

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

SUMMER 2010 'ASK THE PASTOR SERIES'

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Romans 1:18-20 "God's Design"

The "Ask the Pastor" Topic for this week is "6 days vs. 6 billion years: Creationism vs. Darwinism vs. Intelligent Design." Tho' I can't deal with all this in 20 minutes, let us begin by stipulating that all Christians, like all Jews and all Muslims, are "Creationists" in the basic sense that we believe "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

But in modern American discourse, "Creationist" means something else: the belief that God created all things in 6 days around 4000 BC. This is often called "Young Earth Creationism," staking itself to a brief world history rather than the billions of years inferred from modern cosmology. How should we judge these things?

1) How Old is Everything?

Creation around 4000 BC was what everyone believed for almost two millennia of Christian history. But starting with the work of geologists in the early 19th century, accelerated by the discovery of radioactivity by the Curies and measurement of the decay rates of various isotopes, and greatly augmented in the early 20th century by the observations of cosmologists like Edwin Hubble on the expanding universe, suddenly ages of the order of billions of years were being revealed by science. Studies over the past 30 years on the cosmic background radiation, its temperature and its distribution, have converged on a current

best estimate for the "Big Bang" at 13.7 billion years ago.

How do we deal with this in relation to the Bible? Some of course just dismiss the Bible as one more ancient "creation myth" and leave it at that. Others insert large gaps into the biblical narrative to stretch out its time scale. Some make its time very elastic - "a day is a thousand years in God's sight." But none of these quite work, in the sense that they make a linguistic mess of the Bible: you can't just make words or narratives mean what you want in order to adapt the text to modern understandings.

"Young Earth Creationism" has had two phases. One that began in the 19th C. evoked what is often called "apparent age": sure, everything looks very old, but that's the way God made it! In 1857 zoologist Philip Gosse published a book named *Omphalos*; that is the Latin word for "navel." Gosse's basic idea was that Adam had a navel, because if he was formed as an adult by an instantaneous act of creation, he necessarily looked older than he was. He had a digestive system with traces of food, callused feet, a thousand other signs of age. Around him grew trees full of growth rings. Everywhere you looked in this brand new creation, there were signs of age. It could not be otherwise. Living things have a life-cycle - and instantaneous creation is bound to break into

that cycle at one point, giving an impression of age.

Very few people embraced Gosse's ideas, yet they have a logical consistency to them, his book is still read today, and I know people today who believe that the apparent great age of things is just that, "apparent." A minister friend of mine (who also taught philosophy) likes to say "not all clocks started at zero."

But the main thrust of Young Earth Creationism today is to argue that *all* the scientific evidence, rightly interpreted, points to a young earth, and that the great ages are just wrong. So, for example, the "red shifts" of light that indicate an expanding universe are not reliable. The speed of light used to be very much greater than it is now. Radioactive dating is wrong because radioactive decay rates were changed by the flood. The very existence of fossils proves very rapid sedimentation occurred in the flood. Other pieces of evidence proposed include the slowing rotation of the earth, the shrinking of the sun, the recession of the moon's orbit, the decay of earth's magnetic field; together, it is claimed, they all point to a young earth.

I can't go into, and don't know, all the arguments; a few very brief points will have to do. There are simple things that any physicist will tell you: You cannot, for example, change the speed of light by a large factor and still have the same universe. You cannot alter radioactive decay rates without changing the coupling between the strong and weak nuclear forces: do that and you have no atoms, no matter, again no universe. You cannot just change physical parameters at will in order to get the times and distances you want!

I confess I have no enthusiasm for this way of solving the "age dilemma." It rests on the assumption that there is only one possible

way to read Genesis. It declares wrong the inferences of most branches of science. It has to dismiss most of cosmology, particle physics, geology, plate tectonics, paleontology, evolutionary biology and molecular genetics. It ignores polar ice cores that show over 100,000 years' worth of snowfall, deep sea corals that show 100,000 years of water temperature variation. If any one of these disciplines is telling even half the truth, "young earth creationism" is all wrong. And I don't believe they are all completely wrong.

So I have more respect for those who believe in "apparent age," although that has the major theological problem of making God a deceiver.

2) *Intelligent Design*

"*Intelligent Design*" is now taking over from Young Earth Creationism among many American Christians. It has affinities to the long tradition of the "argument from design," such as that of Archdeacon Paley in the 1700s, who said we know God is Creator from looking at his Creation, just as when you find a watch on a country path you know immediately that a watchmaker exists. So anyone can see undeniable signs of God's actions - "his fingerprints are all over Creation" - and the obvious truth is the world was made by an Intelligent Designer. The main battle over this today is in biology.

Defining "design" has never been easy: how do you recognize it in a living cell or organism? "*I know it when I see it*" will not get you far in science. One approach argues that at the cellular and molecular level, life often shows "*irreducible complexity*" - that is, proper function depends on so many interdependent parts that it is impossible to imagine how they could have come together little by little through Darwinian means, being "selected for" by their reproductive

advantage to the organism at each stage. So “evolution couldn’t do this” and there must be a designer. Another approach asks how the very large *information content* of our genes came into being, unless an intelligent designer put it there.

What to say about this? First it faces the old problem called “*the God of the Gaps*” – if you invoke the direct action of God when you find a gap in human understanding, God shrinks every time you make a new discovery, until he becomes too small to bother with. The design movement is also very disingenuous about the “designer,” saying it could be any higher intelligence; whereas to their supporters they proclaim that Intelligent Design is a “wedge” to get the God of the Bible back into the classroom. They were called out on that at the famous trial in Dover, PA in 2005, where the judge found clear evidence that what was presented as Intelligent Design was “Young Earth Creationism” repackaged.

I suspect that in part the modern design movement rests on a misapprehension: that random events cannot produce order, therefore complex and/or ordered things could not arise through random mutation and natural selection. But in fact random only means “unspecifiable in advance by us,” and all of nature is built on such events – quantum mechanics is the great example in physics; you could cite embryonic development in biology. There is no reason for a believer to doubt that God uses what we call random events to achieve his purposes – even the ancients understood that “*the lot is cast... but God determines the outcome*”

The question whether some biological processes are “irreducibly complex” is interesting and important; but here many of us would say that the examples presented so far are very unconvincing to anyone who

knows much biochemistry or cell biology. A much stronger issue centers on the high information content of the genome, but I think the obvious and testable prediction is that if this is a sign of “design,” it ought to appear full-blown and very complete in the most primitive organisms. There is a major research project here that no “design” advocate has yet taken up.

Finally, Intelligent Design has, I think, doubtful apologetic value for Christians. Even if true, it does not point to anything more than a high intelligence, which (as many have pointed out) could as well be a space alien as the God of the Bible. And there is plenty of evidence that design arguments do not induce faith. You can see that already in Psalm 19, where the writer half-way through switches from “the heavens declare the glory of God” to “the law of the LORD is perfect” – implying, as Paul argues in Romans 1, that “natural theology” is inadequate because fallen people “suppress the truth” that is all around them. The right word for that (as R.C. Sproul pointed out many years ago in his book *The Psychology of Atheism*) is “repression” – people bury things they don’t want to know!

So I agree with the author of *Hebrews* who said “*By faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command.*” I agree with Paul that unbelievers repress truth that can be known and treat it as though it did not exist. I agree with John Calvin that “*In vain for us does Creation.. exhibit the glory of its Author... and though this leaves the ungrateful man without excuse, another and better help is given in the light of his Word... like glasses to those whose sight is defective, Scripture shows us the true God clearly.*” I agree with Augustine that “*faith seeks understanding,*” not the other way around. I agree with John Henry Newman who said – when the debate raged around Paley’s “watchmaker argument” – “I

believe in design because I believe in God, not in a God because I see design."

God made all things, this we believe; but *only because we believe can we see* his "fingerprints all over Creation." The universe is "intelligently designed," but you have to know the Designer to recognize his work. But we need not fear: the great age of the world, the baleful social effects of Darwinism as a public philosophy, the newly strident atheism of our day, do not surprise God or divert him from his plans. They should not disturb us either!

Let us pray....