

Evolutionary Christianity

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These may be tumultuous times, but through it all we can detect ways in which faith traditions are maturing and thereby growing into greatness. Evolutionary versions of each religion—Evolutionary Christianity, Evolutionary Buddhism, Evolutionary Islam, Evolutionary Judaism, Evolutionary Hinduism, and more—are emerging. Why is this happening? Because adherents of each tradition have discovered the same thing: *Religious insights and perspectives freed from the narrowness of their time and place of origin are more comprehensive and grounded in measurable reality than anyone could have possibly dreamed before.* Evolution does not diminish religion; it expands its meaning and value globally.

Understandably, many devout religious believers have rejected evolution because the process has so often been depicted as random, meaningless, mechanistic, and Godless. The growing edge of evolutionary thinking today, both scientifically and theologically, points to a very different understanding of the Cosmos and a far more realistic understanding of God's activity. We encounter a Universe astonishingly well suited for life and our kind of consciousness. Scientists themselves are moving away from a mechanistic, or design, way of thinking and into an emergent, developmental worldview. Evolution from this perspective can be embraced and shared with others religiously.

In this essay I shall outline the key transformations occurring within my own tradition—evangelical Christianity.

Flat-Earth Faith vs. Evolutionary Faith

On every continent, and within every religious tradition, “flat-earth” theologies are giving way to evolutionary forms of the same faith. By “flat-earth” I am not, of course, suggesting that adherents actually believe that the world is flat. Rather, the term applies to any and all perspectives in which interpretations of core religious doctrines have sailed through the centuries virtually unaffected by an expanding awareness of other peoples, other continents (indeed, other galaxies), and the depths of time.

Flat-earth theologies, thus, cling to ancient understandings that originated in times when people really did believe that the world was flat and that the Sun and the stars revolve around us. For example, flat-earth forms of Christianity today are those that still interpret *sin, salvation, the gospel, the kingdom of God, heaven, hell, the second coming of Christ*, and other core concepts in ways that pre-date the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and all succeeding generations of celebrated scientists.

Flat-earth forms of Christian faith are out of sync with the needs of Christian men and women and institutions today for the simple reason that they needlessly tether our core doctrines to the abstract and the otherworldly—and, hence, to the realm of the imagination. Accordingly, such doctrines have very little to say about how we are to understand and navigate life in *this world, here, and now.*

In contrast, evolutionary forms of Christianity cherish these same doctrines, yet engage each in far more realistic (REALized) ways. The very same spiritual insights are interpreted in light of our modern cosmological understandings—understandings which, thanks to the scientific endeavor, are based on empirical evidence and thus (for all practical purposes) are indisputably real. Thus REALized, Christian teachings offer powerful and practical guidance and support—and not just for Christians.

Here is my prediction: By the middle of the 21st century, Christians everywhere will understand God, our faith, and the nature of the gospel in evolutionary terms rather than flat-earth terms. And they will do so because nothing is lost—and ever so much is to be gained—by embracing both a God-honoring interpretation of cosmic history and an evolutionary view of God’s self-revelation.

Those Christians who choose to follow this path will not reject biblical Christianity. To the contrary! Thanks to an evolutionary outlook, God becomes *undeniably real* and the gospel, *universally true*.

Faith Benefits of Evolutionary Christianity

To my mind, there is *one major scientific advantage* and *eight theological advantages* that evolutionary Christianity has over traditional, biblical Christianity.

The scientific advantage is this: evolutionary faith squares with the facts—that is, it effortlessly fits with what has ongoingly been revealed by God/discovered by scientists about the nature of the Universe, Earth, life, and humanity.

Theologically, evolutionary Christianity offers these benefits:¹

1. An undeniably real and universally venerable God
2. An experiential and essentially irrefutable view of doctrinal insights
3. A scientifically credible regard for scripture
4. Clearer guidance for living in faith and fulfillment in today’s world
5. A faith-enhancing understanding of death that is congruent with modern science
6. An instinctual view of sin and a down-to-earth experience of salvation
7. Greater ease and success in teaching Christ-like, Christ-centered morality
8. A more realistically inspiring vision of the future

The Nature of Divine Revelation

Many conservative Christians reject evolution. I commend them for their resistance. It compels those of us who do embrace evolution to find ever more inspiring ways of communicating our conviction. Religious believers can hardly be expected to embrace evolution if the only version they’ve been exposed to portrays the processes at work as merely competitive and pointless, even cruel, and thus Godless. Is it any wonder that many on the conservative side of the theological spectrum find such a view repulsive, and that many on the liberal side accept evolution begrudgingly?

Only when the evolutionary history of the Universe is articulated in a way that conservative religious believers feel in their bones is holy, and in a way that liberal believers are passionately proud of, will evolution be widely and wholeheartedly embraced. Fortunately, that time is now—not 2,000 years ago, not 200 years ago, and not even 20 years ago. *Now* is when we are awakening to the reality that God did not stop communicating truth vital to human wellbeing back when scripture was still recorded on animal skins and preserved for posterity in clay pots.

¹ Much of my book, *Thank God for Evolution! How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (endorsed by 5 Nobel laureates and 120 other scientific, religious, and cultural leaders) is a detailed discussion of how I see evolutionary theology providing these benefits. For those interested, the entire book can be downloaded for free (as a pdf) or purchased online here: ThankGodforEvolution.com

Two thousand years ago, it was widely believed that the world was flat and stationary, and that the entire Cosmos revolved around us. The biblical writers reasonably assumed that mountains were unchanging, that stars never died, and that God placed all creatures on Earth (or spoke them into existence) in finished form. How could they have thought otherwise? The idea of a spherical Earth turning on an axis and orbiting the Sun, or of Polaris as an immense bundle of hydrogen gas fusing into helium quadrillions of miles away, or of mountains rising and eroding as crustal plates shift, or of creatures morphing over time: all these would have seemed absurd to anyone living when the Bible was written. Had God inspired someone to write about such things then, the early church leaders would never have considered the document authoritative. They would have thought it bizarre and dangerously misleading, and would have ensured that any such proclamations were discredited and quickly forgotten.

Many Christians, Jews, and Muslims still regard the early history of the Hebrew people, as recorded in the Torah, to be the history of humanity as a whole. We now, however, know a great deal more about what was happening in the world 3,500 years ago—two centuries before Moses was born—thanks to the worldwide, cross-cultural, self-correcting enterprise of archeological and anthropological science (that is, through what God has been revealing over the last few hundred years through these disciplines).

Although none of this world history is mentioned in the Bible, no historian alive today would deny the following: Before Moses was born and before the story of Adam and Eve was written, King Tut III ruled the Egyptian empire's 18th Dynasty; southeast Asians were boating to nearby Pacific islands; Indo-European charioteers were invading India; China, under the Shang Dynasty, entered the Bronze Age; and indigenous peoples occupied most of the Western Hemisphere.

Each of these cultures told sacred stories about how and why everything came into being, why they were special, what is important, and how to survive and thrive in the landscapes and cultures in which they lived. To interpret the early chapters of Genesis—or any of the world's creation narratives—as representing the entire history of the Universe, or to imagine them as rival rather than complementary views of a larger reality, is both to miss the symbolic nature of human language and, ironically, to trivialize these holy texts.

Private and Public Revelation

We are at a turning point in human history. Catalyzing this transformation is our modern method by which we collectively access increasing knowledge about the nature of reality. New (and revised) truths no longer spring fully formed from the traditional founts of knowledge. Rather, they are hatched and challenged in the public arena of science. This is the realm of *public revelation*.

In contrast, by *private revelation* I am referring to claims about the nature of reality based only on personal experiences—some of which, of course, can be very compelling. Unfortunately, revelations enshrined in sacred texts occurred to people in the past and cannot be empirically verified today. Such claims cannot be proven or disproven because they are deeply subjective, one-person, one-time occurrences, obscured by the passage of time. Accordingly, private revelations must either be believed or not believed. When private revelations reside at the core of religious understandings, people are left with no choice but to believe or not. Thus, private revelation produces religious believers and unbelievers. Only public revelation can produce *religious knowers*.

For example: Is it true that the entire Universe was created in six literal days, as suggested in the first chapter of Genesis? Today millions of people believe so—and millions do not. The result personally: families sundered by theological differences. The result collectively: intense conflict over the teaching of science in America's public schools.

Is it, in fact, the case that devout Jews and Christians will burn forever in hell because they do not embrace as the Word of God the teachings of the prophet Mohammed, as recorded in the Qur'an? Hundreds of millions of Muslims believe this is so. And hundreds of millions of non-Muslims (as well as many liberal Muslims) believe not. The result personally: good people who come to harbor judgment and resentment against other good people, as well as the heartache and estrangement that happens when those "others" are kin. The result collectively: communities and nations are divided and at war.

Is it historically true that God intentionally, purposefully drowned billions of animals and millions of human beings in Noah's flood and instructed Moses to kill tens of millions of men, women, and innocent children, as the Bible literally reads? (e.g., Exodus 32:27–28; Deuteronomy 2:34, 3:4–5, 7:1–2; Joshua 11:12–15) Countless people believe that these stories reveal God's unchanging moral character. Countless others believe they do not. The personal result: millions who leave their religious traditions, unable to worship such a God. The collective result: warring nations, each convinced that God is on their side.

These are the conundrums that worldviews based on private revelation, embedded in unchangeable scripture, inescapably promote. And they are by their very nature unresolvable. That is, short of worldwide conversion to one belief system or worldwide expulsion of all such belief systems, the future of humanity will continue to be compromised by adversities born of conflicting beliefs—especially in a world in which weapons of mass destruction now come in small packages.

Is there, perhaps, another way?

Facts as God's Native Tongue

Thanks to what is generally referred to as the scientific method, assisted by the wonders of modern technologies (themselves a gift of the scientific endeavor), *public revelation* emerges via a process whereby claims about the nature of reality based on measurable data are proposed, tested, and modified in light of evidence and concerted attempts to disprove such claims. Such a process typically results in a shared understanding that goes beyond belief to broadly shared knowledge that can be considered, for all practical purposes, factual. From this perspective, the history of humanity can be seen as a fascinating story of how God has progressively revealed the nature of reality to human beings, which is tied to how we acquire, share, store, and reconsider knowledge.² The discovery of facts through science is one very powerful and inspiring way to encounter God directly. Thus, *facts are God's native tongue*.

- If there are scriptures beyond the holy texts of Earth's various religious traditions...
- If God didn't stop communicating knowledge crucial for humans centuries ago...
- If it is possible for new understandings to arise in ways more widely available and testable than what can be channeled through the hearts and minds of lone individuals...
- Then surely this is it: God communicates to us by publicly revealing new facts.

It is through the now-global community of scientists, working together, challenging one another's findings, assisted by the miracles of technology, and standing on the shoulders of giants (but never blinded by the greatness of past accomplishments)—it is through this wondrous human endeavor that God's Word is still being revealed. It is through this ever-expectant, yet ever-ready-to-be-humbled, stance of inquiry that God's Word is discerned as bigger, as more wondrous, as more this-world relevant than could have possibly been comprehended in any time past.

² See *Thank God for Evolution!* (TGFE!), Part II: "Reality is Speaking", especially Chapters 4-6: "Private and Public Revelation", "The Nested Emergent Nature of Divine Creativity", and "Words Create Worlds".

The Trajectory of Human Evolution

Human consciousness emerged within a world of powerful and mysterious forces beyond our comprehension and control. As modes of communication evolved—from gestures and oral speech to writing and mathematics, to print, to science, to computers—so has God been able to reveal more and more about...well, everything: God's nature and will, the scale and venerability of Creation, and the meaning and magnitude of humanity's divine calling. An inspiring consequence of seeing the full sweep of history is discovering that human circles of care and compassion have expanded over time.

Early on, owing to genetic guidance honed in a pre-linguistic world, and then supplemented by knowledge that could be accumulated, retained, and shared only to the extent that spoken language would allow, our abilities to cooperate with one another were limited and localized. Anyone outside the tribe was suspect, and probably an enemy. As technologies of communication evolved, our ancestors entered interdependent relationships in ever-widening circles, from villages, chiefdoms, and early nations, to today's global markets and international organizations.³

Finally, the emergence of the World Wide Web has made possible collaborations no longer stifled by geographic distances and political boundaries. Throughout this evolution of human communities and networks, an inner transformation has also been taking place. At each stage our circles of care, compassion, and commitment have grown and our lists of enemies have diminished. Our next step will be to learn to organize and govern ourselves globally, and to enjoy a mutually enhancing relationship with the larger body of Life of which we are part, and do so to the glory of God. Traditional religions have played crucial roles in fostering cooperation *within* each tribe, kingdom, and early nation—though not infrequently by provoking suspicion and enmity of those *outside* the group. Emerging now is an orientation that encourages wider affinities and global-scale cooperation.

For religious traditions to fulfill their potentials in our postmodern world, each will be called to harmonize its core doctrines with the evolutionary worldview. This effort will prove far more than an exercise in catching up and making do. Rather, leaders within each tradition will delight in discovering that the evolutionary outlook bolsters their core teachings. Instead of an intrusion on our faith, evolution becomes a precious blessing.

REALizing God

Evolutionary theology differs from traditional theology in many ways, but none more significant than how real or imaginary God and religious doctrines are understood. From an evolutionary perspective, theological concepts are understood in light of public knowledge rather than private belief. That God's creativity, for example, is *nested* and *emergent* is a fundamental truth that could not have been revealed to the biblical writers in a way they could comprehend—not only because nearly everyone back then believed the world was flat and at the center of the Universe, but also because of the utter necessity of

³ The evolution of increasing complexity (evolutionary emergence) in the pre-human world occurred along similar lines. Understanding this trajectory clarifies God's will for us as a species and offers unambiguous guidance for our *only* way into a just and thriving future together. See TGFE!, Part I: "The Holy Trajectory of Evolution" and Part IV: "A God Glorifying Future".

The four best resources I know on the question of evolutionary directionality (I highly recommend each) are these: Robert Wright's *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*: <<http://www.nonzero.org/>>; John Stewart's *Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and Future of Humanity*: <<http://www4.tpg.com.au/users/jes999/>>; my wife Connie Barlow's *Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life*: <<http://thegreatstory.org/CB-writings.html>>; and Connie's essay "Let There Be Sight": <<http://thegreatstory.org/convergence.html>>.

telescopes, microscopes, and computers for understanding the deep-time, developmental nature of God's grace and creativity.

By '*the nested emergent nature of God's creativity*' I'm pointing to the now widely accepted scientific understanding that everything did not come into being all at once, but, rather, developed over great expanses of time and in a nested fashion: subatomic particles coalescing into atoms, atoms emerging into molecules, molecules creating cells, cells creating organisms, organisms creating societies, and so on. Like Russian nesting dolls or Chinese boxes within boxes, each nested whole is also part of larger wholes: societies within ecosystems, within planets, within solar systems, within galaxies, within the Universe as a whole. More, we don't merely believe this is how God created everything; we know it. In many cases scientists can see it happening now and they can measure it. To cite just two of the better-known examples: Hydrogen and oxygen come into relationship and create water. Stars create within themselves most of the atoms in the periodic table of elements. So whether we look at the smallest scale or the largest, every nested level is not merely created; it is creative. Divine immanence is real!

From the perspective of evolutionary theology, "God" is nothing so trivial as a supreme landlord residing off the planet and outside the Universe—an otherworldly entity whose main business is engaging in unnatural acts (supernatural interventions). As I and other evolutionary theologians use the term, *God* is nothing less than a sacred, proper name for *Ultimate Reality*—the largest, all-embracing Whole—that One and Only Supreme Creative Reality which transcends yet includes all other realities and makes possible all forms of creativity.⁴

Because human beings are part of the whole and cannot stand outside the whole to examine it, different peoples at different times, living in different parts of the world, reflecting on different plants, different animals, different terrain, and different climates, would inevitably have used different metaphors and analogies to describe the nature of Ultimate Reality. Naturally, they would have told different stories about how to relate meaningfully to that Supreme Wholeness (Holy One) in which we all live and move and have our being. Understanding religious differences is hardly more complicated than comprehending this fact and pondering its implications.

Every characteristic that we attribute to the divine derives from our experience of reality. If we imagine God as beautiful, gracious, loving, awesome, powerful, majestic, or faithful, it is because we have known or experienced beauty, grace, love, awe, power, majesty, or trustworthiness in the world. As Thomas Berry, a 93-year-old retired Roman Catholic priest, cultural historian, and self-proclaimed 'geologist' has said, "If we lived on the moon and that's all we and our ancestors had ever known, all our concepts and experience of the divine would reflect the barrenness of the lunar landscape." Thankfully, we are not confined to a barren moon but can rejoice as part of a flourishing, intensely creative Earth and a vast and awesomely beautiful Universe that call forth our richest images of God.

For example, we can now understand that a "God's eye view of the world" is not merely the objective, transcendent perspective—the view from above or beyond nature. If God truly is omnipresent and immanent, then a God's eye view of the world must also include the subjective experience of every creature. What dolphins and fish see, what bats and birds see, what spiders and dragonflies see: all must be included. God is thus not only Love but also Infinite Compassion. God feels the pain and suffering of all creatures—from the inside. Those who think they can love God and trash the environment, or oppress others, must be blind, utterly, to the immanence and omnipresence of the divine. When we truly *get* the

⁴ See TGFE! Part II: "Reality is Speaking", especially Chapters 5-7: "The Nested Emergent Nature of Divine Creativity", "Words Create Worlds", and "What Do We Mean by the Word 'God'?". This *creatheistic* or evolutionary theistic perspective is distinct from (transcends and includes) previous god-isms, such as flat-earth (pre-evolutionary) theism, pantheism, and panentheism (or dialectical theism).

nested emergent nature of divine creativity, we know that our love of nature and our love of one another are essential aspects of our love of God.

- *God is the Mystery at the Center* of our amazement that the Universe is here at all, that it is what it is, and that it is always becoming, yet always somehow whole.
- *God is the Mystery at the Heart* of consciousness, conscience, compassion, and all the other forms of co-creative, co-incarnational responsiveness of life to life.
- *God is the Mysterious Omni-Creative Power* through which the Universe is and ever becomes more intricately and wondrously fulfilled through the interactions of all its parts (each of which contains a spark of the Whole).

Beyond Evidence: Why I'm Evangelistic About Evolution

Young-earth creationists and others who fail to see God's revelation in the discoveries of science often ask me what evidence I see for evolution. My response generally begins along these lines: "I am not a scientist; thus my evidence begins with this striking fact: well over 95% of the world's scientists and tens of millions of religious people from every faith tradition embrace an evolutionary worldview precisely because of the overwhelming empirical evidence uncovered (revealed) over the past few hundred years. As a species, collectively, we no longer merely believe that the entire Universe has been in a process of evolutionary emergence for billions of years—we know it. And we know it thanks to the mountains of measurable evidence discovered (revealed) in disciplines as diverse as cosmology, astronomy, physics, astrophysics, chemistry, botany, zoology, primatology, microbiology, genetics, anthropology, archeology, evolutionary brain science, and evolutionary psychology."

That is only the beginning, however. Beyond the evidence, I find deep emotional and spiritual sustenance in an evolutionary celebration of my evangelical/Pentecostal faith. I unabashedly celebrate "The Gospel According to Evolution" because a sacred view of the history of the Universe gives me a far more intimate, personal relationship with God and a closer walk with Christ than I had when I was an anti-evolution creationist. (Yes, in my late teens and early twenties I was vociferously opposed to evolution: I handed out tracts and was eager to argue with anyone who thought the world was older than 6,000 years.)

Now that I have learned *my brain's creation story*—this is, thanks to what God has revealed through evolutionary brain science and evolutionary psychology—I find it infinitely easier to live a life of ongoing victory over my sinful nature. When I interpret the science-based history of everything and everyone in God-honoring ways, and live "in Christ"—that is, in evolutionary integrity: growing in trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service—I experience heaven in *this* life: here, now, with all my relations, eternally, without fail. Thus, I am *evangelistic* about evolutionary faith because it expands and deepens my understanding and experience of the gospel, intensifies my communion with God, and helps me live a more Christ-centered, Christ-like life.⁵

My heart aches when I meet those who claim to have "accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior," who read their Bible and go to church faithfully, yet who still struggle mightily with their sinful nature or who have sour or less-than-loving relationships with family, friends, or coworkers. For me, steadfast integrity was out of reach until the evolutionary worldview helped me grasp that 'original sin' and evolved 'human instincts' are pointing to the same reality. (Chapters 9-12 in my book *Thank God for Evolution!*: "REALizing 'The Fall' and 'Original Sin'", "REALizing 'Personal Salvation'", "Evolutionary

⁵ See TGFE! Parts III and IV: "The Gospel According to Evolution", and "Evolutionary Spirituality", as well as my personal testimonial in the Epilogue.

Integrity Practices”, and “Evolving Our Most Personal Relationships” are a good way to begin to explore this path.)

REALizing “the Gospel”

If what we mean by “the gospel” today is the same as what Christians two millennia ago meant when they used the term, we do our tradition a terrible disservice.⁶

The meaning of the gospel is infinitely rich. No generation can possibly exhaust its depths. Every generation has the privilege and responsibility of reinterpreting the core insights of its faith tradition for its own time, as the Holy Spirit leads them.

Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians in Church history, wrote nearly a millennium ago, “A mistake about Creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God.” What Aquinas knew then is even more consequential today. As our understanding of the Cosmos expands, so must our view of God and, for Christians, our appreciation of the meaning and significance of the gospel. Seen as a sacred story of nested creativity in which life becomes ever more complex, more aware, and more intimate with itself over time—this epic of evolution can revitalize the meaning and magnitude of the gospel.

The disciples and early Church leaders, reflecting on Jesus’ ministry within the context of their own first, second, and third century political, judicial, religious, and cosmological understandings, formulated creeds and doctrines about the significance of his life and mission. Since then, our view of reality has grown enormously. If the Christian tradition is correct in its assertion that Jesus truly did incarnate God’s Great News for humanity, then the meaning, grandeur, and this-world relevance of the gospel today must reach far beyond that which any previous generation, including the biblical writers themselves, could have known. In the words of literary critic and historian Gil Bailie:

“Those closest to the historical Jesus didn’t give the gospel its geographical breadth and theological depth. It was Paul, who never knew him. Moreover, impressive achievements in biblical scholarship have brought our generation closer to the constituent events of the Christian movement than were, say, the Gentile Christians of the second century. If the life and death of Jesus is historically central, then people living a hundred thousand years from now will be in a better position to appreciate that than we are. When they look back, they will surely think of us as ‘early Christians’—living as we do a scant two millennia from the mysterious events in question. They will be right. The Christian movement today is still in the elementary stages of working out the implications of the gospel. The greatest and boldest creedal assertions are in the future, not the past. This flawed and unlikely thing we call the ‘church’ is on a great Christological adventure. Even against its own institutional resistances, it is continually finding deeper and more profound implications to the Jesus-event.”

When we become accustomed to seeing God’s will, God’s love, and God’s transforming power operating on the scale of billions of years and embracing all of Creation, our understanding of the gospel opens and magnifies. Its greater realization, however, will take time and will never be exhausted. The Protestant Reformation, made possible by the printing press, did not happen overnight. Similarly, the “evolution revolution,” made possible by advanced telescopes, computers, and the Internet—as well as by ever increasing knowledge of how living systems function—will likely take several more decades before its implications are fleshed out theologically, politically, and economically. Nevertheless, we can say this:

⁶ See <http://ThankGodforEvolution.com/faq.html> and <http://www.ThankGodforEvolution.com/audio-video> for more than a dozen short video clips, as well as a print interview of my responses to the most frequently asked questions I receive related to the perspective outlined in this essay and throughout my book, *Thank God for Evolution!*

Given what we now know about deep-time creativity and grace, we can no longer in good conscience continue interpreting the story of Jesus' birth, life, teachings, passion, death, and resurrection as primarily having to do with saving a select group of human beings from the fires of a literal hell when they die. Such cannot possibly be the truth of the gospel for our time. That interpretation may still appeal to millions of Christians (sadly, who quibble or fight over just who is in the select group), but it is in no way Good News for most of humanity. Indeed, for all other forms of life on Earth, such an anachronistic interpretation is far more a curse than a blessing. How can we continue to think that this is what God wants?

What we call "the gospel" will be *experienced* as good news only if it is a saving response to the bad news that people are actually dealing with. Said another way, If what we mean by "the gospel" does not address in a hopeful, inspiring way what people themselves regard as their greatest personal and collective challenges, then for them the Christian message will not be salvific. It will be irrelevant. This mismatch, between what people in fact experience as bad news and what our church liturgies present as the Good News, is a big reason why those under thirty are largely unchurched—and why the epic of evolution told in holy way is gaining wide appeal. To be frank, most young people are not preoccupied with concerns about whether heaven and hell literally exist. The difficulties in their lives today, as well as their concerns for the wellbeing of the world at large, trump any such otherworldly preoccupations.

From a meaningful evolutionary perspective *the gospel* includes the Great Story of God's love and saving grace as revealed in the Bible, on the cross, and throughout the entire 14-billion-year epic of evolution. The gospel, as such, is transformative on three levels: individually, relationally, and globally. To ignore or discount any one of these is to miss the meaning and magnitude of them all.

Individually, the gospel can free a person from addiction to sin and self-absorption, enabling each of us to savor the fruit of the Spirit in the midst of the never-ending challenges of life, and empowering all to be blessings to the world regardless of our shortcomings. It can also enable one to know peace, even in the midst of difficult circumstances and in the presence of difficult people.

Relationally, the Christ story shows us how reconciliation is possible with virtually anyone. When I take full responsibility, let go of thinking I'm right and the other is wrong, step into their experience, and communicate with love and compassion from *that* place, miracles occur. Always.⁷

Collectively, the gospel can free us from species pride, arrogance, and human-centeredness by revealing the holy trajectory of evolution, the sacred direction of divine creativity, and how we as a human family can fulfill our role in furthering what God has been up to for billions of years.⁸

Believing vs. Knowing

I once believed in the literal truth of biblical scripture. I no longer believe; now I *know*. *Knowing* is powerful, it is personal, and it connects me to truth seekers of other faiths and throughout the global enterprise of science. I moved from believing to knowing when I came to accept that a loving God would not have stopped communicating truth crucial to human existence centuries before humankind had the technological capacity to perceive and to understand the vastness of the cosmos, the immense journey of life, and the nearly unfathomable depths of time.

⁷ See TGFE! Chapters 11-12: "Evolutionary Integrity Practices" and "Evolving Our Most Personal Relationships".

⁸ See TGFE! Part I: "The Holy Trajectory of Evolution", and Part IV: "A God-Glorifying Future".

My own spiritual transformation began when I accepted the fact of evolution as yet another revelation of God—albeit a revelation ongoingly discerned and updated by the community of scientists. Equally important, I then took care to nurture a holy (while scientifically accurate) regard for evolutionary history, all the while contemplating how the core doctrines of my Christian faith could be enriched (REALized) by the scientific perspective—not merely reconciled to it. My evangelical roots moved me to set the bar high: An evolutionary form of my faith must move me to sing out praises to God. It must give me the guidance and the practical tools to be successful in pursuing my calling, to live in more Christ-like ways, and to be a blessing to the world. It must deliver me from my sinful nature. It must fill me with hope and fulfill on its promise of salvation.

And so I have come to this:

I no longer merely *believe* in the fall of Adam and Eve, in Original Sin. I *know* that the reptilian and mammalian parts of my brain have drives of which my conscious mind is clueless—and that these inherited proclivities, my unchosen nature, evolved to serve my ancestors in life conditions far removed from those that govern my life today. The story of Adam and Eve reminds me of this.

I don't merely believe that I am saved by grace, through faith, and that someday I'll go to heaven. I know that *every* time I have been enslaved then freed, estranged then reconciled, lost then returned home, it was a gift of God that gave me a peace beyond description. The Apostle Paul's writings remind me of this.

I don't merely believe in the Resurrection. I know that for billions of years, chaos, death, and destruction have catalyzed new life, new opportunities, and new possibilities. I know, both from my own life and from Earth's history, that Good Fridays are consistently followed by Easter Sundays. The story of Christ's death and resurrection reminds me of this.

I don't merely believe that someday Jesus will return and I'll fly away with him, I know that wherever trust, authenticity, responsibility, and service reign supreme, my Lord has already returned. So long as I remain in deep integrity and continue to grow in "in Christ"—in these qualities—I experience, right here and now, rapturous joy. The theological promise of the Rapture reminds me of this.

An Evolutionary Vision of God's True Nature: Christ Jesus

When I suggest that evolutionary theology offers "a more universally venerable God" than traditional images of Ultimate Reality, what I mean is this: When we see God's love, grace, and creativity extending over billions of years, rather than merely thousands of years, we discover a God much less vindictive and tyrannical and far more honorable and praiseworthy than the characterizations of God found in many parts of the Bible, such as the Pentateuch and Book of Revelation. Recent critics of religion, including Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Michael Earl, are skilled at pointing out gruesome passages in both the Old and New Testaments that portray God as acting or commanding in cruel and unsavory ways. As a devout Christian who holds a high view of scripture, the first time I heard this line of criticism I immediately and forcefully rejected it. My mind instinctively began to come up with justifications. Thankfully, my heart stopped me from going too far down this rationalizing path. Truth won out. Paradoxically, it was only when I allowed this painful information in that I could begin to see the significance (indeed, the magnificence) of the gospel in a postmodern world.

The U.S. Department of Defense defines "terrorism" as "*the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.*" No matter how dearly, even reverently, we

may hold scripture, it is an easily verifiable fact that many modern and postmodern people find the picture of God painted in parts of the Bible problematic at best, if not repulsive.

After quoting nearly two-dozen biblical passages, in context, that depict God in a brutal, homicidal/genocidal light, Michael Earl, author of the enormously popular, free online audio program, *Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You*, <<http://reasonworks.com>> states:

“When we look at a horrific story like Noah’s flood, or at an event like the conquest of Canaan, with the huge massacres of millions of women and children, we must not lose sight of the fact that these events and actions were carried out by, or done in direct response to orders from, God. The Bible makes that absolutely clear. When we read the brutal Law of Moses, where people’s brains are being bashed in with rocks for breaking the Sabbath, for mouthing off to their parents, for having sex with the wrong people, for believing the wrong things: all of these atrocious laws can be traced back to God. And when we read in scripture about hell, about billions of unbelievers being tortured in fire for all eternity—this is God who is orchestrating all of this. (Given a literal reading of scripture) God, by any stretch of the imagination, is a terrorist. God employs the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear—and he does it for religious reasons. In anybody’s book, that’s terrorism.”

Many find this line of reasoning difficult to counter from a traditional, literalist perspective. But from the perspective of evolutionary theology—that is, when we realize that facts are God’s native tongue, and when we can see the entire history of cosmos, Earth, life, and humanity in a sacred light—not only can we make sense of even the most problematic biblical images of God, but we are also compelled, by both heart and reason, to see God’s character and “personality” in Christ-like ways.⁹

It Matters What We Think About Evolution

It is impossible to understand yourself, your world, or the meaning and magnitude of the gospel in the 21st century without an evolutionary worldview. And when I say impossible, I don’t mean just difficult. I mean truly impossible—like trying to understand human illness before we had microscopes and x-ray machines, or trying to comprehend the large-scale structure of Universe prior to telescopes and spectroscopy.

Without an evolutionary theology, when you think about your inner challenges, your relational difficulties, and the trials we face as a species, and when you imagine God or think about what ‘the gospel’ or ‘saving good news’ means *for our time*, you’ll start with wrong assumptions and end with trivial, and possibly even dangerous, conclusions. It truly matters what we think about evolution. It may be that nothing matters more!

- If you think of Jesus as a cosmic janitor who is going to come back to clean up the mess we’ve made, then you’ll make very different decisions and support very different policies from someone who sees all of us as participants in a divine creative process called evolution. Talk about the right hand of God...it just doesn’t get any more real than this!
- If you struggle with addiction, fear, anger, depression, pride, greed, sloth, jealousy, or any other aspect of your ‘unchosen nature’ or ‘inherited proclivities’ (and especially if you think your struggles are because your great, great, great, great-grandmother ate an apple at the insistence of a

⁹ For more on how the evolutionary perspective helps us take a square look at the cruelest of passages of the Bible without recoiling, and how evolution reveals God’s Christ-like nature, see TGFE! Chapter 18: “Our Evolving Understanding of God’s Will”, and Appendix A: “Good and Bad Reasons for Believing” (written by Richard Dawkins) and Appendix B: “REALizing the Miraculous”.

talking snake), though you may console yourself with thoughts of a peaceful afterlife, you may miss out on the heavenly joy and peace that passes all understanding available in *this* life.

- If you think of God as an invisible, otherworldly father/king who dictated all the really important stuff to humans back when people believed the world was flat and that epilepsy was demonic possession, or if you think of Creation as a soulless object devoid of God's living, pulsing presence, then you won't see how naturally and undeniably real God is, nor how generously and faithfully God has been communicating right on up to the present. And you certainly won't see how honorable this planet is, nor what God is up to in the world today!

The Role of the Emerging Church

While pastoring my first church, in rural New England, I stood under the stars one night with a parishioner, an 82-year-old farmer and amateur astronomer affectionately known as Gramps. Gazing at the Milky Way, Gramps whispered, "You know, Reverend, the more I learn about this amazing Universe, the more awesome my God becomes!"

As we Christians open our hearts to embrace a God-centered, gospel-expanding way of celebrating evolution, we will, in the decades to come, prove to be an enormously positive force on behalf of all life, human and non-human. Our destiny as a species and as individuals is to further God's evolutionary creativity in Christ-like ways that bless the entire Earth community. The role of the emerging Church includes spreading the Great News—evangelizing the nations—and thus ushering the entire human family through a process of cultural death and resurrection, to the glory of God. In this way, like Jesus, the Church becomes a vessel of God's saving grace. We no longer passively wait for Christ's return; we fully participate in it. This is our mission, our calling, our Great Work. And it is why, I believe, the scriptures refer to the Church as the both the body of Christ and the bride of Christ.

The Reverend Michael Dowd has devoted his life to proclaiming the "Great News" of a God-glorifying view of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. During the 1980s and 90s, Dowd pastored three United Church of Christ congregations, worked with religious leaders across America on environmental, peace, and justice issues, and managed government funded sustainable lifestyle campaigns on both coasts. Since April 2002 he and his wife, Connie Barlow, an acclaimed science writer, have lived entirely on the road, as "America's evolutionary evangelists", sharing an inspiring view of evolution with religious and secular audiences of all ages. At home in both conservative and liberal settings, and uniquely gifted at building bridges between religious and nonreligious people, Dowd is passionate about sharing the 14-billion-year history of the Universe in sacred ways that offer practical guidance and uplift and expand heart, mind, and soul. For more background on Rev. Dowd's journey from anti-evolution crusader to evolutionary evangelist, see: <http://ThankGodforEvolution.com/the-author.html>

Rev. Dowd's new book, *Thank God for Evolution! How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, has been endorsed by 5 Nobel prize-winning scientists and 120 other scientific, religious, and cultural luminaries (including ministers across the theological spectrum). It can be downloaded for free or purchased online from his website: <http://ThankGodforEvolution.com>

Rev. Dowd is one of the most inspiring speakers in America today. To see his itinerary, invite him to come to your church or event, or correspond with him, go to: <http://thankgodforevolution.com/schedule/> or email: Scheduling@ThankGodforEvolution.com or Michael@TheGreatStory.org