

EVOLUTION, OUR CHILDREN, AND THE CLASSROOM

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My son attends a public school. One of his teachers is a firm believer in organic evolution, and teaches it as scientific fact, not theory. The teacher is insistent that the students learn every aspect of evolution, and requires them to answer questions about evolution on examinations in such a way as to agree with the teacher's view. What is the proper way to handle this kind of situation? How do I teach my child to stand up for his beliefs without causing him to receive failing grades and alienate his teacher and classmates, many of whom agree with the teacher?

This is one of the most frequently asked questions of parents who have children in public schools. As I respond, first let me offer a suggestion about how **not** to handle the situation. I never have found it advantageous to teach a youngster to “make a scene” in class by strenuously and vocally objecting publicly with the things the teacher is saying. On occasion a student may say to a teacher (in a rather strident tone) something like this. “My parents and I are Christians, and we believe the Bible! The things you are teaching me are wrong biblically and wrong scientifically! I do not believe them, and there is nothing you can do to make me believe them!”

In other words, the student places the teacher in an uncomfortable situation before the entire class, which may precipitate a stinging public rebuke of the child. Further, some in the class (e.g., those mentioned above who agree with the teacher in the first place) may use this as an occasion for derision of the child, employing phrases like “religious nut” or “crazy creationist” to poke fun at the youngster’s beliefs. Public confrontation of this sort in the classroom rarely provides the desired results.

It has been my experience that another approach works much better. I suggest that the student visit with the teacher outside of class to discuss the situation (e.g., before or after school, during lunch, during the teacher’s free period, etc.). In this discussion, the student should show proper respect for the teacher’s position and authority. In a kind, non-confrontational manner, the student might say something like this to the teacher. “I know from what you have been teaching us in class that you believe very strongly in organic evolution, and that you will be teaching it to us as the correct view of origins. I wanted to speak to you privately, so I could bring to your attention my personal views in this matter. I do not believe in the concept of organic evolution. Rather, my family and I believe very strongly in the Bible, and the account of creation that it contains. I wanted to discuss this with you, and to let you know that while I disagree with your position, I respect your right to believe it—as I hope you will respect my right to believe what I do. I may ask questions or make comments in class that let you and my classmates know I do not believe in evolution, but I will do so respectfully. I never will do anything to embarrass you, or to place you in an awkward situation before my fellow students. I will give you the answers you want on the examinations, but I want you to know that

as I do so, I do not accept them as true. I also hope that you will not mind if I come talk to you again privately about these matters, if the need arises.”

I never have seen such an approach fail. While the teacher may disagree with the student’s belief in creation, the teacher cannot help but recognize that this youngster has been taught to be respectful. Furthermore, the teacher (and the child’s classmates) cannot help but recognize that this is one student who acts maturely, and who is willing to stand up for what he believes. When the time arrives for an examination, the student inevitably will face such questions as: “The Earth is _____ years old.” The child can place in the blank the answer (currently, 4.6 billion) that the teacher and the textbook have provided. But the student can put an asterisk by his answer, and another one at the bottom of the page where he has written the following comment: “I know this is the answer the book provides, and the answer you want us to give, but it is not right, and I do not believe it.” The student has responded to the question “correctly,” so the teacher cannot consider the answer as wrong. Yet the student has let the teacher know that he (or she) knows better!

In the end, the student has acted in a proper manner toward the teacher, and likely has gained the teacher’s respect. He very likely will have gained the respect of many of his classmates as well. And he has stood firmly on his belief in creation, without compromising his principles. In each of the instances in which I have seen this approach employed, not only has the teacher been impressed, but word soon spread around the school about how the student handled the situation in such a mature fashion—which provided the student with the opportunity to explain to classmates why he acted as he did. In the end, it made for a wonderful opportunity to teach others about creation as well.

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