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Encountering Mission

Pastor, what about . . . ?

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Abstract: People in conversation about the promises of God in Jesus Christ wonder whether these promises can be reconciled with commonly accepted scientific natural laws. Their faith leader seems an obvious resource from whom they feel they ought to be able to get integrated answers to questions which overlap science and faith. Pastors, however, are amateurs relative to science. Apologetic approaches among Christian faith leaders are complicated by various approaches the Word of God as well as their facility with scientific approaches to knowledge. Current apologetic resources do not attempt an integrated approach to knowledge. Such approaches pose mission challenges today. The article presents one experience as a case study attempting to retain a lively conversation with a family struggling between life in the church and holding a scientific worldview.

The Lutheran pastor who is also a trained scientist is certainly a rare commodity. Having attended both Lutheran parochial and public schools through high school, I received the basic general education in science including general earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics. In science, I was a “B” student.

As a pre-seminary liberal arts student at Concordia, St. Paul, I was required to take two general education science courses, which I dutifully packed into summer sessions. In seminary, a few elective courses touched on science as it related to beginning of life and end of life ethical decision-making, but they were electives. I had used all my electives up on exegetical and historical theology where my personal interests lay, and questions of faith and science waited on the back burner.

Those questions did not wait long. Soon after taking up my first congregational calling, members young and old alike wanted to know what answers I would give to scientific questions relative to life, faith, and faithfulness to church teaching. What does the Lutheran pastor today say about “the dinosaurs,” “fossils,” “climate



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change,” “aliens,” “light and astronomy,” “Adam and Eve,” “the snake in the Garden,” “the Fall,” and the Genesis 1–11 foundations of biblical revelation. Parishioners and neighbors alike want to hear a basic straightforward answer to what they imagine to be a straightforward question: What do you think has happened to get us where we find ourselves today, and why? The “why” furthermore includes at least two parts: Why do you think that is what happened; furthermore, how does what you believe inform your thoughts on the meaning of life? The benefits to life in the world through scientific inquiry and research and development in health and life have multiplied dramatically as we have expanded our abilities of observation and action by compounding one set of advances to achieve the next. The scientific method as a critical thinking process is certainly helpful in focusing the use of one’s reason and senses; yet, as a process, it is constantly verifying and even correcting itself as new data are collected. Collected data, measurements, and calculations can all be independently verified or falsified. It is the tug of war surrounding the data which is so challenging. The Lutheran Christian for whom mission matters may find him- or herself in any number of work, social, or family contexts when the question is unexpectedly posed, “So you believe in talking snakes?”

What has actually happened is not a question that allows itself to be contained in silos of competing truth. Specialization in the twentieth century has broken down the conversation between previously recognized branches of knowledge. Conversations within disciplines have become so technical that the layman is left needing rudimentary translations, and conversation among the classical branches of knowledge, the arts and sciences, seems distant and quaint. When asked theological questions impinging on scientific consensus, the pastor wants to be helpful to the neighbor, faithful to the Word of God, and at the same time not say something patently ignorant.

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The scientist’s ability to gather data improves as technological advances in measuring instruments lead to more exact measurements. On the one hand, the ever-expanding collection of data bolsters the central scientific consensus; on the other hand, it always seeks to push past what is known to what is unknown, to answer more questions. As many questions settle into answers, each answer poses new mysteries, inviting the exploration to continue. Scientific conclusions are available throughout our cultural conversation and are often presented as settled wisdom: “We know from science that....” Media dissemination and public policy decisions shape our conversations on everything from gas mileage and choice of transportation to

how much a baseball player will earn in his next contract negotiation based on the spin rate of his curve ball or the launch angle and velocity of his average hit. But when the results of this settled wisdom run contrary to scriptural claims, the confessing Lutheran is left with the question, “What am I obligated by faith and sound reason to believe, teach, and confess?”

The heart of the challenge is perhaps most easily shown with evolution as the hallmark example. The scientific community holds a position with a generally unified core that accepts macro-biological evolution as the best explanation for what we observe around us today. While the core of the theory remains stable, the details and mechanisms remain under investigation as data are collected and evaluated.

Contrary to this view is a minority set of Christian resources claiming to be equally scientific but claiming also to explain the same data from within a biblical framework. Christians who are practicing scientists occasionally publish independent work which they claim cannot be published in peer-reviewed journals because it does not fit within accepted scientific theory and so is disqualified as unscientific. Members of the scientific community ridicule many of these Christian scientific efforts to the point that doubts about the usefulness of such arguments rise up persistently. To what extent can I faithfully and reasonably rely on such arguments? Are they good science, or am I setting myself up as foolish—not legitimately as a fool for Christ and His cross, but just a fool who, because he does not really know what he is talking about, is safely dismissed? In so doing I have done more damage to the cause of Christ and the Gospel because I have lost all reasonable credibility. Can I safely let these Christian agencies do my scientific thinking for me, even while they are roundly criticized by the general scientific community? I do no such thing in my work of preaching and teaching; yet, I am ill-equipped to independently verify the arguments of scientists myself.

Within the church, some advocate that Christians need only confess that God is ultimately responsible for creation, but that the mechanics and methods may be left an open question. We should not feel obligated to be dogmatic about God’s means of creation, but be content to say that God is the creator. For others within the church, such an approach is considered contrary to the church’s teaching and requires repentance. Scientific investigation is rejected out of hand because we already are given everything there is to know. Another approach claims that any loosening of the historicity of the events recounted in Genesis 1–11, with special emphasis on Genesis 3, throws the work of Christ into doubt as well. What do we say about Christ if we are uncertain of the problem He is said to have solved? On the other hand, isn’t the incarnation of God in Christ so much more than just fixing the Fall? Isn’t it a terrible simplification and diminishment of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ to frame it simply as a response to humanity’s Fall? Isn’t it true that God’s purposes in Christ’s incarnation must find their source in eternity rather than in humanity’s Fall to be worthy of God. Again, we are left with the question, “What actually

happened?” If events in Scripture did not happen as described in the earliest pages, if they are a mythical construct, then what is Christ to us and for us?

Not all theologians agree that the question of what actually happened matters to theology. Theologians may set aside historical questions and speak in terms of principles. I certainly learn from conversations with them. Still, I remain compelled to affirm a historical and perfect creation, a historical Fall from perfection, Jesus Christ’s historical incarnation, death and resurrection, along with the promised *telos*—a culmination, a purpose—including both an end and a new beginning.

Such a combination of affirming scientific inquiry as a true and good gift in the created order, while at the same time affirming scriptural revelation, finds unity in God’s existence, that God acts from outside the measurable universe, and that, while scientific inquiry ably discerns the governing laws and prevailing motions of the universe, God is free to intervene.

Most recently, a new family enrolled two teenage girls in confirmation instruction in my congregation. After the first year of instruction, the parents shared with me that their family’s perspective on science conflicted too directly with the Scripture’s claims and they would not be returning for the concluding year of instruction.

Terribly conflicted about how to respond, I shared with them the following observations. These observations were my own; the term “we” below speaks only for myself and my congregation, not for any publication:

I certainly appreciate your forthrightly letting me know as soon as possible. It would be helpful to me personally as a teacher to know from either your or their perspective what it is that seems in conflict between the Scriptures and Catechism and science. If I may, let me share with you a bit of what I would have shared with them had they felt free to share their concerns with me.

In short, we do not reject investigative science using the scientific method. It is an appropriate mode of critical thinking dealing with present day data and our best attempts to use reason.

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A few examples may illustrate the point: We do not dispute astronomical data measured in light years or geological data measured by isotopes; the data are the data, and we certainly do not have any argument with such measurement. The point at issue is whether one must believe that if the data tell me there is a black hole in space now, there **must** have been a time in the far distant past that a star was there, instead of God's having provided the black hole when the fully-formed universe was called into being; or, if the light I see from a star millions or billions of light-years away must have originated at the point of the star instead of the light itself having also been organized by God at the time of creation. In geological matters, it is one thing to measure the half-life of carbon-14 in a sample, but it is quite another to claim that because it contains certain amount now means that there **must have been** a time when this same sample **must have** contained 100% of the radioactive element it could have had. My point in the above examples is that extrapolating into the past moves beyond what may be claimed from the current data. For example, in the realm of evolutionary biology, correlation does not prove causation. The fact that data from certain species of animals correlate does not prove that they ever had a common ancestor.

We confess on the basis of Scripture that God created the universe as a fully formed and functioning system. What we are claiming is that God exists, that He did create the universe. Scientific data provide accurate measurements in the present, and the process of extrapolating present data into the past can be logical and reasonable. Projections into the past based on present data are valid scientific exercises for the sake of understanding how substances and forces, etc., relate to one another in a **closed system**, that is, excluding the supernatural from the equation. The question is whether the historical conclusions based on the data are **true**, that is, did the events or changes actually occur? Theories of origins and evolutionary development based on present-day data are logical, reasonable extrapolations assuming a closed system with no interventions from "outside" the system.

However, the basic question is whether we actually live in a closed system, having never had any intervention from God because God does not exist. Or do we live in an open system that operates by natural, discoverable, scientific laws, reflecting an orderly God who also surprises us by entering the created order for the sake of demonstrating His care and mercy in many and various ways, from creation and miracles in general to His very specific acts in the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus?

In so far as that goes, then, Scripture does not conflict with the scientific method as a mode of critical thinking. We thank God that He has given

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mankind the gift of curiosity, the drive to understand His world and universe. We hope and pray that, at the end of our journey of discovery, our world will see the truth that God is at work in the whole created order.

If the girls object to the possibility of any notion of the supernatural, that is, nothing exists outside of the natural world, including any notion of God, then that is something worth knowing and exploring, because human life is full of much greater possibility.

If their objection is more specific to the accounts of Scripture, again more information would be helpful. In any case, it has been a pleasure to have them in class.

I am, as ever, at your service,

Pastor John Perling

Certainly, my attempt in the above correspondence is worthy of critique. I simply share it as an example of how pressing the need is for the church to engage scientific questions with both excellent science and excellent theology so that we can offer well-informed responses to these legitimate questions. I hope to keep learning so that the defense of my hope does not needlessly cause offense to my hearer. The cross is its own stumbling block. I do not need to add further stumbling blocks by inserting my own ignorance.

Looking into the faces of the members of my congregation—adults, college students, Sunday School and VBS students—while I share the joy of Christ with them and while their trust and hope and joy are fully apparent, there are always those moments when the question comes up, “Pastor, what about...?”