

Reason to Believe: Can Faith and Science Coexist?
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Psalm 19:1-6, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

That article from the Belgic Confession contains a famous image for how God communicates with us. God reveals himself to us through two books. One book is the book of the Bible which tells us about God's nature and his saving work through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The second book is this beautiful creation "in which all creatures great and small are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God, his eternal power and divinity." Theology and faith mostly engage the second of those two books, the Bible. This book is the center of the church's faith. The Bible is our guide for faith and life. Science mostly engages other book, the book of creation. Science looks at the way the world fits together. Science examines the splendid order of things.

You'll notice that in the Belgic confession, these two books aren't fighting each other, they are not in conflict. Both books work together to show us God. Both books work together to reveal different parts of the Father's glory. The Belgic confession imagines science and faith working in sweet harmony. Unfortunately, that harmony is something we need to imagine, because lately it seems as though science and faith are often adversaries.

Blame lies on both sides. Some scientists say that a true scientist can never be a person of faith. Last week I read a quote from Richard Dawkins about the resurrection. He said, "[The resurrection of Jesus] has a fundamental incompatibility [with] the sophisticated scientist." Not all modern scientists are in Dawkins camp, but some very vocal ones are, and for them faith is a scientific embarrassment. Back in 2006 Carolyn Porco, a senior research scientist at the Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colorado, was at a conference in La Jolla California attended by some influential voices in the scientific world-Sam Harris, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Richard Dawkins. She showed some pictures of Saturn's rings taken by the Cassini spacecraft and called for the establishment of an alternative church based completely on science. "Let's teach our children from a very young age about the story of the universe and its incredible richness and beauty. It is already so much more glorious and awesome — and even comforting-than anything offered by any scripture or God concept I know" (NYTimes November 21, 2006). There are plenty of modern scientists who are not hostile to religion, but there are also some who see science and faith as irreconcilable enemies.

It goes the other way too. Many Christians are suspicious of science. In late April, Christianity Today published an article called Should Christians 'Believe in Science' in a Pandemic. The article contained an interview with Christian scientist named Sy Garte, and in the interview he lamented the fact that when you say, "Science shows us that..." for many Christians that statement causes immediate suspicion. That suspicion comes from all sorts of places. It comes from the hostility of people like Richard Dawkins. But it also comes from things like the Scopes trial. In 1925, science teacher John Scopes was prosecuted for teaching evolution in the Tennessee public schools. In the trial, Scopes was defended by famous defense attorney Clarence Darrow. The prosecutor was William Jennings Bryan, a famous lawyer and three-time presidential candidate. The trial made national headlines. It set up a very public clash between the science and faith. It helped create a public perception of science and faith as irreconcilable

combatants. And so today some Christian parents send their kids off to college warning them about what they will hear in their science classes.

What shall we say about all this? Can these two books co-exist? I think that faith and science can coexist. More than that, I think that faith and science need each other. To get to the harmony we need to understand the difference between the two books. More specifically, we need to understand that when it comes to revealing God, Scripture and science serve different roles.

Psalm 19:1-6 is one of the passages where the Belgic Confession gets the idea of creation as a book that reveals God. "The heavens are telling the glory of God! The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech." Creation speaks. It speaks words about the glory of God and those words go out to the end of the earth. The great expanse of the night sky swirling with stars. The tiny translucence of an infant's fingernails. It all speaks to the glory of the creator, says Psalm 19. The Belgic Confession mentions another passage that talks about how creation reveals God. Romans 1:20. "Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what he has made." God's eternal power and divine nature are revealed in creation. But while these passages confirm what the Belgic confession teaches, they also reveal the limits of what the book of creation can teach us. Both Psalm 19 and Romans 1 suggest that God only reveals a part of himself in nature. Specifically, the book of creation reveals "God's eternal power and his divine nature." You can't get the Trinity by reading the book of creation. You won't learn the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the book of creation. You won't discover God's plan for salvation in the book of creation. If all you have it's the book of creation, you won't understand God's grace, or his justice, or the shape of his love. Creation can show you the glory, but not the story.

So let's apply that to the disciplines of science. Science uses research and experiments to figure out what things are made of and how they work. How cells divide. How babies form in utero. What stars are made of. Scientists ask what and how questions and they have been really good at answering those questions. But while science can tell you what things are made of and how they work, science can't tell you what things are for. Science can tell you how our bodies work, but science can't tell you the meaning of bodily existence. Science can tell you how your neighbor's body works, but science can't tell you whether or not you should love your neighbor and why you shouldn't covet his stuff or sleep with his spouse. So science can show you the glory, but it can't tell you the story. It can show you the glory of how things work, but it can't tell you the story of why we are here.

Science is so powerful, and we've learned so much through science, and science has given us so many good things that sometimes we think that science can tell us everything about everything, that it is the only source of truth. That's wrong. That's not science, it's scientism. It's more religion than actual science, and we reject it.

Now let's look at the book of Scripture, because it too has a specific role. 2 Timothy shows us that role. Passages like 2 Timothy 3 give us our high view of the Bible. The Bible is the inspired, God-breathed Word of God. It is not like other books. Its writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit as they wrote and so we say it is an infallible rule for faith and life. God tells us his story in this book. God reveals his heart for us in this book. In this book, God shows us he loved us so much that he sent his son to die for us and then raised him on the third day so that death would not win. In this book, God shows us the shape of his justice and righteousness. This book is so so important to us!

But if you read carefully, Paul limits the scope of the Bible's purpose. Verse 15: The Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us the story of salvation and teach us how we can be saved. Verse 16: Scripture is useful for teaching rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. The Bible helps us learn the shape of the moral life, it helps keep us on his path. That's really important stuff, the stuff at the center of our life. But there is lots of stuff that the Bible doesn't teach us. I hope that doesn't sound like I'm diminishing its importance. I'm not. But there are many things it doesn't teach us. It doesn't teach us how to do plumbing. It doesn't teach us how to do finish carpentry. It doesn't teach us about the human immune system. It doesn't teach us quantum physics or organic chemistry. The Bible does not teach us science. That's not its intention. It is a book for salvation in Jesus Christ, and teaching, rebuking correcting and training in righteousness.

Intention matters! Tim Keller writes-and he's following standard Reformed interpretation practices here-that we are people who believe in the authority of Scripture and the best way to honor the authority of Scripture is to take the biblical writings as their author intended them to be taken. So if you read Psalm 18 and hear the Psalmist say, 'God is my rock,' you honor the Psalmist when you realize that the Psalmist is not making a scientific claim. The Psalmist's does not intend to say that God is made of cold stone; the Psalmist wants to say that God is strong and steady. You can lean on him and he won't move. It's a theological claim.

That's a principle we should apply to passages like Genesis 1 also. What's the author's intention? What's God's intention? Is he trying to teach science? Is he trying to give us a precise videotape account of exactly how it happened? Or is he trying to teach us about who God is, and who we are, and how we are related to him? Is his purpose scientific or theological? People argue about that. There are Christians who say: he's trying to teach us science! The world was created in 6 24-hour days! There are others who say, and I lean this way, I don't think his purposes were scientific. I think he's trying to teach us theology and so the days aren't literal and the earth is old. So we don't have to be afraid when good science done by Christians suggests that the earth is billions of years old. There are good and beautiful Christians in this church who believe that the world is young and that evolution is wrong. There are good and beautiful Christians in this church who say that the earth is old and maybe evolution was one of the tools God used to create this world. There is room for both interpretations in this community and within the bounds of honest, faithful biblical interpretation.

Let me finish with a few things to remember as we try to faithfully read the book of creation and the book of Scripture, as we try to hear God speak to us through these books. First, let's remember that we are reading both these books as little children. Sometimes we interpret the Bible incorrectly. We read that book wrong. Sometimes we misinterpret the scientific data. We read that book wrong. So, let us be humble in our interpretations of both books and let us listen to each other. Second, let's learn to live with the tensions. Sometimes we read the book of Scripture and it seems to say one thing, and then we read the book of science and it seems to say something different, and we can't fit them together. Rather than chucking out the Bible, or chucking out the science, let's remember that we are children who see through a glass darkly. We will not be able to fit everything together this side of the new creation. Sometimes you have to live with the tension.

Finally, let's acknowledge that science and faith need each other. Earlier in this sermon I mentioned Sy Garte, the Christian scientist who was worried about Christians who too quickly dismissed science. It actually used to work the other way for Sy. He was the scientist who too quickly dismissed faith. Sy Garte was raised in a home that was actively unbelieving. He was

taught that science and reason were the only sources of truth and that faith was the product of a weak mind. Christianity was something to be avoided. Sy grew up opposed to faith and he went into a career in science. He went to university and ended up with a PhD in Biochemistry. He loved the discipline, he loved discovery. He found science to be beautiful and exciting.

But soon the curiosity that science nurtured in him led him to ask other questions. “I.. began to contemplate other questions. Where did the universe come from? How did life begin? What does it mean to be a human being? What is the source of our creativity-of art, poetry, music, and humor? Perhaps, I thought, science cannot tell us everything” (CT Feb 2020). A friend brought him to church, and it wasn’t a place of angry judgment; people were friendly and the pastor talked about the grace of God. He started to read the gospels. He liked them. Then one day he was driving down the road, flipping through channels on his radio when a preacher came on. He wasn’t really listening to what the radio preacher was saying, but he started to think about preaching. He wondered, ‘If I was ever asked to give a sermon, what would I say?’ He thought maybe he would talk about Creation and how God used science to create the world, and how good that world was. And as he was thinking these things, he felt a chill go up and down his spine, and all of a sudden he could actually picture himself preaching. He could see himself standing in front of a crowd. “I talked about knowing that Jesus loves me. With a voice full of passionate emotion, I assured the crowd that whatever their sins might be, they were no worse than my own, and that because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross we could all be saved.” Sy had to pull over to the side of the road. Tears ran down his face as he realized he was being changed.

Now Sy lives with nose buried in two books. The book of Scripture and the book of creation are fully open before him, and it is a full and beautiful and rich life. He knows the glory. And he knows the story, and he knows that he belongs to Jesus. Thanks be to God for all the ways he still makes himself known.

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