



# The Confessing Scientist

S. Joshua Swamidass 

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/confessing-scientist/>



**F**or many years, I often wondered how an encounter with Jesus could change the Creation War.

As my contemplation deepened, I wrote and lectured often on how Jesus is fundamentally reordering my view of world. This reordering grew my discomfort with the term *theistic evolutionist*. I continue to affirm evolutionary science, as most scientists do, but I recently abandoned the label entirely. I still affirm evolutionary science, as most scientists do, but this is not my identity.

## Evolutionist No Longer

Call me a *confessing scientist*, a scientist in the Church and a Christian in science, serving the common good with a truthful account of what I have seen.

I still affirm evolutionary science, but I no longer am a *theistic evolutionist*. Since I first became public in my work, I have never been intent on evangelizing [evolution].

A *confessing scientist* makes two mutually-reinforcing confessions at the same time, a dual confession.

1. I confess Jesus is Lord, reordering my view of all things, including science. God makes Himself known with evidence, by raising Jesus from the dead; this is how I know that God exists, is good, and wants to be known.
2. I confess what I have seen in science; whether or not evolution is ultimately true, the plain reading of genomes is that we evolved from common ancestors with the great apes.

This dual confession is self-reinforcing, simultaneously unsettling to and building trust with most factions of the Creation War, including those in both the religious and scientific communities. This confession is in public, so it carries risk. Centered on Jesus, and truthful, it is even offered by young earth creationists. It reveals a God that has no need of false witness and delights in truth. Let us remember, nothing in science, not even evolution, threatens the One who rose from the dead.

I first understood this trust-building, unsettling, and risky confession in 2006, when as a graduate student I encountered the public confession of Francis Collins in the *Language of God*. A confessing scientist to my generation, Collins was both a scientist in the Church and a Christian in science, giving a truthful account of what he had seen. In the war-bent aftermath of the *Dover Trial*, he confessed a word of peace to both worlds. To scientists, he confessed

Jesus, the One who rose from the dead and reordered his entire world. To the Church, he gave a truthful account of what he had seen in science, without censorship by theological concerns and agendas. He made this confession publicly at real personal and professional risk. This confession continues to define him too, as he remains the most visible Christian in the sciences to this day.

Following his example, this dual confession has become a personal discipline, a regularly repeated liturgy of risk. Through this continual work of obedience, my view of the world is being reordered. This reordering, right now, is reworking my view of the Creation War.

## A Young Earther Confesses

I grew up in a young earth creationist family. I still bear the wounds of rejection that came when I affirmed evolution. I was angry, also, about lies I was told about Scripture and science, all in service of a man-made and anti-evolution worldview. The constant pull is to be defined by my injuries. [Encountering Jesus, however, His reordering brings me to things greater than my wounds. ]

Those who reject evolution, at times, are confessing scientists too. Scientists who openly reject evolution are scorned. After spending years in education, they are ridiculed by their colleague. Often, they enter into this abuse willingly, in genuine and truthful obedience. They are a curiosity to our scientific world that points to something greater.

Atheist scientists puzzle over them. The atheist and biologist Richard Dawkins writes of Kurt Wise, a professor at a small Christian college. Wise is a geologist with a doctorate from Harvard, who studied under the Stephen J. Gould, but now he is a young earth creationist. As the story goes, anti-evolutionists claimed to find evidence that disproved evolution: human bones in coal from millions of years ago. Dawkins writes in 2001 about Wise's honest rebuttal of this false claim,

*Wise stands out among young earth creationists not only for his impeccable education, but because he displays a modicum of scientific honesty and integrity . . . Wise patiently and seriously examined the specimens as a trained paleontologist, and concluded unequivocally that they were "inorganically precipitated iron siderite nodules and not fossil material at all." Unusually among the motley denizens of the "big tent" of creationism and intelligent design, he seems to accept that God needs no help from false witness.*

Of course, there are truthful and educated young earth creationists, but these are Dawkins' words. Across the divide, Dawkins sees Wise's honesty most clearly when he rightly abandons a bad argument

against evolution and explains to his own community their error. This is integrity. Dawkins is simultaneously moved and appalled by Wise's "pathetic" commitment to his faith. [Wise tells his story](#). He came to trust in Jesus in elementary school, but as a high school student he reached a turning point. As he laid evolution alongside his understanding of Genesis, and he could not reconcile them.

*I had to make a decision between evolution and Scripture. Either the Scripture was true and evolution was wrong or evolution was true and I must toss out the Bible. . . . [Dawkins's ellipses]. . . It was there that night that I accepted the Word of God and rejected all that would ever counter it, including evolution. With that, in great sorrow, I tossed into the fire all my dreams and hopes in science.*

I think Wise is wrong here; God can create through evolution. I see wisdom and beauty in how Genesis teaches that God called [the land to bring forth life](#) of [many kinds](#), in what appears from within science to be an evolutionary process. This, however, is all beside the point. The real story, Dawkins [hides in the ellipses](#):

*However, at that moment I thought back to seven or so years before when a Bible was pushed to a position in front of me and I had come to know Jesus Christ. I had in those years come to know Him. I had become familiar with His love and His concern for me. He had become a real friend to me. He was the reason I was even alive both physically and spiritually. I could not reject Him. Yet, I had come to know Him through His Word. I could not reject that either.*

Hidden in the ellipses we see Truth. Even if Wise is wrong about evolution, he is certainly right about Jesus; he chose the greater thing. Wise's willing exile unsettles a world that idolizes science, the human effort to study nature. For years, Dawkins gleefully argued against every anti-evolutionist argument imaginable, but confronted by this truthful confession, he writes on his blog about Wise:

*I do wonder whether childhood indoctrination could wreak a sufficiently powerful brainwashing effect to account for this bizarre phenomenon.*

Dawkins is unsettled, but we should understand. Wise was not brainwashed. No, he encountered something greater than science. Wise encountered the Risen One, the man called Jesus, who reordered his entire world. Now, Wise is willing to trade everything to follow Him. His obedient exile declares, "Jesus is so much more valuable than all my dreams and hopes in science." This is the beauty and message of his story. I am not ashamed of him.

Dawkins, it appears, first wrote about Wise in 2001. Twelve years later, he was still unsettled. In a lecture in 2013, he confesses he finds himself [powerless](#) against this. Explaining in 2006, Dawkins wrote in the [The God Delusion](#):

*I find that terribly sad...the Kurt Wise story is just plain pathetic, pathetic and contemptible. The wound, to his career and his life's happiness, was self-inflicted, so unnecessary, so easy to escape...I am hostile to religion because of what it did to Kurt Wise. And if it did that to a Harvard educated geologist, just think what it can do to others less gifted and less well armed.*

A theistic evolutionist, in the way I used to be, would quickly join Dawkins in this lament. Just like Dawkins, I would be saddened. Perhaps my view of Scripture and science might have saved Wise

from this pathetic fate. He is a cautionary tale, a rallying cry more forcefully join the Creation War on behalf of my own view of origins.

This misses the point. Entirely.

Wise is like the man who sold all he had to purchase [a field with a hidden treasure](#). As the missionary Jim Elliot wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Even if he is wrong about evolution, Kurt Wise rightly confesses that "Jesus is greater than all science offers." His exile proclaims this with boldness, integrity, and without regret.

In all this, Kurt Wise is a confessing scientist too. He rightly declares the truth.

I am moved by his example. My colleagues currently accept my confession without casting me from science. If that was to change, however, one day I might have to choose between obedient confession and my place in science. If that day comes, I hope I too would enter into exile, with boldness, integrity, and without regret, knowing I chose the greater thing. Yes, there is [falsehood within some young earth creationist arguments](#). I do not endorse all that Wise himself has said, done, or promoted. Wise, however, rightly declares that Jesus is greater than anything he found in science. He made his confession at great personal and professional cost, declaring with his life that he found the greater thing.

Even if theistic evolutionist me is unsettled, we all are honored by his witness.

## Biologos Confesses Too

In the dark aftermath of the Dover Trial, Francis Collins made his public confession in 2006. From my view in science, it was like light breaking through the clouds. Scientists in my world rained down spite upon Christians, then they all read Collins's confession. In the height of the Creation War, scientists read of this man Jesus, whom God had raised from the dead to make known to the world that He exists, is good, and wants to be known. They were curious. They still are curious about this man Jesus, unthreatened by evolution, and who might bring peace to the world.

At the same time, Collins confessed to the Church the [evidence for evolution](#) he had seen. It was on this confession that BioLogos was launched in 2009, to give a truthful witness of what many of us see in science. BioLogos has been faithful to their mission. Most recently, they are to be commended for [publicly affirming genealogical science](#), including the plausibility of recent common ancestry (as recent as 6,000 years ago) and the [\[silence\] of science on the de novo creation of Adam](#).

This affirmation is the end result of an immense amount of work by Jeff Hardin, Jeff Schloss, and Darrel Falk. I am particularly impressed by Darrel Falk, former president of Biologos, a non-concordist Adam agnostic. Nonetheless, Darrel Falk gleefully writes in support of science that includes positions not his own:

Science is silent on the question of Adam and Eve being ancestors of us all. It is even silent on the issue of whether Adam and Eve were created de novo...One can't pin the question of Adam and Eve on science anymore.

This is what it means to be a confessing scientist, giving a truthful account of science, uncensored by personal agendas and past injuries. Leaders like this earn our highest respect. As we all should, they advocate for the *empty chair*, those historically excluded from their conversation.

BioLogos leadership also deserves praise. They take no official position on Adam, and include a wide range of views within their tent. The leadership, however, is acutely sensitive to the exclusion of those who do not affirm a historical Adam, which includes Francis Collins himself. Many of them have been excluded because of their *non-concordism*, *non-literalism*, and *non-traditionalism*. This exclusion is usually unwarranted and would inflict deep wounds on anyone. [For this reason, publicly ]

[With them in mind, let us remember, even though science is silent on Adam, the traditional marker of orthodoxy is our shared confession that Jesus is Lord and that He rose from the dead, not the historicity of Adam.]

## Which One is Greater?

[I am reminded of the dual confession, the self-reinforcing witness of the ]

If I had to choose one, I would confess that Jesus is Risen. The beauty I find in Him is greater than the beauty I find in science. I see the injustice of this world in the segregated city of Saint Louis. Science, however, can neither name nor end injustice. I hope, instead, for the Kingdom of God to come to Earth as it is in Heaven, ushered in by the Risen One. This Kingdom is the beloved community of which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed, and it is a dream that cannot be found by science.

This answer is driving my separation from BioLogos, more than any other conflict or disagreement. They have been faithful to their founding mission, and have rightfully focused their message on the Church. This mission, however, is no longer enough for me. [I am being reordered by an encounter, and I am no longer content with only one part of Collins's confession. ]

There are seekers in the scientific world. Many heard first about this man Jesus in *The Language of God*, and they are curious. Like the

Ethiopian eunuch, they are outside the Church's view. Along the scientific road, [I hear their questions and see their curiosity. Passing by are science students with unstable faith, looking to scientific arguments for confidence, forgetting the work of God to reveal Himself in history. ]

I still make a dual confession, still serving [the Church with a witness of what I have seen in science. I still work towards peace in the Creation Wars. A genealogical Adam in evolution shows that a *traditional, concordist, and literal* account of Adam and Eve is entirely ]

[Then let us turn to confessing greater things than these.]

My attention still rests on seekers in science, those who are curious about this man from Nazareth called Jesus. My attention rests on the science student, whose faith is unsettled by evolution, needing to find confidence in the Resurrection. Whatever our views on evolution, let us also turn from anti-evolutionism, to give an honest witness of Jesus and the Resurrection. Let the confessing scientists rise as truthful servants. [L]

[In the origins debate, the great Creation War, a liturgy of confession can guide us forward. ]

Let confessing scientists rise.



Francis Collins

## References

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/confessing-jesus-in-science/>

[http://resources.asa3.org/FMPPro?-db=asad49.fm4&-format=%2fasadb%2fdetail3.html&-lay=layout1&-sortfield=first%20author&source\\_occasion=2017%2bAnnual%2bMeeting&-lop=or&-max=2147483647&-recid=36595&-find=](http://resources.asa3.org/FMPPro?-db=asad49.fm4&-format=%2fasadb%2fdetail3.html&-lay=layout1&-sortfield=first%20author&source_occasion=2017%2bAnnual%2bMeeting&-lop=or&-max=2147483647&-recid=36595&-find=)

<http://www.veritas.org/evidence-easter-scientists-list>

<https://peacefulscience.org/series/100-year-tree/>

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/evidence-and-evolution/>

<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2009/09/truth-about-evolution.html>

<http://www.new-wineskins.org/blog/2016/4/20/is-jesus-greater-than-anti-evolutionism-a-presentation-by-s-joshua-swamidass>

[https://www.difa3iat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-language-of-god\\_-\\_A-scientist-presents-evidence-for-belief-by-francis-s.-collins.pdf](https://www.difa3iat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-language-of-god_-_A-scientist-presents-evidence-for-belief-by-francis-s.-collins.pdf)

[https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Kitzmiller\\_v.\\_Dover\\_Area\\_School\\_District](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Kitzmiller_v._Dover_Area_School_District)

<http://www.dinosaur14ages.com/mancoal.htm>

[http://sceptis.net/eng/articles/id\\_2.php](http://sceptis.net/eng/articles/id_2.php)

[https://web.archive.org/web/20120306174710/http://www.geo.ucalgary.ca/~macrae/t\\_origins/carbbones/wise.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20120306174710/http://www.geo.ucalgary.ca/~macrae/t_origins/carbbones/wise.html)

<https://answersingenesis.org/answers/books/in-six-days/kurt-p-wise-geology>

<http://biblehub.com/genesis/1-24.htm>

<http://www.atsjats.org/publication/view/39>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovQf9NxzLhM>

[https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-nmq1McOu-icCFhIe/The+God+Delusion\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-nmq1McOu-icCFhIe/The+God+Delusion_djvu.txt)

<http://biblehub.com/niv/matthew/13.htm>

<https://howoldistheearth.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/an-examination-of-answers-in-genesis-ten-best-evidences-for-a-young-earth>

<http://biologos.org/blogs/deborah-haarsma-the-presidents-notebook/on-geniality-and-genealogy>

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/defense-tim-keller/>

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/confident-faith-science-1/>