



Creation Vs. Evolution in a Christian Worldview

This Sunday, we're looking at Genesis 1 in our sermon. One of the questions that always comes up when looking at Genesis 1 is the question of evolution vs. creation. While this is a really important question for Christians to think through and discuss, it's off topic for the direction we're going with this week's sermon. I know there are people who would have a hard time listening to teaching on this passage without any mention of this topic, so I've decided to write up a brief document on creation vs. evolution rather than address it in this week's sermon. I got a lot of this material from Tim Keller's article "Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople," which you can access at biologos.org and from the Crossway podcast episode "A Christian Scientific Perspective on Evolution." Check them out if you want to learn more about this topic.

The Scope of this Discussion

Obviously, creation vs. evolution is a huge topic, and it covers far more than we can cover in a brief write-up. There are a range of views held on all sides of the debate, even by people who identify as Christians. On one end, there are people who believe that the earth was created in 6 literal 24-hour days, and that you can't be a Christian if you believe anything else. On the other end are people who believe God set the process of creation in motion with the big bang and wired it so evolution would happen, then essentially stepped back and let evolution happen. And there are a bunch of views in between.

And my goal here isn't so much to convince you that one or another position is the right one to hold, but more to discuss what are the range of views that Christians can hold while being faithful to the Bible's teaching.

A Couple Clarifications

At the start, let me point out that our modern day debate of creation vs. evolution wasn't on Moses's mind as he wrote Genesis 1 and 2. That debate didn't exist in Moses's world, since the theory of evolution wasn't developed until the 1800's, more than 3,000 years after Moses died. Obviously, Genesis 1 and 2 have a lot to say in the discussion between creation and evolution, but Moses didn't sit down to write Genesis 1 and 2 with the goal of winning a debate with Darwin. His goal was to instruct the nation of Israel in what it means for them to live properly as God's people in God's world. A big part of living properly was worshiping the true God rather than the false gods of the people in the land they were going to. If you look closely at Genesis 1 and 2 in their historical context, there is actually a lot written into these chapters that is aimed at helping the Israelites worship the real God once they get into the Promised Land rather than the false gods of the nations around them. That means there are a lot of details and questions we'd like answered that are left out, and a lot of things he includes that may seem irrelevant to us.

It's also important to point out that "evolution" is often a really unhelpful word in this discussion. It can refer to several different things, and rarely do people stop and take the time to distinguish which of those things they're referring to. Here are 3 levels of what it can mean:

Level 1 refers to change over time. So for definition 1A: In biology, it can refer to change over time so some species that used to exist on the earth, like dinosaurs, don't exist today, and we have other animals alive today that don't show up in the ancient fossil record. Or for definition 1B: It can also refer to the ways organisms adapt to their environments in small but noticeable ways, like finches whose beaks get longer or shorter based on the weather patterns they live in. Evolution in both of these senses has been observed scientifically and isn't highly controversial.

Level 2 evolution refers to a process where all life alive on the world today descended from a single common ancestor. This is what Darwin taught. This is saying not only that there are small changes within a

species, but that a series of changes builds up so that over time, one species develops into another species. This is the same word, “evolution,” but a very different meaning of the word. This view of evolution has been controversial in the church for some time, and according to Stephen Meyer, who has a Ph.D. from Cambridge in the History and Philosophy of Science, this view is becoming more controversial in the scientific community now, too. According to Meyer, the discontinuity in the fossil record and in the genetic code of different organisms is leading many scientists to adopt the view that there are actually several trees of life or groups of organisms. The scientists who adopt this view say it’s impossible that all life evolved from one single organism. Instead, there need to be multiple starting points. Obviously, if this view gains a larger foothold in the scientific community, it will totally redefine what science believes about evolution.

Level 3 evolution says that the process of all of life descending from a common ancestor happened by an unguided mechanism known as natural selection and acting on random mutations. While level 2 evolution merely describes a biological process, this view carries a philosophical view that describes how that biological process happened. This definition carries the implication that there is no design in living organisms. It invites people to view life through the lens of an evolutionary *worldview* that believes we are all the product of chance, there are no moral absolutes, and there is no God. This view sees evolution not only as a scientific theory for where life began, but also a philosophical theory that tells us there can’t be a God.

Examining Key Questions

As you can see, the word evolution can be used to refer to a number of different views or beliefs. And these views or beliefs range from things that most Christians can agree are true to things you can’t believe while being a Christian, and many things in between. Out of the 3 definitions of evolution I just listed, level 1 (species used to exist that don’t exist now and small changes happen in species over time) is something that most if not all Christians can easily agree is true, and level 3 (all of life developed through random chance mutations without any guidance or design and there is no God) is one that Christians will see as false by definition, because to be a Christian means believing in God. That means that, as Christians, our major area for discussion is really centered around definition #2 (or approaches similar to it) - that all life in the world today descended from a single common ancestor over a long period of time.

Is this view compatible with a high view of the Bible? I believe it can be, given the affirmation of a few key truths.

There are certain things that all Christians must affirm to be aligned with the clear teaching of Genesis 1-3 and the rest of the Bible, and certain areas where the writing style of Genesis 1 gives us some level of flexibility in what we believe.

One of the keys to reading anything properly is recognizing its genre. Genre instructs us on how to read things. If you’re reading a historical book, you expect that everything being said is literally true. If a historical book says a building was 100 stories high, you expect that the building was actually 100 stories high. If you’re reading poetry, you expect metaphorical language and exaggeration, and you don’t hold the author to the same standard of literal truth as you hold a historical writer to. A poet can say a building was 100 stories high, and you wouldn’t be upset if the building turned out to be 20 stories high, because the poet’s main point isn’t literal exactness, but to make a point - that the building was really tall compared to everything around it, so tall that it felt like it was 100 stories high, even if it wasn’t really that tall. So which genre do we find in the creation narrative of Genesis 1?

If you read Gen. 1, it uses key elements of historical writing. For example, when ancient Jewish people wrote history, they would typically use the word “and” to connect different parts of the story together. And if you look through Genesis 1, it is full of the word “and,” which is a big indication that it’s historical. However, Genesis 1 also has literary patterns that, while not pure poetry, are more similar to poetry. So if you look through each day, they follow a general pattern that includes elements such as: “God said... And there was... And God called... And God saw that it was good... And there was evening and there was morning the __ day.” This patterns reflects the patterns of a refrain in a song. Genesis 1 also uses some poetic language. So for example, when it refers the sun as the “greater light” and the moon as the “lesser light,” those are rare and poetic ways of referring to the sun and the moon. Some people look only at the historical elements of Genesis 1 and say, “This is written to be read as 100%, word for word factual.” Others look at the poetic elements and say, “We shouldn’t take any of this chapter literally.” The right approach is probably somewhere in between. One theologian calls the genre of Genesis 1 “exalted prose

narrative.” That means it’s written to tell history, but it’s written in an exalted way that isn’t necessarily meant to be read word for word literally (although it *may* be written to be read literally). But that means we need to exercise wisdom in understanding which parts are to be read as word for word literal and which parts are meant to be more poetic.

And if you’re freaking out now because you’ve been taught your entire life that Genesis 1 is to be read literally and you’re afraid that I’m undermining the Bible’s authority, let me point out one more thing to you. If you compare Genesis 1 with Genesis 2 and read them closely, you’ll realize that the order of events doesn’t exactly line up. In Genesis 1, God made the plants on day 3 and man on day 6. But in Genesis 2, he made the man before he made the plants. So if you insist that both accounts are to be taken word for word literally, then the Bible contradicts itself here. In order for them to both be true without the Bible contradicting itself, it means that one or both of the accounts has its material arranged out of chronological order. This was a common way of storytelling in the ancient world. Authors were free to rearrange the order of events so the events lined up better in the story for advancing the storyline. As long as all the events you included were true, the order wasn’t as essential in their eyes. We have clear evidence of this happening in other parts of the Bible. For example, the gospel writers do this all the time in their arrangement of the narratives in the life of Jesus. That’s why the events of Jesus’ life appear in different orders if you read them in different gospel accounts. All that is to say that the content of Genesis 1 and 2 themselves point us to seeing at least part of the order of the story as being rearranged for content.

Also, the line in Gen. 2:4, “These are the generations…” forms a clear break from the story of Gen. 1. The introduction of a generation in Genesis is an indication from the author that whatever follows is history. After this line, the poetic elements of Gen. 1 are removed from the narrative. From Genesis 2:4 onward, Genesis is written clearly as a historical account. Which means there’s good reason to believe that the details of Genesis 1 may have been placed in the order we have them in by Moses for the sake of advancing the storyline or for the sake of making a theological point, not simply because that’s the exact order in which everything was made.

Core Affirmations about Creation

So, if there are parts of Genesis 1 that can be read poetically and theological truths in the creation account that we are to take literally, where do we draw the line between what is and isn’t ok for Christians to believe? Let me outline 3 key truths you must believe in order to be in line with the Bible’s clear teaching on creation.

1. *God is the creator, and creation is distinct from Him.* The universe is not the product of random chance. God made everything. He may have done it in a way where everything appeared in a moment as He spoke, or He may have done it in a way where things slowly developed and grew over time under His guidance, but either way, God did it. We are not an accident. We are not the product of chance. The entire universe has a meaning and purpose, because it was created by God. And we have a meaning and a purpose, because we were created by God. We are distinct from God, which means that we live life under His authority. We owe Him our allegiance because He is our creator.
2. *God made the world good.* The brokenness we see now in the world isn’t the way things are meant to be. It’s the result of our sinful rebellion against God’s good rule. God made the world good, and one day, He will restore the earth to the goodness it was made to have.
3. *Adam and Eve were literal, historical people who rebelled against God’s rule.* I know this one may be a bit tougher or more controversial from an evolutionary perspective. But like I said, all the poetic elements present in the creation account of Gen. 1 are gone when we get to the creation of Adam and Eve in Gen. 2 and the fall in Gen. 3. We have the freedom to read Gen. 1 as potentially not completely literal because the structure and language of the passage itself invites us to that approach. But the structure and language of Genesis 2 and 3 tell us to read these chapters as history. We can’t throw away the historicity of Adam and Eve without opening the door to being able to disregard any other parts of the Bible we don’t want to listen to as well. As Tim Keller says, “When you refuse to take a Biblical author literally when he clearly wants you to do so, you have moved away from the traditional understanding of the Biblical authority.”

Also, in the New Testament, Paul draws parallels between the work of Christ (which is definitely historical) and the work of Adam (which Paul clearly believes was historical). In Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15, he says that the spread of sin through Adam’s sin and the spread of forgiveness through Jesus’

obedience parallel one another. He claims that Adam's historical existence is a core truth that must hold true in order for Jesus' work on the cross to really forgive us. Theologian NT Wright says, "Paul clearly believed that there had been a single first pair, whose male, Adam, had been given a commandment and had broken it. Paul was, we may be sure, aware of what we would call mythical or metaphorical dimensions to the story, but he would not have regarded these as throwing doubt on the existence, and primal sin, of the first historical pair." He's saying Paul clearly believed that Adam and Eve were historical people, and he drew theological conclusions based on that belief. And theologian Derek Kidner supports the same view when he says, "What is quite clear from these chapters in the light of other scriptures is their doctrine that mankind is a unity, created in God's image, and fallen in Adam by one act of disobedience." A view of Adam and Eve as historical people created in God's image is a core part of a Christian understanding of creation.

That being said, there are a number of different views that account for how Adam and Eve could develop as special creatures made in God's image through the evolutionary process. For example, some people believe that God guided the evolutionary process until a human-like species was around, then He took one of their children and gave that child His image and breath, and the child then was Adam, the first man. Others believe that God guided the process of evolution, and then once it reached a certain point, He created a special creature called man that was specially formed directly by God and didn't descend from the other animals. And other people have a variety of other views on how humanity can be distinct from the animals and bear God's image, even if life developed through an evolutionary process.

Closing Thoughts

So, as Christians, is it ok to believe in evolution? Due to the poetic elements of Genesis 1, it can be, as long as we believe it within the clear boundaries the Bible lays out for us. And do we have to believe in evolution? Absolutely not. There are still a lot of holes in the theory of evolution that the science can't fully explain and that leave alternative options, such as the view that God created the world in 6 literal, 24 hour days, a viable alternative for a Christian to believe. And if you're not sure where you stand, it's ok to say, "I don't know."

In closing, let me remind you that faith in Jesus and His death and resurrection for our sin is what saves us, full stop. Nowhere in the New Testament did the apostles require someone to affirm the belief that the world was created in 6 literal 24-hour days before they would baptize them and accept them into the church. While it is essential for us to hold fast to the core truths God reveals to us, such as the divinity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and God's role as creator, it is also important for us to have love and humility toward one another on secondary issues where we may disagree. And, as long as someone's views of evolution are within the bounds that see God as creator, that see original creation as good, and that see Adam and Eve as historical people, their view falls within the bounds of beliefs we can hold as Christians while still holding a high view of the Bible as God's word.

- Eric Scott