

Is it possible to believe in logic, science, and faith?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-part series

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Genesis 1:1–8 (CEB)

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—²the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters—³God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. ⁴God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

⁶God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other.” ⁷God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way. ⁸God named the dome Sky.

There was evening and there was morning: the second day.

Science and faith are pushed far from one another in our culture. Must it be this way?

As we saw in the first week of this series, Christians hold that there is such a thing as truth; that some notions about the nature of reality correspond to reality and some do not. But for many people today, the notion of truth itself is troubling. For example, they somehow want to hold in their minds the idea that Christianity and Buddhism both tell us much about reality, just from different perspectives, and that, in some mysterious way, both can be true. This is sentimental nonsense.

Truth is that which corresponds to reality; i.e., truth is that which is so. The world-view¹ held by Christians could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or not. The Buddhist world-view could correspond with reality, with things as they are, or not. But, because the fundamental world-views of Christianity and Buddhism are so diametrically opposed, they cannot both correspond to reality - they cannot both be true.

More specifically, it is either true that there is a creator God who made this world, gives it purpose, and is actively involved in the acting out of that purpose -- or it is not true. It is either true that all the world is an illusion,² or it is not true. It is either true that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily resurrected after his crucifixion or it is not true. It happened or it didn't happen. A video camera would have captured it on tape - or it would have captured something else that explains the empty tomb or perhaps it would show that the tomb was never empty. At this point, I'm not trying to say what is true, only that some notions of reality are true and others are not true.

Similarly, for two thousand years Jews and Christians have told competing stories about the nature of god. People often say that Jews and Christians worship the same god, that the only real difference is what they believe about Jesus. This is superficial, because the Christian understanding of Jesus changes everything about our understanding of God. Christians proclaim that Jesus is not merely a prophet, nor merely that he was touched by God unlike any other person who ever lived, nor even merely that he was Israel’s Messiah -- but that he is God himself, fully God and fully human.

1. Each of us carries around in our head and heart a story about how the world works, a story that explains all that is, a story that claims to make sense of all of reality. This story is a key part of what I mean by a world-view. A world-view explains things. It makes sense of it all. It is the way we organize all of reality. It tells us who we are and where we are. A worldview answers four basic questions” (1) who are we?, (2) where are we?, (3) why are things so messed up?, and (4) what is the solution?

2. In the Hindu and Buddhist world-views, the entire cosmos is an illusion, or *maya*, produced by ignorance. We have achieved true enlightenment when we see through the illusion and, only then, we are released from the endless cycle of rebirths and our self is finally extinguished. Striving to achieve this liberation forms the basis for almost Buddhist practices. See John M. Koller’s, *Asian Philosophies*, now in its sixth edition.

For the fiercely monotheistic Jews who still awaited the fulfillment of their god's covenant with Israel, the Christian proclamation of Jesus as deity was blasphemy, taking Christians into the realm of polytheism and paganism. It is possible that one of these two competing stories told by Jews and Christians is correct and that the other is wrong. It is possible that they are both wrong and that the Hindus, or others, have been right all along. But it is not possible that the Jews and the Christians are both right. And we do both religions a disservice when we try to paper over these fundamental differences.

I do not deny the paradoxical or claim that human reason can grasp the truth of all reality. The Christian doctrine of the trinity is, ultimately, beyond the grasp of our reason and common sense, as is most of Einstein's theory of relativity and pretty much all of quantum physics. Sometimes the truth is not found in resolving a paradox but in affirming the fundamental tension. G.K. Chesterton captured this well, "The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians."³

What is important to grasp about Christianity is that it is not, in its essence, a religion of concepts or ideas. It is the story of actual people and events, in real space and real time, and the meaning of those events for us all. There is no inherent paradox in the claim that Jesus was resurrected. Either he got up and walked out of the tomb after having died, as the first Christians claimed, or he did not. And if Jesus was resurrected it changes everything, but more on that in a couple of weeks.

The notion of proof

Here's something that may surprise you: our lives are built on what we believe to be true, not what we know to be true. Outside of mathematics, I can't really think of much that we can actually prove. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything, only disproving.

One of the things drummed into me in my Ph.D. work was the notion that a scientific hypothesis is never proven, only that many hypotheses have yet to be disproved, or as one of the principal scientific texts puts it, ". . . hypotheses can be tested and be shown to be probably true or probably false."⁴ Scientific hypotheses are always predictions, never proofs. That is why DNA results are always stated in probabilities. Modern science works because the visible universe is orderly and predictable, not because science proves things.

This business about truth and proof can be tricky, but just stop to think about all the things you "know." I think you'll soon come to realize that nearly everything in your "knowledge" category is really in a "belief" category. It is just that there are many beliefs for which the evidence is so strong that we take the beliefs to be proven -- and we use the word "knowledge" when speaking of such beliefs. We then go on to organize our world-view around those beliefs until such time that we learn something that causes us to modify our beliefs and, subsequently, our world-view.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Perhaps you've seen the movie, *The Truman Show*. In this movie, the hero, Truman, was born and raised in a completely controlled "artificial" world that was really nothing more than a large movie set. Truman had no reason to believe that there was anything artificial or contrived about his world, even though his wife and all his friends were actors hired to play the roles. Truman was the

3. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1908 (orig.)).

4. This is from a classic textbook on scientific research, Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1986), 20.

only person not in on the secret. Truman's "knowledge" of his existence was utterly reasonable and completely wrong.

There are substantial theological issues embedded in this film because we cannot transcend our senses, thereby throwing into doubt all that we hold to be true. To put it simply, we are stuck with our five senses and we can't get around them. Now, I don't think I'm living in an enormous movie set or even a "Matrix," I just don't think I can prove it beyond *any* doubt. Because everything we know must be mediated by our senses and our senses can be deceived, we have to admit the possibility of being wrong about nearly everything.

Of course, no one actually lives that way. I "know" that I married Patti more than seventeen years ago and that Chris, Matt, and Robby are my sons. For me to hold otherwise would get me committed - and rightly so. We just need to lose the notion that life can be reduced to Euclidean proofs such as we learned in tenth-grade geometry. More to the point, it is unreasonable to ask that Christians supply a proof for the existence of God and then refuse to consider the truth of Jesus in the absence of proof.

Our lives are built on a foundation of countless beliefs about ourselves, others, the world, the very nature of reality. Most of our beliefs do correspond to reality - to what is true - which is a good thing, because we have to make decisions every day on the basis of our beliefs. I did marry Patti in 1998; I was present at my marriage. (Of course, I have to believe that the Justice of the Peace was legit.) Barack Obama was elected President in 2008. (At least the media has told me so.) The American colonies won their independence in 1781. (Or so my books have told me.)

My point is that our beliefs are like a pyramid. When we are children, we begin building our pyramid of beliefs, adding blocks to it, taking blocks away. This pyramid constitutes our world-view. If we are fortunate, our pyramid is built on a wide foundation of many reasonably held beliefs that enable us to build an ever-higher pyramid of understanding. Sometimes our most fundamental beliefs are challenged and replaced with beliefs that we believe are closer to the truth - or, to put it another way, our world-view is modified. This is an unending, life-long process - and an inescapable one.

But what about science? Don't I have to choose between science and faith?

Since the birth of the Enlightenment more than 200 years ago, we've lived with an increasingly wide ditch between science and religion, reason and faith. Both have been seen as legitimate areas of study but they couldn't really be put together -- we kept one in the attic, the other in the basement. Science has been seen as the source of all facts about the universe while religion has been left with spiritual matters, devoid of any appeal to facts. Indeed, the ascendancy of science in all matters has given birth to "scientism," which refers to science applied in excess believing that science can answer all questions worth asking.

In retrospect, this separation is odd, in that the development of modern science depended on the assumption of an orderly and predictable universe. What has changed over the years is the presumed explanation for that order and predictability. Early in the modern/scientific era, it was assumed that God was the designer of this order. However, responding to 19th century shifts in philosophical outlook, science began explicitly to remove a creator god from its world-view, substituting notions of impersonal mechanisms giving rise to the order of the universe. Of course, Darwin's general theory of evolution⁵ was the main impetus to this development. With the

5. Darwin proposed two theories. The first theory, sometimes referred to as micro-evolution, proposed that random mutation and natural selection creates lasting changes in species and can lead to the creation

explanatory vacancy created by the jettisoning of a creator god, Darwin's theory of natural selection was expanded and reshaped into *Darwinism*, a competing story that provided explanations for who we are, where we are, the problem and the solution.

It is very important to note the order of these developments. The loss of belief in a God who is actively involved in his creation left only two options for many in the West -- that there is no god (atheism) or that God got the whole thing started but then left creation to its own devices (the absentee landlord of Deism). As science began to discover that the earth is very ancient and, at one time, was very different from now, a theory was needed to explain, in the absence of God, the plain fact that birds and bees actually do exist. Darwin provided the needed theory. Thus, *Darwinism* became as much a brute force explanation⁶ of all that is as the Christian God. In much of the scientific community, Darwinism became a necessary given in a world with no god. Just as Christians claim that the question of who created God is a nonsensical question -- God simply is -- scientific materialists⁷ hold that the question of who created the primordial soup is a nonsensical question -- the soup simply was, needing no explanation or creator. To a materialist, the work of natural selection on that long-ago puddle of water, hydrogen, ammonia, and methane is a tenant of faith, a truism, not something to be proved.

Indeed, though I referred earlier to Darwinism as a theory, in large segments of the scientific community Darwinism no longer passes the test for being a scientific theory. Karl Popper has shown that for a theory to be useful in the advancement of knowledge, it must be falsifiable. It may be that we now lack the means to test a theory or hypothesis, but the question is whether we could imagine a test. For example, Christians claim the Jesus was resurrected. How could we actually test this claim? We could do so by exploiting a wormhole in spacetime to take a look at what happened in that tomb nearly 2000 years ago. Is such a thing possible? Could we actually do it? Perhaps someday. The point is that we could imagine doing so. What evidence could demonstrate that we are not merely the product of time and chance working on some primordial soup? Could there be such evidence given the expanse of the materialists' claims?

After all, if there could never be any evidence which could disprove a "theory" what good is it -- the "theory" becomes nothing more than a truism, to be taken on faith. For materialists, evolutionary theory cannot be disproved, because doing so would require another explanation for all that is and the only other explanation is some sort of creator god.

of new species. This first theory of evolution has been well-supported by scientific evidence. Much more controversial, at the time it was proposed and still today, is Darwin's more general theory of evolution which proposed that *all* of life has developed through the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. This more general theory is sometimes called macro-evolution and is what people usually mean when they refer to "Darwinism", emphasis on the "ism."

6. A brute force explanation is the answer that lies at the very beginning of all the "why" questions. You may remember pestering your parents with questions like "why is it raining?" -- because storms have moved in -- "why have storms moved in?" -- because of the large weather systems -- and so on, until finally the exasperated parent says something like -- because "that's that!" This explanatory chain inevitably ends up at some explanation about which "why" or "who" cannot be asked. For Christians, God lies at the beginning of this chain. For Darwinists, some notion of natural laws like natural selection acting on a primordial soup lies at the beginning of the chain.

7. Because many scientists began to see science as not so much a matter of method, but rather, a unifying theory of all that is, the result was the rise of what is sometimes called scientific materialism, or naturalism, or physicalism. The materialist story, which is too often taken as fact, proposes that nature is made up solely of material stuff and that we and our world are solely the result of time, chance, random mutation, and natural selection acting on this eternal stuff. For the materialist, there is no such thing as mind or consciousness or spirit -- just material stuff in various configurations. Christians do not deny the effects of time, chance, random mutation, and natural selection -- we just don't think it is the whole story.

Scientific materialism has become an important competing worldview in the West. So long as it is recognized as a worldview, a competing explanation for all that is, there is no problem. But it is incorrect and dogmatic to claim that scientific materialism is synonymous with science.

Science *is* method; it is a means of creating knowledge. It is about immersing oneself in data, arriving at a theoretical explanation of observed phenomena, formulating falsifiable hypotheses, and designing experimental and quasi-experimental means of testing those hypotheses. Science is exceedingly difficult to do well, especially when the phenomena of interest are complex and possible explanations abound.

Science is *a* way of knowing and it has its limits. Quantum physics has proved humbling to modern science, changing our most fundamental assumptions about the nature of physical reality. The Hubble telescope has enabled us to peer into the Big Bang, the very beginnings of time, bringing us to the threshold of the big questions but no further. It is no small irony that scientific advances in recent years have contributed so much to our understanding of the limits of the scientific method.

We must recover an old idea, namely, that science and religion, reason and faith, are sisters in our search for truth. Neither is equipped to tackle all the questions, much less answer them. Rather than consigning them to different wings of our house, both need to be brought into the main room. Science is no more equipped to tell us why we are here than theology and the Bible are equipped to unravel the mysteries of quantum entanglement.

Inescapable Decisions

Now we come to the really hard part. First, each of us is stuck with our belief pyramid, and each belief in our pyramid is only more or less likely to be true. Second, we have to use these beliefs to make decisions every day. Am I really married? Will high cholesterol levels really kill me? Was Jesus resurrected? If I work hard will I get the promotion? Is there a God?

It is pretty easy to see how deciding on your level of work effort will influence your life. It is perhaps not so easy to see how your decision about God will affect your life, especially for pragmatic Americans. It is not even obvious why a decision has to be made. But decisions are inescapable. It is true in life, just as it is true in business, that a decision delayed is a decision made.

Christians hold that you will make no more important decision than your decision about God. Further, we claim that Jesus of Nazareth was born 2000 years ago, that we know little of his life until his public ministry in the last three or so years of his life, that he proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom, that he was crucified by the Romans, died, and was buried, and that three days later he was bodily resurrected, subsequently appearing to hundreds of people. We hold, with Paul, that Jesus' resurrection validates his claims that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, indeed, God himself. Perhaps most importantly, Christians hold that God challenges us to make a decision - do we wish to be part of his kingdom or not? Further, we hold that this decision is bound up with our eternal destiny.

Even in the face of inevitable uncertainty and doubts, we must make a decision. Do we believe that the Christian story is true or do we believe that the Christians have got things wrong, despite their sincerely held beliefs? We may not want to confront this decision but it cannot be avoided -- a decision delayed is a decision made.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series:

Biblical stories that will make you feel better about your own family!

Current series

A follow-on series for the Ask! sermons on some of the big faith questions. We'll go deeper in class and have plenty of time for Q&A.

Second Information Meeting: Fall 2016 Israel Trip with Scott Engle and Arthur Jones

Sunday, Sept. 27 at 6:30 in Festival Hall

We are planning a ten-day trip to Israel, similar to the Fall 2014 trip. If you've ever thought about taking an in-depth tour of Israel, this is the trip to take. Visit Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, Masada, and much more with friends and family. This trip is life-changing. Your faith will be deepened, you will never read the Bible the same way, and you will have a great time. We hope that you will join us!

The deposit deadline is October 1!

Sermon Notes
