

An Affirmation of Creation - Report of the Organizing Committee

General Conference

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The International Faith and Science Conferences 2002-2004 report of the Organizing Committee to the General Conference Executive Committee through the office of the General Conference President, September 10, 2004.

Introduction

The very first words of the Bible provide the foundation for all that follows. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . ."—Gen 1:1 Throughout Scripture the Creation is celebrated as coming from the hand of God who is praised and adored as Maker and Sustainer of all that is. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."—Ps 19:1 NIV

From this view of the world flows a series of interlocking doctrines that lie at the core of the Seventh-day Adventist message to the world: a perfect world without sin and death created not long ago; the Sabbath; the fall of our first parents; the spread of sin, decay and death to the whole creation; the coming of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to live among us and rescue us from sin by His death and resurrection; the Second Coming of Jesus, our Creator and Redeemer; and the ultimate restoration of all that was lost by the Fall.

As Christians who take the Bible seriously and seek to live by its precepts Seventh-day Adventists have a high view of nature. We believe that even in its present fallen state nature reveals the eternal power of God (Rom 1:20), that "'God is love' is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass."—Ellen G White, *Steps to Christ*, p 10

For us, all Scripture is inspired and tests all the other ways, including nature, through which God reveals Himself. We have great respect for science, and applaud the prominence of science departments in our institutions of higher learning and healthcare. We also value the work of Seventh-day Adventist scientists and researchers not employed by the Church. We train students at our colleges and universities how to employ the scientific method rigorously. At the same time, we refuse to restrict our quest for truth to the constraints imposed by the scientific method alone.

The Question of Origins

For centuries, at least in the Christian world, the Bible story of creation was the standard explanation for questions about origins. During the 18th and 19th centuries the methodologies of science resulted in a growing understanding of how things worked. Today no one can deny that science has made a remarkable impact on our lives through advances in the areas of agriculture, communication, ecology, engineering, genetics, health, and space exploration.

In many areas of life, knowledge derived from nature and knowledge from divine revelation in Scripture appear to be in harmony. Advances in scientific knowledge often confirm and validate the views of faith. However, in regard to the origin of the universe, of the earth, and of life and its history, we encounter contradictory worldviews. Assertions based on a study of Scripture often stand in stark contrast to those arising from the scientific assumptions and methodologies used in the study of nature. This tension has a direct impact on the life of the Church, its message, and witness.

We celebrate the life of faith. We advocate a life of learning. Both in the study of Scripture and in the orderly processes of nature we see indicators of the Creator's marvelous mind. Since its earliest days the Seventh-day Adventist Church has encouraged the development of mind and understanding through the disciplines of worship, education, and observation.

In earlier decades the discussion of theories on origins primarily occurred in academic settings. However, philosophical naturalism (wholly natural, random and undirected processes over the course of time) has gained wide acceptance in education and forms the basic assumption for much that is taught in the natural and social sciences. Seventh-day Adventist members and students encounter this view and its implications in many areas of daily life.

In its statement of fundamental beliefs the Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms a divine creation as described in the biblical narrative of Genesis 1. "God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made 'the heaven and the earth' and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished it was 'very good,' declaring the glory of God."—Gen 1; 2; Ex 20:8-11; Ps 19:1-6; 33:6, 9; Ps 104; Heb 11:3

Reasons for the Faith and Science Conferences

Because of the pervasive and growing influence of the theory of evolution, the General Conference Executive Committee (2001 Annual Council) authorized a three-year series of Faith and Science conferences. These conferences were not called to modify the Church's long-held position on creation but to review the contributions and limitations that both faith and science bring to our understanding of origins.

The principal reasons that led to the convening of these conferences involved:

1. Philosophical questions: An ever-present challenge exists in defining the relationship between theology and science, between that of faith and reason. Are these two streams of knowledge in partnership or in conflict? Should they be viewed as interactive or are they

independent, nonoverlapping spheres of knowledge? The dominant worldview in most modern societies interprets life, physical reality, and behavior in ways that are markedly different from the Christian worldview. How should a Christian relate to these things?

2. Theological questions: How is the Bible to be interpreted? What does a plain reading of the text require of a believer? To what extent should knowledge from science inform or shape our understanding of Scripture and vice-versa?

3. Scientific questions: The same data from nature are available to all observers. What do the data say or mean? How shall we arrive at correct interpretations and conclusions? Is science a tool or a philosophy? How do we differentiate between good and bad science?

4. The issue of nurture and education for Church members: How is a Church member to deal with the variety of interpretations of the Genesis record? What does the Church have to say to those who find in their educational curriculum ideas that conflict with their faith? Maintaining silence concerning such issues sends mixed signals; it creates uncertainty and provides fertile ground for unwarranted and dogmatic views.

5. Development of living faith: Clarification and reaffirmation of a Bible-based theology of origins will equip members with a framework for dealing with challenges on this topic. The Faith and Science Conferences were not convened simply for the intellectual stimulation of attendees, but as an opportunity to provide orientation and practical guidance for Church members. The Church cannot pretend to keep its beliefs in a safe place, secure from all challenge. In doing so they will soon become relics. Church teachings must engage and connect with the issues of the day so that they remain a living faith; otherwise they will amount to nothing more than dead dogma.

The Faith and Science Conferences

Two International Faith and Science Conferences were held-in Ogden, Utah 2002 and in Denver, Colorado 2004-with widespread international representation from theologians,

scientists, and Church administrators. In addition seven[1] of the Church's thirteen divisions conducted division-wide or regional conferences dealing with the interaction of faith and science in explanations about origins. The Organizing Committee expresses appreciation to the participants at these conferences for their contributions to this report.

The Ogden conference agenda was designed to acquaint attendees with the range of ways in which both theology and science offer explanations for the origin of the earth and life. The agendas for conferences in divisions were determined by the various organizers, although most included several of the topics dealt with in Ogden. The recent conference in Denver was the concluding conference of the three-year series. Its agenda began with summaries of the issues in theology and science, then moved on to several questions regarding faith-science issues in Church life. These questions included:

- The on-going place of scholarship in the Church. How does the Church maintain the confessional nature of its teachings while being open to further development in its understanding of truth?
- Educational models for dealing with controversial subjects and the ethical issues involved for teachers and Church leaders. How shall we teach science courses in our schools in a way that enriches, rather than erodes, faith?
- What ethical considerations come into focus when private conviction differs from denominational teaching? How does personal freedom of belief interface with one's public role as a leader in the Church? In other words, what are the principles of personal accountability and the ethics of dissent?
- What are the administrative responsibilities and processes in dealing with variations in, or re-expressions of, doctrinal views?

Scholarly papers by theologians, scientists, and educators were presented and discussed in all the conferences. (The Geoscience Research Institute maintains a file of all papers

presented at the conferences.) The Ogden and Denver conferences involved at least some representation from every division of the world field. Well over 200 persons participated in the conferences during the three-year period. More than 130 attended the Denver meeting, most of whom had attended at least one other of the Faith and Science Conferences.

General Observations

1. We applaud the seriousness and dignity that characterized the conferences.
2. We noted the strong sense of dedication and loyalty to the Church that prevailed.
3. We experienced that even though tensions surfaced at times, cordial relations were maintained among the attendees, with fellowship transcending differences in viewpoint.
4. We witnessed in these conferences a high level of concurrence on basic understandings, especially the normative role of Scripture, buttressed by the writings of Ellen G White, and the belief by all in God as beneficent Creator.
5. We found no support for, nor advocacy of, philosophical naturalism, the idea that the universe came into existence without the action of a Creator.
6. We acknowledge that the conflict between the biblical and contemporary worldviews impacts both scientists and theologians.
7. We recognize that tension between faith and understanding is an element of life with which the believer must learn to live.
8. We observe that rejecting contemporary scientific interpretations of origins in conflict with the biblical account does not imply depreciation of either science or the scientist.
9. While we found widespread affirmation of the Church's understanding of life on earth, we recognize that some among us interpret the biblical record in ways that lead to sharply different conclusions.
10. We accept that both theology and science contribute to our understanding of reality.

Findings

1.The degree to which tension exists regarding our understanding of origins varies around the world. In those areas where science has made its greatest progress in society, the questions among Church members are more widespread. With the advance of science across all societies and educational systems, there will be a corresponding increase in members wondering how to reconcile Church teaching with natural theories of origin. Large numbers of Seventh-day Adventist students attend public schools where evolution is taught and promoted in the classroom without corresponding materials and arguments in favor of the biblical account of origins.

2.Reaffirmation of the Church's Fundamental Belief regarding creation is strongly supported. Seventh-day Adventist belief in a literal and historical six-day creation is theologically sound and consistent with the teaching of the whole Bible.

3.Creation is a foundational pillar in the entire system of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine- it bears direct relationship to many if not all other fundamental beliefs. Any alternative interpretation of the creation story needs to be examined in light of its impact on all other beliefs. Several of the Faith and Science Conferences reviewed alternative interpretations of Genesis 1, including the idea of theistic evolution. These other interpretations lack theological coherence with the whole of Scripture and reveal areas of inconsistency with the rest of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. They are, therefore, unacceptable substitutes for the biblical doctrine of creation held by the Church.

4.Concern has been expressed regarding what some see as ambiguity in the phrase "In six days" found in the Church's statement of belief on creation. It is felt that the intended meaning (that the six-day creation described in Genesis was accomplished in a literal and historical week) is unmentioned. This situation allows for uncertainty about what the Church actually believes. Further, it provides room for other explanations of creation to be accommodated in

the text. There is a desire for the voice of the Church to be heard in bringing added clarity to what is really meant in Fundamental Belief #6, Creation.

5. Although some data from science can be interpreted in ways consistent with the biblical concept of creation, we also reviewed data interpreted in ways that challenge the Church's belief in a recent creation. The strength of these interpretations cannot be dismissed lightly. We respect the claims of science, study them, and hope for a resolution. This does not preclude a re-examination of Scripture to make sure it is being properly understood. However, when an interpretation harmonious with the findings of science is not possible, we do not allow science a privileged position in which it automatically determines the outcome. Rather, we recognize that it is not justifiable to hold clear teachings of Scripture hostage to current scientific interpretations of data.

6. We recognize that there are different theological interpretations among us regarding Genesis 1-11. In view of the various interpretations we sensed a high degree of concern that those involved in the Seventh-day Adventist teaching ministry conduct their work ethically and with integrity-by standards of their profession, the teachings of Scripture, and the basic understanding held by the body of believers. Since Seventh-day Adventists recognize their comprehension of truth is a growing experience, there is an ever-present need to continue the study of Scripture, theology, and science in order that the truths we hold constitute a living faith able to address the theories and philosophies of the day.

7. We appreciate and endorse the significant value of ongoing international and interdisciplinary dialog among Seventh-day Adventist theologians, scientists, educators, and administrators.

Affirmations

As a result of the two international conferences and the seven division conferences, the Organizing Committee reports the following affirmations:

1. We affirm the primacy of Scripture in the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of origins.
2. We affirm the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Genesis 1 that life on earth was created in six literal days and is of recent origin.
3. We affirm the biblical account of the Fall resulting in death and evil.
4. We affirm the biblical account of a catastrophic Flood, an act of God's judgment that affected the whole planet, as an important key to understanding earth history.
5. We affirm that our limited understanding of origins calls for humility and that further exploration into these questions brings us closer to deep and wonderful mysteries.
6. We affirm the interlocking nature of the doctrine of creation with other Seventh-day Adventist doctrines.
7. We affirm that in spite of its fallenness nature is a witness to the Creator.
8. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist scientists in their endeavors to understand the Creator's handiwork through the methodologies of their disciplines.
9. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist theologians in their efforts to explore and articulate the content of revelation.
10. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist educators in their pivotal ministry to the children and youth of the Church.
11. We affirm that the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church identified in Revelation 14:6, 7 includes a call to worship God as Creator of all.

Recommendations

The Organizing Committee for the International Faith and Science Conferences recommends that:

1. In order to address what some interpret as a lack of clarity in Fundamental Belief #6, Creation, the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Genesis narrative be affirmed more explicitly.
2. Church leaders at all levels be encouraged to assess and monitor the effectiveness with which denominational systems and programs succeed in preparing young people, including those attending non-Adventist schools, with a biblical understanding of origins and an awareness of the challenges they may face in respect to this understanding.
3. Increased opportunity be provided for interdisciplinary dialog and research, in a safe environment, among Seventh-day Adventist scholars from around the world.

Conclusion

The Bible opens with the story of creation; the Bible closes with the story of re-creation. All that was lost by the Fall of our first parents is restored. The One who made all things by the Word of His mouth at the beginning brings the long struggle with sin, evil, and death to a triumphant and glorious conclusion. He is the One who dwelt among us and died in our stead on Calvary. As the heavenly beings sang for joy at the first creation, so the redeemed from earth proclaim: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created. . . .Worthy is the Lamb who was slain. . ."—Rev 4:11; 5:12 NKJV

[1] East-Central Africa Division, Euro-Africa Division, North American Division, South Pacific Division, Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, Southern Asia Division, West-Central Africa Division.