

## **Age Matters**

### **An Answer to “The Age of the Earth and Confessional Lutheranism”**

#### **Introduction**

The Summer 2017 volume of Concordia Journal, (a publication of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis), offered a variety of articles seeking to deal with the intersection of science and faith. One article suggested a Christological context, in which the answer to difficulties between science and the Christian faith would be formed at the foot of the cross. Another article proposed the doctrine of the two kingdoms as a healthy framework for answering such questions. A third article recommended that acknowledging science as a cultural problem could build a foundation for helping Christians respond to it.

A fourth article, “The Age of the Earth and Confessional Lutheranism,” (Hereafter “The Age of the Earth”) was unique in that did not treat the intersection of science and faith in a general way, but dealt with the particular problem of the age of the earth. Specifically it posed the problem of how to help Christians who struggled with the position of “science” that the earth is very old, over-against the historic presentation of Scripture that the earth is young.

This article reached a startling conclusion that has stirred some controversy in our beloved Synod. It proposed, “As long as parishioners are able to accept the historicity of Adam and Eve, the corrupting influence of sin, and the gospel of salvation, they can expand the days of the creation week to encompass unspecified periods,” and again, “Adherents can accept the standard, secular interpretation of the geological record while still holding to an exegetically credible six-day (yom) creation, the fall of an historical Adam and Eve, and redemption through Jesus Christ.” (Page 71)

The author of “The Age of the Earth” has recognized his error, confessed, been absolved, and has retracted the article. This is truly a reason to rejoice and demonstrates that Christians can hold one another accountable without resorting to threats and name calling. Living within the Gospel grants the Word of God the power to change hearts. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is blessed to receive and to speak that Word in its truth and purity. You can read the apologies of both Dr. Jurchen and Concordia Journal at: [concordiatheology.org](http://concordiatheology.org).

The espousal of false doctrine having been averted does not mean, however, that the problem introduced by “The Age of the Earth” goes away. The article sought to point out that some people seek to become comfortable with the claims of science by expanding the days of creation to include millions of years. This position is not congruent with the Word of God. Consequently, the present article is written to encourage the believer simply to trust God’s Word. Please understand that since the author of “The Age of the Earth” has been absolved, the point of the present article is not in any way the person, but solely the position.

#### **An Answer to “The Age of the Earth”**

##### The Day-Age Theory

The premise of the article (and perhaps of the entire volume) seemed to be that the Church needs to fashion a new attitude toward the claims of science. The evidence to support this premise is that many young people claim to have left the church as a result of the conflict between faith and science. (Page 17) While this conflict may very well bother members of our congregations, the preferred solution, as far as the present article is concerned, is not a compromise between science and the Word, but greater attention to the teaching of the Word with regard to creation.

It is well-known that the theory of evolution requires immense periods of time in order for it to reach its purported ends. In addition, the current geological record is used to support the gradual appearances of different forms of life over great amounts of time. Why the age of the earth, over against any number of other problematic scientific positions became the subject of the article was not revealed. It was revealed that the age of the earth was a particular problem that might be addressed by considering the length of the days of creation.

This compromise between the Word and science generally goes by the name of the “day-age” theory. It holds that if you expand the length of each of the days of creation to mean an “age” of millions or even billions of years you can create space for Christians who struggle with believing that the earth is quite young. “The Age of the Earth” supports the day-age theory of creation as an acceptable understanding of the Scriptural presentation of the creation event. The present article does not seek to charge “The Age of the Earth” with supporting the teaching of evolution. Rather, the error lies in the exegesis of Genesis 1 and the attribution of that error to the position of the Synod.

The article made much of the fact that the phrase “six 24-hour days” has not been adopted as an official position of the LCMS. On the absence of this phrase room was built to conclude that LCMS members could “expand the days of the creation week to encompass unspecified periods.”

There is good reason this phrase has not been used. The concept of a 24-hour day is actually a convention of language. Presently, the actual length of a solar day, (One revolution of the earth), is about 24.000 000 6 hours, (expert estimations vary). Due to the shape of the earth and its orbit, that length may vary, ever so slightly (fractions of a second) from month to month and from year to year. So in place of the phrase 24-hour days, this article will speak in terms of solar days. That the creation event was accomplished in six solar days is supported by the recurring recitation of “there was evening; there was morning the (first) day.”

### A New Hermeneutic

Perhaps the most dangerous element of this article is the introduction of a new hermeneutic. Were this hermeneutic to be adopted, the Word of God would cease to have meaning. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpreting the Scripture. One of the first principles of interpretation taught at Concordia Seminary is that the simplest reading is to be preferred unless there is something in the text that suggests otherwise. “The Age of the Earth” does not reference or even allude to anything in the text of Genesis 1 & 2 that would suggest anything other than the days of creation involving solar days. Indeed, there is nothing of the sort in the text.

Consequently, the hermeneutic the article seems to be espousing is that if the simplest reading of the Scripture is found to conflict with science, it is preferred to comply with the

finding of science. So, if someone is “troubled,” “wrestles,” or “struggles with the age of the earth” this provides a foundation for a revision of the first reading, under the jurisdiction of science. No other reason for abandoning the simplest reading of Genesis 1 & 2 is provided other than that we ought to create a “place” for those who are struggling with the age of the earth, because they are concerned that “science” has proven an old earth.

The application of this hermeneutic would subject the Scripture to countless opinions. To be sure, there are many people who “struggle” with much of what the Scripture says. The answer, however, is not to adjust what the Scripture says in order to comply with science. It is far better to simply speak the Word of God, and allow it to do its work. The conflicted intersection of science and the Christian faith calls for deeper teaching of what the Word actually says. It does not call for a compromise between the Word and science.

**Question:** Is there anything in the text of Genesis 1 that would suggest that the days of creation should be considered as something other than solar days? Answer: No, the Scripture consistently uses this word to refer to what we might call solar days.

### Day

There are Hebrew scholars, whatever their opinion of the creative event may be, who agree that the Hebrew word “yom” can only mean a solar day. For example the October 1988 Concordia Theological Quarterly published an article entitled, “The Length of the Days of Creation.” As a result of a number of arguments the author, Dr. Doug Judisch, concludes

There is no doubt that the word yom, which Genesis 1 uses to denote each of the six days of creation (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), ordinarily means a day of what we should call twenty-four hours. But it is a basic rule essential to the understanding of Scripture that the meaning of a word in a certain passage of Scripture must be equated with the common meaning of the word unless the context or the analogy of faith compel the exegete to accept a different meaning. (Page 266)

This basic linguistic rule was ignored by “The Age of the Earth.”

### Contrary to specific texts

Another of the primary hermeneutical principles taught at Concordia Seminary is that Scripture interprets Scripture. The article seems to abandon this principle when it ignores the text itself. *“God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”* (Genesis 1:5). In order for the “day-age” theory to be true to the text, there would have to be millions/billions of years of darkness followed by millions/billions of years of light. What a tangled web. Once one word of God is adjusted to fit the prescriptions of science, we will be forced into the position of having to adjust many other words.

**Question:** How does the day-age theory deal with the liturgical recitation of “there was evening and there was morning, the first...second etc. day?” Answer: The day-age theory must completely ignore these words of Scripture.

Moses steadfastly interprets the days of creation to have been solar days. These days form the basis of our weekly cycle of work and rest. He equates the days of creation with the days of our normal week. This is a clear case of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

*“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”* (Exodus 20:8–11).

If the day-age theory were adopted, it would call for days of the week that were millions/billions of years long. We would then be required to wait a long time for rest.

In fact, Moses contends, one of the functions of Sabbath rest is to remind us that God created the world in six days. *“Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”* Exodus 31:16–17 By inserting millions of years into the days of creation this theory not only makes a mockery of the God-given cycle of work and rest but ultimately has an impact on the resurrection of Christ. The day of resurrection is supposed to be the day of re-creation. “If any man is in Christ he is a new creation.” Much would be lost if the continuity of days of creation to the days of recreation are jettisoned in favor of science.

**Question:** If Moses is wrong about the length of the days of creation is he also wrong about Christ, for Moses wrote of Him? **Answer:** No, Jesus says that Moses wrote of Him and approves of that writing. He is therefore implying that what Moses wrote is true because it all has some bearing on the truth of Jesus.

### Word-play

The article participates in word play when it suggests that the Brief Statement, (an official doctrinal statement of the LCMS adopted in 1932) has anything other than solar days of creation in mind. It specifically notes “in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures.” What space of time is that? It can only be a reference to the words, “the first day,” “the second day,” etc. Secondly, it specifically rejects “immense periods of time.” This phrase alone refutes the conclusion of “The Age of the Earth” that members of the LCMS “...can expand the days of the creation week to encompass unspecified periods.” Thirdly, it rejects placing limitations on “the work of creation as taught in Scripture.” Adding billions of years to the creative process limits God’s ability to create in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The article adjusts the official position of the Synod to fit its own proposal. From Brief Statement:

“We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Gen. 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days. We reject every doctrine which denies or limits the work of creation as taught in Scripture. In our days it is denied or limited by those

who assert, ostensibly in deference to science, that the world came into existence through a process of evolution; that is, that it has, in immense periods of time, developed more or less of itself. Since no man was present when it pleased God to create the world, we must look for a reliable account of creation to God's own record, found in God's own book, the Bible. We accept God's own record with full confidence and confess with Luther's Catechism: 'I believe that God has made me and all creatures.'" (Emphasis added)

**Question:** In your personal use of the term "day" do you generally qualify it with the phrase "24 hour" in order to clarify your meaning? Answer: Probably not. As noted earlier, whether or not we are aware of the actual length of a solar day, we are all accustomed to using this convention of language to refer to the length of a day. The fact that the Brief Statement does not use the phrase "24-hour day" cannot dismiss its clear intent.

### Ineffective

Expanding the solar days of creation to "encompass unspecified periods" does not accomplish what the article seems to want to accomplish. It is not a satisfactory compromise with science. The geological periods do not in any way correspond to the days of creation. How is the student or parishioner to proceed after conceding immense periods of time to the creative process? Did God create in a moment, at the end of each geological period? Why would He wait so long between creative bursts? Why do the days of creation contradict the purported events of the geological periods? When man finally arrives on the scene do the "days" of the Genesis account suddenly turn into solar days to enable Adam and Eve to survive the events of the day?

If it is true that "behold it was very good," and "The wages of sin is death," why, according to the day-age theory, did animals die for millions of years prior to the sin of Adam and Eve. If it is acceptable to impose the findings of science on the Word of God with regard to the interpretation of the word "day," why is it not also acceptable to do the same with regard to the words "so God created man"? If we are looking to make it easier for people to be Christians, this route does not arrive at the destination. The confused teenager or the "thoughtful parishioner" is not relieved if we were to say, "If you accept not the whole of God's Word, but part of it, you can accept part of the theory of evolution, but not the whole of it." Thus, the state of the questioning parishioner is worse following this cure than prior to it. It is far better to say, "You can trust the whole of God's Word."

Neither the Old nor New Testament wavers on God's creation of all that is. On this the Scripture is consistent throughout. The intersection of science and faith does not in any way preclude the teaching of science. In fact, the remarkable, variety, complexity, orderliness, and beauty of the creation ought to attract Christians to pursue science as a tool to serve our neighbor. More importantly, the increasing stridency at this intersection calls for consistent, faithful, bold, thoughtful teaching of what the Word of God says.

### Destructive of Faith

"The Age of the Earth" presents no reason for rejecting the days of creation as consisting of solar days other than the fact that current "science" rejects a young earth. If the

solar length of the creative days is rejected because science says the earth is quite old, a dangerous precedent is being promoted. The confused teenager or thoughtful parishioner will not have to think very hard to come up with other Scriptural positions that science rejects. How will we teach our parishioners to think about the miracles presented in Scripture if we allow scientific evidence to be the first principle of hermeneutics?

The day-age theory has dire ramifications. We must be consistent in our use of hermeneutical principles. If we reject the solar day as the length of the creative day because science will not allow it, we must also reject the resurrection of Jesus, because science says that dead men do not come back to life after three days. This is an irrefutable scientific principle.

**Question:** Is it reasonable to tell a parishioner that he can submit to science with respect to the days of creation, but that he cannot submit to science with respect to the day of the resurrection? **Answer:** No, since all Scripture is about Jesus, every article of doctrine will ultimately have its impact on Christology. The article of creation is no different. A seemingly innocent, well-intended adjustment of the Word of God regarding the days of creation will ultimately rob us of Christ.

#### How “old” is the earth?

If the age of the earth is truly the only problem, we ought to consider this fact: it was necessary for the earth to be fully functioning when God created it. In order for the earth to be completely functioning, and capable of supporting life it had to have some form of maturity. The ground was capable of supporting plant life. The animals had to have something to eat. Everything had to breathe. The light from distant stars was visible immediately on earth. As Adam and Eve were created with a certain age so was the earth. This is not, as some counter, a deceptive act of God, but the means by which God created a safe place for people to live. In this sense the actual “age” of the elements of the earth is a mystery that is not answered in the Scripture. What is clearly and definitively answered is that He created everything that exists in six “solar days.”

#### **A Pastoral Discretion**

“The Age of the Earth” is properly concerned about how Pastors deal with parishioners who are struggling at the intersection of science and the Christian faith. Are Pastors to dismiss, out-of-hand anyone who questions a particular article of doctrine? Is acceptance of a young earth to be used as a “litmus test” for membership in LCMS congregations? That is not how the Pastors and teachers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod function. The manner in which challenges to Biblical accounts are handled calls for Pastoral discretion. In each case the Pastor will seek how to effectively lead the questioner to the truth of God’s Word. It is well for us to remember that Pastors do not change anyone’s mind or heart. The best a Pastor can do whenever a person is struggling with any question is to simply and consistently teach what the Word of God says. God has promised that His Word will not return empty. Gently, patiently teaching God’s Word is the Pastor’s only power. He will do well not to compromise it.

Pastor Terry Forke  
406-670-1101  
forke@mtdistlcms.org