



# A Work in Progress . . .

Reflections on the International Faith and Science Conference

*By Richard J. Bottomley*

Jan Paulsen speaking at the 2002 International Faith and Science Conference in Ogden, Utah.

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**M**ost Seventh-day Adventists are aware of the apparent conflict between the findings of science and our traditional view of origins. To many Adventists, it is a simple case of scientists, who, under Satan's influence, deny the plain facts of the flood and young earth all around us. It is easy to form this impression from reading our church literature. But to those who have looked at this issue more deeply, it is apparent that there is a much greater problem that defies such a simple-minded characterization. So, although all Adventists are creationists, there is a variety of views about the method and timing of God's creation.

To address this problem in a responsible way, the Church convened The International Faith and Science Conference in Ogden, Utah, late in August. Since this is a sensitive issue and the Church didn't want to signal any movement on this issue, the conference was limited to a small group, mostly church employees, and closed to most outside observers. Participants were counseled to be careful in discussing the content of the conference after its conclusion. Readers can see the official press release on the General Conference Web site at <[www.adventist.org/news/data/2002/08/index.htm/en](http://www.adventist.org/news/data/2002/08/index.htm/en)>. This conference is to be followed by further conferences next year, probably on a division level, as well as a final wrap-up meeting in 2004.

At this conference, points of view were presented, but there was limited formal and informal discussion of the issues. Since the flood was specifically left off the agenda, there was no attempt at synthesis. Metaphorically, the conference set the table, introduced the dinner guests to each other, and increased awareness of their special menu needs, but the meal, which remains to be served, promises to be long.

In retrospect, three distinct groups seemed to be represented at the conference, each with its own set of concerns and questions.

## The Administrators

How does one administer a church that may have a plurality of views on divisive issues such as abortion rights in America, polygamy in Africa, and the age of the earth? The Church has used a variety of approaches. It decides that some issues—like abortion—are best left to individual believers. Some issues, like polygamy, are division-level concerns, but most members would see issues such as creation and a worldwide flood as cornerstones of our basic identity as a denomination.

Must the Church speak with one voice on such an issue, or is it possible to have more than one model of creation within the church community? How would we do this? Should we purge? Punish? Accommodate? Compromise? Is politics or truth the best policy when seeking to administer a large worldwide church? What happens when administrators please one group but infuriate another? Is the Church standing firm or firmly rejecting progressive truth? Can the Church survive if it abandons progressive truth?

Practical concerns such as these are the bane of effective administration.

## The Theologians

This was the largest group at the conference because it included many of the scientists in attendance, who follow the lead of the officially sanctioned theologians. It is clear from recent publications of the Church that many of its theologians believe in the need for a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis, not only because of the text itself, but also because Jesus and Paul appear to endorse or quote the Genesis accounts.

Many theologians believe that if Genesis is interpreted in a nonliteral way the truth of the Ten Commandments, the Bible, and the ministry of Christ himself are compromised and faith becomes impossible. Like a row of dominoes, if one loses faith in the literal historicity of Genesis, every spiritual guidepost will fall until nothing is left except unbelief. In this view, it becomes spiritual suicide to see Genesis as a parable. Add to this the importance of accepting the Great Controversy as literal in every respect and the case seems open and shut.

To understand why many scientists are included in this group, we must look at the interaction of the rational processes of science and the spiritual nature of belief. Some Christian scientists assert that they believe in a six-day creation and the flood and offer scientific evidence to support themselves. On the other

hand, other Christian scientists claim that there is no evidence for a young earth or a universal flood.

Why does such a gap exist if both groups include scientists? First, one has to ascertain whether the scientist in question speaks after considering all the pertinent evidence or whether he holds an a priori assumption that the official theologians are correct. This assumption then requires the “loyal” scientist to disregard the preponderance of evidence for no reason other than his unwavering faith in traditional beliefs. This type of scientist will then focus only on the anomalies of the data or prudently avoid the intellectual minefield of the larger picture.

On the other hand, another Adventist scientist may believe he must face the variant evidence squarely as an ongoing revelation of God’s working in nature and assume that, through this evidence, God is saying something significant about how he created.

## The Scientists

For clarity, the scientists I have included in this group accept the legitimacy of applying the methods of science to the study of origins. Members of this group do not let their faith statement override the scientific method in these matters. Several theologians at the Ogden conference could also be considered members of this group because they understand scientific evidence in the same way as the scientists.

Scientists seem to be causing all the problems. If they quietly went away, the questions of the other two groups would evaporate. However, unless you are a scientist—or are friends of one—it is difficult to see the depth of the problem scientists face. They clearly see the working of God through the laws of nature and understand that the same laws apply to the study of earth’s history. Why should the methods of science have worked well going back to 2000 B.C., and then suddenly have gone haywire?

Scientists clearly see data indicating that God created over a long period of time and that the death of living organisms preceded the Edenic event, some 6,000 years ago. Most of these scientists have learned to integrate such discoveries with their own belief in





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Richard Davidson asking questions at the 2002 International Faith and Science Conference in Ogden, Utah.

God and their Adventist heritage. But this causes friction with other believers who take the traditional position. Should scientists be allowed to discuss these issues openly? Should they be allowed to teach in Adventist schools? Should they even be allowed to remain as church members?

It is difficult to understand the angst and pain of these scientists, who live and worship in “two incommensurate worlds,” as one speaker aptly stated matters. They in no way want to cause problems for their church, but they know they must follow the call to truth that God has placed in their hearts.

### Continuing the Conference Process

The fears of each group keep them from having a fruitful dialogue with each other. Members of each must answer serious questions among themselves if they hope to be taken seriously in discussion. The issue at hand will not be resolved logically or scientifically until these underlying fears are addressed openly.

What basic questions must be addressed for the Church to move forward and resolve this dilemma? In general, each group must engage in serious introspection, including consideration of the possibility that the group itself may be wrong on some issues. In addition, each has its own set of issues.

**Administration.** Can we administer a church with a two-model system? Has it been done successfully elsewhere? Would the overseas divisions accept this approach if it became the norm in North America? In setting policy

on difficult issues, should we listen only to theologians and scientists who give us answers with which we are already comfortable?

**Theologians.** Can we accept in good faith that two people can read the same passage of Scripture and come away with different understandings? Are we reading the Genesis text using only the exegesis of Ellen White? Why don't other denominations give up Christ and Christianity even though they view Genesis as a parable? What about hints

in Genesis that the animals didn't have eternal life in the first place? What is the relationship between sin and physical (not spiritual) death?

**Scientists.** Because it is the scientists who are asking for change, their questions are the most difficult. Can we restate the essentials of our Adventist heritage knowing that the death of plants and animals preceded human sin? Can we retain the essentials of the Great Controversy model—with its idea of a remnant church—yet integrate it with a more realistic understanding of origins? What have other Adventists and Christians thought about these issues? Is there any reasonable doubt about the validity of the scientific evidence speaking to the creation and flood traditions?

### Sustaining the Conversation

It is unlikely that the Church can resolve these questions about origins in any definitive way on any reasonable timescale. Given the difficulty of the issue for most church members, scientists would probably favor having the Church adopt a two-model approach to Genesis. The first would be a traditional interpretation that assumes the literality of the Genesis account. There would be no need to buttress this account with pseudoscience because the people who held this model would understand it is justified by the Genesis text alone.

The second model would be an honest attempt to integrate the Genesis account with good science, while still upholding the important spiritual truths of the Genesis account. Although each group would hold

## The call of God's Spirit

different models, the same fundamental theology of Genesis 1-2 would unite them. This theology would include beliefs in one God, the goodness of his creation, and the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. Each model would affirm belief in the Creator, but each would agree to disagree on the Creator's methods.

Because this is such a complex issue, a sustained process of honest communication is needed on this topic. Could the General Conference set up an effective study group made up of scientists and theologians who are flexible enough to work through these questions together? Could we charge this group with coming up with a new, realistic statement of

Adventist fundamentals consistent with the findings of science to see if it can be done? The work of this group could then be considered by a larger body, possibly another Ogden-type meeting. Can we restore the idea of progressive truth, which was such a powerful part of our early heritage but has seldom been seen on the Adventist landscape in recent years?

Could the Adventist Church recognize that the Christian life is one of growth in understanding of God and his ways, not just growth in spiritual piety alone? Can the Church feed people at the appropriate level? Children often eat simpler food than adults. Is that not also true in religious life? Could we recognize that there are already many Adventists in good standing who would appreciate good counsel, writings, and discussion on these issues at a much deeper level than is now available? The Church needs to appeal to the best and brightest of Adventist minds. It must cherish and honor them as full brothers and sisters in faith.

### Several Points to Remember

As it was in the times of Copernicus and Galileo, the Church through the ages has often believed that accepting the results of science will weaken or destroy faith. Yet history shows repeatedly that the Christian Church has always survived with its vital message

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intact. The call of God's Spirit on the soul of man is independent of discoveries about God's creative acts in nature. It is entirely possible that the new insights God grants us through the study of nature will help us gain new insights into problems such as why Christ's Second Coming has been delayed.

A study of American scientists in 1916 showed that about 40 percent were believers. It was predicted that as time went on this proportion would decrease and that faith would gradually die out among scientists as education and knowledge increased. Yet a repeat of this survey published in *Nature* in 1997 showed that the proportion

had actually remained the same. Faith was not destroyed by the findings of modern science during the twentieth century despite the worst fears of church members.

However, what can destroy faith is a church that does not answer in an intelligent manner a person's sincere questions.

This observation tells us something we already know deep in our hearts: God's great church is real to every age, and it reinvents its outward form to enable it to witness effectively the truth of the gospel to each succeeding generation.

I believe the meeting at Ogden is an outward sign of the vitality of this process at work in the heart of the great Advent movement. May the dialogue continue.

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