

Genesis 1:1-2:3

“What NOT to Believe: Evolution Is Unchristian”

February 19, 2012 Maple Grove UMC

Here’s how some people put the question: Do you believe in creation or evolution? And if the question is put that way, here’s my answer: Yes! Yes, I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. And yes, I believe that one of the ways God creates is through the process of evolution. Granted, that’s not an answer that a lot of people—both conservative Christians and many scientists—will accept. But I’m not alone. A recent survey shows that 66% of “White Mainline Protestants” (that’s two-thirds of the people in this room) believe that humans and other living things have evolved over time.ⁱ In 2005 a letter affirming both evolution and creation was signed by over 10,000 pastors.ⁱⁱ And that’s just on the church side. According to a poll in *Nature* magazine, it’s also true that over 40% of professional scientists believe in a God who answers prayer.ⁱⁱⁱ I’m not really trying to persuade you to believe in both creation and evolution—it’s okay with me if you don’t. What I want to do is tell you that it’s okay to believe both creation and evolution. You don’t *have* to believe that evolution is unchristian—that’s not part of what it means to be Christian.

So if it's okay to believe both evolution and creation and lots of people do, then why am I bringing it up? Here's why: it's because so many people *think* Christians can't believe in evolution. I don't know if it's the way the media presents things, or how assertive conservative Christians can be, or how timid we Mainline Christians are, but that's the perception that's out there. Martin Thielen, who wrote the little book *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian*, tells of a young woman named Mary who was working on her PhD in biology. After attending his church for over a year, she came and said: I want to believe in God, but a literal reading of Genesis is impossible for me. "Dr. Thielen, she said, "can I be a scientist *and* a Christian?"^{iv}

Right here in our own church a young woman recently said, in effect, "I can't be a member of the church." "Why not?" "Because I believe in evolution." To which I want to say, "Me too! *And* I believe in God and the Bible and the love of Jesus Christ." This perception that you can't believe in both creation and evolution is turning people—smart people—away from the church, away from the Bible, sometimes even away from God. It breaks my heart, so I'll say again: You don't have to believe that evolution is unchristian; that's not part of what it means to be a Christian.

In my understanding the conflict is not really between evolution and the Bible; it's between evolution and a certain *interpretation* of the Bible. What we believe and teach about the Bible really does matter. And if you have to take every word in the Bible as literally, factually and eternally true, then it is virtually impossible to accept the theory of evolution. Because it says in Genesis 1 that God made everything there is in six days—the sun came up and the sun went down, and boom, something else was made. It says all animals bring forth according to their own “kind,” not that one kind of animal evolves into another. Oh sure, even literalists will stretch a little ways. Maybe as the psalmist says: to the Lord a day is as a thousand years—so the timing of things might be flexible. But if you have to take Genesis as true in a scientific sense, evolution is never going to fit in.

But what if the Bible isn't *intended* to be scientific truth? What if Genesis is the account of the experience of God of a people who knew a lot about God but thought the world was flat? What if it's simply not important that the ancient Israelites didn't know or care about modern biology or astronomy? Does the Bible have important and authoritative things to say about God and the world even if we don't have to accept every word of it as literally, factually and eternally true? I say yes, oh yes!

Here's how Thielen puts it: "Genesis doesn't try to teach us *how* God created but *that* God created."^v

More in a little bit about what Genesis says about creation, but first let me walk through some words and phrases you'll hear in the controversy about creation and evolution:

- *Creationism* often means starting with a literal interpretation of Genesis and doing what it takes to make the evidence fit with that interpretation. *Creation Science* is a little different. It denies evolution by saying that natural selection can't explain the origin of life or of new species. The problem with these positions, in my judgment, is that they start with a religious conviction—that God created the world in a certain way—and use scientific evidence to support that prior conviction. Their convictions may well be right, but that doesn't make them science, not the kind of science you can teach in a class at school. Science, by definition, has to start with the evidence and draw conclusions from it.
- After it was ruled unconstitutional in the 1980s to teach Creation Science in public schools, *Intelligent Design* was developed to take its place. Intelligent Design says that certain aspects of life—say the human eye—are too complex to have come about through natural

selection but require an “Intelligent Designer,” which is of course a secularized reference to God. Here again the assumptions of Intelligent Design may well be right, but that doesn’t make them scientific assumptions. “Purpose” and “design” are religious ideas, not scientific ones. Just as science can’t tell me what to believe about God, just so religion can’t tell science what is or isn’t too complex to explain with science.

- *Naturalism* and *Materialism* draw the conclusion that natural processes are all there is; they deny even the possibility of God or the supernatural. Some of these people become as unscientific in their atheism as Creation Scientists do in their religion. For example, the famous biologist, Richard Dawkins, says: “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is . . . no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”^{vi} That’s not science; that’s being grouchy and spiteful.
- *Theistic Evolution* is a name given to various ways of accepting both on the one hand a purposeful and creating God and on the other hand natural selection and evolution of species. It is admittedly not always easy to explain exactly how hold them together. But here’s the thing: When I look at the heavens--the moon and the stars, when

I see a newborn baby, I'm telling you, I know there's a creator, a God of goodness and love. And when I look at the fossil records, at the bones of Australopithecus and the Neanderthals, I know that's evolution in action. My awe and wonder at God does not diminish my respect for the scientific evidence, and my respect for the scientific evidence only increases my awe and wonder at how God it all.

Having said that, let me share with you why I think some people *won't* believe in evolution. While I can't agree with them, I do understand that there are real reasons why people believe that and I respect them. Let me share just two examples:

1. They are, for one thing, insisting on the specialness of human beings in the scheme of things. Some scientists suggest that we human beings are merely the accidental result of some chance mutations of DNA and that we're only an insignificant stage on the way to the next phase of evolution. If that's what evolution means, I can't buy it. Not necessarily more than the rest of creation, but at least in a different way from the rest of creation, we human beings matter. We are conscious of our relationship with God and one another. It is hard for evolution to

make room for the special relationship human beings have with God. Creationists are trying to protect that.

2. And second, those who reject evolution are above all insisting on the authority of scripture. For a lot of people, the Bible is either all true or not true at all, true in every possible way or not true in any way. I don't take such a black-and-white view of the Bible, but I understand it. If I *did* feel like I had to choose between science and the Bible, well I'd choose the Bible. I'm just glad I don't *have* to choose.

So if I don't think Genesis is a science guidebook, if I don't think it's meant to teach us *how* God created the world, what *does* Genesis 1 teach us?

1. Well first of all, the work of creation wasn't just making things, but giving order to stuff: this light—over here, and that light—over there! Land separate from water. Did you notice--when God starts creating, there's already an earth, stuff already existed, but it was a formless void. In Genesis, behind creation lies the abyss of chaos, which threatens to make everything come apart. Faith in God as Creator, then, is not just believing that God made stuff; it is trusting that God brings order out of chaos.

I don't know about you, but I can feel chaos nipping at my heels sometimes. Terrorism and war, drinking and debt. Just when you've think you've got it made, something falls apart. Chaos is always out there. We need a God who can sort it out and keep it at bay.

Did you notice how repetitive and orderly Genesis 1 is? And God said . . . and it was so . . . and it was good . . . and there was evening and there was morning, another day. Again, and again, and again. God brings order not only to the formless void of the world, but to the formless void of our lives. I believe in the God who brings order out of chaos, because I need it and because the Bible tells me so.

2. Genesis 1 is a story of goodness and blessing. Seven times God declares that what he's made is good. Three times God blesses creation. Atheists may find the world amazing, but Christians know it's more than that—it is good, pleasing, a reflection of God's glory. Some people focus only on the bad things in the world—sickness and aging, earthquakes and misfortune, the way things are going to the bad place in a handbasket. But that's never the whole story. I believe the world is full of goodness and blessing, because I need it and because the Bible tells me so.

3. Finally, the creation story doesn't culminate in the creation of human beings, but in what? the Sabbath. Part of the very fabric of creation—even for God—is to stop, to rest, to enjoy. There is a time to work and study, there is a time to plan and figure things out. And there is a time to stop, to rest, to enjoy—even for you and even for me. I believe that because I so desperately need it and because the Bible tells me so.

Many people—both scientists and Christians—will tell you that you can't be a scientist and a Christian, that you can't believe in creation and evolution. You can think that if you want to. But you don't *have* to believe that. Science has its important place. The Bible has its even more important place. And I, for one, will take them both.

There is wonderful moment at the end of the movie *Inherit the Wind*. The film retells the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, when presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan prosecuted a Tennessee teacher for teaching evolution and the teacher was defended by the most famous lawyer of the day, Clarence Darrow. In the movie the whole trial pits evolution against the Bible and the Bible against evolution, either one or the other. But at the very end of the movie, Spencer Tracy, playing the pro-evolution attorney gathers his belongings to leave the courtroom. Two

books are on the table in front of him. One is Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, the founding book of evolution. The other book is the Bible.

See what he does.

ⁱ *The Christian Century* (November 15, 2011), 9.

ⁱⁱ Reprinted in Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, *Can You Believe in God and Evolution: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 53-54.

ⁱⁱⁱ E.J. Larson and L. Witham, "Scientists Are Still Keeping the Faith," *Nature* 386 (1997), 435-36.

^{iv} Martin Thielen, *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 14-15.

^v Thielen, 16.

^{vi} Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.