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My Christian Journey and Years at North Carolina State University as a Young Earth Creationist

By C. Gerald Van Dyke, PhD

Editor's Note: Dr. Van Dyke is Professor Emeritus of Botany at North Carolina State University, having taught there 38 years. He is a cofounder of TASC and has served in several positions, including chairman. In this article, Dr. Van Dyke relates how his academic and spiritual histories reflect God's faithfulness. As the scripture teaches: "for them that honor me I will honor" (1 Sam 2:30).

I'm originally from Illinois, and that has something to do with why I'm a bit "corny." Of course this is the time of year when there are a lot of "acornies" around on the ground so I'm in good company. Growing up I was very interested in sports. I was involved with a Presbyterian church and was active in the youth program both locally and statewide and also in some National conferences. Looking back I see how shallow much of this was, and I did not have a good grasp on the idea of salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. From an early time in my life, I do remember having spiritual highs, and I had a strong feeling of God's touch on my life. My frequently quoted Bible verse was Romans 8:28 "All things work together for good to those who are the called of God." I truly believed this but simply felt God was just out there somewhere, but not a close companion.

I do not recall the church I attended speaking about being "born again" as Jesus has said we must be to have eternal life with Him. My father was an Elder in the church; we didn't talk about spiritual things at home. My father read the Bible, but I was never encouraged to do likewise. I sang hymns in the children's choir. I'm amazed now when I hear some of those hymns such as "This is my Father's World." Many of these hymns have rich theology, but if one does not know God personally as I didn't, they may have little effect on the heart. Most of my life I was considered "good," didn't give my parents any trouble, didn't smoke or drink, and was generally well-liked by most people because I showed compassion for others. Not to say I didn't have various struggles like most do growing up. I remember being particularly touched by missionaries who spoke in our church or at conferences and felt maybe that was a calling on my life or even other ministry. The small Illinois town I grew up in did not have minority people groups, but my parents often expressed prejudice toward others. That never seemed right to me. Dishonesty and lack of concern for others always bothered me.

In college I continued to be confronted with inequalities and levels of disrespect for humankind in general. In retrospect (or upon reflection) I wonder if there had been organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU) or InterVarsity, etc., would I have accepted Christ sooner. I only vaguely remember hearing things concerning possible conflicts between the Bible and science being mentioned. I do remember very distinctly an encounter with a theologian who indicated that the Bible, in most of the first eleven chapters, was figurative and not to be taken literally because it did not agree with science. I remember him saying something to the effect that since light from stars is many light years away, this could not align with scriptures. I remember responding to him that if God made light could He not have caused the light to come instantly to the earth. He did not respond and acted as though it was not worth further discussion. In other words it seemed his mind was made up. It was as if he was saying "don't confuse me with what I don't want to believe." Such thinking was troubling to me because I thought if Genesis chapters 1-11 are not relevant, then how can I trust the rest of the scriptures. That was a concern for me for many years.

My first college experience was one of the most traumatic events in my life. My father had suggested that I should consider a career in engineering. I joke today that neither my father nor I knew how to spell engineering. My father died of bone cancer my senior year in high school. I proceeded to enter the University of Illinois (U of I) with a major in Ceramic Engineering. None of my aptitude tests indicated I had any business being in engineering, but I forged ahead anyway. The U of I at that time had nearly 50,000 students; my hometown had a population of about 10,000. I was also not prepared to compete with students from larger schools who had had calculus and engineering drawing—courses that could have helped me get a good start in engineering. I did not make a certain number of hours of "C" grades or higher and I had to leave the University. In other words, I flunked the first semester at the U of I. Of course this was an embarrassment and gave me a real feeling of defeat. I don't believe things happen that aren't intended by God to be for a purpose; so there was a teacher's college, recently upgraded to a university, Eastern Illinois University (EIU), that was on a quarter system rather than semester, and the winter quarter would start early the next year. I enrolled at EIU and was determined that even though my high school principal had said I would

never make it in college, I could succeed. In my first semester at EIU I made decent grades, studying intensely to prove I could make it in college. The next quarter I took a course in botany (plant sciences), and I was totally fascinated with such simple things as how the leaves were attached either opposite or alternating on the branches of the limbs and other aspects of plants and how they function. Then I had the opportunity to use a microscope, and that really excited me. Now I felt I was on my way to making great discoveries in science, such as had been done by Pasteur and others. I was totally consumed with finding out everything I could about plants and other aspects of science. My bachelor's degree was in botany with emphasis in education. The EIU Botany Department was small, so I got extra attention from the professors. That first botany course was taught by a man with a little mustache and twinkle in his eye that sparked something in me—something I had not experienced before. I felt like the world was mine to have. Even as I write this, it gets me excited once again at how much my life was transformed in just one year. As I took more biological science courses, and in particular the study of fungi, I couldn't wait for each new semester to start more studies. Needless to say, I was not the normal student at EIU. Of course, I have since learned that as someone has said normal is "only a setting on your dryer." Interestingly, I don't remember much being said about evolution. However, I'm sure I just assumed evolution was the way God had performed His "magic" when he created all things. Of course, I fell into the same trap many do when they put their trust in science. I was at that time too busy learning all I could, no time to worry about any possible conflict between science and religion. I was still that highly moral young man, no drinking or smoking and little time for young women, but, of course, I *did* notice them. There wasn't much time for anything but learning. I wasn't a prude, just lost in my own world. I was involved in a social fraternity and we did socials, musicals, and sports activities, so I wasn't studying all the time. I think I always thought about the wonders of God's creation and that His creation could not have happened by accident, but like so many, I still thought science had discovered a lot of facts proving things that didn't seem at all logical to me. I did practice-teaching as part of the education component of my degree. That experience catapulted me towards a graduate degree with the hope of teaching at the college or university level. My inspiring teacher under whom I took that first botany class told me to finish my graduate studies and he would make a faculty position for me at EIU. That was encouraging to me and I already admired him greatly; that reinforced that feeling and gave me confidence I could get a higher degree.

With my primary interests in plant science and mycology (study of fungi), a logical expression of that was in the field of plant pathology (diseases of plants). I was offered a graduate assistantship and started graduate school at the University of Illinois (U of I). I loved telling this story to my students I taught at North Carolina State University (NCSU), how I flunked out of the U of I and came back to

get a PhD there. I told them I was the only student to ever do that. I'm sure that wasn't true, but it makes a good story, and it was intended to encourage any students who may have lost confidence and needed encouragement. If I could do that, they could do things they aspired to as well.

Still through graduate school I had little exposure to spiritual things, and in my field of study, evolution was not a particularly relevant topic. I mostly continued to believe that somehow God had used evolution to create these marvelous biological forms. It is interesting to me now to think about how irrelevant evolution is to anything of importance as far as new discoveries or understanding of the real world are concerned. In fact, we know that if one makes the correct assumptions about the created world, it is much easier to understand why things work the way they do; and, furthermore, it fits logically with cause-and-effect principles. There is no need to fabricate the ideas that plants, animals, or fungi changed from different forms into various other forms. All the forms are right there in plain sight, so they should be studied for their uniqueness and exclude ridiculous notions about their so-called ancestral forms. This folly adds nothing to our understanding of them but only distracts us from getting on with relevant science. I finished the PhD degree in Plant Pathology at the U of I in 1968.

When I arrived at NCSU in 1968, I was initially in a post-graduate appointment doing research involving fungi. In 1969 I began a tenured position of teaching and research, and my first assignments were to co-teach an introductory biology class. I did the plant science portion, and others taught the animal sections. I was also continuing my microscopic studies of plant-fungal interactions. In that biology class, made up mostly of freshmen students and numbering about 500 students per semester, I taught the standard evolutionary paradigm as presented in textbooks. I didn't question any of it. In the early 1970s, I was asked if I wanted to attend a Bible study that used a booklet called *The Uniqueness of Jesus*, written by Dr. Bill Bright, who started the Campus Crusade for Christ organization. For the first time, I realized that I was not a Christian; I didn't really know Jesus personally. I remember feeling these people actually believed the Bible was truth. Shortly after that, I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus as Lord and savior of my life. I then received material called "Acts and Facts" from the Institute for Creation Research (ICR). I began reading about creation science and then realized I had to confront what science was saying and what the Bible said. I quickly realized as my hunger for God's Word grew that there was inconsistency between what scientists were proclaiming and what the Bible proclaimed. That was when I knew if I really believed the Bible to be inerrant, which I now was coming to believe, I needed to study to know the truth. I was at the same time reading Josh McDowell's book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. My eyes were opened to see how deceptive the educational system is in its teaching that scripture is not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately I was seeing that even theologians were buying into evolutionary thinking, proposing ideas like the Gap theory and the

Day-Age theory. Of course, they were compromising in the worst way by sacrificing Biblical authority and truth. At about this same time I heard a radio program on the local Christian radio station, WPJL 1240 AM, called "Science, Scripture, and Salvation" produced by ICR, and I discovered it was sponsored by Dr. Donald Hamann, a Professor of Food Science at NCSU. I was excited to meet Don, and we organized a local creation organization which became known as the Triangle Association for the Science of Creation (TASC). Don was on the board of directors for ICR, which was begun by Dr. Henry Morris, the pioneer of the modern creation movement. TASC is the organization responsible for the publication you are now reading. TASC has grown over the years and has an active, productive board of directors involved in promoting creation science whenever and wherever it can. It just so happened that one of the students in that first biology class, where I was teaching evolution, has since also become a TASC board member.

Now my NCSU story begins. I knew I had to arm myself with all the ammunition I could muster to be able to "defend the hope that was in me"—hope that God is truthful and that He does not lie. Immediately I encountered compromise by one of my fellow faculty members who had been instrumental in leading me to Christ. He believed in evolution and was trying to compromise his faith by "going along" with the current paradigm. I could see this was not going to be an easy journey and I had better be prepared for eventual confrontations, however they might manifest themselves. I will tell you that Satan was definitely at work and was determined to find my Achilles' heal and try to make life miserable for me at NCSU. Probably the first major event that caused me to "come out" as a young earth creationist was when I was teaching our introductory botany course. There were recorded lectures used by students in our laboratories where they listened to the tapes and then did an experiment to demonstrate whatever concept was being presented. This was a new idea called the "audiotutorial" teaching method. I was more or less constrained in how I could present certain materials; and since this was a departmental course, I had to do the evolution section. I decided I would simply say on the tape that not all scientists believed the evolutionary model of plant development. This sent "shockwaves" through the Botany Department. Soon thereafter I was called to the office of one of the departmental professors. He was holding the tape I had made and asking me about what I had said on the tape. I don't remember all that we discussed, but he made it clear to me that I apparently didn't understand how science works, that since most scientists believe in the evolutionary model, it therefore followed that it must be true, or something to that effect. The more I thought about what he had said, the more I realized that what he had said was one of the most unscientific statements I had ever heard. He was in effect saying that how we decide things in science is not by the scientific method of observation but by consensus. Then I knew the battle had begun. If evolution is so entrenched in the scientific community that it is not to be questioned, then

what is science? In other words, we must use the scientific method in all areas of science, but never in the area of evolution. This, of course, undermines what science is supposed to be about. This kind of thinking is rampant in the scientific community even today. In fact, it is probably even more widespread now because, as Richard Lewontin said regarding science, "We cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." I was unaware that this had rippling effects all the way up to the major administrative levels of NCSU. I was labeled now as not being a "true" scientist because I didn't fit the model of one who accepts evolution as fact. I was truly amazed to see how I was treated as an outcast both because of my Christian faith and creation beliefs. A few colleagues who presumably were Christians, or at least church-goers, even treated me both rudely and unprofessionally. Several of the department heads I had were in some ways hostile with me because of my position. I still don't understand how that made me less of a person, but then Jesus encountered similar abuse, so why should I expect any less. One department head told me that Moses could not have written Genesis because they didn't have writing when Moses was in Egypt. I didn't know so-called intelligent people could be so misinformed. I gave him a copy of Josh McDowell's book *More than a Carpenter*. That department head kept me from receiving salary raises; I initially was unaware of this. He also attempted to prevent my promotion to full professor. My story doesn't end there. Actually I thought I would either get fired or be so frustrated with my salary I would quit. Fortunately, God had other plans for me. My next department head asked me if I would take charge of our introductory botany course. My dream from undergraduate days had been to have the opportunity to teach a large class of students where I could hone my teaching skills and impact the lives of many students; that is exactly what happened. On the first day of class, I took pictures of each student, about 225 students, placed these on a seating chart, and learned all their names, telling them that I believe each of them was a "special creation of God." Also on the first day of class, I told my students I had various passions in life, one of which was a passion for Jesus. I didn't elaborate but told students if they wanted to discuss that with me to come by my office and we would talk.

I was also teaching coordinator for our department and advised our botany majors. I soon was selected as the outstanding student advisor for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Next I was chosen as an outstanding teacher and inducted into the Academy of Outstanding Teachers. Soon after, I became a Fellow of the National Association of Teachers of Agriculture. I also was named Alumni Distinguished Professor of Botany, an honor that alumni participated in. Meanwhile, I was promoted to full professor. I was also given a salary raise so large it had to be approved by the North Carolina Board of Governors, the governing board of the University of North Carolina universities. I was beginning to catch up salary-wise for what the devil had tried to steal from me. For most of my career, most of my colleagues respected me even if they didn't

agree with me on my faith or my stand against evolution. One of my colleagues asked me one day what it was that gave me strength, so I told him. He proclaimed Christ and even joined TASC at one time but then later seemed to recant everything he had professed. I believe someone frightened him, and he was afraid he might lose his position at NSCU. This is sad but is described in the Bible as what will happen with some who don't get rooted in Christ Jesus. Near the end of my career at NSCU, I was awarded the highest teaching award the University of North Carolina system gives: The Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. At two different ceremonies related to that award, I had the honor of giving God the glory for those achievements that He enabled me to attain. To God be the glory in all things. During my years at NCSU, I had a small plaque on my office desk with the scripture I Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all things for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus." I can tell you exactly where I was one day while walking on the street on my way to NCSU campus when it was as if the Lord spoke to me and said, "Remember what they did to my son." I am

forever grateful for having had the experiences I had at NCSU because they truly caused me to trust Him every day, and they also helped me experience His faithfulness towards me.

Now, in my time after NSCU, I have many opportunities to share the love of Jesus and proclaim the truths of creation science, especially through TASC. ❧

COMING EVENTS

Thursday, December 10, 7:00 pm, Providence Baptist Church, 6339 Glenwood Ave., Raleigh, Room 240

We will continue with the video series from Creation Ministries International *Evolution's Achilles' Heels* taking a look at the fossil record. If the biological diversity of life today is the result of nearly 4 billion years of descent with modification through natural selection, the fossil record should provide the ultimate evidence for it. It turns out that one can hardly find a more factual example for the weaknesses of such a naturalistic view, making the fossil record a true Achilles' heel of evolution. Darwin knew it, and modern paleontologists know it.