Lifting Up – Dr. Deborah Haarsma

Dr. Deborah Haarsma serves as President of The BioLogos Foundation, a position she has held since January 2013. Previously, she served as a professor and chair of Physics and Astronomy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Deb has long been a supporter, presenter, and contributor to the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA). See more about Deb at her profile in the ASA membership directory.

Why are you a Christian? While I grew up in a Christian home, I am a Christian today because I made an adult choice to follow Jesus. I committed and recommitted my life to Christ multiple times through my childhood and young adult years, as I grew to understand God, the Bible, and my need for Christ more deeply. Every day is still a journey where I need God’s grace and forgiveness.

Why are you a scientist? I almost wasn’t. I grew up loving piano and classical music as well as science and math. I even did a double major in piano and physics, before deciding to pursue a science career. (I continued piano on the side, of course – it’s a lot easier than doing physics on the side!) In college, I remember lab projects where our group collected data, graphed it, and plotted the theoretical prediction over the data, and – lo and behold -- it fit! I am still amazed every time I see physical theories, developed by human reasoning, accurately describing the real world that God created. In grad school, I decided to specialize in astrophysics because I was fascinated by the extreme physics out there in the universe that we can’t replicate on earth, like highly curved space, vast distances, and strong magnetic fields.

How do your faith and your science enhance each other? My faith impacts my scientific work in essential ways; it is foundational for everything I do as a scientist. I believe that the laws of physics work consistently across the universe and over billions of years because of God’s faithful governance, and without that we could not do science. I’m motivated to study the natural world because it is the very handiwork of God. Science enhances my faith as well. The astronomer’s favorite psalm has to be Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” I believe God’s creation attests to his other attributes as well. His extravagance and abundance are seen in things like the thousands of planets we have discovered circling other stars, that we didn’t even know existed when I started my career. The sheer vastness of the universe illustrates the scope of God and his work. The point is not to make us feel small, but to teach us about God’s love: Psalm 103 says, “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.” The everlasting lovingkindness of God is higher than the heavens!

What, or who, have been the three greatest encouragements for you personally in your career? First of all, my parents were a huge encouragement. My dad played math games with us as kids and my mother often talked about what careers I might pursue as an adult. They didn’t emphasize a young earth position; they said the answer wasn’t obvious, which gave me permission to work it out for myself over time. The second encouragement, of course, is my
husband. We met as grad students, and in our wedding vows we pledged to encourage each other to develop the gifts God has given us. Loren has always supported me and we’ve even had the pleasure of writing a book together. Third would be the Christian scholars who came before me – people like Galileo and Kepler, but also Christians in science today like so many members of the ASA, and Biblical scholars who dig into science questions. I continue to learn from these scholars every day.

What advice do you wish you had received as a student or earlier in your career, or would you like to offer others? The first piece of advice is for those times of decision -- choosing a major, an advisor, a post-doc position, a job, or choosing not to pursue something. It helped me to remember that God’s primary calling for all of us is the first and second commandments: to love God and to love your neighbor. I realized I could fulfill God’s call by focusing on those two, which helped reduce my worries about the future and keep things in perspective. Second, worry about one’s career can become an identity issue – am I a good scientist? It helped me to pray to God to give me a true view of my real abilities, an accurate understanding of my strengths and weaknesses. I prayed that God would keep me from both pride and from poor self-esteem as I considered what challenges I should pursue.

It’s important to have strategies for when to say “no” to opportunities and when to say “yes.” First of all, I learned to never say “yes” right away – always say “Let me get back to you in a couple days.” This gives you a chance to think, pray, and consider the balance of your commitments. Second, think ahead to what balance of commitments you want. Consider it as a portfolio that should be balanced over the years. You will have so many opportunities with family, church, and career and you don’t have to serve them in all ways all the time. You can be proactive - for example, what way would you like to serve your department or institution? Which committee would be most helpful for your professional development or be the most rewarding? Pick that and then volunteer, rather than waiting to be stuck on a committee that doesn’t interest you. Also, when asked to do something, always consider “is there is someone else who could do it as well or better than I could?” Sometimes the requestor just asks the first person they think of, so feel free to offer other names as a service to the requestor.

What is your vision for Christian Women in Science and/or the American Scientific Affiliation? ASA and CWIS are doing so many great things! I’m glad CWIS is starting. Back in 1997, there was a small conference for Christian women in science; about 30 of us from all areas of science and all stages of our careers. This meeting was a big encouragement to me early in my career, helping me think through the unique challenges we face at this intersection. Electronic communication has grown so much since then that in-person meetings are less necessary, but contact with other women at the same crossroads is just as important.