

# Adventist Evolution

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Friday, June 12, 2009

A Reply to David Asscherick, First Draft

(Please comment, correct, challenge.)

In a letter dated April 30, 2009, David Asscherick pleads with the presidents of the General Conference, the North American Division and the Pacific Union to “do something” in response to the alleged teaching of evolution at La Sierra University. Asscherick does not state precisely what the presidents should do, but his intent is clear: he wants the church leaders to bring about a change in the content of the biology instruction at LSU or to disfellowship the institution.

I strongly disagree with the core ideas in this letter.

First: Asscherick attacks the wrong target. He speaks repeatedly of evolution or naturalistic evolution, assuming evolution is inimical with Adventist mission and message. However, the Adventist Church has **always** taught evolution—of the most rapid and drastic form. Classic Adventist creationism teaches that God created a deathless biosphere that carried within it the inherent capacity to speedily evolve into a post-lapsarian biology characterized by life and death. Following Ellen White, Adventists have generally taught this transformation was “natural,” that is the outworking of great law of cause and effect, rather than “supernatural,” an arbitrarily-imposed punishment.

Other examples of the Adventist embrace of evolution include the “ecological zonation” theory that was presented in Adventist earth science textbooks as an explanation of the geological column and the notion that either the devil or humans created monstrous life forms in the antediluvian world. Creating dinosaurs through “amalgamation” is evolution—non-supernatural biological change. Evolution—biological change over time—is not the great enemy of traditional Adventism as Asscherick has presented it. Instead, the enemy is geochronology, the science of dating rocks and fossils. The great dilemma for Adventists is the putative age of fossil-bearing layers.

We observe the remains of all sorts of extinct life forms buried in the earth and the question arises, how long ago did these things live? Conventional geochronology assigns ages of hundreds of millions and even billions of years to the oldest fossils. It is this time scale that threatens Asscherick. It is geochronology, not evolution that undermines our historic apologetic in defense of the seventh-day Sabbath. But Asscherick never mentions the dating of fossils or the age of the earth.

There is a solid basis for Sabbath keeping that does not depend on a literalistic reading of Genesis One.

Second: Asscherick lumps together theistic and naturalistic evolution. This might be excusable if he were addressing methods and outcomes of science, however, he acknowledges he is not a scientist. His claimed expertise is in “the apologetic, philosophical, and theological issues surrounding the theories of naturalistic evolution.” In the context of theology and philosophy, the difference between naturalistic and theistic worldviews are, to put it mildly, crucial. In a theological context, casually implying that theistic and naturalistic evolution are equivalent is either disingenuous or naïve.

Third. Asscherick is worried the confident faith of students will be unsettled by teachers who present conventional evolutionary views “as fact or as the preferred and normative worldview.” I respect Asscherick’s concern for the spiritual stability of youth who come to college with a fundamentalist world view and then discover that most scientists inside the church as well as outside believe life is vastly older than 6000 years. It is true that most students in Adventist colleges believe life is young. That is hardly remarkable; most of the American public believes the same. However, the church is comprised of “the whole people of God.” The whole people of God includes students and professionals in the sciences. They are a small minority in the church, but they are every bit as much members of the family as evangelists and revivalists. As a pastor, I frequently encounter science students and professional scientists who have been wounded by the pontifications of people like Asscherick who declare: You cannot be a real Adventist unless you are dismissive of the overwhelming physical evidence regarding geochronology.

Asscherick writes: “Governing and administrative structures are not the church. The people are the church.” On this point he and I completely agree. But he wants the church presidents to use the influence given them by the church structure to rid the community of scientists who are persuaded by the vast corpus of evidence supporting a long history of life on earth. The fundamentalist majority is not more worthy of inclusion in the church than intellectuals and scientists. We all need each other. I gladly honor the vitality and zeal of fundamentalists like Asscherick and his young disciples. It brings life and energy to the church. However, if people of this mindset control the church, their zeal is likely to create a harsh, judgmental community that relentlessly pursues an unattainable standard of uniformity of thought and belief.

Asscherick writes, “. . . few doctrines are at greater philosophical odds with Seventh-day Adventism than naturalistic evolution, the arguments

of well-meaning theistic evolutionists notwithstanding. Our Magna Carta is Revelation 14:6-12. If naturalistic evolution is true, Creation is cremated, the Sabbath is sabotaged, and our very name is neutered. What becomes of Scripture? And of our unique eschatology?"

This is a strong argument emotionally. But it is terribly weak in the context of historic Adventist commitment to truth. It suggests that our primary concern ought to be the preservation of our historic creed rather than a commit to a continual pursuit of truth wherever that pursuit takes us. Ellen White consistently used "conservative" in a pejorative sense and told us there would be things we need to unlearn as we follow the forward advance of truth.

Instead of trying to teach science teachers what to teach, Asscherick and his friends would do better to help students learn how to integrate the best of science with the mission of Jesus which is above all representing his Father in giving hope, health and healing.

Asscherick sees the science faculty at LSU as dangerous subversives. I view his stance as a dangerous obstacle to the ongoing search for truth that should lie near the heart of our spiritual life.

Posted by John McLarty at [5:07 PM](#)

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