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Ross Cole

Avondale College of Higher Education, ross.cole@avondale.edu.au

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Trouble in Paradise: One Christian Denomination's Contemporary Struggle Reconciling Science and Belief

H Ross Cole

School of Ministry and Theology
Avondale College of Higher Education
Cooranbong, NSW

ABSTRACT

Proposed amendments to Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief No. 6 represent an attempt to define acceptable Adventist understandings of creation more tightly and to exclude alternative viewpoints in a creedal fashion. In particular, there appears to be an attempt to exclude anything but a young age for life. One question which may be asked is whether the proposed amendments are in fact sufficient to exclude unwanted views, since there are models which allow for a creation week consisting of seven consecutive, contiguous, literal, twenty-four days, yet which accommodate current scientific understandings in ways recent creationism finds uncomfortable. While group identity is important, a focus on the formulation of tighter belief statements as a means of defining heretics will do little to bring resolution. Such documents can all too easily become primarily instruments of power and exclusion. They indicate a shift in focus from the core of a community's identity to its borders and that is no advance. Listening to one another may not always bring unanimity of opinion but it should both foster respect and facilitate a deeper and more productive unity than mere uniformity could ever bring.

Keywords: creed, Sabbatarian, fundamental belief, contiguous

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of Christians struggling to reconcile new understandings of science with traditional formulations of faith. The struggle is not yet over. This article examines the significance of current attempts in the author's own denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to

define more closely the parameters of acceptable belief concerning creation. This tightening is being attempted by amending the language of its most visible and authoritative statement on this topic, number six of twenty-eight statements of fundamental beliefs.

Seventh-day Adventism grew out of

the remnants of the American Millerite movement that had (mistakenly) predicted the second coming of Jesus in 1843-1844. The Millerite movement was interdenominational but in its closing months many of its adherents were excommunicated from their home churches. Understandably, these individuals were subsequently extremely cautious about setting up creeds or confessions by which an “in-crowd” group of believers could judge, exclude, and persecute others counted as being part of the “out-crowd.”¹ It was nineteen years before Sabbatarian Adventists could even bring themselves to form an organisation, but the imperative of mission eventually drove the majority to it. Formally adopting a statement of beliefs took longer, but was perhaps inevitable given the place of doctrine in defining the group’s identity. Early statements of belief were largely informal informational descriptors.²

In 1980 a statement of twenty-seven fundamental beliefs was for the first time adopted as amended by vote at a General Conference session. It was prefaced by a qualification that the language of these beliefs could be updated by vote of future General Conference sessions as better ways of expressing the Church’s positions were found. This qualification comforted those adherents who feared a creed might indeed be under formulation, although many doubted change would ever come.

They were wrong. In the 2005 General Conference session a new fundamental belief on spiritual growth was voted as belief number eleven. It was perhaps a presage of things to come that the addition rather than the deletion of a belief pointed to a tightening rather than a loosening of acceptable belief. Perhaps the denomination was ironically on the road to creedalism after all.

Proposed amendments to a number of the twenty-eight statements of fundamental belief are currently being developed for consideration by the General Conference session scheduled for July 2-11, 2015. Most of the amendments formulated to date are little more than semantic adjustments. However, a different dynamic is at work with the proposed amendments to Fundamental Belief No. 6 on creation, where a narrowing of acceptable options is certainly in view.

The main body of this article will examine the proposed amendments to the statement of the fundamental belief concerning creation and the intentions that seem to be behind them. It will then consider whether the proposed changes are sufficient to accomplish these intentions. Next it will explore the agenda behind the intentions. Finally it will ask whether there might be a more productive way forward by which the denomination can discuss the issue of creation.

**THE PROPOSED
AMENDMENTS TO
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST
FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF
NUMBER SIX**

The following paragraph has been developed by conflating the current statement of belief on creation with the draft of a reworded statement brought to a committee of which the author is a member. Proposed deletions from the present statement of belief are struck out and proposed additions are marked in italics:

God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic and historical account of His creative activity. In ~~six days~~ *a recent six-day creation* the Lord made "the heaven and the earth", *the sea and all that is in them*" ~~and all living things upon the earth~~, and rested on the seventh day of ~~that first week~~. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work *performed and completed during six literal days that together with the Sabbath constituted a week as we experience it today*. The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished it was "very good," declaring the glory of God. (Gen. 1&2; Ex. 20:8-11; Ps. 19:1-6; 33:6, 9; 104; *Isa. 45:12; Acts*

17:24; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3; Rev 10:6; 14:7).

The extra biblical references inserted at the end of the statement do not constitute a change of belief. The same cannot be said of the other proposed changes. In this section we will first consider the intentions behind the description of God as having revealed in Scripture "the authentic and *historical* account of His creative activity" rather than simply as having revealed in Scripture "the authentic account of His creative activity". Secondly, we will explore the significance of describing the six-day creation as *recent*. Thirdly, we will examine why the expression "*the sea and all that is in them*" replaces "and all living things upon the earth." Fourthly, we will consider why it has been felt necessary to qualify the creative work as being "*performed and completed during six literal days*." Fifthly, we consider why it is said that these days "*together with the Sabbath constituted a week as we experience it today*."

An Authentic and Historical Account

The description of the creation account as not only authentic but *historical* is a tacit acknowledgment that a piece of literature can be considered authentic even if it is not considered historical. On a similar disjunction, Seventh-day Adventists have long known that "real" and "literal" are not synonyms. Jesus is the true Lamb of God (John

1:29) but he is not a literal lamb. Adventist belief in the non-immortality of the soul is thoroughly inconsistent with a literal reading of Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Church members recognise this as a parable, much like Abimelech's account of talking trees in Judges 9, and hence do not read it literally.

Nor does Gen 1-2 have to be considered as parabolic for the point to stand. These chapters and maybe the whole of Gen 1-11 may be a *sui generis* of primeval history that describes the indescribable in common terms because we could not comprehend it any other way. Much hangs on the genre classification. The addition of the word "historical" is an attempt to invalidate models which attempt to reconcile Gen 1-2 with current scientific and anthropological accounts.

A Recent Creation

The use of the adjective "recent" is clearly intended to preclude the idea that life has been on Earth for eons. Of course, "recent" is a relative term. One can speak of creation being six thousand years ago and call it "recent". But if one speaks of the recent publication of a book, six thousand years would be too long a period by far. If God himself is the measure of the ages, "recent" becomes a far less definitive term than if cosmic time is the measure. In fact it becomes useless.

The Adventist prophet, Ellen G. White, periodically wrote of the Earth being "almost" or "about" six thousand years old. She may, however, have been simply using the chronology of Archbishop Ussher found in the margins of many Bibles of her day. That she would have approved of the use of incidental references made then to settle a matter of informed debate today is a dubious proposition at best.³ One suspects that an earlier draft revision spoke of a six-day creation "about six thousand years ago" but that this was amended to "recent" in an attempt to preserve White's intent without falling into too strict a creedal position. However, the substitution is so open it hardly clarifies anything.

The Heaven, the Earth, the Sea and All That Is in Them

The current fundamental belief statement speaks of the creation of "the heaven, the earth, and all living things upon the earth". There is a reason for this language. Seventh-day Adventists have never believed that heaven as the dwelling place of God and the angels came into being during the creation week. As they see it, Satan as Lucifer fell before this event and in the context of the foundations of the Earth being laid (Job 38:4, 6). Job 38:7 speaks of how "all the sons of God shouted for joy." Many Seventh-day Adventists see the stars as having been created long before the six days of creation.⁴ Thus, although eons of life on Earth may be problematic to them the vast

ages of contemporary cosmology are not.

A notation on the draft amendment of the fundamental belief received by the author suggests that the alteration better allows for an ancient cosmology than does the current statement. It is difficult to see how this is the case. However, the amended language is more biblical, and on the assumption that biblical beliefs should be expressed as far as possible in biblical language, this amendment is a positive thing.

***A Completed Creative Work
Performed and Completed during
Six Literal Days***

The purpose of the proposed amendments in general receives clarification from the insistence that the work of creation was “performed and completed during six literal days.” The Genesis account may be historical but if the days are taken as being long ages rather than twenty-four hour, literal days there is still room for ancient life on an ancient planet. This addition is an attempt to cut off such a possibility.

***Six Literal Days That Together
with the Sabbath Constituted a
Week as we Experience it Today***

This proposed addition further specifies the literalness of the six days. Derek Kidner is a conservative Old Testament scholar who reads the creation story so historically that he interprets the tree of life and the tree

of knowing good and evil as literal. However, Kidner still makes a reconciliation of these positions with contemporary scientific understanding. His explanation is worth quoting at length:

Through the apparent naivety of this earth-centred and history-centred account God says to each generation . . . “See the present age is the time to which My creative work was moving, and the unconscious aeons before it as ‘but a few days’, like the years which Jacob gave for Rachel.”

This interpretation may leave us dissatisfied on two counts. We may object, first, that the author shows no consciousness of speaking otherwise than literally, and secondly, that this reading of the chapter makes it guilty of saying one thing and meaning another.

The first point may well be true, but it is hardly an objection. We know that the full meaning of an inspired utterance was often hidden from the speaker: even Caiaphas exemplifies this, and the same is said of Daniel and of the Prophets. . . . The latent truth does not make their words any less their own; nor do we have to shut our eyes to it, as though the full flower of meaning were less authentic than the bud.

The second point may seem more weighty. If the “days” were not days at all, would God have countenanced the word? Does He trade in inaccuracies, however edifying? The question hinges on the proper use of language. A God who makes no concessions to our ways of seeing and speaking would communicate to us no meaning. Hence the phenomenological language of the chapter (like our own talk of “sunrise”, “dewfall”, etc.) and its geocentric standpoint; but hence also the heavy temporal foreshortening which turns ages into days. Both are instruments of truth, diagrams enabling us to construe and not misconstrue a totality too big for us. It is only pedantry that would quarrel with terms that simplify in order to clarify.⁵

The proposed amendment clearly disallows even such a modest proposal as this. Speaking of “a week as we experience it today” is also intended to rule out the possibility that the six literal days are anything but consecutive and contiguous. In fact, whether the days are consecutive and contiguous or not, the language of Gen 1 places its emphasis elsewhere. The Hebrew of Gen 1:5 speaks literally of “one day” rather than of “the first day.” The Hebrew of the next four days is distinctive, in that the word *yôm* for “day” in each instance lacks the definite article but the ordinal numeral with which it

stands in attributive position has the definite article. It is as if the author is speaking of “a day, the second one; a day, the third one,” etc.. Only when the day sequence is established do we have reference to “the day, the sixth one” (Gen 1:31).⁶

Summary

The current Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief on creation is most consistent with the belief that life on Earth as we know it was created during a literal six-day week rather than over eons of time. However, for some Adventists it would appear that this is not enough. The statement must confirm that the creation account is not only authentic, it is also historical. The events described are not long distant but recent, whatever “recent” may actually mean. It must be affirmed that together with the Sabbath the days of creation constitute not just a week, but a week as we experience it today. Clearly this is an attempt to leave as little “wriggle room” as possible in defining the time elements of creation.

BUT WILL THESE CHANGES BE ENOUGH?

There is no doubt that dissent may be quashed by sufficiently clarifying the language of belief statements. However, it may be asked whether even these carefully crafted modifications will be enough to accomplish this goal.

Is it enough to insist that Gen 1-2 is authentic and historical, or must one

insist that the chapters are also scientific? May not God have reserved some things for human beings to work out for themselves, like the classification of the animals (Gen 2:19)? Should God then be expected to deliver perfect knowledge of every detail of everything discussed in Scripture, or might He be expected to accommodate to the circumstances of His listeners? ⁷

The fact is that there are models which allow for a creation week consisting of seven consecutive contiguous literal twenty-four days yet which accommodate current scientific understandings in ways recent creationism finds uncomfortable. Perhaps the seven days are seven days of announcements of God's creative intent. Maybe the description of the actual appearance of created things should be placed in parentheses and it is only the announcements themselves that come in the framework of an evening and morning. As for God having finished his creation in Gen 2:1-3, may this not be the language of the prophetic perfect, where something still future is seen as already done in the past?⁸ According to the gap theory there was an initial creation referred to in Gen 1:1 that fell into the chaos of demonic influence. This is the ancient creation recorded in the fossil record. Then God is seen as recreating the Earth in six literal days in geologically very recent times.⁹ John H. Walton speaks of seven days of dedication, such that the universe, Earth, and life

upon the Earth are truly ancient, but dedicated for the divine purpose in six literal days in geologically very recent times.¹⁰ Or maybe every week the creation reoccurs and is rededicated anew each Sabbath day,¹¹ a truly recent view of creation.

Not every proposal is of equal merit and I mention these alternative models with some hesitation because I don't want to encourage yet further tightening of the statement of fundamental belief on creation as the solution. I want to point out instead that the tightening could go on and on but may never be enough to preclude someone coming up with some idea with which we may disagree. I want to encourage a whole different approach rather than the usual habit of more of the same.

AGENDA BEHIND THE INTENTIONS

To appeal to the authority of the text is praiseworthy in and of itself. However, given the variety of ways the text may be interpreted, the question arises as to whether this appeal covers deeper concerns that are not always acknowledged.

For Seventh-day Adventists Gen 1-2 has a special place because of their adherence to the seventh-day Sabbath, which is believed to be a gift for all human beings since it is understood to have been instituted in Eden before the entrance of sin. This is an understandable concern.

However, it is noteworthy that not many other young-Earth creationists have taken up seventh-day Sabbath observance. Clearly then, there is a danger that seeing the account of Gen 1-2 as primarily historical can all too easily end up with seeing it as merely historical. If, on the other hand, the Sabbath is seen as the major reason for the presentation of creation in a week of seven days then is it possible that historical perspectives may not be as strongly emphasised?

The question of death before the entrance of sin is disturbing to many evangelicals but Rom 5 is seen by others as focusing on Adam's sin in relation to human death, perhaps even eternal death, not looking at death in the wider creation nor at science as we understand the term today. Indeed, if the creation itself is genuinely endowed with a freedom to develop in some of its own ways, just as humans are later endowed with freedom of moral choice, some suffering before sin might be expected and would be no more innately problematic from the point of view of the character of God than is the subordination of the creation to frustration as a result of the human fall.¹²

Long time periods for the creation may imply to some minds a limit on the divine power. However, time—whether long or short—is equally finite compared to eternity and deep time need be no more problematic to the doctrine

of divine omnipotence than is deep space. Both may simply be profound symbols of the divine greatness. A long age for the universe and for life on Earth need not rule out specific divine intervention in natural processes at any number of points along the way. However, God must not be seen as a God of the gaps who is needed only when no natural explanation can be found. He is surely as much present in the sunrise and sunset of each day as in the resurrection of Christ, even if differently so. If it transpires that the very appearance of human beings is inherent in the first moment of the “Big Bang” surely that would be a marvellous feat of creation in itself.

These issues need to be squarely faced without being dismissed *a priori* for not being traditional or for being in alleged contradiction to Scripture. It may be easier to appeal dogmatically to the text, despite its potential for ambiguity, before getting to that level of theological searching. However, it is not necessarily more helpful.

IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

In fact the issue may not really be primarily exegetical or theological or scientific. Perhaps the dominant issue is one of identity and of intent to exclude those who don't follow traditional paths. Identity is certainly important. However, a focus on the formulation of belief statements to exclude as many heretics as possible will probably not do much to bring

resolution. Such documents instead become primarily instruments of power and exclusion. They indicate a shift in focus from the core of a community's identity simply to its borders and that is no advance. Listening to one another may not always bring unanimity of opinion but it may foster respect and allow a deeper unity to flourish than mere uniformity could ever bring. After all, if God is the One who both inspired the written word and created the natural world, will we not ultimately find oneness beyond this present complexity. What then do we have to fear?

QUESTIONS

1. The article speaks of holding to the centre of identity rather than guarding its borders. What would holding to the centre look like for Seventh-day Adventists?
2. Is descent into creedalism something that can be avoided as a movement matures or is it inevitable?
3. Theological assumptions as to what a text could not possibly mean may overshadow exegetical evidence concerning what is actually says. How can concern for a coherent overall picture be balanced with respect for the text as it reads?

REFERENCES

- 1 The statement of John Loughborough is indicative. "The first step of apostasy is to get up a

creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such." Loughborough, J. (1861). Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 18, (8 October), 148.

- 2 For a summary of the history of Seventh-day Adventist statements of belief see Guy, F. (2002). September 2002 Avondale College statement, "Being Adventist in 21st Century Australia: Uncovering the Origins of the Statement of Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs", available on <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/doctrines/au2002conference/guy/guy27origin.htm#2> (1/7/2014).
- 3 White's own hesitancy about readers using her incidental references to settle matters of dispute is reflected in the fact that in the 1888 edition of her book, *The Great Controversy*, she speaks of "the palace bell" signalling the commencement of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of French Huguenots in 1572. In the 1911 edition she speaks of "a bell" giving the signal. Jan Voerman defends the accuracy of her earlier claim. Jan Voerman, J. (2007). Ellen White and the French Revolution. *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45, 250–257. However, that defence is inconsistent with her own willingness to move away from

- a more definitive statement. As a conservative group Seventh-day Adventists may innately prefer conservative models of inspiration, but the evidence of how their own prophet worked and her own descriptions of how inspiration works make it far harder for them to maintain this position than it is for fundamentalists generally.
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 - 7 See Herr, L. (1982). Genesis One in Historical-critical Perspective. *Spectrum* 13(2), 50–61.
 - 8 See Hayward, A. (1995). *Creation and Evolution: Rethinking the Evidence from Science and the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
 - 9 Most famously in the so-called Scofield Bible, Scofield, C. I. (ed.) (1967). *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version, with introductions, annotations, subject chain references, and such word changes in the text as will help the reader*, new ed. New York: Oxford University Press. Among Seventh-day Adventists the gap theory has been given special consideration by Jack Provonsha. See Provonsha, J. W. (2000). ‘Creation/Evolution Debate in Light of the Great Controversy’, in Hayward, J. L. (ed.), *Creation Reconsidered: Scientific, Biblical and Theological Perspectives*. California: Assoc of Adventist Forums, 303–311. Also Provonsha, J. W. “The Creation/Evolution Debate in the Light of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan”, unpublished manuscript on file in the Heritage Room, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Spring, MI (n.d).
 - 10 Walton, J. H. (2009). *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
 - 11 As suggested by a friend of mine, the Rev. Dr. Karl Hand.
 - 12 See Emberger, G. (2000). Theological Analysis of Selected Recent Creationist Assertions Concerning the Occurrence of Death before Sin. *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 52,160–168.