

Desmond Ford Raises The Sanctuary Question

by Walter Utt

A news item headed “Teacher given leave to prepare doctrinal paper”^{*} appeared in the *Adventist Review* of December 20, 1979, the *Pacific Union Recorder* of December 17 and in other journals in Australia and elsewhere. It read in part:

Some administrative decisions of the church are of interest to the membership at large. When there is a possibility that these decisions may be misinterpreted or misunderstood it is desirable, and necessary to the unity of the church, that an informational statement be issued. A recent decision by one of the educational institutions of the church impacts on two world divisions and seems to require such a statement.

^{*}The *Recorder* head read “statement” instead of “paper” and differed in capitalization. The Pacific Union version was signed by J. W. Cassell, president of Pacific Union College; C. O. Granz signed the item in the *Review*. I have not seen the others.

Walter Utt, who holds his doctorate in French history from Berkeley, is chairman of the department of history at Pacific Union College.

The board of trustees of Pacific Union College, after consulting with representatives of the General Conference and the Australasian Division, has voted to give Desmond Ford, a visiting professor from the Australasian Division, a leave of absence with salary to provide him an opportunity to devote his full time to continued research and preparation of a documented statement on the topic of the sanctuary and related issues.

This board action was a result of a public presentation by Dr. Ford on the subject of the investigative judgment in a meeting of the Association of Adventist Forums held on the campus of Pacific Union College October 27, 1979, in which he took issue with basic theological positions held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. . . .

A century earlier, Adventist doctrine and polity had been hammered out in vigorous debate and Ellen White had confirmed the conclusions. Committed against a formal creed but with various “pillars” set in the concrete of tradition and with a view of inspiration approaching the verbal, despite disclaimers from the prophetess herself, the church in 1979 found itself facing a reexamination of a “pillar.” Was it merely a decora-

tive one or was it basic to the stability of the structure? Do the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church rest on Scripture alone or must the Spirit of Prophecy be employed to support that which could not otherwise be demonstrated?

The challenge by Desmond Ford at the Forum meeting was nothing new. His concern for the biblicity of the Adventist doctrine of the Sanctuary, the ministry of Christ and the significance of 1844 had been shared by many Bible students for years. The difference in the present situation was the necessity

“In his presentation, Ford stated that the doctrine of the Sanctuary as traditionally held by Adventists could not be supported by Scripture.”

for the church in the 1980s to address a question of doctrine publicly rather than discreetly in some theological dovecote. Ford's use of a public forum, plus the peculiar and controversial chemistry of the man himself, precipitated the affair. He is a veteran of the intense and seemingly continuous theological battles in his homeland which have suggested to bemused Americans a kind of stereotype for the antipodes—an “Australian disease.”

Professor of religion at Avondale College, Ford arrived at Pacific Union College (PUC) in 1977 well equipped with enemies, some of whom tried to prevent his welcome on the California campus. PUC, long affiliated with Avondale, was a logical place for his sojourn when the Australian situation appeared in need of cooling, and PUC accepted him in part as an accommodation to the Australasian Division and the General Conference. The visiting professorship was for two years, but was extended for a third, to end in June 1980. That he proved a charismatic teacher and preacher and was in demand for speaking engagements was no surprise. The familiar

but indecisive battle over Sanctification/Justification continued. Ford's obvious love of debate and his skill in handling both biblical and Ellen White materials gained him numerous and fervent admirers. His opponents seemed to see his dazzling style and cheerful courtesy as further affront. To be neutral about Desmond Ford was very difficult.

The local Forum chapter, then in its second year, had already stirred some criticism. Hearing of a remark by Ford in a Sabbath School class, the Forum co-leaders, Adrian Zytkoskee, chairman of the behavioral science department, and Wayne Judd, of the religion department, invited Ford to speak on the investigative judgment for the first meeting of the school year. They also chose his title, later alleged to have been a provocation: “The Investigative Judgment: Theological Milestone or Historical Necessity?” Even before the meeting, Zytkoskee and Judd picked up some adverse comment and asked Ford if he would prefer to withdraw, but he said he was willing to proceed. He explained that he had accepted the invitation partly because he had tried for years to get a hearing on the question of the Sanctuary and the 1844 event. He well knew that his remarks would be distorted and misused.

In his presentation, Ford stated that the doctrine of the Sanctuary as traditionally held by Adventists could not be supported by Scripture. He rejected the literal heavenly sanctuary, the confinement of Christ in the Holy Place for 1,800 years, and saw 1844 rather as the launching of a movement carrying God's last warning. There was indeed a judgment, but not in the manner commonly conceived by Adventists.

Contrary to some reports, Ford did not “throw out the Spirit of Prophecy,” but rather raised the basic question of the nature of inspiration and the role of Mrs. White in establishment and validation of doctrine. Her function, he asserted, was “pastoral,” not “canonical.” He insisted that her role in the development and survival of the Advent movement was absolutely indispensable. Her inspired messages had, however, been

misused not infrequently over the years, and she herself would have been scandalized by the way in which Bible study among Adventists had been replaced by use of her writings. "To overdo," he declared, "is to undo." He found Mrs. White herself had been open to "new light" and reason in a way which her modern defenders frequently and conspicuously failed to be.*

Eric Syme, professor of religion and history, was commentator and supported Ford's position in general, which he stated to be in the finest Adventist tradition of inquiry. He particularly agreed with Ford's strictures on the misuse of Mrs. White's writings by those in what he called "a stupid literalistic miasma." Although he did not refer to it in the Forum session, Syme does, however, strongly disagree with certain of Ford's eschatological conclusions.

The speed and violence of the response to Ford may indicate lines were already drawn and Ford himself was the issue. Certainly, his view of the investigative judgment offered a clearer target than the debate over justification by faith. PUC's president, J. W. Cassell, and academic dean, Gordon Madgwick, were visiting schools in Australia and the Far East when the meeting took place. The first word (and tapes) reached them in Singapore a few days later. The college officers, the union president and the president of the General Conference were bombarded by messages in unheard-of quantities, both pro and con. Agitation was more overt and vehement in the surrounding Adventist colonies than on the campus itself.

Returning to a *fait accompli* on November 16, the president and the dean left again on the 26th, on their own initiative and with a proposal of their own devising, to consult with the president and officers of the General Conference. Cassell and Madgwick saw their plan as protecting Ford from those demanding his instant dismissal. They would also be returning a hot potato to the General Confer-

ence. To keep Ford in the classroom at that juncture would be difficult for a union conference institution, subject, it was rumored, to threats, at least obliquely. The president and the dean hoped their plan would be a precedent for handling such controversial cases as might arise in the future. They thought that had such a procedure been available in the past, some regrettable ruptures in the church might have been avoided.

After vigorous debate in PREXAD, the action quoted at the beginning of this article was jointly agreed upon (November 28, 1979). Ford would be provided with accommodations near his source material, and time to put his arguments, previously presented orally and informally, into proper scholarly form. He would be in regular contact with theologians. As he remained technically a Pacific Union College faculty member at least until June 1980, he would continue his liaison with PUC's department of religion, through Fred Veltman, chairman. From the very start, Veltman had urged Ford to prepare an extended written elaboration of his controversial remarks.

At the end of six months, in the summer of 1980, it was envisaged that his work would be reviewed by a widely representative group yet to be selected.** A small, working interim committee was named in the next few days by President Neal Wilson to be chaired by Richard Hammill, General Conference vice president and formerly president of Andrews University. This committee would work out procedures for the selection and work of the larger body. In mid-December, Hammill's committee had already met with Ford and Veltman to discuss plans. That the proponent of a disputed concept should be given time and facilities to work out his position seemed eminently fair; it was the uncertainty about what was to happen next that caused concern.

Rumor worked overtime, of course. The

*A cursory glance through *Counsels to Writers and Editors* suggests the compilers found the best quotes in favor of openness and receptivity to "new light" originate after the 1888 controversy; the quotes which refuse to consider modification or examination of "landmarks" come with the Kellogg affair.

**The meeting of administrators and theologians already scheduled for Glacier View in Colorado for the summer of 1980 has been suggested as a good place for the discussion. This meeting, while fortuitous, might not necessarily have the appropriate balance in its composition which the review of the Ford documents would require.

best ones seemed to come from Takoma Park; for example, that Ford was to be brought to Washington to be fired. Contrary to other reports, most of the PUC faculty, whether agreeing with Ford's thesis or not, were concerned for Ford's freedom as an Adventist scholar to express himself and receive a fair hearing. That he and his family had been required to move so abruptly in midyear, leaving his classes to be covered by others, was the principal reason given for unease.*

In the faculty meeting of December 4, President Cassell and Dean Madgwick addressed these apprehensions, elaborating on the explanations they had given the previous day to several department chairmen. President Cassell mentioned the reassurance he felt from the attitude of openness and understanding he and the dean found in Neal Wilson. Ford was not being punished, he insisted, but indeed welcomed the opportunity for study being offered him on a topic in which he had been interested for 30 years. Because the issue was larger than the concerns of one college, the church at large had to be involved. "A delay until the end of the school year," said Dr. Cassell, "will only lead to further entrenchment and polarization within the Church."

Ford publicly stated that he was in complete sympathy with the decision (though some of his friends said that he was privately less happy than his "good soldier" public statement indicated). The president conceded he did not know what would happen after Ford's paper was considered and evaluated by the committee. He bore personal testimony to the effect of Ford's ministry in his own life, and deplored the tactics of some of Ford's opponents. His only criticism, and one in which Ford appears to concur, was that in presenting the topic to a large, unselected audience, the controversy had be-

come larger and more violent than it needed to have.

Several commented later that Ford's presence in Washington would be useful, for the message can hardly be disassociated from the messenger, and it would be well for Ford the human being to be better known.

In spite of assurances, the disappearance of the Fords appeared to threaten the atmosphere of free but responsible discussion which the present administration has fostered on the PUC campus. That Ford might eventually return to Angwin would have been a reassurance, but Cassell said that question had to remain open. The confidence the president and dean were able to convey to the faculty suffered with the appearance in the December 13 issue of the *Review* of a con-

"If there are too many faces friendly to Ford and it appears he may escape a decapitation, there will be accusations of softness on heresy and surmisings about Adventist schools as nests of subversion."

denser version of an address given by Neal Wilson at the annual council. The timing was perhaps coincidental, but the tone seemed to strongly suggest that discussion on any items denominated "landmarks" or "pillars" was already foreclosed.

When the joint release to Adventist periodicals quoted at the beginning of this report arrived a few days later, it stated Ford "took issue with *basic* theological positions," rather than "*certain* theological positions," a wording requested by Ford. The pejorative term again implied judgment had already been rendered—doubtless true enough for many on both sides of the question. In spite of oral assurances by President Wilson to Cassell, Madgwick and Veltman that Ford would be treated fairly and the outcome was not prejudged, pessimism remained. Veltman urged that biblical scholars and the administrators be left to work out the issue decently and in

* In a letter to religion department chairmen, Fred Veltman said: "All attempts to parallel Dr. Ford's move to Washington and Luther's being called to Rome are baseless and unfounded" (Dec. 28, 1979). In response to questions, Dean Madgwick admitted being aware of the episode of Calvin and Servetus but hoped that it had no application to this case.

order, but it seems that despite appeals to Christian charity and forbearance, restraint cannot be expected from either side in such debates. There was a preemptive strike from the pulpit of the college church, January 5, and the same day another speaker left little doubt who he meant when he spoke of Satan's agents being "beautiful, attractive people." The *Review* has continued to print a great deal of material on the topic.

As Dr. Cassell very accurately observed, the issues do transcend the California campus. Once again, the church is invited to consider "new light." Once again, a basic, underlying issue was revived—the nature and role of the inspiration of Ellen G. White. Sixty years before, at the 1919 Bible Conference, church leaders looked at the question, realized its complexity and divisiveness, blanched, and swept it back under the rug. Later, there was the committee in the Figuhr era which considered the Daniel question for five years with no consensus, no publication, not even any minutes. Both groups had met in comparative secrecy. Unlike Ford, they did not "talk in front of the children." The value of such discretion may be questioned when the phenomenon of an inerrant, verbally inspired view of inspiration has continued and been encouraged to grow and rigidify in the intervening decades.

What are the possible scenarios in the Ford Question? A very critical aspect will be the work of the committee headed by Dr. Hammill in recommending members and procedures for the larger group. If there are too many faces friendly to Ford and it appears he may escape a decapitation, there will be accusations of softness on heresy and surmising about Adventist schools as nests of subversion. Choosing too many members preoccupied with administrative imperatives would frighten academic and professional elements in the church. To some suspicious laymen, such a committee would be a case of the blind leading the one-eyed (the theologians). If the primary concern is preventing a damaging schism, the leaders might feel compelled to say to Ford and the "experts": "What you tell us may very well be true, but

our pastoral responsibility is to keep the Church functional. The traditional view of Mrs. White is the cement which is perceived as holding this movement together, and at this time we cannot risk disruption."

Ford has said that a great number of Bible scholars of the denomination agree with him, at least in part. Few would claim he should not be permitted to explain himself. What if the committee—or the scholars on it—endorsed or at least found permissible Ford's interpretation? What of the "children" then, the laity? Could the general membership be reeducated in a more biblical use of the Spirit of Prophecy? In the interest of pastoral concern, would the scholars simply have to be ignored? The loss of confidence in denominational leadership on the part of scholars, lay and cleric, should be in the long run very costly, but it might be a price which would have to be paid to maintain the confidence of a not-so-silent majority. (Recent Roman Catholic and Mormon disciplinary actions could serve as timely precedents.) A church embarrassed by its intellectuals would almost inevitably have to turn to creeds, whatever name they went by. College faculties, particularly the younger and more idealistic members, are watching with some apprehension to see how fairly frankness and free discussion can be handled. If a hard line is taken, a signal would be perceived that teachers—and not just in theology—should be obsequious hacks and reflectors of an official line.

Unless a committee in which informed Adventists have confidence comes to a well-reasoned and carefully substantiated decision against Ford, the worst verdict against Ford is likely to be that his argument remains "not proven," and he will be able to return to his duties at PUC. Certainly, administrators will wish to avoid creating martyrs, with all the attendant disunity and turmoil.

Certainly, many respond to the position Ford advocates with not only anger, but also fear. Was not the investigative judgment the Adventists' only "original" contribution? If it is understood in a new way, would any reason remain for a Remnant Church? Ford says "yes"; his critics say "no." Even if one could be saved without a correct understand-

ing of the sanctuary doctrine, could there be an Adventist Church without it?

Can a worldwide church of increasing diversity survive with an essential unity—perhaps as suggested by the name Seventh-day Adventist—but with various views and understandings coexisting in fruitful tension? (In one passage, Ellen White suggested two basics—the Sabbath and the Commandments — and that to quarrel about lesser issues was harmful.* Certainly, other “pillars” could be added to this short list). To survive, an organization must set limits and enforce them, *but* in ways which are perceived as reasonable and fair. To maintain the unity and purpose of the church while protecting this fairness and openness is the dilemma faced by Neal Wilson and his associates in 1980.

In his letter, previously referred to, Fred Veltman sees the times in an essentially optimistic way. In a world of change, to which the church must ever be able to speak, he

*CWE, p. 77 (from letter 37, 1887).

hopes the administrators will be “very careful in their statements and their proclamations lest they be viewed by others as being obscurantists. At the same time, as biblical scholars we need to be very careful lest we be perceived as iconoclastic and unnecessarily disruptive of orderly progression in theological development.” With care and cooperation, he sees advance for the church in “all lines,” but hastiness could create “a backlash that might set the church back decades.”

A sobering thought is that in 1888, a shift in direction which threatened traditional belief patterns could not be effectively introduced to the church even with a living prophetess vigorously supporting it. What chance is there for a redefinition of an article of dogma in 1980, even if the leadership of the church agreed with the redefinition or saw it as a permissible alternative? As one PUC faculty member observed, people feel on very thin ice in these matters, and there is a lot of open water out there, dark and very cold.