
Ford and Van Rooyen Lose Ordinations

by Adrian Zytkoskee

REGRET TO ADVISE. DIVISION COMMITTEE FEBRUARY 1, 1983, VOTED TO ANNUL YOUR ORDINATION. WRITING [LATER].

With this terse telegram, the Australasian Division informed Desmond Ford that the process of separation between the church and Ford, which began at Glacier View, Colorado, in 1980, is nearly complete. So far, Ford retains his membership in the Pacific Union College Church in Angwin, California.

Two weeks later, on February 17, 1983, the General Conference Committee, with a few dissenting votes—citing the new church policy on discipline of ministers—declared that Smuts Van Rooyen's ordination was "void." Further, the committee requested that Pioneer Memorial Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan, "review his membership for disciplinary action." This most recent General Conference Committee action charged Van Rooyen with

apostasy "because he has identified with and has given continuing support to activity subversive to the denomination and its fundamental beliefs and has persistently refused to recognize properly constituted church authority."

The actions, "annulling" Ford's ordination and voiding that of Van Rooyen, followed after Ford and his associates met in the El Rancho Motel near San Francisco International Airport on January 14–17, 1983, with representatives of the General Conference. It was to be only the first of a series of meetings devoted to theological dialogue, but it turned out to be the last. Eight days after the end of the session, on January 26, 1983, Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, wrote to Ford that "our approaches and presuppositions in the understanding of prophecy are far apart," and that there would be "no constructive purpose served" by further meetings. Wilson also informed Ford that he was giving the Australasian Division clearance to do "what seems best to them" regarding ordination. Less than a week later, the Australasian Division took its action against Ford.

The topic for the "first" meeting was "Methods and Principles of Biblical Interpretation" because the hermeneutic of Ford and his associates had been "divergent"

Adrian Zytkoskee is chairman of the behavioral science department at Pacific Union College.

from that of the church, particularly as applied to eschatology and interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy. The General Conference wanted to know whether the two groups had “common ground” or “little hope of coming closer together,” says Duncan Eva, retired General Conference vice president and chairman of the ad hoc “Ford Committee.”

Eva also states that the General Conference organized the meetings because “it was the proper and Christian thing for both groups to try and come closer together.” It was, he said, “a sincere endeavor” on the part of the General Conference “to seek reconciliation for the people involved and for the church as a whole.”

Other members of the committee selected by the General Conference were: Niels-Erik Andreasen, Old Testament scholar and associate chairman of the Division of Religion at Loma Linda University; Gerhard Hasel, Old Testament scholar and dean of the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University; William Johnsson, a former professor of New Testament at the SDA Seminary, now editor of the *Adventist Review*; Richard Leshner, a vice president of the General Conference and director of the Biblical Research Institute; Enoch Oliveira, a vice president of the General Conference; and J. R. Spangler, editor of *Ministry* magazine. Ford and Van Rooyen were accompanied by Calvin Edwards and Noel Mason, two other former Seventh-day Adventist ministers, now working full-time for the Good News Unlimited Foundation, an organization established by Ford in Auburn, California.

Participants in the meetings agree that they were conducted with a “good spirit all around.” However, differences quickly emerged. Eva made it clear at the beginning of the two days of meetings that the participants selected by the General Conference were bound by the 27 statements of

fundamental beliefs adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church at the Dallas General Conference session. He also said that the committee was not interested in “rehashing” the issues discussed at Glacier View.

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Ford, on the other hand, came to the meeting with 70 reasons why the doctrine of the investigative judgment was untenable. Other members of the Good News Unlimited team suggested that as many as three of the church’s 27 beliefs needed substantial revision. Regarding interpretation of the books of Daniel and Revelation, Ford argued that the book of Revelation cannot be viewed as “a book of history.” He said that Adventist interpretation of Revelation is a 19th-century endeavor that reads 18th and 19th-century events and dates into John’s vision. As a result, said Ford, Adventist interpretation of the book has nothing to say to the 20th-century world.

Hasel, who spoke more than any other member of the General Conference group, argued that the historicist view of prophecy, including the traditional Adventist understandings, could be defended on exegetical grounds and had special relevance for today’s world. He and others contended that Adventists should not reject the interpretation of their pioneers, but instead build upon it. Some individuals present argued that if Ford and his associates were given even tacit approval to teach and promote a new eschatology, it would become necessary for the church to extend its umbrella to include

so many disparate viewpoints that unity would be impossible.

Some have argued that the real issue dividing Ford and the church is Ford's view of justification and salvation—a view called by his critics the “new theology.” Ford himself sees his position on the Second Coming to be integrally related to his position on salvation. Some of the General Conference representatives in the recent meetings with Ford emphatically deny that understandings of salvation are at issue. They see Ford's views on salvation as being within the mainstream of Adventism and insist that there would be no real problem if Ford would refrain from publicly challenging the church's understanding of Daniel and Revelation.

Termination of the two men's ordinations was based on a new policy adopted in October of 1982 at the Annual Council of the General Conference held in Manila,

Philippines. According to that revision of the General Conference Working Policy, a minister who “openly expresses significant dissidence regarding the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church” may lose his credentials. The status of his ordination will be reviewed at an appropriate time. If he persists in dissidence, he may “make void” his ordination, moving him into the category of an apostate. It then becomes the “duty” of the local church where he is a member to administer discipline, possibly including disfellowshipping.

In spite of losing his ordination and coming under threat of losing his membership, Ford expresses sympathy and understanding for administrators. He also quotes Whittier: “Mine is a mighty ordination of the pierced hands,” and maintains that whatever happens, “I will always be a Seventh-day Adventist.”