

# Evincing the Harmony

## Confronting the Challenge of Science for the Church

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In 1857 two Mississippi pastors, the Revs. Richard Gladeney and James A. Lyon, led their fellow members of Tombeckbee Presbytery to adopt the following resolution:

*Whereas*, We live in an age in which the most insidious attacks are made upon revealed religion through the natural sciences; and as it behooves the Church, in all times, to have men capable of defending the faith once delivered to the saints, therefore,

*Resolved*, That this Presbytery recommend endowment of a professorship in the natural sciences as connected with revealed religion, in one of our theological seminaries, and would cheerfully recommend our churches to contribute their full proportion of funds for said endowment.

*Resolved*, That the same be brought before our Synod (of Mississippi) at its next meeting for consideration.

The Rev. Lyon went further. He persuaded a member of his congregation, Judge John Perkins, a wealthy landowner, to endow such a professorship at Columbia Theological Seminary then located in Columbia, South Carolina. As the result of this gift the three synods overseeing Columbia (South Carolina, Alabama and Georgia) passed the following resolution in 1859:

*Resolved*, That in accordance with

the conditions annexed to the generous donation of Judge Perkins, there be added to the existing departments of instruction in the Seminary, a chair, to be entitled the Perkins Professorship of Natural Science in connexion with Revelation; the design of which shall be to evince the harmony of science with the records of our faith, and to refute the objections of infidel naturalists.”

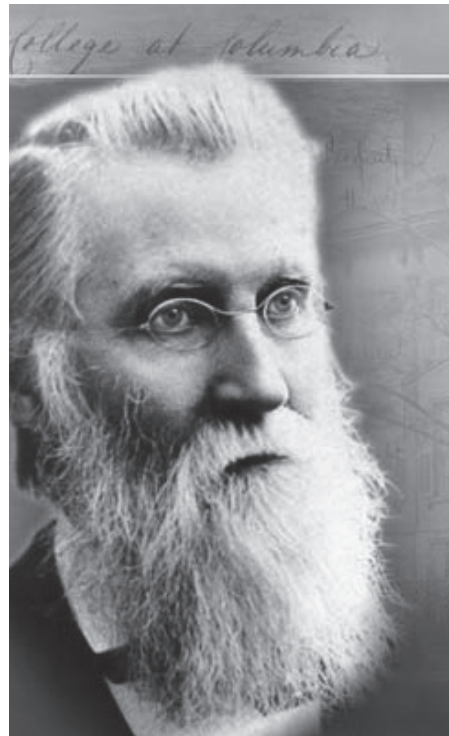
It is clear that the general purpose of the chair was apologetic in both a positive and a negative sense: positive in the sense

of *evincing harmony* and negative in the sense of *refuting infidel naturalists*.

Although Judge Perkins initially considered Rev. Lyon as the appropriate candidate to be the first Perkins professor, the Synod of Georgia had its own candidate in mind. In 1861, James Woodrow, uncle to future president Woodrow Wilson, became the Perkins Professor on Natural Science in Connection with Revelation at Columbia Seminary. This was the same year that South Carolina forces fired upon and captured Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor initiating the American Civil War. Perhaps this civil conflict was an omen of the controversy that would arise during Woodrow's tenure as Perkins Professor.

James Woodrow was an ordained Presbyterian minister, then teaching natural science at Oglethorpe College, when he was selected as the first Perkins Professor. He was a graduate of Jefferson College in Pennsylvania and had studied briefly at Harvard with the noted paleontologist, Louis Agassiz. He had earned his graduate degrees in Europe at the University of Heidelberg.

In the fall of 1861 Woodrow gave his inaugural address. In it he sought to clarify his understanding of what it meant to fulfill the purposes of the Perkins Professorship. He noted three possibilities. First, he could pursue classical natural theology, seeking evidence of God's existence from nature. Second, by means of analogies he could seek to show that nature and



James Woodrow

[Author's Note: I want to acknowledge my debt to earlier scholars whose work has made this article possible. First I am grateful to William E. Phipps, whose essay on James Woodrow in *Beyond Dualism* (Presbyterian Publishing House, 1992) introduced me to the Perkins Professor. Next, I am indebted to Frank J. Smith for his article, "Presbyterians & Evolution in the 19th Century: The Case of James Woodrow," (Contra Mundum, No. 6, Winter 1993). Robert K. Gustafson's dissertation and later biography,

James Woodrow (1827-1907) – Scientist, Theologian, Intellectual Leader (Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) filled in invaluable details about Woodrow's rich and varied life. Finally, as in all matters of evolution and religion in America, I owe Ronald Numbers for his scholarship, particularly *Darwinism Comes to America* (Harvard University Press, 1998). Numbers helps place Woodrow in the larger historical context of late 19th century America.]

scripture were works of the same Author. Instead of these possibilities he chose “to scrutinize the nature and the force of current and popular objections to the Scriptures, to meet them, and to set them aside, by proving that they spring either from science falsely so called, or from incorrect interpretations of the words of the Holy Bible.”

Two years earlier in 1859, Charles Darwin had published his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. In 1861 its scientific standing was still being discussed in the scientific community. Although Woodrow accepted the findings of geology that the Earth was very old, much older than the six to ten millennia suggested by the Scriptures, he was skeptical of Darwin’s work and thought Darwin’s theory was “probably false.”

Still geology alone provided an opportunity for tension between the emerging historical sciences and the theological tradition. In the summer of 1861 Robert Lewis Dabney, professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, published an article entitled “Geology and the Bible.” In this piece he criticized the geological findings that apparently undermined the traditional chronology of the Biblical account of creation and cast a wary eye upon the geologists who were developing this scientific chronology, viewing them as atheistic even if not technically atheists. He wrote his article without any apparent reference to Woodrow or the Perkins Professorship.

However, in 1863 with an essay, “Geology and Its Assailants,” Woodrow began a 23 year journalistic debate with Dabney not only about geology but more generally about the relationships of the sciences and theology. Over the years a number of points of contention became clear.

Dabney argued that scientific inquiry is flawed because due to Adam’s Fall, human reason is impaired by sin. Woodrow did not deny the pervasive impact of the Fall but responded, that if this is so then it is true not simply for science but for all historical studies, mathematics and

even theology, all of which use reason. Dabney argued that science was a “vain deceitful philosophy” referencing science as conceived in the positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Woodrow countered that the philosophy of Comte had no bearing on the practice of science. Dabney charged that science encroaches on the authority of the Bible. Woodrow argued



Robert Lewis Dabney

that the only point of contention was on matters of chronology, particularly related to the age of the Earth. But chronologies, Woodrow claimed, are human constructs not divine revelations. Dabney judged that geology was a cosmogony, an account of the ultimate origin of the Earth. Woodrow countered that geology is silent on ultimate origins.

In 1884 when the controversy brewing around Woodrow and the Perkins Professorship finally boiled over, Dabney writing to a friend noted, “The positions taken by Dr. Woodrow ... were rationalistic. The Church ought to have seen it then, and to have taken alarm. I did my duty and exposed those positions; but most seemed to think it but one of the ‘Dabney crochets’; nobody took the alarm.”

#### Alarm Taken

But alarm was taken. By the mid 1880s Woodrow’s views on Darwin’s theory had changed. Writing to the

Columbia Seminary Board of Directors in 1883 he declared:

“The Bible teaches nothing as to God’s method of creation, and therefore it is not teaching anything contradicting God’s word to say that he may have formed the higher beings from the lower by successive differentiations; and as several series of facts, more or less independent of each other, seem to point this out as the method which he chose.”

In 1861 Woodrow had judged that Darwin’s theory was “probably false.” By 1883, in light of the succeeding scientific discussion of the theory, he had come to conclude that it was “probably true.”

In 1884 the Board of Directors of Columbia Seminary passed the following resolution:

“*WHEREAS* this Seminary is the only one in our Southern Church that has the Chair of Natural Science in connection with Revelation: and

“*WHEREAS* during the Senior year the questions of the Unity of the Human Race and Evolution are fully examined; and

“*WHEREAS* Skepticism in the world is urging alleged discoveries in science to impugn the Word of God; therefore be it

“*RESOLVED* that the Board requests Professor Dr. James Woodrow to give fully his views as taught in this institution upon Evolution, as it regards the World, the lower Animals and Man in the October number of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, or as soon thereafter as possible.”

Although he had remained silent in his public presentations and writings on the matter of biological evolution since he had assumed the Perkins Professorship, he responded to the Board’s request by accepting an invitation to address the Seminary’s Alumni Association in the spring of that year.

In this address he discussed less the scientific support for the theory than he did reasons why the theory should not be seen as theologically problematic. Overall, he affirmed that his task as scientist and theologian was not to demonstrate a harmony between the findings of science and scripture but rather to show that they did not contradict one another. He argued

that while science cannot address itself to matters of ultimate causation, neither does Scripture address proximate causes. Scripture declares “that” God created not “how” God created. He cited Calvin who had declared, “He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere [than scripture].”

Woodrow even went so far as to propose that scripture itself teaches evolution because there are at least three occasions where the existing creation (the seas or the land) is called upon by God to bring forth new creatures. So, he argued that Adam’s body could have organic continuity with preceding creation. But he also argued that Adam’s soul was uniquely created. Curiously, he also accepted the account of the miraculous creation of Eve as given in Genesis. (Interestingly, his position on human evolution was similar in many respects to that taken by Pope John Paul II in 1996.) Finally, Woodrow argued that the facts observed of nature prohibited an outright rejection of evolution.

As a consequence, as these views became known across the Presbyterian Church U.S., there began an effort to have Woodrow removed from the Perkins Professorship. In September 1884, the Board of Directors of Columbia Seminary affirmed Woodrow by an 8-3 vote:

The Board having carefully considered the address of Dr. Woodrow published in pursuance of its request, adopts the following minute:

“Resolved, 1st that the Board does hereby tender to Dr. Woodrow its thanks for the ability and faithfulness with which he has complied with its request.

“2nd. That in the judgment of this Board ‘The relations subsisting between the teachings of natural science and the teachings of Scripture,’ are plainly, correctly and satisfactorily set forth in said address.

“3rd. That while the Board is not prepared to concur in the view expressed by Dr. Woodrow, as to the probable method of the creation of Adams’ body, yet in the judgment of this Board, there is nothing in the doctrine of Evolution, as defined and limited by him, which appears inconsistent with perfect soundness in the faith.

“4th. That the Board takes this occasion to record its deep and ever growing sense of the wisdom of our Synods in the establishment of the ‘Perkins Professorship of Natural Science in connection with Revelation.’ And of the importance of such instruction as is thereby afforded, that our ministry may be the better prepared to resist the objections of the infidel scientists and defend the Scriptures against their insidious charges.”

#### **A Minority Report**

But there is a minority report. Three dissenters had the following protest also recorded in the Board’s minutes:

“The undersigned respectfully request to enter their solemn protest against the action of the Board, in refusing to enjoin upon Rev. James Woodrow not to teach that evolution is God’s plan of creation and that the body of Adam was probably evolved from lower animals, which things are affirmed in an address delivered by him, and published in accordance with a request made by this Board, that he would give fully his views as taught in this Institution, upon Evolution.

“We Protest for the following reasons:

“1. Evolution is an unproved hypothesis.

“2. Belief in Evolution changes the interpretation of many passages of Scripture from that now received by the church.

“3. The view that Adam’s body was evolved from lower animals and not formed by a supernatural act of God, is dangerous and hurtful.

“4. The theory that the body of Adam was formed by the law of evolution, while Eve’s was created by a supernatural act of God, is contrary to our standards (Conf. Faith, Ch. IV Sect. 2-17), as those standards have been and are interpreted by our church.

“5. The advocacy of views which have received neither the endorsement of the Board nor of the Synods having control of the Seminary; which have not been established by science; which have no authority from the word of God; which tend to unsettle the received interpretation of many passages of Scripture, and to weaken the confidence of that church

in her standards; which have already produced so much evil by their agitation; and which will injure the Seminary, and may rend our church; ought not to be allowed.”

When the Synod of South Carolina met in October of 1884, a standing committee reviewing the situation at Columbia produced majority and minority reports. The Synod rejected both reports with identical votes of 44 for and 52 against. It did adopt its own resolution:

*Resolved*, that in the judgment of the Synod the teaching of Evolution in the Theological Seminary except in a purely expository manner, with no intention of inculcating its truth, is hereby disapproved.

The Synod of Georgia, also meeting in October 1884, adopted a more pointed resolution: “1. The action of the Board of Directors of Columbia Theological Seminary in permitting the teaching of evolution as contained in Dr. Woodrow’s address be disapproved. 2. The Synod is entirely unwilling that this theory should be taught in the Seminary, and hereby, as one of the controlling Synods of that Seminary, directs the Board to take whatever steps may be necessary to prevent it.”

In addition, the Synod replaced two pro-Woodrow board members on the Seminary Board. The Synod of Alabama, which met next in 1884, adopted a similar resolution and also replaced two pro-Woodrow board members.

Meeting in December 1884 the reconstituted Board of Directors of Columbia Seminary by a vote of 8-4 called for Woodrow’s resignation. Later in that same meeting, however, by a vote of 12-1, the board affirmed that Woodrow remained the legal holder of the Perkins Professorship.

In the Fall of 1885, the action of the Seminary Board to remove Woodrow was appealed to the Synods that supported the Seminary. The Synods of South Carolina and South Georgia/Florida supported Woodrow. The Synods of Georgia and Alabama voted in support of Woodrow’s removal.

Woodrow argued in various venues that he could not be removed from the

Perkins Professorship unless it could be shown that his views were unorthodox in light of scripture or the confessions of the church. He finally sought a trial of his orthodoxy before his home judicatory, the Presbytery of Augusta. Initially, the Presbytery was unwilling to accede to his request because there was no complaint against him. Eventually a member of the Presbytery lodged a complaint and in the spring of 1886 the Presbytery set Woodrow's trial for the August of that year.

In the meantime at the meeting of the PCUS General Assembly in the summer of 1886, Woodrow's complaint against the Seminary Board's action to remove him was denied, and with a vote of 65-25 the assembly voted for the Synods have him dismissed. In addition, the General Assembly adopted a report by an overwhelming majority that declared:

The church remains at this time sincerely convinced that the Scriptures, as truly and authoritatively expounded in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms teach:

That Adam and Eve were created, body and soul, by immediate acts of Almighty power, thereby preserving a perfect race unity;

That Adam's body was directly fashioned by Almighty God without any natural animal parentage of any kind, out of matter previously created from nothing;

And that any doctrine at variance therewith is a dangerous error inasmuch as, in the methods of interpreting Scripture, it must demean, and in the consequences which by fair implication it will involve, it will lead to the denial of doctrines fundamental to the faith.

Following the PCUS assembly, Woodrow was tried by Augusta Presbytery in August 1886 and was exonerated with regard to his orthodoxy. In October 1886

the Synod of Georgia met and annulled Augusta Presbytery's exoneration of Woodrow. That fall Augusta Presbytery elected Woodrow as its moderator (and subsequently as its commissioner to the 1888 meeting of the PCUS General Assembly).

Given all this ecclesiastical turmoil, perhaps it is not surprising that Columbia Seminary was closed for the 1886-1887 academic year. In fact, the controversy in the church around Woodrow so effected Columbia's standing in the church and its



ability to attract students, that this was a primary factor in efforts to remove him from the Perkins Professorship.

Due to ill health Woodrow was unable to attend 1887 meeting of the PCUS General Assembly to defend himself, but did so in 1888. That General Assembly, however, rejected his appeal and instead adopted the following resolution:

"It is the judgment of the General

Assembly that Adam's body was directly fashioned by God of the dust of the ground, without any natural animal parentage of any kind. The wisdom of God prompted him to reveal the fact, while that inscrutable *mode* of his action therein he has not revealed. Therefore the Church does not propose to touch, handle, or conclude any question of science, which belongs to God's kingdom of nature. She must, by her divine constitution, see that these questions are not thrust upon her to break the silence of Scripture and supplement it by any scientific hypothesis concerning the mode of God's being or acts in creation which are inscrutable to us."

Woodrow ultimately surrendered the Perkins Professorship. During his tenure at Columbia he had also taught science courses "across the street" at the College (later University) of South Carolina. Leaving Columbia Seminary Woodrow continued his teaching at the College. In 1891 he was selected as the 11th President of the College of South Carolina, a position he held until 1897.

#### Reversal

It was not until 1969 that the PCUS General Assembly reversed the anti-evolution actions of previous General Assemblies when it adopted the following:

"If the Confession of Faith, or the Catechisms, appear in some manner to

support the position of the General Assemblies of 1886, 1888, 1889 and 1924 this is not because of Scripture itself but rather because Scripture was interpreted with 17th Century perspectives and presuppositions.

"The real and only issue is whether there exists clear incompatibility between evolution and the Biblical doctrine of Creation. Unless it is clearly necessary

to uphold a basic Biblical doctrine, the Church is not called upon and should carefully refrain from either affirming or denying the theory of evolution. We conclude that the true relation between the evolutionary theory and the Bible is that of non-contradiction and that the position stated by the General Assemblies of 1886, 1888, 1889 and 1924 was in error and no longer represents the mind of our Church.

“We reaffirm our belief in the uniqueness of man as a creature whom God has made in His own image.”

A further resolution by the reunited Presbyterian General Assembly in 2002 again cites “non-contradiction” as the standard for the relationship between science and Biblical theology:

“1. Reaffirms that God is Creator, in accordance with the witness of Scripture and The Reformed Confessions.

“2. Reaffirms that there is no contradiction between an evolutionary theory of human origins and the doctrine of God as Creator.

“3. Encourages State Boards of Education across the nation to establish standards for science education in public schools based on the most reliable content of scientific knowledge as determined by the scientific community.

“4. Calls upon Presbyterian scientists and science educators to assist congregations, presbyteries, communities, and the public to understand what constitutes reliable scientific knowledge.”

It would seem then that in the end Woodrow’s views have won out. Or have they? It is probably true that few Presbyterians are concerned about the evolutionary origins of bacteria, bees, or baboons. But when it comes to *Homo sapiens* not only Presbyterians but most Christians are much more uneasy with an evolutionary account of human origins. This unease is not easily assuaged by simply affirming the standard of “non-contradiction.”

The evolutionary sciences (which include cosmology, astronomy, planetary science, geology, as well as, biology and paleoanthropology) offer no support to the claim that humans are in any sense the pinnacle of creation, even given our exceptional capacities. It has been popular in

these latter days to emphasize stewardship themes about human relationships with the rest of life on Earth in contrast with imperial themes. There is biblical warrant for such an emphasis and it may be morally important. But it is the witness of the biological sciences that *Homo sapiens* are not stewards of the rest of nature but kin to all other life, more particularly we are the cousins of all other living creatures on Earth: bacteria, plants, and animals.

Further, there is no evidence that the evolutionary processes through which humankind has emerged have ceased on Earth or throughout the universe. Theologically put, the evidence demonstrates that humans are not the final creation and God continues to call creatures into being. God’s book of works is still being written even if God’s book of words is not. Still, reflection on God’s book of words in light of the book of works can lead to fundamental new insights into the God in whose image we affirm in faith that humankind is being made.

I suggest that the Woodrow case provides witness to the ultimate inadequacy of seeking to resolve the tension between the two books by placing them in separate bookcases. Though he was committed to doing so, Woodrow’s critics rightly understood that he was not simply demonstrating “non-contradiction” between science and theology but was in fact reforming theology by virtue of taking theologically serious features of creation revealed through scientific inquiry. However, these same critics, as do many so-called conservative Christians today, failed to acknowledge that there is no perennial confession of the faith, fixed for all time, and that every confession constructively assumes some understanding of what the world is like. It is that assumption that is perennially vulnerable to scientific development.

Nevertheless, the relative success of those who have shared Woodrow’s aspiration, that it was only necessary to show that theology was not contradicted by science, has fostered a theological view that is unresponsive to what is being learned about the creation through the sciences and so has steadily been isolating the Christian faith from the mainstream

of human life which is continuously informed, especially technologically, by scientific inquiry. The challenge contemporary Presbyterians and all Christians face has been poignantly expressed in these words of another scientist and Christian theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, who wrote in 1947:

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. 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 (sic) of today and man (sic) of tomorrow.

To the degree that our worship (the language of liturgy, prayer, preaching, and hymnody), our Church education, and our Christian mission in the world do not seriously take account of “the dimensions of the universe known to our experience,” to that degree we both foster a religious pathology that ignores the God whose Word (*logos*) is still calling the world into being, and we encourage an idolatry of the past before a God who is making all things new.

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