



A giant Galápagos tortoise at a breeding center on Santa Cruz Island

# HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED (AND STAYED THE SAME) *With Regard to the Theory of Evolution*

BY LAWRENCE T. GERATY

This is an account of an Adventist believer who, like many others his age, began life with a traditional, fundamentalist view of the relationship between science and Scripture, but who, within the womb of the Church, has gradually grown and changed his views.

I was born in 1940 to Adventist missionary parents, growing up behind Japanese lines in Central China during World War II. When the Communist regime gained control of the mainland, the General Conference moved my family to Beirut, Lebanon, where I spent my teenage years. I grew up on Sam Campbell and Ruth Wheeler books, believing that my world was populated by two kinds of people: those like my family who believed

implicitly in the literal biblical account of creation, and those unbelievers who rejected “the truth” and put their faith in the materialistic and atheistic origin theory of evolution. There, at Middle East College Academy, my biology teacher was Indra Ashod Greer, who gave me a love of science and a respect for its discoveries. I don’t remember the word “evolution” ever being mentioned.

While a theology major at Newbold College in England, I was privileged to take science classes from Albert Watson and Dennis Brailsford. They fostered a respect for science and alerted me to the fact that the discipline led some serious scholars to alternative views from our traditional interpretations.

It was not till I got to Andrews University Theological Seminary, however, that I was confronted for the first time with serious challenges to the ideas I had inherited about origins. I learned about hermeneutics and that, based on certain presuppositions, one could come to different conclusions about science and religion. To my surprise, Ellen G. White's grandson, Arthur, shared the statements by his father (and approved by his grandmother) that White did not expect people to take her statements on matters of history and science as authoritative. Teachers like Richard Ritland and Sakae Kubo modeled a commitment to the Church with a high view of Scripture but without having to read Genesis 1–11 superficially as history in the simple, literal sense. My esteemed archaeology teacher, Siegfried Horn, assured me that Genesis was more theological than historical and that there were all kinds of problems with numbers in the Hebrew Bible, including with respect to genealogies and the quantity of Israelites. F. E. J. Harder pointed out the symmetry in the days of creation, which suggested poetry and parallelism, not literal history.

When I was assigned to my first church in the Southeastern California Conference, I found well-read graduates of Loma Linda University who wondered how I could defend traditional Adventist views on 6,000 years and a world-wide flood. I was forced to read for answers so I could pastor my flock intelligently. By the time I got to graduate school at Harvard, I bravely searched for support of my traditional views, even trying some of them out in my research papers. I'll never forget my major professor calling me into his office after a seminar paper I had written and saying, "I know you are an Adventist. It is not our purpose to change your views, but what is important to me is that when you leave us you will know all the relevant data and that you know how to interpret them fairly." That sounded reasonable. He surprised me by saying, "By the way, I'm looking for a teaching assistant

for next year; would you be willing to consider helping me?" I was drawn to this world-class scholar whose circle had room for differing views honestly held, if backed up by evidence.

It was during this time that I discovered many other Adventist graduate students, not only at Harvard, but also at MIT, Boston University, Northeastern University, and the University of Massachusetts, for example. Most of us were struggling to relate our traditional beliefs to the new data and interpretations we were discovering. It was natural to turn our newly honed critical skills onto what meant the most to us—our faith. It was in this milieu that the New England Adventist Forum was born. As we learned of other such groups of graduate students across the country, the Association of Adventist Forums was founded in an attempt to "save" Adventist graduate students for the Church. *Spectrum* became the journal where we could try out relevant ideas, and since that time it has continued to serve as a lifeline for many thinking Adventists. Because of Alvin Kwiram's contacts at Harvard, where he was teaching chemistry, we were able to interact, for instance, with world renowned scientists like Ernst Mayr, one of the twentieth century's leading evolutionary biologists. It was during that time that I became acquainted with Peter Hare and the age-dating technique of amino-acid racemization, which he developed hoping to demonstrate the 6,000-year age of the earth but which, to his dismay, disappointed him, proving long ages instead!

When I moved to Andrews University as a professor, I soon found a congenial group of colleagues who were loyal Adventists, true to their heritage as seekers of present truth. In the science and religion arena, these included Ed Lugenbeal and Hal James at the Geoscience Research Institute, and Dick Ritland and Clark Rowland on the faculty. Seminary colleagues like Siegfried Horn in Old Testament, Jim Cox in New Testament, and Fritz

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Guy in Theology, were all excellent conversation partners as I tried to come to terms with the relationship between the Bible and scientific discoveries and how, correctly interpreted, they were complementary avenues to truth. As I later learned from Brian McLaren, I was learning to take the Bible *literarily* rather than *literally*, looking to it for *meaning* rather than just *facts*.

It was during this time that I was asked to make a presentation to an Adventist Forum meeting on the topic, “The Genesis Genealogies as an Index of Time.” There I showed that the genealogies were not complete, nor were they given for chronological purposes. When *Spectrum* editor Molleurus Couperus heard it, he asked me to publish it in *Spectrum*. I remonstrated, saying it was intended as an oral presentation only, but he insisted, so I prepared it for print (my first *Spectrum* article). Unfortunately, it became a lightning rod that “pigeonholed” me for life. In fact, my department chair, Horn, said, “I agree 100% with what you’ve written but I’m surprised you would put it out there and risk becoming a target by the brethren.” Fully a decade later, when I was serving as archaeology editor for *Ministry* magazine, its editor, Bob Spangler, called me into his office one day and said, “I’m sorry to tell you but your name on our masthead has become an embarrassment.” When I inquired as to the reason, he mentioned my *Spectrum* article referred to above. When I asked him if he had read it, he confessed he hadn’t. How then, I asked him, had he learned about its existence and contents. “From the brethren,” he said. I asked him, “How about the articles I supply *Ministry* each month on archaeology and the Bible; have they been helpful?” His face reddened and the editor responded, “I haven’t had time to read any of them.” To make his life easier, I resigned.

Then there were the Geoscience tours planned for Adventist Bible and science teachers. I was privileged to participate in one on which we crisscrossed the Western

United States, looking at evidence that could challenge the standard prevailing views. While interpretations advocated by GRI scientists did give pause on occasion, they were ad hoc, because they would be inconsistent with other solutions advocated elsewhere on the trip. I wrote up my evaluation of this trip for *Spectrum*.

When, a few years later, the denominational Faith & Science Conferences were held at Glacier View, I was honored to participate in the second of the three conferences, where I believe the most honest attempt was made to consider the evidence, both pro and con, for creation and evolution. In fact, my invited presentation, “Archaeology and the Flood,” was later published by the independent publishers of *Adventist Today*, in *Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives* (ed. Bull, Guy, Taylor, 2006). I well remember when, at the final session, Ted Wilson, chair of the GC Faith & Science Committee, distributed a statement meant to sum up the conclusions of the conference, but which, after a full discussion, was turned down by the participants. To my dismay, the statement later appeared in the *Adventist Review*, with the claim that it had been voted by the conference; it was not hard to see this as a boldfaced lie. It troubled me that advocates of fundamentalist views had to resort to such underhand tactics.

Another key episode in the growth of my own views relates to the development and subsequent history of the 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, a topic that is fairly well known. I was among those professors at the Seminary at Andrews charged with drafting the original statements. I was assigned statement number six on creation. Our philosophy was to use biblical terminology wherever possible, inasmuch as all Adventists consider the Bible to be our authoritative source of truth. Our recommendation was adopted at the 1980 GC Session in Dallas. Imagine my disappointment to see, in a

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*Sesuvium* ground cover turns orange during the rainy season on South Plaza Island.

subsequent GC Session, the biblical wording replaced by fundamentalist interpretations of biblical wording using expressions about time and mechanisms rather than the actual wording of Scripture itself. It is hard for me to imagine any thinking person with a knowledge of the scientific evidence being able to affirm the current wording of fundamental belief number six. Thus, evangelism among scientists has been dealt a death blow. It has even forced me to reconsider at times whether or not I can be a member of a denomination that intentionally maneuvers its way in a political manner rather than looking for theological positions that recognize that truth emerges from an interpretation of the evidence that honors both sources of revelation: the book of nature as well as the book of Scripture.

During my twenty-five years of administrative responsibilities in higher education, I have not had the time or opportunity to pursue all the reading and research I would have wished, but I have done some reading and been a part of a regular discussion group whose main topic is science and religion. My field of expertise is not science, but the Hebrew Bible and the history of antiquity (archaeology). But I know enough to realize that the increased pace of relevant scientific discoveries

is outpacing the ability of the Church's fundamentalist interpreters to successfully defend their nineteenth-century models.

My latest opportunity to consider these issues was an invitation to participate in *Spectrum's* recent trip to the Galápagos Islands, August 12–24, 2021, about which one can read elsewhere in this issue of the magazine. Needless to say, it was the trip of a lifetime to, in a sense, “re-live” Charles Darwin's discoveries, to consider the subsequent advances in understanding, and to ponder how my own views on origins have changed or stayed the same. I was intrigued that plate tectonics and hot spots best explain the formation and history of the islands (as with the Hawaiian Islands, for instance). In the face of species extinction, I was struck with the importance of biological adaptation—not just based on Darwin's observations but dramatized by the forty-year-long research of Peter and Rosemary Grant on the island of Daphne Major, who were able to measure and document the adaptation of the beaks of finches where DNA has confirmed the interrelationships of these birds going back to a common ancestor.

My questions were certainly not resolved by this trip but, in a sense, they were only brought up anew. One is forced to consider the fact that evidence for survival lies

in a struggle for growth and adaptation. We observed firsthand tortoises, iguanas, and finches—all in the process of adapting. It is not so much the “survival of the fittest” but, as McLaren suggested, it is rather the survival of the best adapted, the most attractive, the best organized, and the most cooperative. Change is obviously inevitable. The question is whether or not we want to have a say in how it will happen. One thinks, in the face of our current extractive economy, of the importance of protecting and saving our environment. Evolutionary theory now has a bridge to ecological theory. Again, I agree with McLaren that “any organism that does not fit harmoniously in its environment will end up as a fossil, as dust blowing across a desert—including the people who submit their brains and chain their lives to inflexible ideologies like contemporary communism and capitalism.” This lesson is not just for our society but also and especially, it seems to me, for our Church and its current commitment to inflexible fundamentalism.

I came away from my Galápagos experience with, as Leonardo Boff put it, “a new perception of Earth as a vast community of which we are members. As members, we are responsible for assuring that all other members and factors—from the energy balance of soil and air through microorganisms and up to the races and to each individual person—may live on it in harmony and peace.”

Again, there are lessons here for our Church. In our quest for spiritual truth, many of us struggle with the relationship between the Bible and science. On the one hand, we hold the Bible as authoritative for faith and practice; on the other hand, we cannot ignore the implications of current scientific discoveries. As I ponder these issues, here are some thoughts I’ve had.

When it comes to origins, I am a creationist. There is just no way that spontaneous generation makes sense!

There is just too much evidence of intelligent design. Because God made the universe with such order and regularity, we can now describe it with reason and logic. It’s like mathematics—I subscribe to the view that it is to be discovered, not invented. Darwin introduced his theory of evolution before we knew anything about DNA, but aspects of his theory have been confirmed by genetics, which suggests that all life forms on earth are related by adaptation through a tree of common ancestry. Could evolution, then, be a scientific description of how God created species, and continues to do so? I find myself drawn to affirm God’s use of evolution in his ongoing process of creation—whatever those processes were and are.

Francis Collins, Director of the National Institutes of Health, and the scientist who led the Human Genome Project, put it this way:

God, who is not limited in space or time, created the universe and established natural laws that govern it. Seeking to populate this otherwise sterile universe with living creatures, God chose the elegant mechanism of evolution to create microbes, plants, and animals of all sorts. Most remarkably, God intentionally chose the same mechanism to give rise to special creatures who would have intelligence, a knowledge of right and wrong, free will and a desire to seek fellowship with him. This view is entirely compatible with everything that science teaches us about the natural world. It is also entirely compatible with biblical Christianity.

When it comes to time, there are several independent measurements and arguments that all point to the same

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conclusion—this world, and life within it, has been around for billions of years, not thousands. I’ve learned from the Bull/Guy trilogy that Genesis is really about the who and why of creation rather than the how and when. For the latter, one needs to go to God’s truth that we find in nature, outside the Bible.

Here’s an important reminder from my biblical-scholar friend, John Walton:

We must keep in mind that we are presumptuous if we consider our interpretations of Scripture to have the same authority as Scripture itself. Nobody is an infallible interpreter, and we must always stand ready to reconsider our interpretations in light of new information. We must not let our interpretations stand in the place of Scripture’s authority and thus risk misrepresenting God’s revelation. We are willing to bind reason if our faith calls for belief where reason fails. But we are also people who in faith seek learning. What we learn may cause us to reconsider interpretations of Scripture, but need never cause us to question the intrinsic authority or nature of Scripture.

As I consider these issues, I want to base my beliefs on evidence—the hermeneutical equivalent of the scientific method. Having to choose between faith and science seems to me to be a false dichotomy. Truth-telling of the Bible supports, rather than undermines, the best scientific investigations. At the same time—in the face of so much I don’t know—I want to maintain humility. After all, it was Jesus who said, “love with your mind” (Luke 10:37).

It is a truism that all truth is God’s truth, whether found in science or Scripture. And the point is not winning arguments but witnessing for him. The Church doesn’t need to be unified in its view of creation, but it should be known for how we treat each other (John 13:35).

The stance taken by the Biblical Research Institute and the General Conference on these matters seems to me to be motivated by fear, fear of losing support for the seventh-day Sabbath. But Christ says to them, “be not afraid.” There are many reasons why we keep Sabbath, chief among them because our Savior did. And as Adventists know, the motivation for Sabbath-keeping

is not only creation (Exodus 20) but because it is a gift of God’s grace based on his—and our—commitment to justice (Deuteronomy 5). Finally, the Origins Museum in the Galápagos (described elsewhere in this issue) had it right: Praise God for the natural world he has given us!

The longer I live, the more I affirm a statement made by Albert Einstein in 1939 and first shared with me by Gerald Winslow:

Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling springs, however, from the sphere of religion. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith. . . . The situation may be expressed by an image: science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.

And so, as Desmond Ford would say, “I believe in Heaven, nothing else makes sense of Earth.”

## Endnotes

1. Brian McLaren, *The Galápagos Islands: A Spiritual Journey* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2019), 215.
2. McLaren, *The Galápagos Islands*, 256.
3. McLaren, *The Galápagos Islands*, 261.
4. Quoted in McLaren, *The Galápagos Islands*, 257.
5. Francis Collins, “Learning the Language of God,” in *Evangelicals Reflect on Faith and Science*, ed. Kathryn Applegate and J. B. Stump (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 73.
6. John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 167.



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