

Faith and Science: Complementary, Not Contradictory

Part of the “**With All Your Mind**” Sermon Series

Genesis 2:7 and Psalm 8

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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At one point in its history, the public record of the National Academy for Sciences included this policy statement: “Religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief.”

When would you guess that was written and adopted? I conducted an incredibly unofficial survey of 10 friends. The latest year any of the 10 guessed was 1931. What do you think? It was 1981. The policy statement declaring science and religion to be mutually exclusive is younger than I am.¹

Within the last 10 years, the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, surveyed young adults and found that one in four reported they had been taught or had experienced the church as being anti-science — the church, whose scripture, whose sacred text, whose authoritative book, quite literally begins and ends with creation.

Now at the risk of stating the obvious, I am standing before you in a preaching robe, not a lab coat. My academic credentials are in creative writing and theology. I survived AP Chemistry in high school, but in college, I was required to take only one science course, and I enrolled in a class called Physics for Everyone. My final project was a paper exploring the scientific principles found in the classic children’s book, *Corduroy the Bear*. It was even more ridiculous than it sounds, which is saying something.

(It is in this very moment that I am realizing my parents, who worship with us by livestream, and

who graciously and generously paid my college tuition, have just now heard about that for the first time ... I’m sorry.)

I have endeavored mightily with this sermon to avoid speaking too far outside my own understanding. I am tempted to say you called me to be your pastor because of my theological mind, not my scientific mind, but even that phrasing perpetuates what has become a harmful, and indeed unfaithful, dichotomy.

If we claim to follow Jesus, we are bound to the greatest commandment, the one we spoke aloud together earlier in this service — the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind.

There is no conflict between religion and science. A paper approved by the Presbyterian Church back in 1947 affirms this: “There is no conflict between religion and science. Each new discovery demonstrates the infinite wisdom, logic, and consistency of the omnipotent Creator.”

The minutes of the 1982 Presbyterian General Assembly unequivocally state, “Neither scripture nor our confessions of faith teach the creation of humanity by the direct and immediate acts of God so as to exclude evolution as a scientific theory.”²

And we reaffirmed this as recently as 2016, declaring, “Scientific inquiry continues to provide ever more profound understandings of the scope of God’s creation in space and time.”

We stand on the shoulders of giants,

¹ The NAS website accessed October 2, 2021 confirms that this is no longer the official NAS policy regarding religion and science.

² “The Dialogue Between Theology and Science,” primarily drawn from minutes of the 1982 minutes of the PCUS General Assembly.

though, including John Calvin, arguably the most influential theologian in our Presbyterian tradition, who back in the 1500s taught that reason, mathematics, and science were gifts from God bestowed upon us, and not to use them would be akin to slapping God in the face.

At the same time, the church has earned some of the skepticism heaped upon us. Because that same John Calvin, along with Martin Luther and the entire Catholic Church, wrote Galileo and Copernicus off as fools and heretics. It would not be until 1992 that Pope John Paul II would lift the Roman Catholic 350-year condemnation of Galileo, saying, "Research performed in a truly scientific manner can never be in contrast with faith, because both have their origin in the same God."

Bill Brown, recently of Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, puts it this way: "If theology is 'faith seeking understanding' and science is a form of understanding, then theology has nothing to fear and everything to gain by engaging the sciences. Science is no hoax. If the task of theology is to relate the entire world to God, but does not take into account the world as science reveals it to us, then theology has failed."³

I suppose people of faith keep having to say these things because there are other people of faith who insist upon the opposite — that to have faith in God requires us to shun science, rather than celebrate it.

But nothing could be further from the truth. If we let it, science can actually bring us closer to God.

We believe that God created the world and everything in it. Psalm 19 reads, "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God's hands.*" Have you ever gone to a museum? Or taken an art history class? If you settle in and study a painting, for example, you learn not just about the art itself — you learn about the artist, too. By examining their handiwork, the techniques they use, the subjects they focus upon, the perspective they offer, the materials they employ ...

all of these things offer insight into who the artist was, both when they were holding a paintbrush and when they wasn't.⁴ Studying creation, exploring the world and the universe with rigorous scientific inquisitiveness can help us come to encounter God even more fully.

Our faith in an incarnate God, a God who came to this earth in the flesh and bone of Jesus Christ, and lived and walked and loved and died and rose again on this earth, our faith in a God who would go to such lengths tells us that this earth matters, deeply. Our faith in an incarnate God does not allow us to ignore the physical world, nor any of its nuances.

And honestly, those nuances of the physical world expand my faith. Any of you who have ever felt closer to God by being out in nature know something of what I'm saying. Dwelling in creation is to dwell within the creative heart of God. Learning about creation is to learn about the creative heart of God. I do not find any less wonder in a God who creates by crafting the incredibly intricate and involved process of evolution over eons than I do in a God who creates with a word and whistle in less than a week. If anything, I find it even more astonishing that God could create systems and parameters and conditions, and set the whole thing in motion and then end up not only with a complex universe but also a human race that can see and observe and describe and alter it.

"*O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. And who are we that you are mindful of us, who are we that you care for us?*" The more I read about atoms and electrons, about quarks and string theory and relativity and the speed of light, the more it reminds me of my proper place in this world — I am part of the world, not the center of it. Science, I think, actually inspires humility, not hubris, as some would accuse. Science does not lead us to see ourselves as God. For those who do, there is a problem, but the problem is not science. Science leads us to stand in awe of God. Science taken seriously requires us to acknowledge that we do not

³ William P. Brown, "Science, Faith, and the Wonder of It All" in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 11, 2017, accessed online.

⁴ Fellow PCUSA pastor Rev. Shawn Coons reminded me of this analogy.

and cannot understand everything. Faith taken seriously requires the same.

I mentioned Galileo and Copernicus before. Their great sin was daring to suggest that we revolve around the sun, the s-u-n, rather than the sun revolving around us. Similarly, as people of faith, we do well to remember that we revolve around the son, the s-o-n, rather than the son revolving around us.

All of this makes me think of my friend Sarah. She and her husband knew even before they were married that they would need scientific intervention if they were ever to have a child that shared their own DNA. And so they began IVF, meeting with doctors weekly, sometimes daily, enduring procedures and needles and medications, over the course of months and months, all so that their cells could meet one another in a way that allowed them to do what they were created to do: form and fashion a baby.

Every year now, about nine months ahead of her children's birthdays, she shares a photo of two microscopic blobs in a little glass dish. In that photo, they are clinically labeled "attempt 1" and "attempt 2." Today, they answer to the names Jacob and Elaine.⁵

And every year, she says, "It's true. The way our children came into being was not natural. It was an absolute miracle. The kind of miracle that can only happen when grace and science meet in the middle."

That's the other thing, of course. Science and faith, approached rightly, lead us toward life. And both the evolution of our voice boxes and the air that God breathed into our lungs means we have a voice to proclaim it.

The Big Bang Theory tells us that once upon a time, roughly 15 billion years ago, nothing existed except for what scientists call a singularity. And then that singularity exploded, for reasons no one can say for sure, and the universe expanded a trillion trillion times, curving to such a degree that particles

popped out of what scientists call quantum nowhere. When the universe was one second old, every spoonful of those particles was denser than stone and hotter than the center of the sun.⁶

As it expanded, it became matter. And then the temperature dropped, and all those particles began to form together. The more they came together, though, the more they warmed up again, and over time they began to explode in on themselves. Over and over again, coming together and collapsing in on themselves, space dust coming together and splitting apart. Eventually, after about 10 billion years, everything cooled off enough for the solar system to congeal.

The earth, however, did not start out blue and green, like we know it to be now. For those colors, it needed life, and for life it needed water and organic molecules, both of which were delivered to the earth by comets.

The oldest rocks thus far discovered on the surface of the earth, off the coast of Australia, date back some 3.8 billion years. Most of them just look like old rocks. But a few of them contain fossils of blue-green algae. Those rocks date back 3.5 billion years.

The leap from those plain old rocks to the rocks with algae is what no one, so far as I understand it, can fully explain. What we do know is that the sun was exactly where it need to be for photosynthesis to occur, and then the rest goes from there.

Science tells us, then, that in some way or another, we all started out on those rocks, rocks that were formed from space dust back in the very beginning.

And of course dust is where it all began. Dust is all God has ever needed. The quantum dust from which the stars arose, the stardust by which the primal elements were sown, the earth dust from which the rocks were made, and the rock dust on which the first creatures grew. *"Then the Lord God fashioned the human from the dust of the ground,*

⁵ This is a true story, but the children's names have been changed for the purposes of this sermon.

⁶ This summary description of the Big Bang, including the connection between space dust and the dust referenced in Genesis 2, comes in large part from Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *The Luminous Web: Essays on Religion and Science*.

and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being."

Faith and science. You don't have choose one over the other. They co-exist beautifully. Which means however you choose to view the world God created and our place in it, there is ample reason to rejoice and be glad.