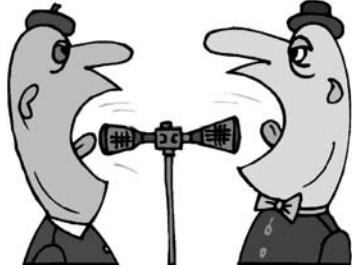


Do We Debate or Dialogue



Issues of Science and Faith?

Discussions on hot issues abound in our time! Among contemporary faith and science issues, I think three of them—origins, abortion, and global warming—have especially been divisive in the Christian community. In our Shenandoah Valley of Virginia community, a church group promoted a public debate between a nationally known young earth creationist (YEC) and an obscure retired professor who advocated naturalistic Darwinian evolution. The YEC promoter quickly pointed out two positions for understanding origins—his specific Christian interpretation and his opponent's atheistic evolutionary interpretation. Using good debate techniques gained from years of experience with this forum, the YEC clearly won the debate in the minds of most persons in the audience. Since only two choices were represented and the Christian option was well promoted, the outcome was inevitable. However, I do not think audience understanding was enhanced.

Similar scenarios have occurred within abortion and global warming debates. Recently, I participated in an online email discussion with a group of persons on faith and science issues, especially as they relate to Intelligent Design (ID) ideas. In a week or two, the discussion morphed away from ID to a “debate” on the exclusive validity of YEC. Soon the discussion shifted from discussing issues such as a recent creation, animal death before the Fall, fossil record, hominid evidences, and length of creation days in Genesis into slanderous attacks on the few persons not holding a YEC view.

In reflecting on these encounters, I wonder about the value of debate as a tool to create understanding. In my experience, debates have created more heat than light and have served to further entrench combatants in defending their position while attacking their opponent's position.

More and more, I am convinced that within the circles of the Christian community, we should avoid the “debate mode.” Rather, we should deliberately advocate a “dialogue mode.” Why?

The goal of a debate is to win, while the goal of a dialogue is to find common ground with delineating differences. One listens in a debate to find argument flaws, which can be exposed and countered. Within dialogue, one listens in order to understand an alternative viewpoint. Debates tend to be polemic and oppositional, while dialogues are collaborative and work to enhance understanding. Dialogue advocates typically try to re-state an alternative view to test the accuracy and clarity of their understanding of that view. Consequently, a dialogue advocate may say, “This is how I understand what you are saying ... Is my description accurate?” Dialogue participants seek self-correction; debate participants seek to correct the other. Open mindedness is created with dialogue; a closed mind position is enhanced with debate. Dialogues encourage respectful conversations over cups of coffee; debates promote forceful speakers behind podiums and lecterns. Finally, debates attempt to finalize a discussion, while dialogues provide for continued conversation. Especially in these issues in which we “dimly peer through our varied perspective glasses,” it behooves us to admit that we do not know or understand with entirety and to hold our positions with humility and grace.

Scripture (Acts 17:16-34) describes the dialogue approach of the Apostle Paul with the Greeks on Mars Hill in Athens. The Apostle begins with a Greek understanding of an unknown god and expands by proclaiming that this unknown god is the Creator of the world and of humankind. Using a common ground approach, Paul affirms the text of a Greek poet to make a further connection with his audience. What was the outcome of this dialogue attempt? Some in the audience disagreed and sneered; some wanted to hear more. However, others (maybe only a few) believed.

As editor, I promote a dialogue approach. I believe that dialogues well presented with respect and care can provide us with more understanding and light, while generating less heat. Furthermore, dialogues enhance the actuality of our common faith and Christian commitment and thereby build the body of Christ. What do you think about the dialogue approach? Do you want to talk more about it? I will buy the coffee.

Shalom,
Roman J. Miller, Editor



In This Issue

Issue Overview ...

Dialogue is a reoccurring theme in this issue. The editorial promotes dialogue as a medium for advancing knowledge and understanding. Two separate dialogue sections with exchanges between multiple viewpoints make up a major portion of this issue. Some of the Letters dialogue between authors and readers.

This expanded issue of 88 pages is made possible by the generous contribution of an anonymous donor who is providing the funds to increase the number of our journal pages from our normal 72- to the 88-page size in some issues. ("May his tribe increase!")

The quality of our journal is largely depended upon the capable work of our reviewers who read and critique manuscripts submitted for publication. As an acknowledgment of appreciation, we list the names (p. 27) of those individuals who have graciously contributed their time and expertise to review one or more manuscripts in 2006.

One Essay/Talk ...

Last year, Luke Johnson, biblical scholar from Emory University, presented a well-received talk at a local meeting. One of our editorial board members was so impressed that he urged Dr. Johnson to submit his talk for publication and simultaneously urged the editor to publish the talk. Johnson reminds us about the limits of language and the diversity of language in Scripture and then applies those realities to help us think theologically about creation (pp. 3-9).

Three Regular Articles ...

Two keynote addresses from the 2006 ASA Annual meeting provide the material for two regular articles. In the first article (pp. 10-18), Karen Lebacqz, bioethicist and Methodist minister, advances the inclusion of four values—equality, expediency, conservation, and caregiver priority—in responding to a pandemic. Are these the appropriate guidelines for response? What are the essential Christian virtues that dare not be comprised during a pandemic?

In the second article (pp. 19-27), Celia Deane-Drummond, director of the Centre for Religion and the Biosciences at the University of Chester in Great Britain, promotes prudence (practical wisdom) infused with divine grace as an essential virtue needed in the issues of genethics. The author carefully links her understanding of prudence both with the insights of Aquinas and theological ideas in Scripture. Can this wisdom rule in our decision-making?

The third article in this section (pp. 28-36) contains Part Two of the three-part series by geologist Davis Young, which reviews scientific dating methods used to quantify geological materials. Young describes several specific radiometric dating methods by providing an overview of their theory and application.

Two Dialogues ...

The underlying topic of the first dialogue (pp. 37-54) is the appropriate method of Scripture interpretation in relating the Bible to origins. Biblical scholar and writer, Paul Seely, critiques concordism, as illustrated by Hugh Ross' approach to the early chapters of Genesis. Seely offers an alternative, more harmonious approach to the biblical content. Ross, astronomer and founder of Reasons to Believe, responds by pointing out alternative understandings to the points raised earlier by Seely. Read this mutually respectful exchange between two persons, each passionately committed to a specific paradigm, but able to critique another view without denigrating the view holder. So how do you helpfully harmonize Scripture with science? Maybe some readers will want to continue this dialogue.

The second dialogue (pp. 55-65) revisits the views of Intelligent Design (ID) in connection with evolution. Three contributors, Loren Haarsma, Michael Behe, and John Bloom, provide varied insights into the adequacies and inadequacies of ID as a way of understanding issues of origin. Physicist Haarsma provides the initial critique of ID; biologist Behe gives a short response; and then physicist Bloom wraps up the conversation by reminding us that the discussion about ID and evolution includes scientific as well as philosophical and theological issues. Can we come to some synthesis on the role of ID, or must we say that we simply do not know enough yet?

Other Sections ...

Art Eyes Science includes two intriguing poems by Harry Poe and one by Paul Arveson (pp. 66-8).

In a News & Views article (pp. 69-70), Linda Whitby describes an enhanced mission effort that reaches beyond spirituality and includes the sustenance of living. Read this short illustrated article to understand how the bee industry affects the well-being of persons.

In the Book Review section (pp. 71-84), 22 published books are classified, briefly reviewed and critiqued. Many readers find these reviews helpful in selecting additions to their libraries.

Our journal issue concludes with six Letters (pp. 84-7). One letter by Jeff Mino corrects a couple of items in a prior published article. The last four letters illustrate readers responding to published articles and then the original authors responding back on those reader comments. ✱