

“Religion AND Science???”  
Genesis 2:4-9, 15-23; Joshua 10:12-14; John 6:16-21  
February 15, 2009  
Rev. Jeff Allen

Thursday of this past week was February 12<sup>th</sup>. You may have heard that it was the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, which was especially poignant considering the Presidential transition this year. Somewhat lost in the celebration of Lincoln’s birthday was the fact that Thursday, February 12<sup>th</sup> was also the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth.

Darwin’s birth was cause for celebration and recognition for many. You may have seen the picture in the newspaper this week of a billboard in Whitehall that read, “Praise Darwin: Evolve Beyond Belief.” The billboard was paid for by a group called the “Freedom From Religion Foundation.”<sup>1</sup> The message they’re sending is that we should not praise God, we should praise Darwin, and that our civilization should evolve beyond the need to believe in a supreme being. And here we go with the debate.

For centuries, the scientific community has been at odds with the religious community. Some notable highlights of this battle include the story of Galileo and the Scopes Monkey Trial. Let’s start with Galileo.

[Galileo Galilei](#) was born in 1564. From an early age, Galileo showed his scientific skills. At age nineteen, he discovered the isochronism of the pendulum. By age twenty-two, he had invented the hydrostatic balance. By age twenty-five, Galileo assumed his first lectureship, at the University of Pisa. Within a few more years, Galileo earned a reputation throughout Europe as a scientist and superb lecturer. Eventually, he would be recognized as the father of experimental physics. Galileo's motto might have been "follow knowledge wherever it leads us."

Galileo's discovery of the telescope in 1609 enabled him to confirm his belief that Copernicus was right in saying that the Earth revolves around the sun, and he began to advocate for this idea. Going against what he said were "nineteen centuries of organized thought piling up to smother him," Galileo pleaded his case through powerful summaries of his thoughts on Scriptural interpretation and the evidence concerning the nature of the universe.

Well, the church didn’t like it, and they brought Galileo up on charges of heresy. They considered Galileo’s statements that: (1) The Sun is the center of the world and immovable of local motion, and (2) The Earth is not the center of the world, nor immovable, but moves according to the whole of itself. This directly contradicts the Joshua passage we read today. The scripture says that during the battle, the sun stood still. This clearly means that the sun must move around the earth. How else would it be possible for the sun to stand still? So, on February 23, 1616, the leaders of the church unanimously declared both of Galileo’s propositions to be

---

<sup>1</sup> “Billboard puts Darwin over Whitehall” *The Columbus Dispatch*, Feb 4. 2009, p. B8.

"foolish and absurd" and "formally heretical." The Pope ordered Galileo to abandon his opinion and to abstain altogether from teaching or defending this opinion and even from discussing it."<sup>2</sup>

So let's flash forward three hundred years to the Scopes Monkey Trial. The Butler Act made it unlawful in Tennessee for any state-funded educational establishment "to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." A high school teacher from Dayton, Tennessee named John Scopes intentionally violated the Act. Scopes was charged on May 5, 1925 with teaching evolution based on ideas developed in Charles Darwin's book "On the Origin of Species." During the trial, the lawyers questioned issues in the book of Genesis to show that the stories of the Bible could not be scientific and should not be used in teaching science. One lawyer asserted, "You insult every man of science and learning in the world because he does not believe in your fool religion." After eight days of trial, it took the jury only nine minutes to deliberate. Scopes was found guilty and was ordered to pay a fine of \$100.00.<sup>3</sup>

Now these two events, the heresy trial of Galileo and the Scopes Monkey Trial are the large events that set the main stage for the battle between science and religion, but the debate continues as people of faith try to reconcile the findings of science with the words of scripture.

The three passages of scripture we read this morning are just three of the examples. From the very beginning of the Bible, the accounts of creation seem to conflict with what science has discovered about the beginnings of our planet. Much attention gets paid to the seven-day creation story of Genesis 1, but I chose to include the second creation story this morning because it is less known and because it places the creation of human beings before the creation of the vegetation or animal life. That's the Genesis passage.

I've already mentioned the difficulty of the Joshua passage during the account of Galileo's heresy trial.

And the Gospel lesson we heard this morning of Jesus walking on the water is just one of the many miraculous events of Jesus' life that people of a scientific mind have a hard time wrestling with. Others might include the virgin birth, the healing stories and even the resurrection.

So what are we to do with the scientific impossibilities represented in the Bible? Some say that if the Bible is not 100% true in all of its statements, it cannot be trusted at all. So do we need to dismiss the entirety of scripture as a worthless lie? I hope not!

The questions that I think get to the heart of the matter are these: What is the Bible to you? How does it function in your life? What does it mean to you?

---

<sup>2</sup> Most of the information regarding Galileo comes from Doug Linder's article "The Trial of Galileo" <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/galileo/galileoaccount.html>, accessed 2/14/09.

<sup>3</sup> Information from this section on the Scopes Monkey Trial is from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes\\_monkey\\_trial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes_monkey_trial), accessed 2/14/09.

Some 5th and 6th graders were once asked to define some things in our world scientifically. When asked to define the law of gravity, one child wrote, "no fair jumping up without coming back down." Another said about thunderstorms, "You can listen to thunder and tell how close you came to getting hit. If you don't hear it, you got hit, so never mind." Another made a comment on clouds, "I'm not sure how clouds are formed, but clouds know how to do it, and that's the important thing." One was asked to describe how rain happens, and the 6th grader said, "Water vapor gets together in a cloud. When it is big enough to be called a drop, it does." One youngster said, "When planets run around and around in circles, we say they are orbiting. When people do it, we say they are crazy."<sup>4</sup>

These are some of the scientific truths of our children. We wouldn't claim any of them to be fact, but within them there is truth, and there is wisdom. To me, this is how the Bible functions.

Our confirmation class two weeks ago was devoted to a discussion of the Bible. We talked about how the Bible can be like a mirror, allowing you to see yourself more clearly and to see yourself as others might see you. It can be like a compass, showing you the way to go, the correct path to take. It can be like a family photo album, containing snapshots of our family history, reminding us of who we are and where we came from.

We also talked about how the Bible can be like a window, and I think this is my favorite way of thinking of the Bible. The Bible is the lens through which we see and experience God. However, some people make the mistake of believing in the lens rather than the one they see through the lens. Frederick Buechner said, "We don't worship the window. We simply look through it to get a glimpse of the divine on the other side. Just because there are smudges, swatted flies, and hairline cracks obstructing our view, we don't throw the window out. We learn to distinguish between what is part of the window and what is beyond."<sup>5</sup>

One pastor once wrote that the Bible "Is not a book of biology, but it will lead you to the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. It is not a book of botany, but it will lead you to the Lily of the Valley and the Rose of Sharon who can save you. It is not a book of astronomy but it can lead you to the Bright and Morning Star whose light can guide you into heaven. It is not a book of medicine, but it can lead you to the Great Physician who can heal your soul. It is not a book of diplomacy, but it can bring you to the Prince of Peace who can give you peace when nothing else can."<sup>6</sup>

A recurring theme throughout the Bible is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind. My fear is that too many have been encouraged to give up loving God with their mind in order to remain faithful.

---

<sup>4</sup> Blair, Brett. "Science is Amazing" *esermans.com*, accessed 2/14/09.

<sup>5</sup> "Taking the Bible Seriously" *Living the Questions*, *livingthequestions.com*, 2007, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> James Merritt, "Science and the Bible" *esermans.com*, accessed 2/14/09.

Science doesn't need to be a threat to religion. In fact, some recent scientific theories and discoveries have made it easier for some to understand Biblical concepts. Tony Campolo writes of several of these theories and discoveries in his book "Speaking My Mind."

He uses Einstein's theories about time to understand the nature of God. He writes that Einstein "came up with the amazing discovery that time becomes compressed with increased speed. In other words, the faster we travel, the more time is compressed. While the following figures are not precise, they may help in understanding what this is all about. If you were put into a rocket and sent into space, traveling at 170,000 miles per second relative to earth, and then returned in ten years, when you returned you would be ten years older, but all the rest of us would be twenty years older. For those of us who remained on earth, our twenty years would be compressed into ten years of your time.

If we got you traveling at 180,000 miles per second, our twenty years would be compressed into one day of your time. If we could get you traveling at the speed of light – 186,000 miles per second – there would be no passage of time at all. If all that were possible, all of time would be compressed into one eternal now."<sup>7</sup>

For Campolo, this helps to explain passages of scripture like 2 Peter 3:8 which says, "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." It also helps us understand what God means when God claims the name "I Am." God never was. God never will be. God is in the eternal now. This also helps us understand the notion that Jesus experienced all of the sin of humanity while hanging on the cross. Thanks to Einstein, these faith concepts can become intellectually plausible.

For those scientific minds out there, I'll give you a couple more examples. Campolo continues, saying, "Physicists are now claiming that electrons can be reduced to vibrating sounds, which would give a lot of support to the biblical ideas that God *spoke* creation into existence and that all of nature sings. Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy declares that no natural laws govern the motions of electrons around the nuclei of atoms – that there is no known force keeping them in order. Something beyond the domain of known scientific laws holds atoms together. It is easy to relate this to Colossians 1:16-17, where we read: "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist."<sup>8</sup>

So not only do science and religion not need to be at odds with one another, science can actually help people of faith to deepen their understanding of God. The church does not need to be afraid of science!

---

<sup>7</sup> Tony Campolo, "Speaking My Mind" Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004. P. 104-105.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 116

The problem is that our society just loves the word “versus” compared to the word “and.” We tend to pit two things as opposed to one another, where we have to pick sides, where one side is right and the other side is wrong. Therefore, we’re much better at science “versus” religion, and not so good at science “and” religion. But it is possible! We, as people of faith, have nothing to fear from the scientific world, and we do not have to turn off our brains to be faithful.

For me, it boils down to this: I look around at the world that I believe God created, I see the beauty of a sunset or the majesty of a mountain and then sings my soul, how great thou art. I see the inventions in hospitals that save people’s lives, I look into a microscope and see the intricacy of a single cell and then sings my soul, how great thou art. I learn about the vastness of the universe and I remember that the God of that universe longs to be in relationship with me and then sings my soul. How great thou art.

Let us sing together our closing hymn, How Great Thou Art.