



Published 2014

The Place of Reason in Dealing With Evolution

by Dr. Bruce Holman

I am often asked how to respond to evolution by teachers, students, parents, and others who realize the great damage this heresy has done in our society.¹ By evolution they mean the whole idea, couched in scientific concepts, that everything has come to be the way it is by natural processes aside from the miraculous intervention of an almighty God. It includes the big bang theory, geologic theories of an old earth that disregard a world-wide flood, abiogenesis, and macro-evolution. These dreams oppose clear scripture, and challenge the reliability of the Bible.

1. This fact has been documented in countless publications. For specific damage to the young people of evangelical churches see: Ham, Ken et. Al. *Already Gone: Why your kids will quit church and what you can do to stop it.* (Green Forrest, AR, Masterbooks) 2010.

My short answer is to join the Lutheran Science Institute (LSI). We're committed to providing the tools to respond to questions of origins, and other challenges science poses to a Christian in today's society. We have for example published a summary of WELS thought on the subject of the place of reason in defending the faith.²

Mark Bergman, *The Place of Reason in Defending the Faith*, (Milwaukee, Lutheran Science Institute) 2012

The full answer ultimately involves individual situations, and finding a way for the gospel to be heard. But the question of whether and how to apply reason needs to be answered once and for all. Confusion over this point has made our response hesitant, weak, and largely ineffective. In this series of essays we:

- explain the principles for applying reason in the life of a Christian (Part I),**
- describe an appropriate apologetic method related to evolution (Part II).**

Reason has a bad reputation in Lutheran circles for dealing with challenges to our faith like those raised by evolution, and it shouldn't be so. Reason can be, in Luther's words: "God's greatest and most important gift to man, of inestimable beauty and excellence, a glorious light, a most useful servant in theology, something divine" or "a big red murderess, the devil's bride³, a damned whore, a blind guide, the enemy of faith⁴, the greatest and most invincible enemy of God."⁵ Luther accurately observed that reason, like our conscience, is not completely debilitated by the fall.^{5,6} It still exists and functions even though corrupted by sin, but because it is corrupted it can't be fully trusted. With such potential for great good or great harm, it is essential we understand its proper use. It can indeed be a powerful ally in meeting the challenges presented to our faith in today's world.

Luthers Werke, Weimar Ausgabe, 10, I, I, 271; 5,I; I,23;

Luthers Werke, Weimar Ausgabe, 5,I, 130; 16, 42f; 40, I, 204

Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, 21-4.

Daniel M.Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) pg 5ff.

I: Principles for Applying Reason in the Life of a Christian

There is by no means agreement on this point within Lutheranism⁷, but for us, it is the manner in which we use reason which determines if it brings blessing or harm. Sin has thoroughly infected every aspect of our nature including our conscience and our reason, but the fall did not completely destroy these great gifts of the creator. They still exist and function, but because they are tainted by sin they cannot be trusted. Nevertheless we must use reason to make sense of the world around us in everyday life, and even to comprehend and understand scripture. What then is the proper formula for how we should use reason?

Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, 21-4, 21.

Reason should be used in a ministerial rather than a magisterial manner relative to God and His Word. By ministerial we mean that reason performs the function of servant to the word of God. As a good servant unquestioningly carries out the will and intention of his master so reason in a ministerial sense helps us understand God's revealed will. In this way reason acts to carry out the intentions of God. Christ would have us read, understand, and take to heart what he has laid down in his Word. He uses the Word to create and sustain faith, and reason may aid God in that activity as long as it submits itself to the authority of the Word. A magisterial function however would mean that reason acts as a judge (or magistrate) relative to God's word. Serving this function our corrupted reason wants to place itself in a position of higher authority than the word of God. Reason used in a magisterial sense assumes the right to question God, and will never submit to his Word. At best a magisterial use of reason might concur with God's word, but would always demand that God play by its own rules and submit to its own authority. It should be clear that we should not use reason in this way. Instead we should use it to understand his revelation and apply it to our lives. God wants us to use our reason and all the capabilities he has given to honor Him either as He has commanded or in Christian freedom.

Pastors are accustomed to applying this formula to their theological work.⁸ They use reason in the proper ministerial sense to determine the meaning of God's word from grammar, definitions, usage, historical setting, and context, and then understand how his word applies to our lives. Understanding what the text says is often, but not always, easy. Even when it is easy, the process of understanding language is a use of reason which is necessary for the word to do its work. The Holy Spirit also uses reason to help us understand on a deeper level the wonders of God's revelation, and its application to our life, as we grow in sanctification.

Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, 188ff.

But when our rational mind inquires how is it that we receive God's true body and blood in the sacrament objections are raised. There are physical and chemical differences between wine and bread on the one hand, and blood and flesh on the other. We are tempted by this thinking to put reason (and science) above God and his Word, as if God must justify himself to reason.⁹ God created reason, matter, and the sacrament, and is not limited by his creation. Thoroughly appropriate uses of reason are to ask questions such as: What specifically does scripture say regarding this blessing which I receive? What are the promises God attaches to his body and blood? What does receiving Christ's body and blood mean for me in time and for eternity? Asking these questions makes our reason subject to the Word of God, and reason acts as a servant would in carrying out the wishes of his master the Word.

Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, 188ff.

There are those who claim that science can tell us something about how to interpret scripture. We have to admit that science can serve a minor ministerial function by helping date Biblical manuscripts, but we must reject a magisterial function for science. It is a terrible crime against God's word that the ideas of evolution have been used by some as a pretext to re-evaluate the meaning of a simple Historical-Grammatical analysis of the text. Reason used magisterially would argue that God could not have intended Genesis chapters 1, 2 and the flood account to be the simple historical account that the rest of the book appears to be. Instead corrupt reason imagines an allegory, mythological speculation, or worse. Here again reason (science) has been accorded a greater authority than God's Word itself. In doing so our sinful nature makes God's Word play by the rules of science, and may even convict it of falsehood. One can see how twisted reason can become when it accuses God of lies, "[God who] is the Rock, [whose] works are perfect, and all his ways just. A faithful God who does no wrong," (Deut 32:4). It is the antithesis of faith to behave in this manner. Can faith exist in the heart of such a one? Only God can know, but if it does that faith is in serious jeopardy.

Reason can and should be used to till the soil of our hearts to make it ready to receive the Gospel. Jesus spoke of the Word as a seed (Matt. 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8) and the hearts of those who received it as different kinds of soil. Paul's evangelistic efforts are described in the Bible as a process of reasoning, and those who came to faith were said to be "persuaded." In Thessalonica, "as was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women." (Acts 17:2-4) In Athens Paul paves the way for the gospel with an argument from reason in Acts 17:16-34. He recognizes the perspective of his hearers and "reasoned" (NIV, verse 17) with them so they would give the gospel a hearing. Anyone can see that the One who created heaven and earth does not live in temples made with hands. Paul wants them to conclude that the God they had forgotten was greater than all the Gods they were worshiping. The unstated implication of that conclusion is that they have been guilty of ignoring the greatest God of all; the only God who really matters. In Corinth, "every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." (Acts 18:4) And when he arrived in Ephesus he "went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." (Acts 18:19) More will be said about this in the next part of this series.

Theology is nothing if not practical, and our new life in Christ is defined, empowered, and given its purpose by the Word of God. Divorcing reason's ministerial role from the spiritual life of the Christian creates an inappropriate compartmentalization. God doesn't want us to check our reason at the door of the church either going out or coming in. God would have us always vigorously use it to apply his word to every situation in life. In Isaiah chapter 1 God asks his people to recognize the relationship God established with them. He asks them to realize (think) how much better off they would be if they made a conscious connection between the professions they make by their sacrifices and the way they lived the rest of their life. He asks them to discern that there is a causal effect between the way they respond to God and the physical situation they find themselves in. He asks them to notice the relationship an animal has with its master, or a child with its parent, and infer that they have not acted this way toward God. He wants them to see that God is their only real source of blessing. He wants them to come to the conclusion that things will be better for them if they return to God in faith. Specifically in v18-21 he argues this way: "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. Having led them through logic he now turns to the gospel: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land. But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." An empty confession is no faith at all. But faith uses reason to find sincere expression by actions in the physical world we live in. (James 2:14-26) As

Luther said, “where reason leads, the will follows.”¹⁰ And it is a rational process by which we lead our wills as Christians.

Luthers Werke, Weimar Ausgabe, 10, I, I, 233, as quoted in Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, pg 89 ref. 74.

Martin Luther never hesitated to use reason to remove impediments to the hearing of the Gospel. His debate with Eck, and his correspondence with Erasmus, and Zwingli demonstrate that. One recalls the famous quote of Luther before the Imperial Diet of Worms “unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I will not recant.” He frequently declared that Christians should in all things be subject to God and his Word. Luther would say that we should train our reason away from its natural tendency to question God, and into a role which seeks to understand and apply God’s Word to every aspect of our lives. Regarding the application of God’s Word to our lives Luther spoke of the reason (or reasoning) of faith whereby reason makes the sermon clear.¹¹ This reasoning is familiar to every Christian. It says, “Scripture tells me that on the basis of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection all my sins have been forgiven. Therefore God is favorably disposed to me and I may apply to myself the promise that he is willing and able to meet my daily needs (Matt 6:25-34). Therefore I have no need to worry” (Matt 26:5) etc. To Luther there was no essential difference between this type of reasoning and any other. He said that this kind of “right thinking about God” is clearly nothing else than faith.¹²

Luthers Werke, Weimar Ausgabe, pg 87ff.

Luthers Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe 40, I, 376, as quoted in Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) 2nd ed., 1999, ref. 65, pg 87.

The doctrine of the real presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a clear example of a so called conflict between science and scripture. Luther disparaged the use of reason to question the clear and simple meaning of God’s Word regarding the sacrament. Those who object to the doctrine on the basis of science (i.e. reason) are speaking past us. We don’t deny that chemistry has value in dealing with the material universe, nor do we deny that we are here dealing with the material universe. We do not imagine that the bread and wine’s chemical composition changes when it passes our tonsils. Our point is that there is more here than the material universe – the clear Word of God. The physical elements of sacrament are only common bread, and wine, apart from God’s Word and promise. We confess that chemistry is incapable of dealing with the effects of God’s Word just as it is incapable of explaining how Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1-11).¹³

SD, VII

Our Old Adam is never converted, and it uses the occasion of evolutionary propaganda to question if God really has spoken in the Bible. This magisterial use of reason often leads people to believe God is far removed from them. Indeed this was the serpent’s question to Eve: “Did God really say...” (Gen 3:1). Many under the spell of evolution question if God is really speaking in the Bible. The magisterial use of reason here often leads people to think that God is far removed from them if he even exists. When belief in evolution is the basis for this idea the individual feels rationally justified in not listening to what scripture says at all. Is it any wonder so many people find the scripture not relevant to their lives when evolution creeps into their world-view? It is a proper role for Scripture to show the folly of the lie that God is far removed from his creation, but how do we get people to take notice?

Similarly the message properly made today is that the universe could not have come to its present form without the miraculous intervention of Almighty God. He is therefore greater than the natural processes and principles that govern the universe he has created, and able to know and deal with every person intimately. The unstated conclusion is that you are accountable to God, and that he knows how you have ignored him. In both cases we can use reason to help create an opportunity for the gospel to be heard.

An appropriate approach in dealing with unbelievers or the Old Adam is to pinpoint the lie itself. The nature and character of science, and the challenge to our faith posed by evolution in particular will be dealt with in Part II of this series. Suffice to say that the revelation of God is more discerning than human reason. There is much that we can't know about God without his revelation. Yet as we strive to understand God's revelation with our reason, it is appropriate to expect our physical world to show signs of its history and origin (Psalm 19:1-4).

The limitations of science and reason are often cited here.¹⁴ Among them is the inability for reason (science) to make a positive proof of anything without certain limiting assumptions. But while reason cannot prove a theory true in the absolute sense it certainly can prove a theory false within the framework set by the theory itself. Even though we (scientists) believe that matter is made up primarily of particles which we admit have a certain non-particle character, we can't really say we've proved it to be so. At best we can only say that this model accounts for all the experiments we can think of doing. Yet we know that matter is not a continuum since we can do experiments which clearly demonstrate it not to be of that nature. Many Christians who work in science will attest to the fact that modern theories and mechanisms imagined for the origin of things by natural spontaneous processes are false and can be scientifically shown to be so.¹⁵

As a starting point see: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804); *Critique of Pure Reason*. Pluhar, W. (trans.), Pl tr, Patricia Kitcher, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett. xxviii. (1996).

As one example, the website: <http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/bios/> accessed Feb. 4, 2013 gives a long list of scientists who have publically affirmed their belief in creation.

We believe there are many situations when a theological discussion is facilitated by first shaking faith in evolution. Here we are not concerned with discerning truth but creating an opportunity to present Christ, the wisdom and power of God, (I Cor 1:18-25), and the Gospel, which alone is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). Yet there are dangers in answering a fool according to his folly (Prov. 26:4, 5), and we will explore those dangers in later parts of this work

Having said all that, the best that an argument from reason can expect to accomplish is to shake the faith of an unbeliever in a particular idol he has constructed. We do not convert people through science. Jews and Muslims believe in creation too. It is the gospel, and only the gospel, which is able to create faith in the heart of the unbeliever. Moreover, that process is not one of reason any more than changing water into wine is one of chemistry. It is a miracle of God. We pray that that miracle is done widely and frequently in our time. *LSI*

Bruce Holman, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Lutheran Science Institute and a member of St. Marcus Lutheran Church, Milwaukee.

He invites your comments on this article by emailing to bholman3@sbcglobal.net

