

'Adventist Thought at Its Best'

✓Reviewed by James J. Londis

God Is With Us

by Jack W. Provonsha

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G*od Is With Us* by Jack Provonsha is the most sophisticated statement of Adventist theology made to the secular mind in recent years. Framed by glimpses into Provonsha's personal religious journey, the picture of a God who accompanies man is sketched in increasing detail through each chapter. Philosophical and theological (rather than confessional and exegetical) in its approach, the book is nevertheless Adventist thought at its best. Unfamiliar terminology and freshly crafted concepts may give some the illusion of heresy, but heresy is not present. On the contrary, there is a refreshing absence of the jargon found in many of our books written for the non-Adventist audience. This is a book for both the biblically oriented as well as the unchurched.

Each chapter will yield new insights to the reader unacquainted with Provonsha's thought and style. God, man, creation, the Sabbath, sin,

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atonement and the Second Advent are explicated from their theological depths. For example, rather than rehearsing the biblical "proofs" for the Sabbath, *God Is With Us* focuses on its importance as a "symbol," an "event-window" that opens out towards a God of creativity and holiness and love and freedom. In the chapter on sin, Provonsha employs psychological insights to create his "self-perpetuating wheel of sin," a concept modern in its formulation and true to Scripture.

While the book does not deal extensively with the epistemological issues in religion, Provonsha's comments are accurate as far as I am concerned. There is no talk of any "certainty" that removes the possibility of error. The inferential nature of knowledge precludes that. One only has the assurance of "faith" that engenders humility before the truth.

Provonsha's own humility before the great questions may be seen in his chapter on evil and suffering. His views, suggestive and helpful, do not attempt to account for all the difficulties in a Christian theodicy. On the contrary, Provonsha is content to rest the problem in the conviction that the God of love suffers with us and will bring an end to it all at the best possible moment.

I found "But Few Are Chosen"—the chapter on election and the church—full of insights. Prophets and prophetic movements are delineated as those who speak to God's people, who speak to those "of integrity and compassion . . .

regardless of their obvious labels.” (p. 55) Those who utter prophetic messages must rely on symbols to identify themselves (hence the garb, manners, etc., of prophets) and call attention to their work. What is not said, but may be inferred, is that this is the reason for some of the more controversial discussions about “standards” in Adventist history. While many of them may be “mores” rather than “morals,” they have served the function for our movement that camel’s hair served for John the Baptist. The only weakness in the chapter is its silence concerning our rationale for “missions” if we speak to “God’s people.”

My only real complaint about the book is Provonsha’s tendency in places to graze difficult and important issues, utter a soupçon, and go on with the reader left tantalized. For example, he says that “the truly free action is a comparative rarity even at the human level. The behaviorists are correct—almost.” (p. 52) Now, being a dyed-in-the-wool Christian humanist, I am not content with that statement as it stands. It may not have the implications I think, but I don’t know that without further elaboration from Provonsha.

Here is another: “To be loving, an action must always be appropriate to the needs of the *moment*.” (p. 75, italics mine) I looked for some qualifier to this argument for some kind of contextualism in Christian ethics, but there is none. Does Provonsha mean to say that long-range needs are unimportant or subordinate to immediate ones? I doubt it, but the brevity of the discussion disallows the possibility of answering anticipated questions.

And, finally, in his very instructive chapter on the Second Coming, Provonsha suggests that one reason for the delay of Christ’s coming may be that one of the major preconditions suggested by the Bible has not existed until now—the gospel to the whole world. “Never before has it been possible for issues to be really universal in scope . . . It is now technically possible for virtually every man, woman and child on earth

to experience any event or issue simultaneously. Communications technology has placed every man in everybody else’s backyard . . . And this is what is most different about our day.

“Think, if you will, about it, and you will understand how truly significant that fact is. The things our fathers looked for were quite impossible in their day, however ignorant they were of that fact. But they are not impossible in ours.” (pp. 145-46)

What are the theological implications of claiming that a lack of technology has delayed the coming of Christ? I am not even sure that this notion can be harmonized with what appear to be his views on mission (the ones I wish he had elaborated on). I realize that a book this size cannot be expected to cover all the issues in depth, but these issues are too important not to receive more space.

Yet, the book is so rich and so well done that these criticisms are minor—almost petty. After reading it the first time, I had to see what kind of impact it would make on sophisticated non-Adventist friends of mine. One couple—the wife a former Adventist and the husband a former Christian Scientist—wrote and told me that for the first time the significance of the Sabbath opened up to them (her in particular). The realization that one must maintain a healthy agnosticism about some issues in faith lifted a major obstacle to faith in her mind, for she had always thought “faith” called for certainty about everything, a certainty that always eluded her.

Even their values were shifting. Time after time the book exposes the superficiality of modern values and it made the both of them realize that pleasure could not sustain the weight of living a purposeful existence. While it is true that “one couple does not an evangelistic audience make,” I am encouraged to send it to others. Jack Provonsha has rendered a real service to the church with this work. It deserves a wide and enthusiastic reading by Adventists and non-Adventists alike.