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“Christians have to be careful to not say *more* than the Bible says.” — Dr. Bruce Lowe

Scripture, Interpretation and Science

Two RTS professors tackle a contemporary challenge.
A Dialogue with Dr. John Yeo and Dr. Bruce Lowe

[begin text]

RTS-Atlanta’s Old Testament and New Testament professors come from educational backgrounds particularly suited to address the relationship of Scripture and science. Dr. John Yeo has a special interest in critical approaches to the Bible and Old Testament interpretation. He holds a Ph.D. in Old Testament from the University of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto. Dr. Bruce Lowe has a Ph.D. in chemistry and is in the final stages of completing a Ph.D. in ancient history at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

This interaction between the two men lends insight into how to handle a growing controversy both within the church and in the academic world at large.

To set the proper context for addressing the relationship between Scripture and science, why is training in biblical interpretation so important?

Dr. Yeo: To start, it enriches our understanding of what God is saying to us in His Word. In my youth, I grew up hearing a hodgepodge of interpretations on a variety of topics related to Christianity and the Bible. I began to realize that I didn’t know which view was right because I didn’t know how to correctly interpret the Bible for myself. It was only after I learned sound principles of biblical interpretation in seminary that the Bible became understandable and familiar. I am thus able to communicate that understanding in my teaching ministry today. That’s one of the reasons why all Christians, not just RTS students, need to become proficient interpreters of the Bible also.

How do students become “proficient interpreters of the Bible”?

Dr. Yeo: By getting acquainted with the biblical languages and learning how to exegete the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek texts. From exegesis, they progress to exposition and ultimately toward a biblical-theological understanding of the text. Genre analysis in narrative and poetry is also important, as well as seeing the text within its proper canonical and redemptive-historical setting, with Christ as its center. Foundational to these approaches is our belief that the Bible in its entirety is the divinely inspired, inerrant Word of God.

John, in referring to poetry, you're undoubtedly aware of a recent debate surrounding the historicity of Genesis 1. Some people are trying to argue that it is not historical, saying instead that it is "poetic." What can you say about this?

Dr. Yeo: There has been a longstanding debate surrounding whether Genesis 1 is poetry or narrative. Some Christian scholars believe that if the text is "poetic," it gives them the validation — based upon their genre analysis — to interpret it from a non-literal or figurative perspective. Additionally, some scholars will claim that Genesis 1 is not historical. My view is that the text is narrative and should be interpreted literally, but let's grant for a moment that Genesis 1 is poetry. Does all poetry, by virtue of its genre, necessitate we interpret it non-literally? For example, we learned poems in grade school that were both poetic and historical, such as the one about Christopher Columbus: "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue" The history of Columbus being made into a poem does not mean it did not literally happen. In other words, not all poetry is figurative or non-historical.

The question of genre and history also pops up in other places. For example, the books of Jonah and Job have been labeled by some scholars as "parables," just like Jesus' parables, because they have alleged myth-like elements. They seem to contain too much that is "amazing," like Jonah being swallowed by a fish, or "coincidental," like Job regaining exactly double what he originally lost. These narratives, however, should be read as true stories because, unlike true parables, they are situated within a particular historical context, consist of fully developed characters and are set in real historical places. But the best reason to read Jonah and Job as true stories is because the Bible itself attests to their historicity: Jonah is attested to in 2 Kings 14 and by Jesus in Matthew 12, while Job is attested to in Ezekiel 14 and James 5.

If we believe that Jesus and the other writers of the Bible are reliable, then we should not have an issue believing that miracles are possible for an all-powerful God, and that God can also cause amazing coincidences to confirm what He has done. The only alternative is to start tinkering with the credibility of the biblical authors, creating a "slippery slope." So it's a matter of weighing things cautiously and honestly so that we don't irrationally and needlessly abandon historicity, whatever we decide about genre.

Bruce, you are a scientist by training. How would you address the stereotype that it is extremely difficult to be a scientist and a Christian?

Dr. Lowe: I think back to something my doctoral supervisor in chemistry said. He studied at Oxford and also had a Christian upbringing. His brother, in fact, was a fine Anglican bishop in Australia, a strong Christian. My supervisor turned his back on it all, yet he was never antagonistic to me. He would say, "Isaac Newton wrote as much on the Bible as he did on science." I suppose this is how I've always felt. Many great scientists, past and present, have been *motivated* by their Christian beliefs, not stifled.

But some people today, particularly atheistic scientists, are saying that real science is incompatible with things like "intelligent design." In a recent article in *American Scientist*,

**intelligent design was described as “religious prejudice disguised as intellectual freedom.”
What is your perspective on this?**

Dr. Lowe: At one level, I understand where statements like this are coming from. The scientific method is extremely powerful, because it not only brings clarity to the world in which we live, but it also perpetuates the search for more clarity. It has, if you like, an immune system protecting the life and liveliness of future inquiry. Science, in fact, would rather get wrong answers in the short term if it means encouraging further discussion toward the right answer in the long run. One of the heroes of science, Francis Bacon, once said, “Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion.”

For militant atheists, a belief in God is abhorrent, and their own violent reaction is like an immune response seeking to protect the organism of science from what they see as its greatest threat. As soon as you start saying, “God did that,” they would argue that you are shutting down the search for a naturalistic solution to that problem. So there *is* scientific bias against God, I believe, making some people want to eliminate Him or at least minimize His involvement exponentially. It’s a tricky issue, because sometimes God *has* been used as an excuse for not looking further. So Christians have to be careful to not say *more* than the Bible says. But they also have to be careful not to be swayed by forceful rhetoric, which is not without an agenda.

Scientific atheists often assert that God doesn’t exist because we don’t *need* him to exist in order to explain the world. But there is circularity in this argument. If you cannot include him in your system because he will kill off your method, then is it any wonder your system has not yet found Him necessary? I think Christians have to be extremely careful not to be swayed by this kind of rhetoric, not only in an overt way from atheists, but also more subtly in science wanting to minimize God’s involvement in the world. Science, as Thomas Kuhn famously pointed out, is not completely objective. So as a Christian who believes in Jesus as God’s Son, I follow Jesus in believing in the truthfulness of the Bible. I must read it carefully to make sure I am not trying to make it say more than it says, but I must also be careful not to minimize what it does say in the face of current scientific theory.

Another scientist said recently, “Scientific answers have a unique hallmark — they do not represent the absolute truth of the matter. They are provisional beliefs subject to continuous critical revision. For now they represent the most reliable conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of the available evidence.” How strongly should we therefore lean on the findings of science? I’d say, confidently in some areas, cautiously in others and skeptically in others still.

What would be a real-life scenario that would illustrate how the church can address the issues you’ve raised?

Dr. Yeo: A real-life scenario hitting close to home in the church today is the question of whether or not Adam and Eve were historical persons. This debate is not new, at least from the perspective of conservative evangelicalism versus theological liberalism. What makes the present debate novel is that some evangelicals now deny the historicity of Adam and Eve because they say the text is not to be interpreted literally. The claim, however, is a bare assertion,

and proponents of this view provide no substantive arguments or firm data to justify their position. Instead, they read whatever they like into the text.

But unlike what we discussed earlier concerning Genesis 1, there really is no debate surrounding the genre analysis of Genesis 3. The Hebrew text in this chapter is unquestionably historical narrative and not poetry, although it contains prophetic material in the form of poetry when God speaks in judgment. A good example of this kind of prophetic poetry is found in verse 15, otherwise known as the *protoevangelium*, or “first gospel,” with the prediction of Christ as the seed of the woman, and His defeat of Satan, the seed of the serpent. However, the passage — while prophetic and poetic in form — is still intended to be historical from a prospective point of view and is expected to be fulfilled later. The narrative, therefore, is intentionally straightforward about the historical circumstances surrounding Adam’s fall and how sin and death originally entered the world.

In the context of the chapter, then, God comes to Adam to confront him about his covenant disobedience, which results in spiritual and eventual physical death. This is the apostle Paul’s basic argument in Romans 5:12-21. Paul claims that because Adam’s sin was historical and that Adam served as humankind’s federal head, all men inherited and were imputed Adam’s “original sin.” Therefore, it was necessary that God send Jesus Christ, His only Son, as the “second Adam” to reverse the curse through Christ’s obedience, thus bringing justification and life to those in union with Him as their federal head. The historicity of Adam is central to Paul’s redemptive-historical argument. The fact that Christ came to bring us justification and life would only make sense if Adam had actually brought sin and death into the world. If there were no literal and historical Adam, there would be no sin for which Christ would have to come and redeem His people.

Dr. Lowe: What I was saying before about the scientific method has practical application to speaking with atheists. To begin with, it helps us have real expectations about their responses. The scientific method assumes that anything that shuts down further research is the enemy, meaning anything supernatural. So expect such a friend to not be super-keen to give ground on anything you say! To make matters worse, science is about sniffing out and eliminating bias (in yourself and others), and since you are the sort to believe in the supernatural, who can trust anything you say? This is not to say that all atheists will be aggressive and militant, but in my experience, atheists are most likely to fight you on everything. Conversations regularly turn into tit-for-tat debate.

Secondly, because such people only have eyes for the scientific method, they are likely to only be interested in scientific points of argument (“Show me the money!”). I’ve sometimes found it helpful to ask them, “What kind of specific evidence would be enough to convince you that God exists?” If they say, “Well, for God to appear to me directly,” you could note that the philosopher David Hume once said that if you have an experience of God, better to assume you’ve gone crazy than attribute it to Him. So I tell them this wouldn’t cut it — chances are, like Hume, you’d attribute it to an insane moment, and indeed I’ve seen this happen with people before. So that doesn’t work. I keep pressing: “What would it take?” The good thing about this question is that it challenges them to think about their method (“Is my approach to establishing things universally capable of establishing everything worth knowing in the universe?”) I reckon that atheists would

answer yes to this, so it's almost like you need to shake this (foolish) assumption first before you can go anywhere else.

What is your vision for the future of the church?

Dr. Yeo: It would be wonderful to look back and see a generation of thoughtful Christians trained to love Jesus and the Word of God.

Dr. Lowe: I can't agree more. I get so excited when I think about a generation of thoughtful Christians impacting this country and the world with the message and teachings of Jesus, the Lord and Savior of the nations.

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