



No conflict

Melvin Tinker

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Why Melvin Tinker thinks evangelicals can differ over their approach to creation

'It is impossible for a scientific discovery given by God to contradict a Word given by God. If therefore a scientific discovery, as distinct from scientific speculation, contradicts what we have believed by the Bible, it is not a question of error in God's Word, but of error in our way of interpreting it. Far from "defending" the Bible against scientific discovery, the Christian has a duty to welcome thankfully, as from the same Giver, whatever light each may throw upon the other. This is the "freedom" of a fully Christian devotion to the God of Truth.'^[1]

Objections notwithstanding, the fact is that within the international scientific community the Theory of Evolution is the universally accepted working paradigm for the origin and development of life. To attempt to downgrade it as nothing but a 'theory' achieves very little. Evolution, as distinct from evolutionism (which is an ideological parasite), is as religiously neutral as Dirac's unified field theory. If the theory is true (and the cumulative weight of evidence and the fruitfulness of the model are not to be dismissed lightly), then we would expect it to be compatible with biblical, evangelical belief. Many think this to be the case.^[2]

If God is the God of Truth, then the truth he has revealed in Scripture would not be at odds with the truth of science. It may be a case that we have adopted the wrong 'viewing distance' when considering a text (as happened with the medieval interpretation of Psalm 96 'proving' that

the earth did not move). Perhaps something like this is happening among some evangelicals today, the equivalent approach to Psalm 96 and Copernican theory is being adopted *viz a viz* Genesis 1-3 and evolution. This article proposes that 'theistic evolution' is a legitimate option for an evangelical to adopt and is not to be immediately ruled out of court as being 'unsound'; rather it provides the most coherent approach which does justice to both Scripture and science.

Cards on the table

The impression which has been given by recent articles in *Evangelicals Now* is that it is nigh impossible to be an evangelical and hold to the theory of evolution. Historically this has not been the case, nor, as we shall argue, is it so theologically. G.F. Wright (one of the original fundamentalists) said this: 'If only the evolutionists would incorporate into their system the sweetness of the Calvinistic doctrine of Divine Sovereignty, the church would make no objection to their speculations'.^[3] Similarly, his fellow fundamentalist R.A. Torrey said that it was possible 'to believe thoroughly in the infallibility of the Bible and still be an evolutionist of a certain type'.^[4] More recently Tim Keller has written, 'For the record I think God guided some kind of process of natural selection, and yet reject the concept of evolution as All-encompassing Theory'.^[5] That is, as an alternative world view – i.e. evolutionism. The men just mentioned can hardly be considered to be weak-minded liberal evangelicals selling the pass! I am a Calvinist who firmly holds to a 'no-risk' view of God's sovereignty ^[6] and can see how in principle this belief coheres with the evolutionary mechanism.

When would incompatibility arise?

There are two grounds on which evolution might have to be rejected by a believer in the biblical view of God as Creator^[7]: 1) Evolution might be necessarily incompatible with divine creation; and 2) Evolution might be contradictory to creation if the biblical texts unequivocally deny such a process.

In and of itself the mechanism of evolution leaves open the question of whether there is a God who initiates or sustains such a process. That information has to be obtained elsewhere.^[8]

Logically the process of evolution is distinct from the act of creation; they belong to different categories.

For example, the fact that a complete and sufficient description can be given (within purely scientific categories) for the way wheat is produced – utilising the process of photosynthesis, enzyme action and the like – does not mean that the petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day our daily bread', becomes redundant. God is the author of the whole show of creation, responsible for the action of everything in his gracious sovereignty. Creation is not just a past act, it is a present one.[9] We thus begin with the biblical view (which is what the early modern scientists did – such as Francis Bacon) of the faithful, sovereign God, which enables science to proceed on the basis of observational experience – you don't speculate what God must have done from a set of a priori beliefs (my reading of Genesis says evolution can't be so....) – you go and see for yourself. This is not bad faith, it is expressing humble faith, trust in the faithful God who is Truth and would not hoodwink us.

Other people's opinions

Let's think of another example. As Christians we believe in the Lord over all history.[10] This does not mean that we cannot accept a historical account of events from someone who is not a Christian. Certainly there may be particular interpretations of history (e.g. a Marxist reading) which we would take issue with, but it is perfectly reasonable for a historian qua historian to present a historical account of events which is scrutinised by his peers within the academy and for this to be acceptable and valid without any reference to God's working at all. For example, Andrew Roberts [11] has written a fascinating account of the workings of Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke and Marshall in securing victory in the West during World War Two and God is not mentioned once! I am not perturbed by that fact. I have no idea whether Andrew Roberts is a Christian or not, but I don't expect theological categories of thought or language to intrude into such a historical account. Perhaps if he were a Christian I might ask: 'Do you believe that God was at work in and through these men?' Which in many ways is a banal question demanding the answer: 'Of course! What else would a sovereign God be doing?' But I

would not think that such a historian is being inconsistent or buying into an 'atheist' view of history because God does not figure in his account. The point is: if we allow for God's concursive work in human history, 'working out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will',[12] then why not on the realm of natural history?

In principle, my strong Calvinistic beliefs actually cause me to expect a thoroughly scientific explanation of the origin and development of life, as I would expect, in principle, for a complete scientific explanation to be given of every part of God's creation. This does not mean we become reductionistic (e.g. man is 'nothing but' a naked ape), but complementarian, such that the scientific description is of a lower order of explanation but complementary to the higher order theological description and explanation (e.g. man may well be something like a naked ape in for certain respects, but he is much more – one who bears the image of the invisible God).

Biblical texts?

However, let us not lose sight of the second basis for the rejection of evolution, namely, it might be contradictory to creation if the biblical texts unequivocally deny such a process. The key word is unequivocally. Readers will have to go to the relevant books themselves to check this out, but I would argue that there is much merit in adopting a literary / cultural approach to the early chapters of Genesis which accommodates the findings of modern science, does justice to the texts themselves and allows fundamental doctrines to shine – creation *ex nihilo*, the uniqueness of man being made in God's image, man's historic rebellion in sin and the promise of a Saviour.[13]

Bad arguments

Unlikely bedfellows, Richard Dawkins and young-earth creationists, are guilty of the same logical fallacy – 'the fallacy of the excluded middle'. A gun is held to our heads and we are told we must choose – creation or evolution. But if by creation we mean, 'bringing-into-being-by-God' (and no Christian can believe otherwise) and not being brought into being by God in a specified 'young earthist kind of way' the choice is a false one. There is a third middle way which has been

excluded simply by the way the issue has been put. The third way is that of compatibilism – allowing the biblical story and the scientific story to be two distinct but complementary ways of describing the same phenomena. However, there is an asymmetry in the relationship, as we have seen. In terms of meaning and significance, the biblical account is higher as it answers the ‘why?’ and ‘who?’ questions – why are we here and to whom are we accountable as the One who made us and owns us?

My plea is that there is openness in debate on this issue, marked by Christian charity, and that in an over-reaction to the parasitic evolutionists of the Dawkins stripe, we do not de-evangelicalise those who have the right to be known as evangelicals.

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References:

- [1] D.M. Mackay, *The Open Mind and other essays*, ed. Melvin Tinker, (IVP, 1988), p.150.
- [2] E.g. R.J. Berry, *God and the Biologist: Personal Exploration of Science and Faith* (Apollos 1996); Ernest Lucas, *Can we Believe Genesis Today?*, (IVP, 2001); Michael Pool, *Creation or Evolution: a false antithesis?* (Latimer House, 1987); and more recently, D.R. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do we have to choose?* (Monarch, 2008).
- [3] See C.A. Russell, *Cross Currents* (IVP, 1985), p.163.
- [4] See Mark Noll, *Evangelical American Christianity: An Introduction* (Blackwells, 2001), p.171.
- [5] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton Press, 2008), p.94.
- [6] An excellent ‘no risk’ view of God’s providence is presented by Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP, 1993).
- [7] As argued by M.W. Pool in *Creation or Evolution: a false antithesis?* (Latimer House, 1987) p.15.

[8] Hebrews 1.1-3; Colossians 1.15-17, etc.

[9] John 5:17.

[10] Isaiah 10:5-11; 40:23; 41:2, etc.

[11] Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (Allen Lane, 2008).

[12] Ephesians 1:11.

[13] See Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word, 1987); E. Lucas, *Can we believe Genesis Today?* (IVP, 2001); David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (IVP, 1990).