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Creationism? Good Grief!

Part 1: Dominoes and Dinosaurs

Can you accept the concept of evolution and still be a Christian? In the Church of God movement that's a fairly radical thought. This article tackles the creationism issue and suggests that not only is creationism wrong, it may also be harmful to your spiritual health.

One of the first things that initially attracted me about the Worldwide Church of God was its strong, clear, no-compromise position on creationism. There were regular articles in *The Plain Truth* that dealt with the issue, complete with colourful diagrams and photographs. And you could send for brochures with titles like “A Whale of a Tale” and “Our Awesome Universe.” The way the church presented it, evolution was a theory shot full of holes.

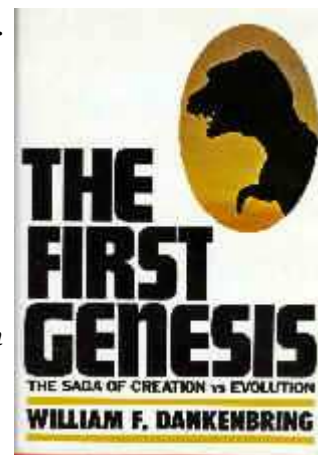
Garner Ted Armstrong, at that time the voice of *The World Tomorrow*, did a nice little number on evolution too. The way Ted told it, those evolutionists were just plain dishonest with the evidence. I believed him.

Mind you, there were moments when you had to wonder. Ted said that the expanding universe – where heavenly bodies are flying apart – wasn't evidence for a Big Bang. Oh no, it was the result of a massive cosmic “war in heaven” caused by Lucifer's rebellion. I may only have been a teenager at the time, but that seemed a pretty silly explanation even then. But maybe Ted's mind was momentarily preoccupied with a somewhat different variety of heavenly bodies and big bangs.

There was, however, one distinctive element that impressed me mightily in the church's version of creationism: the gap theory. There was an unknown time period between the “in the beginning” part of Genesis 1:1 and “the Earth was without form and void.” Church members may not have known much about Biblical languages, but we all knew about *tohu* and *bohu*. Thanks to the gap theory, the Earth could indeed be millions or billions of years old, because the creation described in Genesis was actually a re-creation following the ruin resulting from Lucifer's grab for power. That was the clincher. It all made perfect sense. Yes, there were “Pre-Adamic” dinosaurs. Problem solved.

It was only later that I found out that the gap theory had a long pre-WCG history, and had for many years been the preferred explanation used by creationists before the Seventh-day Adventists created “flood geology”, later popularized by Henry Morris (see Part 2).

In 1975 that great authority on cosmology and anthropology, *Plain Truth* writer William F. Dankenbring, brought out a book that put the church's accumulated wisdom on the subject between two covers. As creationist books go it was well written. In the foreword Herman Hoeh noted that Dankenbring “proposes a disarmingly simple answer in his examination of broad areas of scientific evidence.” I bought both the first and second editions of *The First Genesis*. Somewhere along the line I gave one copy away, but the 1979 version still sits on my bookshelf among other curiosities.



The trouble was, by now I'd developed quite an interest in the subject, and I wasn't restricting my reading. I wanted to know why, if things were as clear as Dankenbring and others painted them, palaeontologists like Richard Leakey weren't carried away by the sheer force of such "disarmingly simple" arguments.

Albert Einstein once said, "*The important thing is to not stop questioning.*" Einstein would never have cut it in the Worldwide Church of God! Questioning and the thirst for knowledge can be a major mistake for anyone who wants to keep their beliefs hermetically sealed. If you want to avoid discomfort don't read anything that will challenge and stretch you. Most creationists read selectively in order to confirm their beliefs.

Books can be threatening beasts. Don't read that stuff, people will tell you. Stick to "faith-building" material. Sometimes they get pretty strident about it and even try and take the opportunity away. Witness those well-intentioned folk who want to keep certain books out of public libraries.

Why do we do that? Maybe it's fear. For some it's a fear that they might "lose their faith", which is a pretty scary prospect. But what that really seems to mean, when you dig a bit deeper, isn't so much faith in God, but faith in the Bible. Or, more specifically, a literal reading of the Bible. The Bible as an inerrant authority on anything and everything. Question the Bible on the Genesis origin stories, and before you know it you'll be questioning a thousand other things. One domino falls, so the theory goes, and the rest follow.

Maybe that explains why some Church of God preachers are still dishing out the same tired, discredited messages they did as far back as the 1950s. Try reading a Rod Meredith article from a 1955 *Plain Truth*, and then compare it with another in the latest issue of *Tomorrow's World*. Chances are you'll find it, as I did, difficult to tell them apart. Rod would probably tell you this is because he "holds fast." Or could it just be because he's learnt next to nothing over nearly 50 long years? Ignorance is the constant companion of fear.

But what about those falling Bible dominoes? There's no gentle way to tell some people: maybe a few of those dominoes *should* fall. It's not the Bible that will be affected, just our perceptions and misconceptions *about* the Bible. The Bible is many things, but was certainly never meant to be a scientific authority. It contains different genre (types of writing) from different periods. It isn't some kind of "instruction manual." It had multiple authors spread over many centuries. And the idea of "inerrancy" would surely have puzzled those ancient writers. Inerrancy is a modern concept and, frankly, a rather stupid one.

And that's without even mentioning the vexed issue of what should or shouldn't have ended up in the Bible canon, the official list of books regarded as scripture.

No wonder then that millions of Christians honour the Bible and ground their faith in its stories, parables, metaphors, histories, poetry and theology without falling for the proof-texting nightmare of fundamentalism with its rigid, wooden, literalistic approach. Rod, Ted and others would tell us that's because such people are not real Christians. The implication being that if you don't believe the way they do, you won't be a proper Christian either. Some people seem to have confused the Bible with the God revealed in the Bible, the message with the medium.

And you don't have to be some kind of "super-liberal" to appreciate that simple fact. Bob Bakker is a case in point. He's a palaeontologist *and* a Pentecostal preacher. "*Evolution has happened. It's a fact. Cambrian life is different from Ordovician and different from Silurian and different from Devonian and there's progress in life*", says Bob. And he adds, "*There's warped ideas about the Bible and there's warped ideas about Evolution.*" Maybe he read *The First Genesis* too.

Another example: the American Scientific Affiliation is an association of professionals in the sciences who also happen to be evangelical Christians. They clearly recognize that evolution isn't the bogeyman fundamentalists usually make it out to be.

So why does the creationist view still carry the day in many Christian circles? Perhaps because the underlying scientific issues can get quite complex. People who see in black and white rarely appreciate shades of gray. Who wants that when a simpler, less disturbing alternative is available? That we swallowed Herbert Armstrong's belief system indicates that most of us prefer not to wander too far into the world of the intellect ("intellectual" being almost as bad a word as "liberal.") And, to make matters worse, evolution is often maliciously identified with atheism, communism, you name it. As one true believer said: *No liberal so-called "interpretation" is needed. God said it, I believe it, and you are going to hell. Praise God!*

Creationism isn't just bad science. It's bad theology. Which might help explain why Sunday morning televangelists - Benny Hinn, Oral Roberts and the whole "Elmer Gantry" brigade - are all ardent advocates of creationism. It goes with the territory.

And just as fundamentalists resort to proof texting in their preaching, creationists do something similar in trying to marshal their case. The Jehovah's Witness comes armed with a few well thumbed passages in their *New World Translation*. The creationist wants to ask you about how something as complex as the eye evolved. Of course they've read up on the topic recently (in a suitably safe book from a Christian publisher) and expect you to be thrilled by the profundity of their learning and logic. No matter the fact that issues like this have been extensively discussed in the literature for years; your average amateur "creation scientist" can be fairly certain their audience hasn't been dipping into the specialist journals lately.

And that was a pretty safe bet with the old *Plain Truth* articles too. They were written by church journalists like William Dankenbring who dabbled in a bit of everything: diet, prophecy, Bible commentary, family counselling and prehistory, but had no real background or experience in any of these fields.

Creationism is about apologetics, not science. It begins with a conclusion, and then works its way back to stack the evidence. And then, in a brazen act of finger-pointing, its spokesmen often turn around and accuse the scientific community of doing the very thing they're guilty of.

How should you react when confronted with one of these well-meaning enthusiasts? Are you really supposed to be impressed by what amounts to a bad second-hand book review? When the subject is raised of dinosaur and human footprints being supposedly found together (or whatever nonsense is currently on their swot list) I cheerfully advise them to take it up with the *National Geographic*.

And if "nonsense" sounds a little uncharitable, perhaps it'd help to note that *Scientific American* used that very term recently (June 2002) when it published an article called 15 Answers to Creationist Nonsense.

There's no question that most creationists are sincere, deeply committed Christian people, just as there's no question that there are many Christians who are thoroughly unconvinced by creationist rhetoric. Maybe it's time to ask a new question: does creationism help us understand the Bible and build genuine faith, or does it actually get in the way of that process?

Part 2: *A Prehistory of "Creation Science"*

Gimme that old-time religion. But is that old-time creationism really as old as some would like you to think it is? And what role did self-styled prophetess Ellen G. White play in the evolution of creationism?

Latter day creationists suffer under the illusion that their view of scripture is that of all Christians up till recent times. Then along came Charles Darwin to help sort out the sheep from the goats. The goats were subverted by the pseudo-science of evolution, and the sheep stayed loyal to God's Word.

Well, not quite. Bob Bakker, who we met earlier, draws our attention to Augustine, the church father who lived in the fifth century.

... after reading Genesis and thinking about it he came up with the conclusion that the story in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 was not a simple historical sequence of events. It just couldn't be. It's not what the words meant. It just wasn't.

Bakker continues:

... you've got Jewish writers in the Middle Ages who wrote books on Genesis and they didn't read Augustine but they came away with the same conclusion: that the six days of Creation could not be six literal days. No way. That's not what the Hebrew says. And that they weren't six things in a row either but that they were six revelations of what happened in order of importance. So there are two thousand years of thoughtful guys reading The Old Testament carefully and treating it with respect and coming away with the conclusion that it was not simple, secular, history.

Perhaps it's not surprising that these insights were largely confined to the well educated. After all, universal literacy is a very recent development. Most Christians at the time of Augustine, for example, could neither read nor write. We might even suspect that "holy mother church" preferred it that way. Ordinary lay people shouldn't have to bother their silly little heads with complex matters. More trouble than it's worth!

Something interesting happened, however, in the nineteenth century. There was an explosion of scholarship in Biblical studies. The power and influence of the churches to control that development was severely limited, for the universities were no longer under the thumb of bishops, and books were no longer the preserve of the few.

At the same time there was a new awareness of the obvious antiquity of the Earth. 6,000 years was not nearly enough time to account for the geology of the planet or the fossil record. And a vigorous and disturbing new theory had recently been introduced to account for the origin of species. Christian churches moved swiftly to accommodate the new insights. In order to explain the age of the Earth it was suggested that the days of Genesis corresponded to ages (perhaps a thousand years each) or that there was a pre-Adamic world which was later re-created (the gap theory). Others suggested the Genesis stories were like impressionistic paintings, conveying truth, but not literal information about pre-history.

In America, however, there was especially stubborn resistance to the winds of change, despite the fact that many American academics had been (and are) in the forefront of both Biblical scholarship and the study of origins. It was here that "fundamentalism" was born in the early twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1915 a series of booklets was published called "The Fundamentals." They attacked the new knowledge as evil and a sign of "liberalism." In 1919 a convention was held in Philadelphia that attracted 6,000 people. A list of five fundamental beliefs was drawn up. One of those was the inerrancy of the Bible.

Inerrancy was seen as a bulwark against dangerous new theories about the Bible itself. And of course it also provided a rallying point against the idea of evolution. Yet even at this point the wackier fallacies we now associate with "creation science" were still in the future. Few of these earliest fundamentalists held to a literal seven-day creation just a few thousand years in the past. According to Mark Noll, writing in the reviews section of *First Things*:

Despite a widespread impression to the contrary, "creationism" was not a traditional belief of nineteenth-century conservative Protestants or even of early-twentieth-century fundamentalists. During the century before the 1930s, most conservative Protestants believed that the "days" of Genesis, chapter one, stood for long ages of geological development or that a lengthy gap existed between the initial creation of the world (Gen. 1:1) and a series of more recent creative acts (Gen. 1:2ff.) during which the fossils were deposited. Some conservative Protestants early in the century - like James Orr of Scotland and B. B. Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary, both of whom wrote for *The Fundamentals* (1910-15) - even allowed for large-scale evolution from one or only a few original life forms as a way of explaining God's way of creating plants, animals, and even the human body... Popular opponents of evolution in the 1920s like William Jennings Bryan had no difficulty accepting an ancient earth.

So where did the kind of creationism we recognize today come from? It may come as a surprise to learn that one of the major influences was none other than Seventh-day Adventist prophetess Ellen G. White, something many Sunday-keeping fundamentalists might prefer not to know. Unable to carry the day in the arena of Biblical scholarship, and concerned that a non-literal reading of Genesis would undermine her rationale for Sabbath observance, she played the ultimate trump card by claiming a direct revelation from God. The Lord told his faithful handmaiden that the days of creation were indeed literal 24 hour days, and that the troublesome fossils used as evidence for an ancient Earth were merely proof of Noah's flood. So there!



Ellen White



George McCready Price

How did Mrs. White's fantasies escape to infect the wider Christian community? Enter George McCready Price. This gentleman was a leading figure in Seventh-day Adventism, and creationism's greatest champion till Henry Morris, a Southern Baptist, turned up in the early 1960s. The following biographical sketch comes from Dr. Ron Numbers, author of *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*, and himself a former Adventist.

During the first two thirds of the twentieth century, during which most Christian fundamentalists accepted the existence of long geological ages, the leading voice arguing for the recent creation of life on earth in six literal days was George McCready Price (1870-1963), a scientifically self-taught creationist and teacher. Born and reared in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, Price as a youth joined the Seventh-day Adventists, a small religious group founded and still led [at that time] by a prophetess named Ellen G. White, whom Adventists regarded as being divinely inspired. Following one of her trance-like "visions" White claimed actually to have witnessed the Creation, which occurred in a literal week. She also taught that Noah's flood had sculpted the surface of the earth, burying the plants and animals found in the fossil record, and that the Christian Sabbath should be celebrated on Saturday rather than Sunday, as a memorial of a six-day creation.



Shortly after the turn of the century Price dedicated his life to a scientific defense of White's version of earth history: the creation of all life on earth no more than about

6,000 years ago and a global deluge over 2,000 years before the birth of Christ that had deposited most of the fossil-bearing rocks. Convinced that theories of organic evolution rested primarily on the notion of geological ages, Price aimed his strongest artillery at the geological foundation rather than at the biological superstructure. For a decade and a half Price's writings circulated mainly among his coreligionists, but by the late 1910s he was increasingly reaching non-Adventist audiences. In 1926, at the height of the antievolution crusade, the journal *Science* described Price as "the principal scientific authority of the Fundamentalists." That he was, but with a twist. Although virtually all of the leading antievolutionists of the day, including William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes trial, lauded Price's critique of evolution, none of them saw any biblical reason to abandon belief in the antiquity of life on earth for what Price called "flood geology." Not until the 1970s did Price's views, rechristened "creation science," become fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Here's a further section from Mark Noll's *First Things* article:

Modern creationism arose, by contrast, from the efforts of earnest Seventh-day Adventists who wanted to show that the sacred writings of Adventist-founder Ellen G. White (who made much of a recently created earth and the Noachian deluge) could provide a framework for studying the history of the earth. Especially important for this purpose was the Adventist theorist, George McCready Price (1870-1963), who published a string of creationist works, most notably *The New Geology* (1923). That book argued that a "simple" or "literal" reading of early Genesis showed that God had created the world six to eight thousand years ago and had used the Flood to construct the planet's geological past. Price, an armchair geologist with little formal training and almost no field experience, demonstrated how a person with such a belief could reconstruct natural history in order to question traditional understandings of the geological column and apparent indications that the earth was ancient. Price's ideas were never taken seriously by practicing geologists, and they had little impact outside of Adventist circles. One exception was the *Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, where a few energized critics of the modern world found Price's biblical literalism convincing, despite the fact that on almost every other religious question the Missouri Synod was about as far removed from Seventh-day Adventism as it was possible to be.

The Missouri Synod, one of the narrowest and most dogmatic Lutheran bodies, began to disgorge creationist volumes through its publishing arm, *Concordia*, (mainly written by the sect's ministers, who in many cases had even less expertise than Price.) These included Byron Nelson's *Deluge Story in Stone* and Alfred Rehwinkel's *The Flood* (*The Flood* was written in the 1950s and *Deluge Story* in the 1930s. Incredibly both are still in print!) Rehwinkel presented a popularized version of McCready Price's theories, and Missouri Lutherans played a prominent role in the leadership of creationist groups. Prominent Synod member and rehabilitated Nazi scientist Wernher von Braun (who held rank in Hitler's SS) was even pressed into service to add credibility to the creationist stance.

Meanwhile George McCready Price wasn't limiting himself to creationist rhetoric. He was a dab hand at prophetic speculation as well, even authoring a book called *The Time of the End*. This tie-in between creationism and apocalyptic prediction isn't uncommon, as anyone who has listened to Garner Ted Armstrong knows. Hard-line creationists tend to be obsessed with prophecy, and people who describe themselves as "students of prophecy" are invariably die-hard creationists. Some of Price's anti-evolution propaganda is still available on the Internet.

After Price's death the mantle was to fall to Henry Morris. Morris, a Baptist, had the advantage of being closer to the Christian mainstream, unlike the Adventist Price (who many regarded as coming from a fringe group). Morris lent greater credibility to the cause among conservative Christians.



Henry Morris

At last, in the late 1950s, a breakthrough occurred. John C. Whitcomb, Jr. (b. 1924), a theologian at Grace Theological Seminary (Winona Lake, Indiana) of the Grace Brethren denomination, and Henry M. Morris (b. 1918), a hydraulic engineer of Southern Baptist background, had each been moving in a creationist direction for quite a while before finding confirmation in Price's work. Each was also disturbed by a book published in 1954 by the evangelical Baptist theologian, Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture...* Soon after Whitcomb and Morris met each other they published *The Genesis Flood* (1961), an updating of Price's work, but one that, because of Whitcomb's theological contribution and Morris' scientific expertise, made Price's points more persuasively.

The rest is history - massive demand for *The Genesis Flood* (twenty-nine printings and sales in excess of 200,000 by the mid-1980s); the popularization (by Whitcomb, Morris, and others) of the creationist viewpoint in tens of millions of other books, articles, pamphlets, and Sunday School lessons; the entrance of creationism into Britain (where before conservative anti-evolutionists had almost never promoted the idea of a young earth); the translation of creationist materials into many foreign languages (including Turkish, for use in Islamic education)... (Noll)

While Morris was more qualified than Price to speak on scientific matters, it shouldn't perhaps be a surprise that his training was as a civil engineer. There has always been a do-it-yourself flavour to the creationist movement. Advocates like Morris, dedicated and sincere though they may be, are usually not writing in their field of expertise. While a number of "creation scientists" do possess valid credentials, they tend to be in areas like engineering, mathematics, physics and chemistry. The late Wernher Von Braun is a case in point. There have been few geologists among the creationist ranks, despite great efforts to recruit qualified individuals.

These give them an inclination toward scientific explanations and a literal, face-value interpretation of respected writings... Disciplines which provide the historical dimension to creative processes are crucial to creationism. Respected geologists and astronomers who possess this needed perspective have not only avoided creationism, they are among its sharpest critics.

(Elbert Dempsey, *God's Other Books*. Herald House, 1987).