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5-3-2018

## Providential Creation and a Gracious Science

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## Providential Creation and a Gracious Science

### Abstract

"Christians who work in the sciences wrestle daily with the work of investigating the universe through the lens of faith."

Posting about God's providence and nature from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/providential-creation-and-a-gracious-science/>

### Keywords

In All Things, knowledge, truth, science, creation

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# Providential Creation and a Gracious Science

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Carl Fictorie

May 3, 2018



Trying to reconcile apparent differences between what Scripture describes about creation and what we observe in that creation is often a point of difficulty for Christians. In particular, the tension between Scripture's description of the beginning of creation and the description provided by contemporary science can be troublesome. This essay cannot begin to address all the concerns and issues, but instead focuses on a central issue, one closely related to how we come to real knowledge about both creation and scripture. My thoughts are based on a decades-long wrestling with these issues, and I am convinced this view is a faithful and, to the extent that a saved sinner can be, correct understanding of Scripture, nature, and their relationships to each other and to God.

Often the tension is presented as a battle between Scripture and science, or more specifically Genesis and evolution. If we are to have sound knowledge of this tension, and the creation that both of these describe, a closer look is warranted.

In the case of evolution<sup>1</sup>, it is vitally important to distinguish between "evolution" as a scientific concept and "evolutionism" as a philosophical stance. This distinction is important because the fundamental battle is between two "-isms", two different worldviews. One, evolutionism, is a type of naturalism that denies the existence of anything outside of the universe, particularly denying the existence of a Creator God. The other, creationism<sup>2</sup>, is a Christian belief that accepts and believes the teaching of Scripture that God is the creator of the universe.

The concept of evolution as a scientific theory is a description of how the world developed from the moment of creation to the present time. Critics claim it is non-scientific because it focuses on historical events. In this view, because of the absence of eyewitnesses, evolution cannot generate any real knowledge because the scientist cannot conduct real experiments to test the theory. But this is a classic straw-man type of argument. It is most certainly a scientific theory because scientists who study evolution work to obtain evidence from creation itself in

an effort to build a picture and framework for how the world developed. This theory can be tested by direct study of creation itself, applying the laws of physics, chemistry, geology, and biology.

The point is that evolution as a type of science is not the threat<sup>3</sup>. Rather, evolutionism as a God-denying philosophy is. The evolutionist seizes onto the science of evolution as an all-encompassing view because he has no other option. Evolution is good science, but the evolutionist applies the theory too absolutely and too broadly to all things. That claim does pose a threat to Christians, because evolutionism cannot accept any notion of a creator.

However, evolution as a scientific concept is not inherently unchristian just because atheists use and abuse it. For example, atomic theory was first proposed by Greek Epicureans who were looking for a purely material explanation of the world. They were as ardent atheists as any modern scientist. The theory was marginalized by the Aristotelians, and left on the margins until Robert Boyle and others (many of whom were professing Christians) saw a valuable concept in the notion of an atom and successfully worked it into their scientific models.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary chemistry is entirely dependent upon the concept of an atom, and our contemporary understanding is sufficiently developed to believe that the concept of the atom is basically correct and all but proven. Just as no serious contemporary chemist can deny atomic theory and function in modern chemistry, no serious contemporary biologist can deny evolution and function in contemporary biology.

On the theological side of this discussion is the notion that Scripture is the clear and inerrant word of God. For example, some assert that the clear teaching of Scripture is easier to understand than the nonverbal communication found in nature. This idea suggests that Scripture is straightforward to read and the plain reading is usually the correct one.

However, the methods of interpreting scripture that I have learned say that it is not this simple.<sup>5</sup> Scripture is clear about the need for and the path to salvation—confess that you have sinned and fall short and seek salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time, Scripture is not nearly as clear about all the nuanced details of what that means.<sup>6</sup> Two millennia of church history has produced dozens of interpretations and many more denominations to go with them. I am not suggesting that all interpretations are equal, but the presence of such a diverse set of interpretations strongly suggests that Scripture is not that clear on its own. It is vitally important to work at understanding Scripture correctly and to articulate those doctrines that Scripture teaches. It is equally important to approach that work with a spirit of humility and grace.

The Belgic Confession speaks to this issue when in Article 2 it says, “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.” Article 2 speaks to the idea that the Bible teaches us what we need to know to be saved and to direct our lives. It does not speak directly to every detail of our existence. Rather, the Bible speaks in many places about man investigating creation and learning from it.<sup>7</sup> If Biblical infallibility and inerrancy require a literal reading of scripture

and the plainest interpretation of it, the Sun would be orbiting the Earth<sup>8</sup>, and the Earth would be a flat disk.<sup>9</sup> Not even Answers in Genesis tries to make this argument given the weight of historical and scientific evidence.<sup>10</sup>

The existence of multiple interpretations of Scripture is a direct result of humanity's sinful state. Scripture is infallible and inerrant, but human interpretation is not. This is why it is so important to recognize that we interpret both Scripture and creation. It is our sinful inability to create either a sin-free theology or a sin-free science that causes battles. And it is only through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds that we even come to partially correct understandings.

Christians who work in the sciences wrestle daily with the work of investigating the universe through the lens of faith. One of the most fundamental truths in this lens is that of the sovereignty of God, a truth clearly taught in Scripture, particularly in Genesis 1. God made creation—all of it, including the very people which occupy and try to understand it. God sustains it, all of it, all the time, from the moment he spoke “let there be light” to the present.

We call this providence.<sup>11</sup> This is true regardless of whether the person doing the investigating is a Christian or not. Therefore, any scientist who takes creation seriously will inevitably run into the effects of God's providence. Careful, open-minded investigation of nature and a willingness to change one's mind when nature does not yield to a hypothesis is a defining characteristic of science, even for the most ardent atheist.<sup>12</sup> While the atheist ignores the pointers to God's providence to their eternal folly, because of God's providence nature does not yield to a bad hypothesis. Therefore, to the extent that the scientist identifies the patterns of God's providence and is able to articulate theories about them in a fruitful and meaningful way, the scientist has spoken truth whether or not the scientist believes in God. In that case, the Christian scientist can, with due diligence and discernment, accept and incorporate these theories into his or her own work. For the Christian, engaging with contemporary science can aid in ensuring that the science is as good as possible, and in doing so help to direct the atheist to the inconsistencies inherent in the denial of a Creator.

The science-religion conflict is between worldviews, a naturalism that denies that God exists and a theism that believes in a God who exists and who creates and sustains all things. For Christians, that God created is without a doubt. With this understanding in mind, how he created is principally a matter of scientific study. Christians would do better to stand together and challenge naturalism than to argue amongst ourselves about whose approach is more faithful.

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## Footnotes

1. In the context of this essay, evolution refers broadly to both the early cosmological and

geological development of the universe and the development of biological life as science on Earth. This is admittedly an oversimplification, but the main point of the essay is unaffected. ↵

2. The term creationism is used in reference to the belief that God, specifically the triune God of Scripture, is the creator of the universe and all that is in it. I am not, in the use of this term, implying a specific mechanism by which God brought the universe into being. ↵
3. I am not suggesting that evolution, or science in general, is a value neutral concept. All theories have inherent assumptions and notions grounded in a particular worldview. What I am suggesting is that it is often possible to extract or separate portions of theories from each other and fruitfully incorporate them into other theoretical frameworks. ↵
4. K. Carlson, "The Other 'Atom' in Christianity and Science", *God and Nature*, Fall 2014, online <https://godandnature.asa3.org/essay-the-other-atom-in-christianity-and-science-by-karissa-d-carlson.html>. ↵
5. Most recently, I have been impressed by the exegetical work of John Walton in *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP Academic, 2009). His analysis of the text of Genesis is thorough, insightful, and reveals a wealth of information that is not obvious to a modern reader. His work illustrates the importance of understanding the historical context of scripture. ↵
6. Acts 8:29-31. ↵
7. Gen. 2:19, Job 28, Ps. 19, 1 Kings 4:33, Matt. 6:26. ↵
8. Josh. 10:12-13, I Chron. 16:30. ↵
9. I Sam 2:10, Job 28:24, Is 11:12. ↵
10. See for example <https://answersingenesis.org/astronomy/earth/does-bible-teach-earth-flat/>. ↵
11. See [Article 13 of the Belgic Confession](#) and [Q&A 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism](#). ↵
12. See for example Carl Sagan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLkC7raIR30> and R. Spangenburg & K. Moser, *Carl Sagan: A Biography*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004, p. 26 ↵