



# ***What I Wish My Pastor Knew...*** **An Introduction**



<http://ministrytheorem.calvinseminary.edu>



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“Don’t know much about biology . . .” That’s a line from the old Sam Cooke song “Wonderful World” but it may also be an apt description for a lot of pastors when it comes to not just biology but the sciences generally. Although the situation has changed slightly in the last decade or so, until very recently most pastors probably got through their education careers having taken fewer science courses than just about anybody else with whom they went to college. When I attended Calvin College in the 1980s, the number of science courses I was required to take *dropped* to almost nothing as soon as I declared myself to be on a pre-seminary track of study. Once I got to seminary, there was nothing in the curriculum that would help me to catch up on the basics of science, either. Like many pastors, I became an ordained pastor with eight years of post-high school education behind me but with virtually no science courses on my resume. Indeed, when a colleague and I recently founded a new seminary course to help seminarians catch up on scientific awareness and basic knowledge, we began the course by surveying the students to investigate how much undergraduate science they had been exposed to. The vast majority of students listed one or perhaps two science courses. Several listed zero.

Yet preachers in the twenty-first century proclaim God’s Word to a world that is saturated with science. Not only do many congregations include a good many scientists as church members, just about everyone in contemporary churches confronts—and very often benefits from—science in one form or another on a daily basis. After all, the science underlying DVDs, Blue-Ray, iPods, cellphones, GPS systems, and a host of other such gadgets is the same complex science that Einstein and Bohr and Hawking represent. Few people know much about the wild world of quantum physics (and how the development of quantum theory shook up the entire scientific world in the twentieth century) yet they use the fruits of that science as a routine part of everyday life. But regular churchgoers encounter science in other ways, some of which even find their way into the church bulletin and into the church

sanctuary every week. Announcements in the bulletin may relay to the congregation the results of Mrs. Jones’ recent MRI scan or ask for prayers as Mr. Robbins will be undergoing a complex medical procedure involving lasers and nanotechnology medical devices. Worship services today frequently employ computer technology to run PowerPoint presentations even as the services are recorded on high-quality DVDs for distribution to homebound members. Meanwhile and behind the scenes, any number of church members may be confronted with difficult decisions that tie in with things like in vitro fertilization, genetic testing on unborn children, stem cell research, and various end-of-life issues that medical science now makes possible in ways that would have been unheard of half-a-century ago.

Knowingly or unconsciously, contemporary people—including contemporary Christian people—have been raised to accept a science-driven society. Even scientific novices and laypeople accept the scientific method as the way to unearth truth: theories get tested, public opinion polls are conducted according to the rigors of scientific analysis, people seek some kind of proof in order to trust the results of a given study or investigation.

Some time ago someone tested the public’s credulity level by seeing what people were willing to believe in case even wild-sounding information was presented to them with a cloak of scientific respectability around it. It turned out that if people were told something had been scientifically tested or approved, they might very well be willing to believe even the very unlikely. So people were told things like, “Did you know that according to research at Stanford University it turns out that eating three chocolate éclairs a day can help you lose weight? Turns out there is an éclair-specific enzyme that actually burns fat.” Or, “According to a study at MIT, jogging actually lowers a person’s intelligence.” When confronted with these unlikely scenarios, people’s responses tended to fall into one of three categories:

- “Where did you say that study was conducted?”
  - “Really? Can that be true? Interesting!”
  - “You know, I’ve always *thought* that was true!”
- Granted, this is perhaps more humorous than anything but it does say something about how we have been trained to think in a science-saturated world.

But this is by no means meant to say that religious faith as traditionally defined no longer plays a role in our lives. Christian people still believe the core truths of their faith—as summarized in, for instance, something like The Apostles’ Creed—for the same reasons they have always believed: namely, these truths have been revealed to them through Scripture and by the Holy Spirit in a way that goes beyond the rigors of the scientific method or lab-tested proofs. Our science-saturated world has not elbowed aside faith! However, the fact remains that even people of faith who enter churches each week live in a time in which science, its influence, its method, and its technological fruits cannot be ignored.

As I have written elsewhere, the *content* of what preachers proclaim remains fixed: we preach the undying truths of God’s holy Word and of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord. For 2,000 or so years, that has been the bedrock of the church’s proclamation. But across those same two millennia, the *context* in which that unchanging Word has been proclaimed has been forever changing. There is a reason why sermons written in the fifteenth century—though biblically and theologically sound and true—would fall flat if proclaimed word-for-word in a church service today. Times change. Idioms change. Sensibilities change. Language changes. Preachers in the twenty-first century may say the same things about the Gospel that Augustine, Martin Luther, and Jonathan Edwards said but because present-day preachers preach to a world that is vastly different from the world of those forerunners in the faith, the packaging of God’s truth will perforce be different.

Most preachers know this intuitively. They

understand that they need a certain level of fluency in terms of the mass media, the political issues of the day, the situations being faced by young people, and the contours of culture in order to be able to speak in ways that are not only true but also relevant and comprehensible to modern ears. But the contention of the John Templeton Foundation’s “Science for Ministry” initiative is that a certain broad understanding of science is also (and necessarily) a part of that bigger picture of the contemporary world that all preachers should know at least a little something about. Pastors and other church leaders should have a positive appreciation for what contemporary biology, physics, geology, astronomy, mathematics, and the like are telling us about the world in which we live—the world that Christians believe is the handiwork of God down to its every and smallest detail. Not only can this knowledge help pastors speak in a contemporary idiom that will be understandable to modern Christians, it will also give pastors a bigger pool of resources to draw upon when celebrating some of the specific wonders God has wrought. Not only will an enhanced knowledge of some of the basics of science help pastors understand the work that is done by their congregants who work in the sciences, such knowledge may also assist pastors in helping people to navigate some of the difficult ethical issues with which certain aspects of modern science now confronts us, particularly in the medical field.

Knowing a bit more about science may help preachers avoid yet another pitfall that they should wish to avoid: bearing false witness against their neighbors. Too often in recent decades and in certain church traditions, all things scientific have been treated as the enemy of the faith, as a grave threat to the traditions of the church and of its core message of salvation through Christ. There can be no denying, of course, that there are voices in the scientific community that take undue delight in trying to take potshots at all religious faith. Alas, although those voices may not represent the majority of the scientific community, they are sometimes among the loudest voices out there even as they prey on public ignorance of both science and religion in

order to score cheap points. True enough. But pastors, of all people, should be invested in speaking thoughtfully and truthfully about what science represents as well as what specific fields of science actually teach. There may still be valid points of disagreement between some aspects of science and some aspects of the Christian faith, but even these valid points of contention should be articulated accurately and well. Setting up straw scientists, or simply misrepresenting what is taught by science, ought to have no place in a Christian pulpit that seeks to proclaim truth above all.

In short, when it comes to science, it helps to know a little something. And that is the core thesis behind the series of “What I Wish My Pastor Knew” essays that are being made available on this website. We approached a number of practicing scientists and teachers of science to ask them to share with a wider church audience those features to their work that most enthruse them, excite them, concern them. If they could share with a pastor (or with other leaders in the church) a bit of what makes them happy to be scientists, what might they say? The fruits of their reflection and writing are presented here.

Not everything contained in these essays will be easy for a scientific layperson to grasp. There are some aspects of contemporary science that resist getting boiled down to the very simple. But what we have attempted to provide here are snapshots of and little peeks into certain aspects of what various fields of science are teaching today. What are middle school, high school, and college students being told about the physical universe we inhabit? What information is shaping their perception of the world, and how might having at least a little idea of what all that entails help preachers articulate God’s Word in ways that will connect with the actual world people live in six days a week? But more than that, can we as pastors and church leaders catch here a glimpse of what makes committed Christians also function as enthusiastic scientists who see their work as a vital part of their own Christian discipleship in ways that contribute to the glory of God? Can church leaders move past the caricature of science

as the enemy of the faith to embrace science instead as perhaps a wonderful partner in the faith?

We invite you to dip into these essays. Here you will discover information on stem cells, geological formations, the beauty of mathematics, the deep complexity of string theory. Along the way you will perhaps sense also something of the joy that scientific research brings to Christian people who find so much wonder and awe emerging from their work (and that those same people are eager to share with fellow believers in the church). Other contemporary issues will also be touched on, including global climate change (and what we can do about it) and some of the more difficult ethical issues that can attend medical advances (and that sometimes confront young couples dealing with infertility or with grave illnesses in their unborn children).

As you read, we hope you will sense that this is information that at least some of the people out there in the church sanctuary each week wish you, the preacher/pastor/church leader, would know a little something about. In coming to know such things, we hope you will be blessed, challenged, enlightened, and so motivated to give still more praise to the great Creator God from whom all blessings—and all wonders—flow.