

Christianity, Science, and Continuing Creation
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My talk today is about continuing the legacy of the Augustana Lutheran Church. It is about renewing the Christian vision for the 21st Century and beyond.

Strange as it may seem my presence here today is tied to the work of the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church in Michigan. In the early 1960's I was a senior research physicist working at the General Motors Research Laboratories near Detroit. At the same time my wife, Rhoda, and I were actively involved in the development of a new mission congregation for the United Lutheran Church in a suburb of Detroit. In 1962 our United Lutheran Church merged with the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church and others to form the Lutheran Church in America and we began to have representatives of Augustana College show up at our synod meetings. So I learned some things about the College and at one point wrote the dean a brief note asking if I could be any help to their physics department. Shortly afterward President Sorensen called and invited me to visit the college. While I was here he asked if I would consider becoming head of the physics department. Well, it was quite a decision because I was working in a beautiful modern laboratory and my research was beginning to be published in European journals. My family and I prayed over it and decided this is where God needed me so we agreed to the move and we have had 45 happy and productive years here in Rock Island. Clearly if the Augustana Lutheran Church had not established congregations in Michigan, I would not be here today.

While I am of German decent, I have always had great admiration for the roles that the Norwegians and Swedes have played in the evolution of Christianity. Over the years I learned a great deal about these Scandinavians having done my undergraduate work at St. Olaf, a college

founded by Norwegians and spent a large part of my adult life teaching at Augustana, a college founded by Swedes. Rhoda and I visited Norway and Sweden in 1989 and were greatly impressed by the accomplishments of the people there and the beauty of the two countries.

As a scientist and follower of Jesus, I have always been grateful that the Lutheran churches of the Scandinavians didn't interpret the Bible literally, particularly the book of Genesis. As a result I have always been comfortable with the theory of evolution and my understanding has been that creation is a continuing process still going on.

We know that creation on Earth has been a continuing process because the historical evidence shows that there has been a continual improvement in the quality and productivity of human life. In early human history it was very difficult to obtain food by growing crops or killing animals and birds. If you fell and cut yourself you could easily die of an infection. Today go into any grocery store and look at the enormous variety and quality of food that is available. If you suddenly become ill, a 911 call brings an emergency vehicle to your home staffed by personnel trained to stabilize your condition while they whisk you off to a building supplied with all the latest medical equipment. Communication is so good that you can see and talk to virtually anyone on Earth in a matter of seconds. Computers are designed to connect you to sources of information that can supply answers to virtually any question you might be able to think of. The improvements to the quality of human life in recent years have been dramatic.

An interesting thing about ongoing creation in the human realm is that the rate of creation depends on the accumulation of past accomplishments and the number of people involved so it appears to be taking place in a shrinking time frame. In the first thousand years of Christianity, there was very little change in human activity from one century to another. After the

development of the printing press changes began to take place at a faster rate because of the improvement in communication. Books were produced and a growing number of people could read them. Ideas could be preserved and shared. In each generation, creation has taken place at a more rapid pace. Today changes occur in medicine so rapidly that it is difficult for doctors to keep up.

An interesting puzzle related to human beings is why they have achieved such great ability to understand the world that they are in. Through science they have not only been able to understand a great deal about the Earth and how it is made up, but also about extraterrestrial bodies such as the stars and the planets and how they came into existence. The scientific method involves observing very carefully and keeping extensive records of what has been observed, then forming tentative explanations or hypotheses of what has been observed and testing the hypotheses by experimentation. We often think of the goal of science simply being the search for knowledge, but most of that knowledge is used for technology, the development of tools needed for improving the quality of human life. Looking back in history at these achievements suggests that God gave humans analytic ability and the scientific method so that they could be assistants with creation. We are in essence created co-creators as suggested by Philip Hefner in his book, *The Human Factor*¹. Without science, human activity would have remained as it was in ancient societies so it is clear that science plays an important role for continued creation in the human realm.

One of the characteristics of scientific research is the belief that the truth is established by repeatability. Young scientists are always reminded to repeat their experiments many times to make sure the results will always be the same and anyone else that does the same experiment

will get the same results. Repeatability has always been important because technology relies heavily on the consistency of behavior of physical phenomena. When we push the buttons on our TV remotes we want our TVs to work as expected. We don't want to be surprised by weird things happening. When we take over-the-counter drugs we want reliable results to occur. We don't want to become sick from them. When we turn on our computers we want them to boot properly. We don't want them to just sit there. We are dependent on the consistent behavior of the universe because it makes it possible to be more confident of the future and our lives more peaceful.

Christianity has also played a key role in continuing creation on Earth and the improvement of human life. The Apostle Paul called the followers of Jesus, "the Body of Christ" because each had different abilities but all worked together toward a common goal just as the organs of the human body are different and have different functions but they all work together and are dependent on each other to make the whole human body work. With that Holy-Spirit-inspired, remarkable description, he was describing teamwork as we know it today. The Body of Christ has become Christ's Team for continuing creation in the 21st Century. Christianity which began with a small number of followers of Jesus in Israel has evolved to become the most dominant religion on Earth. While it might appear that its growth is due to the fact that it was teaching salvation achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, an additional factor, not always recognized, is that it has been teaching teamwork all these years, an absolutely vital element in the proper functioning of civilization. It therefore plays a fundamental role in continuing creation.

It is now easy to see that Christianity and science have become partners in continuing creation on Earth. Christianity teaches teamwork and scientists are most productive when they work in teams. When I was involved in research at the General Motors Laboratories and at Argonne National Laboratory my research facilities were provided by industry and the U.S. government. I had numerous assistants and staff people and discussed my work with other scientists. I used the library and read reports by other scientists from all over the world. All of these people were my teammates when I was working on my research. The more efficient our team effort was the more successful my research became.

Clearly extraordinary team effort was required to develop the technology that made it possible to transport humans to the moon. Through teamwork the impossible became possible.

Christianity has always depended upon science to carry out its work. Consider the construction of the cathedrals or the development of musical instruments. The spread of Christianity depends on communication and the development of communication systems depends upon science. That has been true from the days of the early printing presses to the present.

The efficiency of teamwork depends upon how well the team members obey the rules. For Christians the rules of life are the Ten Commandments and the two emphasized by Jesus. The two recommended by Jesus were in the Hebrew Scriptures which formed the Old Testament but were lifted up by Jesus. They are “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus taught people to love and care for each other and love improves teamwork. If you love someone you want to help them to be as good as they can be. If you love God you pray often to

be in the presence of God and try to assist with creation on Earth. If you love other people you help them to be better teammates whenever you can.

Christ's death and resurrection brought forgiveness, a critical requirement for the success of teamwork. Team members need to receive God's forgiveness then forgive themselves and others. Guilt is really heavy baggage. Any basketball player has to learn from the mistakes of the previous game but then forgive themselves and concentrate on the next game. Players who are still mentally punching themselves for past mistakes are not going to play well in the games ahead. So forgiveness plays a vital role in teamwork.

Team members also have to remain in close contact with their coaches. The members of Christ's Team achieve that by regular periods of prayer. In spite of the many books written about prayer many questions still remain about how God answers prayer. Sometimes the answers come as thoughts in our heads and sometimes in actions and events that take place around us. Those of us who pray regularly believe that as we make an effort to pray we are brought into the presence of God. An earlier view of prayer was that it was used to provide the quick fix. People ignored God most of the time except when they got into trouble and then they expected God to fix things. If it didn't happen the way they expected they thought that there must not be a God. I believe prayer is a gift often misunderstood. Instead of the quick fix, the value of prayer is that it provides wisdom and courage, relieves the baggage of guilt, and quiets the emotional storms, thus increasing the efficiency of teamwork and the possibility of success.

Prayer can take many forms. You can talk to God as you would the most wonderful and awesome teacher you have ever known or you can simply sit silently and experience God's presence. Scientific research has helped us understand some facets of prayer, but the success of

scientific research depends upon asking the right questions and that is often very difficult. That has been particularly true for prayers for healing because the human body has an enormous number of parts and healing is very complicated.

One of the special characteristics of Christianity is the gathering for worship every seven days. It is a vital part of the Christ Team effort and one of the reasons why Christianity has grown so strong and large. It grew out of Judaism and among the other religions is only practiced in Islam. I think of it as being a “Spiritual Oasis every seven days” in the journey of life. In another sense it is a little like the “huddle” in football where the players form a circle and with heads bowed wait for the coach to send in the plan to guide them during the next play. Without that plan to coordinate the effort they can’t function as a team. In our complex world filled with distractions, it is easy to lose our direction and our ability to coordinate our efforts with those of other Team members. In the worship service, the visual art, expressive music, and messages about Jesus provide inspiration and direction for the Team, while weekly fellowship with other Christians provides education and accountability.

An important part of the worship service is the Lord’s Supper which is in essence a reenactment of the supper of bread and wine that Jesus had with his disciples the night before he was crucified. As he broke the bread and passed it out he said “Take and eat; this is my body.” When they had eaten the bread, he passed around a cup of wine and said, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

When we receive the bread and wine during the Lord’s Supper we are reminded that our sins are forgiven and the spirit of Christ lives within us as we go about the events of our lives as Christ’s Team members during the coming week.

Human life is a precious chain to which new life must continually be added. The ability to reproduce ourselves and produce new life is a very precious gift that we have been given. However, it is important to realize that these new members have to be trained carefully so that they can eventually become fully functioning members of Christ's Team. The optimum way for that to occur is within a well functioning family that I like to call the Family Team. We can't emphasize too much the importance of successful family life for the development of strong and healthy human beings to continue the process of creation in the future. In a real sense the quality of family life shapes all activity of the future. If we don't create mature human beings to care for each other and the Earth then creating beautiful cities or transportation systems or anything else we do in our careers won't help much because they will only be destroyed by dysfunctional people.

Our churches and their weekly worship services must continue their vital role in the development of happy, functional families. They have a special part to play and need to continue to do it. They cannot assume that government organizations will eventually take over all that work as they have in many of the European countries where people don't seem to see the need to attend worship services. I believe that attendance at the weekly worship service plays a very important role in the success of the Family Team.

There are still many people in the world living in poverty and disease. One of the characteristics of Christianity is the insistence that every human being is important and loved by God. While benevolence for the less privileged had its roots in ancient Hebrew culture it was brought to a focus in the life of Jesus. He healed both the physical and mentally ill and provided food to those who didn't have it. He even healed lepers who were so severely disfigured that no

one wanted to touch them. More importantly he taught his disciples to do the same. The parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the King who returned in judgment are excellent examples of his teaching. Benevolence for those who are ill or impoverished is called altruism and members of other religions also practice it, but for Christianity it is a mandate and because of their teamwork it is practiced more systematically.

The missionary work of the followers of Jesus is a profound story and a demonstration of the enormous power of the Holy Spirit. It began with the missionary work of the Apostle Paul and gradually spread over the Middle East and into Europe. In later centuries it gradually spread to most of the countries of the world. Through such missionary efforts, Christ's Team began to change the world by spreading the gospel, teaching teamwork, and improving the quality of life.

The Augustana Lutheran Church was involved a great deal in overseas missionary work. It established missionaries in India in 1878, in China in 1905, and in Tanganyka or modern Tanzania in 1928. Some of their work is documented in wonderful stories such as those about August William Edwins in China and Elmer and Lillian Danielson in Tanganyka. They were courageous people with the spirit of Christ living within them

Many of the missionaries were medical missionaries who brought physical healing as well as the gospel. Progress in medicine always depended upon science and communication so it progressed slowly until after the printing press was developed then gradually speeded up. While there were occasional disputes between Christianity and science, most of the time Christianity used its facilities to aid medical science. Christianity was especially a leader in the development of hospitals. Many of the best hospitals in the world were founded by Christian organizations.

Augustana Hospital which served the Chicago area for a long time was founded by the Augustana Lutheran Church.

As a result of the advocacy work of Christians throughout the world, much more of the aid to the ill and impoverished is being handled today by governments in countries which have high concentrations of Christians. However, followers of Jesus are still needed as volunteers to assist with the work. Caring for strangers remains an important part of the work of Christ's Team and is one of the ways that Christianity is spread.

There have been many efforts to prove the existence of God and establish the truth about Jesus. In most cases, people have either attempted to find physical items that would support the validity of the text in the Bible or try to use miracles to prove that God exists. There has been some additional physical evidence found that supports the teachings in the Bible but not enough to remove all uncertainties. Miracles often help us learn things what we need to know, but since they are isolated incidences and not repeatable it also means that they can never be used for proof on demand. So that means we can never know how they were produced.

I personally like the statement that Paul Sabine wrote in his book *Atoms, Men, and God*. He says²,

“Jesus’ declaration of a God of love can only command acceptance in so far as it can be verified in the inner experience of men and women, and find objective expression in their lives. It must be verified by each individual and by every generation”

He is saying that the proof of the existence of Christ lies in the way that the followers of Jesus live their lives. If their lives aren't happy and functional then the spirit of Christ doesn't exist

there. The fact that Christianity has spread so much shows the persistence and power of the Holy Spirit and in the end it may be the best proof we will ever have.

Christ's Team now consists of roughly two billion people, a third of the population of the world. Even with denominational differences Christians still form the largest network of mutual trust on Earth. Their mission programs are everywhere. They have differences of opinion about interpretations of the Bible but still usually support each other when carrying out God's work such as aid to the underprivileged. When you think of the size and strength of Christ's Team when they work together, it is astonishing.

However, since the rate at which creation takes place depends on the number of people involved, the more members there are on Christ's Team the quicker suffering can be reduced and productivity increased.

Space exploration has shown us that Planet Earth is currently a relatively poorly managed space colony. There are still pockets of poverty and illness and conflicts taking place here and there. The refugee camps in Africa are large and governments in the Middle East are unstable. In the United States we are desperately trying to figure out how to clean up the damage caused by oil spills, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Excessive use of energy has caused the carbon dioxide content in the atmosphere to rise to the point where the green house effect is causing global warming. So Christ's Team still has a lot of work to do and must continue to teach people to work together to solve these problems. We also need to learn how to invite people in the other religions to work with us to carry out creation.

You are needed on Christ's Team! Reach out and invite others. The work isn't finished. The immediate goal for Christ's Team is to speed the day when Planet Earth is managed by a superior

civilization. It will take great effort and we all need to work hard and work together to achieve that goal.

The Swedish immigrants who founded the Augustana Lutheran Church are with us in spirit today. If they were here in person they probably would feel guilty for being happy and proud of their accomplishments as part of Christ's Team. However, they might still give each other the high five for their team effort. Thanks for listening. It's the greatest team on Earth.

1. Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1993.
2. Paul E. Sabine, *Atoms, Men, and God*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1953, p. 216

Robert C. Frank is the author of *Christ's Team, A 21st Century View of Christianity*, Kolb Net Works, Williamsport, PA, 2009.