

SCIENTIFIC TRUTH: IS IT TRANSIENT OR ENDURING?

As evangelical Christians we are faced with the problem of trying to help both the skeptical, non-Christian scientist, and the modern ultra-fundamental creationist. If we are going to be able to help either or both of these we must have genuine confidence in both the Holy Scriptures and in the results of careful scientific research. The skeptical non-Christian scientist has little or no confidence in the Scriptures, and is usually doubtful about the permanent value of the discoveries of science. The ultra-fundamental creationist usually has a similar skepticism concerning the value of science, but of course has a strong confidence in the Scriptures.

We unfortunately find in our own moderate evangelical "camp" a lack of confidence in the results of scientific research, and an uncertainty concerning man's ability to know the creation in a reliable and enduring way. And we sometimes seem to have the same problem that the ultra-fundamentalists do in doubting the stability of God's natural laws.¹ (I speak of God's natural laws, and in so doing recognize that this universe in which we live was ordered by God, and therefore that the activities and relationships we see in nature are consistently orderly, and not erratic.) Of course we must not take an extreme uniformitarian view of the earth's history, for we know that there has been great variation in the forces and processes which have formed the earth's crustal features. But this variation has never included changes in the fundamental physical and biological laws which God established when He created the universe.

Concerning the certainty and dependability of modern scientific discoveries we must recognize: (a) There are many theoretical aspects of science which are transient or temporary; (b) On the other hand, there are a good number of known scientific truths which are enduring, because they are actually discoveries of some of the principles of God's plans of the creation. In other words, God allows man to discover by scientific research some of the stable, natural laws which He established and understood from the beginning.¹

If we recognize that there are divinely established, stable physical and biological laws, we should not take the pessimistic view that the scientific principles which have been discovered in the past are all subject to being outmoded and fundamentally changed within the coming decades.

The Misunderstanding Illustrated

A specific example of the confusion which now exists concerning the question of the permanency of scientific

discoveries may be helpful here. It is often said by laymen, theologians, and some scientists, that all science textbooks go out of date practically as fast as they are published. This is taken as an indication that the scientific truths in those books rapidly disintegrate as scientific research progresses. From the standpoint of the popularity of certain themes in the various scientific disciplines, the books soon do become out of date. But it is very far from true that the validity of the actual content goes out of date. For example, in the 1940's and 1950's the textbooks of general biology put heavy emphases on the detailed stages in the reproductive life cycles of many kinds of plants and animals, and on taxonomy. Then in the late 1950's biologists throughout the entire western world became excited about the biochemical cycles within the cells of living organisms, and about the working principles of the genetic code which is built into cells (the functions of DNA, RNA, and other information-bearing compounds). Demand for even the best biology textbooks of the mid-1950's quickly dwindled to a mere trickle.

This circumstance was particularly amusing to extreme fundamentalists who had been saying all along that scientific truth is only transient. But these critics were ill-informed. Practically none of the principles taught even in the biology textbooks of the 1920's and 1930's had been declared invalid. New principles and the life cycles of many new plants and animals had been added in the textbooks of the 1940's and 1950's, so that the college freshman at that time had a 600 or 700-page book. Half or more of that material had to be dropped for the adding of new biochemical materials—and then more biochemical materials as the years progressed. So we have merely observed a trend in science education, and in the interests of scientists—not a disqualifying of the discovered principles concerning the life cycles of marine plants and invertebrate animals. Finally, the trends in biological education have continued to go on, as Professors have become infatuated with new aspects of biochemistry and the physiology of living cells, and have let other aspects of the science fall by the wayside. This same principle of legitimate change is seen in the textbooks of other disciplines of science. For example, in the medical and surgical sciences, the publications are constantly being brought into conformity with the latest discoveries in methods of treatment, the exact causes of diseases, and newly discovered functions of various tissues in the human body. But we do not find the newly published textbooks denying the basic functions of the tissues and organs which have been known for the past half-century. It is of course true that occasional corrections in the textbooks have to be made, due to inadequate data at the time the earlier editions