

The Narrow Lutheran Middle Road For Creation

Mark Bergemann, January 2016 (minor update April 7, 2016)

For thousands of years philosophers and religious leaders from various cultures have realized many of the positions they support are centered between two extremes. They found a harmony, mean, or middle way. Supporters of this idea of a central truth between two extremes include Greeks such as Aristotle, Chinese such as Confucius, Buddhists, and Christians. Today the term “middle-of-the-road” is widely used to describe centrist political positions and even moderate popular music.

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) authors have also spoken of middle road positions. A 2003 article in our seminary’s theological journal states,

The Lutheran church is mostly alone within Christendom in its proper understanding of the sacraments and their use. That is evident from Scripture, our Confession, and the confessions of others. Two errors are treated in this article, one of which is typically Protestant in nature, the other of which is typically Roman Catholic in nature. Between these two errors runs the narrow Lutheran middle road.¹

A very popular book in our circles is “The Narrow Lutheran Middle –Following the Scriptural Road,” where Deutschlander writes about several middle roads including that between that between doubt and presumption.²

In middle road situations, each extreme (each ditch on the side of the road) is seen as emphasizing one truth while trampling on another truth. The devil, the world, and our flesh are constantly doing their best to take our focus away from our Savior and what he has done for us. They use every tactic in their arsenal. Sometimes they tempt us to think one Scriptural truth is so important, that it should be over-emphasized, even at the expense of another Scriptural truth. Satan often mixes some truth into his lies, making his lies more appealing to our sinful nature. In Genesis 3 we see Satan tempting Eve, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat of any tree in the garden?’ ...You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” In Matthew 4 we read the account of Satan tempting Jesus with a mixture of truth and lies, “Throw yourself down” for God promises to protect you.

Road Named Creation

Christians who believe the creation and flood accounts (Genesis 1-11) travel a road named Creation. Most Christians today do not travel the Creation Road. Most Christians travel a road named Evolution, ignoring so much of God’s Word and believing that God used evolution to create. Christians traveling the Evolution Road have elevated their human reason high above God’s Word. But Christians following the Evolution Road are not the only ones who are led astray by their human reason. We are all tempted to question God. Even those of us on the Creation Road can be seduced by our reason.

¹ Peter M. Prange, “Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 100:4 (Fall 2003), 282.

² Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle –Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

From Scripture we are certain that thousands of years ago God created everything in six days: Space, time, matter, angels, every kind of plant, every kind of animal, and our first parents (Adam and Eve). Death entered the world as a consequence of Adam's rebellion against God. God destroyed all humans and animals in a global flood. Only the animals and eight humans on Noah's Ark survived. Land animals, birds, and people alive today descended from the people and animals on that ark.

Evolution denies these truths. Evolution claims that people descended from bacteria-like creatures during 2.5 billion years of death and suffering. Evolution attacks the Gospel and the need for a Savior. Evolution denies the doctrines of sin, the law, and death.³ Evolution claims there is no creator god. Evolution has shipwrecked the faith of many.

How should Christians respond to the attacks of evolution? How should we defend the faith? One's answer will depend on their understanding of the place of reason in defending the faith.

The Narrow Lutheran Middle Road for Creation

There is a narrow Lutheran⁴ middle road regarding Creation. Let's travel that narrow road while not falling into the ditches on either side. The ditch on one side incorrectly sees arguments from reason as able to aid in creating or sustaining faith. The ditch on the other side incorrectly sees no place at all for arguments from reason in our apologetic (in our defense of the faith).⁵

Our human reason enables us to understand what God tells us in Scripture (Acts 17:2-3, Luke 24:26-27), but our reason is also an enemy of faith. See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Proverbs 3:5, and Matthew 11:25. When the disciples asked Jesus "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus pointed to the faith of a little child as an excellent example of humble faith. (Matt 18:1-4 HCSB).

Traveling the Middle Road

First we consider the Narrow Lutheran Middle Road For Creation, before studying the ditches on either side.

Our human reason should never be used to sit in judgment over the Scriptures, nor to invent doctrine. It must submit to the Word of God (the Scriptures) and be an obedient captive to Jesus Christ. Trying to explain God's ways apart from Scripture can easily lead to false teaching.⁶

Reason is completely inadequate when used to defend the Christian faith. Nowhere does Scripture ascribe such power to reason. To the contrary, God tells us in 1 Corinthians that the words of human wisdom are empty of power, that the unbeliever cannot know God or understand spiritual matters, that the wisdom of this world, human wisdom, finds God and his plan of salvation to be

³ Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World – A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), 158-161.

⁴ This article uses the word "Lutheran" to denote those Lutherans who accept the Lutheran Confessions as correctly reflecting Scriptural truth. Such Lutherans are referred to as "Confessional Lutherans" and are a minority of Lutherans in the world today.

⁵ Quoted with revision from: Mark Bergemann, "WELS Schools Must Teach Evolution," *Issues In Lutheran Education Blog*, posted Sep 1, 2015. <http://blogs.mlc-wels.edu/wels-educator/2015/09/01/wels-schools-must-teach-evolution/> (accessed Jan. 23, 2016)

⁶ This and subsequent paragraphs are quoted with slight revision from: Mark Bergemann, "The Place of Reason in Defending the Christian Faith – with ministry ideas regarding creation/evolution," *LSI Journal* (2012). www.LutheranScience.org/2012reason accessed Jan. 23, 2016.

foolishness. Rational arguments should never be used in an attempt to prove any article of faith, such as Creation. The power to turn hearts and minds to God and his teachings is found only in the Gospel as found in Word and Sacrament.⁷

Scripture is the very Word of God and as such is self-authenticating. Scripture itself is the best defense of Scripture, and the best defense of our faith. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (HCSB) we read: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” While in the desert, Jesus used Scripture three times in his apologetic with Satan: “It is written.” (Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13).

Use of Reason in Ministry to Christians

God has chosen to strengthen and grow our faith only through the Gospel in Word and sacrament. However, Scripture shows that arguments from reason can help believers better understand spiritual truths and see the logical inconsistencies that are often apparent in unbelief. In places like 1 Corinthians chapters 9 and 15, Paul uses arguments from reason when addressing believers.

Use of Reason in Witnessing to Unbelievers

The power to turn hearts and minds to God and his teaching is solely in the Gospel as found in Word and Sacraments. Arguments from reason do not in any way increase the effectiveness of the Gospel in bringing souls to faith. Even so, Jesus repeatedly used arguments from reason to silence unbelievers (Matthew 12:9-14, 12:24-29, 21:23-27, 22:15-22; Luke 13:15-16). Peter and Paul sometimes preceded their Gospel message with arguments from reason (Acts 2:14-15; 14:15-17; 17:22,23,28). Rational arguments are of worth if they provide a point of contact with the unbeliever, giving opportunity to share the Gospel message. Reason may also be useful in silencing certain objections to the validity of Scripture, but reason and non-biblical evidence at best provide a short introduction or a point of contact. Presentation of Law and Gospel should not be delayed.

Many See No Need for a Savior

People who do not believe in a “Law Giver” imagine that each individual or society must decide for himself/itself what is right and what is wrong. Individuals who have no understanding of sin cannot understand how they can be separated from God by sin. By planting doubt about evolution, and by appealing to their natural knowledge of God, we may help them to see their own sin (Law) and their need for a Savior, thus preparing them to listen to the Gospel. Even atheists have a natural knowledge of God, but they suppress that knowledge (Romans 1:18-32).⁸

Evolution Is a Stumbling Block for Many

Evolution leads many to ignore the Gospel message. It encourages the thinking that a belief in any god was for ignorant people in the unscientific past, not for thinking people today. Questioning the assumptions of evolution in your witness may be useful for silencing objections to the validity of

⁷ Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:21: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” Cf. also 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Cf. also Romans 10:17: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

⁸ This and the following paragraph are quoted with slight revision from: Mark Bergemann, “Witnessing in a World Where Evolution Claims ‘There Is No God,’” LSI Journal (2015) www.LutheranScience.org/2015witness accessed Jan. 23, 2016.

Scripture. Rational arguments in and of themselves are worthless for bringing an unbeliever to saving faith, but are of worth if they provide an opportunity to share the Gospel message.

Lutherans Write About Using Arguments from Reason

In their Genesis commentary, Lawrenz and Jeske repeatedly use arguments from reason to help believers better understand spiritual truths. Regarding the flood they write several hundred words detailing the number of animals which may have been on Noah's ark, and how all the animals would fit into the ark. Then they explain why they presented this argument from reason:

The preceding paragraphs are not an attempt to prove in a lawyer-like way the truthfulness of the Genesis flood account or to somehow make it more believable. Our purpose is to try and help the earnest Bible student visualize more clearly this important chapter of world history. Finally, what God says is true whether it seems reasonable or not.⁹

Siegbert Becker writes:

We have heard him [Luther] say, in regard to the natural knowledge of God, that there is no argument from reason that cannot be overthrown by another argument from reason. While Luther believed it was ridiculous and downright blasphemous to presume to defend Scripture with rational argumentation, yet he also believed it was perfectly proper to point out the logical weakness in the attacks made on Scripture whenever the opportunity to do so presented itself. In his controversies with his adversaries he says a number of times, "This reason itself is forced to admit." It is evident that Luther did not place a great deal of confidence in such a procedure, but there is scarcely an opponent against whom he did not use this approach.¹⁰

Ehlke warns us not to err either by depending on reasonable argumentation in order to convert the unbeliever, nor by rejecting all use of reasonable argumentation out of hand:

Apologetics – the defense of the Christian faith – is a difficult subject to treat. Most writers on the topic fall into one of two errors. Some apologists seem to think they can argue and reason people into Christianity. The Bible however, states that a saving faith in Jesus Christ is a supernatural gift from God the Holy Spirit. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). This gift comes as the Spirit uses the Bible to bring people to know and believe in Jesus. On the other hand, many Christians feel that any appeal to historical evidences and logical arguments is improper. They look at it as a denial of God's ability to convert. Yet, as Mr. Quist shows, the Bible itself makes frequent use of such appeals.¹¹

The Ditch Where Reason Aids Faith

Most Christians traveling the Creation Road correctly see evolution as a grave danger to the faith. They correctly desire to defend the faith from the attacks of evolution. Sadly, many of these same Christians seem unsatisfied with the powerful offensive and defensive weapons God provides. They heed the siren

⁹ Carl J. Lawrence and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004) 253.

¹⁰ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God – The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 176 (page 169 in 2012 printing).

¹¹ Roland Cap Ehlke, in his preface to Allen Quist's *The Marks of the Nail: A Survey of the Evidence for Christianity* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), v.

call to use human reason in addition to or even in place of the weapons God provides. These Christians have fallen into a ditch on the side of the Creation Road, the Ditch Where Reason Aids Faith.

The Ditch Where Reason Aids Faith emphasizes the truth: Nature testifies that God is almighty and wise (Rom 1:18-20). This ditch tramples on the truth: Only the Gospel can create and sustain faith.

The devil reminds us of God's words; "Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15 HCSB), and "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims the work of His hands," (Psalm 19:1 HCSB). The devil twists the meaning of these and other passages, tempting us to think we can use our human reason (our science) to create or sustain faith.

The thought that human reason has the ability to create or sustain faith is a very large ditch. Most non-Lutheran churches fall into this ditch and never come out. These churches incorrectly credit human reason with the ability to formulate or prove Christian teachings (doctrine), and to help in creating or strengthening faith. When Christians from these churches defend the doctrine of Creation, they often use their church's false ideas about human reason. They assign to science (human reason) unbiblical abilities.

The false view of reason held by authors in this ditch is often not readily apparent in their writings. This false doctrine most frequently manifests itself in what an author emphasizes, and in what he does not say. Eventually though, the false view of reason held by these authors becomes crystal clear in their writings, as we will see in the following quotes.

Speaking of 39 Christians who shared their personal stories, Douglas Sharp wrote, "Each one has had his faith in God strengthened by scientific evidence for creation."¹² This is wrong since we know from Scripture that human reason cannot strengthen faith. Only the Gospel can do so.

In 2013 the then chief executive officer of the Institute For Creation Research (ICR) states (*italics in original*),

If the facts of science do not confirm the words of Scripture, then God is not trustworthy. If we cannot trust that which we can test and evaluate, then why should we believe the words of God when he insists that we must repent and believe what he says about the unseen eternity? Science *does* confirm Scripture. God is trustworthy.¹³

Here, the leader of a conservative Christian apologetics organization asserts that our sin darkened human reason should sit in judgement on God, deciding if God is worthy of our faith. This arrogant attitude opposes God (2 Corinthians 10:5, Romans 9:20-21). This is the sin of Adam and Eve who questioned God's command, "Did God really say?" (Gen 3:1 HCSB) Our first parents used their reason and decided God was not telling the truth.

It is true that much of Scripture can be confirmed by our human reason, but our reason will always be able to find ways to question God. For thousands of years, believers had reason to doubt Scripture which told of a Hittite Empire. Secular history had completely forgotten about the ancient Hittite civilization. Then just over 100 years ago archeologists rediscovered the Hittite Empire, which to their amazement rivaled the power of ancient Egypt and Babylon. Today secular history knows nothing about the Hebrew slaves

¹² Douglas Sharp, introduction to *Persuaded By The Evidence – True Stories of Faith, Science, & the Power of a Creator* [Green Forest: Master Books, 2008] 15.

¹³ Henry M. Morris III, "The Paradox Of Faith," *Acts & Facts*, June 2013, 7.

in Egypt or their escape under Moses. Should we judge God not trustworthy based on history? Humanly speaking it is reasonable to think that the light we see from distant stars has been traveling toward earth for billions of years. This goes against Scripture, so creationists have proposed some possible scientific solutions, but those are no more than conjectures. Christians who want to test God using science may decide against God based on star light or some other reason.

Jason Lisle writes in *Answers In Genesis' (AIG) highly successful Answers Book series,*

The notion of “faith versus reason” is an example of a false dichotomy. Faith is not antagonistic to reason. On the contrary, biblical faith and reason go well together. The problem lies in the fact that many people have a misunderstanding of faith. Faith is not a belief in the absurd, nor is it a belief in something simply for the sake of believing it. Rather, faith is having confidence in something that we have not perceived with the senses. This is the biblical definition of faith, and follows from Hebrews 11:1. ...It is appropriate and biblical to have a good reason for our faith (1 Peter 3:15). Indeed, God encourages us to reason (Isaiah 1:18). The apostle Paul reasoned with those in the synagogue and those in the marketplace (Acts 17:17). According to the Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a “blind faith.” It is a faith that is rationally defensible. It is logical and self-consistent.¹⁴

Most non-Lutheran churches reject many Biblical teachings and replace them with unscriptural teachings which they find to be more logical and reasonable. For example, why do some people come to faith and others do not? God wants all people to be saved. God brings us to faith when we are spiritually dead so we contribute nothing to our coming to faith, yet those who do not come to faith are responsible for not coming to faith. This Biblical teaching is unreasonable to our sin darkened human minds. Lutherans accept such unreasonable teachings by faith. Many others use their human reason to make up unbiblical teachings. Some Christians incorrectly decide God has predestined some people to damnation. Other Christians incorrectly decide that those who come to faith did so by making a decision to do so. Another example: Many incorrectly decide that infants cannot have saving faith, since infants cannot reason as adults can reason. Some even decide that children are sinless until they reach some arbitrary age of accountability. A third example is Holy Communion, where many reject the very words of Jesus, “This is my body,” and “This is my blood.” They reason, “How can bread be Christ’s body and wine be his blood?” They decide Jesus meant to say that the bread and wine are *symbolic* of his body and blood.

Christians who have rejected Biblical teachings which they see as unreasonable can say with Jason Lisle that faith is “logical,” that “Biblical faith and reason go well together,” and that “Faith is not a belief in the absurd.” Lutherans cannot say these things. By faith Lutherans accept unreasonable and even seemingly absurd things which God reveals to us in Scripture. Lutherans confess with Lawrenz and Jeske, “What God says is true whether it seems reasonable or not.”¹⁵

Answers In Genesis (AIG) and the Institute For Creation Research (ICR) are two very large and respected Christian creation apologetic organizations. I subscribe to their periodicals and am very thankful for the scientific details they provide. They also provide clear gospel messages on a regular basis. That said, these are not Lutheran organizations, and their materials occasionally have messages which conflict with Scripture. That is very apparent from the AIG and ICR quotes above.

¹⁴ Jason Lisle, “Is The Christian Worldview Logical?” in *The New Answers Book 3*, ed. Ken Ham, online version May 5, 2014. <https://answersingenesis.org/logic/is-the-christian-worldview-logical/> (accessed Jan 23, 2016).

¹⁵ Lawrence, 253.

We all tend to slip toward the Ditch Where Reason Aids Faith. Sometimes we may slip all the way in, but God calls us back to the narrow middle road. Let us each keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and avoid this dangerous ditch. May God grant our prayer in this regard.

The Ditch With No Place for Reason

The Ditch With No Place For Reason is very tempting to those who correctly see the great danger of the ditch on the other side of the Creation Road. Some are so concerned that they move far away from the Ditch Where Reason Aids Faith, so far that they slip into the Ditch With No Place For Reason. This ditch emphasizes the truth that only the Gospel can create and sustain faith. It tramples on the truths that reason can be used to help believers better understand some spiritual truths, that reason can blunt some temptations, and that reason can sometimes be useful in providing a point of contact with the unbeliever giving opportunity to share the Gospel message.

I remember a bumper sticker slogan from my college days (1970s). That slogan is still a popular Christian sermon title: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." This can be taken as a wonderful confession of Biblical authority. Sadly, some take it to an extreme and are led into the Ditch With No Place For Reason. A song with this slogan as a title was popular among 70s Christian singing groups and versions are still being recorded today. The Heritage Singers made a music video where the song lyrics are a defense against evolution:

God said it and I believe it, And that settles it for me. Do you believe that God created you, Just like He told you in His Word? Do you believe that every world in space, Came to place by His own power?¹⁶

When a high school student asks how all the animals fit into Noah's Ark, because his teacher said that a million species could never fit, what should be our response? Some might say, "I do not know. God can do anything, even impossible things." Now this is a correct statement, but this child may live with constant, even daily evolutionary attacks on his faith. Why allow this child to face great temptation, when a few simple arguments from reason may greatly minimize that temptation? Lawrenz and Jeske provide one explanation of how all the animals could fit.¹⁷ The Lutheran Science Institute (LSI) article, *Creation-Evolution Q&A*, provides another.¹⁸ LSI exists for this very reason: To provide Creation/Evolution resources to our pastors, teachers, and laity.

Some Christians with whom I have spoken believe we should never use scientific arguments against evolution. We should not say that the world's continental sized sedimentary rock layers and the uncountable fossils they contain would be expected from a planet-wide flood. We should not point out the unreasonable assumptions used for dating rocks and bones. They claim that doing so would be trying to prove an article of faith with reason, that it would deny the Means Of Grace.

Christians making this claim are slipping into the Ditch With No Place For Reason. Such claims would leave the high school student to face the temptation of evolution when some arguments from reason may significantly diminish that temptation. Such claims would take away a sometimes useful introductory

¹⁶ Heritage Singers, 1976 www.youtube.com/watch?v=924MCB12MfA (accessed Jan 23, 2016)

¹⁷ Lawrenz, 252, 253.

¹⁸ Warren Krug, "Creation-Evolution Q&A," LSI Journal (April-July 2013), 15. www.LutheranScience.org/2013QA (accessed Jan 23, 2016)

conversation with unbelievers leading to presentation of the Gospel. Scripture encourages proper use of reason in defending the faith. Jesus and the Apostles modeled such use.

To defend themselves against such claims, Lawrenz and Jeske write,

The preceding paragraphs are not an attempt to prove in a lawyer-like way the truthfulness of the Genesis flood account or to somehow make it more believable. Our purpose is to try and help the earnest Bible student visualize more clearly this important chapter of world history.¹⁹

Ehlke calls such claims an “error” in “defense of the Christian faith,” and then he writes,

Many Christians feel that any appeal to historical evidences and logical arguments is improper. They look at it as a denial of God’s ability to convert. Yet, as Mr. Quist shows, the Bible itself makes frequent use of such appeals.²⁰

Other Christians who have also spoken with me, say that it is good for us to use scientific arguments against evolution as long as we are addressing believers and not unbelievers. And still other Christians say that pointing out the assumptions used by evolution is appropriate, but using other scientific arguments is not permissible. Are not all of these Christians slipping into the Ditch With No Place For Reason?

Lord, guide our travels down the road named Creation. Keep us in Your Word, so that we are prepared to avoid dangerous side ditches. Amen.

Mark Bergemann serves as president of the Lutheran Science Institute and as Evangelism Board chairman at Good Shepherd’s Evangelical Lutheran in West Allis WI. Mark is a retired electrical engineer and holds a BS from UW Milwaukee.

¹⁹ Lawrenz, 253.

²⁰ Ehlke, v.