

## Report

# Theological Consultation II

by Alden Thompson

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Tuesday — apprehension; Wednesday — despair; Thursday — euphoria; Friday and Sabbath — realism, but a realism laden with hope and etched with the conviction that a significant healing process had begun.

Such was the experience of the church's scholars as they met with denominational leaders for Consultation II in Washington, D.C., from September 30 to October 3. The post-Glacier View turmoil in the church had cast suspicion on the church's teaching ministry. Consultation II was an attempt to resolve the crisis and to rebuild bridges between the church's scholars and administrators.

The discussions were frank. Even in the plenary sessions the participants confronted the divisive and misunderstood issues that had contributed to the crisis. But it was the smaller discussion groups that really brought the delegates together. There they came to grips with the issues and the tensions. They wept and laughed and prayed. They opened and cleansed old wounds and began to apply the healing salves — gingerly at first, but

with growing confidence as brothers and sisters in Christ began to understand how and why they had hurt each other so deeply.

As Consultation II drew to a close, the euphoria had been tempered with realism. Lowell Bock, General Conference vice president, talked about the bridge that had been built, describing it as a "good walking bridge, even if it probably wouldn't take a ten-ton truck." C. E. Bradford, North American Division president, used the metaphor of a marriage. Numerous factors had effectively driven a wedge between the partners. The fact that they were now at least talking with each other again was a good sign. But they could still expect difficult days ahead.

The group experience on Sabbath underscored the cogency of Bradford's remarks. Traces of pre-Consultation II vocabulary brought twinges of pain to wounds that had begun to heal; strikingly different perspectives on how the church should carry out its work reminded the participants that a certain pluralism was here to stay and could be uncomfortable. Clearly, the gains made at Consultation II would need to be protected. But scarcely a delegate did not feel a deep commitment to guard those gains with his life.

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As participants gathered September 29, the more immediate causes of the crisis stood out in everyone's mind. At the Sanctuary Review Committee meeting at Glacier View in August 1980, the church's scholars and administrators had agonized through to a consensus statement on the doctrine of the sanctuary, a "solution" that many thought would stave off confrontation. When efforts to retain Desmond Ford within the church's official ministry broke down and his credentials were removed, the academic community was stunned. The reaction was particularly acute at Andrews University where the more notable symptoms included the birth of the journal *Evangelica* and the departure of a well-known teacher, Smuts van Rooyen. The appearance of *Omega*, a controversial book focusing on the crisis, intensified feelings on both sides. Even attempts to bring reconciliation, such as the issuance of the Atlanta Affirmation by a group of concerned scholars,<sup>1</sup> were misunderstood, widening the gulf even more.

Meanwhile, as the time for Consultation II approached, developments within the so-called "Evangelical Adventist" movement formed a tantalizing backdrop for the discussions in Washington, D.C. Robert Brinsmead and Verdict Publications had become increasingly strident in their criticism of "Adventist distinctives": the 1844 event, Ellen White, and Sabbatarianism.<sup>2</sup> *Evangelica* seemed to be following a similar course. The review of the book *Omega* in the September 1981 issue spoke of "the overwhelming biblical evidence against the 1844 theology and the alarming discovery that the visionary was a plagiarist."

By contrast, Desmond Ford had clearly separated himself and his organization from the more radical evangelical Adventists, even publishing a book-length defense of the Sabbath doctrine. But persistent press reports quoting Ford to the effect that virtually all Adventist scholars secretly supported his views on the church's sanctuary teachings<sup>3</sup> complicated matters, underscoring the view entertained by some that there is a "conspiracy" in Adventism paralleling the one Harold Lindsell and others claim to have found within the Lutheran Church Missouri

Synod and its Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> Understandably, the matter of trust was a primary concern at Consultation II.

But the underlying issues at Consultation II were really the Adventist view of inspiration and the methods deemed appropriate for the study of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. Many of the church's administrative leaders apparently had come to believe that a so-called "high view" of Scripture emphasizing the divine element in inspiration is essential in order for Adventism to ward off the inroads of liberalism. In non-Adventist circles, Harold Lindsell had become the primary spokesman for this "high view" of Scripture. His book *Battle for the Bible*, held in high regard by several leading Adventists, had focused on the issue of inerrancy, and Concordia Seminary had become the most famous test case: "A Battle Fought and Won," in Lindsell's own words,<sup>5</sup> by the defenders of inerrancy.

In Adventism, the Bible Conference of 1974, which had dealt with the question of inspiration, stood largely in the Lindsell tradition and had suggested to the church's scholars that the church was on the way to a Missouri Synod-style confrontation between administration and academia.

But Adventists have Ellen White, whose views of Scripture and whose own writing practice preserve an awareness of the human element in the inspiration process. Minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference, where her own work as a prophet had been discussed, had been published in 1979.<sup>6</sup> They show that in 1919 the issue was the same as now: Ellen White, inspiration and the Bible. Furthermore, they show several leading Adventists, including General Conference president Arthur G. Daniells, frankly emphasizing the *humanity* of inspired writings.

Together with developments mentioned so far, two other factors had served to heighten tensions. One was the recent effort by certain church leaders to develop creed-like statements on inspiration and creation, that seemed to many to be out of step with traditional Adventism. The other was the rising number of critical studies on the question of Ellen White's relationship to literary sources and cultural influences.

It was in this tumultuous context that, 13 months after Consultation I — a meeting overshadowed by the church's dealing with Desmond Ford — a group of uneasy and apprehensive delegates streamed into the General Conference chapel for the opening session of Consultation II. Except for an initial two-page agenda and a cover letter from Neal Wilson, General Conference president, most delegates knew virtually nothing about the plans for the session. No prepared papers had been circulated. Not even a list of delegates had been released.<sup>7</sup>

As Wilson delivered the opening devotional and moved into his introductory remarks, the delegates listened intently. He frankly addressed the evident tensions, suggesting that it might take a couple of days before the delegates could really open their hearts. But open them they must if the church was to work together as a community.

Wilson assumed full responsibility for the agenda. "You can blame me," he said. "I did not seek a lot of counsel, but I have become aware of a number of key questions from my own observations in the last couple of years. Unless we face them honestly and openly, we will have continual difficulties." He also revealed that many in the church had informed him personally of their strong objections to the idea of Consultation II. Once the meetings had been announced, however, the General Conference had been deluged by requests to attend.

The daily plan called for the delegates to meet in plenary session each morning for the devotional and general instructions. The rest of the morning and early afternoon would be spent in the discussion groups, with group reports coming in a plenary session from 3 to 5 p.m. No evening meetings were planned.

Each delegate received a packet containing a revised agenda,<sup>8</sup> several statements and position papers pertinent to the agenda items, and a list of the delegates by group, the item of most immediate interest as the delegates prepared to disperse from the plenary session. The delegates had been divided into 10 groups of about 20 members each. A chairman and vice chairman for each group had

already been named, but each group was asked to name its own secretary.<sup>9</sup>

The actual agenda for the first day came under the heading: "Toward unity in the message we hold," and listed such items as "academic freedom," "pluralism," and "central vs. peripheral beliefs." But at least in Group 9, the group to which I had been assigned, the official agenda was overpowered almost immediately by the intense interest in the basic issue of trust.<sup>10</sup>

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At the cheerful insistence of our chairman, we dutifully began discussing academic freedom. It was only a matter of moments, however, before the issue of the Atlanta Affirmation arose. One of the few Atlanta participants in attendance at Consultation II, Jack Provonsha (Loma Linda University), was willing to give a first-hand report, something we all agreed we wanted to hear before returning to the plenary session. For the moment, however, the mention of the Affirmation simply provided the occasion for discussing the reaction of church administrators to the Atlanta meeting. One General Conference officer in the group admitted that, as far as the content of the Affirmation was concerned, he saw no problem. But the procedure had been inappropriate. To be more blunt, college religion teachers had no right to meet together outside their union without official permission, even when church funds were not involved. The ensuing discussion could perhaps best be described as a friendly up-

roar. On what basis, when, and where could General Conference personnel meet together for “official” business? In a private home? On the golf course? And who was authorized to give them permission? Could not brothers meet anywhere “in Christ?” Or did they really need official permission?

The exchange was frank and clearly reflected different perspectives. But very little hostility was evident even at that early stage in our discussions. Furthermore, even though certain participants tended to be more dominant, helpful and meaningful contributions came from virtually all members of the group. We were already working together remarkably well.

Before we returned to the plenary session, Jack Provonsha gave his report on the Atlanta meeting. From the standpoint of those who participated in the Atlanta meeting, the Affirmation was a sincerely motivated attempt to bring healing to the church. But certain tactical errors, the publishing of some pirated personal minutes by church “loyalists,” and a general suspicion of scholars’ “meeting across union boundaries” had actually resulted in heightened tensions rather than reconciliation.

“I was amazed and saddened,” Provonsha noted, “to see such an event interpreted almost instantly as hostile in intent, without any recognition of the sincere motivation of the participants.” Provonsha went on to describe the concerns that had led the group to Atlanta. He told of worship, of prayer, and of a common longing that the church could work together in harmony.<sup>11</sup>

The group voted to ask Provonsha to give a synopsis of his report on Atlanta to the plenary session, essentially the only thing of substance that Group 9 had to report on day one.

The plenary session revealed how differently the various groups had reacted to the agenda. The reports were diverse, ranging from Provonsha’s informal analysis of the Atlanta meeting to a line-by-line editing of the study document on academic freedom. Several groups submitted cautious analyses of the term “pluralism,” a word almost as emotive as “Ford” in the context of Consultation II.<sup>12</sup>

But the greatest perplexity for Wilson as chairman and for the entire group was the statement on academic freedom. One report politely noted that it would have been nice if the delegates could have had the documents ahead of time. Another group reported that 15 minutes had been taken right at the beginning simply to read through the documents silently. The report from Group 3 by its secretary, Rudy Klimes (General Conference), was noteworthy for its brevity and for the fact that it evoked the first hearty laugh of the plenary sessions: “We recommend that the document on academic freedom be referred to a broadly-based committee, period.” The plenary session finally decided that it had no other choice but to do just that. The questions were simply too complex to solve quickly, much less by a large group.<sup>13</sup>

As Wednesday’s plenary session drew to a close, two events sent shock waves rippling through the delegates. After the final group report, Wilson turned to Provonsha, who was sitting on the front row, and spoke with reference to the report that Provonsha had given an hour and a half before. Wilson’s voice was tinged with emotion, betraying the fact that he had been deeply hurt. “If the scholars wanted to bring healing, they did not set a very good example.” Then gesturing briefly with a copy of the Affirmation he continued: “No one contacted me personally about this document. In here you talk about a war mentality and generals planning for war. You mention my name. But no one talked to me about it.” For an agonizing moment he paused — and then quickly concluded, “Well, so much for that.”

The second event was not so startling as it was unsettling. As the delegates prepared to go their various ways for the evening, additional position papers and study documents were handed to the delegates. Wilson pointed out that Thursday’s agenda would concentrate on the historical-critical method. The position papers which we were receiving would need our careful attention, for they represented a view accepted by a large majority of the General Conference officers. For the delegates the question loomed large:

How could we possibly digest these many papers overnight and come to a consensus on the next day? The task appeared impossible and almost unfair.

That evening the informal conversations unavoidably centered on Neal Wilson and on the new position papers. The specific items to which Wilson had referred in his comments to Provonsha actually did not come from the Affirmation itself, but from the pirated minutes published by the Adventist "loyalist." Technically, Wilson should have distinguished between public and private information, but we all realized that such a distinction would only be possible in theory. In practice, our emotions are affected by what we know, be the information official or unofficial.<sup>14</sup>

One thing was painfully clear, however: the Adventist underground press was working incredible mischief, regardless of whether it was attacking the administration or academia. It was blurring the distinction between the public and the private. It was robbing us of the privilege of praying out our bitterness, of tearing up our tainted notes and speaking peace.

No one knew how Wilson would react the next day. He had shouldered the burden of Consultation II almost singlehandedly. The success of the meetings seemed to depend on his leadership. But we had caught a glimpse of Neal Wilson, not as a leader of men, but as a human being — with emotions — a man like the rest of us, a man who could be deeply hurt. Could the Lord bring healing to us all so that we could begin to work together again? Wednesday night was not just a night of despair — in many a home and hotel room it was also a night of prayer.

The other major concern on Wednesday night centered on the new position papers. They stood firmly in the Lindsell tradition, emphasizing the divine element and virtually ignoring the human element in inspiration, an approach which virtually the entire Adventist teaching ministry believed to be catastrophic. The church simply knows too much about the human aspect of inspiration from the experience and writings of Ellen White. Was the church as a whole really prepared to follow in the steps of the Bible Con-

ference of 1974? Or was there still hope that we could learn from the Bible Conference of 1919? The events of Thursday could prove decisive. But the pragmatic issue remained the more urgent one: How could the church's biblical scholars successfully condense the work of a full semester or more into a couple of hours? To that question there were no easy answers.

The devotional on Thursday morning was given by the new dean of the seminary,

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Gerhard Hasel. He spoke with conviction and his message was warmly received. When Wilson stepped to the podium and began to address the delegates, pens suddenly came alive across the chapel. This was no ordinary speech. "I hope you will understand and not misunderstand," stated Wilson in measured tones. "It will help us if you can respond. Some feel that the papers you have received are extreme. But there is deep concern over what appears to be an attempt to eliminate the proof-text method. We have long held to the principle that the Bible is its own interpreter and to the principle of the unity of Scripture. Do the scholars of the church still support these principles?"

As Wilson continued, he described the church as standing at the crossroads. "We must go one way or the other. That is the reason for this meeting." He depicted the church as "largely conservative," but as not "extreme in its conservatism." "Adventism has always developed its own approach to Scripture. We have not adopted inerrancy, though some of our group may hold that view."

Addressing the church's scholars, Wilson urged them to speak their convictions clear-

ly. “We can see through the nice words,” he observed — adding a few moments later that the position of the scholars is “now murky.”

As for the use of critical methods, he declared that he was hearing mixed messages. Some had claimed that if we accept the normal presuppositions of the historical-critical method, we would “diminish the authority of Ellen White as an inspired commentary on Scripture.” Others had said that the only way we can “give credibility to Ellen White is to use the historical-critical method.” Wilson described those who had pleaded the latter position with him as “devoted servants of this church.” They had claimed that any other approach would mean that “Ellen White will be made out to be a liar.” On the other hand, he declared: “Some have told me that if our pioneers had used the historical-critical method, we never would have had the message that we have.”

The effect on the delegates was electrifying. Don McAdams, president of Southwestern Adventist College, captured the spirit admirably, exclaiming as he stood to his feet: “Now I know why we are here!”

Wilson’s speech was remarkable for several reasons. First, he not only had challenged the groups to confront the issues directly, he had also pinpointed the crux of the problem: In view of the Adventist understanding of inspiration, what methods are appropriate to use in the study of Scripture? Second, he had implied that the Adventist scholarly community was dangerously close to rejecting the principle of the unity of Scripture, the principle of the Bible as its own interpreter, and the validity of any form of the proof-text method.<sup>15</sup> If that description was a reflection of the way in which the church generally was perceiving its teaching ministry, small wonder that tensions had increased dramatically.

In preparation for Thursday’s work, the delegates had received photocopies of articles from a standard reference work defining the key terms: Form Criticism (Old Testament and New Testament), Redaction Criticism (Old Testament and New Testament), Source Criticism (Old Testament) and Tradition Criticism (Old Testament).<sup>16</sup> For the

most part, these articles presented the descriptive methodologies in conjunction with the classical naturalistic presuppositions, an approach that has never been acceptable within Adventism.

The position papers, in attempting to describe an Adventist position, had rejected one extreme, but had virtually gone to the opposite extreme by declaring that the descriptive methodologies could not be separated from their presuppositions and therefore could not be used at all by Adventist scholars. In other words, Adventist scholars should not presume to describe the human processes by which the Word of God has been handed down to the present generation.

Thus the delegates seemed to be faced with one of two choices: the radical critics on the far left who treat the Bible as a mere human document, or the extreme conservatives on the far right who treat the Bible as divine to the neglect of the human. But from the standpoint of the clear majority of the Adventist teaching ministry, a third option had been overlooked, namely, an understanding of the Bible as both human and divine. If Adventists take advantage of all that is known about inspiration from the writings of Ellen White, including her explicit statements on the subject, then it is possible to admit that an inspired writer has used sources (source criticism), that the inspired writer has a particular theological purpose and a particular message in mind which becomes evident in the way he handles his material (redaction criticism), that the original form of the material used by the inspired writer can be categorized by type as hymn, poem, letter, proverb, etc. (form criticism), and that the history of these various forms can be traced either before the inspired writer has used them or afterward in the successive editions written by the inspired writer himself (tradition criticism).

The clear majority of Adventist biblical scholars not only favor the use of such descriptive methodologies, but are concerned that failure to recognize that God has used human beings and human methods to bring his word to his people can lead to sudden loss of faith in inspired writings. The church was finally awakened to that reality in dealing

with the writings of Ellen White.<sup>17</sup> The question it was now facing was as crucial: Can we also be realistic in our treatment of the human element in Scripture without denying its divine origin?

The full agenda for Thursday carried the heading: "Terms of employment of pastors and teachers" and touched on such items as the church's expectations from its scholars, the causes of suspicion, and termination procedures. But the key issue was formulated clearly as follows: "Should an Adventist college or university employ as a Bible teacher a person who is committed to the historical-critical method (including such methods as form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism)? Theistic evolution? Liberation Theology? Denial of catastrophism? Neo-Orthodox view of inspiration?" Both the form of the agenda and the context of Consultation II implied that the answer to all items should be "no." Judging by the group reports, theistic evolution and the denial of catastrophism were disposed of with dispatch by *all* groups. Not a single group reported on "Neo-Orthodox view of inspiration," and liberation theology was touched only lightly. But the historical-critical method had its day in court and that was the story of Thursday at Consultation II.

As Group 9 assembled, we began our work together by dividing into small prayer groups. The seriousness of the task before us had heightened our sense of need — both of divine assistance and of human cooperation. We then settled down to our task. The scholars were intent on explaining why the two extreme positions were inappropriate in an Adventist context. The discussion was lively and to the point. We used our Bibles to describe what we meant and what we did not mean. Several members of the group had brought along Adventist and non-Adventist literature to illustrate the points under discussion.

Before long, it became evident that the church's scholars were not doing something which differed radically from that which Adventists had been doing all along. The scholars were no doubt attempting to be more consistent and more precise, but in actual practice continuity with traditional

Adventism was clearly evident.

As a group we adopted a position which clearly stated that the descriptive methodologies could be useful in Bible study and need not imply an acceptance of naturalistic presuppositions. In response to Wilson's comments that morning, the group also formulated a statement explaining that Adventists still found the proof-text method helpful. The concern of the scholars was simply that texts be cited according to their original context.

The members of Group 9 made their way to the plenary session with a tantalizing question foremost in their minds. Would there be anything like unanimity in the plenary session? Our group had worked together very well and with very little friction. But admittedly, our group was overloaded with outspoken academicians. Would the same results be forthcoming from the other groups? And what would the various groups do with the position papers, especially the one entitled: "Bible Study and Historical Method," the one that Wilson had especially requested that the delegates critique?

The secretary for Group 1, Ivan Blazen (Andrews University, seminary), was the first to report. But he kept us in suspense, noting that his group would not be prepared to report on the matter of historical criticism until the next day. Instead, his report consisted of a few items of unfinished business from section I of the agenda. Group 2, however, was ready to speak. Its secretary, Niels-Erik Andreasen (Loma Linda University) delivered a well-written report which politely but firmly critiqued the position paper, recommending in addition that the matter be referred to a study group. The substance of the report clearly pointed to a rejection of the two extreme positions and sought to lay out an appropriate middle road for Adventism.

Here was a report identical in spirit to ours. In view of his comments that morning, what would Wilson say? He thanked Andreasen, adding, "There might be a few areas that we can quiz them on. But it sounds good." Wilson had indeed caught the implications of the

report, but was not yet ready to pass judgment. Nine reports remained to be heard.

Groups 3, 4 and 5 followed the lead of Group 1 and simply reported on some unfinished business.<sup>18</sup> Wilson then asked for the report from Group 6. Raoul Dederen (Andrews University, seminary), gave a brief report which left open the question of which methods were appropriate. But significantly, the report ignored the position paper, simply recommending that PREXAD establish “a study group to further explore the matter of historical criticism and related areas.”

When William Johnsson (*Adventist Review*) reported for Group 7, the plenary session heard its most explicit statement yet rejecting the two extremes. Johnsson’s group

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further listed what they affirmed and what they denied relative to the Bible, concluding with a statement about the historical-critical method: “Any use of aspects of the method by Adventists must be partial, and with discrimination, and confined to the descriptive functions.” Wilson thanked Johnsson warmly, but still added an observation reminiscent of his response to Andreasen and Group 2: “We might want to quiz them on certain areas.”

Group 8 had gone ahead to part III of the agenda and so was not yet ready to speak to the issue of historical criticism. Groups 9 and 10 did speak to the issue and simply continued in the spirit of Groups 2 and 7. But by now the direction of Consultation II had become so clear that Wilson no longer spoke of “quizzing” the various groups. A consensus had already formed rejecting the two extreme positions. When the remaining groups reported the next day, the consensus was

unanimous. Each group, *without exception*, had voted to recognize that Scripture was both human and divine, a moderate approach growing out of Adventism’s experience with Scripture and Ellen White.

In his concluding remarks, Wilson suggested the need for fresh terminology (perhaps “historical analysis” instead of “historical criticism”) to describe the Adventist approach since the classical terminology was often misleading. Here he had explicit support from a number of the group reports.

At that point James Cox, president of Avondale College, stood and moved that a committee of administrators and scholars be set up to take a closer look at the way in which Adventists approach the Bible. Such a group should describe “both presuppositions and methodologies, giving illustrations of the latter.” Cox also suggested that each division set up satellite committees to report to the central committee. Wilson clearly favored the motion and assured the delegates that any papers produced by such a committee would be given “wide circulation.” The motion passed with ease, signalling a remarkable triumph for the spirit of cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, given the gloom of the preceding day, it was not hard for the delegates to believe in miracles. They had experienced one that very day.

But before the day came to an end, one more piece of good news awaited the delegates. It came in the form of two comments from Wilson. In his concluding remarks, he mentioned the need to be open but gentle with one another, but then added: “Except Dr. Jack and I; we can be frank with one another and still understand” — an unmistakable reference to the exchange between Wilson and Provonsa that had so startled the delegates on Wednesday. Moments later, Wilson asked the delegates to stand for prayer. Not often does a benediction attract the attention that this one did, but it formed a fitting conclusion to the day as Wilson called out to Provonsa who was sitting toward the rear of the chapel: “Dr. Jack, would you close our meeting today with prayer?” Provonsa would and did.

The remarkable unanimity in the group reports on a highly volatile topic, plus Wil-



son's invitation and Provonsha's prayer explains Thursday night's euphoria. The only question that remained was: What could Friday and Sabbath possibly offer as an encore?

By Friday, all the groups were working well together and concentrating on finishing their areas of interest, a freedom that Wilson had encouraged the groups to take, since it had become obvious that no group could cover the whole agenda in any kind of depth. The final plenary session had been moved up to 1 p.m. to allow time for an open question-and-answer period with Wilson in the chair.

In Group 9, both Harold Lance, an attorney from Ontario, California, and Robert Reynolds, (chairman, Board of Higher Education) had drawn up tentative proposals on procedures for termination of pastors and teachers. These the group discussed, voted, and passed on to the plenary session. In addition, Ben Reaves (Oakwood) suggested that one of the group reports from the preceding day had been a little too categorical in its rejection of liberation theology. The movement was much too complex for such cursory treatment. Accordingly, a statement on liberation theology was developed, discussed and incorporated into the Group 9 report.

Friday's reports in the plenary session were diverse as each group sought to get its last word into the official minutes.<sup>20</sup> Particularly noteworthy, however, was the dramatic easing of tensions. The chairmen were in the best of humor as they introduced their secretaries. The introductions became longer and more anecdotal in nature as each chairman put in a good word for the "superior" way in which his group had functioned. Enoch Oliveira, a General Conference vice president who had developed a reputation as being one of the church's "hard liners," frankly admitted what had happened in his group. "I have an identity problem," he said. "In Brazil I was known as an incurable liberal, but at the General Conference I am seen as a dangerous conservative." He then told how he had expected a "great confrontation" in his group, but his expectations had simply been met with a "great disappointment." Private reports confirmed that some of the more remarkable experiences and touching

reconciliations had indeed occurred in Group 6, the group to which Oliveira had referred.

Friday afternoon was nearly over when Wilson began a question-and-answer period. Time was going to be a limiting factor. The first two questions were missions oriented, asking about the work in Russia and China. Since neither question could be answered briefly, it appeared as though the conference might not get down to some of the issues which had contributed to the build-up of tensions in the church.

But then Louis Venden, Loma Linda University Church pastor, stood and carefully opened Pandora's box. The issue was *Omega*, the best-selling book by Lewis Walton which had caused strong reaction in the church (see reviews, pp. 53-62).<sup>21</sup> Venden was choosing each word with care as he referred to the back cover of the book and the description of Walton as one who was "rapidly" "becoming a spokesman for his church." "By what procedure does one become a 'spokesman?'" inquired Venden. "And is it true that the General Conference president is planning to endorse the book in the *Adventist Review*?"

The question put Wilson in an awkward position and his uneasiness was evident. But he answered with candor, explaining that the description of Walton on the book's jacket was strictly unofficial and hardly appropriate since no procedure exists for designating a layman as a "spokesman." Wilson admitted that he personally had been blessed by the book which he had read for the first time as he was en route to Russia. It had helped him realize the seriousness of the times in which we are living. He could not vouch for the scholarship in the book nor for the actual identity of the "omega" apostasy.

As for the "endorsement" in the *Adventist Review*, it consisted of a one-paragraph reference in a (then) up-coming "From the President" page. Wilson stated that the reference to the book was not essential to the context and that he could have accomplished the same purpose by another means. It was too late to retract the statement, however, since it was already "in print."<sup>22</sup> Wilson obviously was concerned about the polarization caused

by the book, a reaction not suggested by the initial positive response from colleagues and General Conference mail. Only later had the negative reaction begun to trickle in.

The press conference touched on several other issues before the delegates hurried home to prepare for Sabbath.

If the first three days had been dominated by the academics, then Sabbath was the day for the administrators, at least until midafternoon. The traditional Sabbath school time as well as the early afternoon hours were occupied by reports from each of the division presidents. The worship-hour sermon was delivered by C. D. Brooks, a general field secretary of the General Conference.

The closing hours of Consultation II, however, occasioned again a display of

ford, the articulate president of the North American Division, gave the key speech and urged the delegates from the world field to be considerate of the particular needs of North America. "I believe in public evangelism," he said, "but I believe that administrative leaders must be humble and helpful, asking what they can do to be of service rather than simply telling the front line workers what they must do." Moments later Walter Scragg, president of the Northern European Division, followed with another carefully worded comment emphasizing that message and mission belong together. "Now is not the time for us to send out ministers who are less well trained," he urged.

That more balanced tone was reflected in the final four testimonies given from the desk. Wilson had asked a layman, a college president, a pastor, and a division president to speak in conclusion.<sup>23</sup> All four spoke with evident conviction, but the words of James Cox and Norman Versteeg, in particular, stood out, for they represented the academicians and the pastors — those who had come under the greatest suspicion in the church. Versteeg even mentioned the uneasiness experienced that very afternoon, while Cox referred to the deeper misunderstandings of the past.

After expressing his own commitment to the continuing work of the church, Cox appealed to his fellow teachers and to his fellow college presidents to join him in renewed commitment and to indicate that commitment by standing. It was a fitting climax to the four days that the participants had spent together. As Robert Pierson, former General Conference president, offered the benediction, the Adventist family somehow seemed more like a family again.

A second observation about Consultation II concerns methodology. In general, academics like to have a hand in planning their own destiny, especially when it concerns theological discussions. Furthermore, they like to do their homework in advance. From those perspectives, Consultation II broke all the rules, a cause for considerable frustration. But in retrospect, I must admit that throwing the participants together with only their Bibles and Christian experience to

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pluralism. The setting was an open discussion, chaired by Wilson, on the theme "Message vs. Mission."

After several initial contributions of a testimonial nature, the public evangelists took over. The delegates were deluged with forceful comments, coming largely from delegates representing the rapidly growing third-world divisions, underscoring the importance of mission. The phrase "example leadership" was drilled home again and again: the administrators ought to feel "guilty" and "embarrassed" if they did not hold at least one public evangelistic series a year. One delegate told of a desperately reluctant college president and a treasurer who did not want to hold public meetings, "But we made them hold meetings anyway." Wilson himself was addressed personally and urged to set an example for the church.

But then the tide turned. Charles Brad-

rely on was probably the best way to confront the crisis facing the church. From the standpoint of the clear majority of the church's scholars, the position papers were extreme. Had they been distributed in advance, opposition would have been so well

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organized and so vigorous that dialogue would have been virtually impossible. Whether by accident or design, Wilson selected an effective procedure. I personally hope that we can return to careful planning in the future, but for this one emergency, the blind approach worked.

A third observation touches on the potential impact of Consultation II on the church. Those who participated in the healing process at Consultation II are now in a position to see the church in a fresh and more hopeful perspective. But when surrounded again by colleagues who did not participate in that experience, be they administrators or academics, the participants face the very real danger of reverting to old patterns of thought and old rhetoric. Even the reporting of pre-Consultation II words and events runs the risk of opening old wounds and destroying the healing process.

If healing is to come to the church, a spirit of trust must predominate. Nowhere is that more urgent than with reference to the teachers in the seminary at Andrews University, who have suffered disproportionately in the crisis. Both before Consultation II and

after, some church leaders have stated openly that the church has only two or three scholars who really love the Bible. Such an attitude fails to recognize both the spirit and content of Consultation II, and tragically places under a cloud of suspicion many committed Adventists who have dedicated their lives to the work of the church and the search for truth. Consultation II demonstrated that not just two or three of its scholars are dedicated Adventists, but that the vast majority are committed to the Word and to the church.

In the past, an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust has made it too easy to believe the worst about fellow believers in Christ. When a problem arises, the principles outlined in Matthew 18 clearly point to the Christian's responsibility to go directly to the person involved. It is a positive Christian duty to reject secondhand reports that question the methods, convictions, or loyalty of brothers and sisters in Christ. Investigation and close scrutiny are quite in order, but must be carried out in an atmosphere of trust. If the Adventist community can begin to learn that lesson as a result of Consultation II, the cost of bringing the delegates together will have been rewarded many times over.

By way of analysis, a multitude of things could be said about Consultation II, but I see three things as particularly significant. First, the capacity of harsh words to wound. Consultation II clearly demonstrated a remarkable unity in diversity. But injudicious rhetoric during the period of the crisis had inflicted incredible damage and pain. Significantly, not only the teachers but also the pastors at Consultation II felt themselves under suspicion. From at least five different delegates, all of them teachers or pastors, I had personally heard the agonizing wish simply to run away somewhere and hide from it all. Consultation II helped us realize that all God's children are human beings with feelings.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A brief discussion along with the text of the Atlanta Affirmation was published in *SPECTRUM*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 41-43.

2. Shortly after Consultation II, in a letter dated October 12, 1981, Verdict Publications announced the reissue of two July 4 tapes by Brinsmead under the new title, "Farewell, Adventism."

3. *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*, for example, published after Consultation II (October 23, 1981) the following: "But today Ford claims his views are held secretly by virtually all scholars and professors within Adventism. 'I really don't believe anything that the scholars of the church don't hold. The only thing is I said it publicly,' he said during an interview."

Ford's letter, published in response to the feature a few days later (November 8, 1981), contained the following: "For many years the Investigative Judgment has been considered 'dead and buried' by scholars in the Adventist church. . . . No scholarly exegetical work wrestling with its problem has appeared in the last hundred years. The nearest approach was one by Dr. Edward Heppenstall which purposely held back many things that the professor would have liked to have said."

4. Under the leadership of a new Synod president, Jacob Preus, the Missouri Synod had confronted the problem of "liberalism" at its seminary, a confrontation that ultimately led to a split in the church and the exodus of 44 of 49 professors from Concordia along with all but 50 of its 680 students.

In describing the causes of the Concordia situation, Lindsell, a former editor of *Christianity Today*, traced the problem back to an "underground movement" which involved "constructive subversion, encirclement and infiltration." The documentation is found in Lindsell's *The Bible in the Balance* (Zondervan, 1979), pp. 254, 255. The entire chapter details the Concordia situation (pp. 244-274), though it is largely dependent on Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion* (Fort Wayne: Concordia, 1977).

5. "A Battle Fought and Won" is the subtitle to Lindsell's chapter describing the Missouri Synod struggle in *The Bible in the Balance*.

6. The minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference were published in *SPECTRUM*, vol. 10, no. 1 (May 1979). They are also currently available from the Ellen G. White Estate.

7. Some information about the composition of the group and the selection process could be gleaned from incidental remarks in Wilson's opening comments. He noted that invitations had gone to about 200, 40 percent of whom came from the academic community. (The Back Page newsnote in the October 22, 1981, *Adventist Review* indicated an actual attendance of 186.) The delegates included about 35 overseas divisional officers who were in Washington, D.C., for the Annual Council, about 20 seminary faculty, and 12 lay persons nominated by the various union conferences of North America. Wilson did not elaborate further, except to emphasize that the General Conference had not selected the delegates, apparently a reference to those sent from the unions, colleges, and universities of North America. An analysis of the delegate list suggested that each union had selected one administrator and one pastor to attend in

addition to its union president. Each college had sent its president, the head of the religion department and one additional religion teacher.

8. Momentary consternation was evident among some of the delegates when it appeared that a key section of the agenda had been deleted. The revised agenda contained three major sections, one for each of the three working days. The original agenda had contained a fourth section entitled: "Mutual trust between scholars and administrators," a theme that many of the delegates felt was actually the unwritten agenda for the entire session. A closer look revealed that nothing had been lost; the individual points had simply been redistributed into the other three agenda sections.

Aside from the reorganization of the original agenda items, the only noteworthy change involved the softening of a question dealing with seminary training. Originally the agenda had read: "Evaluate the proposition that the SDA Church should have a Bible college instead of a seminary." The revised agenda read: "Define the word seminary in the context of the SDA Church and/or describe the kind of institution an Adventist seminary should be."

9. With the exception of Joseph Smoot, Andrews University president, all the chairmen were General Conference officers. The vice chairmen were a more diverse group and included college presidents, union and division officers, along with one pastor and one local conference president. By contrast, the secretaries came largely from academic circles. Six currently hold teaching positions. The other four, though presently in the General Conference in some capacity, all have academic backgrounds.

10. Several delegates observed that Group 9 was particularly well represented on the academic side. But there was also no shortage of vocal administrators to maintain a balance. The actual composition of Group 9 was as follows: Ralph Thompson, chairman (secretary, General Conference), Don McAdams, vice chairman (president, Southwestern Adventist College), Alden Thompson, secretary (Walla Walla College); seven additional officers from the General Conference: C. D. Brooks (general field secretary), G. O. Bruce (assistant treasurer), Marion Hartlein (associate director, education department), Gordon Hyde (associate director, Sabbath school department), L. A. Ramirez (director, publishing department), Robert Reynolds (associate director, education department, chairman, Board of Higher Education), Roy Williams (associate secretary); five additional teachers: Jack Provonsha (Loma Linda University), Ben Reaves (Oakwood), George Reid (Southwestern Adventist College), Kenneth Strand (Andrews University, seminary), Robert Johnston (Andrews University, seminary); three overseas divisional officers: N. R. Arit (president, North Philippine Union Mission), K. S. Parmenter (president, Australasian Division), A. C. Segovia (secretary, Far Eastern Division); one pastor: James Londis (Sligo Church, Washington, D.C.); one local conference president: John Loor (Northern New England Conference); one lay person: Harold Lance (attorney, Ontario, California). Attendance was remarkably stable; of the General Conference contingent, Hartlein and Ramirez were absent on

Wednesday, Hyde was absent on Thursday, Brooks all three days. From the academic contingent, Reeves was absent on Wednesday, Strand on Wednesday and Thursday. The only other absentee was Parmenter who was taken ill and missed Friday.

11. With reference to the contraband minutes published and circulated by defenders of the faith, Provonsha observed that he had actually been unable to recognize them as minutes of the meetings he had attended. They were fragmentary and personal, susceptible to a negative interpretation if one approached them with suspicion.

Additional details from other members of Group 9 fleshed out the picture of the post-Atlanta reaction. The participants had been labeled as "Ford sympathizers"; in at least one instance, a participant was informed by his academic superiors that his presence at Atlanta made it inappropriate for him to participate in Consultation II.

12. The administrative attitude towards "pluralism" could be detected best from the short preview of Consultation II which appeared in the *Adventist Review* (August 13, 1981) where one of the discussion questions was listed as follows: "Is it healthy to have pluralistic views expressed in college Bible departments?" A companion question listed in the *Review* was "What is the proper way to terminate the service of a pastor, biblical scholar, or teacher?" The note concluded with a reference to the concern of the General Conference president "over developing pluralistic views of our message."

In his very first words to the delegates on Wednesday, Wilson chose to distance himself from the note in the *Review*, stating that he had been out of the country and was not responsible for what had appeared in print. The official agenda questions were much more neutrally formulated, though they still made very clear that the church's teaching ministry stood under considerable suspicion.

13. The motion passed by the delegates left many procedural questions open. The official minutes read: "Voted, to recommend appointment of a committee to develop a document on freedom and the stewardship of workers in the SDA church, not only academicians, using the paper on academic freedom as an initial base. However, the document to be developed shall include a section specifically on academic freedom."

14. Additional information had also come to light about the Atlanta Affirmation. The carefully laid plans of hand-delivering the first copy of the Affirmation to Wilson with a personal word of explanation had fallen through because he had been out of the country. By now, official minutes had been prepared which were to be delivered personally to Wilson by two other participants of the Atlanta meeting, Jerry Gladson (Southern Missionary College) and Doug Clark (Southwestern Adventist College).

15. As several of the group reports would later confirm, the scholars were indeed critical of the proof-text method when it was used indiscriminately. The method could still be useful, however, provided that passages cited were used in a manner faithful to the original context.

16. The articles had been copied (with permission) from the Supplementary Volume of the *Interpreter's*

*Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon, 1976), and from the forward to *From Criticism of the Old Testament*, by Gene M. Tucker (Fortress, 1971).

17. The *Adventist Review* of September 17, 1981, had just appeared with a seven-page feature detailing the legal and personal reaction of a non-Adventist lawyer to Ellen White's use of sources. When the lawyer, Vincent L. Ramik, stated that "What really counts is the message of Mrs. White . . .," he was using a form of redaction criticism and was assuming Ellen White's use of sources. Yet no one would deny that the extent of Ellen White's literary borrowing had come as a surprise to virtually everyone in the church. The mere fact that the *Review* took seven pages to deal with the issue is evidence enough of the seriousness of the questions that had been raised.

18. The report from Group 5 came out of sequence and was actually the last report of the day.

19. In the official minutes the motion reads as follows: "Voted, to recommend to the General Conference the appointment of a committee to prepare a document on SDA Biblical study setting forth the church's presuppositions and describing methodologies which are in harmony with those presuppositions. Further, to set up satellite committees in each division to prepare papers on the topic for use by the committee appointed by the General Conference."

The open-ended nature of the motion is to be seen against the background of the purpose of Consultation II as described in the introduction to the official minutes: "The purpose of the meeting was to provide a forum for discussion between administrators, Bible teachers, et al., of issues that have tended to be divisive. From this discussion it was expected there would arise suggestions for solving some or all of these issues. These suggestions would be presented to PREXAD for study, and for implementation of those that would be regarded as viable."

20. Wilson had requested Richard Leshner, chairman of the Biblical Research Institute and secretary for Consultation II, to meet with the group secretaries to decide how the official minutes would be handled. Their recommendation, which was also adopted by the plenary session, was that the separate contributions appear in the minutes under each question and identified by group. As one secretary good-naturedly observed: "Why should we give SPECTRUM the privilege of doing source criticism?" Simply reproducing the results of each group would result in some unevenness, but the advantage would be that the nature of the consensus could thus be preserved for future reference.

21. One pastor at Consultation II noted that *Omega* had been "more divisive in its influence than Desmond Ford." The academics were generally appalled at the level of scholarship in the book; many church administrators were enthusiastically endorsing it.

22. Wilson's remarks appeared in the November 5 issue of the *Adventist Review*. The tangential nature of the paragraph was confirmed by the primary thrust of the column, which was clearly irenic in tone.

23. Harold Lance, attorney from Ontario, California; James Cox, president of Avondale College in Australia; Norman Versteeg, pastor of the Garden Grove, California, church; and George Brown, president of the Inter-American Division.