

A New Look at Evangelical Christianity

Dr Michael Jarvis

What is Evangelical Christianity?

Theology is a field of study or belief in which mankind try to explain what God has revealed about himself and humanity. Within Christianity there are two main groups, namely Roman Catholic theology and Protestant theology.

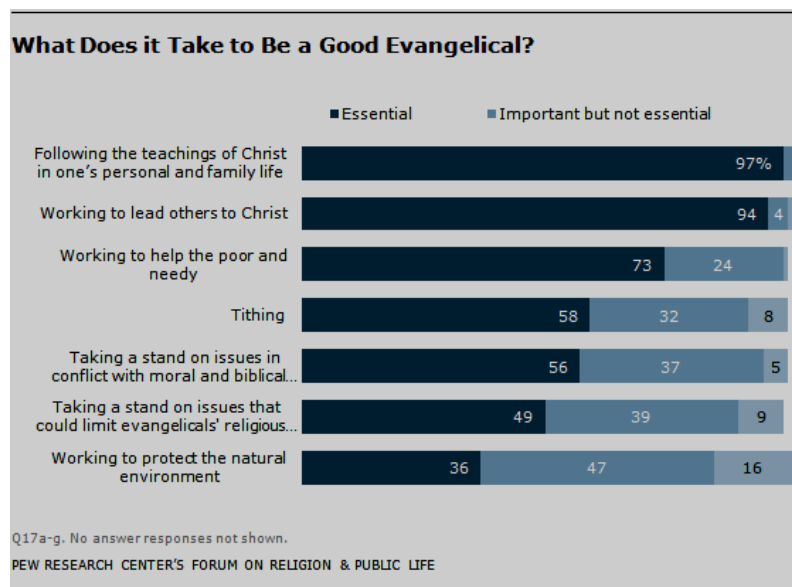
Within Protestant theology one main group is Evangelicalism. This word *evangelical* comes from the Greek word translated 'Gospel' or 'Good News'.

Birth of the Protestant reformation



Evangelical Christianity is often associated with Martin Luther. However, his teachings were actually largely a return to the theology understood by the first century church. His challenge to Roman Catholic theology still retained aspects of Catholic teaching but the Reformation Movement that he initiated has led to a variety of Evangelical Christian beliefs.

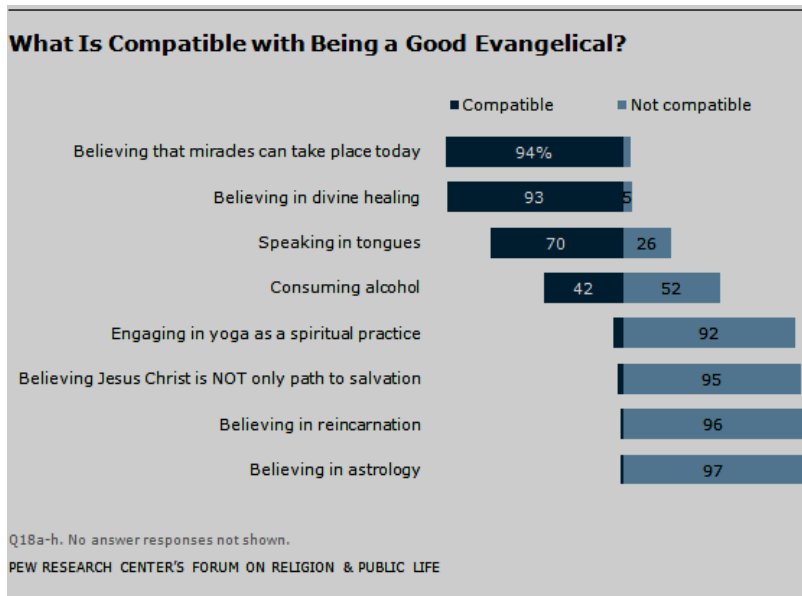
Within this variety of Evangelical theology there are many shared fundamental beliefs.



A survey was conducted on delegates to the Third Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization held in Cape Town in 2010. Four thousand Evangelical Christian leaders attended from 198 countries.

The Pew Research Centre report 'Evangelical Beliefs and Practices' is based on this survey. The internet link is given below.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2011/06/22/global-survey-beliefs>



These findings tell us much about Evangelical Christian beliefs. However the Pew survey also looked at beliefs relating to creation and evolution. These have a direct bearing on some of the basic theology.

I will look at beliefs about creation and evolution a bit later in the article.

Shared theological beliefs of most Evangelical Christians today

Shared beliefs held by most evangelical Christians include:

- A high view of Scripture, meaning that the Bible is considered to be the ultimate authority for Christian theology and Christian conduct. Traditions and oral authority may exist in some of the churches but these must submit to scripture for determining theological significance.
- In the past most Evangelicals have relied on a literal interpretation of the Bible and some claimed that it is 'infallible' as originally written down. Also that its human authors were 'inspired' by God. However the Pew survey found that only 50% of evangelical church leaders now believe all of the Bible should be taken literally.
- Nearly all believe that the universe is the result of the creative activity of God.
- Nearly all accept the need for a personal conversion experience in which people are 'Born again'. This involves personally trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection, is the only basis for forgiveness of our sins and for reconciliation with God.
- Most Evangelical church leaders believe that there is no salvation except through the person and merit of Jesus Christ.
- Salvation cannot be earned. It is by faith alone. Good works are a response of gratitude for our salvation.
- Salvation means being rescued from spiritual death by personally accepting God's forgiveness of our rebellion against his authority and for our selfish behaviour. This leads to being 'Born again' spiritually and so entering into a personal relationship with God while here on earth and this continues into Eternal Life after death.
- Belief in a final Judgment Day for all who have ever lived.
- Belief that Jesus Christ will be the Judge.

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- Belief that Jesus will determine the ultimate destiny of all people.
- Belief in a real Heaven and Hell.
- Belief that Hell was prepared by God for the ultimate destiny of the Devil and his angels, as a place of separation from God's intimate presence, necessitated because angels are immortal beings and so cannot be destroyed.
- It is not God's desire that any of humanity land up in Hell.
- Belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth in visible form and the church will be gathered into his presence.
- There is an emphasis on publicly sharing the Gospel message.

Why is it desirable to look again at Evangelical Christian theology?

The way successive generations of Christians have interpreted the Bible has changed over time. These changes have in part been the result of scientific discoveries about the universe and our world.



One famous example of Bible misinterpretation was the case of Galileo. In 1663 he was tried before the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic church because his observations through the newly discovered telescope convinced him that the earth was not the centre of the universe.

The church believed scriptures said it was the centre. We now know that Galileo was correct in proposing that the earth and planets are in orbit around the sun. The important point to make is that there are a number of scriptures that can be interpreted in more than one way.

The church made the mistake, **commonly seen in our days**, of trying to interpret and criticise the discoveries of science by quoting Bible passages. When this is done it is because theologians fail to understand that God's creation is in fact another 'voice of God' telling us more about his creation and about the laws and processes he has used over long time-scales, in order to bring the creation into being.

In other words, it is wrong to only use scriptures when formulating theology. We need to allow some of God's revelations about himself in scriptures to be amplified and better understood by listening to the revelations being exposed through scientific discoveries.

This is why I am encouraging Evangelical Christians to look again at their theology to see how certain scientific discoveries should lead us to interpret some scriptures differently from how they have been interpreted prior to our scientific age.

Scientific studies have included archaeological excavations, studies of ancient manuscripts, studies of the universe and of the evolutionary history of life on earth.

The scientific studies of life, its origin and evolution over billions of years, have led many Evangelical Christians to believe that their faith in God as Creator is being undermined. This view has been strengthened by the fact that many atheists and agnostics have promoted evolution as an **excuse for not believing in God**.

Unfortunately, many of the most vocal Evangelical Christian contributions to this debate have presented distortions of science and given very narrow interpretations of scripture, as reasons why they reject the evidence for evolution. These presentations have confused and dismayed many Christians who have been trained in one or other scientific discipline.

Many Christians have rebelled against the whole concept of God using long evolutionary processes to bring about his creation. They point to the evolution processes within life that seem to involve chance mutations and mass extinctions and this may suggest a Creator who conducts many experiments before arriving at mankind.

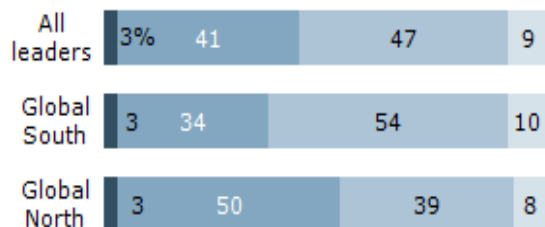
It is vital that we do not create God in our image, or at least not create God to be what we think he should be like. We need to try to understand God as he really is and accept whatever processes he has used to bring about his creation.

In my articles on this subject I point out that **our concept of God is often far TOO SMALL**. I believe He is much greater than the one who simply speaks a word and instantly all things appear. Once we accept the evidence showing God to be a **'hands on' Creator**, who has created over long time-scales, then He has to be so great that he is aware of all details in the universe simultaneously and he continually upholds and guides all evolutionary processes, so as to achieve his pre-ordained end goals.

The Pew Research Centre report included questions relating to the delegates views on creation and evolution.

Evolution

- Evolution through natural selection
- Supreme being guided evolution
- Living things always existed as now
- No response



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This analysis shows that only 3% of delegates accepted the purely scientific understanding of evolution through natural selection. However, 41% did accept God-guided evolution, but 47% still believed that living things always existed as seen today. **In other words the majority still reject the scientific evidence for evolutionary change.**

My personal experience has shown me that **the group who accept God-guided evolution, have often not thought through how this must impact upon other theological beliefs, such as the origin of death, original sin, the significance of the Garden of Eden events in relation to the Gospel message and even in relation to the theology of healing.**

The challenges coming from Modernism and Postmodernism belief systems

During the past 100 years there has been a movement called Modernism that assumed that only science and reason can explain reality. More recently a Postmodernism movement has gained prominence. Postmodernism believes that nothing known to mankind can explain reality. This leads to the conclusion that the most important thing is dialogue between ideas and each opinion should be considered important. There are no absolutes. The combined effects of these two 'isms' are challenges to fundamentals of Evangelical Christian belief.

1. Challenging the Bible view of creation.
2. Challenging relevance of the Bible for defining the meaning of life and the reason for existence.
3. Challenging relevance of the Bible as an authority for dictating morality.
4. Challenging the view that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.

Fundamental roots of the Modernist and Postmodernist world views

The most important fundamental 'root' that has led to Modernist and Postmodernist views is an **attack upon the accuracy and authority of the Bible**. This has largely arisen from scientific discoveries about the age of our universe and how it and life have evolved over billions of years. **All forms of evolutionary process seem to challenge the most commonly held Evangelical Christian understanding of the Bible creation account.**

Fortunately the Pew survey revealed that an increasing number of Evangelical Christian leaders are now open to accepting new approaches to reconciling scientific discovery with belief in God as Creator.

I am convinced that **the MAJOR factor leading to Modernism and Postmodernism** and the decline of Christianity in First World nations, is the conflict between scientific discoveries about our universe and frequently presented and widely broadcast interpretations of the Bible creation account, that contradict the findings of mainstream science.

This has arisen primarily because many Evangelistic Christians thought that their high view of the Bible, as God inspired, necessitated them fighting against anything that seemed to conflict with their traditional interpretation of scripture.

Many people in our times have been **raised within a Scientific Age** where information and technology have become an important part of our civilisation. We can see the benefits of this scientific revolution all around us. Our machines, electricity, communication technology, medical advances and many others, tell us that scientific research brings about visible and tangible results. As a result most people grow up accepting that the scientific understanding of our universe and earth needs to be taken seriously.

It has become a major view amongst people in First World countries, that the Bible is in fundamental conflict with science and scientific discoveries.

A very vocal group within Evangelical Christianity has been those who stick rigidly to their belief that God made everything in six 24 hour earth days. This group are referred to in the public domain as '**Creationists**'. They fight against everything that may appear to contradict their interpretation of the Bible. Their views are widely promoted via web pages, court cases, books, conferences and church sermons. They fight against evidence for the long mechanisms and processes that science says have been involved in the creation of our universe.

Many people have found that these 'Creationist' confrontations with science shake their faith in the Bible because, although scientific information is normally presented in logical ways, the Creationist interpretations appear to fight against many major scientific discoveries. **Many people now consider the Bible to be inaccurate and irrelevant and not to be taken seriously.** They have come to this conclusion because the views of Creationists are in large measure considered to be out of touch with what our generation have been taught about the world through scientific discoveries.

This often leads to the following sequence of events:

- Many lose their belief in the accuracy of the Bible.
- This in turn can lead to rejecting the whole Bible as an authoritative guide to their world view and morality.
- This in turn can lead to many doubting the relevance and unique attributes of Jesus Christ.
- This in turn can lead to many doubting fundamental beliefs of Christianity, such as the resurrection of Jesus.
- This in turn can lead many to reject the uniqueness of Christianity.
- This in turn can lead to belief that all faith systems are equally relevant.
- This in turn can lead to postmodernist thinking.

The most commonly expressed beliefs of Creationists are by far the most important factors that have led to Modernism and Postmodernism and to erosion of public trust in the Bible.

How to counteract Modernism and Postmodernism

The following proposals may seem radical to some Evangelical Christians but I am convinced our generation needs this **New Reformation** to meet the challenges of both Modernism and Postmodernism and to **show how a high view of scriptures can be reconciled with a new understanding of important questions.**

Ways of reconciling these questions with scripture are presented in my articles that are freely downloaded from my webpage www.factandfaith.co.za . In the webpage click on 'Free downloads' & then on 'PDF Update articles'.

Some of the titles most relevant to this article are listed below:

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The following articles should be read in sequence.
Select a title below and **Ctrl+Click to open**.

- [The age of our world](#)
- [The DAYS of Genesis creation account](#)
- [Reconciling the Genesis creation account with science](#)
- [The Garden of Eden](#)
- [Adam and Eve](#)
- [What did Adam and Eve lose](#)
- [Origin of Death](#)

Also read: [Evidence against a world-wide flood](#)

Christians need to take very seriously the truth that God speaks to us in many different ways and one very important **'Voice of God'** is his creation.



Psalm 19 is just one of many scriptures suggesting that we can learn much about God and how he has created, and how he operates, by making a study of the universe and our world. It is science that has the potential to vastly expand our knowledge about the universe and has given us the potential to enrich and expand our worship of the Creator.

The universe, with all its finely tuned fundamental forces and countless examples of Intricate Complexity, does present our generation with the potential for a rapidly expanding wonder and awe. Scientific discovery is potentially giving us new reasons to worship.

In addition, scientific discovery about the history of our universe and the history of life on earth, **should motivate us to reconsider our understanding** of how God has created and how this relates to revelations about God in the scriptures.

An honest acceptance of the reality of death as a fundamental feature of all life and a realisation that physical death did not start in the Garden of Eden, is a major reason for why we need a NEW REFORMATION. We have to look anew at our understanding of the scriptures regarding sin, death and the Gospel message. We have to re-formulate our understanding of why Jesus died and rose again.

Fortunately, a reconciliation between scientific discovery and scripture is possible.

Important steps to counteract Modernism and Postmodernism

I am convinced the vital steps that need to be taken by Evangelical Christianity, include the following:

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1. Stop fighting the findings of science and accept that science is revealing more about how God has created and how he operates within this world.
2. Re-examine traditional interpretations of the Genesis creation account so as to harmonise Bible revelation with acceptance of an ancient universe containing evolutionary processes. There is more than one legitimate way of doing this.
3. Stop promoting the Six Day Creationist agenda.
4. Accept that mankind were created mortal.
5. Accept that death has always been a fundamental part of all life on earth.
6. Look again at the teaching around 'original sin'.
7. Re-examine our teaching about supernatural healing by God.
8. Clarify our teaching on salvation through Jesus Christ.

In the above list, points 1 to 7 are impacted by our interpretation of creation and the origin of death. However, point 8: 'Clarify our teaching on salvation through Jesus Christ' also needs clarification if we are to confront the Postmodernist claim that all faiths can lead to "God".

Our understanding of supernatural healing is impacted by our acceptance of physical death since the dawn of life on earth. I will elaborate on this after first considering the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

Postmodernist views on 'all faiths lead to God' have partly arisen in reaction to the wrong preaching often associated with sections of Evangelical Christianity, where they say no-one who has not accepted Jesus as Saviour will be in heaven. This is a bad distortion of the Gospel message.

What does it really mean when Jesus said "I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me?"(John 14:6 NIV).

Jesus Christ the only way to God?

The following thoughts come from my book 'Big Bang Christianity', freely downloadable from my webpage.

One of the most commonly stated criticisms of Christianity is that many Christians say there is **no other way to God except through Jesus Christ**. In fact Jesus himself said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"*.

It is true that many Christians repeat this and other similar statements, but these words are often misunderstood because they are often **taken out of context of the whole message**.

The Christian message **does not say** that everyone who has not accepted Jesus Christ is automatically lost and condemned to Hell. **No, it does not say this!**

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ means the following:

1. **It is his death for and on behalf of the wrongdoing of all mankind**, that is taken into consideration by God as the basis for forgiving mankind their wrongs.
2. **As the appointed judge of all mankind**, Jesus has been given a unique position of authority. If all men and women who have ever lived will stand before Him as judge, then **it is His decision** as to who will receive mercy and who will not.

Therefore, in these two respects, the Christian is stating that he believes none will obtain acceptance by God in the life to come, except through the mediation of Jesus Christ. **This is through him as Saviour and through him as Judge. However, the Christian message does NOT state that all people who have not accepted Jesus are automatically lost** and destined for separation from God. The crucial question to consider here is **how will Jesus judge?**

In the Bible there are at least three clear categories into which we all can fall:

First, there are those people who have heard the message about God's love and forgiveness shown to us through Jesus Christ, have responded positively and have invited God into their lives through acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. These people will still stand before the judgement seat of Jesus Christ and will be judged according to what they have done with the gifts and talents God has given them during this mortal life. However, the Bible is clear that these people need not fear separation from God. Jesus told his followers, *"In my Father's house are many mansions and I am going to prepare a place for you"* (John 14:2).

Second, there are people who have clearly heard and understood the message about Jesus and yet have rejected it. To this group the Bible seems to clearly state that they have rejected such a great offer of pardon and forgiveness from God, that they have chosen to exclude themselves from His presence.

Third, there is a broad group of people who have never heard the Christian message about Jesus, or have heard it in such a distorted manner that he was never clearly revealed to them. To this group Jesus offers us some clear insights into how he will judge them at the final Judgment Day. **Many of those who have never heard of Jesus in an honest and fair way, will still find mercy from him at Judgment Day.**

At Judgment Day, all people will discover that God is in fact just and merciful. However, those who are granted access to heaven will also discover that they have been forgiven and accepted by God, not on their own merit, nor because they belonged to a specific religion, but only on the merit of what Jesus achieved for all mankind on Calvary's cross.

Many may discover that, **although they may never have heard of Jesus, they have been granted access into the eternal presence of God through the Saving Work of Jesus and through his authority and decision as Judge.**

The words of Jesus, and elsewhere in the Bible, make it abundantly clear that all will be judged according to what they have done or failed to do, but this will be judged in the light of what they knew they should have done. The greatest revelation given to mankind is the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ'. Those who have heard and understood this correctly will first and foremost be judged on their response to this message.

Those who have not heard the Gospel Message, or only heard it in a distorted version, will be judged by Jesus Christ according to the light they had been given. One of the many scriptures on this truth is when Jesus said that the men of Sodom would be judged more leniently than the people of Capernaum who had seen his miracles but still had not repented (Matthew 11:23-24). Jesus said that this was because the men of Sodom would have repented if they had seen the miracles Jesus performed in Capernaum!

This subject is covered in much more detail in chapter 14 of my book 'Big Bang Christianity'.

I was saddened some years back when viewing a film made about a missionary group in Papua New Guinea. They reached out to a small tribe deep in the jungle. The whole tribe responded to a 'Gospel message' and the film showed them all singing and dancing for joy. Then suddenly they all started crying and howling. When asked what the matter was they said "all our ancestors are lost!" They had apparently not been told about people who had never heard the Gospel and how God will judge them differently.

How sad that these people had been taught a 'false Gospel'. **Unfortunately this false presentation of the Gospel is not uncommon within some sections of Evangelical Christianity.** These presentations have been interpreted by many in the Postmodernism group, as saying that Evangelical Christians believe everyone from another faith is heading for Hell. Their reaction to this wrong presentation of the Gospel message is understandably negative since it **calls into question the love, mercy and justice of God.**

What about Evangelical Christianity teaching on healing?

In my book 'Big Bang Christianity', chapter 12 looks into this question in detail.

When we consider a biblical theology of healing, it makes an enormous difference if we accept that our mortality is not the result of Adam and Eve sinning. In other words, the Big Bang creation and the nature of our Universe were planned by God to result in people on Earth who were created mortal!

Our attitude to the origin of physical death will radically influence our theology of healing from sickness. This will have a direct implication for our understanding of the atonement, i.e. what did Jesus achieve for us on the cross?

Atonement is a word that implies restitution, or a way of return to the condition humanity was in before Adam and Eve sinned. Jesus paid the price for our forgiveness and restoration to an Eternal Life relationship with Father God. Atonement is the divine act of grace whereby God draws to himself and makes 'at one' with him those who were once alienated from him. Calvary was the place where the way of reconciliation was achieved. Atonement brings forgiveness of sin and from the consequences of sin.

My understanding is that the death of Jesus, the Second Adam, made a way of restoration to a state of sinlessness in the eyes of God, but it does not restore us to physical immortality. This is because Adam and Eve were never physically immortal. They had an Eternal Life relationship with God that was lost when they sinned.

Jesus restores us to this relationship. We are restored to a state of sinlessness before God, because we are cleansed and covered with the merit of the shed blood of Christ, shed for the forgiveness of sins. We do not approach Father God through our own sinlessness, but because we are covered with the sinlessness of Jesus.

Some theologians remind us that there is no sickness in heaven and so, they argue, there cannot be any sickness on earth in situations where the Kingdom of God operates. For instance, when we enter again into an Eternal Life relationship with God, through the merit of Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit, we have entered into the Kingdom of God. This is true, in the sense that we have now acknowledged the Kingship of God over our lives and have the Holy Spirit within us. One definition of the 'Kingdom of God' is any place where God rules.

Although we have 'tasted of' this Kingdom while here on Earth, we nevertheless still exist within our state of mortality and live within a humanity subject to viruses, bacteria, genetic mutations and ultimately to physical death.

Scripture tells us that, *man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment* (Hebrews 9:27). Why do people die? More often than not one of our vital organs wears out or malfunctions. **We cannot expect to be healed of every infirmity** otherwise we are expecting to be physically immortal! Only God knows when our appointed time has come to die physically, sometimes when we are young and sometimes when old.

We must be careful when quoting scriptures like; *the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53:5 NIV). This same passage is quoted by Peter as referring to us being forgiven (healed), not referring to physical healing! .We read; *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* (1 Peter 2:24-25 NIV).

Much more is discussed in my 'Big Bang Christianity' book. **We are not justified to claim that being Born again gives us an automatic right to perfect health.** The scriptures tell us

that everyone who receives the Gospel message is forgiven. However, many who have entered into this new relationship with God have not experienced physical healing. In other words **perfect health is not an automatic result of the atonement.**

It is very significant that most of the prominent Evangelical Christian preachers who have emphasised so-called 'faith healing' and who have operated on the assumption that all sickness was healed in believers as part of the atonement, have themselves prematurely died from sickness or members of their close families have not been healed.

At the same time many wonderful and sometimes spectacular healings do take place. **The challenge for Evangelical Christians is to be so in tune with the promptings of the Holy Spirit that they will know when and what to pray for when faced with sickness.**

CONCLUSIONS

If Evangelical Christianity is serious about promoting the Gospel message to our scientific and technological generation and serious about confronting the challenges facing Christianity in an honest way, then I am convinced we need to accept the **urgent need for a NEW REFORMATION.** I believe we need to accept the following:

1. We live in a world that is billions of years old.
2. God has chosen to bring about his creation in various ways, including through his guiding of the mechanisms and long processes that are an integral part of the way he has planned the universe.
3. Life on earth has increased in complexity over long timescales, not just 6000 years.
4. The fine-tuning of all the fundamental forces in nature and the existence of countless examples of 'Intricate Complexity' within living organisms, show believers that God has been intimately involved in guiding the processes that science is now progressively discovering.
5. Science has no way of detecting the guiding 'finger of God' but at the same time science cannot deny this probability.
6. Science has clearly revealed that death has been a fundamental part of all life on earth from the dawn of life. The complexity of living systems requires food chains and intricate interactions that are revealed through the scientific study of ecology.
7. Fossils are not the result of a world-wide flood. We must accept the scientific and scriptural evidence showing the flood of Noah's time was not world-wide.
8. Adam and Eve, as representatives of the human race, were mortal but they had an Eternal Spiritual Life relationship with their Creator.

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9. The Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve events are essential for our understanding of the nature of sin and our need for forgiveness, in order for us to be Born again into an intimate relationship with God.
10. We all know today that we are mortal and so the Gospel message is not changed by varying understandings about the Genesis creation account and origin of death.
11. Our acceptance that physical death did not start in the Garden of Eden, means that some Evangelical Christians need to change their understanding of Original Sin and teachings about healing of sicknesses.
12. Our acceptance of the long history of life on earth requires us to look again at how the Genesis Creation account can be reconciled with scientific discovery.

Finally, a **vital part of our NEW REFORMATION** must be the rejection of Creationist views that promote a Six Day Creation and we must stop fighting the vast accumulation of scientific evidence supporting the conclusion that our earth and universe are very ancient. Christians should accept that the Creator has used evolutionary processes as part of his creative activity. We are told this truth by the 'Voice of God' speaking to us from creation. Scientific discoveries are vastly amplifying this voice in our scientific generation.

A most important question: Are we serious about presenting the Gospel message to our generation or are we determined to cling to our traditional interpretations of scripture and so spend time and energy fighting the 'Voice of God' speaking to us from his creation?

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