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# The Gospel According to *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*

by Glen Greenwalt

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**T**he recent publication of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* [Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988)] is a major event in Adventism. Its appearance will have seismic implications, not only for how Adventists do theology in the future, but also how we will use our theology in formulating the boundaries of our community. In this essay, I offer more than a simple review of the book; I seek to show why the book represents, for better or worse, a milestone in Adventist thinking.

For more than a century now, Seventh-day Adventists have held fast the conviction that they are divinely commissioned to share God's final message to a dying world. Yet, in spite of this confidence, the recent publication of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* represents the first official endeavor in which Adventist authors offer a systematic statement of their beliefs. The usual explanation for this paradox is traced to the inherent fear of creedal statements, a fear held by Adventists and many revivalist movements. Creeds, it is believed, petrify belief and obscure the simple teachings of Scripture. Not surprisingly, the authors of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* are careful to assure the reader that they "have not written this book to serve as a creed."<sup>1</sup>

However plausible, something seems amiss in

this explanation. Adventists have proved time and again to be every bit as jealous of their teaching's orthodoxy, and no more eager to modify their teachings in the face of new or alternative views, than were the creedal churches from which they emerged. Adventists have been as resistant to change as any creedal church.

A more satisfactory explanation for why Adventists have resisted formulating systematic statements of belief was suggested to me some time ago by one of my parishioners. Upon hearing one of my interpretations of Scripture, he declared: "I never interpret Scripture; I simply recite it." The logic behind this way of thinking is clear: since Scripture is divinely inspired, and since human thoughts are always contaminated by error, the best theology is the simple recitation of Scripture. By reciting Scripture, our theology is not our own, but God's. It is this logic, I believe, that has led Adventist publishers to formulate doctrinal books that are either lists of biblical texts "answering" key questions, or story books in which biblical texts are recited in the course of the narrative. In this way we preserve our sense of the divine immediacy of our beliefs. We are not, after all, constructing theology; we are simply directing attention to God's Word. What is obviously overlooked in this way of thinking is that, even without comment, the selection and ordering of a certain set of texts is already an interpretation!

Whether or not the authors intended it, the publication of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* represents a monumental shift in Adventist thinking. In the future, no matter how much the church may wish to keep alive the idea of the divine im-

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mediacy of its teachings, the church's doctrines have now suffered the ignominy of being written down by fallible human beings. "The Truth" has been published between two cardboard covers, just like any other book. Personally, I admit a feeling of loss. Innocence is not easily sacrificed for knowledge. People will now know more concerning what we believe than was ever before possible; but the vision of Adventism is threatened.

In the past, Adventists were fundamentally right about one thing in their fear of creeds: the spirit or vision of a community can never be rendered identical to a set of teachings or doctrines. While God's truth is indeed "wonderful" and "beautiful," our statements of that truth are not above reproach, nor is our language always divinely crafted. This is sometimes forgotten in confessional fervor, as exhibited by a recent dismissal of critics of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* as the "one or two in our midst who seem to criticize everything the church tries to do." Such remarks, however well-intended, serve as a threat to honest inquiry and diversity. They also perpetuate a fundamental misunderstanding of the process of theological inquiry—the myth that theology is to be equated with divine truth.

## Criteria for Evaluating Theology

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Criticism is always helpful if it is presented fairly and with a healthy awareness of the beam in one's own eye. I preface my specific criticisms of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* with a set of criteria by which I believe any theology should be judged.

Theology, at its best, is a practical undertaking. It is an attempt, from within the church, to understand and explain the content of Christian faith in the face of challenge and perplexity. Its primary task is not to tell us what people believed to be the Christian message in the past, but, as early Adventists understood when they referred to "present truth," to provide us with an interpretation of Christian faith that is relevant to the present.

Theology is boring and mediocre at best when

it is viewed as the mere recitation and formal ordering of historical texts, however inspired. The Bible is poorly understood and interpreted whenever it is used as a code book with formulas for ordering relevant facts, rules, or moral directives. Scripture functions far more like a collection of case studies that portray an outline of various encounters and relationships—good and bad—that have taken place between God and human beings. The task of theology requires less the perfunctory work of a legal canonist than the analogical imagination of the poet or narrator. The work of theology is always the constructive task of imaginatively highlighting both the similarities and the differences between an original divine revelation and God's present actions and purposes.

Theology, at its worst, is demonic, as the vivid images in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation remind us. It is capable of being both idolatrous and oppressive. Not only does it assume for itself an authority due only to God, but, whether through intention or default, it uses its authority to hold in check or even suppress the aspirations for freedom and justice that are the God-given right of us all. This dark side of theology is always present, even in the best of theology. With the power of interpretation inevitably comes the power to oppress.

## Pro: Nature of Christ and Humanity

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Using these criteria, I would rank sections of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* on a par with some of the best of theology. This is especially true of the sections on the nature of Christ and human perfection. As anyone knowledgeable about Adventist doctrine is aware, these two subjects are closely related in Adventist thinking and have been the source of much controversy within the church. Stated baldly, there are, on the one hand, church members who argue that Jesus' nature was in all points just like ours. If Jesus, as our example and prototype, lived a perfect life, so can we. On the other

hand, other Adventists have argued that Jesus came as a second Adam in perfect manhood, free of all desire or propensity to sin. Hence we are saved not by copying Jesus—although he is the ideal we strive to be like—but by God forgiving our past and rescuing us from our present predicament.

In the best tradition of theology, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* redefines the debate by drawing a more careful distinction: Christ's humanity was neither that of Adam before the fall nor, in every respect, the humanity of the fallen. It was not like Adam's, because Christ's humanity had the innocent infirmities of the fallen. It was not the fallen's, because Christ had no propensity or desire to sin. Christ's humanity was literally our humanity, but without sin.<sup>2</sup>

The question still remains, "Did Jesus face temptation in the same way we do? Are we on the same footing? Or did Jesus have some advantage?" *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* astutely

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reveals that a number of different questions are being confused here. In the first place, Jesus did not need to experience all the temptations we have. "He was never tempted to watch demoralizing TV programs, or to break the speed limit in an automobile."<sup>3</sup> What counts is that the issue underlying all temptation is the question of allegiance to the will of God. Here, Jesus was not only tempted as we are, but he was at a disadvantage because he had the power to act independently of God the Father, whereas we only suppose we can. Jesus' victory over sin was therefore real and not farcical.<sup>4</sup>

Are Christians expected, then, to live perfect lives? Here again *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*

brings clarity to the terms of a debate that has often been at cross purposes. Contenders on both sides of the debate appear to be pleased with the book's formulation of these issues.<sup>5</sup> In the first place, victory in the Christian life is not an imposition demanded of Christians, but a gift offered to them. Perfection is the goal of all Christian living. But perfection is not a static quality of sinlessness. Rather it is a dynamic quality of fellowship.

### *Con: Inspiration, The Sanctuary, Role of Women*

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Unfortunately, most of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* does not qualify as great theology. Most of it is very ordinary. Like the girl or boy your parents wanted you to date, there are no glaring faults in the book, but neither is it very interesting. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* is a handy reference book for anyone who wants a list of texts offered in support of the major teachings of Seventh-day Adventists. It is doubtful, however, if many people will ever read it, for it fails to speak to the concerns and interests of most people living today.

Almost every chapter of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* illustrates the authors' indifference to the need for a contextual study of doctrines. We are presented with a great amount of information about Scripture, God, the atonement, the church, and so forth; but little of the information is addressed to everyday questions people actually ask. Space limits me to only a couple of examples of this overarching problem with *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*.

In their treatment of the doctrine of revelation and inspiration,<sup>6</sup> the authors are justifiably jealous of the importance of the Bible's authority in matters of teaching and practice. While denying belief in the verbal infallibility of Scripture, the authors argue that the Bible, rightfully understood, is the norm by which all other ideas must be tested.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, they give few if any clues as to how Scripture actually is to be used to guide decision-making, or to resolve conflicts when disagreements arise. The chapter on reve-

lation and inspiration is uninteresting, not because it does not uphold the authority of Scripture, but because it fails to offer any practical evidence of how Scripture functions as the final authority for Christians.

My second example is the chapter entitled, "Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary."<sup>8</sup> This is the most unfortunate chapter in the entire book. Not only do the authors write as if the consensus statement that emerged at Glacier View never existed, but they also use such insufferable jargon and impossible transitions that not even traditionalists can feel very comfortable with this chapter. I am convinced that neither non-Adventists nor the average Adventist will ever be able to follow the logic of the chapter. It is bad enough that the writers introduce the reader to the ancient world of blood sacrifices and to Adventist jargon with little or no attempt to cross-reference what they are saying with ordinary language. It is unforgivable that they should expect the reader to follow as they jump back and forth among the meaning of the sanctuary as found in ancient Israel, personal salvation, heavenly anti-type, and prophetic fulfillment. The fact that the object lesson obscures what it is meant to illuminate—God's offer of salvation in Christ—should have alerted the authors that something was wrong in their presentation. If the sanctuary is a parable of redemption—as the authors suggest—they would do well to read again the eloquent stories Jesus told.

My real complaint with this chapter, however, is that in the authors' legitimate attempt to outline what Adventists have believed about the sanctuary, they obscure the most important discovery early Adventists made in regard to the sanctuary doctrine: that God's work of salvation did not end 2,000 years ago on the cross—he continued to act in their day. If the sanctuary is to be a viable doctrine today, its meaning must transcend its importance to ancient Israel and to Adventists who lived in the 19th century. The sanctuary must again become "present truth."

Biblically, the sanctuary's relevance is easily shown.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Bible, it is a sign of God's covenant promise to dwell with his people, to protect and vindicate them against their adver-

saries. Judgment is good news to God's people because it is evidence that God has not abandoned them.

On the darker side, the symbol of a polluted sanctuary is used in Scripture as a sign of the disruptions that have occurred in the relationship between God and his people. Murder, idolatry, divorce, oppression of the poor, and the innumerable other sins the prophets chronicle inevitably force God to forsake his dwelling with his people; thus the Bible speaks of the abominations that make desolate God's sanctuary. The hope of restoration, coupled with the call to reformation, is surely a truth that is as relevant today as it was anytime in the past.

Thankfully, I find nothing demonic in the theology presented in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*. In fact, this book should help confirm Adventists' long-proclaimed contention that they are orthodox Christians. Still, I am concerned that the authors at times flirt dangerously with the temptation of idolatry. For example, the authors defend the notion that God has a physical appear-

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ance like us, because some have seen his hands, feet, and backside.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, God apparently dwells in a real building since the heavenly sanctuary is his "primary" residence.<sup>11</sup> While I am willing to allow that, for some people, such language is the only way they can understand God, I am troubled when such literal language is presented as an article of faith. At this point the confusion between human language and the reality it illustrates is a real threat. Idolatry is not far away.

I am even more troubled by the threat of suppression that is always a part of interpretation. The most obvious example in *Seventh-day Ad-*

*ventists Believe* is the authors' stance on the question of the ordination of women. In an unusual twist of logic, the authors quote 1 Timothy and Ellen White to support the view that an ordained elder must be a man—the husband of one wife—while allowing that if the candidate is unmarried, he should demonstrate leadership in the home.<sup>12</sup> Apparently literalism extends no further than denying women the possibility of ordination.

What bothers me in this case is not that the authors have taken a stand on the question of the ordination of women, however much I and others may disagree with it, but that they have offered no hint that some Adventists are strong advocates of the opposite view. Worse still, when one looks at the impressive list of scholars and administrators responsible for *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, there is a shocking absence of those persons—some of whom are presidents of unions and chairs of theological departments—who have spoken in defense of women's ordination. This can hardly

be seen as anything but an act of suppression.

In reading any book review, I am always interested in the bottom line: Should I buy the book? My answer is yes. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* is a useful handbook of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. Unfortunately, I doubt if it will ever function as more than a reference work, although as such it does a respectable job. On the whole, it possesses neither the prophetic challenge nor the vigor of inquiry exhibited by great theology.

I would not make *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* my only (or even my first) book on Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. That spot on my shelf belongs to *The Reign of God* by Richard Rice.<sup>13</sup> Read together, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* and *The Reign of God* give a fairly good picture of what Adventists are all about. While Rice is weaker on the biblical support of Adventist doctrines, he pursues the question of the relevance of Adventist teachings, and his book is thus a nice complement and, at times, a healthy contrast to *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), p. vii.

2. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 47.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 49.

5. For example of an appreciative note from the perfectionistic camp of Adventism, see Ralph Larson, "A Tale of Two Books: Will This Be the End of an Era?" *Our Firm Foundation* (Sept. 1988), pp. 8-11. For an example of appreciation from the non-perfectionistic camp, see Desmond Ford, "Responses," *Spectrum*, 19:2 (Nov. 1988), pp. 60, 61.

6. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, pp. 5-15.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 313-331.

9. See for example Jon Dybdahl's excellent article, "The Sanctuary as a Call to Moral Seriousness," *Spectrum*, 14:3 (Aug. 1983), pp. 47-51.

10. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 85.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

13. The absence of Rice, along with other Adventist systematic theologians such as Fritz Guy and Charles Scriven, from the editorial committee is deeply troubling. There can be little question but that this was deliberate—especially in the case of Rice, whose book, *The Reign of God*, is used as a textbook for Bible doctrines classes on Adventist college campuses. The most unfortunate aspect of this sad scenario is not the obvious slight to those in the church who have devoted their lives to studying theology, but the fact that the first official book of Adventist doctrines is much poorer for their absence.