

Perspective Digest

Volume 15
Issue 4 *Fall*

Article 5

2010

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Recommended Citation

Baldwin, John T. (2010) "Uplifting a Recent Creation (Faith & Science Update)," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol15/iss4/5>

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Faith & Science

UPDATE

John T. Baldwin

Uplifting a Recent Creation

In a moving inaugural sermon on July 3, 2010, the Holy Spirit, through the new General Conference (GC) president, Ted N. C. Wilson, stirred 70,000 worshipers to voice fervent amens in response to these words:

“Just this week we have affirmed in an overwhelming manner, the Seventh-day Adventist Church both teaches and believes in the biblical record of Creation which took place recently; in six literal, consecutive, contiguous, 24-hour days. The Seventh-day Adventist Church will never change its stand or belief in that foundational doctrine. . . . Don’t go backward to atheistic or theistic evolution, go forward to the prophetic understanding that loyalty to God, the Creator and Redeemer, will be seen in the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath as the distinguishing characteristic of God’s people in the very end of time.”

How did such historic things happen during the recent General Conference? The story and its significance are encouraging.

With eager anticipation, delegates from around the globe assembled in Atlanta, Georgia, on Wednesday, June 23, for the

beginning of the 59th Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. On Thursday afternoon and evening, the various divisions caucused to elect members of the nominating committee. This body began its work on Friday morning to recommend an individual for the presidency of the General Conference. Members around the world had been and were continuing to petition God for guidance in the selection of the president. The answer came swiftly Friday morning as the name of Ted N. C. Wilson received the vast majority of votes. When his name was introduced to the delegates in business session that same morning, their response was equally rapid and enthusiastic. Wilson was elected president by a large margin.

The new leader of the church immediately identified the nature of his burden for the church and its mission. He and his wife, Nancy, are praying for deep revival and reformation in the church and for an accompanying outpouring of the latter rain in its fullness in order to share the love and redemption of Jesus, our compassionate Creator, with individuals everywhere.

Wilson also stressed the importance and centrality of the Scriptures. Holding up his small Bible, Wilson said, "The Bible is, I believe, to be the authoritative word of God."¹ He added, "It is God's word to us, and it is critical we accept Scripture as it reads." Backing up his claim even in relation to the meaning of the "days" in Genesis, Wilson noted that Ellen G. White evaluated the attitude which interprets the days of Creation to be indefinite periods of time as the "worst kind of infidelity. . . . and is an impeachment of his [God's] wisdom."²

During the business session on Wednesday morning, June 30, Wilson came humbly but boldly to the delegates with a significant twofold motion. He acted on his convictions regarding Scripture, the current discussion of Creation in the church, and the fact that while Fundamental Belief 6: Creation (FB6) is a good statement on Creation, it is an incomplete definition of Creation.

In his first major initiative as president, Wilson asked the delegates to: (1) endorse “A Response to an Affirmation of Creation” and (2) request the new General Conference leadership to initiate a process whereby Fundamental Belief 6: Creation could be integrated with the principles in the “Response”—thus becoming a complete definition of Creation—and brought back for ratification to the next GC Session in 2015. The “Response” had been voted by the General Conference Executive Committee in 2004 and affirms, among other things, “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.” These requests electrified the delegates, who sensed that Wilson is leading the church in a God-honoring direction.³

Though a few voices were raised against the initiative, many thought leaders of the church came eagerly to the microphones to give strong support to the motions. Ella Simmons, re-elected vice president of the General Conference, observed that while freedom of thought at our educational institutions is important, “it must come without betraying the word of God. There are absolutes.” Although our schools must be accountable for what they teach our children, Simmons added, “we must first provide clarity” concerning that for which our schools are to be held accountable.” Here Simmons implied her agreement that the definition of Creation expressed in FB6 is too ambiguous and, therefore, needs to be clarified; hence her strong support for Wilson’s motions.

Ed Zinke, a prominent North American businessman and theologian observed: “This statement [FB6] impacts almost every statement in the Fundamental Beliefs. If we don’t accept Creation, we have no reason to exist as a Church.”

Dan Jackson, the newly elected North American Division president from Canada, stood to affirm the importance of FB6:

“My Creator is my Redeemer—the two are linked.” Keith Lockhart notes that Jackson assured the delegates that he was in “full agreement” with the revision of FB6.⁴ Jackson’s perspective in this regard is important in light of the current discussions of Creation in North American Adventist academic and institutional circles.

Telling support for the motions also came from Ricardo Graham, president of the Pacific Union and chair of the La Sierra University Board of Trustees, who said, “Our faith informs our science,” and, as Kellner adds, “not the other way around.”

Several other voices spoke in earnest favor of the motions, including Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review*; Artur Stele, a newly elected General Conference vice president; Cindy Tutsch, associate secretary of the Ellen White Estate; Alberto Timm, rector of the Latin-American Adventist Theological Seminary; and Donna Richards, a lay delegate from the Southeastern California Conference.⁵

The two motions passed with wide margins. These actions are historic because they set the church in a new direction. Practically, this decision by the delegates means that the General Conference leadership will set into motion the process to revise FB6 over the next five years. The reworded statement will then be brought to the 2015 General Conference Session for final discussion and vote. General Conference protocol requires that any revision to the Fundamental Beliefs must be vetted through each world division of the church for a period of at least two years before it is voted at a General Conference session. This provides ample time for input from the world church regarding the matter.

With reverent humility, Seventh-day Adventists believe that the world church, when prayerfully gathered in Holy-Spirit-led General Conference session, represents the highest, Holy Spirit-blessed spiritual and doctrinal authority. This faith position

implies that through the two recent session votes—prompted by the Holy Spirit to affirm “A Response to an Affirmation of Creation” and to revise FB6 according to the principles in this “Response”—the Holy Spirit has provided recent, public, and encouraging witness to the world that the literal, historical reading of Genesis 1-11 represents Heaven’s approved hermeneutical method of understanding these pivotal and foundational chapters of Genesis. This shows the hermeneutical significance of the two motions voted in the 59th General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which can set a pattern for the exposition of Creation in our churches, educational institutions, and in our personal lives. Such action provides comforting divine guidance in our secular, evolutionary age.

The 59th General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is signally important. Julian Gudmundsson, a delegate from Denmark, after listening to Wilson’s Sabbath sermon, deftly assesses the events of the week and the sermon: “This *is* a turning point in Adventist history.”⁶

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mark A. Kellner, “Session Delegates Strengthen Adventist Church’s Creation Focus,” Adventist News Network, June 30, 2010. Hereafter, and unless otherwise specified, many of the facts and all of the names and quotations for this article are drawn from the Kellner article. This is an official report.

2. *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 91.

3. Mark A. Kellner, “Adventist Church Executives Move Statements, Manual Revisions,” Adventist News Network, June 23, 2010.

4. Keith Lockhart, "Under Wilson, Church Begins the Process to Rewrite Creation Belief," *Spectrum* Blog (June 30, 2010). This column has also been informed by Lockhart's useful analysis. This blog is sponsored by the Association of Adventist Forums, not an official church source.

5. The names of Tutsch and Stele are provided in *ibid*.

6. Julian Gudmundsson, in a response to "ANN: Wilson Calls Adventists to Go Forward," at <http://eEducateTruth.com> (July 5, 2010). This site was established by a lay person and is not an official church site.