


# Hope Deferred Makes the Heart Sick

BY GOTTFRIED OOSTERWAL

 On March 21, 2013, the *Adventist Review* published an article by Andy Nash titled “Beyond Belief.”<sup>1</sup> Based on a study carried out by Southern Adventist University’s School of Business in 2011, it explores the reasons why so many Seventh-day Adventists are leaving their community of faith and what—if anything—could be done about it.

Striking are two aspects of the issue: (1) the huge numbers of people actually leaving the church or giving up their involvement in and commitment to its fellowship and message, and (2) the reasons why people do so.

The number of people leaving the church has been high for quite some time, according to the General Conference Statistical Bulletin, ranging from thirty-five to forty for every one hundred souls brought in.<sup>2</sup> In “Beyond Belief,” the figure is given as one hundred souls leaving for every two hundred brought into the fellowship of faith, or 50 percent.<sup>3</sup> New, however, compared to previous studies on why Adventists are leaving their church, are the reasons why. Whereas in the past a (vast) majority of believers gave social and personal reasons for leaving (disappointments, social conflicts, broken relationships), this newer study indicates that “more and more church members are leaving the Adventist church primarily because they’ve changed their beliefs.”<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, it seems that Adventist believers are having doubts about the core doctrines of the church and are suffering from a loss of faith.

For example:

1. Seventy-one percent of those contacted indicated that they had lost faith in the notion of the Adventist Church being the remnant church with its particular mission.
2. Sixty-three percent indicated that they could no longer believe in the gift of prophecy.
3. Nearly 60 percent doubted the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary.
4. Fifty percent or more questioned Adventist teaching on the law of God, the Sabbath, the Great Controversy and the millennium.<sup>5</sup>

The article also points out that this is not only the case with those who actually leave. It is also greatly affecting people who statistically remain connected with the Adventist community of faith, leading to a high rate of nominalism in the church, low attendance, and lack of missionary zeal and involvement.

## Is the Return of Christ Delayed?

No doubt, the same factors of secularization that are affecting religious communities in general are also exerting their influence on Adventist believers. One factor, however, that seems to have the greatest influence on Adventists losing their faith and making the church “sick” is what is generally known as the “delay in the Second Coming of Christ.” Clearly stated in Proverbs 13:12 (NIV), “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.” One cannot for some 160 years keep on asserting that the coming of Christ is “near, very near, tomorrow, at hand, even at the door,”<sup>6</sup> without expecting peo-

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ple to develop some doubt, when for those same last 160 years, nothing has changed. A gap has developed, so it seems, between the assertions of Adventist leaders who keep on “encouraging” the believers to hold onto this statement of belief in the immediacy of Christ’s return, while many believers are no longer convinced of it. And the gap then widens to other issues of faith and behavior as well, including those of the sanctuary, the Spirit of Prophecy, the Great Controversy, the remnant and its mission, and trust in Adventist leadership. That gap shows itself in many aspects of church life, administration, and mission.

The issue of the delay of the Second Coming of Christ is not new in Adventist thinking. Ellen White had already mentioned it frequently, asserting that it is the lack of readiness on the part of the church and its unsanctified behavior that are responsible.<sup>7</sup> In 1980, in preparation for the General Conference Session in Indianapolis, Indiana, the ministerial department invited Adventist scholars and ministers to reflect on the issue during a conference pre-session. Four answers to the challenge of the “delay” emerged:

1. Many prophecies in scripture are conditional; their fulfillment depends on certain conditions in human history and behavior, society and religious commitment.
2. We ought to remember that God’s notion of time is not the same as our earthly concept. As scripture tells us, “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Pet. 3:8).
3. We all meet Jesus and our judgment at the time of our death (Heb. 9:27).
4. The early Christian church, too, faced this problem of the delay. Then it was solved by the realization that many of the prophecies had already been fulfilled in Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, where he is now seated at the right hand of God, ministering to his people and the world (realized eschatology). Our emphasis as a church, therefore, should be more on what Christ has already accomplished: the arrival of his kingdom, the resurrection of the believers in Christ, and the forgiveness of our sins with its corollary, the Judgment.

Thirty-three years later, we are still challenged by the same issue, only more powerfully so. And the longer our hope will remain unfulfilled, the sicker our hearts will become, personally, and collectively as a church. The

church will continue to suffer; the gaps between leaders and clergy on the one hand, and members on the other, will become more obvious and even wider, and our mission will remain unfulfilled.

## What to Think of the Reasons for an “Apparent” Delay?

What to make of these four or five interpretations of the delay?

It is a fact that many of the Old Testament and even New Testament prophecies are conditional. The *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* gives ample evidence of the conditionality of prophecies, and quoting Ellen G. White, states that “the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.” “The Old Testament prophecies were a declaration of God’s purpose for literal Israel, and their fulfillment. . . was strictly *conditional* upon Israel’s cooperation with the divine purpose” (italics in the original).<sup>8</sup> And what applies to the Old Testament prophecies applies with equal strength to those in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

However, no conditions are spelled out for the prophecies of the 1,260 years and the 2,300 evenings and mornings (see Dan. 7–9, 12; Rev. 12–14, 17). God himself set these times aside for his purpose, independent of the status and beliefs of the people concerned. These are fixed dates, as their partial fulfillment already indicates, such as the birth and death of the Messiah during the last week of the seventy weeks! This calls for a renewed study of the events taking place after 1798 and 1844!

The second explanation given for the “apparent delay” does not apply here, as the prophecies refer to actual earthly times and events, where actual days and years count.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the *eschaton*, such as the return of Christ, individualized or personalized. Nowhere do we find a person’s death equated with the arrival of the eschaton. 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 give us the assurance that the living will not have an advantage over the dead when Christ returns.

As for reason number four, that of the realized eschatology: hope has a human and a divine dimension, as well as a horizontal and a vertical one. Unlike the human dimension of hope, built on human needs, desires, and dreams, the divine and vertical dimensions of hope are anchored and rooted in divine promises that have already been fulfilled, such as the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf, his resurrection as a guarantee of our own, and his ascension

into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God, ministering on our behalf and that of the whole world (Eph. 1:20–21; Heb. 6:19–20; Rom. 4:25). Our hope is not a pious wish, a futuristic dream, but a confidence anchored in events that have already been fulfilled in our personal life, in history, and in the guarantee of our salvation. Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture and experienced by the saints is our hope, and we should rejoice in it, live in it, and trust in it until Christ appears on the clouds of heaven. It does not disappoint (Rom. 5:2,5, 8:24–25; Eph. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:1; 1 Cor. 13:13).

With this hope in mind, we would do well to consider once more the time after the fixed dates of 1798 and 1844. What is the meaning of that period of history? What events show us the purpose of this time between the fixed dates and the actual return of Christ? It was in this time that Communism arose, the two world wars took place, and numerous deaths in concentration camps occurred; as did the attacks of September 11, 2011; secularization affecting the faith of many; new messianic movements arising everywhere; religious awakenings; and a rapid increase in science and technology.

### **The Meaning of Time After the End of Prophetic Time**

When Christ entered into the heavenly sanctuary, there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on earth that led to a rapid expansion of the gospel throughout the entire inhabited world at that time. Tens of thousands (myriads) of people were baptized and added to the community of faith, the fellowship of believers (see Acts of the Apostles in the Bible). Luke was the first to recognize that the newly founded community of faith built on the life and work of Jesus Christ and the testimony of his apostles was destined to have its own history, a history that must be related to the history of the world (Luke 3:1–2). He found that the life of the church is not to be a short, frenzied proclamation, because the time is short, but a steady missionary expansion

throughout the whole world, yet with an unflinching sense of urgency because the Lord, who is coming soon, wants all men to be saved, come to a knowledge of the truth, and find a new meaning, freedom, and assurance in accepting the gospel (1 Tim. 2:4). This made the first church a genuinely missionary church in which every member was a witness. By the end of the third century, there was no area in the Roman Empire that had not been to some extent penetrated by the gospel—and that not as a result of many gifted evangelists swaying masses of people, but through the faithful testimony of ordinary believers in their everyday life and work (Acts 8:4, a.o.). When the apostle Paul came to Rome, he was welcomed by believers; how they had gotten there we are not told. The same is true for the other two centers of the faith, Antioch and Alexandria.<sup>10</sup> While waiting for their Lord to return, the believers at that time continued to do what the Lord had started and commanded them to do (Matt. 28:19–20). This gave meaning to the history between Christ's first and second coming. The same is true for the period between 1798 and 1844 and the return of Christ, our own time. It was God-willed and part of his divine plan for the world and for his chosen people. Time did not come to an end. Rather, Christ's second phase of ministry in the heavenly sanctuary opened the door to a new epoch in world history.

### **The Meaning of the New Epoch in History**

When Christ commenced his second phase of ministry in 1844, something similar happened as in the beginning of his heavenly ministry: there was another outpouring of God's Spirit, resulting in a new missionary consciousness and expansion of the gospel to the whole inhabited world. Something radically new took place in the Christian world at the time. In the midst of a rather nominal Christendom, greatly influenced by Rationalism, the Modernism of the Enlightenment, and a rather fossilized structure of an ecclesiastical orthodoxy, suddenly a revival occurred with an emphasis on personal conver-

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sion and rebirth, an enthusiasm to bear witness to the redeeming love of Christ, and a pastoral compassion for souls' social needs. As a result of this revival, a new consciousness developed in the churches, which gave rise to a new lay movement for mission and the rise of scores of missionary societies and boards of mission, as well as Bible societies, aimed at spreading the word of God in people's own language, everywhere. The main motive for this new consciousness and missionary activities was a worldwide expectation—from the Philippines and other parts of Asia to Europe and North and South America—of the soon arrival of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

It was this radically new development that made the time after 1798–1844, in the words of historian Kenneth Scott Latourette, the "Great Century." The Revival in Europe (Revival, Evangelical Awakening) led in England, Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, and other areas to the beginning of mission in "foreign lands." John R. Mott formulated the working goal and expectation of the newly founded missionary societies and boards of missions as "The Gospel to the World in this Generation." And like in the first century AD, some sixty years after the founding of these missionary societies and boards, the gospel indeed had reached the ends of the world. For a host of reasons, the official Protestant Churches in Christian Europe had been unable or unwilling themselves to take up the cause of missions. This was left to the initiative of dedicated individual laymen who volunteered to cooperate in these newly established missionary societies and boards, which relied for their financial support on the voluntary gifts of committed Christians. Particularly in the years from 1795 to 1815, an astonishing number of societies was formed for an extraordinary range of purposes, first of which was to evangelize the world in this generation, but also for the abolition of slavery, the promotion of education, the spread of Bibles and the distribution of literature, and many other concerns of human welfare.

The first of these new missionary societies exclusively directed toward the evangelization of non-Christians was the English's Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1792 through the vision, faith, and determination of cobbler William Carey (1761–1834). This was followed by the London Missionary Society (1795), which started with the aim of "preaching the eternal gospel to the heathen" without being tied to any particular form of church order or government, and the Church Missionary Society (1799).

As a whole, these missionary societies were not only voluntary societies, but also ecumenically oriented, not tied to one confession or another (until later), but interconfessional. They aimed at planting churches in the whole world that were colonies of Christ's heavenly mission, rather than just copies of Western models. The Dutch Missionary Society was founded as a sister institution of the London Missionary Society in 1797, which also inspired many other missionary societies in Germany, Switzerland, and Scandinavia (including Finland), such as the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (1815), the Berlin Missionary Society (1824), and the Rhenish Missionary Society of Barmen (1828). These and others formed a model for later missionary societies established in Asia (India, China), Australia, Canada, and South Africa.

Soon after political independence from Great Britain, missionary societies and boards also began to appear in the United States, chiefly for the spread of the faith on the expanding frontier and to Native Americans. The earliest major organization was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, organized in Bradford, Massachusetts, on June 28, 1810, by the Massachusetts General Association (Congregational), in response to a petition of four Andover Seminary students who were pledged to missionary service. In a courageous act of faith, the ABCFM allowed its first five missionaries to sail for India in February 1812, barely able to purchase passage and provide a year's support. Mightily inspired by the new spirit of missions in the Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed churches, the board was able to open work in Ceylon (1816), among the Cherokee Indians (1817), Hawaii (1820), Turkey and the Near East (1820–1821), China (1830), and Africa (1834).

By the end of the century, there were hardly any boundaries to this radically new missionary enterprise. It stretched from China to Peru, and was at work both beyond the Arctic Circle and in the desolate and hostile regions of Tierra del Fuego. Of course, there were people groups in each great landmass that had not been touched. But with each year, these were becoming fewer and fewer. The Christian faith was becoming the largest and most widespread of all the world religions, and would greatly shape people's lives and customs, thinking and behavior.

The radically new missionary zeal to reach the whole world in this generation with the gospel went hand in hand with endeavors in education, medicine, and health care; agricultural and economic developments; technical growth;

and new ways of thinking and ethics, reflected in people's art, social structures, and even ways of governing and doing business. Yes, the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century went hand in hand with Western colonialism and imperialism, with all the negative effects experienced later. But the "Great Century," with its great educational successes, medical accomplishments, and economic and technological developments all around the globe, was the result of a radically new development within the Christian community of faith.

Compared to earlier and later centuries, the nineteenth century was also characterized by relative peace, a result of the "Pax Christiana" from which the whole world profited and which later allowed the development of new and independent nations, led by men and women who were products of Christian missions. All this was the result of the outpouring of God's Spirit when Christ entered his second phase of ministry in the heavenly sanctuary on behalf of all people on earth. It created a whole new era in the economy of God's salvation. A new epoch in world history had begun, God-willed, and part of his plan to evangelize the whole world in this generation. These events had to happen, and gave meaning to history after the end of the prophetic time. And when the gospel of his kingdom will have been proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations, then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). We see it happening before our own eyes!

### **The Rise of the Adventist Church and Mission**

In light of all this, the statement in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* that the beginning of the second half of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary resulted on earth in the founding and growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church<sup>12</sup> comes across as rather limited, sectarian, ecclesiocentric, and self-serving. No wonder that over 70 percent of the people who left the church did not or no longer believe in it, while many who statistically belong to our communion of faith have rejected the notion as well.

Yes, to be sure, we may indeed see the rise and growth of the Adventist Church also as an outcome of the outpouring of God's Spirit at the beginning of Christ's second phase of ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, but in the context and as part of the worldwide millennial expectations and the new consciousness of or zeal for mission in other churches. For the rise and growth of the Adventist Church was dependent on this new missionary movement in all the world!

The Adventist Church arose as a reform movement within the churches of Christendom. Its message and mission presuppose the existence of a worldwide Christian community. Its first "foreign missionaries" therefore went to Switzerland, Germany, and France, at the time the bulwark of Christendom. And when later missionaries entered the territories of Fiji and Papua, Japan and China, Argentina and Brazil, they went to work with already existing Christian communities there, and not further inland to work with people groups that had never been reached with the gospel before. Our missionary message and methods, including our literature, were shaped by understanding ourselves first of all as a movement within Christianity, and secondly by the belief that in essence the whole world was already a Christian world, with a few pockets of heathenism. Not until the 1960s did our church consciously begin to work with people of other religions, but still only as a second-tier mission. As a result of this intra-Christian mission, in many areas we became known as "sheep stealers," a derogatory name we don't really deserve in view of our particular intrachurch understanding of mission.

No wonder, therefore, that our eschatology also still heavily depends on the status, beliefs, and development of Christian churches: from the call to obedience to the divine Law of God, the issuing of a Sunday law, the power of the papacy, and the relationship between church and state within the Christian community.<sup>13</sup> That community today, however, only makes up about 30 to 35 percent of the world population, actually a tiny fraction of the current world population of

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over seven billion people and growing.

In light of the meaning of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, Adventists need to reflect again on the full meaning of that work in order to understand the meaning and purpose of the era after 1798–1844: not as a time of “waiting and watching” only, resulting in disappointment after disappointment and the rise of all kinds of speculations about certain “signs of the times” and theories of conspiracy, but as a God-willed and divinely planned time of worldwide mission activities reflecting the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, until he returns.

The view of the time between the end of the prophetic times listed in the books of Daniel and Revelation and the return of Christ also demands a clear understanding of how to view and relate to the work of these Christian agencies and their work of mission around the world. That view is beautifully and clearly expressed in the General Conference Working Policy, O75: “We recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communities who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

“Part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world.” This is our theological understanding of our time after 1708–1844. As in Acts of the Apostles, where Luke revealed to the early Christian church God's plan of salvation history, which would shape the meaning of all human history through the evangelization of the whole inhabited world (*oecumene*), so also does the divinely ordained evangelization of our present inhabited world shape the goal and meaning of all human history, which began when Christ entered into his second phase of ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. This should powerfully inform our concepts of church and mission. The evangelization of the world in this generation, which is not the same as the growth of churches in all the world, should also inform our understanding of what it means to be the church in the world today, our literature and preaching, our methodology, and our relationships with other Christian agencies. The times are in God's hands. The epoch of history in which we now live has its own specific goal and meaning, both set by God when Christ entered into the second phase of his ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Every epoch in history, in the words of that great historian Leopold von Ranke, is directly unto God.<sup>15</sup>

## A Work of Grace and Judgment

Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, as also reflected in the earthly tabernacle services, rests on two pillars: the pillar of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and the pillar of obedience, justice, and judgment. The two aspects belong together as the two sides of the proverbial single coin. On the Day of Atonement, the people who had repented were forgiven and brought into a new relationship with God. The goat Azazel took their sins away into the desert, there to be forgotten. The judgment was for those who had not repented and accepted the divine offer of grace resulting in forgiveness (Lev. 16). Christ's sacrifice for all humanity resulted in the same: grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation for those who have accepted his sacrifice, and the judgment for those who have not (John 3:16-18; Heb. 8–10).

The understanding of Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary will forever be a great Adventist contribution to Christian theology and mission. What we Adventists need to learn again is that our emphasis on the second part of Christ's mission, namely the judgment, is intimately and inextricably connected to the pillar of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In mission, the two pillars go hand in hand; they belong together and form one unified message. And it is that twofold ministry of Christ and his followers on earth that gives meaning to the time after 1798-1844, and forms the basis of our hope. That hope is based on nothing else but what Christ has already accomplished on our behalf, on what he is doing now, and on his own promise of returning soon (Heb. 7:19, 6:18; 1 Pet. 1:3, 3:15). And what God promises, for sure he will do!

Of course, the new emphasis on salvation historical facts in our time bears in it the danger of historicizing our message and mission. When that happens, the belief in the soon return of Christ becomes de-emphasized. We already see it happening in our own community of faith. With great joy, fanfare, and holy pride, we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of our church name and of our church's organization.

This process of historization often leads to a de-eschatonization. That danger is not imaginary. Elder Ted Wilson, the president of the General Conference, therefore, according to the Adventist News Network, in his sermon to the delegates assembled for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the church's organization in Battle Creek, pleaded with these leaders not to continue these anniversary celebrations.<sup>16</sup> For from church history, we learn that the process of historization leads to a further de-emphasizing, even doubt and loss of faith in the immediacy of the return of Christ.

We learn from the New Testament, however, that the process of historization of gospel work, as shown in particular in the book of Acts, need not lead to a loss of faith in the soon arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, a tension does exist. But it is a creative tension in which every anniversary celebration becomes another witness to the hope we share in the soon return of Christ, telling us that we are now closer to the return of Christ than when we first believed (Rom. 13:11), and challenging us to ask ourselves, where would we be if Christ would have returned yesterday?

To help believers abide in Christ as their only hope, and to win others to the faith, every local church needs to reflect and implement the two pillars of Christ's ministry in heaven: to help people experience God's abiding grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and to challenge everyone to obey God's word (the law) and prepare for his coming work of justice and judgment. When a person is sick, and especially in the case of a sickness unto death, it is the causes of the disease that must be understood, and then the process of healing can begin. It starts with the recognition that our sickness is rooted in a too-limited understanding of Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary and its consequences here on earth. This has led to disappointment after disappointment, and to an all-too-narrow understanding of the meaning of history after the end of the prophetic time of 1798–1844, which continues to give rise to the notion of a delay, albeit only an apparent delay. Healing comes from the experience of a renewed hope, a hope that is rooted in what Christ has already done and continues to do for all of us. As the Bible puts it, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes it is a tree of life" (Prov. 12:12). ■

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3. Nash, "Beyond Belief," 18.
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6. Matt. 24:33; Rom. 13:12; 1 Pet. 4:7.
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8. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2 vol. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000) 913.
9. *Ibid.*
10. More recent research indicates that the church at Antioch may have been established by Gospel writer Mark.
11. See K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vol. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1947), and his *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 5 vol. (London, UK: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1958–1962).
12. *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 406: "As the initiation of Christ's heavenly ministry coincided with the outpouring of the Spirit on the fledgling church (Acts 2:33), so the beginning of the atypical day of atonement coincided with the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist church."
13. See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), ch. 35–40.
14. *General Conference Working Policy*, 1980 revised edition, Section O75.
15. Leopold von Ranke, "jede Epoche unmittelbar zu Gott" in *Weltgeschichte*, vol. 9 (Leipzig, 1888), 5.
16. See also, *Adventist Review*, May 9, 2013, 8–9. In his sermon, Elder Wilson stated, "We should have been home by now. The Lord has wanted to come long before this. Why celebrate any more anniversaries when we could be in heaven?" 8. As to why Christ has not yet fulfilled his promise to return to earth "ere this," Elder Wilson stated, "How long will we, like ancient Israel, keep breaking our promises to the Lord and following our own counsel and not his?" 9.

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