



What Are We Telling the Kids? Teaching Genesis to Teenagers

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QUESTIONS AND MORE QUESTIONS

If God created the world, then who created God? Why did God put the forbidden tree in the garden in the first place? Whom did Cain and Abel marry? How could the world have been created in seven days when my teacher says it took millions of years? How did Noah get all the animals of the world on one boat?

This is just a short list of many questions that I have received while teaching confirmation classes about the book of Genesis. If you have been in the trenches walking alongside young people as they journey through confirmation, I am sure you have heard these questions too. The question is, How do we faithfully answer these important questions in light of our faith and in light of our modern scientific understanding of creation?

Every week during confirmation instruction at the church I serve we have something called the “Question of the Week.” Our students gather for a large group teaching session one week and then reflect on this teaching in small groups the next week. During that small group time, if they have big questions, things that really make them wonder, things that they cannot answer on their own—about anything—they are invited to write them down and turn them in. During the next

We cannot pass on the faith to the next generation without dealing honestly and authentically with their real questions—including questions about the relation between faith and science, Genesis and Darwin. Risks are involved, but not to engage such matters is the greater risk.

class we take some time to wonder with the students about their questions. Every year, without fail, the majority of questions we receive concern the Genesis creation stories. Young people want to know how they can reconcile the God of creation found in our apostolic confession and biblical witness with all that they are learning about the formation of the world in their science classes. Is there room for evolution and Darwin in the claims of our faith?

ANSWERS AND MORE ANSWERS

I used to think that to be a good pastor to young people I had to have a neatly packaged, easily understandable answer to all their questions. But life is not that black-and-white. There are some questions that just cannot be answered in a single paragraph or with a clever illustration. Not only that, how we approach and answer students' questions is highly important to their faith, because underneath their questions are more questions—questions about how faith in Christ and the witness of Scripture can fit into their life and their view of the world. There is a lot at stake when we answer students' questions.

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Consider Mark. I met Mark on a Tuesday afternoon. He had called me up after attending one of our Sunday services for the first time, and he said he had a lot of questions he just needed to talk to a pastor about. He wasn't kidding. Mark is twenty-six years old, recently engaged to a young woman who wants to go to church, and until last Sunday had not been back to church since he was confirmed in the ninth grade. His fiancée's insistence that church was important to their married life had set him into a tailspin.

Mark came into my office, a spiral-bound notebook in hand. He was kind of nervous, but he thanked me for meeting with him. Before I could even begin with a few get-to-know-you questions, he jumped right in, opened up his notebook, which was filled front to back with questions and thoughts about life and God, and began to ask me what I thought about all he had been wondering about.

Guess what his questions were about? He wanted to know how he could "fit" the claims of Scripture into what he had experienced and learned about the world. When Genesis spoke about the world being created in seven days, does it mean seven literal twenty-four-hour days? Where does evolution fit into faith?

So, I asked Mark more about his questions. Where did they come from? What was the source of what he believed the church taught about his questions? When he was in the eighth grade, he attended a Lutheran church in town. He was a smart kid with a lot of questions. His pastor was teaching about the First Article of the Creed and creation. Mark wanted to know how this fit into what he was learning about

evolution at school, so he asked his pastor. His pastor told him God said the world was created in seven days and he just had to believe. Mark checked out. He was done with the church. Christianity did not make sense to him. In his eighth-grade mind the church was irrelevant to what he was learning about the origin and meaning of life. He would never have come back were it not for his fiancée.

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RISKY BUSINESS

At Hope Lutheran Church we write our own confirmation curriculum. I cannot say that I have read or reviewed every other curriculum available, but I always have an eye out for new stuff. When it comes to teaching about creation and Genesis stories, I have to say I have been generally disappointed. Many teach about creation, that God is our creator, that he is our "Father" and that he created the world and all that exists. Most then spend most of their time focusing on the theological implications of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed or the creation story. For example, if God is our creator and we are created in God's image, what does it mean about how we treat each other and our world? Most do a good job of this. Great stuff to think about and reflect upon. However, rarely do I find a curriculum that addresses how the Genesis stories relate to what students are learning about science, Darwin, and evolution. When we fail to be open to these questions we fail to be relevant to what teens are learning and thinking about.

My hunch is that most avoid teaching or thinking about this because of the possible political or parental feedback they may receive. I have parents that believe that when Genesis says that the earth was created in six days and the on the seventh day God rested it means seven literal twenty-four-hour days, and that the world we live in is only a few thousand years old. In their worldview the public school science teacher is the enemy or at least seriously misinformed or deceived. For them, anything less than a strict, literal interpretation of the creation stories refutes the truth of Scripture.

On the other hand, I have many parents who have just as many questions as the students I serve. They want to know how the claims of science can be reconciled with the claims of faith.

This is certainly a hot-button issue. After all, in many school districts, the debate continues about whether or not intelligent design (the idea that there is a Designer that has planned and made the universe and everything in it) is a credible theory to be included in students' science textbooks.*

To begin to wonder aloud with young people about the claims of science and Scripture when it comes to creation can be risky. It would be easier to play it safe, to

*Editor's note: The debate continues despite the clear rejection of such teaching as unconstitutional by Judge John E. Jones, an ELCA Lutheran, in *Kitzmiller et al. v. Dover Area School District* in 2005. For a thoroughly readable account of the issues and the trial, see Edward Humes, *Monkey Girl: Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America's Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

focus on the larger theological claims, and hope to brush over or ignore the more difficult questions of how science and religion can interact. But if we do, we fail to be relevant to the real questions our young people have, young people to whom we have made promises to pass on our faith.

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Two years ago, I attended a cousin's wedding in Denver, Colorado. While I was there I had the opportunity to engage in a faith conversation with a younger cousin of mine. My cousin is an ambitious, intelligent, responsible young man who had recently been married. I knew, through the family grapevine, that he had abandoned his faith and claimed to be an atheist. His wife grew up in a home with a vocal atheist father. I had not seen my cousin since I was in college. As we sat across the dinner table both of them looked at me as somewhat of an oddity.

My cousin began the conversation, "So, you are a pastor, huh?"

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"Well, I don't believe there is a God or that people should force their religions on anyone else," he jumped right in there. Great way to start a peaceful conversation, I thought.

I wanted to unload on him and tell him how foolish he was to abandon his family's faith, and argue with him about the bold truth of the gospel. However, I relaxed my defenses and asked him how he came to that discovery in his life.

He was amazed that I wanted to hear his story. He said it all began in junior high school, in confirmation, when his friend was challenging his pastor about the claims of the Bible over against the claims of evolution and science. The pastor told him that his questions were unimportant and that he simply had to make a choice, either his textbooks were telling the truth or the Bible was. My cousin made his choice.

These questions are important. When we set up science and faith as oppositional forces, both vying for the allegiance of young hearts and minds, more often than not I believe we will lose. At Hope, we teach young people that science and faith do not contradict but in fact can complement one another, and furthermore that science can be an amazing way to explore the mysteries of God and God's creation.

CONTEXTUALIZE IT

Confirmation students learn about creation at two different points in their three-year experience at Hope; once in seventh and eighth grade when they study

the book of Genesis as part of a biblical overview, and once in ninth grade when they study the First Article of the Apostles' Creed.

When we teach the biblical stories we involve the students in a dramatic, interactive, multisensory retelling of the creation story of Gen 1. We lower the lights, project images of the earth and universe on a large screen, as God speaks and creates the various parts of creation. We try to bring the biblical narrative to life as best we can so the students cannot ignore it.

After we have done this, we spend some time reflecting on what this all means for how we understand ourselves, how we understand the nature of God, and how we understand and treat each other and the world we live in. Rather than just telling the students what they should think, we engage them with open-ended questions and ask them to connect the dots and wrestle with the implications and mysteries of the creation story.

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By this time, the brains are swirling with more questions. How does this all fit in with evolution? How can the world be created in seven days? This is where Rob and John come in. Rob and John are both members of our congregation who also happen to be middle-school science teachers, the same teachers from whom the majority of our confirmation students are learning about Darwin and evolution. Rob and John spend time with our students explaining how they fit the claims of Scripture together with what they know about the world as scientists. They explain that, for them and for many Christians, science and the Bible do not contradict but simply help us see different realities about our world and about God. For one to be true doesn't mean that the other needs to be false, but in fact both can be true in different ways at the same time. We teach them that science and faith can complement each other, each giving us a fuller, deeper, richer understanding of the world we live in, the world that God created.

Often, in confirmation classes, it is a complicated task to engage the hearts and minds of our students. They face a myriad of distractions, from the person of the opposite sex sitting in the next row to what their friend is doing at the moment, and how to answer their latest text message. But when we talk about science and creation, their eyes are alert, they sit up in their chairs, and they are eager to hear what their teachers and their pastors have to say. It is clearly something that most young people are thinking about.

FINAL ENCOURAGEMENTS

Faithfully stewarding the rich and life-giving claims of faith to the next generation is certainly an important task of the church. It is often messy, unpredictable, and full of challenging ideas, behaviors, and questions. But I wouldn't trade the privilege of walking alongside our young people for anything. For all our deeper understanding, complex thought, and intelligent theological reflection, if we fail to pass on our beliefs to the next generation, to be good stewards of the knowledge that God has collectively given us, we have failed. The task of intelligently and respectfully engaging the hearts and minds of young people is at the forefront of our commission from Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20).

From my perspective as a parish pastor, I offer the following encouragements:

Honor questions

It is important that we create space for young people not only to ask questions, but to explore them as well. I have learned over and over again that when a young person asks a question the best response is to ask them more questions. Find out what they really are thinking, where their question comes from, and why they are asking. Encourage them to wrestle with the question themselves. The temptation is simply to give them a neatly packaged, concise answer. When it comes to complex issues, like how to reconcile science and faith, there are no such easy answers. Invite and welcome students to think about the mystery of God. Think about how much study, thought, reflection, and prayer it has taken you to arrive at the conclusions you have. Our job is not to regurgitate our theological education on young people but to walk alongside them in their journey of faith discovery.

This is not a new or particularly modern idea. Even Jesus spent three years telling stories, explaining ideas, praying and wondering with twelve young men before he sent them into the world. When he was asked a complex question himself, Jesus often spoke in parables, inviting the questioner into deeper, more thoughtful reflection.

Be authentic

Unless we demonstrate to young people that we are actually concerned about who they are and the realities they live in, they are not going to be concerned about the things that we care about. I do not believe that in order to be authentic to young people we need to dress like them, act like them, or even be closer in age to them; however, we do need to be aware of and respect their experiences and their generation's particularities.

We cannot assume that we know everything they need to know, that all teenagers are the same, or that their experience of adolescence was the same as ours.

Young people live a complex, media-driven, consumer-oriented society. We need to be able to navigate their realities in order to engage their faith. At Hope we are working on creating a blog site for our young people where they can ask questions and have discussions about what they are learning at church. Students are invited to “facebook” and “text message” us questions about what they are learning and thinking about. Ultimately, for a young person, authenticity has to do with showing a genuine interest in and respect for who they are, what they think about, and what they believe.

Take risks

If we truly engage the lives and questions of young people we will need to take risks—risks that we might offend someone, risks that we will have to talk about real-life issues that are not always politically or socially favorable. Young people do not always need answers to all their questions (just as we don’t have answers to all our questions), but they do need adults of faith who are willing to enter into the conversation with them. Teaching about the complex relationship between faith and science may come with the risk that you might offend some parents, but this is at the heart of students’ thoughts, culture, and questions. We need to take the risk of meeting young people where they are and exploring with them topics of faith and life that they are wondering about. Not to engage their questions, hearts, and minds in meaningful and intelligent ways is the greater risk. ⊕

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