

WHEN FAITH AND REASON ARE IN TENSION

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L. James Gibson

Geoscience Research Institute

Introduction

Experience and revelation are different ways by which we obtain knowledge. Experience leads to knowledge through reason, in a process of discovery. We tend to accept reason as true when we can confirm it through additional experience. Revelation, on the other hand, may provide knowledge beyond our ability to discover, and concerning propositions beyond our experience. We may not always be able to test revealed propositions by experience. Instead, our evaluation of revelation depends on our assessment of the reliability of the source of the revelation. This assessment is an application of reason, showing that reason is indispensable even for receiving revelation. Acceptance of revelation as truth is based on confidence in the Revealer, a condition called faith. The Christian regards both reason and revelation as gifts of God, and holds both in high esteem.

Since both reason¹ and revelation have their ultimate source in God, they should be in complete harmony. Yet reason and revelation appear to conflict when attempting to explain the world around us. Reason, in the form of science, provides one story of the world and its origins, while revelation, in the form of Scripture, provides a different story. The purpose of this manuscript is to discuss some of the factors contributing to the conflict between science (a specific application of reason) and faith (trust in the revelation of Scripture) and seek to suggest ways in which Christians might choose to deal with it.

Why is it possible for faith and science to clash?

At least two factors can contribute to a potential clash between faith and science. Lack of information is perhaps the underlying factor that leads to clashes between faith and science. If we had all knowledge about both revelation and reason, we could see where the truth actually lies. But nobody has all knowledge, and therefore, conflict is possible. Furthermore, some of what we consider to be knowledge is surely false. Serious, sincere Christians frequently disagree over some point of revelation, not because of differences in revelation but because of differences in interpreting the revelation. Likewise, scientists frequently disagree over how to interpret scientific data, and the history of scientific revolutions reminds us that scientific consensus is no protection against future re-interpretation.²

A second factor contributing to the conflict of science and faith is human pride. Pride may manifest itself in a variety of ways. One problem is pride of opinion. Once having taken a position, it is difficult to admit we were wrong and change our view, especially if the process is public. Both scientists and Bible students may find it difficult to retract their stated beliefs. Pride in our own self-sufficiency may also make it difficult to accept revelation. We would rather learn by our own efforts than to have someone give us the answer and expect us to accept it as is. This is especially difficult if the relationship is not close between the giver of the revelation and the

receiver. Another problem of pride is that Biblical revelation is often distasteful. Scriptures reveal that humans are easily deceived, prone to error, and unable to discern the truth about God. Human nature is not a pretty picture, according to the Bible, and human pride recoils from accepting such an evaluation. If the Biblical description is true, humans may at times be perverse enough to deliberately reject revelation even against the force of reason.³

Responses to Perceived Conflict Between Faith and Science

Several responses have been proposed to deal with apparent conflict between faith and science.⁴ These range from denial of conflict to a rigid formulaic approach to a thoughtful but much more difficult attempt to integrate them.

Conflict Denied

Some scholars attempt to deny there is a conflict between science and Scripture. What appears to be a conflict may actually be true in some sense not yet understood (“Complementarity”). For example, science may be referring to material aspects of some phenomenon while Scripture is speaking figuratively or “spiritually.” Another possibility is that science and Scripture may be regarded as addressing different spheres (“Dissociation”) and conflict is the result of misapplying one or the other source of knowledge to questions outside its legitimate sphere. One form of this argument is the claim of “Non-Overlapping Magisteria” (NOMA)⁵ put forth by the late Stephen Jay Gould. According to Gould, science deals with the material world while Scripture deals with nonmaterial ideas, such as God, values, morals, etc. If this claim were true, we should not be discussing the topic. Such views are manifestly wrong; science and Scripture both clearly address some of the same issues, perhaps most importantly the origin and nature of humans.

Conflict Admitted but Resolution Denied

Another approach is to recognize the conflict between science and faith, but to regard the problem as intractable. Science and faith may be kept in isolation from each other without allowing them to interact (“Compartmentalization”). Or, a person may recognize conflict, but adopt the attitude that it is impossible to know what is true (“Agnosticism”). Alternatively, some individuals simply accept one source and reject the other (“Truncation”). Many Christians simply reject science as the work of the devil, while many secularists simply reject the Bible as the work of evil men. Such views may provide an escape from the hard work of dealing with the issues, but they also prevent any possible breakthrough and leave the individual in intellectual limbo. Furthermore, such an approach seems inconsistent both with reason and with the teachings of revelation.

Prioritized Integration

The approach recommended here is to attempt to integrate faith and science into a comprehensive world view. This is difficult work, and will require our best efforts, but in the end, it will be the most satisfactory approach. It requires that one identify apparent points of conflict, evaluate the pertinent evidence from both science and Scripture, and estimate the probable truth status of each proposal. For example, when evaluating the contrasting claims of

historical science and Scripture on the origin of humans, one may consider whether it is more plausible that humans were created directly through divine agency, or through ordinary processes observable in nature.

Prioritized integration is consistent with both reason and revelation. It is consistent with reason because it utilizes reason to examine the evidence from both science and Scripture and it applies reason in evaluating the probable truth status of each proposal. It is consistent with revelation because the Bible writers refer approvingly, albeit sometimes with qualification, to both sources of knowledge. Numerous Biblical writers commend reason, wisdom, or similar concepts.⁶ Revelation is also spoken of highly in Scripture.⁷

Biblical writers affirm both reason and revelation as sources of knowledge about the world. But they do not attribute equal reliability to both sources. The word of God was regarded as absolutely true and binding. Human reason is rather easily misled and must at times be corrected by divine revelation.⁸ While Christians rightly retain a high regard for both reason and revelation, revelation is given a higher priority than reason in areas where they appear in conflict.

Some Christians take the position that since revelation is more reliable than reason, reason can be ignored in areas of conflict. Unfortunately, the situation is not so simple. Even Scripture can be misused.⁹ Humans may misinterpret divine revelation also, so one must be cautious. Reason itself must be applied to properly interpret revelation, and this opens up possibilities for errors to be made. The necessity of using reason to evaluate itself can be a source of difficulty when attempting to resolve apparent conflict between revelation and reason, yet we have no other choice.

We may have to suspend judgment in some cases, and in all cases we must recognize the fallibility of our own judgments and opinions. Yet this does not mean we should retreat into agnosticism. We can use our reason to make a decision to exercise faith, while recognizing that faith is a choice not based on demonstration of our belief.

Four Points of Conflict in Integrating Faith and Science on the Topic of Origins

Biblical and scientific views of origins differ in a host of details, but most of these details flow from only a few major issues. The major issues include the following pairs of contrasting propositions, which involve contrasting assumptions regarding the relationships of God and nature, God and humans, God and time, and God and evil:

1. God and nature

1.A. Creation: God is active in nature. God's activities include regular maintenance actions we observe as natural laws, and also special acts we observe as singularities or miracles.

1.B. Evolution: God is not active in nature. All events in nature occur in accordance with natural laws. God may or may not have set up the universe at the Big Bang, but in either case, He has not intervened and does not intervene in natural events.

2. God and humans

2.A. Creation: Life was created in rich diversity from the beginning, and through supernatural means. Humans are a special creation, endowed with attributes described as the image of God.

2.B. Evolution: Life arose through the action of natural laws and has evolved and diversified from a common ancestor into the rich diversity seen at present. Humans were part of that process, and are fundamentally animals with highly advanced brains.

3. God and time

3.A. Creation: Creation was accomplished through supernatural processes and did not require long ages of time for natural development. The universe was created ex nihilo, by the word of God. The conditions necessary for life on our planet, and life itself, were created in the short period of a week. The creation of our world occurred at a time in the past measured in thousands of years, although other worlds may have been created at previous times.

3.B. Evolution: Production of living organisms and their environment occurred by gradual, natural processes that required time measured in hundreds of millions to billions of years. Our planet is suitable for life because it happened, by chance, to have the properties that permitted such conditions to develop.

4. God and natural evil

4.A. Creation: Natural evil did not exist in the original state of creation. When the world was first created, it was well-designed and all things functioned well. Adam, the first human, was given responsibility for the care of the planet and its living organisms. Through the Fall, Satan seized dominion of the planet. Satan's dominion has resulted in the presence of natural evil, death, disease, destruction, etc. Through Jesus Christ, dominion will be restored to humans.

4.B. Evolution: Natural evil is the unpleasant but natural result of the outworking of the laws of nature. There is no personal devil, no Adam, no Fall, and no future Restoration. Suboptimal design is inevitable when anatomical structures that originated by selection for one function are later modified for different functions.

Most of the details of interpretation that distinguish creation and evolution are related to these four pairs of contrasting propositions (See Table 1, next page). The first proposition concerns the relationship of God and nature. This proposition forms the presuppositional foundation of the other propositions. The way in which one responds to these issues will influence which model of origins is favored. A few examples follow.

Examples of attempts to reconcile Biblical and scientific ideas about origins

Numerous attempts have been made to combine ideas from science and belief in God. Only the most popular of these will be considered here. More extensive discussion is available elsewhere.¹⁰

Theistic evolution is a model of origins that accepts the conclusions of science based on naturalistic philosophy, but tries to include some kind of divine influence to justify the

Table 1. Four issues in relation to science and creation. See text for discussion.

	Bible	Science
<p>God and Nature God is active in nature.</p>	<p>Repeated, direct statements that God is active in nature. Miracles attested. Evil Satan also active in nature.</p>	<p>Evidence of design. Against: The problem of inefficiency. The problem of evil. The problem of the lack of miracles.</p>
<p>God and Man Humans a special creation, in God's image.</p>	<p>Some direct statements of special creation. Human uniqueness strongly attested.</p>	<p>Human mind Strong differences between apes and humans. Against: Strong genetic similarities of apes and humans. Fossil series.</p>
<p>God and Time Creation supernatural, not dependent on secondary process.</p>	<p>Some direct statements that God is not bound by time. Numerous reports of miracles. Direct statements of catastrophic global flood. Statements of God working through secondary processes also (sun, wind, etc).</p>	<p>Strong evidence of catastrophism. Some evidence contrary to standard chronology. Against: Strong circumstantial evidence of long ages. Strong evidence of action of secondary processes.</p>
<p>God and Natural Evil Creation originally good, corrupted by influence of Satan.</p>	<p>Several direct statements that Satan is responsible for evil. God takes ultimate responsibility for evil. Logical relationship of Fall and plan of salvation</p>	<p>Natural good, beauty. Moral sense; recognition of evil. Against: Strong evidence of the existence of natural evil. Some circumstantial evidence for the necessity of natural evil.</p>

idea that we were intended and not accidental. Theistic evolution is a very popular model, probably because it seems to be based on science but does not exclude God. However, there is a logical inconsistency with trying to build a view of divine activity on a foundation of philosophical naturalism which denies God's action in nature. The theistic part of theistic evolution contradicts the philosophical foundation of the scientific view which isolates God and nature. The evolutionary part contradicts the Biblical view of special creation. Theologically, theistic evolution seems to be the worst scheme available; the god of evolution seems worse than no god at all. Scientifically, evolutionary models suffer from evidence that suggests the insufficiency of natural processes to generate morphological novelties or the information regulating their development. Ultimately, theistic evolution fails to reconcile science and the Bible because it subjects the Bible to scientific deductions based on philosophical naturalism, and also because it fails to provide sufficient causes in nature, e.g., for the origin of life, molecular novelties, etc.

Progressive creation is the proposal that God separately created many different kinds of organisms, most importantly humans, but He did so in a series of separate creations over long ages of time. Successive creations were separated by long periods of time in which ordinary processes of natural selection resulted in diversification and evolution on a small scale. This model is open to the possibility that humans may have been created in a recent special creation, perhaps the creation noted in Genesis. There are several variations in the details, but the key features are multiple special creations and long ages of time. Scientifically, this model has the objectionable feature of imagining a special creation whenever convenient, as though God can be invoked to fill any gap. The "god-of-the-gaps" approach is regarded as a historical failure. Also, the sequence of supposed creation events in the fossil record differs from the sequence in Genesis. Theologically, the model fails to explain the cause of death, since it implies that death was present long before any humans were around to sin. It also destroys the idea of a Fall, since the fossil record does not record any change in nature at the appearance of fossil humans. This removes the logical basis for the story of salvation. Progressive creation, while an improvement over theistic evolution, still fails to reconcile science and the Bible because it violates the norms of scientific thinking by introducing God whenever a "gap" seems to require this, and also because it destroys the logic upon which the central theme of Biblical salvation is based.

*Two-stage Genesis creation*¹¹ is the proposition that Genesis 1:1 refers to an original creation of the universe that left the earth in an uninhabitable condition that might have lasted for only a few moments, or for eons of time. While the earth was in this condition – dark, wet, unsuitable for life and uninhabited – God, in one week, created a variety of suitable habitats and populated them with living organisms. When the creation was first accomplished it was without fault, but Adam's sin led to Satan's dominion over the earth, bringing death, violence and disease. God will eventually re-create and restore a world without fault, but this must be accomplished while preserving human freedom of choice. Theologically, this theory is far superior to any other yet proposed. Scientifically, it raises some questions that merit discussion.

The Genesis creation account introduces a question in the relationship of the events of the first and fourth creation days. The earth is lighted on the first day, but the sun is not mentioned until the fourth day. How were the first three days and nights caused? We cannot answer this question with certainty, not because it is logically impossible to do so, but because we lack information. In fact, at least three possible solutions have been proposed. First, the light of the first three days might have been produced by something other than the sun. God's presence may have been the source of the light. Or, perhaps a supernova lighted the earth at that time. Then the sun could have been created on the fourth creation day. A second possibility is that the sun was actually present on day one, but not visible as a discrete object, perhaps due to a cloud cover that diffused the light. On the fourth day the cloud cover dissipated and the sun could be seen as a discrete object. A third possibility is that the sun was present and visible from the first day, but on the fourth day it was appointed to "rule" the day, and function in signs and seasons. Our lack of certainty of which, if any, of these possibilities is correct does not mean the question has no solution. It only means we don't know what the solution is.

The two-stage creation model also suffers from scientific problems. The best known of these are radioisotope dating and the nature of the fossil sequence. Certain rocks contain the products of radioactive decay that would require hundreds of millions of years to accumulate through natural processes. The two-stage creation model includes the possibility that some rocks might be that old, but does not explain why there should be a progression of dates from older to younger. The existence of a fossil record is readily explained in the two-stage creation model as the result of a global catastrophe known as the Flood. However, the model does not explain why fossils appear in an ordered sequence in which similar kinds of organisms are grouped in successive geological strata that typically correlate over wide areas of the globe. How could a global catastrophe create an ordered fossil sequence rather than a chaotic jumble? Perhaps the pre-flood world was highly ordered, and the global catastrophe occurred in a highly ordered sequence of stages. While this explanation is consistent with the two-stage Biblical creation model, it is an ad hoc addition to the model.

Although the two-stage Biblical creation model does not provide an explanation for all our questions, it seems the best available model. It properly gives credence to the Scriptural record while accepting as much science as is consistent with the teachings of Scripture. A crucial advantage of this theory over the others is that it proposes a cause sufficient for any phenomenon in nature -- an omniscient, omnipotent Creator. Nevertheless, the fact that there are still questions for which the model provides no answer is a signal that we have more to learn in this area. We must remain open to the possibility that new information may clarify some points and add to our understanding of earth history and Scripture.

Faith and reason in tension: How shall we then live?

Having reached this understanding of the tension between faith and reason, what is a proper response from ourselves personally, and what can we do for those who look to us for help in dealing with the issues?¹²

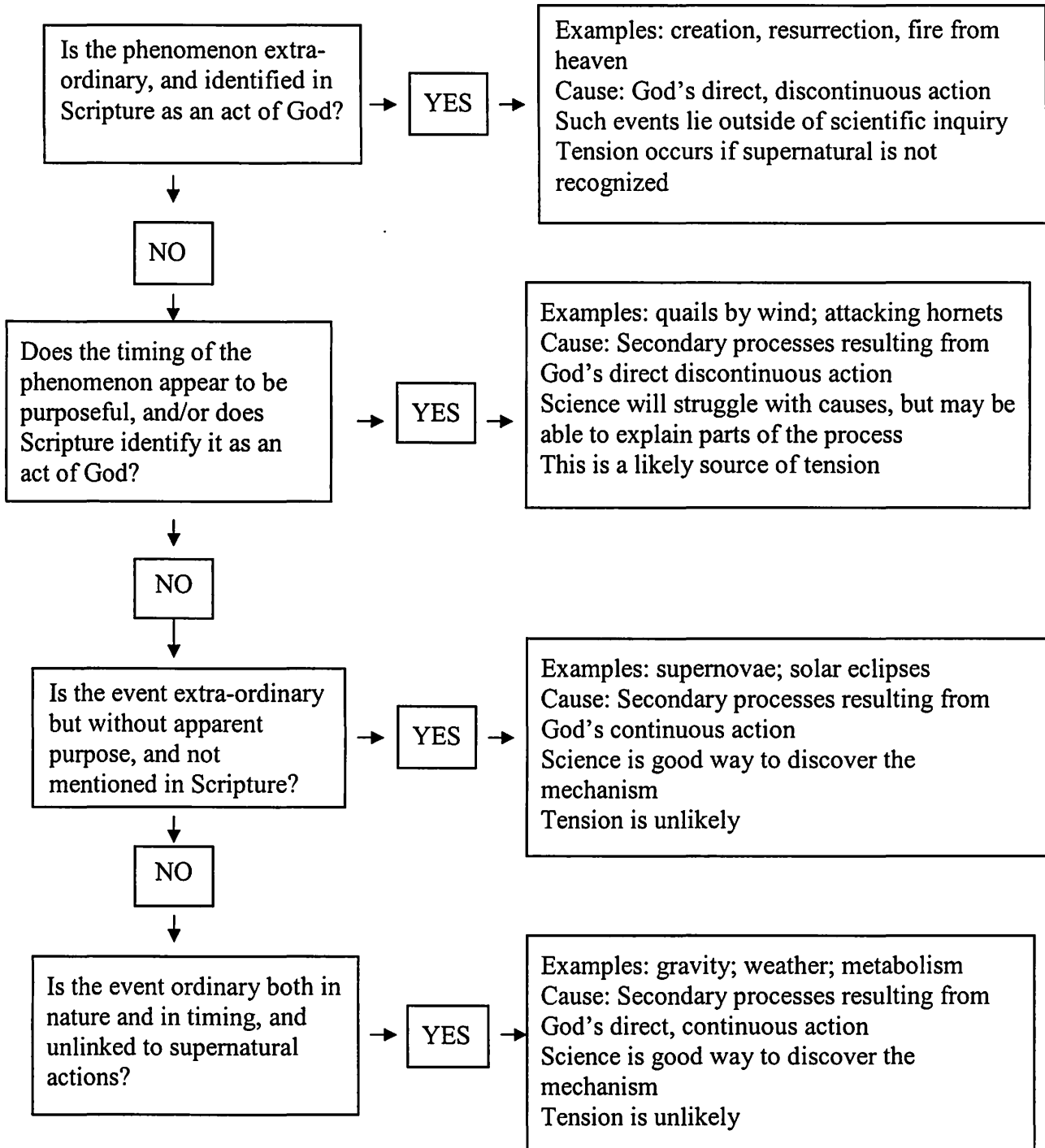
First, we can contribute toward a better understanding of the nature and limitations of science. The success of technology and experimental science is so great that many are greatly influenced by the pronouncements of scientists even in areas outside of science. The differences between experimental and historical science should be explained. The difficulties of dealing with singularities and questions of origins may not be obvious to the untrained, but they are crucial to understanding why science can be so successful in some areas and so incomplete and speculative in other areas. Figure 1 (next page) presents a scheme that might be helpful in doing this.

A second contribution is to share the realization that proof of our beliefs is not possible. We cannot prove anything without assumptions, and our assumptions determine what we are able to prove. It is only when assumptions are shared that one person can prove a point to another. Secularists, many of which are scientists, make assumptions that are incompatible with the assumptions of Christians. It is no surprise that conflicts remain unresolved. We can never prove creation to be true nor can we use arguments based on naturalistic science to prove evolution false, although we can certainly show that it has problems. We must learn, and teach others, to be comfortable living without proof.

A third contribution is to provide help in developing critical thinking. We should encourage others to be cautious about the claims they hear, and to learn to distinguish between data and interpretations, and between good arguments and bad ones. Believers in creation seem prone to accept bad arguments. For example, creationists once claimed that dinosaur and human footprints were found mixed together in the limestone bed of the Paluxy River of Texas. This claim has been repeated hundreds of times and is still sometimes advocated, even though the original claimants have retracted their claims and informed creationists do not use that argument.

Another bad claim is the claim that the earth cannot be very old because the human population has been expanding too fast. It would take only a few thousand years to produce the number of people now living. The problem with this argument can be seen if one applies the argument to locusts, or mice, or oysters. The present population of any of these species could be produced from a single pair in less than a century, yet this is not evidence that the earth cannot be more than a hundred years old. Natural forces act to keep populations in check, preventing them from multiplying beyond the carrying capacity of the environment. Likewise the human population could not expand at its modern rate until the development of agriculture, the invention of writing, the production of metals and improvements in health care and mechanization. These inventions provided means of supporting larger populations and expanded the carrying capacity of the environment for humans. Without these and other inventions, North America might still have a population of only a few million, as it did 500 years ago.¹³

Figure 1. Flow diagram to illustrate a method to reduce tension between science and Scripture by identifying events for which science may be unsuited because of supernatural action.



Evolutionists also make bad arguments at times. For example, sometimes claim that the ark story could not possibly be true because it would have to hold all the species known today, including millions of kinds of insects. But creationists do not believe these things. The ark was built for terrestrial vertebrates, and diversification has occurred since the flood. Space does not permit discussion of all the bad claims made by creationists or evolutionists, but the need for informed caution is apparent.

Another way in which we may help other believers is in criticizing the dominant culture where it conflicts with Biblical values. Too often, cultural values are unconsciously adopted despite the fact they are in conflict with Biblical principles. One of these is overconfidence in science and human reason. Another example is the sufficiency of the secular life, and the dispensability of religion. A third example is the focus on self-interest rather than Christian service. All these cultural influences, and others, have lethal effects on Christian living and are powerfully promoted by much of the material available on computer and video screens. We should raise the alarm in warning of the harmful effects of these cultural influences.

One of the most important contributions we can make is to let others see us model an attitude of faith even with the knowledge of the difficulties encountered in the integration of faith and reason. Many believers have grown up with the expectation that valid Christianity provides answers to all problems. Such a person can become quite unsettled by the discovery that there are questions for which we cannot provide empirically based answers. It can be a great encouragement to their faith to discover there are others who are well aware of the problems and have made a conscious, rational decision to accept the Biblical record as an act of faith. Faith is not opposed to reason, but is chosen through an act of reason.

Another way we can help others is by being cheerful in our discussions of creation. Our responsibility is not to force acceptance of the gospel, but to make it attractive. As Mother Teresa stated on many occasions: "God has not called me to be successful. He called me to be faithful."¹⁴ A winsome attitude will open more hearts than a combative spirit. The words of a young Seventh-day Adventist pastor are worth memorizing: "Our duty is not to defend God, but to reveal Him."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should develop the ability to think and act from a Christian perspective generally, and from a creation perspective specifically. This requires mental discipline and alertness to recognize the implications of various ideas and the need for reinterpretation. It also requires recognition of the difference between data and interpretation, and the need to start with careful collection or review of the data, critical analysis, and collaboration with colleagues in order to develop interpretations based on Christian assumptions. The results can be surprising, and helpful in the attempt to understand how to live with the awareness of tension between science and faith.

End notes

¹ Here and through the remainder of the paper, “reason” is used to mean human reason based on experience and observation, independent of divine revelation, especially as in science.

² Kuhn, T.S. 1970. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Romans 1:18-25.

⁴ E.g., see Barbour, Ian G. 1997. *Religion and science; Historical and contemporary issues*. San Francisco: Harper; Haught, J.F. 1995. *Science and religion; From conflict to conversation*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press; Brand, L.R. 2006. *A biblical perspective on the philosophy of science*. *Origins* 59:6-42.

⁵ Gould, S.J. 2002. *Rocks of ages: Science and religion in the fullness of life*. New York: Ballantine Books. Another evolutionary biologist, Kenneth Miller, has noted the “duplicity” of Gould’s proposal on page 170 of: Miller, K.R. 2002 (1999). *Finding Darwin’s God*. New York: HarperCollins Perennial edition.

⁶ “And he [Paul] argued [reasoned] in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks.” Acts 18:4; “Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” Isaiah 1:18 RSV; “. . . Always be prepared to make a defense (reason) to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, . . .” 1 Peter 3:15; “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, . . . nothing you desire can compare with her.” Proverbs 3:13,15; Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God . . . 1 John 4:1.

⁷ “Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.” John 17:17; “. . . the word of the Lord abides for ever.” 1 Peter 1:25 (Isaiah 40:8); “The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children . . .” Deuteronomy 29:29; “Surely the Lord God will do nothing but He revealeth His secrets unto His servants the prophets.” Amos 3:7.

⁸ I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” 1 Corinthians 1:19-20;

“Although they knew God they did not honor Him as God, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, . . .” Romans 1:21-22; “Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.” Ecclesiastes 8:17; “[The Lord] who turns wise men back, and makes their knowledge foolish; who confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers;” Isaiah 44:25-26 (part)

⁹ “There are some things in them [Paul’s letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” 2 Peter 3:16; “Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” Matthew 4:5-6; “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” John 5:39-40.

¹⁰ Gibson, J. 2004. Issues in “Intermediate” models of origins. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14(2):71-92.

¹¹ This basic idea is widely accepted among creationists, with differences arising over the length of time in which the earth remained in an uninhabitable condition.

¹² See Plantinga, A. 1991. When faith and reason clash: Evolution and the Bible. *Christian Scholar’s Review* 21:8-32.

¹³ Jared Diamond reports recent estimates range as high as twenty million; previous estimates were more like one million. Diamond, J. 1999 (1997). *Guns, germs, and steel: The fates of human societies*. New York: W.W. Norton.

¹⁴ <http://www.cbu.edu/library/archives/sabita.htm>