

HOW OLD? Age of Earth debated among SBC scholars

Oct 20, 2010

By [DAVID ROACH](#)

Witness Correspondent

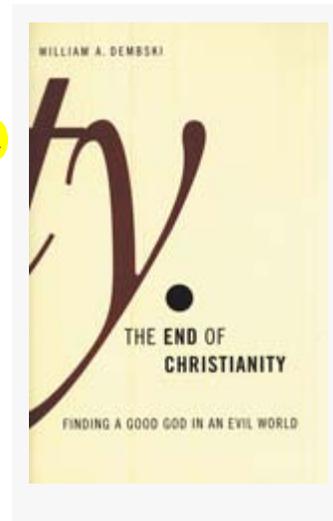
FORT WORTH (FBW)—The age of the earth has generated discussion recently among several Southern Baptist scholars.

It began with a 2009 book by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor William Dembski but includes a broader dialogue about evolution and the boundaries of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000.

Dembski's book, *The End of Christianity* (B&H Academic), argued that the universe is billions of years old—rather than thousands, as young-earth creations contend—and that God brought death, decay and natural disasters to earth long before Adam and Eve sinned. That natural evil, he said, was a retroactive punishment for their disobedience. In a similar manner to God's application of the effects of Christ's death to humans who lived prior to it, He also applied the Fall to a creation that existed prior to it, according to Dembski.

"The young earth-solution to reconciling the order of creation with natural history makes good exegetical and theological sense," wrote Dembski, who holds Ph.D. degrees in both philosophy and mathematics and is a leading proponent of the Intelligent Design movement. "Indeed, the overwhelming consensus of theologians up through the Reformation held to this view. I myself would adopt it in a heartbeat except that nature seems to present such strong evidence against it."

He went on to argue that "there never was a chronological moment when the world we inhabit was without natural evil (or a disposition toward it; it is, for instance, not apparent how, at the moment of the Big Bang, the universe could have exhibited natural evil)." Dembski, research professor of philosophy at the Fort Worth, Texas, seminary, speculated that the Garden of Eden could have been merely a pocket of unfallen creation amid a world already afflicted by natural evil.



DEMBSKI

He also argued that Noah's flood likely was limited to the Middle East rather than being global in scope. However, he later retracted that claim in a statement released by Southwestern.

Dembski declined an interview request by *Florida Baptist Witness*, saying by email that he has already expressed his opinions through his writings. But he emphasized that he is not an evolutionist and has a forthcoming book countering theistic evolution.

RESPONSE TO DEMBSKI

In response to *The End of Christianity*, Tom Nettles, professor of historical theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., wrote a review in which he critiqued Dembski for allegedly letting scientific commitments to trump the most natural reading of the Bible. The review appeared in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Vol. 13.4, 2009), Southern Seminary's official theological journal.

"One thing that's not driving [Dembski's interpretation of Genesis] is just a straightforward exegesis of the text," Nettles told the *Witness*. "And he admits that if the text were to stand as it is, then the traditional view would be there. And he also is committed to a tremendously old earth. So these things, one theological idea and one scientific idea, drive his interpretation."

Nettles said his review did not suggest that Dembski was outside the bounds of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000 but was intended merely to engage a thought-provoking book and point out seemingly troubling implications. Nettles also noted that he and Dembski had offices next door to

one another and became friends when Dembski taught at Southern from 2005 to 2006.

In response to Nettles' review, David Allen, dean of Southwestern's School of Theology, released a white paper through the seminary's Center for Theological Research defending Dembski as **within the bounds of orthodoxy** and critiquing Nettles for misunderstanding the book. The paper included Dembski's statement admitting error regarding Noah's flood.

"In a brief section on Genesis 4-11, I weigh in on the Flood, raising questions about its universality, without adequate study or reflection on my part," Dembski wrote. "Before I write on this topic again, I have much exegetical, historical, and theological work to do. In any case, not only Genesis 6-9 but also Jesus in Matthew 24 and Peter in Second Peter seem clearly to teach that the Flood was universal. As a biblical inerrantist, I believe that what the Bible teaches is true and bow to the text, including its teaching about the Flood and its universality."

Allen, himself a proponent of a young earth, saw many of Nettles' critiques as invalid though. He said in an interview with the Witness that Nettles quotes Dembski out of context.



NETTLES

"On page 82 of Nettles' review, he quotes Dembski and he misquotes him," Allen told the Witness. "He quotes Dembski and is totally missing the context of what Dembski is saying. Where he interprets Dembski as saying that old-earth evidence trumps the most natural reading of Genesis and the overwhelming consensus of theologians and so forth, the context of that in Dembski's book is the current mental environment thinks that, not that Dembski thinks that way."

Nettles responded to Allen's written critique in an open letter published on the blog of Founders Ministries, an organization of Southern Baptist Calvinists.

PAIGE PATTERSON

Southwestern Seminary president Paige Patterson told the Witness that while he disagrees with Dembski's assessment of the earth's age, he is confident of his character, Christian commitment and adherence to the Baptist Faith & Message.

Patterson said that when Dembski's questionable statements came to light, he convened a meeting with Dembski and several high-ranking administrators at the seminary. At that meeting, Dembski was quick to admit that he was wrong about the flood, Patterson said.

"Had I had any inkling that Dr. Dembski was actually denying the absolute trustworthiness of the Bible, then that would have, of course, ended his relationship with the school," he said.

To fall within the bounds of the Baptist Faith & Message, Patterson said a professor needs to believe only that there was a time when nothing but God existed, that God created the entire universe as an expression of grace and that He created it for His own purposes and plans. He said any belief in theistic evolution is not within the bounds of Southern Baptists' confession of faith.

"I would not consider orthodox somebody that wants to make Adam and Eve parabolic or something of that nature," he said. "I think that to move to a position, 'Yes, God created everything, but Adam and Eve were just symbolic figure heads,' makes a total disaster when you get to the New Testament."

Patterson, like Nettles and Allen, believes that proper exegesis of the early chapters in Genesis requires a young earth. **But he also said that young- and old-earth creationists banding together to combat evolution is more important than internal debates among creationists.**

"We've had now two symposiums at Southwestern bringing together early-earthers and late-earthers specifically to try to build some bridges between them regarding what I conceive to be the common enemy and being sure that they would talk to each other and not about each other," Patterson said, adding, "The common enemy is naturalism."



PATTERSON



He noted that even Southern Baptists who disagree with Dembski on the age of the earth should appreciate his contribution toward defeating naturalism.

“This is the man who has gone all over the United States debating the evolutionists successfully to the point that it’s almost impossible to get one of them to have a public debate with him now,” he said of Dembski.



MOHLER

ALBERT MOHLER

Southern Seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. agrees that naturalism is the chief enemy. He has addressed the topic of creation in several recent articles and addresses, including one at the 2010 Ligonier Ministries National Conference in Orlando.

He believes that any form of evolution is incompatible with the Christian Gospel and has engaged in debate on the topic with BioLogos, a group of Christians who believe God used evolution to create life.

“The problem is that the theory of evolution in its current standard form is completely incompatible with the Christian Gospel,” Mohler told the *Witness*. “That’s not to say that all evolutionary thought is the same. But evolution as a standard theory is driven by naturalistic assumptions.

“Christians who seek to be theistic evolutionists are in the awkward position of trying to adopt a cosmology that has theological ramifications that, in my view, do nothing less than catastrophic

damage to the Gospel.”

Even though the disagreement between old- and young-earth creationists is a less important issue, it still has crucial implications, according to Mohler.

“Theologically, the historical Adam as the common ancestor of the human race is the most important issue. But the question is, how in the world do you end up with an historical Adam if you have an old earth?” he said. “It’s becoming increasingly clear that an old earth implies something other than an historical Adam.”

Mohler worries that most Christians who hold to an old earth are not thinking through all the logical implications of their position.

Kurt Wise, professor of biology at Truett-McConnell College in Cleveland, Ga., agrees. He obtained a Ph.D. at Harvard under the famed evolutionist Stephen J. Gould and has long advocated a young earth as the only position compatible with Scripture. He replaced Dembski on Southern’s faculty in 2006.

“Believing in a young creation is in no way a requirement for salvation,” Wise told the *Witness* in an email. “I do believe, however, that it is impossible to consistently believe in both an old earth and inerrant Scripture.”

He added, “Jesus’s claim that Abel was slain from the foundation of the world cannot be true if the earth is old; natural evil cannot be a consequence of Adam’s sin if the earth is old; Noah’s Flood cannot be global if the earth is old; the genealogies of Genesis 5 & 11 cannot be accurate if the earth is old; Noah’s Flood cannot be global if the earth is old; all humans cannot be descendant from Adam or from Noah or from the people at Babel if the earth is old.”

In the end though, Mohler said Southern Baptists should be thankful that Dembski’s book sparked so much discussion on creation and take advantage of the occasion to think through the issue carefully.

“I think the kind of intellectual interchange between Professor Dembski and Professor Nettles that is indicated there [in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*] is what we should hope for out of our seminaries and seminary professors,” he said. “We should not be afraid to enter into this kind of discussion, whether it’s over creation, Calvinism or any other doctrine. We are a community of scholars, not just located on one seminary campus, but in the SBC on six.”

Original page can be found at:

Copyright © 2012 Florida Baptist Witness