

CHAPTER 10

EARLY CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO GEOLOGIC DISCOVERIES

What has been, and what should be the Christian's response to the scientific evidence for a long earth history? The past two centuries have been characterized by a wide variety of responses among Christian groups, but for the most part there has been an increasing trend toward acceptance of the scientific evidences. Yet islands of traditionalists in Christian circles of the western world have produced some interesting and often bitter conflicts. In this and the following chapter our purpose is to deal with the progress and failures, together with the strengths and weaknesses of the Christian response during the past two hundred years.

One of the most basic causes of conflict concerning the evidences for a long history of the earth has been a lack of knowledge both of the methods and of the results of scientific research. The clergy, as well as most of the lay members of the Christian community have nearly always had very little training or experience in science. Thus the Christian community usually has had no way to properly evaluate scientific data. Also, it usually has lacked effective means of protecting itself from theological antagonists who promote the view that the Bible and the discoveries of science can not be reconciled. As a result, pockets of heated resistance against scientific research have arisen among evangelicals. Sometimes this resistance centers on a rejection of medical science, with exclusive emphases on faith and "natural foods." At other times the emphasis is on a condemnation of geologic research, or on condemning practically all science as being evolutionary and atheistic.

All too often theological students have taken only the bare, required minimum of science during their years of training, and have--along with most of their parishioners--considered science to be largely unrelated to the facts of history and to the great principles of human thought. This seems to be the case particularly among the more conservative evangelicals. At least among the latter, there has been a frequent failure to recognize the great principle that science can and should be used as a legitimate means of discovering many of the details of God's creative work, which could not be given in the brief Biblical account.

Similarly, another side of the problem is that most students in training for scientific careers have avoided courses in theology and religion. These students seem to consider theology and religion to be far removed from the principles of science, and thus irrelevant for the scientist. So, here again there has been little concern or expectation for reconciling theological truth with the discoveries of science. Most scientists, like many theologians, have been willing to allow the two disciplines to exist side by side in their minds as unreconciled bodies of knowledge.