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### **'Untruths and Propaganda' – Churches of Christ, Darwinism, and the 1985-1986 ACU Evolution Controversy**

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## ABSTRACT

In 1985-1986, Abilene Christian University endured what one observer called the worst attack in “size, nature and intensity” on a university affiliated with Churches of Christ. The flashpoint was whether two biology professors were teaching evolution as fact without refutation. The university denied it, but the controversy raged for two years. Left unanswered was the most basic of questions: Did ACU professors actually teach evolution without a creationist rebuttal? Which leads to another: Why in 1985 – 130 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and 60 years after ACU had fired a professor who questioned readings of Genesis – did the controversy erupt? This study attempts to provide those answers.

This study answers the first question principally through the use of primary sources – including interviews with those participants still alive and able to relay memories of the events, as well as memos, letters, and notes written by ACU administrators, faculty and students, and by the accusers and their allies. Secondary sources are used to help describe the history of Darwinism among Churches of Christ, especially in the decades leading to the ACU controversy. These sources include previously published material, and articles and letters written by those who were influential in shaping the assumptions of the movement.

The study finds that the controversy occurred when it did because of the decades-long assumption among Churches of Christ – reinforced by ACU leaders – that evolution was profoundly anti-Christian. But this attitude was not universally held, especially among science faculty at ACU, who had become increasingly willing to accept aspects of evolution. The study also finds that the accused faculty members did indeed teach evolution as fact without rebuttal in their classes. The semantic ambiguity surrounding the subject, however, allowed the university to issue denials eliding the substance of the evidence presented against the professors.

This study concludes that the attack was ultimately unsuccessful in its aims. The same forces that had led to the controversy – an unraveling of the consensus around certain beliefs among Churches of Christ beginning in the 1970s – also limited the effectiveness of the attacks.

‘Untruths and Propaganda’ –  
Churches of Christ, Darwinism,  
and the 1985-1986 ACU Evolution Controversy

A Thesis Presented  
To the Graduate School of Theology  
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Modern and American Christianity

By  
Paul A. Anthony  
May 2016

To Jocelyn, Grace, and Haven:

Be brave. Be kind. Be good.

Above all, never stop asking questions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following work would not be possible first and foremost without those who so generously gave of their time, their memories, and their archives at my request. They are credited in the footnotes and the bibliography, but such citations cannot capture the sacrifice required to reopen wounds that for some of them had clearly not quite healed thirty years later.

I also am grateful to the Center for Restoration Studies – especially to Mac Ice, who worked around my finicky schedule to help me get the time I needed with the papers of W. W. Freeman, C. G. Gray, and others – and to Apologetics Press president Dave Miller, who not only made available Bert Thompson’s archives, but showed tremendous hospitality during my visit to Alabama.

This thesis was built on a foundation of several term papers written for Drs. Doug Foster and Fred Aquino, whose mentorship with Dr. Brannan during this process has been invaluable. They made me a better thinker and a better writer, as have a host of current and former ACU Bible faculty over the past 16 years.

Finally, I owe a great debt to my wife, Jennifer, and my three daughters, to whom this project is dedicated. Their willingness to let me pursue this degree – and all of the absences both physical and mental it required – was indeed an act of love, one I can never fully repay. I love you all very much!

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Little scholarly research to date has explored the response among Churches of Christ to the Darwinian theory of evolution, except briefly as part of larger projects on its members' shifting alliances with broader American Fundamentalism.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the mid 1980s, evolution became the focal point of a significant rift between Abilene Christian University and many of its constituents in Churches of Christ – significant in its length and impact, and because ACU is one of the largest universities affiliated with the group. Despite the recency of these events, exactly what was being taught in ACU's biology classes has been unclear, as has the full story of the university's response to the accusations against its professors.<sup>2</sup> The 1985-1986 evolution controversy also raises a fundamental question: Why did it erupt when it did, nearly 130 years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, more than 80 years after the university's founding, and six decades after it last publicly addressed the question?<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this study is to document and analyze the ACU evolution controversy in its context of conservative American Christianity in general, and Churches

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1. Cf. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 17; Michael Wilson Casey, "The Interpretation of Genesis One in the Churches of Christ: The Origins of Fundamentalist Reactions to Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the 1920s" (Master's thesis: Abilene Christian University, 1989).

2. The story was initially told in the paper out of which this thesis has grown: Paul A. Anthony, "'Untruths and Propaganda': Surveying the 1985-86 Abilene Christian University Evolution Controversy," *Restoration Quarterly* 58 (Spring 2016): 40-53.

3. See below on the history of evolution at ACU and the 1922 firing of W. W. Freeman.

of Christ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century specifically. It will rely heavily on oral history interviews with those participants still living. It will also draw from key primary source documents, including letters, meeting notes and internal memos, and contemporary news accounts and commentary.

First, secondary sources will help place the controversy in its broader historical context – within American Fundamentalism/Evangelicalism and within Churches of Christ. Second, primary sources and contemporary accounts will help detail the specifics of the controversy and assess the nature of the accusations against the university. Third, primary and secondary sources together will help this study document and analyze the ACU's response to the accusations.

### **Significance, Scope, Limitations**

This is the first comprehensive attempt to study the ACU evolution controversy of 1985-1986; it is also the first in-depth effort to describe the response of Churches of Christ generally to Darwinian evolution in the 20th century and place it within the well-documented broader history of Evangelical creationism. This study will document first-hand accounts of key participants in the controversy, either through recollections given in interviews or through memos and letters written at the time. In so doing, it will place the controversy in the broader context of 20th-century Churches of Christ, particularly in the ways mainstream voices in the movement provided the ideological and rhetorical foundation for the attack on ACU.

The study will begin with an overview of the response of Churches of Christ to the theory of Darwinian evolution, centering especially on the decades leading to the 1985-1986 ACU evolution controversy. It will then describe the controversy itself, and

assess the nature of the allegations and the university response, paying particular attention to the semantic ambiguities surrounding key scientific terms.

Primary limitations of this study are the death or incapacitation of key participants, as well as incomplete records, some because they have been misplaced or destroyed in the ensuing 30 years, and others because they will not be released until after the death of their authors. As with any study of this nature, faltering memories are another limitation. Overcoming these limitations is not altogether possible, but can be mitigated by redundancy of sources, both oral and written.

### **Definition of Terms**

This study involves two subjects – science and religion – in which imprecision can lead to misunderstanding. Therefore, this section offers a series of definitions to terms that will appear over the following pages:

#### **Churches of Christ**

Churches of Christ are a collection of congregations without formal denominational structure with origins in the 19th-century Stone-Campbell Movement (often called Disciples of Christ at the time) and generally share a cappella worship and an emphasis on restoring the practices of the New Testament church.<sup>4</sup> Because each Church of Christ is autonomous and self-governing, making generalizations can be dangerous; nevertheless, this study will do so with the understanding that exceptions exist, even when a generalization applies to the vast majority of a group.

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4. On the history and development of Churches of Christ, see Thomas H. Olbricht, “Churches of Christ,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 212ff. For a more concise definition, see *Churches of Christ in the United States* (Nashville: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian, 2012), xi, which makes a cappella the primary factor.

## Abilene Christian University

Founded as Childers Classical Institute in 1906, Abilene Christian University is a private, regionally accredited university serving about 4,000 students in Abilene, Texas. It is affiliated with Churches of Christ, and it plans to be “the premier university for the education of Christ-centered, global leaders” by 2020.<sup>5</sup> Although formally known as Childers Classical Institute until 1920 and Abilene Christian College until 1976, I will generally use the present name and acronym, ACU, for simplicity’s sake.

## Creationism

As used in this study, creationism is the belief that God created all matter in more or less its present form at the point of its creation. Although the word itself is broad enough to encompass practically any theory of how the universe came to exist, its popular meaning is essentially opposition to evolution, whether the creationist believes the event occurred in six 24-hour days less than 10,000 years ago (young-earth creationism) or over undefined ages of time much earlier. As Ronald Numbers describes, the rise of creation science in the 1960s shifted the creationist assumption toward a literalist interpretation of Genesis 1-11 and a young earth.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, “creationism” in this paper will refer to the young-earth variety unless otherwise noted.

## Evangelical

Despite the notorious difficulty in defining Evangelicalism,<sup>7</sup> this paper broadly describes as Evangelical conservative Protestant Christians who describe themselves as

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5. “Advancing Toward the Future,” [acu.edu/about/21-century-vision.html](http://acu.edu/about/21-century-vision.html).

6. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 17.

7. D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

“born again” and accept a premillennial dispensationalist eschatology, and from whom Churches of Christ traditionally have held themselves apart, largely because of disputes over eschatology and the role of baptism in salvation.

### Evolution, Darwinism, Organic Evolution

At its most basic level, evolution is defined as change over time<sup>8</sup> – a process that causes little controversy. More practically, the word has come to be equated with the specific theory of Darwinism, as defined below. When used in this study, evolution will assume its Darwinian interpretation unless otherwise noted.

Simplified, Darwinism is the scientific theory of evolution in which all of life has descended from a common ancestor through a process of genetic mutation and adaptation through natural selection. Although many self-described creationists do not object to the mechanisms of Darwinism, they reject the notion of a single common ancestor, particularly for humanity. These creationists often make a distinction between microevolution – evolution within and between lower forms of animals, such as genera or species – and macroevolution. Darwinism in this study refers to the fully formed macroevolution of all species from a common ancestor.

In biology, organic evolution is synonymous with Darwinism, “organic” differentiating the phrase from inorganic, or chemical, evolution. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Human Biology and Evolution* equates “organic evolution” and “biological evolution,” defining the latter as Darwinism (see above).<sup>9</sup>

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8. “Evolution,” in Larry Mai et al., eds., *Cambridge Dictionary of Human Biology and Evolution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 179.

9. “Organic evolution,” in *Cambridge Dictionary of Human Biology and Evolution* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge, 2005), 384, reads: “‘See biological evolution.’” The entry for “biological evolution” (p. 62) defines the term as “1. change in a lineage of an organism through time; ... transformism. 2. descent

## Organization

The study is organized into five chapters:

1. The introduction, describing the purpose, methodology, significance, scope, and limitations of the study; defining its terms; summarizing its organization; and reviewing relevant literature.
2. Evolution in Churches of Christ, contextualized through studying the emphases and rhetoric used in two previous incidents – the first ACU evolution controversy, which led to the dismissal of W. W. Freeman in 1922, and the Texas textbook controversy of 1964, led by Reuel Lemmons and the *Firm Foundation* – and placed within the broader historical context of the 20th-century rise of Evangelical creationism.
3. The history of the 1985-1986 ACU evolution controversy, beginning with the first communication from ACU alumnus and Alabama author Bert Thompson and ending with the formal ACU response to the publication of *Is Genesis Myth?*
4. A description and assessment of the allegations Thompson leveled against the university, looking specifically at the three primary pieces of evidence he cited, followed by the same for ACU's response, with a primary focus on the semantic ambiguities of such terms as "myth," and a review of possible motivations for the response.
5. Conclusion, summarizing the study's findings, particularly connecting the 1985-1986 controversy to its historical antecedents, and assessing why this controversy ended less favorably for opponents of evolution.

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with modification (Darwinism, 1859). ... 4. change in a population's allele frequencies between generations (this also called the operational definition of neo-Darwinism)."

## Literature Review

Although Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 raised profound problems for traditional Christian understanding of scripture, reaction to the book was more accepting than is often assumed. A metaphorical reading of the Genesis creation stories was the norm, rather than the exception.<sup>10</sup> Then, as now, many Christians – among the most famous being American botanist Asa Gray<sup>11</sup> – accepted evolution as God's way of creating the world.

Nevertheless, opposition to Darwinism grew with the rise of Fundamentalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the famed Scopes Trial of 1925.<sup>12</sup> Among Disciples of Christ, concern over evolution also rose. Before the turn of the 20th century, “no consensus on evolution existed” in the Stone-Campbell Movement, according to James Gorman, and responses ranged from embrace to rejection, when Stone-Campbell leaders spoke about it at all.<sup>13</sup> Writers affiliated with Churches of Christ began reacting more strongly against the increasing popularity of biblical criticism and evolution by the 1910s, as detailed by Michael Casey, but the battle was truly joined after World War I.<sup>14</sup> Mirroring the rise of Fundamentalism in the broader American culture, Churches of Christ, now fully independent of the Disciples of Christ, became more hostile to attempts to reconcile evolution with a literal understanding of Genesis. As a

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10. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 17.

11. E.g., Asa Gray, *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism* (New York: Appleton, 1878).

12. Edward Larson, *Evolution: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 199 ff.

13. James L. Gorman, “The Stone-Campbell Movement's Responses to Evolution, 1859-1900,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 14 (Fall 2011), 191-206.

14. Casey, “Genesis One,” 31-33.

result, ACU Bible professor William Webb Freeman was embroiled in a controversy when he questioned scriptural infallibility on matters of science in 1922. The resulting furor, which included a public rebuke from ACU president Jesse P. Sewell, led to Freeman's dismissal.<sup>15</sup>

The predominant position among Churches of Christ therefore was set for the next 60 years, again reflecting a stasis that existed in the broader culture, which turned its attention to more pressing concerns, such as the rise of ecumenism, Catholicism and communism. Among Fundamentalists, including ACU faculty, evolution was an unscientific philosophy to be rejected outright, theistic evolution a fatal compromise not to be countenanced.<sup>16</sup> In broader society, most Christians still accepted a form of creationism that made room for the scientific consensus on such items as an ancient earth. Meanwhile, evolution itself was in retreat, only cursorily mentioned in public school textbooks despite the creation of a synthesis between Darwinian natural selection and Mendelian genetics that reinforced the explanatory power of Darwin's 1859 theory.<sup>17</sup>

The early 1960s, however, opened a new phase in the clash between Fundamentalist understandings of Genesis and scientific insistence on the preeminence of Darwinism as the explanation for the diversity of life. The simultaneous creation of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS) and the Creation Research Society (CRS) heralded the rejuvenation of both Darwinism and creationism as broad explanatory

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15. Ibid., 61-80.

16. A. N. Trice and Charles Roberson, *Bible vs. Modernism: A Compendium of Sundry Critical Hypotheses and Their Refutation*. (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1935), 245ff.

17. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 35-37; Gerald Skoog, "The Topic of Evolution in Secondary School Biology Textbooks: 1900-1977," in *Evolution Versus Creationism: The Public Education Controversy*, ed. J. Peter Zetterberg (Phoenix: Oryx, 1983), 69; Larson, *Evolution*, 221ff.

frameworks. As Arnold Grobman describes, the shock of the Soviet Sputnik launch led to an overhaul of high school science curriculum, including in biology, where the BSCS wrote three new textbooks focused on evolution as the “pervasive theme.”<sup>18</sup> At the same time, evangelical Christians, led by Henry Morris and others, formed the CRS and its eponymous quarterly journal to argue for a literal reading of Genesis 1-11, including six 24-hour days of creation less than 10,000 years ago.<sup>19</sup>

The increasing emphasis on origins in both biology and fundamentalist Christianity led to a new phase of national debate over evolution and creationism beginning in 1964 with a controversy over the new BSCS textbooks up for consideration by the Texas Board of Education. Led by Reuel Lemmons, influential editor of the Churches of Christ publication *Firm Foundation*, Christians denounced the books as unscientific and atheistic and called on the state to reject them from consideration for use in public schools.<sup>20</sup> Lemmons was among several prominent members of Churches of Christ to testify before the State Board of Education, including Douglas Dean, former biology chair at ACU and at the time a biology professor at Pepperdine College.<sup>21</sup> Dean gave his beliefs a full airing later in the decade during a four-night lecture series in Arlington, Texas, where he espoused a young-earth creationism that denied the existence

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18. Arnold Grobman, *The Changing Classroom: The Role of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 204.

19. Henry M. Morris, *A History of Modern Creationism* (San Diego: Master Book, 1984), 178-88, tells the story of the CRS's founding, from 1961-1964.

20. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 239; James Hefley, *Textbooks on Trial* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976), 45; Hillel Black, *The American Schoolbook* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 155.

21. H. Douglas Dean, “Address before Texas Textbook Committee,” *CRS Quarterly* 2 (Jan. 1966): 9.

of transitional fossils and beneficial mutations – and flirted with the theories of Immanuel Velikovsky.<sup>22</sup>

In partnering with the CRS to oppose the BSCS books, Lemmons opened the pages of the *Firm Foundation* to more scientific-sounding arguments critical of evolution, while he himself used rhetoric that could be described as sensationalistic, for example calling the textbooks in question “the most vicious attack we have ever seen on the Christian religion.”<sup>23</sup> Twenty years later, Bert Thompson used the same kind of language when he disseminated an attack on an ACU faculty member – on whose governing board Lemmons sat – as “one of the most dangerous miscreants dwelling among God’s people.”<sup>24</sup>

Thompson was the primary representative of Churches of Christ in a growing body of creationists who wrote against evolution between the 1960s and 1980s. Henry Morris, Duane Gish, and Ken Ham published popular rejections of evolution from 1961-1987.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, continuing efforts to discredit evolution and require the teaching of

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22. H. Douglas Dean, *The Bible, Science, and Evolution*, (Arlington, TX: self-published, 1966). Velikovsky, in an effort to reconcile the stories of the Old Testament with human history, postulated a series of catastrophes caused by the Earth’s supposed near-collisions with multiple bodies, including Venus.

23. [Reuel Lemmons], “An Extremely Dangerous Textbook Coming,” *FF* 81 (June 30, 1964): 410.

24. Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 1986), 126-27.

25. Henry Morris and John Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961); Duane Gish, *Evolution: The Fossils Say NO!* (San Diego: Institute for Creation Research, 1973); Ken Ham, *The Lie: Evolution* (Green Forest, AR: Master, 1987).

creation science in the public schools led to constant controversy and recrimination, as described by numerous authors over the past forty years.<sup>26</sup>

Thompson, a 1970 ACU alumnus, began publishing shortly after his graduation, including in 1977 *Theistic Evolution*, where he described any deviation from the “literal, actual and historical” text of Genesis 1-11 as a “false, God-denying, Holy Spirit-denying, Jesus-denying faith.”<sup>27</sup> In 1986, Thompson published *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University*, the results of an investigation he led over the previous year into allegations a biology student had made about the content of two biology courses. The courses, reaction, publication, and response from 1984-1988 ended with the publication of *Evolution and Faith*, a book-length treatment of the questions in play, featuring essays by several ACU faculty members.<sup>28</sup>

Until now, the controversy has received scant notice in the broader literature regarding the conflict between creationism and evolution.<sup>29</sup> Publicly, the two sides of the controversy have remained at an impasse for 30 years – Thompson insisting into the 21st

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26. An incomplete list includes: Edward Caudill, *Intelligently Designed: How Creationists Built the Campaign against Evolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2013); James R. Durham, “Religious Right Involvement in Texas Public Education, 1963-1989” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1992); Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Evolution*, updated edition (New York: Oxford University, 1989); Dorothy Nelkin, *The Creation Controversy: Science or Scripture in the Schools* (Boston: Beacon, 1982); Eugenie C. Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004); and George E. Webb, *The Evolution Controversy in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994), as well as the aforementioned Black, *American Schoolbook*; Hefley, *Textbooks on Trial*; and Numbers, *The Creationists*.

27. Bert Thompson, *Theistic Evolution* (Shreveport, LA.: Lambert Book House, 1977), 6, 64. Further works included *The History of Evolutionary Thought* (Fort Worth: Star Bible & Tract, 1981); *Essays in Apologetics* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1984); and *The Scientific Case for Creation* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, 1985).

28 J. D. Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988).

29. Numbers, *Creationists*, 315.

century that his allegations were correct,<sup>30</sup> and ACU leaving its 1986 denial as its last direct word on the controversy, both in its own communication and in the reporting of the student-run newspaper, the *Optimist*.<sup>31</sup> Yet several of the principals in the controversy are still alive, one of them still a full-time professor at ACU. Until recently, one of the two accused professors was well enough to speak about his experiences and what he taught in the classroom. After three decades, the papers of some ACU administrators and board members from the era are available for review. This allows for a fuller picture to emerge of what was being taught at ACU – and whether Thompson’s allegations were correct.

The passage of time also allows for the placement of the controversy in its context as the culmination of the previously discussed decades of evolution, to use a particularly apt word, in attitude among Churches of Christ about the Darwinian theory and its appropriateness – or lack thereof – for Christian belief. This study undertakes both projects – to analyze the ACU evolution controversy and to place it in its context as a manifestation of the conflict between evolution and creationism within 20th-century conservative American Christianity.

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30. Bert Thompson, “What’s Wrong with Theistic Evolution?” (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 2001), [www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990](http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990).

31. “University,” The *Optimist*, Feb. 7, 1986, A-2, comprised the text of the ACU response that was mailed to all parents of currently enrolled students. A letter to the editor from twenty-two biology students defending the professors ran the next week. No further opinion pieces on the subject, save a guest column by Charles Trevathan a year later, ran in the paper. *Evolution and Faith*, published in 1988, never directly referred to the controversy.

## CHAPTER II

### DARWINISM AMONG CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1859-1984

Despite the presence of two significant evolution controversies at Abilene Christian University, including one within living memory, little research to date has been done on the attitudes among Churches of Christ about the Darwinian theory of evolution. This extends to the 1985-1986 controversy, which according to contemporary accounts was a significant event that roiled Churches of Christ across the country. Exactly what was taught in ACU's biology classes has until now been unclear, as has been the full story of the university's response to the accusations against its professors. This controversy also raises a fundamental question: Why did it erupt when it did, nearly 130 years after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, eighty years after the university's founding, and six decades after it last publicly addressed the issue?

That question is best answered by looking at how Churches of Christ, including leaders affiliated with ACU, responded to evolution during the 20th century. To understand the forces that buffeted Abilene Christian University in the mid-1980s, one must go back to the earliest decades of its existence. In that period Churches of Christ, like much of conservative American Christianity, expressed alarm at the implications of evolutionary theory for a literalist reading of the Bible. Not coincidentally, ACU's first evolution controversy occurred in the 1920s, a decade already famous for the clash between evolution and its religious opponents. Its details and conclusion – as well as the positions of ACU-affiliated authors and speakers in the decades leading up to the 1980s –

prove to be instructive in explaining why conservatives in Churches of Christ reacted so strongly in 1985 to the suggestion that ACU faculty might be teaching evolution as a scientific fact.

### **Increasing Suspicion, 1859-1959**

The rise of Fundamentalism and its vigorous opposition to evolution in the early 20th century, culminating in the Scopes Trial, has been well documented. Although many have written in more detail about facets of Fundamentalist anti-evolutionism and the trial itself,<sup>1</sup> Ronald Numbers cleared the field with his comprehensive history, *The Creationists*, especially by tracing the history of the movement after Scopes and into the middle of the century. Beginning with *The New Geology*, published by George McCready Price in 1923 and extending through the formation of the Religion and Science Association (1935), the Deluge Geology Society (1938), and the American Scientific Affiliation (1941), young-earth creationism maintained a fragile toehold among conservative Christians opposed to evolution. Nevertheless, “Organized creationism in North America appeared to be all but dead during the second quarter or so of the 20th century.”<sup>2</sup>

Churches of Christ followed a similar pattern. Late in the 19th century, the fragmenting Stone-Campbell Movement featured a variety of voices on the question of whether Christians could reconcile their faith with evolutionary theory. “No consensus on evolution existed” among Stone-Campbell leaders writing in the movement’s primary

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1. For example, Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods* (New York: Basic, 1997), on the Scopes Trial, or George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford, 1980), on the movement in general.

2. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 158. The story of creationism from Price to the ASA’s acceptance of theistic evolution in the 1950s is told in pp. 72-183.

journals, James Gorman found, and that lack of consensus “largely resemble[d]” the broader response of Christians in America.<sup>3</sup> Although philosophically predisposed by their Baconian-empiricist roots to distrust the inferential conclusions reached by Darwin, some members of the Stone-Campbell Movement were open to the possibility of assimilating evolution with Christianity. Gorman quotes Illinois minister R. D. Cotton, who in 1877 found “so much truth in the hypothesis that it will not do to try to laugh it down.” In 1891, New York preacher R. S. McArthur went so far as to say, “There is a Christian evolution; God as evolver, and truth in its highest forms as the result.” Perhaps most remarkably, David Lipscomb himself, writing in 1899 but apparently still in agreement with the sentiment as late as 1913,<sup>4</sup> cautioned against hasty rejection of either the Bible or science based on a perceived conflict between the two: “The Bible is true. Real science is true. But men’s readings of each are faulty.”

The rub, of course, was what counted as “real science.”<sup>5</sup> For Lipscomb, geology certainly did. In one remarkable passage, Lipscomb acknowledged that “for a great while, men understood the first chapter of Genesis said that the world was created in the six days enumerated in the chapter. The truths of geology led to the study of this matter and – lo! – the Bible does not say this.”<sup>6</sup> Science therefore could lead biblical interpretation to at least some extent, and indeed Lipscomb showed an openness to evolutionary theory, particularly as it paralleled the spiritual evolution he saw in a human under the influence

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3. James L. Gorman, “The Stone-Campbell Movement’s Responses to Evolution, 1859-1900,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 14 (Fall 2011), 192.

4. Ibid., 204, quotes from an 1899 *Gospel Advocate* article by Lipscomb that was reprinted in the 1913 *Salvation from Sin*, a compilation of Lipscomb’s writings edited by J.W. Shepherd (Nashville: McQuiddy), from which I quote.

5. Lipscomb, *Salvation*, 347.

6. Ibid., 349.

of the Holy Spirit. The progressive creation described in Genesis 1 amply supported the evolution from simple to more complex forms of life, Lipscomb argued, and he even signaled a striking acceptance of the evolutionary origins of humanity: “When this highest mechanism of God was completed, God breathed into it a spirit that differentiated it from all the lower creation and allied it to the spirits and to God himself.” Lipscomb dismissed entirely the notion of special creation – “no one claims that beings were created as they are” – and seemed comfortable with evolution, at least to the extent that he could reconcile it with his reading of Genesis: “These facts, given in both nature and the Bible, are the grounds for the theory of evolution.”<sup>7</sup>

However, a consensus solidified in the early 20th century that shifted sharply away from Lipscomb’s conciliatory statements. Churches of Christ, listed by the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies as separate from the Disciples in 1906, became increasingly hostile to evolution, particularly as it was linked ever closer to biblical criticism in what was perceived as a modernist assault on Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Although usually loath to associate too closely with Fundamentalism because of their exclusivist ecclesiology and Fundamentalism’s premillennial leanings, advocates in Churches of Christ set aside those differences in the 1920s to attack evolution and higher criticism, catching in the crossfire Abilene Christian professor William Webb Freeman.

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7. Ibid., 358-59. On pp. 360ff., Lipscomb criticizes some elements of evolutionary theory, most of them since discarded by scientists. The result, however, is to muddle what to that point is a strong defense of theistic evolution. The likeliest explanation is that Lipscomb was reacting against the atheistic scientism of Darwin’s 19th-century defenders.

8. As Michael Wilson Casey, “The Interpretation of Genesis One in the Churches of Christ: The Origins of Fundamentalist Reactions to Evolution and Biblical Criticism in the 1920s” (Master’s thesis: Abilene Christian University, 1989), notes, among the reasons for this shift were the rise of communism in 1917 and the association of higher criticism with its country of origin, Germany, at a time of strong anti-German sentiment.

Freeman, holder of a Th.M. degree from Southern Baptist Seminary and working toward a doctorate, was the cornerstone of ACU president Jesse Sewell's plan to establish the first seminary among Churches of Christ. ACU's College of the Bible had been in place for three years when Freeman left for Yale to earn a Ph.D. Freeman came to Connecticut highly recommended by ACU's Board of Trustees, which sent with him an effusive letter of recommendation: "With intelligence and training far above the average brother, Freeman has already done a great work in the church, and we feel sure ... he will be of great value as a preacher and teacher. We regretted to see him leave us even for a short time and shall rejoice in his return."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the seminary's very existence, along with some of the men chosen as its faculty, had already been the target of attacks from journals affiliated with Churches of Christ, and an economic downturn led to financial trouble for both ACU and the journals that closely watched it.<sup>10</sup>

Into this situation came four letters Freeman wrote to the *Firm Foundation*, responding to a *Gospel Advocate* writer who had argued for six literal 24-hour days of creation. "If there is one God," Freeman asked in the first letter, "should his children not welcome truth from nature as well as from revelation? ... Certain data in each realm are relatively final, but man's conclusions can hardly be dignified by the term infallible." In this way, Freeman did not stand far from Lipscomb's thoughts republished just nine years earlier.<sup>11</sup> The second letter, published a month later, pushed the point further, asking: "Is The Bible an Infallible Guide in Science?" and answering with some cheek: "If it is,

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9. Open letter by ACU board, Oct. 14, 1921, W. W. Freeman collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, CRS MS#24.

10. Casey, "Genesis One," 58-61.

11. W. W. Freeman, "The Use and Abuse of the Bible," *Firm Foundation* 39 (June 2, 1922): 3.

physicians, etc., study the wrong books.” Although agreeing with previously expressed sentiments that the Bible and science, properly understood, could not conflict, Freeman argued that should the conflict occur in “the spiritual realm, the Bible will stand the test. In the physical and chemical sciences, the Bible contributes nothing but history, and little definitely of that.” One particular phrase – that “the Bible is not infallible in every dictum” – would prove particularly problematic.<sup>12</sup>

The pair of letters led to a rebuke from *FF* editor G. H. P. Showalter: “I do not think that Brother Freeman surely would mean to say or imply that the author of the Bible does not speak with unerring accuracy with reference to everything about which He makes declarations.” The origins of humanity were especially problematic; Darwinism “does not harmonize in any measure” with the Bible, Showalter wrote, and Freeman’s stance would seem to make Scripture “untrustworthy” regarding the creation account. “It is far safer to accept without question what God says with reference to things about which we know nothing.”<sup>13</sup>

Of particular relevance for this study, Sewell initially supported his professor but warned him that “ordinary people would not understand the language of the article.”<sup>14</sup> However, in a public response to Freeman’s second letter – headlined “Just What Do You Mean, Brother Freeman?” – Sewell spoke “as the rightful representative of the trustees, faculty, students, patrons and supporters of Abilene Christian College” and issued a stern

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12. W. W. Freeman, “The Use and Abuse of the Bible, No. 2,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (July 11, 1922): 4.

13. G. H. P. Showalter, “The Bible and Science,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (July 18, 1922): 2.

14. Casey, “Genesis One,” 64-65.

rebuke: “The Bible is right. If it and science disagree, then science is wrong.” Regarding the potential fallibility of the Bible, Sewell left no room for Freeman’s argument:

Will you be kind enough to tell us which dicta are fallible, and how they happened to be fallible? As president of the institution in which you hold a professorship, I have a right to ask you this question. ... I regret, exceedingly more than I can tell, to write this. But I believe my responsibility to my own conscience and to that host of good people who are looking to me to guide Abilene Christian College demand it.

Sewell attempted to rescue Freeman by urging him to use clearer language because he had committed a “grave injustice” against himself in the two letters thus far published. In the same issue, Showalter recommended Sewell’s letter to his readers and added that he was “glad that Brother Sewell ... [indicated] distinctly the policy of Abilene Christian College on matters of fundamental importance.”<sup>15</sup>

However, the next two letters – written before Freeman had read any of the responses – were quite clear: Freeman rejected the hermeneutical assumptions on which Showalter and Sewell agreed. “One may be a loyal Christian in confession and in life regardless of his scientific views as to the physical world. ... When we are unaware of certain data, we can be very sincere and extremely zealous but very intolerant while we are far from correct. There is danger in claiming too much for the Bible, even in religion.” Freeman spoke as a professor, arguing that the current path of the church was to destroy the faith of its students once they confronted what he saw as the facts of science and higher criticism: “The average college student should not be obliged to fight the devil on all sides. It hardly helps the student for the parents to curse the teachers.”<sup>16</sup>

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15. J. P. Sewell, “Just What Do You Mean, Brother Freeman?” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Aug. 15, 1922): 2. G. H. P. Showalter, “Brother Sewell’s Article,” same page.

16. W. W. Freeman, “The Use and Abuse of the Bible No. 3,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 5, 1922): 4.

The words would prove prescient, both for Freeman's immediate circumstances and those of his employer 63 years later.

The result was "ridicule rather than reasoned argument"<sup>17</sup> from Showalter, who tied Freeman to the hated Germans with the use of the word "Kultur" in reference to higher criticism. He derided Freeman's letters as "[n]either logical [n]or Scriptural," and he dismissed Freeman's education, as well as theological education generally, as "a mania for degrees" and a "panting after notoriety" that led people like Freeman to chase after the "chief seats" and the title "Dr. Dr." "A close, prayerful, persistent, conscientious and devout study of the Bible is necessary, and all that is necessary, for the solution of these problems" Freeman had raised.<sup>18</sup>

For his part, Freeman in his fourth letter compared strident support for young-earth creationism to the "dark ages" rule of Roman popes, and described a literalist hermeneutic as "a materialism in the church almost as ruinous as materialistic evolution and Mammon worship." Coincidentally, Freeman concluded the letter by returning to Genesis 1 and again echoing the words of David Lipscomb from less than a decade before: That the days of creation aligned with the progression of the fossil record. "Thus I decided that God knew what he was about and did not write a geology but a library on the science of true living."<sup>19</sup> Freeman's harmony with Lipscomb notwithstanding, Showalter criticized his "vague, indecisive, untenable course" and quoted Alexander Campbell's exegesis of Genesis before lamenting that Freeman had "doubtless read Adam Smith and

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17. Casey, "Genesis One," 68.

18. G. H. P. Showalter, "Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Bible," *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 5, 1922): 2.

19. W. W. Freeman, "The Use and Abuse of the Bible No. 4," *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 12, 1922): 4.

other such speculators far more than he read and studied the Bible.” Freeman’s “disgusting” notion that the Bible is not completely infallible “finds its parallel only with all wreckless (*sic*) asserters who reject the word of God and deify human reason.” Showalter attacked Freeman personally, continuing to mock his education and ridicule his arguments as “perfectly absurd” without addressing their substance.<sup>20</sup> This style of argumentation – ad hominem attacks wedded to unsupported assertions – would reappear throughout the century, including and especially during the next ACU evolution crisis.

The 1922 crisis, however, would end quickly. On the page facing Freeman’s fourth letter, a five-line note read: “Telegram: Abilene, Texas, September 7. Please announce in first paper possible W. W. Freeman will not return to Abilene Christian College. J. P. Sewell.”<sup>21</sup> Freeman himself had not been notified of that fact; he was traveling during the controversy and did not realize the depth of the outrage against him. Sewell sent him a pre-publication draft of his initial response to the letters; Freeman answered his questions, thinking they would run alongside Sewell’s article. Instead, they ran later – with Sewell’s subsequent responses alongside. Freeman didn’t even learn of his own termination until a week after Sewell’s notice ran in *FF*. Privately, Freeman criticized the “grandstand play” that he considered designed to soothe the congregations who provided the donations and the students on which ACU survived. “It appears,” Casey notes, “that Sewell was trying to protect the enrollment and support of Abilene Christian by firing Freeman and having representatives of the school express their doubts

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20. G. H. P. Showalter, “More about the Use and Abuse of the Bible,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 12, 1922): 2.

21. “News and Notes,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 12, 1922): 5.

about him.”<sup>22</sup> That was certainly Freeman’s conclusion, and he told Sewell as much, absolving the president of blame for “your official action, which under the existing circumstances I heartily endorse – my dismissal.”<sup>23</sup> However, he cautioned Sewell to “stand by your men. Do not let editorial kisses to the masses stop your academic work.”<sup>24</sup>

Whatever he said in public, it seems unlikely that Sewell was surprised to learn Freeman – the star professor of Sewell’s personal project – held such positions. In the 1921 *Prickly Pear* yearbook, Freeman in an essay called the Bible, “Not a book, but a collection of booklets forming a divine library of religious experience and eternal truths, inspired through fellowship with God.” Nowhere in the essay did Freeman describe the Bible as embodying scientific or historical accuracy; in fact, he not only implicitly defended an openness to extrabiblical scientific discoveries by quoting John 21:25,<sup>25</sup> he explicitly defended “reasoning daily” by citing the example of Paul in the school of Tyrannus, a subtle rebuke to those, like Showalter, who criticized Freeman’s advanced degrees and Sewell’s seminary.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, none other than the chair of ACU’s board of trustees, J. S. Arledge, agreed with Freeman’s contention that Showalter’s curious decisions regarding the delay in publishing Freeman’s four letters and subsequent response to Sewell had allowed the controversy to grow to a level that forced Sewell’s hand: Freeman “has simply been

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22. Casey, “Genesis One,” 70.

23. W. W. Freeman, letter to Jesse Sewell, Nov. 20, 1922, Freeman papers.

24. W. W. Freeman, letter to Jesse Sewell, Dec. 20, 1922, Freeman papers.

25. The verse as it appeared in the yearbook: “There are many other things which if written the world, I suppose, would not contain the books.”

26. W. W. Freeman, “The Bible,” *Prickly Pear* 6 (1921): 75.

misunderstood by the brethren.”<sup>27</sup> For his part, Freeman did not appear to resent his termination, telling Arledge, “Nor should the action of Brother Sewell as an official of the school be questioned, for that is his perfect right and privilege, and under what I hear were the circumstances, I have no censure for that act in itself at all.” But he did lash out at Showalter and the response his letters generated. “The harm has been to me and is unquestionable. I have the right to interpret my own language. I have been misrepresented and misquoted. Insinuations have been thrust in when definite questions should have been submitted to me.”<sup>28</sup> The parallels between Freeman’s frustration and those involved in the 1985-1986 controversy will become clear.

In any event, Freeman and Sewell’s public disagreement continued on the pages of *FF* for another month after the end of their professional relationship, with Sewell arguing that since Freeman accepts “one theory of inspiration” that rejects the Bible’s scientific infallibility, he must therefore not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus: “I hope I am mistaken, but I can get nothing else from Brother Freeman’s articles.”<sup>29</sup> Privately, Sewell apparently was frustrated by the brief notice Showalter had published about Freeman’s dismissal from ACU – an indication that he was indeed feeling pressure from ACU’s supporters and had hoped firing Freeman would generate enough publicity to put the college back in their good graces. According to G. C. Brewer, a prominent critic

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27. Brother and Sister Arledge, “Copy of a Copy Sent by Geo. A. Klingman,” undated, Freeman papers.

28. W. W. Freeman, letter to J. S. Arledge, Nov. 20, 1922, Freeman papers. It should be noted that Freeman maintained this position despite Sewell’s denial (letter to Freeman, Dec. 10, 1922, Freeman papers, 3): “Please do not think, as you seem to, that I dismissed you as a matter of expediency – to save the school. That was not it at all. I did it because you had written and published a lot of things that put you where I could not tell what you believed as to God’s word. ... My action was based on principle – not expediency or fear.”

29. J. P. Sewell, untitled response to W. W. Freeman, “What I Mean,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 26, 1922): 2-3.

among Churches of Christ of evolution and higher criticism,<sup>30</sup> Sewell had written him and:

complained that we are always to criticize him but do not commend him for the efforts he makes to keep error out of Abilene Christian College. He said he had been criticized because of Freeman but he doubted any one would think to commend him for dismissing Freeman from the faculty; that his announcement of the dismissal had not been given enough prominence in the *Firm Foundation*, etc.”<sup>31</sup>

Brewer, intending to oblige Sewell with such a commendation, instead wrote a harsh attack on Freeman, calling the deposed professor an “infidel” and a “small man [with] a big education” who should at least show the “principle” of overtly rejecting his faith and absolving ties with Churches of Christ. “Brother Sewell,” Brewer concluded, “if there are any ideas of theology in Abilene Christian College, get them out or dynamite the premises and blow the school to gehenna.”<sup>32</sup>

Casey describes well Freeman’s attempts to regain his footing amid a swirl of accusations and recriminations – now appearing in his private mail, as well as the *Gospel Advocate*. His positions required too much nuance, and his letters grew longer and longer,<sup>33</sup> likely reducing the number of people who read them compared to the shorter,

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30. Thomas H. Olbricht, “Brewer, Grover Cleveland,” in Foster et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 98.

31. G. C. Brewer, “Brother Freeman’s Explanation and Challenge,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Nov. 21, 1922): 1.

32. G. C. Brewer, “Some Observations on W. W. Freeman’s Recent Remarks,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Oct. 3, 1922): 4. One would be remiss to overlook Brewer’s comments upon Freeman’s death in 1954: “The academic world has lost one of its leading educators. The church has lost a faithful gospel preacher and we have all lost a true friend and a beloved brother in the Faith of the gospel. We believe that our loss is his gain and we shall see him again in the sweet bye and bye.” The quote can be found in Willis Jernigan, “William Webb Freeman – a Tribute,” *The Gospel Guardian* 6 (May 27, 1954): 6, which also quotes then-ACU president Don H. Morris applauding “the many ways in which [Freeman] has helped in the building of Abilene Christian College.”

33. These culminated in a mammoth – especially for *FF* – two-part “Explanation and Challenge to My Critics,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Oct. 31-Nov. 7, 1922): 2-3.

punchier replies by Showalter, Brewer, and J. D. Tant.<sup>34</sup> Freeman attempted a letter-writing campaign behind the scenes, to little avail. Finally, by the beginning of 1923, Showalter publicly moved on “for Brother Freeman’s protection,” and the matter largely rested there, seven months after Freeman wrote his first letter.<sup>35</sup> Casey implied the controversy played a role in Sewell’s resignation as ACU president in 1924 and noted that several men who had studied with Freeman left Churches of Christ soon after.<sup>36</sup>

That his attempts to reconcile science, scholarship, and Christianity should cost Freeman his job at ACU is not surprising, given the increasingly strong anti-evolution consensus at the college. Later in life, Sewell claimed to have been in anti-evolution hero William Jennings Bryan’s “inner circle of friends” before the latter’s death, and that he had received a hand-written note from Bryan during the 1925 Scopes trial. Sewell acknowledged to William Banowsky not only being “well aware” of the broader Fundamentalist movement as president of ACU from 1912-1924, but that he “actively participated in it, attending meetings and reporting to the college.”<sup>37</sup> Like Brewer, Sewell found in Fundamentalism a powerful if temporary ally against the twin evils of evolution and higher criticism, toward which Freeman had pushed ACU too close.

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34. G. H. P. Showalter, “Brother Freeman’s ‘Explanation and Challenge,’” and J. O. Garrett, “Twenty-Four Hours of Creation,” *FF* 39 (Oct. 31, 1922): 2; and Showalter, “Brother Freeman’s Final ‘Explanation and Challenge,’” and J. D. Tant, “How Long Will This Foolishness Last?” *FF* 39 (Nov. 7, 1922): 2. This is supported by O. E. Phillips, letter to W. W. Freeman, Dec. 5, 1922, Freeman papers, in which Phillips, ACC’s fiscal agent who was frequently on the road raising money for the college, reported: “I find the following: The Firm Foundation is the trademark for loyalty in Texas. Any one Brother Showalter attacks is not loyal. Take your last article of explanation. ... I enquired of many if they read it ... they replied that they started to, but found it so long that they just read what Brother Showalter said about it and Brother Brewer.”

35. G. H. P. Showalter, untitled response to E. S. Jelley, “Our Out-Grown Bible,” *FF* 40 (Jan. 16, 1923): 2-3.

36. Casey, “Genesis One,” 80-81.

37. William Banowsky, *The Mirror of a Movement: Churches of Christ as Seen through the Abilene Christian College Lectureship* (Dallas: Christian Publishing, 1965), 34.

Sewell was not the only prominent ACU-connected figure to speak out against evolution in the early 20th century. The college's founder, A. B. Barret, wrote a chapter in E. A. Elam's 1925 *The Bible versus Theories of Evolution*, in which he described evolution as a "string of bald assertions and wild guesses."<sup>38</sup> In the same book, ACU president Batsell Baxter, who took over from Sewell the year before, compliments evolution as "a thrilling adventure story."<sup>39</sup> However, he joined his co-authors in dismissing the theory as unscientific and, further, explicitly rejected theistic evolution:

It is unreasonable that such a tiny object [the single-celled common ancestor] so wonderfully complex ... could have sprung into existence without an intelligence of some kind arranging it; and to believe that man came from such a tiny organism, made by God and guided along its way through millions of years of struggle with adverse environment until it finally became a man, is no more reasonable than to believe that God made man in his own image as a direct and special act of creation.<sup>40</sup>

Ten years later, ACU's Bible chair, Charles Roberson, co-wrote *Bible vs. Modernism*, which attacked evolution and higher criticism with many of the same terms Showalter, Brewer, and Tant had used during the Freeman controversy. Evolution, Roberson and Allison N. Trice wrote, was nothing but a collection of "unproved theories and hypotheses." The only possible outcome of accepting Darwinism, they wrote, was "disbelief in the Bible."<sup>41</sup>

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38. A. B. Barret, "Evolution," in *The Bible versus Theories of Evolution*, ed. E.A. Elam (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1925), 230.

39. Batsell Baxter, "The Theory of Evolution," in Elam, *The Bible*, 217. Elam's book also includes a reprint of the Lipscomb article on evolution in *Salvation from Sin*, but excises the conciliatory remarks discussed above.

40. Ibid., 223-24.

41. A. N. Trice and Charles Roberson, *Bible vs. Modernism: A Compendium of Sundry Critical Hypotheses and Their Refutation*. (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1935), 245.

Likewise, from 1918-1960, the verdict on evolution from ACU's Lectureship stage, where the best and most famous speakers among Churches of Christ held forth every February, was unanimous: "total rejection." According to Banowsky, "The men at Abilene were unable to envisage any grounds for harmonizing the evolutionary hypothesis and the teachings of the Bible." These included George Klingman, who later became Freeman's immediate supervisor at the college. In 1918, he decried "the decadence of the Darwinian theory," which had "not a single fact to confirm it."<sup>42</sup> He was followed by other speakers in 1925 and 1926 in the portrayal of evolution as an unscientific philosophy of origins that left no room for God.<sup>43</sup>

Freeman's dismissal, including and followed by the rejection of evolution by major figures in the early history of ACU – Barret, Sewell, Baxter, and Roberson – and by every speaker who broached the subject in the university's highly influential lecture series for the next 40 years, was a clear signal: Belief in evolution was not tolerated on the Abilene Christian campus, and proponents of evolution could expect an unceasing campaign from leading voices in Churches of Christ that would jeopardize not just a job, but the ability to remain affiliated with the movement altogether. The tone, tenor, and even some of the language that would prove so shocking to ACU administrators and faculty in 1985 was first tested successfully on the same campus six decades earlier.

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42. However, Klingman's position seemed to soften a bit, perhaps through his friendship with Freeman, whom he wrote in 1923, asking "whether or not you have been thoroughly convinced that evolution is a fact that cannot be successfully disputed. I have not yet reached the point where I can say, 'I KNOW that man was evolved through a process which took millions of years' etc. Can you? If so, what led you to that conclusion?" (George Klingman, letter to W. W. Freeman, Nov. 27, 1923, Freeman papers). If Freeman responded, he did not keep a copy of it in his papers.

43. Banowsky, *Mirror*, 120-3. In 123ff., Banowsky details three broad approaches to the findings of modern science by ACU Lectureship speakers through 1961, all of which can be seen in Trice and Roberson's work: 1) hostility toward evolution itself as unscientific, 2) demarcating separate spheres for science and religion, and 3) claiming perceived biblical harmony with later scientific findings as proof of divine inspiration.

Meanwhile, the furor over evolution, both within Churches of Christ and in the broader American Fundamentalist movement, turned inward in the wake of the Scopes Trial. For Fundamentalism generally, the result was the establishment and growth of friendly institutions such as Wheaton College, Bob Jones University, and Dallas Theological Seminary, and a reliance on radio programs and journals that rejected the broader moderate-to-liberal consensus.<sup>44</sup> For Churches of Christ, it meant the rise of internecine battles, especially over premillennialism, which dominated the group's discourse in the 1930s and sidelined evolution as a major issue.<sup>45</sup>

A pair of anti-evolution figures briefly appeared among Churches of Christ after World War II. James Bales, a Harding College professor, formed the short-lived Evolution Unscientific Movement, with an accompanying journal called *The Thinking Christian*, in 1948. But after three issues, the journal died, and Bales shifted his attention to combating communism rather than evolution.<sup>46</sup> In Texas, El Paso high school biology teacher Rita Rhodes Ward self-published a booklet called *The Bible versus Evolution for Young People* in 1949. If not the only anti-evolution publication among Churches of Christ, it was the only one to warrant even moderate levels of notice in the decades since.<sup>47</sup> Ward's booklet cited several authors affiliated with Churches of Christ, but only the works of Elam and Trice and Roberson addressed evolution specifically, rather than modernism or apologetics generally. Instead, Ward followed most closely the Seventh-

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44. Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 194.

45. Robert Hooper, *A Distinct People: A History of the Churches of Christ in the 20th Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 132.

46. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 152-53 n.27.

47. Ward's booklet is the only treatise between 1945 and 1960 by someone openly affiliated with Churches of Christ listed in Tom McIver, *Anti-Evolution: A Reader's Guide to Writings Before and After Darwin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992).

Day Adventist George McCready Price and the Presbyterian Harry Rimmer, the two most outspoken creationists of the post-Scopes, pre-World War II era.<sup>48</sup>

Ward followed a pattern highlighted by Numbers in describing the creationism that existed until the 1960s – objecting to evolution because its implications for Christian faith rendered supporting it unthinkable. This attitude was perhaps best articulated in the Freeman controversy by Sewell – “If [the Bible] and science disagree, then science is wrong.”<sup>49</sup> – and echoed by Barret, Baxter and Roberson in their treatments of the subject. As a result, Ward – like those before her – dedicated herself to dethroning evolution from its scientific perch, but as a biology teacher, she added a twist: elevating the Bible as a more reliable record of origins. In this way, she planted the seeds of a philosophy that would germinate – with her help – as creation science.

#### **Solidified Consensus, 1960-1984**

Despite the brief forays by Bales and Ward, Churches of Christ in post-war America did not appear to consider evolution to be a threat worth spending significant energy on.<sup>50</sup> The *Firm Foundation*, so crucial to ending the academic career of William Webb Freeman over his views on biblical infallibility decades earlier, devoted only an occasional article to criticizing the continuing scientific consensus on Darwinism. Instead, editor Reuel Lemmons seemed much more concerned with the twin threats of communism and Catholicism. In 1960, for example, against no fewer than 12 articles on Catholicism in the year John F. Kennedy was elected president, *FF*’s only discussion of

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48. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 60, says: “No antievolutionist reached a wider audience among American evangelicals in the second quarter of the 20th century than Harry Rimmer.”

49. See n.15 above.

50. That Ward found only Elam and Trice/Roberson worth quoting more than two decades later indicates the level to which anti-evolutionism was assumed and therefore not discussed during that time.

evolution was in a three-part series by Elmer L’Roy responding to a 1959 *Saturday Evening Post* article commemorating *On the Origin of Species*’ centennial. The series relied heavily on a 1960 ACU Lectureship address by event director J. D. Thomas.<sup>51</sup>

Thomas’s address was essentially a summary of what became the first significant written response to evolution among Churches of Christ in more than 25 years – his book *Facts and Faith*, published in 1960.<sup>52</sup> Although remarkable for breaking a nearly three-decade drought, Thomas’s work broke little new ground; rather, it updated the arguments from earlier in the century that evolution was “just a faith” relying on “philosophic interpretations,” and rebutted evidences for evolution put forward by a new generation of scientists.<sup>53</sup> Thomas did, however, add a note of caution: “Whenever we argue against evolution, we are only arguing that man came by special creation of a powerful God rather than by naturalistic evolution – we have no obligation to champion any specific date.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, Thomas joined his predecessors in conflating ontological and methodological naturalism, using the former to reject the latter, insisting that “there is no reason whatsoever for any Christian to need to assume theistic evolution as the way things came about.” But he also was not an advocate for young-earth creationism.<sup>55</sup>

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51. Elmer L’Roy, “One Hundred Years of Evolution,” *FF* 77 (March 29, 1960): 196. Part 2: “How Does Evolution Oppose the Bible?” (April 5), 213. Part 3: “Why Evolution Cannot Be True,” (April 12), 231. Count of articles on Catholicism derived from “Index,” *FF* 77, 812-16. In an ironic twist, L’Roy was a student of Freeman’s: Elmer L’Roy, “He Was My Teacher,” *Gospel Guardian* 6 (May 27, 1954): 11.

52. J. D. Thomas, *Facts and Faith, Vol. 1: Reason, Science, and Faith* (Abilene: Biblical Research, 1960).

53. *Ibid.*, 109-13.

54. *Ibid.*, 180.

55. *Ibid.*, 183.

Thomas's book, which followed Roberson and Trice in splitting its focus between evolution and biblical criticism, and the occasional article aside, Churches of Christ had largely sidestepped evolution in the post-war era, likely because the consensus against it had been so firmly established. As Jack Lewis told a Lectureship audience in 1954: "Is it necessary to remind ourselves that evolution, after all these years, is still a hypothesis?"<sup>56</sup> But a push in the early 1960s to modernize science education in public-school biology textbooks by increasing the focus on evolution provoked a furious response from Lemmons and the *Firm Foundation*, opening a new, more confrontational era between Churches of Christ and Darwinism.<sup>57</sup>

To address a "crisis in science education" caused by curriculum that had not kept up with technology growth since World War II,<sup>58</sup> the Biology Sciences Curriculum Study<sup>59</sup> in 1960 developed three books from which schools could choose, each version providing a different biological emphasis.<sup>60</sup> They shared in common, however, a shift in the way biology was taught; rather than simply describing facts and observations, the texts were a "reflection of the principles and emphases of the science as a whole." The

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56. Banowsky, *Mirror*, 136.

57. The following is adapted from Paul A. Anthony, "'Drenched with Evolution:' The Role of Reuel Lemmons and Churches of Christ in the Texas Textbook Controversy of 1964," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies, Irving, TX, March 12, 2016).

58. Paul DeHart Hurd, *Biological Education in American Secondary Schools, 1890-1960* (Baltimore: Waverly, 1961), 108-09.

59. Hereafter, BSCS. One example of the crisis scientists found was an absence of evolution in biology textbooks: Gerald Skoog, "The Topic of Evolution in Secondary School Biology Textbooks: 1900-77," in *Evolution Versus Creationism: The Public Education Controversy*, ed. J. Peter Zetterberg (Phoenix: Oryx, 1983), 83. Less than eight percent of the words in a sample of fifteen biology textbooks from the 1950s referred to evolution, Skoog found (p. 69).

60. Joseph J. Schwarb, ed., *Biology Teachers Handbook: Biology Sciences Curriculum Study* (New York: Wiley, 1963), 15: The green version – *High School Biology* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963) – emphasized the community of living things, the yellow – *Biological Science: An Inquiry into Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963) – focused on cells as the basis for life, and the blue – *Biological Science: From Molecules to Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963) – emphasized molecular biology.

primary principle was evolution, the “warp and woof of modern biology.”<sup>61</sup> BSCS director Arnold Grobman said, “It was generally agreed that evolution should be a pervasive theme throughout the Versions.”<sup>62</sup> The textbooks were introduced officially in 1963.<sup>63</sup> In May 1964, Texas began its annual book selection process, which would culminate that November with the state Board of Education’s selection of five new biology textbooks from which local school districts could choose for the next five years.<sup>64</sup>

While evolutionary science was gaining a toehold in the nation’s biology textbooks, so-called “creation science” was finding its voice on the West Coast. Henry Morris and John Whitcomb in 1961 published *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications*.<sup>65</sup> Morris then co-founded the Creation Research Society<sup>66</sup> in 1963, with *CRS Quarterly* in 1964 providing a forum for anti-evolution scientists to advance their claims publicly.<sup>67</sup> By beginning with the Bible, rather than scientific

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61. Schwarb, ed., *Handbook*, 6, 32.

62. Arnold Grobman, *The Changing Classroom: The Role of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 204.

63. Bentley Glass and Arnold B. Grobman, foreword to Schwarb, ed., *Handbook*, xii. On incidents of controversy during testing, Grobman, *Changing Classroom*, 210-11, recounts Florida officials blacking out diagrams of the human reproductive system. He also relays, 205-7, a series of controversies in Phoenix from 1962-1964 that ended when the city’s BOE unanimously affirmed the BSCS texts.

64. George E. Webb, *The Evolution Controversy in America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994), 140.

65. John Whitcomb and Henry Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 327: “The Creation, the Fall and the Flood constitute the truly basic facts to which all the other details of early historical data must be referred.” Although many Christians had criticized Darwinian evolution in the century since *On the Origin of Species*, Morris and Whitcomb voiced a particularly fundamentalist strain that rejected even the “day-age” and “gap” theories that attempted to reconcile scientific findings about the old age of the earth with the biblical text – and which were evident in the statements reviewed above by the likes of Lipscomb and Thomas.

66. Hereafter, CRS.

67. Henry M. Morris, *A History of Modern Creationism* (San Diego: Master Book, 1984), 178-88.

findings, *The Genesis Flood* “struck a responsive chord with many concerned Christians,” Numbers writes. Although young-earth creationism was not a new concept, its presence as a coherent and forceful movement began at the same time as biology experts crafted their new, evolution-centered textbooks.<sup>68</sup> Into this nascent conflict stepped Lemmons, who on Jan. 29, 1963, published an editorial headlined “The Textbooks Our Children Study.” Although focusing more on the “bits of communism craftily planted” in history textbooks, Lemmons nevertheless warned of “a future Biology textbook ... full of godless infidelity and evolution ... to be taught in the schools next fall.”<sup>69</sup>

Lemmons at the time possessed an enormous platform.<sup>70</sup> According to one estimate, his weekly editorial was “probably the most widely read single column among members of the Church of Christ.”<sup>71</sup> As a result, Lemmons wielded influence beyond what even the *Firm Foundation* circulation numbers would indicate.<sup>72</sup> This “editor-bishop” served to direct opinion among many, if not most, Churches of Christ, which

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68. Ronald Numbers, “Darwinism, Creationism and ‘Intelligent Design,’” in *Scientists Confront Intelligent Design and Creationism*, Andrew J. Petto and Lauren R. Godfrey, eds. (New York: Norton, 2007), 35-37.

69. [Reuel Lemmons], “The Textbooks Our Children Study,” *FF* 80 (Jan. 29, 1963): 66. Although anonymously written, Lemmons is listed as the author in the annual index.

70. E.g. Howard W. Norton, “Editorial: A Tribute to Reuel Lemmons,” *Christian Chronicle* 46 (February 1989): 18. “A spiritual leader who exercised profound influence over more than one generation of dedicated churchman,” and, “Reuel Lemmons’ name is closely identified with most of the important advances in our brotherhood in the last 40 or 50 years.”

71. R. L. Roberts, “Lemmons, Reuel G.,” Handbook of Texas Online, [tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fle90](http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fle90).

72. These are difficult to determine. According to Charlie Marler, “A Historical Study of Church of Christ-Related Publications, 1938-72” (term paper, University of Missouri, 1972), 64-69, *FF* had a paid circulation of 20,000, and this is the lowest – though most reliable – of the estimates available.

otherwise had no central authority to adjudicate doctrinal disagreements or spur their members to collective action.<sup>73</sup>

The warning shot Lemmons fired in early 1963 was a prelude to an all-out war waged with his pen on the pages of the *Firm Foundation*. Beginning in February 1964, *FF* ran a three-part series about “Genesis and Modern Science” arguing “the case for evolution has been grossly overstated by its advocates ... the assumptions and interpretations quite fallacious.”<sup>74</sup> The series led into an editorial from Lemmons on June 30 headlined “An Extremely Dangerous Textbook Coming.” It singled out the BSCS textbooks up for review by the Texas Textbook Commission as “the most vicious attack we have ever seen on the Christian religion.” There was, however, “a dim ray of hope,” if Lemmons’s readers petitioned the Board of Education. “It is just possible,” he wrote, “that enough public opinion can get these godless texts rejected if they cannot be changed.”<sup>75</sup>

The editorial kicked off a months-long campaign against evolution, beginning that issue with the first of a series of articles analyzing the BSCS textbooks. The series author was Ward, the El Paso biology teacher who had continued to reprint her anti-evolution pamphlet for youth.<sup>76</sup> She also was a friend of Texas Western College professor Thomas Barnes, a member of the Creation Research Society’s first board of directors. Ward thus

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73. T. Wesley Crawford, “Lemmons, Reuel Gordon,” *ESCM*, 469.

74. Warren R. Howard, “Genesis and Modern Science,” *FF* 81 (Feb. 11, 1964): 83. Further installments are on pp. 167 (March 17) and 315 (May 19).

75. [Reuel Lemmons], “An Extremely Dangerous Textbook Coming,” *FF* 81 (June 30, 1964): 410.

76. Rita Rhodes Ward, *The Bible versus Evolution for Young People*, (El Paso: self-published, 1949). The frontispiece notes reprints in 1957, 1960 and 1962. It was rewritten and published as *In the Beginning: The Bible versus Evolution for Young People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

became a key link between Lemmons and the earliest leaders of the creation-science movement.<sup>77</sup> The partnership, unusual in that members of Churches of Christ generally were not inclined to ally themselves with Evangelicalism,<sup>78</sup> was a two-way street: Lemmons provided the connections and infrastructure for the ensuing protest; Ward, Barnes, and other CRS members provided arguments for creationism rooted in scientific rhetoric, something rarely before seen in the *Firm Foundation*.

In her four *FF* articles, Ward objected to the evolutionary content of the textbooks and pointed to statements by the books' authors about the importance of teaching evolutionary theory and helping students reconcile evolution with theism.<sup>79</sup> Ward described the books as "aggressively evolutionary" and "purely a text in evolution." They were, she claimed, unfairly biased: "There is only one point of view presented. ... All three versions are saturated with the idea."<sup>80</sup> Even the texts' honesty about the theory's weaknesses was evidence of duplicity: "The writers of BSCS materials admit weaknesses in evolutionary theory but treat the subject as a fact."<sup>81</sup>

Lemmons's advocacy and Ward's descriptions – which quoted little from the textbooks themselves – galvanized response from across the state. One week after the final installment of Ward's series and less than a month after Lemmons's call for protest,

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77. Based on Lemmons' editorial, which cites "workshops from which we have direct reports," it seems likely Ward alerted him to the upcoming textbook, contra Numbers, *The Creationists*, 239, who attributes the activism in 1964 to Mel and Norma Gabler. Per below, Lemmons and the Gablers ran parallel campaigns against the textbooks in ignorance of each other, with Lemmons taking the lead as the public face of the movement thanks to his built-in constituency as editor of *FF*.

78. For a brief summary of the "aloof" nature adopted by Churches of Christ, see Robert Cornwall, "Evangelical," *ESCM*, 314.

79. Rita Rhodes Ward, "Evolution in the New Biology Texts," *FF* 81 (June 30, 1964): 414-15.

80. Rita Rhodes Ward, "Evolution and the BSCS Biology Texts," *FF* 81 (July 7, 1964): 431.

81. Rita Rhodes Ward, "The Immensity of the Program," *FF* 81 (July 21, 1964): 461.

petitions circulated in Abilene, Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, and Lubbock. The state's textbook commissioner told UPI "quite a number" had already been received.<sup>82</sup> In days the story became national news, with *The New York Times* interviewing Lemmons. "I have no objection to the teaching of evolution as theory," he told the paper, "but these books teach it as fact. ... They put students who believe in God and Christ at a disadvantage." The measured tone of the interview contrasted with the acerbic flourishes of Lemmons' editorials. He told the *Times* he opposed banning the teaching of evolution, and said, "It is not proven that the theory of evolution is true or false," although readers of his publication likely would have inferred the latter.<sup>83</sup> According to the *Times*, the initial complaints mostly came from Churches of Christ.

Hundreds of petitions and letters, most of them identical, had been sent to state officials, from the Board of Education to the Texas governor himself, the state's textbook commissioner said.<sup>84</sup> By August, more than 500 of them, representing more than 3,000 Texans, had been filed. The petitions, circulated through Churches of Christ, gave as their primary reason for objecting to the textbooks, "Our acceptance of the Genesis account of the origin of man." They were most often form letters, including one to Gov. John Connally connecting the godlessness of evolution to the purported godlessness of Lee Harvey Oswald, who had shot Connally during the Kennedy assassination less than a

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82. UPI, "'Other Side' Fires Back in 'Monkey War,'" *Pampa Daily News*, July 29, 1964: 1.

83. E.g., Howard, "Genesis," 93: "Against the logic of statistical probability, the second law of thermodynamics, analogy of man and God, and God's astounding revelation of His will, the sophisticated men of the world have become obsessed with a theory of existence which is illogical in its basic assumptions."

84. "Texans Protest Evolution Books," *The New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1964: 42.

year earlier.<sup>85</sup> In an interview with the *Dallas Morning News*, Lemmons claimed the textbooks would create an atmosphere of discrimination against religious students because of their presentation as fact “a materialistic theory.”<sup>86</sup>

Eliot Tucker’s 1967 analysis of the letters revealed three basic arguments, all of which would have been familiar to W. W. Freeman and his interlocutors four decades earlier: 1) Objection to the notion of human evolution from apelike ancestors; 2) Claims that evolution was not scientific but philosophical; and 3) Fear that students would feel pressured into accepting a theory as fact. The letters often relied on common sources and therefore made similar arguments – both more traditionally anti-evolution, such as the alleged lack of transitional fossils, and more novel pro-creation arguments, such as pointing to what was then known as the Cambrian Explosion.<sup>87</sup> These arguments had not appeared in *FF* in the years leading up to the controversy, but they would be common in the years following it.<sup>88</sup> Other letters quoted CRS founder Walt Lammerts.<sup>89</sup> Tucker’s analysis indicates that those inspired by Lemmons’s crusade – including Lemmons himself – drank from the anti-evolution well dug by the Evangelical creationists of the Creation Research Society.

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85. Mary Jane Bode, “Church of Christ Members Lead Biology Text Outcry,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, Aug. 16, 1964: 16-B. In passing, Bode also cites Ward as the one who brought the textbooks to Lemmons’s attention. Despite the vociferous objections, most comments acknowledged not having read the books, according to Bode, “Most Protesting Biology Books Haven’t Read Them,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, Aug. 17, 1964: 24-A.

86. Richard Morehead, “Evolution: In 1964, Is It Blasphemy?” *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 15, 1964: 8A.

87. Eliot Tucker, “The Anti-Evolutionists of 1964,” *Science Education* 51 (Oct. 1967): 372-6.

88. E.g., H. Douglas Dean, “Observations Concerning the Blue, Green and Yellow Versions of High School Biology,” *FF* 82 (March 9, 1965): 151, and a nine-part series by Ward, “Meeting BSCS Biology,” beginning *FF* 82 (Sept. 7, 1965): 565.

89. On Lammerts’s key role in the formation of CRS, see Morris, *History*, 172-8.

In all, the Textbook Commission received more than 1,400 comments – 844 opposing the textbooks, and three-quarters of those opposed objecting on the basis of evolution being presented as fact.<sup>90</sup> To prepare for an Oct. 14 appearance at the Textbook Commission’s hearing, Ward enlisted her connections with the Creation Research Society: She convinced Barnes to speak and even coached his testimony, while arranging the flight to Austin of one of the CRS’s earliest members – and a former ACU biology chair – Douglas Dean of Pepperdine College.<sup>91</sup> Lemmons attended, along with Harding College biology professor Jack Wood Sears.<sup>92</sup>

Also attending was Norma Gabler, who had yet to make her name as the nation’s most powerful opponent of textbooks seen as immoral, unpatriotic, or irreligious by her and her husband, Mel. The Gablers had first raised questions about textbooks in 1962, and appeared at hearings in 1963 to protest the history and math books that had briefly caught Lemmons’s attention. Even so, the hearings in 1964 produced a turnout larger than the Gablers could have managed at the time.<sup>93</sup>

About two hundred people filled the Texas Education Agency Conference Room, including dozens of reporters and camera crews, ultimately lining the halls when the room couldn’t fit any more. Nine of fifteen speakers were on the agenda to protest the

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90. Richard Wilhelm, “A Chronology and Analysis of Regulatory Actions Relating to the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools” (PhD diss.: University of Texas, 1978), 102.

91. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 239, citing an interview with Ward. This seems more credible than the alternate scenario described in Hefley (below cit.) in which Barnes appears as a representative of Norma Gabler, given Ward and Barnes’s geographic proximity and subsequent service together on the CRS textbook committee, as well as the story coming from Ward herself. On Dean’s career, see “Dean, Dr. Douglas,” in Charlie Marler and Paul Anthony, *AnswerBook*, 21st edition (Abilene: ACU Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, 2015).

92. James Hefley, *Textbooks on Trial* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1976), 45.

93. Ibid., 19. Still early in their career, the Gablers did not yet have the publicity apparatus that Lemmons had. Although Hefley and Numbers treat them as leaders of the 1964 controversy, their absence from contemporary reports indicates that Lemmons and Ward were in fact the drivers.

BSCS books. As coached by Ward, Barnes allowed the existence of “special evolution” within certain limits, but claimed “general evolution” was problematic. Dean took a self-described scientific approach to his objection: “I believe the books to be unscientific. ... You cannot teach with these three books without getting the idea that evolution is a basic fact. I want to protest the theory of evolution being taught as a fact.” Lemmons was blunter, decrying the BSCS versions as “textbooks in complete atheistic materialism. As for the theory of evolution, it is not only anti-God and anti-Bible, it is also unscientific” and requires “an anti-religious, even anti-moral approach to life.” Publisher representatives objected to that characterization, pointing to their own mainline Protestant church membership. Nevertheless, Lemmons argued that teaching the texts would “undermine faith in God and in the spiritual, and to that extent undermine America” – a refrain that would return in the evolution controversy of twenty years later. Speaking last, Norma Gabler argued the protesters were seeking fairness, a notion that would appear frequently across the creationist movement and in the *Firm Foundation*: “Let our children be given both sides in the field of biology. ... Our children will be taught atheism out of these books. ... Why is it unfair to teach the creation theory to a child?”<sup>94</sup>

After more than a day’s deliberation, the Textbook Committee voted to recommend the three BSCS volumes, along with two others, to the State Board of Education, which would meet Nov. 9.<sup>95</sup> The Gablers were disappointed;<sup>96</sup> Lemmons was

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94. This account of the hearing is derived from Hefley, *Textbooks*, 44-49; Hillel Black, *The American Schoolbook* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 155; H. Douglas Dean, “Address Before Texas Textbook Committee,” *CRSQ* 2 (January 1966): 9; and Associated Press, “Witnesses Flay 3 Textbooks for Treatment of Evolution,” *Dallas Morning News*, Oct. 15, 1964: 10A.

95. According to Black, *Schoolbook*, 157, the committee needed to be “persuaded a good bit.”

96. Hefley, *Textbooks*, 50.

irate. On Oct. 27, his *Firm Foundation* editorial castigated the textbook commission's decision. "Our school children will be drenched with evolution if these publishers and these scientists are allowed to get away with it," he wrote.<sup>97</sup> Although Lemmons, Barnes, Dean, Ward, and Gabler were among sixteen people to testify before the BOE on Nov. 9, the board voted 14-6 to approve the books.<sup>98</sup> In his editorial lamenting the decision, Lemmons sounded a note that would prove prophetic: "We haven't lost anything. Nothing was being done, and these texts were being pushed through without a protest until a few of us took up the fight. And we have just begun to fight."<sup>99</sup>

Although in fact Mel and Norma Gabler were planning to protest the books, it is true they did not have the resources Lemmons had – nor did they yet have the connections Ward had. The available records indicate the 1964 textbook controversy was begun, led, and sustained by the efforts of Reuel Lemmons, with key support from Ward and her connections at the CRS. The effects of the campaign would reverberate for decades, as the Gablers carried the baton and eventually won significant concessions from the BOE regarding evolution in Texas textbooks.<sup>100</sup>

For Churches of Christ, however, Lemmons's crusade marked a reengagement with Darwinism – and, concurrently, a reengagement with broader theological movements that shared the congregations' antipathy toward evolution. In 1973 Lemmons reprinted in *FF* the first chapter of influential creationist Duane Gish's book, *Evolution:*

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97. [Reuel Lemmons], "Drenched with Evolution," *FF* 81 (Oct. 27, 1964): 682.

98. "Minutes of Meeting of the Texas State Board of Education," Austin: Nov. 9, 1964, 13-14.

99. [Reuel Lemmons], "Get Ready for Evolution Next Fall," *FF* 81 (Dec. 1, 1964): 762.

100. By the 1970s, the Board of Education had forced significant changes to the BSCS textbooks and rejected two of them before requiring qualifying statements about evolutionary theory to be included in all science texts.

*The Fossils Say No!*.<sup>101</sup> In the same issue, Lipscomb College professor Russell Artist advertised the creationist textbook *Biology: A Search for Order in Complexity*, written and published by the Creation Research Society.<sup>102</sup> The articles indicate an ongoing partnership between Churches of Christ and the Evangelical creation-science movement. Artist, Sears, Dean, and Ward all were members of the CRS committee that wrote the textbook, while Lemmons later quoted Gish in anti-evolution editorials.<sup>103</sup> The partnership between the influential Lemmons and the rising stars of creation science remained fruitful for both sides.

Gish was among the most prominent of numerous Evangelicals to publish works attacking evolution and advocating a form of creation science in the following decades; he went on to help found what would become the Institute for Creation Research in 1970 and returned to his best-seller in 1985 with the sequel *Evolution: The Fossils Still Say NO!*. Gish's works influenced another staunch creationist, Ken Ham, who went on to found Answers in Genesis and establish the Creation Museum in the 1990s. Morris remained influential, as well, publishing *Evolution and the Modern Christian* (1967), *The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth* (1972), *Scientific Creationism* (1974), *The Genesis Record* (1976), and *The Bible Has the Answer* (1976), among others.<sup>104</sup>

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101. D. T. Gish, "Evolution: A Philosophy, not a Science," *FF* 90 (March 20, 1973): 184.

102. Russell C. Artist, "What Christian Parents Need to Know about the Creation-Evolution Controversy," *FF* 90 (March 20, 1973): 179.

103. On the textbook committee, see "Dr. Barnes' Text Book Committee Making Progress," *CRSQ* 2 (Oct. 1965): 4. Barnes, Lammerts and Gish were also on the committee. Lemmons quoted Gish in "Science and Creation," *FF* 93 (Oct. 19, 1976): 658.

104. McIver, *Anti-Evolution*, 179-84. McIver lists an astounding 38 books written, co-written or edited by Morris from 1944-1986.

Within Churches of Christ, evolution re-emerged as a primary source of concern. In the twenty years leading up to the 1985-1986 ACU controversy, authors from Churches of Christ flooded the market with anti-evolution, pro-creationism treatises. James Bales, the Harding professor who flirted with creationism in the 1940s, returned with the popular *Why Scientists Accept Evolution* in 1966, followed by three other works in the following decade. Others included Don England's old-earth creationist work *A Christian View of Origins* (1972), Jack Sears's *Conflict and Harmony between Science and the Bible* (1969), Rubel Shelly's *Simple Studies in Christian Evidences* (1970), Furman Kearley's *The Relation of Evolution to Modern Behavior Problems* (1974) and Jon Gary Williams's *The Other Side of Evolution* (1970), published with a foreword from Russell Artist,<sup>105</sup> whose role in helping enact Tennessee equal time legislation that eventually was overturned by the courts has only recently been described in detail.<sup>106</sup> Nearly all of these authors were also published in *Firm Foundation* and other major journals affiliated with Churches of Christ; in real ways, the creationist movement owed a debt to Reuel Lemmons, and Lemmons in turn carried forward the anti-evolution assumptions affirmed by prominent ACU-affiliated authors.

As Churches of Christ turned toward a greater engagement with Darwinism, so too did ACU faculty. Furman Kearley, director of ACU graduate studies in Bible before moving on to become editor of the *Gospel Advocate* in 1986,<sup>107</sup> published articles and books critical of the theory and what he saw as its natural consequences – fascism,

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105. See the entries for these works in McIver, *Anti-Evolution*.

106. Kari Edwards, "'Equal Space with Adam and Eve': Tennessee's 'Genesis Bill' of 1973 and the 50th Anniversary of the Scopes Trial," *Journal of Southern Religion* 16 (2014): [jsreligion.org/issues/vol16/edwards.html](http://jsreligion.org/issues/vol16/edwards.html).

107. See his entry in Marler and Anthony, *AnswerBook*.

communism, and genocide.<sup>108</sup> In 1980, ACU hired Arlie Hoover, who already had published several articles critical of what he saw as the faulty philosophical assumptions underpinning evolution and continued to publish such articles as an ACU history professor.<sup>109</sup> By all public appearances, ACU's faculty remained firmly opposed to evolution.

No author affiliated with Churches of Christ, however, was as prolific as 1970 ACU alumnus Bert Thompson, working with his ally Wayne Jackson. Beginning in 1974, with Jackson's *Fortify Your Faith in an Age of Doubt*, the pair wrote or co-wrote ten books condemning evolution and upholding young-earth creationism. Thompson debuted with *Theistic Evolution* in 1977, and moved in quick succession to publishing *Can America Survive the Fruits of Atheistic Evolution?* and *The History of Evolutionary Thought* (both in 1981).<sup>110</sup> Along the way, Thompson founded Apologetics Press, a publishing house that became successful enough to allow it to move into its own 11,000-square-foot building in Montgomery, Ala., in 1985<sup>111</sup> – the same year he received a package in the mail from a biology student enrolled in Abilene Christian University.

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108. In addition to the work cited above, he published a four-part series, "Influence of Evolution on Behavior," *Gospel Advocate* 128 (March 6, 1986 ff.): 134.

109. E.g., Arlie Hoover, "Fallacy of Evolution: The Case for Creationism," *Restoration Quarterly* 21 (Oct. 1, 1978): 251; "Fallacies of Evolution," *Does God Exist?* 8 (May 1, 1981): 6; "Evolution and Environmentalism," *Gospel Advocate* 126 (Sept. 20, 1984): 564; "Marx, Man and Evolution," *GA* 127, (May 16, 1985): 298.

110. McIver, *Anti-Evolution*, 271.

111. "An Open Letter to Our Readers," *Reason & Revelation* 6 (June 1986): 1.

## CHAPTER III

### EVOLUTION IN ABILENE, 1985-1986

#### **Pro-Evolution Voices**

As the last chapter showed, public voices of support for evolution were rarely heard within Churches of Christ after W. W. Freeman's removal from the ACU faculty in 1922. A brief survey of three such evolution defenders serves to illustrate by their isolation how widely assumed was the belief among Churches of Christ, including on the ACU campus, that evolution was incompatible with a Christian education.

Jimmy B. Throneberry and Neal D. Buffaloe

Although professors from Harding, Lipscomb, and Pepperdine appeared in Austin in 1964 to condemn the BSCS textbooks and rebut the claims of evolution's factuality, ACU was not directly represented.<sup>1</sup> The university employed a single professor at the time with a Ph.D. in biology – Jimmy B. Throneberry, a Lipscomb graduate who had joined ACU as an instructor in 1956 and earned his doctorate in 1962. When Lemmons began marshaling allies to testify against the BSCS books, ACU's dean, Walter Adams,

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1. Of course, there were several indirect connections, including: Lemmons was an alumnus of ACU and was a member of its Board of Trustees at the time of the controversy, although it's a connection he does not appear to have cited during his fight. He was named the university's Outstanding Alumnus of the Year in 1969. Second, Dean was a former ACU biology chair, although this too does not seem to have been referenced during the 1964 textbook controversy. Finally, a letter opposing the textbooks was sent by the elders of College Church of Christ, citing the findings of three elders assigned to read the books, including Russell Lewis, an ACU education professor at the time. On the letter – which argued the books violated students' academic freedom, failed to develop critical thinking skills, and contained "many unproved and biased statements" regarding evolution – see "Abilene Eldership Properly Opposes Biology Texts," *Christian Chronicle* 22 (Oct. 2, 1964): 2-3, and "College Church Protests Books," *Abilene Reporter-News*, Oct. 14, 1964, evening: 4-A. See also the Lemmons and Lewis entries in Marler and Anthony, *AnswerBook*.

asked Throneberry to lend his expertise in opposing the books. The professor declined, recalled his widow, Barbara Throneberry: “He told them, ‘No, I cannot do that. I just wouldn’t believe in doing that.’” Adams persisted, she said:

They spoke several times, and finally [Adams] told him that [Jimmy] needed to pray about it, and when he did, he would come to the conclusion he needed to go and do this. That was hard on Jimmy. He said, “I have prayed about it, and I can’t do that.” That’s when he decided it would probably be best if he just left.<sup>2</sup>

Throneberry for nearly a decade had carefully taught the components of evolution without using what was known as “the e-word,” said James Womack, a student of Throneberry’s who later returned as an ACU faculty member in 1968. “He taught about mutation. He taught about natural selection. ... I don’t remember any specific discussions in class. I remember thinking when a class was over that when you added everything together, it suggested an evolutionary basis for diversity in life.”<sup>3</sup>

Throneberry left ACU for the University of Central Arkansas, where in 1967 he helped revise his colleague Neal D. Buffaloe’s 1962 textbook *Principles of Biology*. The book was clear on the subject of Darwinism: “Evolution is not mere speculation that has been devised in order to avoid the alternative of special creationism. ... [T]hat it did occur is no longer a matter of doubt to most biologists.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Barbara Throneberry, Conway, AR, telephone interview: Oct. 19, 2015. Notes in possession of the author. Dates of Throneberry’s employment at ACU were obtained from his C.V., emailed to the author by Brent Hill, professor and interim chair of biology at the University of Central Arkansas.

3. James Womack, College Station, TX, telephone interview: Jan. 5, 2016. Notes in possession of the author. Womack, who taught at ACU from 1968-1973, taught genetics to Bert Thompson and was on faculty when Ken Williams was hired to teach botany. If Thompson took offense to Womack’s teaching, Womack said he doesn’t remember it: “I taught genetics – certainly taught mutations, taught selection. I taught the components of evolution, but I never had a section I would label as evolution, per se.”

4. Neal Buffaloe and J. B. Throneberry, *Principles of Biology*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 347. Buffaloe, also a Lipscomb graduate, and Throneberry likely were shielded from more significant blowback because the bulk of their careers came at a public university. Buffaloe seems to have always been an avowed evolutionist, telling a reporter that upon being hired at the University of Central Arkansas in 1957, “I taught evolution and stuck to my guns. ... I am not a controversial person, but

Buffaloe, who had taught Throneberry biology at Lipscomb, was the preaching minister at College Church of Christ in Conway, Ark. He attracted notice in 1969 with an article for *Mission*, a magazine founded two years earlier by several ACU-affiliated faculty and other members of Churches of Christ. In the article, titled “God or Evolution?,” Buffaloe argued, “Either the Genesis account of the ‘days’ is non-literal or it is false.”<sup>5</sup> The article won one of the magazine’s annual awards for its “effectiveness in bringing the biblical message to bear on the 20th-century world,”<sup>6</sup> an accolade excoriated in the conservative *Truth* magazine, where Cecil Willis called Buffaloe’s article “damaging,” and asked a series of rhetorical questions attacking Buffaloe personally in a way that echoed the rhetoric of 45 years earlier: “How would you like to have such a man teaching your children in a Bible class? Or how would you like to have him preach for the church where you worship?”<sup>7</sup> The *Mission* article and a 1981 piece on evolution and creationism also attracted the attention of Bert Thompson. He inveighed against them as recently as 2001 – although Buffaloe and Throneberry’s pro-evolution biology textbook

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sometimes you just get pulled into it.” Carol Rolf, ““Creationism and Evolution,”” *Log Cabin Democrat*, Feb. 10, 2006: [thecabin.net/stories/021006/sty\\_0210060036.shtml](http://thecabin.net/stories/021006/sty_0210060036.shtml). Throneberry remained a member of University Church of Christ in Conway until his death in 2012, per his obituary: [legacy.com/obituaries/thecabin/obituary.aspx?pid=157760619](http://legacy.com/obituaries/thecabin/obituary.aspx?pid=157760619).

5. Neal Buffaloe, “God or Evolution?,” *Mission* 3 (April 1969): 18-19.

6. “Panel Selects Awards Winners,” *Mission* 3 (October 1969): 31. Before too long, ACU’s affiliation with *Mission* came under fire, and three of the four faculty on the magazine’s board resigned at the urging of President John C. Stevens in the late 1960s or early 1970s, according to James W. Thompson, “The Formation of an Academic Tradition in Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University,” *Restoration Quarterly* 45 (2003): 28. Thompson places the resignations in a series of controversies occurring in 1968-1969; the fourth board member, JW Roberts, resisted resigning until his death in 1973.

7. Cecil Willis, “Mission Magazine and Biological Evolution,” *Truth* 14 (March 26, 1970): 5-7.

appears to have escaped his notice.<sup>8</sup> Also unnoticed was *Animal and Plant Diversity*, a 1968 book Buffaloe wrote that also made no apologies for evolution.<sup>9</sup>

### Leroy Garrett

One of the most prominent of the few voices to express an openness to Darwinism in the decades leading up to the 1985-1986 ACU controversy was Leroy Garrett, who in 1964 published a letter in his *Restoration Review* that came close to opposing the Lemmons campaign. In it, Robert Meyers affirmed that textbooks should not describe evolution as “a proved fact” but nevertheless criticized a statement from elders at Abilene’s College Church of Christ opposing the textbooks. “There is a touch of the ominous here,” Meyers wrote. “If how one feels about the evolution theory is to become a test of orthodoxy, we may be in for rough days in the next decade.”<sup>10</sup>

Garrett himself in 1967 took issue with an ACU statement on academic freedom that placed faculty under “the authority of the Scriptures.” Garrett asked: “Would a biology teacher be free to present the theory of evolution alongside creationism, explaining that it is *his* personal conclusion that evolution is the stronger case, while all along respecting the opposing viewpoint?”<sup>11</sup> In 1973, he criticized those who would

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8. Bert Thompson, “What’s Wrong with Theistic Evolution?” (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 2001), [www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990](http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990). According to his obituary – [arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2012/jul/29/neal-buffaloe-2012-07-29](http://arkansasonline.com/obituaries/2012/jul/29/neal-buffaloe-2012-07-29) – Buffaloe in 1981 transferred membership to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), after which he co-authored an article republished as Neal D. Buffaloe and N. Patrick Murray, “Creation and Evolution: The Real Issues,” in *Evolution versus Creationism: The Public Education Controversy*, ed. J. Peter Zetterberg (Phoenix: Oryx, 1983), 454-76.

9. Neal D. Buffaloe, *Animal and Plant Diversity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 30: “The differences we see in organisms today are a reflection of some two billion years of change. ... Whatever the origin of life may have been, it has expressed itself in the great diversity of our present world.”

10. Robert Meyers, “Texas Textbooks and Evolution,” *Restoration Review* 6 (November 1964): 171.

11. Leroy Garrett, “Freedom at Abilene,” *RR* 11 (May 1969): 88. Emphasis in original.

make “irresponsible remarks about the theory of evolution,”<sup>12</sup> and ten years later affirmed that “what really matters is that the living, creator God is behind it all.”<sup>13</sup> Shortly after, Garrett wrote, “Even if man and ape have a common ancestry ... that does not preclude a divine origin for man in the dim, distant past.”<sup>14</sup> Garrett’s views over the decades were themselves a picture of evolution.

The uniqueness of Buffaloe’s and Garrett’s public openness to evolution is evidenced by how often conservative writers referenced them and no one else – not even Throneberry, who seems to have slipped under the radar. As mentioned, Buffaloe remained a target 30 years after his most recent writing on the subject, while evolution was one of several stances for which Garrett received lifelong criticism from such periodicals as *Truth* and *Contending for the Faith*, which in 2014, the year before his death, reprinted the text of a 1970 Pepperdine lecture that described Garrett as part of “the extreme radical left wing of the brotherhood.”<sup>15</sup>

By 1985, therefore, a typical layperson in Churches of Christ would have heard a nearly unanimous rejection of evolution as a viable explanation for human origins, not only by those who saw themselves as upholding the fundamentals of the faith, but also by those, such as Lemmons, who considered themselves to be moderates within the Stone-Campbell Movement – this consensus reaching back decades and including prominent faculty members from ACU itself. To the extent members of Churches of Christ heard of

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12. Leroy Garrett, “People with Problems,” *RR* 15 (March 1973): 48.

13. Leroy Garrett, “Only a Creator God Makes Sense of Things,” *RR* 25 (February 1983): 25.

14. Leroy Garrett, “The Nature of Man,” *Restoration Review* 25 (November 1983): 164.

15. Glenn Wallace, “The New Face of the Church,” *Gospel Guardian* 22 (April 8, 1971): 738, reprinted in *Contending for the Faith* 45 (May-June 2014): 4.

a possible reconciliation between the text of Genesis and evolutionary theory from one of the few voices supporting such a possibility, it likely would have been met with outright and unqualified condemnation. And the proponents of such a reconciliation – such as Freeman and Throneberry – did not feel welcome on the group’s affiliated college campuses.

### **Facts of the ACU Controversy**

Such was the state of affairs on March 27, 1985, when Bert Thompson sent a pair of nearly identical letters from his office at Apologetics Press in Montgomery, Ala., to the Abilene Christian University campus. Addressed to biology professors Archie Manis and Ken Williams, the letters accused them of using materials in class that rejected the Genesis account of creation and promoting “organic evolution.” In his letter to Manis, Thompson wrote that he had received complaints from students that “they are being taught evolution in certain classes, and ... the Genesis account of creation is both belittled and ridiculed” in Manis’s senior-level Biology Seminar course. “If the accusations are true,” he wrote, “the damage to a young person’s faith could hardly be overestimated!”<sup>16</sup>

After looking at the class materials he had received, Thompson told Manis, “There is but one conclusion I can reach, ... that the accusations which have been leveled against you are correct and true.” Specifically, Thompson cited the use of *Science and Creationism*, edited by Ashley Montagu, and the testimony of an unnamed student that “the claims of the book against creationism, and the God behind creation, were being vindicated in class.” He also cited a document called “Research in Genesis,” on which Manis had appeared to call Genesis 1 a myth. “These materials represent some of the

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16. Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 1986), 22-24.

most venomous (*sic*) materials I have ever come across,” Thompson wrote. “I am very disturbed at the documentation I have seen. ... There is no doubt that an explanation from you is in order.”<sup>17</sup>

In his letter to Williams, a botany professor, Thompson cited an overhead transparency called “Phylogenetic History” that described the evolution of plant life and, according to a student Thompson had asked, “was taught as factual!”<sup>18</sup> The rest of the letter, however, was identical to the one sent to Manis. Concluding the letters, Thompson included lists of 30 questions each “in an attempt to better understand exactly what you do believe regarding these matters.” He asked whether they believed “the Bible contains scientific errors,” if “theistic evolution [is] acceptable to you,” and if the days of creation in Genesis 1 are “literal days of approximately 24 hours each.” Question 24 asked whether the professors were using materials “written by humanists and/or evolutionists,” and in Manis’s case listed the specific textbooks, with a follow-up that if the answer was yes, “are you using these materials in order to **refute** the positions contained therein?”<sup>19</sup>

Williams forwarded his letter to Perry Reeves, dean of the College of Natural and Applied Sciences, with a handwritten note: “Dean Reeves, these are the kind of untruths and propaganda we will have to deal with. KW.”<sup>20</sup> Williams later said he “could see what

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17. Ibid., 25-27.

18. Ibid., 30.

19. Ibid., 22-32, contains the text of both letters and questionnaires. Emphasis in original. Copies of the letters also can be found in the collections of Perry Reeves and C. G. Gray, as well as in the Thompson archives at Apologetics Press (below cit).

20. Ken Williams, note to Perry Reeves, personal collection of Perry Reeves, Abilene Christian University Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. With Reeves’ permission, the author has donated Reeves’ box of materials related to the controversy to ACU’s Center for Restoration Studies.

was coming” when he received the letter.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps more than even Williams could have guessed, however, the professors and their university were plunged into a whirlpool of condemnation and denials. Over the course of the controversy, which would last most of the next two years, ACU found itself the focus of anti-evolutionary arguments, as well as heated personal rhetoric, that often echoed what confronted W. W. Freeman in 1922 and the Texas Board of Education in 1964.

Thompson’s evidence came from Mark Scott, a junior biology major<sup>22</sup> who had confronted at least three ACU biology professors – Manis, Williams, and James Nichols – over what he saw as teaching that supported evolution without any effort to refute it or describe creationist alternatives. Particularly noxious to Scott, Nichols recalled, was when Manis handed out the “Research in Genesis” sheet, which included a photocopy of Genesis 1 on the back. Above the chapter heading, Manis had written “Creation Hymn, Myth.” According to Nichols, “That really triggered him off.”<sup>23</sup>

Scott had developed a reputation as confrontational and difficult to handle, abrasively questioning professors in both Bible and the sciences about their views on creation and evolution.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, after Scott’s initial complaints, Reeves conducted

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21. Ken Williams, interview, Abilene: Oct. 11, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

22. Cindi Patterson and Angie Mayo, “Instigator of evolution dispute refuses enrollment conditions,” *The Optimist*, Jan. 17, 1986, A-1.

23. James Nichols, interview, Abilene: Sept. 12, 2013. Notes in possession of the author. The handout is reproduced in Thompson, *Myth*, 15-16.

24. Letter from student to C. G. Gray: Nov. 19, 1985, Reuel Lemmons Collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, CRS MS#11, Box 3. Also John Willis, interview, Abilene: Oct. 23, 2013, notes in possession of the author, in which he relates how Scott confronted him at church about the issue; Tommy McCord, memo to John Little: Aug. 9, 1985, C. G. Gray Collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, Box 1, in which McCord asks that Scott no longer be placed in his classes; and Ken Williams, letter to John Stevens: Oct. 31, 1985, Reeves collection, in which Williams asks that a noted scholar not be invited to visit until the next semester, when Scott will no longer be in the class. Finally, Nichols related how Scott, after Nichols attempted to explain his views in a private

an investigation and found that although “various facets” of evolution were taught to the Biology Department’s 221 students and “standard university textbooks on the subject” assigned, “the material consistently was presented as theory” in keeping “with the conservative approach of the church of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Apparently dissatisfied with this result, Scott wrote Thompson, claiming “evolution is being pushed on the students,” and that “the Bible is attacked from the word ‘go’” in Manis’s Biology Seminar and Williams’s Botany class.<sup>26</sup> At Thompson’s request, Scott followed up with documentation, including the photocopies of Manis’s handouts and the covers of assigned textbooks.<sup>27</sup>

Although his letters to Manis and Williams were ostensibly to obtain an explanation for Scott’s allegations, Thompson’s questionnaires raised flags for the professors, indicating he would accept no answer short of affirming direct creation in six literal 24-hour days – a tenet accepted by neither of the accused professors.<sup>28</sup> Neither

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meeting, leaned forward and said: “Based on what you’ve just told me, I honestly can’t say you believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Nichols, interview, 2013).

25. Cheryl Mann, “An Evolving Controversy: An Examination of the Communication Trends of Abilene Christian University and Its Critics during the Conflict over Evolution,” term paper (Texas Tech University: May 13, 1986), 7. As discussed below, Cheryl Mann Bacon became assistant to President Bill Teague during the controversy, making this paper, written just a year after the first letters arrived, a valuable source of contemporaneously recorded history. Although her personal files were the source for this study, a copy of the paper is preserved in the Gray collection.

26. Mark Scott, letter to Bert Thompson, Feb. 25, 1985: Bert Thompson collection, Apologetics Press, Montgomery, AL.

27. Thompson, *Myth*, 4-7. Despite several insinuations by ACU faculty and staff from the period, there is no evidence of prior communication between Thompson and Scott in Thompson’s papers on file at Apologetics Press. That said, Thompson did not express the surprise at Scott’s allegations that he claimed in his book. Cf. Thompson, *Myth?*, p. 6 (emphasis in original) – “Quite frankly, this writer was not easily disposed to believe the charges ... [because] it seemed absolutely inconceivable to me that what Mark Scott **claimed** to be happening could actually **be** happening” (emphasis in original) – with Bert Thompson, letter to Mark Scott, Feb. 26, 1986: Thompson collection, 1: “Upon reading your letter, I was both sad and angry. I have known of the leanings of Dr. Williams toward theistic evolution for some time now, but I had no idea he had gotten so bold with it.”

28. See ch. 4, n.36 ff.

man responded, with Manis returning his unopened.<sup>29</sup> In an April 12 response to Thompson, Reeves gave a foretaste of ACU's public defense, arguing Manis and Williams "expose [students] to evolutionists' claims" so the students can "face attacks on their faith" after graduation. He defended the professors as "dedicated men – dedicated to the Church and to the University and its students." Reeves closed his letter with a firm statement: "In no way is it our intent to destroy or cripple the faith of our students. We believe God is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe."<sup>30</sup> Thompson, however, was not mollified, replying to Reeves that any future response "will have to explain how it is that a Christian University, supported in large part by funds from members of the churches of Christ, can allow the destructive teaching of organic evolution to occur, and continue, in its science department." Thus raising the prospect that ACU's income stream was at stake – the consideration that had weighed so heavily against Freeman sixty years earlier – Thompson threatened that if he did not receive a satisfactory response from either of the professors, biology chair John Little, Reeves, ACU President Bill Teague or the university's Board of Trustees, "We will have no choice but to publish for widespread distribution the results of our attempts ... to halt the teaching at ACU of atheistic or theistic evolution in the biology department."<sup>31</sup> By this time, Thompson had received a letter from another student, Kent West, who said he was taught evolution without refutation in Plant Taxonomy and Astronomy; the latter "was a course in stellar evolution. ... It bothered me a great deal that the instructor was strongly evolutionary

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29. Thompson, *Myth*, 33-34. The return receipt is in the Thompson collection.

30. Perry Reeves, letter to Bert Thompson, April 12, 1985, Reeves collection.

31. Thompson, *Myth*, 39.

(theistic of course) in his cosmogeny (*sic*).”<sup>32</sup> Scott also continued to write, sending at least ten letters to Thompson over the course of the 1985-1986 controversy, keeping him apprised of on-campus developments.<sup>33</sup>

On May 16, having received no response from Williams or Manis, Thompson sent a similar letter to Little, adding the story of the subsequent communication and including a list of 40 questions regarding Little’s personal views and the teaching practices of the professors in his department.<sup>34</sup> With no response from Little after more than a month, Thompson sent a nearly identical letter to Reeves on Aug. 12, with a similar list of questions.<sup>35</sup> Although Thompson had threatened to take his allegations public in the April 29 letter if he did not hear a response by the end of his letter-writing campaign, on May 16 he referenced “other interested parties,” and on May 22 sent a letter to ACU’s Bible dean, Ian Fair, promising to “keep you up-to-date on any progress ... being made.”<sup>36</sup> The next day, he received a letter from Furman Kearley, ACU’s director of graduate studies in Bible, encouraging him to “pursue in the right manner and the right spirit the matter

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32. Kent West, letter to Bert Thompson, March 13, 1985, Thompson collection: 2. In an email to the author sent March 15, 2016, West said he no longer remembers whether he recommended that Scott write Thompson or vice versa. However, he confirmed that he had been disappointed with what he was taught in biology and saw himself at the time as “one of the heroes of the book.” An ACU employee since 1991, West said that although his beliefs about creation have not changed, his attitude has. “I ... came eventually to realize that the book, or at least its tenor, may not have been the best way of dealing with the issue.”

33. Mark Scott, letters to Bert Thompson, Feb. 25, undated [presumed March], undated [presumed April], May 13, undated [presumed May/June], June 10, undated [presumed July], Aug. 18, [presumed fall] 1985; undated [presumed early 1986], Thompson collection.

34. Thompson, *Myth*, 42-49.

35. Ibid., 52-60. Additional communication led Thompson to make accusations in this new letter – as well as in the book – about Scott’s grades being cut in retaliation for his opposition to evolution, a side controversy this study passes over, not least because it is purely (and literally) a he-said/she-said argument between Scott and his lab instructor, Marla Potess. Scott later was blocked from registering for the Fall 1986 semester and refused to sign a pledge committing to certain behavior that would have allowed him to return to school. Needless to say, Scott/Thompson and ACU had starkly different perspectives on this.

36. Bert Thompson, letter to Ian Fair, May 22, 1985, Thompson collection.

concerning evolution at ACU.”<sup>37</sup> Supportive letters from a circle of Thompson allies sent in June indicate that Thompson was indeed beginning to distribute his allegations.<sup>38</sup>

On July 11, ACU President Bill Teague received the first letter from someone other than Thompson referencing the allegations. “Since my four children are very close to college age, I must know the direction that Abilene Christian is going,” J. R. Clark wrote before listing four questions about the university’s policy regarding evolution. He also enclosed copies of the Thompson questionnaires, “just in case you might not be aware of the questions which [Manis and Williams] have refused to answer. ... I personally see nothing offensive about them. Either one believes what the Bible teaches or one believes the contrary.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Reeves’s initial response remained the only official communication from ACU, Thompson’s letters appeared nonetheless to have an effect. At the end of the spring semester, students in the three classes in which Scott was a student – Introduction to Biology, taught by Nichols, along with the Manis and Williams courses singled out by Scott and Thompson – were asked to complete an unusual evaluation. Because evolution “has been an integral part of this course,” according to the prompt given to students, “we would appreciate your opinions as they relate to the presentation of the material in this class.”<sup>40</sup> To Thompson, the evaluation – passed along by Scott<sup>41</sup> – was evidence that

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37. F. Furman Kearley, letter to Bert Thompson, May 23, 1985, Thompson collection.

38. E.g., Arnold Sexton, letter to Bert Thompson, June 17, 1985; Bennie Whitehead, letter to Thompson, June 18, 1985; Jodie Boren, letter to Thompson, June 18, 1985; Garland Elkins, letter to Thompson, June 19, 1985, Thompson collection.

39. Mann, “Controversy,” 8, and J. R. Clark, letter to Bill Teague, July 8, 1985, Thompson collection.

40. Evaluation papers, Reeves collection.

41. Mark Scott, letter to Bert Thompson, May 13, 1985, Thompson collection: 6-7.

ACU was intimidating students into defending the professors, especially because they required the students to sign their names even as they promised that the professors would not see any responses until after grades had been filed.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, word of the controversy had begun to spread – largely thanks to Thompson himself. On Aug. 12, Thompson distributed an open letter on Apologetics Press letterhead “to those who have received our previous packets of correspondence concerning the teaching of evolution at Abilene Christian University.” In it he wrote, “The documentation which we possess will easily prove the charges against the professors.” An enclosed “Important Announcement” solicited letters from former ACU students describing their experiences in ACU’s science classes.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Teague’s response to J. R. Clark, forwarded to Thompson, is notable for its contrast to Jesse Sewell’s tepid defense of Freeman in 1922. Teague dismissed the allegations as “specious,” distributed by “hedonists, humanists and relative (*sic*) well-intentioned critics whose zeal is not always according to knowledge.” The university would “continue to pray for those individuals in our brotherhood ... . We will not encourage them by completing questionnaires.”<sup>44</sup>

In the middle of his letter-writing campaign, and as word of the allegations continued to spread beyond the university, Thompson visited Abilene for what he said was a previously scheduled seminar on creation and evolution. According to Thompson, newspaper advertising for the three-day seminar at Fifth and Grape Church of Christ alarmed ACU officials, who wrongly assumed Thompson intended to make his

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42. Thompson, *Myth*, 60-61.

43. Bert Thompson, open letter, Aug. 12, 1985, Thompson collection.

44. William J. Teague, letter to J. Mark (*sic*) Clark, July 25, 1985, Thompson collection.

accusations fully public. C.G. Gray, ACU's vice president for academic affairs, called Thompson the week before the seminar, requesting a meeting before any such release occurred, Thompson wrote.<sup>45</sup> Thus Thompson came to campus Sept. 13, 1985.

Determining what happened at that meeting is difficult. Thompson published in full a description that he said was written by James Willeford, an elder at Fifth and Grape who was chosen by the congregation to be a neutral observer. Additionally, Ian Fair took rough notes. Among the participants in the meeting who remain alive and able to recount their experiences – W.C. “Dub” Orr, secretary of the Board of Trustees; Gray; Reeves; and Fair – Gray said he recalled being interrupted and steamrolled by Thompson, and Reeves said Orr tried to find middle ground by drawing a circle on a chalkboard, asking Thompson whether views on evolution were inside the circle of faith essentials or outside of it. Fair and Orr said they did not remember specifics.<sup>46</sup>

According to Thompson/Willeford,<sup>47</sup> Thompson presented the following pieces of evidence: 1) Handouts titled “Evolution Notes” and “Research in Genesis” from Manis’s class; 2) The textbook *Science and Creationism*, reading pro-evolution passages from it and asking for material showing their in-class rebuttal; and 3) A series of accounts by former ACU biology students who had told Thompson in recent weeks they had been taught evolution without rebuttal. “You have men who are out-and-out theistic

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45. Thompson, *Myth*, 64-65, emphasis in original.

46. C. G. Gray, interview, Abilene: Oct. 7, 2013: “I started making a presentation, and he jumped up and said, ‘You’re in my territory now.’ All he did was turn the meeting around.” Also, Perry Reeves, interview, Abilene: Oct. 23, 2013: “That was the substance of the meeting. We believed God created, but the exact way God created is not a salvation issue. Bert’s response was if you can’t believe Genesis 1, you can’t believe anything.” All notes in possession of the author.

47. This narrative of the meeting was fully reprinted in Thompson, *Myth*, 74-85, and is, along with Fair’s notes, in the Reeves and Gray collections. The first and last pages of a draft of the Willeford document are in the Thompson collection; however, the middle pages are missing.

evolutionists teaching children sent here by parents who have entrusted you with their most precious possession – their own children,” Willeford quoted Thompson saying. “These men have violated and prostituted that trust, and I am therefore calling on you to correct the situation via appropriate measures.”<sup>48</sup> Thompson, using similar language, wanted ACU to repeat its actions from 1922 and, to a lesser degree, 1964.

The confrontation reportedly elicited a measure of conciliation from the ACU officials present, who agreed, according to Thompson/Willeford, to obtain signed seven-point statements from Manis and Williams affirming that “Genesis 1-11 is literal and historical,” promising to “refute organic evolution in my classes,” and “repent[ing]” of teaching even theistic evolution in a way that allowed students to believe it “may be believed by a faithful Christian.” If the full, signed statements were not provided by the end of October, Thompson said he would make his evidence fully public.<sup>49</sup>

The Willeford report was a significant part of Thompson’s story – seeming to record concessions by ACU administrators that they either would fire the professors if they were found to have taught evolution without refutation, or would send detailed statements affirming the professors’ literal reading of Genesis. It portrays Thompson in a favorable, even incontrovertible, light while ACU’s administrators appear poorly prepared, willing to concede Thompson’s arguments.

However, the report’s credibility is questionable. For example, another Fifth and Grape elder, A. J. Bivens, in March 1986 wrote a letter seeking middle ground between Thompson and ACU and listing errors he believed both sides had made. Among

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48. Thompson, *Myth*, 74-82.

49. *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Thompson's mistakes, Bivens wrote: "Calling part of the book 'The Willeford Report,' when it was written and masterminded by Bro. Thompson himself."<sup>50</sup> Bacon contended that Willeford "did not confer with university representatives to affirm the accuracy of his report, but did review the document with [Thompson] and allow it to be edited and revised by him."<sup>51</sup> Finally, Willeford himself, asked directly about the report, "replied that he and Brother Thompson wrote it," with drafts and phone calls going back and forth until Willeford "was satisfied with its accuracy."<sup>52</sup>

Fair's notes, therefore, are important as a corrective to the Thompson/ Willeford document. According to Fair, Willeford, not Thompson, suggested the professors provide signed statements, and Fair's summary of the statements to be provided, to the extent his notes can be deciphered, also differs.<sup>53</sup> Thompson in his book made much of Fair's note-taking as support that all parties had agreed on the seven specific points the signed statements must contain. However, Fair's notes do not include any notion of repentance; they also do not refer to the question of whether "Genesis 1-11 is a myth."<sup>54</sup>

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50. A.J. Bivens, untitled letter, March 18, 1986, Gray Collection, 4. Bivens also said Thompson delayed immediate publication of his evidence at the request of the Fifth and Grape elders, a detail Thompson did not include in his chronology, and said the elders were "alarmed" that they would be connected with the controversy as a result of hosting Thompson for the evolution seminar.

51. Mann, "Controversy," 10. It's not clear from her paper how she knows this, although her position makes it likely she heard it from Teague himself or was in meetings where this was revealed.

52. Tommy J. Hicks, "Uncle Tom's Gabbin': A Brief Report on the Handley, March 8, 1986, Meeting on the ACU/Evolution Controversy, Part 2," *Handley Herald* 14 (March 26, 1986): 2.

53. Ian Fair, "Meeting with Burt (*sic*) Thompson," Sept. 13, 1985, Reeves collection. The entirety of Fair's notes dealing with the statements is as follows: "Define term evolution. I don't believe in organic evolution. prog. creation. Theistic evolution. Do not advocate ... Statement must deal with the handouts. Not necessary to publish the statement in ACU Today or any other place. Statement just for Thompson's satisfaction."

54. Thompson, *Myth*, 83-84, lists the points Thompson said he expected from the statements.

The Fair and Willeford accounts are compatible in key areas – agreeing that the professors were expected to reject theistic evolution and the roughly synonymous progressive creation and deal in some way with their in-class handouts – but it’s unclear who provided the more accurate level of specificity regarding what kind of statement Thompson would find acceptable,<sup>55</sup> and given the significant problems raised by Bivens, Bacon, and even Willeford himself, the more detailed account is not necessarily more trustworthy where it differs with Fair’s notes.<sup>56</sup> Six weeks later, Orr also questioned Thompson’s version of events. “I stated that I felt that the letters to be requested should be positive statements of the beliefs of Drs. Manis and Williams,” Orr wrote, “and would not deal with the more specific details of the Biblical account of creation versus the theory of organic evolution. As I understand it, this is what Ken and Archie were asked to do, and from my reading of their statements, this is what they did.”<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, Gray sent Thompson two signed statements on Oct. 23. Williams’s single sentence claimed belief “in the Bible, in Christianity and in the biblical account of creation,” and said he did not “advocate organic evolution.” Manis, meanwhile, provided a six-point series of statements, including belief “in the Genesis account of creation” and rejection of “organic evolution.”<sup>58</sup> Thompson, citing his and Willeford’s account of the

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55. Fair, for example, noted a discussion of whether to publish the statements in the *ACU Today* alumni magazine, which Willeford did not mention despite a much lengthier account. It would be wrong, therefore, to assume that Willeford was more accurate simply because he was more detailed.

56. It is of course true that Thompson and Willeford did not necessarily compromise their report’s accuracy – and could even have increased it – by crafting it the way they did; however, Thompson’s failure to properly describe how “the Willeford Report” actually was written and Willeford’s failure to extend the same courtesy of review and revision to other participants in the meeting raise questions about whether accuracy was the primary intent.

57. W. C. Orr, letter to Bert Thompson, Nov. 7, 1985, Thompson collection: 3.

58. C. G. Gray, letter to Bert Thompson, Oct. 4, 1985, Reeves collection: 2-3.

agreement reached with the university, rejected the statements as too vague<sup>59</sup> and subsequently compiled his evidence in *Is Genesis Myth?*, which Apologetics Press published in January 1986.

As Thompson readied the book for publication, word of the controversy had grown from a series of leaks to an outright torrent of outrage and condemnation – spurred in part by Thompson’s own efforts. On Nov. 26, he began circulating the “Willeford document” among his supporters, which included pulpit ministers and editors of Church of Christ-affiliated publications, who recirculated it.<sup>60</sup> Reeves and Gray, whose archives were available for this study, received dozens of letters from across the country. Teague’s office from February through April received as many as ten letters per day, a total of 378 during the twelve-week period.<sup>61</sup> Thompson’s papers, made available by Apologetics Press for this study, indicate he too received hundreds of letters, with those supporting him outnumbering those opposed by at least 4-to-1. In *Is Genesis Myth?* Thompson quoted from correspondence between accusing parents and ACU administrators that the parents had forwarded to him. As he put it, “The report of evolution being taught in one of ‘our’ schools is not the kind of news that can be easily stifled.”<sup>62</sup>

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59. Thompson initially drafted a lengthy rejection, preserved in his collection, that reiterated the points he believed had been agreed upon and included a cut-and-paste mockup created from the statements themselves to reflect how he felt they should have read. In the unsent letter, he described himself as “appalled” and “in total and utter disbelief” that Gray could have sent such “namby-pamby,” “pitiful excuses of ‘statements.’” In the end, Thompson never sent the letter, instead writing a much shorter dismissal, found in the Thompson, Reeves and Gray collections (Bert Thompson, letter to C. G. Gray, Nov. 1, 1985), describing the statements as “extremely regrettable” and declaring that “further discussion would be futile.”

60. Bert Thompson, open letter to “Individuals Who Have Been Receiving Materials about the Teaching of Evolution,” Nov. 26, 1985, Thompson collection.

61. Mann, “Controversy,” attached chart, Evolution Paper folder, in possession of the author. At Bacon’s request, the folder has been deposited in the ACU Center for Restoration Studies.

62. Thompson, *Myth*, 111.

Indeed, decades of commentary on evolution from leaders among Churches of Christ had left a deep antipathy for the very notion of its acceptance in any form, and ACU, its administrators, and especially the two professors paid the price. Beginning in late 1985 and lasting until at least late 1987, letter writers excoriated Manis, Williams, Reeves, Gray, Teague, and others on the campus, as well as ACU more generally. Almost unanimously, they rejected ACU's arguments that the professors had been falsely accused, or that evolution was being taught simply to strengthen students' faith. "Please do not insult my intelligence," one respondent wrote to Teague.<sup>63</sup> The university was the biblical King Ahab, according to one evocative letter, and its critics were "Elijah, the troublers of ACU."<sup>64</sup> In response to the university's 1985 year-end solicitation letter, rejections poured in to C. G. Gray's office. "I am not willing to even consider making a contribution after receiving documented evidence of the teaching of organic evolution in the Biology Department," one wrote. "God will not bless the expansion of an effort that defies His word."<sup>65</sup> Another said they would not give "until such time as the university is willing to honestly deal with the charges made with reams of evidence. ... We continue to be appalled at the cover up campaign being waged extensively + the absolute refusal to be honest."<sup>66</sup> Tommy Hicks, minister of Handley Church of Christ in Fort Worth, compared the controversy to Watergate. If that controversy could take down Richard Nixon, Hicks wrote, "surely the same can happen to the president of a small-time ... private college if he betrays the trust given him by ... supporters (especially financial

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63. J. R. Clark, letter to Bill Teague, Feb. 6, 1986, Lemmons collection.

64. Harry Hass, letter to C. G. Gray, Dec. 4, 1986, Gray collection.

65. Mrs. Charles A. Thompson, letter to C. G. Gray, Nov. 23, 1985, Gray collection.

66. John and Michelle Scott, [January 1986], Gray collection. Emphasis in original.

supporters) of his institution.” Hicks said he would “personally ... do everything I can in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex to inform every Christian regarding this problem,” including copying his letter to 100 “brethren around the United States.”<sup>67</sup>

Some of the university’s harshest critics not only sent letters, but also broadcast their condemnation in church bulletins. One example was “Person to Person,” Dub McClish’s weekly column in *The Edifier*, published each Sunday by Pearl Street Church of Christ in Denton, Texas. On Jan. 23, 1986, he wrote that he had been receiving material from Thompson about ACU for “several months,” and added, “Evolution’s being taught as a fact of science is but a horrible symptom of a crucial lapse of conviction that has become increasingly evident over the years.”<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Garrell Forehand of Granbury Street Church of Christ in Cleburne, Texas, dismissed the ACU defense: “Abilene Christian University has faculty members (plural) teaching the theory of evolution as absolute fact to their students, and Genesis 1 and 2 as a ‘myth.’ ... Lies have been told, and are still being told, to students, to families of students, to local Abilene newspapers, and to inquiring brethren from around the country.”<sup>69</sup>

Abilene Christian was not the only institution troubled, however: The controversy also enveloped Abilene’s Baker Heights Church of Christ, where Manis was an elder. In *Is Genesis Myth?*, Thompson devoted 16 pages to describing a 1981 interaction between Manis and L. D. Swift, at the time a Baker Heights deacon. Swift had asked Manis about evolutionary theory, he wrote to Thompson, and Manis “made it very clear over the

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67. Tommy J. Hicks, letter to William Teague, Dec. 16, 1985, Gray collection. Emphasis in original.

68. Dub McClish, “Person to Person,” *The Edifier* 6 (Jan. 23, 1986): 1. Gray collection.

69. Garrell L. Forehand, “Abilene Christian University: The Facts Are In,” *News and Views of the Granbury Street Church of Christ* (Jan. 26, 1986): 2-3. Thompson collection.

course of our discussion that he was a ‘theistic evolutionist’ and related his conviction in the classroom at ACU.” Swift said he and his wife left Baker Heights as a result of the conversation, but that after hearing of the Thompson-led controversy, L. D. and his wife, Dana, called Manis to confront him again, and again Manis confirmed that he did not rebut evolution in his class. The interactions led Swift to say:

Archie Manis is in my judgment one of the most dangerous miscreants dwelling among God’s people I have ever known. ... I firmly believe Archie is bringing great harm to many, many young people. ... Whether one aids the cause of evil intentionally or from ignorance makes no difference to the outcome. The cause of evil is served in either fashion.<sup>70</sup>

As members of Baker Heights put increasing pressure on Manis, Thompson portrayed an increasingly erratic self-defense by the professor, describing another deacon’s account of meetings with Manis that led to contradictory accounts of whether the elder believed in evolution – first saying, “Evolution is science. ... I teach science,” then weeks later recanting to say, “I believe God created everything in six literal days,” before reversing himself again to describe the days of Genesis as being nonliteral. These meetings led at least one Baker Heights member to seek Manis’s resignation as an elder, Thompson said. Instead, however, the congregation’s elders continued to support Manis, leading two deacons to resign their positions and leave the church in November.<sup>71</sup>

As the invective reached a crescendo, the Baker Heights elders delivered a statement to the congregation on Dec. 8, 1985, affirming Manis’s innocence of the accusations Thompson had brought and was about to make public, as well as absolving

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70. Thompson, *Myth*, 111-27. The quote is from L. D. and Dana Swift, “Statement of Witness Concerning Dr. Archie Manis,” Nov. 2, 1985, Gray collection, 7.5-7.6.

71. Thompson, *Myth*, 131-37. This account is largely supported by documents found in the Reeves, Gray, and Thompson collections.

Manis of dishonesty charges.<sup>72</sup> With that introduction, Manis then stood before his congregation and tearfully read an apology that seems, at least in part, to confirm Thompson's account of the preceding weeks:

I've misled and hurt some of my dearest loved ones, some of this congregation, some of the very sheep I'm committed to care for. I've done so without intent and without deliberation, but it was done, and I deeply regret it. ... I stand before you in utter despair ... and in the deepest possible pain of heart, asking your prayers for my forgiveness as I confess my sin of causing anyone to be misled, as I repent of my sin, and as I beg my family at Baker Heights and my God to forgive me of any wound or hurt that I have caused anyone at any time and for any reason.<sup>73</sup>

### Public Phase

The controversy until December 1985 had occurred largely through meetings, letters, and the semi-public statements to the Baker Heights congregation. Beginning in December, however, Thompson's allegations became a fully public conversation, with three significant chapters: 1) the publicity leading up to and surrounding the January publication of *Is Genesis Myth?*, 2) the university's official response in February, and 3) the unofficial letter-writing campaign by Kentucky lawyer Charles Trevathan, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

One month after publishing *Is Genesis Myth?*, Thompson sent a letter to all ACU parents, offering free copies of the book, which he described as "the calm and careful presentation of the results of a year-long, well-documented investigation."<sup>74</sup> By that time, supporters of ACU also had been responding publicly.

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72. Bob Childress, "Statement Made by the Elders of the Baker Heights Church of Christ," Dec. 8, 1985, Reeves collection.

73. Archie Manis, "Statement by Archie Manis, Baker Heights Church of Christ, Abilene, Texas," Dec. 8, 1985, Reeves collection.

74. Bert Thompson, "Apologetics," *Optimist*, Feb. 7, 1986: A-2. This is a full reprint of the letter.

As the allegations swirled well before the book's January publication, the *Optimist*, ACU's student-run newspaper, broke the news of the controversy in a full-page editorial on Dec. 13, 1985. The paper's editorial board defended the university and its professors as the victims of "rumors and unjustified accusations." Having access to the student evaluations from the three classes in which evolution was a prominent topic, the *Optimist* cited several that denied the teaching of evolution as fact. "This charge is unjustified," the paper concluded.<sup>75</sup> Throughout January, letters from students in the professors' classes defended the men,<sup>76</sup> while a letter from Thompson's colleague, Wayne Jackson, pushed back against the *Optimist*'s defense: "Just where have these charges been refuted?" he asked. "Certainly not in the *Optimist* editorial."<sup>77</sup> At least one student agreed, noting the paper had not published the professors' actual positions on evolution and creation. By the end of January, a group of students began distributing the book on campus, and the *Optimist* editorial board, upon reading it, reiterated its support of the university: "We firmly believe that the university is correct in its refutation of the charge that professors teach evolution as fact."<sup>78</sup> In the same issue, Jackson asked that the editorial board read Thompson's book and then "tell me whether you believe that the university has adequately answered the charges." The paper replied in an italicized editor's note: "*After reading and discussing Is Genesis Myth?, the Optimist staff*

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75. "Evolution," *Optimist*, Dec. 13, 1985: A-2.

76. See letters on p. A-2 of the Jan. 11, 28, and 31, 1986, issues of the *Optimist*.

77. Wayne Jackson, "New Publication Examines Evidence," *Optimist*, Jan. 11, 1986: A-2.

78. "Read Thompson's Documentation," *Optimist*, Jan. 31, 1986: A-2.

*continues to strongly support the university in an effort to maintain truth.*”<sup>79</sup> One student even dropped off a \$7 check in Teague’s office to help cover ACU’s mailing costs.<sup>80</sup>

Letter writers also came to ACU’s defense. The elders of Highland Church of Christ in Abilene wrote Teague in December 1985, expressing “confidence in you, your handling of this difficult situation and of the future of the university. We stand ready to help you any way we can.”<sup>81</sup> A cautious letter to Ian Fair from a minister in southwestern Oklahoma warned that “ACU is already receiving a lot of bad press in this area. ... If you attend ACU, you are viewed with suspicion by a number of preachers here.”<sup>82</sup> Some ACU supporters confronted Thompson himself – among them Prentice Meador, the preacher of South National Avenue Church of Christ in Springfield, Mo. “I know personally of the controversy which your letter attempts to address,” he wrote in response to the Apologetics Press missive to all ACU parents. “I can neither endorse the intent or the method by which you have attempted to correct what you think is ‘error.’”<sup>83</sup>

In February, the university formally responded in two ways: The Board of Trustees formally accepted the results of an internal investigation it had commissioned and issued a unanimous institutional statement absolving the professors of wrongdoing, and the administration responded to Thompson’s mailing with one of its own to all of its parents. The investigation had been commissioned after Thompson leveled his allegations in the fall, and was led by Orr, the board secretary, working with fellow trustees Bill

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79. Wayne Jackson, “Jackson Asks Editor to Read Book,” *Optimist*, Jan. 31, 1986: A-2.

80. Tom Tackett, photocopy of check, Feb. 7, 1986, Gray collection. Mann, “Controversy,” 14.

81. Highland Church of Christ elders, letter to Bill Teague, Dec. 20, 1985, Gray collection. Among the signers was Teague’s eventual successor, ACU assistant Bible chair Royce Money.

82. David Smith, letter to Ian Fair, Jan. 7, 1986, Gray collection.

83. Prentice Meador, Jr., letter to Apologetics Press editors, Feb. 2, 1986, Gray collection.

Young, a Fort Worth minister, and Roy Willingham, an Abilene doctor and former ACU assistant professor of natural science.<sup>84</sup> The subcommittee was appointed by board chair Lynn Packer, who told the rest of the board that doing so would “dispel any hint of cover-up or unwillingness to examine evidence.” Further, he said, “there is the potential of considerable furor” as the result of “carelessness on the part of these teachers,” but that their transgressions “all seem to be basically one-time mistakes.”<sup>85</sup>

The investigators largely agreed, finding that “the theory of organic evolution is not advocated at the University” though accepting that “a small number of students has been disturbed or confused to varying degrees.” Regarding Thompson’s evidence, the report dismissed it out of hand because of “bias and prejudice” that made it “informative but not conclusive.” The subcommittee’s report followed closely to Packer’s line of thought, singling out Manis and his handouts in particular as “misleading and susceptible to incrimination when viewed outside the context intended by the professor,” who was “unwise not to provide a written disclaimer and more complete refutation.”

Regarding Thompson’s allegation that ACU had failed to comply with the agreement about the signed statements reached during their September meeting, the report concluded “unequivocally” that Willeford’s account “is incorrect. ... No deception has occurred. The University complied with and fulfilled the only commitment mutually agreed upon in the September 13 meeting.” The investigators had interviewed a combined 105 students who had taken classes from Manis and Williams over the previous five years, and 101 of them expressed support for the professors. Of a total of

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84. See their entries in Charlie Marler and Paul Anthony, *AnswerBook*, 21st edition (Abilene: ACU Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, 2015).

85. Lynn Packer, memo to Board of Trustees of Abilene Christian University, Dec. 17, 1985, Gray collection.

137 current and former students, “only three believed that any advocacy of the theory of organic evolution had taken place” – one of them being Mark Scott.<sup>86</sup>

The subcommittee report was one of several materials the university distributed in February to rebut Thompson’s book. Along with accepting the investigatory report, the Board of Trustees composed its own five-point institutional statement, unanimously accepted after hours of discussion and disagreement, according to Bacon, who was in the room.<sup>87</sup> On Feb. 7, ACU mailed to all parents of currently enrolled students a packet including the institutional statement, several *Optimist* editorials, and a one-page letter titled “We Believe.” It affirmed the university’s belief that “God’s word is true and inerrant,” and that ACU taught evolution merely as it taught its students about totalitarianism and “worldly lifestyles.” The letter was then redesigned into an advertisement that was published in five Church of Christ-affiliated publications and handed out at the university’s annual Lectureship.<sup>88</sup> University supporters then distributed it further to congregations around the country, and board members and other officials often personally defended the university in letters and personal appearances.<sup>89</sup>

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86. “Abilene Christian University Investigative Report: Prepared by a Special Committee of the Abilene Christian University Board of Trustees,” Feb. 13, 1986, Lemmons collection, 8-9.

87. Mann, “Controversy,” 15, and Cheryl Mann Bacon, interview, Abilene: Oct. 16, 2013: “The majority of the trustees – and this was after the board saw the report – accepted the report, accepted the intent of the faculty, wanted to support the faculty, and there were a few who were very suspicious.” Notes in possession of the author. An ad hoc committee was formed to redraft the statement, but after two hours only made minor revisions to the original Orr-crafted document.

88. Mann, “Controversy,” 15.

89. As described in Les Gleaves, letter to William Teague, March 3, 1986, Gray collection: “We are leaving copies of the institutional statement that ACU prepared everywhere we can.” Gleaves was minister at Waterview Church of Christ in Richardson, Texas. See also Robert J. Hall, letter to William J. Teague, March 4, 1986, Gray collection, in which Hall, an ACU trustee, described defending ACU at Jasper Church of Christ. Just days earlier, the church’s minister – Ray Wells, “O Dear Christian College We Love You,” *The Bulletin* 16 (Feb. 28, 1986) – wrote in the weekly bulletin, “We become incensed when a misinformed and minor radical element seeks to destroy ACU and her influence by publishing false statements accusing ACU faculty of teaching evolution as fact. ... ACU is RIGHT! Brethren need to know

Finally, Highland Church of Christ provided the entire 80,000-household mailing list for its Herald of Truth ministry, allowing ACU to circulate the documents more broadly.<sup>90</sup>

“In recent months, we have been accused of teaching evolutionary theory as fact,” the “We Believe” document stated. “We have been wrongly accused. ... No evidence, understood in its context, supports the accusations. You deserve to know.”<sup>91</sup>

Thus, to a typical member of a Church of Christ congregation in 1986, the public pronouncements of Bert Thompson and his allies stood starkly opposed to ACU’s public and private response. On the one hand, Thompson claimed ACU professors had taught evolution without rebuttal. On the other, ACU’s president and Board of Trustees denied the charges outright. This controversy, coming after a decades-long, nearly unanimous rejection of evolution among Churches of Christ – including by prominent ACU voices – seems likely to have reinforced the apparent rightness of that position. But was ACU “wrongly accused,” as its defense stated? The next chapter will analyze the evidence Thompson claimed supported his allegations.

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and defend her. We can trust our children to her care and teaching.” Among the off-campus ACU officials, Alumni Association president Jerry Strader’s rebuke of Harry Hass is particularly notable: “These are Godly men,” he wrote by hand at the bottom of Hass’s letter to him. “It’s people like you who crucified the Christ” (Jerry Strader, letter to Harry Hass, November 1986: Thompson collection).

90. Mann, “Controversy,” 15.

91. “ACU: We Believe:” Evolution Clippings (Abilene: ACU Creative Services archives).

## CHAPTER IV

### ASSESSING THE ALLEGATIONS AND RESPONSE

To assess the accuracy of the accusations – and the rebuttal that “no evidence, understood in context,” supported them – one must specify what they were. Bert Thompson twice laid out his allegations comprehensively and publicly. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, in his on-campus meeting with ACU officials of Sept. 13, 1985, Thompson reportedly alleged three things:

1. A pair of handouts in Manis’s Spring 1985 Biology Seminar portrayed evolution as factual and labeled Genesis 1 a “myth.”
2. In the same class, Manis required students to read several books written by proponents of evolution with the stated purpose of debunking “creation science.”
3. Two ACU students described being taught evolution without refutation in Manis’s and Williams’s classes.<sup>1</sup>

Five months later, in the letter to ACU parents, Thompson listed five key points:

Some of the most atheistically oriented books in print have been used as texts in ACU biology courses. (2) The works are pro-evolution and rabidly anti-creation. (3) ACU officials have privately admitted that **absolutely no refutation** whatever of these infidelic materials was given to the students. (4) Material, authored by an ACU professor, has affirmed that “the fact of evolution is beyond dispute.” (5) An

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1. Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 1986), 80-81, with additional detail in 66-70.

ACU professor has called Genesis 1 & 2 creation “hymns,” and characterized this inspired writing as “myth,” etc. It is an incredible nightmare.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Mark Scott in a lengthy letter to C. G. Gray accused him of “continuing to deny the truth, and that is that A.C.U. is teaching and trying to persuade its students in the belief of evolution. ... It has been proven to you many times, and you know it.” Scott listed 39 “evidences” of this, among them his own conversations with Williams, Manis, and Nichols; Manis’s pro-evolution handouts; the testimony of an unnamed student;<sup>3</sup> and the use of mainstream biology and botany textbooks that accepted evolution and rejected creationism.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Wayne Jackson in a letter listed ten key issues, of which five dealt with materials used in class, two with whether those materials were refuted, and two with the statements of the professors and students.<sup>5</sup>

Distilling those arguments into broad categories produces the following allegations: In-class handouts referred to Genesis as a myth and described the unimpeachability of evolution, pro-evolution textbooks were used in class without refutation, and students taking the classes – and perhaps even the professors – confirmed the teaching of evolution without refutation. This study now assesses these claims.

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2. Bert Thompson, “Apologetics,” *Optimist*, Feb. 7, 1986: A-2, emphasis in original. Wayne Jackson, Stockton, CA, telephone interview: Oct. 29, 2013, remains certain that Thompson’s evidence “was very, very solid. There was just no question what was being taught.”

3. The context makes clear that this is Lisa Fitts, discussed below.

4. Mark Scott, letter to Norm Archibald and C. G. Gray, Dec. 23, 1985, C. G. Gray collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, 11-15. “Archie Manis and Ken Williams have as their primary purpose in teaching Biology at A.C.U., the influencing of students in the belief of evolution. Is there any other conclusion that a person could come up with?”

5. Wayne Jackson, letter to Gary Workman, Feb. 1, 1986: Bert Thompson collection, Apologetics Press, Montgomery, AL.

### The “Myth” Handout

Thompson focused on this allegation more than any other. In Ian Fair’s notes of the Sept. 13 on-campus meeting, he paraphrased Thompson: “Statement must deal with the handouts.”<sup>6</sup> Thompson’s book seized on Manis’s use of “hymn, myth” language to ask its readers, “Is Genesis myth?” Additionally, Thompson pointed to Manis’s distribution of “Evolution Notes,” a handout with a series of summary statements about the development and contours of evolutionary theory. Particularly alarming was Point 14: “The fact of evolution is beyond dispute. The concept is rational, scientific and supported by an overwhelming mass of evidence from past and present.”<sup>7</sup> Thompson highlighted the statement at the top of Chapter 1 of *Is Genesis Myth?*, referencing it twice more and reprinting the entire handout.<sup>8</sup>

In response, neither ACU nor Manis denied handing out the offending documents. Manis briefly addressed “Evolution Notes” in his signed statement delivered to Thompson, calling it a “summary of many different readings in evolutionary theory.”<sup>9</sup> In a memo to Orr elicited as part of the board investigation, Manis said he regretted using the word “myth” because the popular definition implied an untruthful story; rather, he used it in the academic sense, meaning “a body of information essential to understanding a culture, whether true or false.”<sup>10</sup> Reeves also defended Manis on these grounds, sending

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6. Ian Fair, “Meeting with Burt (*sic*) Thompson,” Sept. 13, 1985; personal collection of Perry Reeves, Abilene Christian University Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.

7. Thompson, *Myth*, 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 1, 9, 14.

9. C. G. Gray, letter to Bert Thompson, Oct. 4, 1985, Reeves collection.

10. Archie Manis, memo to W. C. Orr, Dec. 16, 1985, Reuel Lemmons collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, CRS MS#11, 2.

along photocopies of a dictionary page bearing a similar definition in response to criticism from Furman Kearley.<sup>11</sup> Even as they rejected the interpretation Thompson gave to the handouts, no one seems to have denied their existence or their use in class. In fact, Bacon wrote shortly afterward, “Although academically correct ... this choice of words by the professor has been the single most difficult item to explain and defend.”<sup>12</sup>

### Pro-Evolution Textbooks

*Is Genesis Myth?* quoted excerpts from three books allegedly assigned by Manis in his seminar class: *Science and Creationism*, *Abusing Science*, and *Science on Trial*.<sup>13</sup> Thompson called them “blatantly anti-God, anti-religion, anti-creation, anti-Bible,” and argued Manis did not refute them.<sup>14</sup>

The books indeed accepted evolution as true and were written to debunk creationist arguments such as those advocated for decades by Thompson, Lemmons, and Ward – but they were not antagonistic toward God or special creation as matters of faith. In *Science and Creationism*, Montagu wrote, “There is no incompatibility between a belief in God” and evolutionary theory.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Kitcher’s *Abusing Science* “is not ... an attempt to debunk religion.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Thompson equated any argument against a literal six-day creation as “anti-God.” This blurring of arguments was evident early in

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11. Perry Reeves, letter to Furman Kearley: March 7, 1986, Reeves collection. Reeves quotes the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

12. Mann, “Controversy,” 14.

13. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Science and Creationism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984); Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science: The Case against Creationism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982); Douglas Futuyama, *Science on Trial: The Case for Evolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

14. Thompson, *Myth*, 8.

15. Montagu, ed., *Science and Creationism*, 14.

16. Kitcher, *Abusing Science*, 6.

Thompson's career, when he described theistic evolution – which by definition affirms God's existence – as “a false, God-denying, Holy Spirit-denying, Jesus-denying faith.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, neither ACU nor the professors denied the books were assigned, and although Reeves and others characterized their purpose as strengthening students' faith,<sup>18</sup> Thompson's argument that their pro-evolution statements went unchallenged does not appear to have been disputed.

### **Eyewitness Reports**

The question of what happened in the classrooms turns on the testimony of eyewitnesses – the faculty members and their students. Among the latter, Thompson primarily cited two testimonies. In interviews, both women confirmed the general thrust of Thompson's allegations, but they also raised questions about the way he collected their accounts.

#### **Lisa Fitts**

Lisa Fitts Powell confirmed she was “surprised at the extent to which [evolution] was taught at ACU” when she took a class from Manis as a visiting high school student in 1985. “Every other word out of his mouth in that class was evolution,” she recalled. “He loved teaching it. ... He was teaching it as if it were fact and that he believed it.”<sup>19</sup> Thompson, using what he described as Fitts's testimony, quoted Manis as telling the class, “I'm an elder in the church, and I believe in evolution. I'm going to teach it to you, and you are going to believe it as well.”<sup>20</sup> This, however, is inconsistent with what Fitts

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17. Bert Thompson, *Theistic Evolution* (Shreveport, LA: Lambert Book House, 1977), 6 and 70.

18. Perry Reeves, letter to Bert Thompson, April 12, 1985, Reeves collection.

19. Lisa Powell, Lake Stevens, WA, telephone interview: Oct. 13, 2013, cf. Thompson, *Myth*, 69-70. Notes in possession of the author.

20. Thompson, *Myth*, 69.

actually described. As reported in a letter by Mark Scott, Fitts said Manis had told the class “he was an elder in the church and that he believes in evolution and it is alright (*sic*) if they do”<sup>21</sup> – still likely problematic to Thompson, but different in tone and meaning.

In a similar vein, Thompson in his book described Fitts’s complaints to ACU’s administration, including a tape-recorded session with Bob Hunter, the university’s vice president. However, decades later, Powell said she was not a willing complainant, contradicting the book’s implication; Powell said she was dating Scott at the time, and the 26-year-old “kept quizzing me about that class.” She remembers him then “dragging” the 17-year-old high school student to Hunter’s office to complain. Powell called the experience “absolutely horrifying. ... It was one of those things I tried to block out.”<sup>22</sup> Scott himself later told Thompson, “Even though Lisa and I were dating at the time, it was like pulling teeth to even try to get her to speak to the administration ... but when she did, she was great.”<sup>23</sup>

#### Brenda Lobley

Likewise, Brenda Lobley – a 1984 ACU graduate whose mother, Rowena Lobley, had written Thompson in September 1985 to complain about Brenda’s report of evolution being taught without refutation – said she was “mortified” to read her name in Thompson’s book, even though she believed he had correctly captured her frustration at not hearing opposing viewpoints to evolutionary theory in Manis’s or Williams’s classes. The impetus for her mother’s actions, she said, was when Lobley was assigned a paper on “the myth of Genesis” in 1984 and mentioned it to her. “Evolution was taught,” Lobley

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21. Mark Scott, letter to Bert Thompson, Aug. 18, 1985, Thompson collection: 2.

22. Powell, interview, 2013.

23. Mark Scott, letter to Bert Thompson, [spring 1986], Thompson collection: 2.

said. “I kept waiting on the other side of the coin.” Like Powell, Lobley said she did not realize Thompson would publish her comments and said, contrary to Thompson’s implications, that she did not have her faith shaken by what she learned in ACU’s science classes. Although Thompson quoted Lobley as unsure “the man [Ken Williams] believed in God, to be quite honest,” she denied ever saying that. Williams was actually one of her favorite professors, she said, adding: “My mom and Bert Thompson poured gasoline on a fire that should never have been a fire.”<sup>24</sup>

#### Other Students

A review of contemporary testimony from other students presents a muddled, even incoherent view of what they heard in Manis’s and Williams’s classes. On the one hand, the *Optimist* defended the university and the professors, citing the failure of other students to confirm the accusations. “We couldn’t find anybody else who backed up Mark Scott’s story,” said the 1985-1986 editor, Cindi Patterson Nellis.<sup>25</sup> In a series of excerpted evaluations run alongside its Dec. 13 editorial, the *Optimist* quoted two students saying evolution was not presented enough and none claiming to be troubled by its presentation.<sup>26</sup> In dozens of letters to the editor, the vast majority of students defended the professors, capped by a Feb. 16, 1986, letter from twenty-two biology students: “We all stand behind the university in stating that these accusations are false. These professors

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24. Brenda Lobley, Weatherford, TX, telephone interview: Nov. 10, 2013, cf. Thompson, *Myth*, 66-68. Notes in possession of the author.

25. Cindi Nellis, Oak Lawn, IL, telephone interview: Oct. 8, 2013. Notes in possession of author.

26. “Evolution,” *Optimist*, Dec. 13, 1985: A-2.

are not teaching the theory of organic evolution as fact. ... The two professors have repeatedly expressed to the students their belief in God as the creator of all things.”<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, former students such as Bruce Woodall and Kevin McLeod said they learned “the macro-evolution model of soupy seas to Soupy Sales” at ACU without refutation. Woodall said that although Williams “violently criticized” the notion of human evolution from an apelike ancestor, “more often than not, evolution is taught directly from the textbooks without a personal expression of belief in God or counter arguments.” A 1985 alumnus, Woodall wrote Thompson to argue that ACU biology professors had an obligation to counter evolution, especially in undergraduate classes. “Unfortunately, this doesn’t happen often enough and is dangerous in the context of evolutionary thought.”<sup>28</sup>

McLeod, author of the “Soupy Sales” letter, said he was so troubled by what he believed to be the theistic evolution taught at ACU that shortly after his graduation in 1976, he sought explanation from Charles Ivey and Clark Stevens, then the chairs of the physics and biology departments, respectively. He enclosed their responses in a 1986 letter to Reeves. Stevens described believing a form of micro-evolution in which “major groups” remain fixed and humans were created separately from animals; Ivey embraced the scientific consensus of an ancient cosmos: “If the Universe is as young as 9 billion years, we will all be shaken,” he wrote. “If it is younger, then we will be truly

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27. Tim Jackson et al., “22 Biology Students Support University Stand,” *Optimist*: Feb. 16, 1986, A-3.

28. Bruce Woodall, letter to Bert Thompson, April 1, 1985, Reeves collection. Woodall is another example of a student agreeing with Thompson’s concerns while objecting to his manner. He initially wrote to Thompson then later withdrew permission for Thompson to use his letter. “I do not wish my position on this matter to be misrepresented,” he wrote to Thompson, “so I cannot allow it to be represented by you” (Woodall, letter to Thompson, Nov. 25, 1985, Gray collection). Thompson alleged ACU intimidated Woodall into changing his mind (Thompson, *Myth*, 19).

astounded.” McLeod told Reeves, “I attended ACU and learned evolution in my biology, chemistry and physics classes ... without comment, discussion, without refutation, alternative, and certainly without mention of creation science.”<sup>29</sup> McLeod forwarded his correspondence to Thompson, adding that it was “apparant (*sic*) that ACU has been caught with their pants completely down upon this matter and that no one has the testosterone to stand for right.”<sup>30</sup>

The largest collection of student response came first in May 1985, when students in three classes Scott attended – Manis’s Biology Seminar, Williams’s Botany, and James Nichols’s Principles of Biology – were required to give their assessment of how evolution was presented; and second in the winter of 1985-1986, when the board subcommittee investigating Thompson’s allegations reached out to dozens of former ACU biology students to get their feedback. The responses, which relied on the impressions of students who entered the classes with different bases of knowledge, varied widely. None was anonymous.<sup>31</sup>

Among the May 1985 evaluations, a picture emerges that the professors were not the strident advocates for evolution that Scott and Thompson described; however, it also reveals professors who taught the tenets of evolution while rejecting creationist alternatives and declining to offer significant rebuttals to the scientific theory.

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29. Kevin McLeod, letter to Perry Reeves, Feb. 20, 1986, Reeves collection. Enclosures included Clark Stevens, letter to Kevin McLeod, Feb. 18, 1980, and R. C. Ivey, letter to Kevin McLeod, Nov. 10, 1980.

30. Kevin McLeod, letter to Bert Thompson, Feb. 20, 1986, Gray collection. In response to McLeod’s letters, Bill Teague, letter to Kevin McLeod, Feb. 28, 1986, Gray collection, replied: “It is my belief that things are much improved and that students today are receiving the contra-material so clearly important to their development.” There is no evidence that students received any such material.

31. Without speculating about how the lack of anonymity affected students and alumni as they gave their opinions, it should be noted that effects were possible, even likely, and the potential for bias should thus be kept in mind.

In Nichols's class, Trent Davidson said he learned "just how important evolution is in life," and Jennafer (*sic*) Richie said Nichols "emphasized that Creation didn't necessarily occur in 7-24 hr. days." In Manis's class, Steven Trapp said the in-class discussion "always painted creationists as the bad guys," while Joel Tidwell said Manis "taught strictly from a Christian point of view" but "did not deny that aspects of evolution had occurred." In Williams's course, Rod Conley "could not believe my ears" because of the amount of evolution taught at ACU, but Ken Russell said "the profs are almost afraid to deal with it." Even so, Jill Yarbrough said Williams "stood up for evolution," while Michelle Marie Jackson said Williams told the class "we did not have to believe in it."<sup>32</sup> To make matters more confusing, three of the students, including Trapp, were among the twenty-two students who claimed that "at no time have we seen either professor teach evolution as fact."<sup>33</sup>

Months later, Dub Orr, Roy Willingham, and Bill Young called former students to get their perspectives. According to the men's memos to each other – which redacted the students' names, identifying them by their graduate school – the feedback was no less mixed. Sampling from Orr's notes on those who had taken Biology Seminar from Manis in 1984, one student said that "in no way did Dr. Manis advocate evolution;" another said, "Manis was being careful in stating his own position" and "indicated that aspects of evolution were true." Still another student came away from a class in which Manis assigned *Ever Since Darwin* by Stephen Jay Gould believing the professor agreed with

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32. Student evaluations, Reeves collection. The names of the courses and Scott's presence in each indicate these are the May 1985 evaluations referenced by Thompson, *Myth*, 60. Scott's evaluations in no way resemble his classmates'. He called Nichols "an evolutionist," claimed Manis "obviously, emotionally supports evolution," and said Williams "saturated" the course with his "pet topic."

33. Jackson et al., "22 Biology Students."

Gould's views. Even so, she said, she "was never in doubt" about Manis's Christian faith. A student who had taken Williams's botany class said he "shook her up considerably with what she considered to be outrageous statements in the classroom," which Williams subsequently chalked up to an effort to wake up his students "and make them mad." Another student, however, "recalled no references to theory of evolution" in the class.<sup>34</sup>

### The Professors

The wide variety of interpretations held by the students and alumni can be explained largely by the professors' own caution on the subject, carried down from the careful teaching of professors such as Jimmy Throneberry. Reeves said he told faculty members "repeatedly" to "be very circumspect with what you did so people didn't misunderstand." To that end, Williams avoided putting his beliefs down on paper. "He would never leave trails anywhere for people to pin him down," even though "a large number of us" in the sciences were "uncomfortable" with the young-earth creationism Thompson demanded they teach.<sup>35</sup>

In a rare exception to this practice, Williams in a hand-written memo objected to releasing a statement to Thompson: "Things change and for me to say otherwise would be telling my student (*sic*) untruths and would make me even more despicable than those who refuse to acknowledge scientific fact."<sup>36</sup> Even decades after the controversy, Williams remained circumspect. Asked if he taught evolution in his classroom, Williams

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34. Dub Orr, "Report on calls made by Dub Orr to former students," memo to Roy Willingham and Bill Young, Jan. 9, 1986, Gray collection. As Orr, interview: Abilene, Nov. 13, 2013, put it: "You're talking about several thousand students, all of whom feel and remember differently. You end up just doing the best you can." Notes in possession of the author.

35. Perry Reeves, interview: Abilene, Oct. 23, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

36. Ken Williams, memo to C. G. Gray, Oct. 8, 1985, Gray collection.

replied: “I guess that sort of depends on how you look at it. I taught a lot about gene flow. Genes flow; that’s a fact.”<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, Nichols acknowledged the use of “code words” to smooth over the teaching of evolution in a culture deeply suspicious of it. In a letter to Thompson, Mark Scott called Nichols an “evolutionist” based on the professor’s misgivings about young-earth creationism: “He made the statement in class that he thought that the belief of spontaneous generation was a hard view to stand on, but he also said that he believed that the literal 24 hour, six day creation of Genesis has also a particularly hard view to stand on.”<sup>38</sup> As he read Thompson’s accusations of teaching evolution without refutation in 1986, Nichols said he thought, “Yeah, that’s what we were doing.”<sup>39</sup>

Manis died in 2006, and his family declined to be interviewed for this study. Nevertheless, he made his views clear in a number of memos and notes, beginning with comments on Scott’s tests in early February 1985, describing an ancient earth “based upon firm, incontrovertible evidence.”<sup>40</sup> On another test, he wrote, “Our simple objective is to analyze and understand evolution in all its aspects, as an example of scientific thought and take it for what it is worth,” after comparing it to the well-established theories of blood circulation and geological sedimentation.<sup>41</sup> In a Feb. 2 memo, Manis

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37. Ken Williams, interview, Abilene: Oct. 11, 2013. Notes in possession of the author. Cf. Paul Madden, “Gene Flow,” in *Magill’s Encyclopedia of Science: Plant Life*, ed. Bryan D. Ness (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2003), 483-84, defines it as “a recurrent exchange of genes between populations” that is one of the “especially” important additions to evolutionary theory since Darwin.

38. Mark Scott, letter to Bert Thompson, May 13, 1985: Thompson collection, 6-7. Nichols, now professor of biology at ACU, suggests personality differences for his “really quite amazing” absence from the book – he is well known on campus for his low-key, conciliatory demeanor.

39. James Nichols, interview, Abilene: Sept. 12, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

40. Mark Scott, test answers, Feb. 7, 1985: Thompson collection.

41. Mark Scott, test answers, [Spring 1985]: Thompson collection.

told Scott, “I’ve traveled this road hundreds of times in the last 32 years or so; all your reservations and objections are, quite frankly, tired old territory to me. Bear with us and you will see why during the course of the semester.”<sup>42</sup>

In a series of memos written after Thompson’s letters arrived, Manis described his “approach to biology” as “quite typical,”<sup>43</sup> and said he would not deny “natural selection, which has plenty of evidence.”<sup>44</sup> In a statement of defense prepared for the Board of Trustees, Manis defended “the validity of these [evolutionary] models” and warned against “censorship of ideas common to the scientific community.”<sup>45</sup> More than six months after the Board of Trustees rejected Thompson’s accusations, Manis told one of the investigators, “A refutation of evolution from science is impossible.”<sup>46</sup> Finally, in a handwritten attempt to explain his beliefs to former Baker Heights congregant L. D. Swift, Manis said:

I do believe in change, and nonrandom gene shifts in populations, that brand or type of evolution. ... But I have never believed that the universe, life, man and what we call nature ever made itself by an evolutionary process. The Bible says God made it all, and I’ve always believed that. ... Our teaching at ACU has never presented evolution as an explanation for the world – it has been and is being presented as a body of scientific thought supported by a body of scientific evidence. As theory goes, there is no decisive evidence against any of these [evolutionary] viewpoints.<sup>47</sup>

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42. Archie Manis, “Seminar on Evolution, and Us,” memo to Mark Scott, Feb. 2, 1985, Thompson collection.

43. Archie Manis, memo to Perry Reeves, Aug. 16, 1985, Reeves collection.

44. Archie Manis, memo to Perry Reeves, Sept. 20, 1985, Reeves collection.

45. Archie Manis, “For My Defense,” Aug. 29, 1985, Reeves collection.

46. Archie Manis, letter to Bill Young: Aug. 30, 1986, Reeves collection, 1. The full quote is: “I’ve said that a refutation of evolution from science is impossible, but that refutation from religion is indeed possible. I still believe that.” He then launches into a lengthy rebuttal of creation science.

47. L. D. and Dana Swift, “Statement of Witness,” 5.1, Gray collection.

The overall picture painted by these comments from Williams, Nichols, and especially Manis helps explain why their students had such divergent views on what they had been taught: The professors taught a version of evolution that fell somewhat short of a full-fledged Darwinism in which all living things, including humans, descended from a single common ancestor – but they nevertheless held that evolutionary change was a significant contributor to biological diversity, and saw the primary components of neo-Darwinism – natural selection wedded to Mendelian genetics – as scientifically sound, especially compared to creationist alternatives. Thus the comments help clarify that while they likely did not advocate evolution as an all-encompassing philosophy or even as a biological process that included human descent from an ape-like ancestor, Manis and Williams did indeed teach evolutionary theory without rebuttal to an extent that Thompson and his allies would have found alarming.

### **Conclusion about Allegations**

Based on the three categories of allegations discussed above – handouts portraying evolution as fact and Genesis as myth, unrebutted pro-evolution textbooks, and eyewitness testimony – this study reaches the conclusion that Bert Thompson's accusations against ACU were largely correct. In fact, the university made little or no effort to rebut the specific pieces of evidence Thompson provided to support his allegations. Although the questions about the handouts were easily answered as requiring greater academic context to be properly understood, the other two arguments are confirmed by the available evidence. ACU professors, although doing so to a more limited extent than Thompson implied, nevertheless taught the core concepts of

evolutionary theory without rebuttal and rejected creation science as a valid alternative. ACU as an institution, however, did not publicly acknowledge this.

### **Response: Reliance on Semantics**

ACU had two goals in its communication during the controversy, Bacon wrote at the time: “1. To establish the truth and make it public without destroying the critic or the professors. 2. To respond to inquiries in an open and direct manner to the greatest degree possible without compromising the integrity of the professors or the university by allowing an outside individual or group to dictate the university’s policy, curriculum, or philosophy.”<sup>48</sup> Those stated goals notwithstanding, the university in many ways benefitted from the semantic ambiguity that surrounds the notions of evolution, creation, theory, and fact. Such ambiguity, although it hurt ACU in some ways, allowed the university to deny Thompson’s allegations while still maintaining a measure of the truthfulness and academic integrity it sought to portray.

Orr, author of the Board of Trustees’ investigation report, said he intentionally chose the “ambiguous words” populating ACU’s response,<sup>49</sup> which emphasized the professors’ rejection of “advocacy” in their presentation of evolution. Strictly speaking, this appears to have been accurate. The student evaluations indicate Manis and Williams generally were careful not to advocate for evolutionary concepts, even as they did not rebut them. Thus the report used strong anti-evolution language by declaiming advocacy

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48. Mann, “Controversy,” 17.

49. Orr, interview, 2013: “I chose those ambiguous words.”

without acknowledging the validity of Thompson's evidence regarding a lack of rebuttal.<sup>50</sup>

Thompson himself left the university this opening. Although the meat of his argument, as described above, was the presentation of evolution without refutation via handouts, textbooks, and in-class statements relayed by students, Thompson consistently equated this *presentation* with *advocacy*. In the initial questionnaires sent to Manis and Williams, Thompson first asked what the professors personally believed, then asked about the practices in their classrooms. In succession, Thompson asked whether any "written materials" handed out in class "suggest or teach" that evolution "is correct and true" (n.20), whether the professors refuted evolution in their classes (n.21), whether they presented evidence in favor of creationism (n.22) or against it (n.23), whether they used textbooks "written by humanists and/or evolutionists" such as Montagu and Kitcher (n.24), and whether they used those textbooks "in order to **refute** the positions contained therein" (n.25). Based on the evidence described in this chapter, had the professors answered these questions, they would have affirmed the existence of the handouts and the use of the textbooks while denying their rebuttal and the presentation of pro-creationist evidence. In Question 26, however, Thompson asked whether the textbooks were used "to **advocate** the positions contained therein."<sup>51</sup> To this question alone did the university provide a public answer in its institutional statement of Feb. 17, 1986: No.<sup>52</sup>

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50. In his personal correspondence with the university's critics, Orr was strikingly consistent in his use of the "advocacy" language. For example, W. C. Orr, letter to Harry Hass, Nov. 3, 1986, Thompson collection: "I am convinced that Dr. Manis and Dr. Williams do not advocate either theistic or organic evolution in their classes."

51. Thompson, *Myth*, 29-30. All emphasis in original.

52. "Institutional Statement," Feb. 17, 1986, signed by all members of the Board of Trustees and ACU President Bill Teague, Point 1: "Abilene Christian University does not, has not and will not advocate

By linking refutation and advocacy, Thompson left an opening for ACU to deny the latter and allow audiences to presume denial of the former. Thus ACU's president, Bill Teague, could say in a speech to the university at Chapel on Feb. 7, 1986: "Students in the classes ... overwhelmingly understood the material later offered as evidence of the professors' position to be nothing more than teaching techniques, not an advocacy of anti-biblical philosophy."<sup>53</sup> Although the teaching techniques were precisely what Thompson was questioning, his conflation of failure-to-rebut and intent-to-advocate allowed Teague to deny the allegations *in toto*.<sup>54</sup>

Two further examples in ACU's public response show the extent to which the university relied on popular-level semantic confusion in its denial of Thompson's allegations. As shown above, in responding to Thompson's heavy emphasis on Manis's "hymn, myth" note in a handout, the university relied on the academic definition of "myth" and denied the more popular definition.<sup>55</sup> However, in asserting that the professors had not advocated "evolutionary theory ... as fact," the trustees appeared to rely on a popular definition of "theory" that conveys less certainty than does the scientific definition.<sup>56</sup> The investigatory committee referred repeatedly to "the theory of organic

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evolutionary theory, either organic or theistic, as fact." Point 2 endorses the investigative report compiled by Orr, Willingham, and Young, "which concludes that ... evolutionary theory is not advocated as fact at the University." The statement also affirms "the literal creation of man." Copies of the statement can be found in the Reeves, Gray, Lemmons, and Thompson collections.

53. Bill Teague, Chapel speech, Feb. 7, 1986, audio recording, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University. Transcribed by the author.

54. Kevin McLeod, letter to Bill Teague, undated but received in Teague's office Feb. 24, 1986, Gray collection, made the argument clear: "I was taught evolution in my classes at ACU without alternative. You have not been wrongly accused."

55. See nn.10-11 above.

56. E.g., National Academy of Science, "Is Evolution a Theory or Fact?" [nas.edu/evolution/TheoryOrFact.html](http://nas.edu/evolution/TheoryOrFact.html): "The formal scientific definition of theory is quite different from the everyday meaning of the word. It refers to a comprehensive explanation of some aspect of nature that is supported by

evolution” in its findings, including the statement that both professors in interviews “unquestionably repudiated organic evolution and the theory’s particular reference to the evolutionary creation of man.”<sup>57</sup> From one perspective, this was true: Neither professor appeared to accept human evolution from an ape-like ancestor, and to the extent “the theory of organic evolution” includes the evolution of all creatures including humans, they could indeed repudiate it. The impression, however, is that Manis and Williams rejected evolution as a whole – although Manis actually said it could not be refuted, and Williams described its major components as factual.<sup>58</sup>

In the second example of beneficial semantic confusion, the one-page advertisement titled “We Believe” told parents the university taught students an “inerrant” Bible – language carrying a connotation<sup>59</sup> that did not necessarily reflect the views of the ACU faculty<sup>60</sup> but was truthful under a broader definition.<sup>61</sup>

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a vast body of evidence.” As an example of how much work the word “fact” did in some defenses of ACU, see trustee Robert J. Hall, open letter, Feb. 22, 1986, Gray collection: “As God is my witness and as my word is my bond, ACU has been wrongly accused of teaching organic evolution as fact. No one in ACU has ever, does not now, and will not in the future teach evolution, either organic or theistic, as fact.”

57. “Abilene Christian University Investigative Report: Prepared by a Special Committee of the Abilene Christian University Board of Trustees,” Feb. 13, 1986, Lemmons collection, 6.

58. See nn.36-37, 46 above.

59. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, [reformed.org/documents/icbi.html](http://reformed.org/documents/icbi.html), describes the Bible as “without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation.”

60. E.g., J. D. Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), 191-92, uses 2 Peter’s “day is as a thousand years” language to argue that Genesis 1 makes no statements about the age of the earth or length of creation, a statement for which Thompson himself accused Thomas of “compromising the creation account” [Bert Thompson, “What’s Wrong with Theistic Evolution?” (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 2001), [www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990](http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990)]. Although Thomas’ essay indicates the ACU professor thinks he accepts a literal, inerrant Bible, Thompson and his allies had long made clear that the standard was six 24-hour days of creation – a test for inerrancy most ACU professors could not pass, the university’s adoption of the concept notwithstanding.

61. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2011), accessed Dec. 3, 2013, at [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inerrancy](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inerrancy) defines “inerrancy” as simply “exemption from error,” which allows room for error-free metaphorical readings of Genesis.

Bacon, who as Teague's assistant compiled the notes from the three board-appointed investigators, rejected any "intentional deception." However, she said the investigation report's weight depended on the reader's definition of "theory," and that ACU's response contained "a certain amount of parsing."<sup>62</sup> Alumnus and former faculty member James Womack agreed. "I don't know that I teach 'water is wet' as a fact, so I maybe could say that, too," he said. "There's a lot of semantics there. Not everybody thinks of a theory the way what we do in science."<sup>63</sup> For his part, Nichols likened the response to a hypothetical scenario he proposes to students in his bioethics class: "I tell Farmer Brown I am a creationist. That's a true statement, but I recognize that I'm misleading him because he's going to get off the phone with the idea that I believe something I do not believe."<sup>64</sup>

### **Evolving Responses**

The university's choice of response was not the only one available. Indeed, records and interviews indicate board members and faculty advised Teague and other administrators to adopt an approach that rejected the basis for Thompson's allegations and acknowledged that Christians both on and off campus accepted tenets of evolution while believing in God's creative agency. "Just say nobody knows," Orr said he counseled Teague. "When you hit the pearly gates, ask the first angel you see."<sup>65</sup>

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62. Cheryl Mann Bacon, interview, Abilene: Oct. 16, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

63. Womack, interview, 2016. He graduated from ACU in 1963 and won the university's Outstanding Alumnus of the Year Award in 2006 for his work in genetics. See Tamara Thompson, "Outstanding Alumnus of the Year James Womack," *ACU Today* (Winter 2007): 19-20.

64. Nichols, interview, 2013. The import, of course, is that the farmer would think Nichols rejects evolution in favor of creationism while Nichols believes God created through evolution.

65. Orr, interview, 2013.

Likewise, Arlie Hoover, the prolific anti-evolution writer who was professor of history at ACU, advised Teague in May 1985, less than two months after Thompson's letters had arrived, that the university should tell the accuser: "Once a person announces his belief in the eternity of our personal, transcendent God and the contingency of matter, he is free to believe what evidence may suggest about the age of the universe and the days of Genesis 1. Why? Because these latter are open questions."<sup>66</sup> An unsigned document that appears also to have been written by Hoover, based on similar shorthand and vocabulary, was titled, "Our position should be," with the following statement in all-caps: "If you can prove by proper exegesis that the Bible requires a certain position on this question, we will immediately adopt that position." The document also advises the university to "avoid a debate," which Thompson could use to "make you look bad in the eyes of some brethren. Even our policy of silence won't work forever, since silence indicates to many people that you have something to hide." A literal six-day creation and other similar positions, although widely believed by ACU faculty, "are open questions and should not be made tests of orthodoxy."<sup>67</sup>

The document's warning about the university's silence proved prescient. By September, documents in C. G. Gray's archives indicate ACU was working on a template response to the increasing number of queries it was receiving. The letter draft, signed by biology chair John Little, expressed an openness to evolution:

The members of the department are also students of nature and observe that the potential for change is present in both plants and animals. This is easily seen when one looks at the practices and results of plant and animal breeding. ... The same mechanisms for change require more time when left to natural processes.

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66. A. J. Hoover, memo to William J. Teague, May 10, 1985, Gray collection.

67. "Our position should be," unsigned and undated document, Gray collection. It is filed alongside the Hoover memo in the "February 21, 1985-October 1985" folder.

These slower changes are evolutionary, but are within the genetic guidelines of Creation.<sup>68</sup>

The draft was dated Sept. 6. Another, dated four days later, was initialed or signed by Little, Manis, Williams, Nichols, and other members of the ACU faculty. The language of Sept. 6 was gone; in its place was a more aggressive denial:

The Genesis account of Creation is the only account of Creation that is advocated by our faculty. ... These good people have been treated unfairly by the unsubstantiated testimony of one or two students who take classroom comments and materials out of context and sequence in order to fashion an allegation of impropriety. ... All who have accepted and transmitted these unsubstantiated allegations owe an apology to the men who have been besmirched by these attacks.<sup>69</sup>

An undated third letter replaced the last paragraph seeking an apology with one restating the university's mission statement and assuring the audience that "our Board of Trustees, the administration, and the faculty are dedicated to this mission, and everything we do is directed toward achieving this end."<sup>70</sup> At the same time, Gray spoke to faculty about the controversy, reading a statement on Sept. 12, the day before he and other administrators met with Thompson on campus. "Some of our faculty have been unjustly charged with teaching organic evolution as fact," he said. "There is no basis for this charge, and we are taking a firm position in refuting the charges."<sup>71</sup> The tone was therefore set. By the end of the month, Teague was sending responses to letters he received with the following statement: "We believe in the Biblical account of creation. We do teach our students about evolution, but only so that our students may know what

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68. Draft letter template, Sept. 6, 1985, Gray collection.

69. "Tentative draft," Sept. 10, 1985, Gray collection.

70. "Dear \_\_\_\_\_:" undated, Gray collection.

71. C. G. Gray, "Statement made at faculty meeting," Sept. 12, 1985, Gray collection.

they will encounter in the world. We in no way accept, or believe, organic evolution as a theory of origins.”<sup>72</sup>

In January 1986, a letter signed by Alumni Association president Jerry Strader was sent to alumni inquiring or criticizing the university in response to its year-end solicitation campaign. “These men believe with all their heart the Genesis account of creation,” the letter said. Although still six weeks away from the Board of Trustees’ acceptance of the Orr committee’s report, Strader nevertheless wrote that the investigators “concluded that the teachers in question did not advocate organic evolution in or out of the classroom.”<sup>73</sup> Individual board members, both before and after the university’s official response, tended to take a still harder line against evolution, thus providing even firmer denials. Among them was none other than Reuel Lemmons, the originator of the 1964 textbook controversy who had done so much to oppose evolution as editor of the *Firm Foundation* and who still sat on the ACU board. “The matter has been thoroughly investigated by competent people,” he wrote, “and found to be totally, completely and absolutely false.”<sup>74</sup> Shortly after the release of the board report, he lent

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72. Bill Teague, letter to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wall, Sept. 30, 1985, Gray collection. According to Mann, “Controversy,” 17, Teague read every letter he received and either responded to them personally or assigned a response by phone or letter to others. Gray often received the assignment to call a letter-writer, and letters to Teague in the Gray collection often have notations attached of the time and date of Gray’s call – but without more than the most cursory of comments about how the call went.

73. Jerry Strader, letter to Gail Gray, Jan. 2, 1986, Gray collection. Identical letters were sent to John and Michelle Scott, and Jerry and Rowena Loble, even though the Scotts’ letter accused ACU of a cover-up (an accusation the Strader form letter did not address) and the Lobleys already had been communicating with ACU faculty and administrators – not to mention Thompson – about Brenda’s experiences.

74. Reuel Lemmons, letter to Harry Hass, Nov. 18, 1986, Thompson collection.

his name to a fundraising letter assuring parents they “can have confidence that ACU is committed to Christ and to educational excellence.”<sup>75</sup>

One indication that ACU could have mounted the aggressive defense suggested by Hoover and Orr is that such a defense actually took place in an apparently unsolicited campaign by the previously unaffiliated Kentucky lawyer Charles Trevathan.<sup>76</sup> In letters sent across the country in 1986, Trevathan declaimed his ability to know how God created the earth and attacked Thompson and Jackson for their tone and rhetoric. The campaign started with a letter to his wife’s childhood congregation, East Main Church of Christ in Murfreesboro, Tenn., which had criticized ACU in its bulletin. “Were your devastating conclusion correct,” Trevathan wrote, “one would, indeed, be at a loss for adequately disconsolate words. It would be something on the order of being told that your saintly grandmother was a child-pornographer.” Trevathan launched into a lengthy defense of ACU, describing “our brotherhood’s latest bout with extremism” and dubbing it the “24-Hour Day Creation Controversy,” in which *Is Genesis Myth?* was a “monument of molehill to mountain transitions.” As for the questions about evolution, Trevathan dismissed the basis for Thompson’s arguments:

I’m no kind of biologist and have no time to become one, but I really can’t believe that questions about the length of creation days are worthy of such excitement of the general brotherhood. Let people who enjoy that get off in a room somewhere and have a good time. ... This is not the stuff by which we need to be testing fellowship and faithfulness.<sup>77</sup>

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75. Reuel Lemmons, letter to “Christian Friend,” May 9, 1986, Thompson collection.

76. Trevathan in 1987 was hired by ACU to serve as its general counsel, later becoming vice president for campus life and eventually instructor of sociology. See his entry in Marler and Anthony, *AnswerBook*. Full disclosure: The author was a student of Trevathan’s and considered him a friend before his death in 2004.

77. Charles Trevathan, letter to Gary Colley and elders, East Main Church of Christ, June 17, 1986, Lemmons collection: 2-5.

The circle of letters widened from the congregation to include Thompson and Jackson, then to additional small congregations and the so-called “brotherhood journals” that seemed to support the book, and finally to the presidents of all Church of Christ-affiliated four-year colleges, whom Trevathan encouraged to publicly support ACU and condemn Thompson.<sup>78</sup> Trevathan even proposed a debate over the tone of the book, but Thompson and Jackson declined.<sup>79</sup>

In his letter to the editors of the *Firm Foundation*, *Gospel Advocate*, *Christian Chronicle*, *Contending for the Faith*, and *Spiritual Sword*, Trevathan said he had received questions about whether he was “as ignorant on the subject of evolution as I appear to be. The answer to that question is – yes.” He rejected Jackson’s accusation that he was a “closet-evolutionist unwilling to open the door on my views.” Rather, he said, “I primarily decide that this issue is not, in my judgment, a biblically critical issue so as to justify a breach of fellowship between those who disagree upon it, and I definitely decide that this is not an issue on which disagreement would justify the outlandish accusations of Dr. Thompson’s book.”<sup>80</sup>

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78. ACU did eventually receive a letter of support signed by the Harding Graduate School of Religion faculty: “We wish to express our appreciation for Abilene’s long-standing contribution to our brotherhood, our support in this pressing time, and our confidence in your ongoing commitment to the ideals of Christian education” (Harding Graduate School of Religion, letter to William J. Teague and Faculty, Nov. 20, 1986, Gray collection). On the other side, Freed-Hardeman College not only continued inviting Thompson to lecture during the controversy, but sold *Is Genesis Myth?* in their campus bookstore, something FHC professor Dwayne Wilson found “obviously unethical.” He added: “I rather suspect that some of the motivation for their actions is the warped belief that somehow F-H would benefit from the criticism of ACU” ([Dwayne Wilson], letter to Fred Bailey, Feb. 14, 1986, Gray collection).

79. See Charles Trevathan, letter exchanges with Wayne Jackson and Gary Colley: July 2, 1986 ff.; letter exchanges with William Cline, et al.: Sept. 2, 1986 ff.; letter to the presidents of Columbia Christian, et al.: Oct. 20, 1986; and letter to Furman Kearley: Nov. 5, 1986, Lemmons collection.

80. Charles Trevathan, letter to William Cline, et al., Oct. 17, 1986, Lemmons collection: 3, 8-10.

A similar, smaller defense was carried out by James Womack, who in addition to teaching Thompson at ACU was also a colleague of his at Texas A&M University. Womack told Ken Williams he would “finally come out of the closet a little bit” to defend ACU, sending a letter to twenty like-minded people encouraging them to support the university. “I seriously doubt that any competent biologist could teach at A.C.U. under the conditions Bert demands,” Womack wrote. “I cannot embrace his tactics and am fearful for the future of A.C.U. if he is allowed to tell anyone how to teach biology.” Teague was grateful for the offer, Womack recalled, but “I was never asked to speak directly on the issues.”<sup>81</sup>

Ian Fair said he believed Trevathan’s letters blunted the attacks on ACU,<sup>82</sup> and Bacon referenced Teague’s gratitude toward Trevathan.<sup>83</sup> On Thompson’s side, Trevathan clearly had some effect. Abilene supporter Cleo Reeder, referring to an earlier exchange in which Thompson had sounded pessimistic about the success of the campaign against ACU, asked in the spring of 1987: “Did lawyer Chas. Trevathan injure us?”<sup>84</sup>

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81. James Womack, College Station, TX, telephone interview: Jan. 5, 2016, notes in possession of the author; Jim Womack, letter to Ken [Williams], undated; and Womack, letter to “Fellow Christian,” Feb. 24, 1986, Gray collection. See also Womack, letter to Bill Teague, Nov. 26, 1985, Gray collection.

82. Ian Fair, McKinney, TX, telephone interview: Oct. 14, 2013. Notes in possession of the author: “When Dr. Trevathan got into this, it almost died shortly after that. No question that it helped. Dr. Trevathan was a person who was well known by a lot of people. East of the Mississippi, he was very well known and well respected.”

83. Bacon, interview, 2013: “I was in the office, standing there when he got the letter from Charles Trevathan. We had no idea who that guy was. [Teague said] ‘This is great. Who is this guy?’ He’d read a little more, and he’d laugh. He was just so encouraged by this person who’s not an alumnus, never been to Abilene, Texas, and has risen to our defense. ... [Trevathan’s campaign] distracted Thompson. It gave Thompson something else he had to deal with. If Thompson had to spend his correspondence with Charles Trevathan, he wasn’t spending his hours stirring up something else.”

84. Cleo Reeder, letter to Bert Thompson, March 23, 1987, Thompson collection. Thompson did not save his response, which is referenced obliquely in a follow-up letter from Reeder.

Even if he did, the university at no point echoed Trevathan's argument that the method of creation was something over which faithful Christians could disagree.

### **Possible Motivations**

The evidence shows that between the arrival of Thompson's first letters in March and his arrival on campus to meet with administrators in September, the university's official response turned away from the suggestions of Orr and Hoover, and the eventual approach of Trevathan, and toward a flat denial of the charges. This section explores some possible explanations for that decision, and the next section explores the effects it had on the controversy and its principals.

According to ACU officials involved in the controversy, the university's response was driven by several factors: 1) the extremism of the accusations, 2) a sense that ACU's existence as a credible university was at stake, and 3) the public relations maxim to make bad news old news fast.

*1. Extremism of the accusations* – ACU officials reckoned Thompson's acerbic tone and hard-line position – tarring as evolutionists otherwise conservative Christians who disagreed with his approach to Genesis 1<sup>85</sup> – would isolate him from otherwise concerned parents, alumni, and ministers. “Eventually people saw him for what he was,” Gray said. “His attack on us damaged him.”<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Fair said, “His purpose was to bully ACU. The only person who got bullied was Bert Thompson.”<sup>87</sup> Even Furman

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85. Manis, though he believed in the basics of evolutionary theory, was “so conservative, he squeaked,” according to Nichols, interview, 2013. Likewise, as previously discussed, Woodall, letter to Thompson, April 1, 1985, said Williams did not believe humans evolved from apelike ancestors. See also the conclusions above based on student testimonies.

86. C. G. Gray, interview, Abilene: Oct. 7, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

87. Fair, interview, 2013.

Kearley, the former ACU faculty member who had become editor of the *Gospel Advocate* and a Thompson ally, told Williams he “regret[ed] the tone and manner in which Bert has written his book.”<sup>88</sup>

On a similar front, the professors were so clearly not the monsters portrayed by Thompson,<sup>89</sup> university officials felt their firm statements of innocence lay closer to the truth than Thompson’s accusations did. Manis and Williams were “teaching Sunday school” compared to biologists in other universities, Reeves said, “and he’s acting like they’ve done the worst thing since Judas.”<sup>90</sup> Gray agreed: “We weren’t doing anything wrong. Archie wasn’t doing anything wrong. Brother, you don’t have any choice [in biology class] but to get into evolutionary theory, and from [Thompson’s] standpoint, if you talk about it, you’re wrong.”<sup>91</sup> Thus a denial of wrongdoing was seen as more effective – and closer to the spirit of the matter – than a more nuanced statement.

2. *Credibility of the university* – Bacon identified the driving question for the ACU response as, “Would the university extend academic freedom to scientists to teach science?”<sup>92</sup> Orr said the Board of Trustees was “remarkably agreed that we weren’t going to let this ruin the school. Keeping ACU a high-quality educational institution was going to be an objective, with or without evolution.”<sup>93</sup> Early in the controversy, Manis grasped

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88. Furman Kearley, letter to Ken Williams, Feb. 26, 1986, Reeves collection.

89. See Ch. 3 n.70.

90. Reeves, interview, 2013.

91. Gray, interview, 2013.

92. Bacon, interview, 2013. Cf. Gray, “Statement,” in which he denied academic freedom as a motive: “We accepted Christ’s limits on our freedom long before we came to Abilene Christian University.” Indeed, as seen in ch. 3 n.11, a statement about academic freedom had raised questions for Leroy Garrett about whether evolution could be properly taught in the university’s science classrooms.

93. Orr, interview, 2013.

the importance of Thompson's attack. "Our Christian university is in jeopardy," he wrote just a month after receiving Thompson's initial letter.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Thompson just days before sending his first letter to ACU had written: "Academic freedom does not, on the campus of a Christian college, guarantee the right of the false teacher to ... spew out error. In fact, quite the contrary is the case."<sup>95</sup> From Kentucky, Trevathan wrote:

Whether religious or secular, few schools have experienced so vehement and concentrated an attack upon their fundamental integrity. ... As best I can determine, none of our [Church of Christ-affiliated] schools has ever been subjected to anything even approaching the size, nature and intensity of the present attack on ACU.<sup>96</sup>

3. *Make bad news old news fast* – Although the university's flat denial provided weight to the accusations against it by tacitly agreeing Christians could not teach or believe in evolutionary theory, the decision was the correct one from a public-relations perspective, Nellis and Bacon said. "Sitting down to have a reasonable conversation about the origin of the species, that's an academic conversation, and this was a public relations problem," which relies on the maxim, as Bacon put it, of, "If it's bad news, make it old news fast."<sup>97</sup> The controversy had become a public relations crisis, threatening the university's prime

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94. Archie Manis, "Alabama Witch Hunt, Continued," memo to Perry Reeves, April 18, 1985, Reeves collection. See also Womack's letter above, n.81.

95. Bert Thompson, letter to the editor, Freed-Hardeman College *Bell Tower*, March 18, 1985, Gray collection. Emphasis in original. This letter, although written to the editor, was not published by the newspaper but was subsequently circulated on the Freed-Hardeman campus, according to an attached note by Freed-Hardeman professor Dwayne Wilson, whose positions were the subject of Thompson's letter.

96. Charles Trevathan, "Evolution Attack Labeled 'Extremist Mistake,'" *Optimist*, Jan. 9, 1987, A-2.

97 Bacon, interview, 2013. She is ACU's only employee to be Accredited in Public Relations (APR) by the Public Relations Society of America, according to the "APR" entry in Marler and Anthony, *AnswerBook*. Nellis also works in the public relations field.

sources of revenue: students and donations.<sup>98</sup> President Bill Teague “was getting a lot of pressure from donors in Dallas to take a stand,” Orr said. “He felt he had to take a stand.”<sup>99</sup> As a result, Reeves said, the investigation was a “whitewash,” designed more to “protect their turf” than engage the allegations Thompson had leveled.<sup>100</sup> In a similar vein, the university also believed a more nuanced response would have been fruitless. “Everything you said would be misconstrued” in such a scenario, Gray argued. “They could twist facts and comments every way they wanted.”<sup>101</sup> Teague himself said a comprehensive response would result in an “endless ... debate with every critic over motives, definitions,” etc.<sup>102</sup> A variant of this attitude can be seen in a conversation Orr recalled having with Board of Trustees chair Lynn Packer, who he said grew angry when it became clear evolution had in fact been taught without rebuttal at ACU. “Cool it, Lynn,” Orr said he told him. “We’re going to live with it as long as we don’t let it split us.”<sup>103</sup>

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98. According to Mann, “Controversy,” 3, 80 percent of ACU students at the time were members of Churches of Christ.

99. Orr, interview, 2013. “I never did agree with him,” he added.

100. Reeves, interview, 2013: “Yeah, it was a whitewash. I think they felt really vulnerable. Those little congregations of West Texas, they were part of the pipeline of students to ACU. They were trying to defend the pipeline and did not want to promote a feeling that ACU might not be spiritually sound. They were trying to protect their turf.”

101. Gray, interview, 2013. Cf. Reeves, interview, 2013: “I would have been very comfortable saying, ‘Yes, we explain various views of evolution to the students, but we believe in God,’ but that wouldn’t have been good enough for Dr. Thompson.”

102. Cindi Patterson, “University Mails Letters,” *Optimist*: Feb. 7, 1986, A-1.

103. Orr, interview, 2013. Packer’s anger is understandable when taking into consideration the confidence with which he appointed the investigative subcommittee, as discussed in Ch. 3 n.85. The importance of a united front is made clear by Lynn Packer, letter to Paul A. Crockett Jr., Jan. 8, 1987, Thompson collection: “The 66 people on the Board that were present, many of whom are preachers of the Gospel and elders of the Lord’s church, sincerely believe these men are not theistic or organic evolutionists and truly believe all of God’s Word.”

### Effects of the Response

Thompson's attack had significant short-term effects but seemingly negligible long-term ones. Whether the university's response made a difference in the ultimate arc of the controversy – and the extent to which Trevathan's aggressive response played a role – is difficult to determine without speculation. Letters in the Gray and Reeves collections indicate many people were not convinced by ACU's response. "How can you men deftly shift, dodge, squirm and then just deliberately (*sic*) lie in your effort to cover up something you know is true?" one letter asked. "I have no doubt you will be able to get away with it too, insofar as the brotherhood majority is concerned."<sup>104</sup> In his *Christian Courier*, Thompson ally Wayne Jackson dismissed ACU's response documents. "Just *when, where* and *how* have these charges been answered?" he asked.<sup>105</sup> "The investigation proves nothing," according to another letter. "How could it? No material has been produced in favor of Manis and Williams refuting the theory of evolution."<sup>106</sup>

Nevertheless, in the areas where Thompson most hoped to make an impact – radically altering the curriculum of the biology department or, failing that, reducing ACU's enrollment and donations – he appeared to be unsuccessful. Bacon relayed an estimate from Teague that the time and effort spent in receiving and responding to letters sent just to his office cost ACU about \$90,000. Donations declined in 1986, but that was also the year plunging oil prices led to a sharp recession in Texas. Likewise, application

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104. Graham and Charlene Cain, letter to C. G. Gray, Feb. 14, 1986, Gray collection. Gray's response dated Feb. 18, 1986, included this remarkable line: "We have not, are not and will not teach evolution as fact at Abilene Christian University."

105. Wayne Jackson, "More on the Evolution Controversy at Abilene Christian University," *Christian Courier* 21 (February 1986): 38-39.

106. Denny Owens, letter to C. G. Gray, April 3, 1986, Gray collection.

numbers in spring 1986 declined from the same period in 1985, but were up from 1984.<sup>107</sup> A “Statement of Concern” circulated in 1986 among conservative Churches of Christ collected 208 signatures; however, more than half were not even in ACU’s database of mailing addresses, indicating they had no connection with the university. Just 41 were ACU alumni, and only 42 had ever donated, giving a total of just \$2,816, according to ACU’s internal analysis.<sup>108</sup> The implication – supported in part by several letters claiming the controversy confirmed previously held concerns about ACU’s rectitude<sup>109</sup> – was that those most outraged by the controversy were those who had already broken with ACU, or were ready to do so at the slightest provocation.

Among them was Rowena Lobley, who continued corresponding with Thompson as Brenda made her way through medical school. “I am a little ashamed at how I’m feeling right now,” she wrote in September 1986. “I’m weary. ... I am discouraged. I don’t want to quit anything but I guess I’m a little bruised and I’m not as tough as I should be.”<sup>110</sup> By 1987, Thompson himself seemed to understand the effort was failing. “The University has covered this thing up so well that there seems to be little more that we can do,” he said two years after the controversy’s instigation.<sup>111</sup> In his frustration, he

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107. Mann, “Controversy,” 20-21.

108. “Concerned Ads,” handwritten note, September/October 1986 folder, Gray collection.

109. E.g., Ruth Locke, letter to C. G. Gray, Feb. 18, 1986, in which the 1945 graduate said she “began to hear ‘strange and foreign’ sounds issuing from those great halls” in the decades before the 1985-1986 controversy. Among her chief complaints: the shift from college to university in 1976. “Changing one letter (C to U) was probably one of the blackest hours for all of those who worked so hard to have a Christian place for our children to attend.” Gray’s handwritten note attached to the letter described Locke as “to the extreme right of the conservative movement.”

110. Rowena Lobley, letter to Bert Thompson, Sept. 21, 1986, Thompson collection: 2.

111. Bert Thompson, letter to Conover S. White, April 21, 1987, Thompson collection.

wrote to an ally who had confronted Manis, Williams, and Gray at a 1987 meeting that apparently had not gone well:

No one, except those of us who have been in such meetings, can fully understand just how evil some of these people really are, and how they work to try to discredit the truth. ... It is evident that you now know, from firsthand experience with these men, that theistic evolution is exactly what they believe. I hurt, as you do, that the situation stands as it now does. The ACU Board will not do anything; Teague has them “snookered” completely.<sup>112</sup>

Thompson’s long-time ally, Jackson, agreed that Thompson’s goal “to purge the system of error was not fully achieved,” and although he cited “significant impact” in the short-term, he said, “I’m not sure any generally permanent progress was made.”<sup>113</sup>

The non-financial short-term effects, however, were consequential indeed. “The amount of pressure and the level of paranoia it generated was just incredible,” Bacon said. “They felt every word they said was being scrutinized. It was a very, very difficult time, and it went on for months. It spanned two years, and those two years were hellacious for those people. It was really awful.”<sup>114</sup> Manis and Williams said they changed how they taught biology – avoiding certain words, even when discussing the subject with administrators and members of the board. Shortly after Thompson had met with his bosses on campus, Manis promised Reeves he would avoid using the words “evolution” and “Darwin” in class,<sup>115</sup> while Williams said he altered how he described his teaching to administrators as soon as he received Thompson’s first letter.<sup>116</sup>

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112. Bert Thompson, letter to Buren Carr, May 25, 1987, Thompson collection.

113. Wayne Jackson, Stockton, CA, telephone interview: Oct. 29, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

114. Bacon, interview, 2013.

115. Manis, memo to Reeves, Sept. 20, 1985.

116. Williams, interview, 2013.

The burden of the attacks fell heaviest on Manis, who as shown above seemed to break down under the strain of questions, especially by members of his congregation, about his beliefs.<sup>117</sup> In numerous memos, Manis expressed how personally he took the accusations and subsequent firestorm – particularly in one written a month into the fray:

I've bared my soul, I've tossed through many a night of cat-naps and bad dreams, I've been emotionally drained from a failure in ability to even attempt to deal with this awkward, if not impossible, situation, all things considered. I still don't see how I can respond appropriately to what I take to be a wanton, calculated, vicious and slanderous assault on my Christianity, on my person, on the nature of my motives, and on the very nature and merit of my pedagogy as an informed scientist and Christian scholar.<sup>118</sup>

Adding injury to Thompson's insult, Manis felt ACU's response undermined his attempts to maintain academic integrity. Thompson and others said they had received concessions from ACU that they would monitor the teaching of evolution more closely.<sup>119</sup> Several times, university officials – whether Manis knew it or not – seemed to openly criticize his teaching, and members of the Board of Trustees seemed to believe Manis and Williams had indeed done something wrong.<sup>120</sup> Manis's signed statement, issued at Thompson's demand, was formulated by Ian Fair, he complained to Gray. "I'm

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117. See Ch. 3 nn.71-73. Another example of the attacks Manis experienced: Bob Kiser, letter to Archie Manis, Feb. 26, 1986, Gray collection, compared the professor to the biblical character of Achan, who was stoned to death for violating God's commands after the battle of Jericho. "The same God still lives," Kiser wrote. "He will judge Abilene Christian if she does not go into the tent and uncover the spoil. May you save the administration at ACU a lot of problems by stepping down."

118. Manis, "Witch Hunt, Continued."

119. E.g. A. J. Bivens, essay, March 18, 1986. The Abilene elder said he had met with Perry Reeves and John Little, and "they stated ... good has already been done because we will monitor our department more closely and see that there is no question about the type of evolution taught."

120. For example, W. C. Orr, letter to Harry Hass, Nov. 3, 1986, Thompson collection: "In the past they have made human mistakes by not allowing enough time to fully refute evolutionary theory in classroom discussion, but these mistakes of omission do not merit their dismissal." Likewise, Joe McKissick, letter to Mary Ruth Thompson [Bert Thompson's mother], Feb. 21, 1986, Thompson collection, 2-3: "It was right that someone should have firmly called this to the attention of the administration. ... ACU is stronger because of this problem and solution, and Evolution will be taught against in a clearer manner in the Science Department in the future."

undone and exasperated,” he wrote. “If I must sign another statement, composed by someone else, I’d respectfully request that all ACU faculty members be required to sign the identical statement. ... Am I to understand my own word, second-hand or otherwise, is quite worthless unless it is in the form of a written affidavit?”<sup>121</sup> In a follow-up, Manis said he was “hurt enough by having to write the thing” and worried about public exposure: “I’d like to keep some dignity, to believe my name was not to be forever associated with wicked behavior in the line of professorial duty and its subsequent reprimand.”<sup>122</sup> Williams also objected to ACU’s perceived capitulation. In a handwritten note, Williams said he signed his statement “with a great amount of frustration.”<sup>123</sup>

The statements attracted the criticism of others from off campus, as well. Leroy Garrett – whose openness to evolution, as described in Chapter 3, had earned him the criticism of conservatives for decades – lamented ACU’s response to Thompson: “Here we see the underbelly of the Church of Christ in its true ‘institutional’ form, with the usual intrigue and subterfuge, such as professional scientists having to manipulate and equivocate (and suffocate!) in reference to what they really believe as scholars. ... Is it not also shocking for an honored Ph.D. to have to grovel and bow and scrape for what he teaches from heart and mind?”<sup>124</sup> Likewise, in response to the Board of Trustees’ institutional statement and investigation report, 1970 alumnus Dale Butland called

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121. Archie Manis, “Evolution,” memo to C. G. Gray: Oct. 2, 1985, Gray collection.

122. Archie Manis, “Requested Statement, re 9/25, re 10/9,” memo to C. G. Gray: Oct. 9, 1985. Gray collection.

123. Ken Williams, memo to C. G. Gray: Oct. 8, 1985, Gray collection. The memo trail indicates that both men wrote their own statements at Gray’s request, but that Gray either shortened or rewrote them, perhaps with Fair’s input, and sent them back for their signatures.

124. Leroy Garrett, “Stormy Weather in Abilene,” *Restoration Review* 28 (March 1986): 260.

himself “embarrassed and disappointed” that ACU “has once again capitulated to the rantings of fundamentalist fanatics.”

When I attended ACU, I learned that there is no inherent conflict between evolution and a belief in God. Indeed, I was taught that the two complement each other – and that a belief in theistic evolution allows us to reconcile our faith with our knowledge. Apparently, there has now been a regression at ACU.<sup>125</sup>

Nevertheless, the course of denial had been set. Coinciding with the upcoming investigation report and letter to parents, Teague addressed the student body in Chapel on Feb. 7, 1986. After nearly a year fighting Thompson’s allegations, the president rose to make the definitive statement from the university.<sup>126</sup> “The general public upon reading [Thompson’s] attack may wrongly conclude that the teachers labeled as evolutionists have accepted the theory of the origin of man sometimes called Darwinism,” Teague said. “Everyone including the critic believes in the process of gradual change, a fundamental definition of evolution. When a person’s affirmation of this fundamental process is made to apply to origins, you have an inflammatory situation based upon distortion and misquotations.”<sup>127</sup>

Manis left ACU at the end of 1987, and although he cited other reasons, the evolution controversy – and ACU’s response – remained in his mind,<sup>128</sup> even long after he had left Abilene. “It destroyed him,” Reeves said. “Twenty years later, he couldn’t get

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125. Dale Butland, letter to Leigh Ann Craig, May 21, 1986, Gray collection. In an interesting bit of coincidence, the letter defending Manis and Williams was sent to Manis’s daughter. Leigh Ann Manis Craig was the editor of *ACU Today*, which had run the Board of Trustees documents in its most recent issue, to which Butland responded. She also was tasked with collecting newspaper clippings on the controversy from across the country.

126. Bacon, interview, 2013: “He basically said we’re done.”

127. Bill Teague, Chapel speech.

128. Julie Fitzpatrick, “Manis Resigns Faculty Position,” *Optimist* (Jan. 15, 1988): A-1.

it out of his soul. He felt like the school had abandoned him.”<sup>129</sup> Bacon agreed. “His life was never the same again,” she said. “He never got over it.”<sup>130</sup> Nichols called Manis “the only casualty” of the controversy.<sup>131</sup> Upon learning of Manis’s resignation, Thompson and his allies cheered. “It couldn’t have happened to a more deserving person!” one wrote.<sup>132</sup> Thompson in an “important update,” presumably sent to the same allies who had received updates in 1985-1986, was more tactful: “Truth finally triumphed. The professor who labeled Genesis as ‘myth’ will no longer be able to teach ‘our’ children such error.”<sup>133</sup>

Thirty years later, Jackson was unapologetic for the role he played. Told of the toll the controversy took on Manis, Jackson replied, “Any damage to anyone, physical or psychological, is regrettable, but sometimes we reap what we sow.”<sup>134</sup> Teague had a different assessment: “We have sought only to know the truth, and to follow the truth,” he wrote in the spring of 1986. “In doing so, we have uncovered not wrongdoing, but overwhelming evidence that two Godly men have been teaching effectively on our campus for many years, positively influencing the lives of their students and colleagues.”<sup>135</sup>

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129. Reeves, interview, 2013.

130. Bacon, interview, 2013.

131. Nichols, interview, 2013.

132. Cleo Reeder, letter to Bert Thompson, March 11, [1988], Thompson collection.

133. Bert Thompson, “An Important Update,” spring 1988, Thompson collection.

134. Jackson, interview, 2013.

135. Bill Teague, “University Appreciates Support of Alumni, Friends,” *ACU Today* 38 (Spring 1986): 2.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In the spring of 1986, as critics of Abilene Christian University continued to question its version of events, one letter writer enclosed a document, suggesting, “If the men whom Brother Bert Thompson called in question would sign this article ... as being what they believe and teach, surely this would clear every question concerning the disturbance.” The article, an editorial headlined “Fiat Creation,” criticized “those who claim to believe the Bible and evolution too. ... They opt for the natural-development-through-millions-of-years theory of evolution and call that ‘creation.’” Opposing this position, the editorial argued, “A man’s attitude toward the Genesis account is an index to his attitude toward the whole Bible. ... Church members who say that they accept the Genesis account, but do not accept it as literally true,” were “the latest threat” against which readers must contend. “We are unable to detect any basic and fundamental difference in old-time atheism and modern theistic evolution.”<sup>1</sup>

The article’s author was none other than ACU trustee Reuel Lemmons, who published it in the *Firm Foundation* in 1974 – exactly one decade after Lemmons led the fight against evolution in Texas textbooks and one decade before Brenda Lobleigh grew frustrated by the evolutionary content of her ACU biology classes. The editorial against theistic evolution was one example in which six decades of antipathy toward evolution

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1. Jack Glasgow, letter to ACU, April 16, 1986, including photocopy of [Reuel Lemmons], “Fiat Creation,” *FF* 91 (Aug. 13, 1974): 514. C. G. Gray collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University.

among Churches of Christ generally, and ACU-affiliated voices specifically, were cited in the 1985-1986 controversy. This antipathy, though its specifics differed over the years, generally was expressed this way:

Critics tended to 1) misinterpret or oversimplify nuanced positions, leading them to 2) make generalizations that often devolved into ad hominem attacks and forcing those under attack to 3) balance in their response the competing impulses of academic integrity with traditional faith commitments. This back-and-forth often was 4) litigated in public forums, including the so-called “brotherhood publications” and congregational meetings. Despite these four commonalities, ACU during its evolution controversy fired no professors and made no promises of curriculum changes – indeed, its faculty continued teaching evolution. After elaborating on the similarities between the 1985-1986 controversy and its historical antecedents, this concluding chapter will explore why Thompson was unsuccessful despite following such a well-rehearsed template.

### **Misinterpretation of Nuanced Positions**

Thompson in his initial letters to campus defined “evolution” as “the General Theory of Evolution, i.e., organic evolution as the term is generally employed in the scientific community.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, as shown in Chapter 4, neither of the accused professors appeared to believe in the classic Darwinian notion of evolution, encompassing the descent of all species including humans, from a single common ancestor. Rather, according to their own statements and those of their students, they accepted the basic building blocks of evolution, including genetic mutation and natural selection, while arguing that God specially created humanity. Thompson, however, glossed over that

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2. Bert Thompson, *Is Genesis Myth? The Shocking Story of the Teaching of Evolution at Abilene Christian University* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 1986), 23.

distinction, claiming Archie Manis and Ken Williams taught “as fact organic and/or theistic evolution.” Thus, although Thompson possessed a handwritten statement from Manis that “I have never believed that the universe, life, man, and what we call nature ever made itself by an evolutionary process,” the author used Manis’s acceptance of “nonrandom gene shifts” to claim Manis did in fact “believe in evolution.”<sup>3</sup>

ACU did not correct this misconstrual. The Board of Trustees’ insistence that Manis and Williams did not advocate evolution left unexamined the question of what exactly the professors believed and taught; Thompson and other critics filled the gap. As the minister of Michigan’s Saline Church of Christ wrote, “I find it amazing that you would write a report which does not deal with a majority of the issues raised against you. I find your silence on these issues highly suspect. ... If you are going to have professors there which advocate an old earth, things reproducing after a different kind, longer than 24 hour days in creation, etc., then say so.”<sup>4</sup>

With both sides willing to blur the nuances of evolutionary theory, the professors were left in the middle, expressing frustration. “It is very disturbing,” Williams wrote, “when one individual can exploit the ignorance of others and cause so much trouble.”<sup>5</sup> Manis, already “undone and exasperated” at the prospect of submitting to Thompson a

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3. Ibid., 121-22.

4. Rusty Stark, letter to ACU officials, April 16, 1986, Gray collection: 2. Although the writer sees these three tenets as problematic, they would not in of themselves rise to the level of theistic evolution under either Thompson’s definition in his letters to Manis and Williams or Lemmons’s in his 1974 editorial; both seem to require belief in human evolution from an apelike ancestor. This perhaps is an indication of just how convoluted the debate was, as it seems unlikely Thompson or Lemmons would have taken comfort in learning ACU professors accepted evolution in every respect *except* humans. (Cf. John C. Stevens, memo to Archie Manis, Feb. 12, 1986, Gray collection, in which the former ACU president points out that Thompson and Wayne Jackson in a previous work, *Essays in Apologetics*, had acknowledged that day-age creationists were not necessarily evolutionists.)

5. Williams, memo to Gray, Oct. 8, 1985, Gray collection

statement of beliefs apparently written by Ian Fair, said he considered himself “an abused victim of gross misrepresentations and false judgment.”<sup>6</sup> Manis summarized the situation in complaining to C. G. Gray:

When some of my brethren encounter either of two ideas – (1) that variation exists in nature, as explained by ordinary and basic genetic principles, and (2) that the time period of the Genesis account of creation might be longer than six 24-hour days, either one, much less both at once – they feel it is their solemn duty to share their belief with everyone that the holder of such ideas just must be (1) some type of evolutionist, and (2) that such a person obviously can’t read Genesis, so he can’t believe in any of the rest of the Bible either, including the divinity of the Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Manis’s complaints echo those of W. W. Freeman, who 63 years earlier privately complained about the misrepresentation of his position both by critics and employer. “The harm has been to me and is unquestionable,” he wrote to J. S. Arledge. “I have the right to interpret my own language. I have been misrepresented and misquoted.”<sup>8</sup> A month later, he criticized both the Abilene Christian College president who fired him and the *Firm Foundation* editor who criticized him: “If Brother Sewell and Brother Showalter want to do the right thing, they will correct the bad impressions they have made, for I have explained in full.”<sup>9</sup> In 1922, as in 1985, the nuanced positions of university faculty suffered when exposed to summarization and critique by those outside the academy.

### **Generalizations and Ad Hominem Arguments**

In addition to complaints about misinterpretation, the history of evolution in Churches of Christ includes a reliance on strident, even ad hominem attacks on those

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6. Ch. 4 nn.121-22.

7. Archie Manis, “Larry Swift’s Document,” memo to C. G. Gray, Nov. 14, 1985, Gray collection: 2.

8. Freeman, letter to Arledge, Nov. 20, 1922: 2. See ch. 2 n.28

9. W.W. Freeman, letter to J.S. Arledge, Dec. 11, 1922, W. W. Freeman collection, Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, CRS MS#24.

perceived as advocating the scientific consensus on the subject. These arguments generally took two forms – mockery or outright dismissal of the proponents’ credentials, and the danger the proponents posed to Christian children.

In the 1922 Freeman controversy, G. C. Brewer utilized the first mode. “I never saw a clearer case,” he wrote, “of a small man and a big education.”<sup>10</sup> In private, Brewer was scarcely more civil. “You need to get over your present attitude,” he wrote Freeman. “You have not learned your lesson. I pray that you may recognize your error and show yourself a man.”<sup>11</sup> G. H. P. Showalter similarly dismissed the findings of science and biblical criticism, as discussed in Chapter 2: “This panting after notoriety, this exaltation of worldly wisdom, this arrogating to one’s self-knowledge, and the innumerable and dangerous consequences of becoming wise in one’s own conceit ... cannot be overlooked or safely disregarded by godly men.”<sup>12</sup> One letter writer, upon receiving Freeman’s “only affirmation” that “God made the world (universe) in the way HE DID, details being unknown,” replied with some heat: “I believe from what you have said to me that you are a believer in Theistic Evolution. ... A band of hoodlums calling themselves Theologians, Scientists, Educators embrace this damnable, God-destroying, church-dishonoring doctrine. As for me, I believe God and His Bible.”<sup>13</sup> The parallels are easy to find between his language and that used by Lemmons in 1964 and Thompson in 1985 when discussing science textbooks.

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10. G. C. Brewer, “Some Observations on W. W. Freeman’s Recent Remarks,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Oct. 3, 1922): 4.

11. G. C. Brewer, letter to W. W. Freeman, Dec. 13, 1922, Freeman collection: 5.

12. G. H. P. Showalter, “More about the Use and Abuse of the Bible,” *Firm Foundation* 39 (Sept. 12, 1922): 2. See Ch. 2 n.18.

13. W. W. Freeman, letter to J. L. Hines, Dec. 12, 1922, and Hines, letter to Freeman, Jan. 28, 1923, Freeman collection. Emphasis in original.

Anti-intellectualism finds parallels in the many interactions critics had with each other and ACU officials and faculty in 1985 and 1986. For example, one Thompson ally described a phone conversation with Bill Teague: “After an exchange of comments, I informed him that his PhD stood for piled higher and deeper.”<sup>14</sup> Another gave a more tempered version of the attitude when he asked Manis, “Is it an acquired, learned characteristic of a PhD in Biology to give evasive answers to sincere questions?”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Russell Artist lamented the “similar experiences” he’d had with attempting to root out evolutionary beliefs among David Lipscomb College faculty in 1976. “I warned Bert that this [perceived stonewalling] would likely be the outcome of his strong stand for the Bible account,” Artist said. “It just is not very popular among some of our ‘educated, Ph.D. brethren’.”<sup>16</sup> In 1985, holding a Ph.D. was for some still a reason for suspicion, if not ridicule.<sup>17</sup>

The second form of generalization sliding into ad hominem argument was far more common – a thread strung throughout the interactions between Churches of Christ and evolution in the 20th century and best illustrated by a cartoon run on the front page of the *Firm Foundation* in 1965 and adapted by a Thompson ally twenty years later. The cartoon depicts a teacher forcing a large bottle marked “EVOLUTION” down the throat

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14. Harry Hass, letter to Bert Thompson, Oct. 28, 1986, Bert Thompson collection, Apologetics Press, Montgomery, AL.

15. Buren Carr, letter to Archie Manis, May 8, 1987, Thompson collection: 6.

16. Russell C. Artist, letter to James D. Willeford, Dec. 3, 1985, Thompson collection.

17. But not all, e.g., James H. Murphy, “Let’s Save America from Atheism,” *Firm Foundation* 80 (Jan. 8, 1963): 6, in which he blamed it for reducing the Christian influence in the sciences: “The failure to understand science, being ignorant of the simplest facts along with an improper spirit of sarcasm, caused further eruption. Most of the science was then developed by non-religious folk with an atheistic and anti-Christian spirit. God-fearing scientists became an oddity.” Tellingly, however, Murphy proposed no solutions that would have sought rapprochement with scientific findings.

of a pigtailed schoolgirl. The 1985 version replaced the word “SCHOOL” on the girl’s desk with “ACU.”<sup>18</sup> In 1965, the cartoon accompanied an editorial, “Evolution and the



Figure 1 – Cartoon sent to Bert Thompson, modified from the original published in the *Firm Foundation* in 1965.

Classroom Pulpit,” that warned, “The classrooms of those [public] schools, though closed to the teaching of the Bible and of Christianity, will be completely open to the teaching of atheism and evolution” under the Biology Science Curriculum Study textbooks.<sup>19</sup>

This position, marking evolution as a danger to children’s faith, was pervasive among Churches of Christ – including among ACU faculty. Bible chair Charles Roberson in 1935 even argued evolution had

no educational value at all: “Darwinism ... can have but one effect on those who accept its conclusions, and that

is disbelief in the Bible.”<sup>20</sup> After all, Roberson and Allison Trice argued, “if evolution made atheists and skeptics of such men as Darwin, Haeckel, Spencer and others, do we expect it to make Christians of our boys and girls who study evolution taught in our schools and colleges, not as an hypothesis, but as *demonstrated truth*?”<sup>21</sup>

Lemmons continued using charged rhetoric to condemn evolution throughout the 1960s and 1970s. “If we surrender to these authors of these atheistic texts and

18. Dub [McClish], letter to Bert Thompson, Dec. 6, 1985, Thompson collection, adapted from *Firm Foundation* 82 (Sept. 7, 1965): 561. The provenance of the cartoon is unknown.

19. [Reuel Lemmons], “Evolution and the Classroom Pulpit,” *FF* 82 (Sept. 7, 1965): 2.

20. A. N. Trice and Charles Roberson, *Bible vs. Modernism: A Compendium of Sundry Critical Hypotheses and Their Refutation*. (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1935), 245. See ch. 2 n.41.

21. *Ibid.*, 264. Emphasis in original.

indoctrinate a generation or more with a completely materialistic outlook on life,” he wrote in 1965, “the spiritual values upon which this country was built will have been thrown into the garbage.”<sup>22</sup> The push to teach evolution in schools, another *FF* author said, was “an unholy conspiracy ... for the purpose of controlling the thoughts and attitudes of all students.”<sup>23</sup> In other articles, Rita Rhodes Ward described theistic evolution as “exceedingly dangerous,”<sup>24</sup> and Lemmons, as discussed in Chapter 2, generated support for his fight against the BSCS textbooks by arguing “school children will be drenched with evolution if these publishers and scientists are allowed to get away with it. ... Let these teachers brainwash a whole generation of our youth with Evolution, and we will have a godless state right here in America.”<sup>25</sup> More than a year later, with the evocative anti-evolution cartoon dominating his paper’s front page, he used perhaps his strongest language yet: “There isn’t a denominational dogma on earth more dangerous than godless, materialistic, atheistic evolution.”<sup>26</sup> Given that “our sons and daughters ... are the soil into which both the good and the bad seed shall be implanted,” as another *FF* author wrote, the stakes were high.<sup>27</sup> Such views, of course, were not limited to Lemmons or the *Firm Foundation*, as evidenced by the reaction to Neal Buffaloe’s 1968 *Mission* article on evolution, described in Chapter 3.<sup>28</sup>

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22. [Reuel Lemmons], “Those Biology Textbooks Again,” *FF* 82 (Jan. 12, 1965): 18.

23. Bob Wear, “The Unholy Conspiracy,” *FF* 82 (Jan. 12, 1965): 19.

24. Rita Rhodes Ward, “Some Ways Evolutionists Attempt to Meet the Religious Issue,” *FF* 82 (Jan. 19, 1965): 35.

25. [Reuel Lemmons], “Drenched with Evolution,” *FF* 81 (Oct. 27, 1964): 682. See ch. 2 n. 97.

26. [Reuel Lemmons], “Classroom Pulpit.”

27. Hailey C. Litton, “Our Pseudo-Sciences (5),” *FF* 83 (Oct. 25, 1966): 681.

28. Ch. 3 n.6: “How would you like to have such a man teaching your children in a Bible class?”

With such rhetoric well established in the mainstream of Churches of Christ, it is not surprising to see it echoed by Thompson and his allies, who relied on the argument of evolution's danger to the beliefs of children literally from the beginning: The heading of Wayne Jackson's introduction to *Is Genesis Myth?* was titled, "The Subversion of Our Youth – a Betrayed Confidence." "As you read," Jackson wrote, "I want you to think of the youngsters – sons and daughters like your own perhaps – who are now studying under such instructors, and being guided by such administrators, as are revealed in this narrative."<sup>29</sup> In his letter advertising the book to ACU parents, Thompson struck a similar note, invoking the specter of "child abuse" in the first sentence and arguing parents "have the obligation to determine the facts in this matter."<sup>30</sup>

With such a dangerous potential, the theory's roots clearly lay in a darker source than Darwin. "It is incredible that [evolution] would be taught at Abilene," Garland Elkins, of the *Spiritual Sword*, wrote Thompson in 1985; "however, nowhere is off limits to the devil, as you well know."<sup>31</sup> The war veteran Harry Hass, typically colorful, admonished Bill Teague, "I have not backed down from Generals so why should I back down from that devils (*sic*) doctrine."<sup>32</sup> In questionnaires sent to ACU trustees and administrators, Hass asked, "Why are you permitting the wolves, Drs. Kenneth Williams and Archie Manis, to teach perverse things?"<sup>33</sup> The increasingly strident attacks on evolution as a dangerous, devilish plot against schoolchildren and college students

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29. Wayne Jackson, introduction to Thompson, *Myth*, i, iv.

30. Bert Thompson, "Apologetics," *Optimist*, Feb. 7, 1986: A-2.

31. Garland Elkins, letter to Bert Thompson, June 19, 1985, Thompson collection.

32. Harry Hass, letter to Bert Thompson, Oct. 28, 1986, Thompson collection.

33. Harry Hass, letter to Jerry Strader, [November 1986], Thompson collection.

reached their logical peak with L. D. Swift's striking ad hominem attack published by Thompson and discussed in Chapter 4, describing the ACU professors as "dangerous miscreants ... bringing great harm" to their students.<sup>34</sup>

### **Balancing Academic and Faith Commitments**

The 20th century showcased how an institution of higher learning shifted its balance between academic integrity and the predominant commitments of its faith tradition – from W. W. Freeman's conviction in 1922 that Jesse Sewell fired him to save Abilene Christian College, to Jimmy Throneberry's 1964 refusal to testify against the BSCS textbooks, to Charles Trevathan's observation in 1987 that ACU had weathered the most intense attack ever faced by a university affiliated with Churches of Christ.

In the early 1920s, traditional faith commitments clearly took precedence. Despite Sewell's protests to the contrary, Freeman believed he was sacrificed for the greater good of preserving ACU's reputation among Churches of Christ. "A 'strategic retreat' has been made," he wrote, "but you wait only to see the attack renewed until Klingman, Bell, Rhodes, Baxter, Sewell and all others ... will be threatened or driven out."<sup>35</sup> Some years later, Freeman's thesis on the history of higher education in the Stone-Campbell Movement carried forward this dark assessment of ACC's struggles with the broader Fundamentalist forces of the day. "The conservatism of the patrons, the presence of a congregation in the college auditorium, the monopoly of the religious press (in other hands), and the responsibility of preserving traditional views in line with which the institution had been founded and developed, led [Sewell] to adopt a program of

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34. Ch. 3 n.70.

35. W. W. Freeman, letter to George Klingman, Nov. 1, 1922, Freeman collection. R. C. Bell was instructor of Bible, Benjamin F. Rhodes was professor of social science, and Batsell Baxter was professor of science, according to the 1922 and 1923 *Prickly Pear* yearbooks.

constructive propaganda rather than one of progressive life,” Freeman wrote. Sewell’s College of the Bible failed, according to Freeman, because “it was difficult to secure men of seminary training who were acceptable to the conservative constituency. ... Older men lacked academic standing, and younger men seemed unsettled ‘in the faith,’ so this phase of the college failed and was discontinued.”<sup>36</sup>

Chapter 3 discussed in depth the balance achieved by ACU faculty, especially science professors such as Jimmy Thronebery and James Womack, between their academic commitments and the restrictions required by their affiliated faith tradition. In the Bible department, the university was no less cautious, leading to occasional public controversies and even the exit of some professors deemed too liberal.<sup>37</sup> By 1985, science faculty had become increasingly secure in their discussion of evolutionary concepts, as shown by the relatively open way Manis discussed in writing his agreement with the arguments underlying natural selection and the idea of an ancient earth.<sup>38</sup> Williams, although more circumspect, nevertheless produced handouts assuming evolutionary origins for plant diversity and gave his students the impression that he did not disagree with them.

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36. W. W. Freeman, “Thesis, Part 2, Chapter 3,” 6b, 10b. Freeman collection, Box 4 T-W, MS24. This is the draft of the thesis, “A History of the Campbell Movement and Its Educational System,” eventually presented to Southern Methodist University in 1933.

37. James W. Thompson, “The Formation of an Academic Tradition in Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University,” *Restoration Quarterly* 45 (2003), 15-28, discusses the history of the ACU Bible program from the 1930s through the 1960s, and John C. Hardin, “Common Cause: B. C. Goodpasture, the *Gospel Advocate*, and Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century” (Ph.D. diss: Auburn University, 2009), 227-28, along with Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2008), 325, also provide details, which go beyond this study’s scope. See also ch. 3 n.6 regarding the controversy surrounding *Mission* and ACU.

38. Ch. 4 nn.40-42.

This comfort with evolution among ACU's biology faculty does not coincide with responses to the controversy written by members of the Board of Trustees. As seen above, board chair Lynn Packer appointed the investigative subcommittee with a confident statement of eventual acquittal but in the end appeared to support the final statement with a measure of reluctance.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Packer continued defending the professors on the grounds that evolution "was refuted [at ACU] and will be as long as I am on the Board of Trustees." He then lamented the rhetoric used by ACU's opponents. "I do not believe there is anything to be gained in Christian education to further drag this matter through the mire. To do so would only hurt the Lord's church."<sup>40</sup> Hulen Jackson, a board member who also was a prominent anti-evolution voice during the 1964 textbook controversy, told Thompson, "The teachers made mistakes in judgment and maybe were stupid in their choice of words at times. ... Mistakes were made by the administrators; by the teachers; likely by the committee and maybe the board as we now look back."<sup>41</sup> Reuel Lemmons himself, now writing solely as an ACU trustee, dismissed a critic without question: "I would advise that you no longer contribute to this disgraceful campaign of calumny."<sup>42</sup>

The disconnect between the accounts given by the two professors and their students, and those of the board members who investigated and exonerated them can be explained by Dub Orr's comments about the February 1986 board meeting, at which the

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39. Ch. 4 n.103.

40. H. L. Packer, letter to Harry Hass, Dec. 15, 1986, Gray collection.

41. Hulen L. Jackson, letter to Bert Thompson, July 1, 1986, Thompson collection.

42. Reuel Lemmons, letter to Harry Hass, Nov. 18, 1986, Thompson collection.

trustees agreed to unify around the goal of preserving ACU's reputation as both a Christian *and* academically respectable institution:

I remember that it was an important meeting. I also remember the board was remarkably agreed that we weren't going to let this ruin the school. Keeping ACU a high-quality educational institution was going to be an objective, with or without evolution. We weren't going to take a position one way or another. In my opinion at this distance, the board was remarkably determined that the board itself would not split.<sup>43</sup>

In 1986, ACU leaders, though largely still maintaining the traditional skepticism of, even opposition to, evolution characterized by Churches of Christ in the 20th century, for the first time set aside that commitment in favor of maintaining the university's academic reputation.

### **Brotherhood Publications**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Churches of Christ in the 20th century featured no formal denominational structure for adjudicating doctrinal disagreements, largely relying instead on the “editor-bishops” of such publications as the *Firm Foundation* and *Gospel Advocate*. The question of evolution and creation, therefore, was answered in their pages – and almost unanimously against any form of evolutionary theory.<sup>44</sup> ACU's relationships with these two weekly journals was often symbiotic – faculty wrote articles, and administrators circulated the publications during annual lectures and other events; in return the publications provided advertising space, published commemorative issues coinciding with special events and anniversaries, and withheld criticism.<sup>45</sup>

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43. Dub Orr, interview: Abilene, Nov. 13, 2013. Notes in possession of the author.

44. A rare exception came from Tony Ash, “Evolution,” *FF* 92 (Aug. 5, 1975): 488-89.

45. Hardin, “Common Cause,” 99-100, discusses how B. C. Goodpasture, long-time editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, managed this arrangement with ACU and Freed-Hardeman College in the 1940s.

This arrangement was not yet in place when W. W. Freeman's fate was sealed and announced on the pages of the *Firm Foundation* in 1922. After World War II, however, the anti-evolutionary assumptions of such men as Showalter and his successor Lemmons enforced a public conformity among universities such as ACU through the 1960s and into the 1970s. During this period, prominent faculty members such as J. D. Thomas inveighed against evolution on the pages of *FF* and *GA*, arguing that "the creation view is much more probable and reasonable."<sup>46</sup> This consensus, like others in American society, began crumbling in the 1970s. B. C. Goodpasture, editor of the *Advocate* since 1938, died in 1977.<sup>47</sup> In 1983, *FF* was sold, and Lemmons, editor since 1955, became founding editor of the journal *Image*.<sup>48</sup> In the meantime, a host of newer publications from across the theological spectrum rose to prominence, several of them discussed in Chapters 3-4.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the *Christian Chronicle*, established in 1943, was redesigned and repurposed in 1981 to serve as a nonpartisan news source serving Churches of Christ.<sup>50</sup>

This fracturing of consensus, and the media organs enforcing it, limited the effectiveness of Thompson's attacks on ACU in 1985-1986. Although no single editor had the power to suppress the criticism – thus allowing Thompson's arguments to find an audience by appearing in multiple publications, including church bulletins – no one or

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46. J. D. Thomas, "Scientific Theory and Scientific Fact," *FF* 81 (Nov. 3, 1964): 703.

47. Robert E. Hooper, "Goodpasture, Benton Cordell," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 359-60.

48. T. Wesley Crawford, "Lemmons, Reuel Gordon," *ESCM*, 469.

49. Hughes, *Ancient Faith*, 307-51, tells the story of this fragmentation, represented especially by *Mission*, on the one hand, formed in 1967 as "a genuine alternative to the lockstep orthodoxy that had characterized" *GA* and *FF* (p. 318), while *The Spiritual Sword* began publishing two years later "in determined opposition to skepticism, liberalism, and relativism" (p. 329).

50. R. Scott LaMascus, "Christian Chronicle," *ESCM*, 176-77.

two publications reached the vast majority of the congregations anymore. Thompson, therefore, was limited to the audiences of conservative journals already inclined to agree with his assumptions. While Freeman's career fell to the objections of G. H. P. Showalter, and the concerns of Reuel Lemmons sparked a statewide movement against textbooks that lasted decades, Bert Thompson's allegations, starved of media fuel, did not accomplish long-term changes to the way ACU approached science education.

By 1985, the *Firm Foundation*, though now willing under its new ownership to criticize ACU, no longer had the circulation or influence it once did. Meanwhile, the *Gospel Advocate* was newly under the editorship of Furman Kearley, the former director of ACU's graduate Bible program. A staunch foe of evolution and a friend of Thompson, Kearley nevertheless demurred from criticizing the university publicly. He rejected efforts to advertise the "Expression of Concern" signed by more than 200 elders and ministers, arguing, "The publication of this by me would only aggravate matters and terminate my channels to communicate with and influence ACU personnel in a right direction."<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the *Christian Chronicle* not only rejected the Expression under its policy of refusing advertising that criticized "by name a brotherhood institution,"<sup>52</sup> but editorialized in support of ACU and the professors. Unlike Freeman, Throneberry, Womack, or any other proponent of evolution in Church of Christ-affiliated colleges in the 20th century to date, Manis and Williams were defended by a prominent movement

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51. Furman Kearley, letter to Tommy Hicks, Nov. 17, 1986, Thompson collection. Hicks in a testy reply implied Kearley was naïve: "Come on Furman! We both know ACU does not have a few bad spots. We both know it is rotten to the core! ... I question how much influence you really have. ... From discussions I have had with various folks in the Administration and on the Board, your credibility and influence is 'Q' (*sic*) with them. They do not consider you a friend to them or to ACU" (Hicks, letter to Kearley, Nov. 24, 1986, Thompson collection). The exchange highlights Kearley's awkward spot as both a recent colleague of the accused professors and a friend and ally of Thompson – leading him to be distrusted by both sides.

52. Howard Norton, letter to Tommy Hicks, Sept. 24, 1986, Thompson collection.

publication urging its readers to “avoid the urge to condemn people and institutions.” The editorial, signed by editor Howard Norton, criticized those who had “already rushed to judgment and decided that they are guilty. I am not one of those people. I prefer to wait and weigh evidence as it comes forth.”<sup>53</sup>

With no support from the *Advocate* or the *Chronicle*, Thompson and his allies relied on the numerous smaller conservative journals and congregational bulletins.<sup>54</sup> Among these latter was the *Handley Herald*, the weekly bulletin of Handley Church of Christ in Fort Worth, which over two Sundays reported on its own congregational meeting about the controversy.<sup>55</sup> Tommy Hicks, Handley’s minister and eventually a leading force in distributing the Expression of Concern, convened in March 1986 a gathering featuring two ACU board members, Thompson, Scott, Willeford, the Lobley family and other participants in the controversy. The report of the meeting included Willeford defending his authorship of the report bearing his name, former Baker Heights deacon John Propst restating his allegation that Manis was a “theistic evolutionist,” and Brenda Lobley affirming Manis had never refuted evolution in class.

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53. Howard Norton, “The Benefit of the Doubt,” *Christian Chronicle* 43 (February 1986): 26. The editorial was swiftly criticized in Wayne Jackson, letter to Howard Norton, March 3, 1986, Thompson collection: “Dr. Thompson states that you admitted, in a phone conversation with him, that you wrote your editorial, and went to press with your slanted February issue of the *Chronicle*, without having read the book ... though you had it in your possession at the time! That is utterly incredible.” Attached to this letter in the Thompson collection is a picture of the *Chronicle*’s National Council, with a notation from Cleo Reeder pointing out that three of the seven council members were also members of the ACU Board of Trustees, including council president Jack Pope. A fourth member, Dale Brown, joined the ACU board in 1988, according to his entry in Charlie Marler and Paul Anthony, *AnswerBook*, 21st edition (Abilene: ACU Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, 2015).

54. Among those publishing ads for Thompson’s book or running a copy of the “Expression” preserved in Thompson’s papers are *The Banner of Truth* 24 (May 1986), *Bible Herald* (March 1986) and *Firm Foundation* 103 (Oct. 14, 1986). *FF* actually ran the ad for *Is Genesis Myth?* an extra two times for free, “to help repay you, in some small way, for your troubles,” according to William S. Cline, letter to Bert Thompson, March 11, 1986, Thompson collection.

55. Tommy J. Hicks, “Uncle Tom’s Gabbin’,” *Handley Herald* 14 (March 19 and 26, 1986): 1-2. Copies provided via email by Handley Church of Christ.

The audience for this report, however, seems certain to have been much smaller than that of the journals in circulation at the time, never mind the *Firm Foundation* and *Gospel Advocate* at the height of their popularity. ACU, on the other hand, had no such trouble, thanks to the donation of the Herald of Truth mailing list by Highland Church of Christ. Thompson was locked into a small and shrinking set of media, while ACU's response reached all of its direct constituents, plus thousands more households affiliated with Churches of Christ.

### Different Results

In his attack on ACU, Thompson received the private support of nearly every other high-profile evolution critic discussed in this study. Rita Rhodes Ward, whose connections to the Creation Research Society had proven so valuable to Reuel Lemmons in 1964, praised *Is Genesis Myth?* in a lengthy handwritten note. "I didn't have time to read the book, but I couldn't put it down," she said, going on to encourage Thompson: "You are not alone in this struggle."<sup>56</sup> Russell Artist, contributor to the CRS biology textbook and architect of the short-lived Tennessee equal-time statute, condemned ACU's defense as "the biggest lie I have ever seen!" and tried to collect intelligence for Thompson on Archie Manis's tenure at David Lipscomb College.<sup>57</sup> Kearley, although expressing reservations about Thompson's tone and striving to maintain whatever influence he retained inside ACU, nevertheless encouraged Thompson: "I am deeply concerned that the noses of several camels are in A.C.U.'s tent. ... Some of the most dangerous camels are worldliness, materialism, theological liberalism, legalism and

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56. Rita Rhodes Ward, letter to Bert Thompson, Jan. 29, 1986, Thompson collection: 1-2. Emphasis in original.

57. Russell Artist, letter to Bert Thompson, [March 1986], Thompson collection.

evolution.”<sup>58</sup> Even 1964 textbook controversy veteran Hulen Jackson, although now an ACU trustee and a defender of the university, told Thompson, “I fully endorse the great work you are doing and agree completely with you in your fight against evolution as generally taught in schools.”<sup>59</sup> Only Lemmons and those still employed by ACU, such as Arlie Hoover and J. D. Thomas, kept silent or rejected outright the Thompson attacks.

But times had changed. Despite this support and the vocal contributions of numerous congregations and their ministers and elders, two key differences discussed above blocked Thompson from forcing meaningful long-term changes at ACU: The university for the first time prioritized its academic integrity over the historical commitments of its faith tradition, and the media landscape among Churches of Christ had fragmented, limiting the spread of Thompson’s message.

ACU, meanwhile, had institutional tools at its disposal to neutralize Thompson’s attacks. Among them was a book of its own. In 1988, the J. D. Thomas-edited *Evolution and Faith* was published by ACU Press and distributed to its highest-level donors.<sup>60</sup> The book is in many ways a snapshot of the contradictions that swirled through a university emerging from decades of rejecting the scientific consensus on evolution and related topics. On the one hand, ACU geology chair Charles Felix argued against evolutionary assumptions about the age of the earth and the fossil record.<sup>61</sup> On the other, James Nichols stated simply, “There is no reason for anyone to be staggered at the fact that

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58. Furman Kearley, letter to Bert Thompson, Feb. 12, 1986, Thompson collection.

59. H. Jackson, letter to Thompson.

60. “President’s Circle Collection,” Marler and Anthony, *AnswerBook*.

61. Charles Felix, “Geology and Paleontology,” J.D. Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), 36.

there is clear evidence which could support evolution at one level (speciation), and to extend that to more major groups seems plausible.”<sup>62</sup> Further, physics professor Michael Sadler defended the concept of a 10-billion-year-old universe: “The attitude is not supported that such conclusions are only made by misguided scientists who have some satanic vendetta against a deity.”<sup>63</sup> None of this, however, kept President Bill Teague himself from arguing in the book’s introduction “that creation/evolution is not a choice between faith and fact; it is, rather, a choice between faith and faith.”<sup>64</sup>

Kearley had long argued that ACU should publish a book about evolution; however, one that defended speciation through natural selection and an ancient universe was likely not what he had envisioned. In 1985, he had proposed a book opposing evolution with chapters written by “some of the well-trained science professors in our schools,” potentially edited by Hoover, with Kearley, Thompson, and the prominent Pepperdine creationist Douglas Dean as contributors.<sup>65</sup> In a frustrated letter written several months later, Kearley asked administrators,

Who at ACU is writing books like Charles Roberson’s Modernism, which exposed evolution and theological liberalism? Is Brother Roberson’s book still being used as a text? Are teachers still teaching the things Brother Roberson taught? I know of nothing like Brother Roberson’s book that has been written by any science faculty, who should be the most qualified to write and refute the theory of evolution.<sup>66</sup>

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62. James Nichols, “Biology and Evolution,” in Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith*, 61-62.

63. Michael Sadler, “Scientific Dating Techniques and the Age of the Universe,” in Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith*, 91.

64. Bill Teague, foreword to Thomas, ed., *Evolution and Faith*, iii.

65. Furman Kearley, letter to Bert Thompson, Aug. 7, 1985, Thompson collection.

66. Furman Kearley, letter to Abilene Christian University Administration, Feb. 27, 1986, Gray collection: 2.

Thompson did not miss the irony in ACU publishing a book that would not meet Kearley's expectations. "Looks like your idea that ACU write a book on evolution has completely backfired," he wrote upon hearing the news of its upcoming release and the list of its contributors.<sup>67</sup> As he expected, Thompson was not pleased with the results: "Pity the poor ACU student reading this volume. What is he or she to believe? From beginning to end, the book is filled with contradictions and false teachings on the creation account and related passages."<sup>68</sup> The book's contradictory stances aside, its public discussion of evolution and the big bang on the heels of surviving Thompson's attacks appeared to effectively defang the anti-evolution movement among mainstream Churches of Christ. Concurrently, the broader American conversation shifted away from anti-evolutionism toward Intelligent Design Creationism.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

This study has shown that at the time of the 1985-1986 ACU evolution controversy, Churches of Christ had established a decades-old consensus regarding evolution, namely that it was unscientific, dangerous, and incompatible with Christianity. This consensus was in place by the time W. W. Freeman questioned the scientific accuracy of the Bible in 1922 and showed no signs of cracking through the 1964 Texas textbook controversy – indeed, it was often reinforced by the statements and publications

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67. Bert Thompson, letter to Furman Kearley, August [1987], Thompson collection.

68. Bert Thompson, "What's Wrong with Theistic Evolution?" (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics, 2001), [www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990](http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/1990).

69. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 241. Tom McIver, *Anti-Evolution: A Reader's Guide to Writings Before and After Darwin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), lists no books in the years immediately following the evolution controversy from the group of anti-evolution authors who had published so prolifically in the years leading to it. The term "Intelligent Design Creationism" is taken from Robert Pennock, ed., *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

of ACU faculty and administrators themselves. With little public discussion and the quick condemnation of dissent, ACU was slow to accept the scientific consensus on evolution, and Churches of Christ were unprepared for the possibility that “their” science professors could be teaching evolution without refutation.

Nevertheless, the evidence makes clear that Archie Manis and Ken Williams were indeed teaching evolution in their classes as an explanatory framework for most of the world’s diversity in plants and animals. They rejected young-earth creationism and denied that such an idea could be proven scientifically. And they accepted the basic concepts of evolution, such as natural selection and genetic mutation, as beyond dispute. Regardless of whether either man accepted fully the Darwinian system of all life’s descent from a single common ancestor, there is little doubt that when Bert Thompson accused them of teaching evolution without refutation – especially given that ACU never disputed the vast majority of the evidence he presented – he was correct in the basic facts of his allegations, notwithstanding either the university’s denials or his own acerbic style.

Several overlapping reasons help explain ACU’s denial, which came despite contrary advice and contrary testimony, and hinged on the semantic ambiguities inherent in any discussion of complex scientific concepts. By taking advantage of Thompson’s rhetorical excesses, the university truthfully denied the apologist’s conclusions that the professors advocated a godless, anti-Bible theory of evolution without addressing the less inflammatory – but no less troubling for Thompson or most of his conservative audience – substance behind those audacious claims.

In the end, Thompson’s attack on ACU – damaging as it was in the short term, especially to the psyches of the professors and administrators involved – did not, by his

own admission, result in significant long-term victories. The fragmentation among Churches of Christ that had begun in the 1960s was reflected by 1985 in the collapse of the consensus-building “brotherhood publications” that could have enforced an orthodoxy on evolution and aired Thompson’s grievances more broadly. In combination with ACU’s decision to turn away from the historical positions of Churches of Christ on evolution in favor of maintaining academic integrity in the sciences, the broader fragmentation hobbled Thompson’s attacks. Faster perhaps than Thompson and his allies liked – indeed, faster perhaps than they realized – the movement’s near-century-long consensus on science had evolved.

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