

Karl Giberson

“The Heart and Soul of the Evolution Controversy”

Episode 5 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity
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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 5 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com).” I’m [Michael Dowd](http://MichaelDowd.com), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

[Karl Giberson](http://KarlGiberson.com) is our guest today. [Karl](http://KarlGiberson.com) is a noted science-and-religion scholar who teaches at Eastern Nazarene College. Until recently he was the vice president of [The BioLogos Foundation](http://TheBioLogosFoundation.org), a think-tank begun by [Francis Collins](http://FrancisCollins.com), which helps [evangelical Christians](http://evangelicalChristians.com) integrate faith with science. He’s the author of [a number of books](http://aNumberofBooks.com), including the bestselling [Saving Darwin: How To Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution](http://SavingDarwin.com). He writes widely and he speaks widely about all aspects of the creation/evolution controversy, including blogging regularly for both [HuffPost](http://HuffPost.com) and [Biologos](http://Biologos.com). *In my opinion, Karl and his colleagues at BioLogos are doing some of the most important work on the planet.* Here we talk about “The Heart and Soul of the Evolution Controversy.”

Host: Hello Karl Giberson, and thanks for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Karl: Hi Mike, I'm happy to be with you.

Host: So Karl, it's been awhile since I first put out the word for this teleseries, and I was particularly interested in interviewing you and having a conversation with you because of your stature as a scholar in this field—not just a writer but really someone who's thought deeply about these issues and is well respected within not just the evangelical world but across the spectrum among Christians. And I'm wondering if you could just start by sharing a bit of your story, your testimonial, and how you came into this, and then your background for those who aren't familiar with your work.

Karl: Well, I got into this in a deeply personal way. I was raised in rural New Brunswick in a fundamentalist Baptist parsonage. I was expecting to spend my life fighting against evolution and the evil men that preach it as the, sort of, gospel of atheism, and went off to an evangelical college in Boston, expecting that those beliefs would be affirmed there. But what I found

instead was that, with a good liberal arts training, most of that anti-intellectual fundamentalism disappears along the way. And so, I gradually became convinced that I needed to come to terms with evolution, and I did so in the context of having Christian professors and friends and supportive family. So I made that transition to accept evolution without abandoning my faith, but it required a lot of rather dramatic—and sometimes even traumatic—rethinking of some of the things I'd been taught growing up.

That experience was very formative for me. Then I went off and got my Ph.D. in physics and came back to teach at my alma mater, the same school where I had experienced this transition. It wasn't long before I was teaching a general education class that all the students in the college had to take. Lo and behold, I was regularly encountering versions of my younger self, constantly, coming up to see me after class and saying, “Well, I know this sounds right, what you're teaching—but as a Christian, how do I make sense of the *Genesis* creation story? [What do I do about Adam and Eve?](#) How can I trust the Bible on anything if I can't trust it on origins?” (Listen to/read NPR special: “[Evangelicals Question the Existence of Adam and Eve.](#)”)

They were asking all these questions and, over time, I became increasingly interested in that—both as a problem in terms of ministry, because these are young people who are bright and struggling and that's what they need, but it also became a scholarly interest of mine. So I began to dig deeper into the questions and try to learn what I needed to know about biblical interpretation; I learned a few Hebrew words along the way. I was a physicist, so I didn't naturally know about genetics and biology. I had the opportunity to talk to biology professors and geneticists and eventually got to know [Francis Collins](#), and so on.

Slowly, I tried to educate myself in the broad range of fields that all come together with this one question. It's such an interdisciplinary conversation, and that forced me to dig into a lot of different scholarly areas. My temperament was very much to be interdisciplinary, so I really enjoyed the process of seeing how to think about different ways of knowing, different approaches to knowledge, how to think about issues of faith—including whether there *is* such a thing as faith within science, and whether there is such a thing as facts within religion. All these are deep philosophical questions. So I began to write and to speak and to get increasingly involved in this—and that's where I am now. I spend almost all of my professional time now thinking about this issue.

Host: That's great. You direct the honors program at [Eastern Nazarene College](#), right?

Karl: Yes.

Host: I'm curious: If a young freshman college student, who really has got a passion for Christ and is deeply committed to the faith and to sharing the gospel—yet has grown up in a family or had a preacher that was telling them that all the evils of the world could be attributed to Darwin and that evolution is of the devil—How would you coach him or her? How would you support that student? What would you say?

Karl: Well, you always start slowly. You meet the student where they are. You don't expect that you can take them too far at one time. With experience, you learn where the hot-button issues are, and you try to stay away from those, at first. For a freshman, you always recognize that they're going to take four years of classes here. This topic (along with broader philosophical discussions that are relevant to this topic) will occur every year in their experience—so you don't have to do it all at once.

What I usually start out with is I talk about my own experience. For the most part, the college students trust the professors. I generally build a good relationship very quickly with my students and get to know them. I try to get them calling me by my first name, and tell them stories about myself, and so on. So, I humanize myself, and I try to establish my credentials as a caring authority figure who takes his Christian faith very seriously, and then I begin to talk about my own experience.

For the most part, young people today are not coming to college—at least not colleges in the northeast—with an aggressive, militant commitment to biblical literalism, fundamentalism, and Young Earth creationism. There are places in the country where that's more common, but in a freshman class that we would get of 250 students here at Eastern Nazarene College, there might be one in that whole class who is coming in all ready to fight.

So they come in just having heard a lot of things from the pulpit. What I try to do is disabuse them of the things which are the easiest. And the easiest place to begin is just with Darwin himself. Once they understand—and they're always surprised by this—that Darwin grew up in a home where his mother read to him from the Bible, that Darwin read the Bible a lot himself, that Darwin thought about becoming a clergyman, that Darwin wrestled with faith issues for most of his professional life, and so on—I mean, this is a very different Darwin from the [supposedly] anti-religious crusader who invented a story for atheists while he was on the *Beagle*, which is what they heard about him from the pulpit. And none of that requires interpretation. None of that is aggressive or faith threatening. It's just historical.

Once they begin to see *Darwin* differently, they are open to seeing *evolution* differently. And then I just work with them as the questions arise. It's not too long until they're starting to ask questions about scripture, about theology, about Adam and Eve, and so on—trying to make sense of all that.

Host: Karl, as you were speaking, my eyes got moist because it brought me back in such a compelling way to my own experience at Evangel College—now [Evangel University](#)—in Springfield, Missouri. Briefly, I grew up Roman Catholic, and I didn't have a close faith relationship. Then in my teenage years, I struggled a lot with drug and alcohol issues, and had a born-again experience in an Assemblies of God church while I was in the military in Berlin, Germany. So before I went to Evangel College, there was a three-year period when the people I hung out with and the books I read were all coming from a very anti-evolutionary perspective. In fact, I remember thinking that Jesus was coming back by the year 2000, and I interpreted all that in a very literal way. I was very anti-science and anti-evolution.

So when I went to Evangel, and the first day the biology teacher held up the textbook we were going to use—and it was a textbook that I had used four years earlier at the University of Miami, Florida, so I knew it taught evolution—well, I stormed out of class. I remember telling my roommate, "Satan obviously has a foothold in this school." I mean, it was the only way I could make sense of how they could be teaching evolution at an evangelical, Pentecostal college.

I went on to discover that at most evangelical colleges and universities, they teach evolution. They just teach it in a God-honoring way, in a theistic way. But it was professors like *you* who befriended me and allowed me to call them by first name. In fact, with two of them I shared part of my life story, and they shared some of theirs: they shared their testimonial. It was that *personal* experience with professors who, I knew, were Christ-centered—I mean, I worshipped with them; I went to church with them. These were *real* people, and I could see that evolution not only didn't threaten their faith, but in some very real way it stretched or deepened or enriched it.

I was telling somebody a couple months ago, when they asked how I made that shift, and I said it wasn't an argument that did it. I wasn't *convinced* in any kind of rational argument. It was meeting people who, clearly, were deeply Christian—in the best sense of that term—who had fully embraced science and didn't see that conflict.

So, as you were sharing, you brought me back to that in a way that, frankly, I haven't been reminded of in an emotional way in a long time. Thank you.

Karl: You're welcome. *[laughter]* I'm glad I could stir those memories.

So much of this goes back to what Aristotle used to talk about—with what he called the "social transmission of knowledge." It's very easy for academics to lose sight of that, because we tend to think of ourselves as being skeptical and as demanding arguments and reasons that are disembodied. We forget that the natural way that humans communicate is through other humans. Normally, humans spend a lot of time thinking about whether or not we can trust someone: Do we think they would mislead us? Do they seem to be honest?

I think it's so important for people to be able to study under somebody that they feel they can trust—to know that there's no agenda this person has to destroy one's faith, or faith in general, or to undermine the connection with one's family in any way. [The student needs to feel] that this person is on their side, so to speak—and because they are older and more educated than the student, that they can help the student make an important life transition.

Host: Exactly. It was precisely that: it was the relational element—the conversations—that allowed me to open my heart to see that there could be an integration. It actually reminds me that most of quality education throughout human history has been mentoring. It's been someone older, more experienced, taking someone younger and less experienced under his or her wing and guiding them. So the relationship was foundational—before the rational knowledge occurred, or the skill set was developed.

Karl, that actually leads me to want to ask you about your relationship with BioLogos. [BioLogos](#) is, in my opinion, one of the most important organizations right now doing advocacy work within evangelical and broader circles. So could you say a little about the mission of BioLogos, how it came into being, and what your vision is?

Karl: Sure. I've been involved with BioLogos from the beginning, and I'm currently the vice president. The organization was the brainchild of [Francis Collins](#), and Collins wrote a book, [The Language of God](#), a few years ago that was his first venture out into the science-and-religion waters. The book was very well received. It contains a winsome testimony that endeared Francis to his readers. It contains an authoritative discussion of genetics and how that opens up the truth of evolution and gives us insights into the way the world has been created—and it raises a lot of questions.

The book became a bestseller, and Francis found himself inundated with letters and emails and requests from religious people—most of them, conservative evangelicals who were wrestling with evolution, inspired by his book and his testimony, but wanting to know, “How do I get from here to there?” And he soon found himself literally in possession of a mountain of frequently asked questions. He didn't have to imagine what questions might arise and make them up, the way people do on a website. He actually *had* the questions that were frequently asked.

And he realized, “I can't answer all these; I'm just one man. Yet, somehow, I've got to respond here, because I've identified a real need in this conversation.”

So, he talked to the [Templeton Foundation](#) about starting a website where he would post his answers to these questions. But then, Francis explored with the foundation the possibility of reconceptualizing this modest project of an online set of answers to frequently asked questions into a very large project that would be ongoing and involve more people. Francis got very excited about this. He was technically unemployed at the time, having finished mapping the human genome and thinking about his next project; so he had some time. Of course, he wasn't *really* unemployed—in the sense that millions of other people are unemployed now — but he didn't have his professional roots planted anywhere.

So, this BioLogos Foundation was started with a generous grant from the Templeton Foundation. Francis came to see me in Boston and asked me if I would get involved with the leadership, and I said, “Sure.” Before too long we had a team in place, and we started a website: [BioLogos.org](#), where we put out fresh content on this topic on a daily basis and provide a place where people can post comments and interact. We have also run conferences. We ran a very successful conference in New York City at the [Harvard Club](#). We ran a conference at [Gordon College](#) on the north shore of Boston in June that was very successful. And we plan to do more of those in the future. We are producing some books with InterVarsity Press, who has been very cooperative with us, and they're quite eager to work with us on this topic.

So, everything has been moving ahead very nicely with BioLogos—but with one rather unfortunate hitch. That happened when Francis Collins was asked by Barack Obama to

become the head of the [NIH \[National Institutes of Health\]](#), and he accepted. He discovered that the rules were that he would have to completely decouple from involvement with BioLogos. Reluctantly, he stepped down as our president and now is kind of a quiet cheerleader on the side. Nobody stays at the head of the NIH forever, so we hope that maybe at some point we'll get Francis back. But in the meantime, Darrell Falk is the president and I'm the vice president, and we have a team of other people. And we are getting a lot of very positive feedback about how helpful people are finding this project, which is creating a safe place where evangelicals (and any Christians that are wrestling with this question) can go and get involved with our site, and with us directly and indirectly.

Host: That's great. One of the things that so impressed me with Francis' book, and then I was delighted to see BioLogos continue, is that BioLogos and Francis' book—and *your* writings — are deeply grounded in a fairly conservative interpretation of Christianity: a solid evangelical understanding with a strong emphasis on having a personal relationship with God and taking the Bible very seriously. And yet you also don't go the path of Intelligent Design. You're grounded in our best scientific understandings of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. I'm wondering if you could say just a few things about how it is that your perspective, and the perspective of BioLogos, differs from Intelligent Design.

Karl: Well, there are two main ways that we differ. One is that the Intelligent Design movement has its origin in politics—not in science, not in religion—but in politics. When Young Earth creationism was ruled unconstitutional and not something that was ever going to make it into the public schools, that collection of ideas had to be repackaged. [Intelligent Design](#) is different in many ways from [Young Earth creationism](#), but shares a common ancestor, so to speak. It is an attempt to get these anti-evolutionary arguments into the public schools, to try to get this other way of thinking about origins taught alongside evolution.

So, in an effort to get past the barrier of the separation of church and state and make their way into the public schools, they had to secularize what they were doing. I understand the logic behind that, and I have great sympathy for that, and I think that the separation of church and state has made this national conversation into a disaster—and that if we didn't have the separation of church and state, we would probably *not* have the controversy over this topic that we do. I come from Canada, a very similar culture in many ways, but we don't have the separation of church and state there. So you can talk about these issues in the classroom. As a result, students can work through them in the right environment, and they don't have to feel like there's some kind of incompatibility there.

But the separation of church and state has, for better or worse, made it so that if you want to have something in the public schools, it can't smack of religion at all. So the Intelligent Design people, who are almost all conservative Christians (and personally what they're interested in is getting on the table that God is the creator and meaningfully involved in origins): they want to get that into the public schools, but they can't. So they take the whole thing and pull out the God part. I think that creates the most important distinction between BioLogos and

Intelligent Design: we're leaving the God part *in*. We think that's where the conversation is. This is not about whether evolution is an adequate theory or not. That's in the background—and we wouldn't be doing what we're doing if we didn't think evolution was an adequate theory—but that's not where the conversation is. The conversation is, *Can we embrace evolution and still be authentically evangelical?* That's where the conversation is, and the Intelligent Design people can't have that conversation, because they don't bring God in. So that's a very big difference.

The second difference, I think, has to do with the fact that the Intelligent Design literature is really quite critical of science. When you see science discussed in terms of how the community behaves, what its fundamental values are, how it works, it's often portrayed very negatively. Now they like to call themselves strongly pro-science, and of course you would *have* to say that or your ideas would never have a chance of getting into the public schools. But if you actually read what they write, they talk about how evolution is widely accepted because of the assumption of naturalism—not because it has any evidence to support it. Well, this is a very negative perspective that impugns the integrity of the scientific community. The peer review process is not respected by the Intelligent Design people as a way to ensure that only the best results make it into print. The peer review process is a way to *prevent* new ideas from getting a hearing: that's how they talk about it.

So if you go across the board from one to the other of the senior fellows at the Discovery Institute and you look at how they talk about science, most of the commentary is critical. At BioLogos, we want to do just the opposite. We want to talk about science as being a wonderful enterprise, that we live in this amazing world, that God created this world, and it's sort of a worship experience to study it and to dig into it. We want people to be able to celebrate that, and to recognize that the scientific community is not a collection of charlatans who are just perpetuating some atheistic myth about origins, and *that's why we take evolution seriously*. Rather, we are a community of people with integrity who are trying our very best to understand the world that God created—and this is what we have discovered about it, and it's wonderful. We want to share that in a constructive and positive way, and make people who are Christians think, “Oooh! I'd like to *be* a scientist.” If you listen to the Discovery Institute, why would you ever want to be a scientist—join *that* community with *those* frauds and charlatans?

Host: *[laughter]* Right! Good point!

I'm reminded of a quote from [Carl Sagan](#) that I really like. He says, “*Science is, at least in part, informed worship.*” And I don't know that I would interpret it necessarily the same way he would, but I really like that quote.

Karl: Yeah, and I think that's a quote that a lot of deep-thinking scientists would say, “Yes, that's exactly what it is.” Even scientists who are rather hard-nosed and atheistic would say that there's a tremendous grandeur in the view of the world that is coming from their work.

Host: For me personally, I'm reminded of [St. Thomas Aquinas's](#) quote some 750 years ago, when he said, "*A mistake about creation will necessarily result in a mistake about God.*" If that's true, what it means is, the more we learn about the nature of creation, the nature of the universe, if we're not updating what we're pointing to when we use the word *God*, we may have definitions and understandings of God that are not current with the most current revelations.

My *experience* of God has actually been enriched by an evolutionary understanding. And I'm curious, How if at all has a science-based, evidential understanding of reality—an evolutionary understanding of reality—how has that enriched or enhanced or shifted *your* views and your experience of God and your religious faith?

Karl: Well, there's actually several ways I think that is connected, and the older I get and the longer I live with that way of thinking (which is so different from the way I was brought up), the more profound it seems to me. I really like the sense of being connected to all of creation as a grand unity, and I find it to be very meaningful to think about what we share with the rest of the world. At the very end of my book [Saving Darwin](#), I tell the story of taking a canoe ride with my daughter on a lake called Indian Lake in the middle of nowhere in rural New Brunswick, Canada.

Host: How old was your daughter at the time?

Karl: My daughter was 14 or 15. And this lake is very remote. It's not a recreational area. It's a mile or so long, and there's a small collection of cottages all clustered together on one end, and then the other end is just pristine wilderness. You can canoe down there, go around the little bend in the lake, and that takes you out of sight of all the cottages. So, you can see no evidence that there's a civilization anywhere. And so, you hear the sounds of nature, you see the sights of nature, you can put your hand in the water and pick a lily pad as you're going along in the canoe, and so on.

At the very end of the lake are two beaver huts, and there's a dam running in between them, and that's what determines the height of the lake—how high the beavers have built their dam. One year, the lake got a little too high, and it was coming up over our wharf, and so I had to go down and tear a little bit off the top of the beaver dam to fix the lake level for the rest of us. I'm thinking about the fact that here are these little, sort of, "cabins" that the beavers have built. The beavers built these cabins to raise their families in, and they dammed up the lake to make a secure place to do this, and the adult beavers love their little baby beavers—like I love my daughter behind me in the canoe.

There's an amazing sense of connectedness there. You don't feel like you're some sort of an interloper who has dropped into the wilderness to look at it and then leave again. You feel like you are a part of all of that. Having taught astronomy for many years, I'm simultaneously aware of how our planet got to be where it is, how the material in our bodies was once stardust, how habitable zones form around certain types of stars, how the Big Bang produces

the cosmos and the galaxies and so on. You look at that whole picture, and it's so amazing! It's [this incredible cosmic narrative](#) that goes from the Big Bang to the present to where the future will be, which we don't know—and, yet, here we are. We're a part of this unfolding story, and we're *connected* to it. And that's a very deeply theological way to view our human presence.

For me, the scientific narrative is much more meaningful than thinking that somehow God made all of this creation separate from us, and then he placed us in it, like little figures in a diorama, and to be (sort of) temporarily present—to look after it for a few years, and then he will reach into the diorama and pull us out when the time is right. The picture of being *connected*, I think, is much richer theologically. So that's how my work has made my faith, in many ways, profoundly deeper.

Host: That's great! I had never heard the diorama analogy before, but I like it a lot. I was just actually doing a children's story a few weeks ago, and it was on this theme of, “we are made of stardust.” When I talked to the kids, I said, “We now know how God created the very atoms of our bodies and created the periodic table of elements. [We are stardust!](#)” And these kids were lit up. It was quite fun.

Karl: Yes, it's amazing. If every Christian kid could grow up with that grand picture, instead of growing up with a very literal and narrow interpretation of the *Genesis* story of creation that they then have to wrestle with as young adults, then I think we would be so much further along. That's the vision that BioLogos has for some far future: when we will see that Ken Ham's museum has been mothballed because nobody wants to go and hear that story of origins anymore. *[Editor's note: This is the [Creation Museum](#), across the river from Cincinnati Ohio, which opened in 2007 and which houses exhibits that present a biblical literalist and Young Earth view of origins.]*

Host: Connie and I have been to that museum twice, and one of the things they do is, they *do* tell a story that includes a sense of meaning and that gives and to life's big questions. Now, you and I have different answers to those questions, also grounded in our Christian tradition, but until some of our best science museums have a room dedicated to *interpretation*—not just telling the facts of evolution and cosmic history, but helping young people and people of any age to interpret it in an inspiring, meaningful way, in a way that draws them closer to God, in a way that encourages them to live lives of greater integrity and love and compassion—I think we're probably going to see the Ken Hams of the world continue to fill a role. [Young Earth creationism] will continue until we who are coming from an evidential, science-based perspective can be as effective in telling our *common* creation story, the history of the universe, in a way that religious people feel is sacred, or holy.

Karl: Unfortunately, you're completely right. I don't think that in our lifetime, or that of our children, we will see them bringing the mothballs to Ken Ham's museum to close it down. I

remember when I was in his museum walking around in the bookstore—I spent quite a bit of time there, looking at the sheer volume of material, media of all different sorts with this consistent message that evolution is a lie, that we've got to read *Genesis* in this particular, literal way, and so on. It made me think that somehow the Christian church has got to get itself unhooked from this way of understanding. It's going to be a big project.

Host: Yes, I think it is. My own approach to it is that scientific evidence, historical evidence, and cross-cultural [evidence reveal divine communication—divine guidance](#). I talk about in my book that “facts are God's native tongue, and evidence is the main way that God is speaking to humanity today.” My hope, my prayer, my wish is that *that* perspective will help bring about a new reformation. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, there was mostly emphasis on how God guides us and is communicating through the tradition and the church hierarchy. Then, with the Protestant reformers, it became “solo scriptura”—only the Bible, followed by a lot of different interpretations.

My hope is that we are in the early stages of what could be seen as an “[evidential reformation](#),” where we see that God didn't stop communicating all the important truths back in biblical times, but is also faithfully revealing truth today. Every fact discovered by science is also a revelation of God. God is revealing the nature of reality. I'm hoping that this perspective can make a difference in the evolution of Christianity. I'm curious: do you have any thoughts on that? I know it's a fairly radical idea in some circles.

Karl: Yes, that's exactly what we're hoping will be the case at BioLogos. How we try to present the type of knowledge that we get from science is that science is another way that God is revealing truth. You can go back to [Galileo](#), and he has his famous “two books” metaphor: the book of nature and the scriptures. Even back then, Galileo is making this argument—but he's not making it in the abstract. He's making it in a very specific context where he's recognizing that there are true things we are finding out about the world, and we've got to bring these true things onboard and somehow wrestle with them. But they're not in the Bible; they actually don't agree with the Bible. So, we've got to somehow deal with the fact that we have two sources of truth. It's not going to work if you try to do what Ken Ham and the biblical literalists do, who say we have one source of *real* truth, and then a lot of secondary contenders that always have to play second fiddle. It's just not going to work to try to do that. You've got to recognize that when you find out something that's true about the world, that truth is a sacred truth. It's a fact about the world. It's something which God knows is true—that in most understandings of the way that God interacts with his creation, this is now a revelation, because we have found something that is characteristic of the world that God created. And so we have to say, we accept this.

And then, if we have trouble with our tradition, if we have trouble with our theology, if it seems to contradict some Bible verse in the Old Testament, then we've got to deal with those things. But we can't just say, “Well, I know, it really does look like the world is billions of years old—but, hey, the Bible says it's not, so we can't go there.”

Host: This is the second time, Karl, in this conversation that you've either moistened my eyes or brought goose bumps, because what you're reminding me of is a conversation that I had with one of my professors at Evangel 25 years ago—and it was exactly on your point. I was introduced to [Arthur F. Holmes'](#) book, *All Truth Is God's Truth*, and the sense that if there's a seeming conflict between the Bible and what God's revealing through evidence, through science, then the problem is usually a problem of our *interpretation* of one or the other. So perhaps I should look at how I'm interpreting the Bible, and perhaps I'm interpreting it in a literalistic way—whereas if I held it in a metaphorical or symbolic way, then it wouldn't be difficult to reconcile the two. But that difficulty *is* there if I think that God communicated all the vital, necessary, important stuff two or three thousand years ago, and all the discoveries since then are just sort of *secular* and not able to (using religious language) “give God glory,” or to honor God in that process. So, thanks for bringing the hairs up on my arms. *[laughter]*

Karl: You're very welcome.

Host: Karl, one of the things I have been trying to do in this series, or at least what I'm envisioning in this series, is to try to see if there's a core commons. We've got so many different kinds of Christians—Catholic, Protestant, liberal, conservative, everything in between—yet is there anything that we can speak with one voice about, all of us who are committed Christians of one sort or another and yet who fully embrace an evidential, evolutionary worldview? I wanted to try out, sort of as a trial balloon, a first draft offering of what I think may be a core commons. And I'm thinking about it in three statements.

The first is: It seems to me that, no matter what our differences, we all have an evidential, deep-time understanding of the universe. That is, we have a deep-time perspective, an evolutionary perspective, that's gained not from a particular mythic story (like some of the Hindu understandings of deep time), but come from an evidential understanding. And I think that all of us, no matter what our diversity, we all have evidential deep-time eyes. Does that ring true to you, given what you've seen in terms of who's part of [this teleseries](#)?

Karl: Absolutely. It's almost the price of admission to say, “I'm with you on deep time,” to get into this conversation. If you're not willing to go there, then, okay, go somewhere else and have a different conversation.

Host: Yes, that's what I'm thinking. The second one is: As I have read at least some of the writings of everybody in this series, it seems to me that all of us have what I'm calling “a global heart and commitment.” That is, we have a concern, a commitment—not just to our own soul salvation, not just to the success of our religious group or the wellbeing of our nation—but we also all have a commitment to the health and well-being of the larger body of life of which we're

a part. That is, we have a desire and a commitment to help see that evolution can continue into the future in healthy ways. Does that ring true for you, as well?

Karl: Yes. I'm not sure what the phrase means, "for evolution to continue into the future." I mean, certainly evolutionary processes will continue to run, but I'm not convinced that there's some trajectory in place that we need to protect—and you're probably not saying that. But yes, I would basically agree, I think, with that.

Host: Yes, I'm not saying that there's some foreordained conclusion or trajectory. Well, let me speak personally. *I'm* committed to doing everything I can in my lifetime to ensure that the larger body of life of which humans are a part, and upon which we depend, can continue in healthy ways. In other words, I interpret language like, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," in a *this-world* way—so that we've got healthy soil, healthy air, healthy land, and that we value the health and the well-being of this planet and its diverse species, and that humans can enter a mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth community. That's the way I interpret it. I'm not sure that language would work for everybody else, but that's certainly what I'm committed to.

Karl: I think absolutely that *that* is a growing commitment, as people get over their reluctance to accept the reality of global climate change and some of these things that seem clear from the scientific perspective are going on, and how that threatens not only the welfare of many non-human species but also our own species. I do think the health of the planet and its ecosystems and the diversity is something that we need to take very seriously, as well as beginning the conversation about, What are the *rights* that these other animals that share a planet should have? Do we have a right to take baby monkeys away from their mothers and put them in a cage and charge people to look at them?

Host: [Thomas Berry](#), before he died, one of the last major focuses of his life was around what he called [Earth jurisprudence](#)—having legal structures that weren't only concerned with the well-being of humans and human corporations and human nation-states, but also had in their internal structure concern for the health and well-being of other species and the air, water, and soil.

Karl: Yes. That's the conversation for the third millennium that is just getting started.

Host: So the third thing that all of us in [this teleseries](#) probably agree on is that we all value the importance, even the necessity, of interpretation—and that there's no one way to interpret any set of facts. As well, our differences may not be a problem to be solved, but our differences may actually be a partial solution to our problems. I know for me, one of the big shifts that an evolutionary worldview offered was that, prior to an evolutionary worldview, prior to a deep-time understanding, certainly of human differences and human history, I pretty much had the

idea that our differences were a problem to be solved. I assumed that in many cases, on most issues, there was one right, true answer, or one right, true interpretation. I'm far from being a relativist, but I *have* come to the place of embracing diversity—kind of the way that in a healthy body the kidneys and the lungs and the liver and all the different organs do different things: they have different roles in the same body for a healthy body. I've come to see that, too, in terms of the memes we carry, the ideas we carry. And so, I'm wondering if that resonates with you, or if you have a different way of thinking about that?

Karl: I think that's a very important insight and something which has to be on the table. In this era, which the humanities people like to remind us is post-modernity rather than modernity, it becomes challenging to use the language of interpretation, because there is a constituency out there that has abandoned the idea that things can be true. And so, you have lots of different models of reality, and there's no real adjudicating between them. I always want to pull back from that, and I think there's a very real sense in which science—particularly in the harder mathematical sciences like physics and chemistry—those sciences really haven't been touched by post-modernity. They're done in the same way they always were, and most physicists today have no clue what in the heck post-modernity is. When they hear about it, it has nothing of relevance to say to them.

So, I do think there's a sense in which we have to be wary of going too far with that framework of multiple interpretations, and let too many different things come on the table and all be candidates for what's true. But at the other end of the spectrum, when you get a long way away from mathematical physics and start talking about views of nature and religious practice and things like that, then it would be nonsense to say we have to figure out what the facts are and get everyone to agree. That's just not going to happen. We're going to bring our own personality to those investigations. And we have to be tolerant and comfortable and recognize that perhaps in the totality of all the different responses people have, there's something we can say that is true—but that any individual perspective is just a little piece.

Host: University of Miami philosopher [Susan Haack](#) wrote a book—I think it's titled [Defending Science Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism](#)—and I have found it to be one of the wisest books on this topic. A year ago, Connie and I were rafting down the Grand Canyon with [Eugenie Scott](#) and 24 people from the [National Center for Science Education](#), and Genie and I got into a conversation on this topic, because I think that in science classes in public schools they should just teach the science. But I think that we do our students a terrible disservice by not having a worldviews class or an interpretation class where we help students from different backgrounds to interpret the same science, the same factual understanding, in ways that enrich their faith, that strengthen their faith, that deepen their faith—because that's not happening in schools. So, it's left up to parents and churches to do that, and I'd love to see in the coming decades that we provide that opportunity for students to interpret it in ways that help them see that, not only it doesn't have to be a conflict, but there can actually be a mutually enriching relationship.

Karl: That would certainly be progress, but I'm not sure we're heading in that direction.

Host: *[laughter]* Yeah, well, maybe I'm overly optimistic.

Karl, in beginning to wind this conversation down, could you please say something about your books? You've published four already, I think you've got three in the hopper that are soon to be coming out. Could you say a little bit about each of your books?

Karl: My first book was titled [Worlds Apart: The Unholy War Between Science and Religion](#). I published that with the Denominational Press of the Church of the Nazarene, where I have taught and worshipped now for 25 years. It was a very controversial book for that conservative publisher to put out. It generated a lot of heat.

Host: How did you get it published in the first place?

Karl: Well, depending on whether you think the end result is laudable or not, you would say it was done via a conspiracy, or it was providential. *[laughter]* It was the case that there were some of the more moderate educators in the denomination, including the president of [Eastern Nazarene College](#) at the time, [Cecil Paul](#), who felt like the denomination needed a book on this topic, and he encouraged me to write it. There's a book committee that has to, sort of, police the publications for orthodoxy, and there was an insider there who made sure that sympathetic readers would review the manuscript, and that the ones who would oppose it wouldn't discover what had happened until it was too late. *[laughter]*

So, all of this happens, and I end up with a signed contract. And then at *that* point, some of the fundamentalist voices began to be raised in protest, and there were some serious efforts to try to derail the publication. I was told at one point by one of the insiders, "I don't think this is going to happen now." But the guy who ran the publishing house basically came out waving the contract and said, you know, "Once we sign a contract with someone, we have a moral obligation to follow through, and so whether you like the book or not, it's too late—the book committee reviewed it."

So, it came into print, and it's actually still in print and still being used, and it's found use in a lot of classrooms around the country. It's been used at [Gordon College](#) on the north shore of Boston for years, and in San Diego on the other end of the continent. It's been used at [Point Loma Nazarene](#), and a lot of schools in between. So it has been, I think, a very useful book for the Church of the Nazarene on this topic, because it's the only thing in print. There are no Young Earth creationist books in print. By being the only thing in print, it is sort of as close as you get to a statement on this.

So, that's been very encouraging for me, but it was also very encouraging as I began to hear from colleagues. It was extremely encouraging to other people, because professors in biology departments and religion departments who wrestle with this topic with their students all the time, they can sometimes feel, "Gee, I'm all alone. It seems like there are so many voices

raised against me. I wish the denomination could make progress on this question.” And then along comes a book, and they say “Oh, okay. Here’s something now that I can give to my students to read, and because it’s published by our publishing house, they can’t look at it and say, ‘Is this okay for Nazarenes to believe this?’”

That was very encouraging for me, and there have been some people who got more involved in the creation/evolution discussion as a result of that. So, I was very encouraged by that.

I began to write that book not too long after I had just gotten tenure. I was a young professor, and in a sense I was reacting against my youthful, fundamentalist self throughout the book. So there's a kind of an edginess to it that I would soften if I had the chance to write the book again.

The second book I did was called [*Species of Origins: America's Search for a Creation Story*](#). By the time that I wrote that—it was published in 2002—I had begun to have a little more appreciation for some of the reasons why creationism and Intelligent Design and these other positions that I had personally rejected, why they were so attractive to people. And I thought, it would be useful to have a book which would lay out *why* these different views are attractive, because if you're purely an academic and you just look at the collection of scientific ideas that are under the umbrella of Young Earth creationism, you say, “How does anyone believe that?” Like, why is there even one person in the whole country who takes that seriously? How can this be?

But that movement, and those people who subscribe to that—they don't do that because they *like* those scientific ideas. They don't do it for that reason at all. They do it for *other* reasons that have to do with their faith, their view of scripture, who are the protagonists in the conversation, and so on. *That's* why that's popular. And so, you've got to get away from this idea that this is all about getting the facts right. It's *not* about getting the facts right; it's about getting the worldview in place so that you're listening to the right people. That's why Ken Ham has such a huge audience, because he understands that. He doesn't spend a lot of time talking about the facts. He spends a lot of time talking about the Bible and why it's important to take it literally; about your faith tradition and why it's important to stay with the conservative background you were raised with. He knows how to keep that audience *with* him.

Anyway, *Species of Origins* was an attempt to lay all that out so that, no matter where you stood in the conversation, you could understand the other positions. It was published with a secular press. The pendulum, in a sense, is continuing to swing.

My third book, which was with Oxford University Press, was called [*Oracles of Science: Celebrity Scientists Versus God and Religion*](#). After writing *Species of Origins*—and we had one chapter on atheism and why it seems to be so tightly connected to evolution in many people's minds—the more I thought about that question, the more I began to realize that if you look at the public face of science, if you look at who are the people that might get animated and appear on *The Simpsons* or on *South Park*, who are the people that are going to show up on *Nova* and get interviewed on National Public Radio and so on, those individuals are

predominately atheistic or agnostic, and many of them are crusaders against religion. You can talk about Richard Dawkins, you can talk about Carl Sagan, you can talk about Stephen Jay Gould. All of these individuals have viewpoints that religious people find very uncomfortable—sometimes to the point of hostility. Stephen Jay Gould tried to be a peacemaker, but religious people didn't like what he did to religion.

So, I wanted to develop this argument more carefully, so that a reader could see that for people who are not a part of the scientific community, that are not in the academy, that if they simply encounter science in our culture in the common way that millions of people do, they're going to have some idea of what the scientific community is like. And that idea is going to be determined by listening to people like [Richard Dawkins](#), [E. O. Wilson](#), [Steven Weinberg](#), [Carl Sagan](#), [Stephen Hawking](#), [Stephen Jay Gould](#). We picked those six in the book and said, these are the people that shaped the English-speaking world's view of the scientific community. We called them “the oracles of science.” They're celebrities, and they paint a picture of science that is very alienating to religious people.

So, that was the thesis in that book. In a sense, it's almost a mirror image of my first book, which was kind of an anti-creationist book. This later one was not exactly anti, because it's a scholarly book. It was looking at the New Atheist phenomenon at the very beginning, when that began to emerge.

And then my last book was [Saving Darwin](#). That was the most fun I've had writing anything yet. It was with HarperOne. It was a trade book. I didn't have a particular agenda; I just was writing about the controversy. And so by that time, I had become more comfortable as a writer. I had spent some time as an editor of a couple publications and worked with some other journalists, and I'd developed my writing voice. So I told a much more personal story. And so, in *Saving Darwin*, I laid it all out: *why* this is such an intense conversation, and I went all over the map, and talked about Ken Ham and his museum, but I also talked about the New Atheists, and I talked about how much mileage you get by blaming Darwin for the Holocaust—even though that might not necessarily be true. I just laid all these things out and interwove it with a deeply personal story, as well. That book was very well received. It got [reviewed](#) in *The New Republic* by [Jerry Coyne](#). The *Washington Post Book World* gave it one of their best of 2008 recognitions.

Host: What's the subtitle of *Saving Darwin*?

Karl: The subtitle is, *How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*—which is not a very accurate subtitle, as many reviewers have noted. That subtitle wasn't mine; the marketing department at HarperOne came up with that, so I thought, “Well, okay, you're HarperOne; you probably know what you're doing.” So I didn't kick up too big a fuss. But, it has been a little frustrating when I read what's, in general, a very glowing review, and then the reviewer writes, “but it doesn't do what its subtitle promises at all.”

Host: Yeah, “how to be a Christian and *accept the evidence* of evolution” isn't quite as sexy, even though it's more accurate.

Karl: Exactly.

Host: Could you say a little bit about the three books you've got forthcoming?

Karl: There's a book coming out in March with InterVarsity Press. It's the first book that's going to lay out the BioLogos perspective. Francis Collins and I have coauthored that. His contribution to that project ended when he went to the NIH, because they told him that he can't be doing this anymore. That book is called [The Language of Science and Faith](#)—playing off his *Language of God* book. The subtitle: *Straight Answers to Genuine Questions*. It's going to be a book-length version of what we're trying to do on the BioLogos website, but it's going to read like a book and not like an encyclopedia. So I've tried to pick the standard themes that people wrestle with, and weave all that together in a series of chapters that I hope people will find effective. It's very significant that InterVarsity is publishing it, because that's a very respected evangelical publishing house and they're taking some risk, I think, in doing that.

And then in June, I have a biography of [Sir John Polkinghorne](#) coming out from British Press: [Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion](#). This was a project that began a few years ago in some conversations with the Templeton Foundation. Polkinghorne has just turned 80, so they provided a modest grant to provide a little bit of support. My coauthor for that is [Dean Nelson](#), who's a very experienced and senior journalist, and he spent some time on the ground with John Polkinghorne in England. So we've got a science and religion book that has a biographical dimension to it, and Polkinghorne is such a fascinating and important figure for those in this camp that you're talking about here. He in many ways is quite literally an embodiment of the harmony of science and faith. So, we're pretty excited about that.

And then, in the fall, my colleague [Randall Stephens](#) and I have a book coming out with Harvard University Press that has a tentative title of [The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age](#). We're looking in that book in a more scholarly way at how certain individuals acquire such vast followings within evangelicalism. We have a chapter on [Ken Ham](#), and one on [David Barton](#), [James Dobson](#), a few other key figures like that. We're asking questions like, How is it that, for example, David Barton, who has a degree in communication arts from Oral Roberts University (that's his education) but he is, sort of, the *historian* of the evangelical world. He's constantly appearing on [Glenn Beck](#) and he's a leader in the Republican Party, and so on.

So the question is, How does this happen? How do you take someone with no credentials of any sort in this field, and then they become “Professor Barton” in “Beck University”—and lots of evangelicals go there and learn about history from this guy? How did this happen? So, we're making the argument that I mentioned much earlier in our conversation about the social conduits of knowledge. When Barton or Ham or James Dobson, [Tim LaHaye](#)—when any of

these guys—position themselves in a certain way, they will be accepted by their audience. That acceptance will allow them to *lead* that audience. And if they lead them into truth, that's great. But if they lead them into error, then that's a problem. But that's the way cultures work, and evangelicalism, I think, is prone to some of these anti-intellectual tendencies. So they tend to follow after people who sound very spiritual, without looking to see whether they actually know what they're talking about.

Host: One of the things that I appreciated about you and could actually feel some empathy around was that, not too long ago, you were in a similar situation to one that I found myself in, where I had written [a sermon](#) that had generated [some attacks](#)—some heat—on both the New Atheist side and also among Young Earth creationists, like [Albert Mohler](#) at [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#). I know you've been fending off attacks on both those sides as well, so I feel a kinship with you in this work.

Karl: It's a very entrenched movement, and there's lots of support, and there's millions of dollars that are being spent every year in maintaining the hegemony of Young Earth creationism within conservative evangelicalism. And [Ken Ham](#) and [Al Mohler](#) and [Kent Hovind](#) and a whole roster of people like that: they're all invested in that. It's a very big challenge to help Christians recognize that this is *not* the way that Christians have always thought. This is a relatively recent emphasis, and it's not the way that anybody who has a scholarly grasp of the Old Testament or a clear understanding of science would think. They just would not think in those ways. But somehow that word has got to get out, and maybe projects like this one that you're doing now can help with that.

Host: That's certainly one of the visions of this, was to try to account as evidence to Americans and the larger world that the polarized perspectives that get most of the media attention—namely, faith-rejecting atheism or science-rejecting creationism—are not in the majority, that there's actually millions of us in the middle who embrace the two. We don't all integrate them in the same way, but we all find a way of saying, “Yes!” to both head and heart, faith and reason, scripture and science.

Karl: I hope that you're right. It's a very interesting question about how big this middle ground is. One of the things I've noticed as a professor at Eastern Nazarene College for many years is that it seems to me that, while students continue to come to college with Young Earth creationism as their default worldview, it doesn't seem to be as deeply held as it used to be. So I'm hoping that what we're seeing is that Young Earth creationism is just stuff that people hear, but it's not being emphasized anymore. And then it will be easier to dislodge than maybe it has been in the past.

Host: And you also write for the *Huffington Post*, isn't that right?

Karl: Yes, I've been [blogging on Huffington Post](#) for about a year now. That's been very interesting there, because that readership is really very secular. I've been amazed at the response. If you write anything there that's supportive of religion, you get hundreds and sometimes thousands of comments from people who assault you for that. I'm teaching an honors seminar right now called "Contemporary Questions," and basically every single student in the class has come from some kind of evangelical background. So, I wrote a piece in there about how these students didn't really strike me as people that had had religion crammed down their throat. I was reading their journals and I pulled a few comments out of their journals and put them in my article on the *Huffington Post*. These are kids wrestling with the right things, thinking about religious pluralism, about what they're going to do with their life, wondering about which things are really important to believe and which things need to be secondary.

And students are saying things like, "Whatever I have in my theology, love is going to be at the center. That's where I want to stand and try to make sure that I am the embodiment of love in all my relationships," and so on. These students don't look at all like they have been brainwashed and programmed by right-wing fanatical Nazi parents to carry on some hostile agenda from the 1970s. They don't look that way at all. So, I wrote a nice piece on the *Huffington Post* about these great kids that I have in my class, and 1,800 comments were posted there—and almost every one was, "Well, I certainly had religion crammed down *my* throat when I was little, so you must be talking to the wrong students!" or something like that.

It's very polarized. We need to get the point where people can say, "Look, you can be a wholesome religious person, you can be a moral agnostic, and we can all celebrate the world together." That's not our culture right now, and the internet makes it so easy to have a publication that caters to every particular constituency. So, writing positive things about religion on the *Huffington Post* is very interesting, and writing positive things about evolution at BioLogos is interesting in the opposite way. *[laughter]*

Host: Well, I for one deeply applaud you for your bridge-building work and, again, count you as a close colleague in exactly that—trying to show people on both sides that religion can be understood in a deeply meaningful, science-celebrating way, and that science can be understood in a way that inspires people's faith and calls them into a deeper, more Christ-centered or Christ-like commitment. So, thank you.

Karl: Absolutely.

Host: Anything else you'd like to say to our listeners in terms of any projects you're working on, or how they could learn more about your work?

Karl: Well, I would say just visit us at BioLogos.org, and we are eager to be in dialogue with people who are struggling from all parts of the spectrum. We have Young Earth creationists that

talk to us there and we have Jerry Coyne's fan club that hangs out there too. So, there's room for anybody that wants to engage the conversation in a respectful way.

Host: That's great. Well, thank you Karl Giberson for your great work in the world, and for sharing your ideas and your experience with our listeners today here on the leading edge of faith.

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