

EDITORIAL

ZEAL AND HOAXES

Several years ago a story about a missing day was publicized by a number of newspapers and other public media. This story purported that a group of scientists at the Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland, were studying the varying positions of the planets of our solar system as they relate to time. They were unable to find exact agreement between ancient historical data and expected dates. As a result of this, the computer that was processing the data quit. When corrections were made for Joshua's long day as described in the Bible (Joshua 10:13), near-perfect agreement was obtained. When a second correction was made for the moving back of the sun for King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:9-11), perfect agreement was the result. Confidence in the accuracy of the Bible was thus enhanced.

Investigation of this account by several individuals has proved disappointing. The individual reporting the incident could not remember where the data were obtained from originally, and no one at the Goddard Space Flight Center seems to have been involved in this somewhat dramatic computational incident. It does not appear that this event ever took place. Some have tried to exonerate the incident by emphasizing the good purposes and intentions involved. Others have pointed out that the event should not be taken so seriously, since a number of individuals who believed in the accuracy of the Bible never did accept the story, but the incident still remains as an embarrassment to defenders of the Bible.

During the second decade of this century Charles Dawson and Sir Arthur Smith Woodward announced the discovery of the now-famous Piltdown human remains in Sussex county in southern England. The Piltdown skull remained in more or less good standing for decades as one of the evolutionary intermediates between man and lower forms. The brain case was remarkably human while the jaw was more ape-like, corresponding to the then-prevailing idea that the brain led the way in human evolutionary development. Some researchers also reported finding primitive features related to the more modern human cranium. About 30 years later three renowned anthropologists announced that the Piltdown skull was a hoax. The jaw had been stained and the teeth had been filed to make them match the more modern cranium. Relative dating by the fluorine technique showed the jaw to be younger than the cranium.

Some have tried to exonerate this incident by pointing out that there always were some who questioned the validity of the Piltdown findings. However, at least for a while, the skull won a respected position on man's

proposed evolutionary tree, and the incident remains as an embarrassment to the defenders of evolution.

One is loath to implicate specific motives in both of the episodes reported above, but that they occurred and that for a time each argument was promoted as valid by supporters of creation or evolution should have an important lesson for us. Both incidents are embarrassing. They suggest that unreasonable zeal for what one believes to be true may destroy confidence in the very truth being promoted. This should be avoided. Truth does not need the support of error.

When something is perceived to be true, it should be communicated, but one should not resort to supporting that conclusion with false or carelessly gleaned information. Such a procedure is crippling to the truth-gathering process. To those who do not recognize the erroneous information, error becomes a part of their creed; to those who do recognize it, "truth" becomes tainted, or rejected along with falsehood. In either case pollution is encountered, and such should be studiously avoided.

The two incidents reported above are rather clear cases of corruption of the truth-gathering process. Of greater concern are those situations where the cases are not so clear and more careful scrutiny is necessary to detect error. Well-meaning individuals may betray a lack of thoroughness. Implications and conclusions gleaned from carelessly obtained data may be no better or may be even worse than the poor data themselves. The inferential perspectives colored by these partially erroneous conclusions can have very broad effects. Of similar importance is the problem of selection of data where accurate data on only one side of a question are presented while opposing data are ignored. This also gives a false view and stifles truth. The significance of this issue is seldom appreciated as it should be.

Let us have more zeal for accuracy.

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