

Remnant in Crisis And a Second Disappointment

James Londis' appreciation of Jack Provonsha's thought.

by James Londis

FOR ADVENTISTS ON OCTOBER 23, 1844, THE Great Disappointment flowed from the non-appearance of Jesus Christ. Out of that disappointment a movement with a "remnant church" theology was born, built upon the conviction that the sanctuary in heaven played a key role in the finishing of Christ's "atonement" for sin.

For Adventists 150 years later, their disappointment is concerned about the relevance and power of the "remnant" theology, especially in relation to the atonement and sanctuary. His sense that this is the case prompted Jack W. Provonsha to write *A Remnant in Crisis* (Review and Herald, 1993), the summary of his lifelong theological effort to keep this second disappointment from driving a whole generation of well-educated, thoughtful Adventists out of the church. In Provonsha's view, the church can ill afford the conse-

quences of such a second disappointment, for it is our faith in the distinctiveness of Adventist theology on the atonement that is the core of our continuing passion to preach the three angels' messages.

One confusing aftermath of this second disappointment is the conflicting theologies of the atonement rampant in contemporary Adventism, most of which, Provonsha feels, inadequately attempt to preserve Adventism's unique historical role as the "remnant." These perspectives on the atonement are either unsophisticated or misguided, leaving many church members bewildered about the special historical character and mission of Seventh-day Adventists.

To begin with, Provonsha takes issue with those who see at Calvary an innocent person dying for guilty ones, an injustice over which we should rejoice. This is only a legal metaphor, borrowed from the Roman practice of permitting the substitution of an innocent person for the guilty. Roman law was faulty in allowing an innocent person to pay the penalty for a guilty one. Only in civil law does

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present-day jurisprudence recognize the substitutionary principle. Christ was our substitute, not because of faulty Roman jurisprudence but because he is our alter ego in the heavenly sanctuary. There he is our substitute, not on the cross. Because human justice is not divine justice, God satisfies justice on his terms, not ours. "He suits the punishment to the criminal rather than to the crime" (p. 119 [this and subsequent references are from *A Remnant in Crisis*]).

The Investigative Judgment As a Referendum on God

This last notion is crucial, for it means that "The Eternal Judge, who is by nature merciful, does what is *appropriate* rather than meting out what is *deserved*, and what is appropriate for the truly penitent sinner is forgiveness" (ibid.). It would be unjust for God to forgive unrepentant sinners. However, it is just for God—who reads the heart—to forgive repentant sinners. Divinity needs no cross to make such forgiveness possible.

God's notion of "distributive justice" is not "an eye for an eye" but "to each his or her own." Here the Adventist synthesis is needed. According to Provonsha, the reason forensic theology could never make the theory of atonement "come out whole" or sound coherent, is that the doctrine of the "investigative judgment" was missing. (This is not to be confused with the "pre-Advent" judgment that occurs only in the mind of God, who determines those who are truly in Christ.)

What Provonsha refers to is the judgment on God being done by the universe, a judgment not finished until the end of the millennium. The hour of God's judgment in Revelation 14 is not the hour when God judges, but the hour when God is judged! Thus, the investigative judgment helps reveal the truth about God, even as the cross did. That is how the sanctu-

ary contributes to the atonement.

As he moves toward the end of his argument, Provonsha distinguishes between *chronos* and *kairos*, the two Greek words for time. *Kairos* is "event time," a subjective time of opportunity and fulfillment, rather than objective, chronological, or "clock" time. The birth of Jesus was *kairos* time, when the whole of history or all of *chronos* was at stake, when the meaning of all time hung in the balance.

The cross was also a *kairos* moment that pulled back the curtain and revealed what has been true for millennia within a *chronos* perspective—that God has suffered over sin. Nothing changed on the cross other than our knowledge and trust of God due to that divine self-revelation.

The Day of Atonement is like this as well. It has happened over a sweep of time rather than at one moment. One monumental legal event is not the story. The crucifixion is crucial, but so is our High Priest's continuing ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Satan's rebellion against God is given sufficient time "to unmask itself" (p. 130). Once the universe sees the truth about the deceiver, the justice and mercy of God will be forever placed beyond question.

In this way, Provonsha projects the atonement symbolized by the earthly sanctuary service into the sweep of history. *Chronos* and *kairos* are both figuratively in the service itself, which symbolizes the Great Controversy from beginning to end.

To repeat, the essence of traditional Adventism, rather than concentrating on one, even the main, event by itself, "wholistically" stressed that at-onement took time, time punctuated by significant events. This is what we have meant by Christ's continuing ministry on the "day" of atonement. The outer camp, the court, the holy place, and the Most Holy Place progression is a cosmic reality (p. 133).

For this reason, Provonsha is not worried about the exegetical issues in Daniel 7-9. What

is critical is that our Millerite ancestors were convinced that 1843-1844 was the time, and what they believed and did about it is more important than what Daniel may or may not have had in mind. History rather than exegesis resolves the issue.

Provonsha's buttresses this historical (rather than exegetical) defense of 1844 by arguing that the mid-19th century "literally marked the occasion of the beginning of the final separation of the two kingdoms" (p. 135). He suggests that a phenomenological treatment of 19th-century events supports the thesis that the conclusive struggle between good and evil was beginning, and the final phase of unveiling God's kingdom had begun. Provonsha assumes that the authenticity of the final prophetic movement's message is partly discerned in its interpretation of history. Since Adventist historical interpretation based on *The Great Controversy* is unique, it gives us the "meaning of the play" in a way others will accept.

He suggests that the Great Controversy is archetypal and may be seen in pre- and non-Christian cultures and religions. Adventists see the concept as an undercurrent in the Bible and Ellen White's Conflict of the Ages Series, and believe that the book *The Great Controversy* is the key to comprehending the three angels' messages. It paints a cosmic perspective with apocalyptic materials. We must recognize that our best guesses about it, especially in the details, are like crude, impressionistic brush strokes in an incomplete painting.

Satan's alternative to the divine order is transparent: "Human autonomy and self-sufficiency apart from God versus trustful dependence on God constitute the two sides in the great controversy" (p. 140). Ellen White defines the issue in terms of obedience or disobedience to God's law as well as two competing notions of freedom. "Doing one's own thing" is the root of a sinful autonomy.

"Absolute autonomy inevitably leads to tyranny. As individual freedoms compete for power, a struggle for dominance develops in which those with the greatest strength, power, ability (or weaponry), climb to the top of the heap" (p. 143).

One way (this reviewer gets the impression it is the primary way) God supports his side of the Great Controversy is through self-disclosure. In the words and life of Jesus the essential contrast of the two kingdoms is obvious. The whole of history may be seen as a struggle between self-serving dominance and self-sacrificing love. All of this is to argue that

something of great significance to the great controversy between Christ and Satan was taking place here on earth around the middle of the nineteenth century. The precise date—1844—may be incidental, but it is at least interesting that the completion of Charles Darwin's major essay; the birth of the philosophic father of social Darwinism, Friedrich Nietzsche; and the call of an American movement to be an instrument in the hands of God to finish His work all took place in that year. (It was a vintage year!) (p. 152)

Finishing the Work as Catalyzing Controversy

Jesus highlighted the essential difference between the two kingdoms. "Freedom as self-sufficiency leads to tyranny and self-destruction. Freedom under God leads to eternal life" (p. 145). It seems reasonable to Provonsha—as indicated in Jesus' parables—that the world will eventually reach the point of final polarization when the two groups are clearly identified and at war with each other. This is his understanding of the "finishing of the work" SDAs talk about so much, a viewpoint that may surprise some. The "work" is not finished in either geographics (every country is entered with the message) or demographics (every person hears the message). It

is finished when good and evil are clearly delineated. For this reason, no one can predict the time of Christ's return.

To Provonsha, it does "not seem unwarranted to refer to the birth of [the Advent] movement in such a setting as coterminous with the passage of Christ into the Holy of Holies in heaven, the final progression of earth's 'day' of at-one-ment" (p. 152). These events are part of the great "final contrast" between good and evil, the beginning of the disclosure of the falsity of Satan's kingdom.

On this unique Adventist perspective, at-one-ment takes the whole of time to work itself out (*chronos*), from the original rebellion in heaven until the final consummation and restoration. There are "vertical events" (*kairos*) along the way (the Jesus-event being pre-eminent) that "further the progression of the revelation of the truth about God and His kingdom that is so essential to the reuniting of the separated" (p. 130). Thus, the prophetic movement's message is a development, a synthesis of truth that has been long on the way. This is why Christ's continuing atonement ministry in heaven virtually defined the Advent movement. To preserve our continuities with the past while we change and grow, we must take this concept seriously and see the doctrine's essential truth underneath its conceptual clothes.

Adventism has taught that the faithful are expected to come out of "Babylon" during the end time. Those who are still in "the world" along with those still in the fallen churches, will join the Adventist Church remnant. Conversions during this period will be "rapid" and surprise the church. Provonsha suggests a

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variation of this understanding: "But what if the final remnant is mainly a quality of life and faith rather than an established institution?" (p. 163). In other words, at the end, we may not have a formal church—there will be no time. The final remnant gathering may be broader and more extensive than any formal church, as such, could possibly organize, however successful its proselytizing strategies. The Adventist Church may lose itself in something bigger than itself. "The proleptic remnant may one day be absorbed into the final remnant that it has played such an important part in bringing into being" (*ibid.*). It is to make known God's character. "The

prophetic movement is called to *be* as well as to *say*. . . . God is to be revealed *in* as well as *by* His called people!" (p. 164).

Provonsha borrows an illustration from physics. It is possible to cool water below the freezing point without its freezing. Such water should be free of impurities—preferably distilled—and one must handle it with some care. But it can be done. "However, supercooled water is very unstable. All that is required is that someone drop a small piece (or nidus) of ice into the water, and very quickly ice crystals will begin to form, and in a short time the liquid water will become solid ice" (pp. 164, 165). This may be the role of the prophetic movement. It is a "catalyst" in an unstable world to "crystallize" the controversy.

People will no doubt be coming from everywhere, as they do when any crisis is captured in media, and will line up quickly over the issues. When people do come out for God, where will they turn for support and

fellowship? Those who can fill that need are “sealed in their foreheads” and they “deliver an unmistakable picture of the truth about God and His way” (ibid.).

“What God is waiting for during this time of holding back the winds, then, is for the right people to find their way to all the right places of earth. The establishment of that kind of presence is what constitutes the ‘finishing of the work’” (p. 165). This requires translating the good news into all languages, including the languages of science, art, and commerce. *People* could mean “people groups.” Only God knows when the time is right to allow the storm to break.

Provonsha’s Remnant Is Only Partly Prophetic

Over the years, those who have either sat in Provonsha’s Sabbath school class or heard class lectures at Loma Linda are acquainted with many of these proposals, brought together in writing for the first time. It is a revered teacher’s legacy to his students and to the larger church that deserves a careful and impartial hearing. I found myself stimulated, challenged, and heartened by much of what the book contains. It is destined to become a classic example of how to do theology in a contemporary context, while affirming the fundamental validity of our historic positions. It helps provide a rational foundation for remaining a Seventh-day Adventist during a time when many feel Adventism is intellectually poor, if not bankrupt.

Some questions that remain are: Does the crisis in Adventism need to be enlarged beyond the theological one Provonsha describes? Is this doctrine of the atonement too dismissive of the richness of a forensic dimension? Can the fortuitous nature of certain 19th-century events really undergird—even partially—a defense of the special historical role of Ad-

ventism?

When Provonsha prefers to describe Adventism as a “prophetic movement” rather than “the remnant,” he says that what really distinguishes a prophet is his or her message, thus justifying the importance of the Adventist theological synthesis. This strikes me as only half a loaf. Anyone who has read Abraham Heschel on the prophets cannot forget the importance of the prophetic *passion*, the sense of God’s demands on his people, the importance of justice, mercy, and faith. All those past decades when the Advent people felt “special” and believed they had a unique message, they often tolerated racial and gender injustice within the church and said or did little to protest it in the larger culture. Neither has much been said or done about the systemic perpetuation of poverty, especially among children and women, both high priorities for the prophets.

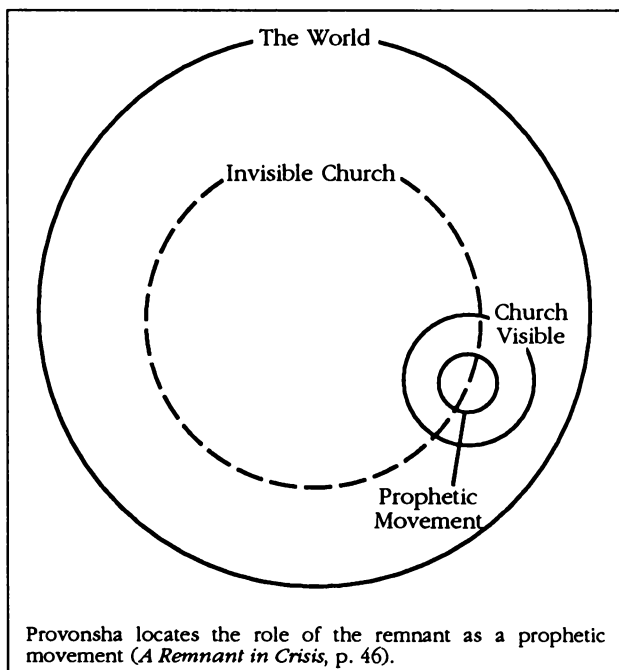
Provonsha knows all this, but fails to include it in his discussion. Before I read his analysis of the Adventist crisis, I had just finished *Resident Aliens*, a book about the crisis facing the larger Christian church—this one by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon of Duke University. It adds to Provonsha’s analysis by arguing that the church’s attempt to make its theology “relevant” or update it, as important as that may be for the preaching of the gospel, misses the mark when it comes to addressing the crisis of the church.

The real failure of the church is not to present its theology with greater sophistication (as Paul Tillich and others assumed), but to truly be the people of God, to sense the radical nature of the call to be pilgrims in this world, resident aliens through whom the Spirit creates a community unlike any other in history. Such a church would challenge most—if not all—the assumptions of the world and thereby incur its hostility. Its members would have learned how to help people mature in Christ, whether they were narcissistic, alco-

holic, racist, sexist, materialistic, power hungry, or lustful. The integrity of such a community would stand in constant judgment on all other communities, most especially the nation state. The loyalties evoked by the church would eclipse the loyalties all of us feel toward any and all competitors, whether race or culture or even family.

While Provonsha tends to characterize the crisis facing Adventism in epistemological/theological terms (we must redefine ourselves and recognize our special role as a prophetic movement), Willimon and Hauerwas identify the crisis of the larger church (Provonsha's invisible remnant, if you please) in moral and spiritual terms. More than redefining our theology, they ask that we be true to the theology that defines us. They suggest that the reason the church is losing members is that it has failed to be the church.

I suspect that underneath the theological confusion in Adventism there is also a confusion over identity of character. While we unquestionably need to rethink our theological apparatus (and Provonsha has surely helped us do that), we also share most profoundly in the crisis of the remnant's character. I wish



Provonsha had also addressed this issue. We need to recognize that while we may have failed rationally and theologically (our doctrines do not always speak powerfully to us and help us sense our uniqueness), we have also failed spiritually (we have not become the prophetic movement in our courage and moral commitments). In other words, while our failure to deal with modernity is a problem, a more critical challenge may be our failure to be the people of God, to be risk-takers who embrace the radical nature of God's call to us to be resident aliens in a world that must of necessity come to reject us as it did our Lord. As one recent writer in the *Adventist Review* put it: "Our young people are over entertained and under challenged" (as well as misinformed and theologically confused, I might add).

Provonsha's Atonement Utterly Abandons the Forensic Model

Provonsha's discussion of the atonement took me back to the battles that occurred between Roy Allen Anderson and M. L. Andreasen over the views expressed (or not expressed) in *Questions on Doctrines*, our attempt to explain our theology to the evangelical Christians associated with Drs. Barnhouse and Martin.

Andreasen accused *Questions on Doctrines* of abandoning historic Adventism, when it appeared to minimize the importance of Ellen White's phrase "the final atonement" in relation to the high priestly ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary. The book suggested that the "final atonement" referred to Christ's heavenly ministry of applying the "benefits" of the atonement achieved on the cross. This approach was seen as a "sell-out" of Adventism in favor of an evangelical, reformed, more forensic model of salvation. This debate later included Robert Brinsmead (who stood on both sides of the issue at different times) and

Geoffrey Paxton, the author of *The Shaking of Adventism*.

For the evangelicals, the cross is all that is needed for human beings to be “right” with or “justified” by God in Christ. Anything added to the cross constitutes “works” righteousness. Christ was our substitute “once and for all.” On the cross, God’s victory over sin was final and complete.

Adventist theologians like Heppenstall and Anderson wanted to affirm the centrality of the forensic value of the cross (Christ was our “legal” substitute) for Adventist theology. At the same time, they also insisted that Adventism goes beyond the forensic model made popular by the Reformers, who saw it taught in the writings of the Apostle Paul, especially Romans and Galatians.

More is needed for God to win the final victory over sin, including the investigative judgment as a referendum on God’s character. Sin still exists after the cross and must be disposed of in a just fashion. Andreasen tended to see the “final atonement” in terms of the sanctification/perfection of believers who are alive when Jesus returns. This viewpoint was not supported in *Questions on Doctrines*.

As Provonsha recasts this debate, he utterly abandons the forensic model of *Questions on Doctrines* and argues that the substitutionary, legal language of the Pauline writings is metaphorical only. It stands for nothing literal, even while it is saying something quite substantive. Literally, there can be no sense in which Christ’s death on the cross substituted for what each sinner deserves. No “ontological” transaction of any kind took place. That is, God’s intrinsic relationship to us did not change in any way.

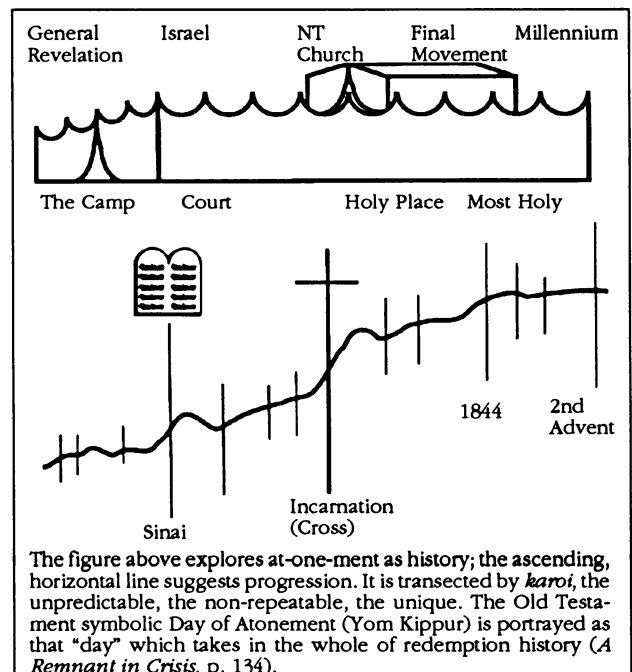
When Paul says that “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (NRSV), nothing happened on the cross *beyond the fact that God was revealing himself to us*. The accomplishment of the cross was epistemological, not legal or ontological. At Calvary, we

saw God in Christ in a clarity never before seen in human history. It was the revelation that was reconciling, not the death-by-crucifixion itself. In other words, because we see God’s character more clearly in the cross, our relationship to God changes, rather than the cross changing God’s relationship to us. In this way, Provonsha breaks with Heppenstall.

At the same time, he embraces Heppenstall’s suggestion that the judgment is a referendum on God. Provonsha sees it as a continuance of God’s efforts to make the truth about himself clear to the world. What he does is project that understanding back through the cross. All of the salvation-history events are a divine referendum, an attempt to reveal God to the world.

Provonsha is willing to make the cross the central event of the many “kairoi” in which God reveals His character and unveils the nature of the conflict between good and evil.

Eschatological events are an integral part of that process. That is why doctrine and the three angels’ messages are so important. God’s character and the nature of the divine war with sin may be seen on the cross proleptically, but the war will engage every living human being only at the end. In this way, Provonsha justifies



the unique role of Adventism in history. We are a critical part of God's effort to "wrap up" a dramatic conflict of the ages that was seen in all its fury on the cross. It is a view theologians have sometimes called the "moral theory" of the atonement.

An Alternative Model of the Atonement

I must confess a certain unease with a complete abandonment of all substitutionary, ontological language in the atonement. The notion that Jesus "bears our sins," it seems to me, cannot be explained away simply as a Pauline confusion about law and metaphor. In Provonsha's view, the death of Jesus was necessary only because it dramatized the truth about God and the nature of evil, a revelation that encouraged sinners to confess and find redemption. In the forensic view, the cross—in some sense—made it possible for God to justify sinners. Without it, the demands of divine justice would have been violated.

Perhaps a third position is possible. In his book *Christus Victor* Gustav Aulen searched for one and found it—he thought—in the view that the cross was a "decisive battle" in the war between good and evil. In this way, the power of sin over the human race was broken. It was a battle only Christ could fight and win.

In this sense, something about the "being" or ontology of God's relation to sin and sinners was different. This approach tried to avoid the difficulties attached to the strictly forensic view (God had to satisfy his "law" with his Son's death) without sliding into the notion that the cross was revelatory only. I am inclined to believe that Aulen's enterprise is more adequate than Provonsha's, though just how one would articulate the meaning of the atonement in this middle position has probably never gained consensus. Perhaps it is a mystery that requires us to hold both polarities

in some tension.

I am also uncertain about the value and validity of Provonsha's attempt to identify Adventism as a "prophetic movement" based on a phenomenological analysis of 19th-century events, especially those that occurred in 1844. His pointing out that 1844 included events associated with Darwin and Nietzsche as well as Adventism strikes me as grasping for straws. When he says that it is more important for Adventists to be right historically than exegetically, I do not see this in any way strengthening the Adventist claim to a unique role in salvation history.

If we grant (something not everyone is prepared to do) that we cannot "prove" exegetically that the three angels' messages and Daniel 8:14 apply in some special way to the Advent movement, it seems gratuitous to claim that the confluence of historical events in the 19th century warrants Adventists believing in themselves. Virtually any religious group, it seems to me, could go back to its historical roots and find a number of factors and events that justify the importance of its existence. I think I prefer Provonsha's emphasis on the Adventist understanding of the "meaning" of the play as a justification for believing we have a contribution to make, rather than the historical milieu in which we arose.

All of this is to say that *A Remnant in Crisis* is an important contribution to the effort for self-understanding among Adventists, especially those disaffected or confused by earlier doctrinal statements. It will certainly have many detractors and many supporters, and reinforces the idea that different theological currents flow through Loma Linda than through the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. It will certainly stimulate debate about those things that truly do matter most to a denomination that believes it exists for some divine purpose, and not just as some "accident" of history.