

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND EVOLUTION

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Three cheers

I was born, raised, trained and have lived and worked my whole life among faithful, thoughtful Christian liberals.

I have said it before and will say it again, that I wouldn't want to be a part of a church that hadn't been strongly touched by the liberal tradition.

First, because I enjoy the freedom: it is good to be a priest in a communion that isn't generally oppressive or even overly restrictive. I have watched pastors in other denominations and, the grass does not look greener on the other side.

Second, because, in general, liberals are open to change, and change is often good.

Third, because, in particular, liberals have been the first Christians to recognize the breakthroughs that have come from science. Even to a fault, liberal Christians have been ever ready to accept a scientific consensus, at points when evangelical and catholic Christians have remained stubborn. That has brought liberals into an important mediating role, bringing new discoveries within the household of faith for consideration.

You may be a liberal

So who is a liberal?

If you do not get up early in the morning and, with that cup of coffee, read, mark, and inwardly digest the scripture to begin your day, then you may be a liberal.

If you don't know Leviticus from Deuteronomy, or Chronicles from Kings . . . then you may be a liberal.

If you've never given the Book of Revelation so much as a second look because, frankly, you find it a little weird, then you may be a liberal.

If you've neither thought twice about lending or borrowing at the market rate then, like it or not, you may be a liberal.

If you know and readily accept the 4 source hypothesis—J,E,P, and D—for Hebrew Scripture, and are familiar with Q, then you may be a liberal who has taken EFM.

If you think that, in hearing Paul's remarks concerning women, sexuality, or slavery, we need to understand his views in the context of the prevailing opinions of his day, then you are a liberal and are probably comfortable as an Episcopalian.

If you would recommend a book by Bishop Spong, Karen Armstrong, or Elaine Pagels, then you are a liberal and you've got it bad.

If you enjoyed *The DaVinci Code* and found it theologically intriguing, then you are a liberal and may want to consider medication.

Defining liberal

What is “liberal” theology?

“Liberal” is from the Latin *liberarer*, “to set free.” In theology, this has meant freedom with respect to the authority of scripture and church tradition.

Last week, I referred to the “Five Fundamentals,” by which the Fundamentalist movement had been originally defined. The first fundamental was belief in the “Inspiration and Infallibility of Scripture.”

If theological liberalism can be said to have its own set of “fundamentals,” I think the first would be its recognition of “the historical character and human fallibility” of scripture.

A Parallel

In this respect, there is an interesting parallel with the history of ancient theology. If you remember, earlier in this course I mentioned that in ancient times there were two, opposite approaches to understanding the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

The Alexandrian School tended to take Christ's divinity for granted, then puzzled over the issue of humanity.

With the School of Antioch, the approach was more or less the opposite: start with humanity, then find away to reckon with divinity.

The classical solution, developed through the Council of Chalcedon, 451, was to affirm what Barth calls the "union of opposites" in Christ.

In modern times, we could say that the "Fundamentalist" School takes the Alexandrian high road concerning holy scripture: the Bible is the Word of God: inspired, infallible, divine.

The liberals take the low road out of Antioch: the Bible is a Human Word: historical, fallible, like us.

There is also a Chalcedonian solution. We find it in Karl Barth, who reads the bible as a "union of opposites": altogether human, altogether divine.

“Holy Scripture,” Barth writes, “is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only nor human only. Nor is it a mixture of the two, nor a *tertium quid* between them. But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human document.”¹

Another theologian with an intriguing name, Hans Urs von Balthasar, puts it this way:

“The Bible mirrors the interplay between Divine Revelation which gives meaning and belief which receives it, a closed ellipse with two centers.”²

¹ Barth, CD I.2, 501.

² From memory.

Historical and fallible

When I say that liberals regard the Bible as historical and fallible, that means precisely what?

When we speak of the Bible's "historical character" we are recognizing that the biblical writers, being human, lived in a certain time and place, and we are acknowledging that what they wrote reflected the times in which they lived. Now the Bible was written over a long period of time, more than a thousand years, and so it actually reflects certain evolutions. That's why books can be written with titles like *The Evolution of God*, that cite changes in the idea of God though the course of scripture. Some of the early ideas about God are quite primitive, even polytheistic.

When we say the Bible is "fallible," we are suggesting that, yes, the Bible writers, being human, can be wrong. Wrong about facts, as when it says (Deuteronomy 14:7) that rabbits chew their cud; and perhaps even wrong concerning values. For a liberal, it is possible to disagree, for example, with the views of the Apostle Paul regarding various topics of interest to the church.

Paul didn't seem to consider himself infallible—he said that for now our "knowledge is imperfect," seeing as it were "through a glass, darkly." Only later will we know in full when we at last meet God "face to face." (1 Cor 13:9-12). If Paul does not consider himself infallible, then why should we?

So liberalism begins with recognition of the Bible's fallibility, and historicity.

Here is Marcus Borg presenting his liberal view of the Biblical stories of creation:

“I see the Bible as a human response to God. Rather than seeing God as scripture's ultimate author, I see the Bible as the response of these two ancient communities to their experience of God. If we see the Bible as a divine product, then these are *God's* stories of creation. As God's stories, they cannot be wrong. If we go very far down this road, we may find ourselves attracted to scientific creationism (the attempt to show that a certain kind of 'science' supports a literal reading of Genesis). But if we see the Bible as a human product, then we read the opening chapters of Genesis not as God's account of creation but as ancient Israel's stories of creation. . . If we ask, 'What are the chances that ancient Israel's stories of creation contain scientifically accurate information?' the answer would be, 'About zero.' Having said that, though, let me add that I think Israel's creation stories are profoundly true -- but true as metaphorical or symbolic narratives, not as literally factual accounts.”³

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollins / HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 22-23.

That's the view from Antioch.

Now let's turn to Chalcedon, for profoundly different interpretation.

In 1965, Karl Barth's grand-niece had written her famous theologian uncle for his comments about a class-room discussion in which she had been involved, and in which Darwin and Genesis had been examined under the same light. The question was whether there was any way to "harmonize" the two accounts.

Barth seems surprised that no one in the seminar had explained to her that "one can as little compare the biblical creation story and a scientific theory like that of evolution as one can compare, shall we say, an organ and a vacuum cleaner—that there can be as little question of harmony between them as of contradiction."

Barth explains that "the creation story is a witness to the beginning or becoming of all reality distinct from God in the light of God's later acts and words relating to his people Israel—naturally in the form of a saga or poem. The theory of evolution is an attempt to explain the same reality in its inner nexus—naturally in the form of a scientific hypothesis."⁴

There are two things for us to notice here.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Letters 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 184.

First, Barth is saying that Israel knew God as Savior before it knew him as Creator. It was by “the light of God’s later acts and words related to his people Israel” that the biblical authors composed the creation story. Barth would say to Marcus Borg: Yes, the opening chapters of Genesis are Israel’s creation stories—and they know the God whereof they speak.

Second, we notice that Barth gives a distinctive account of the difference between the biblical creation story and Darwin’s scientific theory. He does not make this a difference between “primitive” and scientific. It is rather that the one account is a witness to “the beginning or becoming” of creation, whereas the other is an “attempt to explain the same reality in its inner nexus.”

A Barth scholar named Neil MacDonald has described this as the difference between “the *coming into being* of created reality” and, “*created reality* itself.”⁵ The Bible, Barth thinks, has something important to tell us about the former. Darwin may have discovered something about the latter.

In the terms of some of our earlier discussion, we could say that Barth understands the biblical creation story as having to do with God’s “doing of the world,” and Darwin’s science as describing and accounting for events in the world as done. So we have two accounts, one a “witness,” the other an attempt at explanation, of two categorically different events. Each account is rendered in the idiom appropriate for the events with which it has to do. Science is the proper idiom for

⁵ MacDonald, *Barth and the Strange New World*, 146.

understanding events on the horizontal axis. But only idioms of the imagination—saga and poetry—can begin to speak adequately to events of this other kind.

On Barth's exegesis, what Genesis tells us through saga and poetry is that the meaning and purpose of creation are fulfilled in the fellowship between humanity and God ("the covenant is the internal basis of creation"), and that the fellowship between humanity and God takes place precisely under the conditions of this creation ("creation is the external basis of the covenant.")⁶ So, as Barth tells it, the biblical narrative discloses the origin, meaning and purpose of the world that Darwin's science describes, and vice-versa.

Another way to talk about this is in terms of a relation between the "secular" and "sacred," where the sacred would be the meaning of the secular, and the secular the medium of the sacred.

Thus, through a human word, historical and fallible, in faith we hear the divine message concerning the origin and true nature of creation.

When I suggest that classical theology takes us "beyond liberalism," this understanding of the Bible is where the differences begin.

⁶ Barth, CD III.1, 94–228; 228–329.

Other liberal positions

As a theological movement, liberalism has come to be identified with distinctive positions on a variety of other topics. In the fall, we talked about Nancey Murphy, who identifies liberalism by way of contrast with fundamentalism on three questions:

The first question is, how do we know God? The fundamentalist grounds knowledge of God on scripture, the liberal on experience.

The second question is, how does God act? The fundamentalist has said that God acts by intervention. The liberal says that God is present to the world, but doesn't intervene.

The third question is, what is the sense of religious language? The fundamentalist has said that it is descriptive of objective facts. The liberal has said it is symbolically expressive of subjective experience.

We saw two out of three of those marks in that brief quotation from Marcus Borg. The bible is important as a record of the experience of God, and its truth is metaphorical in nature, rather than factually descriptive.

Post-liberal theology

Karl Barth and Nancey Murphy are theologians you hear me mention from time to time. Both can be accurately described as “post-liberal” theologians.

A post-liberal theologian is one who has passed through liberalism and learned from it, been changed by it, before moving on.

Murphy and Barth both keep a liberal’s recognition of the historicity and fallibility of scripture.

But they each have been sharply critical of liberal theology in important ways.

Barth

Barth's challenge to liberal theology is regarded as one of the great turning points in the history of theology.

One of his major criticisms was of liberalism's theological subjectivism. It had made faith's primary concern our subjective spiritual experience—our journey, as we now say. Barth would certainly acknowledge that our journey is important, both to ourselves and God. But he insisted that faith's primary concern is with the light from above that brightens our journey—God's journey, no less, in his Son, into the far country, to create a new fellowship between humanity and God and filling us with faith, and hope, and love.

Barth also accused liberal theologians of being inconsistent. Barth once remarked that every church in Christendom ought to have three words carved above the door: "Is it true?"⁷ Coming from most anyone else that might sound like an invitation to doubt. But coming from Barth, the point is that, to answer "yes," changes absolutely everything. From the moment we say "yes" we see everything in life in a whole new light and approach it in a different way. This should include, Barth insisted, the way we do theology. Liberal theologians, Barth said, would answer "yes, it is true," but the "yes" failed to penetrate their theological procedures and assumptions.

⁷ From memory.

“Widespread vacillation” was Barth’s verdict on a movement in which Christianity had taken a turn that was inconsistent with its own core assertions, without breaking from them altogether.⁸

So those are two major emphases in Barth’s critique of liberal theology: subjectivism, and inconsistency.

⁸ Barth, CD I.2, 292.

Murphy

As for Murphy, last fall I presented her critique that liberalism, no less than fundamentalism, had let itself be captured by a mistaken scientific picture of the world: the “closed cosmology” of physical determinism. (This is an instance of liberal theology being sometimes over ready to accept a scientific consensus at face value.)

To be consistent with that cosmology, which science now knows to be mistaken, liberals gave themselves over to more and more radical re-writings of central Christian doctrines. Liberals are open to change, and change, as I have said, is often good. But the openness to theological revision trended towards equivocation.

Murphy’s charge against liberal theology is that it often has been equivocal. It uses the language of traditional faith, but so alters its meaning that “only the words remain.”⁹

An example I would use concerns our understanding of the Resurrection. A series of thinker from Rudolf Bultmann to John Dominic Crossan have used the word “Resurrection” to mean that, though Jesus died, and remained dead, the faith that he had spawned, and which had been in ashes through the crucifixion, was brought back to life and still lives in us today.¹⁰

⁹ Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, 14.

¹⁰ Crossan: “First of all, *resurrection* is but one way, not the only way, of expressing Christian faith. Second, *apparition*—which involves trance . . . is but one way, not the only way, of expressing Christian experience. Third, Christian faith experiences the *continuation* of divine empowerment through Jesus, but that continuation began only after his death and burial. Christian faith itself

The equivocation comes with using a word that had traditionally been applied to an experience of Jesus (that he had been dead, and now he lives) for an experience of Christians (that through an experience of loss, they have come to faith again). The same word is given infinitely and qualitatively different meanings: objective in the one instance, subjective in the other. The Light from above has become a light from within.

was there beforehand among Jesus' first followers in Lower Galilee, and it continued, developed, and widened across time and space after his execution. It is precisely that *continued* experience of the Kingdom of god as strengthened rather than weakened by Jesus' death that is Christian or Easter faith. And that was not the work of one afternoon. Or one year." John Dominic Crossan: *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins / HarperSanFrancisco, 1994),160–61.

Two differences

The message of this course is (1) that the Anglican thesis of compatibility between Christian faith and evolutionary science is sound; (2) that we see how this is so by the light of our most important doctrines, and by drawing from classical theology.

In certain respects, this means “classical” theology in distinction from “liberal” theology, because there are points of divergence between classical and liberal theology concerning Theistic Evolution.

There is not time, in 30 minutes, to make the arguments, but I will tell you a little about two points of disagreement I have with some of the more prominent theologians writing in this field today. I address both issues in some details in my dissertation, and one of them is rather central to my thesis.

The first issue concerns our understanding of science; the second concerns our understanding of God.

Methodological Naturalism

So what is “science?”

This is a controversial topic, especially as of a few years ago, and most of the more liberal minded theologians are aligned on one side of it, with the scientific establishment, and I am on the other side with the rebel insurgents—and some other allies I will mention in a moment.

What is the “established” view concerning what should qualify as science?

It is called “methodological naturalism.” Methodological naturalism is a rule of modern science not to appeal to the Creator or any non-physical entity as “cause” for phenomena in nature.

John Haught, who is one of several theologians who have defended the rule both in public debate and in the federal court, says that “from a purely scientific point of view, of course, all phenomena need to be understood *etsi Deus non daretur* (as though God were not a factor). Natural science, for the sake of its own integrity, has to leave out all appeals to divine explanation. From the point of view of science, a theological reading of nature is always out of place.”¹¹

¹¹ Haught, *Deeper than Darwin*, 17.

This rule was recently a bone of contention in the state of Kansas, in a political battle between the National Academy of Sciences and proponents of Intelligent Design. The controversy concerned language in the science guidelines established by the Kansas Board of education.

Before the controversy, the guidelines had stated:

“Science is the human activity of seeking natural explanations for what we observe in the world around us.”

Under pressure from proponents of Intelligent Design, they were revised to read:

“Science is a systematic method of continuing investigation that uses observations, hypothesis testing, measurement, experimentation, logical argument and theory building to lead to more adequate explanations of natural phenomena.¹²

What was missing from that definition was any language restricting science to “natural” explanations. The National Academy of Sciences brought intense pressure to bear on the state of Kansas to return that language to the definition. After an election, a new board quickly complied with NAS requirements, and thus the crisis was resolved.

¹² Jodi Wilgoren, “In Kansas, Darwinism Goes on Trial Once More,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/06/education/06evolution.html?th&emc=th> (accessed May 6, 2005).

As a result, the established view that methodological naturalism is definitive for science is legally and culturally entrenched to a point of near impregnability.

Legally and culturally entrenched positions, though, are historical, and fallible. I hope that rings a bell.

I think this one is especially vulnerable because it is philosophically weak, to a point that, if it is applied to certain special cases, it actually works counter to the scientific pursuit of disinterested inquiry leading to probable conclusions. It is also theologically mischievous.

In saying that it is philosophically weak, I have the support of at least one very prominent philosopher of Biology, Philip Kitcher—the Columbia Professor who made his name by dismantling creationist arguments piece by piece. Kitcher will tell you that the problem with creationism first, and now with Intelligent Design theory, is not that arguments involving God can't be scientific arguments—the problem is that the arguments haven't been scientifically successful.

Historically, when Darwin developed his theory of evolution by natural selection, he was contending against a theory that species had been specially and independently created by God. That was what his own teachers and mentors had thought, and he was able to convince them that they had been wrong.

I do not believe that Darwin would have accepted a definition of science that would have told his teachers, whom he revered, that they hadn't been scientists all along. If they weren't scientists, how

could they let evidence and argument convince them to change their minds? I am saying that Darwin would have worked from a broader view of “science” than the National Academy of Sciences is willing to countenance.

This is a pretty easy case, and it supports the idea that it isn’t the search for a “natural” explanation that determines whether an argument is scientific, but rather, as Kitcher says, “the character of the proposals and the ways in which they are articulated and defended,” period.¹³

The other claim I make is that an unqualified commitment to methodological naturalism is theologically mischievous. That is a several step argument, with more detail than we can go into here. Reading from my dissertation, this is what I claim:

The National Academy’s line-in-the sand restriction of “science” to the “search for natural explanations,” is (indirectly, but demonstrably) inconsistent with at least one core Anglican commitment, the celebration of Easter as Christ’s victory over death. It can be shown that the way the NAS would have us define science would push the Christian down a logical path that would ultimately force her to a repugnant and otherwise unnecessary choice between commitment to science and commitment to a strong interpretation of the (core) doctrine of the Resurrection.

¹³ Kitcher, *Abusing Science*, 125.

For Anglicans, as I go on to say, something will have to give: whether in our commitment to methodological naturalism as constitutive of science, or in our conception of the Resurrection as a core element of Christian faith and doctrine.

In an appendix I develop an explanation for why this is so. If any of you would be interested in reading it, I will put it on the web. If my reasoning is sound, then accepting an absolute commitment to methodological naturalism does what acceptance of evolutionary science does not do, which is undermine one of our central religious doctrines.

That would be the end of our Anglican thesis of compatibility.

As an alternative to an unqualified endorsement of methodological naturalism, I argue for a qualified acceptance of it, as an “heuristic,” a guide to good, normal scientific practice, theologically grounded and understood as the search for secondary causes, while allowing, as theological tradition has done, that science might find itself, from time to time, up against a miracle.¹⁴

¹⁴I think here of Dr. Alexis Carrel, the 1912 Nobel–winning vascular surgeon, accompanying a patient, sick and dying from tubercular peritonitis, on her way to Lourdes. Carrel, an ex–Catholic, remarked to a friend that if a woman this sick were cured, he would become a monk. The woman, named Marie Bailly, was, in fact, cured at the shrine. Dr. Carrel did not keep his promise to become a monk, nor exactly a believer. He reportedly lived most of the rest of his life in a state of suspension between acceptance of something he had seen with his own eyes, and his scientific training, which insisted that he lend no credence to “supernatural” explanations. Towards the end of his life he returned to the Catholic faith. For this story, see Peter E. Hodgson, *The Roots of Science and its Fruits: The Christian Origin of Modern Science and its Impact on Human Society* (London: Saint Austin Press, 2002), 34–35

Bottom Line

In writing my dissertation, my advisor pressed me for the bottom line of this argument. He asked: “Shall scientists leave their own work open to the conclusion ‘God did it?’ What are we looking for science to be? What is at stake in this discussion?”

This was my reply:

As to the stakes, three points. 1) As a matter of intellectual courage of convictions, those of us who agree with Intelligent Design theorists *on the specific issue of defining science* should be willing to say so for the record, rather than standing silently by as they are broadly maligned for their position. 2) As I argue in the Appendix, a dogmatic commitment to methodological naturalism is not theologically neutral. It is consistent with some interpretations of crucial doctrines, but not with others. It is not consistent with a traditional interpretation of the resurrection. 3) As is further shown in the Appendix, there are circumstances (at least in context of *historical* discovery) where restricting inquiry to the search for the “natural” explanation may actually *impede* a disciplined quest for the most likely explanation. So this is to answer, yes: in at least the one instance of the resurrection, and therefore conceivably also in others, our position is that scientists should leave their work open to the conclusion “God did it.” A good scientist will be guided by her tradition to be wary of that conclusion, to put it off while searching diligently for answers solely in terms of secondary causes. But if the evidence forms up and points its finger in the divine direction, she doesn’t stop being a good scientist if she turns to consider the possibility that this time, here, indeed “God did.” The bottom line is that methodological naturalism is a good rule and, as with other good rules, it should be open to exceptions.

God

Now let's talk briefly about God.

This gives me a chance to repeat a favorite quote from Evelyn Underhill, the great early twentieth century student of mysticism. At one point she wrote a note to the Archbishop of Canterbury asking if he would please remind the clergy that “God is the interesting thing about religion.”

There are some interesting and important differences between classical and liberal theology concerning God.

Classical theology affirms a radical conception of divine transcendence, both with respect to God's relation to time, and God's relation to the natural order. Remember Aquinas's phrase:

[God's] will is to be thought of as existing outside the realm of existents, as a cause which pours forth everything that exists in all its variant forms.”¹⁵

Liberal theology does not affirm such a radical conception of divine transcendence, either with respect to time, or the natural order.

¹⁵ Timothy McDermott, trans. and ed., *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 282–83. “Source: Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, 1.9 (18b26–19a22).”

This position has far-reaching implications for our understanding of God's knowledge and power.

Concerning knowledge, the liberal position is that God doesn't know the future. God knows everything about the present and the past, and so God has a very good idea about tomorrow, and even the long-range forecast, but he doesn't "see" it, as classical theologians had said he did. That is because divine foreknowledge is said to be inconsistent with human freedom. If God sees what I am going to do tomorrow, that means I don't truly have a choice between working and going to the track. There is an active literature on this.

Concerning power, the liberal position is that the world is only free to the extent that God withdraws his power. There is a biblical word frequently associated with this position, *kenosis*, which means to "empty." Liberal theology says that the world is free because God has emptied himself of power with respect to the world's activities.

You will find that view in a recent reaching document of the Episcopal Church, titled *The Catechism of Creation, an Episcopal Understanding*. It includes this statement:

“Knowing the creation as evolving also helps us to think of God’s relationship to the cosmos in another way. In Phil. 2:5–11, Christ is said to ‘empty himself’ of divinity and take in human form the role of a servant. The Greek word for emptying is *kenosis*. A kenotic theology of creation expresses the notion that the Triune God freely and graciously withdraws absolute power in order to ‘let the world be’ (Genesis 1) A loving parent is faithful to her child, guides and protects him, but allows him to become his own self. In a comparable but more profound way, God the Divine Lover loves God’s own creation, faithfully holding it in existence, calling it to greater levels of complexity and beauty, but allowing the physical laws that govern the galaxies, and those of chance, environment, and selection that govern life, to take cosmic and biotic evolution in whatever directions the gifts given to creation permit. God’s kenosis gives the universe its freedom and opens up its future; God’s covenantal faithfulness and natural laws ensure its cohesion and regularity.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Executive Council, Committee on Science, Technology and Faith, *A Catechism of Creation: An Episcopal Understanding*, first edition, revised June, 2005, available from <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/CreationCatechism.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2005), 12–13.

As I read this statement, it appears to mean that, even from God's vantage, life is somewhat a role of the dice... beginning with early evolution and continuing into a misty future.

I don't like the thought of that, and I don't believe its true.

It is grounded on a doubtful premise, that there exists a zero-sum relation between God's freedom and activity and ours: to make us free, *libre*, God must merely watch and wait.

According Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Barth, Austin Farrer, C.S. Lewis—the line of classical theology goes on and on—nothing could be further from the truth. We are free because of, not despite, the activity of God.

Alexandria and Antioch

Again, we find roads that start (figuratively, not actually!) in Alexandria and Antioch.

From “Alexandria,” there is a view that because God is God the world does what it does with no meaning of its own, moving passively under God’s direction. Active God/Passive World. The problem here is to find a place for human freedom.

From “Antioch,” there is a view that God, out of respect for the world’s integrity, remains passive as it finds its own meaning and direction. Passive God/Active World. The problem here is to find a place for God’s purposeful direction. You will find an attempt to do that in process theology, which is quite influential in Theistic Evolution circles.

Like the Council of Chalcedon, Classical theology unites the opposites. It affirms freedom and autonomy in the natural order, under the purposeful direction of God.

Listen again to Barth, affirming the standpoint of Alexandria:

This Lord is never absent, passive, non-responsible or impotent, but always present, active, responsible and omnipotent. He is never dead, but always living; never sleeping, but always awake; never uninterested, but always concerned; never merely waiting in any respect, but even where He seems to wait, even where He permits, always holding the initiative.¹⁷

And now from Antioch:

And yet it is still the case that all creaturely activity has its own meaning and determination; that Israel itself and all other peoples live out their own individual history; that all men, the obedient no less than the disobedient, think, and speak and act according to the manifest desire of their hearts; that the desert is dreary and the night dark; that the sea roars and honey is sweet; that bread sustains and wine makes glad the heart of man; that everything is and acts as it does.¹⁸

¹⁷ Barth, CD III.3, 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 189.

In Chalcedon, the opposites unite:

Much may vary in the sphere of the divine disposing. In it there is a place for prosperity and adversity, victory and defeat, peril and protection, life and death, angels and demons, even human sin and human liberation. God is Lord in all these things. He is so in very different ways.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

The classical tradition would have the Christian understand herself as living in a world where God's respect for the freedom and integrity of natural causes folds into a story whose beginning and end are fully known to God, who is able and willing to direct it to a particular fulfillment.

I think this is an extraordinarily rich and hopeful understanding of creation. I think it is the one that the one that is indicated in the gospel. And I think it is true.

From the beginning, God's purpose in creating this world, 12.5 billion years ago, was to establish a relationship between himself and his creation, a covenant of grace with creatures who can know and will and freely answer an appeal to our responsibility and love. And, in the fullness of time, he humbled himself—"emptied," to use Paul's phrase—to deliver that appeal in person, and show us how it's done.