

Creation Debate in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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At the Annual Council in 2001 the General Conference Executive Committee organized a series of conferences on faith and science during the years 2002-2004. The first conference in 2002 was an international conference in Ogden, Utah. More than 80 scientists, theologians and church administrators from different parts of the world began discussing the interrelationship between faith and science. Topics ranged from the hominid fossil record to Ellen White's view of science. The conference revealed the seriousness and breadth of differences concerning questions of origin that are present in the SDA community today.

During 2003 and the first half of 2004 seven divisions held similar faith and science conferences in their territories. The formal discussions culminated in August 2004 with the second international conference on the subject in Denver, Colorado. At this conference papers were read summarizing the findings of the discussions during the previous two years.

The new element in this conference was a discussion on the ethics of dissent dealing with the ethical responsibility of those who differ in significant ways from the biblical position of the church on the topic of creation. The discussion was open, candid, and highly professional. It was obvious that a small number of individuals – scientists and theologians – did not support or felt uncomfortable with the biblical doctrine of creation in six literal, consecutive days as clearly revealed in Genesis 1.¹

There was no attempt on the part of church leaders to modify or change our fundamental belief on creation. This was clearly stated by Elder Jan Paulsen before the discussions were initiated. However, such discussions cannot be avoided because the theory of evolution and the Adventist doctrine of creation represent two antagonistic and fundamentally diverse world views. Unfortunately, theistic evolution is one view that is being held and taught by some Seventh-day Adventists today.

Secondly, it is important for the church to be aware of the fact that neither evolutionists nor creationists have all the answers in the debate. These conferences provided a proper environment to discuss these questions while at the same time holding to our faith commitment.

An Affirmation of Creation

A report entitled “An Affirmation of Creation” was presented on September 10, 2004 to the Executive Committee of the General Conference by the International Faith and Science Conference Organizing Committee.² This report noted “a high level of concurrence on basic understandings” and “widespread affirmation of the church's understanding of life on earth.” However, the document also observed that “some among us interpret the biblical record in ways that lead to sharply different conclusions.” Specifically, “alternative interpretations of Genesis 1, including the idea of theistic evolution,” were rejected as lacking theological coherence and inconsistent with Adventist beliefs, including the biblical doctrine of creation. It also noted concern about the alleged ambiguity of the phrase “in six days” found in Fundamental Belief #6, resulting in “uncertainty about what the church actually believes.” In this same connection, the following observation is also significant:

We recognize that there are different theological interpretations among us regarding Genesis 1-11. In view of the various interpretations we sensed a high degree of concern that those involved in the Seventh-day Adventist teaching ministry conduct their work ethically and with integrity—by standards of their profession, the teachings of Scripture, and the basic understanding held by the body of believers.

The report also included the following statements of affirmations and recommendations:

Affirmations

1. We affirm the primacy of Scripture in the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of origins.
2. We affirm the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Genesis 1 that life on earth was created in six literal days and is of recent origin.
3. We affirm the biblical account of the Fall resulting in death and evil.
4. We affirm the biblical account of a catastrophic Flood, an act of God's judgment that affected the whole planet, as an important key to understanding earth history.
5. We affirm that our limited understanding of origins calls for humility and that further exploration into these questions brings us closer to deep and wonderful mysteries.
6. We affirm the interlocking nature of the doctrine of creation with other Seventh-day Adventist doctrines.
7. We affirm that in spite of its fallenness nature is a witness to the Creator.
8. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist scientists in their endeavors to understand the Creator's handiwork through the methodologies of their disciplines.
9. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist theologians in their efforts to explore and articulate the content of revelation.
10. We affirm Seventh-day Adventist educators in their pivotal ministry to the children and youth of the church.
11. We affirm that the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church identified in Revelation 14:6, 7 includes a call to worship God as Creator of all.

Recommendations

The Organizing Committee for the International Faith and Science Conferences recommends that:

1. In order to address what some interpret as a lack of clarity in Fundamental Belief #6 the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Genesis narrative be affirmed more explicitly.
2. Church leaders at all levels be encouraged to assess and monitor the effectiveness with which denominational systems and programs succeed in preparing young people, including those attending non-Adventist schools, with a biblical understanding of origins and an awareness of the challenges they may face in respect to this understanding.
3. Increased opportunity be provided for interdisciplinary dialog and research, in a safe environment, among Seventh-day Adventist scholars from around the world.³

The 2004 Annual Council, after careful discussion of this report, produced a response in which the members of the Council strongly endorsed the Church's historic, biblical position of belief in a literal, recent, six-day creation.

Response to "An Affirmation of Creation"

Whereas belief in a literal, six-day creation is indissolubly linked with the authority of Scripture, and;
Whereas such belief interlocks with other doctrines of Scripture, including the Sabbath and the Atonement,
and;

Whereas Seventh-day Adventists understand our mission, as specified in Revelation 14:6, 7, to include a call to the world to worship God as Creator,

We, the members of the General Conference Executive Committee at the 2004 Annual Council, state the following as our response to the document, An Affirmation of Creation, submitted by the International Faith & Science Conferences:

1. We strongly endorse the document's affirmation of our historic, biblical position of belief in a literal, recent, six-day Creation.
2. We urge that the document, accompanied by this response, be disseminated widely throughout the world Seventh-day Adventist Church, using all available communication channels and in the major languages of world membership.
3. We reaffirm the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the historicity of Genesis 1-11: that the seven days of the Creation account were literal 24-hour days forming a week identical in time to what we now experience as a week; and that the Flood was global in nature.
4. We call on all boards and educators at Seventh-day Adventist institutions at all levels to continue upholding and advocating the church's position on origins. We, along with Seventh-day Adventist parents, expect students to receive a thorough, balanced, and scientifically rigorous exposure to and affirmation of our historic belief in a literal, recent six-day creation, even as they are educated to understand and assess competing philosophies of origins that dominate scientific discussion in the contemporary world.
5. We urge church leaders throughout the world to seek ways to educate members, especially young people attending non-Seventh-day Adventist schools, in the issues involved in the doctrine of creation.
6. We call on all members of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family to proclaim and teach the church's understanding of the biblical doctrine of Creation, living in its light, rejoicing in our status as sons and daughters of God, and praising our Lord Jesus Christ—our Creator and Redeemer.⁴

It is significant that this response of the 2004 Annual Council called on all school boards and teachers at our schools to uphold and advocate the Church's position on origins. Unfortunately, this recommendation has not been sufficiently followed up. Therefore, at the recent General Conference session in Atlanta, it was voted "to reaffirm and endorse" the 2004 Annual Council's response to the Affirmation of Creation statement. It also voted, in accordance with the 2005 General Conference session protocol for amending a fundamental belief, to request that the General Conference administration initiate a process to integrate Fundamental Belief #6 with this response.⁵ It is hoped that this action of the world church will encourage the boards and teachers of our schools and universities to ensure that teaching on origins supports and affirms the church's Fundamental Belief #6.

Conclusion

The last few years have shown that theistic evolution has gained entrance into our church. Should it become more and more accepted, we will be in danger of losing the biblical foundation for the Sabbath and our understanding of salvation. Without the creation week, the Sabbath becomes a Jewish institution; and if death existed long before the appearance of man, then there was no Fall in Eden and therefore really no need for salvation. And if there was no Fall, then Paul was in error when he wrote:

Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Rom 5:12)

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¹Ángel M. Rodríguez, "Second International Faith and Science Conference: A Report," *Reflections* 9 (Jan. 2005): 2.

² “An Affirmation of Creation,” Report of the International Faith and Science Conference Organizing Committee; online: <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat54.html>; accessed July 8, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This response to “An Affirmation of Creation” was voted by the Annual Council in Silver Spring, Maryland, October 13, 2004; online: <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat55.html>; accessed July 8, 2010.

⁵ *Adventist Review*, July 2, 2010, p. 30.

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