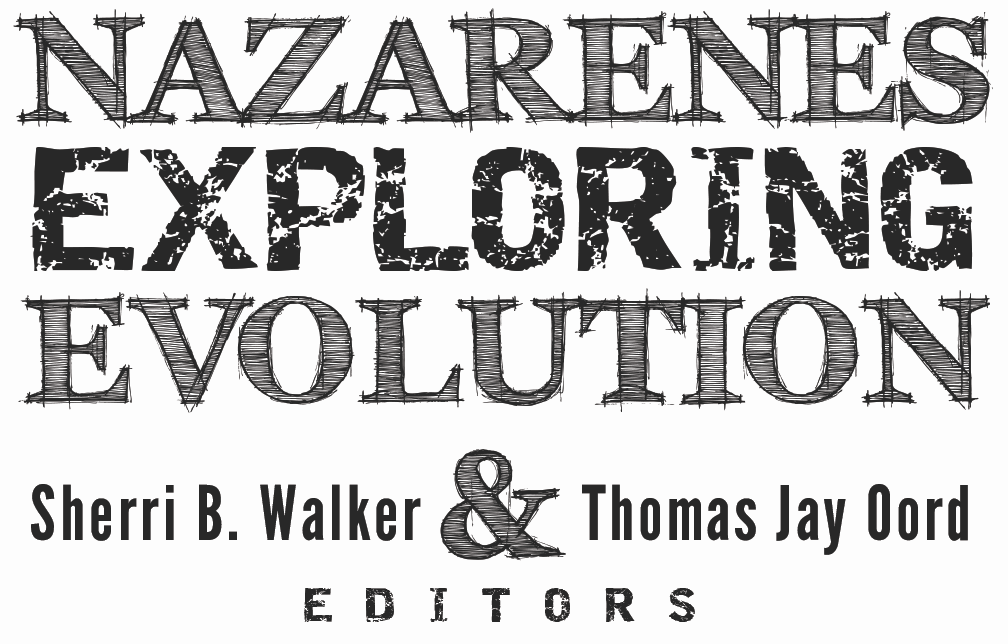
Excerpt from…





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Many of these essays were originally published online at exploringevolution.com

Published in Boise, Idaho by Russell Media

ISBN: 978-1-937498-41-2

Cover design: Jay Akkerman Cover image: Thomas Jay Oord Interior design: Sherri B. Walker

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** Walker, Sherri B. and Oord, Thomas Jay Nazarenes Exploring Evolution

ISBN: 978-1-937498-41-2



INTRODUCTION

Thomas Jay Oord

Few issues are more important than how God created the universe. And few are more contentious!

Virtually all Christians agree that God is Creator. And virtually all believe the biblical witness to God’s creative activity. But how God acts as Creator is disputed. And Christians disagree with one another on how to best interpret the Bible’s statements about creation.

In 2013 and 2014, a group of leaders in the Church of the Nazarene undertook a project to explore the possibility that God creates through evolution. The project shares the title of this book: Nazarenes Exploring Evolution. In a loving, constructive, and humble endeavor, the project tried to help the Church of the Nazarene consider how evolution can com- plement rather than contradict Wesleyan-holiness theology.

The project was conceived and led by Thomas Jay Oord, profes- sor of theology at Northwest Nazarene University. Sherri Walker served as his assistant in the project. Project leadership also included Robert Bran- son, Jennifer Chase, T. Scott Daniels, Kerry Fulcher, Philip Hamner, Mark Mann, and Mark Winslow. A conference with the project name was hosted by Point Loma Nazarene University in January of 2014, with Mann and Oord serving as conference directors.

The Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project worked to foster great- er understanding among members of the Church of the Nazarene about the potential fruitful relation between Wesleyan-holiness theology and evolution. Its goal was not to ridicule those who hold non-evolutionary views of creation, such as Young Earth Creationism, Progressive Creation- ism, or some versions of Intelligent Design. Instead, it offered Theistic Evo-

lution or Evolutionary Creation to the denomination as a viable alternative among accounts of how God creates the universe.

NAZARENE SCIENTISTS ON GOD CREATING THROUGH EVOLUTION

In a 2009 Pew research study, 97% of scientists said humans and other living things have evolved over time by natural processes, guided by God, or evolved in some other way.1 Prior to the Nazarenes Exploring Evo- lution project, no polls had been taken to find out how scientists in Church of the Nazarene colleges and universities think about evolution. But some scientists in the denomination had previously published their views on the subject.

Karl Giberson, long-time professor at Eastern Nazarene College, had affirmed evolution in a variety of books and publications. In one book, he writes, “I think evolution is true. The process, as I reflect on it, is an expression of God’s creativity, although in a way that is not captured by the scientific view of the world… God’s creative activity must not be confined to a six-day period - ‘in the beginning’ - or the occasional intervention along the evolutionary path. God’s role in creation must be more univer- sal – so universal it cannot be circumscribed by the contours of individual phenomena or events.”2

Darrel Falk, professor at Point Loma Nazarene University, had written in one of his books on the subject that “for the past century and a half, thousands of scientists from disciplines as diverse as physics, geology, astronomy, and biology have amassed a tremendous mass of data, and the answer is absolutely clear and equally certain. The earth is not young, and the life forms did not appear in six twenty-four-hour days. God created gradually.”3

Rick Colling, a long time scientist at Olivet Nazarene University, had said that “some people, on religious grounds, choose to aggressively ig- nore or deny many scientific concepts and principles, especially in the do- main of evolution… The problem, as I see it, is that we tend to squeeze God into small rigid boxes… Unfortunately, this approach to religious faith is

fraught with liability because it prevents God from truly being God – a creator capable of using any means He chooses for His creation.”4

Fred Cawthorne, professor at Trevecca Nazarene University, ar- gued that “evolution by no means contradicts the fact that God is the Mak- er of heaven and earth and that he has been actively guiding and sustaining the universe for all time. If we say God cannot create through a gradual, progressive process such as evolution, then we limit God’s transcendence and immanence.”5

Before the Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project polling, it was difficult to know if these views represent the majority of Nazarene scien- tists. But the polling results to be offered shortly confirm most Nazarene scientists believe the evidence for evolution is strong and evolution does not necessarily conflict with the belief God is Creator.

NAZARENE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARS ON GOD CREATING THROUGH EVOLUTION

There is little doubt some people reject evolution based on their interpretation of the Bible. The Bible says little to nothing about evolution. And the first chapters of Genesis, when read literally, do not easily fit the theory of evolution.

Many biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers in the Church of the Nazarene, however, believe the Bible should not be inter- preted as a straightforward science or history book. For instance, many believe Genesis 1 reads like a hymn of praise. Others believe it draws from Jewish Temple literature, which is religious and not scientific. Most Naz- arene theology, Bible, and philosophy scholars believe the main point of Genesis and other creation texts is theological: God is Creator. Genesis and other books of the Bible need not mention the specific ways God creates for this main point to be true.

Like several Nazarene scientists, some religion scholars in the

Church of the Nazarene had published their views on science, evolution,

theology and the Bible. For instance, Robert Branson, a long-time profes- sor at Olivet Nazarene University, said that “it is one thing to say we believe that God is the Creator. It is quite another to say that in Scripture God described with scientific accuracy ‘when’ and ‘how’ he created.”6

Alex Varughese, professor of Mount Vernon Nazarene Universi- ty, and his Nazarene co-writers of *Discovering the Bible* say that a “careful reading of Genesis 1:1-2:4a shows that the focus of the text is on the Cre- ator and what He made. Our usual questions of why, how, and when are not answered in this account.”7

Dennis Bratcher, a long time Bible scholar in the Church of the Nazarene and manager of an important ministry website, said that “some- times it is hard for us to realize that the Bible, particularly the Old Tes- tament, is an Oriental book… The thought world of Oriental culture is radically different from the thought world of Western culture, particularly when we recall that there is a period of three thousand years between us and that culture… That’s why they are not writing about evolution in Gen- esis 1; that’s 3,000 years in their future.”8

Michael Lodahl, profess or theology at Point Loma Nazarene Uni- versity, has published several items on issues of creation. In his book, *God of Nature and of Grace*, Lodahl said that “a Wesleyan reading of Genesis – and of the world – need not and should not shy away from the dominant ideas of the contemporary natural sciences. It is obvious that if the evolu- tionary story of the universe (including our own planet and all of its living inhabitants) is generally accurate, then the opening chapters of Genesis cannot be assumed to be giving a straightforwardly literal account of the creation of the world.”9

Thomas Jay Oord, of Northwest Nazarene University, has also published significant writing on the subjects of evolution and creation. He says that “the Bible tells us how to live abundant life. It does not tell us sci- entific details about how life became abundant. The Bible also tells us how to go to heaven. It does not provide the science to tell us how the heavens go.”10

The Nazarenes Exploring Evolution poll of religion scholars re- veals that the ideas expressed in the quotations above represent well the majority of biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers in the denomi- nation. Most scholars in Bible, theology, and philosophy seem at least open to the possibility that Wesleyan-holiness theology is compatible with evo- lution. And many are convinced the two are compatible.

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN SCHOLARS AND THE PUBLIC

The 2009 Pew Research poll revealed that the majority of scientists in the United States believe in evolution. In fact, more than 9 of 10 profes- sional scientists believe the evidence for evolution is compelling..11 While the theory of evolution comes in a variety of forms, virtually all forms say that gradual changes occurred to produce new species over long periods of time.

Not only do the majority of scientists affirm evolution, the gen- eral features of evolutionary theory – including an old earth and natural selection – are widely accepted in American culture today and in societies around the world. Most public television and scientifically-oriented pro- grams simply assume the general truth of evolutionary theory.

That same Pew research also shows, however, that more than half of white American Evangelicals believe humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.12 Those who hold this view typically believe the world is relatively young. And they in- terpret Genesis (and other books of the Bible) in a particular way to sup- port their young earth view.

This difference between 1) many Evangelicals and 2) the vast ma- jority of American scientists represents the difference between most laity and most scholars in the Church of the Nazarene. Many denominational scholars in various disciplines – scientific, biblical, and theological – be- lieve the general theory of evolution is compatible with Wesleyan-holiness theology. Yet, many non-specialists in the Church of the Nazarene reject evolution. Dan Boone, president of Trevecca Nazarene University, sums it

up: “The bulk of our Christian scholars/scientists are in a camp different from the bulk of our laity [on issues of evolution].”13

TWO POLLS ON NAZARENE VIEWS

One particularly interesting aspect of the Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project was the polls it conducted. One poll with a set of ques- tions was placed on the project website. Anyone who visited the site was welcome to answer the questions in the poll. While both members of the denomination and nonmembers participated, the results below show the response of the 285 who reported being members of the Church of the Nazarene. Here are the results of that public poll:

Question 1:

The Bible can properly be interpreted as com- patible with the theory of biological evolution.

120

100

80

60

40

20

37.89%

21.75%

10.53%

4.56%

25.26%

0

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 2:

Genesis and other biblical texts require Christians to believe the earth was created less than 15 thousand years ago.

200

150

100

50

0

14.39%

7.37%

4.21%

18.95%

55.09%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 3:

Geology, astronomy, and physics have established that the world is billions of years old.

120

100

80

60

40

20

35.44%

22.11%

12.98%

9.82%

19.65%

0

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 4:

Humans likely became a species as God worked with the biological evolutionary process.

100

80

60

40

20

27.72%

16.49% 17.19%

7.37%

31.23%

0

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 5:

The Church of the Naz- 150

arene should allow the 120

43.51%

theory that God creates 90 through evolution as one acceptable view of creation 60 among others. 30

0

19.30%

7.37%

3.51%

26.32%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Much could be said about these polling results from the public survey. The only known poll of Church of the Nazarene member views on

evolution prior to this was in 2007 and conducted by the Pew Research institute. In that poll, only 21% of Nazarenes questioned “mostly agreed” or “completely agreed” that evolution is the best explanation for the ori- gins of human life on earth.” 14 Among other things, the public Nazarenes Exploring Evolution poll suggests more Nazarenes today feel comfortable with the idea human themselves are a part of the evolutionary process.

POLLS OF NAZARENE SCHOLARS

The second poll conducted by the Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project was not open to the public. Instead, private invitations were sent to scholars in science and in religion who teach in Church of the Nazarene educational institutions in the United States. All of the major American universities and colleges of the Church of the Nazarene were contacted, including Nazarene Theological Seminary and Nazarene Bible College.

Here are the results of this invitation-only poll of scholars work- ing in the U.S. Church of the Nazarene educational institutions. A total of

81 professors participated in this poll: 39 were from the sciences, 42 were from Christian ministry departments.

Question 1: 80

Genesis and other bibli- 70

60

cal texts require Christ-

50

tians to believe the earth 40

was created less than 15 30

thousand years ago. 20

10

0

0.00%

1.23%

3.70%

13.58%

81.48%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 2:

40 49.38%

The Bible can properly be 35

interpreted as compatible 30

with the theory of biologi- 25

33.33%

cal evolution. 20

15

10

5

0

Question 3: 40

35

Wesleyan-holiness theolo-

30

Strongly

Agree

49.38%

3.70%

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

37.04%

7.41% 6.17%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

gy can be reconciled with 25

the theory of biological 20

evolution.

Question 4:

15

10

5

0

Strongly

Agree

40 49.38%

8.64%

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

2.47% 2.47%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

References to Adam in the 35

30

New Testament are com- 25

patible with the idea the 20

30.86%

earth is old.

15

10

5

0

Strongly

Agree

12.35%

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

3.70% 3.70%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 5: God is creator.

80 92.59%

70

60

50

40

30

20

10

0

6.17%

1.23% 0.00% 0.00%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 6:

60

65.43%

50

Scientific evidence sup- 40

ports the general theory 30

of biological evolution.

20 19.75%

10

0

Strongly

Agree

8.64%

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

3.70% 2.74%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 7:

35 39.51%

30

Humans likely became a 25 species as God worked 20 with the evolutionary 15

27.16%

18.52%

process.

10

5

0

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

7.41% 7.41%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

60

Question 8: 50

The universe is billions of

years old. 40

30

20

10

0

66.67%

17.28%

13.58%

0.00% 2.47%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 9:

25

27.16% 25.93%

20

23.46%

Some species and or- 15

ganisms show evidence

of design. 10

11.11% 12.35%

5

0

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

Question 10:

60

66.67%

50

Geology, astronomy, and 40 physics have established 30 that the world is billions 20

of years old.

19.75%

10

0

Strongly

Agree

8.64%

Agree Unsure/ Don’t Know

3.70% 1.23%

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

60

Question 11: 50

The Church of the Naz-

69.14%

arene should allow the 40

theory that God creates 30 through evolution as one 20 acceptable view of creat- 10

ing among others.

0

18.52%

7.41%

3.70% 1.23%

Strongly

Agree

Agree Unsure/

Don’t

Know

Disagree Strongly

Disagree

This set of results from scholarly views and the online results from the public polls confirms Dan Boone’s statement that we find in the Church of the Nazarene a marked difference between how laity and scholars think about evolution. One goal of the Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project was to address this divide and to argue that how we think about evolution makes a difference.

DOES IT MATTER?

Even those mildly interested in questions of theology and evolu- tion know the science-and-religion discussion has a history of conflict. Any progress toward insight or reconciliation comes slowly, if at all. Veter- ans of the discussion are prone to weariness, and denominational leaders might wonder if the “fight” is worth the trouble. Does addressing the issues of evolution really matter?

Christians have long believed that truth matters. Although Chris- tians may not ever know all truth because we “see through a dark glass” (1

Cor. 13), we are called to search for truth in our attempts to love God with our minds. Because the natural and social sciences are primary avenues for discovering truth about existence, these sciences can play a central role in helping Christians discern how to love God and others as oneself.

Al Truesdale, long-time professor at Nazarene Theological Sem- inary, summarizes the importance of seeking truth in the Church of the Nazarene: “Denominations that stand in the Wesleyan tradition [such as

the Church of the Nazarene] are at their best when they advocate a vital faith that seeks understanding through a bold examination of the results of all human exploration, whether in technology, in the sciences, or through historical research.”15

One reason this discussion matters, therefore, is that the search for more adequate understandings of God and the world God creates relies upon a variety of sources, not the least of which are the sciences. If evolu- tion is widely accepted among those who have studied the natural world most intently – scientists – it matters how Christians engage the science of evolution in light of Christian Faith.

This brings us to a second reason why the discussion of evolution and theology matters. It matters because many (but not all) scientists in the Church of the Nazarene affirm the general theory of evolution. These scientists often feel ostracized, get labeled as ungodly, are marginalized, or considered deceived.

The testimony of Nazarene biologist, Darrel Falk, is similar to the testimonies of many Nazarene scientists: “One of the biggest deterrents (to entering a Nazarene community) was my impression that I could never be- come part of an evangelical fellowship because of my belief in gradual cre- ation…. Unless the church begins to downplay the significance of believ- ing in some variety of sudden creation, there will continue to be thousands of individuals … who will be denied true fellowship in God’s kingdom.”16

CHRISTIAN WITNESS TODAY

A third important reason why the evolution and Christian theolo- gy discussion matters is the nature of Christian witness. And the Christian witness pertaining to evolution is especially true for how young people think of God and Christian faith.

In a recent Pew study, more 18- to 29-year olds reported having a positive view of science than those in any other age category. More specif- ically, sixty-one percent of young people believe life evolved over time due to either natural process or divine guidance. Seventy percent of all college

graduates – no matter their age – affirm some form of evolution. In sum, young people and those with degrees in higher education are more likely to trust scientists who argue for the validity of evolution.

Statistics also show, unfortunately, that young people leave the church and/or become atheists because they perceive the church to be op- posed to science in general and evolution in specific. In his book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith*, David Kinnaman uses the data from Barna Group research to show why

18- to 29-year olds are leaving the Church. Nearly 3 in 10 say the church is out of step with science, and one quarter say Christianity is anti-science. About one quarter of young people are turned off by the creation vs. evo- lution debate, and about one-fifth say Christianity is anti-intellectual.17

Kinnaman quotes one young person and why he left faith over the church’s failure to accept science: “To be honest, I think that learning about science was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” says the young person. “I knew from church that I couldn’t believe in both science and God, so that was it. I didn’t believe in God anymore.”18

Stories from Nazarene parents, youth pastors, and university pro- fessors indicate that some young people are leaving the Church of the Naz- arene for the reasons Kinnaman reports. These young people think they cannot affirm the idea that God creates through evolution and still feel welcome in the denomination.

Dan Boone, president of Trevecca Nazarene University, asks an im- portant question of himself that also applies to the Church of the Nazarene, “Will I engage a young generation in an open-minded biblical conversa- tion that welcomes scientific discovery, reasoned philosophy, and careful logic? Or will I ignore all of these in favor of an interpretation of creation that is barely one hundred years old and rooted in the fear of science?”19

THIS BOOK

At the heart of the Nazarenes Exploring Evolution project were more than 50 essays from Nazarenes on issues of evolution. These 1,000-

word essays were published weekly in 2013 on the project website: ex- ploringevolution.com. Essayists were invited to explore whatever dimen- sion or issue in evolution they wanted. They were also encouraged to speak from their hearts and to tell their stories, whenever appropriate.

This book offers in print most of the essays offered online in 2013. Some of the essays are identical to their online versions; others have been expanded significantly by their authors for this book. The editors have or- ganized the essays to foster continuity among the diverse ideas.

This book provides a powerful testimony in itself to the compatibility most essayists believe exists between the general theory of evolution and Chris- tian faith.

The editors are grateful to many people for their support and en- couragement. We especially appreciate the BioLogos Foundation for gra- ciously supporting the project with a grant. In addition to thanking all who wrote essays for this book and/or for the website, we thank the following: Jay Akkerman, Kathryn Applegate, Dan Boone, Clayton Borah and 6foot4, Robert Branson, Jennifer Chase, Ken Crow, T. Scott Daniels, Darrel Falk, Kerry Fulcher, Karl Giberson, Deborah Haarsma, Ryan Hanson, Lydia Heberling, Rich Houseal, Mark Maddix, Mark Mann, Jesse Middendorf, Northwest Nazarene University, Point Loma Nazarene University, Mark Russell, Al Truesdale, Burton Webb, and Donald Yerxa.

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