
Fifty Years of Creationism: The Story of an Insider

by Richard Hammill

Since I was a member of the guiding committee for geoscience from the time it was set up in 1957 until my retirement in 1980, I must bear some of the responsibility for its history and for the relationship between geology and religion within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I have been asked to elaborate on my own role in those developments, and to give my personal viewpoints concerning them. My comments are bound to be subjective, although I have attempted to be as objective as possible.

Origins

Although various Seventh-day Adventist ministers and teachers published articles on the relationship of geology to the biblical teaching on creationism in the late 19th century, Adventists did not take geology

seriously until George McCready Price began to write on the subject at the turn of the century. His teaching and writings resulted eventually in sufficient interest for the church to help some of its science teachers get professional training in geology.

My first acquaintance with Professor Price and the subject of creationist geology occurred at Walla Walla College in the fall of 1934, when it turned out that my teacher for Greek II and Dogmatic Theology was George McCready Price, a new member of the faculty. In these classes, for which Professor Price had little or no training, he often diverged from the assigned topic to his geological interests. His public debate in England with a noted evolutionist was a favorite topic. As a new Adventist, who had read quite widely on evolutionary geology while in high school, I was fascinated with his views and later enrolled in one of his courses in creationist geology. That sparked in me an interest lasting for the 50 years since.

As a very young man, Price attended Battle Creek College for two years (1891–1893), after which he engaged in colporteur and evangelistic work. A Canadian, in 1896 he enrolled in a teacher-training institute in New Brunswick, and

Richard Hammill, former vice president of the General Conference (and before that president of Andrews University longer than any in the school's history), is now retired and living in Washington state. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

then taught for several years in Canadian public schools. During this time, he read extensively in the field of geology and began to publish articles in Adventist journals on the subject of creationism. In 1902 he published his first book, in which he sought to refute the idea of a geologic column of fossil-bearing strata. Meanwhile, he obtained teaching positions in several Adventist secondary schools in California. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, he received a bachelor's degree from Loma Linda College in 1912, and a few years later a master's degree from Pacific Union College, both of them honorary degrees. Price then taught geology successively in the College of Medical Evangelists, Pacific Union College, Union College, Stanborough College, Emmanuel Missionary College, and Walla Walla College, where he retired in 1938.

Professor Price's main thesis, which he propounded in about 20 books (some of them published at his own expense), was that the geologic column of fossils, increasing in complexity from the bottom strata to the top strata, was a theory, advanced by evolutionary geologists, that was not true to geological facts. He tried to show that the different sedimentary strata occurred in many places in a sequence different from that advocated by evolutionary geologists, and that there is no verifiable order of fossils from the simple to the complex in the strata of the earth. He asserted that the Genesis flood was responsible for all the major sedimentary strata, and that they were all laid down within the short time of the flood. All life forms preserved as fossils had been created about 6,000 years ago in six literal, 24-hour days, and there was no order to the fossils in the geological record.

Not having had academic training in geology, nor being psychologically interested in field studies, Professor Price was mainly a theoretical critic of evolutionary geologists. Often in class, while showing us pictures of some geological feature high on a mountainside, he would remark, "Why

should I risk my neck trying to climb up there when the pictures show it very clearly?" (I had the impression that physically he was not a strong nor an active person. Sometimes in class he could become very emotional, particularly if he discovered a student cheating or being unruly. But Professor Price was a compassionate man, always keenly interested in his students. While I was enrolled in his classes he discovered my lifelong affliction of poor eyesight. Every time I chanced to meet him in the next 30 years he inquired with much concern about further visual impairment.)

Despite being handicapped by his lack of scientific training, Professor Price must be credited for creating a very deep-seated interest in geology and scientific creationism in the Adventist church. His influence eventually led the church to finance training in geology for some of its gifted science teachers, and to support the Geoscience Research Institute. He was a brilliant man who remained mentally active and interested in geology up until his death at age 91. When a group of us, who had been his former students, asked what we could give him for his 90th birthday, he provided the titles of two large scientific books on the new discipline of oceanographic geology.

About the time Professor Price's work was drawing to a close, two biology teachers in our colleges began to write on aspects of geology that related to Adventist views of cosmology (a branch of philosophy dealing with the origin, processes, and structure of the universe). These were Harold W. Clark, of Pacific Union College, and Frank L. Marsh, of Emmanuel Missionary College. Though neither of them had received academic training in geology, their graduate studies in biology enabled them to write penetrating material on creationism which was much appreciated by Adventists. Apparently Professor Clark was the first Adventist writer who accepted the validity

of the geologic column and attempted to explain the fossils in it by his unique "ecological zonation" theory.

The first Adventist with specific training in geology, of whom I know, was Clifford L. Burdick, who, near the end of World War I, earned a bachelor's degree with a minor in geology from Milton College, a Seventh-day Baptist institution in Wisconsin. He then taught chemistry and geology in public high school, during which time he became a Seventh-day Adventist. Despite advice from W. E. Howell, educational director of the General Conference, not to attend university, he enrolled in a graduate program in geology at the University of Wisconsin (soon dropping out because of Sabbath problems). Burdick published several dozen creationist articles in Adventist journals; one article caused him trouble when it came into the hands of his professors at the University of Arizona, where he was enrolled as a doctoral candidate in 1958, when I first met him.

About this time, a significant event took place in the study of geology in the Adventist church. As an associate secretary in the education department of the General Conference, it was my responsibility every summer to arrange "the college teacher section meetings." For 1956, the group of

One of the major responsibilities of the leaders of our church is to provide an atmosphere in which Adventist scholars can conduct research scientifically and responsibly without suspicion coming upon them.

teachers were from the applied arts and natural sciences departments, and met at Union College in August. The papers and discussions among the science teachers centered on the increasing difficulties they were encountering in answering some of the problems modern geology presented to believers of the biblical account of origins of

the earth and life upon it. The science teachers recommended that the General Conference should finance some Adventist scientists for graduate studies in geology so they could conduct research and write effectively on problems geology presented to creationists.

E. E. Cossentine, the director of the Department of Education, and I presented this recommendation twice to the Adventist college presidents. At Canadian Union College, in the summer of 1957, they approved the idea and E. E. Cossentine presented it to R. R. Figuhr, the president of the General Conference.

Commitment to Truth: 1954-1966

Reuben Figuhr had gotten his professional experience largely in missionary service. In 1923, a year after his graduation from Walla Walla College, he accepted a mission appointment to the Philippine Islands, where he served for 18 years, the last 10 as president of our work in that country. He was elected as president of our work in South America in 1941, where he served for nine years until becoming, in 1950, a general vice president at the General Conference in Washington, D.C. Four years later he was elected president of the world church.

Though not a trained scholar, Reuben Figuhr was much interested in intellectual matters and was a strong supporter of Adventist educators. During his administration, with his strong leadership, the church established two universities: Andrews University in 1957, and Loma Linda University in 1961. Figuhr helped get approval of the suggestion of F. D. Nichol, editor of the *Adventist Review*, that a Seventh-day Adventist bible commentary be published. With the General Conference president's leadership, the General Conference Committee set up two study groups which developed two ground-breaking books: *Seventh-day*

Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (1957) and *Problems in Bible Translation* (1954). It was due to Figuhr's sensitivity to concerns expressed by biblical scholars, about the denomination's theological problems, that a committee of biblical scholars, editors, and a few administrators was appointed to study sensitive problems in the biblical book of Daniel.

The recommendation that the General Conference financially support trained geologists was well-received. Figuhr shepherded the recommendations through the General Conference officers (August 28, 1957), the General Conference Committee (August 29, 1957), and the Annual Council of the General Conference Committee (October 25, 1957). The last authorization provided an annual budget of \$13,500 to finance graduate study in geology for "two mature, experienced men of proven loyalty." The General Conference Committee also approved the appointment of a standing committee to administer the project, and "to make such recommendations as may be necessary to implement the progressive development of the program," including recommending names of people to be appointed for study. R. R. Figuhr was elected chairperson of the committee on October 28, 1959, and chaired it until he retired in 1966.

My teacher for Greek II and Dogmatic Theology (for which he had no training) was George McCready Price, who often diverged from the assigned topic to his geological interests.

Early minutes of the committee show that it saw as its function to encourage the colleges to give leaves-of-absence to certain science teachers, who would then take graduate studies in geology, supported by financial grants from the committee's budget. These teachers were to return to

their posts to teach classes in creationism and to help their faculty colleagues answer questions posed by evolutionary geologists. The committee authorized E. E. Cossentine to explore, with their respective college presidents, the possibility of such training for P. E. Hare, Ray Underhill, Harold Coffin, and Earnest Booth. (The minutes indicate that a longer period of study, and special assignments, were envisioned for Dr. Booth.)

The college presidents were cool to the overtures of the committee, for they did not want to lose the services of some of their best teachers. This caused a change in planning. The committee concluded they would have to employ a staff of their own and give them professional training in geology. Following this preparation, the geologists would be assigned to full-time research, writing, and field conferences and institutes for Adventist science and religion teachers, not only in the North American Division, but also in the overseas fields.

The committee invited Dr. Frank L. Marsh, who had an established reputation as a defender of creationism (April 17, 1958), to join the endeavor. He was granted a one-year leave-of-absence for geological studies, which he chose to take at Michigan State University. The committee discussed the possibility of inviting Clifford Burdick to join the staff, but because in 1958 he was already 65 years old, and was just starting work on an ambitious dissertation project, they turned away from it. (They did authorize a \$1,000 grant to encourage him in his research.) Instead, on May 8, 1958, the General Conference Committee invited P. E. Hare, of the Pacific Union College chemistry department, to join the staff, and granted him a two-year leave to earn a doctoral degree in geochemistry, which he chose to do at the California Institute of Technology. Hare was already studying

geology part time at the University of California, Berkeley.

In January of 1960, the committee appointed Richard Ritland to the staff. Ritland was the first appointee who was already professionally trained, having earned a doctorate in paleontology and comparative anatomy from Harvard University before he started teaching anatomy at Loma Linda University. Dr. Ariel Roth was invited in 1963 to participate in the new endeavor, but declined. Instead, he joined the biology department of Loma Linda University. Later he accepted half-time employment with the new project, also studying geology at the University of California at Riverside. He joined the staff full time in 1971. They invited Dr. Harold Coffin in 1964 to join the group for research in the paleontology of invertebrates. In the summer of 1965, Harold James, who was studying geology at the University of Massachusetts, was appointed to the staff and financed to complete his doctoral studies in sedimentology at Princeton University. Finally, in 1967 the committee called Edward Lugenbeal and financed his doctorate in the anthropology of early man at the University of Wisconsin. Thus, the guiding committee sought to build a research staff with competence in the various specialties of geology. The original authorization for "two mature persons" had indeed gone through a "progressive development."

In February 1962, the Committee on the Teaching of Geology and Paleontology, whose membership was made up of people who could administer the business affairs and guide the general direction of the project, recommended, and the General Conference Committee voted, the appointment of another group composed of people able to counsel the staff in their research and publishing activity. This committee, which was known as the Consultant Committee on Geoscience Research, was authorized to invite various scientists and religion teachers from our colleges and universities to join

them in listening to and counseling the staff about their research and publications. This group met once or twice a year and served as a sounding board on sensitive problems in geology and creationism.

In the meantime, after fumbling with several names, the project was named the Geoscience Research Institute. The Committee on Teaching of Geology and Paleontology became the Board of Directors of the Geoscience Research Institute.

I have given this historical development as the background for my evaluation of R.R. Figuhr's administration in its relationship to the study and teaching of geology in the

I have been told on reliable authority that the Institute staff were not in favor of including a reference to 6,000 years in the "Statement of Affirmation" (see page 59).

Adventist church. Much of the impetus given to the study of geology among Adventists from 1957 onward was due to his wisdom and insight. Figuhr not only led out in providing organization and funding, but also encouraged the new staff to do basic research. He encouraged field travel and provided funds to purchase equipment for a carbon-14 laboratory, becoming greatly disappointed when this equipment was sold after Edward Hare left the staff of the Geoscience Research Institute in 1964. Figuhr provided funds to purchase a building for the Institute staff, and for an excellent research library in geology.

Although there were other contributing factors, it was Elder Figuhr's insistence that the staff engage in basic research which led in 1964 to a change in leadership of the Institute, when it became apparent that the current director, Frank L. Marsh, did not care to engage in basic research. This was

due in part to Marsh's minimal training in geology, partly to his age, and partly to his firm belief that the record in the earth's strata was misleading on the subject of origins. He preferred to discuss origins on the basis of interpreting inspired writings. While recognizing the necessity for guidance from such writings, the committee wanted the Institute to apply itself to scientific research. Dr. Ritland was appointed the next director of the Institute. At that time, 1962, I was president of Andrews University and was assigned the chairmanship of the newly formed Consultant Committee on Geoscience Research. I made a special effort to become acquainted with the issues which the geoscience group were addressing. I read all the papers produced by the staff, and relevant material which they recommended. One of the major problems that led to some polarization within the staff and also within the interested Adventist scholarly community concerned the Genesis flood, namely: are all the major periods and systems of the geologic column the result of Noah's flood, or are the flood deposits to be found only in the upper layers in the Cretaceous or Tertiary?

Discussion centered largely around two sets of data: first, did the layered fossil forests of the Yellowstone and Nova Scotia areas grow successively in their present locations? One member of the staff advocated that such was the case, and that the data collected by counting the annual growth rings in the successive layers of trees requires far more time than allowed for in the 6,000-year chronology for life on the earth.

The staff member had also done extensive reading and research in phylogeny, or the historical development of a species of plants or animals, as seen in the fossil record. He introduced a second set of troublesome data that the majority of organisms in the lower levels of the geological column are not found in the upper levels, apparently having become extinct when those strata were laid down. In contrast, a large part of the forms

of life living today are found as fossils in the upper layers of the geologic column.

This staff member's studies in biogeography, the biological study of the geographic distribution of animals and plants, had made it clear to him that some orders and many families, genera, and species unique to specific areas of our present world (armadillos, ground sloths, anteaters, certain groups of marsupials, rodents, and many other forms) were also unique to those same geographic areas in the fossil record. The obvious conclusion is that the strata in which these fossils are preserved (mainly those of the Cenozoic period) were laid down subsequent to the Genesis flood, for if all the strata of the geologic column were laid down during the flood, and present life forms are the descendants of animals and plants saved in the ark, one would expect to find fossils of these plants and animals in many places and not just where those plants and animals now live on the earth. No issue raised as much heat among some members of the staff (and still does!) as these arguments from phylogeny and biogeography.

Conversely, others on the staff advocated that the fossil forests had been floated in to their present locations in a short time by successive waves of Noah's flood, and concentrated their research on trying to develop scientifically supportable flood models to account for the geologic column.

As divisiveness increased over these and other issues, including the validity of various geochronometers (radioactive materials used to date fossil records), someone accused me of being a "fence straddler" and one who held "liberal" views on creationist issues, particularly in regard to a short chronology for life upon the earth. I thought that it was premature to take a definitive position for either theory about the fossil forests, and that much research needed to be done on the subject. As chairperson of the Consultant Committee, I tried to play mediator. I encouraged open

investigation and discussion, believing then, as I still do, that creationists must look at all the facts and be wary of developing creationist models built on selective data. But at that time, 1964, a letter was sent to the General Conference president alleging that the consultant committee was “stacked” with people who did not accept the teachings of Ellen White on earth history, and implying that the chairperson was one of them.¹

About that time, several professors in the theological seminary were heavily criticised by various conference presidents for liberal theological views. One of the influential senior conference presidents talked to me about it: “Reports are being circulated that you, too, President Hammill, do not believe that life on the earth is only 6,000 years old.” I thanked him for his frankness and immediately arranged a meeting with President Figuhr and his chief advisors to explain my views about the 6,000-year chronology.

Before becoming an Adventist in college, I had been exposed in public school to teachings about evolution and had read fairly widely about it. However, when I converted to Christianity, I wholeheartedly accepted creation in six literal days, and have believed it ever since that time. In Professor Price’s classes I accepted the position he held at that time, that God had created the universe *ex nihilo* a long time ago, but it was only about 6,000 years ago that God had made the earth fit for man. I had also studied under Dr. Marsh at the theological seminary and believed that I stood in the mainstream of enlightened Seventh-day Adventists.

When I studied at the University of Chicago, one of my comprehensive examinations for my doctorate was on ancient Egyptian history. At the Oriental Institute, I studied about the long period of pre-history leading up to the formation of Egyptian civilization and the successive kingdoms of more than 30 different dynasties. I had been surprised to learn that in strata underlying the ancient pyramids of the early dynasties

there were evidences of a very long development of various cultures, including the primitive hand-ax, stone-age culture similar to the Acheulian in France and Germany.

At the meeting with Reuben Figuhr, I explained to him and some of his associates my views about the great age of Egyptian civilization. I referred to the discovery by Lynn H. Wood, a professor in the Adventist seminary, of a record of an ancient eclipse mentioned on an Egyptian inscription, which fixed without question the beginning of the 12th Egyptian dynasty of kings at 1991 B.C. On the basis of this datum, it was impossible for the flood to have occurred at 2348 B.C., as Bishop Ussher’s chronology asserted, because there is no way that all the events that had happened in Egypt up to that time could be crowded into the 357 years between 2348 B.C. and 1991 B.C. Thus, the 6,000-year chronological scheme has to be expanded, and life on earth has existed longer than 6,000 years.

The data collected in the layered fossil forests of Yellowstone requires far more time than allowed for in the 6,000-year chronology.

I stated that I trusted implicitly in God’s inspired word, but that word does not mention 6,000 years and I could not accept chronologies, based on interpretations of certain passages of the Old Testament, which my knowledge of the Hebrew Bible made it impossible for me to accept. My major field of graduate studies had been in the Hebrew literature of the Old Testament, and I was aware of how imprecisely some Hebrew writers often used round numbers. Many generation gaps could be demonstrated by comparing the various biblical geneological lists. Moreover, whenever we have duplicate accounts in the Bible of the

same event or series of events, we often find different lengths of time cited. If we had duplicate accounts of other events recorded in the Bible, this human element of inspiration, of which Ellen White speaks, would no doubt show itself also.² But in all this, God's purpose in revealing to mankind His will and the way to salvation always stands out clearly and unmistakably. I explained that with the vast explosion of knowledge in recent centuries, data accumulates to the extent that reasonable men must acknowledge certain historical dates as proven, no matter what philosophical or religious beliefs they hold. I was convinced that historical data concerning the history of civilizations in the Mesopotamian and Nile valleys proved that life has existed on the earth for more than 6,000 years, however, I did not think in terms of hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Moreover, evidences from geology, such as the successive periods of glaciation on top of fossil forests, and of ancient, superimposed drainage basins (such as those of the Green River and Colorado River) compelled me to look beyond the 6,000-year chronology which some claim the Bible supports. R. R. Figuhr and his associates seemed satisfied with my explanation, and I had no further problems on that issue during my administration.

The policies and programs R. R. Figuhr instituted and supported, as well as the type and quality of people he helped appoint to the Institute staff, bear witness to the openness of his mind to new ideas and approaches. In my capacity as chairperson of the Consultant Committee on Geoscience Research, I often discussed sensitive areas of geology and biblical cosmology with Reuben Figuhr. I found him very interested in ideas developed by scientific research. This General Conference president was not panicked by critical "fan mail," nor could he be pressured to back away from the study of sensitive areas of denominational thought and life. When an "Omega attack" was made against ideas contained in the book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, he

met it decisively. Reuben R. Figuhr's commitment to theological and scientific truth was very great. Seventh-day Adventist scholars and teachers owe a very large debt of gratitude to this quiet, but determined and thoughtful church leader.

The Conservative Defense: 1966-1978

When R. R. Figuhr retired in June of 1966, he was succeeded by Robert H. Pierson. After finishing the two-year ministerial course at Southern Junior College, Robert Pierson had become an active evangelist, first in this country and then in India. There his spiritual qualities and native leadership ability quickly led to administrative positions. He served first as a top-level church administrator in the Caribbean, then in local conferences in the United States, and finally as president of two world divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist church: in Southern Asia and later in Southern Africa. While serving in the latter post, Pierson was elected to the presidency of the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

I worked closely with Elder Pierson on various projects and committees from 1954 onward, and it was always a pleasure to serve with him, partly because one could disagree with him without his getting upset. Robert Pierson was intelligent, quick to grasp the implications of facts and ideas, and always cheerful and energetic. He also had a fine sense of humor. Above all, Pierson was a deeply spiritual leader who always sought divine guidance when dealing with difficult situations.

Since most of his career had been spent in the mission fields, when Elder Pierson became president of the General Conference he was not well-acquainted with the theological tensions which had led to the establishment of the Geoscience Research Institute, nor with the mushrooming problem of academic freedom in our colleges and rapidly growing new universities. However,

Elder Pierson diligently became knowledgeable about these aspects of the church. He appointed M. V. Campbell, one of his general vice presidents, to serve as the chairperson of the Geoscience Institute, but he himself faithfully attended the board meetings.

Despite constant demand for his time and attention, Elder Pierson attended the second major geology field conference during the summer of 1968. Noticeable tension and polarised views, existing both within the Geoscience Institute staff and between some Adventist scientists and church administrators, dominated this field tour. In the earliest years of the Institute, the staff had had to concentrate on helping the church understand some fairly simple concepts about geology. There were still quite a few teachers and church members who denied that dinosaurs had ever existed, or that glacial ice sheets had at several successive times covered large parts of North America and Europe. As a holdover from the teachings of Professor Price, many Adventists still believed that the concept of a geologic column of sedimentary rocks was a figment of the geologists' imaginations. The Institute staff addressed itself to such issues in their early days. Articles in our periodicals, and books such as Dr. Ritland's *Search for Meaning in Nature* (1966) and Dr. Coffin's

With the vast explosion of knowledge in recent centuries, reasonable men must acknowledge certain historical dates as proven, no matter what philosophical or religious beliefs they hold.

Creation—Accident or Design (1969), were very helpful to the church on these matters.

But by the time of the geology field tour of 1968, questions not so easily answered were being discussed. How much of the geologic column was a result of the Flood? Where does the Flood fit in the column?

How much time is necessary to account for the successively layered fossil forests of the Absaroka area in Montana and Wyoming, and in Nova Scotia? How much time transpired in the development of the many successive basalt layers of the Columbia River basin, and of the evidence of extensive glaciation above them? What is the validity of the various geochronometers? How long did it take for the coral reefs to form or for the superimposed drainage basins of the Tertiary and Quaternary to develop?

The Geoscience Research Institute staff had prepared excellent background material and sent it to the delegates ahead of time. Due to his heavy program, Elder Pierson, as well as some of the other denominational leaders on the tour, had not read many of the articles and there was no time to do so on the trip. Moreover, Elder Pierson's extensive mail was waiting for him at the end of most days, and sometimes he had to miss important lectures to read and answer it. This made it difficult to get the facts lying back of the ideas being discussed on the trip. One lecture, by a physical chemist about the length of time indicated by certain geochronometers, was particularly upsetting.

The influence of this tour on Elder Pierson was significant. Although he wanted to support scientific investigation, his strong conservatism and his implicit faith in the inerrancy of Ellen White's statements on biblical chronology led him to reject the view of many that Ellen White's understanding of early biblical dates was based on Bishop Ussher's dates, which were printed in the margins of the Bibles of her time. He instinctively reacted against research data which looked like it might prove more than 6,000 years of earth history. Several years after Elder Pierson became president of the General Conference, questions about my beliefs were again raised when several seminary teachers left the faculty under

heavy criticism. Again, I tried to make clear to Robert Pierson, W. J. Hackett, and the other leaders my views of the 6,000-year chronological interpretation of biblical data. Their reaction was not quite the same as that of Reuben Figuhr,, although they did not regard my views as outside the borders of acceptable Adventist beliefs. They expressed confidence in me and continued to support me in my work at Andrews.

At the Annual Council following the 1968 field tour, W. J. Hackett was elected as a general vice president of the General Conference, and as soon as he arrived at world headquarters he was assigned to serve as chairperson of the Geoscience Research Institute board of directors (January 9, 1969), replacing M. V. Campbell. Elder Hackett had attended the 1968 field tour, and he had reacted the way Elder Pierson had. Under his conservative leadership, important changes took place in the Geoscience Research Institute. The Consultant Committee on Geoscience Research was terminated and a new emphasis was instituted for staff activities. Research tended to concentrate on selected areas where the data were most supportive of the 6,000-year biblical chronology of Bishop Ussher. Before long, the tacit policy arrived at in the 1950s during the General Conference presidency of W. H. Branson (to the effect that the 6,000-year chronology need not be emphasized in Seventh-day Adventists publications) was abandoned. Moreover, the new plan called for the Institute staff to devote more of its time to holding creationism conferences on college campuses and to participating in public hearings relative to the teaching of evolution in public schools, plus similar activities. This was not congenial to Dr. Ritland, the director of the Institute, who was most interested in pure research. He resigned in 1971 and was replaced a little over a year later by Robert H. Brown, who was willing to support the new emphasis. In the next few years two other staff members left. These vacancies were filled with individuals who

were comfortable with the new orientation of the Institute.

In the spring of 1976, Elder Pierson invited me to become a general vice president of the General Conference and to work with him on two special projects: reorganizing the

There were still quite a few teachers and church members who denied that dinosaurs had ever existed. . . .

division structure in Africa and establishing four or five full-fledged theological seminaries in key places around the world. At that time I had served as president of Andrews University during 13 years of rapid development of the facilities, the curricula, and of a faculty oriented to university level teaching and research. I was worn out from the heavy work load and the tensions of helping our leaders and people understand what a university really is and the role it would fill in the church. High inflation was making it increasingly burdensome to operate Andrews University on sound financial and academic bases. I was ready for a change, and I think quite a few others were also.

In the following four years during which I served as a general vice president, I tried to present a viewpoint not often expressed on that level of church administration. I emphasized basic research on the part of all members of the Geoscience Research Institute staff. I urged that we not impede free inquiry, and that those sometimes labeled as liberals should be encouraged to state their views.

During this period of my participation in General Conference leadership, something occurred that has resulted in a number of inquiries, namely, the development of a more or less official statement of consensus about biblical teaching on the subject of the creation and early history of the earth,

initiated by W. J. Hackett. The first draft was made by an *ad hoc* group drawn from the participants in a geology field trip conducted by the Institute during the summer of 1976. Intended as the starting point for discussion of current Adventist beliefs about creationism, the document underwent many revisions. I was not closely associated with developing the document, although I was present when it was discussed by the General Conference officers and presidents of our world divisions in October, 1977, and at a lengthy discussion at the Nosoca Pines Conference in February of 1978. I also participated with Elders Hackett and Eva when that document and the companion statement on inspiration and revelation were discussed with the religion and science faculties in several of our colleges.³

The statement was eventually published in the *Adventist Review* (June 17, 1980). The clause that caused the most debate reads: "Accepting the Bible time-frame, which clearly indicates a short history for life and the human race upon the earth. . ." Quite a few people wanted the statement to assert that the extent of earth history was embraced within 6,000 years, and at some stages in the development of the document, a clause to that effect was embodied in it. In all these discussions, the staff of the Geoscience Research Institute consistently favored including only a reference to a "short chronology for earth history."

Robert H. Pierson resigned his post as president of the Seventh-day Adventist church in October of 1978, to alleviate physical problems caused by long years of heavy work and stress. The Annual Council delegates did not take long to decide upon Neal C. Wilson as his successor.

Maintaining the Defense: 1978-1984

Elder Wilson had spent his youth with missionary parents in Africa and India,

where he had taken his elementary and secondary education before attending and graduating from Pacific Union College. After studying at the seminary, Elder Wilson was appointed to mission service in Egypt, where he subsequently spent more than a decade. After returning to the United States, he served successively in several posts on the local conference level, then as president of the Columbia Union Conference, and finally for eight years in close association with Elder Pierson as vice president of the North American Division of the General Conference. He served as chairperson of both the Board of Higher Education for North America and the Board of Trustees of Loma Linda University. Thus he was well-acquainted with the theological and academic stresses within the church in North America.

Recently, another "Statement of Affirmation" relative to creation and the chronology of earth history was published jointly by the *Adventist Review* (December 8, 1983) and *Ministry* (December, 1983). The document ascribes its source as "the participants of the 1983 Geoscience Field Conference," and the names are given at the end. Participating in the trip were most of the presidents of our world divisions, most of the key officers of the General Conference, and several editors of our church papers. The affirmation on time reads: "That the biblical record requires a short chronology of approximately 6,000 years in contrast to tens of thousands or millions of years." Although the Geoscience Research Institute staff planned and directed the field trip, none of the staff are included at the end of the document. I have been told on reliable authority that the Institute staff were not in favor of including a reference to 6,000 years, although they certainly do not advocate "tens of thousands or millions of years." In such statements about time, the staff have consistently argued for letting the matter stand as "a short chronology of earth history."

While he was still vice president for the

North American Division, Elder Wilson showed considerable interest in the work of the Geoscience Research Institute. As a member of its board of directors, he attended meetings faithfully and had been on one of its earlier field tours. He heartily supported the concept of a geology field tour for North American Division administrators; when it was arranged for the summer of 1977, he put considerable pressure on the union presidents to be present. On the tour, he attended all the meetings and was an interested participant, asking questions and making observations. Elder Wilson seemed to be better informed than most church leaders on the problems of a short chronology for earth history. During his many years of service in Egypt, he had become acquainted with the long span of ancient Egyptian dynasties, and did not seem to be unduly disturbed by the fact that they did not fit with the conservative Adventist interpretation of a 6,000-year maximum for earth's history. As far as I can discover, Elder Wilson has not published any views on the problems of geoscience, but he has encouraged research and publication by others. During his administration, funds have been provided from the general church treasury for Seventh-day Adventist scientists to research geological problems related to biblical creationism. (One would wish that more Adventist scientists would participate.)

During Elder Wilson's administration as vice president of the North American Division and as chairperson of the Loma Linda University board of trustees, approval was given for Loma Linda University to offer bachelor's and master's programs in geology: a giant step forward for Seventh-day Adventist geologists. The General Conference provided a \$125,000 annual grant to support these and the graduate program in biology. This was gratifying for those of us who for decades had wanted geology taught in the Adventist educational system. To give greater breadth and depth of faculty for this new curriculum in 1980, the headquarters of the Geoscience Research Institute were

moved from Berrien Springs, Mich., to Loma Linda University in Calif.

Examining the Evidence

In our effort to understand what the Book of Inspiration has to say about origins and earth history, too little attention is being given to analyzing the Bible with

Neal Wilson had become acquainted with the long span of Egyptian dynasties and did not seem to be unduly disturbed by the fact that they did not fit with a conservative Adventist chronology.

carefully thought-out and rigorously applied interpretive methods comparable to the methods scientists use to study the Book of Nature. Correctly understanding biblical cosmology requires carefully evaluating the assumptions, literary devices, and technical terms which the biblical writer brought to his effort to set forth God's message.

This neglect is understandable, in a way, for most people who study what the Bible has to say about origins assume that the Bible writers had the same knowledge about the universe and the solar system which we have today. Moreover, most Adventists, including ministers, give preference to Ellen White's writing on cosmology because she wrote in our language and time, whereas they are unable to read the Bible in the languages in which it was written. They know that in reading the Bible in translation they are coming to it through another person or people. They do not have the skills to dig into the full implication of words or the shades of meaning in the syntax, tenses, and modes of the ancient languages. But those who don't understand the biblical languages ought to give more weight than they do to the counsel of those who are able to conduct research into the Bible as it was

originally written. (I am thankful that the number of Adventists with such training is considerable, and is being augmented year by year.)

No doubt those who neglect the study of the Bible in preference for Ellen White's accounts of early history are unaware of what they are doing and would, in fact, warmly deny it, but my close acquaintance with many ministers and leaders indicates this is indeed so. I appreciate the difficult theological and administrative problems our leaders face, and I concur in their desires to preserve the unity and fellowship of the Adventist church. At this stage in our denomination's history, I prefer that we have conservative leaders, for conservatism is in line with the central consensus of our members. Our leaders, in the face of the many problems now present in the church, must steer a course that will enable the church to live, to grow, and to solve its problems as the providence of God shall indicate. In the meantime, they should support those who keep the Bible in a predominant place while discussing doctrinal problems. This is the *sine qua non* of the church's continued existence. One of the major responsibilities of the leaders of our church is to provide an atmosphere in which Adventist scholars can conduct their research scientifically and responsibly without suspicion coming upon them.

Adventists should allow no theory to stand in the way of the search for truth, for truth is a part of ultimate reality, and our commitment to it must be absolute. If we cannot accept concepts that seem to numerous believers to be fully supported by incontrovertible biblical and scientific data because to do so would change past teachings, then we will be in a critical condition spiritually. God is the embodiment of truth, and in our search we must keep close to His revelation of truth. The church is God's church, and responsible scholars will cherish its unity, making a

distinction between research and advocacy. They will not create divisiveness by the premature or sole dissemination of unsettling concepts. Scholars and church leaders must have confidence in one another and work together, realizing that it is best to move very slowly when there is no clear consensus on belief and action.

At the same time, all Adventists need to be aware of certain human tendencies as expressed by Lester C. Thurow in another connection: "Facts are difficult to deal with when they conflict with theory. And before changing theories most human beings will spend long periods of time pretending that the facts do not exist, hoping that the facts will magically go away, or denying that the facts are important. Only if the facts are very painful and very persistent will they deal with the fundamental inconsistencies in their world views."⁴ As a church, we are encountering some very persistent and painful facts which require calm, thorough, and honest investigation. Among these are geochronometers, and early man and his place in the geologic column. We look to the staff of the Geoscience Research Institute to help us all in these particular investigations.

As originally conceived, the General Conference's purpose for preparing key individuals with expertise in geology was, first, that they might help our science and Bible teachers find solutions to the problems being raised for creationists by the evolutionary geologists; and second, to help our ministers and interested laypeople become acquainted with scientific support for creationist views. The Institute has succeeded quite well in achieving these goals through its publications, geology field trips, and creationist classes and seminars conducted on the campuses of our colleges and universities.

In recent years, a few in the Adventist scholarly community have asserted that the Geoscience Research Institute staff give so much emphasis to what the staff terms "creationist apologetics," that they may be inadvertently minimizing the importance of

geology as a valuable discipline in itself. If this were to happen, it would be a reversion to approximately the same view of geological studies held by Professor Price, who conceived of himself mainly as a defender of creationism and the 6,000-year life span for earth, rather than as a scientist using geology as a means for finding out what the rocks and strata of the earth might teach us about their own history. The policy of appointing to its staff only arch-conservatives has isolated the Geoscience Research Institute from many in the community of Adventist scholars, and reduced its ability to help them.

Geology is an academic discipline in which careful study and research can help us to learn more than we now know about the early history of the earth. It is God who gave us inquiring minds and logical ability. As Christian scholars we must examine carefully all geological data that is available, and exercise great care against ignoring or passing lightly over data that does not mesh with models of early earth history established by religious faith. Such models are extremely important to Christians, but in scientific inquiry all available data must be

taken into account as we try to understand the twin books of revelation and of nature.

I am extremely grateful that God in His providence led me to the Seventh-day Adventist church. Its interpretation of God's Word is closer to the true intent of that word than that of any other religious group. Life within the Adventist church has been infinitely richer and more satisfying than any other I could have chosen. I am also grateful for the contribution Adventist geologists and scientists have made to my life. George McCready Price, Frank Marsh, Richard Ritland, P.E. Hare, Harold Coffin, Robert Brown, Ariel Roth, and Ed Lugenbeal have all helped open my eyes to the wonders of the universe and in the earth to which I had been blind before my association with them. One of the greatest blessings in life is to understand what has gone on in the earth before you came along, and what is happening to you and others as you live out your days. The Adventist church and the Adventist geologists and scholars in many fields have all helped me to achieve such an understanding, indeed, to achieve an inner serenity. But my curiosity has not dulled one iota. I remain committed to the search for truth and to understanding about all that is and is coming to be in every area of human activity and thought.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Other members of the committee were W.G.C. Murdoch, Ariel Roth and E. R. Thiele, all from Andrews University, and H. W. Lowe, General Conference field secretary, who was serving as chairman of the Daniel Committee and of the Defense Literature Committee. I considered all of them to be conservative Adventists.

2. *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, pp. 19-21.

3. At the request of Elder Pierson, I wrote the first draft of the statement on inspiration and revelation in the fall of 1976. It was then sent out to various Bible teachers, editors, and church administrators around the world, soliciting their suggestions; in the light of their written comments the document was revised. Before the document was sent to the Bible and science teachers in our North

American Division colleges, it was drastically revised at the Nosoca Pines Conference in February of 1978. Two sections of the document were excised: one of these dealt with the human element in revelation and the resulting problems of contradictions or differences where there are multiple accounts in the Bible of certain events; the other excised section dealt with the role of reason in seeking to understand inspired writings. I was not included as a member of the subcommittee which excised these sections and further revised the document, no doubt because I had just made known my views about that in a paper on inspiration which I had presented earlier in the conference.

4. *Newsweek*, August 8, 1983, p. 66.