

The Creation Debate: Geological Evidence for the Age of the Earth—Part 2

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Steve Austin

[Editor's note: In June 1990 The John Ankerberg Show taped a series of interviews with men from several branches of the sciences regarding the evidence for creation. For technical reasons we were unable to air these interview. Nevertheless, we have decided to release portions of these interviews in a series of articles so you could read the arguments that were being made at that time—more than a decade ago.

Considerable effort has been made to quote the gentlemen correctly. We have attempted to find the correct spelling of the scientific terms used. However, the reader should keep in mind that this is a transcription of oral interviews. Mistakes in spelling and in the technical language should be laid at the feet of the editor.]

Dr. John Ankerberg: Steve, you've been telling us about some of the things that caused you to doubt the generally accepted age for the earth. What else did you find?

Dr. Steve Austin: I've been involved with studying canyons, and I used to think that canyons provided long terms of time. At Mount St. Helens we over-flew a new canyon that formed through solid rock after May of 1980. Mudflow of some type came through and gouged out a canyon over 100 feet deep, eroded through solid rock in a matter of, we think, just a few days after the summer of 1980. Does canyon erosion require long periods of time?

But here is one of the most amazing things that was seen at Mount St. Helens. A valley was blocked by a large mass of landslide debris on May 18, 1980. That valley was unblocked by a mud flow on March 19, 1982, and it made a whole series of canyons. Mud flow, basically operating in one day, created a whole series of branching canyons. I had thought that canyons would form slowly by slow and gradual process. Here at Mount St. Helens, though, a rapid breaching event formed this amazing terrain.

As we overlooked this area, scientists looking at this new canyon that formed since 1980, over 100 feet deep, 140 deep in places, we thought immediately of the Grand Canyon. It is the Little Grand Canyon of the Toutle River in the Mount St. Helens area. It has many of the same features of the Grand Canyon: plateau land north and south, has kind of a snaky path going through there; it has those cup-shaped side canyons, and has those pointy-headed canyons, somewhat like the Grand Canyon.

Did the Colorado River cut the Grand Canyon? Over the years I used to believe that the Colorado River cut the Grand Canyon. But myself and other geologists have now pretty much junked that idea, that the Colorado River cut the Grand Canyon over tens of millions of years. I used to think that way, but more and more, I'm thinking of some type of rapid breaching event to breach this plateau land. And so I've come to doubt that the Colorado River cut the Grand Canyon. In fact, most of my colleague geologists who know the area of northern Arizona well are of the same opinion. The Colorado River didn't cut the canyon.

One of the major problems is that there's an uplifted plateau. How did the Colorado

River and the Grand Canyon become positioned through that uplifted plateau in northern Arizona? The elevated area to the north and east of the Grand Canyon, the headwaters of the Colorado River is a lower elevation than the Grand Canyon plateau area. In a way, it's a river that runs uphill.

As I think about this, it's an immense problem. How did the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon get positioned through northern Arizona? It seems unlikely that slow and gradual erosion could do it. Rivers run around hills, they don't run over hills. It's a difficult problem. So, myself and others are thinking about the Grand Canyon being formed as a rapid breaching event, somewhat like Mount St. Helens, the unplugging of that terrain, there north of Mount St. Helens, by mud flow. Maybe water overtopped a dam and we could cut the canyon rapidly.

In other words, when it comes to some of these things that used to convince me of great age in the rock strata layers and in the surface configuration of the earth, I find myself doubting the notions of great age, and especially now, thinking about modern catastrophe like at Mount St. Helens. What modern catastrophic process can do is absolutely amazing.

I'd always thought that layers formed slowly and gradually, that each individual layer was laid down maybe between a summer and winter season, and a boundary between two adjacent strata would require long periods of inactivity. Yet at Mount St. Helens, a deposit about 25 feet in thickness formed in one day, on June 12, 1980. Hurricane velocity flows coming out of the crater at Mount St. Helens deposited a layered deposit. I thought that layering would form slowly and that a catastrophe would homogenize things, and boy was I wrong! Right here at the mountain, a catastrophe moving along at 100 mph, made thinly layered strata. The closer you get the June 12, 1980 pumice-flow deposit, the more layered it becomes, in fact, thinly layered deposits. Now I thought that would require long periods.

In other words, the more I study about geology, the more my notions of slow and gradual process in geologic age come into question. I have learned that I need to have an open mind when it comes to thinking critically about the origin of geologic features. And in the process, I've grown to dispute evolutionary theory in my thinking. The earth is foundational to evolution and biological evolution. And here I am questioning some of the most unchallengeable things that are supposed to be the foundation of evolutionary theory.

Ankerberg: You're accepted as one of the authorities on Mount St. Helens, and yet some of your friends who are Christians, such as VanTil, and those up at Calvin College, have specifically criticized those who would take this position, that the geological time strata in the Grand Canyon and in other places would suggest a younger earth age. What would you say back to those fellows?

Austin: Some people take the opinion that the strata of the Grand Canyon represent long periods of geologic time as oceans came slowly over northern Arizona and deposited lime mud, clay-mud and sand. Then alternations of these oceans, the rise of the land up and down, over long periods of time created the stratification that we see. I think it can be explained as well in a rapid catastrophic water/flood model.

That immediately brings to mind something like Noah's flood. Here in the Grand Canyon we might have geologic agents on a catastrophic scale. And there are indications of that. Some evolutionists would respond to my assertion that catastrophe did play an important part in the strata, by admitting that. They would say, yes, those strata, some of them formed rather rapidly, maybe even a matter of minutes like at Mount St. Helens, but that

there are long erosions surfaces between strata, so-called unconformities. They say that's evidence of missing millions of years.

But as I look at some of those erosion surfaces, I find myself doubting that there are millions of years between rock layers. I think we need to admit that the strata generally show rapid deposition. Fossils, structural indicators in the rocks represent rapid deposition. We find ourselves, I find myself, doubting individual geologic ages. And some of those erosion surfaces look somewhat doubtful to me.

Ankerberg: Why? Why do they look doubtful? Because there are other scientists that have staked their reputation that there is erosion in the Grand Canyon in some of those strata, right at the top.

Austin: I believe there are erosion surfaces between the strata layers of the Grand Canyon. I don't think that's in dispute by geologists. The question is how much time is assigned to those erosion surfaces? Evolutionists imagine great intervals of geologic time as the ocean floor is uplifted and formed the continent and then the whole continent is beveled down and some of the rock layers in the Grand Canyon were removed to destroy the fossils. And then the whole area was dropped down below sea level millions of years later and another strata layer was deposited.

You would expect to see soil profiles, and even deep weathering, and even cave development and deep channeling along some of those surfaces. And what you see pretty much is a flat, horizontal contact. In some of the formations in the Grand Canyon, they have actually been described as conformable strata, no evidence of erosion between the strata. Yet lately some of those same strata elsewhere have been discovered to have 750 feet of other formation in between. Therefore, there must be great periods of time between what appear to be flat-lying, horizontal erosion-free strata sequences in the Grand Canyon. I marvel at the amazing amount of erosion that's occurred in the canyon. Yet it seems to have left little evidence of geological ages in between.

Ankerberg: What are the implications of what you're saying? If there's other evidence such as Mount St. Helens, in other words, if that's what took place in other areas of the earth, what implications does this have now for evolution and creation?

Austin: We live in an age of discovery, and I believe that a proper investigation of these processes which have affected the earth will lead to great vistas of understanding. We need to pursue this subject aggressively and develop this whole new field of understanding of geology. I think we need to do that rigorously.

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