

# What Does "Soon" Mean?

*The Adventists' Dilemma.* By Edward W. H. Vick.  
Nottingham, U.K.: Evening Publications, 2001.

*Reviewed by Michael Zbaraschuk*

Edward W. H. Vick's new monograph, *The Adventists' Dilemma*, should be required reading for any Adventist who wishes to examine seriously her or his intellectual and religious heritage relating to questions of the Second Advent. Vick uses an approach taken from the philosophy of language, putting his central point in the form of a dilemma regarding a statement that mainstream Adventism has affirmed for years: "The Advent is soon." The dilemma is that when we examine this statement closely, it is either false or meaningless: false, if "soon" is taken in the ordinary sense of the word, and meaningless if it turns into something like "in the unknown but indefinite future but not long into that future."

After outlining the dilemma, Vick goes on to examine various contemporary Adventist responses to this dilemma: the argument from prophecy, the idea that the delay is only apparent, the idea that language about the Advent is inspirational or hortatory, and the idea that the apparent delay is based on God's pleasure that we are misguided. Although Vick notes some interesting directions in contemporary discussions about the breaking of the Kingdom of God into the present day, he nevertheless finds all of the attempts to preserve the statement "the Advent is soon" sadly wanting.

He then proposes that, in light of the dilemma, we return to the New Testament sources and see what they say about the delay of the Christ's return. Vick points out that the New Testament was written in a context in which the expected return of Jesus had not occurred, and that the writers found Jesus' teachings appropriate to their situation of disappointment and delay. Noting carefully the differences between our situation and theirs, he offers the suggestion that a careful examination of the New Testament writings about the Kingdom of God and the return of Jesus could offer some suggestions for a way out of the dilemma.

Finally, Vick offers the beginnings of a systematic eschatology, based on suggestions from Karl Rahner. Pointing to the primary experience of God's grace in the present and the doctrine of last things as a projection into the future of the experience of the present, Vick sketches the outline of a good, gracious, creative, powerful God conserving or preserving what is good in the future, breaking into the present from outside history, the future calling us on. The eschatology that Vick sketches is firmly in the camp of the "realized" eschatology, meaning that it is present, rather than future, that it is existential, rather than historical. Although such an emphasis is not totally unknown within Adventism, the shift away from an historically oriented eschatology is significant.

Vick's willingness to describe the emperor's lack of clothing is refreshing. Although there has been a spate of recent Adventist writing on the "delay" of the Advent, most of it is, as Vick describes, an attempt to preserve the status quo. With his frank admission of error on the part of the Adventist contention that the

Advent is “soon,” Vick clears much intellectual underbrush from the scene and allows us to see the problem far more clearly than before.

In addition, his attention to writings in the New Testament needs to be praised. Vick’s point that the New Testament was written at the time when the early church was concerned over the failure of Jesus to return is well taken, as is his attention to the difference in contexts between our contemporary world and that of the Greco-Roman Empires. His point that the three-story universe is implied in the idea of a “return” of Jesus from a celestial place that is “above” us is only one example of such attention.

Another excellent point that arises out of his attention to the New Testament is that the Kingdom of God and the Second Advent are not identical. Vick points out that while New Testament writers expected and wished for the return of Jesus, they also paid attention to the present experience of God’s kingdom. The delay of Jesus’ return did not invalidate their present experience of God’s grace.

Finally, Vick’s insistence on rationality in theology and his crusade against sloppy thinking and obscurantism are points that are too often ignored in all theological circles.

Vick’s treatise has much to engage readers. The first point I would like to address is his assumption that neologisms are not a legitimate use of language, ignoring the phenomenon of “semantic drift” as a possibility in the Adventist discourse about the word “soon.” Meanings are dependent on contexts, and it is entirely possible for the same word to have one meaning in one context and a different one in another. Certainly, the Adventist discourse about “soon” with reference to the Advent has meaning—it just might not have the meaning that someone from outside might think it has. Vick is correct, however, to point out that we should be clear about what we are talking about, and if, for example, the use of the word and its meaning has “drifted,” such a drift should be acknowledged. I suspect that much of Vick’s criticism would still hold.

Another point on which I wish Vick had spent more time is the relation between religious experience and the Scriptures. In his final chapters, he points out that the present religious experience of God’s grace is primary, and it is our present experience we discuss when we formulate a doctrine of last things. At the same time, he seems to have a view that the New Testament writings are in some degree normative or deeply suggestive of workable answers to the questions he poses. Vick also explains in a footnote that the New Testament views are not ones that we can adopt uncritically, and notes the

existence of a variety of theologies in its writings. In addition, he points readers to aspects of the New Testament writings that deal with the present reality of God’s salvation. How and why does he consider such passages authoritative? Is it on the basis of religious experience? I think it would have to be, but I wish for more clarity surrounding this point.

Although it is a minor point, I found myself wishing that I could open a discussion with Vick on his view of the person and work of Jesus. He seems to adopt wholeheartedly the position of E. P. Sanders and others that Jesus was an eschatologically oriented prophet in a Jewish milieu, while at the same time pointing out that the Synoptic Gospels were written some distance from the actual life of Jesus and reflected the needs of the early church.

How do we know whether it was Jesus’ message or the early church’s that was eschatological? Put more directly in relation to Vick’s topic, he seems to hold that Jesus’ message was that the Kingdom of God was present, and that a consummation would also come. He holds that model up as one from the New Testament for contemporary Adventists to emulate. How does he know that Jesus’ message had both a present and future component, and how does he make distinctions between the early church’s view and Jesus’ view about the Kingdom of God? This is perhaps a minor point, because Vick does point to the New Testament—rather than to Jesus’ teachings specifically—as the model by which Adventists can come to grips with the delay of the Advent. However, he does seem to engage in the appeal to Jesus as an authority, which would seem to be an inconsistency. This is another point on which I would like more clarity.

I wrote at the beginning of this review that Vick’s monograph should be required reading for any Adventist who wishes to examine seriously her or his intellectual and religious heritage relating to questions of the Second Advent. That is true, but the book should not be read as the final word on the subject. Rather, it is a serious criticism of traditional Adventist eschatology and offers suggestions toward a more adequate doctrine of last things. Much more labor will need to be done before that day comes, and many more books will need to be written—hopefully others written by Vick.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Openness of God

Ever since Richard Rice came out with his first book on this issue ("The Openness of God," *Spectrum*, summer 2001), I have been a proponent of the open view of God. I have to confess that I stand alone in my family in my support of this view. The issues that Rice raises in his excellent article are the same ones the rest of my family stumbles over. However, I agree with Rice that the open view is the most cogent and most consistent with Scripture, and that it best addresses the issue of freedom.

The reason I have stepped into this discussion is to share with everyone who reads *Spectrum* something that, for me, has been a fairly new but exciting discovery. This discovery has, in my opinion, profound consequences in relation to this debate. I have been doing a lot of reading in physics of late. The most exciting thing I have learned is that physicists now believe freedom is a much broader issue than that of creaturely freedom. They now believe that freedom is fundamentally built into the very structure of the universe all the way down to the subatomic level and below.

This insight excited me so much that I had to call up my father-in-law, Al Smith, who taught physics at La Sierra University for many years. I phrased my question like this: "If I understand what I read correctly, it seems that God is so committed to freedom that he built it into the very structure of the universe at the most fundamental level. Am I right?" I could tell by the tone of his voice and by his typical short answer that he, too, was excited that I had made this discovery.

I encourage Rice to engage physicists he knows in this discussion. They might have some valuable insights to strengthen his views. Regardless of whether or not we all agree with the open view, I think we can agree that, as Adventists, we are committed to a view of God as a God of infinite love.

Thank you again for a stimulating and excellent issue.

*Dave Reynolds*  
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In Richard Rice's article, it is not clear what the writer means by God's openness. Does he propose to inform God

of something he did not know? A wise employer will be open to the suggestions of his employees. But that employer is finite in all things, and his employees may well have some information he lacks. Can this be true of God?

The article focuses on the question of God's foreknowledge of future events. In particular, it takes the position that if he knows what we will do we are not free to do something else. I disagree. This position is artificial, not what we are actually faced with. For that situation to arise we must know what God knows of the future events, and these in turn must involve an act or omission on our part. If we do not know what he knows it will not occur to us that what we are doing agrees with or contradicts what he knows. This being so, how can we be said to be prevented from doing what we choose? Lack of money or lack of time, and much more will stand in the way, but not his foreknowledge.

What we face is a practical problem more than a theological one. We are not likely to know what God knows that stands in our way of doing something. Rather, the problem is more apt to be a lack of funds, time, or opportunity. If we are restrained by God, the cause is more likely to be our respect for his law than our knowledge of what he knows.

*Kenneth H. Hopp*  
Yucaipa, Calif.

### Church Music

I greatly enjoyed the interview with Herbert Blomstedt (*Spectrum*, summer 2001). Some years ago, I saw him conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra in Beethoven's Third Symphony. I have not forgotten the performance—it was polished and powerful. He had just released a well-reviewed recording of that composition with, I believe, the San Francisco Symphony.

Blomstedt's comments on church music were right on target. Our church hymnal has a large collection of excellent, high-quality hymns. However, in most churches there is no effort to help the congregation learn these new hymns, so we

all too often select and sing the gospel-type hymns of lesser quality—those with the same types of flaws that Maestro Blomstedt pointed out with respect to “How Great Thou Art.”

A music issue of *Spectrum* would make interesting reading, particularly if it focused on pragmatic issues pertaining to congregational singing in our churches and covered topics that would be relevant to small congregations, as well as our larger, institutional churches, where the resources often exist to ensure a somewhat higher quality.

I do not necessarily have in mind a *Spectrum* issue that debates the merits of contemporary Christian music vs. hymns vs. classical music. That debate is old and will never be resolved. But an issue devoted to worship and music in worship might focus on different styles of worship, not necessarily criticizing the styles or comparing them favorably or unfavorably to one another, but focusing on how each style might be improved so that, gathered together in a congregation, we sense and respond to the awesome power and majesty of God.

*Jeffrey Bromme*  
Washington, D.C.

## Dancing

Thank you so much for publishing Chris Blake’s excellent article “A Time to Mourn, a Time to Grand March” (*Spectrum*, summer 2001), the point of which could perhaps have been summarized by the addition of this old chestnut:

Q: Why don’t Seventh-day Adventists make love standing up?

A: It might lead to dancing.  
Keep up the sacred-cow slaying.

*Jerry L. Cox*  
Modesto, Calif.

## Hell, No

In the letter to the editor, “SDAs and Evangelicals,” (*Spectrum*, summer 2001, pages 76-77), the anonymous author argues that not believing in eternal hell somehow diminishes the sacrifice on Christ on the cross. He holds that “perish” in John 3:16 means “eternal conscious separation from God,” not “annihilation.”

The cross of Christ provides a powerful argument against the author’s thought. Most of us would agree that Christ suffered the punishment that unrepentant sinners will endure in the lake of fire at the end of the millennium, which Revelation 20:14 calls the “second death.” But he did not suffer an eternal hell. Although he tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9), his sufferings on the cross lasted just six hours.

Did he suffer conscious separation from God? He certainly

did. Did he pay the price for our sins? Yes. Was his sacrifice sufficient to redeem everyone of us? Infinitely so! But his sufferings unto death do not demonstrate an eternal hell.

*Ralph Neall*  
Lincoln, Neb.

## Historic Beliefs

Whatever our feelings about the Perez lawsuit, Tom O’Hanley’s article (“What’s in a Name,” *Spectrum*, winter 2001) offers fresh evidence of the vast rift in Adventism between the perceptions of people such as O’Hanley and those of the denominational mainstream. Perhaps his article will help dispel the persistent illusion of some that these polar-opposite convictions can peacefully work and worship alongside each other in the contemporary church.

Whether or not he or others like it, our historic Adventist eschatology regarding the papacy and other topics is not only based on clear biblical evidence, historical and contemporary affirmation, as well as confirmation by Ellen White, it is also part of our official beliefs as a church, as documented in the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, pages 155-57, 168, 343.

O’Hanley’s claim that in our presumably enlightened world “we have had to work harder and harder to find potential new threats” to religious freedom, makes one wonder how much attention he pays to national or global events. Even now, as I write, the pope’s influence on President Bush regarding the stem cell debate is making headlines and causing widespread concern. Why can’t O’Hanley and his fellow travelers give any consideration to the possibility that such events might possibly mean Ellen White and our historic beliefs are right after all?

*Kevin D. Paulson*  
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## Correction

In our summer 2001 issue the last paragraph of Pat Cason’s poem “Window, Wall, and Door” was unfortunately omitted. With our apologies to Dr. Cason here is the last paragraph as it should have appeared:

And in that moment before the door opens,  
the doctor’s white blossoming into the room,  
you long to feel hope  
open around you, the dogwood unfolding  
its trunk and its limbs, while its roots  
search for the heart of the earth.