

The Continuing Crisis

by Richard Emmerson

One year after the events generally known as “Glacier View,” the Seventh-day Adventist church remains in a state of crisis. Although the scandal of the denomination’s financial involvement with Dr. Donald Davenport has, for the time at least, drawn national attention away from the theological and ethical issues raised by the defrocking of Desmond Ford and the dismissal of Walter Rea, these issues remain real and of major concern to many Adventists. Certainly the inappropriate — and in some cases perhaps unethical — decisions by several denominational leaders concerning the investment of church monies (see page 50) need careful scrutiny. But the continuing hard-line decisions of church leaders, the disillusionment and even loss of many congregations and young pastors, and such events as the Desmond Ford sponsored “Gospel Congress” (see page 45) ultimately may be of greater significance for the future of the church.

Since SPECTRUM published its first re-

port, “Must the Crisis Continue?” (Vol. 11, No. 3), church leadership has continued to harden its position concerning theological matters and the freedom of theologians and teachers to differ from “official” positions, while at the same time theologians and others have formally asked this leadership to take a more moderate and open stand on “new light” and in its treatment and reporting of divergent opinions.

The decision last spring of Smuts van Rooyen, a popular religion teacher at Andrews University, to resign under pressure shocked Adventist college campuses perhaps even more than did Desmond Ford’s dismissal last summer. Although university officials maintain that van Rooyen was not forced to resign, the decision not to allow him to preach at the university church on May 9 and the university’s generous waiver of his educational debt of approximately \$50,000 suggest that the university made its position clear. According to van Rooyen, the university gave him no ultimatum, but he was expressly told twice by Dr. J. Grady Smoot, president of Andrews, that he did not see how van Rooyen could continue to teach at an Adventist institution, and since the university was expecting to cut its teaching staff,

Richard Emmerson, a graduate of Columbia Union College, Andrews University, and Stanford University, teaches English at Walla Walla College. He is the author of *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature*.

van Rooyen believed that he might not be rehired. Andrews University provost, Roy Graham, would not comment on van Rooyen's resignation, noting that he had promised van Rooyen that their conversations were private.

Van Rooyen apparently ran into trouble with some members of the university community when he refused to say with confidence that the Adventist church is God's remnant church on earth. In a phone interview with SPECTRUM, however, van Rooyen stated that he did not believe that his difficulties were due to one particular issue and definitely not to his theological beliefs, since a number of teachers at Andrews and elsewhere hold similar positions. He believes that rumors concerning his connection with *Evangelica* played a major part. "After Wilson's visit to Andrews, I severed all connections with *Evangelica*," he noted, "but they thought I was responsible for each succeeding issue."

Although he claims to feel no malice over his difficulties at Andrews, van Rooyen does believe that the administration was weak in giving in to rumors and pressure and in not investigating the issues at hand. "They never took the time to discuss my views with me in any detail, or to discuss the rumors or their particular concerns." Noting that he never was given a hearing before his peers, as Smoot had promised, van Rooyen said the whole situation led to "a tremendous breakdown of communication."

Having joined Desmond Ford to work with Good News Unlimited, van Rooyen denies emphatically that he and Ford are forming a new denomination. Good News Unlimited wishes instead to become "something equivalent to a Billy Graham ministry, or to a Campus Crusade." For the future, he plans to publish books and preach, "perhaps on television and radio," but for the present he will be writing his dissertation on the history of the doctrine of justification within Adventism in order to complete his doctorate at the University of South Africa.

Aware of the loss of many committed teachers and pastors from denominational employ, many Adventists, both formally and informally, have expressed their dismay

regarding the actions of church leadership since Glacier View. One area of concern is what is perceived as biased and needlessly polemical reporting of news in official church papers. The editors of the student newspapers of the Adventist colleges in North America meeting at Pacific Union College sent on April 7 an open letter to Franklin Hudgins, Kenneth Wood, and Neal Wilson. Affirming their dedication to the church, the college editors nevertheless complained that official church news releases "were needlessly rhetorical, often to the point that the material might be considered not only inaccurate but also misleading."

As examples, the letter pointed to the church's reporting of the Ford dismissal and of recent discussions concerning Ellen White's unacknowledged use of materials written by her contemporaries. The editors felt that the news releases were "defensive" and perhaps "counter-productive." The letter concluded with a plea for greater trust on the part of church leadership in the ability of church members "to handle debatable and delicate issues" and a statement of confidence that a unified church can be the result of "a well-informed clergy and laity."

A similar commitment to church unity and a desire, as Lorenzo Grant of Southern Missionary College said, to address in the spirit of "reconciliation" the discord and theological upheaval now troubling the church brought together 17 teachers from seven Adventist colleges and universities on June 12 in Atlanta. Over two days the participants shared their feelings and fears, their convictions and hopes, their prayers and songs, in the end producing a document signed by all 17 participants,* christened "The Atlanta Affirmation."

The document (see box) declares the group's confidence in the Adventist mission and message, determination to be faithful to the tasks of ministry and teaching, belief in the need for theological curiosity and openness, and commitment to the support of such

*Later, one participant, Norman Guley of Southern Missionary College, requested that his name be removed from the document.

openness. It further declares the group's unhappiness with policies and actions that have fostered division and misunderstanding in the church, and finally encourages efforts to build trust and to affirm and renew the Adventist message.

Several religion teachers at Southern Missionary College, led by Grant, organized the Atlanta meeting. Participants and visitors emphasized the importance of freedom within the church for theological reflection. For example, Frank Knittel, president of Southern Missionary College and a visitor to the first session, said that the church required an atmosphere conducive to theological study "devoid of fear." Others were troubled by the after-effects of the present crisis. Adrian Zytoskee of Pacific Union College worried over the "cynicism" he finds among many of his students, and Charles Teel, Jr., of Loma Linda University noted that many college students end up leaving the church. Said Teel: "The true-believer mentality is not washing."

Speakers at the meeting reaffirmed the importance of theological study and the need to tackle difficult problems. Jack Provonsha of Loma Linda University suggested that,

rather than being disturbed by the church's theological problems, we should acknowledge that the search for understanding is eternal and that the church is a community "in collective and never-ending quest."

One participant at the Atlanta meeting, Richard Rice, commented on the connection between fruitful study and diversity of opinion. No one group in the church should be allowed to define Adventism. "We must pluralize and complicate what Adventism is," he said. Ironically, Rice's attempt to suggest new approaches in Adventist theology has since led to problems for the Loma Linda University theologian.

Rice's book, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (see reviews, pages 62 and 64), has become the center of a controversy in the church that raises serious questions concerning both the freedom of theological study and the editorial repercussions of the recent decision to combine the Southern Publishing Association with the Review and Herald Publishing Association. Having been accepted for publication and printed by Southern, the book, which in six months sold over half its initial printing, was, at least temporarily,

The Atlanta Affirmation

Because of our shared commitment to the building up of the church and to the preservation of its unity, we have come together to explore ways in which our ministry may contribute to these ends. As a result of our prayer and worship as a group, and of our frank discussions with one another, we together affirm:

1. That we are confident in the providential origin and distinctive message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2. That we take seriously our call to the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and that we intend to be faithful to that call.

Because careful theological study led to the founding of our movement, and has always been considered the means to advance in our knowledge of truth, we further affirm:

3. That the task of theological inquiry is linked inseparably to our vision and way of life, and that we are irrevocably committed to the responsible fulfillment of that task.

4. That the atmosphere of openness, curiosity, trust and love for one another necessary for fulfilling the task must be preserved.

5. That advances in the knowledge of truth occur, as has been the case from our movement's beginnings, when a variety of gifts and viewpoints come to expression.

6. That we are bound in solidarity with one another and with our colleagues in the teaching ministry and are committed to support one another in our efforts to be honest, creative and redemptive through scholarly investigation.

7. That we are committed to work with church administrators in their efforts to unify the church through theological dialogue, Bible study, fellowship and prayer.

In the light of these affirmations we call attention to, and express our concern over, the following points:

1. That the dismissal or withdrawal under pressure of certain teachers and pastors from denominational employ has given rise to grave concern among many members of our church.

withdrawn by decision of the Review and Herald Administration Committee. Bothered by the book's theology, the Review and Herald at first decided simply not to advertise the book, and then to draft a disclaimer to accompany it. In a letter dated July 14, however, Richard Coffen, a book editor at the Review, notified Rice that the Administration Committee had declared the book out of print, which in effect meant that the book's remaining copies would not be distributed.

When reached by SPECTRUM, Rice stated that he was not sure exactly what were the book's problems that had led to the decision to withdraw the book, since he has not been informed officially. He understood, though, that some church leaders did not approve of his approach to the Ellen White statements in the book's appendix and that others were unhappy with his use of "process thought" in the book.

Rice was hopeful that the book would be available soon. He noted that in a phone conversation, Robert Kinney, head of the book department at the Review and Herald, informed him that the decision to withdraw the book had been changed. Although at the

time of this writing he had not received a written confirmation of the conversation, Rice understood that the remaining copies of the book would be offered for sale, although the book would not be advertised. In a conversation with SPECTRUM, Kinney confirmed that the book would be available. Rice expressed his hope that the book would make a contribution to the thinking of the church and his desire that it "be judged by its content rather than by its publication history."

Nevertheless, the book's publication history certainly raises issues with major implications for the future publication of the work of theologians and others dealing with delicate issues within Adventism. Will the church no longer offer the opportunity to its theologians to advance new ideas for general discussion? Does the merger of the Southern and Review and Herald Publishing Associations mean the end of the theological creativity encouraged by the Anvil Series formerly published by Southern? How is it possible for one Adventist editorial board, after careful scrutiny, to approve a book for publication only to be reversed by another?

2. That loyalty to the church is now often measured with reference to certain personalities or publications rather than to Scripture.

3. That well-meaning attempts to respond creatively to theological questions now confronting Adventism have been interpreted in some circles as jeopardizing the integrity of the church and its message.

4. That the credibility, and therefore effectiveness, of seminary and certain other religion faculties — made up of the very persons prepared to serve the church theologically — are now being eroded.

5. That the treatment of recent theological controversy in the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* has not always reflected the variety of viewpoints that exist in the church, and that this one-sidedness has fostered an attitude of suspicion and a sense of impotence among a substantial number of our members.

6. That both critics and defenders of currently dominant expressions of Adventist doctrine have stated their views in a manner tending to divide rather than to heal.

7. That energies which should go into the building up of the church are now being wasted in dealing with the consequences of the present climate of distrust and alienation.

8. That frustrations associated with developments we are noting have engendered hurt, dismay, and cynicism among our students, our colleagues in other academic disciplines, and the general membership of the church.

On the basis of the foregoing, we recommend:

1. That teachers, pastors, administrators, and other church members attempt now to stop the polarizing process that threatens our unity and future as a movement by cooling rhetoric, easing tensions and enhancing mutual trust within our community.

2. That they take frequent opportunity to express confidence in the truthfulness of the Adventist message.

3. That they continue, in light of the present situation and in faithfulness to our Lord, to learn about, examine, and renew the heritage God has given to us all.

Dalton Baldwin
Ted Chamberlain
Douglas Clark
Walter Douglas
Jon Dybdahl
Larry Geraty
Jerry Gladson
Lorenzo Grant

Jack Provonsha
Richard Rice
Charles Scriven
Charles Teel
Fred Veltman
Edwin Zackrisson
Robert Zamora
Adrian Zytoskee

What these and other recent events mean for the continued open discussion of theological issues within Adventism is not altogether clear. Nor is it clear what will be the result of two actions taken at the September 1 meeting of the Andrews University board of trustees. First, the board elected General Conference president Neal Wilson to serve as its chairman, although Wilson said that he did not intend to continue as chairman "indefinitely"; and second, the board appointed Gerhard Hasel, present chairman of the department of Old Testament in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, to be seminary dean. These appointments fill positions vacated by the recent resignations of General Conference vice president Max Torkelson as board chairman and Thomas Blincoe as seminary dean.

Although many had expected Wilson to "take over" the Andrews board, even members of the small "search" committee appointed by President Smoot to consider candidates for the position of dean were caught by surprise when Smoot announced to a hastily gathered meeting of the seminary faculty that Hasel had been chosen. After the meeting, many of the faculty expressed "amazement," "disbelief," and "chagrin" not only with Hasel's appointment, but with "a complete lack of consideration of the faculty's wishes." During a previous meeting, Smoot had promised a nomination that would meet with the approval not only of the field, but also of the seminary faculty. Instead, he evidently capitulated to pressure from Wilson, who in turn was trying to please local and union conference presidents who have been

increasingly strident in their complaints about the seminary faculty. In his own account of Hasel's appointment, Wilson is reported to have told members of the General Conference committee two days later that the seminary is "infected with Christian humanism," and that Hasel was chosen by the board from among five candidates because he was the only available person conservative enough to deal with the problem. (One faculty member later commented how ironic it is that the church, in an effort to bring about theological unity, chose the one person most likely to bring division.)

In the September 1 meeting with the faculty, and after Smoot had announced an "overwhelming" approval by the board (there were only two dissenting votes) of "his recommendation," Wilson spent approximately 30 minutes defending the board action. Repeatedly appealing to the "wishes of the world field," he called on the seminary to become the "arsenal of defense" that the church needs and complained that it had produced men "bewildered, confused, and unable to preach with conviction." Referring to the need to be candid, he stated that "the field is making strong demands for a seminary more conservative in thought and direction." Finally, while admitting that "many of you and others . . . will be uneasy, disappointed and depressed," Wilson said that he was sure that the decision was the one that would meet with the widest possible support in the church as a whole. "You should know," he stated emphatically, "that the board wanted no confusion as to where Andrews University stands theologically."