

Seven Ways to Put Science in the Pulpit

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With pastors serving congregants in increasingly science-savvy communities around the globe, church leaders may want to use science in the pulpit, but how? Most of the options fall into one or more of seven categories, one for each of the letters making up the word "Science." A preacher can use science to *spark*, *corroborate*, *illustrate*, *exegete*, *notify*, *clarify*, and *enhance*. Each of these uses of science in sermons carries relative strengths and weaknesses, but those will be the topic of a future essay.

Spark.

The easiest way to bring science into sermons is to use it to *spark* the attention of the congregation. A recent headline about the discovery of earth-like exoplanets (planets that revolve around other stars instead of our sun) could preface a sermon on God's sovereignty, creative awesomeness, or how much smaller human ways are than God's.

Corroborate.

A slightly deeper use of science is to support or *corroborate* a theological point that is a bit stronger when you bring in the science. The Bible teaches us that our world had a specific beginning and will have a definite end. So does science!

Illustrate.

Finding a metaphor or *illustration* from science can sometimes help communicate challenging theological ideas or make them more credible. For instance, some skeptics say the Trinity is incoherent. Neuroscience, however, teaches us that the two halves of human brains normally produce different characteristics, almost like two persons in one head. We have the experience of wholeness because of the instantaneous and constant communication between the two halves. This piece of science may be used to illustrate features of the Trinity and make it more understandable.

Exegete.

In the process of *exegeting* a biblical text, it often helps to know what the original audience of the text would have understood from it. Various sciences can help us get into the minds of those ancient people and draw relevant comparisons to us today. Proverbs 6 has some stern things to say about sleeping too much, but how much sleep would have been too much at the time of its writing? Sleep researchers think that without the interference of electrical lighting, adult humans naturally gravitate toward about 9 hours.

Notify.

Science is good at *notifying* us concerning problems that may not be easy to notice and it (sometimes) gives us guidance regarding possible solutions. Psychologists have identified that people in many countries (including the US) are subject to the Fundamental Attribution Error: we attribute our own failings to contextual factors (I cut that guy off because I have to get to the hospital fast) but do not so readily do so concerning others (that guy is a bad driver and a jerk). This tendency is so reliable and widespread it is called “fundamental.” Becoming aware of this tendency and intentionally wondering what it is that we cannot see that could be influencing someone’s behavior can help us extend grace to others.

Clarify.

Often biblical theology presents us with multiple ways to understand scripture or doctrine. Science can help adjudicate between plausible alternatives and clarify theological truths. To illustrate, we have biblical reason to think that God has implanted in all of us a sense of his divinity, called a *sensus divinitatis* in Reformed theology. Is this sense of the divine constantly working in the background or only activated under certain conditions, such as experiencing an awesome sunset? Contemporary science both *corroborates* this basic idea but also *clarifies* it. For instance, it appears that from early childhood humans naturally see design and purpose in the natural world all over the place and readily connect that purpose to the intentions of someone who made it, so, no glorious sunsets required.

Enhance.

The deepest engagement with science is allowing it to *enhance* theological inquiry and insight. For example, the Bible is replete with instances of using bodily movement and postures in worship, but why? Contemporary science tells us that the physical expressions on our faces and the posture of our bodies influences how we think and feel; not only do we act in response to our thoughts, but we think in response to our actions. It appears that God has given us science as a tool to help build upon and *enhance* timeless biblical truths (e.g., to worship with our whole selves) so that the church can advance God’s Kingdom and promote the flourishing of his children.