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My Struggle with Evolution

Kevin Twain Lowery

“In the Beginning ...”

I will never forget my first grade Sunday school teacher, Miss Cook, a sweet but stern elderly lady at the small-town Methodist church where I was raised. The very first day of class with Miss Cook is still vivid to me. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth!” she emphasized with passion, pounding her fist on the table in cadence with the verse as we recited it with her. Miss Cook believed that the place to start was at the beginning, and that was indelibly impressed upon my young mind. I saw the creation story as a foundational part of Christian faith.

In the middle of my fourth grade year, my family started attending a Wesleyan church several miles away. The people there were much more self-assured than the Methodists I had known. The pastor and a lot of the church’s leaders were rather outspoken on a lot of issues. It was a culture of legalism and fear. The fear was so gripping for me that during altar calls I would silently ask God to forgive me of any sin I had failed to confess, even though I could not think of any. I did this almost every service for the next five to six years.

That pastor (and church) claimed that only those who take every part of the Bible literally really believe it. Anything less is not genuine faith. Ironically, I have never known anyone to actually follow every edict in the Bible literally, including NT admonitions (e.g., women needing to keep quiet in church). Of course, the pastor dismissed evolution out of hand with jeers like, “I may have had ancestors who swung from their necks, but I never had any that swung from their tails!” The congregation always responded with boisterous laughter and amens. Evolutionists were disparaged with labels like “worldly,” “humanists,” “liberals,” and “atheists.” Scientists

were considered the guiltiest of all. Like the atheists who opposed the Bible and prayer in public schools, scientists had set their sights on destroying everyone's faith in the Bible. Unfortunately, I bought into all of this hook, line, and sinker. As a result, grappling with evolution would require me to rethink a great number of my beliefs and presuppositions.

Survival of the Fittest Idea

I managed to make it through public high school with my belief system unscathed. In fact, it was pretty easy. I simply told myself that I was right and everyone else was wrong. After all, there were plenty of other people who didn't buy into evolution, even if they didn't care about or understand the Bible like I did. Moreover, I could always count on my local church to reassure me that we were on the right side of the issue (i.e., God's side). Whenever I would take a biology test or quiz, I told the teacher what he wanted to hear without taking any of it seriously. What made it even easier is that there were people like Henry Morris and Ken Ham who offered "answers" to the "Bible's critics." As long as they were on the job, I could rest easy knowing that the historicity of the biblical creation story could be defended intellectually.

Armed with the "answers" I needed, I was not afraid to debate those who tried to defend evolution. I was like a bulldog. I didn't back down for anybody or anything. We were talking about God's Word! One of my Catholic friends at school, Donna Pope (a great name for a Catholic), tried to convince me that Christians could accept evolution and still regard the creation story as inspired by God. She said that the two could be reconciled. I just couldn't accept that, and we argued about it many times throughout our senior year of high school.

College didn't pose much of a threat to my beliefs either. I attended a local state university, and since my two majors were physics and mathematics, I managed to all but avoid

the subject of evolution while an undergraduate. I didn't have to take any chemistry courses, and the one required biology course was titled "Man and His Environment" (before gender neutral language became commonplace). Like high school, whenever evolution was discussed, I just let the professor's words go in one ear and out the other.

Nevertheless, one college course impacted me like no other. I was in the honors section of the required junior-level English composition class, and it was taught by a professor who was a lecturer and practitioner of Zen Buddhism. We read *God and the New Physics* by Paul Davies and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn, among other things, and between the texts, the professor's comments, and class discussions, a lot of my presuppositions were challenged. I didn't change any of my beliefs, but now I wasn't so cocksure of them. In spite of my numerous disagreements with the professor, he patiently listened to my perspective, and he simply showed me how to do quality work without forcing his beliefs on me or anyone else. I began to see that the stereotypes I held weren't very accurate after all. Not everyone who rejects biblical literalism is duplicitous or has some kind of anti-Christian agenda.

It was during that semester I decided to follow the truth wherever that might lead — the truth about God, the world, and myself. It was a turning point in my life. Even though I had not yet changed any of my beliefs, my attitude toward my beliefs shifted dramatically. I have always enjoyed learning, and I had convinced myself that I was objective, even though that was not the case. This class made me realize that. As a result, I became increasingly open to having my beliefs challenged. I learned to value the *pursuit* of truth, not just my beliefs *about* the truth. However, I still resisted accepting evolution, because it was so central to my thinking. The thought of working through the implications was daunting.

The most viable idea that I took away from college was the value of truth itself. If I really had the faith I claimed, I should not be afraid to explore and scrutinize my beliefs. I decided to have a genuine faith, one that is intellectually honest, even if that entails changing my beliefs or being different from everyone else. When my time comes to stand before God in judgment, I want to know I have done my best to know and live by the truth.

Digging Up Old Bones

After working several years as an engineer, I left for seminary to pursue the call to ministry I felt. Even in a conservative environment, it didn't take long for my views on creation to be challenged once again. In my first semester I took Old Testament Intro, a course that examines the origins and context of the OT books. When I learned that the Pentateuch (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) was compiled from several sources and was not written by Moses, I became angry. I was not upset with the professor, for this information gave me my first glimpse into the hidden complexities of the Bible, and the Bible came alive to me in a new and interesting way. Rather, I was disgusted that I had spent my entire life in the church, going every time the doors were opened, and I had never heard anything remotely like this before. I was even more appalled to discover that this kind of information was at least one to two centuries old, and this was only the tip of the iceberg! I felt like my church and denomination had let me down.

During my time in seminary and the pastorate, I still held onto six-day creationism, but I grew increasingly tentative about it. On one hand, it was getting very difficult to regard the creation narratives (I learned that there are two in Gen. 1–2) as historical accounts. On the other hand, although many creationists had assured us that evidence would eventually be found to vindicate creationism and reveal evolution to be a hoax, that other shoe never dropped, in my

opinion. When I began my doctoral studies, I took up the issue again in my spare time and in researching a paper I wrote for a class. As I read arguments from both sides of the issue, I became increasingly convinced that while the evidence to support evolution was rapidly mounting, the creationist explanations were convoluted and contrived. The creationists seemed to be desperately grasping for straws. Eventually I lost faith in their explanations and now had to face the difficult task of working through the various implications of evolution.

Making Sense of It All

What does it mean that evolution is true? How does it affect our theology? Here are four key areas that it impacts.

First, and most obviously, evolution influences the way we view revelation. Biblical scholars tell us that the creation narratives in Genesis are adaptations of older creation myths that circulated in the ancient near east. We cannot view them as historical accounts, but the modifications the biblical authors made reflect their distinct beliefs about God, and these can certainly be regarded as revelatory. Besides, it is not obvious to what extent the ancient Jewish people viewed these narratives as historical or allegorical. Although Jesus mentions Abel in the gospels, we don't know whether he viewed Abel as a historic figure. Likewise, I am not convinced that viewing Adam as an archetype challenges the historicity of Christ as the second Adam.

Second, evolution shapes the way we view the origins of evil. Evolution shows that there was no pristine, Garden of Eden state corrupted by a literal fall. Rather, life evolved from its simplest form, and it is still evolving today. Each of us starts as a single cell, then we grow and develop into adulthood. We are born self-centered, only being aware of our own needs and

desires. However, we also have certain proclivities that give us the potential to feel and express love. Sociobiology is a vast field devoted to understanding these moral predispositions. Our tendency toward selfishness is inherited, not through a curse, but through biological and social factors. We are certainly creatures in need of divine forgiveness and transformation.

Third, moral accountability must be interpreted from an evolutionary perspective. Children gradually become morally accountable as their ability to reason develops and they better understand how their decisions affect others and themselves. Perhaps moral accountability starts with simple obedience, but it goes way beyond that, for even pets can be taught to obey. Rather, it entails the ability to discern good and evil, i.e., to weigh the potential benefits and harm and not just react according to stimulus and conditioned response. This illustrates another way a literal reading of the creation narratives is inadequate. How could God create two adults with developed reasoning without giving them false memories, thus influencing the result? Since we have evolved as a species, we must take responsibility for ourselves and aspire to be what God wants us to be with his help. The evolution of our higher reasoning enables us to move beyond impulse and instinct.

Finally, evolution affects the way we view divine providence. Granted, God's role in evolution can be depicted as an active craftsman, a general guiding presence, one who occasionally intervenes, or an observer. Nevertheless, the developmental nature of evolution suggests that God accomplishes his purposes incrementally, even over eons of time. This has implications for theodicy. Rather than wondering why specific bad things happen, we should simply accept the fact that God allows his creation to develop, the good alongside the evil. God's purposes will eventually be accomplished, and good will overcome evil through his grace.

Learning to Love Truth

My primary purpose is not to offer a compelling intellectual argument for evolution, because I think we are inclined to believe what we want, regardless of whether it is true. If we refuse to accept something emotionally, we won't be convinced by even the strongest evidence or arguments. We often go through the grieving process when facing a difficult truth. If we refuse to face the truth, we can become defensive and closed-minded, and this is personally stifling in many ways.

I want to emphasize the importance of being a lover of truth. John 8:32 is one of my favorite verses in the Bible, because truth is truly liberating and transformational when it is understood, embraced, and lived. Pursue truth, and let evidence speak for itself. It is not a coincidence or a conspiracy that over 99% of biologists accept evolution as scientific fact today. The evidence is overwhelming, and we should accept it for what it is. The truth may not always be the most palatable or pleasant at the moment, but in the grand scheme of things truth is far more important than the temporary pleasures we derive from self-deception. It is quite likely we will discover that the purposes of God are even broader and weightier than we had imagined.