

## Human origins and the church: a discussion with James K.A. Smith

BY JOHN KLOOSTERMAN  
Op-Ed Editor

The human origins controversy which erupted at Calvin last year has had an impact far outside the Calvin community. It has been a topic in the Christian Reformed Church at large since its denominational magazine “The Banner” picked up the story in fall 2010. More recently, the story has appeared on NPR and “The Chronicle of Higher Education,” along with being covered in many stories by the Grand Rapids Press. It is obvious this issue has struck a nerve in many people, and different takes on the issue have been presented.

*Chimes* Op-Ed editor John Kloosterman met with Calvin philosophy professor James K.A. Smith to take a step back and discuss why people are so passionate about this issue, how theological changes can legitimately take place in the CRC community and the role of professors in the church.

***Chimes:* It’s easy to pick out two sides of this debate: Biblical literalists on one side, and people reading more hermeneutically along with people who, like the website Gawker, mock the literalists for believing ridiculous things. But are these the only voices in the discussion?**

Smith: I think the first thing we could do is do ourselves a favor and stop pretending there are two sides, because all we are getting out of that are a series of false dichotomies. This conversation is going nowhere as long as we have that impression. But we fall into that rhetoric really easily.

Among people who are taking these issues really seriously, nobody thinks we are going to arrive at the *one* way to think about this. It’s a question of the range of models, paradigms, frameworks that we can use to make sense of a variety of knotty theological problems. If anyone thinks this is easy, in either direction, that is a clear sign that they haven’t appreciated what is really at stake.

**Given that questions about human origins do not play into**

**anyone’s daily life, how come people are so passionate about the issue?**

Legitimately, people understand there are things at stake in this conversation. It’s not a clear deduction from what you think about Adam and Eve to whether you hold a given position on a moral problem. What people do perceive is a kind of nexus of commitments that get signalled here. For those that have legitimate concerns about what legitimate theological development looks like on this question, it comes down to how we understand Scriptural authority, how we understand the theological interpretation of the Bible, how we take seriously scientific engagement with God’s world without that being a license to trump Scripture. So you can see how people think there’s legitimate questions of biblical authority here, and that clearly has ripple effects on how we live our Christian life.

Others think what’s at stake here is whether our Christian commitments require us to bury our heads in the intellectual sand. Especially for Christians who have come out of traditions where that’s *exactly* what they were encouraged to do, you can understand why all their hackles go up.

So, sure, there might not be clear, simple deductions from what you hold about human origins to how we pursue community together, but there are these stakes that get attached to those issues, and I completely understand why people are passionate about this. I think legitimately so. We could use a little humility and a sense of mystery, saying we can be passionate about it *and* might not be entirely able to figure out how this goes.

I don’t think this just comes down to a literal reading versus a non-literal reading of Scripture. The question is whether you can robustly and wholeheartedly receive the canon of the scripture as what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls “divine discourse” — as the word of God, what God has to say to us, and say that what God has to say to us in Genesis 1 and 2 is not necessarily a biological picture about how things emerge but still core theological points and claims. That’s the way this conversation has to go.

It can’t be some sort of ac-

count like [theologian Rudolph] Bultmann’s, who once famously said something like “How can anyone believe the mythic world of the New Testament in an age of electric light and the modern radio?” That’s a problematic way of framing the conversation, saying “We’re too smart to believe that superstition.” Our argument can’t be that science has shown *x*, therefore we have to get over how simplistic the Bible is. That’s just not how Reformed Christians can grapple with this issue.

**Then what is a good Reformed way to deal with those cases where we see science and our biblical interpretation clash?**

I think what we need to do is spend a lot of time “throat-clearing” — reflecting on methodology. We need to revisit some of these core commitments. I think that as a community we need to revisit what it is to interpret the Scriptures as divine discourse.

The Reformed tradition has a long heritage of understanding the interpretation of Scripture as a theological project. That’s why it’s always a *canonical* reading of Scripture — you can’t just carve it up and treat it as discrete texts; it’s all a package. This is right in the warp and woof of Reformed Biblical hermeneutics. I do not think we will make progress on these issues until we revivify that hermeneutic heritage of the Reformed tradition — and until we appreciate the hermeneutics at work in science as well.

This is not to debunk the science, ignore the science or not take seriously the evidences that are coming from the natural world. But I do think there has to be a levelling of the playing field here, lest we fall into some assumption that science is giving us an objective take on the world and the Bible is some sort of loaded take on the world. There are plenty of takes all around.

For a lot of my colleagues it comes down to this — it was the Reformed tradition which encouraged them to explore the natural world. If it seems to me that the natural world is saying this about how the universe came to be, how humans came to be, and we’ve inherited a reading of Scripture that says something else, then I feel pressured between those two things and both of them have a Reformed impetus. That’s a very legitimate point of tension.

**Is the role of scholars in the church sometimes to challenge the ideas people have?**

Nothing in this doesn’t mean that scholars can’t serve the church, precisely by helping it feel the pressure that the scholar feels, as a Reformed scholar situated between a received scriptural interpretation and what evolutionary history is telling them. But it’s all about *how* you do that. Is it really legitimately offered as a proposal to help the church think through this issue? If so, there are certain ways of doing that.

By the way, I think a very important document that was forged last year, called HCL2, is trying to describe a process where that’s what goes on. We’re not slavishly repeating everything that we’ve heard before.

It comes down to the dynamics of how you live as a community. The question is not just about what we know. It’s how you deal with what you know. It’s such an educative task — how do you invite a community to feel the pressure that you feel



PHOTO COURTESY JAMES K.A. SMITH

as a scholar? And then how, as a community, do we discern a constructive way forward that is faithful to the tradition?

**In the Christian Reformed Church, the three confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, are what we use as criteria to decide what legitimate theological developments are. If we have three 400-year-old documents and one 2000-year-old document as criteria, does that get in the way of us making legitimate changes?**

Those three 400-year-old documents were already a development in the tradition. In a way, development is in the DNA of the Reformed tradition, because if there was no development, no reform, no renewal, there would not be a Heidelberg Catechism or Belgic Confession. Those are already testimonies to the need for rearticulation.

What we don’t want to fall into, though, is some kind of whiggish progress myth where we are onwardly marching towards advanced knowledge, and we are so much smarter than the 16th-century authors of the Reformed confessions, ergo we can’t possibly think what they thought. That is a really simplistic hermeneutic.

Earlier I was saying that we need a much more sophisticated hermeneutic for Scripture as divine discourse. I think we need an equally sophisticated hermeneutic of how to read confessions. For instance, I don’t think the goal of reading the confessions is just determined by authorial intent. It’s not just a matter of figuring out what the 16th-century authors had in their mind. So I don’t see the historicity of our documents as a hampering constraint. In a model of tradition-based reasoning, the constraint of the tradition is also a gift that helps us to think this through.

By the way, let’s not forget that the Bible is *revelation*. This isn’t what some people at a certain time in history thought about God for us to take as a lead. I’m not saying there is not a human aspect to the Scriptures, but it is also received as the word of God, and some people rightly think *that* is what at issue in this debate.

**If we read the confessions hermeneutically, recognizing we are interpreting them, does that make it difficult for the confessions to be used normatively,**

**since our interpretations might not be exactly the same?**

I don’t think a strong commitment to faithful interpretation of the confessions requires imagining that there is one right interpretation for every issue. But it does require affirming that there is a range of interpretations that are discerned as legitimate; that also entails that there are interpretations that fall outside of that range. Recognizing that Scripture and the confessions are interpreted can’t be license for saying everything is up for grabs. On the other hand, it doesn’t mean it’s supposed to be easy, simple or entirely straightforward.

The fact that we are wrestling with these issues is *completely* consistent with being a Reformed Christian community. This is exactly what we should be doing. We can maybe do it better — *how* we do it could be better, but that we are doing it is completely consistent with being the sort of community we are.

The confessions in particular function as guardrails. They are supposed to be guides to interpreting the Scriptures, which take priority. The confessions are on the one hand a sort of guardrail metaphor, to help guide you to how to take on this big, remarkably diverse book and see the canonical narrative that is shaped there. Or the confessions are the grammar that help you understand the particulars of the story of Scripture.

That [having an external guide for interpreting Scripture] is not illegitimate or contrary to *sola Scriptura* — it is as old as Christian interpretation of Scripture. It’s called the “rule of faith.” The rule of faith was a summary understanding of what the scriptures teach which then becomes what you bring to the interpretation of the scriptures. This is not a vicious circle — it is what Heidegger calls a hermeneutic circle. You need a horizon of expectation to know how to come to this text. There can be constructive feedback between those two things, and nothing is to say this makes it easy, clear or simple.

On the other hand, you are not doing this on your own — there is a tradition of interpretation, a heritage of interpretation, a community of interpretation, and all of those are important aspects of figuring out what the center of the story is.

See “Smith,” pg. 15

### Write for Chimes Op-Ed

“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

—Oscar Wilde

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## SMITH: More than two positions on origins

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**The CRC has many different points of view inside it that disagree on many issues. Is the CRC community cohesive enough to come to decisions about which theological developments are valid?**

On the one hand, it is remarkable that the CRC has the range of theological diversity that it does. This is one of the places where I think the confessions can have a critical prophetic function, because part of this conversation should be to recenter the community.

I think that would have implications across the board. The confessions are going to be an equal-opportunity offender in this respect. What it might also show is that some people who take themselves to be “defending the faith” are actually functionally ascribing to versions of Christianity that are not overly Reformed. I think we should be able to name that. Not all the diversity in the CRC is good diversity.

Everyone’s going to be frustrated and disappointed, but I want that across the board, because we might have to remind parts of the community that functionally they have not been subscribing to the Reformed confessions either, even though they might see themselves as the “conservatives” in the denomination.

I would love it if one of the results of the difficult conversations we have had at Calvin over the last two to three years is precisely that we revivify the function of the confessions as live, formative expressions of faith, both for the college and for the church. I don’t think they function that way right now. If all you do is invoke the confessions whenever you want to police something, that is completely unhelpful.

That is why HCL1 also talks about the confessions having a *centering* function. But if they are going to have a centering function, you have to make these documents live, you have to weave them into the warp and woof of the community, and we don’t do that very well — whether at the college or in our congregations.

I think that is a real loss. The Heidelberg Catechism, for ex-

ample, is a wonderfully warm summary expression of the Christian faith. I think there are treasures there that we have neglected. So I would love it if one of the outcomes of this very hard season for the college and for the church is that people come out with a newfound interest in the confessions.

**So how did we get to the place where we do not use the confessions this way?**

I think there are two different issues there. One is internal to the college: I think there was a season at the college where the thickness and particularity of our Reformed identity was less important than a robust academic witness to our guilds. What was important was not all the particulars of the Reformed tradition, but just the ones you needed to underwrite the task

*Being “Reformed” is about more than just affirming the goodness of creation and the life of the mind. Being Reformed is this whole package deal.*

of Christian scholarship in the wider academy. That would be pretty minimalist, like affirming the goodness of creation. So you could live with a functionally very minimal reflection of the Reformed tradition, because that is what you needed to get people to care about the life of the mind and the vocation of scholarship.

But being Reformed is not the equivalent of affirming a merely minimalist Reformed “worldview” or just affirming “the goodness of creation.” The fact is, a lot of other Christian colleges in North America have figured out that Kuyperian piece. In a way that is a certain triumph for Calvin College in Christian higher education — our vision has sort of won the day. On the other hand, it also means we’re no longer distinctive in that emphasis.

But more importantly, being “Reformed” is about more than just affirming the goodness of creation and the life of the

mind. Being Reformed is this whole package deal of worship, theology, creeds, confessions, catholicity and a theology of culture. That is the unique genius of this tradition. And I think if the project is going to not just survive, but thrive, we need the animating resources of this whole “package,” so to speak.

On the church side, the church went through a season of falling into the trap of thinking that being seeker-sensitive and generically evangelical was the future of the denomination. There was pressure to downplay our Reformedness and just try to be community churches.

These are two very different ways to downplay our distinctives, but they end at the same result: the confessions are no longer live documents for us.

**To close, what is the place that professors have as voices in the church?**

I think that signing up to be a professor at a Christian college, particularly the college of a particular church, is to sign up to serve the church. One of the best ways we can serve the future of the church is to educate students who ask really hard questions, who have intellectual courage, who are not going to hide from difficulty. But they will do that *for* the church and *for* the kingdom, not as a prelude to abandoning it.

I also think that as a professor at a Christian college, I am engaged in a project of formation. I am not just interested in providing information to my students and “letting them think for themselves.” There is such a hands-off, libertarian way of talking like that — and it’s something that a lot of us who are professors sort of imbibe in our graduate school formation. But I don’t think that is what Christian colleges are about. Christian colleges are about trying to habituate and form students to become the kinds of people to contribute to the church in all kinds of areas, who are ambassadors for justice in our world, who pursue vocations of entrepreneurial service. We are unapologetically trying to *form* students. It’s a very intense, invasive project, but it is also the most rewarding.

## FROM THE EDITOR

It’s that time again folks — back to school. Whether it’s your first year, your fourth or your fourteenth, I’d like to be one of many welcoming you to another year at Calvin.

As editor of *Chimes* this year, it’s my job to keep up what I think is one of Calvin’s greatest traditions. *Chimes* is a place for you, a place where the voices of Calvin can be heard. If that’s not enough sentimentality for you, get ready for this brilliant simile: consider the title of our fair newspaper. *Chimes*. Quite literally, we are like a wind chime. You know the one — it hangs on your grandmother’s porch next to the hummingbird feeder, above the lawn gnome. Every time the wind blows, the chimes tinkle. Every time something happens at Calvin, *Chimes* is published. But a wind chime isn’t just one tube of metal. It can’t make noise unless there are three, four, five pieces to bump together. And *Chimes* can’t function with only one writer, one viewpoint. Unless we are able to publish the voices of the entire Calvin community, *Chimes* is not valid.

So we need you. *Chimes* isn’t just something fun for me and the other editors to do in our free time. I should hope it’s not just another line on our resumes. We can’t fill twelve or fourteen pages on our own, and no one would read it if we did. We need you, the freshman with a new perspective on old issues. We need you, the fifth year senior with maturity and Calvin experience. We need you, the tenured biology professor with a challenge to students. It is all of your voices that make up *Chimes*, that allow it to make noise.

If you can handle any more of this wind chime analogy, I’d also venture to say that wind chimes have different size pieces. A thicker, longer piece makes a deeper sound, while the thin pieces create that jingle. Likewise, *Chimes* runs all kinds of articles. The most obvious difference is between those that inform and

those that give opinions, but it also goes deeper than that. We need you to tell us what you love about Calvin. Write about the concert that introduced you to a great new band, the dorm activity where you had a great conversation with your floor-mates, the lecture that surprised you. Write about classes, LOFT, friends, Bible study, internships, service projects — heck, write about how well the oven in your coffee kitchen works. Calvin is great at a lot of things, so help us celebrate those by writing for *Chimes*.

But Calvin, like any school, has its issues. Simply using *Chimes* to sing Calvin’s praises would not be giving an honest reflection of our community. So we also need you to tell us what you don’t love about Calvin. Write about a class you don’t think is relevant anymore. Write about an area where you think Calvin could try harder in its quest to be eco-friendly. Tell us your frustration when “Bess can’t go there,” it’s 2 a.m. and your paper is due at 8. If you’ve been at Calvin for any length of time, you know that memos have been written, bands have been banned and theology has been questioned. And through everything, *Chimes* has been the place to go for anyone wondering how the students felt about it all. Please help us uphold that tradition by writing in when things feel wrong.

The upcoming year promises to give us reasons to celebrate, reasons to worry and issues to debate. The SAO concert series looks exciting and inspiring as always, but in this very issue of *Chimes* you will read that Professor Schneider has “retired.” And perhaps most importantly, President Byker is retiring at the end of this year. His successor is already being sought out, and it is important for students to influence that decision. Yes, this year is sure to be eventful, and we at *Chimes* promise to do our best to bring you the news and opinions you need to hear.

But once again, we can’t do it without you. Add your piece to the ringing *Chimes*. Do this, and I’ll promise to stay away from cheesy analogies. For now.

~ajz

## Campus controversies should prompt reflection on issues

BY JOHN MUYSKENS  
Guest Writer

There is trouble at Calvin College. Professor Schneider’s recent departure is a symptom of this underlying trouble. Schneider asks hard questions — ones that he is trying to answer now.

Schneider dared to question the historicity of Adam and Eve. The science is clear-cut on this — it is impossible that we are all descended from an original pair of humans. There’s just too much genetic diversity.

What then do we make of the first chapter of Genesis? Drawing from the poetic language of the passage and the culture of oral tradition in ancient Judaism, Genesis 1 is best read as an allegory for the power and goodness of the Creator. Those that would interpret it literally must reconcile the conflicting account of Creation in Genesis 2, which takes place in a single day.

The real trouble lies in the implications of this reinterpretation on the Fall. The science doesn’t seem to support an “Eden” in a traditional Bible story sense. The theological implications of

reinterpreting the Fall cut too close for some in the Calvin administration. Calvin faculty members are required to sign a Form of Subscription to the Reformed confessions. To question a historical Fall was seen as a violation of Schneider’s terms of employment.

I don’t wish to debate the factors contributing to Schneider’s early retirement, but I do want to point out that the administration struck a similar chord last fall with the cancellation of the New Pornographers concert. Here too we had a symptom of an opaque administration that made an unpopular decision leading to a well-publicized embarrassment of the college. It’s time to ask hard questions.

Schneider’s former colleague, Professor Dan Harlow, writes that “... there are three possible responses to the apparent erosion of biblical truth by modern science: (1) dispute the science, (2) finesse one’s interpretation of Scripture to accord with the science or (3) assign the Bible and science to two separate spheres of authoritative discourse.” Response one seals our academic grave. Three spits in the face of our Reformed

worldview — that our faith permeates all spheres of life. This leaves two, where Schneider, Harlow and others now tread.

Calvin should be a place that welcomes hard questions and seeks answers. If the professor’s hands are tied, then the students must have the courage to ask. This is the time to think deeply about what you believe. Here we approach what I prefer to think of as a frontier rather than a void. It takes courage to venture into the realm of unanswered questions, but it is necessary. In real life, the answers aren’t all in the back of the book.

Einstein dared to question Newton’s venerable laws. Newton gave us some valuable approximations, but didn’t have the whole picture. Perhaps, like Newton’s Laws, the Creation-Fall-Redemption model needs to be refined or eclipsed by something new. It is time to ask these questions.

Calvin College has been put under a harsh spotlight. Our faults are on full display — along with our accomplishments. What is to be done? We must show them what it is *really* to be a Calvin student. Are we blind followers of a

cold, dogmatic religion? Or are we inquisitive, curious questioners of a vibrant faith?

What do I really mean when I write, “We are all children of Adam, meaning we are born with the guilt of fallen humanity,” in an article? What really is original sin? How does Redemption really work? What role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives?

These questions aren’t just for the religion majors; every Christian at Calvin College must

deal with them. I write these questions in hope that our collective conversation will shift to include them. First year students have a unique opportunity — Prelude — in which these questions can and should be discussed. Don’t just take in everything your professor says passively. Question it. I will ask hard questions, but it’s up to you to take them into the classrooms, dining halls, dorms and beyond. Now is the time to start asking.

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