



An interview with Oliver Barclay

Dr Oliver Barclay is the former Director of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), and was Secretary of CiS for over thirty years. He now lives in Leicester with his wife Daisy.

What have you been doing until now?

I started off studying zoology at Cambridge. After my PhD I spent a year in teaching and research, before taking up a two-year position at UCCF. I stayed there for the next 35 years! For nearly all the time that I was on the staff of UCCF, I was also the Secretary of CiS, and I had called the first conference in 1944. I also edited Science and Christian Belief at its start. Since retiring, I have been speaking and writing a good deal.

What do you do for fun?

I enjoy spending time with family, writing, and gardening. I have four children and eleven grandchildren, some of whom live nearby. I also keep in touch with many former UCCF staff and student contacts.

Who have been the most important role models in your life?

I became a Christian through the OMF missionary, and later bishop, Frank Houghton. He was a lifelong inspiration. Professor Hooykaas and Donald MacKay informed much of my thinking on science and faith. I also learned a lot from Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose church I sometimes used to attend. My friendship with John Stott, who was my contemporary at Cambridge, has been an important influence and a great help.

What challenges have you come across as a Christian and a scientist?

The whole gamut really. I wrestled with evolution early on. I also considered the wider relationship between science and faith as a whole, and have edited journals and booklets on the topic. Early on, the debate was very different from today and we tried to move it from details of “science and the Bible” to more basic conflicts such as the status of scientific laws and miracles. On evolution the conclusion I came to was that if evolution was a scientific process, then that was no problem. If it is a philosophy however, that is a big problem, and since it is often used as a stick to beat Christians with, that basic “naturalism” has to be confronted. The question of biblical interpretation is usually in the background.

In addition to my other work constantly visiting CUs, I was always reading on one or other aspect of apologetics or Christian doctrine, not just science and faith, with a view to writing something at the end. This helped me to keep up to date, even when I was busy.

How has your faith helped you as a scientist, or vice versa?

My science has not really helped my faith, apart from helping me to delight greatly in and marvel at the wonders of God's creation. My faith did help me as a scientist though. It motivated me to work with integrity and honesty, and to pursue research that would be useful. The main focus of my research was the mechanics of animal movement and human walking. This was partly motivated by the fact that a better understanding of these movements would allow the development of more effective artificial limbs. My ultimate aim while I was studying was to teach at a university in the third-world, especially China, but the war stopped that, and I was diverted to student work, which I have loved. My scientific background proved very useful there.

What science-faith books have you most enjoyed/found most helpful?

Initially I was much helped by a long forgotten book "*Christ and the world of thought*" by Daniel Lamont who was an evangelical Professor of Apologetics in Edinburgh. Donald MacKay's writing has been the most helpful, particularly "*The Clockwork Image – a Christian perspective on science*" (IVP, 1974, reprinted 1997). He was the leading academic thinker in CiS for a long time. Until he became involved, thinking had often revolved around questions over events such as Joshua's long day. He brought a strong reformed theological background, and allowed us to get to the fundamental issues.

What do you think is the main role of CiS?

Basically, it is to establish the credibility of a Christian view of science, and show that science and faith are harmoniously compatible, instead of an either/or situation. This is especially important for new Christians. It aims to deal with the big apologetic questions, and addresses the people who use science as an excuse for not believing.

CiS is different to other professional groups in some ways, because it is more concerned with answering questions raised by non-Christians. In helping ourselves to think more clearly on these issues, we can be better equipped for the questions that we are asked, and better able to help towards an integrated Christian outlook.