

AN OPEN LETTER TO GRADUATING SCIENCE (AND NON-SCIENCE) STUDENTS
AT NAZARENE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Dan Lawrence, Ph.D.
Northwest Nazarene University

What is it like to be a Christian and a scientist in the world today? To those of you who are on the path to becoming a Chemist, Biologist, Engineer, or Physicist, there are some things I think you should be prepared for. To those of you who aren't going to be a Chemist, Biologist, Engineer, or Physicist, pay attention, because you will be called on to love them in your work places and churches. And they will need it.

To those of you who are going to be scientists and engineers in the near future, here is some hint of what you are about to experience. As you go out to attend graduate school or get your first job, there will come a time quickly where you will identify yourself as a Christian. This identification will have an immediate result of your being viewed as an inferior scientist/engineer to those around you, even to other fellow Christian scientists and engineers. You will spend the next few months (or years) having to prove that you are a real scientist. Christian fundamentalism in the US has taught all non-Christian scientists that Christians are fools. You cannot be a REAL scientist if you are a Christian. Oh, they will not come out and say that – well, some might – but with a subtle roll of the eyes or change in body language, you will see it happen. It will confuse you. In our Christian universities, being a Christian and a scientist or engineer is deemed such a non-issue. We really don't even talk about it. The lack of conversation has done you a disservice. I am sorry. I will try to do better. But you will need to prove you are a real scientist to the other scientists. They will probe your knowledge over time until they are satisfied you are a real scientist and a real Christian. Until you are seen as a real engineer or a real scientist, don't even try to share Christ with them. As an engineer friend always used to tell me, "It takes an engineer to save an engineer." The technical relationship must be secure before they hear anything you say about your faith without a large dose of skepticism.

Of course, there is a place where you can go to feel loved again, your local church. In your new job or graduate program, you will need to find a church family to be a part of. The median church size in the US is 75, so odds are you will find a small to medium church of 50-300 members. You want to attend that church because you want to get involved, and that is the only church of your denomination that you grew up with in the area. You show up to Sunday school the first week and everyone is excited to meet you. They ask what you "do", and you reply – "I am a biologist", or "I am a physicist." This statement will have an immediate result of your being viewed as an inferior Christian to those around you. You will spend the next few months (or years) having to prove that you are a real Christian. You cannot be a REAL Christian if you are a scientist. Oh, they will not come out and say that – well, some might – but with a subtle roll of the eyes or change in body language, you will see it happen. And it will confuse you. In our Christian universities, being a Christian and a scientist or engineer is deemed such a non-issue. We really don't even talk about it. The lack of conversation has done you a disservice. I am sorry. I will try to do better. But you will need to prove you are a real Christian to the other Christians. They will probe your knowledge over time until they are satisfied you are a real scientist and a real Christian. Until you are seen as a real Christian, don't even try to share science with them. In a recent poll by the University of Idaho on the state of Science,

Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics in Idaho, almost 60% of the 12,000 respondents said science was a belief system that conflicted with their beliefs. We scientists have a responsibility to help our non-scientist friends see that there cannot be conflict between science and theology. They both come from God, and He doesn't contradict Himself!

I know this caution sounds depressing, but it will be OK. Once you are seen as genuine, you will have the ability to be used by God in ways you never knew were possible. And to those of you who aren't going to be a Chemist, Biologist, Engineer, or Physicist – remember I said you will be the called on to love them in your work places and churches. They need it.

I have experienced both of these situations I have described. Having to prove I was a real scientist to other scientists, and having to prove I am a real Christian to other Christians. And what I want to share with you is what I have learned about it, and learned about me through the odyssey.

The church I grew up in was all about rules. Being a Christian was all about what you did and did not do: not drinking, not dancing, not listening to the proper music (or listening to heavy metal rock music – that leads STRAIGHT to hell). However such prescriptions were not what I have learned was the important thing, which was love. I think that is what I love about teaching at a Nazarene University so much, our emphasis on love. Jesus talks about this in Matthew 22:37-39. I am going to quote it from the Message.

34-36 When the Pharisees heard how he had bested the Sadducees, they gathered their forces for an assault. One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up: "Teacher, which command in God's Law is the most important?"

37-40 Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them." (Message)

Loving God, to me, is the easier of the two commandments. How can I not love someone who created this world for me to discover and was crucified to show me how much He loves me? However, loving others, this admonition proved where it gets difficult. How do we love others? What does that really mean? How do I love others that look down at me as a scientist or a Christian because I am a scientist or a Christian?

There is another passage in the bible that speaks to me about that. Most often, this passage is read during a wedding ceremony. How do you love this person who is about to squeeze your toothpaste wrong or put the toilet paper in backwards? But I think that 1st Corinthians 13 speaks to more than your spouse. Verses 4-8 speak about what love is (or isn't).

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. (NIV)

Love is patient. I struggle here. It is hard to love that person going 15 mph slower than the speed limit when I am trapped behind them. When it comes to showing your scientists/Christian friends who you are, loving them with patience takes less time than loving them with loud angry arguments.

Love is kind. I remember when two Mormon missionaries came to my house in Tucson AZ. It was at the end of a long day. As they introduced themselves, I made a statement that they really didn't believe in Jesus properly. They got upset really fast and started point at their nametags which said "Church of Jesus Christ" on it. They left and I shut the door, probably loudly. I didn't really prove to them that I was either a good scientist or a good Christian. I still regret that. It is easier to love with kindness than to live with regrets.

Love does not envy. Love does not boast. Love is not proud. Love is not self-seeking. Joining in with coworkers about how bitter you all are about not getting to go to that conference in Hawaii makes you one of them. It does not make them ask you why you are happy despite being left behind. Bragging about how great you are because you got published in a major scientific journal or received a patent is hard to follow up with how Jesus has changed your heart. Both are missed opportunities to show what Christianity really is about, not what they are expecting it to be about.

Love is not easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrongs. It is easy to get angry when someone looks down on you for something you really never considered anyone would look down on you for. Christianity is all about love for heaven's sake! How can that be bad? Science is about looking for truth. What is evil about that? Don't get angry, it won't help your case. Christians haven't always been nice. Scientists haven't always been truthful.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. This seems easy to me as a scientist. It my walk with Christ and as a scientist, I am seeking truth, and how to reconcile the truths in the Bible and the truths I discover in nature. I know they have to fit together. God created it that way. I delight in searching for that fit. That is why I am a scientist. Explaining that to others is a loving act, even if they don't see it.

Love always protects. Love always trusts. Love always hopes. Love always perseveres. In the words of Jack Nicholson, in the movie *A Few Good Men*, "You want the truth?! You can't handle the truth!" Sometimes people are not ready for the truth either the realities of radioactive dating techniques, or our failure of loving others as we should. Don't push your truth on someone if it stops all conversation and relationship. Protect them and the relationship. Know when too much truth is harmful. This is really difficult to do. Trust in God. Put your hope that He will give you wisdom and He will speak to them. Let the relationship persevere.

Love never fails. It took me a long time to understand that simple statement. For me, I used to read it as "God's love never fails." He never fails. But I believe it is explaining to us that when

dealing with others, Love always works. If we love, we will not regret. If we love, we will not be responsible for broken relationships. If we love, we can be the person that God wants us to be. My hope for all of you, is that if nothing else, your time at a Nazarene University teaches you to love.