

Changing the Creation Fundamental: *The Possible Effects of Proposed Changes* | BY TREVOR LLOYD

This is a reflection on some possible repercussions for the Seventh-day Adventist Church if things continue in the present direction regarding the rewording of the Creation Fundamental Belief. Five areas of concern are raised for the future well-being of the church.

The limitation of our field of mission

There is concern that future generations will look back on the year 2015 and regard it as one in which the church chose to limit its mission to a shrinking part of the global population. The world to which we have

been called to carry the gospel is becoming progressively better informed. In choosing to include non-scriptural terminology in the Creation Fundamental, we may find ourselves making both God's Word and the church appear less and less relevant to the continually expanding body of even moderately well-educated persons in both the developed and the developing world.

It is one thing to defend biblically based doctrines in the face of determined opposition, and quite another to cut ourselves off from untold numbers around the globe who are both well informed and honest in heart.

Here is a question awaiting our prayerful considera-



"THE MENDOCINO COAST" BY JEANNE LAMAR / WATERCOLOR

tion: Is the acceptance of a recent creation, for example, essential for salvation? To this we might add: Must we leave to other church bodies the evangelization of those whose education and training have led them to believe that the earth and life on it are not recent? Should we conclude that, so long as they persist in such a belief, these persons are forever beyond hope? Such questions have serious implications for our evangelistic role and should be honestly faced.

The timing of the present urge for change

There is a further concern that coming generations will ask what it was that led to the new direction in 2015 and why we appeared to be intent on dismissing from our institutions some of our most talented and committed scientists. Do we really want to lose them? Many of these have responded to their church's call to study for and obtain advanced qualifications so that our colleges and universities might gain registration and recognition. They have followed the church's time-honored bidding that in education they are to "go as far and as fast as possible." Shall we desert them now and usher them out? Or shall we, with them, prayerfully work toward discovering how best we can be faithful to Scripture and, at the same time, give suitable recognition to what they see as well-established findings in their various disciplines?

In seeking to meet the needs of their church, many of these scientists have struggled with the challenge of reconciling these findings with Scripture. Still they have stayed on, willing to work in faith and hope within their church family toward a resolution, meanwhile taking care to be discreet in commenting on the church's stated positions. Let us keep in mind that they are best equipped to guide our Adventist students in retaining confidence in God's Word despite the emerging contrary scientific evidence that they are bound to face as they advance in their chosen academic fields. In the critical years ahead, do we want these church-employed scientists

excluded from the deliberations that their church is conducting to find resolution between faith and science in the face of many admitted unanswered challenges from current scientific research?

There has not always been an attitude of impending exclusion. Back in 2004, at the last of three Faith and Science conferences, there were Adventist scientists present and there were those of a more conservative turn of mind. At the time, it was made clear that the church was not about to be swayed in its understanding of Scripture by positions taken by contemporary science; however, the then General Conference president included the scientists and relevant others in the mission of the church with the words: "The church needs you. Please do not walk away." As we would expect, during that third conference, our time-honored position was upheld that the way is left open for reconsideration, in view of further light, of the wording of any of our doctrinal statements.

In the past, the church in its wisdom has resisted calls from its more conservative wing to use non-scriptural terminology in referring to the Creation record in its statements of belief. As well, it has maintained its Protestant position of requiring that these statements be specifically supported by Scripture alone. And this attitude has been totally consistent with the fact, alluded to above, that there are a number of serious and well-recognized unanswered questions we have to face.

The effect on Adventist scientists

Does the church have a responsibility toward those honest-hearted Adventist scientists and others employed outside the church's institutions who are aware of the challenges to be faced in, for example, maintaining a recent Creation? Many of these were already members under the earlier (1980) Creation statement—or have joined this fellowship over the past thirty years. Countless thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of them around the globe

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have given wholehearted support to God's Word and have gladly helped to maintain the life and mission of our local congregations in faithful leadership in the various departments. They have served as models for the academically minded young people growing up in their local churches and have urged them to stay by the gospel and by Adventism.

In all of this, these Adventist scientists working in non-Adventist universities and laboratories have been willing to accommodate their scientific views to the pre-2015 Creation statement. Shall we tell them they must now subscribe to the new statement or resign their church membership? Though they hold positively and totally to the creatorship of God and to the inviolability of the Sabbath, if they cannot now accept the specific wording of the new version, shall we tell them they should leave?

These well-educated Adventist professionals know the challenges to faith which are presently circulating in their special fields. Yet they faithfully maintain their membership and look forward to the day when the scientific difficulties may be ameliorated or their church finds its way to adjusting its interpretations of Scripture.

They may shortly have to face a cruel awakening. If things continue as anticipated, these committed church members are due to wake one morning during the coming General Conference Session to find themselves heretics to the faith they have long loved and supported—with the fundamental belief under which they were baptized now changed into one which, to the best of their knowledge, they could never subscribe to and that would rule them out.

As well, this newly stated fundamental belief appears to be in a form many of these professionals could never recommend to their work colleagues. Under these conditions, we may discover we have lost our foremost means of witness to the bulk of the professional world, for this valiant band has prime access to the vast majority of educated mankind to

whom we are commissioned to take the gospel and from whom we appear bent upon cutting ourselves off.

Holding academically minded young people

Many of the academically minded young people, growing up from early to late teens in our Adventist homes and churches are attending non-Adventist high schools and universities and are being introduced to the latest scientific research by non-Adventist teachers.

Already, we are losing vast numbers of this age group while still in the formative stages of faith development. Should the proposed changes to the Creation statement go through, it may well be expected that their position will be made still more precarious. The more non-scriptural specifics that are brought in, the more likely those specifics are to be adversely compared with commonly held scientific positions. Under such conditions, these young people may be seen as likely to dismiss the church or God's Word—or both.

Here is an appeal to the supporters of a more specifically conservative Creation statement: You may find the proposed changes comforting and reassuring (and this is certainly important); however, these young people may find these changes to be a fatal stumbling block. If your faith can be maintained with the well-accepted, non-divisive 1980 wording, we may find that it will hold many of these young folk within our nurturing church circle. They are growing up in a new day with challenges to faith that some of us never knew, and they deserve our loving consideration and support.

The threat to progress

The church has long hoped for harmony amongst those with advanced qualifications in both Old Testament studies and the sciences. Giving the more conservative wing total say and, meanwhile, silencing or eliminating many of those who have come, in good conscience, to see the situation differently, may give a semblance of unity; however, it may be at the cost of

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creating tragic division and fragmentation across the global church. On the other hand, having both branches listen to each other may open up the most promising lead yet toward a representative Creation statement that will win the respect of those who hear it. Meanwhile, it can be anticipated that, at the coming General Conference Session, leaving the Creation statement as it is (pre-2015) could provide the calmest and most productive atmosphere for a genuine meeting of minds led by God's Spirit.

In the context of the foregoing discussion, it is appealing to look for study groups made up of Adventist personnel representing a wide range of gifts and expertise within the church. Those included might be drawn from biblical scholars, linguists with understanding of the contemporary writings of other ancient cultures, and a good number of scientists from a range of disciplines, including archaeology, both from within our church institutions and beyond.

However, right now we have the prospect in view of a vote shortly to be taken that will affect the global church and its worldwide mission. In this context, here is a further appeal to the advocates of the new Creation statement: Before pushing ahead with and supporting the proposed changes, would you sit down and listen to some of the challenges our dedicated scientists have to face every day of their professional lives? They, too, love this church and are committed to its mission. They need our understanding and heartfelt support if they are to be effective in fulfilling their role both within our institutions and beyond. And let us never forget, we need their support if we are to gain the respect of a better and better informed global audience. The coming General Conference Session is our opportunity, with God's leading, to work toward that goal.

Some conclusions

There is still considerable work to be done before the Creation statement is ready to be changed. We are in need of a statement that truly reflects our commitment to the eternal

creatorship of God as was achieved by our spiritual forebears in their day—and, at the same time, that makes plain to a well-informed global community that we are aware of and prepared to face the needs and challenges confronting the generation of our own day.

For the days ahead, the net for the selection of personnel to prepare future recommendations for the wording of the Creation statement should be cast widely and include theologians, scientists, and linguists, with significant lay representation.

The remaining time leading up to and including the General Conference Session offer us an ideal time to pray and work in several ways—for the avoidance of fragmentation and division in the church; for the bringing together of hearts and minds committed to honoring the creatorship of God and to upholding the inviolability of the Sabbath and salvation doctrines; and for listening to, and working with, those who best understand the challenges we face in honoring the creatorship of God as we reach out to the present generation. ■

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Footnotes

1. See the specific wording changes to be voted on for the Fundamental Belief on Creation on p. 36.
2. John McLarty, "Report of the International Faith and Science Conference," *Adventist Today*, August/September, 2004.

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