



Science in Christian Perspective

Science College Teaching/Research

Taking the Road Less Traveled: Reflections on Entering Careers in Science

Keith B.* and Ruth Douglas Miller*
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506

In today's cultural and religious climate, the pursuit of a professional career in science as a Christian calling and ministry is certainly becoming a road less traveled. The evangelical Christian community at best views science as an apologetic tool, if not with skepticism or outright hostility. Rarely do evangelicals see science as a God-affirmed pursuit of truth or a quest toward a deeper understanding of God's creation. Nor do they recognize the vital importance of science for a proper Christian stewardship of the creation. We here recount some of the important lessons that we have learned in our personal entry into our scientific and engineering careers.

Children have an innate curiosity about their natural environment, and that interest was cultivated in both our lives. As we grew up our parents strongly affirmed our interests in nature and science. They encouraged us to see the value and enjoyment of observing nature. A love of nature and a desire to understand it grew from our childhood fascination with the insects, birds, plants and rocks we encountered around us. Keith's parents also affirmed for him the reality of God's presence and involvement in creation. Furthermore, the living witness of his parents made clear that God has a claim on all aspects of our lives. His parents' lives evidenced no sacred/secular dichotomy, but did demonstrate that sacrificial giving was the expected outcome of Christian faith.

In contrast Ruth was not raised in awareness of God, and formed her ideas of religion on her own, based on what she read. Her parents' scientific training and outlook perhaps had something to do with her empirical, experiential view of spiritual things - she chose not to believe in a God she could not see, hear, or feel. It took the body of Christ living his love toward her to convince her of the reality of God - his in a non-denominational high school fellowship group. Unfortunately the same group placed little emphasis on the life of the mind, so that Ruth went to college assuming her eventual career would have little to do with her faith except as a place to share Christ with others.

Non-denominational fellowships strongly influenced Keith during high school as well. The Jesus movement of the 1970s greatly strengthened his relationship with God. Inspired by the experience of Christian community during an outdoor charismatic Christian festival in 1973, a fellowship of high school students began meeting in his home, and like Ruth he experienced the love of God as shown through fellow believers.

Keith became increasingly aware of the central importance of the body of Christ, and the value of its diversity, during his college years. Through his involvement in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship he learned the value of divergent viewpoints in understanding and applying Scripture. Understanding the meaning of Scripture simply could not be done in isolation from the body of Christ. College provided important opportunities to experience differences in worship, theology, and culture. Keith values the opportunity he had to participate in a wide range of denominational worship styles, experiences which have proved very helpful in broadening his understanding of the Church universal.

At college Ruth experienced a new thing: a faculty mentor in her own field who was openly a Christian. This dedicated researcher and engineer was the advisor to the InterVarsity chapter on campus. He displayed over his desk a sign listing Maxwell's equations (describing all electromagnetic phenomena) as the words spoken by God to bring light into being. That may have been the first Ruth knew of "work" being an expression of service and worship of God, and those magical equations still proclaim his glory to her daily.

With the beginning of the serious study of our disciplines in graduate school, we first came to understand what was involved in advancing our understanding of the natural world. It was very enlightening to realize the degree of disagreement and debate within the scientific community, and it was exciting to become a part of that debate. It also was apparent that scientific researchers, although affected by a variety of personal biases and pressures, are driven by a passionate desire to pursue truth. Scientists vigorously defend a particular hypothesis or interpretation because they believe it to more truly reflect the reality of the natural world than a competing interpretation. The often intense debates occurring at scientific meetings and in the scientific literature are expressions of this commitment to truth, and provide continual critical tests of our present understanding of nature.

While the parallels between the search for truth in nature and the understanding of Scripture seem obvious now, it was not until our participation in a graduate Bible study group at the University of Rochester that we really began to think in terms of integrating our faith and learning. Finding the graduate fellowship at Rochester (and Keith!) and the ASA was "coming home" for Ruth - here was a group of Christians of like faith who valued the life of the mind! This group of graduate students, diverse in both denominational backgrounds and chosen academic disciplines, provided a fertile environment for the stimulating discussion of our common Christian faith. This group spelled out clearly the idea that what we do, in the lab, in industry, or in the classroom is all service to God. We pursued truth in a holistic sense. We brought our particular understandings of nature, history, and philosophy, obtained from our academic work, to bear on our scriptural interpretation and application, and we brought scriptural principles to bear on issues we faced in our academic pursuits. Because we were willing (or became willing!) to question our own theological positions and consider diverse perspectives, we all grew in our understanding of God. This would not have occurred in an environment in which we were isolated from other theological traditions and from the perspectives of different academic disciplines. We fear this is precisely the situation for much of the evangelical Church, which has isolated itself not only from the academy but also from other believers. One expression of this is the lack of appreciation for the history of ideas - even the history of our own theological traditions.

In more recent years, we have continued to grow in our understanding of God's claim on all reality, and on all aspects of our lives. Stewardship includes much more than our money and time. It should be a lifestyle that includes the life of the mind and what we do in our chosen professions. There is indeed no sacred/secular distinction. This was made very clear to us during our visit to Cambridge,

England in 1994 for the C. S. Lewis Summer Institute. Lining the walls and floors of the cathedrals and village churches in England are memorials to the lives of Christians recognized for their service, not as missionaries or pastors, but as honored contributors to the sciences and arts. The buildings themselves are testimonies to the highest attainments in art and engineering. In these places Christians recognize lives lived in devoted pursuit of science, literature or art as fulfilling a divine calling. It is unfortunate for both the Church and our culture that this understanding has been largely lost in the United States.

From our own experiences entering the scientific and engineering professions, we would place several challenges before the evangelical church in the United States. (1) Encourage young people in the pursuit of their God-given talents and affirm their spiritual callings to serve God in their professions. (2) Recognize the value of divergent viewpoints in issues not central to the Christian faith. We need to openly discuss the different perspectives on issues held by committed believers. When we are unwilling to consider the positions of others, or to question our own strongly held beliefs, we restrain the Holy Spirit from guiding us to a fuller understanding of Scripture and its application in a very technological and scientific world. How can we deal redemptively with the complex issues we face in our society if we do not value the professional and academic training required to understand them? (3) Encourage young people to think deeply about their faith and the world. Discuss the contributions of the great Christian thinkers of the past and present. Honor those who have made seminal contributions to the advancement of human knowledge.

For those who may be just beginning their path toward a career in science or engineering, we offer the following words of encouragement. In studying the processes of the natural world, you are watching the hand of God at work. By striving to understand the workings of creation, you are equipping yourself to fulfill the stewardship mandate given to us by God. Never think of your calling as a scientist or engineer to be of less value than a calling to "full-time ministry" as a pastor, teacher, or missionary. Each of us is called to full-time service to Christ and the Church. Be assured that the pursuit of knowledge and truth honors God, and empowers the body of Christ to be a transforming power in society. While in school seek out Christian faculty as mentors - and don't think that secular colleges employ no Christian faculty. The faculty ministry of InterVarsity (smorrison@ivcf.org), for example, is working to develop a mentoring program in colleges and universities throughout the U.S. Finally, the academy, and professions, can be engaged by Christians who demonstrate a mastery of their disciplines, and who take seriously the views of others. It is the passionate pursuit of truth, not a defensive response to criticism or a reactionary denouncement of others, that will make the Christian worldview a respected voice. Above all, a life lived with integrity and in sacrificial service will reveal the reality of a God who demands our entire lives.

**ASA Fellows*
