



What you need to know about the evolution debate

Tony Watkins

Writing anything on creation and evolution feels akin to sticking a sign on my back reading, 'Kick me!' I'm exposing myself to attack from one side or another – or maybe from every side! What drives me to stick my head above the parapet is a couple of strong convictions. First, I am absolutely convinced that Christians who disagree should be discussing the issues in a loving, gentle, humble way rather than attacking each other. It seems to me that attacking each other is becoming more common as the debate becomes more polarised. My second conviction is that by focusing on controversy, we are missing significant opportunities to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ in a world which desperately needs to hear it.

So here are ten things you need to know about the creation / evolution debate. Wherever you're coming from on this issue, I would encourage you not to instantly write off things you disagree with, but give them some more thought. If we're ever going to sort this issue out we have to approach the questions more open-mindedly than perhaps we've ever done before.

1. Not all Bible-believing Christians see things in the same way

Christians who love the Bible and believe it to be God's inspired, truthful and authoritative Word disagree about the timescales of creation. That in itself should make us stop and think.

At one end of the spectrum are people who believe that Creation happened exactly as Genesis 1 appears to describe: God created the

world in six literal days, and rested on the seventh. These people are *Young Earth Special Creationists*. They are 'young earthers' because if you do some sums based on the ages of people in the Bible, reigns of kings and so on, you can arrive at an age for the earth of a few thousand years. In the 1600s, Archbishop Ussher gave a date for creation of 4004 BC but many young earthers would now simply say it was a few thousand years ago. They believe in special creation – that is, God acted in very direct, immediate ways to bring about creation.

As we move along the spectrum we find *Old Earth Special Creationists*. They accept the scientific evidence for an old universe and an old earth, but not for biological evolution. There's quite a range of views among old earthers. Some people see a vast time gap between verses 2 and 3 of Genesis 1 and believe that, although the earth is a few billion years old, the rest of creation took place in six days. Others point out that Psalm 90:4 indicates that God's view of the passage of time is not like ours. So perhaps each day represents an age – in which case there is no difficulty in accepting much of the scientific evidence concerning the age of the earth, fossils etc. The order in Genesis 1 is very similar to that in the fossil record. Many people adopting this position would think in terms of six acts of special creation separated by immense periods of time.

Others, however, like Derek Kidner in his Tyndale Commentary on Genesis, see the 'days = ages' interpretation of Genesis 1 as entirely consistent with the generally accepted scientific view of evolution by natural selection. These people are often known as *Theistic Evolutionists* because they believe that God is behind the process of evolution. A better term would be *Evolutionary Creationists* or *Process Creationists* – they still believe that God is the Creator. Many process creationists see the ordering of days as a literary structure rather than as a reflection of the timeline of creation. They point to the way the first three days describe three stages of separation (light from dark, water above from water below, land from sea), leading to various environments, whereas the next three days describe a filling, or the creation of things to inhabit the environments (lights, birds and fish, land animals and humans).

It is important to remember that all these people

believe that God is the Creator because they all believe Genesis 1. The issue is not whether or not they believe the Bible, but what they believe is the right way of interpreting part of it. It is vital that we have respect and humility towards those with whom we disagree.

2. Evangelicals have not always tended to hold to a six literal day model

A common idea is that evangelical Christians have always tended to believe in a six-day creation, and that this was the traditional view of the church until the time of Darwin. In fact, Christians have always had a range of opinions on how to understand the time frame within Genesis 1, and, more recently, have had differing attitudes towards evolutionary theory.

Before the 18th century, of course, nobody had given any thought to how you could discover the age of the earth in any way other than by calculations from the Bible, so the majority of people had no cause to question figures like those of Ussher. Even so, the argument for the days of Genesis 1 not being literal days goes back a lot further. In AD 391 Augustine wrote a commentary on Genesis in which he said that the days of creation were not literal days but were a way for the writer to talk about the whole of creation. He was insistent that, 'No Christian would dare say that the narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense.'

The response to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, was not divided on Christian / non-Christian lines, as we often assume. Actually Darwin was initially opposed by scientists as well as church people, and he was supported by other Christians, as well as by other scientists. In fact, historian James Moore states that, 'With few exceptions the leading Christian thinkers in Great Britain and America came to terms quite readily with Darwinism and evolution' (*The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p.92). This included people like B.B. Warfield, one of the signatories to the document defining the *Fundamentals of the Christian faith*. Almost all American Protestant zoologists and botanists accepted some form of evolution within a decade or so of the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. Young earth creationism in its modern sense didn't take off until the 1920s,

and then again in the latter decades of the last century.

3. This issue creates real tensions for some people – especially students

Many young people feel torn during their education – especially further education – because they assume that the evolutionary view of origins they're learning is not compatible with their Christian faith. This is a key reason for why Ken Ham, executive director of *Answers in Genesis*, attacks evolution so vehemently. He says: 'People who go to university and college know that if evolution is true in the sense that chance, random processes formed man and he just evolved, then the Bible's account of history is not true. Then they ... say, "Well, we're not going to trust the message of morality and salvation from the Bible".'

It is an important pastoral issue, but Ernest Lucas, tutor in biblical studies at Bristol Baptist College, has a very different perspective on where the problem lies. He says: 'I've seen too many students who've had their faith wrecked when they've gone to university because they've come from a very narrow background and people have said to them, "Unless you toe this line, you're not truly a Christian." Then when they have found that the scientific evidence they're faced with means they cannot toe that line, they can often flip over into a rebellion against their background and that often means a rebellion against God and Christianity. That's tragic.' For Ernest, who has PhDs in biochemistry and Old Testament studies, the solution is to help young people to understand what the early chapters of Genesis really are saying – and what they're not.

4. Believing in evolution can stop people taking the Bible seriously

Young earth creationists insist with Ken Ham that, "Evolution is one of the big stumbling blocks to people today being receptive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

"The gospel itself is founded on the historicity of the events in Genesis," says Paul Garner of *British Creation Ministries*. "And if Genesis 1–11 is not historical, if Adam was not a real person, and if there was not a real fall and a real curse, then the

whole of the Gospel no longer makes sense.” Young earthers see evolution as inextricably linked with atheism. But it’s not simply about intellectual belief, because beliefs shape actions. For some people, including Ham, belief in evolution is undermining the moral foundations of a once Christian society.

Young earthers see evolutionary creationists as having compromised themselves. David Tyler, secretary of the *British Creation Society* says, “As Christians they do claim to base their thinking on the Bible and yet, whenever one does get close to the Bible, people pull away and I find them very fuzzy about human death being the consequence of sin ... [and] about the historicity of Adam and Eve. I think the modern theistic evolutionists have abandoned trying to get concordance between the Bible and science.”

John Bryant, chairman of *Christians in Science*, responds: “I think that’s an outrageous statement ... We’re not throwing the Bible out, we’re saying you need to read it as a set of books, not as one particular kind of literature. What it needs to tell us is that we are God’s creation and we’re made for relationship with him, and we have a special place in the world. And Genesis does that extremely well. I often ask, ‘Which version of the creation are you reading literally?’ Because there are two, and if you try to dissect them stylistically the second text is older than the first one.”

5. Believing in a literal six-day creation can stop people taking the Bible seriously

John Bryant continues, ‘I’ve never been an aggressive “evolutionist” but I’m very distressed to see the whole thing being rubbished now, because I’ve seen the effect that this will have on me attempting to share my faith with students, all of whom are biologists.’ The former director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, Professor Sir Ghilleain ‘Iain’ Prance echoes this when he says, ‘I think it’s not doing us any good to ignore the scientific facts. It’s not helping Christianity that people are denying what we can see are facts, or are trying to distort the facts.’

Bob White, professor of Earth Sciences at Cambridge University, is far from alone in thinking that the much-heralded *Intelligent Design* (ID) Movement is also deeply flawed: ‘It’s *God of the*

Gaps by another route. They don’t have a robust view of God’s actions in the world, so there are two dangers. One is that they say, “This thing is so complicated that it must have been created and can’t have evolved”, and that suggests that God only acts at that point in the world and he doesn’t act in all the other things. That’s the implication and it’s bad theology. It’s also a bad way of approaching things because what happens if one day somebody does explain it – where has God gone?’

Denis Alexander, head of the Molecular Immunology Programme at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, is not sure that Intelligent Design arguments are always very useful in bringing people to faith: ‘You don’t end up with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; you end up with a heavenly engineer who fiddles around with bits and bobs which didn’t work out by some other mechanism. The worry I have about the ID movement is it gets people as far as Antony Flew perhaps. Flew [for years a prominent atheist philosopher] has been persuaded by the ID argument and has become a Deist (belief in a supreme being). I don’t know if it’s such a great advantage. If it’s a pathway to theism then maybe it is. But it’s really not necessarily such a good thing that people start believing only in a heavenly engineer because it might even prevent them coming to know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I’m not sure that the design argument, even if it’s completely valid, really gets you theologically where you’d like people to go.’

6. Science and the Bible have different agendas, and humans aren’t perfect

One of the reasons for the apparent conflict between science and faith is that we have forgotten that science and theology have different approaches. Science is limited to describing the physical space-time world of matter and energy. It can do no more than understand how things work. Ultimately it can make no comment about why. The Bible can and does comment on the why. It is not concerned primarily about mechanisms, but about meanings. These are complementary, not conflicting, levels of talking about reality. As creator and sustainer of the universe, God stands behind all that we see around us – the laws of physics are his laws.

Science has its ideas about how life came into existence. But it cannot answer some of the most fundamental questions of life: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? These are the kind of questions the Bible is interested in and Genesis introduces the answers. We will miss the point of these wonderful early chapters of Genesis if we come to them with a scientific agenda rather than a theological one. Ernest Lucas says it can only lead to trouble: 'I think that attempts to read scientific information out of it are misconceived and lead to all sorts of problems with distorting it.'

The Bible's main purpose is to reveal God to us and show us how to respond to him, not to satisfy our scientific curiosity. It wasn't written as a science text book and we shouldn't treat it as one. The questions we can and should ask are about bigger issues: 'What is the nature of the world around us?' 'What does it mean to be a human being; what are my responsibilities?' and 'What has gone wrong with our world?'

7. There are good reasons for believing in *Special Creation*

Special Creationists take the Bible as their fundamental point of reference. Paul Garner says, 'I always start with the Scriptures. The Bible is the foundational truth on which I base all of my thinking in science, and I think that's where we need to begin. First and foremost, it's what the Bible reveals about the history of the earth and the universe.' Ken Ham agrees saying, 'No apparent, perceived, or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record.'

But *Special Creationists* also point to scientific evidence to support their case. For Paul Garner evidence for Intelligent Design is key: 'I think when you look at, for example, DNA, it is a highly ordered code and we can recognise the hallmarks of intelligence. There's information encoded in DNA. And information, from all of our scientific observations, is always a product of mind and intelligence.' Another key aspect of Intelligent Design is the 'irreducible complexity' of biological systems. David Tyler adds that 'there are limits to [biological] variation. This runs right across the evolutionary position which is that there are no limits. But it seems to me that the data of science

points to limits, and that's where we would identify natural boundaries between groups of animals.'

There are some notable scientists who are *Special Creationists*, including Andy McIntosh, Professor of thermodynamics at Leeds University; Edgar Andrews, Professor of materials science at the University of London; David Back, Professor of pharmacology and therapeutics at Liverpool; and Professor Terry Hamblin, consultant haematologist at Southampton. Paul Garner, a Fellow of the Geological Society, says that, 'Worldwide there are thousands of scientists at PhD level who would identify with this position, and they cover all field of science – biology and geology, even astronomy and cosmology. I think it's a growing movement'

David Tyler also gives three reasons for believing in *Young Earth Special Creation* from the non-living world: 'I would point first of all to the uniqueness of the earth ... it is something that points to design and a creator. Secondly, the design of the elements themselves to support life, the way that the building blocks of matter fit together to support life. And the third area is the fine tuning of fundamental constants. They are too finely tuned to be chance. They are designed for life.'

However, these latter reasons are actually shared by Christians right across the spectrum – they support belief in a Creator, not necessarily a particular view of creation.

8. There are good reasons for believing in *Process Creation*

Denis Alexander says there is an important issue of integrity: 'The task of scientists who are Christians is to describe what God has done in creation, and, as part of their worship, to tell the truth about God's creation. Since Darwinian evolution is the best explanation we have at the moment for the origins of biological diversity, as scientists we should say that. We should tell the truth to the best of our ability, always knowing that science is incomplete and there's always lots more to find out.'

For Ernest Lucas, studying the early chapters of Genesis within their historical context is crucial: 'The opening chapters of Genesis are concerned primarily with teaching us theological truth about

God, the nature of God, the nature of the world, our role in the world and so on ... I came to that reading of Genesis not from the scientific side but from the years I spent studying ancient near eastern culture and religion.' Similarly, Derek Kidner in his Tyndale Commentary, David Atkinson in the Bible Speaks Today commentary on Genesis 1-11, Gordon Wenham in his Word Biblical Commentary on Genesis 1-15, and French theologian Henri Blocher (among others) reject a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 on the basis of the texts themselves, not on the basis of science.

They still recognise essential historical truths, though. Denis Alexander is clear that God endowed Adam and Eve with his Spirit, and that the Fall was a historical event: 'It seems to me a Fall implies ethical and moral obligations which is difficult to see could have happened without a command from God. That's what God gave in the garden of Eden, he gave specific commands not to do certain things and they disobeyed his commands.'

Most *Process Creationists* agree with special creationists that there can be no explanation for the origin of life or of the human spirit without God. Iain Prance, one of the world's most eminent botanists, says, 'I'm a believer in evolution because obviously as a scientist who's observing life, I see that it has developed gradually. But there are two things that I think one cannot explain in science. One is the actual beginning of life. No-one's been able to recreate life as such. They've taken bits of what already is life and made other organisms, but they haven't really started it off from the beginning. And the other thing that is certainly true is that at some stage God used a particular organism to give a soul to and created man in his image.'

There are many other notable scientists – world leaders in their fields – who are evolutionary creationists. These include people like Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project; Sir John Houghton FRS, former Director General of the Meteorological Office; Prof. Bob White FRS, Professor of Earth Sciences at Cambridge University; and Malcolm Jeeves, Honorary Research Professor of Psychology, University of St Andrews.

9. Everyone has to live with some tough – maybe unanswerable – questions

For a long time I've suspected that the positions people adopt in this debate have as much to do with the questions we're prepared to live with as with the things we're certain of. This is because many of the issues in creation and evolution are so difficult to completely pin down, and the subject as a whole is too vast for any of us to master every aspect.

For Denis Alexander, 'The biggest challenge is the question of theodicy and how a loving God who loves us and his creation would choose to bring about biological diversity, including humankind, by what seems to us a long and difficult process which involves the extinction of more than 99% of all the species and an awful lot of death and suffering along the way.' That's not a question which only faces the evolutionary creationist though. The special creationist has to contend with the fact that God has still allowed 99% of all species to die, though in their schema it was due to the flood.

John Bryant, on the other hand, doesn't see species extinction as necessarily a problem: 'Is there anything cruel for an individual creature if its species becomes extinct? I can't see that there is ... I don't see extinction as a problem that makes God cruel; it's just part of the changing and evolving structure of the universe. There's something very sentimental about people's worrying about it. I would, though, put a very different light on extinctions which have been caused by human activity.'

Death is a tricky question for both ends of the spectrum. What does it mean when God tells Adam that, 'in the day that you eat of [the fruit] you shall surely die' (Genesis 2:17, ESV) when he clearly doesn't? The evolutionary creationist says that God's words refer only to spiritual death – a world without death before the Fall would have been unsustainable as bacteria would rapidly have taken over. The special creationist will agree that Adam does immediately die spiritually, but insists that physical death entered also the world at that point.

Some aspects of this debate will just go on and on until we reach the new heavens and new earth

and we just have to live with it.

10. Controversy means we often miss the main points of Genesis 1–3

The tragedy is that this debate divides Christians and alienates non-Christians. But the issue of human origins raises questions of profound significance and the world desperately needs to hear a Christian perspective.

The real conflict is between Christians who believe in a Creator, and atheists who go beyond evolution as a biological mechanism and turn it into a worldview – evolutionism. According to evolutionism, humans are here by chance and have only one purpose – to pass on their DNA. Richard Dawkins says, 'It is every living object's sole reason for living.'

Most people feel that there must be more to life than this. But science cannot come up with any other answers – it's about mechanisms not significance. The beginning of Genesis, however, introduces the most transforming set of answers the world has ever heard. These are the chapters that first tell us about God, our world, human nature and our fundamental problem. People need to hear these particular answers – but they won't while all Christians do is squabble over the mechanics and timescales of creation.

We need to understand clearly what the early chapters of Genesis are primarily about. As we've seen already, it is a mistake to approach them looking for scientific answers – it couldn't possibly be what the writer and first readers understood them to be teaching. Those who have extensively studied the creation accounts in their historical and literary contexts insist that their primary function theological: to give God's people a right view of God, the world and humanity, in contrast to the false views of surrounding pagan nations in the Ancient Near East.

Genesis 1–3 teach us six key things everyone needs to understand:

1. *God is the creator of everything.* There is a God, and absolutely everything (the heavens and the earth) owes its existence solely to God's will. The universe didn't create itself and it didn't appear by chance.

2. *There is only one God.* We're unlikely to be tempted into sun or moon worship, but we may look to more contemporary idols like wealth, science, sport, relationships, etc. Nothing within creation is fit to usurp the rightful place of the Creator to whom we owe our life moment by moment.

3. *The world reflects its creator.* The world is orderly (and therefore understandable by rational human beings) and beautiful as well as functional (Genesis 2:9). Paul tells that creation shows us enough about God that there's no excuse for anyone not to believe in him (Romans 1:20).

4. *God is the law-giver.* The universe obeys God. He gave us the responsibility of being stewards of the earth. All created things have a divinely appointed role, and they will only fulfil that role if they obey God's instructions.

5. *Human beings are God's image bearers.* Genesis shows who we really are. The question of what it means to be human is one of the most fundamental there is. But humanity in our postmodern, secularised world is suffering an identity crisis – people are uncertain about what being human means. Atheist scientists deny that we have any purpose beyond passing on our DNA. We are an accident of history. When we die, we rot. There is nothing more. No life has any real value. And we wonder why so many people have a low self-image? Genesis challenges these assumptions and claims we are God's image bearers – the crowning glory of creation. We are like God – even after the Fall, despite all the corruption and wickedness that pervades us. Being made in God's image includes our self-consciousness, our creativity and aesthetic awareness, our moral responsibility and our relational dimension. But over all these is our awareness of the transcendent – our spirituality – because we were made for a relationship with God.

6. *Human beings are rebels against God.* Genesis 3 tells the tragic story of how everything changed. All these aspects of the image of God are still true of us, but our rebellion has demeaned and warped every one of them. So we live in a world of alienation – from God, each other, our environment and even ourselves. We live in a world of fear and shame and lies. We hide from God and from each other. We are under God's judgment. Incredibly, God still cares for his image bearers, and we see the first sign of God's grace as he seeks out the newly fallen couple – 'Where

are you?' (Genesis 3:9) – and the first hint that God will sort this mess out – one will come to crush the Tempter's head (Genesis 3:15). The rest of the Bible is the unfolding story of God's judgment and grace until, finally, we see a stunning picture of redeemed people back in relationship with God in new heavens and a new earth.

The big issues in Genesis 1 are not scientific. How much does it really matter if creation was a quick miracle or a slow one? The questions which Genesis 1–3 addresses are much more profound and important. We see there a God of power and creativity and grace. We see what sort of a world we live in. We see what it really means to be human and we see our need for a saviour. That's what the world needs to hear.

For further reading

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