



Reading Genesis After San Antonio | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

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The idea of women as permanent outsiders appears to be losing ground among Adventists. Delegates to the 2015 General Conference session in San Antonio will consider whether to allow the ordination of women where “division executive committees” deem it “appropriate.” Although a Yes vote seems uncertain, or even unlikely, hopes for such an outcome have continued to galvanize advocates of gender equity, and their energy will doubtless be evident in San Antonio.

Another set of outsiders, Adventist scientists, will also be watching the goings-on in San Antonio. But they will do so without substantial coalescing of Adventist energy in their support.

The church’s current leadership is proposing changes to the official statement of Adventist belief concerning the doctrine of creation, and these changes would disturb not only Adventist scientists but anyone with the barest minimum of scientific literacy. Already deeply conservative, the present statement declares: “In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week.” But top administrators worry that these words (taken more or less directly from Scripture) may lend themselves to non-literalistic interpretation. They know that the reigning scientific consensus posits a long-developing natural (and human!) world, and that this consensus cannot be squared with a straightforwardly historical reading of the biblical creation

accounts. So these administrators, as fearful of mystery and metaphor as of science itself, want to rigidify the biblical literalism they find consoling.

The key proposed changes to the sixth of Adventism’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs are as follows: “authentic account” becomes “authentic and historical account,” “six days” becomes “a recent six-day creation” and “performed and completed creative work” becomes a work “performed and completed during six literal days that together with the Sabbath constituted a week as we experience it today.”

All this is laughably mindless, not least because none of us can experience a week in which the sun, moon, and stars do not even exist for the first several days. In one way, of course, it is quite irrelevant. Referring to controversy that surrounded Galileo, Albert Camus, in his famous essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” remarked: “Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference.” He meant that the essential questions involve life or death and the dulling or intensification of human passion. Conviction as to whether a loving God is our maker does touch on these things: God’s creative work matters, and how we feel about it may certainly dull or intensify our passion for life. The manner and timing of that work, on the other hand, seems less important.

But what cannot be unimportant—for Christians—is loving the Lord with our “minds,” a key aspect, according to Jesus, of

what he calls “the first and great commandment.” Nor can it be unimportant that the full meaning of love—love for neighbor as well as love for God—leads Paul to say that it relativizes all prophecy and knowledge. As humans, we know in part, we see dimly. So insisting on exactitude with respect to matters we cannot fathom in any case (Isaiah 55:8, 9) amounts to a *refusal of love*. A large part of loving God with our minds is embrace of due humility, and determination not to exclude others just because we think we know more than they do. Willful mindlessness is not mere ignorance; it is moral failure—a kind of arrogance, a callous and corrupting blight.

Whatever happens in San Antonio, Adventist energy is slowly empowering women. But that seems not yet to be the case for our scientists. They will likely continue to be outsiders, and so continue to suffer. For it is a kind of suffering—mark this well—to feel that you have to hide or deny what you believe in your heart to be true.

In light of all this, it’s good to remember that no one now admires the bureaucrats who made life miserable for Galileo. It’s even better to remember that the Bible’s creation perspective is a profound affirmation of hope, and that we need not despise science or deny mystery and metaphor in order to appreciate and affirm what the Bible says. A revised Belief Number Six will be a kind of political platform, at once imperfect and temporary. It cannot be—it must not be—a brake we put on our obligation to love God with our minds as well as with our hearts and souls. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.

FEEDBACK

■ *letters, e-mails, and comments*



A Big Amen

I just want to take a moment to shout my “AMEN” over Elder James Londi’s article about the delay of Jesus’ coming. It is so encouraging to find another who shares the same views on Matthew 24–25 in addressing Adventism’s persistent fascination with “signs of the times” as I have held for many years. Indeed, we as a people eschew time setting, but we embrace fervently “sign-setting,” and it has only increased the bewilderment and questioning over the disappointment of delay. Jesus was concerned about His disciples’ focus on the “sign” of His coming, suggested in the first words out of His mouth in response to their query, “Let no man deceive you.” Yet, due to the makeup of Adventist spiritual DNA, our church has sought to read the signs in hopes of discerning a clear progression toward that great event that all of God’s people wish to see, Jesus’ second coming.

The six parables Jesus leaves His disciples are what will keep us from being deceived. It will get us off the signs and busy about the commission we have all been given: go into all the world. The parables are about a faithful people doing what God has called them to do, being about their Father’s business. The time of His coming is not for us to know. Jesus Himself emphasized we are not going anywhere until the gospel goes everywhere. Our task, then, is to be faithful meeting Jesus in those we serve in this life that now is. The sooner we can realize this clear biblical truth, the sooner we will be relieved of disappointment-delay anxieties and empowered with a clear mission of taking the gospel to the world.

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