
FIRST PERSON

God and Geology in Graduate School

M. Elaine Kennedy

God is love. He is the Creator. Sin is responsible for death. Those are the basic concepts that were ingrained in me growing up in a conservative Southern Baptist family. As a young girl, I believed all three, no questions asked, but in high school, things changed. My church hired a new, "progressive" pastor, and I began taking more and more science classes. By my freshman year in college, I was convinced God had molded and developed life through evolution. Physical death was not the result of sin; it was just a natural part of the life cycle.

Although I wanted to believe the biblical account of Creation, my major was geology, and evidence certainly seemed to support an evolutionary origin for life. I was taught that organisms lived and died 600 million years before the first humans appeared. How then could the sin of humanity be responsible for those deaths?, I wondered. Studying the fossil graveyards, with their record of mass mortalities preserved in rock, made me heartsick. How could a loving Creator God allow His work to be destroyed in such a way?

I dropped out of school during my junior year in college and married Dee, who was an Air Force pilot. It was the right decision at the time. Both of us became involved in a nondenominational Bible study group and read Hal Lindsay's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Our interest in end-time events grew rapidly. Dee and I decided that Lindsay's interpretation was probably right, but that he didn't always support his

conclusions with Bible texts. We were convinced that Jesus was coming soon and believed that more was known about this momentous event than what was presented in the book. As we came to that conclusion, a billboard on the way to the air force base began advertising a prophecy crusade.

We went to Ken Cox's series of public lectures every night and were amazed at how well the Bible explained itself. Each evening we would return home with an outline of the meeting to compare it to Lindsay's book. The next night, we would corner the Seventh-day Adventist evangelist with "Hal Lindsay says . . ." He would counter saying, "Let's see what the Bible has to say about that." As good Southern Baptists, we liked his reply, since for us the Scriptures are the foundation for all truth. Gradually, the Bible as a whole began to make sense to us.

One night, the talk was titled "Adam's Mother's Birthday." "I don't have to go home and study this one," I thought smugly. After Pastor Cox had finished speaking, I walked up to him and said, "You're crazy. I'm a geologist and

I'm telling you the earth is four-and-a-half billion years old and life is at least 600 million years old." He asked me to come back because he had a book he wanted me to read. I saw little point in doing so. He had absurdly used the six-day creation week to establish the truth of the Sabbath, I thought. But "greed" and curiosity won out, and I agreed to come back for the book.

I could hardly believe what I was reading as I devoured the pages of Harold Coffin's *Creation: Accident or Design?* (Review and Herald, 1969). I was more than familiar with the geology he wrote about, but his interpretations were so different, so biblical, and the time-frame was so short! The data didn't require such long periods of time at all; I saw it was a matter of interpretation of the evidence. Scripture and science were in harmony, I realized, and at last I was free from conflict.

After my youngest daughter began attending preschool, I decided to go back to college, taking one class at a time. My stance would be openly creationist, I decided. I would approach my studies as a short chronologist and Flood geologist. But explanation of my beliefs was not well received by the chairman of the geology department of the university I attended; in his eyes, I was an intellectual drug pusher. "Your completely erroneous ideas will infect the minds of our younger students," he said. "You shouldn't be allowed to spread this nonsense anywhere." Fortunately, I wasn't required to take classes from him, and my other

professors didn't seem to care about my personal convictions. I completed my undergraduate degree in geology, and the Lord allowed me to begin graduate studies.

I was fortunate to study in Loma Linda University's master's program in geology on the La Sierra campus. It was a joy to discuss issues of creation and evolution openly with fellow Christians. I longed to continue my studies in that atmosphere, but since no doctoral program was offered, I enrolled in a private university.

University policy stated that personal religious beliefs would not affect the degree program. But graduate degrees are rather political, and it is relatively easy to eliminate "problematic" students. So I prayed about it. I told God I was not ashamed of Him or of the truths I had come to know; I placed my degree in His hands, promising to openly share my faith. People would know I was a conservative Seventh-day Adventist and if anyone asked me directly, I would explain my personal beliefs with regard to origins.

One morning at school, another student told me she had been taking her children to Sunday school. "What do you tell your kids about Adam and Eve?" she asked. "What do you mean?" I replied. "I thought they were real." The conversation ended there. I thought she might speak to one of the professors about our conversation, but apparently she never did.

For a Sabbath keeping geology student, field trips can pose a real problem. Most professors like to schedule them over the weekend. One of my professors opted for Sunday only, out of his love for collegiate football. Most classes offered the option of either Saturday or Sunday trips, but I could never take Depositional Systems because the class was in the field most weekends, and there was no way of completing the coursework independently.

I signed up for Tectonics only to learn that the course required a weekend trip. When I approached my tectonics professor, he appreciated my taking the time to explain my religious reasons regarding field work on Saturday. He said he'd keep me in mind in developing the itinerary for the trip, and he did. Two hours before sunset, we finished our last site for the day. The professor told me the group would be in Death Valley for the rest of the weekend, and that they would meet me at the visitor's center on Sunday morning, 8:00 a.m. sharp. He amazed me by adding that it would take me about an hour to get back into town, giving me just enough time to prepare for vespers. He was right.

As I came out of the lab one afternoon, I met a fellow student. We struck up a conversation, and he soon learned I was a Seventh-day Adventist. He told me his mother had been raised an Adventist, but that he hadn't. Then he asked me point blank what I believed about origins. True to my promise, I told him. He was surprised, but as I explained that it was the theology and not the geology that caused my "problem," I found he understood my view better than anyone else I've encountered. As an isotope geologist, he dated rocks himself using radiometric dating and was more aware than I of the many factors that come into play in interpreting data from the rock record. When I explained the cause of death and God's loving nature, he saw that

my beliefs made sense. He couldn't understand how my views could explain the mass mortalities, however, so I told him about the Noachian flood and God's efforts to save His creation even in the midst of worldwide destruction. We spoke again about these issues, but his doctoral degree and future employment hinged on his faith in the interpretations of radiometric dating.

My most frightening experience in school occurred during a conference toward the end of my doctoral program. A professor from another university asked about my plans after graduation. I told him about the Geoscience Research Institute. In the course of the conversation, he learned about my faith and beliefs. He became very agitated. The next day, my major professor asked me point blank, "Elaine, when you teach, do you teach evolution?" "Sure," I said. My professor didn't want to know what I believed, I realized; he only wanted to assure himself that I was at least giving evolution equal time in the classroom.

Being an Adventist in a non-Adventist school places a student in a very sensitive position. Most of the individuals in academia are not a reliable source of spiritual guidance, I found. While generally tolerant of divergent views, the people I dealt with during my doctoral studies seldom understood my motives and seemed baffled by my commitment to certain principles. Sometimes, I felt my greatest witness was just being a friend. Other times, as I struggled with my own beliefs, I felt I had no witness to offer. But the knowledge that my Creator God cares for me kept me going.

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