

“WHERE FAITH AND SCIENCE MEET (#1): GOD AND GALILEO”

(Acts 17:24-28a)

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**[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) “Mad Scientist” Intro Video clip; (#2) Someone to play piano;
(#3) Video Clip from movie Contact]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-10-10]

–I–

1. **[BOTH Services:]** Read Text (Contemp. MSG; Trad. NRSV): Acts 17:24-28a and Pray.

2. **[VIDEO INTRODUCTION BY “MAD SCIENTIST” LUDWIG VON NEBUCHADNEZZAR:**
“...*Conflicted Between Competing Truth Claims: Science & Faith*” (Time:3:00)]

A–Our resident “mad scientist” Ludwig von Nebuchadnezzar has a problem, doesn’t he?
He’s conflicted over what seem to be two competing truth claims, which (at least in our popular way of thinking) say that science and faith are rivals, and that the only possible resolution is for us to choose one over the other. ¹

B–But is that the way it *really* is? *Are* faith and science *truly* opposites (e.g., rivals) of each other... to the point where we have pick one over the other? Has science eliminated the need for faith in today’s world? And is it really possible to be a rational, thinking person *AND* at the same time be a person of deep religious faith and conviction?

C–These are some of the questions we’ll be exploring over the next five weeks in a new series I’m simply calling Where Faith and Science Meet.

D–And my hope and prayer is that through our time together, as we explore our amazing universe, the origins of humanity, and the relationship between faith and medicine, we’ll come to a better appreciation for the respective roles that faith and science can (and I believe *should*) play in our lives.

1–On the one hand, we’ll be able to see how the discoveries of science and reason can better inform our *faith*, in helping us understand who God is, who we are, and who it is that God is calling us to be....

2–...And on the other hand, we’ll see how religious faith can actually inform and complement *science* by suggesting answers to ultimate questions of reality that science itself cannot answer. ²

–II–

3. I want us to begin, though by remembering that this tension between faith and science has not always existed.

A–In fact, for the first 1500 years of Christianity, the two were seen as partners in a common quest for truth and knowledge. But a number of scientific discoveries in the late middle ages began to change that.

B—And one of the key events illustrating that change was the story of Galileo Galilei – a man of religious faith who went against the prevailing belief of his day by theorizing that the earth was *not* the center of the universe, but that instead it (and all the other planets) revolved around the sun. ³

1—In 1633 (in an incident that was *not* one of Christianity’s finer hours), he was put on trial by a church “Inquisition,” made to recant his views, and placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life.

2—And since that time, the perception is that science & faith have continued on separate journeys apart from each other because (at least in the minds of many), religious faith wants to *limit* science, and science wants to *disprove* faith altogether.

4. Now, I believe that the real mistake of the Inquisition was not in their foolish belief that the earth was the center of the universe, but in their misunderstanding of the purpose/use of the Bible.

A—You see, in that day, the Bible was understood to be the absolute, literal truth about *every* topic/subject contained within it – including history, philosophy, politics, *and* science.

1—So, for example, when it makes certain claims about *how* the universe was created or functions, then those claims were to be accepted as absolute truth, and anything that contradicted that literal interpretation was considered invalid and heretical.

2—And you may know that this isn’t only how the church of *Galileo’s* time understood scripture, but also how many fundamentalist Christians understand it *today*, as well.

B—But here’s a question: if God really wanted the Bible to tell us *everything* that there is to know about *every* realm of knowledge (including science), then why didn’t He include those details there?

1—Why not separate appendices about physics, biology, chemistry, and astronomy?

2—I mean, if teaching us correct *science* were God’s ultimate goal in giving us the Bible, then why is it that its content consists primarily of stories *not* about science, but about the relationship between God and humanity? ⁴

5. Could it be, you see, that the primary purpose and use of the Bible is not to teach us proper **Cosmology** (e.g., *How* the universe & our world work or was created) but proper **Theology** (e.g., *Who* God is, *What* His nature and character are, *Who we* are as human beings, and *How* God interacts with us)? ⁵

A—You see, I believe that *this* is the what the Bible is written to address: ...the ultimate questions of life and reality and existence – questions that science can neither “solve” nor “prove,” but towards which creation itself points.

B—And that’s what today’s scripture from Acts 17 tell us, as well (Vss. 24 & 27):

(MSG) “*God... made the world and everything in it... so we could seek after [Him] and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him.*”

(NRSV) “*God... made the world and everything in it... so that [people] would search for [Him] and perhaps grope for him and find him.*”

C— In other words, all that *is* & all that’s *discovered* by science is merely meant to point us towards God – Yes, that’s a *theological* statement, but one that many scientists even agree with.

–III–

6. And this means, of course, that in the end science and faith are *not* in conflict after all, but are merely *complementary* sources of knowledge and truth. ⁶

A—Think about it: the focus of science is on the *mechanics* of creation: How was the universe created? What forces and processes were used? How does it all function and work together to allow for life as we know it today?

B—But the focus of faith is different... its focus is on the *purpose and meaning* of creation: Why is there a universe at all? How did its laws come into being, why do they function the way they do, and is there something at work behind them? And what is the meaning and purpose of it all?

C—You see, these are both very different (but necessary) forms of knowledge. As geologist Chuck Barnes says, “*Science and faith are, in a way, simply different expressions of what it means to be human. They ask quite different sets of questions and have different views of what counts as ‘evidence.’*” ⁷

7. And that means that life is more than what can be explained by pure science. We know this from our own instinct and experience. Take music from a piano, for example:...

A—When we press a key, we experience sound [**PLAY ONE KEY...**]. And what’s called “Mechanical Science” can explain it: ...the energy from our finger is transferred to the key, causing a hammer to move and strike a string, creating a vibration-sound wave that moves around the room at about 740 mph.

B—But there’s more. Let’s say we press several keys at once [**PLAY SEVERAL DISSONANT KEYS...**]. What’s called “*Neuroscience*” says that when the sound waves from the piano reach our body, they enter the outer ear and travel through the ear canal to our ear drum.

1—The ear drum vibrates and transmits the vibrations through three tiny bones in the middle ear (the malleus, incus and stapes). These amplify the sound and send it to fluid-filled organ in the inner ear called the cochlea.

2–And there the vibrations produce ripples in the fluid that bend tiny pieces of hair projecting from the cochlea walls, which in turn create electrical impulses that our auditory nerve sends to the brain.

3–The brain translates these impulses into what we experience as sound. And *that* is the scientific explanation for music.

C–So what do you think? Does that really explain music? It may explain sound and noise. But, does it really explain this... **[PLAY A BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF MUSIC...]**

D–You see, how much poorer we would be if all we had were the rational, scientific explanations for all that happens.

8. Let's watch another example from the 1997 movie Contact that makes the same point.... **[VIDEO from Contact (“Did you love your father? Prove it!”) (1:13:44-1:14:57 – Total Time:1:15)]**

A–You see, not all reality can be explained or proven scientifically. There is far more that we need to know and understand about our world than what science alone can tell us. ⁸

B–Now, as people of faith we *need* science (its *not* the “enemy”), because science helps us understand *what* something is & *how* it works. But it's *not* equipped to answer questions of ultimate reality and meaning (nor should it)... because that's what *theology* is for.

–IV–

9. So in the end, you see, God and Galileo / Faith & Science are not really opposites that we have to somehow choose between, but instead are *complementary* forms of knowledge that God gives us – each having its own unique purpose, methodology, and realm of influence that we need to understand and live in today's world. ⁹

A–And because of this, do we Christians need to be afraid of sharing our faith for fear of being “irrelevant” or “out of touch” in today's world. Absolutely not!

B–Is there room for belief in God in a world of science and technology? You bet! And by the end of this series we'll see that such a world actually *requires* that kind of belief!

C–Is it possible for us to be rational, thinking people *AND* at the same time be people of deep religious faith and conviction? By all means! In fact, the evidence nearly *demand*s it!

10. And the heart and mind that God put within each of our bodies is evidence that faith and science belong together ...as partners.

11. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

1. Ian G. Barbour states that “*Scientific materialism and biblical literalism both claim that science and religion make rival literal statements about the same domain (the history of nature), so a person must choose between them*” [Barbour, When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers or Partners (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 11].

Of course, advocates of reason argue that science is the “obvious” choice. Rationalist Paul Keller says, for example, that “*Faith is a euphemism for prejudice, and religion is a euphemism for superstition.*” [Keller, cited in Judson Poling, Do Science and the Bible Conflict? (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), p. 18]. And in one of his books, the modern-day “evangelist” for atheism Richard Dawkins writes that “*Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.*” [Dawkins, cited in Poling, p. 21].

And unfortunately, this kind of rhetoric comes from the religious side, as well. We all know of televangelists and fundamentalist preachers who’ve denounced and ridiculed the findings of science when those findings appear to be in conflict with a literal interpretation of the scripture.

Today’s debate over creation vs. evolution is the most well-known example.

2. Questions like: why do we exist? what is the meaning and purpose of life? why do the “laws of nature and science” work the way they do? Is there more to life than merely what can be seen and touched and proven rationally and scientifically?

3. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) also invented the modern telescope from a child’s toy, eventually discovering moons around the planet Jupiter, and postulating that the earth (and all the other planets) revolved around the Sun, rather than them revolving around the earth as commonly believed in that time. He was tried by the Roman Catholic Church’s “Inquisition” for his “novel” scientific ideas, and forbidden to teach them, but contrary to popular myth, was never tortured or threatened with death because of them (Paul E. Stroble, Faith Questions: What About Religion and Science? A Study of Reason and Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 71-72).

4. John Jefferson Davis gives the following example: “*The agendas that modern interpreters have tended to bring to the text of the early chapters of Genesis – issues of ‘science and scripture’ – are at best secondary to the primary interests of the biblical writers.*” (Davis, The Frontiers of Science & Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 115). For instance, the first 11 chapters of Genesis “*challenge the ideas of the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East... [They] are concerned with affirming the unity of God in the face of polytheism and the justice of God rather than caprice: ‘scientific’ issues in the modern sense of the word are related only indirectly to the purpose of the text.*” (Davis, p. 115).

5. Its purpose is not to correct our understanding of science or nature, but to correct our understanding of morality, ethics, and salvation. It’s true that the Bible does contain *some* claims about science (including some claims that have since been corrected by modern scientific discovery). But even the claims that it *does* make in the end merely point us to questions of ultimate meaning that are only answered by claims of faith.

6. John Polkinghorne says that “*Religion and Science... [are] complementary ways of understanding the many surprises that await us as we seek to understand life and the world.*” (Polkinghorne, Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion (Crossroad, 2005), p. 17), and in another book refers to the “*cousinly relationship between scientific and theological method*” [Polkinghorne, Belief in God in an Age of Science (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), p. xii], and that “*Science and Theology... [are] partners in a common quest for understanding*” (Polkinghorne, Belief, p. xiv).

In a similar vein, John Jefferson Davis says that “*Christian faith and scientific method are understood to be complementary ways of knowing God’s creative work, each having its distinctive ways of knowing, methods and areas of validity.*” (John Jefferson Davis, The Frontiers of Science & Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,

2002), p. 7), and William Chalker says that all knowledge arises out of experience, which we receive from two distinctly different sources (rubrics): utility (science); and ultimate purpose of life (theology) [William H. Chalker, Science and Faith: Understanding, Meaning, Method and Truth (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. xii-xiii].

7. Barnes, cited in Paul E. Stroble, Faith Questions: What About Religion and Science? A Study of Reason and Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 23. Along the same lines, geologist Chuck Barnes says that “*Science seeks those truths that come from reason applied to observation of the material, physical world. Theology, in contrast, seeks those truths that come from reflection, prayer, and divine revelation about the immaterial world. Science deals with questions like ‘How does this work?’ ‘Of what is this made?’ ‘How is it made?’ Theology deals with issues of ‘Who are we?’ ‘Why are we here?’ ‘What is our purpose?’*” [Barnes, cited in Paul E. Stroble, Faith Questions: What About Religion and Science? A Study of Reason and Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 30].

Paul Stroble likewise acknowledges that “*Religion has to do with [questions about] ultimate reality (God, heavenly beings, he afterlife, etc), and the beliefs and practices that relate to ultimate reality (ways to worship, ethics, patterns of personal devotion, social responsibilities, etc.)*” [Paul E. Stroble, Faith Questions: What About Religion and Science? A Study of Reason and Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 30], and John Polkinghorne explains that “*Science rejoices in the rational accessibility of the physical world and uses the laws of nature to explain particular occurrences in cosmic and terrestrial history, but it is unable of itself to offer any reason why these laws take the particular (anthropically fruitful) form that they do, or why we can discover them through mathematical insight*” [John Polkinghorne, Belief in God in an Age of Science (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 10-11].

8. In 1931 the mathematician and logician Kurt Gödel (1906-1978) proposed that propositions can neither be proved nor disproved from within their own system – that systematic propositions can only be proven true using systems *outside* themselves. (See pp. 89-91). What this means for the relationship between science and theology is that “*the notion of truth cannot be reduced to the notion of provability*” (John Jefferson Davis, The Frontiers of Science & Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 101). In other words, just because something cannot be logically *proven* (i.e., through science) does not mean it doesn’t exist. What this means for theology and faith is that it need not try to justify itself using the language of science. As Davis states, “*Theology has its own distinctive voice and need not forever be preoccupied with justifying itself in language of Euclid and Einstein*” (Davis, p.101).

9. Albert Einstein himself once wrote that “*Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind*” [Einstein, Science and Religion II: Science, Philosophy and Religion, A Symposium “Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc.” (New York, 1941)]. Ian G. Barbour says that “*Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. Each can draw the other into a wider world, a world in which both can flourish*” [Barbour, When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers or Partners (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 17].

John Jefferson Davis also points out that “*The history of the science-religion relationship indicates that both disciplines are best served when theologians do not attempt to derive empirical results from their religious texts, and when physicists do not presume to settle issues of value, meaning and purpose by the scientific method*” [John Jefferson Davis, The Frontiers of Science & Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 173].