

The Gospel and Society
Creation
Session Three
January 31, 2005

In the beginning God created...

Thus begin our story and the story of God's creative and relational powers.

In 1859, when Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*, the great debate between religion and science took center stage. Off stage, this debate had been going on for years, but with Darwin's bold thesis that species are the product of a long history of transmutation by natural selection the debate heated up.

Many intellectuals, including members of mainline denominations, thought that the debated ended midway between Knoxville and Chattanooga in Dayton, Tennessee.

A young general science instructor and part-time football coach, John T. Scopes, got George Hunter's *Civic Biology* book out of storage and used it for review purposes while filling in for the ill high school principal who usually taught the biology class.

(Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion, by Edward J. Larson, pp89-89)

On a hot July day, when the son of prosecutor William Jennings Bryan and the defendant, John Scopes, returned from a cool swim together in a mountain stream, the prosecutors delivered their opening statement that Scopes violated the antievolution law by teaching that *"mankind is descended from a lower order of animals, and therefore has taught a theory which denies the story of divine creation of man as taught in the Bible"*. (Larson; p,170)

The defense team lead by Clarence Darrow, whom some called the most famous – or infamous – trial lawyer in America said that they would show *"by the testimony of men leaned in science and theology that there are millions of people who believe in evolution and in the story of creation as set forth in the Bible and who find no conflict between the two,... and that this is a matter of faith and interpretation, which each individual must determine for himself."* (Larson, p. 171)

The end of the trail resulted in what the novelist Irvin Stone called; *"the deathblow to Fundamentalism."*

Now 80 years later, we know that the ‘deathblow’ was but a bruise and a delay in the debate over the Bible and evolutionary theories.

Last week a suburban Atlanta school district decided to appeal a federal judge’s ruling that it must remove from biology textbooks stickers that refer to evolution as “*a theory not a fact.*”

In Harrisburg, PA., high school students heard about “*intelligent design*” for the first time last week in a school district that attracted national attention by requiring students to be made aware of “*intelligent design*” as an alternative to the theory of evolution.

Richard Thompson, chief counsel for the Thomas More Law Center which is speaking on the district’s behalf stated; “*The revolution in evolution has begun.*” (CNN.com)

From the early days of this debate, biologists gave overwhelming support to the general outlines of the evolution of species, with the major points of dispute on the mechanics of evolution.

In the early days, Protestant clergy worked to embrace an understanding of evolution into one of four camps:

1. **Theistic Evolutionists.** This is a progressive creationism that attempts to combine long periods of variation within species with periodic special creations of new species.
2. **Transmutation Evolutionists.** These creationists allowed for a transmutation of species for the whole of the animal kingdom, as long as the special creation of human beings was preserved.
3. **Pantheism Evolutionists.** This group so identified God with the forces of nature as to lose any transcendent reality.
4. **Deistic Evolutionists.** This group believed that the activity of God had little relevance beyond an initial setting in motion the forces of nature. (Darwin himself was in this group)

The principal concerns of the clergy were to present a defense of one of the interpretation of the Bible:

- Literal.
- Inerrant.
- Defense of the Divine purpose, and design.
- Defense of the uniqueness of humanity as the goal of creation.

A vocal minority of Protestants wanted no compromise with Darwinism and insisted on only a literal-historical interpretation of Genesis creation stories that should not be accommodated to the any new theories.

This group believed that the truth about origins was divinely revealed in the Bible and should not be sacrificed to an ever changing science or to a science that seemed –both in motivation and in result – to be naturalistic.

These preachers and theologians who saw biblical criticism as of the same order as evolution were unsympathetic with a discussion of historical context and literary characteristics, which began to be studied at this same time.

Rev. Dr. Charles Hodge, of Princeton Seminary, and his son Archibald lead the march of the ‘Anti-Scriptural Theories’.

Rev. Dr James Woodrow, of Columbia Theological Seminary, an uncle of Woodrow Wilson, suggested that much of the controversy hinged on the assumption made by almost all parties that Genesis and modern science were using words in a comparable manner and for a comparable purpose. When he suggested they were NOT comparable and that to take the language of Genesis in a scientific sense was to grossly pervert its meaning, and that one did not need to choose between evolution and creation, Dr. Woodrow was dismissed from his teaching post by the seminary board.

Today, the same positions and arguments – often stated verbatim – continue prominently in the literature on creation.

Along side about 500 other belief systems and creation stories taught by thousands of faith groups, the debate centers on the Genesis-Evolution accounts and the belief systems fall in four camps.

1. **Young Earth Creation Science** (44% of public support) This group believes that God created the universe during 6 consecutive 24 hours days, less than 10,000 years ago. God rested on the seventh day then created various kinds of animals that are present on earth today. A worldwide flood in the time of Noah wiped out all humans, except for the 8 people on board the ark, and all land animals downed except for the pairs of each species on the ark.
2. **Theistic Evolution** (39% support) This group believes that the universe is over 10 Billion years old, and that God caused the first living cell to appear. Humans evolved out of lower forms of life under the direct guidance of God. Species have been evolving ever since, and dinosaurs became extinct many tens of millions of years ago, long before the first humans evolved.

3. **Naturalistic Evolution** (10% support) This group holds much the same belief system as the theistic evolution, except that God is assumed to have no part in the processes, and that evolution was driven by purely natural forces.
4. **Old Earth Creation Science** (7% support) This group believes that each day in Genesis may have been much longer than 24 hours and that there were various gaps between one or more of the ‘days.’ God created all of the animals over a relatively short period and these species of animals are fixed. Dinosaurs were created not long before humans, but became extinct.

(Based on a Gallup Poll in 1997)

Can you be a Christian and believe in evolution?

The intensity of emotions around this issue and the degree of irrationality which comes to the surface when these two ideas are debated gives convincing evidence that stories about creation are very important to the people of faith and who believe in Jesus of the Gospels.

Can you be a person of the science and still be a person who believes in the words of the Gospels?

The flat earth concept was for many Christians relatively easy to accept as false. Some may have been frightened and threatened as their view of the earth was destroyed, but most of them moved ahead with a new and better view of the earth in the shape of a ball.

One reason it was easier for the flat earth people to shift to the round earth view was that view of earth did not threaten their view of God. *“The earth is flat and God is in the heavens.”*

If they, against current data, had said; *“The earth was created flat by God who is in heaven,”* I think they would have had much more difficulty accepting the scientific data because it threatens their concept of God.

Some believe that there are no universally accepted proofs from nature that eliminate any of the major belief systems of evolution, and this lack of proof continues to fuel the debate.

Both scientists and creationist work to prove their point of view and the debate, of course, has moved into the political arena.

A state law of Arkansas passed in 1981, titled “Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science Act” is an early example of the public school issue. The

act begins; *“Public schools within this State shall give balanced treatment to creation-science and to evolution-science.”* (www.religioustolerance.org)

This Act, and those that followed, are supported by the Creation Research Society, (CRS) which splintered from the American Scientific Association (ASA) in 1963, and requires its members to believe:

1. Evolution did not happen; Earth came into existence by special creation, as described in the Bible.
2. The entire Bible is inspired by God and without error as originally written.
3. The creation passages in Genesis are *“a factual presentation of simple historical truth.”*
4. During Creation week, God created *‘all basic types of living things.’*
5. The description of the worldwide flood of Noah is accurate.
6. Salvation can only be attained by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

An interesting sidebar to this science-evolution debate and the Scopes’ Trial is the story of Sir John Templeton, the mutual fund tycoon. He gives \$16 to \$30 million dollars each year to fund studies on the relationship between faith and science - from studies on the scientific basis of forgiveness to faith healing. Sir John first got interested in this subject as a young boy while witnessing the *‘monkey trail’* unfolding in a nearby county in Tennessee.

Pope John-Paul II, in his message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996 argued that between ancestral apes and modern human beings, there was an *‘ontological discontinuity’* – a point at which God injected a human soul into an animal lineage. (Genome by Matt Ridley, p. 24)

Some theological thinkers, and those that parallel my thinking, offer that we owe our Being to a divine authorship as attested in Scripture. HOWEVER, it can not be reasonably maintained that Genesis is authoritative concerning the chronological sequence of events nor the means employed in the creation of man or his world. These matters are outside the field in which we find the Bible to speak with authority. Within the particular passages of Genesis, there are two narratives concerning the creation of man, written centuries apart (but placed together by the priestly editor) that flatly contradicting each other.

According to the first chapter of Genesis, living creatures appeared in the following order:

- Vegetation
- Fish

- Birds
- Land animals
- Men and women

The much earlier second chapter, reports that man was created first, then the useful plants, then animals and birds, then women and finally the annoying weeds.

Rather than fearing that the apes were replacing the divine Creator acknowledged in Genesis, it can be seen that this represents *“but a stage in the forming of the ‘dust’ into man”*. (A Theology of the Living Church, by L. Harold DeWolf, p.149)

We understand and most of us agree that the Bible is the story of God and God’s relationship with His people.

There are two types of stories, those that are testable and those that are untestable. When a view of God, or a story about God’s activities, is called into question, does it call into question all views and stories about God?

The first story, in chapters one and two of Genesis tells us about our beginnings. When we look at the Genesis account, we see that there is both a God story; *“In the beginning God created...”* and a story about the order and timing of creation; *“And God said; Let there be light, ...darkness, water, land, vegetation, plants, cattle and creeping things, and male and female.”*

The first story is inherently untestable, whereas the second story is quite testable, and with the advancement of science more and more testable.

The God story concerns the **WHO** of creation whereas evolution concerns the **WHEN** and **HOW** of creation.

Evolution theories should be no direct threat to the God story.

The theory of evolution is testable, and the testing is going on continuously.

The God story is not testable, but a foundation of faith.

Evolution does not directly threaten, for me, the supremacy of God as Creator.

The theoretical alternatives to the **WHEN** and **HOW** of creation, like the two accounts of creation given in Genesis, does not threaten by understanding of the **WHO** of creation.

I understand evolution, and the continuing theories of evolution, as supplement to the story of Creation in Genesis, rather than a replacement of it.

How one comes to his/her understanding of Genesis is determined by how one reads the rest of the Bible.

We read the Bible through many lenses.

1. Literal
2. Inerrant
3. Literal and Inerrant
4. Historical
5. Literary
6. Historical and Literary
7. Contextual
8. Kerygmatic

We can use one or some, but not all of these lenses.

I prefer the Kerygmatic lens, where the emphasis is put on the essence and spirit of the Gospel message, and all other accounts and activities are interpreted through this lens.

As a Christian, the Creation story does not for me begin in Genesis, but in the Gospel of John. *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made”*.

The Bible is the story of men and women’s love affair with God. On again, off again, loving and loathing, moving toward and recoiling from God, until the message changes, and the direction is reversed in the Gospel story.

God, in Jesus as the Christ, in the Logos, comes to humankind.

“In the beginning was the Word... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

John 1:1-18 is our Creation story.

Alfred North Whitehead said and demonstrated that scientific laws are *“an unconscious derivative from medieval theology.”*

The Biblical movement from the Garden to the wilderness, from the pagan to the religious, from the idols to the Christ, is our evolutionary journey as we move from the

lower to the higher, from the worse to the better. We move from fear to faith in a hierarchical movement from sin (less evolved) to salvation (more evolved) as we follow Christ.

Albert Einstein said: “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical.”
Louis Pasteur said; “Happy is he who bears a god within, and who obeys it. The ideals of art, of science, are lighted by reflection from the infinite.”

We believe in and trust in a God of the Heavens, the teaching of science can not move this trust.

We move in step with science.

Pope Leo XII, in 1829 declared: “*Whoever allows himself to be vaccinated ceases to be a child of God. Smallpox is a judgment of God, and vaccination is a challenge toward heaven.* (The Catholic Observer, 4/13/01)

God, I believe, cannot be properly be conceived as a great Granddaddy in the sky or a big Creator set apart from the creation, from things and events and human beings, including science.

Our God is best seen, in my view as the Source of all things, events, and even our life. This Creation debate points to the important of our ‘being’. “*Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being*” (Paul Tillich, ST, Vol 1, p14) We are concerned that God, if he were absence would absence all things.

As nature is not something set apart from mountains, eagles, rivers, and people, but something that runs through the fibers of each and all, God is in all creation and sewn through the fabric of all that we know.

Like no one has even seen Nature – we see trees and birds and clouds and grass, but not some specific thing we can isolate and call Nature, no one saw God until the Christ event in history.

This event set history on a new course, and is the event through which we see all history.

Edgell Franklin Pyles, Ph.D.