



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

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Few people impact their generation with an influence that continues in succeeding generations. John C. Whitcomb is one of those people. In fact, everyone reading this article has probably been touched by his life, whether you know it or not.

In 1961, Dr. Whitcomb coauthored a book now synonymous with his name, *The Genesis Flood*. At the time, he was an Old Testament professor at Grace Theological Seminary, where he served for 38 years. Since his retirement, he has continued to speak, write commentaries, and distribute Bible-training materials. But he'll always be known for that book, which launched the modern creation movement.

Now he is 93. Last year, failing health forced him and his wife, Norma, to move into a small, nicely furnished apartment in his son and daughter-in-law's home in Indianapolis (not far from our Cincinnati offices). This summer, I stopped by and chatted with him about his book and the reasons for its impact.

More than anything else, I wanted to glean wisdom from a seasoned theologian who played a central role in some of the greatest battles that have afflicted the church and our culture over the past century. Perhaps he could help me—and our readers—understand better how this generation can reach today's topsy-turvy culture.

NO END OF SURPRISES

I was constantly surprised by his answers. Perhaps I shouldn't have been.

Throughout the interview, Dr. Whitcomb kept going back to the Bible for answers, instinctively. When I would press him to elaborate on the most effective arguments to convince people, he kept opening his Bible and emphasizing God's grace and the power of his Word.

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.

Anyone who has met Dr. Whitcomb would agree: he is one of the gentlest spirits you'll ever meet. In our interview, he kept muttering, "Praise the Lord. Amen. Thank you, Lord." He would raise his feeble hands to his thinning hair and shake his head, as he paused to consider the good things God has done for him.

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.

In God's providence, the omnipotent Creator orchestrated a series of circumstances to raise up a prophetic voice to challenge his wayward church. The church had become lost in the wilderness, embarrassed by one of Scripture's most basic teachings—recent creation in six days. It took a gentle spirit, with fire in his bones, to challenge that thinking.

LIGHT UNDIMMED

When I entered Whitcomb's apartment, he was sitting quietly on the couch. His broad smile was sincere and his voice steady, but he spoke and moved slowly. He paused to take my name and shakily wrote it down on a sheet of paper. Then he asked me to repeat what I said, apologizing that his hearing was bad. I had heard about his recent health issues, and I wondered how this interview would go.

Once we moved past the pleasantries to the subject at hand, my fears vanished. His love of Christ and his Word swept him along. The same fire still burned that once drove him to coauthor one of the most seminal books of the twentieth century, despite a full teaching load and a growing family.

He asked if we could open with prayer. Then my first question: "Why did you become a theologian, and what drove you to write the book?" He jumped instantly to his salvation testimony.

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.)"

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 4:12–13 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.

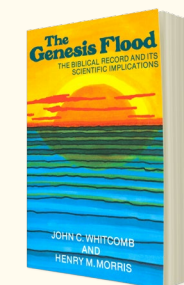
ONE HOUR TO ABANDON THE GAP THEORY

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 1:1 and 1:2, 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.'"



“Other people have written bigger, better books. But this book has a special characteristic. It is totally, 100% Bible focused. It assumes the absolute inerrancy, truthfulness, and relevance of God’s written revelation on how the world began.”

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* (1961).

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 7:11. “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, it wouldn’t make a difference when it happened. You could just say, ‘Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a man named Noah.’ This would be another way to say there wasn’t any such a person.

“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 am stirring up your sincere mind 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.

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.

“We 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.’”

Drs. Whitcomb and Morris didn’t intend the book to be read by a general audience. “Just look at all those 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 was after much bigger fish. He believed that the church’s greatest need was for believers to start all their thinking and witnessing with the Bible.

We make a 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.



“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?

Dr. Whitcomb could have pursued any number of directions 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 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).

“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.’”

So if you don’t want to suffer loss when the Lord comes, believe the Bible, obey the Bible.”

Then he 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 that it’s true and what it really means. What a challenge!”

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 important. If you don’t believe the beginning and the end, how do you believe what’s in between? That’s the alphabet of revelation.

“Be careful what you do with Alpha and Omega. If you dismiss origins and eschatology, you’ll be more likely to dismiss everything in between as personally irrelevant, as unimportant to your understanding of the things of God.

“If I can’t take Genesis and Revelation seriously, why should I bother with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Maybe Jesus wasn’t born of a virgin. Maybe he didn’t rise from the dead.”

We’re in a Cosmic Spiritual Battle. Dr. Whitcomb then quickly moved to another reason Genesis matters, which we don’t often hear these days. “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against . . . the cosmic powers over this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). Satan and his demons are very active, totally dedicated to destroying everything that God ever said in the only book he ever wrote. That’s the one thing they hate the most, the Bible.

“Let’s face it. We need help.”

I asked what he meant by *help*. “We need the Holy Spirit, who wrote the Bible, using 40 humans as instruments (2 Peter 1:21). If we are not in tune with his Word, his way, his priorities, Romans 8:26 says the Holy Spirit ‘intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words’ in order to purge us from false thinking, to illumine us with God’s truth.”

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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 today? *You’re Special*’ [the title of the tract].”

If you need proof that a person’s life and testimony are woven together, I can’t think of a better example than this. For all of Dr. Whitcomb’s fame and influence, for all his talents and insights, the keys to his success have been his humble, childlike faith in God’s Word and his desire to share it with everyone.

LAST WORDS

I closed the interview with one last question. “If you had something that you wanted me to make sure to share that is still timeless for today, what would you say? How would you summarize what we just talked about?”

“Every true theologian wants his disciples to move one step at a time in an upward direction toward the Lord, following his will and his Word in their 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). ■

Mike Matthews earned a BA in English and an MEd in English education from Bob Jones University. Mike was content manager for the Creation Museum and now is the editor in chief of *Answers magazine*.



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