Further definition on tap for Adventist fundamental belief on creation

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Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN

Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s newly formed Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee are expected to meet in June, the next step in a five-year process to clarify the denomination’s biblical understanding of origins.

Last year, delegates of the 59th General Conference Session in Atlanta voted to reaffirm the church’s belief in a “literal, recent, six-day creation.” The vote formally endorsed a document drafted at the International Faith and Science Conference in 2004 and later that year affirmed by the church’s Annual Council business meeting. The move addressed questions from some Adventists regarding interpretation of the denomination’s Fundamental Belief Number 6.

The Reaffirmation of Creation statement specifies that the seven days in the Genesis creation account are “literal 24-hour days” and tags creation as “recent,” while the existing fundamental belief reads, in part: “In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ ... and rested on the seventh day of that first week.”

Because the Adventist Church cannot hold two official statements on the same belief, Session delegates also voted to grant top church administration what world church General Vice President Artur Stele called a “mandate” to merge the two statements’ language and intent into one comprehensive fundamental belief.

The move is also expected to close what some Adventists claim is an interpretative loophole that hypothetically allows theistic evolution to explain the Genesis origins account, said Angel Rodriguez, director of the church’s Biblical Research Institute (BRI) and Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee co-chair with Stele.
Theistic evolution posits that evolution is a natural process of creation, overseen by God, and seeks to make the biblical creation story compatible with natural evolution.

“We as the Adventist Church strongly believe that the Lord is our creator. If you take that away — it’s such a foundational belief — or even compromise it, then there is an effect on other beliefs,” Stele said.

Because theistic evolution stretches each creation day into epochs, many Adventists fear the theory threatens another of the church’s core beliefs: observance of the seventh-day Sabbath as a celebration of the creation week.

While amending the church’s fundamental beliefs might seem exceptional, it’s neither unprecedented nor unsolicited. The preamble to the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs invites revision as the church’s understanding of truth expands.

“We state, ‘This is how we understand Scripture,’ but we also state that if we find a better expression or better wording — or if our understanding is broadened — then we will be open to change,” Stele said. “We don’t have doctrines like some other denominations — unmoving, unchangeable.

**Why not?**

Early Adventist Church leaders were adamant that the emerging church not be corralled by creeds. “Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement,” church co-founder James White said during a discussion in 1861. “Suppose the Lord ... should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed?”

Ten years later, the then Review and Herald magazine published a list of “Fundamental Principles,” drafted by early church leader Uriah Smith. They were printed with a disclaimer that sought to allay any remaining unease: “We have no articles of faith, creed or discipline, aside from the Bible. We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them,” Smith wrote.

Those core beliefs shifted in number and content over the decades, but were never officially voted by the church until 1980.

Two years before the 1980 GC Session in Dallas, Texas, a few church administrators at church headquarters wrote a preliminary draft of what would become the Fundamental Beliefs. Shortly afterward, scholars and theologians at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, participated in rewriting the beliefs, launching a revision process involving academics, administrators and church members.

What emerged were a set of beliefs that condensed and codified key Bible-based principles universally held by the church.

“A major reason we’ve been able to achieve widespread agreement among Adventists worldwide is
because the Fundamental Beliefs keep very close to the wording of Scripture. They either quote Scripture directly or paraphrase it,” said Bill Johnson, who was among the group of scholars and theologians at the Seminary tasked with rewriting the preliminary draft.

How a belief is changed

The Fundamental Beliefs were first formally changed to accommodate the “Growing in Christ” belief voted in 2005 at the 58th GC Session. During that same Session, church administrators also voted to adopt a protocol guiding any further changes to the Fundamental Beliefs.

Suggested changes to the church’s beliefs must be rooted, the protocol states, in a “serious concern” for the “well-being of the world church and its message and mission,” as well as be Bible-based and “informed” by the writings of church co-founder Ellen G. White.

A suggestion can come from the world field or world church headquarters. In this case, then newly elected world church President Ted N. C. Wilson called for revision of the church’s belief on creation, responding to challenges to the church’s interpretation of origins.

Protocol states that once a revision is entertained, world church headquarters should create an ad hoc committee to “coordinate” the revision process — this time, the Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee, co-chaired by Stele and Rodriguez.

Joined by Adventist Review Editor and Publisher Bill Knott and BRI Associate Director Gerhard Pfandl, Stele and Rodriguez will draft the first revision of Fundamental Belief Number 6 in the coming months.

Cue church administrators, theologians, scholars and local church members, all of whom will review the suggested draft as it circulates church business meetings at headquarters and each of the church’s 13 world divisions. Later, to solicit feedback from members worldwide, the draft will appear online and in the Adventist Review, which historically published the church’s beliefs as they evolved over the years.

“We want to make it as accessible to as many people as possible,” Rodriguez said. “The committee will set up criteria by which to evaluate [the suggestions], trying to be as objective as possible.”

Ultimately, the church’s Annual Council will vote whether to add the revision to the agenda of the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio, Texas, where a final vote would occur.

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