WHY GENESIS STILL MATTERS

OUR CONVERSATION WITH JOHN C. WHITCOMB

The publication of The Genesis Flood in 1961 sparked the modern creation movement. Coauthor John Whitcomb, one of the towering theologians of our times, explains the timeless truths that will help us reach the next generation with God’s message of redemption.

INTERVIEWED BY MIKE MATTHEWS
PHOTOS BY CHRIS NEVILLE
The reverent words “God’s inspired, infallible, written revelation” continually rolled off his lips. He didn’t credit human skills for any good that his book accomplished. “Other people have written bigger, better books, but this book has a special characteristic. It is totally, 100 percent Bible focused. It assumes the absolute inerrancy, truthfulness, and relevance of God’s written revelation on how the world began.”

As he shared details about his conversion, his book, his ministry afterwards, and the needs of our culture today, it dawned on me why his book had such an impact. It wasn’t just the arguments. It was the mark of God’s grace in his life.

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Church history is replete with people like this, whose influence is as much a result of God’s grace in their lives as their work. John Newton didn’t touch lives simply because of the words in “Amazing Grace.” He experienced it as a godless slave trader. The wonder of his transformed life spread throughout the British empire, creating fertile soil for his hymn to take root.

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No one else in our generation has had such a significant influence on so many people as John C. Whitcomb. In his lifetime he was a theologian, a teacher, and a writer. He is one of the most influential authors of our time. He is a man of faith andaction. He is a man of God.

One hour? He could sense my question before I asked it. God’s Word is like a flashlight in a dark cavern, he explained. If you’re with someone who doesn’t know the way out, just turn it on. “Why argue where the flashlight came from? Its light is self-authenticating. You don’t have to argue that the light is there; you see it instantaneously. God’s Word is like that—see what Hebrews 4:12-15 says, for example.”

His words struck a chord in my heart. That was my experience. It didn’t take a lot of complex arguments about science. Just hearing what God’s Word says, along with some common-sense ways a universal Flood could explain fossils, opened my eyes to consider the Bible’s claims about the origin of human sin and my need for a Savior.

ONE HOUR TO ABANDON THE GAP THEORY

Even though he abandoned evolution, Dr. Whitcomb didn’t settle his views on a recent creation and a universal Flood until he began working on his doctorate in 1953. “When I graduated with honors in history from Princeton University in 1948, I didn’t understand those things, even though I was a Christian. At Grace Theological Seminary, I just adopted the general view of the evangelical world at that time, that there was a gap between Genesis 1 and 2, millions of years passed, and then God recreated the world in six days.”

In the fall of 1953 a leading expert in hydrodynamics (water motion) came to his community to give a one-hour lecture on the biblical Flood and its power to lay down the fossil layers we see today. The speaker, Dr. Henry Morris, also showed how the Bible’s words were clear that it must have been a global Flood.

The clear statements from Scripture, which Dr. Whitcomb had never thought through, convinced him, even before he finished speaking. “After the lecture I told Dr. Morris, ‘I’m overwhelmed by your message. I can see now where I have been in total error. Pray for me as I write my doctoral dissertation on what the Bible says about the Flood.’”

ONE HOUR TO CHANGE A LIFE

Like so many others, Dr. Whitcomb accepted evolution as a lost young man. He loved science, and in his first semester at Princeton University he enrolled in an evolutionary geology course. But God changed his thinking soon after he was invited to a Bible class taught by Dr. Donald Fullerton, a Princeton graduate who had become a missionary to students on campus.

Fullerton later visited Whitcomb in his dorm. “He didn’t argue about evolution, or geology, or other religions,” Dr. Whitcomb explained. “He just told me what God said. Within one hour I was a born-again Christian. I’ve never recovered! (Laughter.)”

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After he completed his dissertation (1957), he asked Dr. Morris to coauthor a book on the Flood, bringing his scientific expertise to bear. That was the genesis of The Genesis Flood (1965).

But few Christians believe the gap theory anymore, so I wondered how it might apply today. I asked Dr. Whitcomb what he thought was the biggest misunderstanding about the Flood in our day, and whether his arguments are still relevant. (The abandonment of the gap theory is largely a testament to the creation movement, which Dr. Whitcomb helped to spark.)

“The gap theory has seen its day,” he agreed. “Today the main compromise in the church is that the book of Genesis—creation through the Flood—is viewed as poetry. Don’t take it literally, the scholars say. ‘Don’t take it seriously. Don’t take it scientifically. It’s a beautiful story.’”

We then turned to the question of how this modern view is just as wrong as the gap theory and how to convince fellow Christians about its destructive ramifications.

THE FLOOD’S FLOW THROUGH SCRIPTURE

I asked Dr. Whitcomb, “Please clarify how long it took you to abandon the gap theory?” His answer was not what I expected.

“I was not a gap-theory scholar. I just didn’t know that much about it. So I was very ready in God’s providence to spend three years studying his Word as I wrote my dissertation.”

He continued, “Most Christians have never thought through these issues. A one-hour talk about the Flood, under God’s mercy and the work of the Holy Spirit, can be overwhelming to people. I never knew the Bible said that much about the Flood.”

What followed was an impromptu twenty-two-minute walk through the Bible, without notes and without more prompting. “When all else fails, let’s open the Bible,” he quipped with a laugh. He then showed, verse by verse, just how deeply and centrally the Flood narrative winds its way through the Bible, including final redemption through Christ.

He started with Genesis 7:1. “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth…”

“Why all this detail?” he asked. “If this was just a legend, why would we care to change the order of events in his career. I asked him, “Why does this subject matter so much?”

His answer surprised me (again). Actually, he had several answers with multiple layers. I kept asking him the same question in various forms, so I could get closer to the heart of the matter.

Our Eternal Rewards Are at Stake. Again, he turned to the Bible (three passages). He began with the chapter where Peter spoke on creation, the Flood, and the coming judgment.

“Let’s listen to what the apostle Peter says about this. He said concerning the letters of the Apostle Paul, ‘There are some things in his epistles that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction’ (2 Peter 3:16).”

“A WARNING TO CHRISTIANS

“Self-authenticating” is a technical term for the Bible’s power to speak for itself. It’s its own final authority. It doesn’t require an outside reference to prove its certainty. This approach to sharing God’s Word and the gospel is known as presuppositional apologetics, which I learned at Answers in Genesis. I didn’t realize it was so central to Dr. Whitcomb’s teaching long before Answers in Genesis started.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Our Gospel Witness Is at Stake. When I asked Dr. Whitcomb to explain why the view “Genesis 1–11 is poetry” is such a terrible mistake, he declared:

“The Lord Jesus is Alpha and Omega, beginning and the end, first and last (Revelation 1:8). He’s not just somewhere in the middle. His very name suggests the beginning and the end are inextricably joined. If you don’t believe the beginning and the end, how do you believe what’s in between? That’s the alpha and omega of revelation. So if you don’t want to suffer loss when the Lord comes, believe the Bible, obey the Bible.”

He then turned to 1 Corinthians 3, where Paul says our works will be tried by fire. “We’re going to stand in the presence of the Lord one day. Here’s the difference in the work that will last. If you believe everything God says, no matter what the consequences, you will be rewarded at the judgment throne of Christ. If you were not faithful in everything, you will suffer loss of your reward.”

Next he quoted 2 Timothy 2:2, one of his life’s verses, where Paul admonished Timothy to pass down what he had learned to other faithful men. Paul also warned Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Dr. Whitcomb then made this pointed application about our need to be concerned for our reputation before God, not men: “Your reputation, your relationship to God in eternity, is dependent on your diligence in handling accurately the word of truth. You don’t just say you believe it, you have to show it’s true and what it really means. What a challenge!”

A WARNING TO CHRISTIANS

Another shock. Dr. Whitcomb didn’t write The Genesis Flood to change the minds of lost people or lead them to Christ. It was written to convince believers to be faithful to the Bible’s clear teaching. Our first need is to start from the Bible, and build our thinking from there.

“I didn’t write this kind of book to win people to the Lord. Assuming they knew him, we then asked how we can explain all these fossil-filled layers of hardened mud in the Grand Canyon. We didn’t argue whether there was a Flood. In light of what God has revealed, we just said, ‘Now let’s look carefully at what the Flood did, assuming it really happened.’”

Dr. Whitcomb and Morris didn’t intend the book to be read by a general audience. “Just look at all these footnotes,” he said with a chuckle. (I counted over a thousand.) “We were hoping it would help theologians, teachers, and Christian men of science. We had no idea the impact the book would have on the general Christian public. That was a surprise.”

Slowly it began to dawn on me why Dr. Whitcomb’s life and ministry have had such an impact. His goal was not to win arguments or provide a new weapon in our arsenal of debate. He wanted much bigger things. He believed that the church’s greatest need was for believers to start all their thinking and witnessing with the Bible.

We make grave mistake. Dr. Whitcomb believes, if we think we need to prove the Bible’s validity from outside sources so people will consider what it says.

Instead, the Bible begins with chronology—Genesis 1 and its ‘six days’—and climaxes with chronology. Jesus rose on the third day. God is very committed to chronology. So this is God’s way of saying something really happened.”

This walk through the Bible ended with the last words of the apostle Peter, who warned us that in the last days people would mock the creation and the worldwide Flood judgment that destroyed the earth (see 2 Peter 3:3–6).

“You know, friends,” Dr. Whitcomb continued, as he lapsed into the cadences of a life-long presentation to larger audiences, “Look at what’s going to happen. This is awful.” And he proceeded to show how Peter tied God’s original creation out of nothing and the worldwide Flood to the coming judgment of fire.

“Peter said, ‘I’m stirring up your conscience by way of reminder’ (2 Peter 3:1). So we’re not just speculating,” Dr. Whitcomb emphasized. These past events are just as true as the coming judgment, and they are intended to stir us to godly living.

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I RECEIVED A GOSPEL TRACT

As the interview wound down, Dr. Whitcomb blurted out, “Guess what. I needed this reminder today to focus on things that really count for God. I can get so distracted with ‘Do this, do that’ to care for my illness. Help me, Lord.”

His very next words were, “Everywhere I go, I give out gospel tracts like this.” And he gave me a tract! “I say to people who see my veteran’s hat [he fought in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, December, 1944], ‘Guess what you are . . . the cosmic powers over this present darkness’ (Ephesians 6:12). Satan and his demons are very quick to step at a time in an upward direction toward the Lord, following his will and His Word in life. I say, ‘Lord, I don’t know who you have in my sphere of influence anymore. Help me to focus on those few people that you give me connections with, from time to time, to do what you want me to do, to say what you want me to say, for your glory and for the glory of your Son.’”

It is clear that Dr. Whitcomb wants every last moment of his life to matter in what counts most. With his last breath he wants to stand up for God’s Word from the first verse to the last, and he yearns to pass down this passion to the next generation.

A favorite passage at this stage in his life is Psalm 71: “Do not cast me off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength is spent . . . So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come” (vv. 9, 18).

“Let’s face it, we need help. If we are not in tune with his Word, his way, his priorities, Romans 8:26 says the Holy Spirit ‘intercedes with groanings’ to purge us from false thinking, to illumine us with God’s truth.”

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