



What A Scientist Learns From A Southern Baptist Seminary

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/science-sbc-first-week/>



Ken Keathley invited me to be a “scientist-in-residence” at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS), in North Carolina. I just returned from my first week there, and I learned quite a bit. I sense much more is to come.

I am a scientist at a secular institution. Visiting positions at seminaries are...unusual...for us. Some of the particulars had to be adjusted. Rather than spending the full year with them, I will be there for just a week at a time.

The topical focus of this year is, “What is the meaning of ‘human’?” We are entering a host of conversations about origins, but also race, artificial intelligence, and human uniqueness. The conversation on these topics, it seems, has been growing larger in theological circles.

The goal of my residency is to encourage a better exchange of ideas between the seminary’s scholars and science.

In time, perhaps they will learn something from me. What is clear already, however, is that I have learned quite a bit from them. Every where we look, from origins to abuse and also race, it is clear we live in a fallen world. Our *response* matters greatly.

Courage on Race

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) had a tumultuous denominational meeting earlier this year. One of the flash points was race.

To their credit, this group of very conservative religious folk elected, in the end, a balanced candidate as their president. Their new president is white, but he has built solid relationships with black pastors in the denomination. The denomination chose well.

But conversations on race are difficult in the SBC. They are charged.

A couple years back, Albert Mohler commissioned a report on the racist origins of the SBC. He writes,

The founding faculty of this school—all four of them—were deeply involved in slavery and deeply complicit in the defense of slavery. Many of their successors on this faculty, throughout the period of Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, advocated segregation, the inferiority of African-Americans, and openly embraced the ideology of the Lost Cause of southern slavery....What

we knew in generalities we now know in detail. As president of this school, I have sought models for how an institution can honestly deal with such truths.

This is an ugly and messy history. It took courage to search out and honestly deal with the truths of this story.

The denomination is beginning to reckon with this history. Mohler’s report is a milestone, but the process is not over. Several large black churches have left the denomination as the conflicts over race have grown.

It is in *this* context that Ken asked me to talk to the seminary about the science of race. I am a Christian that affirms evolution. Inviting me to a creationist seminary takes courage. But asking me to talk about race in the SBC? This takes even more courage.

So, my first lecture at the seminary, delivered last week, was titled “The Science of Race...for The Theologian.”

The question of race is one of the foremost places where scientists and theologians have worked out our understanding of what it means to be “human.” Science is not the whole story, by any means, but it has a place at the table.

I found that SBC members, at all levels, wanted to enter into these difficult conversations. They want to learn, and to explore difficult questions with sensitivity, rigor, and honesty.

Would this be true of all of us.

Accountability on Abuse

The SBC is facing a crisis in how they handled reports of sexual abuse. Did they turn a blind eye to reports of abuse over the last several years? The Convention this summer resolved that the leadership of the denomination must be transparently investigated.

Right now, several organizations are facing questions like this. What I am seeing in the SBC is messy, but it also gives me hope. The Convention resolved to investigate.

How did the leadership respond? While I was visiting SEBTS, we found out that they refused to transparently investigate. The leadership claimed a “fiduciary responsibility” to protect the denomination.

Self-protective evasion by leaders is common. I was observant. How would the SBC community react?

I found that the refusal to conduct an open investigation is a significant concern, with several people publicly taking the denomination's leadership to task. All six seminary presidents made statements demanding the denomination leadership investigate. As one pastor insisted,

If we've done some things wrong that require restitution, then we need to make restitution...If we've done things wrong and need to apologize, then apologize. We need to do the right thing for the right reasons and live out the faith we profess and trust that the Lord will provide for us and bless us if we do what is right.

While the debate is not yet resolved, this will not go quietly into the night.

All organizations fail at times, sometimes spectacularly. How we handle these failures exposes a great deal of our character. I found that the SBC, as a whole, wants to act in a trustworthy way. They will hold their leaders accountable. A coverup will not be tolerated.

In this response, I am hopeful. It cannot be taken for granted. Far more commonly, cover ups are tolerated.

Peacemaking on Origins

While I was at SEBTS, William Lane Craig's book on Adam and Eve was published, along with an article summarizing his view.

His position is that Adam and Eve, ancestors of us all, lived about 700,000 years ago. He is comfortable with such an ancient Adam and Eve because he reads most of the Genesis narrative is mythological. This is quite closely resonant with the common Catholic understandings on Adam and Eve.

References

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But Craig attends an SBC church. The response to his article was swift and harsh, and also misguided.

Ken Keathely knows Craig's critics in the SBC. But he does not agree that so much of Genesis can be dismissed as mythological. So how did Ken respond?

Ken is a peacemaker. He reached out to people in the SBC, working to rebind a broken conversation.

To be sure, Ken disagrees with Craig's argument too. But, at the same time, he knows that how we disagree can be far more important than the details of the disagreements themselves.

And, of course, Ken is the one who invited me, a Christian that affirms evolution, to be a resident scholar in his creationists denomination. He does not agree with me about everything, but that isn't the point. There is a value in this conversation across disagreements that is worth the risk.

Ken, of course, is inviting all sorts of Christians into dialogue on origins. Later this year, he is bringing in scholars from all sides. Maybe we can sort out some of our differences together.

He is not alone. Several SBC scholars engaged with me, all of them showing me the utmost respect. Some of us talked for hours. It seems we are all looking forward to seeing how the conversation unfolds from here.

More to Come

So these are things I am learning from the SBC. All organizations fail, including the SBC. How we respond to these failures matters. In their response to failures, something good is growing here.

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