

Lessons from the Middle of the Battlefield

A message spoken by Jennifer Secki Shields at Christ Crossman UMC (Falls Church, VA) as part of Evolution Weekend
February 14, 2010

Today our congregation is participating in Evolution Weekend. This annual event aims to create an opportunity for serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between science and religion. It may seem strange to spend our time together this morning talking about the battle between science and faith given the many life-and-death issues going on in our society and the world. Continued suffering of epic proportions in Haiti. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Health care reform. Climate change. A nuclear Iran. The list goes on and not only is it long, but each issue is fraught with controversy and divisiveness. Here in the United States, the political atmosphere rains daily with vitriol, enmity, and quarrel. Nonetheless, in case you hadn't heard, a 150-year-old battle is being waged in the name of theistic belief and the line drawn in the sand is Darwinian evolution.

On one side of the battle is the New Atheism. Not to be confused with the atheism of ages past, the New Atheism is unabashed in proclaiming its gospel, which includes "disregard for the tolerance of religion" and "advancement of a naturalistic worldview."¹ Make no mistake—this is war and they would like nothing more than the destruction of the Christian church and faith. They are forming their own congregations, with atheist and humanist societies experiencing a surge in memberships. Some groups hold de-baptism ceremonies and send de-baptism certificates to churches to request removal from church membership rolls. There are atheist summer camps—analogue to our church camps—where children go to learn atheism from the new prophets. There is now a humanist chaplain on the campus of Harvard University—he holds his version of "church," is building a fellowship, and leads charitable service mission trips—all to proclaim the gospel that we don't need God. And their evangelism efforts are enviable.

Despite all that, what is most unfortunate about this new "enemy" is that we helped create it and we gave them their best weapons against us. Michel Martin, of NPR, interviewed Blair Scott, founder of the North Alabama Free Thought Association about what it means to be an atheist.² Martin asked Scott whether he had been raised as an atheist, to which Scott responded, "No, I was actually raised Presbyterian. Between the sixth and seventh grade, I started asking a lot of questions and I didn't get satisfactory answers. Kind of looked on my own for a while, you know, jumped back and forth from church to church. And ultimately, I just kind of gave up. And, you know, what was sad, at the time, is I thought there was something wrong with me." In a September 2009 interview in *Parade* magazine, Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol*, was asked whether he was religious.³ He replied, "I was raised Episcopalian, and I was very religious as a kid. Then, in eighth or ninth grade, I studied astronomy, cosmology, and the origins of the universe. I remember saying to a minister, 'I don't get it. I read a book that said there was an explosion known as the Big Bang, but here it says God created heaven and Earth and the animals in seven days. Which is right?'"

Unfortunately, the response I got was, 'Nice boys don't ask that question.' A light went off, and I said, 'The Bible doesn't make sense. Science makes much more sense to me.' And I just gravitated away from religion." Notice his description of what happened to him—initially, he didn't gravitate toward another worldview, he simply gravitated away from religion. This story shared by Mr. Scott and Mr. Brown actually is a common one. What makes it profoundly sad is *not* that it represents a triumph of atheism or secularism, but that it really points to the failure of the church to make Christian disciples who are equipped for a scientific age. Mr. Scott, Mr. Brown, and those with similar experiences were repeatedly failed by their Christian parents, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, pastors, and Christian communities. In sum, much of the seed crop of potential disciples for the New Atheism was planted by the Christian church.

On the other side of this war for hearts and minds are brothers and sisters in Christ who have made the mistake of thinking that attacking the world is the same as proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ; in doing so, they have given the New Atheism its best weapons. I don't think it is a coincidence that as the anti-science, anti-progress, fear-based, "us vs. them" kind of Christianity has become popularized in this country, the number of people who claim no religious affiliation has doubled since 1990.² The rise in the number of atheist books on the NYT best-seller list also is no coincidence. I would argue that these developments represent a backlash against Christianity. While this part of the body of Christ has spent the last two decades waging court cases against secular, public schools for teaching evolution in science class, the New Atheism has been busy going out into the science-technology world and making disciples. In that same interview with NPR, Blair Scott reported that the North Alabama Free Thought Association has a monthly dinner, a monthly movie night, a coffee social once a week, a bagel social once a week, and a monthly picnic. At the time of the interview, they also were launching a regular skeptics-in-the-pub gathering. Let's do the math on that—they are doing at least 12 fellowship-based events out in the community *each month* to further their evangelism. How many groups or programs does your church have that go out into the community to build relationships and share the Gospel? Friends, we should be embarrassed and ashamed. The disciples of Jesus invented evangelism when the risen Christ commanded them, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them... everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28: 19-20). But, since the dawn of the Enlightenment, Christianity in the West has been in decline. For the last 40 years, mainline Christianity has been in decline. Certainly, we may not be able to point to one, singular explanation for those trends, but I think we could certainly agree that we have not done a good job of making disciples for Jesus Christ in the age of science. While much of the body of Christ has been busy attacking the scientific world and the rest of it has failed to articulate a theology for a scientific age, the New Atheists have been out in that world, engaging it, building fellowships, and spreading their gospel of no god.

So, how did we arrive here and what do we do now? As Tina Turner once asked, "What's love got to do with it?" and I think that is the question we must ask ourselves (on Valentine's Day, no less). Friends, it should break our hearts when we hear stories like Dan Brown's and Blair Scott's, stories from baptized children of God who were let

down by the Christians in their lives. These are not prodigal sons who rebelliously left their churches and became non-believers. These are individuals who were steeped in the church, who searched and searched. Every story like theirs a failure of the church Christ died for, the church I love. It is, quite simply, our failure to love as Christ taught us. Do we not love them enough? Do we not love our neighbor, our co-worker, our children, our grandchildren enough to take the time to learn how to talk about the Gospel and the Scriptures in the light of science? Do we not love enough to trouble ourselves to learn a perhaps more informed, enlightened theology? How hard would it be for you to learn how to answer a child's question, "Grandma, how does God hold the wind and the rain in His hands?" Or, "Dad, how does the Big Bang fit with the Genesis story?" Or, to a hurting adult, "I'd like to go to church; I just can't get into that whole anti-evolution thing."

We must learn how to answer those questions—not just those of us who are parents currently raising children, not just those of us who teach Sunday school, but all of us. We are disciples of Jesus Christ sharing the Gospel and living in a scientific age—our answers must be both theologically and scientifically sound. We must stop attacking, rejecting or ignoring science—and start engaging a world that is irreversibly a science-technology world. When we hear what atheists say, rather than be defensive, we must *in love* acknowledge the failures of the church and continue to reach out. We must do more, *much, much more*, to engage our community.

I believe we are called to stand in a difficult and dangerous place, in the middle of the battlefield. Unfortunately, I also believe that the enmity from each side will get worse before it gets better. No doubt we will be criticized by both sides. But, I also know that God's justice always prevails. Always. Until then, we must be firm in our resolve and in our stand with Christ. Today we stand with friends in 851 other congregations across this nation and in 11 other countries—we reject false dichotomies. We are willing to do the uncomfortable work of peacemaking. We have much to learn from this issue about how to engage the world, how to stand in the midst of conflict, how to stand for peace and reconciliation, and how to represent the Gospel of Christ Jesus. I have given you a page of Scriptures and resources—I encourage you to take the time this week to let them challenge and grow you. Whatever scientific and technological advances we make, this is still a broken, hurting world in need of the Gospel message of hope and God's overwhelming love. Thanks be to our God, who in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit, makes all things new and possible. Amen.

¹ www.newatheism.org

² Report: Atheism on the Rise in U.S. NPR. August 2009.

³ Kaplan, James. Life after the Da Vinci code. *Parade*, 09/13/2009: 4-6.

For Reflection:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all

mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

---I Corinthians 13: 1-2, 4-7

You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

---Matthew 5: 43-45

A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

---Proverbs 18: 2

Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies, you know they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome; but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.

---2 Timothy 2: 23-24

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

---James 3: 18

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

---Matthew 5: 9

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

---Proverbs 10: 12

"To conclude, therefore, let no man out of a weak conceit or sobriety, or an ill-applied moderation, think or maintain, that a man can search too far or be too well-studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's work; divinity or philosophy [science]; but rather let men endeavor an endless progress or proficiency in both."

---Charles Darwin

Resources:

www.wesnex.org

For "the dialogue between science and religion within the Wesleyan tradition in the 21st century."

www.biologos.org

The BioLogos Foundation explores, promotes and celebrates the integration of science and Christian faith. This site recommends many books and other resources on the reconciliation of evolution and the Christian faith.