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A Worldview-ing Approach to Faith and Science

In my teens I struggled with questions about faith and science. I was instructed to “take the Bible at its word.” What my spiritual mentors meant by this was what I came to recognize as a “proof-texting” way of treating important topics. My high school biology teacher simply had it wrong when he told us human beings had evolved from lower forms of animal life. The Bible says that God created various animal “kinds” on the sixth day of creation, and later on the same day, God created a man and a woman as fully formed human beings.

In high school, I came across a wonderful book, Christian View of Science and Scripture, by evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm. Preachers and Bible teachers had condemned it as “evolutionistic,” but I was secretly intrigued. I read it with great interest, and it helped me think in new ways about the relationship between faith and science. Ramm distinguished between two big-picture perspectives: Evolution, in the capital E sense, is a perspective on reality that insists everything happens by a chance process of adaptation and change. Creation, with a capital C, is the view that all of reality unfolds according a plan established and guided by a sovereign God. These two big-picture perspectives are different from evolution and creation—no capital letters—which we can observe as specific mechanisms of change in the world.

I came to see that Ramm was illustrating a “worldview” approach to the natural sciences—an alternative to the proof-texting perspective I’d been taught. Ezekiel’s reference to “the four corners of the earth” reveals an important truth about God’s working in history. God isn’t teaching us the earth has corners. I can say “I have a ton of work to do” without meaning I’ve actually used a scale to weigh my assignments. I’ve spent a good part of my academic career asking what overall view of reality the Bible is affirming. In recent years, I have come to emphasize the need to engage in worldview-ing rather than having a worldview. I have come to rely on the Psalmist’s confession that the Word of God “is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” We are on a journey and often have no idea what we’ll come upon. But we can shine the light of God’s Word on new discoveries made by geologists, or new challenges in medical technology, and pray for the discernment that comes from what God has revealed in the Scriptures.

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Many of the students I teach have also been shaped by a proof-texting approach to biblical application. Often one of them will ask me: “You say that you believe the Bible to be the supreme authority, but you also say that you believe in evolution. How do you reconcile the two?”

I want to make clear that my belief in the truth of God’s Word is not of the same order as my belief in things I have come to accept in evolutionary thought. As Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued, we must bring to our intellectual pursuits certain “control beliefs” that guide our efforts to engage in scholarly investigations. These control beliefs are biblically based convictions that provide non-negotiable reference points for our intellectual explorations. Belief in Creation is a fundamental control belief for the Christian. In other matters to which I give my intellectual assent—beliefs based on carbon dating of bones, the study of geological strata, evidence produced by archeological digs—my theories and assessments are guided by my firm confidence in the reality of a creation called into being and sustained by the sovereign will of God. Those guided by an evolutionary set of control beliefs often come to quite different conclusions than the believer. As Christians, we need to attend prayerfully to our interpretations of scientific evidence, making distinctions with care.

I want my students to come to see there is no need to fret about reconciling our non-negotiable convictions, grounded in the truth of God’s Word, with our scientific pursuits. Thoughtful Christians have long pictured the created order as an arena in which the Lord gives powerful evidence of his honor and glory. Thinking biblically about the pressing issues of contemporary life is a dynamic process. We have much to learn as we shine the lamp of God’s Word on scientific exploration.

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