

AN ADVENTIST CREED?

I. Introduction

Key General Conference leaders are now acting on their fear that Genesis 1-11 is being seen in some quarters as a record of theological insight but not necessarily of scientific fact. Many Adventists, especially teachers and students on college campuses,* object strongly to the kind of action they are taking.

Willis Hackett, Duncan Eva and Richard Hammill, all General Conference vice presidents, are now in the process of visiting Adventist campuses in the United States and some campuses in other countries. At meetings of religion and science faculties they are presenting proposals for “centrist” theological statements on both creationism and the inspiration of the Bible, the latter serving, in effect, as the premise for literalistic positions taken in the former.

*News stories and editorials on this development have appeared in several college student newspapers. For example, a strongly worded editorial in the April 29, 1977 issue of *The Criterion* of Loma Linda University's La Sierra campus, spoke disapprovingly of a “move toward close-minded fundamentalism.”

In a May 26, 1977 guest editorial in the *Review and Herald*, Hackett described the reasons for the development of such statements. Other churches, he said, have allowed their basic doctrines to undergo revisions suggested by modern scientific understanding, with the result that they have “lost their identity.” To prevent among Seventh-day Adventists a similar trend toward “liberal theology,” he continued, church leadership “is preparing carefully formulated statements on what it considers to be its [*i.e.*, the church's] fundamental beliefs.” After receiving “wide input” on the contents of the statements, the leadership will publish them in church magazines and books. With these statements as guides, he wrote in a key paragraph,

administrators, church leaders, controlling boards and leaders at all levels of the church will find it easier to evaluate persons already serving the church, and those hereafter appointed, as to their commitment to what is considered basic Adventism.

To these overtures we present on the following pages a series of responses. As background for our readers, we first of all reprint the full text of Hackett's editorial. Then come three documents whose origin traces back to a May 1977, meeting at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. On the weekend of the 13th to the 15th, the religion faculties of the three west coast Seventh-day Adventist colleges were together for their annual conference. The main interest of the teachers focused on the Sunday morning meeting, at which Hackett, Eva and Hammill would be presenting their proposed statements of belief. The devotional talk on Friday evening, by PUC's Fred Veltman, took the development of the Sabbath doctrine in the Old Testament as the basis for urging theological freedom within the church. The talk was obviously meant as background for the Sunday discussion, and we here publish it, virtually in the form in which it was originally spoken.

The same conference was enlivened by the circulation of a letter giving the PUC religion department's "preliminary general response" to the idea of developing official statements of belief. That letter is published on the pages that follow.

At the Sunday morning meeting, the three General Conference representatives hoped to spend the time refining drafts for the proposed statements on the inspiration of the Bible and on the interpretation of the creation story. The religion teachers (and some of PUC's science faculty) turned a large part of the morning into a discussion of whether such statements should even be prepared.

During this discussion, the three vice presidents pleaded for unity of doctrinal belief; that, it seemed to them, was the church's urgent need. Hackett was sure enough about this to say, without reservation, that, as board chairman at Andrews University, he would use the statements in the hiring of faculty. "When a man wants a job teaching at the seminary," he declared, "I'm going to use these statements to find out what he be-

lieves, and whether or not he should be teaching in one of our schools."

The teachers, on the other hand, pleaded for toleration of different views, for recognition that truth is progressive. They feared that a "creed" was developing, and objected, as one of them phrased it, to "putting the truth in a box." Hammill, however, described "all this concern about creeds" as "so much hot air," and suggested that "creeds have had a very positive influence throughout church history."

Before the discussion ended, however, Eva acknowledged that General Conference leaders should give further consideration to the "use" to which such statements would be put. He said he could not claim to have heard the teachers' concerns if he did not recommend to his colleagues the postponement of official endorsement of any statements until more study had been given to the question of their function.

But the publication a few days later of Hackett's editorial (it had been set in type before the meeting) helped keep alive the religion teachers' worries. In the month of June, the members of the three departments wrote a joint statement, signed by the three department chairmen, which was sent to various church officers. We also publish here the contents of that statement.

The series of responses continues with two articles written especially for this issue of SPECTRUM. One is an essay opposing the adoption of doctrinal statements, in which the author makes his argument by means of a review of Adventism's "historic witness" against credal formulas. The last article of the series briefly recounts recent developments in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, and in the Southern Baptist Convention. The crises of authority that have afflicted both these communions have, as the author contends, "instructive relevance" for the problems now being faced by Seventh-day Adventists.

The Editors