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GC Delegates Vote to Tighten Language of Fundamental #6 on Creation

Sean Pitman

On Tuesday of the 2015 GC session (July 7) the delegates overwhelmingly voted to update the language of the statement of Fundamental Belief #6 on Creation to specifically highlight historic Seventh-day Adventist position on the literal nature of the creation week described in Genesis (the changes in wording are highlighted below).

God has revealed in scripture the authentic and historical account of His creative activity. In a recent six-day creation the Lord made “the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” and rested on the seventh day. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His creative work, performed and completed during six literal days that we call a week today. 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. (Link)

The reason for this update, as highlighted by Clifford Goldstein during the discussion period just before the final vote, was that some were using the original language to justify their promotion of various evolutionary theories of origins over vast eons of time – especially within Seventh-day Adventist universities like La Sierra University and, to a less blatant degree, other Adventist universities such as Pacific Union College, Avondale College, and Walla Walla University. Dr. Lawrence Geraty had specifically drafted the original wording of FB#6, as listed below, to be “more inclusive” of those who held to certain theistic, Darwinian, or evolutionary views of origins (Link).

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.

According to Guy, this less specific statement of belief was felt to be necessary to be more inclusive of long-age views of origins – as he explains below:

The only ‘official position’ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is stated in Fundamental Belief #6,
where the language is deliberately Biblical, and broad enough to accommodate various views about Earth's natural history.

In other words, as Silva explains, “This means that Fundamental Belief #6, as it reads today, can be used to support any approach to the biblical account of Creation, including progressive Creationism, theistic evolution, etc.” This is important to note since both Drs. Guy and Geraty refer to themselves as “progressive” in regard to their Adventist faith. In short, Dr. Guy is an open and unabashed theistic evolutionist who believes that life has existed and evolved on this planet for hundreds of millions of years (see *Understanding Genesis*, p. 53).

Likewise, Dr. Geraty is no fan of the historic fundamentals of Adventism regarding the creation story in particular. His comments, published in *Spectrum* in 2010, are most telling:

> Christ tells us they will know us by our love, not by our commitment to a seven literal historical, consecutive, contiguous 24-hour day week of creation 6,000 years ago which is NOT in Genesis no matter how much the fundamentalist wing of the church would like to see it there.

> Fundamental Belief No. 6 uses Biblical language to which we can all agree; once you start interpreting it according to anyone’s preference you begin to cut out members who have a different interpretation. I wholeheartedly affirm Scripture, but NOT the extra-Biblical interpretation of the Michigan Conference. Since when is salvation by correct knowledge anyway?

Dr. Geraty has also directly challenged the historic Adventist understanding of the world-wide nature of the Noachian Flood, arguing that the author(s) of Genesis are most likely talking about a local flood. In the book, *Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives* Dr. Geraty wrote:

> “Was the Genesis flood worldwide? There is no evidence for that as of now, but it certainly covered the world known to the author. It is the opinion of most experts, and little reasonable doubt remains (although some would dispute this) that the events of Genesis 6-8 must have taken place within a limited though indeed a vast area, covering not the entire globe, but the scene of the human story of the previous chapters.”

To further clarify his position, Geraty argued on the floor of the current GC session that the language of the new fundamental statement of belief regarding creation is simply “not Biblical”.

> And again, why insert the word “literal” in line 39? I personally happen to believe Moses had nothing else in mind other than literal, 24-hour days, but those words are not biblical. That was not a biblical concern so why should we make it a test of fellowship for our scientists and historians? It is not a matter of salvation. (Link)
This is a strange argument considering that the creation story in Genesis quite clearly describes a series of literal days each separated by "evenings and mornings" (Genesis 1). Even modern secular scholars of Hebrew are in general agreement that this is the most accurate interpretation of the language of Genesis. Take, for example, the comments of well-known Oxford Hebrew scholar James Barr:

> Probably, so far as I know, there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1–11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that: (a) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience. (b) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to later stages in the biblical story (c) Noah's flood was understood to be world-wide and extinguish all human and animal life except for those in the ark. Or, to put it negatively, the apologetic arguments which suppose the "days" of creation to be long eras of time, the figures of years not to be chronological, and the flood to be a merely local Mesopotamian flood, are not taken seriously by any such professors, as far as I know.

Letter from Professor James Barr to David C.C. Watson of the UK, dated 23 April 1984.

It is therefore nonsensical for Dr. Geraty to argue that the door should be left open, within the statements of Adventists Fundamental Beliefs in particular, to theories that are clearly non-Biblical. For a church that wishes to remain faithful to the claims of the Bible, especially given everything that the Bible has to say regarding the nature of origins, the choice is clear as to what the Seventh-day Adventist Church should be promoting on the topic of origins. After all, the literal nature of the creation week is part of the very name of the church itself – the basis of the meaning of the 7th-day Sabbath! And, contrary to the suggestion of Dr. Geraty, the concept of a literal creation week by no means started with the claims of Ellen White! The literal creation week was the nearly universal understanding of the claims of Genesis until fairly recent times. The notion of interpreting the “days” of creation as vast indefinite periods of time didn’t begin to be in vogue until Darwinism started to become popular in the mid-1800s. As a former president of La Sierra University, and the one responsible for bringing in many professors into the school who believe in and promote various Darwinian ideas, is it any wonder that LSU has been so actively opposed to the fundamentals of the Adventist message on origins? – to the very basis of the name Seventh-day Adventist?

But what about Geraty’s argument that this issue is “not salvational”? While this is true, it is also true that no doctrinal concept is truly salvational in and of itself. No one is saved based on any correct doctrinal understanding whatsoever. After all, even Satan himself believes and understands more points of doctrine than any Christian (James 2:19). Yet, he hates God and will not be saved despite his correct knowledge. How can that be? The difference is based on love. All are saved based on a love of what little truth that they have been given to know, not on a correct understanding of all doctrinal truths that may exist. Nor is anyone lost because of an honest misunderstanding of any particular point of doctrine. However, this does not make doctrinal truths or the Gospel message of hope unimportant or irrelevant. Doctrinal truths have the power to make our lives better and more happy and hopeful now while we struggle through this life of pain, sorrow, and death. In particular, the Adventist view on creation, to include the literal nature of the creation week, has a very important part to play in the “good news” of the Gospel message of hope regarding what God has done and will do for us to give us a solid hope in a very bright future. In this way, it also has a part to play in the conversion process as those who have never heard the Gospel...
Message hear it for the first time and are strangely warmed by it and are drawn to the God who loves them.

So, what will these changes in the wording of the Adventist doctrine on creation really mean for the church? Well, according to Dr. Ron Carter, the provost of LLU, it may not change how teachers are able to promote Darwinian ideas in our schools. As long as the doctrinal statements aren’t enforced, teachers will be able to continue teaching ideas that are fundamentally in conflict with these new statements on the creation doctrine.

Carter thought that problems could be finessed with no effect on their academic program even with the passage of modifications to FB#6 because he believes the statement remains the same in concept. While there has always been tension on campus with the presence of the Geoscience Research Institute (GRI), says Carter, they have always managed to coexist peacefully, and this could be no different. Carter believes that the tensions have primarily been as a result of differences in approaches. GRI has focused on creation apologetics while most researchers at the university are trained in the health sciences, not in the earth and historical sciences, and conduct translational research in medicine.

Trouble would come, says Carter, only if the Adventist denomination would attempt to require scholars and administrators to sign statements of belief that restrict appropriate academic freedom that encourages open academic discussion or implements other enforcement tactics that would affect the actual operational decisions of the University. Carter emphasized that LLU is committed to God as creator and redeemer and being cooperative and supportive of the world church so long as it does not compromise their ability to perform their medical work faithfully with integrity and credibility. (Link)

The question is, however, why have church schools at all if the “academic freedom” of professors allows them to directly undermine the church’s clearly stated primary goals and ideals? What if the church hired pastors who started preaching in favor of eternally burning Hell Fire? or other doctrinal ideas that are fundamentally opposed to the Seventh-day Adventist message? Why then do teachers who are working for SDA schools think themselves at liberty to do essentially the same thing? – simply by claiming “academic freedom” to teach whatever they want regardless of the primary reason why they were hired to begin with? – to offer the unique Adventist perspective on education to the youth of the church? Is this not being dishonest? – equivalent to stealing from one’s employer?

In short, I do hope that Dr. Carter isn’t going to be proved right. I hope and pray that things will not continue as usual in our universities where the church allows its own professors to continue to undermine the idea of a literal creation week in favor of popular secular models of Darwinian style evolution over billions of years… implying that either God doesn’t exist at all or, if He does exist, that He’s fundamentally evil in His deliberate use of an extremely hateful method of suffering and death to create sentient life on this planet. Just before the vote was taken at this GC session, one of the delegates told a story about sending her children to one of our SDA universities and seeing her own children lose their faith in the very existence of God because of what they were taught about the “truth” of Darwinian evolution – at one of our own schools! I’ve personally received many letters and E-mails from desperate parents recounting to me very similar stories. This is not some trivial side issue. May the church stand up behind its historical understanding of the Biblical model of creation where God created sentient life on this planet within just one literal week of time in a way which did not depend upon the suffering or death of any sentient creature. Only in
this way would the Bible’s claim that everything was “very good” by the end of that creation week make any sense (
*Genesis 1:31*). This is also the basis for a rational hope in the future of the “New Earth” to once again be made “very good” without any more suffering of any kind.