

**“ALWAYS EVOLVING!”**  
***Genesis 1:1-4, 26-27; Psalm 104:1-13, 24-35; John 3:1-17***  
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February 12, 2009, came and went without much fanfare in Cleveland, Ohio. Few people were aware that there was anything noteworthy about that day. Yet February 12, 2009, marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of two people who have had a profound impact on the world as we know it: **Abraham Lincoln** and **Charles Darwin**. How intriguing that these two giants of influence upon world civilization were born on the very same day!

Abraham Lincoln is arguably one of the greatest, if not the greatest President, that the United States has ever had. His support for and signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and his steady hand of leadership in the war that followed was masterful, to say the least. His attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation towards the Confederacy did much to heal the deep-seated wounds that had divided the regional factions of this country for generations. His ability to translate lofty ideals into practical and effective strategies of leadership is admired to this day. Indeed, Lincoln’s philosophy and leadership style have provided a conscious and intentional role model for President Obama and his administration. Abraham Lincoln is a leader well worth studying, a statesman well worth emulating.

On the same day that Abraham Lincoln was born in rural Kentucky, across the pond another person who would influence the world in a profound way was also born: Charles Darwin. Initially studying to become a priest in the Church of England, Darwin developed a deep interest in naturalism.(1) During a visit to South America and the Galapagos Islands, he examined the fossil remains of ancient organisms and observed the diversity of life forms in isolated environments. Building on these observations and based on additional work over more than twenty years, Darwin developed the theory of evolution by natural selection. In 1859, he published these ideas in his profoundly influential book, *The Origin of Species*.

Darwin proposed that all living species are descended from a small set of common ancestors — perhaps just one ancestor. He held that variations within a species occur randomly, and that the survival or extinction of each organism depends upon its ability to adapt to its environment.

Darwin’s view engendered immediate and intense controversy, especially in religious circles, which has continued to this day and shows no signs of abating. While no serious biologist today doubts the theory of evolution to explain the marvelous complexity and diversity of life, a recent Gallup poll indicates that only one-third of Americans believe that the theory of evolution is well supported, with the remainder being equally divided between those who agree that it has not been well supported and those claiming they don’t know enough to affirm evolution or reject it.(2)

The theory of evolution rests on two basic ideas: 1) that all of life is related, and 2) that

species change over time. First of all, scientists insist that **all of life is related**. If you hug a tree, you are hugging a relative, a very distant relative, but a relative, nonetheless! From the outset, one of the objections to the idea that we are all related is the idea that human beings are descended from apes and monkeys. Thomas Huxley, a contemporary of Darwin's, is reported to have said that he was not ashamed to have a monkey for an ancestor, only ashamed to be related to anyone who obscured the truth!(6) Scientists reassure us that we're not descended from apes and monkeys the way those species are now. It's that we share common ancestors.

How do we know this? The same way we know whether people are related to one another. Everybody knows, (thanks to courtroom television!), that DNA can be used to determine paternity. Because children share the DNA of their parents, we can tell whether people are related by seeing if their DNA is the same. This principle works across all living things.

While the study of genes and the DNA which comprise them has been going on for years, the Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, revealed more about the interrelatedness of life than humanity had previously known. It was discovered, for example, that while there are 3.1 billion letters of the DNA code arranged across 24 chromosomes comprising the human genome, there are only about 20 - 25,000 protein coding-genes. That was especially shocking in light of the fact that the gene count for other, simpler organisms such as worms, flies, and simple plants seem to be in about the same range as that for humans.

Another striking, and I believe, theologically profound finding coming from the Human Genome Project is that at the DNA level, all the different members of our human species are 99.9 percent identical!(4) That similarity applies regardless of which two individuals from around the world you wish to compare. Take a look at the person to the right of you, and to the left of you. Ninety-nine point nine percent of your DNA is exactly the same! Thus, by DNA analysis, we are truly members of one family.

The second fact of evolutionary biology is that **species change**. This was what Darwin observed on the Galapagos Islands and what scientists (and non-scientists) observe all the time. The size, shape and color of plants and animals change over time.

In her recent book, *Evolution and Christian Faith*, Joan Roughgarden, professor of biological sciences and geophysics at Stanford University, says, "*The single-tree-of-life and species-change discoveries are the bottom-line, take-home facts. I believe these two facts must be taught in any science curriculum today. Not teaching these will cripple the minds of children, as though asking them to find a place in modern society after being raised by wolves.*"(5)

Far from being at odds with religion in general and the Christian faith in particular, I find the two major premises of evolutionary biology quite compatible with orthodox thinking. First, all of life is related. The most accepted theory of the creation of the world among scientists at the current time is the Big Bang theory, which states that at a single moment, approximately fourteen billion years ago, the universe began.(6) Of course, the Big Bang theory begs the question of what came before that, and who or what was responsible for the forces coming together that created the universe in the first place.

Francis Collins writes, "*The Big Bang cries out for a divine explanation. ...I cannot see how nature could have created itself. Only a supernatural force that is outside of space and time could have done that.... For the Judeo-Christian tradition, the opening words of Genesis are entirely compatible with the Big Bang.*"(7)

Genesis 1:1 tells us that *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*

The creation-poem set in the Garden of Eden describes God creating all the species of plants and animals. Does Genesis 1 contradict evolution’s tree of life? No, Genesis does not specify one way or the other about whether the plants and animals God placed on earth are related to one another. They are, however, all designed and made by the same Creator. Genesis does not tell us how God created; it only tells us why: God created humanity in God’s image for fellowship with God.

All of life is related, a fact which has now been proven by science, a fact which has broad implications as communication increases and the world continues to shrink before our very eyes. All of life is related, we realize as we do irreparable damage to the land, water and to the species of plant and animal life that God has created over millions of years. All of life is related, we need to remember as we seek solutions to problems that threaten to destroy the very breath of life that God breathed into our nostrils at the dawn of creation.

That brings me to the second fact of evolutionary biology that is also quite compatible with the Christian Gospel: that species change over time. Scientists have observed mutation occurring in plants and insects and other species through laboratory experimentation and the examination of fossils. Change is vital to the survival of living things. Change is also fundamental to our belief system. Change is a cornerstone of the Christian Gospel.

I have chosen Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus to illustrate my point. Nicodemus was intrigued by the teaching of Jesus and the way of life he demonstrated. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, for he didn’t want to admit to the other intellectuals of his day that his education and his profession had not brought him the happiness and the satisfaction for which he yearned. Nicodemus sensed that there might be something he was missing. Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, that he needed to accept God’s lordship of all things and start looking at life through fresh, new eyes. The most important part of life, according to this Jewish teacher, is not what we can get, but what we can give. We can begin living a new life not someday when we die, but here and now, today.

We don’t know whether Nicodemus came to faith immediately or whether the process took a while. But we do know that after Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus came with Joseph of Arimathea to claim and care for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus, formerly afraid to be seen with Jesus for fear of what people would think, was now willing to risk his reputation and his very life in order to care for the body of his crucified Lord. A profound change had taken place in his life.

Whether or not the account in Acts is totally accurate, we know that another man was changed dramatically, as Saul, the persecutor of Christians, became Paul, the Apostle, the greatest missionary the Christian church has ever known. Again, a change of heart and life is a fundamental result of the Gospel message.

Species can change. It was the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, who urged his followers not to be satisfied with where they were in their spiritual lives, but to go on to perfection. Citing Matthew 5:48, ***“Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect,”*** John Wesley urged a continual process of change and growth causing the Christian believer to evolve, if you will, toward the person God intends us to be.

For some, the change is profound and dramatic. The Apostle Paul is a prime example. For others, the change is more subtle and gradual. But for all living things, change is essential, not only to our growth, but to our survival in God’s world. It is true in the physical realm; I

submit it is also true in the realm of the spirit.

Some people have the gift of storytelling. When Professor Harrell Beck lectured on the origins of the Hebrew Bible, he made the story so real that I wanted to sneak a peek in the corner of the room to which he was gesturing. I wanted to catch a glimpse of the Bedouin shepherds and the campfire they had built to take the chill off the night air. Dr. Beck said that when he went to speak at local churches, he wanted to take a Bible, and rip off the back cover, to demonstrate the fact that God did not stop speaking in the second century A.D., nor have the acts of the Apostles ceased. “The Bible is still being written today!” He would proclaim in a thundering voice. Species can change. Species do change!

In his book, *The Language of God*, Francis Collins tells about being asked to head the Human Genome Project. At the time, he was quite happy at the University of Michigan, and commented that never imagined himself a federal employee! “*I initially indicated no interest,*” he wrote, “*But the decision haunted me. There was only one Human Genome Project. This was going to be done only once in human history. If it succeeded, the consequences for medicine would be unprecedented. As a believer in God, was this one of the moments when I was somehow being called to take on a larger role in a project that would have profound consequences for our understanding of ourselves? ... I have always been suspicious of those who claim to perceive God’s will in moments such as this, but ... the potential consequences for humankind’s relationship with the Creator could hardly be ignored. ... I spent a long afternoon praying in a little chapel, seeking guidance about this decision. I did not ‘hear’ God speak — in fact, I have never had that experience. But during those hours... a peace settled over me. A few days later, I accepted the offer.*”(8)

Collins’ work has demonstrated and confirmed the theory of Charles Darwin, that all of life is related and that species change. As Harrell Beck so dramatically proclaimed to our seminary class, God is still speaking; God is still creating; the Bible is still being written today. What will your chapter say? How will you demonstrate your awareness of your relationship to all of creation? How will you respond to God’s call to continue to evolve and let God create in you the person that God desires you to be? As long as we are living, we are **always evolving**. May we always seek to grow in the image and likeness of God.

#### Notes:

1. Collins, Francis. *The Language of God*. New York: Free Press., p. 96.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
4. *Ibid.*.
5. Roughgarden, Joan. *Evolution and Christian Faith: Reflections of an Evolutionary Biologist*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006., pp. 24-25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 67, 82-83.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 118-119.