

ARTICLES

CAN THE CHRISTIAN AFFORD SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH?

J. Mailen Kootsey
Professor of Biophysics
Andrews University

The Christian has responsibilities that call for all his time and resources. Some thought-provoking ideas are presented on the appropriateness of spending some of these precious resources on scientific research.

Urgency is the keynote of the Christian's life. Before him is the high goal of restoring the image of God, and, in the background, the ever-present uncertainty of life itself. His responsibility to others is outlined in the Master's commission and his time scale is shortened by fulfilling prophecy. With such a challenge before him, can the Christian afford to spend time and resources on scientific research?

I would like to suggest a positive answer to this question: exploration of the natural world is not out of character with the Christian perspective and the eschatological event. Before listing some reasons, however, a word of caution is in order. Anything said in defense of research is not meant as a blanket justification for any research done by any person in any circumstance. For the Christian (as for anyone), time and resources should be spent on research only when there is a reasonable expectation of some return on the investment, whether the return be in the form of a practical benefit for mankind or the more esoteric fulfillment of the desire to explore and create. The following discussion is an attempt to list some of the positive factors that a scientist who is a Christian might take into account. One or more of these factors might be applicable in a specific instance.

The word "research" suggests different things to different people. One thinks of a term paper made up of quotations gleaned from library sources while another pictures a massive laboratory filled with gleaming instruments. When the word "research" is used here, it will be taken to mean a systematic investigation of the natural world at any level from sub-nuclear particles to galaxies or from single-celled organisms to human societies. Such an investigation usually combines planned observation with a theoretical synthesis and aims for an understanding of complexity at one level in terms of more familiar ideas at another level. This discussion will be limited to scientific research simply because justifications in this area are less likely to occur to a layman; research in theology or archaeology is

not as prone to be misunderstood. The discussion will also exclude development of technology. The Christian might have need for this as well, but the rationale for it is usually quite different from what will be presented below.

First on the practical Christian's list of scientific needs undoubtedly would come those specific areas where he has a different viewpoint or approach, one that is not likely to be pursued by others. Two examples that immediately spring to mind are the history of the earth and the principles of healthful living. Majority opinion in some of these areas (e.g., the origin of man) occasionally is strongly opposed to the Christian's view. This is surprising only so long as one persists in the myth that all scientists are completely objective in their pursuit of knowledge. To organize facts without bias is a worthy goal, but one that is, in fact, rarely achieved. A scientist's beliefs influence not only his theories, but his methods and even his observations. Since the majority of scientists work from a non-Christian perspective, it is to be expected that this majority will occasionally tip the balance of "evidence" against the Christian view. Thus the Christian has a positive responsibility to work from his own viewpoint (with the same goal of objectivity) to provide balancing facts and syntheses. Is it reasonable to ask a non-Christian for a Christian commitment when balancing evidence has not been provided?

Christ's commission to "go into all the world"¹ undoubtedly refers not only to geographic coverage, but to various social and intellectual strata as well. It is an established principle that a person is influenced most strongly by someone similar to himself in age, education and general interests. Thus, one reason that the Christian might well devote some of his energies to scientific research is that he sees scientists as a group who need the gospel, and he wants to be in the best possible position to communicate with them. The habit of constantly being critical (in the best sense, we hope) of new ideas gives scientists the appearance of being intellectual snobs. In fact some are, but more often it is because scientists are used to responding to an appeal from logic and evidence. One who is familiar with this process is best able to present a knowledge of God and His plan for man in a way that will appeal to minds of similar training.

The Christian systems of education often include scientific subjects at all levels from primary to graduate school. It is true that the goals are somewhat different than for similar instruction in other schools, but there is no reason why the quality should not be as high or higher. Teachers who lead students through the dense forest of facts and techniques must have more to offer than simply having read through a new textbook ahead of their students. Particularly at the upper levels, the teacher should be on such familiar terms with his field that he can organize the facts and ideas

in the way that will best meet the needs of a particular group of students. Active participation in creative thinking is the best (and virtually the only) way to keep the teacher “alive” for his students. A single intensive experience during graduate school is not sufficient for a lifetime, either to provide information in depth and breadth or to maintain the stimulus of learning itself. All too frequently an advanced degree becomes the end of learning when it is meant to be only the “commencement.”

For a person who believes in creation and in a continued close relationship between creation and Creator, one of the positive aspects of research is the knowledge that study of the creation is in reality study of the Creator Himself. It is through the combination of nature and revelation that we have the complete picture of God. Such divine characteristics as unfailing dependability and the exercise of creativity circumscribed by principle are readily apparent to a person who pursues nature’s secrets.

So far, the discussion has centered around the results obtained from research. The next positive factor, and in my mind the most important, has to do with the process itself. An oft-cited quotation from the well-known book *Education* reads: “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator — individuality, power to think and to do.... It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought.”²

How, exactly, do you train a person to be an independent thinker? Every part of the body responds to exercise by increasing in capability, and the mind is no exception: the capacity for independent thought increases as independent thought is practiced. In very specific terms, three steps are involved: recognizing a question or problem, solving it by the application of general principles, and finally testing the solution to evaluate its worth. A person can be described as “not a mere reflector” if he can find solutions without directly copying someone who has gone before. Such independence does have its limits; independence from God and complete independence from other men in all circumstances is not justified. There is a time for cooperation and for learning from others, but there is also a need for individuality and independence.

While the sentences quoted above are often used (and rightly so) in the context of religion, the principle applies to the study of nature as well: “Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation.”³ In the study of nature, research is the ultimate exercise and test of the capability for independent thought. The researcher pits his powers of logic and organization against the very facts themselves, much as a tracker follows a faint trail through an

unknown wilderness. Any mental laziness or other indiscretion sooner or later is exposed by the arrival of more information. The experience of discovery is a powerful reward for the effort expended, one that is not easily described to a person who has not experienced it. Textbook problems are good practice, but knowing that the answers are in the back of the book or in some teacher's key takes the keen edge off both the challenge and the reward.

If the capacity for original thought is a characteristic of the Creator, then it must be that those who are striving in all ways to be like their Creator should be the most capable of imitating Him in this respect. Careful attention to the principles of physical and mental health, for example, should give the mind the best possible chance to develop. The humble and realistic evaluation of one's own capabilities (in comparison with other men and with the Creator) which is essential in the Christian pattern can prevent the most frequent downfall of gifted men — pride. The Christian will recognize that the worth of research is not measured in grandeur of apparatus or abstractness of theory, but in the quality of effort it calls forth from the mind.

Yes, the Christian may very well have time for research. Because of his sense of urgency and because he considers all his resources as valuable gifts and not to be wasted, the Christian will be more careful about his reasons for research. Its pursuit will not be for selfish gain, but that through it he might grow to serve more fully. When kept in correct balance with other aspects of life, it can help him restore his Creator's image and demonstrate it to a world in need.

ENDNOTES

1. Matthew 28:19.
2. White EG. 1952. Education. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, p 17.
3. Ibid.