

Two Creation Apologetics with Opposing Views of Science are Taught in the WELS

by Mark Bergemann

A teen may hear from her Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastor at a youth group Bible study, “There is NO evidence for evolution,” and the next day be taught at her WELS high school, “There IS evidence for evolution.” An article in *Forward In Christ* magazine proclaims that evolution is not science,¹ while several other *Forward In Christ* articles argue the opposite.² One Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) book tells us “evolution is not scientific,”³ while another published that same year, says the opposite.⁴ *Christlight* proclaims that “The Bible and true science never contradict each other,”⁵ while students in the Earth Science course at Luther High School are taught the opposite.⁶

This situation can be very confusing for pastors, teachers, students, and laity. What is happening? Two creation apologetics, with opposing views of science, are being taught in the WELS. If pastors, teachers, and authors were aware that two competing creation apologetics are regularly taught in the WELS, they might mention this, as they teach their preferred creation apologetic. If students and laity were aware of this situation, they could better understand why they hear conflicting teaching, and be better able to form their own beliefs around one apologetic or the other.

¹ “Darwinian evolution is a religion, not genuine science.” Allen Quist, “Questioning Evolution,” *Forward In Christ*, 97:2 (Feb 2010), web version page 2. <http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/february-2010/questioning-evolution> (accessed January 21, 2014)

² “Evolution, as an answer to the question of the origin of the universe, is science ... Good science is whatever a majority of scientists say it is at any given time.” Vernon Gerlach, “Reflections On Creation Science,” *Forward In Christ*, 74:20 (November 1987), web version page 2. <http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/november-1987/reflections-creation-science> (accessed January 21, 2014).

“Biologists already have found it necessary to modify Darwin’s theory of evolution. Nothing in human science remains the same for very long.” Ronald A. Buelow and Ryan C. MacPherson, “A Lutheran View Of Science” *Forward In Christ*, 91:1 (January 2004), web version page 2. <http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/january-2004/lutheran-view-science?page=0,0> (accessed January 21, 2014).

³ Jon D. Buchholz, *Basic Bible Certainty: A Study in the Truths of the Christian Faith* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 8.

⁴ “The only way to integrate science and Scripture while also maintaining scientific respectability is to revise one’s interpretation of Scripture when a new consensus among scientists emerges –such as the consensus reached during the late 19th century in favor of evolution. If one does not want to be stuck in the position of having to revise one’s interpretation of Scripture in light of science, then one would be wise not to try and integrate science and Scripture in the first place.” Ryan Cameron MacPherson, “The Church and Science Through the Ages: Seven Key Questions From the History of Science,” in *Here We Stand –A Confessional Christian Study of Worldviews*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), 208-209.

⁵ Gerald Kastens, *Course 5 Teacher’s Guide – Reading the Bible: The Focus, Lesson 1* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 4. <http://online.nph.net/SampleFiles/Print/746091E.PDF> (accessed January 21, 2014). Kastens was the project director of the *ChristLight*® religion curriculum published by NPH during the 1990s.

⁶ “Other dangerous philosophies sneak in such as attempting to find the ‘true’ science that lines up perfectly with Scriptures. Since even the science of Christians is a human endeavor, it is a mistake to think that a true science exists in a sinful world.” Greg Schibbelhut, Earth Science webpage, Luther High School <http://www.lutherhigh.org/academics/course-webpages/earth-science> (accessed January 21, 2014)

Same Theology -- Different Apologetic Methods

These two creation apologetics hold so much in common. WELS adherents of both apologetic methods hold to the same Biblical doctrines. They both believe that only the Gospel can create and sustain faith, and that their apologetic reflects that belief. They both believe the Bible is inerrant in all it says about every subject, including history and science, and that their apologetic reflects that belief. They both point out that evolution is incompatible with the Christian faith.

There is variation on both sides of this issue. Some even take a middle ground, holding a mixture of views taken from both apologetics. Yet the majority of individuals across this apologetic spectrum hold that science has a legitimate place in our apologetic as we witness to the truth of creation, and against the lie of evolution.⁷ Both apologetic methods make significant use of scientific evidence to show logical problems with the evolution story. They both proclaim evidence showing that the world around is often as we would expect based on the Biblical account of creation, and that the world is often NOT as would be expected if evolution were true.

Two Definitions of Science

The difference between these two apologetic methods is that they use opposing definitions of science. These two creation apologetics have been taught in the WELS for decades. Dr. Ryan MacPherson, professor at Bethany Lutheran College, mentions a 1978 creation “debate” between David Golisch (then a WELS science teacher at Huron Valley Lutheran High School) and Martin Sponholz (then a WELS science teacher at Luther High School).

Even within a relatively small, theologically conservative church body such as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), scientists and theologians have had significant disagreements regarding how to explain a young-earth thesis among their church members and how to defend that conclusion against old-earth proponents. ... Golisch’s frustration with Sponholz’s paper arose not from a different interpretation of Scripture, but from a different interpretation of science. More exactly, it arose from a different definition of the word “science.” Sponholz defined the laws of science as “intellectual models of artistry. The laws of science are men’s laws. They are not God’s ordinances.” ... Golisch and others were following creation science gurus Henry Morris and Duane Gish, who defined “science” as an endeavor that, if not corrupted by evolutionist practitioners, will discover truths that corroborate revealed truth. ... The Sponholz-Golisch debate illustrates that two young-earth advocates within a synod that tolerates very little theological variance nevertheless differed markedly in their approaches to teaching their beliefs to the next generation of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and explaining their young-earth worldview to those outside of their fellowship.⁸

One of these two creation apologetic methods defines “science” as temporary “truth,” parts of which are often found to be incorrect and then replaced. Science is seen as mankind’s flawed and incomplete attempt to explain nature.⁹ This view of science is similar to that used by the scientific community.¹⁰ This

⁷ A recent article in the LSI Journal covers in detail the use of reason in defending the Christian faith: Mark Bergemann, “The Place of Reason in Defending the Christian Faith – with Ministry Ideas Regarding Creation/Evolution,” *LSI Journal*, 2012. <http://www.lutheranscience.org/2012reason> (accessed May 22, 2014).

⁸ Ryan C. MacPherson, “On the Antiquity of the Earth: Episodes from the History of Science That Have Shaped People’s Perceptions of the Earth’s Age” (paper presented at the tenth annual theological symposium, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, September 22, 1999, with minor corrections and revisions, 2005) <http://www.ryanmacpherson.com/presentation-list/14-conference-papers/36-on-the-antiquity-of-the-earth.html> (accessed January 21, 2014).

⁹ For example: “Science is an attempt by mankind to grasp the concepts of God’s creation.” Riley W. Westphal, Chemistry Course Description, Winnebago Lutheran Academy <http://www.wlavikings.org/inner.iml/academics/science>

view of science is the one taught by an overwhelming majority of teachers at our WELS high schools and colleges.¹¹

“True Science”

The other creation apologetic method is called “True Science.” The “True Science” apologetic refuses to accept as science any physical laws or theories which violate the teachings of Scripture, rejecting them as “false science,” while accepting scientific laws and theories which are demonstrably true and which do not violate the teachings of Scripture.¹² This view of science was the majority view in the WELS during the 1970s, but has been the minority view for the past 30 years.¹³

For over 50 years the term “True Science,” has been used to describe this second creation apologetic method. It a very descriptive name for the creation apologetic which so often involves the use of that very term. Sometimes those who use this apologetic use similar terms such as “real science,” “genuine science,” “honest science,” or “correct science.” Sometimes those who use this apologetic refer to evolution using the antonym of true: “false science,” or with terms such as “pseudo-science,” “so-called science,” “bad science,” etc. Authors throughout the WELS have used these terms for decades. (*Bold underlines in the quotes below are not in the original.*)

The Bible and **true science** never contradict each other; they cannot, for God created the laws of science too.¹⁴

True science will not contradict what the Bible teaches. We can combat the theory of evolution by proclaiming what the Bible teaches and by encouraging unbiased scientific investigation and honest presentation of scientific facts. **Honest science** will not treat an unproven theory as a fact.¹⁵

Darwinian evolution is a religion, not **genuine science**.¹⁶

In the first two chapters of Genesis we have the genesis of the history of God’s reign of saving grace among men. These chapters were not written, to be sure, to satisfy our curiosity about scientific matters, yet they nowhere conflict with **true science**.¹⁷

(accessed January 21, 2014)

¹⁰ For quotes from WELS science teachers and from the National Academy of Science see: Mark Bergemann, “*True Science: A Bad Apologetic Method Rejected in the WELS*,” an unpublished research paper prepared for discussion by the Lutheran Science Institute (LSI) Board (March 13, 2013; updated April 22, 2013), 4,5. Copies can be requested from the author at MarkBergemann@yahoo.com.

¹¹ Bergemann, “*True Science*,” 56.

¹² For example, LSI President David Golisch writes in a widely circulated letter to Martin Sponholz, “True science is defined as that which does not disagree with or negate Scripture” (October 1, 1978), point 44. In 1965-1966 *The Northwestern Lutheran* published “Man Distinct from the Animal” by Robert W. Adickes who says, “When the Christian separates the facts of true science from the false theories of modern evolutionary teaching he sees that there is no conflict and he has no difficulty in accepting, through faith, the Scriptural account of man’s creation.” Reprinted in Werner H. Franzmann, ed., *Is Evolutionism The Answer? The Christian Response To Evolutionism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1967), 64.

¹³ Bergemann, “*True Science*,” 50.

¹⁴ Gerald Kastens, 4.

¹⁵ *WELS Topical Q&A*, in the evolution category. Captured in archive: #30 of 46 (captured September 28, 2009): http://web.archive.org/web/20090928142048/http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1518&cuTopic_topicID=73&cultem_itemID=3119 (accessed January 21, 2014).

¹⁶ Allen Quist, 2.

Real science cannot possibly be a threat to one's faith. ... **Real science** and the Bible are in harmony.¹⁸

"It makes sense to teach evolutionary theory as well as biblical creationism in Christian schools too. Explain the theory to students and show how it conflicts with the Bible and with **real science** and the well-established laws of nature."¹⁹

WELS authors who use the other creation apologetic, sometimes use the term "true science" to describe the apologetic they oppose. (*Bold underlines in the quotes below are not in the original.*)

"Other dangerous philosophies sneak in such as attempting to find the '**true**' science that lines up perfectly with Scriptures. Since even the science of Christians is a human endeavor, it is a mistake to think that a **true science** exists in a sinful world."²⁰

"We must not attach God's name to our favorite scientific theories. We do not know God's science. If science is only the attempts of humans to understand God's creation there can be no **true science**."²¹

"Within our own circles there exists a Lutheran Science Institute which boasts of 'communicating **true science**.' Several of our synodical schools in their course descriptions boast also of this ability to distinguish between theories and the **true laws of science**. ... The laws of science are man's laws, not God's!"²²

"We also especially need to guard against Reformed answers to evolution that elevate reason human and try to develop a **true science**."²³

"That calling [of WELS teachers] is not to save this world from its **false science** by finding a **true science**. Look what must be added to find a hopeful harmony between our Bible and science."²⁴

"I have heard that there is no conflict between science and religion. I have heard the laws of science are proved. ... To hide behind the semantics of **true science** which has little or nothing to do with the subject we commonly refer to as science today is to play into the hands of the devil.

¹⁷ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "The Biblical Account of Creation and Modern Theology," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 59 (July 1962), web version pages 13, 19. <http://www.wlssays.net/node/588> (accessed January 21, 2014)

¹⁸ Warren Krug, "There's a Role for Science in Biblical Interpretation," *LSI Journal* (January-February, 2005). <http://lutheranscience.org/2005scienceBible> (accessed May 22, 2014).

¹⁹ Warren Krug, "SCOPES TRIAL IN REVERSE. Kentucky 'teacher' gets in trouble for NOT teaching evolution," *LSI Blog* (October 29, 2008). http://lsiblog.blogspot.com/2008_10_01_archive.html (accessed January 21, 2014).

²⁰ Greg Schibbelhut.

²¹ Paul L. Willems, "Where Experiments End," *The Lutheran Educator*, 46:4 (May 2005), 102-104.

²² David A. Kipfmiller, "Fighting The Good Fight," (paper presented at the Capitol Circuit pastors' meeting, St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI, September 21, 1982).

²³ John Isch, "Remember These Things: The Church's Responsibility to Teach," *Proceedings: Thirty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the Minnesota District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (June 21-23, 1994), 106-116. As quoted by Paul Boehlke, Reflections on a New Science Building, CHARIS 3:3 (Summer 2004).

²⁴ Martin P. Sponholz, "Teaching and Unteaching Evolution: The Fossils Say Nothing" (paper presented to a teacher's conference, October 24, 1985, updated and presented as a handout for a workshop at Martin Lutheran College, New Ulm (July 5-10, 1999), 1.

... But what is **true science**? Have we become so enwrapped with the scientific age we live in that we need such a crutch?"²⁵

Mark Bergemann, a retired electrical engineer, serves as president of LSI. He holds a B.S. from UW-Milwaukee and is an evangelism leader at Good Shepherd's Ev. Lutheran Church in West Allis, Wisconsin

²⁵ Martin Sponholz, "The Changing Laws" (paper presented at the Evening Forum at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, January 13, 1977), 1, 2.