

## Identity Markers and Moral Action: Understanding Reconciliation Failures within the Creation/Evolution Debates

L. Bryan Williams, Ph.D.

Christians seem to have always longed for a Christian identity marker: a sign that points to a person's status as a Christian. With the many threats from outside society, Christians have sought ways to protect those within the boundaries of Christianity from any perception of danger. An establishment of a marker often allows participants to convince themselves that their community is safe from the threat of outside persons or ideologies. In some circles, that sign may be the gift of the Holy Spirit; in others, it may be a successful Godly business; in others, it may be healthy participants; or in others, it may be a baptized adult. In each case, the sign becomes a marker that identifies to other like-minded believers that an individual can be viewed as a successful and safe participant. As well, that sign predisposes the believer to moral action towards those within the specific body with evidence of the particular sign and moral action against those who are demarcated as outside the body with no obvious sign. If an individual has the influence to enforce acceptance of a particular sign within a body of Christians, he or she will wield considerable social power in defining another person's Christian status in the corporate body. One marker seems to have particular longevity in American Christianity: creationism.

The ongoing war between creationists and evolutionists can be analyzed by using the rubric of Christian identity markers. Since the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial, many Christians have sought to define Creationism as an identity marker, if not *the* identity marker, for Christians. Evolution became the ideological construct that helped define who could not be a Christian: an Evolutionist seemed to be someone who sought to eliminate God's actions from the narrative of the world's origins. While an evolutionary atheist by definition cannot be a Christian, another group of individuals also became suspect. Any Christian who dared to postulate that evolution may have a divine origin and may serve as a tool of God's activity has been intellectually "tarred and feathered"-an interesting social identity marker-by powerful camps of Christians determined to protect their Creationist identity marker. This conflict among Christians has erupted in many places; however, the most damaging site may be the Science Departments of Christian universities, in particular, Biology. Christian professors of Biology have spent much of their intellectual energy fending off attacks from other Christians who view them as a threat. This dispute damages these centers of Christian inquiry and the Church as a whole. The failure of reconciliation in this dispute must be compared to other failures to allow for potential reconciliation in the future.

This paper will develop how Christian communities generate identity markers and then how moral responses flow from those markers. Using the examples above, each marker identifies how God is interpreted to act and to interact with humanity: with one's speech pattern that may be perceived as angelic sounds, with one's symbols of success that mimics God's success, with one's pure living that models God's purity, or with one's social actions that relives God's previous actions. Each marker offers us clues to how God is perceived and, therefore, how God acts. To change actions that are perceived as defective, one must first reexamine how a Christian opponent constructed a marker that leads to moral activity such as the exclusion of a person from the Christian community. This paper will develop an understanding that Christian identity markers are often constructed as a result of conflict on the appropriate moral response to theological issues. Two examples will be explored for models of action: Jesus' response to the issue of Sabbath conformation and John Wesley's response to the name "The Methodists".

The paper will develop how Jesus confronted defective Jewish identity markers in his day. The Pharisaic definition of God's restful activity on the Sabbath, an interpretation dependent on passages including Genesis 1, was exposed by Jesus as a defective understanding of God and God's activity. The exposure of this interpretive conflict became a source of irritation with opponents that lead to social ostracization of Christ and added to the arguments demanding His socially constructed death. Jesus' identity marker was radically different than existing markers. That marker lead him to act in ways that were divergent from his social peers: he healed on the Sabbath while



they rested-and argued with him. His methodology in response to Marker conflict instructs us on how we may want to act in the Creation-Evolution war: he opened the scriptures with all to relearn what the text is saying; he confronted his opposition with clarity and sincerity by defining the weaknesses of existing markers; he acted according to His identity marker; he developed a new generation who could adopt his new marker and act according to that marker; and he paid the social price demanded by those he confronted. But he failed yet he won!

For Wesley, the Methodist name was one of many coined to be a malicious nickname, a social tool used to identify those in the non-conformist Oxford bible study that Wesley eventually lead. The name represents an identity marker that defines moral action by both protagonists and antagonists. Wesley absorbed the intellectual blows implicit in the name and allowed the name to inform the nascent community. With these two examples, a powerful methodology to approach the Creationist debate is to use scripture to explore Christ's actions with those around him who had a differing view of God and His actions and to manipulate another's marker to one's advantage.

These two models become templates for the Christian Biology professor who seeks reconciliation with Creationists. Unfortunately, the Christian Biology professor is rarely equipped to handle the conflict in a manner that is acceptable to the challenger and failure has been the result. The Biology Professor is a product of a specialized university system that restricts knowledge to a specific field of inquiry. The conclusion of this paper will interact with Thomas Friedman's best selling text, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman argues that specialization, while crucial to the past, hampers our future. Future professors require an integrationist approach to knowledge to solve complex problems. In this case, the typical Protestant-trained biology professor has little seminary training to assist her or him in the creationist debate. Christ taught Christians that an effective use of scripture is a crucial early step in religious confrontation. Unfortunately, few Biology professors have been schooled in the exegetical and hermeneutical tools of scripture. They often must confront pastors and laity who have those resources available to them. At this juncture, a seminary degree with an emphasis on Biblical Studies-akin to a Jesuit model of academic preparation-needs to be recommended for every Biology professor at a Christian post-secondary institution. With the unacceptable challenge that this recommendation raises for some, Biblical studies faculty in Christian universities are recommended to form a phalanx around Science faculty. Ongoing exegesis and interpretation of crucial passages must continue by a cadre of scholars.

Biology professors must also seek ways to turn the nomenclature to their advantage. As Wesley absorbed and turned the Methodist title to his advantage, Biology professors must also strive to redefine the Evolutionary titles to their advantage. The paper will suggest identity markers such as gradual creationism and Intelligent designer/sustainer to assist in a reconstruction of an appropriate identity for future discussions.

Unfortunately, there will be a social price that may be required for one who confronts another's identity marker. Christ has illustrated for us the profound cost of that action. Confrontation with opponents may be necessary; however, the development of the next generation of thinkers is the central role of the university and the task that the Christian university does best. Although social disputes often result in reconciliation failures, failure is an honorable outcome if it protects the future from a narrowed moral response to defective identity marker of the present.

L. Bryan Williams, Ph.D.

Asst. Professor of Ethics and Religion

Warner Pacific College

Portland, OR

Adj. Professor of Human Biology and Bioethics

Point Loma Nazarene University