

...They're anti-science

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to see all of you here at the start of our series. And over the next three weeks, we want to look at three common criticisms which society has of Christians.

And to start off this week, and you've already had a bit of a chat about it, we want to answer the question, are Christians anti-science? Now, I think this is a common view today. You only have to turn on the TV, watch programs like Q&A; or The Project, or read the newspapers or social media, and the view you often pick up is that religious belief in general, and Christian belief in particular, is opposed to science.

So Sam Harris, a noted atheist, put it in these terms. I've got it on the slide. He says, the conflict between religion and science is inherent and very nearly zero-sum.

The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma. The maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science. In other words, he's saying that the discoveries of science always threaten religious belief.

And if you're a Christian, then you can only keep believing by refusing to accept the discoveries of science. Elsewhere, another person, Peter Atkins, an Oxford chemistry professor, well, he says this, Science and religion cannot be reconciled, and humanity should begin to appreciate the power of its child, and beat off all attempts at compromise.

[1 : 30] Now, I think if you boil these views down, what you get are two broad criticisms. They're related to each other, but distinct. And they're in your outlines tonight, the first two dot points.

First, people think that Christians are anti-science because they continue, Christians continue to hold beliefs which science has already disproved. Like the age of the earth, like the origin of life. What the Bible says about these things is simply incompatible with what science tells us. So that's the first criticism, and I want to come back to that shortly. The second goes to the nature of faith itself.

Faith, they say, is to believe in things blindly. Or, as Victor Stenger, the quote that you just discussed earlier, puts it, faith is believed in the absence of supportive evidence, and even in the light of contrary evidence.

In other words, Christians believe without evidence. And doing that goes against the very principles of science. Because science draws its conclusions by making observations, by studying the data and the evidence, building hypotheses, and drawing conclusions.

[2 : 45] So those two, I think, are the broad criticisms that people level when they say these things. But let's look a little closer to see if these are justified. Now, when we hear people say that science has already disproven Christianity, I think what comes to mind immediately is the Bible's account of Genesis.

They think that given the discoveries of cosmology and evolutionary biology, how can Christians still believe in that account? How is a belief in seven-day creation still credible?

Or believe that Earth is no more than 6,000 years old? Well, my opening response to that is to say that we cannot read the Bible as if it were a scientific text.

Genesis wasn't written to tell us how things were created. Not in minute detail anyway. Rather, it was written to answer the why questions. Why are things the way they are?

And so the Bible is first and foremost a theological text. It tells us who God is, what he's like. It reveals who we are and why we're here.

[3 : 59] And what's more, the Bible communicates these truths in a wide variety of forms or different genres, to put it in a literary way. And so when we come to a passage like Genesis 1, we immediately see how stylized and poetic they are.

So take Genesis 1 and verse 3. And God said, let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and there was evening, and there was morning the first day.

And throughout the rest of that chapter, the phrases repeat themselves in a very poetic way. Its style is typical of Hebrew poetry. And it lacks scientific accuracy.

But it's actually very effective because the way it's written enables the text actually to be accessible to all humanity, to people throughout every age, and across every culture, not just for us in our time, and not just for first world people like us.

And so the main things we want to derive from Genesis 1 is not how did the earth begin, but what are these theological truths that the Bible speaks of.

[5 : 10] And I've listed a few on the screen, and I'm just going to go through them quickly. There will be more, but these are the ones that I have listed for myself. So we learn, firstly, that God the Creator is transcendent.

That is, He's totally separate from creation. And then two, we know that creation had a beginning. Three, we learn that it came into being by God's initiative, by His power and word.

Or as our reading in Hebrews put it, the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. Fourthly, we know that creation has order.

That everything has its place and purpose. It's the order of the environment, sky, land, and sea, then serves the purpose of the living things. Trees, plants, in turn, then serve to enable animals and humans to thrive, and therefore to serve their purposes.

And then fifthly, right at the pinnacle, God created humanity. And although humanity is part of creation, it's special because humans are made in God's image.

[6 : 16] We have a special capacity, unlike anything else in creation, to know God, to understand His purpose, and to rule on His behalf. Now, how exactly in the minute detail all this comes about, the Bible actually doesn't go into.

And if it does, it only does so in the broadest of brushes. There is a verse in Proverbs, which I like very much, and it's Proverbs 25 and verse 2, and it says this.

It says, It is the glory of God to conceal a matter. To search out a matter is the glory of kings. And so I have a sneaky suspicion, then, that it was actually God's intent not to reveal all things scientific to us.

It's not that He forgot or He overlooked it. No, He did it on purpose. Why? In order to give us the joy and the glory of discovering them for ourselves, of searching out a matter, of finding out how things work, and thinking His thoughts after Him.

Now, listen, my wife, she has a cousin who, when he was young, he used to love taking apart electronic gear. Yeah. You know, radios, video recorders, whatever.

[7 : 35] Things like that. And you know why He did that? I'm sure some of you do that. Anyone do that here? Luna? Yeah. Okay. Only one. But a lot of people like doing that.

And why do they do that? Because they love to understand how things work. How does the radio work? How does the video recorder work? And when they do that and they work out how it does work, they take great delight in working how it works and how beautifully it's designed.

Well, I think scientific work has the same sense of wonder. It's the very thing that was expressed in our first reading when in Psalm 19, the psalmist says, the heavens declare the glory of God.

The skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they reveal knowledge. And so when scientists decode the human genome or when they peer into the depths of outer space or into the depths of the ocean and they find things there, when they search out what God has actually hidden for, you know, some things, thousands and thousands of years, their response is invariably one of wonder and awe.

Now, does that mean the Bible has nothing to say about anything scientific? Well, no, I don't think that that's true at all. But it means that on the question of how things work, of things observable in nature, Christians take the evidence of science and consider carefully how it marries up with the Bible.

[9 : 12] And so on questions like how old the earth is, how did the universe come into being, well, we can allow science to take the lead, as it were, in answering some of these questions. But I feel we need to go further than that because I know that for some, atheists in particular, the case is already closed.

They say that science itself has proven that God does not exist. So never mind what the Bible says in the first place, science has shown us how the world came into existence and therefore it doesn't need a supernatural being like God to do it.

Now, is this true? Well, what I'm about to describe with you is an oversimplification, so if there's anyone out there who wants to pick a bone with me later, it is a gross simplification.

But essentially, atheists who hold this view, I think would explain how the world came about in this manner. So they would say something like, everything started with the Big Bang. There in the beginning was this intense burst of energy concentrated in a singularity.

And then from this tiny point in time and space, energy produced matter. And in the subsequent expansion in space, stars, planets, galaxies, they begin to form.

[10:27] Now, all this over billions of years, of course. And then on one of these planets, namely Earth, life eventually begins to form. Initially, these were small and simple organisms, single-cell organisms like bacteria or protozoa or whatever.

But from it and through the process of evolution, more complex organisms begin to emerge. Plants, animals, mammals, leading eventually to humans, the highest and most complex form of organisms.

So it's just like a set of dominoes, right? You guys have built those dominoes? Mine never works. It's always after the third one stops. But it's like a set of dominoes. Once the Big Bang occurred, it set off a chain reaction, bringing us where we are today.

Now, as I said, what I've described is a gross simplification. And I know that, for instance, many will point to the fact that it's not as deterministic as that. It's not one chain of dominoes.

But perhaps it's like a complex network of tributaries, right? And some reactions lead to a dead end, i.e. extinction. And we happen to be at the end of one of those tributaries that has kept going and may keep going, although no one can predict where it will end up.

[11:42] But no matter how simple or complex the analogy, what is undeniable is that if you're committed to atheism, meaning that God doesn't exist, then you're committed to a closed system.

Does that make sense? That is, this universe which we live in cannot be subject to any external rational input. Everything has to happen from within. And from the atheist point of view, science has enabled them to make this claim.

From the big day, the Big Bang, until today, they've explained everything that's needed to explain how it works. And therefore, there is no need to postulate the hand of God in anything.

Everything has already been explained through scientific or natural phenomenon. Well, my response to that is to say that the first thing I want to say is that I have no issue with the process, all right?

It could well be that the world we live in came about by this process. I don't know myself, but if it is proven that this is the case, then that's fine.

[12:51] The details of which science continues to fill out, because they know that there's a lot of things that still has not been explained. So I don't have an issue with the process. And I think for some parts of the process, we have more evidence than others.

So, for example, there is good evidence behind the Big Bang, what came immediately after as well. Scientists have looked into the skies, into outer space, they've measured the background radiation, observed dying stars and the like, and they've postulated how it all started.

But on other points in the process, I think there's actually less evidence than that. It's not as certain as people make out. On some of them, even scientists don't agree.

In other words, the science is still fluid. And sometimes all we have are just plausible explanations. So it takes, for instance, how life began in the first place.

That is, we went from an inorganic world to an organic world. Well, Francis Collins, who is a Christian and the one-time head of the Genome Project, he readily admits that we really can't explain how that happened.

[13:58] And so I do follow that, you know, what may still be discovered with interest, but I'm not wedded to any view when it comes to these sort of signs.

But for atheists like Richard Dawkins, for them to then use what are only plausible explanations and then say that they are concrete proofs against God's existence, well, I think that's just indefensible. Now, to be fair to Dawkins, I think what he says exactly is that, what he's saying exactly is not that God definitively does not exist.

What he says is that it proves that you don't need a God. Okay? Subtle difference. But I still think that science is not even close to proving that. Nor do I think that science can prove that. Because I think that even if you finally proved every step in that chain reaction, even if you manage to account for every domino, it doesn't prove that God doesn't exist.

[15:03] Because all we've done at this stage is to describe the processes that have got us to where we are. It says nothing whatsoever about whether there was an external agent behind it all.

using the very processes that we've just studied to achieve that end. Let me give you an analogy. Say you turned on your computer, right? And as you allow it to idle, it goes into screensaver mode. Yeah? Nowadays it's all fancy pictures, but let's say we go back a few years, and what appears on the screen are these screensaver patterns, you know, these old-fashioned ones. Remember those? Very mesmerizing. And let's say you're an IT buff, right? And so you study, you know, I don't know how you get to it, but you get to the source code, and you study how the source code generates those elaborate patterns.

And let's say you understand it all. Would you then immediately conclude, because you understand the source code, that there wasn't a programmer, that a programmer wasn't needed to generate that?

[16:05] You wouldn't, would you? And if someone then asks you, how was the screensaver created? Well, you could answer in two ways, couldn't you? You could answer it at the source code level.

You could explain how the computing logic works, how there was a random number generator. Is that how it works? I don't know. Or you could say, a Microsoft programmer created it. And both answers would be right.

Because the programmer is the agent, and the code, the means to creating the pattern. And so too with our universe. There is absolutely nothing inconsistent in saying that God created it, and yet to acknowledge the means by which he used.

We could explain every step in the chain reaction scientifically, and yet acknowledge that it is God who did it. He did it using the laws of chemistry and physics. And in fact, as Christians, we want to acknowledge both.

Now there's more that I could say about this whole question. Like how even if science can account for the entire process, what it can't account for is the Big Bang itself.

[17:15] How the whole show gets going in the first place. So there's more I could say, but I'm going to leave it for now. Because I want to turn to the second criticism, where it's often said that the Christian faith is blind.

Some of you may be thinking that I have made a case that science hasn't disproved God. Good. But what about the positive evidence that God exists?

Or is our belief as Christians, as many think, not based on evidence at all? Because if it is, then it is the antithesis of science, isn't it?

Because science uses logic, observation, and evidence to come to its conclusion. Well, let me first say, first of all, that it is absolutely possible to have blind faith.

Okay? But that doesn't make faith, by definition, blind. The word blind is used as an adjective to faith. But just as you can have tall people and short people, you can have blind faith, or you can have reasonable or evidential faith.

[18:20] Evidential faith, then, uses the same tools that science uses, that is, reason and logic, of studying the evidence before it draws its conclusion.

Now, at this point, I could draw your attention to certain scientific data to try and argue my case, but I will not do that because I can see that if I did that, then I don't think that it's actually conclusive. Science by itself cannot conclusively tell us whether God exists or not. Instead, the data that I'm going to appeal to is different to that which science uses.

But that shouldn't surprise us, should it, if you think about it? Because the aim of science, if you think about it, is actually to study nature. That is, it's to study things that exist in the world, things within creation.

But as I said earlier, the God of the Bible is actually not part of creation. He exists outside creation. And so, by definition, he cannot be investigated scientifically.

[19:26] Fine, if he intervenes into this world, we may be able to argue that he exists through circumstantial evidence. But if he uses the very laws that govern this world in the first place, then

how do we actually tell the difference?

Because the laws are working all around us all the time. And so, the only way to know he exists, I think, is if he chose to intervene outside the normal laws of nature.

And lo and behold, he does. And we have to be thankful for that because otherwise he would not be knowable. But God chose to reveal himself in creation.

And for me, the evidence is found definitively in the Bible. Because the Bible isn't simply a book about theology, it's also a book of evidence.

Not of scientific evidence, but of historical evidence. That is, the Bible provides evidence that God has acted decisively in history. And the particular evidence I want to focus on tonight is the life and work of Jesus.

[20 : 37] For here's where we see the pinnacle of God's intervention in history. Here, God didn't just influence nature in a far-off way.

No. God actually influenced nature by entering creation himself in the person of his son, Jesus. And so, we are able to know not just that God exists, but exactly who he is.

And so, if there's anyone here today that takes pride in being pro-science, then here's my challenge to you. Study carefully the historical evidence of Jesus and then use that to form your conclusions.

Just like you would a scientist. Use that method to decide whether God exists or not. And each year, in this church, we run a course to help people do just that.

It's called Christianity Explored. I've got a slide of that on the screen. And we're going to start the next one in August. So, I do invite you to come along if you're investigating. And come and talk to me later if you want more details.

[21 : 48] But I want to come back to the argument and say that it's simply not true that Christians have no evidence on which to base their faith. In fact, I have to say that I myself wouldn't be a Christian were it not for the fact that I was convinced, I am convinced by the evidence of Jesus and his resurrection in the Bible.

This evidence God retained for us in the Bible. And in it, we are able through the eyewitness accounts of those who were there to determine that Jesus is God.

And then, if Jesus is God, by extension, we know that God must exist. In fact, I'm going to put up two passages on the screen. They're actually words from two of the gospel writers.

So, firstly, from Luke in chapter 1 and verse 1 to 4. Here's what he says. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who were from the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an early account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

[23 : 07] And then from John, at the end of his gospel, chapter 20, verse 30 and 31, he says this, Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book.

But these, these miracles, are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and thereby believing you may have life in his name.

It's pretty clear, isn't it? Both Luke and John almost implore us to consider the evidence. They're asking us, look at the evidence and base your faith on it.

They're not saying just believe without the evidence. No, they're saying, we beg you, look at what we are producing and providing as evidence and then believe on the basis of that. Now for me, there's actually a further layoff evidence because the Bible, as we know, isn't a single piece of work, right?

All written at once. Rather, it's 66 books, each book written independently of each other and together they span a period of a thousand, more than a thousand years.

[24 : 16] and so what it does is it gives us records of what God has promised to do many, many years before it actually happens so that when it happens, it's actually a confirmation that it wasn't a coincidence or an accident.

Rather, God has spoken and then he acts decisively in history. God goes out of his way, as it were, to give us this evidence so that we can know for sure that what has happened wasn't actually fudged.

And this pattern of promise and fulfillment applies across the Bible and in particular to Jesus' own life. If you read the first chapter of Mark, you see the writer doing exactly that. He quotes extensively from the Old Testament to show that what Jesus is doing when he comes is a fulfillment of promises made by God in the Old Testament. All right, let me wrap up because I do want to leave some time for questions at the end.

How can I summarize what I've said tonight? Well, I hope that what I've done is debunked the view that we have to choose between science and a belief in God. Christians are not anti-science because Christians are not anti-science because we have to choose between science and God.

[25 : 41] In fact, if God exists and he created this world, then the domain of science is actually his as well. It's his laws. It's his processes. And rather than fear science, we actually can embrace it. We ought to embrace it. So Christians are not anti-science because it's God versus science. What we are against though, even though we're not anti-science, is we're against the belief that science is all there is.

That is, science is the only way to prove that God exists. No, the discipline of science has its limitations. So we're not anti-science, but we're anti-scientism, if that makes sense.

Second, I hope also to have debunked the view that faith is blind. That again, we have to choose between faith and reason. But again, that's a false dichotomy because the Bible actually invites us to weigh the evidence for Jesus, to use our mind to reason and draw conclusions. The Christian faith is actually a reasonable and evidential faith. faith. But we need to be mindful, however, that when all is said and done, faith is still required.

[26 : 57] Remember what Hebrews 11 said in that second reading. Faith is the confidence, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance or being assured of what we cannot see. We cannot see outside creation, but God has come into creation through Jesus and so we can be confident that he exists. That's not being anti-science, but it's wisely recognizing the limitations of science that we still need to believe even after we've seen the evidence. And so personally, I've studied the evidence and I believe God exists. Now what about you?