

Got Questions: Can I Believe in Science and Faith?

Sunday, July 13, 2025

Psalm 8:1-4

Eighty years ago this week, a trial took place in the small Tennessee town of Dayton that has left a lasting impact on the world. This trial involved high school teacher John T. Scopes, who was accused of teaching evolution, which was against Tennessee law at the time. The trial became a media sensation, with both sides seeking to promote their viewpoints. Ultimately, Scopes was convicted and fined \$100, but the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the conviction on a technicality. Known as the Scopes Monkey Trial, it is seen by both non-believers and Christians as a pivotal moment in the history of the relationship between science and faith in the United States. Non-believers view it as the point where science triumphed over faith, since, despite Scopes' conviction, public opinion shifted against the Tennessee law after the trial due to widespread media support for Scopes. Some Christians see the trial as the moment when the American media turned away from faith and helped science to "destroy" it. These ideas continue to influence the ongoing relationship between science and faith.

The Scopes trial was not the first instance of a clash between science and faith. For example, consider the famous Galileo trial in 1633, where questioning the orbits of the planets was seen as questioning God. Many people believe that science and faith have been, and will always be, in conflict. One of the questions we received for our "Got Questions?" series addressed this very issue. While the question specifically focused on the creation stories of Genesis, it also highlights the broader relationship between science and faith, asking about the proper relationship between these two areas of knowledge. How does a Christian navigate

between the claims of modern science and the claims of a faith as old as human society? Must Christians choose a side or prioritize one over another?

Luckily, I have some ideas! Working with youth who spend most of their time thinking scientifically in their education, this issue comes up often, so I've dedicated quite a bit of time to it. I also personally have loved both science and God since I was a child. This sermon reflects my opinions only, developed over years of study. You are, of course, free to disagree, and we can still be friends and respect each other!

One of the most distinctive and significant contributions of the Wesleyan tradition is what Methodists refer to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The Wesleyan Quad tells us that when we think about God, we do so through four lenses: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture is our primary authority for matters of faith, but we understand that faith is seen through the other three lenses. It is in the areas of reason and experience that science can and should be a part of our interpretive lenses. After all, science is just applying reason to repeated experience. We conduct repeatable experiments to refine our reasoning and gain a deeper understanding of the physical nature of reality.

When it comes to science and faith, I believe the first thing we should acknowledge is that the battle between them has been exaggerated to push agendas for both scientists and Christians. Scientists who have a beef with religion have pushed the idea that science is superior to religion and that once we understand how the universe works, we no longer require God. This was the position of famous physicist Stephen Hawking, who said, "Before we understand science, it is natural to believe that God created the universe. But now science offers a more convincing explanation." In response to this, Christians often feel compelled to defend Scripture

and faith, which can lead them to make claims from Scripture that it never intended to convey. For example, it is commonly believed that the Big Bang theory was created with the intention to replace the story of creation from the Book of Genesis. Yet, the truth is that the first scientist to propose the modern theory of the Big Bang was George Lemaitre, who was a Catholic priest. Lemaitre's ideas were initially rejected by many scientists of the time, who believed the universe had always existed. Proposing a beginning to the universe sounded too much like the Genesis account to the scientists of Lemaitre's day!

Often, both atheists and fundamentalists misunderstand the purpose of science and faith. Science aims to understand the physical nature of reality and is not meant to tackle moral or existential questions. Faith, on the other hand, seeks to reveal God's workings in our world, guiding us toward a deeper love for the divine and teaching us how to serve others in love. It is not intended to explain the physical processes of nature. I believe that science and faith each try to answer different questions, and mixing them improperly or prioritizing one over the other can cause significant harm to both.

For example, the church of my youth leaned more toward faith than science. The Bible was the primary source for all our questions, even the scientific ones. We were taught that science and evolution were tools of the devil meant to mislead us. (This even went so far as to suggest that the devil created false fossils to deceive scientists into false datings of the Earth's age. I haven't seen anything in Scripture to suggest the devil can create anything...) Anything not found in Scripture was met with suspicion or outright denial, even if our church didn't take these ideas too far. (We still took medicine when sick, for example.) These beliefs can easily lead to situations where physical harm might happen.

Of course, there is an equal danger of leaning too heavily on science over faith, thereby discounting and purging the spiritual aspects of faith. This can lead to a dry faith that denies the power of God's Spirit to be seen and work in our lives. The author of 2 Timothy would call this "a form of godliness" that denies God's power. (2 Tim. 3:5) In our very logical and precise mainline Christian faith, this can be a real temptation. We can go through our everyday lives in the humanist world of science and technology, neglecting our spiritual lives and needs. We can easily forget that our Christian lives are spiritual in nature, and there is a spiritual dimension that we should not overlook. For example, I often attempt to fix problems using only my own power, forgetting that I should call on God to help guide me to solutions.

Denying the spiritual can ultimately lead to a complete loss of faith. I once asked an atheist friend if he had ever had a spiritual experience when he heard or felt the presence of the Divine in a way he could not explain. Surprisingly, he replied that he had, but because science told him that God was not real, he believed that he was hallucinating. For him, it was easier to think that he was mentally ill than believe that God might be trying to reach him. Again, science is not intended to answer the more profound spiritual questions as my friend was attempting to do.

I believe there is a middle ground where we can have both science and faith in a "both/and" approach, where we can see that science and faith complement each other in informative and often surprising ways.

For example, my belief that the earth was created in a billion years or six days does not diminish my view of the amazingness of creation or its creator. The vastness of the universe

makes me feel in awe of God and God's love even more! In this way, my understanding of science deepens my faith.

From the other perspective, when I take seriously the ethical teachings of the Bible regarding my responsibilities to my planet and my fellow humans, it changes the way I respond to the fantastic technology that science has provided. I learn that all of the benefits of modern science must be used responsibly in a way that helps all creation to flourish and for all to feel and know God's love. I cannot learn that from science.

May God give us the wisdom to use our reason and experience to know God more closely through all the tools available to us. May God always remind us that we are to see everything in the light of God's love for us and others. Amen.