

Beyond Intelligent Design

A sermon preached at Niles Congregational United Church of Christ
on Sunday, February 12, 2006, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: Mark 1:40-45

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One day, a visitor to the local zoo noticed that an orangutan was reading the Bible and Darwin's Origin of Species. In surprise, the visitor asked the ape, "Why are you reading those two books?"

"Well," the orangutan replied, "I'm trying to figure out if I'm my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."¹

Our Gospel lesson for today has in it one of those things that can bug Christians with a scientific mind. Healing stories can cause internal conflict for followers of Jesus who also have some scientific background. On one hand, we believe that Jesus is God incarnate and that, as the Creator of all that is, could do some creative work and cause an illness to end. Like Jeannie crossing her arms and blinking, Jesus could touch the leper and make the bacteria leave his body, restore his infected flesh, and make him well. It's that whole thing about choosing – "If you choose, Jesus, you can make me well" – and we want Jesus to be compassionate and to choose to heal the guy.

On the other hand, we believe that the universe has order and laws – like the conservation of mass and energy – and that the bacteria couldn't just disappear into nothingness. And we don't want Jesus to violate the natural order. If he does, it raises all sorts of problems about him choosing to this time, but not some other time.

We end up with our own headaches wondering if we should ask Jesus to heal them.

While this topic is wonderful fodder for a sermon, I'm not going to speak to it directly today. Instead, I want to use the headache the story causes as a springboard for a sermon about Intelligent Design.

You may be wondering why I am choosing to speak about Intelligent Design today. Yes, the issue has been in the news over the past months. But, no, I haven't heard anything specific about Intelligent Design being an issue right now here in the Tri Cities or, in fact, anywhere in the United States. So, I haven't picked this topic because I think it is a particularly pressing issue. I picked this issue because I've thought for some time that I should speak about it and, because today is Evolution Sunday, a day recommended by the Clergy Letter Project as a time to preach about the compatibility of religion and science. So, I figured, why not today?

As I prepared for this sermon, I realized that there probably isn't enough time to really cover the topic as thoroughly as it deserves. So, I don't think this is the last word on the topic. In fact, I doubt this is even my last word on the topic. Rather, I hope that this sermon will help you figure out where you stand on these issues and, if you reach the same conclusions as I have, that it will help you talk about the issue with others in our community when the issue comes up.

Given that there's lots of ground to cover, let me tell you how I'm hoping to cover it. First, I want to summarize Intelligent Design, as I understand it. Next, I want to tell you why I do not think it should be taught in science classes, and why I doubt it should be taught at all in public junior and senior high schools. And finally, I want to tell you why I think the theology behind Intelligent Design is really inadequate for Christians.

So, let's begin.

Intelligent Design is the theory that the universe is too complex a place to be accounted for by an appeal to natural selection and the random processes of evolution.

Some kind of overarching intellect must have been at work in the design of the natural order.² It is very similar to an argument by English theologian William Paley, creator of the famous watchmaker analogy. If we find a pocket watch in a field, Paley wrote in 1802, we immediately infer that it was produced not by natural processes acting blindly but by a designing human intellect. Likewise, he reasoned, the natural world contains abundant evidence of a supernatural creator. The argument from design, as it is known, prevailed as an explanation of the natural world until the publication of the Origin of Species in 1859. The weight of the evidence that Darwin had patiently gathered swiftly convinced scientists that evolution by natural selection better explained life's complexity and diversity.³

Proponents of Intelligent Design maintain that their version of argument from design (unlike Paley's) is soundly supported by both microbiology and mathematics. These antievolutionists differ from fundamentalist creationists in that they accept that some species do change (but not much) and that Earth is much more than 6,000 years old. Like their predecessors, however, they reject the idea that evolution accounts for the array of species we see today, and they seek to have their concept – known as intelligent design – included in the science curriculum of schools.⁴

The primary reason I think Intelligent Design should NOT be taught in science classes is that it isn't science. It's been along time since I took a science class, but as I remember it, science is science if it uses the scientific method. The scientific method is has four basic steps:⁵

- Observation and description of a phenomenon.
- Formulation of an hypothesis to explain the phenomenon.
- Use of the hypothesis to predict the existence of other phenomena, or to predict quantitatively the results of new observations.
- Performance of experimental tests of the predictions by several independent experimenters and properly performed experiments.

Intelligent Design gets the first two steps done just fine. They observe and describe the complexity of the universe. They hypothesize that the complexity is best explained by an "intelligent cause."⁶ But their hypothesis fails to predict observed natural selection. And there is no way to form an experiment to test for the existence of an "intelligent cause." So we need to keep Intelligent Design out of our science classrooms.

And the challenge of Intelligent Design doesn't stop at the science classroom door. Intelligent Design very clearly is about its conclusion: that there is an intelligent

designer of the universe. Though the designer isn't named, the designer is clearly a fundamentalist image of God. Because I firmly support the separation of the state from the church, I do not want this taught in public schools.

I recently heard of a church in the valley placed Intelligent Design in a philosophy class.⁷ Now, you might join me in thinking at first, "Well, that's where a discussion Intelligent Design belongs – in a philosophy class." But it turns out that the whole class was about Intelligent Design and that it was being taught by a pastor's spouse. There was also a plan for three so-called experts on Intelligent Design to come to the class, but no one was coming to give an opposing view. So it turns out it wasn't a philosophy class at all, but an attempt by conservative Christians to teach religion in the school.

There is a website that has given me a few good laughs: www.venganza.org. This is the site for the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. That's right – the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Members of the CFSM also believe in Intelligent Design. They just happen to believe that the intelligence is a Flying Spaghetti Monster.

"It was He who created all that we see and all that we feel. We feel strongly that the overwhelming scientific evidence pointing towards evolutionary processes is nothing but a coincidence, put in place by Him."⁸

This website is really just tongue in cheek fun, created to argue against including Intelligent Design in science curricula.⁹

In our pluralistic society, it is good to learn about various religions. It is good to be exposed to the various belief systems people around the world have. But it is important that in our public schools we teach about these various religions, rather than teaching any one of them. And that is very difficult to do. What ones are you going to include? What are you going to exclude? Do we include the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster? We should be extremely cautious about teaching Intelligent Design anywhere in our public schools.

At this point, I hope someone in the church is thinking, "This is all very interesting, ..." Actually, I hope you're all thinking that. But I hope someone is also thinking, "What about God and faith and stuff?"

This is actually where I think my arguments against Intelligent Design are strongest. I think that it is tragic that there are Christian churches teaching children that evolution and Christianity cannot both be true.¹⁰ What happens to these children when they finally get a good science education and recognize the truth of the evolutionary process? They end up rejecting their faith.

By the way, I find it equally sad that some scientists assume that if one accepts the evolutionary explanation for life on earth, one must assume that we humans are nothing but animals. But I will leave it to these scientists to get into the details of why Intelligent Design fails scientifically. The more significant failure of Intelligent Design is its misunderstanding of God and God's action.

Christians have traditionally understood God to act in at least two ways: by performing special acts (like curing lepers and providing subtle signs about the divine will); and by constantly upholding all natural processes. That's right; Christianity has traditionally holds both of these to be true, despite the headache it causes.

On the other hand, the God of Intelligent Design can only work in one way. If God is the great watchmaker, the creator of the natural laws so that we would evolve to what we are today, then the created order is unfolding in a pre-ordained or pre-destined way. There is no real free will. There is no need for grace. And there is no interaction with us today.

If, on the other hand, one thinks that by identify an event in which no natural process is involved, one can prove that God has acted (this is where I think more folk of the Intelligent Design movement are today), then God is only a special actor and does not constantly uphold all natural processes.

One of the basic things that Intelligent Design seems to miss is the questions evolution and theology are trying to answer. Evolution is trying to answer the how question: How did creation happen? Theology is trying to answer the why question: Why did creation happen? That's why we teach science in the science classroom and theology in the theology church.

It occurs to me that maybe part of the problem is the reaction to paradox. Science tries very hard to explain away paradoxes. Theology embraces paradoxes as a way of expressing the unknowability of God, of expressing the divine mystery.

I remember in 8th or 9th grade, Evan Morton asking me if I believed God that God could do anything.

I said, "Yes."

"Could God create a really big rock?"

"Sure."

"So big that no one, not even God could move it?"

I knew that Evan was trying to prove that God couldn't do everything, so I replied, "Yes, God could create a rock so big that even God couldn't move it – and then God would move it just to prove you wrong."

I had not problem with that paradox, but it drove Evan nuts.

That's why, even as I learn more about science – like the theory of the "multiverse" (as opposed to the "universe") I just read about yesterday – I am convinced of the wonder and awesomeness of God. Scientific understanding amplifies my understanding of creation, and thereby my wonder and reverence for God. Science helps me sing hymns like "We Sing Your Mighty Power, O God" and "Creative God, You Spread the Earth."

Nothing convinces me more of the existence of God than to behold a newborn infant's fingernails.

Well, there you have it. My first sermon on evolution, creation, and Intelligent Design. Maybe it was more of a lecture than a sermon. I hope that's okay.

And if I'm going to be a good lecturer, I suppose I should sum up: Intelligent design is bad science and incomplete theology. And that's why I believe in something beyond Intelligent Design.

Peace.

¹ Based on a joke shared by Ray Kerley on Ecunet, note #1957 in “Puns and Other Word Play,” 2/12/06.

² David C. Steinmetz, “Creator God,” *Christian Century*, Dec. 27, 2005, 27.

³ <http://www.actionbioscience.org/evolution/nhmag.html>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ http://teacher.nsrl.rochester.edu/phy_labs/AppendixE/AppendixE.html.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligent_design.

⁷ I learned this from the Rev. Joe Walters, pastor at First Christian Church (DOC), Fremont, CA. Doing some poking around the internet, I figure he was talking about a class in the El Tejon school district. See <http://www.cnn.com/2006/EDUCATION/01/17/evolution.debate.ap/>.

⁸ www.venganza.org.

⁹ “I don’t have a problem with religion. What I have a problem with is religion posing as science. Teach creationism in school, fine, but DON’T teach it in a science classroom. Science = the study of repeatable, observable, natural phenomena. Accepting a supernatural explanation is a cop-out. It’s faith, NOT science.” <http://www.venganza.org/faq.htm#f4>.

¹⁰ These thoughts are spurred by Nancey Murphy’s responses recorded in an interview, “Nature’s God,” in *Christian Century*, Dec 27, 2005, 22-25.