

Does God Care About Our Research?



Session I

Discussion Session



Audience: How do the two ideas—God cares about my research topic and God guides my decisions—work together in life?

Harper: God inspired a deep spiritual yearning and hunger early in my life that He later blocked by a rather long discipleship in the sciences, which seemed like a spiritually barren desert. But through that desert, God later provided the opportunity for the hungers to be met.

Let's face it. Work in cosmology or planetary science doesn't have much to do with disasters and poverty in Africa. But because I now work in philanthropy, there are lots of opportunities. Interestingly in our current economy, the new wealth is creating awesome opportunities for philanthropy. Many people have recently made a hundred million dollars. People are developing and looking for philanthropic ways to use large amounts of money for the service of the Kingdom. So, philanthropy has become a very interesting opportunity.

My preparation and calling, which has to do with science and religion, are now my main job. I am also involved in some other things that really have to do with needs in the Third World situation. I praise God for that. Sometimes he brings back the things he had formerly blocked.

Suppe: I encourage reading Christian biographies. It is helpful to see how God takes believers through things and uses these experiences in his service. The Lord may wait until you're 40, 50, 60, or 70 years old to use you in very fruitful ways. As a new Christian at age 36, I came to the point fairly quickly where God showed me my call. I was relieved! I felt he was calling me to be a witness on university campuses. However as a baby in Christ, I had no idea what this meant. Then I started to have the humbling experience that simply being a Christian faculty member physically present on a university campus was something that God uses profoundly. As I matured in Christ, he started using me in other ways.

Audience: I have two questions. First of all, if we have to go through a long cycle before we get into what God is calling us, we will lose time. It almost looks like the wilderness journey of the Israelites. I know that God didn't plan to spend forty years to get there but somehow it worked

that way. So I wonder, is there something you think we can do so we don't need to go around the full cycle?

My second question deals with funding research. Sometimes the agencies that give you money decide what they want you to do. Let me give you an example. We wrote a proposal to NIH because I wanted to do some work with parasites. They said the proposal was viable but they didn't fund it. Instead they gave an option. If we would give an evolutionary explanation to the parasite project, they would fund the proposal. This was not our idea, and we were uncomfortable with it. It seemed they wanted proof that we were evolutionists. What can we do as Christians to counteract such funding pressures that divert from our original research direction?

Harper: In terms of science, I think the issue of shortcuts is pretty important. We all know that the process of becoming an authority in the sciences doesn't have a shortcut—except maybe for 25-year-old Albert Einstein! But that is extremely rare. To become a master in an area of science, to speak with authority in the major journals, and to make breakthroughs in sciences require a long and serious discipleship. Only people who are gifted with the ability to do the hard work can be successful in that way. I think that there are no shortcuts. If we are to have science careers for the Kingdom, it will never be a short process.

In terms of funding, when you are in research you can't really control it. A young super bright Christian at Yale University is running a parasitology research lab there. He is trying to develop a vaccine against a common parasite infestation that doesn't kill people but harms them by causing a loss of physiological vitality that allows other diseases to be expressed. This problem affects maybe half of the world's population. The medical drug treatment costs about \$30 a year per person to control this particular kind of parasite. But there are two problems with this medical treatment. First, if the drug was used very widely, parasitic resistance would develop. Secondly, that is much too much money for people who live on less than \$2.00 a day. So there is a need for a vaccine.

I think Christians can use leverage to accomplish an end. In the last few years, we have seen the whole issue of malaria vaccine development



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hit the news because Harold Varmus and some others started talking and writing publicly about it. Some opinion journals picked up the idea that it was an ethical mandate for Americans to start funding basic research for malaria vaccine development though drug companies didn't have an interest in it. This concern has been picked up by the Gates Foundation, for example, which has just invested millions in this project. Many institutions are following suit. It has now become a mainstream cause.

If Christians are savvy in a Wilberforce sense, they can begin to exercise this kind of leadership. Wilberforce was an Englishman who was most known for his work to stop the English slave trade. He gathered men and women around him who worked and prayed with him. He campaigned and played politics supremely. On his deathbed, he actually saw his effort come to a successful conclusion. He cleverly but wisely used public, political, and personal resources to bring about a major civic transformation. Unfortunately, evangelicals today are not notable for thinking and acting that way.

Audience: Charles, when you said that sometimes the Gospel calls us to turn our back on prudence or to leave our parents and do what is required, that resonated with my own life. Given the demands of the Gospel, I wonder how you find the balance between what you called "slaying philosophical dragons" on the one hand and "subtle interlocutors" on the other?

Harper: You are really talking about the issue of Christian boldness in the sciences and the question of whether this is consistent with what I said in my concern about Christians wanting to jump forward and slay the dragon of Darwinism. I'll try to give you a thumbnail sketch of my own views on this.

When Christians look at the sciences, particularly from outside the details of evolutionary biology, paleontology, etc., we see it as a philosophical construct that tangles with Christian belief. When we see evolutionary biology as philosophy, we rightly wish to attack that philosophy for its materialistic pretensions. I think the critical mistake is the subtle assumption that a particular philosophy must follow from the science. While it is prudent for Christians to attack a particular philosophy, it is imprudent to assume that by attacking science then the philosophy is defeated. I don't know if I am making that clear, but if you are inside the sciences you realize that evolution is fundamentally different from Marxism or Freudianism. Evolution is based on a huge base of data from people studying trilobites and dating rocks and doing molecular experiments. Since evolution has this gigantic base of factual data, it is very different from some 19th century, explain-it-all wacky philosophy cooked up by some hare-brained Hegel student brooding on Wagner and world revolution. But evolution then becomes philosophically interpreted. Interestingly when evangelicals look at science from the outside and see people like Stephen J. Gould, Peter Atkins, Richard Dawkins, or Daniel Dennett philosophically interpreting science in the public sphere, evangelicals accept the interpretation as science. That's the trap, in my view. I think that evangelicals should make their own narrative of what science means. We need narrators of the sciences in terms of the book of nature, the glories of God. We have people that interpret science through the lens of philosophical atheism. So some of the public believe that is what science means. The tragedy is when we misjudge bad philosophy to be faulty science and then attack the

science wrongheadedly. We need to narrate the story of science to the public in interpretive terms of the glory of God with respectfulness to the proper respect due to the carefulness and thoroughness of the detailed science which has been done and with proper humility to recognize where Christians have made poor judgments in the past with respect to promoting what is clearly embarrassing nonsense. We, therefore in my view, should not be in a responsive mode doing battle with bad philosophy, but in a pro-active mode narrating science and offering high quality philosophically sophisticated alternatives to the science = atheism choir. That's my little philosophical vignette.

Audience: When it comes to choosing a research topic, I wonder if there might not be a more mundane factor. I'm thinking about the commitment you were talking about of 14–16 hour workdays, especially for a married person. God created marriage for companionship. I blurted out in an interview with Texas A&M a year after I got married, after they described expectations close to that, that much of my life wasn't for sale. I didn't get the job. What do you think about a Christian spending so much time in research so that her/his family seldom sees him?

Suppe: A lot of the fourteen-hour workday in research science is certainly self-inflicted. We are workaholics and have a passion for these things. We keep upping the ante. I think that is part of the nature of people who are self-selected for scientific research. So if you don't fit that mold then obviously it is much more painful. But for someone that really fits that mold it can be a very exciting thing.

Similarly the highest levels of corporate America select only certain personality types. To a very large extent, top universities select certain personality types. A trait of this personality type is the tendency not to work very well with others. That's why we have all these problems with faculty meetings! Just trying to find anyone who could be a chairman of a department is really difficult. So I think part of that problem is really just a nature of our culture. For example, I was on sabbatical one year at Cal Tech, which has a culture that is really "macho engineering." It is really very distinctive, very different from the culture at Princeton. There are similar realities in university life.

Even before I became a Christian, I started to realize that being a workaholic is actually a little bit crazy! The human character is to have your mind and desires go so much faster than your feet. I started to realize that I have a family to enjoy. By not working so much, actually I accomplish more. So this is something I encourage young faculty members to do. Work less and perhaps work smarter.

Harper: A spiritual calling is not going to be comfortable. I have certainly experienced certain tensions. As a Christian, you have to draw boundaries and you have to be distinctive about not going over them. But if you have a calling and a ministry in the academic life and if you are not an Albert Einstein, then you really do have to put in long hours. I think working long hours is an unavoidable necessity. Spiritual calling to a more conventional form of ministry, like evangelism, involves a similar sacrifice. Billy Graham has spoken of his family life as being a disaster and I think it was. His kids never saw him. So while the problem is a painful thing with which we struggle, I don't think it is unique to the academy. ☆