

FAITH AND SCIENCE 1: A 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGE

Slayden Yarbrough

Text: Genesis 1: 1-5; 1:27-28

Introduction: In early October 1957, I was one of many, many Americans who stood in the early night, looked upward, and watched a tiny light move across the darkened sky at a methodical pace. I was observing Sputnik, the first of a series of robotic spacecraft launched by the Soviet Union, and the first man-made object to orbit the earth. The satellite was about 23 inches in diameter, weighed 183 pounds, and took about 96 minutes to travel its elliptical orbit once around the earth.

Although there was great consternation on the political scene emanating in Washington, D.C., I was simply a teenager fascinated by what had suddenly burst upon the world scene, and was amazed to be a part of a whole, new fascinating world, or should I now say “universe.” For the first time, I became aware and appreciative of the importance of science in our lives. Sputnik was a real eye-opener in so many ways for me.

I remind you of this important event to provide a foundation for today’s sermon on “Faith and Science.” This one singular event resulted in a genuine appreciation for the role that science plays in our lives. From that moment until today I continue to be amazed at the ability and enthusiasm of scientists to uncover the mysteries of our world, universe and even galaxies, and to use such discoveries combined with parallel technologies to invent and produce products that usually make our lives better.

For example, I remember when I was a grade school kid living in Washington Park, on the edge of East St. Louis, IL, our electronic entertainment was the radio. I could turn on one knob for power and volume, and another to tune in the varying stations. To this day, other than knowing it takes a transmitter and a receiver, I have no clue as to how the radio signals work, but I have no doubt that they do work.

The first television in our neighborhood was owned by the family down the street related to an uncle married to my Mom’s sister, my Aunt Alberta. We kids would go over and watch the test pattern for an hour or more until a show finally was broadcast in the early afternoon. I recall the day when my parents came home from shopping bringing with them a used Sylvania black and white television. It had a round screen and the area outside the rectangular picture was

illuminated with a white light. I simply could not believe that we actually had a television. It was not supposed to be a part of our world.

Janis and I bought our first tv from the parents of a friend who now lives in Lafayette. They were upgrading to a new color tv, and we purchased their old, used (or, pre-owned in today's language) Zenith model. It had a really great picture. Later, we gave this tv to Janis's parents, who lived on a farm in Northern Missouri, their very first television.

We purchased our first brand new color tv, a Sears model, in 1967, when the St. Louis Cardinals made it to the World Series. It was an incredible transition in our viewing experience, and we kept that tv for a number of years. In Oklahoma we purchased a Sony Triniton, which lasted us for about 25 years, until we finally replaced it with another Sony last summer when our apartment building was wired for HD. I am absolutely astonished at the clarity of the picture when an HD program is being broadcast. I say all of this to tell you that science has the drive to never stop understanding, never stop developing, never stop advancing, and in so doing makes our world such a better place.

Yet, for centuries there has been a consistent conflict between science and religion. It seems that for so many believers, you either believe in God or you believe in science, and never the twain shall meet. For so many Christians, science has become an obstacle to faith in God.

Today, I want to propose a better approach. And I am someone who believes in God and in science, and one who believes that when both people of faith and proponents of science do their tasks with integrity, they do not have a conflict with each other but really compliment one another.

II. A 21st Century Interpretation of Genesis 1: Terrible place to begin teaching the Bible – Often, the first question from one of my students would be "Dr. Yarbrough, do you believe in evolution? The hidden agenda behind this question really was either you accept God, or you accept the godless, atheistic, approach of science.

I wanted to answer – I didn't until I started teaching freshmen, when I think I discovered the missing link.

Genesis 1 -

Possible Interpretations:

A. *Historical Interpretation* – Genesis 1 provides a day by day account of the events that are recorded in Genesis (although man has not been created). Issue over the interpretation of

“day” (Hebrew – *yom*): 24 hour day; long day; symbolic or theological day, a way to convey time without requiring a specific time period.

B. **Scientific Interpretation** – quite similar to historical interpretation. God creates the world and the universe and all therein basically *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Dinosaurs, etc., explained by the idea that God planted the bones in the earth. God could do that – but why would He?

C. **Mythological Interpretation** – similar to myths from other cultures – mythology was a way to explain the unexplainable -Babylonian (Enuma Elish; Utnapishtim and the flood stories); Egyptian; Assyrian; Sumerian; Hebrew” Gen 1 and Gen 2- the language of Genesis has parallels to that of other creation stories from neighboring cultures

D. Theological Interpretation – not an attempt to provide a historical or scientific account; phenomenological account, based upon observation.

1. The writer begins with a **theological interpretation of creation** – In the beginning God ...

2. God created light and separated it from darkness – He called the light day and the darkness night – but there was a problem – the source of day and night as we understand it is the sun in the day and the moon and the stars at night – and they were not created until day 4! (Keep in mind that this was actually the way that the writer of Genesis 1 understood day and night). How can you take a literal interpretation, or a historical or scientific interpretation, and explain this? Those who claim to believe the Bible wind up having to twist it to make the pieces fit. This is required of those who interpret the Bible as historical or scientific.

3. The writer describes the world as he understands and experiences it – blue sky, the water above and the water below the **firmament** or the **expanse** (canopy holds the water back, windows of heaven open bringing rain, snow, sleet); (Mention having my students draw a picture of the creation as described in Genesis 1, and the problems that they encountered as they tried to impose their 21st century understanding on an ancient story).

4. Bottom line: Creation is orderly (seven days); it is “**good**,” **man is the highest aspect of creation with dignity, value, responsibility** (dominion over the earth). Man was viewed as the center of the universe – this provides the theological interpretation of creation – God is the creator of all things, his creation is good (what he intended for it to be), and mankind has a special and an important place and role in creation.

The writer of Genesis answers the theological questions of “Who?” and “Why?”

Science answers the question “How?” These questions are not contradictory unless the theologian tries to answer the scientist’s questions because he knows the theological answers, or unless the scientist because he knows the question of the scientist, then assumes that he has the answer to the theologian’s questions.

For the Biblical writer, the sun rises in the east, sets in the west, moon and stars appear at night for light, and the earth is the center of it all. Every day the sun would appear in the east and disappear in the west. How it got back to the east on the next morning was not known. And man was the center of it all.

The writer was saying that the world as I observe it, as I understand it, was created by God, it is good (in accord with God’s purpose); and man is created free and responsible (a theological understanding, not a scientific understanding).

In terms of the “**Why?**” humanity has the responsibility to remind and challenge science to use its discoveries for good, not evil. The same science that can create marvelous engines can also create weapons of destruction. The same science that can result in the technology to power a nation can also use the same to abuse and destroy our environment. The same science that can mass produce food can also for the sake of profit manipulate society into dependency upon foods that severely damage one’s health. The science that can launch mighty rockets into space can also launch destructive weapons into that same space. We could go on and on, but those in the religious community have a responsibility to serve as the conscience of a people in calling for science that is for the good of mankind and our world.

E. Flash forward to the 21st century – my view of the world – based upon observation and experimentation – our understanding of the world is so much different than that of the writer of Genesis – sun is the center of our universe; the earth is one of nine (or is it now eight planets); there are countless galaxies, stars, planets, and other heavenly bodies; elements – when I was in school there were 96 elements; today they tell us that there are 118 elements, although three are not yet known but are anticipated to be out there. (Scientific theory is based upon layers and layers of scientific knowledge – we will find these elements!)

Science provides the foundation for new technology – most good , some bad (constant development of new products, sometimes weapons of war) –

My interpretation is the same as that of the writer of Genesis – the world and universe as I know and understand it – God created it, we are responsible for it.

Later generations – their understanding will be different based upon science – for people of faith, the interpretation will be the same – the world as we understand it was created by God.

Conclusion:

When Neil Armstrong on July 20, 1969, during the Apollo 11 mission, became the first person to step onto the surface of the moon, I was a graduate student in the Department of Religion at Baylor University. At this very point my theology and science intersected in a strange and marvelous way. I realized that science had suddenly changed my view of God. God was now much greater, much more mysterious than ever before. He was not simply the God of the earth upon where I, and all of humanity, lived. He was the creator of the universe, of the innumerable galaxies of which I cannot comprehend. But I still know that those galaxies are out there!

From the perspective of faith I now I have an expanded view of God. Science has told me so much more about the universe, and through the eyes of faith, much more about the Creator than I could have ever imagined.

Whatever science discovers, my faith never wavers. Answering “how” tells me more about God, rather than disproving God. God cannot be put into a test tube and analyzed. If God could be proven or disproven, then God would not be God!

But we need not seek to battle science continuously in an attempt to protect the divine.

I believe in God –through faith. And I have confidence in science, based upon centuries of dedicated persons, who as “inquiring minds want to know!” Go ahead and fight your battles between faith and religion. As for me, and my house, we will love and appreciate both God and the scientists who provide the foundation for our very being and understanding.

Many, many years ago the writer of Genesis 1 looked around him and gazed up into the sky. He concluded that, “THE WORLD AS I OBSERVE IT, AS I UNDERSTAND IT, WAS CREATED BY GOD.” As a theologian, not a scientist, I gaze off into the heavens, as I did in October 1957 when I observed this tiny speck of light moving methodically across the sky at night, and I knowing so much more about our world and our universe find myself in complete agreement with the Biblical writer, “THE WORLD AS I OBSERVE IT, AS I UNDERSTAND IT, WAS CREATED BY GOD.” Centuries, possibly even millennia from now, a person of faith whose knowledge of our world and universe will stare off into the heavens, possibly even as he

or she stands on the surface of another planet, and will conclude that “THE WORLD AS I UNDERSTAND IT, AS I OBSERVE IT, WAS CREATED BY GOD.”

Benediction: (Jim Hurley’s prayer from “Glory Shakes the Ground,” p. 59.

Eternal Father,

We gathered here today because of our need;

Our need to focus our minds and souls;

Our need to open our eyes to your claim and call;

Our need to stand in awe before the mystery of your love and grace;

You have given us benediction.

Now as we take leave of each another

Go with us,

And grant us the courage to be a part of your world -

To be whole, authentic people in an uncertain world,

for it is in giving ourselves in ministry and service

that we find our true selves and your will

even as Jesus your obedient son did. Amen.

CHILDREN’S SERMON:

Take old crank phone and cell phone – talk about the history – Cranfills Gap, one of the last three phone systems in Texas - black phone, local operator, gravelly voice –wooden leg – Arnold Schibler - with switchboard in his living room, party lines, 6 longs for information - Long rings, short rings; our ring was 2 longs and a short);

Black dial phone – 2 letters, five numbers (CL803811 – Aunt Berta’s number)

Touch phones, Princess (pink) – 7 numbers – go through the operator for long distance calls

Added 1-area code- number for long distance

Wireless home phones, operating from a base

Cell phones – with all kinds of gadgets – no wires

What will be next?

Phones a result of science – comes from Latin “scientia” – knowledge – Webster’s “knowledge gained through study or practice”