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God Started It: Creating

I have heard it said that the most important thing about the first chapter of Genesis is the very first part of the very first verse. *In the beginning when God created... or, in the beginning, God...(Genesis 1:1)*

On the other hand, it seems to me that we squander the riches of the first chapter of Genesis, and the second chapter as well for that matter, when we understand them to have been written in accurate scientific detail. When it comes to creation, the controversy between the Bible and science just won't go away. There are those who think that the first chapter of Genesis is meant to be a scientific explanation of the time table and sequence of how the earth and its inhabitants got here. Discussions of the first chapter of Genesis for those people often turn quickly to how it squares with evolution. The answer, of course, is that it does not.

Curiously, our fundamentalist brothers and sisters prefer the timing and sequence of creation in the first chapter of Genesis rather than the timing and sequence of the same events in the second chapter. The two chapters are profoundly different about this. Here are just a couple examples. In the first chapter of Genesis the man and woman are created after everything else, in the second chapter the man is the first thing created on earth. In the first chapter men and women are created simultaneously, in the second chapter they are created separately, the time between when the man was created and when the woman was created long enough to allow God to create within that period all plant life and all animal life, and the man time enough to give everything a name. To insist upon the scientific accuracy of the first chapter of Genesis but not the second is inconsistent to say the least. But be that as it may, if a person believes that the time table and sequence of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is meant to be taken literally, then that person must choose between accepting the Genesis account of creation or the scientific theory of evolution. There is simply too much difference between the two points of view to be able rationally to accept them both.

I think the whole controversy is silly, but because religion and science seem once again to be at odds in the public square perhaps we need to take a little bit of time to consider the issue once more. Did you ever think that in the year 2008 a candidate for Vice President of the United States would support teaching the time table and sequence of creation events in the first chapter of Genesis, as science, in science class, in public schools, alongside of and as an alternative to evolutionary theory, and expecting perhaps a majority of Americans to think that a good idea. Is there any doubt that the church still needs to teach people the difference between the domain of religion and the domain of

science? Will some people ever understand that the Bible is not a scientific textbook? The Bible is an authority on the nature of God and the spiritual nature of humankind. In short, it teaches us about religion, not science. When it comes to creation it teaches us who created the world and why, not how the world was created and when. Who and why are religious questions, how and when are scientific questions. Religion often uses poetry, story, metaphor and parable to teach its truths, just like Jesus did. Science uses the most precise possible prose. Thus the Bible contains a lot of poetry, story, metaphor, and parable, and, hence, it is not always meant to be taken literally. When Jesus said *I am the door (John 10:9)*, is he a wooden or steel barrier swinging back and forth on hinges? As a young boy, when I was told that Jesus said, *I am the vine and you are the branches (John 15:5)*, I was confused. Jesus was not a plant. I did not have leaves. Children take almost everything literally. We must be careful how we talk to children. We are to have the faith and trust in God of a child, but not the thinking of a child. As Paul wrote, *when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became an adult I put away childish ways (1 Corinthians 13:11)*.

To think of the Bible as a book of science is to abuse the Bible. If one wants to teach the literal scientific accuracy of the time table and sequence of creation events found in the first chapter of Genesis in church and Sunday School (in that way misunderstanding that portion of God's Word to be scientific prose rather than poetry and story and metaphor and parable), then at least the church and Sunday School would be the right place to misinterpret it. Creationism as the term has come to be understood today is a religious point of view, not a scientific one. If something is taught in science class then use science to teach it, not the Bible. If you use the Bible to teach it then it is based upon religion and has no place in science class.

I took way too much time on what really ought not to be necessary, but apparently it is being proven again how old errors die hard. I think misinterpreting the first chapters of Genesis is a squandering of its greatest treasures because there is so much spiritual truth to be learned from the first chapter of Genesis and time spent arguing about whether or not it has scientific value could be so much better used learning from it about the nature of God and the spiritual nature of human beings, which understanding leads to our salvation and would be the very salvation of the whole world.

The 27th verse of the first chapter of Genesis teaches us that God created humankind in God's image, male and female God created them. Now, just what is this image? Well, despite what the Mormons say, it is not physical, that seems certain. If it was, would God be male or female, since both the man and the woman are said to be made in God's image. Theologians from the time of ancient Israel through today have understood the image of God to be a spiritual image, God implanting in human beings a capacity for love and joy, a capacity for moral decision making. It is the intelligence to know right from wrong which is our glory. Only humankind has a conscience. No other animal; not nature itself.

One fish is eaten by a bigger fish which is eaten by a bigger fish which is eaten by one bigger until we get to the killer whale, which loves to devour helpless baby seals

without batting a whale eye, and which is itself one of the only animals thought to never experience fear, the killer whale having no known natural predators. Do we condemn the Killer whale and all the fish for being pitiless? No, we don't. They are just following their instincts, as do other animals such as the lion, or the wild dog which picks out the slowest or youngest or otherwise most defenseless animal in a herd and then the dogs gang up on it and with coordinated effort take turns chasing it down until it falls from exhaustion and then the dogs tear it limb from limb. I am fascinated by the natural world but I choose not to watch television documentaries about predatory animals because I always feel sorry for their prey. But the predatory animal seems to feel nothing of the sort. Animals have no conscience, at least certainly nothing like ours. They just do what they do. Why, we might ask, did God create such a situation? I sure don't know. Sometimes I think I have made my peace with that question just by thinking that God knows what God is doing, but to be honest, most of the time I try not to think about it, as I try sometimes not to think about the injustice of natural calamity and disease and suffering and early death of innocent human beings. I am made in God's image so I have a conscience and a sensitive heart and soul. But I must also try to remember that I am not God, and perhaps take some comfort in the prophet Isaiah's proclamation that *as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's ways and thoughts above mine.* (Isaiah 55:9) If there is any theme which runs through the whole Bible from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of Revelation it is that God loves us and created the world out of love for us to enjoy. If we have biblical faith we must at least always believe that, even when the natural world doesn't seem very loving. To paraphrase a bit, *For God so loved the world that God sent his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have wonderful everlasting life* (John 3:16). And the biblical concept of everlasting life begins here, now.

If God is a Creator God, if it is a feature of the very soul of God to create good things out of love, and if we are made in the spiritual image of God, would it not also be in the deepest nature of human beings to create good things out of love? Would not such creativity be a capacity that we share with God? Would it not be to fulfill one aspect of the very nature of our human being and thus lead to our deep satisfaction, as far as we are able, whenever we can, to continue to create on the earth over which God has given us dominion, good things out of love?

Is not the Bible profound in this way? Not scientifically, but spiritually. Not only do we learn who God is from the Bible, we learn also who we are, what our nature is, what would bring us fulfillment and joy. *It has been told you, O human mortal, what the Lord requires of you, wrote the prophet Micah, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God* (Micah 6:8).

There is a movement afoot in our land which has taken on the name of *Paying it Forward*. It is the idea of taking initiative to do something nice for someone, not waiting to pay someone back for something nice they first do for us, but rather paying it forward as it were, getting it started. It is a fine idea, as old, dare we say, as biblical religion itself, but those promoting it, as far as I can tell, do not anchor their thinking in Christianity or in any true religion. They seem, actually, to speak as if they have

discovered a new idea. As for all ideas without a religious basis, I think this one is weaker than if it had one. So let's give the idea a faith foundation. Let's say to the secular moralists, we will take your idea and raise you one better. We will join you in your paying it forward movement but for a better reason than any other. We will join you because God started it, and we are created in God's image and so it is the very nature of human being to pay it forward. Real Christians and others of true religion have been doing it for thousands of years. Paying it forward, you bet! God did it in creation, then through Moses and the prophets and through countless graces in the lives of people from the beginning of humankind to yours and mine today, and most of all God did through giving of God's whole self for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord and Savior. When Christians pay it forward, we also pay it back.