

## When Christians Get It Wrong: Science and Politics

### Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:4b-9

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So when did God create human beings? Genesis chapter 1 says on the sixth day, *after* God created the birds, fish and trees. Genesis chapter 2 says *before* God created the birds, fish and trees. Genesis chapter 1 says God created male and female human beings at the same time. Chapter 2 says a man first and then a woman later on. Genesis chapter 1 says creation is a blessing and everything in it is good. The other story will end up with humans so bad that God expels them from the Garden at the point of an angel's flaming sword.

Scholars have long understood that the creation poems of Genesis are two very different stories not just in sequence but in theology. One uses the name "Elohim" for God; the other a derivative of "Yahweh". They are very beautiful, inspiring and important to be sure, but they are two very different stories written hundreds of years apart by very different writers with very different points of view.

That modern North American Christians use these two stories to argue against evolutionary science or insist that they be taught along side of public school biology or ecology is not just misguided, it dishonors the intention of the Biblical writers. To argue as some 'creationists' do that the universe is only 6,000 years old, that humans and dinosaurs lived on earth at the same time, that indeed the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around the earth because that is what the Bible says, ([www.talkorigins.org/faqs](http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs)) not only denies common sense it betrays the spirit and purpose of those who wrote the Bible in the first place.

In his book The Heart of Christianity (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004) Oregon State University New Testament Professor Marcus Borg writes:

"In the last half century, probably more Christians have left the church because of the Bible than for any other single reason. More precisely, they left because the earlier paradigm's way of seeing the Bible ceased to make sense to them. Contemporary biblical literalism with its emphasis on biblical infallibility, historical factuality and moral and doctrinal absolutes is an obstacle for millions of people." (Borg p. 43)

In response to this worship series I received the following email message from the father of a daughter now in her late teens that dropped out of our church and youth group years ago, quoting his daughter as saying; "The fundamentalists make ridiculous claims in the name of religion, opposing science and trying to dictate too much about what people are supposed to think. (This isn't a problem with LAUMC.)"

Such a response illustrates the research of David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons in their book unchristian, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007) that for the generation now between 16-29 years old, 40% no longer see the Christian faith as relevant to their spirituality. (Kinnaman/Lyons p. 18) Those who consider themselves outside of the

Christian faith also expressed alienation because of religious politics; over half of 'outsiders' and over half of young people in the church responding to Kinnaman and Lyon's research described Christianity as "too involved with politics" (Kinnaman/Lyons pp. 27, 33-34).

In August of 1999 the Kansas State Board of Education voted, six to four to "reject evolution as a scientific principle" based on a proposal authored by Tom Willis, president of the Creation Science Association of Mid-America, one of the leading proponents that the earth is flat and the center of the universe because that's what the Bible says ([www.talkorigins.org/faqs](http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs)). That Kansas policy stood in place until overturned in February 2007, again by a six to four vote. During those eight years anti-evolution legislation was introduced in 24 state legislatures and similar policies were under consideration in at least 20 other states, according to the National Centre for Science Education in California. (Suzanne Goldenberg, "The Guardian", 02/15/07)

As a preacher for over thirty years it is not uncommon to hear the criticism that I am "mixing politics with religion" when people disagree with what I've said and the praise "pastor that is prophetic preaching" when people agree with my point of view. I don't fault anyone, even with those whom I disagree, for the sincere attempt to apply the principals of their faith to the politics of the day; as Jesus did throughout his ministry (John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, HarperOne, 2009). And, the research is suggesting that for those outside of the church and young people within it are watching very carefully how we are politically faithful, in particular with the use of the scriptures.

The culture wars in America fought over a host of issues from abortion to marriage to science in public education often involve the Bible, with all sides hurling their favorite scripture passages back and forth as if gauntlets. Not only does such hermeneutic confuse and misinform those in and outside of Christianity, it alienates millions of people, especially young people, from even considering our faith.

To use the Bible as modern science when it was never intended to be is a capricious manipulation of this sacred scripture. The Bible as we have it didn't come down in one piece from Mt. Olympus nor was it delivered as a final product by heavenly UFO in the Kings James Version! The Bible was crafted together by very human people over a thousand years. Just as an example, remember that we in the churches continue to disagree over which books should or should not be considered sacred; the Protestant Bible has 66 books, the Roman Catholic Bible has ten more, the Greek orthodox Bible four more and the Slavic Orthodox two more than that (Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, 1993, p.viii.) Notice; human beings determining what is sacred!

To suggest that the Bible is a supernatural product devoid of human touch ignores what we find within its very human pages; the beauty and truth of human beings struggling to know and love God. One consistent story from Genesis to Revelation is that God works through and with human beings, often fragile and failing human beings. Why wouldn't that be true for the inspired writing of the Bible as well?

When we apply artificial categories such as "infallibility" or "inerrancy" to the Bible we miss its power for our lives. The danger when we do that is to use the scripture to justify all sorts of human evil in the name of God. If you want to find a Bible quote to justify your hatred of racial minorities you can do so; the white supremacists do (Genesis

6). If a man wants to find a Bible quote to justify the oppression of women he can do so. A person can pick out a verse or two in the Bible to justify just about anything.

Quoting Psalm 107 (KJV), "He raiseth the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea...He turns rivers into a desert, and springs of water into a thirsty ground; a fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it," David Crowe, the executive director of Restore America, wrote this about Hurricane Katrina:

"What Americans observed on their television sets was a stunning, even prophetic snapshot of precisely what the Psalmist—over 2000 years ago—depicted for a people who are under ungodly leadership...a window into the future of all Americans under the anti-God, morally challenged, secular princes of state, local and federal government ...Katrina was an act of God upon a sin-loving and rebellious nation, a warning to all who foolishly and arrogantly believe there is no God ...It is also a serious call to repent, to turn away from our wicked ways, from the heart of a loving Father." (beliefnet.com, 09/2005)

A loving Father who sends a hurricane to kill over a thousand and leave millions without homes because of a verse in the Hebrew psalms? A loving Father who causes a devastating earthquake to punish Haiti according to Pat Robertson?

A person can pick out a verse or two in the Bible to justify hatred, ignorance and fear. But the same Bible can be an inspiration for history changing transformation. Consider these words from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964:

"...there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. ...I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid." (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel acceptance speech, 1964)

The authority of the scripture is not found within the words on its pages if by some supernatural force, but rather the power of the Bible is found within the spiritual relationship between its texts and the reader. That's why we call it the 'living word of God'. If you're looking to prove your prejudices you can find it. If you're looking for what God's dreams, you can find that too. The Bible is a dynamic and inspiring resource of faith not the final words of a God dictated from long ago.

Thank God that those who fought to end legalized slavery didn't take the regulations for and support of the institution found throughout Old and New Testaments as the only word of God on the matter. Thank God that those who fought for a woman's equality a century ago, didn't stop reading the Bible at I Corinthians 14:34, "...women should be silent in the church. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate as the law also says..."

Both of those movements...the abolition of slavery and women's rights...relied heavily on Biblical inspiration and were deemed either as "mixing politics with religion" or as "prophetic justice" depending on one's point of view. But today only a few would argue that the end result was nothing less than an inspired benefit for all of human history.

"The Bible is the product of two historical communities, ancient Israel and the early Christian movement...it tells us how they saw things...how they saw their life with God. It contains their stories about God's involvement in their lives, their laws and ethical teachings, their prayers and praise, their wisdom about how to live and their hopes and dreams...as sacred scripture it functions as; our foundation document...upon which Christianity is built, without which the structure will fall into ruins; our identity document; its stories and vision are to shape our sense of who we are and of what our life with God is about...our wisdom tradition...concern[ing] the two most central questions of life, What is real? And how shall we live?" (Borg pp. 45-47)

The response to our series "When Christians Get It Wrong" has been quite amazing. Your pastors have been overwhelmed with stories of people wounded from their encounters with Christians and the church! People have been shunned from congregations, publicly shamed by preachers and priests and rudely ignored or condemned by church members or Christians because of some perceived judgment on their part. All too often a scripture verse has been used as a bludgeon to condemn someone to hell or suggest they are a sinner in the eyes of a loving God.

That such people still seek out a church community is testament to their courage, their desire to grow closer to God and to find that promise of faith that cannot be spoiled by the small mindedness of others.

The research suggests that North Americans aren't leaving the church and rejecting Christianity because of the media's misrepresentation or issues of doctrine but more often than not because of how they were treated by those who profess to be followers of Jesus.

The Bible was not written to be the basis of 21<sup>st</sup> century science. And Jesus didn't use his scriptures as a weapon to condemn but as a doorway for the new and possible relationship to the living God. Shouldn't we?

Amen.