

# Issues, Etc.<sup>TM</sup>

## JOURNAL



*The Blind Men and the Elephant*

by Todd Wilken

*Wittenberg Trail:  
The Wisdom of God*

by Christian Tiews

Spring, 2012



Dear *Issues, Etc. Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, I evaluate the famous story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* as a critique of Christianity. When it comes to theology, are we Christians like blind men, each with his own partly-right, partly-wrong opinions? Is Christianity itself merely one, limited, half-true perspective on God? Read on for answers.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Pastor Christian Tiews. His story takes him from the agnosticism of a committed Darwinist to faith in Jesus Christ. It is the story of God's faithfulness to and patience with His Baptized children.

And as usual, you'll find a list of supporting congregations in the Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host  
**Issues, Etc.**



## ***The Blind Men and The Elephant***

by Todd Wilken

You've heard the story of the elephant, haven't you? There were six blind men who were curious to know what an elephant was like. Each one laid his hands on a different part of the animal. The first blind man felt the elephant's side and concluded that an elephant was like a wall. The second man felt the elephant's tusk and concluded that an elephant was like a spear. The third man felt the elephant's trunk and concluded that an elephant was like a snake. The three other blind men felt the elephant's knee, ear and tail and concluded that an elephant was like a tree, a fan and a rope respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The story is the subject of a famous poem by John Godfrey Saxe, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. What you might not know about this poem is how it ends:

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!*<sup>2</sup>

This story is often used as a critique of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. The general critique is that “theologic wars” or theological differences among the religions are the result of ignorance rather than true knowledge of God. The critique particular to Christianity is that theological differences among Christians are the result of the same ignorance.

Is what this story says true? When it comes to theology, are we Christians like blind men, each with his own partly-right, partly-wrong opinions? Is Christianity itself merely one, limited, half-true perspective on God?

Although it usually doesn’t, the elephant story should raise all sorts of red flags for Christians. First, it asserts that all knowledge of God is perspectival. Second, the story suggests that knowledge of God is gained by examination. Third, the story implies that knowledge of God is limited to analogy. Finally, the story states that all religions have some partial knowledge of the true God.

## **My Perspective, Your Perspective**

The elephant story is a perfect example of Perspectivism, an idea developed by nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Perspectivism is a theory of how we know what we know --an epistemology. Nietzsche famously wrote: “The only seeing we have is seeing from a



perspective; the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective.”<sup>3</sup>

Perspectivism says that our knowledge, like the blind men’s knowledge of the elephant, is always partial, always limited by our particular point of view, and never completely accurate.<sup>4</sup>

Many Christians today are Perspectivists. They might not know what that word means, or even who Friedrich Nietzsche was, but they are Perspectivists nonetheless. When it comes to Christian doctrine, they no longer use words like “true” and “false” or “right” and “wrong.” Instead, they prefer “my point of view” and “your point of view.” Objective truth has been replaced by subjective perspective; doctrinal definition has been replaced by positions, views and opinions.

The fatal flaw of Perspectivism is that it is logically self-refuting. Nietzsche’s dictum, “the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective” must apply equally to all knowledge, including the dictum itself. If all knowledge is mere perspective, then Perspectivism is also mere perspective. But the Perspectivist doesn’t think that *his* knowledge is just one perspective.

Consider a character in the elephant story that is usually ignored, the narrator. Again, the narrator ends the elephant story with the following judgment of the blind men and their perspectives:

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
**Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!***

Of course, the narrator can only make this judgment because he has actually seen an elephant, right? He has seen an elephant and knows far more about elephants than the blind men know. He has seen an elephant and knows that an elephant is really nothing like a wall, spear, snake tree, fan or rope.

Isn't that exactly what Perspectivists are claiming? Aren't they claiming to have seen the elephant, or in their case, to have seen God? They believe that they are in a position to judge the truth claims of all religions: "*each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong.*" Yet that judgment would require that the Perspectivist himself knows something absolute and comprehensive about God. So, Perspectivists inadvertently and inconsistently claim to know more about God than all the world's religions combined. The elephant story shows what Perspectivists really think: Everyone's knowledge of God is partly-right and partly-wrong *except their own*.

## **Touching God's Tail**

The elephant story also suggests that knowledge of God is gained by examination. In the story, one of the blind men put his hands on the

elephant's tail and concluded that an elephant was like a rope. Of course, an elephant isn't anything like a rope. Yet each of the other blind men put their hands on a different part of the animal, and reach different, but equally mistaken conclusions. How do they reach these conclusions? They begin knowing nothing about elephants. They cannot see the elephant, so they examine the animal with their hands. They fail to realize that there is more to the elephant than the small part they have examined.

So, the elephant story suggests that Christian theology works the same way, we are all like blind men groping various parts of an elephant: We begin knowing nothing about God. We nevertheless are able to examine one or more of God's attributes, but like the blind men, we fail to realize that there is more to God than the limited set of attributes we have noticed.

Does this describe how Christians gain knowledge of God? At first, it might seem so. It is true that in our natural, fallen state, we know nothing about God --not God himself. Speaking of fallen man's state of knowledge, the Apostle Paul writes,

*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.<sup>5</sup>*

Our natural knowledge of God is extremely limited. "What can be known" isn't much: his eternal power and divine nature. That is, we know only that an all powerful Deity exists, nothing more. In this sense, we are like those blind men who have heard of elephants, but know nothing about them.

It is also true that in our fallen state, we are spiritually blind. In fact, regarding our spiritual blindness, the elephant story really doesn't go far enough. In the story, the men are blind, but they are still able to examine the elephant directly with their hands. According to Christianity, we are not

only unable to see God, we are unable to directly examine him *in any way*. And we only know *of* God (like the blind men know of elephants) because God has made plain his existence and power --but nothing more-- in the created world around us.

So, regarding our natural knowledge of God and our spiritual blindness, the elephant story also has a point. In fact, we're worse off than blind men when it comes to knowing God. But this is where the story goes wrong. It assumes that we gain knowledge of God by examination. We don't.

Christian knowledge of God isn't gained by examining the attributes of God; it is given by revelation. God doesn't reveal himself as a composite of individual observable attributes. He reveals himself in the Incarnation, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.



To rightly understand Christian theology,  
consider this twist on the story:  
what if the



elephant

could talk? In the elephant story, what would happen if the elephant weren't the passive object of the blind men's examination? What if the elephant could talk and tell the blind men exactly what and who he is?

This is why the elephant story ultimately fails as a critique of Christianity. *Christianity claims to have heard from the elephant himself.* Christianity asserts that the elephant has spoken and revealed himself to blind men. Christianity asserts that the unknowable God has made himself known, that the unseen God has revealed himself, that the spiritually blind

are made able to see, and that those unable to know God are given knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.

For Christianity, the elephant is Jesus. But unlike the elephant in the story, Jesus doesn't just stand there as the passive object of our examination. Rather, he speaks and acts to reveal himself to us. And, when Jesus reveals himself, he reveals God.

Like the elephant in the story, Jesus does subject himself to examination after his resurrection: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe"<sup>6</sup> but it is his revelation, not our examination that produces knowledge of God and faith.

## **Is God Like Something Else?**

The elephant story also implies that knowledge of God is limited to analogy. That is, that we know God only by comparing him to something else.

In the elephant story, although the men were blind, they were still apparently able to gather knowledge of things other than elephants: walls, spears, snakes, trees, fans and ropes. Otherwise they would have no point of reference. They wouldn't have been able to liken the elephant to anything else. Even then, the best that the blind men could do was draw an analogy between the elephant and those things with which they were familiar: "The elephant is like a \_\_\_\_\_."

Is this how Christians know God, only by analogy? No, not at all. Take one of the foundational and most mysterious doctrines of Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity: Is it an analogy? No. God is not *like* Father, *like* Son

and *like* Holy Spirit. God *is* Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact, the Trinity defies analogy. Many have tried, but all have failed to find something truly analogous to the Trinity. It simply cannot be likened to anything else without doing damage to the doctrine itself.

This is also why the historic Christian Creeds make absolutely no attempt to liken the Trinity to anything else; they simply confess what and who the Trinity is. Why? Because Christian knowledge of God is not knowledge by analogy; it is knowledge of God himself, even if that knowledge surpasses our reason.

Or, think of it this way: Jesus himself is no analogy. Contrary to what many Christians think, Jesus did not come to reveal *what God is like*; he came to reveal God himself. To see Jesus is to see God. To touch Jesus is to touch God. To hear Jesus is to hear God. Not only is no analogy necessary, any analogy would be an implicit denial of Jesus' divinity. Does Jesus use analogies to describe God's work to save sinful mankind? Yes, we call them "parables." But Jesus is no parable; he's God.

This means that Jesus' death is no analogy either. Again, contrary to what many Christians think, Jesus' death is not some grand object lesson, pointing us to something else. It is not a mere demonstration of God's love; it is God's love. It is not God showing us how much he loves us; it is God loving us. To put it in philosophical terms, Jesus' death doesn't signify something else; Jesus' death is the thing itself.

## **True Knowledge of the True God**

Finally, the elephant story concludes that all religions have some partial knowledge of the true God. Is this true? It depends on how you ask the question. Do the world's religions know there is a God? Yes, non-

Christians share that natural knowledge of God. Do they therefore know, even partially, the true God? I answered this question in detail in a 2004 article called "Mere Monotheism,"

*God's [natural] revelation in creation is self-evident, reliable, limited, and yet sufficient to make fallen man accountable to God. But what does fallen man do with this revelation? Fallen man receives this reliable, limited revelation of God and suppresses it in wickedness, misapplies it to things other than God, abandons it in favor of his own speculations, and worships the creature rather than the Creator. In short, fallen man "exchanges the truth of God for a lie." Non-Christian monotheists possess a knowledge of God, but it is "suppressed in wickedness". Jews and Muslims do not worship God according to natural knowledge. Rather, they believe and act against this knowledge, and worship an idol of their own imagination. This is why Scripture often describes this natural knowledge as a lack of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>*

Non-Christian religions know of God, but do not know God himself. In terms of the elephant story, non-Christian religions are blind men who know that elephants exist, but never actually encounter one, much less lay hands on a specimen. Apart from Jesus, there is no true knowledge of the true God. Here the Scriptural evidence is overwhelming, and comes from none other than Jesus himself:

*No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

*The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.*

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. ...Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."*<sup>8</sup>

Only Christians know the true God, and even then, only through God's special revelation of himself in the Word of Scripture and the Word made flesh. Does that mean that Christianity claims to have comprehensive knowledge of God? No, not yet.

## **I Shall Know Fully**

Christianity has never claimed to possess complete knowledge of God. The Apostle Paul acknowledges that our knowledge of God is presently partial:

*For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.<sup>9</sup>*

Christians, like little children, are presently limited in our knowledge of God. Full knowledge of God will come only after the final resurrection.

Unfortunately, this is exactly where we most often find Christians citing the elephant story as an explanation for the

theological differences *among* Christians. And, here is where we must be especially cautious.

In spite of the elephant story's failure as a critique of Christianity, Christian Perspectivists persist. They believe that theological differences among Christians are the result of our partial knowledge of God. If Christians disagree on some doctrine, instead of searching the Scripture to decide who is right and who is wrong, the Christian Perspectivist says in effect, "*each is partly in the right, and all are in the wrong.*" They interpret Paul's words "now we see through a glass dimly" to say that Scripture itself is unclear in what it teaches. Theology, they say is always provisional and speculative. Theological disputes are a waste of time, no one knows anything for sure, they say. Like the narrator of the poem, they declare that theological differences among Christians are like so many blind men arguing over an elephant they have never seen.

But the Christian Perspectivists are wrong. While it is true that on this side of the resurrection, we can know of God only what he has revealed of himself in Scripture, that in no way means that this partial knowledge of God is unclear, inadequate or inaccurate. In other words, what Scripture teaches may be partial, but it is nonetheless *completely true*.

## **More Than Revelation**

Scripture is especially clear on this: If the true God is to be known, he must be known only in Jesus. And, he is most clearly and most fully known in the death of Jesus for sinners. Jesus came to reveal God, but he came to do more than just reveal God to us, he came to reconcile us to God through his blood on the Cross.

The elephant story is right on one point. We were blind men! We were naturally ignorant of God. But God has not left us in the darkness of ignorance. In the elephant story, the blind men lay their hands on the

elephant to discover what it was. But in truth, God has come in the person of Jesus and laid *his* hands on us, hands scarred by the nails of his crucifixion. He has opened our blind eyes and minds. He has spoken and revealed himself to us. He has lived, he has suffered, he has died and rose again to save us.

The world remains full of blind men, as we once were. Paul writes:

*If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

This is why we, who have seen God in Jesus Christ are bold to proclaim that no one need remain blind, groping for an unknown God but never knowing who He is. Paul continues:

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This story appears to have its roots in Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist traditions.

<sup>2</sup> John Godfrey Saxe, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," *The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881, p. 491.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*. III.12, trans. Ian Johnston

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche went so far as to deny that there was objective truth that could be known --that there is no elephant to examine. This is why he is considered the philosophical father of Nihilism and Postmodern Relativism.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:19-20

<sup>6</sup> John 20:27

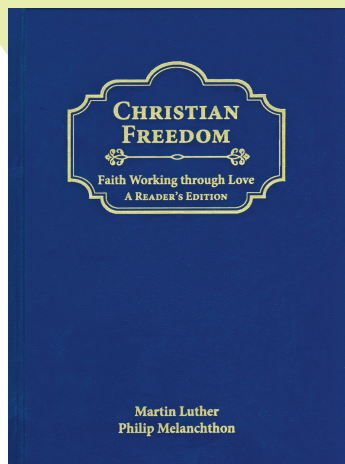
<sup>7</sup> Todd Wilken, "Mere Monotheism? Why Christians, Jews and Muslims Do Not Worship the Same God." *Issues, Etc. Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, p. 5. See Romans 1:18-25, 32; Psalm 79:6; Jeremiah 8:3; 10:25; Hosea 4:1; John 8:54-55; 15:21; 1 Corinthians 15:34; Galatians 4: 8; 1 Thessalonians 4: 5; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8

<sup>8</sup> John 1:18; 5:37-38; 14:6-7, 9

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

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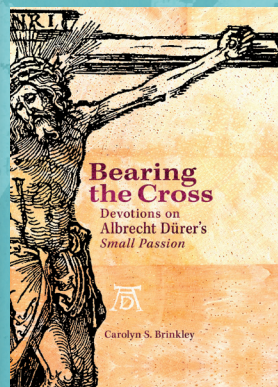
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# Wittenberg Trail: *The Wisdom of God*

by Christian Tiews

"The Earth is only eight to ten thousand years old and Jesus will one day return to raise everyone from the dead? You have *got* to be kidding..."

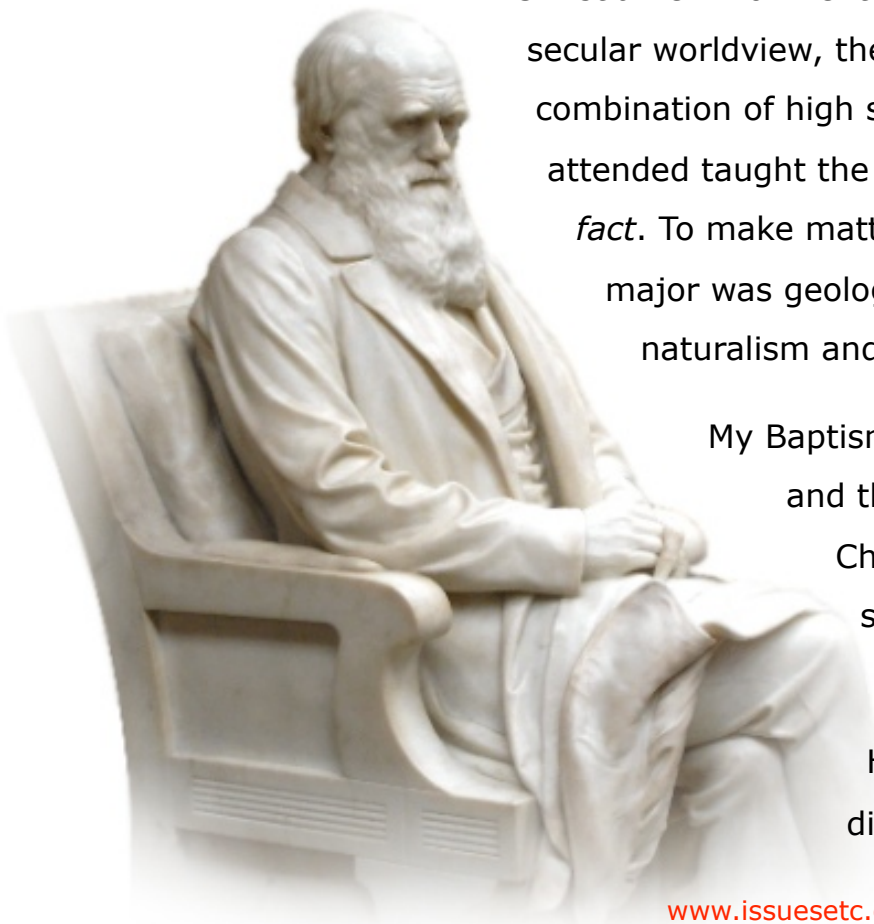
Up until my mid-thirties, I had never heard of such "foolish" doctrinal positions as six-day creation or the Last Day.

Why? Because I was born and for the most part raised in secular Germany, where only an estimated 3-5 percent of the population are confessing Christians (as opposed to 35-40 percent of the U.S. population).

Although baptized as an infant, I did not grow up in a decidedly Christian environment. Compounding my increasingly secular worldview, the humanist *Gymnasium* (a combination of high school and junior college) that I attended taught the theory of evolution as a scientific *fact*. To make matters even worse, my college major was geology--a science based on naturalism and Darwin's theory.

My Baptism had blessed me with salvation and the ability to believe in Jesus Christ, but my temporal surroundings had, over time, turned me into an agnostic.

However, things started to take a different turn when I was in my



early thirties. Working in software sales, my whole life revolved around making quota, chasing revenue, and closing deals. But deep down inside something was missing.

Then my life hit a wall --financially and spiritually. Like a turtle on his back, I was struggling to get on my feet, while searching for a deeper meaning to life.

About that time, my wife-to-be, Lula, and I attended a concert of Händel's *Messiah*. Having grown up on the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, I sat in that concert hall trying to gain an appreciation for the unfamiliar music. Why had G.F. Händel (a German) written the lyrics to his oratorio in English, which was not his native language? The program indicated that Händel had not penned the lyrics to the *Messiah*, but had put passages from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to music.

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. (Isaiah 7:14)*

*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. (Isaiah 9:6)*

*He shall feed His flock like a Shepherd. (Isaiah 40:11)*

*He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. (Isaiah 53:8)*

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-6)*

Even an agnostic evolutionist with no formal catechesis could tell that these verses were referring to Jesus Christ. But when were these ancient texts written? Hundreds of years before Christ, the program said. "Then these are fulfilled *prophecies*, which came true hundreds of years after they were written!"

Intrigued by the insight that Scripture must be something supernatural, I soon started reading the Bible from cover to cover, although its contents remained largely veiled.

Unbeknownst to me, the Lord--who had already made me His own some thirty-five years earlier at my Baptism--was drawing me ever closer to Himself.

In 1996 Lula and I moved to the United States, where I had spent part of my early childhood. Winding up in Texas, we went church-shopping for about a year. Then one Sunday morning, the pastor of the Lutheran church we were attending at the time got my attention with these words:

*Jesus Christ paid the price for your selfishness and egotism. Jesus Christ paid the price for the mess you made of your life. Jesus Christ paid the price for the fact that you turned away from Him. Jesus Christ paid the price for your agnosticism.*

At the close of the service, the pastor said that anyone wishing to thank Jesus for His work on the Cross was invited to come down to the altar rail, and that the pastor would pray with them.

I grabbed my Catholic-raised wife by the hand and said, "Let's go down!" She shrank back in mock horror. But she also wanted to support me --and so we walked down, along with a few other people. By the end of the prayer, I was in tears and my mind was in a whirl.

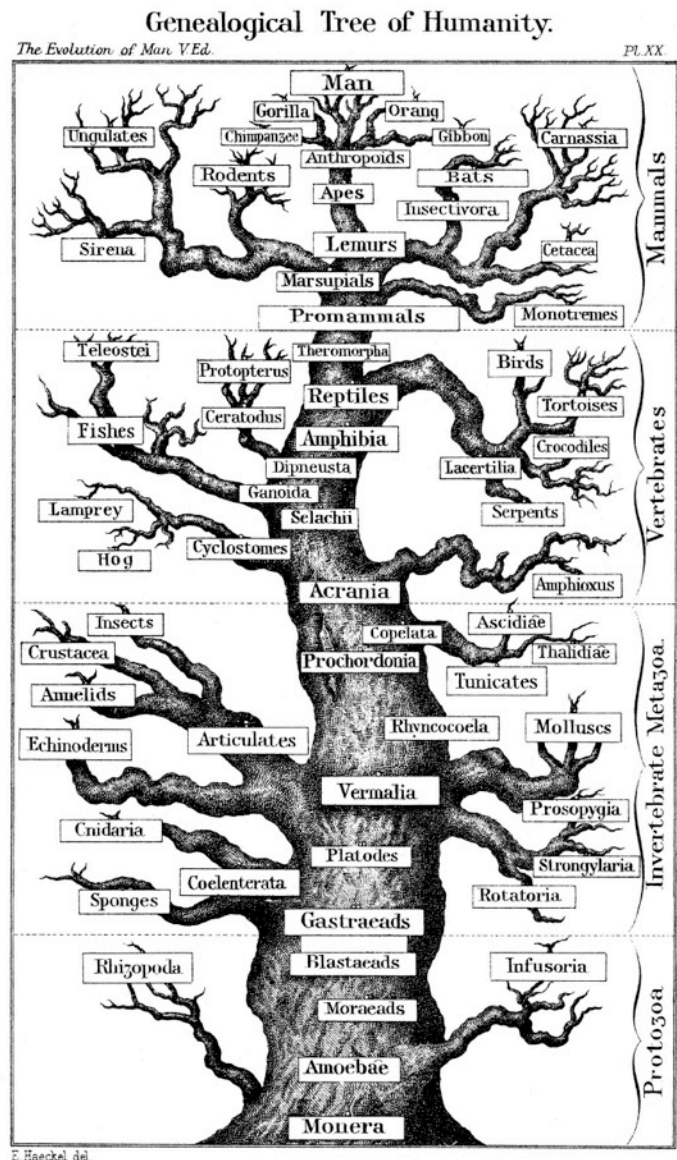
What did this all mean? Would the Gospel, as the pastor had called it, impact my life in any way?

I was eager to hear more about Christianity and so, from that point on, we never missed a Sunday service. Very soon afterwards, we volunteered for various church activities, which grew in frequency and intensity over the years.

What happened to my position on evolution during this process? I stubbornly clung to that concept for several years afterward, thinking, "Jesus saved me. And I thank Him for my salvation. But don't mess with evolution... The first few chapters of Genesis blatantly contradict science, so they are obviously only mythological and not meant to be taken literally."

Yet while studying the Bible, the concept of six-day creation kept popping up. There was no escaping it: Jesus confirmed and fulfilled the Old Testament and *everything* in it. And, nowhere did He even imply that creation is a natural process evolving over billions of years.

The Scriptural account of creation opposed what we had been taught in university. According to Darwinism, death was a "natural" part of life. Yet Scripture clearly indicated that death is an anomaly, and did not occur until



*after* creation, when sin entered the world. Similarly, academia taught that man slowly evolved over billions of years, while Scripture clearly recorded that man was created by God from the dust of the earth. Nowhere did Scripture indicate that God somehow used evolution to create life, so the two concepts could not be blended. Either Jesus was wrong and evolutionary science was right, or Jesus was right and evolutionary science was wrong. Something had to give.

Doing more research, I eventually stumbled across the dirty little secrets they had neglected to mention in university --such as the fact that transitional fossils one would expect to find between species have never been found. If evolution were true, transitional fossils would be ubiquitous all around the globe. The frauds and shenanigans that evolutionists play with so-called "missing links" had also been exposed, along with Haeckel's Embryos, Stanley Miller's infamous experiments, and academia's circular reasoning in fossil dating. Where did the matter come from that exploded in the Big Bang? Where did the energy come from that caused this explosion in the first place? Science offered no real answers to such questions. I realized that naturalism was based only on assumptions and conjecture--*not* on fact.

So why had no one mentioned the cataclysmic *scientific* problems of the evolutionary theory in university? Why had no one admitted that there were other models (a six-day Creation; Intelligent Design), which do explain earth's history much more plausibly than had naturalism and the theory of evolution?

Growing in our understanding of Christianity over the years, our family found a home in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, with its solid Biblical teaching (including creation/evolution issues), its interpretation of Scripture in light of the Book of Concord, its use of liturgy (at least in some churches),

and even in its rich German traditions. Yet in the grand scheme of things, even doctrinal issues as important as creation only served to highlight the *core* of the Christian faith, which had eluded me for so long:

*Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification. He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all. This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us.* <sup>1</sup>

*Sola Fide, sola Gratia, sola Scriptura, solus Christus.* This is what we came to know as the Gospel. To the unbeliever, it sounds every bit as foolish as a six-day Creation, or as Jesus return at the Last Day --“a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.”

*But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* <sup>2</sup>

Thanks be to God that He continues to save us sinners and to demonstrate His wisdom in the Word made Flesh--crushing the strongholds of the world and setting the captives free.

Christian Tiews went on to earn a Masters of Divinity degree at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, MO. He serves God's people as the pastor of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



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<sup>1</sup> Smalcald Articles, I

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:23-25



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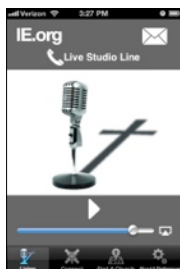
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