us a cult...some odd group that is not really interacting with the world. And rightly so, because we are not using our gifts and trusting God's Providence that brought us to this point of our awareness.<sup>2</sup>*

(Note: I have not been able to locate the video anywhere on the internet as it has apparently been taken down everywhere. However, that this is an accurate quote is corroborated by many websites.)

At the time the video debuted, Dr. Waltke had been a professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) for more than 20 years, but his resignation from the seminary was reported on April 6.<sup>3</sup> *Biologos* reports that on March 29 he was asked by the seminary to request that the video be taken down. *Miscellanies: a Christ-centered Blog*<sup>4</sup> reported a clarification by Dr. Waltke on March 31 in which he continues to affirm that Adam and Eve are historical figures from whom all humans descended.<sup>5</sup>

Although some early reports indicated that RTS had essentially forced his resignation, Dr. Waltke and seminary Chancellor and CEO Robert (Ric) Cannada have subsequently issued a joint statement that this is not true.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Waltke tendered his resignation because of the harm the video was causing RTS and his resignation was accepted as being in the best interests of RTS.

On April 30, the board of Knox Theological Seminary approved the appointment of Dr. Bruce Waltke as Distinguished Professor of Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> (Knox Theological Seminary is a ministry of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, a member of the PCA.)

### This "Will Make Us A Cult"

*The Alliance for Biblical Integrity* holds to Young-Earth Creationism (YEC) and I will deal with some of the specific scientific and exegetical issues in the evolution / creation debate at some point in the future. However, in this article, I am limiting my comments to the general theological and philosophical problems of evolution, including those associated with marginalizing Young-Earth Creationists by suggesting we may eventually be viewed as a cult.

To be fair, Dr. Waltke has stated that he would have given the video a different title and that the interview was edited in such a way to make him appear to be making stronger statements than he intended against those who don't agree with his views on theistic evolution. The following has been posted on a third-party blog as being copied from a statement on his Facebook site:

*I am not a scientist, but I have familiarized myself with attempts to harmonize Genesis 1-3 with science, and I believe that creation by the process of evolution is a tenable Biblical position. I apologize for giving the impression that others who seek to harmonize the two differently are not credible. I honor all who contend for the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup>*

However, the statement concerning the problem of being labeled a cult does not seem to simply be an off-the-cuff remark in an unguarded moment. And even if he might state it differently in retrospect or if this was not his intention, his comments do reflect a widely-held view that YEC is only held by those on the anti-intellectual fringe of conservative evangelicalism. Of course, this has been the consensus of the scientific establishment for as long as anyone can remember. But Dr. Waltke's words seem to imply that we legitimately run the risk of this becoming the common consensus---which would necessarily include that of the evangelical community in general.

It seems surprising that Dr. Waltke would use the word "cult" so loosely and imprecisely. "Cult" is almost exclusively reserved for groups that deny the deity of Christ, yet it seems unlikely that he is suggesting that rejecting theistic evolution is somehow even close to being equivalent to such heresy. So why even use this term---even if to stress his concern that those who continue to hold this position run the risk of losing credibility? At the very least, the term is unnecessarily inflammatory.

The reasoning behind Dr. Waltke's statement is also puzzling.

Ultimately, a primary reason for us to be concerned about being labeled a cult for any reason must be that the gospel message we proclaim will be rejected as a result. But who would reject our gospel over the question of beginnings if not those who already reject it on other grounds--including many in the scientific community?

### Will Theistic Evolution Really Help The Cause Of The Gospel?

Is it reasonable to expect that Muslim intellectuals will accept the deity of Christ if--or because evangelical Christians accept theistic evolution? Will Hindu biologists accept the concept of the triune personal God of the Bible if--or because evangelical Christians reject Young-earth Creationism? Will liberal Protestants return to the biblical gospel of personal redemption through faith in Jesus Christ alone if--or because evangelical Christians embrace their view of Genesis 1-11 as merely a collection of myths? Will even one materialistic evolutionist recognize that he has been wrong about God's existence if--or because evangelical Christians recognize that they have been wrong about Darwin's theory?

The answer to these questions seems intuitively obvious. These groups all rejected the biblical gospel long before the evolution / creation debate became a scientific issue, a social cause, a cultural phenomenon or a political football. And if anything, the deepening rejection of the gospel within academia has tracked right with the movement away from a literal view of creation - and not even pretending to slow down at theistic evolution on its way to atheistic evolution. Despite Dr. Waltke's long years of ministry and work in the rigorous field of theological academics, his comments seem oddly naive.

From a scientific perspective, don't the twin issues of the resurrection from the dead and life-after-death pose least as much of an obstacle as evolution? Concerning the case for the resurrection, the only evidence consists of historical records. Concerning the case for life-after-death the only arguments are purely philosophical/ theological. There is no empirical evidence that the spiritual realm exists, apart from a few spurious claims to the contrary. Anecdotal reports of common near-death experiences do not constitute scientific proof. But even if such proof did exist, it would not produce a rush by the scientific community or anyone else to trust in Christ for salvation, because lack of evidence is not the real issue.

Another significant issue is that of Adam and Eve. In a post-video follow-up, Waltke states:

*1. Adam and Eve are historical figures from whom all humans are descended; they are uniquely created in the image of God and as such are not in continuum with animals.*

*2. Adam is the federal and historical head of the fallen human race just as Jesus Christ is the federal and historical head of the Church.<sup>9</sup>*

I don't see how Dr. Waltke's present position will give him much more credibility as long as he continues to maintain that Adam and Eve were historical figures. Sooner or later, he will have no choice but to abandon one view or the other. Apart from the scientific problems, the virtually insurmountable nature of the logical and theological problems can readily be seen by anyone who thinks through the issue. (These will be discussed later.)

### Is Theistic Evolution The Only Credible View?

Apparently, Dr. Waltke has not always thought so. In an article on biblical cosmogony in the Jan.-Mar. 1975 edition of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Dr. Waltke asked the question:

*Why has the new generation turned from the theologian to the scientist for the answer to his nagging question about the origin of the universe?<sup>10</sup>*

In the quote from the video, and in the subsequent clarification, one cannot deduce for sure that Dr. Waltke has completely ruled out the possibility that the Genesis account can be taken literally. However, he does seem to be very close to that position---particularly in light of his resignation from RTS. This leads us to wonder what has happened over the last 35 years that has caused him to change his views regarding evolution if his high view of Scripture hasn't changed, as well---something which he also maintains.

Although Dr. Waltke has made it clear that he holds to theistic evolution (as opposed to naturalistic evolution), it is not at all clear that he held to any form of evolution in 1975. In explaining his position in this article, Dr. Waltke refers to a lecture he gave as a guest speaker in a course on genetics at Southern Methodist University, during which he appeared to defend the literal creationist position. His basic thesis was that evolution, like creationism, is a faith position which cannot be scientifically proven.

*During the questioning session that followed the lecture, the basic thesis was accepted by both professor and students, but their next question was, "Why should we accept your faith position instead of ours?"*

*Now the author is not suggesting that by this one experience he has refuted the hypothesis of evolution, but he is maintaining that all answers which attempt to explain the origin of the universe are essentially faith positions. The question that the LORD asked of Job is asked of every man: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"<sup>11</sup>*

The following is an excellent statement that he made in the same article under the section, "The Importance of Cosmogony." (If Dr. Waltke's views haven't fundamentally changed since 1975, it seems odd that after 20 years it would only now be in the best interests of RTS for him to leave the school.)

*But it may be asked, "What difference does all this make?" It is important because the question of cosmogony is closely*

*related to one's entire world view. Someone has said that our world view is like the umpire at a ball game. He seems unimportant and the players are hardly aware of him, but in reality he decides the ball game. So likewise one's world view lies behind every decision a person makes. It makes a difference whether we come from a mass of matter or from the hand of God. How we think the world started will greatly influence our understanding of our identity, our relationship to others, our values, and our behavior. Because the question of cosmogony is important for understanding some of the basic issues of life, intelligent men throughout recorded history have sought the answer to this question. Just as the knowledge of the future is crucial for making basic choices in life, so also the knowledge of beginnings is decisive in establishing a man's or a culture's Weltanschauung ("world view"). No wonder the Bible reveals both.*

*Because of man's limitation as a creature, he must receive this knowledge by revelation from the Creator. Moreover, because of the noetic effects of sin, he needs to be reborn before he can comprehend that revelation.<sup>12</sup>*

Scientists now regularly state that evolution is no longer a theory, but a proven fact---and it would appear that Dr. Waltke has become persuaded that this is true. However, the problem he cites above has not changed, and in fact, it cannot change. As he notes, "The answer is beyond the range of empirical proof" and this is because it involves events that happened in the past.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that God has created the universe such that macro-evolution can actually occur without his ongoing intervention. That macro-evolution could happen and that it actually did happen are two entirely separate issues. The only way there can be a necessary relationship between the two is if God does not exist---and that is precisely the starting point for atheistic evolutionists.

But this begs the question for theistic evolutionists, as well. If theistic evolution is true, then either evolution requires God's intervention or God unnecessarily chose to be involved. However, this presents a conundrum. The evidence and arguments required for theistic evolutionists to maintain that God is necessary at some point in the process are essentially the same ones used by Young-earth Creationists. So, what is the advantage when trying to persuade anyone either of God's existence or of the truth of the Gospel? If the arguments are essentially the same, then on what grounds do Young-earth Creationists run the risk of being labeled a cult any more than the theistic evolutionist who also maintains the view that Christ arose from the grave to be alive forevermore---a view that most scientists would claim to be decidedly "unscientific."

### **Irreconcilable Practical and Theological Problems**

Ultimately, theistic evolution creates far more problems than it solves. This is not simply an issue of whether or not a given passage should be understood figuratively or literally. Below are just a few of the many questions and problems raised by the

theory of theistic evolution.

If theistic evolution is true in general...

- Wouldn't death have been a part of life for the millions of years prior to the fall of Adam and Eve?
- Wouldn't biological decay have occurred over the eons, as well?
- Wouldn't have all the forces of nature that we observe today been at work also---i.e., destructive weather and geological phenomena?
- What, exactly, were the effects of the Fall, if death, destruction and decay had been an inherent part of the creation from the beginning?
- How could God pronounce that all he created was "good," if death, destruction and decay had been an inherent part of the creation from the beginning?
- How could it be determined scientifically which parts of the evolutionary process were immediately and necessarily guided by the hand of God, and which ones could have happened without God's direct intervention?
- How would the answer to the previous question fundamentally differ from the arguments used by Young-earth Creationists?

If Adam and Eve were created instantaneously millions to billions of years after the initial creation...

- How can it be explained that Adam and Eve were placed in an environment that was already marked by death, destruction and decay?
- Were Adam and Eve created to live forever in such an environment?
- Did God also at that time create the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or are these simply metaphorical?
- What, exactly, did Adam and Eve do to bring about their spiritual and physical death, if these things are only metaphorical?
- Why did Moses include the details about cherubim and a flaming sword guarding the entrance to the Garden---and how should we understand this passage, if these things are only metaphorical?

If instead of Adam and Eve being independently created, lower life forms had evolved into hominids over the millennia...

- Would it be proper to say that Adam and Eve were animals prior to God breathing into them the breath of life so that they became "living souls?"
- Would it be reasonable to assume that only two such animals had evolved or that these were the only two among many which became living souls---which would be required

for them to be the only progenitors of the human race?

- Wouldn't it be reasonable to suggest that there were many such hominids at that time, who were biologically identical to humans and looked exactly like humans, but really were not?
- What would have prevented procreation between humans and biologically identical hominids---or is it possible that this actually happened?
- What happened to all of these pre-human animals?

These are not absurd questions. And because of these and many others that could be posed, it doesn't seem that theistic evolution could possibly be more acceptable to unbelievers than Young-earth Creationism. When carefully considered, it actually seems that theistic evolution could be viewed by naturalistic evolutionists as even more foolish and logically inconsistent than YEC.

I understand there are some significant difficulties that remain to be addressed by YEC from a scientific perspective. However, theistic evolution introduces at least as many problems because science and biblical theology must still be reconciled---which is obviously not a burden for naturalistic evolutionists.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem that either Dr. Waltke's position on theistic evolution or his comments are in any way helpful to conservative evangelicals and the cause of Christ.

1. <http://biologos.org/blog/>
2. [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/04/ot\\_scholar\\_bruc.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/04/ot_scholar_bruc.html)
3. [http://www.rts.edu/newsevents/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=1370](http://www.rts.edu/newsevents/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=1370)
4. <http://spurgeon.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/waltke-on-waltke-on-the-evolution-video/>
5. Although I have not yet found the original, that this is accurate is also corroborated by other websites carrying the same statement.
6. <http://mgpcpastor.wordpress.com/2010/04/13/statements-from-bruce-waltke-rts-on-resignation/>,  
[http://www.rts.edu/newsevents/newsdetails.aspx?news\\_id=1371](http://www.rts.edu/newsevents/newsdetails.aspx?news_id=1371)
7. <http://knoxseminary.edu/Forms/Dr.%20Bruce%20Waltke.pdf>
8. <http://spurgeon.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/waltke-on-waltke-on-the-evolution-video/>
9. <http://spurgeon.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/waltke-on-waltke-on-the-evolution-video/>
10. [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted\\_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Waltke-Cosmogony-BSac.pdf](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Waltke-Cosmogony-BSac.pdf)
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.