

## LECTURE: Hawking, Extra-Terrestrials, and Accelerating Universe - Challenges to the Christian Faith in 21st Century

**Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church. Tuesday 16th July 2013**

I enjoyed hearing Dr Wilkinson, astrophysicist and theologian last night. However I feel a disquiet on thinking over what he actually said and what he did not.

1 The fact that he is a well-known writer and a member of that esoteric club called 'astrophysicists' ensures an attentive audience. Astrophysics is essentially for the mathematically minded and that left 99% of the audience dependent on his interpretation of what the discipline has discovered and how he chooses to present those discoveries.

2 The way he presented science in relation to Christianity is to assure us that there is really no conflict. In fact, he says, God is just making use of the laws of physics He created. These, he affirms, are the same laws that brought the Universe into being through the Big Bang, which he says most scientists accept as the true picture of 'creation'. He neglected to mention that hundreds of scientists disagree with the evidence purported to support the theory of the Big Bang in a document signed in the UK, where he hails from.

3 He outlines various opinions on the interpretation of the creation account recorded in Genesis 1 and states quite categorically that he sees it as a 'song' or a 'hymn'. One reason for this belief is that the structure is akin to other Biblical poetic passages where there are similar repetitions of phrases. One would expect that in the very nature of the sequential creative acts of God that there would be repetition of certain phrases. Enquiries by members of the audience on the literal interpretation of the Biblical creation account cropped up during question time. It was obvious the audience wanted to know his stand. In response he could have dealt with it more fully, as he did with other queries, but he did not. In a related question on whether he believed in evolution he hedged his reply by saying that he was a physicist and not a biologist. He was not hesitant however in suggesting that life could originate elsewhere in the Universe if water is found.

His point, repeated throughout his talk, was that God is more powerful than we can imagine because He, after all, is the Creator. Therefore whether it was the Biblical seven days or the current belief of 13.5 billion years for the creation of the Universe it would not be a problem with God. The question on my mind (and probably on other minds as well) is this. If he believed that God has such immense power as to bring an entire Universe into being, why is it so hard to believe that He could have made the world and all that is in it in six literal days, as God says in the Bible that He did?

Dr Wilkinson's deference to the reasoning of modern cosmology could be better served by the realisation that it is an edifice built on faith. He expounded the theory of the Big Bang origin of the Universe by stating as an accepted fact that all the substance and energy we now have arose from the explosion of a bit of dense matter about the size of a pinhead. This left the audience breathless because they had just viewed a short video on the immensity of a Universe containing untold billions of galaxies, most of them larger than our own. Is it really believable all that came from a miniscule 'pinhead', however dense? Of the origin of this 'singularity' there was no explanation. It is accepted because the reasoning is that working backwards from an expanding Universe we must ultimately come to such a beginning. This sounds more like metaphysics than physics. It enters the realm of

belief, trust and faith. Then we were treated to some imaginary scenarios of the very first moments after the Bang. Not unlike magic, conjectures of the Universe early scenarios were pulled like rabbits out of a cosmic hat.

On being asked to explain what 'black matter' and 'black energy' meant, all he could truthfully say was "I don't know". In other words, we have no idea where the initial 'pinhead' of matter came from, and that 96 % of the stuff of the present Universe is hidden from sight, being 'black'. Yet the admirable eye of cosmological faith can still aver that its theory of the origin of the Universe is to be believed over and above the record given by an intelligent God who has described how He did it!

4 I would not write this critique of what Dr Wilkinson said were it not for the fact that he is an influential person in the Christian community. He is also gracious in presenting his points and admits that there are things in science that he does not know. It is in the nature of science that it is always discovering new things. Indeed he admitted at the start of his talk that today he would not be saying something that he said so confidently ten years ago on how the universe will end. New findings have made him change his mind.

But suppose what he understands today as the basis for his views about cosmology were to be altered by yet newer findings that reveal that the Big Bang theory is basically flawed. He will have to again realign the Genesis account of creation *with* these new findings, or face the possibility of rejecting it as outmoded. Well, outmoded - but true in a poetic sort of way. This disarmingly honest attitude towards the Genesis account for the scientifically unsophisticated has a dire consequence as I explain below. (5)

Dr Wilkinson quite rightly did not take kindly to the attitude of 'God of the gaps', espoused by some Christians. This has provided fodder for an accusation levelled against Christians by the likes of Richard Dawkins. Christians are accused of filling in the gaps of what science cannot explain by assuming that a supernatural Being is responsible and taking such gaps as proofs of God's existence. As science progresses in understanding more about the world and our Universe the number of gaps gets less. The need for God as an explanation shrinks, and, with that, the use of it as a proof.

The Christian who believes the Bible does not need to do this. What science does is to try to understand what God has created and to unravel the workings of a created order. The Christian who trusts God's Word does not have to fill any gaps with God in his understanding of the world. However, since Dr Wilkinson does not believe in the literal interpretation of Genesis he fills up 'gaps' in his poetic understanding of Biblical cosmology with the latest theories of modern cosmology. Hence he changes his mind occasionally. It is a curious reversal of roles in the 'God of the gaps' position.

5 When David Wilkinson talks in this way, he confuses Christians. He must know, and if does not he should know, that Scripture clearly teaches a God who created the universe and performs great miracles. Deny the Biblical account of creation by trivializing it as a 'song' instead of a factual account, however poorly we may understand it, is wrong. No doubt he may find a sympathetic ear from an atheist or a Muslim. If this is one way to present the Gospel in a non-adversarial manner I am afraid the effect is lost. The atheist will take it as an attempt by a Christian to accommodate the Bible to the demands of science. The Muslim believes in creation by God anyway and would

welcome some support from an astrophysicist. This pleases both the parties but does not shed any light on the understanding of Genesis 1, as far as honest enquiry of the plain text demands.

The corrupting effect of all this is that the Christians will tend to look for natural explanations of Biblical miracles. For instance, bread and fish do not appear out of thin air. It is against the laws of physics. How does one get around to finding an explanation that is acceptable to present thinking of modern science? One explanation for the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes by our Lord goes like this. A little boy was willing to share his lunch. This led to an overwhelming response from the crowd which then produced their own lunches, until then hidden. What a marvellous miracle wrought by the innocence and selflessness of the young!

6 We are all aware of the scientific excitement of finding hundreds of exoplanets scattered among the galaxies. None of which appear to be hospitable to life. In reference to 'alien life' on other planets Dr Wilkinson correctly emphasised that there must be stringent physical conditions for life to emerge anywhere. He pointed out the truth of the 'Goldilocks enigma' – the chance of the Universe existing and of life having arisen on Earth as vanishingly small. And yet here we are on Earth, with life in all its glorious forms. He then concedes that there might be primitive forms of life on some other planet. Could this primitive life evolve, with time, from an 'amoeba to architect' ? ( He gave this 'amoeba' illustration to everyone's amusement so I don't think he meant it to be taken seriously! )

Well – the amoeba could change dramatically, given lots of time. From the viewpoint of evolution the original hypothetical cell that arose (through vanishingly small chance!) did evolve to man by mutation and natural selection. It certainly did on this planet anyway. Given lots of time anything can happen. Time is the hero of evolution. As he espouses the 13.5 billion-year history of the Universe, it seems that he left this an open-ended option. So did God create man from a single cell?

7 Precisely because Dr Wilkinson interspersed affirmations of his belief in Scripture with theories of cosmology not in accord with the plain interpretation of the same Scripture - the whole gamut is readily internalised by impressionable minds. For instance, Dr Wilkinson affirms a Scriptural truth, 'God is not a Deist'. He is intimately tied in with his creation. Heads nod in agreement. He testifies that he himself has encountered this wonderful God in Jesus. More heads nod in appreciation. In between he lays out a cosmology that is at odds with the plain teaching of Scripture.

After listening to him it would be difficult not to conclude that his theological convictions were inordinately influenced by modern cosmological thinking. I hope I do not come across as harsh in my critique of his views. It seems to me that he is trying to please both sides of a big divide and falls between the proverbial two stools.

Throughout the evening there was no mention of saving grace, sin or repentance. One may say that is asking too much. After all this was a lecture on science. He gave his talk also as a Christian theologian and pastor to a mainly Christian audience. Would not a word on salvation be an encouragement to Christians and also a testimony to any non-Christian present?

Swee Eng

Thursday, 18 July 2013