Scientists Who Believe: An Interview with Dr. John Baumgardner

Author: John Baumgardner
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Last year, U.S. News & World Report (June 16, 1997) devoted a respectful four-page article to the work of Dr John Baumgardner, calling him "the world's pre-eminent expert in the design of computer models for geophysical convection." Dr. Baumgardner earned degrees from Texas Tech University (B.S., electrical engineering), and Princeton University (M.S., electrical engineering), and earned a Ph.D. in geophysics and space physics from UCLA. Since 1984 he has been employed as a technical staff member at Los Alamos (New Mexico) National Laboratory.

The views expressed in the following interview do not necessarily represent the views of Los Alamos National Laboratory or the United States government.

Why did you choose a career in science?

Dr. Baumgardner: As far back as I can recall I seemed to have had an aptitude in scientific things. When I was about six years old, before I started school, friends of my parents and relatives would bring broken appliances for me to work on and fix. I had my own little workbench in my dad's shop where I would work on those electrical appliances. My sense is that I was gifted from birth with a natural ability. Science was an area of strength in school, so it wasn't unnatural for me to select a science major in college.
What are your goals as a scientist?

Dr. Baumgardner: I would say my primary goal in my scientific career is a defense of God's Word, plain and simple. In our day it's like the Philistines in the days of Saul and David. When David came to the battle to bring some supplies to his brothers, he heard Goliath taunting the armies of Israel. And David said, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26). I believe the church is like the Israelite army, cowering in the face of Goliath, when there ought to be people stepping forth to slay Goliath. God's Word is being mocked and ridiculed today throughout the academic world, and I say it's time for Christians to stand up and take on these challenges.

Soon after I became a Christian, when I was 26 years old, I started to see what was going on. I guess God put it in my heart to try to do something about this situation.

John, how are you incorporating the Word of God into your daily work as a geophysicist?

Dr. Baumgardner: I'm trying to understand what happened to the Earth in Noah's flood and put together a solid scientific case that supports the biblical account of a world-destroying catastrophic flood.

Back in 1978 I felt strongly led to go back to graduate school and get professional credentials to work on the problem of what happened to the Earth in the flood. As part of my Ph.D. research, I developed a three-dimensional model for the Earth's interior called Terra. Today it is recognized as the most capable code computer model of its type in the world. Currently NASA is funding this effort as one of their nine grand challenge projects in high performance computing for the next three years. It's recognized as a unique tool for understanding the dynamics of the mantle of the Earth.

What is NASA's interest in this project? Your goal sounds like it's different from theirs.

Dr. Baumgardner: Well, they see it as an important means for solving as yet unanswered questions about the Earth. They have a number of satellite observation programs for monitoring the Earth and measuring tectonic motions of the Earth's surface. They see my computer model as complementing some of these observational programs. They see it as cutting-edge science. And the model can be applied to the other terrestrial planets of the solar system - Venus, Mars, and Mercury in particular.

How do your Christian beliefs and values affect your work? How should a Christian view science?

Dr. Baumgardner: I believe science as we know it is a product of the Christian worldview. It was only in the Christian world that science developed and I believe could have developed. For example, in the Buddhist or Hindu worldview this physical realm is
more or less regarded as an illusion and not representing ultimate reality. Of course, Christians don’t regard this world as eternal, but nevertheless it’s real. Science has flowed from a Christian understanding of reality, a Christian understanding of God, and a Christian understanding of the natural world. In general I believe that science is legitimate, that it does reveal the glory of God, that it does confirm what the Scriptures say is valid and true.

John, how has your work in geophysics confirmed your faith?

Dr. Baumgardner: I believe that there is strong evidence in favor of the proposition that the Earth has suffered a major cataclysm in the past that is responsible for most of the fossil-bearing portions of the sedimentary record.

The great flood of Noah’s day?

Dr. Baumgardner: Yes. There's an abrupt beginning to the portion of the geological record that contains fossils. There's a worldwide discontinuity in the record, above which we find fossils, below which we do not. Above that boundary there is abundant evidence that the sedimentary layers were deposited rapidly by processes that were global in lateral extent-a regime dramatically different from anything we can observe on the Earth today. The majority of the sedimentary record since that point is the product of global catastrophism.

My work in particular has focused on what conceivable mechanism could result in such an event. I believe I have identified it or at least a likely candidate for a mechanism.

And what is that?

Dr. Baumgardner: The name that other people have applied to this process is thermal runaway. Tectonic plates of the Earth's surface can slide down into the hot mantle that comprises about the outer 2,000 miles of the Earth. What I'm finding is that this runaway process involving the tectonic plates can indeed occur and cause a massive catastrophe at the Earth's surface.

One exciting discovery from the Magellan mission to Venus in the early 1990s was that Venus had been entirely resurfaced in the relatively recent past. The high resolution images showed the surface of Venus had been catastrophically flooded with lava, presumably as a result of some process interior to the planet. All the ancient craters had been obliterated by this lava. The images show hardly any change of a geological nature has occurred on Venus since this catastrophe.

So within our own solar system we now have at least one indisputable example of global tectonic catastrophe. This was exciting to me because for years I had been investigating a similar possibility for the Earth. I firmly believe the idea of a global tectonic catastrophe on the Earth is not a far-fetched idea, but close to being established scientific fact.
And, of course, this supports what the Scripture has said all along about the past history of the Earth.

**How have your colleagues responded when they discover you believe in God and the Bible?**

**Dr. Baumgardner:** On the whole my colleagues respect my Christian faith. Many don't agree, necessarily, but they generally convey respect. Others are mostly quiet and choose not to engage me. It's rare that one of my colleagues will directly challenge me on my beliefs or my scientific conclusions.

**Have you found that your work as a credible scientist actually gives you open doors to share the gospel with others?**

**Dr. Baumgardner:** Yes, it gives me a number of opportunities to share with people. In several cases people have come to faith in Christ as a result of these interactions. I'm working with a scientist from mainland China right now. I've been studying the Bible on a weekly basis with him and he's very close, I believe, to receiving Christ.

Actually, I don't see any great difference between scientists and other people. They have families, all kinds of personal needs, and trials in their lives. There's a group of scientists here at Los Alamos, mostly Christians, who meet every Friday. We call it Megaviews Forum. We study books that are relevant to some world-view topic. Currently we're going through a book that reveals spectacular and sweeping correlations between Egyptian history and the biblical record.

**How do you deal with the creation/evolution controversy?**

**Dr. Baumgardner:** If ever there was in the history of mankind clear evidence for creation, evidence for a Super-Intelligence behind what we see today, it's the genetic code. Incredibly complex information structures, coded in DNA, form the genetic blueprints for every living organism. Evolutionists have absolutely no clue as to how such structures could arise by natural processes, much less how the code itself could come into existence.

Actually, evolutionists do not have a viable mechanism for macroevolution at any stage, whether we're talking about the origin of a first living cell or the origin of new structures in existing organisms. Natural selection and mutation alone are pitifully inadequate to account for what we see, especially with our current understanding of molecular biology.

And in the area of Earth science, uniformitarianism—the idea that the present is the key to the past, that the present can explain the past—is essentially obsolete. It won't be long, in my opinion, before that idea completely collapses.

**Because there's so much evidence for catastrophism?**
Dr. Baumgardner: That's right. The evidence for catastrophism supports an entirely different understanding of the fossil record—that it's a product of a single catastrophe rather than hundreds of millions of years of gradual change.

Would you encourage Christian young people to pursue careers in your field? What advice would you give them?

Dr. Baumgardner: I'm sympathetic to Christians who recognize that much of the information portrayed as science in the media and in public schools is hostile to Christian belief. For Christians who are not scientifically trained, it's legitimate that they are alarmed and concerned.

On the other hand, I believe that true science is consistent with Scripture and is not to be feared or shunned. My advice would be for Christians who have this kind of concern to get in contact with some of the organizations that are attempting to deal with these issues from a Christian perspective.

Would I encourage Christian young people to pursue careers in science? I believe they should first of all seek God's direction. There's a great opportunity for Christians trained at a professional level to make a significant impact for the truth in a wide spectrum of scientific fields. If Christian young people have obvious scientific abilities and sense the leading of God, I would encourage them to pursue such a career, but they need to understand that science is a realm where intense spiritual warfare occurs. To pursue a career in science today as a Christian, one must be keenly aware that a real battle for the minds and hearts of people is raging right now in almost every discipline of science.

But God is very much involved with his people today. He's raising up scientists all over the world, and I believe he's going to raise up in the next few years a mighty witness to the accuracy of his Word. I sense that I'm a part of that, and I'm especially excited about what's going to happen in the decade ahead.