

# TABLE TALK

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*...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7*



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## Authority In The Church Authority In our Lives

Rev. John Erickson

I am not sure how far out the news reached, but here, in the mid-west, it was headlines for several months. First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, MN, a prominent and historic congregation was, by vote at the denomination's annual meeting (June 27), expelled from the Evangelical Covenant Church. This was the first time something like this has happened in the denomination's 134 year history. The issue? The congregation's position on the LGBTQ issue.

I have been somewhat familiar with the Evangelical Covenant Church for most of my life. At least on paper, one of the things that impressed me about the Covenant church body was their claim that they were "people of the book," and that book is the Bible.

**We are people of the book. That book is the Bible. Central to the life of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Bible reveals God and God's intent for us and our world. By it we discover our identity and mission as individuals and as a church. By it we are brought to new life in Jesus Christ, life in God's kingdom.**

**The Covenant Church was begun by people who were known as "readers" because of their deep love for the Bible. By reading the Bible both individually and in corporate worship, they sought to understand it and to allow it to bear fruit in their lives.**

[A COVENANT RESOURCE PAPER: The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible <http://bemidjicovenant.com/filerequest/2898>]

What I found interesting in all that went on in bringing this issue to the fore before the June vote, was the way I found the denomination defending it's position with regard to the threatened expulsion of the Minneapolis church. The news media of course was having a heyday with all

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that was going on. They played on peoples feelings. For example from the Minneapolis Star Tribune -

**Many people have seen First Covenant Church of Minneapolis: It is the large, redbrick edifice across the street from U.S. Bank Stadium. If you walk into the church on a Sunday morning, there is a lot to take in. Some people linger from working at the homeless shelter in the basement as artists set up at the front of the sanctuary, ready to paint as the liturgy proceeds. The people who filter in represent the city and the neighborhood, a mixture of young and old, rich and poor. There is human warmth and remarkable energy in that room. One might not suspect that this congregation is on the verge of being ejected from its denomination for electing to treat LGBT members (and non-members who encounter the church) the same way it treats everyone else.**

[<http://www.startribune.com/downtown-church-may-be-ejected-from-denomination-for-accepting-lgbt-members/511210102/>]

The press's point being - Who could imagine this historic, loving congregation being on the verge of being ejected from its denomination for electing to treat LGBT members the same way it treats everyone else?

But what surprised me (I suppose it shouldn't have in this day and age) was the way the denomination responded when questioned about all this. And this was true whether the interview with church leaders was in print or on radio or TV. The synod's response was that First Covenant of Minneapolis was "out of harmony on the issue of human sexuality."

The other side (First Covenant and others who sided with First Covenant) again played on feelings.

**"The better course is to love and include all who choose to come through our open doors. One**

**individual who gave support to First Covenant's position was herself earlier pushed out of the denomination, explained her action by saying, "I discerned this care not because I was caving to cultural norms, but because I was seeking to follow the Jesus I know, who healed on the Sabbath, thus breaking a long held religious rule, one in fact written in stone, in order to heal a man's image of himself and his image of God." [ibid]**

Why, if the Bible actually does hold the place in the Evangelical Covenant Church that the statements of the Church claim it does - and I would assume the leaders of the Church claim to hold those statements themselves - why did the denomination only release to the media the notion that the reason they were considering expulsion of First Covenant was because the congregation and its pastor were "out of harmony" with the position of the denomination? Why was/is the Church which claims to be the "people of the Book" so afraid to point to that Book as the reason for the stand they were/are taking. Where is the boldness of the prophets of old, "Thus says the Lord!" In other words, where does the authority for the Evangelical Covenant Church lie? Does it lie in the words of divinely inspired Scripture, or does it lie in what those who make up the deciding body of the denomination decide should be? It appears the denomination's position on this is similar to what the individual mentioned above holds to be authoritative for her... "I discerned the care...", in other words, "I choose to interpret things this/my way..."

This parallels so well with what took place some years back now with the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As an example of what I am referring to, I am going to draw attention to the volume written by Herbert Chilstrom and Lowell Erdal and published in

2001, titled: *Sexual Fulfillment for Single and Unmarried, Straight and Gay, Young and Old*, [Augsburg Fortress 2001, Minneapolis MN.]

These two men were both retired bishops in the ELCA at the time of their writing (Chilstom was first presiding bishop of the ELCA and Erdal was bishop of the St. Paul, MN, area synod of the ELCA). The church body in which they accepted these leadership positions (the ELCA) had/has the following position on Scripture:

**202.c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.**

**2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.**

The constitution of the ELAC (1987)  
Chapter 2.CONFESSION OF FAITH

This is what both men took vows to uphold when they were installed into office in that church body.

Much earlier Chilstrom served in the former Lutheran Church in America. His vows at that time would have included a promise to uphold that church's position on Scripture.

**This church acknowledges the Holy Scriptures as the norm for the faith and life of the Church. The Holy Scriptures are the divinely inspired record of God's redemptive act in Christ, for which the Old Testament prepared the way and which the New Testament proclaims. In the continuation of this proclamation in the Church, God still**

**speaks through the Holy Scriptures and realizes His redemptive purpose generation after generation.**

LCA Constitution Art. II.  
Confession of Faith. Section 3.

Erdal served in the former American Lutheran Church. His vows then would have included a promise to uphold that church's position on Scripture.

**The American Lutheran Church accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as a whole and in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God, and submits to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life.\***

Constitution of the ALC -1968  
Chapter 3. Confession of Faith 3:10.  
\* cf. United Testimony on Faith and life.  
III The Means of Grace. page 149]

Yet, when it came to dealing with matters of sexuality we find the following on page 117 of their volume:

**It is also important to underscore the fact that Christians do not derive their ethical and social teachings from the Bible alone. We believe that all truth is God's truth and that wisdom received from the natural and social sciences is a vital element in our ethical decision making. Our understanding of human sexuality, especially of sexual orientation, has been greatly enhanced by the scientific discoveries of the past century. We now have information and insights that were unknown and, therefore, never considered in biblical times. To ignore, to deny, these realities is, we believe, a betrayal of God's gifts of knowledge and reason.**

So what is authoritative when it comes to God's will for the believer in the area of human sexuality? Is Scripture the authority? Or is it Scripture plus contemporary natural and social science findings? Is Scrip-

ture limited to the recording and announcing of God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ? Or does Scripture speak also to the life of the person of faith? In other words, if Scripture is the norm for the faith and life of the Church to what extent is this the case? Should Scripture be submitted to as the *only* authority in all things pertaining to faith and life?

And we want to be careful here, because it is not easy. Much of it, as Chilstom and Erdahl comment on in their book, comes down to interpretation. But when it comes to interpretation, what we find as seen in the above quote from their book, is that they appear to be less interested in the one over-arching principle that has guided theologians throughout history, namely, *Scriptura sui interpres* [in English, Scripture interprets itself, i.e., the idea that Scripture itself helps us understand Scripture], than they are in bringing the studies and contemporary conclusions of science into the mix.

We know that conclusions of science are always changing or subject to change, whereas God's Word does not and cannot change. It stands forever. As we find it in Psalm 33:11, "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations." Or in Psalm 119, "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (v. 89); "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation" (vs. 97-99); "I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me... through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (v. 104); "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (v. 105).

It is not easy, it is never popular, but no matter the issue, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts

5:29). Addressing himself to Israel, Moses writes, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 10:12). Jesus, quoting Moses, addressed the people of His day, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve" (Luke 4:8). What was true for Israel and what was true for the people in our Lord's day, is no less true for us in the twenty-first century.

And we read in Proverbs 3:5-6 a principle that is most appropriate in this discussion, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." It is true for all, but especially for those in authority, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death (Prov. 14:12;16:25).

But, in the matter of homosexuality and the issues pertaining to the LGBTQ life-styles, the position taken by so many is that Jesus never spoke to these issues. But is that the case?

What is Scripture? It seems even from the differing constitutional stances quoted above, that there is some agreement in this, that our Bible, that Scripture, is the Word of God. Scripture is inspired by God. Scripture is to be submitted to as authoritative in the faith and life of the church and of the individual believer.

We could look elsewhere, but in this I draw attention to 2 Peter 1:19-21 which speaks of the prophetic word and where Peter makes clear that no prophecy of Scripture came "from someone's own interpretation," rather the authors of Scripture "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

This means, does it not, that when

Moses speaks to the issue of homosexuality, see for example Genesis 19:5-7 and Leviticus 18:22, and even if that exact word is not used, it is no different than that God Himself is speaking? This means, does it not, that when Paul speaks of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God... and among those he lists we find those who practice homosexuality and the sexually immoral and adulterers... it is God who is speaking?

The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture, the Holy Spirit is God, and in the Holy Trinity of God the Holy Spirit cannot act in any way contrary to the will of the Father and/or of the Son (the Athanasian Creed is most helpful in this). And Scripture can not be considered inspired of God if any of the authors penned words contrary to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

No matter the issue: divorce - remarriage after divorce - the habit of taking the Lord's name in vain - taking short cuts in business - one addiction or another - pornography - illicit affair - abortion - same sex marriage - homosexuality - neglect of God's Word... in so far as the ramifications for eternity in any of these cases and more are concerned... the answer(s) is not up for debate. God has spoken! No matter what a pastor might say... no matter what a prominent theologian might say... no matter what a church position paper might say... if God has spoken, that is it! No matter the author... and no matter one's trying to somehow rationalize the issue... if Scripture has spoken, that is it! And, if Scripture has not directly spoken to some particular issue, you can be sure that there are principles in Scripture (Scripture interprets Scripture) that can be applied to give a clear answer (if one wants to hear it).

The principle ought to be, not how can I get around what Scripture has to say, but how can I take seriously... and take to heart... what

Scripture has to say.

I find Matthew 7:21-23 to be some rather sobering words of our Lord in all of this. Here we have spiritual leaders who seem to be doing wonderful things in and for the Kingdom of God, and to whom, on the last day, our Lord will declare, "I never knew you." Why? Because they were "workers of lawlessness." They did not the "will of my Father who is in heaven." Oh... but some of these folks are so spiritual... they are such good workers in the church.

I don't recall where I found it, but it is most fitting to the discussion at hand. It was with regard to prayer: *"Well it is to pray for something clearly not in agreement with the will of God. Then one may be convinced that it is in God's will. But that does not mean it in fact is."* I am afraid we can all be in danger of taking comfort in particular matters pertaining to the faith by a misuse of prayer.

And then, with regard to some of these issues where what Scripture has to say seems so out of step with our own feelings, or those of family and friends, and/or with the views of society, it is well to remember this, *"Faith is unconcerned with the 'how'. Faith believes it and leaves Him to fulfill it 'how' He wills and knows."*

I maybe ought to leave things at this, but there are a couple of issues related to the subject at hand that I feel should also be addressed. The first is the responsibility of the Church and its leaders, its pastors and teachers... but also, I believe, of the individual believer. And it is not something that is easy.

In the Old Testament it is found in Ezekiel 3, in Ezekiel's call to be a watchman for Israel (see verses 16-21). I realize these words were spoken to Ezekiel, but the principle reaches far beyond him only, and also beyond the days of the Old Tes-

tament. The New Testament challenges Christian leaders - and parents and others in authority - to be ready to correct, to reprove, to rebuke if necessary the erring individual.

We find the same language used with regard to our Lord as found in the Old Testament concerning the people as sheep... as sheep wandering aimlessly because they have no shepherd (for example compare 1 Kings 22:17 and Matthew 9:36). The shepherd... especially the person set aside for ministry... called to a position of spiritual leadership... I don't believe there is any question but that neglect, especially intentional neglect, in the labeling as sin, that which is sin, yes, and even more so, in the approving of certain sins that the Bible clearly denotes as sin, will, if not repented of, bring condemnation upon the offender.

As synods, as denominations, as congregations, as pastors and teachers, especially for such, it is a grave responsibility, to make the free gift of salvation of God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus... and the truths of the whole counsel of God's will for the men, women, and children of this world, as found in God's Word... clearly communicated to who are given into their care.

The other issue I want to life up is that of repentance.

In Luke 13 there are two situations that were brought before our Lord that the people thought pointed to unfairness in God's justice. In both these situations, Jesus answered, "I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (verses 3 and 5).

In the first sermon preached in the New Testament Church, the people, after hearing the sermon, convicted of their sin, asked "...what shall we do?" To which Peter answered, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your

sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... the promise is for... everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

I am afraid that in much of the church today, the importance, and the necessity of repentance is overlooked. Recognizing sin for the sin it is - confessing that sin (acknowledging that it is sin) - is not enough. Sin must be repented of. One must turn away from sin and to the Savior. "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him" (1 John 3:6).

I'll stay with Lutherans here, but it applies to other churches also. The corporate confession of sin is common in most Lutheran churches. The vast majority of persons attending worship in a Lutheran church join in the confession of sin. And what do those folks hear after making their confession? They *hear* the pastor say something to the effect, "I as a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by His authority, forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I am sure that very few understand all that is behind these words. What they *hear* is that they are forgiven. Yes, they are weak... yes, they know that their lives are not what they should be... but Jesus died for their sins... and now, *they hear*, the pastor has forgiven them.

But how about repentance? How about *the need to turn from sin...* the need for *all* (me also) to turn from all that is sinful in their lives. Every true believer - while availing themselves of the Means of Grace - has the need, daily, to resolve with the help of the Holy Spirit to work to strengthen their faith, amend their ways, and walk in His ways (see Philippians 2:12).

*O that the Lord would guide my ways, to keep His statutes still! O that my God would grant me grace; to know and do His will!* Isaac Watts

Editor's note:

In considering the church of say, two or three decades down the road, what might that church look like? If the social and political scenes continue to evolve in an anti-Christian - and by that I mean, anti-biblical, direction - then what will that mean for the Christians and for the church that desire to be faithful to the Word. And even today, when it comes to planting a church... it no longer is that case that one can simply put up a sign and expect that people are going to gravitate to it. And then today too there is the issue that, especially in the more rural areas, we have congregations that are shrinking in membership along with shrinking population. Church bodies do not feel they can help, and/or have no interest in helping many of these congregations keep going. And in not so few cases, there are no suitable alternatives for worship for those few remaining members who are of strong religious convictions.

Will the answer in many of these situations, more and more, be found in the house church?

*Some Quick Thoughts on House Churches:  
The Good, the Bad, and Why You Should Be Open to Them*

They appeal to certain church planters and in certain contexts.

Ed Stetzer, Author



### **Discerning House Churches**

The house church discussion is always an interesting one. People can be very passionate about house, simple, and organic churches, and that can limit some important discussions.

Some say, "Of course, that's the best way—that's what is in the New Testament!" And, actually, they are right about the New Testament. However, it can be tricky to evaluate something that you are convinced is the only right way.

On the other hand, house churches are far from the norm in the English-speaking Western world. And, as such, unfamiliar for many. To be honest, many readers will have had experiences with house church people that is less than positive. (I hear often from pastors about disgruntled or theologically-odd people ending up in house churches.)

The fact is, there are healthy and unhealthy expressions of house / simple / organic churches. There are good expressions, and I've written lots on that, but I've run into plenty of the bad ones.

### **Healthy and Unhealthy Expressions of House Churches**

Let's be clear from the front. Even if you had a bad experience with someone, there are many healthy expressions of house churches.

First, many are excellent in discipleship. They focus on the simple elements of discipleship, which enhances the effectiveness to rapidly reproduce.

Second, house churches often release believers into areas of leadership and service at a higher rate than other models.

Third, house churches are simple and stripped of all the glitz and glamor. As a result, people are reached with the gospel through relationships.

Neil Cole, who is intimately involved with the house church movement and has the best and most winsome writing on the subject, often says, "What churches win people *with*, is what churches win them to."

Thus, house churches do not have to worry about adding additional ministries in order to keep people committed or entertained, especially in a culture where the attention span of consumeristic people is diminishing and where brand loyalty is waning.

But, just as in other models, there are also some unhealthy elements within house churches.

Too many house churches are filled with people who got burned by the more institutionalized church. Thus, house churches tend to attract dissatisfied people—sometimes the angry children of evangelical megachurches.

The reality is, dissatisfaction does not a movement make.

In addition, most house churches aren't places where one will find the singing to be excellent, the teaching and preaching to be proficient, and the children/youth programs to be safe, secure, and engaging. This 'organic' flavor may not be palatable for some, but it is certainly countercultural.

This countercultural reality is one of the reasons we have no house church focused Church Planting Movements in the West like we do in much of the world.

But this counterculture approach may be the reason many are reaching people now, and may indeed reach more in the future.

So, there is good and bad, for sure.

### **The Appeal of House Churches**

Yet, I believe there's an appeal house churches have among some church planters and specific cultural contexts.

I was recently with two Lutheran (LCMS) pastors. Lutherans have a high [very institutionalized] ecclesiology. In addition, they map out the ministry process for their pastors: the pastors go to college, then Concordia, and then the bishop tells them where they are going.

But these two Lutheran pastors took a different approach. They went to the bishop and said they didn't want to go just anywhere. They wanted to gradu-



ate from seminary, move to a community, work at Home Depot, and plant a church relationally with their colleagues and neighbors.

These pastors wanted to take a path less traveled. They wanted:

- To go where led
- To not be restricted by money or funding
- To be part of a church that was high on relationships
- To be simple in their approach
- To be naturally ingrained into the rhythms of the community
- To see a church birthed from intentional discipleship

Many church planters, if we are honest, find this appealing. And it's in this appeal that there's great potential for the house church.

It's appealing because it's biblical, missional, contextual, and more.

House churches may not only appeal to certain church planters, but also to certain cultural contexts. Certain contexts may be conducive for house churches:

- Restricted areas
- Closed countries
- College campuses
- Large apartment complexes
- Urban or high-density areas where the cost of living is expensive
- People who are disenfranchised, weary, or intimidated by the more institutional and organized forms of church

## Conclusion

Some may be nervous about a house church movement. Some worry that house churches don't have all the marks of a biblical church. [I wrote a blog series explaining the marks of a biblical church.] However, house churches can have all those marks for a very simple reason: otherwise, you'd have to rule out the first 100 years of Christianity, since that's what they did.

Given the healthy expressions of house churches and the appeal house churches have to certain planters and in certain cultural contexts, evangelicals need to be more open to house churches.

I'm not trying to give a full evaluation here, but simply to say there are good things (and some not as good things). It's good to acknowledge both, but to also give house churches a chance if you've already rejected the idea.

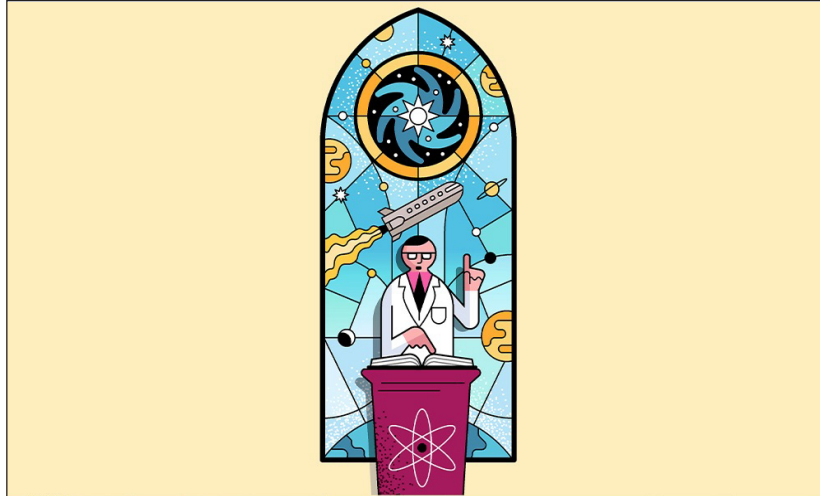
However, and this is a big however, house / simple / organic church leaders need to know that most of us have seen a lot of unhealthy expressions (like in traditional church as well, I know!), so some may be hesitant.

As healthy expressions grow, or their stories are told (as I try to do here), we can see more and better examples of house / simple / organic churches.

# Almighty Science?

We've given it far too much reverence

by Joel Belz



The universe, which scientists have always considered to be pretty big, may be a good bit bigger, according to some of those same scientists. In the interest of not embarrassing them by reporting statistics that they might have to adjust again in a few weeks, we'll wait for the specific numbers.

For now, probably all we need to know is that spiral galaxies, like our Milky Way, are the most common type of galaxy encountered in the known universe. The largest known spiral galaxy, NGC 6872, which is 522,000 light-years across from the tips of its outstretched spiral arms, is about five times the size of the Milky Way. Bigger than anybody thought.

Maybe a bit easier to grasp was the recent assertion by Elon Musk, a scientific entrepreneur if ever there was one, that he expects to see advances in his field of space travel that will enable special rockets carrying 1,000 people to go most anywhere on Earth within 20 minutes.

One more adjustment by scientists of the size of our universe is unlikely to curtail space travel anytime soon. The crash of a Musk spaceliner would have more sober results.

*Increasingly over the last century or two, the gods of science have been the measure of all things*

Not that the temples of scientism are on the verge of collapse—at least in the public perception. Increasingly over the last century or two, the gods of science have been the measure of all things. Theologians and ethicists, playwrights and lyricists, therapists and politicians, historians

and pundits—like everyone else in society—all could have their say. But more and more, each would have to face up ultimately to the supposed precision of the scientist, who among them all seems to have a lock on reality, or at least on the tools for discovering reality.

So profoundly has this worldview pervaded our assumptions that much too often even our Christian apologetic has looked to science for its warrant of Biblical truth. For many years, one organization's popular and apparently effective evangelistic booklet spelled it out: "Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws that govern your relationship with God." The assumption of the physical becomes the very basis for the possibility of believing in the spiritual. It's a tendency endemic to our age and altogether characteristic of the evangelical community in almost every modern context and expression. A white lab coat trumps a clergyman's robe almost any day of the week.

Yet there is evidence that while all the rest of the world goes merrily along with implicit faith in the high priests of science, some of the high priests themselves are increasingly wracked with doubt. They are like ministers trying desperately to offer comfort and certainty to their parishioners, while enjoying little comfort and no certainty themselves.

The Wall Street Journal was not cheery about things. "[A] metaphorical gale is now roaring through the fields of scholarly thought about nature—and, by extension, threatening the confident faith in progress that has informed Western thought for centuries."

The Journal continued: "At bottom, these observers see the breaking up of secular, rationalistic humanism, a philosophy that germinated during the Renaissance, reached full flower in the 18-century Enlightenment, and still permeates Western culture today...."

"Through reason, man would discover the 'laws of nature.' If man could just know enough and apply that knowledge, things would get better and better.

"But now doubts are eroding this secular faith. Nature, once viewed as inherently orderly, is coming to be viewed by many (although certainly not all) scientists as inherently disorderly."

All this takes a lot of godly wisdom to comprehend. Our children won't see much of this backpedaling anytime soon in their science textbooks. Still, alert Christians should be increasingly aware that huge changes are coming to a field of thought that has long been godlike in its immunity to challenge.

Christians who take the Bible seriously should be especially careful in the near future (just as we should have been careful for the last several generations) to refrain from the temptation to keep adjusting our Biblical understanding just because of the latest scientific fad.

An important closing note: That excerpt from The Wall Street Journal is accurate. But it was part of a front-page article first published there in mid-1994—25 years ago. You might like to read it again, just to get the context.

**Article can be found at - [https://world.wng.org/2019/07/almighty\\_science](https://world.wng.org/2019/07/almighty_science)  
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Table Talk  
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