

# The Conservative Restoration At Geoscience

by Edward Lugenbeal

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Don Neufeld, an associate editor of the *Adventist Review* and of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, had given a non-traditional interpretation of Genesis 1. Eric Magnusson, a research chemist from Australia and later president of Avondale College, logically and clearly defended the scientific validity of radioactive dating techniques and by implication, life on earth that was millions (if not billions) of years old. Listening to these presentations during the 1968 Field Conference conducted by the Geoscience Research Institute were leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the leaders were becoming increasingly mutinous. After Magnusson's presentation, some even wanted to abort the conference. The leaders were angry that scientific evidence was not being provided by all speakers to support the creation of the world 6,000 years ago.

Reassurance did come from biologists Ariel Roth and Harold Coffen, who expressed the minority views of the Geoscience Institute. Before the end of the conference, Harold Coffen defended the notion that the layer-upon-layer of fossil

forests at Yellowstone Park was due to the Flood. At the end of his presentation, the General Conference president, R. H. Pierston, stood to offer a fervent speech of gratitude. Dr. Coffen responded with equal emotion. "Someone has to do it!"

The Adventist church had passed a decisive turning point. As it had never done before the 1968 Geoscience Field Conference, Adventist church leadership endorsed one side of a deep and continuing debate among Adventist scientists and theologians concerning creation.

In the decade of the 1960s, a conflict developed in Adventism. For the first time in its history, a whole generation of scholars with doctorates from secular universities became active in church institutions. Probing, open to change, skeptical of tradition, imbued with the values and culture of higher education, this new breed of "progressive" Adventist intellectual soon began to re-evaluate Adventist tradition. A conflict with church leaders, who represented the Adventist mainstream, was predictable.

During the early 1960s the conflict did not flare into an open fire. Perhaps the church did not yet clearly understand where the progressives were heading. Progressive theologians, for example, did not attack traditional views. They used traditional terminology and concepts but infused them with new meanings. It may have taken a while for conservatives to sense that although the words and symbols were familiar, the theological perspective was new.

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But the arrival of R. H. Pierson to the General Conference presidency brought a dramatic change. The new administration concluded that the progressives threatened the very soul and mission of Adventism. Policies based on that perception altered the course of the Geoscience Research Institute and of the Adventist study of geology.

## *The Philosophies*

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A conflict between “conservative” and “progressive” philosophies was central to the history of the Geoscience Institute from the start. The Institute began its life with two staff members, Frank Marsh and Peter Hare. Before long a third, Richard Ritland, joined the team. Soon a split developed that persisted for two decades. Ron Numbers described the conflict this way:

Before long this Institute was split down the middle. On one hand you have Marsh insisting that the group . . . adopt the traditional and historical Adventist interpretation of the Bible and the writings of Mrs. Ellen G. White on science. Marsh thought the function of the scientist was to study the Bible and Mrs. White’s writings to discover what was true, and then to go out into the field and to verify what you had discovered. Hare and Ritland took a different position. They believed . . . it was just as easy to make a mistake in interpreting the book of Revelation as it was to make a mistake in interpreting the book of nature. This “open-minded approach,” . . . [Marsh] regarded as satanic. He . . . believed this was a real threat to the future of the Seventh-day Adventist church.<sup>1</sup>

After Marsh’s banishment to the “Siberia” of the Andrews University biology department and Hare’s departure to the Carnegie Geophysical Laboratory, the players changed, but the conflict continued. The “open-minded” approach of the progressives and the “tradition-minded” approach of the conservatives vied for ascendancy.

The difference was not intellectual capacity. It is not necessary to administer I.Q. tests to observe that both sides had their quota of brilliant and pedestrian minds. The difference was not scientific training. Many

progressives felt that once their conservative brethren (scientists, administrators or educators) saw the data they would take the only course open to reasonable men and reevaluate their traditional positions. This assumption was naive.<sup>2</sup> Nor was the difference loyalty to the church. While the historical record shows that it is harder for progressives to retain their loyalty to the church (often because of the obstacles placed in their path by conservatives), it is important to recognize that many progressives were profoundly loyal to the church. However, the two camps were very different.

Conservatives and progressives pursued different strategies in the search for harmony between Genesis and geology. Progressives were willing to accept the weight of contemporary scientific evidence and change their theology in order to achieve harmony. They were willing to keep open multiple theological hypotheses and live with uncertainty. This is what Marsh meant in the early years when he characterized his colleagues as endorsing an open-minded approach.

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Conservatives were willing to achieve harmony only by trying to revolutionize contemporary science. They steadfastly refused to compromise what seemed to them “fundamental” theological positions whose alteration undermined the essence of Adventism. Included in these fundamental positions were the age of the earth, the literal creation week, and the universal Flood. The real differences at the Geoscience Research Institute were theological, not scientific. The theological differences

came down to a disagreement concerning what aspects of Adventist religious ideology were negotiable. If the two sides had ever reached theological agreement, the so-called scientific differences would have vanished.

### *The Scientific Authority of Scripture and Ellen White*

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Conservatives and progressives had significantly different views of the doctrine of revelation and inspiration. Both groups accepted the authority of Scripture in Christian life. Both groups believed Ellen White was a divinely inspired prophetess. Both gave lip service to the concept that inspiration did not require inerrancy. But in practice these affirmations didn't mean the same thing to the two sides. For conservatives, the Bible, as interpreted by Ellen White, was crystal clear. Did you accept or reject the Bible and Ellen White?

For progressives, that was not the issue at all. They too acknowledged the inspiration and authority of these sources. For them the issue was traditional interpretation versus an objective examination of the relevant scriptural and scientific evidence. Ellen White was a key. Progressives believed inspired messages could come in fallible wrappings. They believed it was unnecessary to defend the inerrancy of every historical, scientific, or exegetical statement made by a prophet. Conservatives agreed in theory that Ellen White was fallible, but their actions indicated otherwise. They consistently defended every one of Ellen White's published scientific comments—no matter how incidental to the message of the passage. When asked, for example, about her statements attributing vulcanism to the burning of coal or her assertion that giant men had been found in the fossil record, not once did the Geoscience Research Institute

conservatives suggest these statements might illustrate the fallibility of a prophet. Without fail they defended each statement's validity in terms of contemporary scientific knowledge. In short, they treated the entire corpus of Ellen White's writings as inerrant.

Given this view of Ellen White, conservatives could not compromise on the age of the earth or a universal flood (Ellen White was crystal clear about them). Ellen White probably played an important role in the conservatives' conclusion that no intermediate position between the traditional Adventist view and naturalistic evolution was viable. All compromise positions were, at worst, in direct opposition to the clear teaching of the Bible as interpreted by Ellen White, or at best empty speculations, unworthy of serious consideration. There was no room for compromise. The Adventist faith, with its glorious eschatological hope, was a sham unless its traditional views of earth history were true.

Because of their views on authority, conservatives and progressives had different levels of tolerance for diversity. During the early 1960s, when progressives were in positions of leadership at the Geoscience Research Institute, conservative points of view coexisted in the Institute and were given ample opportunity for expression. During the 1970s, when conservatives controlled the Institute, progressive points of view were not allowed free expression. This is not because conservatives are rigid and intolerant persons. The differences flow logically out of the philosophical commitments of the two groups.

In any human institution, revolutionaries are not handled with *laissez faire* tolerance. If the identity or existence of the institution is at stake, confrontation may be necessary. Conservatives believed that the identity of the church was at stake. Church institutions did not dare tolerate progressive views that would eventually destroy the institutions that tolerated them. Of course, progressives felt just the opposite was true. They believed that a diversity of theological ap-

proaches, instead of threatening the identity of Adventism, would contribute to a clearer understanding of truth and ultimately to a firmer and more viable definition of the Adventist mission. An asymmetry of acceptance is characteristic of conservative-progressive religious conflicts. The progressive is philosophically free to accept the legitimacy of the conservative's point of view, but the conservative cannot accept the legitimacy of the progressive point of view without compromising his conservatism.

### *Role and Function of the Institute*

The progressives saw the Geoscience Research Institute as an open-ended research institute dedicated to helping the church discover the truth about origins within the context of Christian commitment. For progressives, the founding of the Institute was a call for help by the church. The Institute had been established to generate information and analysis needed to allow management to act wisely. They certainly did not see it as a corporate public relations department with a mandate to place the best possible face on management's previous actions. By the mid-1960s, the progressives' study of the issues led them to conclude that harmony between Genesis and geology required some kind of theological accommodation by the church. This had consequences for their view of the day-to-day role of the Institute. For example, the Institute under Ritland hired two new staff members (Harold James and Edward Lugenbeal) with backgrounds in theology. Since at that time the most theologically flexible products of the Adventist educational system were its seminary graduates, the Geoscience Research Institute was signaling that theological flexibility was vital for reaching a resolution of the problem of creation and science and for educating the church regarding the resolution.

During this time, the Institute placed great emphasis on educating thought leaders and administrators in the church to the severity of the problems posed by the geologic record for traditional views concerning the age of the earth and the Flood. A primary consideration in collecting data became the ease with which it could be grasped by scientific laypeople. The best example of this is the attention devoted to the Fossil Forests of Yellowstone. The Fossil Forests are a fascinating but relatively minor slice of geologic history. The Fossil Forests were enormously exciting to progressives precisely because Yellowstone's levels and rings made it easy for the layperson to grasp the problems with the traditional timescale. The Fossil Forests were an excellent apologetic tool.

In general, progressives conducted a limited number of detailed field and laboratory studies of the Fossil Forests. Most of their work was (as conservatives complained) essentially descriptive. Why? Because the progressives were quite satisfied

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with descriptive information. The implications seemed obvious. Why miss the Forests for the trees? Progressives were sensitive to the criticism that their focus on illustrating time problems was too negative, and they involved themselves in other kinds of study. One type of research aimed at locating the Flood in the geologic record. The progressives said: "Let us define portions of the record that could not be Flood deposits because they contain evidences for the passage of time. If we find a punctuation mark (a temporal break) in the record, we can conclude the Flood occurred either before this point in the record or after."

The search for the Flood in the record also led previous progressives to collect a large quantity of data about the distribution of fossils. This information provided some critical tests of the Flood model. Unfortunately, this research program also evolved into a “negative” effort. The progressives found much evidence for time in the geologic “column.” Responding to this evidence, the Adventist geoscientist community began to restrict the portion of the record attributable to the Flood. However, perceptive students soon saw where this approach was leading—pushing the Flood out of the entire record. Evidences for time could be discovered throughout the geologic column. Hence this tack slipped into a means of falsifying Flood geology, instead of a “positive” effort to locate the Flood in the record.

In yet another effort to make a more “positive” contribution to the life and faith of the church, the progressives began to collect scientific information that suggested fundamental patterns of design in nature that called for a Designer. This effort never found a significant market in the Adventist community.

Conservatives, of course, had a completely different view of the role of the Institute and what constituted legitimate work. The conservative view is well-stated in an unofficial document in the 1970s entitled, “The Role of the Geoscience Research Institute Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”<sup>3</sup> Although this document was never adopted formally, I believe it candidly and clearly reveals the true feelings of the conservatives.

The document makes several points. In the second paragraph it states flatly: “The Institute is not an open-ended research organization . . . free to investigate all possible ideas and reach whatever conclusions may appeal to investigators.”<sup>4</sup> It later states that “the Institute should conduct and stimulate original research if that research gives promise of providing data that would

increase the effectiveness with which the church can maintain its position, accordingly, the Institute is obligated to work within the framework of the established beliefs of the church and to seek interpretations of available scientific data from the viewpoints of these beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> The document goes on to list several conclusions that a staff member of the Institute must support. Included in the list of ready-made conclusions are the supernatural origin of life, the six-day creation week, the universal Flood, and a less than 10,000 year age for the earth. In the next to last paragraph, the document states: “In its work the Institute must be taught by the understanding of divine revelation that is held by its supporting church; it is not warranted to attempt the role of an instructor of the church in these matters.”<sup>6</sup>

This document clearly expressed the basic strategy of the conservatives. For them, as for the progressives, the Geoscience Research Institute was primarily an apologetic instrument. But for conservatives, the Institute’s open-ended scientific research ultimately must bow to traditional beliefs. The conservative and progressive views of the role of the Geoscience Research Institute were both vulnerable to criticism. Inherent in each were internal contradictions or ethical dilemmas. The difficulties with the conservative view were stated eloquently by a conservative critic: “Our intellectual approach in Geoscience can raise a serious question about a lack of integrity that we need to be careful about. Unless we are willing to take the risk involved in the openness of scientific investigation, we cannot honestly claim the support of science in our work. Our act is and appears a sham. Much of the basis for the authority of science comes from its openness and willingness to look for truth wherever it may lead.”<sup>7</sup>

Conservatives were vulnerable to the charge that they posed as scientists working in a “research” institute (which enhanced the effectiveness of their defense of traditional beliefs) while they actually operated

on a dogmatic nonscientific basis. For example, was there any natural data they would accept as falsifying a short chronology for life on earth? Their treatment of evidence from ancient history, archeology, and geology suggested their commitment could not be altered by any conceivable body of natural evidence. Progressives were vulnerable too—for being less than candid about their true aims. Conservatives could rightfully complain that progressives, while never clearly stating their goal of influencing the church's traditional belief system, were in fact working hard to undermine the very beliefs they were paid to defend.

### *The Transition*

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**D**uring most of the decade of the 1960s, progressive staff members exerted the greatest influence over the operation of the Institute. But this ascendancy was soon to end, and began ending in 1966 with the arrival of the Pierson administration, which moved to counter what it saw as the threat of creeping (or perhaps galloping) liberalism. The attempt to minimize or isolate progressive, intellectual influences in the church became a conscious policy. The 1968 Field Conference, the last organized by the progressive forces, was a watershed for the Geoscience Research Institute. Field conferences had provided numerous show-and-tell forums for the progressive message concerning the problems posed by the geologic record. In the early years of the institute, the progressives were the most geologically knowledgeable Adventists. They were the only ones attending, for example, the annual Geological Society of America meetings, and had much to tell and much to show their Adventist confreres. They led conservative colleagues to the tops of many mountains, the brinks of many canyons. Conservatives lost their geological virginity. They too recognized the problems. But finally they returned from the

brink of an abyss. The horror of its depths was too much. By the 1968 Field Conference, the time for problems was over. The time for answers had come.

At the 1968 Field Conference, conservatives took a public stand. By then they knew the progressives would never solve the problems they could so effectively present. They suspected that the progressives had no intention of solving those problems. They sensed that the problems were presented in order to create pressure for theological change. So, in order to protect the church, they made a consistent effort to provide answers for all problems, or at least to suggest problems with all problems. "Blowing smoke," and "throwing sand in peoples' eyes" is what the progressives called this tactic. "Presenting a balanced picture," and "exhibiting true scientific rigor and caution" is what the conservatives called it. Church administrators at the 1968 Field Conference recognized kindred spirits among the conservative scientists. The actions of R. H. Pierson after the 1968 Field Conference left little doubt where his sympathies lay. In an *Adventist Review* article, in 1968, summarizing the conference, he wrote: "In our controversy with the proponents of the evolutionary theory we must keep in clear perspective the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy are not on trial." Even more

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telling, at a Geoscience meeting shortly after the conference, Pierson introduced a resolution that called upon members of the Geoscience Research Institute to refrain from presenting problems in all public and semi-public meetings. Asked if a field conference was a semi-public meeting, he answered, "yes."<sup>8</sup> The era of a progressive approach to problems was over. After the 1968 Field Conference, the Pierson adminis-

tration exerted increasing pressure on the Institute to abandon its problem-oriented approach. Altering the course of the Institute was politically easy (unlike the difficulties in controlling the universities and seminary). At Geoscience there was no tradition of academic freedom to overcome, no accrediting bodies to worry about, no independent-minded board to contend with (board members were almost exclusively General Conference officers). All that was needed was a change in the leadership of the Institute.

Richard Ritland's decision to resign from Geoscience and accept a position as professor in the Andrews University biology department provided an opportunity for the board to alter the course of the institute. So by 1971, new interim leadership (Ariel Roth), and by 1972 new permanent leadership (Robert H. Brown), was firmly in place. The Pierson administration could look with satisfaction at the Institute, which had accepted the administration mandate to become a conservative apologetic institute for traditional Adventist views of origins. The influence of the two progressive scientists on the staff was minimal. By 1979, both were gone.

### *The Rise of the Present Geoscience Institute*

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The immediate challenge for the 1972 Geoscience Research Institute was to be both positive and visible. The Pierson administration was eager to use the Institute in its struggle against "liberalism" and the newly transformed Institute was eager to be used. Under the strong leadership of R. H. Brown, an impressive array of new programs was instituted, aimed at communicating broadly with the church, increasing the visibility of the Institute, and creating an image of greater productivity. Indeed, these programs may have saved the Institute's

budget. There was some apprehension that dissatisfaction with the Institute's lack of positive results might lead to its dissolution. Many a union conference president looked hungrily at the hundreds of thousands of dollars swallowed by the Institute budget.

Some of the communication vehicles used by Brown were traditional. Beginning in 1976, a cycle of three field conferences was arranged—one geared for the Union Conference presidents. The hope was that the Institute's new answer-oriented approach would build political and therefore financial support. Another conference was directed more at academically-oriented individuals.

Other programs were newer. At the request of W.J. Hackett, chairman of the Institute's board, the Institute arranged to

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visit one or two Adventist college campuses each year. These visits provided an opportunity to promote confidence in the church's traditional beliefs, regarding origins, among students and faculty. The apologetic outreach of the Institute also included the organization of several secondary or elementary teacher conferences and a steady parade of visits to workers' meetings, ministerial retreats, and other Adventist gatherings. The Institute also intensified its use of the print media in the church. It sponsored a regular feature in *Ministry* magazine and provided an increasing flow of articles for various church publications. Its most ambitious venture was the publication of an excellent scholarly journal, *Origins*.

The materials printed often set a new standard of excellence for creationist literature. A final important contribution (and one with quite a history of its own) was the

complete revision of the painfully outdated creation and geology articles in the *Seventh-day Adventist Commentary*. After the transition to conservative control, the Geoscience Research Institute cooperated closely with the Pierson administration in its efforts to contain progressive influence in church institutions. On several occasions, efforts were made to influence Seventh-day Adventist institutions not to hire progressive geoscientists. The Institute also became involved in the Pierson administration's effort to develop and promote statements that defined the acceptable limits of belief for scientists employed by the church. The creation statement sought to control the growing diversity of views in the church concerning origins. Its affirmation of the traditional views was used as a tool for screening employees.

The first discussion of a creation statement took place in an informal group at a Geoscience Field Conference. Progressive participants at the conference were pointedly excluded from these discussions. Throughout the controversial and divisive life of the creation statement, the Geoscience Research Institute leadership supported it. This was consistent with the Institute's commitment to narrowing the range of acceptable discourse in Adventist creation science. In general, the Geoscience Research Institute supported the Pierson administration in its using administrative authority to protect the church from infiltration by progressive modes of thought.

Another result of the transition at Geoscience Research Institute was a change in the character of the Institute's interaction with Adventist theologians. In the progressive era, interaction with seminary theologians was frequent. Seminary professors would gather with staff for informal and formal discussions and seminars. A consultant's committee composed of administrators, Bible scholars, and scientists met periodically with the staff of the Institute.

After the transition, the institute's theological interactions were restructured. The

administration created a science council for the Geoscience Research Institute and channeled theological interaction through it. The consultant's committee (accused of liberal leanings) was disbanded. Throughout the decade of the 1970s, the Geoscience Research Institute faithfully reflected the conservative views of the Pierson administration instead of the views characteristic of the seminary.

In the 1980s, the Geoscience Research Institute began to reach out, for the first time, to its counterparts in non-Seventh-day Adventist creationist organizations, and to become involved in the public debate regarding the propriety of teaching creationism in the public school systems. In spite of the commitment of Adventism to a meticulous separation of church and state, and the reservations expressed by many Adventist geoscientists, some staff members of the institute vigorously promoted the teaching of creation in state-supported schools. This support culminated in the highly publicized Arkansas trial at which Geoscience staff members played prominent roles as witnesses. The movements to cooperate with other creationist groups were made with caution and hesitation. Institute staff members were generally embarrassed by the low quality and tone of the publications of other creationist groups and hesitated to be identified with them. Nevertheless, there was a recognition of common ground. Some very tentative and minor steps toward rapprochement evolved.

Research in the post-transition Geoscience Research Institute proceeded along two different lines. First, the persuasive force of the progressives' most effective exhibits had to be neutralized. Progressives called this the fire-fighting function. Clearly, the most damaging progressive fire was raging in the Fossil Forests, therefore the institute used its new research fellowship program to fund numerous projects related to them.



Second, a conscious offensive effort was launched. Many of the problems raised by the progressives were put on the shelf as Institute conservatives determined to build a Flood Model. Justification for an essentially selective approach to geological data was garnered from the writings of the philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn. The Geoscience Research Institute staff members concluded they could (in a Kuhnian sense) step outside the mainstream and build their alternate paradigm, nurtured by the knowledge that science progresses because of the courage of visionaries whose radical new paradigms can eventually revolutionize their disciplines.

### *A Model for the Future*

Between 1966 and 1972, a significant transition altered the course of the Institute. Appropriately, the transition was not evolutionary, but the competitive replacement of one species of thought (progressive) by another concurrent species of thought (conservative). Given the political environment of the Pierson administration, we might justifiably conclude, however, that the selection that occurred was natural. Al-

though the conflict between progressives and conservatives no longer enlivens the Geoscience Research Institute, the conflict continues in Adventism. An important factor that could influence the future history of the conflict is the momentum given to new views of Ellen White by recent discoveries of her extensive literary dependence on contemporary authors.

Future historians may conclude that the Geoscience Research Institute's most important contribution was that it stripped Adventism of geological innocence. It thereby set the church on a course with an uncertain destination. That course now is taking a new turn. Adventist geology has grown beyond the Geoscience Research Institute. The church has a department of geology at Loma Linda University and a growing community of professionally trained geoscientists whose primary focus is not on apologetics but on the study of geology as a discipline. Do church leaders realize that the course followed by the Institute since 1972 has increasingly isolated it from this broader community of Adventist geoscientists?

Although in its first 25 years the Geoscience Research Institute has been the primary force molding the character of Adventist geology, it may be hard pressed to retain this primacy in the future.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Ron Numbers, unpublished manuscript in my files (transcription of presentation to a forum group at Loma Linda), no date.

2. The Geoscience Research Institute did have great difficulty recruiting a single professionally credentialed conservative geologist for its staff.

3. Robert H. Brown, "The Role of the Geoscience Research Institute Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church," unpublished manuscript circulated among staff members of the Institute, 1979.

4. *Ibid.*, page 1.

5. *Ibid.*, page 2.

6. *Ibid.*, page 3.

7. Ariel Roth, unpublished letter to Robert H. Brown with copies sent to other Geoscience staff members, May 10, 1979.

8. Richard Ritland, personal communication, 1969.