

Not Of This World, And Of It

Preached at the Unitarian Church of Charleston, South Carolina on February 4, 2018

By R. T. Dillon, Jr and J. T. Vance

SECTION #1, VANCE

Hello, my name is Jason Vance. I am an associate professor of Biology at the College of Charleston and have served as the coordinator of Darwin Week for 2017 and 2018. I am a member of the Essex Village Church of Christ in West Ashley. My colleague Rob Dillon, the most dangerous mind in Charleston, was formerly an associate professor of Biology at the C of C, and the founder and coordinator of Darwin Week from 2001–2016. Rob is a member of First Scots Presbyterian Church in Charleston.

This morning we continue the age-old discourse between science and faith in a sermon entitled “Not Of This World, And Of It.” Perhaps the arguments we present today will not be novel to this congregation; I nonetheless invite your attention as the opinions we will share arise from each of us reflecting on a significant period of our lives spent as Christians and as scientists, and reconciling the conflict between faith and science in our personal and professional lives. And perhaps some of our brothers and sisters in the pews this morning also wrestle with this conflict; we hope the following discussion may frame the context of reconciling science and faith, not because we believe them to be compatible, but because we don’t think they are incompatible, either.

SECTION #2, DILLON

“Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.”

This reading from John 18 is not the most important teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor the most surprising, nor the most difficult. But it is certainly among the top five, in all categories.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” This was a truth he demonstrated throughout his life and work. He was not born into a palace, but into the humblest circumstances imaginable in first century Palestine. He had no treasure. His earthly ministry was a long journey down a dusty road, homeless and penniless. He had no court, no servants—if fact, he himself was the servant of all, the lowest of the low. And he died alone, spit upon and spurned, friendless. Christ’s kingdom was not of this world.

At the very minimum, understood in its narrowest sense, Jesus’ confession to Pilate in John 18 refutes the concept of a Christian army, and any use of military force in the name of Christian principles. Jesus said, “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.” But his disciples and apostles did not fight. Peter was personally rebuked for drawing his sword against the servant of the high priest in the garden. There can never be any Christian justifi-

cation for forming an army and marching off to war for any cause whatsoever.

But notice that although our Lord Jesus Christ did not endorse the use of military force, he did not condemn it, either. He did not criticize the Roman army nor suggest that Rome was wrong to conquer the Mediterranean World in the first century A.D.

And in fact, I should imagine that most of us here in the pews this morning are not unhappy that the United States has a powerful army today. The world is a rough place, full of tyrants and despots. Two of my uncles, my mother’s brother Lawson and my father’s brother Julian, were killed in action fighting such a despot in 1945. I will forever feel a sense of profound debt to these two young men I never knew, who gave their lives in the cause of freedom.

I have no hesitation to assert to you all this morning that military force can be a good thing. And I further suggest to you that my confession here regarding the necessity of military power in the world does not contradict any teaching of Jesus.

Because the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world. Neither has our Lord an army, nor can he be conquered by armies. Christ exerts no military power, and he himself is not subject to military power. Christ’s kingdom is a spiritual kingdom.

This very narrow and direct reading of Jesus’ confession to Pilate in John 18 is not difficult to understand in isolation. But let us open our net a bit wider and see what we catch.

Governments, even in the first century A.D., were more than occupying powers. At the very least, they enforced a civil law. Thieves and murderers were apprehended by the Roman authority and punished. But Jesus had no more relationship with the civil government of Rome than he did with the military authority.

Jesus loved all. He loved the representatives of Rome, the tax collectors and publicans. He equally loved the criminals—the thieves and the prostitutes. Thus the civil authority today cannot try and judge and imprison anybody in the name of Christ, any more than military authority of today can march to war in the name of Christ. Jesus lived and ruled outside of the civil law, just as he ruled outside of military force. His kingdom was not of this world.

But surely thieves and murderers must be apprehended and punished, yes? Is it possible that some justice exists that is not Christian justice?

Let us reason a bit further. Slavery was a widespread practice in first century Palestine. Yet Jesus did not speak out against it. In fact, just the opposite. The lowest slave of the low was Jesus Christ himself, who made himself servant to all, even unto death on the cross. Slaves were commanded to obey their earthly masters four times in the epistles: Ephesians 6.5, Colossians 3.22, Titus 2.9 and 1 Peter 2.18.

There is no Christian teaching against slavery. Rather, Christianity is the religion of slavery. Nor is there any teaching in favor of women’s rights, nor indeed, rights for any subset of humanity whatsoever. There can be no Christian warrant for involvement in civil rights demonstrations, protest marches, legislative advocacy, press conferences, or rude assemblies to importune elected representatives over petty injustices. The name of Christ cannot be invoked in support of any political cause whatsoever, because his kingdom is not of this world.

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Does this mean that we should sit idly by in the face of civil injustice? No. There is good that is not Christian good, there are rights that are not Christian rights, there is justice that is not Christian justice, there is truth that is not Christian truth, there are worlds that are not Christian worlds.

Let's extend this line of reasoning even further. What is the relationship between the kingdom of Christ and the world of money and finance? I will not dwell on that question this morning, but I will make a simple observation. Jesus was a penniless beggar, and his disciples were penniless beggars, and on the Day of Pentecost, all the apostles, every single member of the First Christian Church of Everywhere, sold everything he owned and gave it all to the poor, every last nickel. Sometimes we hear a figure of 10% tithing bandied about the Christian pulpit. Vain nonsense. The Disciples and the Apostles gave 100%, every last penny. Christ gave more.

What is the relationship between the kingdom of Christ and the family? I will not dwell on that question this morning either, but I will make another simple observation. Jesus renounced his earthly parents at age 12, never married, and had no children. In fact, he said in Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." Sometimes we hear charlatan preachers prattling on about "Christian Family Values." I do not think that phrase means what they think it means.

Are we forbidden, then, to get jobs, get married, and have children? When Paul exhorted the Roman Church, "Be ye not conformed to this world," was he suggesting that we not go grocery shopping? When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God," was he telling us to quit school? Or might the Holy Scriptures be written in some other language?

The language of Christ is not the language of this world, the truth of Christ is not the truth of this world, the values of Christ are not the values of this world, the kingdom of Christ is not the kingdom of this world.

Then from whence cometh our faith?

SECTION #3, VANCE

Must the world be a stumbling block to our faith? We see, we hear, and we grasp at the physical nature of the world around

us. And many of us so often want the reassurance that our faith in Christ's kingdom is compatible with the natural world; witnessed by the beauty of Earth; supported by scripture; confirmed by history; justified by observation; proven through intellectual discourse, or even scientific investigation.

But, in the epistle to the Hebrews (11.1), faith is defined as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence (or assurance) of things not seen." In the absence of tangible evidence ... in the absence of observing Christ's kingdom ... in the absence of proof, Christians have "faith."

And faith exists in stark contrast to science.

By definition, science employs a systematic approach to building knowledge about our universe and the natural world. Science employs a methodology of observation and experimentation. Science extends beyond simply gathering evidence, but using that evidence to compare two competing predictions about the nature of the world. These two competing predictions—hypotheses—are not glamorous; but do possess important characteristics that distinguish science from faith:

First, through experimentation, science tests two hypotheses—a null hypothesis ("there is no effect of X on Y"), versus an alternate hypothesis ("there is an effect of

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X on Y"). Where does faith in God fit into these hypotheses?

Is God the alternate hypothesis, and can we test for his effect on the natural world? In Matthew 4, Jesus rebukes Satan by saying "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." While fitting advice for any person contemplating a literal 'leap of faith,' so too should it apply to testing God to reveal himself in the natural world. If Jesus was unwilling to invoke the power of his Father to prove his divinity, then what possibility should we expect God to reveal himself for the sake of our faith?

On the contrary, can God be the null hypothesis? If science has explained half of the natural world, is the remaining unexplained half—the null hypotheses—due to God? Is my faith glass half full or half empty? When science hits 80%, is God only glorified for his remaining 20%? This is the crux of the 'God of the Gaps' fallacy: as a scientist, I

can affirm this is not science; as a Christian, I cannot argue how glorifying the God of null hypotheses is good theology.

Second, both hypotheses must be refutable. That is, empirical evidence must be capable of refuting either hypothesis. When studying the natural world, the experiment must be crafted to collect data that will support one hypothesis and refute the other hypothesis. Without bias either outcome should be possible. An experiment fails to be science when the outcome of a hypothesis is guaranteed, or not possible at all, regardless of the data. Certainly, bad science exists, and mechanisms such as statistical testing, peer review, and conflict-of-interest disclosures can help evaluate the merit of even the most complicated of experiments. But the merit of the test for God seems quite simple: no empirical evidence exists to support the hypothesis that God exists and no empirical evidence exists to support the hypothesis that God does not exist. These hypotheses are not refutable, and therefore cannot be tested scientifically.

Third, science proves through disproof. In the battle royale between the null and alternate hypothesis, the victor that emerges is not necessarily the 'true' explanation. The hypothesis that you accept is the 'best tenable hypothesis'; it is the best explanation that is supported by the data, and it stands because

the opposing hypothesis was disproven by the data. The trueness of the truth ultimately depends on the quality, specificity, and accuracy of the hypotheses to begin with, which in turn is a function of the advancing knowledge that science produces and depends on the quality, specificity, and accuracy of the techniques used to test the hypotheses. As our scientific knowledge progresses, so too does the technology we employ to test our natural world.

The 'best tenable hypothesis' accepted as true with today's state-of-the-art may not hold up next decade, or even next year. A better test, better tools, and better techniques may ultimately produce results that supersede previous conclusions. Scientists accept this possibility, as their hypothesis was refutable to begin with and should remain refutable no matter how long it stands tenable. Is our faith the 'best tenable hypoth-

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esis'? If so, how long will it stand tenable? Evidence-based faith defies the definition of faith itself, and the technology we possess today provides us no more empirical evidence of God's kingdom than what first century Christians had 2,000 years ago.

Finally, science is reproducible: the hypotheses can be tested repeatedly by the same researcher and similarly by other researchers, or the same conclusions can be reached through different experimental techniques. If the results cannot be reproduced, then doubts are cast on the original conclusions. Science seeks to understand the nature of nature. If phenomena do not adhere to the natural laws of our universe, then they may be 'supernatural' or, perhaps, an emerging branch of physics. Of course, science is equipped to evaluate new advancements in physics!

However, science lacks the tools to evaluate the supernatural. If science could investigate the supernatural and generate reproducible results, it stands to reason that its reproducibility would reclassify the phenomenon as a natural process. God's nature is not the nature of this world and the science of this world is incapable of testing the nature of God.

Science provides a systematic framework through testable predictions that advances our knowledge of the natural world and universe around us. Conversely, our faith is in the supernatural—in God, in Christ—in the absence of evidence or observable proof. Therefore, I cannot draw comfort from the

notion that science and faith are compatible. I can marvel at this physical world, investigate and appreciate evolution and the interrelatedness of all life on Earth. I can be in awe of the universe and simply have no concept of what existed before the Big Bang, or where the universe is located and what is beyond it. I can admit that 'I don't know.' And, I can hope for a promise made some 2000 years ago, and have faith in a kingdom I cannot see. As a Christian and a scientist, I find that science and faith are worlds apart and simply not compatible ... and that's okay.

SECTION #4, DILLON

My father was both a banjo picker and a baseball player. But he never tried to harmonize his banjo with his catcher's mitt. He never tried to integrate his baseball bat into his bluegrass band. He had the common sense to know that sports and music are entirely different things. They have different cultures and different languages and different assumptions about their different worlds. Playing baseball and playing banjo are not compatible, and nobody would try to make them so. But playing baseball and playing banjo are not incompatible, either, because many people enjoy both.

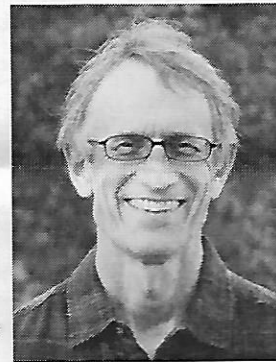
Might Christ reign over yet another world, a spiritual kingdom not compatible with earthly diversions like music and sports, not compatible even with the rule of earthly law or the bonds of earthly science, yet not incompatible,

either?

I will leave you with one final question. Might the Kingdom of Christ be uniquely profound? All the earthly kingdoms—law and politics, money and commerce, art, science, sports, all of them—have their origins in the self.

Only the Kingdom of Christ issues from elsewhere. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Notice the position of the syllable "self." In the Kingdom of Christ, and only in the Kingdom of Christ, self is last.

Jesus denied himself, he emptied himself, he humbled himself, he made himself the servant of all, the lowest of the low. And the heirs of His kingdom will not be known by any earthly achievement, not their wealth or their power, not their wit, not their skill, not their worldly wisdom, but by their unworldly humility.



Dr. Rob Dillon



Dr. Jason Vance

Two Sermons

How Science and Faith Are Related. Or Are They?

By the Reverend D. William McIvor, D.Min.

PASTCF Editor/Publisher

Two sermons and reflections about them take up substantial portions of this issue of *SciTech*. Formally unconnected to each other, they both arrived in my inbox at roughly the same time for possible publication and quickly became foremost in my mind to include in the August issue.

The sermon "Not of This World, And of It" comes from biologist Rob Dillon, PASTCF member and occasional contributor to *SciTech*, and his friend and former colleague at the College of

Charleston, Jason Vance, also a biologist. It was preached on February 4th at the Unitarian Church of Charleston, South Carolina.

The other sermon, "Truth and Consequences: Science, Technology, and the Church in an Age of Truthiness," was delivered by Ellie Stock at PASTCF's association meeting and luncheon on June 21st at the 223rd General Assembly in St. Louis. In many ways very different and in other ways very similar, both sermons reflect on how science and religion or science and faith do or do not relate to each other, a subject implicit in PASTCF's very name and reason for being.

I include both of them, not for evaluative purposes or declaring one better than the other. Such comparisons are pointless. By what

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