

Science & Faith Sermon: **Science without conscience will ruin the soul.**

St Marks Spotswood, 20 September, 2014. Kari Gobius.

Good morning, today I will be continuing and concluding our Science & Faith Sermon series.

I have just been to a major conference in Boston:

The knowledge shared at the conference indicates that 30 years of research is beginning to pay dividends in the improvement of people's lives.

The subject of discussion was about Pathogenic *E. coli* producing a toxin that can cause permanent kidney damage. We are managing the presence of the organism in the beef supply chain and at the same time are now able to have more effective treatments when people do get sick.

This is a wonderful example of scientific research knowledge being used for the betterment of life.

At the close of the conference an imminent Danish researcher had been called upon to provide a summary of the significant new research that had been presented over the previous 4 days.

I was quite astounded when he began with a quote from 1532, made by a French author called Francois Rabelais.

Francois Rabelais is recorded as having written "**Wisdom entereth not into a malicious mind, and knowledge without conscience is but the ruin of the soul**".

This astounded me because it is so foreign to have matters of conscience and values introduced into the halls of science. In today's world, the halls of science usually only want to discuss matters of the mind which are considered factual or objectively determined as true. Discussion is always tightly constrained within the boundaries of these walls. The names of the 4 walls which make up the halls of modern-day science are called factual, rational, objective, and secular. These 4 walls are considered to be independent of values.

In these days of widespread internet connectivity, I was able to quickly Google Francois Rabelais and uncover more of the context of what he wrote.....

La sagesse ne sera pas entrer dans un esprit malveillant, science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme.

A malicious mind can't be wise, and science without conscience will ruin the soul.

With this statement Rabelais has identified several notable points:

1. He has used the word **science** in French, which becomes **knowledge** when translated into English

¹ François Rabelais. 1532. Pantagruel. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/François_Rabelais

2. He asserts that science or knowledge that is exercised **without** a conscience will ruin the soul, and
3. He links the notion that science and knowledge exercised without conscience may result in malevolence (*or bad intent*).

Lets begin to understand the first point -

The word science comes from the latin word SCIENTIA whose definition is: of knowledge, science; *especially : knowledge based on demonstrable and reproducible data.*

Omniscient definition, having complete or unlimited knowledge, awareness, or understanding; perceiving all things.

Prescient definition, having prescience, or knowledge of things or events before they exist or happen; having foresight:

Conscience: derived from the Latin word conscientia, con-‘with’ + scientia - ‘knowledge’.

Therefore, conscience essentially means ‘with knowledge’.

With these considerations in mind, today I will use the words science and knowledge interchangeably.

I will have more to say about the 2nd and 3rd points later.

SCIENCE IS ESSENTIAL TO OUR MODERN WORLD. SCIENCE IS ABLE TO HELP US MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT HEALTH, TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, AGRICULTURE & FOOD PRODUCTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL USE AND MANAGEMENT. Without scientific research and the transformative knowledge that it generates we would not have pharmaceutical drugs, airplanes that fly hundreds of people from Los Angeles to Melbourne without stopping, satellites, cars, trains, tractors, email and mobile phones. All of these things, in and of themselves are good, and each one is able to bring glory to God and help in the building of His Kingdom.

I could give first hand examples of each of these to illustrate how Christians use these to share the Gospel of Jesus and give Glory to Him.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT KNOWLEDGE & SCIENCE?

In Psalm 24 the Bible declares:

1 THE earth is the LORD’s and **all** that is in it, **the world, and those who live in it,**

2 **for he has founded it** on the seas, and **established it** on the rivers.

3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?

In these short verses, as well as right throughout the whole Bible narrative, it is clear that God considers ALL of His creation, including the creative knowledge that springs from **those who live in it** to be His.

ALL that is in the world belongs to God;

ALL the SCIENCE and **ALL the KNOWLEDGE** that exist and is being created, **should belong to God, and bring glory to God.**

Since God is a God of conscience - seen through both His judgement of evil and His mercy - ALL the SCIENCE and ALL the KNOWLEDGE that exists and is being created, should belong to and bring glory to Him, SO science must ALSO have a conscience.

Three quick illustrations of unconscionable use of science:

1. WW2 Nazi medical experiments on prisoners - deliberate creation of body wounds and infection with tetanus and gas gangrene bacteria, followed by deliberate restriction of blood supply - all in order to test experimental antibiotics
2. Failure to reasonably respond to what scientific data is telling us about acidification of the global oceans due to increased CO₂ absorption.
3. Adding toxic hormones or chemicals to food supplies for short term economic gain

In 1597 Sir Francis Bacon, a Christian, philosopher and scientist, known as the father of the scientific method, noted that "Knowledge is Power".

In Bacon's scientific method, science and knowledge progress by theory and hypothesis testing. Each hypothesis is rigorously tested in order to demonstrate its reliability. When hypotheses are tested rigorously, they are tested using a variety of approaches to ensure that the new answers or knowledge is reproducible and consistent with other related science and understanding.

In this fallen world, the advantage of science being able to correct and build on itself in this way is consistent with progressive redemption and promotes a more accurate understanding of the nature of God's creation. Self-correcting science in its best and most honourable form is able to embrace the biblical narrative that 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'.

However, this form of scientific progress requires a humility that operates at both a personal (I don't know because I don't have all the answers) and a systemic (science is good and helpful but it may not be adequate to answer all the questions that arise on this earth). The problem for Western scientific rationalism is that it has become so successful in translating knowledge for technological innovation, that it now thinks this is the **only** or most important measure of human existence.

Not surprisingly, we see that the created no longer thinks that it is created, and it's proud scientific rationalism has elevated its status to that of the creator.

Western scientific rationalism has become a new idol and we know that the purpose of all idols is that they are designed to replace the one true God. With this idolatrous distortion, we see that "Knowledge is Power" can become very dangerous.

No longer is scientific knowledge EMPOWERING of the Creator, or EMPOWERING of all His Creation, but rather the idol of Western scientific rationalism has become arrogantly self-serving, self-promoting and uses its power to condemn and suppress alternative world views, particularly Christian views that reject it's almighty self-serving idolatry.

Under the repressive power of scientifically rational secular culture, the Church has largely retreated to the margins and we have difficulty living holistic lives that fully proclaim 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'. **Charles Ringma, an Australian Christian writer, reflects on how Christians today often live lives that are influenced by the spirit of the age rather than the Spirit of Christ².**

“While we have made a dichotomy between the natural world, as the world of science, and the spiritual world of faith, our Christian forebears made no such distinctions. God is above, but also in all things. **Sadly, we moderns have become terribly reductionist. Things of God and of faith have largely been relegated to the private sphere of life and to the sanctuary. All else has been relegated to the secular sphere of life.** Neither the biblical story nor our Christian foremothers and forefathers support such a view. In fact, the opposite is the case. God as the creator and sustainer of the universe and of our world is involved in all things. No sphere of life is outside of God’s love and concern. St. Patrick, reflecting an Irish spirituality of God in the midst of all the daily activities of life, writes: “He inspires all things, he quickens all things, he is over all things, he supports all things.” This is a wonderful vision of life. God’s Spirit at work in nature. God’s Spirit renewing our inner life. God’s Spirit sustaining and empowering the church. The Spirit at work in families and social institutions. God’s presence everywhere working unseen and mysteriously to sustain, renew, and bring goodness and love. We will need new eyes of faith to see such things. But the biblical story and the inspiration of the Spirit can give us such a new vision. And such a vision can provide a new impetus to the contemporary church in its witness to the world.”

NT Wright has also written of the power exerted by secular knowledge over those who choose to have faith in Jesus Christ³.

“All this gives us reason to ask, just why it is that when we say there is ‘no other name than Jesus, by which we must be saved’ has been so unpopular within the politically correct climate of the last few generations in the Western world. ‘No other name’? People say this is arrogant, or exclusive, or triumphalist. So, indeed, it can be, if Christians use the name of Jesus to further their own power or prestige. But for many years now, in the Western world at least, the boot has been on the other foot. It is the secularists and the relativists who have acted the part of the chief priests, protecting their cherished temple of modernist thought, within which there can be no mention of resurrection, no naming of a name like that of Jesus.”

In these descriptions by Ringma and Wright we have to recognise the boundary between faith and knowledge.

² Ringma C.R. 2013. Hear the Ancient Wisdom. Cascade Books. Oregon. ISBN 13:978-1-62032-772-2. eISBN 13:978-1-62189-578-7. January 20. God the Sustainer.

³ Wright N.T. 2008. Acts for Everyone. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. London. ISBN 978-0-281-07184-5. eISBN 978-0-281-07286-6. Resurrection plus the name of Jesus equals trouble.

Through science we can have knowledge about so much of the 'how' of the universe, and as David Barnett so skilfully pointed out for us in his opening sermon on Faith & Science, many of the scientific understandings point clearly to the work of our Creator.

Using and understanding this legitimate knowledge is a healthy thing; it equips us for reasonably engaging with the diversity of viewpoints around us and as I have already said, allows us to join our Creator in continuing His work of redeeming the world.

The dynamic interaction of scientific knowledge and knowledge from revelation and faith means that as a Christian and professional scientist I need great discernment to understand when knowledge is being used for idolatrous power OR for Jesus glory through the tools of service and empowerment.

As Christians we need to ENSURE THAT KNOWLEDGE DOESN'T BECOME AN IDOL.

1 Cor 13:8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; **as for knowledge, it will come to an end.** 9 **For we know only in part,** and we prophesy only in part; 10 **but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.** 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 **For now we see in a mirror, dimly,** but then we will see face to face. **Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.** 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Here is an injunction to hold knowledge lightly; for knowledge on this earth is something that we can only know in part; it may well pass away and at the restoration of the earth, knowledge will come to an end.

Why will knowledge come to an end? Perhaps the nature of the new creation will no longer require science & knowledge. Since science and knowledge are applied to overcome difficulties, often due to fallenness on this earth, these difficulties are not likely to be there in a fully redeemed creation.

While in this imperfect world we need new knowledge in order to overcome brokenness, we also see that knowledge brings renewal; as the old is superseded and replaced by the new, we may even be contributing to God's work of redemption of the earth.

Think of LED lighting, solar energy, wind energy, battery storage, renewable liquid fuels, genetic medicine, telecommunications through wireless and satellite internet - these are all illustrations of the extraordinary power of science and technology to create redemptive and beneficial outcomes that exceed previous generations of science-led solutions which are now understood to be inadequate.

Another illustration of empowering science can be seen in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - This Foundation has an endowment budget of over \$40Bn and is concerned with

- helping the world's poorest people lift themselves out of hunger and poverty
- harnessing advances in health science and technology to save lives in developing countries
- improving U.S. high school and postsecondary education and supporting vulnerable children and families in Washington State

Bill Gates and Microsoft changed the world through science, technology and software. Now, with those proceeds, he and his wife are changing the world again, twice in his lifetime.

At the same time we also need to be vigilant and aware of the intent of secularists and relativists to use rational knowledge as an idol to bulldoze and overwhelm Christians into abandoning witness to our resurrection faith in the public sphere. In order to overcome these forces Charles Ringma observes⁴

“The modern world with its science and rationality has stripped the world of its sacredness. But we can re-enchant our world. The modern world has reduced most things to mere utilitarianism. Sadly, this also includes the way we treat humans. While we are productive we are valued, but we don't seem to have a sacred value in and of ourselves. This crass, functional way of understanding life and the world is denigrating and demeaning. We urgently need to recover a new vision of the world and of ourselves. Several theological starting points are key. God is the creator of the world and the universe. We are made in God's image. The world reflects something of the glory and greatness of God. And all of life is to be lived to the glory of God. This opens up the way for us to see everything with new eyes. Everything bears the mark of God and all of life is sacred and precious.”

How can we then identify the appropriate balance of faith and knowledge???

If we are made in the image and likeness of God, and science is yet another gift from God, how then should we make use of knowledge? Of course the answer must be that we should use knowledge to Glorify Him; and how should we Glorify Him with knowledge? We should use knowledge to build relationship and community; to sacrificially love and build up one-another.

The Bible frequently refers to knowledge and wisdom at the same time - the book of Proverbs is a prominent example Prov 2:6

For the LORD gives wisdom;

from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

from this we can understand and recognise that science/knowledge must be used carefully, justly and for the Glory of the Lord, and that this is a very ancient understanding; indeed, a very ancient demonstration of wisdom.

As I close, let me return to the writing of Francois Rabelais' in the year 1532:

⁴ Ringma C.R. 2013. Hear the Ancient Wisdom. Cascade Books. Oregon. ISBN 13:978-1-62032-772-2. eISBN 13:978-1-62189-578-7. September 26. Recovering a Vision of the Sacred.

I found out that Rabelais' wisdom was even greater than first apparent. Perhaps my Danish colleague was not aware of the full passage, or perhaps the way in which Rabelais expanded on how wisdom, science and conscience should work together would have been a bridge too far inside the 4 walls of 21st century science?

For the more complete copy of what Rabelais wrote is:

But because, as the wise man Solomon saith, Wisdom entereth not into a malicious mind, and that knowledge without conscience is but the ruin of the soul, it behoveth thee to serve, to love, to fear God, and on him to cast all thy thoughts and all thy hope, and by faith formed in charity to cleave unto him, so that thou mayst never be separated from him by thy sins. Suspect the abuses of the world. Set not thy heart upon vanity, for this life is transitory, but the Word of the Lord endureth for ever. Be serviceable to all thy neighbours, and love them as thyself. Reverence thy preceptors: shun the conversation of those whom thou desirest not to resemble, and receive not in vain the graces which God hath bestowed upon thee.

Or a more modern English translation:

Wisdom won't enter into a malicious mind, and knowledge without conscience will be ruin of the soul. Therefore, you should serve, love, and fear God; and cast all your thoughts and hope on Him; and in faith formed in good works cling to Him, so that your sins will never separate you from Him. Be aware of the evil and temptations of the world and don't be motivated by your own ego and pride, because life on earth is temporary, but the Word of the Lord endures for ever. Serve all your neighbours, and love them as you love yourself. Respect your teachers: avoid keeping company with people who you don't want to be like and don't take for granted the Grace that God has given to you.

May the Lord Bless you with science, knowledge, wisdom, hope, faith and love. AMEN.