

## General Revelation and the Doctrine of Scripture

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The recent book, [\*Ancient Word, Changing Worlds\*](#), provides insights into some key factors that are relevant to evangelicals in the harmonizing of general and special revelation. The book, though concise, provides a good representative of the prevailing, conservative evangelical view of Scripture. It addresses the issues of inspiration, inerrancy, and interpretation. The appendix includes the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the 1982 Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, and various other doctrinal statements concerning Scripture. The book covers approximately 150 years of history, beginning in the 1850's, as it relates to varying perspectives regarding the doctrine of Scripture.

Of particular note is Article XII of the 1978 statement as it relates to issues of history, science, creation, and the flood. Article XV is also relevant as it relates to accommodation. Similarly, in the 1982 statement, Article II is relevant to the issue of an incarnational view of Scripture, Article XIX is relevant to the issue of evolution, Article XXI is relevant to the harmony between special and general revelation, and Article XXII is relevant to the historicity of Genesis 1 to 11 as it relates to scientific evidence regarding origins.

It is understandable why the framers of the Chicago statements were so concerned about preserving the integrity of the Scriptures. Some relevant Scriptures addressing the importance of maintaining a reverent perspective toward God's Word are as follows:

[Isaiah 66:1-2 HCSB](#) This is what the LORD says: Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. What house could you possibly build for Me? And what place could be My home? (2) My hand made all these things, and so they all came into being. This is the LORD's declaration. I will look favorably on this kind of person: one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and trembles at My word.

[Matthew 7:24-27 ISV-v2.0](#) "Therefore, everyone who listens to these messages of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. (25) The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not collapse because its foundation was on the rock. (26) "Everyone who keeps on hearing these messages of mine and never puts them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (27) The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and battered that house, and it collapsed, and its collapse was total."

[John 12:47-49 ISV-v2.0](#) If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not condemn him, because I did not come to condemn the world but to save it. (48) The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has something to judge him: The word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day, (49) because I have not spoken on my own authority. Instead, the Father who sent me has himself commanded me what to say and how to speak.

[1 Timothy 4:16 ISV-v2.0](#) Pay close attention to your life and your teaching. Persevere in these things, because if you do so, you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

[2 Timothy 2:15 ISV-v2.0](#) Do your best to present yourself to God as an approved worker who has nothing to be ashamed of, handling the word of truth with precision.

[James 1:22-25 ISV-v2.0](#) Keep on being obedient to the word, and not merely being hearers who deceive themselves. (23) For if anyone hears the word but is not obedient to it, he is like a man who looks at

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himself in a mirror (24) and studies himself carefully, and then goes off and immediately forgets what he looks like. (25) But the one who looks at the perfect law of freedom and remains committed to it — thereby demonstrating that he is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of what that law requires — will be blessed in what he does.

Ephesians 4:14 ISV-v2.0 Then we will no longer be little children, tossed like waves and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, or by clever strategies that would lead us astray.

Each of these passages stresses the critical role that God's word has in shaping our lives. While the motives of the framers of the Chicago statements may not be questionable, their assumptions certainly are. There is nothing in either statement that Martin Luther would have likely disagreed with (of course some references would have been foreign to him, such as those relating to evolution, etc.). Yet his posture did not keep him from [criticizing](#) Copernicus erroneously. If we are to see things as they really are, it is important that we are attentive to both special and general revelation. Pitting one against the other, or speaking of one “trumping” the other, reflects a biased perspective that fails to acknowledge all truth as God’s truth. The following is a passage that is often quoted in apologetic settings.

Psalms 19:1-4 ISV-v2.0 The heavens are declaring the glory of God, and their expanse shows the work of his hands. (2) Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they reveal knowledge. (3) There is no speech nor are there words — their voice is not heard — (4) yet their message goes out into all the world, and their words to the ends of the earth...

General revelation predates special revelation considerably (about [13.7 billion years](#), to be specific). To hastily establish a “lens” through which general revelation must be perceived that is based on a particular perspective on special revelation is to set the church up for the same kind of error that Luther made. It sounds pious to speak of the “primacy of Scripture”, but it does not provide any better guarantee of arriving at truth than what Luther possessed in his geocentric view of the world. If our foundation is to be reliable, it must be rooted in a pursuit of truth – even if that means our paradigm must change. We cannot “anchor” our beliefs to a “lens” that is incompatible with logic (as those who opposed Copernicus and Galileo on religious grounds did). In making disciples of all nations, we must challenge non-Christians to be logical in their evaluation of the various worldviews that stand in contrast to the Christian worldview. We cannot do that effectively if we ourselves are unwilling to be logical when it comes to the reasonableness of our own dogma. If we are to inspire others to pursue the truth, we must be pursuing the truth with integrity ourselves.

In 2008, I delivered a lesson at an apologetics conference entitled [Integrity in Apologetics](#) in which I highlighted the importance of being open to a paradigm shift if the evidence supported it. Some people have taken offense at my suggestion that some traditional evangelical positions are “intellectually dishonest”. In retrospect, honesty may not always be the issue. In some cases, an unyielding commitment to a paradigm can blind people to a perspective that is incompatible with that paradigm, regardless of the evidence for it or the reasonableness it reflects. Jesus gave an example of such blindness in the following passage.

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Matthew 13:13-15 ISV-v2.0 That's why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but don't see, and they listen but don't hear or understand.' (14) "With them the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says: 'You will listen and listen but never understand. You will look and look but never comprehend, (15) for this people's heart has become dull, and their ears are hard of hearing. They have shut their eyes so that they might not see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'

A Muslim who is committed to the Qur'an, or a Jehovah's Witness who is committed to the hermeneutic of the Watchtower Society, or a Mormon who is committed to the Mormon scriptures – all of these people can read the same Bible that we read and see a different Jesus than we do – all because of the “lens” through which they see the world – the lens of their paradigm. When a paradigm becomes the “end” instead of the “means” to an end, it has the potential to blind those who cling to it from seeing other possibilities that are potentially more reasonable. Only if we make a pursuit of what is true the real “end” (rather than a defense of our paradigm) can we hope to avoid such obstacles to our perception. We all bring biases to our investigations. We have to be honest about these biases and diligently attempt to keep them from clouding our vision. We challenge others to do this when we share our faith with them. We must be willing to do the same if we hope to have any credibility with those outside of the Christian community.

The following verse illustrates the importance of reason in God's outreach to humanity.

Isaiah 1:18 ISV-v2.0 “Please come, and let's reason together,” implores the LORD. “Even though your sins are like scarlet, they'll be white like snow. Though they're like crimson, they'll become like wool.

In this passage, God appeals to our sense of reason. It is not something we must sacrifice in order to be people of faith. We convey this message when we challenge non-Christians to consider the Gospel message. We need to apply this challenge to ourselves as we develop apologetic arguments.

In this regard, I believe the following articles from the Chicago statements have the potential to predispose adherents to a position that limits their capacity to recognize legitimate challenges to some of the traditional answers that have been embraced by the evangelical church.

1978

### **Article XII.**

*WE AFFIRM that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.*

*WE DENY that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.*

The presupposition about literal interpretation (see 1982 Article XV), coupled with this article, tends to blind adherents to other, better substantiated explanations.

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## **Article XIV.**

*WE AFFIRM the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.*

*WE DENY that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth claims of the Bible.*

Like it or not, we have people like [Bart Ehrman](#) writing books like [Jesus Interrupted](#) (see this [YouTube](#) video for an overview) highlighting the variations that can be observed when the Gospels are read “horizontally” or “side by side”. To deny the variations is to take a “see no evil” or “head in the sand” approach. Such postures are unlikely to enhance our credibility. The same applies when we “reserve judgment” on issues in which the answers are already plain. We do not take such postures with regard to extra-Biblical documents. We cannot be inconsistent when it comes to Biblical issues.

1982

## **Article XV**

*WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.*

*WE DENY the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.*

This posture predisposes adherents to marginalize other interpretative approaches that are often better equipped to answer questions relating to literary observations from the texts of other cultures, etc.

## **Article XIX**

*WE AFFIRM that any preunderstandings which the interpreter brings to Scripture should be in harmony with scriptural teaching and subject to correction by it.*

*WE DENY that Scripture should be required to fit alien preunderstandings, inconsistent with itself, such as naturalism, evolutionism, scientism, secular humanism, and relativism.*

## **Article XX**

*WE AFFIRM that since God is the author of all truth, all truths, biblical and extrabiblical, are consistent and cohere, and that the Bible speaks truth when it touches on matters pertaining to nature, history, or anything else. We further affirm that in some cases extra-biblical data have value for clarifying what Scripture teaches, and for prompting correction of faulty interpretations.*

*WE DENY that extrabiblical views ever disprove the teaching of Scripture or hold priority over it.*

In both of these articles, the literal interpretive “preunderstanding” is unquestionably recognized as the “gold standard” without consideration as to whether or not it merits such a position. Once established, this posture predisposes adherents to manipulate general revelation in order to make

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it “fit” these presuppositions. This has resulted in some preposterous explanations in an effort to make general revelation harmonize with an assumed interpretation of special revelation.

### Article XXI

*WE AFFIRM the harmony of special with general revelation and therefore of biblical teaching with the facts of nature.*

*WE DENY that any genuine scientific facts are inconsistent with the true meaning of any passage of Scripture.*

This article is not problematic by itself, but when combined with Article XV, tends to produce some very unreasonable positions.

### Article XXII

*WE AFFIRM that Genesis 1-11 is factual, as is the rest of the book.*

*WE DENY that the teachings of Genesis 1-11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.*

The insistence on literal interpretation, coupled with a determination to see general revelation through this type of “hermeneutical lens”, has blinded many adherents to the realities of general revelation. It is much more reasonable to allow the original revelation (general) to shape the “lens” through which we see special revelation.

Because of the presuppositions that many evangelicals hold, as a result of embracing the Chicago statements in their entirety, there exists a tendency to see the current controversy over [Common Descent](#) as being different than the [Galileo Affair](#). It is not. I did not believe in evolution prior to reading the [The Language of God](#). The [Human Genome Project](#) was not just a “game changer” in the creation/evolution controversy – it was a game ender. I have summarized the key issues in an [article](#) I wrote several years ago for an on-line apologetics course. The same technology has been utilized in [Genetic Anthropology](#) projects like [The Genographic Project](#) (see this [YouTube](#) video). The following is a quote from my book review of [Evolutionary Creation](#).

Denis Alexander, director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion and author of *Evolution or Creation? Do We Have to Choose?*, summarized the evidence for common descent in the following quote from his lecture at the 2007 ASA Annual Meeting in Edinburgh.

*“Our common descent from the apes is about as certain as anything you can find in biology. The signatures of our evolutionary past are indelibly inscribed within our genomes. We are all walking genetic fossil museums, with some 45% of our DNA comprising transposable elements, including many copies of endogenous retroviruses, which have been integrated into our genomes as permanent passengers, providing irrefutable evidence for our common descent from the apes.”*

The following excerpt from Francis Collins’s book, *The Language of God*, provides a glimpse of some of this evidence.

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*“Even more compelling evidence for a common ancestor comes from the study of what are known as ancient repetitive elements (AREs). These arise from “jumping genes,” which are capable of copying and inserting themselves in various other locations in the genome, usually without any functional consequences. Mammalian genomes are littered with such AREs, with roughly 45 percent of the human genome made up of such genetic flotsam and jetsam. When one aligns sections of the human and mouse genomes, anchored by the appearance of gene counterparts that occur in the same order, one can usually also identify AREs in approximately the same location in these two genomes. Some of these may have been lost in one species or the other, but many of them remain in a position that is most consistent with their having arrived in the genome of a common mammalian ancestor, and having been carried along ever since. Of course, some might argue that these are actually functional elements placed there by the Creator for a good reason, and our discounting of them as “junk DNA” just betrays our current level of ignorance. And indeed, some small fraction of them may play important regulatory roles. But certain examples severely strain the credulity of that explanation. The process of transposition often damages the jumping gene. There are AREs throughout the human and mouse genomes that were truncated when they landed, removing any possibility of their functioning. In many instances, one can identify a decapitated and utterly defunct ARE in parallel positions in the human and the mouse genome. Unless one is willing to take the position that God has placed these decapitated AREs in these precise positions to confuse and mislead us, the conclusion of a common ancestor for humans and mice is virtually inescapable. This kind of recent genome data thus presents an overwhelming challenge to those who hold to the idea that all species were created ex nihilo.”*

Even Michael Behe, author of *Darwin’s Black Box* and arguably the leading scientist within the ID movement, has acknowledged the validity of common descent in his most recent book, *The Edge of Evolution*.

There is a consensus among biologists with regard to the conclusiveness of the evidence for common descent. While some ID proponents like Behe may challenge the capacity of random mutation and natural selection to explain how evolution has occurred, there are not a significant number of biologists that question the conclusion that it has occurred. Those scientists who do reject common descent typically are not specialists in biology. Almost invariably, such scientists have a bias rooted in a literal reading of Genesis. It is misleading to convey the idea that the “jury is still out” on the question of common descent (at least among the biologists who are most qualified to comment on the issue). In view of the evidence for common descent that has been derived from the Human Genome Project, it is natural to question how this can be reconciled with Genesis. Another question that is relevant to the discussion is whether or not the Bible contains ancient science. The evidence is sufficient to conclude with a definitive “yes”. Those who subscribe to scientific [concordism](#) dismiss this conclusion, but a recent [article](#) by Denis Lamoureux provides historical evidence that ancient science is in the Bible and that it was acknowledged by previous translators. Modern translators, who subscribe to scientific concordism, have engaged in some “revisionist history”, attempting to represent the “firmament” as an “expanse”, etc. Such was not the case with the Septuagint. Additional discussion regarding this topic is included in the article referenced above.

These issues can be unsettling (they certainly were for me). I am not advocating that these issues should be raised with the church in general. I am advocating that leaders who are interested in apologetics should be informed about them so that they can develop better apologetic answers. Many of the traditional positions that have been embraced by evangelicals tend to make students vulnerable to a “crisis of faith” when they become more scientifically literate. This is unnecessary. Authors like [Denis Lamoureux](#), [Peter Enns](#), and [Kenton Sparks](#) have made valuable contributions to the development

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of a hermeneutic that is compatible with general revelation. Such authors should be appreciated rather than marginalized. It is time that evangelicals learn the lesson from the Copernican Revolution. In the information age that we live in, the church is no longer able to get away with the type of “anti-intellectualism” that it did several hundred years ago.

C. S. Lewis is a classic example of a Christian who has had an incredible impact, in spite of holding a paradigm that was not filtered through a “lens” that is consistent with all of the articles of the Chicago statements. His book, *Mere Christianity* inspired Francis Collins to embrace the Christian faith. Lewis’s arguments fostered faith rather than discouraging it. The lectures by Collins at events such as those sponsored by the [Veritas Forum](#) have had the effect of encouraging faith by demonstrating its compatibility with legitimate science. Evangelicals need to encourage this type of thinking if they are to remain relevant to a sophisticated and skeptical audience that has relatively instant access to information.

It is natural for Christians to want to be able to “prove” God to an unbelieving world. Regardless, proving God is not a realistic goal. Faith is involved, whether a person credits God with creation or concludes that life is best explained by non-intelligent processes within a [Multiverse](#). Rather than elevating adherence to the Chicago statements to the status of a “test of fellowship”, apologists would do better to focus on the arguments that led intellectuals like C. S. Lewis and Francis Collins to become Christians.

[Ecclesiastes 3:11 ISV-v2.0](#) He made everything appropriate in its time. He also placed eternity within them — yet, no person can fully comprehend what God is doing from beginning to end.

Humans are conscious of their mortality and instinctively ask questions about life after death.

[Romans 1:19-20 ISV-v2.0](#) For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God himself has made it plain to them. (20) For since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes — his eternal power and divine nature — have been understood and observed by what he made, so that people are without excuse.

Even the long time skeptic Antony Flew understood the reasonableness of contemplating the [Anthropic Principle](#). Some will embrace the weak interpretation while others will embrace the strong interpretation. Both selections involve a faith in the unknown.

[Hebrews 4:12-13 ISV-v2.0](#) For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow, as it judges the thoughts and purposes of the heart. (13) No creature can hide from him, but everyone is exposed and helpless before the eyes of the one to whom we must give a word of explanation.

God’s word penetrates the human heart, exposing motives and judging right from wrong.

[John 16:7-13 ISV-v2.0](#) However, I am telling you the truth. It is for your advantage that I am going away, because if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. (8) When he comes, he will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment — (9) of sin, because they do not believe in me; (10) of righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; (11) and of judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. (12) "I still have a lot to say to you, but you cannot bear it now. (13) Yet when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all

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truth. He will not speak on his own accord, but will speak whatever he hears and will declare to you the things that are to come.

The Holy Spirit reveals the Moral Law to the human heart. Both Lewis and Collins found this compelling.

Romans 10:17 ISV-v2.0 Consequently, faith results from listening, and listening results through the word of the Messiah.

God can work through the Gospel message, along with the witness of transformed lives, to inspire faith – even among people like Lewis and Collins who have not embraced the paradigm advocated by the Chicago statements.

There are lessons to be learned in the harmonizing of general and special revelation that are critical to the future credibility of the evangelical church. It is time to evaluate the “ends” that we are pursuing to make sure that they are consistent with a pursuit of truth and not just a quest to defend the “status quo”. Such evaluation may be uncomfortable, but it will prove to be advantageous in the long run by demonstrating that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive.

John Lang  
8/14/10