



PreCiS

Autumn 2023

Bringing Christian faith and
science together

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Interview with
Dr Nathan R. James
Spring Conference Talks
and CiS Local Groups



London in Autumn

An interview with
Dr Nathan R. James

Winner of the 2023 Oliver
Barclay lecture

Congratulations for winning the 2023 Oliver Barclay Lecture. Do you have any thoughts on what your lecture may be about?

Thank you! I want to talk about what it means to be a Christian in science. That might sound a bit tame, but it won't be, I promise! We often think of science as a higher calling, but this idea means different things to different people. As Christians, we try to approach science as a divine calling to study the works of God. In academia, however, the idea of a calling is used to exploit scientists and force them to sacrifice too much for the sake of a scientific career. These are ideas that I am wrestling with in my own life, so hopefully I have some insights to

Dr Nathan R. James



share!

When and how did you become a Christian?

I grew up in a Christian family. There was never a time when I thought of myself as not a Christian, but my faith has matured substantially over the years. I have often referred to myself as an Old Testament sort of guy, growing up within the covenant community and always having access to a

personal relationship with God.

My parents and I are very scientifically minded. We always want to know and understand the truth, and if something is true, it matters. I have been studying the historical claims of the Bible ever since I started as an undergraduate, and no matter what else might be going on in my mind, the essential truth and reliability of the Bible keep coming back to hit me. The Gospel is true, and following the example of Christ is the best way to live.

In recent years, when work has been difficult, I have found tremendous support from the church. It is truly remarkable that I can travel anywhere in the world and find people of my own family on whom I can rely. When we think of the Gospel, we often focus (with good reason) on the eternal aspect, but I have seen the transforming work of Christ in the here and now.

What were the things that spiked your interest in science?

I have always loved dinosaurs, playing in ponds, and learning about the natural world. It helps that both my parents have biology degrees, and my mum is a biology teacher! I also found a keen interest in chemistry while in sixth form, which ultimately led me to study molecular biology. Like my eleven-month-old daughter, I want to pick things apart to see how they work; the difference is that I get to use electron microscopes!

How do you view studying science in relation to God?

Well, that is kind of the point of my lecture! Like generations of scientists before me, I believe that science fulfils the Creation mandate of Genesis. In Genesis 1:26 and 1:28, humans are commanded to fill the earth, subdue it, and wield dominion over all creatures. Then, in Genesis 2:19–20, God brings

creatures to Adam for him to study and classify. And in Genesis 3:23, after Adam and Eve fail to assert dominion over an especially savvy creature, God sends them out to work the ground. God made us to do science. He made it difficult. But he also made it fun and satisfying, to an extent!

However, it is very, very difficult to live according to this ideal in the twenty-first century. The culture of academia teaches us to idolize our research, while the structure of an academic career drives us to desperate acts as we struggle to secure funding and publish research. Academic science is oppressive. Rather than being an act of worship, science easily takes the place of God and becomes the object of our worship. As Christians, we need to acknowledge this temptation, keep our eyes on God, and strive to model a better way of living.

If this sounds intriguing to

you, come to the Autumn Conference!

What has been the most interesting thing you have worked on in your career?

Obviously, whatever I am working on now! My research is focused on the circadian clock – a biomolecular timekeeper found in every cell of the human body. The function of the clock is to anticipate predictable changes in the environment that occur each day, allowing the cell to prepare for times of waking or sleeping, feeding or fasting, and increased or decreased energy expenditure. As a result, the clock is critical for human health, with dysregulation strongly associated with debilitating conditions such as neurodegeneration, cancer, diabetes, and depression, but little is known about how it exerts its control on the human cell. Currently, I am trying to uncover

the mechanisms by which the circadian clock controls gene expression and cellular behaviour.

What do you do for fun and what are your major interests outside of work?

Outside of work, you say? One of the problems of having a scientific career is never being able to turn off work mode. There is always something important to do. And it doesn't help that my extracurricular interests are mostly academic! I read a lot about the history of science and religion, and



Nathan with his young daughter

I have just finished writing a paper about Francis Bacon. I also teach undergraduates and school students, and I do a lot of science outreach.

When I do get away from work, life currently revolves around my daughter, who seems to have limitless energy despite being awake all night. Thanks to her, I am also a world-class nappy-changer.

If you could chat with a scientist from the past, who would it be?

It depends on how strictly we define scientist... but probably Francis Bacon. He had a vision for what science could become. It would be fascinating to get his perspective on the modern world.

Alternatively, Tycho Brahe sounds like a lot of fun. After losing his nose in a drunken duel, he reportedly wore a brass prosthesis, keeping a gold one for special occasions!

What challenges, if any, have you come across as a Christian and a scientist?

Too many to count! Probably my biggest challenge is the temptation to idolize my scientific career and then despair at the slow progress of my research. I work in a very high-pressure environment, surrounded by many brilliant scientists, so I am always tempted to compare myself with others. As a result, I suffer terribly from imposter syndrome and anxiety. God is faithful, but I easily forget!

What makes you go “WOW” at work?

Whenever something goes according to plan. It is so rare! Also, in structural biology, seeing something that no one except God has ever seen before. It is such an uplifting feeling.

What makes you go “WOW” outside of work?

Lately, watching my daughter

learn to walk! Seeing her grow from the first ultrasound till now has been the most wonderful experience.

Where is life taking you now?

Honestly, I don't know. I have some research projects in the pipeline, but postdoctoral contracts are short and science is difficult. Preparing for the Oliver Barclay Lecture has forced me to reassess my future. I want to be a research scientist and I enjoy teaching, but I fear the lifestyle associated with an academic career. All I can do is pray for guidance.



Nathan relaxing with his cat

CiS Spring Conference talks now available

The talks from our Spring Conference in Edinburgh are now available on our YouTube channel -

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ChristiansinScience>

We had a great line up of speakers on the day:



Miracles – Dr Bethany Sollereeder

Lecturer in Science and Religion, University of Edinburgh



Why does Evolution work? – Dr Zachary Ardern

Postdoctoral Fellow, Wellcome Sanger Institute and CiS
Oliver Barclay Lecturer 2022



What can Theology learn from Science? – Dr Joanna
Leidenhag

Lecturer in Theology and Liberal Arts, University of
Leeds



***Science and the hiddenness of God: towards a kenotic
theology of science*** – Professor Wilson Poon

Professor of Natural Philosophy, University of Edinburgh

LOCAL GROUP NEWS

BRISTOL

For information on Bristol events please contact Andrew Halestrap - ahalestrap@hotmail.com

DUNDEE

For details on events please contact christiansinsciencedundee@gmail.com

EDINBURGH

For more information please email cisedinburgh3@gmail.com

HARROW

For details of future events in Harrow please contact Revd Lyndon North - revlnorth@aol.com

IPSWICH

For more information about future events please contact Dr John Ling - jjling@btopenworld.com

IRELAND

For details please contact Dr Neville Cobbe - neville.cobbe@yahoo.co.uk for more information.

MANCHESTER

For details please contact sec.cismanchester@yahoo.co.uk

NORWICH

Please contact sfnorfolkl@gmail.com for more details.

OXFORD

For more information on Oxford events please contact Diana Briggs at diana.briggs@wolfson.oxon.org

SHEFFIELD

For information please email Dr Jonathan Foster - jona.foster@sheffield.ac.uk

If you wish to start a Local Group in your area, please get in touch with our Executive Officer, at maryb.cis@outlook.com



SOUTH WEST

For information on events please email cissouthwest@gmail.com

SOUTHAMPTON

For information about the group please email Peter May - southampton@cis.org.uk

ST ANDREWS

For information about the undergraduate group, please contact Dr Andrew Torrance (abt3@st-andrews.ac.uk).

For information about the postgraduate group, please contact Dr Rebecca Goss (rjmg@st-andrews.ac.uk).

TYNESIDE & NORTHUMBERLAND

For information on Newcastle events, please contact Bill Clegg at bill.clegg@ncl.ac.uk

WORCESTER

For more information on Worcester events please contact Kim Stansfield on kimestansfield@gmail.com