

2002 International Faith and Science Conference



Ron Carter
addresses the
2002 International
Faith and Science
Conference.

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A Family Affair

By Edwin A. Karlow

It was my privilege to participate in the International Faith and Science Conference (IFSC) in Ogden, Utah, August 23-29, 2002. Convened by the General Conference at a total cost of \$55,000, the event drew 84 participants from over 20 countries. All of the Church's world divisions were represented.

Included were twenty church administrators, four pastors, eighteen theologians, thirty-five scientists, and seven invitees from the General Conference, including the editors of *Ministry*, *Adult Bible Study Guides*, *Adventist Review* and *Signs of the Times*. In addition, six lay members attended. Regrettably, the list of attendees included only two women. The employing organizations of the attendees covered their cost of travel and housing.

Organizers intend the meeting to be the first of a series, including regional meetings throughout the world in 2003, and culminating with another international conference in 2004 to summarize the dialogue regarding the Church's understanding and explanation of Genesis 1-11.

Motivation for this series of meetings came from an action of the Geoscience Research Institute board. In 1998, the board had recommended to the General Conference president "that consideration be given to appointment of

an ad hoc study committee for the purpose of exploring the theological and scientific implications of various views of Genesis 1-11, and developing a more explicit Adventist theology of origins."

The board's action included the suggestion that the study committee be limited to ten to fifteen members. The IFSC organizing committee wisely disregarded that limitation, and sought to assemble a much larger, more diverse, and more representative group of participants.

In his introduction to the conference, Lowell Cooper, chair of the organizing committee, reminded us "this conference is intended as a dialogue. It is not charged with the obligation of defining or redefining Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal beliefs. . . . The first objective is to broaden our understanding of the questions and issues involved. Accordingly, greater emphasis will be given to awareness than to advocacy of ideas."

To that end, the conference did not vote a final statement of its accomplishments, nor was a statement or set of recommendations prepared in advance. Conferencees were instead reminded throughout the conference that their task was to identify issues, not solve problems.

However, in his Friday night address General Conference president Jan Paulsen affirmed that the Church already has a clearly defined belief with regard to creation. "We believe that this earth and life on it was created in six literal days and that the age of the earth since then is a young one." Recognizing that some "come from a perspective which is not where I am," he stated, "you are a necessary partner to the conversations we are having."

Paulsen urged attendees to "carry on this conversation without being divided into camps." He encouraged them to "sense the things that also bind us together in the family," in hopes "that the common love that we have for the Church will be predominant and will be perceived in what we are doing together. God will bless us."

Finally, he made clear that we cannot shrink from this difficult task. "Not to engage in this conversation is simply to pretend and not face the realities as they are."

Talking Points

Organizers for this conference assigned topics, and they asked some presenters to review several competing viewpoints.

The papers began with one by Richard M. Davidson that examined the textual evidence for a literal understanding of the story of origins as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2. Although stoutly defending a literal creation week of seven days, he chose the "passive gap" interpretation

of texts from Genesis 1:1, 2 to Genesis 1:3, which allows for the possibility of much older ("millions of years") pre-fossil rocks.

Randall Younker followed with a paper that explored the evidence for cultural influence upon the writer and hearers of Genesis, and concluded that Genesis 1 and 2 "portray a God who steps into and interacts with human history." Younker asserted that the texts are historical and accurate, though not to be taken as "science" in today's terms.

After Younker, Fritz Guy argued for reading the Genesis accounts as primarily theological in nature. He reminded attendees that reading the text "literalistically" is itself an interpretation, and that "no interpretation has a preferred status."

The next presenter was Gerhard Pfandl, who showed that in almost every instance Ellen White wrote about the age of the earth she did so without intending to measure time since creation. Surprisingly, no one contested Pfandl's conclusion.

Another high point at the beginning of the conference was a presentation by John T. Baldwin, who reviewed concordist approaches to the relationship between faith and science. Baldwin argued for a link between the parallel phrases in Exodus 20:11 and Revelation 14:7, which refer to the Lord having made the heavens, earth, and seas. According to Baldwin, by implication, the phrase "in six days" found in Exodus must also apply in Revelation. Although some conferencees liked a conclusion that linked the great controversy story with creation, others did not find it persuasive.

After this theological introduction, scientists were invited to join in. H. Thomas Goodwin and Kevin E. Nick provided a brief but illustrative treatment of the evidences for evolutionary theory. Their presentation included an overview of the geologic column and an analysis of how the paradigm of long ages (millions of years) successfully unifies many disciplines dependent upon data from the column, whereas a shorter chronology does not.

Lee Spencer then made a case for the taxonomic similarity of fossil hominids, which carries the strong suggestion of evolutionary development. The discussion of evolution continued with Ron Carter, who suggested that although evolution as a worldview cannot be tested, hypotheses of how evolution might have occurred can be. Thus, evolutionary hypothesizing can be placed squarely in the camp of legitimate science.

Hearing that Adventists do not hold to "fixity of species" was new to many in the audience, and learning that there is little distinction between micro- and macroevolu-

tion seemed to remove one more “safe” expression from the lexicon of creation/evolution debates.

To some in the audience, these ideas were unfamiliar; they sounded strange coming from fellow Adventist colleagues. Many left that particular session feeling uneasy, fearful they were being sold a line of evolutionary thinking. However, the conference planners had deliberately scheduled presentations that way, and Goodwin and Nick returned the next day to present a distinctly Adventist perspective.

Goodwin and Nick returned to tell how, motivated by belief in a short chronology, they had built models that adequately interpret some aspects of geological and paleontological data. In contrast to traditional evolutionary modes, which assume slow rates of depositions over time, theirs assumes rapid burial of fossilized remains and the associated sediments and gives credence to flood scenarios.

Goodwin and Nick cited the Cambrian explosion as an example of the sudden appearance of new life forms without precursor in the geologic column, thus suggesting some form of creative activity.

However, they also pointed out that none of the creatures alive today that can be traced to ancestors found in the Cambrian bear any resemblance to those creatures whatsoever. This fact augurs for some kind of evolutionary change since the Cambrian explosion, claimed Goodwin.

Two other scientific papers also offered strategies for approaching the study of the natural world with biblical motivations. Leonard Brand illustrated how hypothesis development and testing in science find parallels in religion. Affirming a framework of a recent seven-day creation event and a global flood, Brand uses biblical insight to form hypotheses and encourage research.

James Gibson, the second of this pair, reminded attendees that extra-biblical teaching can creep in when the text of the Bible is ambiguous. For instance, antibiblical writers in the nineteenth century promulgated the flat earth myth on the basis of wording in the

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implications for alternate models and the problem of living with uncertainty where science and theology seem to be irreconcilable. In relation to this line of thought, Richard Rice evaluated the problem of evil, saying that it is pervasive, and, even without the entanglements of evolution, challenges our concepts of a good and loving God.

Rice also pointed out that, for a number of Christian thinkers, “evolution not only reveals God’s power and intelligence: it also reveals God’s love and goodness.” The kenosis, or emptying, attributed to Jesus in the hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 finds its parallel in “the costly course of evolution thus expressing the self-giving and self-restraint that characterize all of God’s dealings with his creatures.”

Bible that refers to the four corners of the earth. In other places, the Bible refers to the circle of the earth. Gibson invited listeners not to see the Bible in conflict with itself, but to understand that science has clarified points left indeterminate in the Bible.

However, Gibson was not optimistic about harmonizing biblical and scientific views of the natural world. As practiced today, modern science is independent of any explanation that involves God, thus placing it in a category that Ellen White called “false science . . . something independent of God” (*Messages to Young People*, 190). According to Gibson, “we cannot legitimately apply Ellen White’s statements of expected harmony to the current practice of science.”

Gibson quoted Ellen White: “I have been warned that henceforth we shall have a constant contest. Science, so-called, and religion will be placed in opposition to each other, because finite men do not comprehend the power and greatness of God” (*Evangelism*, 593).

During the final full day of the conference attendees returned to considerations of theological



Soon after Rice's presentation, Marco Terreros tackled the topic of death before sin. In his view, thinking about the possibility of death before the fall could offer an attractive way out of the problems of ancient fossils in the geologic column and evidence for ancient humans.

Terreros suggested that the death of bacteria and vegetable composts should not be included in the curse of death that resulted from the fall. However, if such death is only a natural problem, it could have a natural solution and need no supernatural intervention, such as God's entry into human history through the Incarnation. Terreros suggested that we recognize discontinuity between creation and Providence. "The present conditions of a world fallen into sin must not be made the measure of the so-called natural conditions of an unfallen creation," he concluded.

Another major theological issue in relation to creation is the Sabbath, which Norman Gulley examined. Gulley looked at the issue of whether the Sabbath made sense linked to Christ as Lord of the Sabbath rather than as the climax of a literal creation week. He reviewed the perspectives of several Adventist writers who seemed to distance themselves from the literal meanings of the Genesis story.

Gulley suggested that in each case they had abandoned the Church's historic position on the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. "Any question about the literal, historical, six-day week with a seventh-day Sabbath in the creation record jettisons the foundational biblical record for the Sabbath," he concluded.

John Brunt gave one of the last papers, which discussed how the Church can deal with uncertainty and pluralism. Brunt's presentation used a musical metaphor. If we acknowledge that all of our interpretations of Scripture are imperfect, he suggested, then we should at least expect these various voices to sing in harmony rather than cacophony.

To continue the metaphor, producing harmony requires agreement on at least the key signature and meter. We all agree that God is Creator and that the universe came into existence at his command. But we find it difficult to make a harmonious chord of our various understandings of how and when that creation was effected.

In a related presentation, Frank Hasel asserted that we seek integration of faith and science, not separation or segregation. "Integration is possible only on the basis of some higher authority that can be appealed to and that provides the basis and parameter for a harmonious integration. For Adventists this integrating authority is the Bible."

To Hasel, integration does not combine two equal partners, but must be understood as the integration of reason into faith, which implies that faith has priority. Thus, science can never interpret Scripture; it must always be the other way around.

Hasel's respondents found his position problematic, however. They claimed that it derives its motivations from the legitimately tentative and incomplete nature of science, but that it also assumes faith and doctrine derived from Scripture have an absolute, unchanging nature. Furthermore, they faulted Hasel's line of reasoning for failing to acknowledge that science and theology are both human activities.

Identifying Issues

As the conference ended, many of the nonscientists expressed a desire to hear more about topics like radioactive dating and why arguments for long ages and evolutionary development seem so compelling. The overall balance of the presentations and breakout discussions had been toward the theological/philosophical side, and attendees realized they needed to hear more "hard evidence" from science.

In what was the most personal—but also the most speculative—paper of the conference, Brian Bull traced his own journey in faith and science. He offered a tentative "long ages" synthesis of his "two incommensurate worlds"—the world of science encountered during his work week, and, "by faith," the world of Genesis he encountered on Sabbath.

Bull's presentation indicates that he longs for a decisive experiment to settle the question of long versus short ages for earth history. However, he admitted that if the long chronology is really true, then "the world that lies at the center of my spiritual understanding drifts away from my outstretched fingers and I am left with a dark and featureless void."

These words prompted one theologian to confess that he had "finally heard the angst of the scientists" who struggle with these issues.

Perplexing Conversation

As the week progressed, I became increasingly perplexed as to what the "family conversation" to which President Paulsen referred in his opening and closing comments could amount to.

On one hand, the interpretation of Scripture that several theologians presented appeared so tight that it seemed nothing external to the biblical text could

have any bearing upon the understanding of that text. The preeminence of Scripture seemed to preclude contact with God's other book—the natural world.

On the other hand, many of the scientists admitted that the vocabulary of evolution, as well as creation, is useful in their descriptions of the natural world.

The scientists urged attendees to separate questions of origins from questions of change through time. On this point, there seemed to be a scant possibility that the textual evidence for Genesis 1:1 in reference to creation of the universe as a whole, separate from the creation of the earth in the succeeding verses, allows for this distinction. As one participant summarized matters, the rocks are old, but life is new.

This was a pebble-sized consolation in a field of boulder-sized problems! But perhaps it symbolizes the incremental progress we must accept while trying to keep the lines of communication open among the members of our church family.

Still, the question remains: What kind of conversation can we have? If our Scriptural understandings are exempt from the influences of contemporary science, and if science must rely on a worldview that lacks the dynamic vocabulary of change, there seems to be little hope for meaningful dialogue.

Both theology and science are human enterprises. The presuppositions we bring to the table do not belong to either. Can we, with impunity, elevate one over the other? It is one thing to claim Scripture as preeminent, but another to claim an interpretation of Scripture as preeminent. Science has no claim on ultimate reality. However, neither should its findings, however tentative, be discarded as irrelevant to understand that reality.

As the conference ended, I wrestled with the gnawing feeling that attendees had talked past each other, speaking, as it were, on different levels and in different directions. Perhaps this was inevitable. This conference was a first, bringing together fellow believers with widely differing viewpoints about creation.

Like an estranged family, attendees struggled to hear past the words and decipher their intended meaning. I wondered if we could ever find common ground beyond our mutual commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, Creator, and Redeemer.

Fortunately, the conference ended on an upbeat note. Conferees left the door of dialogue wide open. Indeed, there is no other choice.

I look forward to the regional meetings next year.

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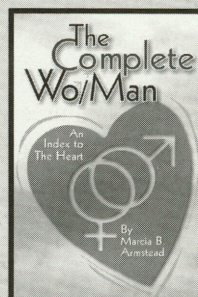
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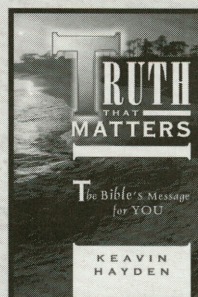
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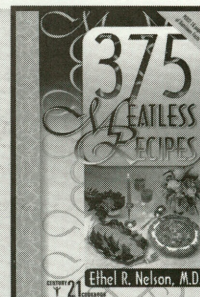
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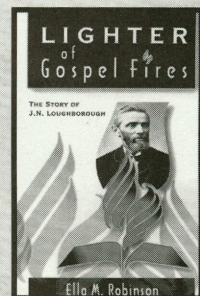
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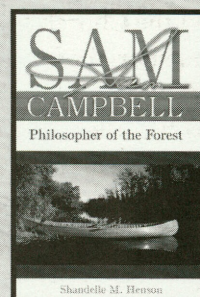
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