

AlbertMohler.com

On Darwin and Darwinism: A Letter to Professor Giberson

Wednesday, August 25, 2010

An open letter to Professor Karl Giberson, in answer to his posting, "[How Darwin Sustains My Baptist Search for Truth.](#)"

Dear Professor Giberson:

I read with interest your posting at *The Huffington Post*, brought to my attention by friends. I will respond by means of this open letter, though your tone and chosen forum are not indicative of any serious desire for an honest exchange. Your choice of a secular website, well known for its more liberal leanings, is quite a statement in itself. Did you write this in order to gain the favorable attention of the readers at *The Huffington Post*? If so, presumably you have your reward. But your tone — hardly the tone of a serious scholar or scientist — is even more disappointing.

You make quite a shocking list of accusations. You suggest that I do not "seem to care about the truth" and that I seem "quite content to make stuff up when it serves [my] purpose." Those are not insignificant charges. You say that I "made false statements about [Charles] Darwin." I would not want to do that, so I have once again looked carefully at the evidence.

I have read your posting several times, and it seems that your central complaint comes down to one or possibly two sentences in [my address to the 2010 Ligonier Ministries National Conference](#). Indeed, you provide a link to the [transcript](#) of my address that was posted at the BioLogos site. You point to this section of my address: "Darwin did not embark upon the *Beagle* having no preconceptions of what exactly he was looking for or having no theory of how life emerged in all of its diversity, fecundity, and specialization. Darwin left on his expedition to prove the theory of evolution."

You complain that this was a misrepresentation of Darwin, and you answer that with considerable bombast. In your words: "Of course, Mohler may simply have made a mistake. He is, after all, a theologian and not a historian. He could have gotten this wrong idea from any number of his fellow anti-Darwinians. However, I don't think so. In his address he read from my book *Saving Darwin*, in which I took some pains to correct the all-too-common misrepresentation of Darwin he presented. So, unless he was just cherry-picking ideas from my book that he wanted to assault, he should have known better. But let us bend over backwards here and give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps his only real encounter with *Saving Darwin* was an instruction to an assistant to 'find something in Giberson's book that I can ridicule in my speech.'"

No, I can assure you that my encounter with *Saving Darwin* comes through reading the book quite thoroughly and more than once. You are at great pains to present an understanding of Darwin that will appeal to conservative Christians who are committed to biblical Christianity. You have a great challenge in this respect, and I seriously doubt you will make much headway. You are determined to convince biblical Christians to accept evolution. I seriously doubt you will make much progress through your book.

In making my argument, I did not need to "cherry-pick" ideas from your book. Nor do I need to misrepresent Darwin and his views. I would be most interested and concerned to find that I have in any way misquoted or misrepresented you.

I am confident that your larger problem with the Christian public is in being understood, rather than in being misunderstood. You are straightforward in your celebration of evolution, and you utterly fail to demonstrate how an embrace of evolution can be reconciled with biblical Christianity. Your rejection of an historical Adam and Eve is one precise point at which the Gospel of Christ is undermined, and your proposed “new and better way to understand the origins of sin” is incompatible with the Bible’s clear teaching.

The theory of evolution is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ even as it is in direct conflict with any faithful reading of the Scriptures. Darwin’s historic role in the development of evolutionary theory is central and significant, but the theological objections to evolution are not centered in the person of Darwin, but in the structure and implications of his theory of natural selection.

But, given the specific nature of your complaint, I now cite the larger context of the statement from the provided transcript of my Ligonier address:

The second great challenge was the emergence of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Coming at the midpoint of the 19th century, we need to be reminded that Darwin was not the first evolutionist. We need to be reminded that Darwin did not embark upon the Beagle having no preconceptions of what exactly he was looking for or having no theory of how life emerged in all of its diversity, fecundity, and specialization. Darwin left on his expedition to prove the theory of evolution. A theory that was based upon the fossil record and other inferences had already been able to take the hold of some in Western civilization. The dawn of the theory of evolution presents a direct challenge to the traditional interpretation of Genesis and, as we shall see, to much more.

You cannot possibly disagree with any sentence of this paragraph, save one. Darwin was certainly not the first evolutionist. His grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was a well-known evolutionist long before Charles Darwin set foot aboard the *Beagle*. One difficulty here, of course, is the word “evolution,” which was not even Charles Darwin’s preferred word. In any event, evolutionary ideas were already present within Victorian society in Britain, even if it would be left to Charles Darwin to develop the theory of natural selection. I do not deny the intellectual impact of Darwin’s own theory. Evolution is not often known as “Darwinism” by accident.

The one sentence central to your complaint is this: “Darwin left on his expedition to prove the theory of evolution.” Upon further reflection, I would accept that this statement appears to misrepresent to some degree Darwin’s intellectual shifts before and during his experience on the *Beagle*. At the same time, the intellectual context of Darwin’s times (and of his own family, in particular) leave no room to deny that some form of developmentalism had to be in the background of his own thinking, presumably consistent with his own acceptance of a natural theology and an argument from design. Long before Charles Darwin reached adulthood, his own grandfather had affirmed the “natural ascent” of all life. I am happy to correct any misrepresentation of Charles Darwin’s intellectual ambitions, but that sentence has no consequential bearing upon my larger argument or on my rejection of Darwinism.

And if a misrepresentation of Charles Darwin is the central issue, I must insist that it is you who offers the truly dangerous misrepresentation. In *Saving Darwin*, you attempt at great lengths to present Charles Darwin as a rather conventional and orthodox Christian, prior to his later loss of faith. You state that he was “born to a well-to-do British family who, despite having some unorthodox characters listed in the family Bible, raised him in the Anglican Church, educated him in an Anglican school, and put him on the train to Edinburgh to study medicine.”

This hardly seems adequate or straightforward. The “some unorthodox characters listed in the family Bible” included both his father and his paternal grandfather. His mother’s family was Unitarian in belief, rejecting the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Even as Charles Darwin was nominally involved in the Anglican Church, largely through the influence of his sister and brother-in-law after the death of his mother, his involvement and exposure appears to me largely incidental to his life. He later married a woman of Unitarian convictions as well.

It is certainly true that Charles Darwin was directed to become an Anglican clergyman by his unbelieving father, but this was a social tradition for second sons of the developing British middle class. As Randal Keynes, Darwin’s own great-great-grandson explains, “His idea was to become a country parson, caring for his parishioners but living for natural history.” And, as the authoritative biographers Adrian Desmond and James Moore recount, “Dr. Darwin, a confirmed freethinker, was sensible and shrewd. He had only to look around him, recall the vicarages he had visited, [and] ponder the country parsons he entertained at home. One did not have to be a believer to see that an aimless son with a penchant

for field sports would fit in nicely. Was the church not a haven for dullards and dawdlers, the last resort of spendthrifts? What calling but the highest for those whose sense of calling was nil?"

Of far greater concern is your tendency to appear to agree with some of Darwin's complaints against biblical Christianity. You claim that he "boarded the *Beagle* with his childhood Christian faith intact," but then add, "although he had begun to wonder about the historicity of the more fanciful Old Testament stories, like the Tower of Babel." This is insignificant? Are we to understand that you, too, see that biblical account as "fanciful"? You explain that Darwin, "like most thoughtful believers," began to distance himself from the doctrine of hell — a doctrine you describe as "a secondary doctrine that even many conservatives reject."

If your intention in *Saving Darwin* is to show "how to be a Christian and believe in evolution," what you have actually succeeded in doing is to show how much doctrine Christianity has to surrender in order to accommodate itself to evolution. In doing this, you and your colleagues at BioLogos are actually doing us all a great service. You are showing us what the acceptance of evolution actually costs, in terms of theological concessions.

I stand by my address in full, and only wish I had been able to address these issues at even greater length in that context. I plan to do that over the next few months. I greatly regret that you have committed yourself to a cause that I can see as incompatible with the Scripture and destructive to the Christian faith.

Sincerely,

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Karl Giberson, "[How Darwin Sustains My Baptist Search for Truth](#)," *The Huffington Post*, Saturday, August 21, 2010.

Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* [HarperOne, 2008].

Randal Keynes, *Creation: The True Story of Charles Darwin* [RiverHead Books, 2001].

Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist* [W. W. Norton & Company, 1994 edition, originally published by Michael Joseph Ltd., 1991].

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