

The Relevance of the Investigative Judgment

by Richard Rice

Seventh-day Adventists often describe the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary as their distinctive contribution to Christian theology. It played a central role in the church's early development (see box). And in recent years, Adventists have turned to the doctrine with greatly renewed interest.

This essay explores the contemporary significance of the sanctuary doctrine. Its thesis is that Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary concludes with a review of the ultimate impact of God's saving activity in human history. This review is comprehensive because it occurs at the end of history. Its effect is to demonstrate the true character of God's sovereignty. And because it surveys the whole sweep of history, this endtime judgment discloses with utter and unprecedented finality that God's deeds are great and wonderful, that his ways are just and true (cf. Revelation 15:3).¹

We can support this interpretation of the heavenly sanctuary by reflecting carefully on three important ideas: (1) there are larger issues involved in the work of salvation than the redemption of individual human beings; (2) the meaning of history is apparent only in

light of its end; and (3) the course of human history is genuinely open, undetermined in advance. We will develop each of these themes.

But first it will be helpful to review another, more familiar, interpretation of the investigative judgment. As Seventh-day Adventists understand it, the investigative judgment involves an endtime review of heaven's records. It focuses specifically on human beings who at some point in their lives have accepted God's offer of salvation.

It is commonplace to say that the investigative judgment establishes the identity of the redeemed. The endtime review of each life's record determines whether a person's sins have been entirely repented of. And when the review is complete, Christ will know whom to save when he returns.²

This interpretation of the investigative judgment raises some important questions. For one thing, it does not explain why this review is conducted immediately before Christ's return. Seventh-day Adventists believe that probation closes at death; there is no further opportunity to repent. But if a person's eternal destiny is fixed at death, it is not clear why an endtime review is needed to establish the identity of the redeemed. This is something that could be determined throughout human history as individuals die.

In addition, this explanation of the inves-

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tigative judgment does not indicate just who needs this review. The picture of God having to pore over books of record in order to find out who really belongs to him is unacceptable. It contradicts the attribute of perfect knowledge, the idea that God knows all there is to know immediately and intuitively. God doesn't need records to find out anything. And perhaps more important, it conflicts with the belief that God enjoys a deep personal relationship with his human children. He knows who belongs to him. So we cannot explain this review as something God needs to discover who his loyal followers are.

We also have to rule out human beings as the beneficiaries of the investigative judgment, even though it concerns their lives, because the investigative judgment does not take place in their presence. We have no way of knowing just who will be saved or lost until Christ actually returns.

This leaves the unfallen inhabitants of the universe. And many Seventh-day Adventists account for the investigative judgment with reference to this group. To Graham Maxwell, professor at Loma Linda University, for example, the investigative judgment demonstrates to unfallen beings that those who have accepted salvation are really "safe to save". They can be trusted not to reintroduce rebellion into the universe if they are admitted to the society of perfect, immortal beings.³

But this explanation, too, fails to account for a distinctly eschatological examination. There seems to be no good reason why unfallen beings must wait until just before Christ returns to find out who is safe to save. This could be determined throughout the course of history with the passing of each human life.

So there are difficulties with the idea that the investigative judgment establishes the identity of the redeemed. For this concept to be intelligible, we need to look for other explanations. We can find one, I believe, by reflecting carefully on the three concepts mentioned above. Taken together, they

provide us with a rationale for the investigative judgment that is faithful to traditional Adventist concerns and relevant to contemporary Christian experience.

Salvation Larger Than Individual Redemption

The presence of issues in the plan of salvation larger than individual human redemption is a familiar theme in Seventh-day Adventist theology. Its most famous and influential expression appears in the great controversy motif which plays a prominent role in the writings of Ellen G. White. This is the idea that the opposition of sin and salvation in human history is part of a cosmic conflict between superhuman forces of good and evil. And in the outcome of this larger controversy, the destiny of the entire universe is at stake.

The focal issue of the great controversy is the sovereignty of God. Properly understood, it pertains not to God's power, but to his character. The question is not whether God has sufficient power to dominate his creatures. It is whether he is the kind of person who deserves their allegiance. If power were the issue, the great controversy could easily be settled with a display of superior force. But since the issue is God's right to rule, rather than his ability to rule, it takes considerable time to resolve the matter.

The issue before the universe, therefore, is this: Does God deserve to be God? Does his character inspire his creatures to respond with love and devotion, or must they merely acquiesce to superior power?

E. G. White's writings locate the saving work of God in human history within the context of the great controversy.⁴ Christ's death speaks to the fundamental question of God's right to rule by demonstrating decisively God's true disposition toward his creatures. It provides irrefutable proof that

God places the highest priority on the welfare of his creatures. He is willing to make any sacrifice on their behalf.

The concept of the great controversy provides a similar perspective on the investigative judgment. The lives of certain human beings contribute to a resolution of the great controversy by demonstrating the effectiveness of God's saving activity. A comprehensive review of the lives of those who have accepted salvation supports the conviction that God deserves to be God.

There are several ways in which this view of the investigative judgment moves beyond the idea that it establishes the individual identity of the saved. As we just saw, it

suggests that the primary object of concern in the judgment is God's activity rather than the performance of individual human beings. Second, the investigative judgment is something God does for his people. It is his judgment on their behalf. This provides a helpful corrective to the all too prevalent feeling that we have something to fear from the judgment. People are often disturbed by the specter that one forgotten sin, unconfessed and unforgiven, will stain their record in the heavenly data bank and seal their eternal doom. Moreover, this concept fits nicely with the characteristic apocalyptic motif in which God acts to rescue his people and reverse their negative fortunes in this

The Emergence of the Sanctuary Doctrine

Development of the Doctrine

Seventh-day Adventists developed their unique concept of the heavenly sanctuary over a period of 13 years following the Great Disappointment.¹ They left intact the time calculations of William Miller and the Seventh Month Movement, which held that the 2,300 evening-mornings of Daniel 8:14 ended on October 22, 1844. But they reinterpreted the cleansing of the sanctuary as a reference to something that happened in heaven, rather than the return of Christ to this earth.

According to this concept, Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary comprises two distinct activities which began at different times. Since his ascension to heaven, Christ has mediated the benefits of his atoning sacrifice for human beings. His work as our high priest consists of forgiving sins, providing human beings with direct access to God, and directing the work of the church on earth. In 1844, Christ began the "investigative judgment." In this phase of his high priestly ministry, Christ examines the life records of his professed followers throughout human history. At its conclusion, he blots out the sins of those whose lives were/are consistent with their profession. By bringing the work of salvation to a conclusion, the investigative judgment prepares for the return of Christ to deliver his people from the earth.

Discussion of the Doctrine

Over the years, people both inside and outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church have raised

questions about this interpretation of Daniel 8:14: "Unto two thousand and three hundred days: then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (KJV).²

On the level of biblical exegesis, the precise meaning of *nitsdag* is debatable. It occurs only once in the Bible, and its translation as "cleansed" is problematic. Questions also surround the use of Leviticus 16, which describes the day of atonement services, to interpret Daniel 8, which describes the judgment of God against the little horn. In the one case, the sins of God's people are removed from the sanctuary. In the other, God removes from the sanctuary the defilement caused by his enemies. Third, Hebrews 8 and 9 pose problems for the view that Christ did not enter the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary until 1844. These chapters seem to indicate that the day of atonement services, in which the high priest enters the most holy place of the Hebrew sanctuary, were fulfilled at Jesus' ascension.

On a broader level of biblical interpretation, the year-day relationship raises questions when it is used as a principle of prophetic interpretation. Extending the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14 to the mid-nineteenth century seems to conflict with many New Testament passages which proclaim the nearness of Christ's return to those who lived in the first century. There are further questions concerning the whole character of biblical prophecy. Is there, as some maintain, a basic difference between so-called classical prophecy and apocalyptic prophecy? Furthermore, what is the nature of prophetic fulfillment? Do biblical prophecies apply

world. His people are threatened, and he saves them. The world condemns them, and he vindicates them.

The investigative judgment also concerns the people of God as a whole, not merely as individuals. We often overlook this aspect of the day of atonement services, which played an important role in the development of the sanctuary doctrine among Seventh-day Adventists. The day of atonement involved the entire people of Israel. It represented a renewal of God's covenant with the nation as a whole. Similarly, we can view the investigative judgment as involving the people of God in the most comprehensive sense. It includes those throughout history

who have responded to God's gracious offer of salvation. But it views them as a cohesive group, as one people. They are not merely a collection of individuals.

Finally, the investigative judgment concerns God's saving activity during the entire course of human history. And this is something more than its total effect on individual human lives. The investigative judgment is not just a final tally of who deserves to be saved. It assesses the cumulative impact of salvation in human history. And for this reason, it must be eschatological. This brings us to the second of the three elements in our interpretation of the investigative judgment.

to the distant past (preterism), to the future (futurism), or to the historical process as a whole (historicism)? Or, do they somehow apply to all three (cf. Desmond Ford's apotelesmatic principle)?

The concept of an investigative judgment also raises questions of a predominantly theological nature. For some people, it detracts from the sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice as the basis of human salvation. If, during his earthly ministry, Jesus accomplished everything necessary to save us from sin, what is the point of an investigative judgment?

Moreover, the idea that our sins are not blotted out until an end-time judgment seems to deprive us of the assurance of salvation. We may accept Christ and believe that we are forgiven, but our sins stand against us in the heavenly record until some indeterminate future time when they are finally removed.

Because of its importance to our sense of denominational identity, Seventh-day Adventists have devoted considerable attention to the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary. Matters of biblical interpretation have attracted most of the attention. Adventist scholars have developed lengthy word studies and examined various biblical concepts related to the sanctuary. This trend is evident in most of the contributions to the recent publication entitled, *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*.³

To a lesser extent, we have also discussed theological questions arising from the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary. Portions of the book *Questions*

on Doctrine, published 25 years ago, attempted to show that this concept is compatible with the affirmation that Christ's sacrificial atoning work was complete at the cross.⁴ And some recent papers and articles on the topic of the sanctuary emphasize assurance as the essential theme in the doctrine.⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Donald F. Neufeld traces this development in a nine-part series of articles entitled, "How SDA's Adopted the Sanctuary Doctrine (*Adventist Review*, January 3-February 28, 1980).

2. Most of these questions areas are mentioned in the Consensus Document, "Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary," accepted by the Glacier View Sanctuary Review Committee in August 1980. This and other documents from this conference have been published in several places, including *Adventist Review* (September 4, 1980), *Ministry* (October 1980), and *Spectrum* (Vol. 11, No. 2).

3. *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies*, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner (Washington D. C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1981).

4. See the answers to questions 29-31 in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: An Explanation of Certain Major Aspects of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Washington, D. C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1957), pp. 341-364.

5. William G. Johnson, "What the Sanctuary Doctrine Means Today," parts 1-6, *Adventist Review*, May 14-July 23, 1981, especially part 3; and Fritz Guy "Confidence in Salvation: The Meaning of the Sanctuary," *Spectrum* (Vol. 11, No. 2), pp. 44-53.

Judgment Must be Eschatological

No contemporary theologian has done more than Wolfhart Pannenberg to emphasize the importance of eschatology, or the study of last day events, to an adequate understanding of Christian faith. An important element in Pannenberg's eschatology is the concept of a final future, which he derives from the writings of the German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey.

The question of the end of history arises as Dilthey reflects on the possibility of meaning in life. He argues that something is meaningful as part of a larger pattern or whole which includes it. Conversely, a whole is meaningful in light of the various parts it comprises. We understand a sentence, for example, through the meanings of the individual words which make it up. And we perceive the meaning of the individual words in light of the sentence as a whole. Similarly, the individual events of a human life have meaning in connection with that life in its totality. This relation between part and whole is not complete in the case of an individual until the end of his life. So it is only in light of the end of a person's life that the individual events acquire their final meaning.⁵

Does history as a whole have meaning? Dilthey seems to think not, because it never becomes a totality. "One would have to wait for the end of history," he writes, "to have all the material necessary to determine its meaning."⁶

Pannenberg agrees that history must come to an end in order to be meaningful. But, he argues, this is precisely what Christian eschatology affirms. Christian hope anticipates the coming of a final future. With it, reality will at last become a totality, and the meaning of the entire course of history will become evident.⁷ In light of this comprehensive whole, the

meaning of history's individual events finally emerges.

The idea that individual events acquire their meaning only in relation to the whole of history makes an important contribution to our understanding of the investigative judgment. For one thing, it explains why this judgment must be eschatological. Because every event exerts an influence as long as time lasts, its ultimate meaning is apparent only in light of the end of history.

The ultimate effect, and consequently the final meaning, of a person's life is never realized at the time of his death. It continues long into the future. This is especially noticeable in the case of outstanding figures such as Martin Luther whose work and writings affect us today, hundreds of years since he died. But it is also true of less conspicuous individuals. In fact, it is true of every one of us. The events of our lives, our actions and decisions, exert an influence on other people that is largely imperceptible. And this influence continues not just as long as we live, but clear to the end of time. Consequently, a final assessment of individual lives must take into account the course of history as a whole.

This concept clarifies the central focus of the investigative judgment in another respect. The specific concern of the investigative judgment is the cumulative impact of God's saving activity in history. The effectiveness of salvation is evident as history reaches its conclusion to a degree never discernible before. With the entire course of history in view, it is clear to every observer that God is the source of all that is good in human life and that the plan of salvation has succeeded in counteracting the destructive consequences of sin. The investigative judgment thus removes all doubt about the nature and desirability of God's sovereignty.

With this in mind, we can describe the investigative judgment as a comprehensive review of the total impact on human history of God's activity in the lives of human beings who have accepted salvation. It provides a climactic demonstration of the

effectiveness of salvation and helps to resolve the question of God's right to complete creaturely allegiance.

History is Open

We have argued that the investigative judgment must be eschatological because events acquire their meaning only in relation to the whole of history and history becomes a totality only because it comes to an end. This explains why everything must be evaluated in light of the end of history. But it does not explain why nothing can be fully evaluated *until* the end of history. For this, we need to take a closer look at the nature of history itself. An open view of history helps us to understand the importance of a judgment at the very end of time.

In a publication entitled, *The Openness of God*, I argue that reality itself, and God's experience of reality, are open rather than closed.⁸ An open reality is one whose contents are dynamic rather than static. Events come into being, rather than existing from all eternity. And creaturely decisions and actions make a real difference in the scheme of things.

Such a view of reality requires a similarly dynamic view of God's relation to the creaturely world. God does not encompass past, present, and future in one exhaustive experience. Instead, he experiences the events of this world as they happen moment by moment.

The open view of reality makes possible a coherent concept of creaturely freedom. By definition, a free choice makes definite something previously indefinite. Freedom involves the presence of genuine alternatives and the capacity to make an uncoerced choice between them. And the choice is something brought about by the agent himself. In principle, therefore, a genuinely free decision does not exist until its author makes it. This is why freedom is incompatible with a static view of reality. On a static view, everything is definite from all eternity. Our

deliberations contribute nothing to the scheme of things. So we are not really free.

The open view of reality also makes possible a coherent concept of divine love. Love involves sensitivity to the experiences of its objects. If you love someone, your feelings will reflect the experiences of the one you love. You will feel joy and disappointment, happiness and distress, as the one you love experiences these things. The basic affirmation that God loves the world makes sense if God experiences the events of our lives as they occur. It is incoherent if we think of him as enjoying the total content of our lives all at once.

On the view that reality is open, the concept of an endtime review of history makes more sense than it ever could with the idea that reality is closed. If the entire course of history were definite from the outset, then God would perceive the ultimate impact of each person's life from all eternity. The actual end of history would contribute nothing new to his perspective. And the endtime judgment would have no real significance for him.

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But if reality is genuinely open, then the ultimate impact of creaturely decisions and experiences is imperceptible, even to God, until the course of history actually concludes. Only then is the final meaning of each event and each life completely clear. This is because the ultimate impact of a person's life is determined to a significant degree by the way in which others respond to him. And their response is largely a matter of their own decision. My father's influence on me, for example, is partly determined by the way I choose to respond to him. Consequently, the ultimate effec-

tiveness of God's saving activity in this world is perceptible only at the end of time. And a comprehensive assessment of God's efforts to save human beings cannot take place before history has run its course.

Contemporary Relevance

We have interpreted the investigative judgment as a review of the ultimate impact of God's saving activity in human history. This understanding makes a positive contribution to the outlook of contemporary Christians in several different ways.

First, it presents us with a theocentric concept of salvation. It directs our attention to what God is doing in human affairs to accomplish his purposes.

This view of the judgment also encourages us to look beyond the confines of personal concerns to the destiny of God's people as a whole. It reminds us of our solidarity with others in the experience of salvation.

This notion of a pre-advent judgment

heightens the sense that our actions and decisions are significant. It reminds us that the things we do day by day have a real impact on the course of events. It is true, for example, that sins forgiven pose no obstacle to our relationships with God. But their effect on subsequent events cannot be undone. Salvation does not simply cancel the results of sin, although it mitigates its consequences over the long haul. So, the concept of the investigative judgment reminds us that everything counts, for good or ill, until the end of time.

Finally, this interpretation underlines the importance of eschatology. It indicates that the course of history does not merely terminate, or run out. It concludes. It reaches a culmination with its final events. The concept of the investigative judgment thus reinforces the conviction that history will reach a meaningful climax.

These considerations give a positive answer to the question posed in our title. Properly understood, the concept of the investigative judgment is indeed relevant for Christians in the 20th century.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The present effort represents an exercise in "systematic theology," as distinct from two other aspects of the theological task—"biblical theology" and "philosophical theology." Unlike biblical theology, which examines the different concepts and ideas employed by the writers of the Bible, and philosophical theology, which assesses the meaning and validity of fundamental religious beliefs, systematic theology explores the inner vitality of the various symbols and ideas with which a religious community expresses its faith and seeks to integrate these contents within a coherent, cohesive framework of thought. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this essay is not to examine the biblical basis of the investigative judgment, nor to establish the validity of the idea by an appeal to common human experience. Instead, it analyzes the inner meaning of this idea and attempts to situate it within the large context of Christian faith.

2. Ellen G. White often explained the investigative judgment along such lines: "There must be an examination of the books of record to determine who, through repentance of sin and faith in Christ, are entitled to the benefits of his atonement. The cleansing of the sanctuary therefore involves a work

of investigation—a work of judgment. This work must be performed prior to the coming of Christ to redeem His people; for when He comes, His reward is with Him to give to every man according to his works" (GC 422).

3. See A. Graham Maxwell, *Can God Be Trusted?* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), p. 134.

4. See, for example, Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, (Washington, D.C., Review and Herald Publishing Association), pp. 19, 26, 758–59, 761, 763–64, 763–64.

5. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, edited with an introduction by H. P. Rickman (New York, N.Y.: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), pp. 106, 108.)

6. *Ibid.*, p. 106

7. *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press, 1971), 2:62.

8. Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville, Tenn.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1980).