



Theological Transitions | BY DAVID LARSON

Since the death of my father, Ralph S. Larson, I have spent much time thinking about his life as a whole and how similar and different mine has been so far. Although he was an outspoken advocate of "historic Adventism" and I'm not, I have been surprised by how much we had in common theologically. But there were some big differences. One of these is that I am more comfortable with theological diversity and change than he was.

My father was not a sentimental man—far from it!—but he could be nostalgic about the Advent movement he joined when he was sixteen years old. On occasion, it was painful for me to read him mourn in print for those days that are forever gone. "That was when all around the world we all believed the same thing and acted the same way," he wrote.

I see this differently. I suspect that in 1936 Adventism was more diverse than my father realized. Also, I believe that our movement, like everything else, has always been changing, sometimes in good directions and sometimes in bad. Theological diversity and transitions are inevitable. To some extent we can guide them; however, we cannot avoid them and it can be destructive to try. But here are some things we should expect of our theologians:

- They should propose changes *openly* and *honestly*. One of the sources of the frustration and anger in some quarters about the book *Questions on Doctrine* is that, as virtually everyone now agrees, it published some changes without first making a strong case for them within our church and because it handled some of the our denomination's theological history in ways that were, to use one of George Knight's understatement, "less than transparent." At the time, Raymond Cottrell and others predicted that this would produce fifty years of controversy. They were right.
- They should submit to *peer review*, as do all other professionals. Some in recent years who have felt called by God to introduce doctrinal changes have been reluctant to place their ideas before their theological colleagues.

Instead, they speak of these things almost exclusively to non-theologians who never seriously challenge them on an equal footing. This is the equivalent of a physician who talks and listens only to patients.

- They should not think of themselves as primarily *defending* or *discarding* earlier doctrines. Rather, their job is to *study* the theological heritage, selectively *retrieve* those themes that remain promising, *examine* them in the light of the whole of Scripture and the pertinent humanities and sciences, and *reformulate* them in ways that are fruitful for the church and society today.
- They should usually advance newer formulations *positively* instead of attacking earlier ones. This is how Arianism in our denomination was finally overcome. I heard one of its last proponents at a worship service some time between 1964 and 1968. This elderly Christian gentleman, who has long since gone to his rest, took his Arianism with him to his grave. This is the best way to prevail!
- They should *not try to demolish* the positions they oppose. In sports, one can win by only one point! In such cases, the winning team often congratulates and thanks the losing one for playing so well. Theologians should do the same thing. They lose nothing when they grant that the other side scores some strong points too.
- They should *not be ashamed* of their previous theological failures. Some in our midst seem embarrassed by the Great Disappointment and its theological aftermath. They need not be. Many postmillennialists, who believed that human life was gradually improving, were just as disappointed by World War I. Mistakes are common in all walks of life. The point is to learn from them.

The main thing to remember in the midst of theological diversity and change is that "God's steadfast love endures forever." This is true always and everywhere! ■

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