

Genesis 1:1-27
“To Know or to Be—That is the Question”
Series: Religion ? Science
December 17, 2010
First UMC-Jefferson City
Daniel Hilty

Media Event 2

(Please display graphic file, “Series Generic 2.”)



Well, today marks the halfway point through our five week series on religion and science. As you may have guessed from the video of today’s scripture, this is the weekend that we’re going to spend some time on the subject we all knew was coming: creation and evolution.

*But...*this is a sermon that is ultimately *not* about creation and evolution.

We’re going to use creation and evolution as a jumping off point today. It’s kind of like the cliff we’re going to hurl ourselves off of—ready or not. But where we will find ourselves at the end of today’s message will hopefully be a different place.

To help us get there, the sermon today is going to be divided into four brief parts—four brief acts, if you will. And here they are:

Media Event 3

(Please display the following text, revealing one at a time as Daniel gets to it)
ACT 1: THE BOOK
ACT 2: THE DEBATE
ACT 3: WHAT IN THE WORLD IS THAT? *or* I THINK I’LL PASS ON THE PIE!
ACT 4: THE I-PHONE

We'll begin with Act 1, "The Book," ...next we will move to Act 2, "The Debate"...after that we will come to Act 3, "What in the world is that? or I THINK I'LL PASS ON THE PIE," and then finally we'll arrive at Act 4, "The iPhone."

Media Event 4

(Please display the graphic file, "Act 1 The Book")



So...to begin with: Act 1. The Book. The book that starts our story off today is a work that a lot of people associate with tension between religion and science. It was published back in 1859 by a man named Charles Darwin, and it's titled, *On the Origin of the Species*.

A lot of us probably learned about Darwin's book in a science class along the way. It introduced the world to the concept that human beings have evolved over millions of years through a process of natural selection. In other words, humans haven't always been human. We've mutated and changed from other species over countless generations to become who we are today.

OK. So that's Act 1. The act that sets the stage: the Book. Next comes Act 2: the Debate.

Media Event 5

(Please display the graphic file, "Act 2 The Debate")



For the first 50 years or so after the publication of Charles Darwin's book, Christians held a variety of opinions about his ideas—as we still do—but there wasn't the high degree of tension that we often associate with them today.

Then, beginning around 1915, things began to change. A lot of people began to be really opposed to the idea that science and religion could coexist with each other. When it came to the origins of humankind, many people in society came to believe that you were either a person of faith, or a person of science, but you could not be both. You may remember that George LeMaitre, who was the subject of the first sermon in this series, and who was alive during this era we're talking about today, also felt that pull between science people over here, and religion people over there.

And so, by the early 1920's, the battle-lines had been drawn. The two men on the screen have kind of come to embody those two sides in a lot of people's minds: these are Carence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan from the Scopes Monkey Trial back in 1926, which was a case brought against a school teacher by the state of Tennessee for teaching evolution in the classroom.

On the one side, there were some Christians who believed that God created human beings exactly as is literally described in the first chapter of Genesis—the passage we heard today. And on the other side, there were other people who believed that human beings were merely the result of a process of random mutations, and God played no part in it.

Now, I need to say that in actuality there were more than just two sides in the debate. And there are still more than just two sides today. There is also

another group of Christians, for example, which believes that “creation versus evolution” is kind of a false dilemma. In other words, it doesn’t simply have to be an “either-or” question. According to these folks, evolution may very well be something like God’s tool for making you and me and all other life—in one way or another. These folks say that they still believe in creation, but they just believe evolution is the process by which creation happened. And whether the earth and all that is in it came to be in seven days, or 13 billion years, it’s still an amazing miracle and gift from God either way, and Genesis Chapter 1 is a beautiful, inspired poem that captures that miracle better than anything else can.

There are still other sides to the debate, of course, but as I mentioned a few moments ago, what any one group believes about creation and evolution is ultimately not the point today. Because ultimately, figuring out our ancient past is not the point of faith. *Knowing* things is not the point of faith. No, the point of faith is to build a relationship with the living God today. The point of faith is building a relationship with the living Christ today. Faith is about who we are right now, and who God is helping us to become.


In other words, both science and religion may aim at discovering the truth about us and the world around us, but they have different roles to play, and they answer different questions. The point of science is to answer questions like “how?” and “what?” and “when?” “How was the universe formed?” for example. “When did the dinosaurs walk the earth?”

And the point of religion is to answer questions like “why?” and “who?” “Why are we here?” “Who is our maker?” and “To whom do we belong?” If we think about it, those are really the kind of questions that Genesis answers, right? The “who?” and “why?” questions: “Who made us?” Genesis tells us: God made us. “Why are we here?” Genesis tells us: we are here to care for all creation and to be in relationship with God.

But if we start asking “how?” questions of Genesis, we find that it doesn’t really provide the answers as much. For example, if we ask of Genesis, “how did God make us?” Well, all it says is that God said the word, and it happened. Which is miraculous and amazing and true—I believe that with all my heart. But it still doesn’t answer “how,” does it? Maybe God spoke the word, and we were formed in an instant. Or maybe God spoke the word, and we were formed over billions of years.

Religion and science seek to answer different questions. They seek to play different roles. And sometimes we can get ourselves into trouble when we ask one to play the role or answer the questions of the other. I’ll give you an example: a silly example, but an example nonetheless.

Which brings us to Act 3...

Media Event 5	
(Please display the graphic file, “Act 3 The Hedgeapple”)	

“What in the world is that?” or “I think I’ll pass on the pie!”

Back in early October, Kristen, Elijah, Maggie and I decided to take a hike through some of the beautiful autumn woods that we have here in Missouri around that time of the year. Well, we hadn't gone very far before we stumbled across one of the scariest looking fruits we had ever seen in our lives. There were dozens of them, scattered all over the ground under a tree. And we had no idea what in the world they were.

So I whipped out my iPhone from my pocket, and took a picture of it. That's the photo up there on the screen right now. Now, I need to ask you: does anybody know what kind of fruit that is?

Right! A hedge-apple! Which is also known as an "Osage orange." Good job! It is hard, and bumpy, and totally, totally inedible.

But none of us in our family knew that at the time. We had no idea what it was. So there in the middle of those Missouri woods, I uploaded that photograph to my Facebook page—which is a way that friends can connect together over the Internet—and I typed in the question, "hey! Does anybody know what this is?"


And do you know that within 2 minutes I had an answer? A friend in St. Charles wrote back and said, "That's a hedgeapple!" Within an hour I had five responses saying the same thing, and by the end of the day, seventeen people had written in—including many of you who are members of the church! Some of you even knew the Latin name!

We learned all sorts of amazing uses for the humble, inedible hedgeapple. Some of you dry them in ovens and use them for arrangements, for instance. My aunt in Kansas said farmers grow the trees there as windbreaks. Former church

members in Fayette told us that you can put them in the basement to control spiders. A friend in North Carolina said they used to bean each other with hedgeapples at Boy Scout camp. And one of you here in the church said that you and another member would use them for bowling balls as kids, “but” this member continued, “please don’t ever invite us over for any hedgeapple pie!”

Now, in my mind, that episode with the hedgeapple, and Facebook, and the iPhone, is a silly little metaphor for the kind of role that science and technology *can* play best, and the kind of questions that science and technology can answer best. It’s great for helping us *know* stuff. In this case, it was very trivial stuff to know—a hedgeapple. But in other cases it can be very important stuff—like how to make a sick person well, or how to make an airplane, or how to keep us safe.

Science is great at helping us *know* things; and religion is great at helping us *be*. But problems can develop when we get their purposes flipped. Which brings us to Act 4.

Media Event 6	
(Please display the graphic file, “Act 4 The iPhone”)	

Act 4. You see, my iPhone also has a dark side. Or, more precisely, I should say it brings out *my* dark side. And it’s not just the iPhone.

You see, if I am not careful, I can very easily allow the iPhone—as well as all the other gadgets of my life—to tell me who I am, and what I’m here for, and what’s important.

For example, unless I guard against it, I can very easily end up spending the better portion of a day just staring at one type of screen or another: when I’m at work, I’m in front of a computer; when I go out, in between hospital visits and meetings, I look at my iPhone; when I’m at home, I watch the TV. Big screens, little screen, fat screens, thin screens—screens, screens, screens. Everywhere and in everything screens. And I’d be fooling myself if I thought that that didn’t have an effect on me...on what kind of person I am, and how I relate to other people, and who I am becoming. Don’t get me wrong: screens have a role to play: after all, there’s one right here in church. But at the end of the day, am I a human *being*, or am I just a human *watcher*? Did God really put me here to love other people, or just to be fed a steady diet of electronic data day after day after day?

It really hit home a few weeks ago. It was in the evening, and I was at the house with my family. And once again I was on my iPhone, checking out Facebook, reading my wife Kristen’s status update...which is basically a short sentence or two that people can write on Facebook to let their friends know what is going on in their lives.

So there I was reading my wife Kristen’s status update on Facebook when the real Kristen walks into the room.

“Honey?” she asks.

“Just a second,” I say. “I’m checking Facebook.”

“But honey,” she says.

“Yes, I know,” I say. “I’m almost done. I’m reading your status update on Facebook.”

“But honey,” she says one last time. “I am right here...right here in front of you. If you want to find out what’s going on in my life, instead of checking my Facebook status update, why don’t you just ask me?”

And, of course, she was exactly right. *If you want to know about me, why don’t you just talk to me?*

So what do hedgeapples and iPhones have to do with evolution and creation, and science and religion? Only this: science is like my iPhone. It’s a powerful tool, and a great way to get to *know* stuff. And there’s a lot of good—tremendous good—that can come out of it. People’s lives are saved every second because of science and technology.

And on the other hand, religion is like sitting down to have a face-to-face conversation with my wife. It’s a great way to build a *relationship*, and to become more of who God wants me to be.

But we can get ourselves in trouble when try to switch roles between the two. Back in the middle of those woods, on that early October day, my wife and kids and I could have talked to each other and had face-to-face conversations till we were blue in the face, but we would have never figured out that the strange fruit in front of us was a hedgeapple. And yet staring at my iPhone, I could read

Facebook status updates till the cows come home, but it will never help me build up a relationship as much as talking to someone face-to-face.

Or to put it another way, we could argue from here till the end of time about how God made us—we could argue ad infinitum about what we know and how. But when all is said and done, all that arguing would miss the point of faith if it prevented us from spending time face-to-face with God *today*. The point of faith is to fall in love with God *today*. The point of faith is for you and me to *be* the love of God through Jesus Christ in the world today.

But we will never get there if we look to our faith only to help us *know* things, and not to transform us into something new. We will never get there if we spend all of our energy and time only staring into screens, and arguing about who's right and who's wrong.

The events of this past week, for example, are a horrific reminder of just how urgently the world needs people of faith who are more concerned about who we are today than about what we know about days gone by. I imagine the people of Haiti right now care very little about how God made human beings, and when, and by what process. I imagine what the people of Haiti care most about right now is where God is *today*, and what God is doing *today*.

And closer to home, the same idea is true. The father wondering how he can afford to feed his family, the older woman facing cancer, the couple who are going through a divorce, the young person who is being abused—none of these

is most concerned about how God made us in days gone by. No, they are concerned about how God loves them—and what God is making them into—today.

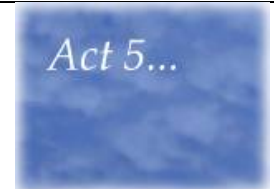
None of which is to say that science doesn't have role to play in making the world better. The machinery rescuing survivors in Haiti right now is the result of science. Diseases are being cured right now as a result of science. Whether science can make the world better is not the question for us today. No, the question is whether we who claim the name of Jesus Christ will use our faith to make the world better too.

You see, we who claim the name of Jesus Christ have a choice to make: either we can continue to stare at our screens, and hide behind our arguments, and worry more about what we know than who we are...

Or every now and then, we can set the screens aside, and our arguments too, and we can choose to be the love of God through Jesus Christ for our world today. We can choose to offer a new witness to the world: that in the name of Jesus Christ, what we *know* as Christians is not nearly as important as what kind of people we are today, and whose we are, and whom we love, and why.

Media Event 7

(Please display the graphic file, "Act 5")



And if we choose to make that new kind of witness to the world—in the power and the strength and the grace of Jesus Christ—then thanks be to God, a new act may very well begin. Amen.