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Essential Tools for the Creationist

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I have often asked myself: What is it that God's people really need with respect to creation and evolution issues? What tools do they need in order to help them evaluate things such as creation models and points of evolution from a Lutheran perspective?

It is absolutely imperative that Christians begin by making certain fundamental distinctions in order to enable them to assess creationist models and evolutionary viewpoints adequately. Therefore, what is of great help to God's people is not necessarily providing a new creation model, but rather — and more importantly — providing a way of evaluating such models using certain important distinctions.

Let's look at some of these important distinctions which are essential to our evaluation process.

A. Thoroughly and persistently distinguish between scientific **1** issues and theological **2** issues.

This distinction is necessary because the answer will determine the criteria by which assertions and conclusions are to be properly evaluated. For example, the criteria by which we evaluate scientific assertions and conclusions would include such questions as: Is the hypothesis testable, measurable, and repeatable? Is the phenomenon observable? Are the conclusions logical? On the other hand, the criterion by which we evaluate theological issues is the whole of Scripture, i.e., both the Old and New Testaments.

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1. This author defines "science" and "scientific" as they are commonly used, namely, that which is understood solely from observations and measurements of the natural, physical world and universe around us.
 2. There are differences in theological definitions among the different Christian denominations. This author takes the Lutheran Confessions, as expounded in the *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Concord* of 1580, as expressing the true doctrine of Scripture.
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When exposed to creation and evolution literature, Christians often find themselves asking only one question: "Is this right/wrong?" A better approach is to maintain the distinction between the scientific and the theological by asking two separate questions instead of only one:

1. "Is this conclusion theologically permissible?" and
2. "Is this conclusion scientifically logical and valid?"

This is a worthwhile practice because something that is theologically permissible may have more than one scientific opinion. It is even possible that two scientific opinions which are diametrically opposed to one another may both be theologically permissible.

As we make this distinction between science and theology, it is also necessary to ...

B. Clearly distinguish between what the Bible says and, especially, what the Bible does not say.

To clearly distinguish between what the Bible says and does not say is especially important because, on those issues where God has spoken, the matter is already settled for us. On those issues where God is silent we must allow for differences of opinion. On matters where God is silent, he leaves it to our Christian freedom **3** to explore and observe, and to use our human logic and reason, to come up with models which describe this universe. We realize that to a large extent such models are merely human conclusions and are not derived from God's inerrant Word. In scientific issues about which God's Word is silent, we not only allow for differences of opinion, but in Christian love we also understand that a Christian may in good conscience feel free to select any position that he/she sees fit.

3 . "Christian freedom," "Christian liberty," and "adiaphora" are related terms. For further explanation on the topic of Christian freedom, the reader is encouraged to look at the book of Galatians (especially 5:1-4) and Article X, Formula of Concord, in the *Book of Concord*.

A method which may be used to evaluate the existence or absence of Christian freedom in creation/evolution issues might consist of something like the following thought process:

- * First, ask, "Is this mentioned directly in the Scriptures?"
- * Then, "Is this implied by Scripture?"
- * Then, "Is this permissible by Scripture? If so, which parts are permissible by Scripture and which parts are not?"
- * Then, "Do the scientific conclusions have a theological basis that needs to be evaluated?" The answers to these first four questions will enable the Christian to evaluate whether or not Christian freedom is involved by emphasizing the specifics about which Scripture speaks, or does not speak, on a given issue.
- * Finally, evaluate scientific conclusions based upon the science itself.

Failure properly to make this distinction between what the Bible says and what it does not say may result in a number of undesirable deficiencies:

- * It may result in subtracting from or minimizing what the Bible states (sometimes referred to as "a half-truth").
- * It may result in adding to what the Bible says (e.g. "a truth-and-a-half").
- * It may result in a misapplication of the Scriptural doctrine of Christian freedom. This misapplication may unnecessarily bind the consciences of others with scientific conclusions as though they were theological conclusions. This binding might happen if someone takes a scientific question and presents what should be a scientific answer but rather passes it off as a theological answer. In so doing, he would be presenting the issue as theologically settled, whereas in reality the matter is open to Christian freedom of assessment and discernment.

This last point is certainly something to keep in mind as Christians apply the Gospel to their lives when creation and evolution issues are discussed. The latitude of Christian freedom to hold varying scientific conclusions about matters in which God's Word is silent is something that is often overlooked. This consideration needs to be emphasized regularly so that consciences are not unnecessarily bound in such matters when information is presented as though Scripture were speaking when, in fact, it is not.

Also understand that confessional Lutheranism offers some unique insights into the Scriptures --- insights which enable Christians to deal effectively with paradoxes between what God's Word says and our observations of the natural world. A Lutheran approach does not inherently seek to resolve everything

the Bible says with our observations of the natural world. An example familiar to many is the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper, where the communicant receives the body and blood of Christ in addition to the bread and wine. This sacramental presence is certain, not because our observation and logic are conclusive, but because the words of Christ are conclusive. It is because of confessional Lutheranism's unique approach — one which does not find the need completely to understand and rationalize everything that God's Word says, but simply accepts it by faith, and an approach which applies Christian freedom properly — that we Lutherans may potentially offer some new approaches to creationism.

How might we apply these first two principles? To begin, let's itemize a sampling of questions so that the reader may better understand the science/theology distinction involved. First, here are examples of theological questions which the Bible definitively answers:

- * Were Adam and Eve the first humans and special creations of God?
- * Was there only one creation event?
- * Did creation occur during six consecutive 24 hour periods of time, called "days"?
- * Did matter exist before creation?

Next are some examples of scientific questions which the Bible does not address:

- * What is the circumference of the earth?
- * How deep are the oceans?
- * What is the life cycle timeline of a star?
- * How far from earth is the Large Magellanic Cloud?
- * Are the sedimentary layers which we see in the Grand Canyon a result of the biblical Flood?
- * What is the measured age of the earth?

Now let's continue with a specific example by looking at this last question and analyzing it further. In keeping with these distinctions, we will note that "What is the measured age of the earth?" and "When was the earth created?" are two separate questions. The former is a scientific question requiring scientific measurement while the latter is a theological question requiring us to search the Scriptures.

Somewhat analogous to the treatment of the Lord's Supper, a confessional Lutheran would not necessarily need to have the same answer for both questions since, as was mentioned previously, we do not need to resolve everything the Bible says with our observations of the natural world. Our observations in nature may correlate well with the Scriptures but they don't have to. And if we discover that there is a lack of correlation between our observations in nature and the Bible, it is still the Bible which is more certain.

A rough approximation to "When was the earth created?" may be obtained by looking at the genealogies in the Bible. However, since internal evidence **4** reveals that the Bible's genealogies are incomplete and the time periods are not necessarily consecutive, we are not able to determine from the Bible the definitive date of creation any more specific than some "multi-thousands of years ago."

4. That is, evidence from Scripture itself. To the point, the Scriptures do not reveal the length of time which transpired between the lives of Noah's sons and Abram's father Terah. Most confessional Lutheran commentators allow for between a couple hundred years and a couple thousand. Supplying that information and adding up the years which the Bible does supply in the genealogies renders the universe to be between 6 and 10 thousand years old. But faithful Lutheran commentators leave this matter as an open question, unsolved by the Scriptures themselves.

We will also recognize that, while Genesis describes the condition of God's creation as being "very good," without sin and death, and fully functional, it stops short of providing many specifics. For example, the Bible neither gives us the distances to the stars nor radioactive decay parameters. Therefore, the question "What is the measured age of the earth?" is a scientific one, the assessment of which we have the Christian freedom to use our scientific tools.

From a confessional Lutheran perspective, an aged universe — that is, a scientifically measured age which may be orders of magnitude older than the elapsed time since God created the world **5** — may be theologically acceptable with respect to some aspects of creation as long as those aspects do not contradict what the Scriptures specifically say.

5. As described in Genesis 1 and 2

The late 20th century Lutheran theologian Siegbert W. Becker properly applies these distinctions when he comments:

The point that ought to be clear to all of us is that, entirely aside from the theory of evolution, we are taught by the biblical revelation of creation to expect to find a world that seems to be much older than it really is. If scientists would be truly scientific and say that the universe seems to be millions of years old, or even that it is millions of years old unless at some time in the past the whole natural world came into being in a supernatural, miraculous way, or that some catastrophic event or events speeded up certain processes of nature at one time or another, we would have no reason to quarrel with them; in fact, we would agree and say that the earth appears to be far more ancient than it is. We know that it is much younger than it seems to be only because God, who is the only one who really knows how all things came to be, has shared this secret with us in Genesis one and two. **6**

6. Siegbert Becker, "Evolution and Genesis," page 7. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essays, <http://www.wisessays.net/node/106> (accessed May 15, 2010). Dr. Becker was a professor of systematic theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin.

Another late 20th century Lutheran theologian, Carl Lawrenz, also cautions: "The creationist, in opposing the billions of years invoked by the evolutionist, needs to be conscientious in asserting nothing further concerning the age of the world on the basis of Scripture than is actually said there." **7**

7. Carl Lawrenz, "Darwin, Evolution, and Creation." Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 57:3 (July 1960), 223. Prof. Lawrenz was a professor of Old Testament theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and also served for many years as the school's president.

Finally, an additional tool which can be beneficial for the creationist when used consistently is to ...

C. Clearly and fully understand the definitions of terms which are being used.

The creationist needs to understand that there are often differences between the Scriptural definitions of words and definitions used in science or in colloquial speech. One example is the word "truth." There is a difference in the definition of "truth" between science and theology because the criteria for determining a "truth" are different. Scientific truth is, to a large extent, based on repeatable observation,

whereas in theology, truth is centered on the certainty of God's promises to us in Christ rather than what we observe and feel. The Christian is certain of God's revealed truths in Scripture not because of the Christian's own abilities to perceive and observe, but through faith worked by the Holy Spirit (2Co 2:5-13; Jn 8:31-32). Scripture is, therefore, the basis of absolute certainty for Christians.

An interesting side note illustrative for our purposes of pointing out the importance of distinctions and definitions was the much publicized court case concerning Intelligent Design (ID) (Kitzmiller v. Dover, 2005). In that case, the question before the state Supreme Court was not "Is Intelligent Design true?" Rather, the question was "Is Intelligent Design science?" Those are two completely different questions. The first would answer "What is objectively true and certain?" The second would be "Does ID meet the criteria which science has defined for itself?" **8**

8. "After a searching review of the record and applicable case law, we find that while ID arguments may be true, a proposition on which the Court takes no position, ID is not science" (p. 64); "To conclude and reiterate, we express no opinion on the ultimate veracity of ID as a supernatural explanation. However, we commend to the attention of those who are inclined to superficially consider ID to be a true "scientific" alternative to evolution without a true understanding of the concept the foregoing detailed analysis. It is our view that a reasonable, objective observer would, after reviewing both the voluminous record in this case, and our narrative, reach the inescapable conclusion that ID is an interesting theological argument, but that it is not science" (p. 89), in THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA, KITZMILLER v. DOVER AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, Case No. 04cv2688, MEMORANDUM OPINION, December 20, 2005, http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller_342.pdf (accessed May 15, 2010).

Second, science and theology define "truth" differently because the permanence of truth in the scientific realm is viewed differently than in the theological realm. In the Bible, we are assured that our God is unchanging (Ja 1:17) and that his words of truth are permanent (Jn 17:17; Mt 24:3).

On the other hand, in science there is no such thing as a "final truth" as the National Academy of Sciences points out when they define "scientific fact": "In science, an observation that has been repeatedly confirmed is for all practical purposes accepted as 'true.' Truth in science, however, is never final, and what is accepted as a fact today may be modified or even discarded tomorrow."**9** Also, "...the statements of science should never be accepted as "final truth." Instead, over time they generally form a sequence of increasingly more accurate statements. Nevertheless, in the case of heliocentricism as in evolution, the data are so convincing that the accuracy of the theory is no longer questioned in science."**10**

9. "Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences, Second Edition" (National Academy of Sciences, 1999): 3, <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/6024.html> (accessed May 14, 2010).

10. "Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science" (National Academy of Sciences, 1998): 30, <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/5787.html> (accessed May 14, 2010).

The University of California Museum of Paleontology also explains that "Science is based on the principle that any idea, no matter how widely accepted today, could be overturned tomorrow if the evidence warranted it." **11** "In science, ideas can never be completely proved or completely disproved. Instead, science accepts or rejects ideas based on supporting and refuting evidence, and may revise those conclusions if warranted by new evidence or perspectives."**12**

11. "Misconceptions about Science," Understanding Science, University of California Museum of Paleontology, <http://undsci.berkeley.edu/teaching/misconceptions.php#b2> (accessed May 14, 2010).
12. Ibid.
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They also note that "science is always a work in progress, and its conclusions are always tentative." This means that scientific conclusions are "not tentative **13** in the sense that they are temporary until the real answer comes along. Scientific conclusions are well founded in their factual content and thinking and are tentative only in the sense that all ideas are open to scrutiny. In science, the tentativeness of ideas such as the nature of atoms, cells, stars or the history of the Earth refers to the willingness of scientists to modify their ideas as new evidence appears."**14**

13. "Characteristics of Science," Understanding Science, University of California Museum of Paleontology. <http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evosite/nature/llcharacteristics.shtml> (accessed May 14, 2010).
14. Ibid.
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It is important that Christians neither overestimate nor underestimate this tentativeness. When you board a flight in Chicago bound for L.A., you are fairly certain that you will arrive at your destination on time and intact. This is due to a certain level of understanding about aerodynamics, metallurgy, structural forces, electronics and software. If you undergo a medical procedure, it is often the case that the medical professionals have a fair grasp of the risks and benefits involved, based upon a certain level of understanding about biochemistry, cellular biology and metabolic pathways.

I would not be employed as an engineer if science were not, to a large degree, reliable. On the other hand, it is the tentativeness in science due to incomplete knowledge, the uncertainty caused by how much one does not know and the misinterpretation of correlation instead of causation, that make an engineer constantly concerned about potential product field failures and recalls. It is not necessarily what you know that catches you unaware, it is what you don't know — and you never know what you don't know.

Scientific knowledge is often perceived by people who do not work directly in scientific fields as an impenetrable monolith of certainty. Rather, and more realistically, I have often represented scientific knowledge as a ball of varying porosity since the known and unknown are intermixed and outside of the ball there are an unknown amount of unknowns. There will always be some unknown variables, the existence of which are why scientists and engineers continue to be employed. There will always be an unknown number of scientific questions which have never been posed because not enough is known yet to ask those questions. In fact, if all the unknowns were to be answered, science would cease to exist since science thrives at the interface between the known and unknown in the physical world.

The primary reason why there is no "final truth" in science and why science is considered tentative is because science, by its very nature and definition, will always consist of an incomplete body of knowledge.

This even applies to so-called "creation science," that is, scientific evidence used to support Biblical creationism, and Christians would do well to remember to give appropriate qualifiers when presenting scientific evidence in creation models. Therefore it is of the utmost necessity that the reader keeps this incomplete and tentative nature of scientific conclusions in proper context — especially when applied to creation science issues. If this is not understood, it is my experience that our sinful nature¹⁵ will begin to take the scientific evidence which favors creation and substitute it for faith in God's Word, and, if the

science which was incomplete in the first place is later falsified, despair will prevail.

It is because science is always incomplete that it should always be a necessary goal of every confessional Lutheran creation model to lead the Christian into the following mindset: If there is scientific evidence in favor of creation and it correlates well with the Scriptural account, that's great! And if such evidence is later falsified, that's okay too, because in the end it really doesn't matter — the promises of God in Christ are certain. *LSI*

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