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Intelligent Debate

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Right now, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, there is a drama unfolding that may alter the future of the United States in ways not seen in generations. In October, 2004, the Dover, Pennsylvania, School Board voted to require a statement to be read before ninth grade biology classes stating in part that "The theory [of evolution] is not a fact. Gaps in the theory exist for which there is no evidence." It went on to recommend that they consult a book put out by a Christian publishing company in Richardson, Texas, which is critical of evolution. According to School Board member, Alan Bonsell, the statement was the result of months of discussion on how "to bring prayer and faith back into the school."

At issue is a concept called "Intelligent Design" which has become the common term for "Creationism" after the 1987 Supreme Court decision banning the teaching of Creationism in public schools. Intelligent Design and Creationism argue that the world is too complex to have evolved by evolution and natural selection and must, therefore, have been designed by someone with vast intelligence .

Not long after the statement was introduced in the classrooms, six parents filed suit against the school system claiming that it was promoting a religious belief in public schools and was violating the establishment clause of the Constitution.

This whole debate is deeply troubling to me. I'm from the south and was raised in what used to be known as a "fundamentalist" Christian church. We went to church twice on Sundays and prayer meetings on Wednesdays. I sang in the choir and led a Christian singing group. I also led revivals, preached in them and organized them. And, for what it is worth, I still believe that God lives and moves and changes things on this planet and in our lives.

However, in spite of all of that and in spite of my love of Jesus Christ as my savior today, I could not back then and cannot today, understand why anyone would ever want religion to go to battle against science to prove that the world was created by God instead of through evolution.

I am concerned that if the Dover School Board wins its case, and the theory of Creationism/Intelligent Design is promoted and accepted as a scientific theory on par with the theory of evolution, it would ultimately do tremendous damage to the concept of faith and the task of Christians to proclaim the Gospel.

According to my tradition, faith is the "assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). If it ever came to pass that science could prove the existence of God or prove that God created the world in seven days, then the whole nature of faith as we know it would be turned on its head.

Faith comes about through a leap beyond the stability of knowable facts into the riskiness of trust in God. It is drawn forth from us by a love that cannot be measured or quantified. It brings about in us a sense of conviction, a sense of being pulled toward trust in and loyalty to the God who is beyond the limits of knowledge and facts.

To me, the idea of a public school teaching my kids that a paleontologist can prove the existence of that deep, vast, and mysterious God by studying fossil forms in the rock record, is very unsettling. It would undermine the basic task of churches to help people find an intangible inner strength with which to cope with the growing madness and chaos of modern life.

The philosophy of "Intelligent Design" implies strongly that evidence of the mysterious ground of our very being, that we call God, can be discovered by studying such things as the amino acid sequences of key proteins. That encourages us to believe that that which we worship can be known by the mind and the senses instead of the heart and the spirit. This desire to demonstrate God concretely is an ancient idolatry that was panned by the prophets and condemned by the church because it takes away the gray areas of religion and denies us the soul-strengthening struggle with doubt that is a necessary forerunner for faithful conviction.

When I was in high school a counselor at a Christian summer camp once helped me out when I was trying to make sense out of the resurrection. I told him I didn't understand it and that it was hard to believe. He told me that that was just the point. It wasn't supposed to be easy. Part of our job as Christians, he said, was to reach and stretch and wrestle with the teachings of the Bible and theology. If it was easy then we'd all be comfortable and stay in the same place developmentally all of our lives, and never grow in our faith or the complexity of our beliefs.

One of the things that makes me nervous about Intelligent Design today is that if it is accepted in our school systems and in our culture, we may well create a whole generation of Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and Jewish children who will grow up thinking that belief in God is easy.