



William Jennings Bryan

Even though not all Evangelical Christians would necessarily agree with his policies or particular beliefs, there were still many admirable qualities in the “Great Commoner” - William Jennings Bryan.

William Jennings Bryan was born on March 19, 1860¹ the same year the War between the States broke lose. He grew up in Illinois as the son of a Baptist preacher. He himself considered joining the ministry as a young man².

He enjoyed school and books. His mother taught him for the first ten years of his life, and then he attended public school and Whipple Academy. He continued his studies at Illinois College, graduating in 1881. William obtained his law degree from Union College in 1883, and began his private practice in Nebraska just a few years later³.

Politically speaking, we would have called Mr. Bryan “progressive” in his views. He served as Secretary of State during the Wilson Administration from 1913-1915. Resigning in protest over Wilson’s push for more American involvement in the brewing storm previous to WWI. Interestingly, he ran unsuccessfully three times for the Presidency, in 1896, 1900 and again in 1908. He was the youngest presidential candidate ever to be nominated by the Democratic party, at the spry age of 36. His favorite topic? Free silver, and a silver backed dollar⁴.

After his failed campaigns, Bryan turned his attention to other pressing issues, such as the raging debate over the teaching of the evolutionary theory in public school class rooms across the United States. In the 1920s, Bryan stepped up his “crusade” challenging the theory, giving speeches and writing about the dangerous aspects of this philosophy⁵.

He thought the evolutionary theory was:

“the most paralyzing influence with which civilization has had to deal in the last century” and that Nietzsche, in carrying the theory of evolution to its logical conclusion, “promulgated a philosophy that condemned democracy,...denounced Christianity,...denied the existence of God, overturned all concepts of morality,...and endeavored to substitute the worship of the superhuman for the worship of Jehovah⁶.

1 <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=b000995>

2 <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/bryanw.htm>

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 http://americanphilosophy.net/fundamentalist_modernist.pdf

It is with these things in mind that we now examine the famed Scopes Trial and Bryan's performance at the trial. As a former prominent lawyer and articulate orator, Bryan offered his services to the prosecution. I will not dwell on the particulars of the trial (for further reading, consider Phoebe Kautt's article *The Scopes Trial: Real History or Hollywood Fiction?*) but will look at the line of reasoning Bryan gave as he was grilled by Clarence Darrow, the lead attorney for the defense. Specifically I wish to consider how Bryan answered Darrow's questions concerning the days of the Creation Week and how he faltered in his *apologetic* of Holy Scripture.

[Darrow] Q--.... All right. Does the statement, "The morning and the evening were the first day," and "The morning and the evening were the second day," mean anything to you?

[Bryan] A-- I do not think it necessarily means a twenty-four-hour day.

[Darrow] Q--You do not?

[Bryan] A--No.

[Darrow] Q--What do you consider it to be?

[Bryan] A--I have not attempted to explain it. If you will take the second chapter--let me have the book. (Examining Bible.) The fourth verse of the second chapter says: "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth, when they were created in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens," the word "day" there in the very next chapter is used to describe a period. I do not see that there is any necessity for construing the words, "the evening and the morning," as meaning necessarily a twenty-four-hour day, "in the day when the Lord made the heaven and the earth."

[Darrow] Q--Then, when the Bible said, for instance, "and God called the firmament heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day," that does not necessarily mean twenty-four hours?

[Bryan] A--I do not think it necessarily does.

[Darrow] Q--Do you think it does or does not?

[Bryan] A--I know a great many think so.

[Darrow] Q--What do you think?

[Bryan] A--I do not think it does.

[Darrow] Q--You think those were not literal days?

[Bryan] A--I do not think they were twenty-four-hour days.

[Darrow] Q--What do you think about it?

[Bryan] A--That is my opinion--I do not know that my opinion is better on that subject than those who think it does.

[Darrow] Q--You do not think that ?

[Bryan] A--No. But I think it would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the earth in six days as in six years or in 6,000,000 years or in 600,000,000 years. I do not think it important whether we believe one or the other.

[Darrow] Q--Do you think those were literal days?

[Bryan] A--My impression is they were periods, but I would not attempt to argue as against anybody who wanted to believe in literal days⁷.

Here we see Bryan failing to recognize the importance of believing that the days of Creation were literal, 24-hour days, and not undetermined periods of time. This good example of a bad idea, points out how Christians *must be able to defend* the Bible from external, and internal attacks on its authority. The exhortation of Peter "Always be ready to give a defense of the hope that is within you, with meekness and fear." (1 Peter 3:15) is certainly appropriate in this instance.

Although Bryan did not fully uphold the inerrancy of Scripture, I believe we can learn from this chapter of Bryan's life and take heed as to how *we* answer when questioned.

Just a few short days after the conclusion of the Scopes Trial, Bryan passed away in his sleep. He was interred in Arlington National Cemetery, and on his headstone are the words: "He kept the faith."⁸

7 <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/day7.htm>

8 Ibid.

Sadly, we still see Christians compromising regarding the authority of Scripture.

As I stood there under the shadow of his statue in front of the Rhea County Court House, I reflected on the life of an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things in his life, and I was certain that man is not perfect, and yet he can still with God's help, do great things. Bryan did great things. As the young student eager to learn. The lawyer and politician striving to get his niche in this world. Or as the valiant defender of the faith. He *did* great things.