

Time Complications

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SciTech† Editor/Publisher

Hang around people who actually do science and before too long you will hear the phrase “bench scientist.” It connotes and might even denote the *practice* of science—lab coat frocked, beaker in hand, eyes affixed to microscope oculars, hoping *this* culture will sustain the hypotheses. If you Google “bench scientist” you’ll even find some Jeff-Foxworthy-styled “You might be a bench scientist if ...” lines.

For example, “You might be a bench scientist if someone mentions she has a bacterial infection, and your reply is ‘Really? What kind?’” Or “You might be a bench scientist if you have talked to your cultures—you swear it helps them grow.” Or “You might be a bench scientist if you have a pubmed widget and use it constantly.” [For non-bench scientists, PubMed is a service of the National Library of Medicine. It includes over 15 million citations from MEDLINE and additional life science journals for biomedical articles back to the 1950s. The widget permits a Macintosh or PC quick access to PubMed’s links to full text articles and other related resources.]

My college roommate became a bench scientist. I did not.

To maintain the idiom, I’m what you could call a “bench preacher.” My frock is a pulpit gown, my beaker a commentary, my microscope a book or a meeting, my culture a congregation. If bench scientists *do* science, bench preachers *do* ministry.

(We even have our own “you might be a preacher” lines — “You might be a preacher if your children want to be paid for any stories/references/examples/quotes about or from them that you use in sermons ... and want editing rights to same. Cash only.” Or “You might be a preacher if your nightmares involve forgetting the deceased’s name at a funeral or walking into the sanctuary Sunday morning and realizing you’ve forgotten to prepare a sermon.”)

So as a bench preacher, what am I doing editing and occasionally writing in a science-related journal? I’ll come back to that.

This is the 50th issue of *SciTech*†. When the Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology and the Christian Faith was formed,

Dan Martin was elected vice-president and one of his duties was to edit a regular newsletter for the membership. The first issue came out in September 1992. Beginning in 1993 I helped Dan publish *SciTech*† which he continued to edit until 1997. Since then I’ve been responsible for both editing and publishing what attempts to be a “quarterly” newsletter/journal of interest and information for PASTCF members and friends. (I also attempt to maintain the Association’s website, but that’s another story and perhaps another article.)

In its 15 years of existence, the cumulative material of *SciTech*† is, I think, rather impressive. The previous 49 issues total 381 pages with over 309,000 words — all of which aims in one way or another to help achieve the Association’s purpose and objectives (which have been printed in every issue except the first—see the last page of this issue).



Regular *SciTech*† readers know that article after article talk about the implications of science/technology for Christian faith. They talk about the faith’s implications for science and technology. We’ve even created a ‘Science as Christian Vocation’ recognition—since his death in 1998 named in honor of Dan Martin—to honor science/technology professionals and science educators who pursue their vocations with a clear sense of divine calling.

But it’s not simple, this science-technology-faith thing. Science and technology are gigantic and complicated subjects with a vast literature. Christian faith in all its dimensions and many connections is a gigantic and complicated subject with a vast literature. Thinking about science or thinking about

faith are complicated enough by themselves. Thinking intelligently about them together, well, that adds at least a couple of magnitudes of complication.

I’m guessing this is one of the reasons PASTCF has not grown as an Association the way we would like or the way it must if we are going to better accomplish our purpose and objectives. We began in 1992 with about 100 members. Today we have 300+ members. A 200% increase might appear impressive. But note the denominational context. Approximately 1 in 6 Presbyterian Church (USA) members has a college degree in math, science, or engineering (about 1 in 5 elders and 1 in 10 clergy). In round numbers this means that at least 300,000 Presbyterians have college-level training in scientific and/or technological fields and a significant majority of these are likely gainfully employed in science/technology-related endeavors. Yet less than one-tenth of one percent belong to the **one** Presbyterian organization specifically related to the science-technology-faith conversation. *Why?*

The PASTCF Board talks about this a lot and we can only guess. Here’s my guess. The science-technology-faith conversation is complicated. Most Presbyterians I know are busy and find their lives complicated enough already. Few of us need more complications and, speaking as one bench preacher, it’s tough enough being knowledgeable about the Bible, church history, theology, ethics, and parish practicalities. Thinking about how science and technology affect what we do seems a bridge too far. Mostly we just want the sound system and copier to work.

It’s also complicated because we live in a contentious time. Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett, like some infernal law firm, happily put believers in the dock to prove them guilty (and foolish) for having faith. (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*).

Of course, the “other side” has its own attack dogs. The late Jerry Falwell once took on the scientists when he told Ted Koppel in a *Nightline* interview, “Of course, we don’t believe in the Big Bang or anything like that. We believe that one morning God pulled

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his overalls on and whipped up the universe before breakfast.” (The bench preacher in me admits that this is not an entirely wrongheaded paraphrase of the folksy intent of Genesis 2. Who’s to say that when God got down in the dust to form the *adam* he didn’t put his overalls on first?)

Putting Dawkins *et al.* and Falwell *et al.* in one’s brain at the same time can cause one’s head to explode. Complication. However, the biggest complication comes, I think, not from far left or far right or any far place. It comes not from those who devalue faith or science. It arises just from thinking about truth.

In an August 23, 2005 editorial in the *New York Times*, Verlyn Klinkenborg, a member of the Times editorial board and visiting professor of literature at Bard College, talked about how grasping the depth of time is the first step in understanding evolution. He mentioned that a team of paleontologists had recently announced finding several fossilized dinosaur embryos that were 190 million years old—some 90 million years older than any dinosaur embryos found before. He went on to mention other staggering numbers.

- The universe is perhaps 14 billion years old.
- Earth is some 4.5 billion years old.
- The oldest hominid fossils are between 6 million and 7 million years old.
- The oldest distinctly modern human fossils are about 160,000 years old.

Klinkenborg wrote, “One of the most powerful limits to the human imagination is our inability to grasp, in a truly intuitive way, the depths of terrestrial and cosmological time.... It’s been approximately 3.5 billion years since primeval life first originated on this planet. That is not an unimaginable number in itself, if you’re thinking of simple, discrete units like dollars or grains of sand. But 3.5 billion years of biological history is different. All those years have really passed, moment by moment, one by one. They encompass an actual, already lived reality, encompassing all the lives of all the organisms that have come and gone in that time.”

The editorial says that thinking about this, accepting the truth of it, is a lot to absorb and not surprisingly many refuse to absorb it. “Nearly every attack on evolution—whether it is called intelligent design or plain creationism, synonyms for the same faith-based rejection of evolution—ultimately requires a foreshortening of cosmological, geological and biological time. ***Humans feel much more content imagining a world of more human proportions,*** with a shorter time scale and a simple narrative

sense of cause and effect. But what we prefer to believe makes no difference.” (emphasis added)

It’s about truth, you see, and ***imagining a world of more human proportions*** in the face of the truth of deep time is what makes this science-technology-faith thing complicated. As a bench preacher for almost 35 years, without equivocation I can attest to the fact that typical church members, even scientists, often don’t want to think about deep time.

They never express it in those terms, of course. But I’ve stood at many gravesides praying, in the words of *The Worshipbook*, “Lift heavy sorrow, and give us good hope in Jesus, so we may bravely walk our earthly way, and look forward to glad heavenly reunion.” And I know that even if the deceased was the most ardent of evolutionists, her or his family and loved ones are not contemplating biological life being around on this planet for 3.5 billion years or that the earliest truly human species were around 160,000 years ago.

As the creed says, “In life and in death we belong to God.” But it sure feels better if the God to whom we belong and the Universe this God created are in more human proportion. I don’t stand at the graveside with a grieving family and pray the prayers while keeping my fingers crossed behind my back. But in those moments I am deeply conscious that we all want God to be more our size.

Is it any wonder that a “young earth” of say 10,000 years has a powerful emotional appeal? Is it any wonder that the *Left Behind* books sell umpteen millions because the whole cosmic drama is wrapped up in understandable time-scale? Is it any wonder that the truth of deep time, if seriously considered, can and does cause doubt in the God of the Bible and the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? So many just give up on the God thing. Too complicated. And many believers just give up on the hard work of ***holding together*** the truth of deep time and the truth of the God who created it.

So I’ll answer now the question posed paragraphs ago about what a bench preacher like me, mostly untrained in science, is doing editing and occasionally writing in a science-related journal. It’s just doing what I can. Perhaps not as high-mindedly as the unnamed woman in Mark 14 who anointed Jesus’ feet with a costly ointment and was scolded for her trouble by everyone except Jesus. But are we not all called to do what we can because all truth, including that of deep time, is God’s truth?

Others on the PASTCF Board or those who write in these pages can and have dis-

cussed more cogently the pros and cons (mostly the cons) of so-called Intelligent Design. For me, I arrive at its limitations from its irony. Intelligent Design, which as a movement is simply an evolved creationism, has arisen roughly during the same lifetime as PASTCF. That’s ironic in itself. But what is most ironic to me is that ID invokes “irreducible complexity” to argue for, almost to protect, what will inevitably be a “smaller god,” one who acts demonstrably in the world and, presumably, in a more human timescale.

We should probably all read again J.B. Phillips’ *Your God Is Too Small*. Published in 1952, it remains one of the most important and compelling little books of theology ever written. Phillips wrote: “All ‘lofty’ concepts of the greatness of God need to be carefully watched lest they turn out to be mere magnifications of certain human characteristics. We may, for instance, admire the ascetic ultra-spiritual type which appears to have ‘a mind above’ food, sexual attraction, and material comfort, for example. But if in forming a picture of the Holiness of God we are simply enlarging this spirituality and asceticism to the ‘nth’ degree we are forced to some peculiar conclusions. Thus we may find ourselves readily able to imagine God’s interest in babies, (for are they not ‘little bits of heaven?’), yet unable to imagine His approval, let alone design, of the acts which led to their conception!”

What I’m trying to say and why I do what I can for PASTCF is this: I don’t want God to be too small. Nor do I want my “lofty concepts” of God to be merely magnified images of my own thoughts. So I ***must*** think about deep time and I ***must*** think about God and I ***must*** think about them together. Bench preachers and bench scientists and everyone else need to do the same, I suggest. If you’re reading this, you are already doing it. Let’s find some others to join us.

I think a similar hope was expressed in Klinkenborg’s final paragraph. “The essential, but often well-disguised, purpose of intelligent design, is to preserve the myth of a separate, divine creation for humans in the belief that only that can explain who we are. But there is a destructive hubris, a fearful arrogance, in that myth. It sets us apart from nature, except to dominate it. It misses both the grace and the moral depth of knowing that humans have only the same stake, the same right, in the Earth as every other creature that has ever lived here. There is a righteousness—a responsibility—in the deep, ancestral origins we share with all of life.”

Amen to that.