

## Paradigm Shifts in Adventism

*Needed or Unwanted?* | BY BØRGE SCHANTZ



Some of the Christians who expected Christ's Second Coming and experienced the Great Disappointment of 1844 did not lose courage. They met, gradually organized, and formulated their fundamental beliefs around 1880.

They accepted the Reformation principles of righteousness by faith, but they thought that the Reformers had not gone far enough. There were Roman heresies that remained in Protestant churches. There were forgotten biblical teachings that were not revived.

The first Adventists thought they were called to finish what the Reformers had left undone. They labeled their special message *present truth*, a term derived from 2 Peter 1:12: "Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth" (KJV).

They claimed that the forgotten biblical teachings they had rediscovered were God's appointed message before Christ's Second Coming. Erroneous teachings would be exposed when these special biblical messages were presented. The early Adventists believed they were a prophetic movement called to preach present truth. The term *present truth* constituted what they later called the "Advent message."

With these terms, vital Bible teachings (Sabbath, conditional immortality, health principles) were amalgamated

with end-time prophecies. This combination of eschatology and doctrine were regarded as the seal of God.<sup>1</sup>

The call to proclaim present truth received strong endorsement when Ellen G. White wrote that the Third Angel's Message and the Sabbath were to be regarded as "the sealing, separating message" of God.<sup>2</sup> In other words, to gain a passport to the Holy City, one must not only accept Jesus Christ as savior, but also obey *present truth* as defined by the Church.<sup>3</sup>

### Paradigm Shift in Seventh-day Adventist Eschatology

The Seventh-day Adventist Church faced the twentieth century with a message based on traditional doctrinal absolutes it inherited from Evangelical/Protestant traditions. It augmented these with biblical doctrines developed during the formative years of the movement.

The mission statement of the General Conference succinctly expresses the Church's message:

*The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to communicate to all peoples the everlasting gospel of God's love in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12, and as revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Saviour and Lord and to unite with His remnant church; and to nurture believers as disciples in preparation for His soon return.*<sup>4</sup>



This mission statement is succinct and direct. Still, Adventist structures, evangelistic methodologies, theologies, and prophetic interpretations are all influenced by the world in which they exist. Over the past century, societal changes have caused the Church to make adjustments and modifications in the methods it uses to proclaim present truth.

Paradigm shifts have slowly but surely taken place. These have resulted in attempts from leaders to meet the needs of the day by efforts to incorporate current events in the religious and political world within Adventist eschatological patterns. At times, conservative boards and members have found it difficult to understand and accept these changes.<sup>5</sup>

### End-Time Eschatology

Eschatological motives are part of the word *Adventism*. The Church is a "remnant" that fulfills end-time prophecies. In the decades up to and after the Second World War, the Church's literature, Sabbath morning sermons, and public evangelism focused on religious and political events, scientific developments, and natural catastrophes in various parts of the world, and how the Scriptures' predicted these events.

In contrast to these rather negative omens, the Church declared that preaching the gospel to the whole world (Matt. 24:14) was an eschatological sign of the Kingdom. In this way, missionary involvement became a work of God, as well as a work *with* God. By involving itself in worldwide missionary activities, the Church thought it could play an active role in hastening the Second Coming.

### Between-Time Eschatology

Apocalyptic eschatologies were the main topics of preaching and printed materials produced by Adventist in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the history of Christian missions has revealed that an extreme preoccupation with the nearness of the end of the world often crowds out the proclamation of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. The result is a failure to build lasting structures needed for the future mission involvements.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, early Adventists tended to ignore institutional factors vital to securing the movement's future. Living in expectation, church members saw no need to be involved with the rapidly changing world in which

the Church existed.<sup>7</sup>

As with first-century Christians, nineteenth-century Adventists were concerned with the delay of his coming. The waiting time resulted in spiritual inactivity and even caused apostasies. In their eager expectation for Jesus to return, early Adventists overlooked texts implying that the Lord might delay his coming (Matt. 24:14; 2 Thess. 2:1–12; 2 Peter 3: 3–9) and warning that "no-one knows about that day or hour" (Matt. 24:36).

However in accordance with the parable in Luke 19:12, 13, some Adventists eventually transformed the delay into an opportunity and a justification for action.

*Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.'"* (Luke 19:12–13 NKJV)

This parable encouraged Christ's followers to occupy, trade, and do business during the waiting period. The paradigm shift from an *end-time eschatology* to a *between-time eschatology* was gradual and not achieved without trauma. From the 1870s, Adventists began to focus their attention on refinements of doctrines, administrative structures, and an ever-increasing variety of enterprises devoted, for example, to publishing, education, and medicine.

Religious groups tend to go through similar stages as they develop from sects to denominations. The creation of detailed policies, bureaucracy, and institutionalization occur late in the process. This change can be seen as a symptom of decline and loss of vitality. However, a framework of institutions and policies was needed in order for early Adventism to survive.

Institutionalization had a double focus: to strengthen the Church and to reach the public. The systematic benevolence (tithing) system introduced in 1859 provided a firm economic basis. Appeals for financial support made it possible for the growing Church to plan for world missions.<sup>8</sup> In itself, this was a paradigm shift.

Adventism's approach to mission began with the exclusivist "shut door experience" police (1844–51) and expanded to concern about preaching to Caucasians in North America. By the 1870s, literature evangelists and missionaries were being sent to Protestant/Christian areas in Europe, Australia, and South Africa. Around 1890, the Church targeted the non-Christian world with evangelistic efforts.<sup>9</sup>



In the "do business till I come" period, present truth was still preached. Interpretations of end-time prophecies were updated as new wars and calamities occurred and sophisticated means of communication were invented. The two paradigms (end-time and between-times) coexisted, but often in an unhappy marriage and with various kinds of tensions. The between-time concept no doubt gradually gained the upper hand.

### **Social Concern Eschatology**

Over time, another paradigm gradually crept in. In 1960s, general global concerns that held the interest of people in the late twentieth century received attention in Adventist sermons and literature. This shift emphasized present truth less than before.

This paradigm was a humanistic philosophy that stressed apocalyptic preaching less and placed more emphasis on general religious topics, including social and psychological aspects. This new priority did not occur without tension and resistance from conservative members. They were anxious about maintenance of the original remnant's uniqueness and the Advent Message as emphasis moved away from apocalyptic theology to doctrines shared with mainline Christians.

Social activities for societies and individuals are powerful, worthwhile, and biblical. However, they have the side effect of pushing spiritual matters into the background and making witness for distinctive doctrines a questionable activity.

In Western countries, social concerns are best observed in a trend within some educational and medical institutions. Whereas emphasis on social services had previously incorporated both physical and spiritual dimensions, spiritual aspects were gradually pushed into the background.

In general church activities, such as lectures and literature, it is currently apparent that the nearness of Christ's coming and signs of the times no longer stand in the forefront. This, despite the fact that people today are troubled by issues previously at the center of Adventist preaching. Various kinds of wars, terrorism, Islamism, global warming, climate changes, and financial disasters could be timely elements for public evangelism if newly interpreted within biblical themes.

One bishop in the Danish Lutheran Church stimulated a national debate recently by proclaiming that climate changes and other calamities among people and in nature

could be fulfillments of Bible texts as signs of the world's end. In lectures, sermons, television interviews, and articles, he referred to New Testament prophecies about wars and rumors of war, earthquakes, famines, distress among nations, and signs in the sun, moon, and stars.

Fellow bishops, pastors, and churchgoers reacted strongly to what they regarded as over-imaginative interpretations of New Testament texts. They associated the bishop irrelevantly with what they termed "dubious Christian sects," such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>10</sup>

In this case, it was sobering and disappointing that Seventh-day Adventists, with a history of more than one hundred years in Denmark and a name that highlights the Second Advent, were not even mentioned in media references as a tradition that preaches about signs of the Second Coming.

Presently, lectures, seminars, Voice of Prophecy Correspondence School lessons, and articles in Seventh-day Adventist publications slant steeply toward subjects such as family relations, stress management, marriage, childrearing, problems with teenagers, health and diet, and personal finance. Generally, the only place our end-time doctrines are still being taught is on private and church-supported television channels.

One Sabbath morning, I was abruptly asked to preach at a divine service. I quickly searched my sermon file and found a lecture about the Second Coming of Christ that I had presented years before. I adapted this public lecture for an Adventist audience, although I thought it would be spiritual milk for babes. After the service, however, quite a few hearers told me that they appreciated the sermon and commented that they had not heard about this pillar of our fundamental beliefs for years.

It should be observed that reports of church population show either no growth or losses in Western churches, but increasing numbers in traditional mission territories. Out of about sixteen million Adventists, more than 80 percent live in the developing world. In this area, where political and economic conditions are often difficult, contextualization and adaptation of present truth to local environments bring amazing results. This happens despite minimal financial support.

Obsession with social concern in Western churches has affected financial support for traditional missions negatively. In the past, mission appeals were often made to spread the gospel, but today these appeals



tend to focus on development and relief.

Traditionally, the Seventh-day Adventist Mission Statement has emphasized the main objective of the Advent movement as proclamation of the everlasting gospel to all people. Worldwide mission has been not only a sign of Christ's Second Coming, but also an effort to hasten that event. Social services offered by schools and medical facilities have been extremely important factors in this worldwide task. They have educated and assisted the needed, breaking down prejudices and preparing people to accept the everlasting gospel.

Today, however, those supporting agencies and activities have acquired a tendency to become goals in themselves, in some cases even dominating the biblical mandate to preach the gospel to all nations. No doubt one reason for lack of balance is heavy financial support from governments and private non-Adventist donors. Often these donors stipulate that their funds should be used to address social problems and promote development.<sup>11</sup>

### **Advantages and Dilemmas Caused by Paradigm Shifts**

Paradigm shifts happen unobserved all the time. New paradigms are generally developed from old ones as circumstances and situations change. Societies and churches continually evolve, which suggests that every generation must face these shifts.

The causes are legion. Main factors are developments in technology, transportation, communication, and behavioral sciences. These factors have great potential to advance society, but they may also become secularizing influences.<sup>12</sup>

Another cause for such shifts is that we live in a world where adherents to various kinds of religion are no longer separated geographically. Modern communication, immigration, and integration have made all of us neighbors. People are exposed to religious and cultural differences that they not only need to understand, tolerate, and accept, but also live with.

One paramount cause for paradigm shifts is the gap between generations that all societies experience. The younger generation—often postmodernists—question not only church structures they have inherited, but also the belief systems of their parents.

Change is always threatening, often leading people to view paradigm shifts negatively and meet them with scepticism. However, such shifts are not necessarily neg-

ative. Although inevitably unsettling, they present new challenges and opportunities. We need to figure out how to hold on to "absolutes" in established paradigms while embracing positives in new ones.

Thus, if we try to balance present truth (biblical absolutes) with current social concerns, proclamation of the gospel will be strengthened. All three paradigms are important. However, overemphasis on any one results in unbalanced priorities. Rightly understood and managed, tensions caused by paradigm shifts can be healthy and creative.

### **Paradigms Scrutinized**

The main controversial issues that the apostle Paul addressed in his epistles were matters that arose from the paradigm shift that took place when Christianity emerged as a continuation of Judaism. The apostle stands out as moderator and reconciler par excellence in this delicate process.

Paul was a Pharisee: he was particular about all matters related to the laws of Moses, Hebrew religion, and Jewish culture. His training in Jewish law was combined with his cross-cultural experience as he grew up in the Diaspora.<sup>13</sup> These factors made him better able than any other apostle to distinguish cultural baggage in the old paradigm (Judaism) and determine its relevance for the new paradigm (Christianity) when preached to Jews and Gentiles. Paul could discern and focus on issues in the old paradigm that were divine absolutes needing to be maintained while focusing on the new paradigm, the gospel.

Today, in similar situations, the old and new must be carefully analyzed. Decisions can then be made about which elements agree with biblical absolutes and should not be touched. Other elements of cultural and popular character can be left out safely.

Adventists should make a clear distinction between core biblical truths expressed in the Church's doctrines and mission statement, on one side, and neutral trends and modes dictated or influenced by culture, on the other. The former should always be maintained, whereas the latter demands adaptation.

Obedience to the Great Commission makes it necessary for us to evaluate the various elements in paradigm shifts—visible as well as subtle—that could become goals in themselves, not the means to fulfill a divine call to bring people into a meaningful and personal relationship to Jesus Christ and his church.

In the history of Adventist missions, problems have



# Have You Heard?

Recent and upcoming events at  
**San Diego Adventist Forum**  
*Recordings available on CDs and audio cassettes*

- ☐ Julius Nam, Ph.D. July/08  
**Questions on Doctrine: 10/07 Conference Report**
- ☐ Fred Hoyt, Ph.D. August/08  
**Apologists and Scholars: Can They Peacefully Coexist within the SDA Church? (citing Francis D. Nichol as a case study)**
- ☐ John Cobb, Ph.D. September/08  
**The Bible and Euthanasia: Is Suicide Always Wrong?**
- ☐ Edward Reifsnnyder October/08  
**Trends in SDA Education: Interesting or Alarming?**
- ☐ Jon Paulien, Ph.D. November/08  
**The Open Remnant: A Biblical and Historical Vision**
- ☐ Ivan Blazen, Ph.D. January/09  
**Biblical Texts and Homosexual Practices**
- ☐ Gerry Chudleigh February/09  
**California Proposition #8: Why the Division among SDAs?**

**CD or Audiocassette Format — Please specify!**  
 Mark your choices and send with check, \$9.50 (domestic), or \$10.50 (international), per selection to:  
**San Diego Adventist Forum • P.O. Box 3148, La Mesa, CA 91944-3148**  
 619-561-2360 • ak-jk@cox.net

\*\*\*\*\*

To be included on the monthly newsletter announcement mailing roster without charge and/or to receive a listing of all recordings available, please send a postcard, or e-mail, or make phone call to a destination above indicating your name and address.

# Winter 2009 Schedule of Meetings

- 1/03/2009** 11:00 Atonement & Salvation: Les Wright
- 1/10/2009** 11 & 2:15 Financial Challenges Facing Adventism: David Denis
- 1/17/2009** 11:00 How to Read the Bible: Terry Anderson
- 1/24/2009** 11:00 Joint with City Lights
- 1/31/2009** 11:00 Adventists, War and Military Service: Ron Lawson
- 2/7/2009** 11:00 Modern Physics, the New Rabbit Hole? Ed Samuel
- 2/14/2009** 11 & 2:15 From Doubt to Faith & My most Interesting Archaeological Discoveries: Larry Geraty
- 2/21/2009** 11:00 Christians, Unfair Trials and Capital Punishment: Jonathan Gradess
- 2/28/2009** 11:00 Joint with City Lights
- 3/07/2009** 11:00 How to Read the Bible II: Terry Anderson
- 3/14/2009** 11 & 2:15 Life in Occupied Territories & Christ the Fifth Way: Ron Osborn
- 3/21/2009** 11:00 Reformed Church or Reforming Church: Kristine Gibbie
- 3/28/2009** 11:00 Joint with City Lights

See **www.MNYAForum.org** for our current program.  
 Contact us at **(718) 885-9533** or chaplain@mnyaforum.org.  
 Worship with us Sabbath mornings at 11:00 at  
 St. Mary's Episcopal Church,  
 521 W. 126 St., Manhattan  
 (two short blocks from the 125 St. Subway station  
 on the #1 line).

arisen when such supporting structures as medical or educational institutions became major foci of the Church and replace the main objectives. In all activities and enterprises, the main objectives should be kept clearly in view.

As a Christian movement, Seventh-day Adventists are called to bring a unique message to the world. While seeking to maintain a balance between all elements in this comprehensive task, we must keep our special calling in the forefront untouched. ■

## Notes and References

1. Ellen G. White *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:327.
2. P. G. Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 145.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1978), 7:970.1.
4. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, *2006 Yearbook*. (Hagerstown MD.: Review and Herald, 2007), 9.
5. J. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 4.
6. Jonathan M. Butler, "Adventism and the American Experience," in *The Rise of Adventism*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 173-206.
7. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 504.
8. Richard Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1979), 381, 382.
9. Børge Schantz, "Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: A Contemporary Appraisal" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), 765 ff.
10. "Dommedags-biskop møder hård kritik," *Copenhagen, Denmark, Kristelig Dagblad*, Mar. 20, 2007.
11. Børge Schantz, "ADRA and Adventist Missions: Rescued or Kidnapped?" *Spectrum* 32.1 (winter 2004):32-36.
12. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 4, 187.
13. Barclay William, *The Mind of St. Paul* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 12.

A native and resident of Denmark, **Børge Schantz** has served for forty-seven years as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, missionary, evangelist, field president, and departmental director, as well as founding director of the Seventh-day Adventist Global Centre for Islamic Studies.