



Summer School in Oxford

by Thomas S. Heard

Every summer in the first week of July, about one hundred Christians gather at Keble College, Oxford University, for a life-changing educational and spiritual experience. The RZIM Zacharias Trust Team, a group of extraordinarily talented and eloquent Christians, brings depth and profound meaning to Scripture and contrasts it with current attitudes and postmodern worldviews. I was fortunate to attend RZIM's conference this summer.



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Many of the students arrived in England a day or two before the first day of summer school to do a little pre-conference sightseeing, but Keble College started to buzz with activity Sunday afternoon as the attendees arrived for the conference. Everyone congregated in the welcoming center for a cup of tea or coffee, and we each received a notebook outlining the week's events. Measuring close to two inches thick, the notebook forecasted a week that would not be light in subject matter and a schedule without much free time. Despite this demanding curriculum, the yoke of the schedule was easy, and its content was deep and meaningful. As the attendees continued to congregate on the eve of the summer school, new friends were made as handshakes and names were exchanged, and hugs greeted friends made the previous year. The excitement was palpable both for new and returning attendees.

It was light fare for the orientation as Michael Ramsden and Amy Orr-Ewing welcomed us in our first assembly and, with a lot of humor, provided an overview of the week's schedule. After dinner, we all walked over to the Oxford Museum of Natural History for Michael Ramsden's impeccably delivered and heart-impacting lecture on "Sacrifice," from the "With All Your Heart" series. The spiritual food following dinner was rich and thoughtful, and just a taste of what the next five days held in store.

The next morning, like all mornings, began with community breakfast in the Dining Hall, followed by

worship and readings from the Psalms led by Phil Lawson Johnston and his daughter in the Keble Chapel across the Liddon Quad. Inside this Anglo-Catholic chapel is an incredible display of stained glass and mosaics depicting biblical stories and scenes from the life of Christ. A small side chapel just under the organ pipes houses Holman Hunt's famous painting, "The Light of the World," which depicts Jesus' offer in Revelation 3:20. The worship included both familiar songs and hymns and new songs, some penned by Phil Lawson Johnston.

A short walk down Parks Road after morning worship brought us to the Rhodes House, where Dr. John Lennox jump-started each day with an in-depth exploration of a specific book of the Bible. This year, Dr. Lennox expounded on Revelation. Not only did Dr. Lennox lead us deeper into Revelation than we'd ever dared, but he also taught us how to continue these studies once we returned home.

After our time with Dr. Lennox, we broke for coffee and tea in the lawn behind the Rhodes House, where we found a bookstall selling books by dozens of authors, including the summer school speakers. The tables reflected the deep level of scholarship and the breadth of subject matter at the RZIM conference. It was a wonderful time to pick up additional material to go deeper after the conference and add to my already-burgeoning library.

It was not long after break until we were engaged with the next theme of the morning, "The Uniqueness of the Christian Faith." Throughout the week, we heard talks that elaborated on aspects of the Christian faith that are challenging on their face and plumbed the depths of questions we'd not carefully considered before. L.T. Jeyachandran tackled the difficult aspects of the Trinity while the Rev. Dr. Alister McGrath asked the question, "What difference does believing in a creator God make?" Amy Orr-Ewing engaged us with her thoughts on eternity, deity, sufficiency, exclusivity, and sovereignty in the "I Am" statements from Jesus, while Dr. Ravi Zacharias explored Christ in history. On the final day, Michael Ramsden addressed the questions

of judgment and love in “How Can a Loving God Judge Us?”

Lunch was served in the Keble Dining Hall, where we always found much to talk about after the two morning sessions. Following lunch, we had an hour of free time before the afternoon sessions began. Being a lover of books and science, I used my free time to visit Blackwell’s Bookstore just down the road and the Museum of Natural History just across the street. Others welcomed some quiet time on a bench in the Liddon Quad or in the chapel before the afternoon sessions began.

The first of the afternoon sessions divided us into two different tracks, “Searching Issues” and “Spiritual Disciplines.” Those who taught the “Uniqueness of the Christian Faith” series again engaged us in the “Searching Issues” series, while Thomas A. Tarrants III, President of the C.S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C, taught the “Spiritual Disciplines” track.

“Searching Issues” included lectures on the historicity and reality of the Bible; “Suffering”; “The Da Vinci Code Book and Movie”; and “Atheism and Agnosticism.” These lectures provided exceptional guidance in responding to secular questions in these areas. “Spiritual Disciplines” focused on how the Holy Spirit led the early Church to grow in areas essential to all Christians, including Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and worship, as exemplified in Acts 2:42. Though we each attended a single track throughout the week for these series of talks, all sessions were recorded and made available later.

The late afternoon session rejoined everyone in a new session called “On the Spot.” Each day, two different members of the RZIM Team would tackle the most burning questions that most of us fear being asked about our faith, and they received some tough ones! They gave us immediate, intelligent, thoughtful, and deep responses, leaving us inspired to defend the faith. After this challenging and fun session, supper awaited us.

After dinner, we had one more seminar series before us. This year’s evening theme was “With All of Your Heart,” and each seminar focused on a different topic, including sacrifice, the workplace, service, and outreach, with the concluding evening’s talk given by Dr. Zacharias. These evening talks were held in the Museum of Natural History, in a lecture hall literally feet away from the original hall where Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley had their famous debate on Darwin’s book, *The Origin of Species*. As a scientist, I often wondered during those evening lectures how often God might be on the minds of people who work in this building or pass through it as tourists.

The evening’s seminars ended around 9:15, but many of us found we had some energy left to spend.

Those of us not ready to tuck it in for the night found our way down Museum Road to the Eagle & Child or the Lamb & Flag, local pubs where members of the Inklings, such as C.S Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, once met on a regular basis. In these historic pubs, we talked about the lessons and insights of the day and shared what had impacted us the most. Sleep began to overtake us all around 11:00 p.m. or so, but the anticipation of the next day was palpable as we bid each other a “good night.”

Given that the majority of the delegates attending the summer school were from the States, our British brothers and sisters from RZIM threw us a 4th of July celebration that included punting on the River Cherwell for the adventurous ones and dinner at the Cherwell Boathouse for all. Michael Ramsden’s comedic streak kept us entertained throughout the week with quick, pithy humor. Just before the 4th of July festivities began, Michael brought loads of laughter from us as he teased that they would be setting up a booth for repatriation for those who would like to stop their rebellious ways. He also joked that we’d each be given a tea bag to throw over the side of the boat while punting on the river. In reality, though, the gift we were given was a wonderful key ring with the Oxford College Symbol, which is inscribed with the words “The Lord Is My Light” in Latin. Later in the week, the RZIM Team offered us tours of Oxford. The week ended with a talk and a book signing by Dr. Zacharias followed by a farewell Hog Roast.

The conference follows a tight schedule that does not allow much in the way of getting out and seeing Oxford to its fullest. If you’re interested in attending summer school in 2007, I would recommend arriving a few days in advance or staying a few days afterward so you can explore Oxford. For those staying longer, I would recommend Evensong at Christ Church for the days you will be in town and Sunday worship at either Saint Aldates or Saint Ebbs. For those who still find themselves spiritually hungry, Wycliffe Hall has their Summer School during the week immediately following RZIM’s Summer School. The schedule for the Wycliffe Hall Summer School is less concentrated and you’ll get more of a chance to see Oxford.

While Oxford is a great place to visit, the city itself is not the reason I’ve attended the RZIM summer school two years in a row. I look forward to attending because of the depth and thoughtfulness of the teaching. I have always come away enriched and ready to give seekers relevant and meaningful answers, and I believe you can too.

The week flew by in a flash, but it was full of worship, fellowship, and the deepening and fortifying of our faith. I left Oxford with new friends that I’ve continued to stay in touch with, and a ton of material to

meditate on and inwardly digest. It's a time in your life to think, to reflect, and to be equipped to respond to the call of 1 Peter 3:15.

Thomas S. Heard is a patent examiner at the United States Patent and Trademark Office. He holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in chemistry and a doctorate in biochemistry. After completing two postdoctoral fellowships at Merck, Inc., and the National Institutes of Health, he settled into a career in intellectual property in the Northern Virginia area. He is active in the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program and has a passionate interest in Christian apologetics and theology. Tom is a member of the Falls Church in Falls Church, Virginia.

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703/914-5602
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