

Presbyterians & Evolution in the 19th Century: The Case of James Woodrow

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The relationship between religion and science is of perpetual interest and the controversy over origins of the universe and especially of life is always in the forefront of the discussion. Traditionally, scientists had adopted a perspective that respected the Bible as the Word of God and therefore as paramount in any interpretation of natural creation. This viewpoint, which was dominant up until the mid-nineteenth century, has largely been forgotten in the scientific community, even among many evangelicals. The key issue in causing the loss of biblical vision was the theory of evolution.

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Charles Darwin's publication, in 1859, of his *Origin of Species* set off a world-wide revolution. While evolutionary ideas had been promulgated before that time, this naturalist's particular brand captured the imagination of society. Darwin's theory of evolution would stick a dagger in the heart of Protestant natural theology. His ideas threatened the traditional apologetic which included argument from design as well as the veracity of Scripture. They challenged the doctrines of the Church in such a way as not to allow for readily apparent adjustment between science and the Bible.

The initial discussions by Southern Presbyterians were largely critical of the evolutionary thesis. Many of the articles were derogatory. Yet even in the 1870's there was an almost imperceptible shift by at least a few individuals away from the traditional position that the creation of man was instantaneous.

Woodrow Appointed

An ordained minister who was trained as a scientist (and the uncle of the future President Woodrow Wilson), James Woodrow was one of the intellectual stars of the Southern Presbyterian Church. He studied under the renowned Louis Agassiz at Harvard University. He graduated *summa cum laude* (A. M. and Ph. D.) from Heidelberg University in 1856, and was immediately offered a full professorship there. However, his love for his own people and his church led him back to the South, where he continued to serve as professor of Natural Science at Oglethorpe University (1853-1861). During his stay in Europe, he met many of the world's most eminent scientists, including Virchow, Quatrefages, Tyndall, Huxley, and Lyell. From Scottish stock, and a product of the South, Woodrow sought, in many ways, to perpetuate his Covenanter heritage in a world that had become skeptical of the church and her ways.

But it was the result of the establishment of a chair at Columbia Theological Seminary—the “Perkins Professorship of Natural Science in its Relations to Revealed Religion”—that Woodrow was eventually to become embroiled in a great controversy that threatened the peace and purity of the Southern Presbyterian Church.

In his inaugural speech at Columbia (actually given in 1860), Woodrow put forth his idea of his task, along with a request for approbation or constructive criticism. He stated that there were three possible ways to construe the harmony between revelation and natural science. First, natural theology could be used to demonstrate the existence of God. Second, there could be shown an analogy between natural theology and revelation in ways other than natural theology. Third, there could be the effort to show the harmony where it has been denied or controverted.

According to Woodrow, there must be full academic freedom to explore the relationship between revelation and natural science. He affirmed his belief in the Bible as the actual word of God and therefore unequivocally true.

Among the items he found as definitely true were the geological teachings regarding the earth's great age and gradualism. He found definitely false (or at least unproven) the undermining of the unity of the human race. One of the undecided issues was that of the nature and extent of Noah's flood.

He advanced the ideas that scientific findings should be tested apart from preconceptions; that Scriptural exegesis should not be tortured into fitting one's preconceptions; and that geography, astronomy, and other such knowledge might help in one's understanding of any given passage. He suggested that conflicts between science and religion were heightened because of people regarding the Bible as a scientific textbook, and because of their thinking that phenomenological language should be taken in a strict scientific sense—something which afflicts especially the less educated classes. Woodrow celebrated the free inquiry after truth. He concluded by appealing to the Triune God to assist him in his

endeavor.¹

Woodrow Suspected

In the 1870s James Woodrow had remained strangely silent in his publications on the subject of evolution. His silence may have been due to his still wrestling with the subject; as well as due to his belief that the Bible itself was silent on the topic. Whatever the reason, his public muteness was beginning to cause consternation among folks in the church.

In 1879, Dr. J. B. Mack, a newly-elected member of the Board of Directors of Columbia Theological Seminary, informed Woodrow of rumors concerning his teaching on creation and urged him to use the columns open to him in the *Southern Presbyterian* or the *Southern Presbyterian Review* to put these reports to flight. Woodrow replied that the only peculiar matter about his teaching on creation was his rejection of its being done in six literal days, but that the church already knew that; and “that he was too busy to notice the slanders of 'old Plumer.’”²

The Board adopted this message to the General Assembly the next year (1883) along with this statement from Woodrow:

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.³

Woodrow's words only increased the suspicions of Joseph Bingham Mack, the Board's secretary and financial agent. He therefore got the Directors to adopt this 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 Scepticism in the world is urging alleged discoveries in science to impugn the Word of God; therefore be it

1 William Childs Robinson, *Columbia Theological Seminary and the Southern Presbyterian Church: A Study in Church History, Presbyterian polity, Missionary Enterprise, and Religious Thought* (Decatur, Ga.: Dennis Lindsey Printing Co., 1931), 170-72.

2 Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1963, 1973), Vol. II 459-60.

3 Thompson, 461.

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.

This was a request that Dr. Woodrow could hardly refuse. He accordingly considered the whole matter and prepared to give his views at seminary's Alumni Association meeting in the spring of 1884.⁴

Woodrow's Position

In this address, Professor James Woodrow indicated that he had moved from believing that evolution was probably not true, to believing that it probably was true. He began by reiterating his early adherence to non-contradiction rather than harmony as the proper relationship between science and the Bible; he held to this on the basis that truth is one.

Woodrow alleged that the language of Genesis was not explicit and may admit of different interpretations. Even man's creation from "dust" does not tell which kind of dust (the serpent eats "dust"—*i.e.*, flesh and blood). Therefore, the term refers only to pre-existing material. The soul of man was immediately created. And, "in the circumstantial account of the creation of the first woman there are what seem to me insurmountable obstacles in way of fully applying the doctrine of descent".

There are several reasons, according to Woodrow, for believing that evolution may be true. One, the solar system may have evolved from a homogeneous whole to the heterogeneous. Newton's belief in gravity is an example of adhering to an hypothesis even though there may be remaining questions. Two, the fossil record seemingly indicates that lower forms came first and with great similarities along the way. However, he admitted that there are gaps—a fact which he thought could be explained as being due to an incomplete record. Three, it is hard to explain the rudimentary organs on the basis of immediate creation. Four, "the changes through which an animal passes in its embryonic state are just such as the doctrine of descent requires". Five, the geographical distribution of animals may lend weight.

Woodrow remarked that the contemplation of these matters led him to praise God. He could more genuinely and fully appreciate God's creation, and "to join in saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to received glory and honor and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created".⁵

4 Thompson, 461-62.

5 James Woodrow, *Evolution. An Address Delivered May 7th, 1884, Before the Alumni Association of the Columbia Theological Seminary* (Columbia, S. C.: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1884), 4-30.

The Press Engages

On June 25, 1884, the *Christian Observer* rhetorically asked why Woodrow should get so upset regarding General Assembly's desire that his views be published. Three weeks later appeared in the same publication a copy of Dr. Woodrow's editorial in the *Southern Presbyterian*, along with Dr. Mack's reply.

In the very same issue were two editorials critical of Woodrow. One mentioned that he had been requested for a period of years to give his views on the subject and that now that he had acceded to the pressure, it was evident that he is teaching evolution. This editorial noted that eleven years prior, in criticizing Dabney's position on science, Woodrow had repudiated evolution. Further, especially in light of the Board of Directors' public statement, a seminary professor had no right to teach these views to his classes and refuse to give public notice of the change of his beliefs.

The other editorial on the topic pointed out various errors of evolution as presented by Woodrow. First, it is an assault upon God's character to suggest that one should look for harmonies between science and the Bible. Second, it is not true that there are no contradictions between evolution and the Bible. Third, it is not true that there are good reasons for believing in evolution—something which both Woodrow and James McCosh had taught.⁶

Meanwhile, Woodrow's own *Southern Presbyterian* was fighting back. Besides the editorials that attacked the various papers' attack of him, he set forth the positive side of his argument. He wrote that “as a doctrine of natural science, Evolution is merely descriptive of a process or method, and nothing more”. There is a difference between immediate and mediate creation, and in the latter, we can inquire regarding the process. Belief in evolution should not be condemned “unless, indeed, it is very clear that the Scriptures do really contradict it”.⁷

Still in August, the *Observer* dealt with Woodrow's defense. The most serious defect was Woodrow's view “that we are not to expect harmony between the Bible and science”. Second, Woodrow manifested conflicting views of evolution (apparently due to the church's opposition). Third, was it right for a professor covertly to teach as “true” that which he had previously denounced as an “anti-Christian error”?⁸

6 “Columbia Seminary and Evolution”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 26 (June 25, 1884), 4. James Woodrow, “Evolution in Columbia Seminary. Circumstances of the Publication of Dr. Woodrow's Address”, and J. B. Mack, “The Other Side”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 29 (July 16, 1884), 5. “The Address of Evolution. The Circumstances of Its Publication”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 29 (July 16, 1884), 4. “Erroneous Phases of Evolution”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 29 (July 16, 1884), 4.

7 *Southern Presbyterian* (August 7, 1884), cited in Marion W. Woodrow, ed., *James Woodrow as Seen by His Friends* (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1909), 656, 660.

8 “Dr. Woodrow's Defense”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 35 (August 27, 1884), 4.

The first issue of September featured two articles. Rev. John S. Park alleged that Woodrow was teaching evolution as early as 1879. Rev. W. E. Boggs came to Woodrow's defense: in his Address, he had laid out the proper limits of physical science; and non-contradiction is the proper relation between science and Revelation.⁹

Meanwhile, the *Southern Presbyterian* put the issue this way: "Does the Bible certainly teach that the dust of which Adam's body was made was inorganic matter?" Woodrow's critics "are certain that it does so teach", while Woodrow "thinks that probably it does not".¹⁰

In mid-September, Rev. H. B. Pratt stated flatly that the seminary's Board was fully cognizant of the fact that no presbytery would send its ministerial candidates to a seminary that teaches evolution. Rev. D. O. Davies said that the worst part of the whole affair is that evolution was being taught in a seminary.¹¹

October 1st witnessed five articles on the subject.¹² The editorial on "Two Revolutionary Principles" warned against the course of action adopted by the Board of Directors of Columbia Seminary: not accepting the plain meaning of the Bible, and, in contradistinction from the principle which led to separation from the Northern Presbyterian Church, teaching what the Bible does not teach, *viz.*, evolution. S. F. Tenney asked rhetorically what assurance does the church have that Woodrow would not go farther in his evolutionary views: "twenty years more of study, and riper years, may again modify his views, so that at that time he may be prepared to accept Evolution as applying to the soul, as well as the body".

Of the popular church press, the *Southern Presbyterian* remained loyal to its editor, James Woodrow. The *St. Louis Presbyterian* gave some support, but it had limited circulation and influence. The *Christian Observer*, the *Central Presbyterian*, the *North Carolina Presbyterian*, the *Southwestern Presbyterian*, and the *Texas Presbyterian* all took positions against Professor Woodrow.¹³

The debate continued in those papers for some time to come. But at this point we turn our attention to the official ecclesiastical struggle that resulted from Professor Woodrow's

9 John S. Park, "Prof. Woodrow on Evolution in 1879", and W. E. Boggs, "The Perkins Professor and Evolution", *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 36 (September 3, 1884), 4, 5.

10 *Southern Presbyterian* (September 4, 1884), cited in Woodrow, *James Woodrow as Seen by His Friends*, 679.

11 H. B. Pratt, "Evolution and Candidates for the Ministry", and D. O. Davies, "The Columbia Trouble", *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 38 (September 17, 1884), 4, 6.

12 "Two Revolutionary Principles", "Evolution Tends to Infidelity", "The Columbia Teaching on the Authority of Scripture", S. F. Tenney, "The Tendencies of Evolution", and James Lewis Howe, "Science and Religion", *Christian Observer*, Vol. 63, n. 40 (October 1, 1884), 4, 6.

13 Thompson 466. For the *Central Presbyterian*, see especially July 9, 16, 23, August 6, and September 10, 17, 1884. For the *Texas Presbyterian*, see August 8, 1884. For the *Southwestern Presbyterian*, see July 17, and August 21, 28, 1884. Of course, these are merely tokens of the numerous articles written on this controversy.

revelation of his belief in evolution.¹⁴

Synod of South Carolina

Could Woodrow continue as a professor in one of the church's theological seminaries? The question was of prime importance, and had to be considered from at least a couple of angles.

One of the primary concerns, of course, was financial. Columbia Theological Seminary had already had to shut down temporarily just a few years before this controversy, because of lack of funds. If the church as a whole did not have confidence in the institution, and if presbyteries would not send their candidates there, that would mean the end of the school.

But also of concern was the fact that the church seemingly was putting its imprimatur upon a professor and his teaching when his views were conspicuously out of accord with the sentiment of the vast majority of the church, if not with its confessional statements. And, there was also the problem that Woodrow had been charged with no heresy and admitted to no heterodoxy.

The Board of Columbia Seminary voted on September 17, 1884, by a count of 8 to 3, that it agreed with the professor on his statement of the relation between natural science and the Bible; and that, while not agreeing with his belief regarding the probable way in which Adam's body was created, there was nothing with his carefully-delineated views on evolution that was incompatible with the faith. The Board also at this time put on the record its sense of the wisdom of the synods in establishing the Perkins Professorship and “of the importance of such instruction as it afforded, that our ministry might be the better prepared to resist the objections of infidel scientists and defend the Scriptures against their insidious charges”.¹⁵ However, the three dissenters issued a protest for the record.

Various presbyteries and synods had the matter come before them in the autumn of 1884. Standing almost alone was Bethel Presbytery of South Carolina, which, with many of Woodrow's friends in its membership, tabled denunciatory resolutions by a margin of 24 to 18. But the decisive actions would be taken in the four controlling synods—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and South Georgia and Florida. The first of these courts witnessed the most fascinating debate, in October 1884, in Greenville. Lasting five days,

14 For a very unofficial look at the whole controversy, see Mark Reynolds, Jr., letter to Lizzie [Miss Elizabeth Waties Anderson] (his fiancée), October 26, 1884, in which he reported listening to Prof. Alexander in college chapel, during the time of the Synod in Greenville, advocating Woodrow's views, (Reynolds Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library).

15 Quoted in John L. Girardeau, *The Substance of Two Speeches on the Teaching of Evolution in Columbia Theological Seminary...* (Columbia, S. C.: William Sloane, 1885), quoted in R. A. Webb, “The Evolution Controversy”, *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau, D. D., LL.D., Late Professor in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Columbia, S. C.*, George A. Blackburn, ed. (Columbia, S. C.: The State Company, 1916), 235. The quote is from the Report of the Board of Directors of Columbia Theological Seminary to the Associated Synods.

this great debate, according to a Congressman who witnessed it, had never been equaled on the floor of the United States Senate for “ability, dignity and force”.

The Committee on the Theological Seminary brought in majority and minority reports. Three members wanted to sustain the Board of Directors. They reported that the evolution hypothesis is “purely scientific and extra-Scriptural” and that therefore “the Church, as such, is not called upon to make any deliverance concerning its truth or falsity”. Secondly, in light of the deep interest in and fears surrounding the subject, it would be “expedient to say that the Church, being set for the defence [sic] of the Gospel and the promulgation of Scriptural doctrines, can never, without transcending her proper sphere, incorporate into her confessions of Faith any of the hypotheses, theories or systems of human science”. Third, while the Perkins Professorship necessarily touches on the hypothesis of evolution in its relationship to the Bible, “nevertheless, neither this nor any other scientific hypothesis is or can be taught in our Theological Seminary as an article of *Church* faith”. Therefore, there should be “no reason to interfere with the present order of our Theological Seminary as determined by the Board of Directors”.

The other two on the committee contended that the issue was not whether Dr. Woodrow had contradicted the Bible “in its highest and absolute sense”, but whether his views were contrary to the Southern Presbyterian interpretation of the Bible. The minority recommended that the Board's action be reversed and that the teaching of evolution as being “probably true” be forbidden since it was “contrary to the interpretation of the Scriptures by our church and to her prevailing and recognized views”.¹⁶

Woodrow's Defense

Though a member of the Synod of Georgia (and thus not a member of the Synod of South Carolina), Dr. Woodrow was given the privilege of the floor in order to set forth a defense of his views.¹⁷ He began his apology by making reference to his long association with the Synod, especially in his capacity as professor at the Seminary.

Woodrow continued his professed allegiance to the “absolute truthfulness” of every “single word in the blessed Bible”. He also contended that he had faithfully carried out the original mandate given him as the Perkins Professor, and that the Board had affirmed his position on the relationship between the Bible and natural science by a vote of 8 to 3.

Woodrow's defense next centered around his inaugural address over two decades prior to this, when his stated goal was to demonstrate “entire harmony, or at least the entire absence of discord”, between science and revelation. He admitted that he had learned

16 Synod of South Carolina, *Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina, at Its Annual Sessions at Greenville, S. C., October 22nd -- 28th, 1884* (Spartanburg, S. C.: T. J. Trimmier, Printer, Bookseller & Stationer, 1884), 11-12.

17 This address, which was spread over a two-day period, appeared in print three months later. See “Professor Woodrow's Speech Before the Synod of South Carolina”, *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. XXXVI, n. 1 (January 1885), 1-65.

over the past twenty-three years that he should have utilized only the latter phrase to describe the relationship, as his work since that time had been to show the lack of disharmony.

The professor averred that he had never taught physical science in the seminary, except to the extent that the church had authorized—that is, with regard to the connection between general and special revelation. Further, he stated that he had inculcated only one principle—that his students must submit to the Lord and His Word.

Interestingly, he next said that the purpose of the Perkins Professorship was “purely apologetic; it is purely defensive”. But he also quoted from the original document establishing the chair, that it was being set up “to refute the objections of infidel naturalists”.

Woodrow reminded the court that when he had taken the subscription vows requisite for being a seminary professor, the Board of Directors knew that he believed in the great antiquity of the earth. Therefore, he could not be charged with violating his subscription to the Confessional Standards, since those who administered the oath knew of his views in that regard.

The next line of argument focused on the spirituality of the Church, that doctrine that had been of especial importance to the Southern Presbyterians. Woodrow stated that the Church may not teach anything other than what Christ has commanded—*i.e.*, the Bible. The Church may do many things in order to carry out the Great Commission, including the efficient preparation of preachers of the gospel. And, part of that training may include instruction in the physical sciences. Or, the Church may, as at Davidson College, teach the subjects of political economy and chemistry. But, once the Church has selected whom it judges to be competent instructors in these fields, it may not then oversee their work and judge whether they are teaching good politics or good science. In other words, the Church as the Church is not competent to go beyond the confines of Scripture and determine the validity of the findings made in general revelation.

It was noted that the resolution from the minority of the committee on the Theological Seminary was framed from notes which John Lafayette Girardeau, Woodrow's colleague at Columbia, had supplied. Woodrow worked toward refuting the concept expressed in that report, that the question was not whether his views involve heresy. He first expressed remorse that such a statement would even be entered on the record, since it inevitably raised suspicions regarding his orthodoxy; and since, if he was going to be tried, he would have to face particular charges and have the privilege of a carefully-conducted trial.

The defense next took aim at the position of the minority report, that what was at stake was not whether his views contradicted the Scripture “in its highest and absolute sense”, but whether they were out of accord with “the interpretations of the Bible by the Presbyterian Church in the United States”. He ridiculed this notion as implying a contradiction between what the Bible teaches and what the Presbyterian standards say.

Further, such an approach, according to Woodrow, would cause many bright young people to lose faith in Christianity.

Against another of the resolutions of the minority, *viz.*, that the Board's approval of Woodrow's views of the relationship between the Bible and natural science, Woodrow also fought back. He continued to maintain that “non-contradiction” is the proper relationship between them, and that Girardeau's insistence upon the term, “the harmony of non-contradiction”, was merely an argument about words. But more to the point, Woodrow forthrightly argued, in contrast to the Medieval view, that the Bible does not teach natural science.

Contrary to the minority's assertion that he had inculcated evolution, Woodrow insisted he had not. Moreover, he had only taken a public stance on the subject after being asked to do so by the Board. With regard to the theory of evolution being an “unverified hypothesis” and therefore it should be rejected, the Church should be aware that that argument is a double-edged sword that could come back to haunt her; for just consider on how many doctrines Christians disagree. From a different angle, he could recall a delightful evening spent in the home of a Judge Ezekiel Pickens of Alabama some years ago, at which time the judge presented the case that “all that had been said with regard to the rotundity of the earth and the rotation of the earth upon its axis, was—to use the expression that has been here repeated so often—an unverified hypothesis”.

What followed was a recitation of the leading schools in the country and their professors, nearly all of whom were evolutionists. The same was true of the naturalists abroad. Even those who could be brought in to testify for the traditional view have some strange baggage of their own. For example, Sir William Thomson, a Presbyterian elder, besides not being an expert in natural history, believed that life originated on earth by being transported by meteorites wandering through space and falling here. Louis Agassiz, a friend and mentor of Woodrow's, rejected evolution; but he believed in polygenesis.

Denying that the Confessional Standards speak of the mode of man's creation—that is, of whether creation was mediate or immediate—the professor stated that evolution addresses only the process: “a description of a mode according to which changes take place, not a description of the power which produces the changes”. To say that “God made me” is not to say that God made each individual immediately; rather, we are all the product of natural generation. Woodrow could find no clear statement as to the mode of the creation of Adam's body, while he did see that how Eve's body was made is perspicuously set forth. Woodrow took note of the fact that his belief in “Creationism” as to the origin of each human soul—that is, the doctrine that the body is mediately created *via* the parents, while the soul is immediately created and implanted into each body—was the historic view of the Reformed Churches, with rare exception until recently: as a matter of fact, Girardeau himself being one of the exceptions by his belief in Traducianism. Furthermore, there is a great likeness between the First Adam and the Second Adam, in that in the Incarnation there is the mixture of mediate and immediate creation.

Woodrow preferred not to stand alone, but he said he was not afraid to do so. Using Luther-like rhetoric, he stated, “With regard to the charges against me, if any man can prove that they are true by the word of God, I will repent and recant; but until then, here I stand, I cannot otherwise; God help me. Amen.’ And so stand I.” But he also castigated those synods who were crying the loudest against him, which allowed the teaching of evolution in their universities.

Woodrow continued his speech the next night. He adduced the testimony of theologians in Reformed seminaries to the effect that evolution did not contradict the Bible. He then quoted at length from the 1633 decision of the Tribunal of the Supreme Inquisition against Galileo Galilei. Woodrow reiterated that the Church must confine her authoritative teaching to the gospel. Only when science contradicts Scripture must the Church deal with scientific matters. Replying to a question by Girardeau, Woodrow said that the a church court may determine only if a matter is Scriptural, not necessarily if it is true.

Girardeau's Argument

The drama intensified as John Lafayette Girardeau took the floor. This colleague of Woodrow maintained that the question was not one of heresy *per se*, since he denied "no fundamental of the gospel scheme" and accepted all the teachings of the Bible.

He stated that all valid thought must be harmonious with itself; and that Woodrow's choice of terminology (“non-contradiction”) was therefore misleading. Girardeau also noted that there can be no contradiction between “the Bible in its absolute sense as the very word of God, and science in its absolute sense as a true interpretation of the facts of nature”.

The issue at stake was therefore not whether evolution contradicted the Bible in an absolute sense, for, according to Girardeau, it would not be judicious for a church court to dogmatize regarding that. Rather, the question was with regard to Woodrow's hypothesis and the Bible as interpreted by the Southern Presbyterian Church—that is, “The Bible as it is to us”. The church must not allow “a disproved assumption of science” to take precedence over a contradictory interpretation of Scripture by the church, for that “gives the advantage to science”. Building on this issue, Girardeau laid down as a basic proposition the notion that no unproved scientific hypothesis should be taught in a theological seminary, the basic purpose of which is “to teach the church's interpretation of the word of God”. Indeed, Woodrow himself admitted that evolution was only “probably true”.

Girardeau's second proposition was that Woodrow's theory of evolution did actually go against the denomination's prevalent and recognized views. Girardeau therefore asked not that the Synod remove Woodrow, but rather disapprove the Board's action in sustaining Woodrow and to forbid the teaching of the theory of evolution, even as probably true.

The South Carolinian warned that the Seminary would lose the support of the church if this course of action were not taken.¹⁸

Woodrow's Defenders

Among those who defended Woodrow were C. R. Hemphill, fellow professor at Columbia, and J. B. Adger, both of whom attacked the notion of a theological seminary as a place that was to be free from controversy. The latter stated that a seminary was to be an institution where its participants could inquire into all truth. The former reminded the court that there were many ideas once accepted by the Christian world—such as creation in six literal twenty-four hour periods, a universal Noahic flood, and the inspiration of the Hebrew vowel points in the Scripture text—which were no longer necessarily adhered to.¹⁹

J. L. Martin, a physician and a pastor, vehemently said that Woodrow had given him the armor in order to fight the battle with scientific infidelity. Indeed, his class had enabled him to avoid a life of “infidelity and atheism and cheerless blank despair”.²⁰

Synod Rules

After several days of debate, the Synod rejected both the majority and the minority reports by identical counts of 44 to 52. It then adopted, by a vote of 50 to 45, this resolution, from Charleston's W. T. Thompson: “That in the judgment of this Synod the teaching of Evolution in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, except in a purely expository manner, without intention of inculcating its truth is hereby disapproved”.

Eight men on the Board had voted in favor of Woodrow. Five of those eight had terms which expired, and only one was re-elected. The Synod of Georgia expelled one of the others which had sustained the controversial professor. Thus the majority of eight had become a minority of three. On December 10, 1884, the new Board asked for Woodrow's resignation. He declined to resign; and he also refused to appear before the Board to explain his declination. The Board thereupon voted to remove him from his chair. At this, two of the pro-Woodrow professors, W. E. Boggs (Church History) and C. R. Hemphill (Biblical Literature), though not adherents to the theory of evolution, themselves resigned.²¹

But here the plot thickens. Woodrow refused to vacate his post, for, as he told the 1885 meeting of the Synod of South Carolina, the Directors had mistakenly believed that he had stated that he would continue to teach evolution as probably true, and they also had not asked him whether or not he would obey the instructions of the Synod. According to

18 Girardeau, *Two Speeches on the Teaching of Evolution*, in Webb, 234-80.

19 Thompson, 473.

20 Thompson, 473.

21 Thompson, 475.

Woodrow, the Board could not remove him from his chair because the four supporting synods had entered into a binding covenant to the effect that a professor could be only suspended pending the outcome of a trial. Therefore, this was an illegitimate effort to have him removed.²²

Church Reaction

Fast and furious was the response throughout the denomination and its press, as editorials and articles poured fuel on the fire. While most of the periodicals supported the traditional perspective, they remained open to opposing articles. But this was not the case with Woodrow's publications, the *Southern Presbyterian* and the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, which kept up a steady drumbeat in his defense.

For example, J. William Flinn's two articles on "Evolution and Theology" appeared in April and July 1885. In the first, this New Orleans pastor criticized the treatment which the church had afforded Woodrow, and predicted that the world, on the basis of the Southern Presbyterian handling of the matter, would conclude that Christianity is against culture and science, and against freedom of thought and investigation. In the second, this soon-to-be-elected professor at the University of South Carolina noted that a hundred men had protested the actions in the four controlling synods. All of these—many of them older statesmen but most of them younger, future leaders in the church—had essentially had a stigma (as heretics or at least apostates) attached to their names as a result of their position. But the burden of Flinn's writing was to convey the idea that there were virtually no scientists or textbook authors who rejected evolution; and that most evangelical communions, including those in the Reformed camp (such as the Northern Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, and the major Presbyterian bodies of Scotland) tolerated belief in evolution as consistent with the Bible.²³

Also in the July issue of the *Review* was J. B. Adger's "Calm and Candid Review". While not referring to Girardeau by any but his given name, Adger pilloried this John to whom, as he said, comparison had been made, in times past, to the golden-mouthed John of Constantinople or John of Patmos.

Adger attacked what he alleged would be the loss of private judgment, if Girardeau's construction were adopted. "The Bible, the Bible alone (said Chillingworth) is the religion of Protestants'; but our friend says the religion of Southern Presbyterians, which must be taught by the teachers whom their Church accredits amongst us, is what *that Church holds and what she dictates!*"

Adger assailed the notion that theological professors are not as free as pastors to deal with

²² Thompson, 475.

²³ J. William Flinn, "Evolution and Theology", *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. XXXVI, n. 2 (April 1885), 270-71, n. 3 (July 1885), 507-89; cited in Thompson 477-78. These two articles by Flinn were also reprinted in a pamphlet, *Evolution and Theology* (Columbia, S. C.: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1885).

unsettled matters in their respective posts. “In the General Assembly he [a seminary professor] may bawl as loudly as he likes out of his presbyterial mouth regarding any unverified hypothesis, but in the Seminary on no such question shall one whisper escape his professorial lips!”

He excoriated Girardeau's contention that theological seminaries should be purely dogmatic rather than allowing for development and speculation.

The idea is preposterous. It is not Protestant. No merely human idea is perfect. Our standards are not infallible and our Professors must not teach their students to regard them as infallible, for that is the surest way to make these young inquirers search to find errors in them.

Far from stifling free inquiry, seminaries should encourage it, since their purpose should not be teaching the accepted doctrines as such, but the teaching of the truth.

Adger maintained that when a Presbyterian professes that the church's doctrinal standards are “standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice”, the faith is only “*as regards salvation*”. Surely it will not do to say that our standards teach all on every subject that the Scriptures teach”. The writer pointed out what he thought was hypocrisy on Girardeau's part, when he would not insist that the “six days” referred to in the confessional standards had to mean six literal days.

Girardeau's thinking at the time is perhaps best represented by a letter he wrote to R. A. Webb on September 14, 1885. After noting the concern of the students of Columbia Seminary about the lack of professors—at that moment, Girardeau was the only faculty member!—he stated that, even if the school was forever closed, he would be consoled by the fact that at least evolution was not allowed to be taught there.

Synods Meet

The relationship between the Bible and confessional standards is often problematic. The appeals by Adger and others to the notions of *sola Scriptura*, the right of private judgment, and liberty of conscience apparently took their toll as the four controlling synods prepared to meet in the autumn of 1885.

In contradiction to Woodrow's appeal to the Synod of South Carolina, Dr. Girardeau presented his position. He argued that a formal trial of his colleague was not only impracticable but also unnecessary, in light of Woodrow's published views; and that therefore no injustice had been done to him. The Board was faithfully carrying out its duties, in accordance with the wishes of the Associated Synods, to prevent the inculcation of evolutionary views at the Seminary. The trustees were under no obligation to ask Woodrow if he would comply with the will of the synods. Woodrow himself had opportunity to signal a change in his intentions; and, indeed, he had stated to the Synod of

Georgia, after the meeting of the Greenville Synod, that he would teach his view.

Girardeau had the previous year stated that there was no question of heresy at stake. But at this time, he was of the opinion that an investigation of the orthodoxy of Woodrow's views would be warranted. He cited, among other things, Woodrow's savage temper; that there was no check to the exposition of evolution; and that even if he omitted the teaching of evolution he would be unworthy to hold the post for which he had been hired. Woodrow had been insisting on a formal trial, which was impossible. If he continued to insist on a formal trial, the Board could not grant that request, as the four synods had already prohibited the inculcation of evolutionary beliefs; and therefore the Board would have had to ask for his resignation. If, on the other hand, he now dropped this vehemently maintained demand, he would be seen as being insincere and a troubler of the peace of the church.

How much of this address was actually heard on the floor of the court is difficult to determine, since it was apparently only partly delivered because of time constraints. The Synod, in any case, was not favorably impressed, and by a vote of 82 to 50, expressed disapprobation with the Board of Directors in requesting Woodrow's resignation; and, with almost as large a margin, voted that his removal from the Perkins chair was unconstitutional. Two of the members of the Board, J. B. Mack and Frierson, thereupon resigned and were replaced. The Synod of South Georgia and Florida, noting that the Board had not determined whether Woodrow would comply with the synod's will, took exception to the Board's action in removing the professor. The Synod of Georgia, however, voted in favor of the Board, as did the Synod of Alabama, since there was no other way to implement the explicit synodical directions.²⁴

On December 16, 1885, the Directors recognized Woodrow as the lawful occupant of the Perkins chair, and asked if he was willing to abide by the synod's request not to continue teaching his theory of evolution as revealed in his recent address. After Woodrow replied that he would accede to the explicit desires of the synods by omitting evolution from the subjects he taught, the Board voted, 8 to 5, respectfully to request his resignation. The specific reasons noted were the agitation in the church and the necessity to further the best interests of Columbia Seminary. When Woodrow refused to give an immediate reply, a motion to remove him immediately lost, 6 to 7. Girardeau again offered his own resignation—which had been previously offered and prompted because of his involvement in the controversy—and it was accepted. For the record, it was noted that two seniors and six juniors would leave the Seminary rather than attend Woodrow's classes. Only eleven students would be left at the end of the term, with five of those seniors who would be graduating, leaving only six total for the next year.²⁵

In April 1886, Augusta Presbytery, in accordance with Synod's directive, took up

24 Thompson 479. For Woodrow's letter to the Synod, see Synod of South Carolina, *Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina, at Its Annual Sessions, Held at Chester, S. C., October 21-24, 1885* (Spartanburg, S. C.: Cofield, Petty & Co., Plain and Fancy Book and Job Printers, 1885), 8-10.

25 Thompson, 479-80.

Woodrow's request for the clearing of his name. The presbytery exonerated him from any charge of heresy, and thus found no basis for proceeding to trial. However, William Adams, a member of presbytery, pressed charges against Woodrow: first, for inculcating doctrines in conflict with the Scriptures as interpreted by the Confession of Faith; and secondly, for inculcating dangerous doctrines which were designed toward unsettling the church's mind regarding the authority and accuracy of the Bible as the infallible rule of faith. Signing on with Adams was, among others, Girardeau. Augusta Presbytery would consider the charges at its next meeting—after the General Assembly.²⁶

1886 General Assembly

Meanwhile, eight presbyteries had sent up overtures on the subject of evolution to the 1886 Assembly. The bills and overtures committee had majority and minority reports. As chairman, Dr. George D. Armstrong presented the majority report, which stated:

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 human 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 Scriptures it must demand, and, in the consequence which by fair implication it will involve, it will lead to the denial of doctrines fundamental to the faith.

The Assembly took five days to debate the issue. Armstrong was a strong advocate for the majority recommendation, declaring that accepting evolution would undercut belief in the Bible's full inspiration and result necessarily in the abandoning of the doctrine in man's fall. Genesis 1 and 2 are actual history, the Garden of Eden a real place, with a real tree from which Adam actually took the fruit and ate and chewed it.²⁷

The presbyteries had chosen their commissioners carefully, since there was general knowledge that this controversy would be the major theme of the Assembly. Augusta Presbytery sent Dr. Woodrow, so he could speak in his own defense. He stated that he accepted the first couple of chapters of Genesis as being absolutely historically accurate and that he believed in the full inspiration of the whole Bible; however, Genesis does not

26 Thompson, 480.

27 Thompson, 481.

say how God created man's body, whether from organic or inorganic dust, whether instantaneously or *via* an evolutionary process. He pled that the Church is incompetent to determine scientific matters, and that she inevitably makes the wrong choice whenever she intrudes upon this area. He also sounded the warning that for every person lost because of the intrusion of science into religious matters, thousands had been pushed into hell because of religious intrusion into matters of science.²⁸

J. B. Strickler, future theology professor at Virginia's Union Seminary, replied that the Presbyterian General Assembly would lose the respect of the masses of people if it told them that man evolved from a monkey. The Assembly as a whole agreed, overwhelmingly, 137 to 13.²⁹

Now the debate shifted to the question of control of the seminaries. They were directly under the authority of the various synods, so the question was whether the Assembly could put a hedge about them in terms of heresy or error. After three days of discussion, the highest court asserted that it had such a prerogative, as exercised through the synods. This theoretical expression took on concrete form when the Assembly later recommended, by a tally of 65 to 25, that the four synods in charge of Columbia Seminary dismiss James Woodrow. Twelve of those voting against this resolution made clear that they, too, believed that the embattled professor should go.³⁰

Woodrow Hangs On

Because of all the turmoil, the Seminary had been unable to operate for the 1886-1887 school year. Woodrow, the only one left of the old faculty, had been ousted by direction of the four synods. Three new professors were elected, including Girardeau (Chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology). A fourth declined the offer to occupy the Perkins chair.³¹

But Woodrow would not give up the post, clinging tenaciously to it until the four synods would ratify the Board's decision.³² He and his friends displayed anger and bitterness at the re-institution of Girardeau as a professor and J. B. Mack as a trustee. J. B. Adger, for instance, wrote that Girardeau, having felt that he must, for the sake of honor, resign from the Columbia faculty since he had been so instrumental in securing the removal of his colleague, could not with honor return to his former post. The re-election of Girardeau and re-appointment of Mack "are a declaration that one party in the four Synods intend to keep control of the Institution to the exclusion of many of its oldest friends and supporters. United, we can with difficulty sustain it. Divided, it may not be found practicable".³³ Further irritation came when the faculty, backed by the Board, would not

28 Thompson, 481-82.

29 Thompson, 482.

30 Thompson, 482.

31 Thompson, 484.

32 Thompson, 484.

33 Jno. B. Adger, "An Open Letter", October 31, 1887, mfm. Roll #160, South Caroliniana Library. This

permit a seminary student to attend Woodrow's scientific lectures at the South Carolina College.³⁴

In the meantime, a new theological journal, designed to replace Woodrow's *Southern Presbyterian Review*, made its debut. In the premier issue of the *Presbyterian Quarterly*, George D. Armstrong strongly argued against evolution.

Woodrow's Defense at 1888 General Assembly

James Woodrow's ill-health had prevented him from presenting his complaint against the Synod of Georgia to the 1887 General Assembly, so it was not until the next year that he appeared before the high court.³⁵ He started by making his standard argument that he had not been regarded by his accusers as having held to anything that contradicts the Word of God in the absolute sense.

After several pages of quotations from his own writings, Woodrow reaffirmed his belief in the absolute supremacy of the Scriptures. But—and here was the crux of the matter—he maintained that the Bible was silent respecting the mode of man's creation, and further that the church could not inquire into the truth or falsity of the natural history issue, as to whether evolution was correct.

Dealing directly with the Scriptures, the complainant addressed the question as to what is meant by the term, “dust” or “the dust of the ground”. He argued against the notion that the Bible is a scientific document, and, in order to illustrate his point, dealt with such phrases as: greater and lesser lights (Genesis 1); “four corners of the earth” (Isaiah 11:12, Revelation 7:1); “the water under the earth”, etc. (Exodus 20:4, Psalm 24:2, 136:6); “Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed forever”, etc. (Psalm 104:5, 119:90, Ecclesiastes 1:4-5); “the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth” (Genesis 2:5); “for in six days the Lord God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is” (Exodus 20:9, 11; Genesis 1); and the various unclean and clean animals (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14). Woodrow stated:

These considerations must constrain us to approach the examination before us with the expectation that we shall not find natural science taught us, or anything except moral, spiritual, and religious truth. We do not reject the scientific interpretations which have been enumerated because we find from outside considerations that they would cause the Bible to speak falsely; we can never consent that outside knowledge shall “assume to control the interpretation of the inspired word”; but we reject such interpretations because they are based on a false principle; upon a principle proved to be false by the only “infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture”, namely “the

letter was published in a newspaper, probably the *News and Courier*.

34 Thompson, 484.

35 Thompson, 485.

Scripture itself’.

The argument next turned directly to examine the Biblical usage of “dust”. Two major points were made: one, that its use in Genesis 2:19 and 3:14 would not lead us to conclude that the word was intended to convey a chemical meaning; two, that when the Scripture refers to “an animal body being made of dust, or clay, or the ground”, it is said that “it has been *immediately* transformed from the inorganic state into the animal frame” (Job 33:6; Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7). The complaint stated: “we have no right to say in any case where these expressions are used, that the derivation was immediate and not mediate, was instantaneous and not gradual”. To posit that the silence of God in the case of Adam with regard to intervening steps mandates immediate creation, according to Woodrow, merely begs the question.

Woodrow noted that the confessional standards merely quote the Bible, and that furthermore the phrase “dust of the ground” has no historic sense (since it was not a matter of contention); thus those documents cannot be used to determine the authoritative interpretation in this particular issue. Even the indictment on the basis of that which is “universally understood by the Church” cannot be maintained.

The complainant also attacked the idea that the Confession of Faith and Catechisms can always be held to as historically understood. He cited as proof the use of the word “earth” (Larger Catechism #115, Shorter Catechism #57) as referring, in the minds of the Westminster divines, to a fixed, immovable body; and the doctrine that the Church should be “countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate” (Larger Catechism #191). He also applied the test of “historic sense” to the Bible itself, in rejecting that Christians would have to attribute sickness to the effects of the moon (“lunacy”—Matthew 4:24). He summarized the point this way: Presbyterian officers are bound to “the historic sense of what the Westminster divines said, and not of what they did *not* say”.

Woodrow denied that his views were contradictory to belief in the organic unity of the human race, or that they implied a multiplicity of human beings at the beginning. He referred to a number of prominent individuals, in the Southern and the Northern Presbyterian Church, who were not opposed to his basic position.

Woodrow pleaded with the Assembly not to condemn a man who did not deny the teachings of the Bible. He also pleaded that the Church making scientific mistakes held her up to scorn and ridicule and only undermined her credibility.³⁶

36 James Woodrow, *In the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Complaint of James Woodrow versus the Synod of Georgia* (Columbia, S. C.: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1888), 5-41.

Assembly Rules Against Woodrow

The Assembly, after lengthy debate, voted 109 to 34 not to sustain the complaint; and it adopted this statement:

It is the judgment of this General Assembly that Adam's body was directly fashioned by Almighty 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 the 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.

Eighteen commissioners protested on several grounds, including that the Assembly had in effect, despite assertions to the contrary, determined “a purely scientific question”.³⁷

Woodrow Still Kicking

Despite the finding of the General Assembly, James Woodrow remained a member in good standing in Augusta Presbytery, which promptly elected him as Moderator in the fall of 1888 and as a commissioner to the 1889 General Assembly, where he was appointed as chairman of one of the important committees.³⁸ Apparently, there was no willingness to go any farther and force the issue by requiring Augusta Presbytery to defrock him—perhaps because of fear of the constitutional crisis that may have been precipitated, or of the possibility of splitting the church.

But what about seminarians attending Dr. Woodrow's classes at the state university? The Synod of Georgia agreed with the ban imposed by the Board, the Synod of South Carolina disagreed, and the Synod of South Georgia and Florida tabled motions dealing with the matter. In 1889, a graduate of that university who had studied various sciences under Woodrow applied for admission to Columbia Seminary and asked that he also be allowed to take a course in mineralogy under his old professor. The four-member faculty agreed unanimously that the student would be granted permission to attend any class at the university, except for one taught by Professor Woodrow—an action denounced by Woodrow as an act of cowardice, tyranny, and infamy.

Girardeau responded in an unpublished paper that the faculty's hand had been forced by

³⁷ Thompson, 485. See J. William Flinn, *An Argument on the Complaint of Rev. Jas. Woodrow, D. D. against the Synod of Georgia* (n. p.: n. n., n. d.); this document argued in favor of Woodrow on the basis of technicalities of ecclesiastical law.

³⁸ Thompson, 485.

the student who was seeking an “issue” and that the faculty had sought answer from his home presbytery. Further, it was unfair for the Woodrow crowd to censure the faculty without trial.³⁹

In another paper, Girardeau set forth the proper jurisdiction of the faculty. His first premise was that there was a “right to arrest attendance upon instructions condemned by the judicial decision of our highest court”. This power, incumbent on inferior courts, was, by analogy, possessed by a seminary. No one has the right to teach a condemned view, either from the pulpit or in the classroom. Nor does anyone have the right to sit under such teaching, because of the encouragement and sustenance given to that teacher; because the student “injures his own soul, if the judgment of the supreme court be correct”; because of the bad example he sets; and because “he lends his influence to the dissemination of the condemned view and so becomes responsible for its diffusion”. Girardeau had no necessary problem with someone reading “injurious views”, but “[t]here is a manifest difference between the reading of such views, and hearing them enforced by the personal influence of the living man”. Further, anyone who read such views with a view to adopting them should be prohibited from that. And, “It is always dangerous for young persons to listen to heterodox speakers. The dangers of absorption of his views is great, even though the intentions of the hearer may be good”. At this juncture, he quoted from several Scripture texts, including Psalm 1:1 (“Blessed is the man that *walketh not* in the counsel of the ungodly, *nor standeth* in the way of sinners, *nor sitteth* in the seat of the scornful”); Genesis 49:6 (“O my soul, *come not thou into* their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united”); I Timothy 1:20 (“Of whom is Hymeneus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn *not to blaspheme*”); I Timothy 6:3-5 (“If any man teach otherwise, [etc.] from such *withdraw thyself*”); I Timothy 6:20, 21 (“O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith”); and Titus 1:10, 11 (“For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers ... *whose mouths must be stopped*”).⁴⁰

James Woodrow caused still another controversy for the church courts. According to custom, he had retained membership in his home presbytery while a seminary professor. When he was finally relieved of that duty, he attempted to transfer to Charleston Presbytery, within whose bounds he was living. That judicatory, however, fearing renewed difficulties, refused to receive him, on a vote of 17 to 6; and the synod in 1890 upheld that decision.⁴¹

Girardeau was a key figure in those discussions within the presbytery. He apparently

39 [John L. Girardeau], “Paper on the Jurisdiction of the Faculty in the matter of the attendance of Students upon the Lectures of Prof. Woodrow” (handwritten manuscript), mfm. Roll #160, South Caroliniana Library.

40 [John L. Girardeau], “Paper read to members of the Faculty, Dec. 3, 1889, as to Jurisdiction of Faculty, etc”., handwritten manuscript, Evolution and Woodrow Case folder, Blackburn Papers, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi. Girardeau had emphasized the underlined words in the Scripture quotations with his own heavy underlining.

41 Thompson, 487-88.

made several objections, including the following. First, that “he does no strictly ministerial work for wh[ich] he is responsible to any Presbytery. He had as well belong to one as another”. Second, that Woodrow’s “party aim to offer him again a place in the Seminary”. Three, “Dr. W. himself has always held that he has not been legally displaced. If so, he is legally an incumbent of his chair, and therefore connected with the Seminary, himself being judge”. Fourth, Woodrow “knows the position of the Presbytery, as opposed to his views.... By applying for membership, he forces the Presb. either to recant its doctrinal position, or, to reject him, or, to receive him and try him”. Such a course of action, however, would disturb the peace of the church both within Charleston Presbytery and at large.⁴²

Four years later, having become President of the University of South Carolina, he transferred into South Carolina Presbytery.⁴³

Evolution Lives On

In some sense, the Southern Presbyterian Church had to choose, in the Woodrow controversy, between two types of science; and it is tempting to say that the General Assembly condemned this professor’s views because they were viewed as being bad science. It is much more on target, however, to say that it was both because of the perception of danger in subsequent developments, and because of the rationalism already inherent in Woodrow’s system, that the Church stood against his views.

Unlike assertions to the contrary,⁴⁴ the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterians who accepted evolution did not do so because of a commitment to higher criticism. As we have seen, they were steadfast in their belief in the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of Holy Scripture.

This does not mean, however, that they were totally sound in their views on the Bible. The key issue was not Bibliology, but hermeneutics. Increasingly, those who advocated evolution—or at least did not perceive any inconsistency between it and the Bible—rejected traditional interpretations of the Word of God in order to try to accommodate the

42 [John L. Girardeau], untitled handwritten manuscript, Evolution and Woodrow Case folder, Blackburn Papers, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.

43 Thompson, 488. For a contemporary comment on the refusal of Charleston Presbytery to receive Woodrow, see “Dr. Woodrow’s Application For Admission to Charleston Presbytery”, *Christian Observer*, Vol. 77, n. 43 (October 22, 1890), 4: the article basically was a plea for “rest and quiet on this subject”. For two other, twentieth century looks at the whole Woodrow situation, see T. Watson Street, “The Evolution Controversy in the Southern Presbyterian Church with Attention to the Theological and Ecclesiastical Issues Raised”, *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, Vol. 37 (1959), 232-50; and Clement Eaton, “Professor James Woodrow and the Freedom of Teaching in the South”, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 28 (1962), 3-17.

44 See, for example, Jon Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859-1900* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 160, 172-73. Roberts’s book is a good general overview of how Darwinism affected American religious bodies; but its very breadth is a weakness, in that the volume is unable to distinguish sharply among various groups, such as the Southern Presbyterians.

Bible to science.

Even though there was no repudiation of the historic Christian view of Scripture in the nineteenth century, the fight over evolution paved the way for more bizarre interpretations of the Bible and, ultimately, to an acceptance of the critical perspective. This was accomplished especially because of the refusal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) to exercise full discipline against evolutionists.

James Woodrow remained a minister in good standing in the Southern Presbyterian Church. The Synod of South Carolina elected him as Moderator in 1901. However, that body rejected a motion that his retiring moderator's sermon the next year be printed—a very unusual happenstance—probably because of a possible reference to the old controversy, and even more likely because of his seeming to recognize the Roman Catholic Church as a key part of the visible church.⁴⁵

In 1905, after he had retired, by reason of infirmity, from all activities, Columbia Seminary's Board of Directors formally expressed its confidence in his personal devotion, character, and orthodoxy. The trustees also repealed all former actions that may have adversely reflected on him and the actions that forbade seminarians from sitting under him at the university. Two years later, in 1907, Dr. Woodrow died, at the age of 78.⁴⁶

But the controversy did not die with him. Darwinism continued as a topic of interest in the church papers throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ The modernist-fundamentalist war which heated up in the 1920's and 1930's served as the backdrop for the continued fight over evolution.

The PCUS, having taken the stance it did in the 1880's, was prepared to meet the challenges of Darwinism in the 1920's. In 1924, the General Assembly, along with other judicatories, condemned the teaching of evolution and reiterated the Church's position.⁴⁸

However, in the period from 1929 to 1934, the Church failed to carry out discipline, for technical reasons, against Dr. Hay Watson Smith of Arkansas. According to one commentator, "The Hay Watson Smith case was a watershed case, because it opened the door for others to set forth their liberal views with impunity".⁴⁹

Rev. A. M. Hart was turned down for reception by Central Mississippi Presbytery in the early 1960's. "The ground for his being turned down was the fact that he did not believe

45 Thompson, 488.

46 Thompson, 488. For his obituary, see J. William Flinn, "James Woodrow, A. M., D. D., M. D., LL. D.", *The State* (Columbia, S. C.), January 18, 1907, 10. See also Marion W. Woodrow, ed., *Dr. James Woodrow as Seen by His Friends* (Columbia, S. C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1909) and J. B. Adger, *My Life and Times* (Richmond, Va.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899).

47 Thompson, Vol. III, 307ff.

48 Thompson, 311.

49 Morton H. Smith, *How is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions*, 2nd edition (Jackson, Miss.: Premier Printing Co., 1973), 85.

in the inerrancy of Scripture, and denied the historicity of Adam and Eve, as well as some other points that were brought in the rather detailed examination”.⁵⁰ A lengthy series of judicial cases for several years again dealt only with procedural matters, not with the substantial ones. Even though Central Mississippi was successful in blocking Hart from accepting a call within its bounds, the clear direction of the denomination was away from the traditional position. The 1969 Assembly adopted a report which stated, “Neither Scripture, nor our Confession of Faith, nor our Catechisms, teach the Creation of man by the direct and immediate acts of God so as to exclude the possibility of evolution as a scientific theory”. Further, the Assembly declared,

Our responsibility as Christians is to deal seriously with the theories and findings of all scientific endeavors, evolution included, and to enter into open dialogue with responsible persons involved in scientific tasks about the achievements, failures and limits of their activities and of ours. The truth or falsity of the theory of evolution is not the question at issue and certainly not a question which lies within the competence of the Permanent Theological Committee. The real and only question 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 concluded 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.⁵¹

Woodrow's view regarding evolution thus triumphed in the Southern Presbyterian Church, but at a price not even he would have been willing to pay; for it gained victory only after the rejection of Scripture as the actual Word of God, coupled with a totally different type of theology, had gained the ascendancy.

P.C.A. & Evolution

In 1973, a “Continuing Church” movement, seeking to perpetuate the historic Southern Church, came out of the PCUS to form the denomination now known as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Although the “Message to All Churches ...” adopted by the PCA's First General Assembly did not specifically address the question of evolution, it is generally understood that that was one issue on which the Southern Church had strayed regarding its view of Scripture.⁵²

50 Morton H. Smith, 87.

51 Permanent Theological Committee of the Presbyterian Church in the United States General Assembly, “Evolution and the Bible”, paper adopted by the 1969 PCUS General Assembly; cited in Smith, 262.

52 See Frank J. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Continuing Church Movement* (Manassas, Va.: Reformation Educational Foundation, 1985), for a discussion of the

But the implicit in the PCA has recently become explicit. In 1991, the General Assembly finally concluded a judicial case that had been boiling for several years. Mrs. George (Susan) Alder, a member of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, Virginia, filed a complaint against the Session for its continuing to allow John Tyson, a professor at Virginia Technological University, to teach Sunday School. New River Presbytery agreed with the complainant that, even though Tyson was not ordained, his views were sufficiently dangerous so as to preclude him from occupying even a non-ordained teaching position. Grace Covenant Church complained this action of Presbytery, but the Standing Judicial Commission denied the complaint. It was disclosed that the man in question “holds exceptions to such doctrines as the doctrine of inerrancy, the doctrine of creation (in that he holds to the doctrine of theistic evolution), the doctrine of the fall of man, the doctrine of original sin, and the role of confessional standards”. The court agreed with the Presbytery that ‘the view of beginnings expressed in “theistic evolution” is contrary to the fundamentals of our system of doctrine taught in the Word of God and our standards. Such a view destroys the basis of such doctrines as the doctrines of sin, of marriage, of salvation, of covenants, and others.’ Rodney King, the respondent for New River Presbytery, wrote: “no system of safeguarding could be adequate in these circumstances. Continued broad spectrum teaching would, of necessity, impinge on these cardinal doctrines.” The record states:

It is clear to the [General Assembly Judicial] Panel that the teacher who was the subject of the original complaint holds exceptions to a number of the fundamentals of our system of doctrine and that when all these exceptions are taken together it does appear reasonable for the Presbytery to have taken the view that these exceptions would necessarily result in the teacher teaching views which were out of accord with the fundamentals of our standards.⁵³

In a day when Darwin's views are increasingly coming under attack, including from irreligious scientists, this continuation of the Southern Presbyterian Church has spoken clearly against evolution—even the theistic variety—as being inimical to numerous basic doctrines of the Christian faith. The issue for the PCA is not that of science *per se*, but rather fidelity to the Word of God and the perspicuous teachings found therein.

Conclusion

There really is nothing new under the sun. The nineteenth century debate over evolution helps to illustrate the fact that the battle against rationalism in all its forms is ever present.

Whenever the Church fails to address all of created reality in light of the Word of God, she at that point surrenders to the world instead of standing against it. Conservatives in the Christian Reformed Church have long understood the necessity of maintaining the

formation of this church. See also John Edwards Richards, *The Historical Birth of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Liberty Hill, S. C.: The Liberty Press, 1987).

53 *Minutes of the Nineteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Atlanta, Ga.: Office of the Stated Clerk, 1991), Vol. I, 81, Vol. II, 479-87.

antithesis, and have also perceived the interconnectedness of the issues of egalitarianism, feminism, and evolution. Dabney and Girardeau and many other Southern Presbyterians, having been through a devastating war and reconstruction that attempted to foster French Revolutionary ideals upon society, likewise knew that the acceptance or even the toleration of these ideas could lead only to a watering down of the Church's message and eventually to apostasy. When will we ever learn?

Although these Calvinists from Dixie were not perfect, their struggles regarding the nature of science and evolution are informative; and they may very well be of usefulness to the Church today in meeting the contemporary challenges from a materialistic science.