

# Faith and Science

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i> .....	3
Introduction to <i>Faith and Science</i> .....	4
Session 1. Faith Seeking Understanding . . . Through Science .....	5
Session 2. Cosmos .....	11
Session 3. The Story of Life .....	17
Session 4. Human Beings .....	23
Session 5. Brain and Mind .....	29
Session 6. Technology and the Future .....	35
Suggestions for Further Study.....	42

# Faith Seeking Understanding . . . Through Science

## Scripture

Psalm 19:1–2 Wherever we look, nature reveals God’s glory.

John 1:1–3 Christ the Savior is also the Word through whom God creates all things.

## Prayer

Fill us anew, O God, with childlike wonder for creation. Make us curious about tiny things. Reconnect us with the steady rhythms of nature, and awaken within us a spiritual longing to engage creation and understand its ways as best we can. Open our eyes to amazement, and help us become witnesses of the grandeur of your creativity and the tenderness of your care. O Lord Jesus Christ: may your Spirit be the light by which we see your presence revealed throughout creation; for it is through your name that we pray. Amen.

## Introduction

How often have we heard someone refer to “the warfare” between science and religion! Maybe it was a Christian complaining that scientists are arrogant, obnoxious atheists. Or maybe it was a scientist complaining that every Christian opposes science, rejects evolution, and believes the earth is flat and rests on the back of a very large tortoise.

The truth, of course, is more complex. Sure, scientists and religious leaders have sometimes disagreed. But “warfare”? Hardly. Experts who study the history of the science-religion relationship insist that it is a complicated mix. Occasionally they tangled. Nevertheless, mostly religion supports and encourages science.

Yes, it is true that some scientists are atheists, a few of them even believing that science requires every honest person to reject religion. Most scientists—by far the majority—understand that science simply cannot prove or disprove religion. Many scientists, including some of the most prominent names in science today and in the past, are active believers.<sup>1</sup> Some see their science as an expression of their faith.

1. For example, see Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Yes, some Christians feel compelled to reject scientific theories like evolution. However, not all of us do. Reformed Christians in particular are open to science, eager to learn everything it can tell us about creation. We believe we are not forced to choose between good science and honest faith. We are confident that we can be biblically grounded, serious-minded Christians and still engage the natural sciences in all their vigor.

Why do we believe this? Because the God who speaks to us through the pages of the Bible, the same God who is known to us in Jesus Christ, is also the creator of the natural world studied by science. When science explores this world, it shows us the details of creation as never before. The more we see the details of nature, the more we are amazed at the wonders of God's creative majesty. The truth about nature cannot contradict the truth about the Creator. God is not inconsistent.

In worship, we profess our faith in God the "maker of heaven and earth." We praise God by giving thanks for creation, and we do this best when we understand the world God is creating.

## **Science Misused**

Not everyone agrees, of course. Some say that whenever science advances, faith retreats. Faith, they assume, is based on ignorance. Science is the opposite. It is knowledge in its most rigorous form. The darkness of faith, they say, must yield to the light of science.

Especially today, Christians are being ridiculed by a group of writers who like to call themselves "the new atheists." Not much is new about their atheism, but they are busy trying to persuade many people—especially our young people—that it is impossible to embrace science *and* faith. One way or the other, everyone must choose.

The new atheists claim religion tries to stop science. Moreover, since science is a good thing, anything that stops it must be bad. Just look at history, they say. Repeatedly, the church blocked science. They point to familiar stories about Galileo or Darwin. They say these stories prove that religion is the enemy of science. Historians do not agree. For every story about how some church leader opposed science, there are many more about how the church encourages science, medicine, and the development of technology. Far from being bad for science, most experts now agree that Christianity promoted the rise to modern science.

The new atheists claim science proves that nothing exists except the material universe. There are no ghosts or gods or imaginary

friends, they like to say. Of course, science cannot “discover” God or measure or prove spiritual reality. But can science discover or measure *everything*? Does science answer every important question? Does technology solve every important problem? If you think they do, then your list of “important questions and problems” is small. Christians believe the world is more complex than that, with plenty of big questions and challenges that science and technology cannot resolve. The new atheists assume otherwise, but how do they prove that assumption? Not by science.

The new atheists also try this argument: Religion is for children. As people grow up, religious explanations should give way to science. The problem here is that the new atheists seem to think that belief in creation is a kind of primitive or childish science. It’s not. It is a way of looking at the world, one that complements or enriches what science has to say. It is a way of seeing how all things depend upon God. Science enriches faith, but it cannot prove or disprove it, much less replace it.

Their arguments are discredited, but the new atheists are not going away. They will continue to misuse science as a weapon against Christians. That is why Christians, especially Reformed Christians, need to speak up. In churches and on campuses, in public and through the media, we need to state clearly: the God we worship wants us to discover everything we can about creation. God is not honored by ignorance. Belief is not preserved by anti-intellectualism. We praise God best when our brains are engaged and when our faith seeks understanding.

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## **Christians Called to Science**

God calls a small minority of Christians to be pastors. God calls the great majority of Christians to serve in other ways, often in the “secular” workplace and in every line of work from accounting to zoo-keeping.

On the long list of Christian callings are vocations in science, engineering, healing, and inventing. In these callings, we are invited to share Christ’s work in specialized ways. The fact that there were no computer scientists or chemical engineers when Jesus walked the

earth is obvious. What is not so obvious but is profoundly true is that God is actively present in every aspect of creation, including new fields and emerging technologies.

After all, the Christ who saves us is the savior of the whole world. The sphere of Christ's work is not limited to the walls of the church or to religious organizations. It is done wherever God is present, which of course is everywhere!

In classrooms and boardrooms, hospitals and research laboratories, wherever Christians find themselves called to use their God-given intelligence to solve problems, the call of God is being heeded. Finding new cures, discovering new insights into the hidden workings of the created order, teaching young people about the wonders of nature, caring for the environment—all these are forms of discipleship.

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Sometimes, however, even well-intended Christian parents might discourage their children from careers in science. Sure, the work is demanding, but there is no good religious reason why a young Christian should not respond to Christ's call to discipleship by becoming a scientist or an engineer. Done well, science leads us to a better understanding of the creation. Technology leads to a safer, healthier, more sustainable world. Of course, there are challenges, conflicts, and moral struggles involved in making sure that science and technology are done well. That's even more reason why Christians need to be present in these lines of work, to support the intellectual integrity of science and the moral integrity of the scientists.

In many churches, scientists or science teachers are part of the congregation. At times, they may feel out of place. They might feel that too many hymns picture heaven "up there." They might hear references to "Adam and Eve" or to "how God created us in the first place," and wonder whether such comments are meant to imply that science has the wrong view of these matters. They might hear about environmental challenges and think that technology is being blamed for all our problems. Or they may feel as if their work should have nothing to do with their faith, as if there must be a split between their heart and their mind.

To be open to science is to be open to scientists, to welcome them into our communities of faith, to invite them to talk about their work and their intellectual struggles, and to encourage them to teach the rest of us about some of the new ways that science sees our world.

## Science Enriches Our Faith

More than that, however, researchers and educators in science can teach us something about recent discoveries. Of course, the sciences are quite diverse today, using different approaches to different aspects of nature. Quite simply, an expert in chemistry might not know much biology, and biologists probably do not know much about cosmology. In one way, that simple fact might be reassuring to non-scientists. No one can cover the whole front of today's research.

Even so, nearly anyone working in science can help other Christians understand nature more clearly and fully. It hardly matters where we start. The key is to approach nature with an open mind, eager to learn, to have ideas stretched and horizons expanded.

Can science enrich our theology?

Can it help us see God's creation more clearly? For Reformed theology, the answer is a resounding, *yes!* We believe that through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God inspires human understanding, elevating our limited capacity to know the mysteries of God's love and the wonders of God's creation.

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John Calvin (1509–1564) put it this way: “If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.”<sup>2</sup>

We could say that the role of the Holy Spirit is four-fold. First, the Spirit inspires the writers of Scripture to write the biblical words that Christians cherish. Second, the Spirit inspires Christians in every age to understand the meaning of the biblical text. Third, the Holy Spirit is the fountain of truth, inspiring the human work of science through which the mysteries of creation are discovered. And finally, the same Spirit is with each believer, guiding and reassuring us, helping us in our doubts and in our unanswered questions, making it possible

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.15.

for us to put the time-proven message of the Bible together with the latest research in science. If we stop the four-fold work of the Spirit at any point, if for example we dishonor science or deliberately ignore its insight, we run the risk of dishonoring the Spirit of God.

Thank God for the presence of the Holy Spirit among us! We are not alone as we face some of the difficult questions that lie ahead. As we move through the sessions before us, our confidence rests completely in God the author of nature and of Scripture, revealed to us in Jesus Christ and through the presence of the guiding and sustaining Spirit.

### **Spiritual Practice**

Focus your attention on nature, especially on its tiny, delicate, or intricate structures and patterns. Notice the wings of insects, the shape of snowflakes, or the flight of a hummingbird. Give thanks to God for what you see, asking God to enrich your faith and your gratitude through every encounter with nature.

### **Questions for Reflection**

Have you ever heard Christians warn others about science? Why do you think they are cautious? What do they fear? Do you think science poses a risk to our faith?

Think of an experience of nature, perhaps an unusual sunset, or a baby's first smile. Did that experience trigger a religious response? Try to recall that feeling. Ask yourself how you can experience the joy of creation more often.

What kind of reputation does your church have in your community—a friend of science or anti-science? Can you think of ways in which your church might encourage scientists or engineers to participate in your worship and grow in their faith?