

The way of the snake and the dove – a way forward for ISCAST

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For tonight's devotion I would like to share some thoughts that have been increasingly on my mind over the past few years. ISCASTians have been no strangers to controversy. Vigorous and sometime heated exchanges over how Christians should understand the first chapters of Genesis, respond to medical challenges associated with abortion or euthanasia, or to technological innovations such as nuclear energy or cloning are familiar to us all. We, as an organisation and as individual Christians in science and technology, have occupied a space that is sometimes seen as a no-man's land between opposing camps, as compromisers and traitors to one (or both) sides, or as bridge builders between rival communities that see no need for a bridge.

I think it is true so say that we have seen some fruit of our work in these areas over the past 15 years. By the grace of God, through engagement with churches, institutions and the media, by scholarly articles, public meetings, visiting speakers and conferences, we have been able to raise the level of public and Christian discussion in many areas. Not that we can rest on our laurels, or assume that we have in some sense arrived; but we can and should give thanks that we have been able to have an impact in both churches and the broader community.

As we look to the future, are there further frontiers that ISCAST can play a role in? In the wider field of science and society I have been disturbed by an apparent trend to increasingly vitriolic discussions. One area has been in regard to attitude of self-appointed apologists of science such as Dawkins and Tyson whose disdain for religion seems now to be spreading

to a wholesale rejection of philosophy. The other has been the politicisation of science, where positions on whole disciplines and technologies have become shibboleths. These include the use of solar and wind power, genetically modified organisms, forest management, coal-seam gas, and many others.

A particular stand on, for example, wind turbines or genetically modified organisms, is taken to indicate an entire package of ideology and the individual and position condemned or praised accordingly. There is, it would seem, to be no room for a nuanced or common understanding across political divides.

Why is this so? Why, for example, are the small number of geologists who don't accept plate tectonics still accepted at professional meetings, still able to publish in peer viewed journals and, while generally thought as wrong and are sometimes the butt of jokes, generally respected? Is it because plate tectonics has not become loaded with social and political baggage, whereas coal-seam gas or forest management have? If this is so then the community has lost because the co-opting of complex questions by political agendas is a near guarantee that the issues will not be discussed correctly. Confusion, not light, will result, and barriers will be erected between people of good will across social and political spectra.

Is there a role for ISCAST in such discussions? Are there lessons in our discussions on the interpretation of Genesis and engagement with the new atheists and Peter Singer which we can apply to water management or the development of northern Australia? Is this a discussion space where we can pattern Christ-like behaviour to the wider world as a form of incarnational evangelism, or do we risk losing our focus or speaking in areas where we have no real expertise? Certainly some of us are or have been professionally engaged in such topics in the past. Even if we do not move in this direction as an Institute, we need to be aware of the needs and roles of our members who are active in these areas.

Are the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:16 relevant to our ministry in such areas? 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as snakes and as peaceful as doves.' Here Jesus uses two quite different images, one pagan, one Biblical, to illustrate Christian witness in a hostile world. Snakes were often used as wisdom figures in the (pagan) Greco-Roman world, while the dove symbolised the end of judgment in the story of Noah and is used to symbolise the Spirit of God who renews and sustains creation. Regardless of whether ISCAST moves into new fields or stays on familiar territory, both the organisation and its members will need both the wisdom of snakes and the peacefulness of doves through the anointing of the Spirit. We do have the promise of the consequences of such actions – we will be handed over, and brought before the authorities. But we also have the promise that the Father's Spirit will speak through us, regardless of the consequences.

As we plan the direction for ISCAST let us be both warned and encouraged by these words.