

THE POWER OF IDEOLOGY¹

Evangelical Science Denial

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ABSTRACT

The author describes an intellectual journey which took him from young earth creationism to an evolutionary perspective. Rather than eroding evangelical faith, science, rightly understood, can lead to a more accurate interpretation of scripture's creation accounts. The author argues that evangelical resistance to biological science is ideologically driven. Scientific evidence is summarily dismissed, based on the presupposition that the young earth interpretation of the Bible's creation accounts is beyond reproach, with proponents either unaware of or ignoring the fact that scientific methodology has built-in limitations with regard to the supernatural and displays a healthy agnosticism toward the spiritual and metaphysical.

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INTRODUCTION

Near the end of the book of Job, God challenges his servant with a series of questions. God wants to know if Job was present when the earth's foundation was established. He asks Job about the earth's dimensions. He wants to know if Job has journeyed to the place where the sea originates. It's clear that God is testing Job. Why would that be? Is God saying, "You'll never know these things, so why bother?" Or perhaps, "You don't know these things? Well, get to it then. Use the intelligence and skill I've graciously given you to study my creation. But give me the credit and the glory." [1]

For a good portion of my adult years, I have investigated the relationship of science and faith. I have come to believe that faithfulness to a particular theological heritage (in my case, confessional Lutheranism) may, from time to time, require a willingness to challenge that same heritage. Since the 1950's, my denomination (Lutheran Church – Canada, sister church to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) has maintained a long-standing relationship with, and provided significant support to, young-earth creationism (YEC). [2] When I was ordained, my understanding of scripture's creation accounts was inadequate. I was well aware that young-earth creationism is an important part of my denomination's history and systematic theology, but I wasn't sure what I personally believed, or why. Psychologists call this malady cognitive dissonance. As science writer Gordie Slack says, there comes a time

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when an old paradigm rattles even when driven at the speed limit. [3] It was time to do some research.

I wanted to know what scientists, especially believing scientists, had to say about balancing science and faith. Two incidents sparked my interest. The first was a *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (CBC) science broadcast back in 1989. The topic was the Cambrian Explosion and the Burgess Shale, home to a large number of exceedingly rare and unusual soft-bodied fossils dated to approximately 540 million years ago. The second was a book by paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) titled *Wonderful Life*. [4] It, too, focused on the Burgess Shale. Gould's writings opened the door to the world of science, not just for me but for many people. Most important was the fact that, although he was an atheist and an evolutionist, Gould was also a friend of faith. His writings were generously sprinkled with Scripture references and relevant discussion.

An ongoing record of my dissonance can be found in marginal comments made over the years. How could I as a pastor in a young-earth denomination sing the Lord's song in this strange new land of science? Some evangelicals believe that studying the theory of evolution leads to a loss of faith or, at the very least, to erosion of the Bible's authority, insisting that there are significant theological reasons why evolution must be rejected. Should church workers depart from the party line, it is best to keep their views to themselves. It has been said that the human mind is not a blank slate but a formatted hard drive. A paradigm shift is similar to the installation of a new operating system. After the upgrade, some components may not function as before. And new capabilities appear. Intellectual transformations are similar. Some components – previous beliefs or priorities – will have to be adjusted. And new insights appear.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Evangelicals stress Biblical authority, including scripture's inerrancy and inspiration. Christians of all stripes understand that God wants his people to be good stewards of all of his gifts, including the gift of knowledge. Our faith stresses the importance of being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A God-pleasing interpreter of scripture "...correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV) Despite differences in explaining creation, evangelicals generally agree that all people are created by God in his image, that sin is real and we are all subject to it, and that Christ's death was necessary to forgive sin and restore access to a holy God. Most evangelicals agree, in addition, that creation is not a salvation issue. While I was in seminary, I visited an inactive member of a local congregation. I was asked whether it was necessary to believe in a literal six-day creation in order to be a Christian. I said that being a Christian meant trusting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and that

a proper understanding of the creation narratives was secondary. I am reminded of the words of Lutheran patriarch C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887) who said, “The findings of science can neither give us the faith nor rob us of it.” [5]

YOUNG EARTH CREATIONISM

Today’s young earth creationism has connections to nineteenth-century Seventh-day Adventism, specifically to prophet Ellen G. White (1827-1915). [6] White recounted a vision that dealt with the flood of Noah. In her vision, a worldwide flood dramatically altered the earth’s geology. It deposited fossils and plant matter that became the source of the earth’s oil deposits. White’s vision, which Adventists took to be from God himself, became the foundation of what came to be called flood geology, a point of view tirelessly promoted by fellow Adventist and Canadian amateur geologist George McCready Price (1870-1963). [7] Flood geology was the focal point of *The Genesis Flood*, a book by Henry Morris (1918-2006) and John Whitcomb. [8] That book, published in 1961, had an immense positive impact on the young earth creationist movement. Young earth creationism gives credence to the common-sense understanding of the natural realm found in the scriptures. It is trapped in a pre-scientific worldview. Ironically, it denies many of the contributions of modern science. A pervasive lack of scientific literacy among evangelicals makes it difficult, to use the vernacular, for the average YEC to distinguish information from disinformation.

YEC insists on a “literal” interpretation of the creation accounts. Saint Augustine (354-430) proposed a distinction between literal and what could be called “literalistic” interpretations. [9] A literal interpretation seeks to understand the text as the original author intended. A literalistic interpretation, on the other hand, simply reads the words off the page. A literalistic interpretation is often guilty of eisegesis – the cardinal sin of hermeneutics (i.e., textual interpretation) – that is, of reading modern notions back into ancient documents.

SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY

Scientific methodology sets out limits for the discipline. Science has been compared to a fisherman's net that can't catch small fish because the holes in the net are too large. [10] Science cannot tell us everything we need to know about what’s important in life. Most scientists gladly work within these limits, but a vocal minority, the so-called New Atheists, use science to attack religion. Two prominent new atheists are British biologist Richard Dawkins and American philosopher Daniel Dennett, author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. [11] These individuals represent a point of view called scientism – the idea that science is the only reliable way to determine truth. Another limitation inherent in scientific methodology has to do with the supernatural. The supernatural is not included in scientific discussions because it

cannot be falsified. Science therefore cannot legitimately speak to metaphysical questions such as the existence or nonexistence of God. It cannot deal with miracles like the incarnation or the resurrection of Christ. What this means is that Christians are free to live out their faith without scientific interference.

CONCLUSION

Christian leaders need to be scientifically literate. “*Zeal not based on knowledge...*” is harmful to the faith. (Romans 10:2, NIV) It is important that all believers, especially youth and young adults, know what various groups believe. My own understanding increased exponentially when I read Francis Collins’ *The Language of God*. [12] That’s when I discovered *BioLogos* – an advocacy group that seeks to develop an approach to evolution that is faithful to the foundational beliefs of Christianity. When I learned of evolutionary creation, the view that God used evolution as his method of creation, disparate pieces of information began to come together. I learned that evolutionary creation acknowledges miracles and posits God’s ongoing supervision of creation.

Recently, I decided to go public with my research. The result was a book, published in mid-2018, titled *Evolving Certainties: Resolving Conflict at the Intersection of Faith and Science*. [13] My goal is to present the issues as objectively as possible. I leave it to the reader to determine an appropriate response. *Evolving Certainties* contains endorsements from several scientists affiliated with *BioLogos* along with a foreword by past president Darrel Falk. I look forward to the day when Christians emphasize dialogue rather than debate and irenics rather than polemics. I am convinced that if our interpretation of the scriptures is more accurate, our doctrines have been appropriately reviewed, our respect for science has grown, and our personal faith has been enriched, this intellectual journey is worthwhile. To those who travel this road, however, I would point out the Greek myth of Ariadne and Theseus. Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of red thread which he unrolled as he made his way into the abyss so that he could find his way out. Christians will be blessed if they maintain a strong connection to their faith as they negotiate these complicated, controversial, and, at the end of the day, critically important issues.

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