

Outlook Guest Viewpoint

Thank God for the Scientists!

By James C. Goodloe IV

Charles L. Moffatt, Presbyterian minister, taught me to fear no truth, for all truth is from God. The other side of that is not to be afraid to challenge any claim to truth, for not all claims to truth are from God. That is to say, the church does not have to swallow whole every new teaching that comes down the pike. We have an obligation to examine every new claim from the perspective of the truth we have been given.

So it is that I approached "[What Does It Mean to Be Human? A Conference on Genetics and the Christian Faith](#)" with a healthy dose of skepticism. The question I brought to the conference was, "Can human being be explained, without remainder, by reference to the genetic code?" Yes, I know that I am a complex, integrative, self-sustaining chemical reaction, but am I anything more? What I found was that most, if not all, of the theologians were too ready to give away too much. Thank God for the scientists, who seemed to be more prepared to uphold the Christian faith.

In the face of the rapidly burgeoning knowledge of the genetics underlying human life, some theologians and ethicists were ready to say that there is no distinct soul or self, and that the image of God in us simply consists of our highest capacities for self-consciousness, language, imagination, self-transcendence, and so forth. But, in regard to human nature, does the soul merely consist of our genetically and environmentally determined capacities for freedom, or is it an entity which has those capacities? Does not the reality of "personal choice" imply that there is a "person" behind, or beyond, the very capacities -- such as choice -- that the "person" exercises?

Some suggested that understanding human being as a psycho-somatic unity is closer to the Bible. What was not explained is how this avoids being anything other than reduction to a sheerly physical explanation of human being. It even led to talk of animal souls.

The scientists, on the other hand, seemed more careful not to be reductionist. Dr. Victor G. Vogel III, Presbyterian elder, said, "At a very profound level, we are our

genes. At another level, we are not." He urged us to both scientific inquiry and faith in the "providential revelations of God" which are available "to attentive minds."

Dr. Kenneth W. Culver, Presbyterian elder and the first physician to perform human gene therapy, gave a compelling account of God's calling him into medical practice, research, and therapy. And Stephen A. Haneline, Presbyterian elder and molecular biologist, who spends his days in the lab mapping gene sequences, said that the little we do know now points to how much we do not know, that a gene map compares to the reality of life the way a written account of a beautiful fall day compares to actually going outside to enjoy the day, and that the sheer intricacy of the genetic structures points him clearly to God as the Creator of all that is.

Byron Spice, science editor of the Pittsburgh *Post Gazette*, may have said more than he realized: "Our complex genetic structure is either the work of genius or the work of a billion years of evolution." Philosophically, he posed the two as mutually exclusive.

Some in the church are too ready to throw over the work of genius in creation and to cling to random, purposeless, and meaningless molecular permutation. Thank God for the scientists who work within that framework and yet who are bold to uphold the faith!