

## **HAPPY BIRTHDAY CHUCK!**

**Colossians 1:15-20**

**Dr. Robert Cornwall**

I want to begin this morning by giving a big Happy 200<sup>th</sup> Birthday cheer to Charles Darwin. In case you missed it, on Thursday Darwin joined Abraham Lincoln in celebrating his 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now neither of them was around on Thursday to share in the festivities, but we can recognize and celebrate their legacy anyway.

Now, one of my more famous predecessors as pastor here was a big fan of Abraham Lincoln. As I understand it, Edgar DeWitt Jones hosted an annual Lincoln Lecture, because the study of Lincoln was one of his passions. So in the spirit of my predecessor, I invite you to share in one of my passions by observing Evolution Weekend on the Sunday following Charles Darwin's birthday. This year the number of churches, synagogues, and mosques participating has grown to about 1000.

This event was born four years ago as an outreach of the **Clergy Letter Project**. That project produced a letter, which you will find in your bulletins this morning. The letter, which was written by Dr. Michael Zimmerman and then signed by over 11,000 clergy and theologians, including me, is entitled "An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science." By signing this letter we declared our belief that Christians can believe in God and also affirm the scientific truthfulness of evolution.

I realize that many Christians would disagree with that statement, and I'm sure they would find it not only odd but sacrilegious for a church to observe the birthday of Charles Darwin. After all, in the minds of many he was the spawn of Satan, and an enemy of the church. Obviously, I don't share that sentiment. It's true that Darwin's theories have posed a challenge to our faith, and they have forced us to reconsider some of our traditional readings of the Bible, but even though Darwin was an agnostic at his death, he was never an enemy of Christianity or of the church. In fact, he remained a member of his family's church and contributed to it until his death – in honor of his wife's deep faith.

The reason why I introduced this observance to the Lompoc church and here is that I believe that something very important is at stake in this debate over the relationship of faith and science. Indeed, I believe that the intellectual integrity of our faith and our witness to the world is at stake.

## **1. Jesus, Darwin, and the Spiritual Mind**

Although the gospels record Jesus saying that we should love God with our heart, soul, and **mind** (Mt. 22:37), there is much anti-intellectualism within the Christian community. Many Christians seem to be afraid of what they'll discover if they start asking too many questions about the meaning of the bible or their own faith tradition. Better not to ask questions, and if people start asking questions, it's best to change the subject.

The reason why I'm so passionate about this issue is that I believe very strongly in the principle that "all truth is God's truth." If this is true then I believe we must, as Christians, be willing to pursue that truth no matter where it takes us, even if it takes us down paths that we find uncomfortable or challenging. The good news is that we don't have to take the journey alone. We can go on this journey together in the company of God's Spirit.

By taking this pathway, we will be true to our heritage as Disciples of Christ. The Disciples have been, from the beginning of our movement, committed to the life of the mind. Sometimes we can be overly rational, but the point is, as important as the mystical and the experiential may be to our spiritual welfare, our minds are important as well. Indeed, when we come to church we shouldn't have to leave our brains at home!

The problem we face today as Christians is that there are too many partisans on both sides of the issue telling us that we have to choose: It's either God or Evolution. You can't have both. As for me, I reject that demand. Like many Christians, who

unfortunately have been quiet of late, I want to declare my firm belief in God the Creator and at the very same time affirm the teachings of modern science concerning the manner in which this world emerged.

## 2. Interlude: Jesus Loves Darwin

There's this bumper sticker, which features two fish kissing. Maybe you've seen it. On one fish the name of Jesus appears, and on the other one, the one with legs, you'll find the word Darwin. If you go to our church Facebook page and then check out the invitation I sent out for today's service, you'll be able to see it. I used that symbol because I think it's very appropriate for what we're trying to do today.

That bumper sticker has a very ancient lineage. You see, the fish has been a Christian symbol since the first century CE. The fish reminds us that some of the earliest church leaders were once fishermen, and Jesus himself invited them to join him in fishing for humans. Of course, there's another reason they used the fish – it makes for a very nice acrostic that carries with it an important theological message: You see, the Greek word for fish is *ichthus*, and if you take each letter of that Greek word you can get this statement of faith: **Jesus Christ, God, Son, Savior.**

In recent years lots of fish decals have sprung up. When you see one you expect that the person driving the car is a Christian. So, because Jesus and Darwin are supposed to be at war, it's not surprising that the "other side" came up with their own similar decal. Their fish, however, has legs, reminding us that the first land animals descended from fish, and instead of Jesus's name, you'll find Darwin's name on it. By bringing these two fish together, we declare our belief that religion and science aren't enemies.

I realize I can't speak for everyone here today, but I would like to affirm this three-part premise: As followers of Jesus, who believe firmly that God is our creator, we can also affirm three important scientific premises: 1) Our universe is very old; 2)

Humans share a common ancestor with all living things; and 3) natural selection is the currently accepted scientific explanation for how all of this has taken place. I realize that there's a lot more that can be said here, but I think that's a good start for now.

### **3. Jesus, Creation, and Redemption**

You might be wondering – what about that scripture text that we read today – where does it come in? That passage, the one from Colossians 1, speaks clearly and powerfully of Jesus' role in creation. It is, in fact, a hymn, a song of praise to Jesus, declaring to all that he is God's partner in the work of creation and redemption.

As to the first point, this hymn boldly declares that Jesus is the first born of creation, and that in him, and through him, and for him, all things, whether in heaven or on earth, have been created. Not only that, but he is before all things and in him all things hold together. Indeed, he is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. And then the hymn moves on to the second point. In Jesus, God chose to dwell and in him and through him God has reconciled all things. That is, in and through the cross of Jesus, God has brought peace to earth and to heaven.

The language of this hymn not only soars, but it's cosmic in nature. Everything, not just our existence, is taken up into Jesus, so that everything that exists might find its purpose in God.

This passage, whether written by Paul or not, reflects in hymnic language the biblical confession that God is creator and that what God creates is good and has purpose. At the same time, it reflects the biblical confession that brokenness has crept into this creation. Indeed, as Paul himself writes in Romans 8, the whole of creation is groaning in labor pains, anticipating the freedom and the wholeness that it will gain together with the children of God at the appointed time (Romans 8:22ff). Now that's not a scientific statement. It's poetic and theological, but nothing in that statement is at odds with science.

It's my belief that both science and theology have something important to say to us. Each bears witness to important truths, but they do so from very different perspectives. We get into trouble when we try to turn the Bible into a science book. And, while science has much to say to us as Christians, there are truths that are beyond even it's insights. It doesn't make either of them deficient – just different. We can learn from both and celebrate both. And that, I believe is the point of Evolution Weekend! So, since Jesus loves Charles Darwin, we can wish him a very happy birthday!

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