

Bible Study: Science & Faith – Is Science A Christian Activity?

Introduction

From the Scopes trial in America in the 1920s to current debates about creation, evolution, human reproduction and a host of other issues, science and religion – particularly Christianity – have often been portrayed as being at odds with one other. Some Christians don't perceive any conflict between science and faith, and many scientists are people of faith. For others, however, the questions that scientific discoveries raise about how we read and understand the Bible, and the ethical challenges of some new technologies, can be challenging or even disturbing. Some might go so far as to suggest that engaging with science isn't appropriate for Christians.

Although scientific enquiry as we understand it isn't something that we find in the Bible, there are passages that show people behaving in ways that might be considered 'scientific', suggesting that science does have a place in the life of the believer. This Bible study looks at some of these passages and poses questions for each that explore how scientific enquiry relates to faith.

This Bible study is suitable for use by individuals or small groups. There is a short discussion section at the end that groups might find useful.

Opening Questions

How would you describe the relationship between science and religion?

Have the differences between scientific understandings of the world (or universe) and biblical narratives ever made you uncomfortable?

Do you think it even makes sense to have a conversation about science and the Bible?

Thinking about science in the Bible

The following four Bible passages could each be understood as describing something 'scientific', even if the biblical writers wouldn't have used that term. Read each passage and consider the accompanying questions. As you do, you may want to think about what these passages say about faith – is it blind and unquestioning or is faith something that enables us to ask questions about God and about God's creation?

Noah's 'Experiment': Genesis 6.11–22, 7.12–18 & 8.1–12

Questions:

- Noah's activities with the raven and dove look very much like a type of scientific experiment. He had a question about the world (was it dry enough to open the ark) and devised a series of tests that would provide an answer.
- Did Noah's experiment in any way suggest a lack of faith in God?
- What might Noah's story suggest about the place of science in the life of a Christian?

The Wise Men: early astronomers: Matthew 2.1–2

Questions:

Although we know little about the wise men, it seems clear that they spent time studying and perhaps charting the skies. Although how they used their knowledge of the stars made them more astrologers than astronomers as we would understand these terms, the observation, charting and tracking of stars and planets probably did have an element to it that we might call scientific.

- If we think about the activity of the wise men as scientific, what might this tell us about (a) how God can use the scientific activities of human beings; (b) how scientific discovery can inspire one's faith?

'Doubting' Thomas or 'Scientist' Thomas?: John 20.19–29

Questions:

- Like Noah, Thomas had a question to be answered and devised an 'experiment' to answer that question.
- Did Thomas' need for evidence reflect a lack of faith?
- Jesus was willing to let Thomas carry out his experiment. What do you think this might say about God's response to someone's doubt, questions, or desire to have evidence to support their faith?
- What about Jesus' statement that, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe?" Is this an argument for 'blind' faith?

Everyday Science: Matthew 16.1–3

Questions:

In this passage, Jesus contrasts people's ability to observe the natural world and make predictions based on what they see, with their inability to observe what he was doing and make predictions about the coming of God's kingdom.

- Do you think that Jesus' criticism in this passage is a condemnation of human beings' interest in the natural world?

- What does this passage suggest about the importance of cultivating religious knowledge alongside worldly knowledge?

The book of nature and the book of scripture

Christian tradition says that God has given us two books that teach us about God: the book of nature and the book of scripture. Paul himself writes in the letter to the Romans that even the ungodly should be able to know about God because the nature of God is revealed through the things that God has created (Romans 1.19–20). The study of the natural world, therefore, can be a means for understanding the nature of God.

Learning about the Creator by studying the creation: Psalm 19.1–4

Questions:

- What do you understand this passage to be saying?
- How might it be understood in relation to scientific endeavour?
- The second half of this Psalm begins (vv 7–8) by talking about the Law of God as imparting wisdom and knowledge. What does this pairing of the things of nature and the Law as sources of revelation suggest about the value of studying the natural world?

Discussion:

Thinking about the above passages and your answers to the questions, talk together about your understanding of the relationship between science and faith, and how you think those outside the church perceive that relationship. Do you think that these passages could help the church engage with those who struggle to accept Christianity because they feel it isn't compatible with science?