

Student Conference 2012:
Questions of Science and Faith
Conference Report.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
Psalm 90:2

God has made a beautiful Creation. Nevertheless, many questions arise from scientific study of his Creation, and, sooner or later, all Christians in science must confront these challenges to their faith and practice. In light of this, CiS held the 2012 Student Conference, Questions of Science and Faith, and it was exciting to be surrounded by students who are all near the beginning of their scientific walks with God. The day was infused with intellectually challenging talks and discussions, but helpfully geared toward practical aspects of representing Christ in the laboratory and scientific community.

To begin the day, Dr. Rhoda Hawkins gave an interactive discussion asking 'How do I live out my faith day to day in the lab?' With regard to counteracting religious stereotypes, Rhoda clearly applied Scriptural principles to the novel environment of the laboratory, illustrated with real life examples. We must aim for openness, honesty and diligence, and should be ourselves, because 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). Rhoda followed this with conversational advice, as we exploit naturally arising opportunities to tell others about our faith. Again, actions often speak louder than words, and humility, respectfulness and perseverance will allow us to 'be doers of the word' (James 1:22).

Next, Prof. John Bryant addressed the question 'Can we develop a Christian toolkit for dealing with bioethical dilemmas?' John outlined the various ethical philosophies, with the distinction between virtue and deontological ethics being particularly enlightening, and provided Scriptural challenges to many of our ethical assumptions. In addition, real life examples of bioethical issues stimulated some intense and diverse discussions. This mix of academic philosophising and practical application was ideal for engaging minds and seemed to be particularly stimulating for medical students.

The third question of the day, 'How do I engage others?', was split into two halves. Firstly, Dr. Clare Foster, the outgoing CiS Student Rep, gave clear advice and instructions on setting up a CiS Local Group and getting involved in outreach to schools and universities. This involved demonstrating Science Putty and a soapy foam that can't decide if it's a liquid or solid, as well as a scientific detective game. Clare was followed by Dr. Ruth Banciewicz, who introduced the Test of Faith materials and gave a clear introduction to the science-faith issues that arise in apologetics, whether historical, hermeneutic or philosophical. For our evangelistic conversations, it is important to know and understand these issues, 'always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15), thereby taking 'every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The final talk was given by Rev. Dr. Ernest Lucas, who discussed the title of his book 'Can We Believe Genesis Today?' Ernest gave a very understandable overview of Biblical interpretation and the language of Genesis 1-3, including an exposition of John Walton's functional view of Creation. These fascinating insights into the historical and mythological context of Genesis were coupled to the relationship between Creation and modern science. As a biochemist who could survive on scholarly discussions instead of air, I was in my element during Ernest's talk; those students with a greater degree of sanity were also engrossed, as an informed, truly Biblical understanding of Genesis is important for all Christians when confronting science-faith issues in conversation or the media. Somewhat predictably, upon finishing his talk, Ernest was soon surrounded by a throng of students with endless questions.

After a short break, we split into small groups for discussions. This was a fantastic opportunity to meet new people with similar interests and challenges. In the biological group, our discussions focussed on bioethical issues arising from labwork, as well as practical aspects of living as Christians in primarily secular, or even atheistic, environments. Several people were able to take away useful advice, and the groups provided a stimulus for later discussions.

As the last activity of the day, the panel discussion provided an outlet for all the questions that had remained unasked. A good spectrum of topics was covered, with bioethics being a particularly popular choice. The talks had been challenging and often controversial, and now the speakers were confronted with even more challenging questions from their erstwhile audience.

The day was wrapped up with closing remarks from Becky Lowton. With the bookstall nearly empty (and, in my case, a missed opportunity to get a signed copy of Ernest's book) and many questions asked and answered, it was time for digestion and discussion down the pub, before heading home in the snowfall. Overall, the conference maintained an ideal balance of academic and practical questions, and we took away many challenging answers.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
Proverbs 9:10