

## Does Adventist Theology Have, Or Need, a Unifying Center?

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In discussing this question, we will first reflect on the nature of Christian theology in order to establish its aptitude for being built around some central idea, principle, or truth. I will take the position that theology has and, indeed, needs some kind of unifying center. We will then take a closer look at Adventist theology in order to identify possible candidates qualifying as *unifying centers*. Finally, we will suggest ways of presenting Adventist theology in an intentionally rational, coherent, and focused way around some unifying idea, principle, or truth.<sup>1</sup>

### The Nature of Adventist Theology

Like Christian theology in general, Adventist theology in particular, is rational, coherent, and focused. Therefore, it is demonstrably capable of having a theological center of some sort.

#### Adventist Theology is Rational

Christian faith is rational in its make-up. It holds certain views to be true, which deal with God and humankind, proper behavior and a meaningful life, history and the future, etc. These truths can be expressed in an orderly fashion, argued for in a logical way, and presented in a convincing manner. Though faith is more than belief, it is no less than belief. In other words, while faith is *relational*, involving a divine-human encounter, it is also *rational*, capable of being expressed in a manner appealing to human reason. Transcending reason, it is not devoid of it. Rather than being

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was initially presented at the European Theology Teachers' Convention in Belgrade, 16–20 March 2005. The theme of the convention was “Beyond Diversity in Contemporary Adventism.” The paper has been slightly revised for publication. I devote it to my respected teacher, colleague, and friend Hans K. LaRondelle, who has modeled to me the role of a preacher-teacher who inspires his students to love and study the Word of God.

irrational, it is open to sound reasoning, argumentation, logical conclusions, and so on. In short, Christian faith is a reasonable faith.

Because it is rational rather than irrational, Christian faith lends itself to scholarly inquiry, rigorous questioning, and serious reflection. This is particularly obvious in the setting of higher learning, i.e., at theological seminaries, graduate schools and universities. Here faith is subjected to critical examination, challenged in scholarly debates, and presented in academic fashion. Such reflection follows the two main roads of scholarly research, i.e., inductive and deductive reasoning, respectively.

What can be said about Christian theology in general, also holds true for Adventist theology in particular. Growing up in a semi-rationalist environment and following the common-sense philosophy of the day, early Adventists intentionally sought to present doctrine in a logical, coherent, and systematic fashion. In fact, they were convinced of presenting a perfect system of truth, where everything had its proper bearing and place, and nothing was meaningless or superfluous. It is no surprise, then, to discover that Adventist theological thinking is rational, reflecting (on) a reasonable faith. This is no less obvious today, when a growing number of Adventist educational institutions are offering (post)graduate degrees in religion and theology.

### **Adventist Theology is Coherent**

Theological reasoning, like all rational thinking, can be either *analytic*—i.e., taking *things* (ideas) apart in order to study them in detail and in depth—or *synthetic*, i.e., putting *things* (ideas) together in the search for their inner coherence and unity. In both cases, the existence of some wholeness or unity is presupposed, implicitly at least, which can be either analyzed or synthesized, respectively. Thus, exegetes study individual words and phrases, historians ponder over fragments of letters and inscriptions, while archaeologists investigate even tiny pieces of pottery. They do this in the search for a better understanding of the Bible as a whole and of ancient Near Eastern history, the womb of the Judaeo-Christian faith.

On the other hand, dogmatic theologians strive to present the Christian faith in a systematic and orderly fashion, demonstrating the inner relationship of the truths of faith, endeavoring, in a sense, to put the pieces back together to form a coherent whole. By means of implications and applications, inferences and conclusions, systematic theology puts the pieces of the puzzle together so that the whole picture will appear. Whatever method one follows, whichever discipline one may favor—everyone works on the implicit assumption that there is something to be analyzed (i.e., taken apart) and synthesized (i.e., joined together), respectively.

Adventist theology consciously works on this basis, too. Taking Scripture as the Word of God conveying the message of salvation to humankind, it attempts to provide a sound understanding of the Bible, its meaning and message, content and concern. Theological statements are believed to be, not incoherent utterances, but coherent ideas, revealing an inner relationship to each other and forming a meaningful whole. The doctrinal loci do not stand beside each other like strangers at a bus stop; rather, they treat of different aspects of the one truth of God. This interrelatedness forms a network of ideas and insights, disciplines and departments.

### **Adventist Theology is Focused**

Granting that Adventist theology—working as it does on a rational basis—forms a network of research methods, theological insights, and doctrinal truths, this does not necessarily imply that there is, indeed, a central focus to this scholarly endeavor. A network may be either centralized (having a clear focus) or decentralized (not having a unifying center). While it is capable of being built around some central idea, principle, or truth, it does not by itself or inevitably do so. In fact, strong centrifugal forces—like the demands of academic specialization, the dominance of (hyper)critical analytical methods, or the dissemination of postmodern pluralist notions of truth—may prevent this from happening, good intentions notwithstanding.

Judged from the Bible, the main source of the Judaeo-Christian faith, it is apparent that the faith of God's people was built on and around some core beliefs, regarded as foundational. Old Testament thought is focusing on the God of Israel, his redemptive acts in history and the revelation of his will to his people. The New Testament, in turn, is based on the divine-human person and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, proclaimed as Savior and Lord by his church. While each book of the Bible has its unique perspective and particular concern, it still—and thereby—contributes to the overall message of Scripture, expressed in quite diverse ways.

An Adventist theology that wants to be *biblical* because it regards Scripture as normative, will, thus, naturally look for unifying ideas, principles, or truths, which faithfully reflect the central concern(s) of the Christian faith. However, there may be more than one option for this.

### ***Unifying Centers of Adventist Theology***

Looking at the history of the Adventist church and its theological development, it is possible to identify quite a number of *candidates* qualifying as

possible unifying centers of Adventist theology. In this brief survey, we will look at about a dozen that may be considered as such.

### **The Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs**

The first thing that may come to mind is the official statement of *Fundamental Beliefs*, which was adopted at the General Conference in 1980 and has since become a common reference point for the Adventist faith. It consists of a summary of the main doctrinal and ethical teachings as well as lifestyle concerns, organized according to the traditional sequence used in dogmatic works.<sup>2</sup> To an uninformed reader, this order of entries may give the erroneous impression that eschatology is about the last thing Adventists like to talk about, while, in reality, it constitutes the very heart of the historic Adventist faith.

On a more serious level, it is to be noted that, in spite of their systematic ordering, the 28 fundamental beliefs do not offer a focused presentation of Adventist beliefs. Doctrinal views, ethical reflections, and lifestyle issues are placed indiscriminately side by side, without clear indications of their inner relationship. As a result, one could even argue that all 28 statements, including everything said therein, are of equal weight and importance. Few, if any, Adventist theologians would want to subscribe to this notion. Like all valuable things, truths must not only be counted, but properly weighed. Beyond sheer quantity (28 seem good enough on that), it is quality that is needed. This, of course, is to ask for the center or heart of faith.

In the introduction to the semi-official commentary on the fundamental beliefs, which may be regarded as a kind of Adventist catechism, the editors point out that *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...* presents a “Christ-centered exposition of what we believe.”<sup>3</sup> “All doctrines, when properly understood, center on Him, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and are extremely important.”<sup>4</sup> However, neither the original formulation of the 27 fundamental beliefs nor their elaborate interpretation is *Christ-centered* in any particular or obvious sense. Rather, the impression is given that doctrines are seen as Christ-centered *per se* (i.e., in and of themselves) without this claim needing to be argued for or demonstrated in any specific way.

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<sup>2</sup> The 28 entries are dealing with the doctrine of God (5), man (2), salvation (4), the Church (7), the Christian Life (5) and last things (5). A 28th point (listed as no. 11) was added in 2005 on the Christian life, dealing with spirituality.

<sup>3</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of [27] Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 1988), viii; 2d ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2005), viii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Christ-Centered Doctrines**

In my own series of Bible studies for baptismal candidates, I have made Jesus the main focus and center of every single topic. Entitled “*I want to introduce you to Jesus...*” this series deals with the many facets and claims of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> He is the hub from which doctrines issue like spokes from a wheel, going out to the rim where “the rubber meets the road.” Without doctrine, there is no clear connection between the confession of Christ and one’s personal life.

What is helpful for pastors and lay members in giving Bible studies to baptismal candidates should also be useful for academic theologians presenting the Adventist faith in a systematic and comprehensive fashion. What does the church’s confession to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior practically mean and imply when it comes to explaining the doctrines of the church?

In the *Prolegomena* to his *Systematic Theology*, Norman R. Gulley discusses a variety of possible foci or themes for theological systems.<sup>6</sup> He compares systems to revolving swings, hanging from a central pole. Wherever one sits, one always looks up to the central pole. Gulley declares Jesus Christ to be “both the center and context” of his theological system, for he is also central to the plan, and history, of salvation as well as to all Scripture.<sup>7</sup> However, this is not meant to be a reduction (Luther’s “canon within a canon”) or a replacement of the Bible as the Word of God (Barth’s “Christomonism”). It remains to be seen how this goal is realized in the presentation of Adventist doctrines as envisioned by Gulley.

How does a truly Christ-centered approach to the Christian faith affect the Adventist understanding of Scripture? An important case study involves the interpretation of biblical prophecy, more particularly, apocalyptic prophecy, which is paramount in Adventist thought. Inspired by Louis Were (an

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<sup>5</sup> Among these facets and claims are: the alpha and omega [Lord of history, Creator], bread of life [Lord’s supper], bridegroom [second coming], chief cornerstone [decision], friend [salvation/discipleship], head (of his body) [church, spiritual gifts], healer [health/temperance], high priest [sanctuary], hope [future], (righteous) judge [righteousness/judgment], king [second coming], lamb of God [atonement], light (of the world) [mission/discipleship], Lord and God [divinity/worship/stewardship], Lord of the Sabbath [Sabbath/Sunday], Messiah/Christ [prophecy], helper/*paraklete* [Holy Spirit], (prince (of peace) [shalom], resurrection and life [resurrection, (non)immortality, eternal life], savior [redemption], (good) shepherd [church], Son of God [messiah-king and preeminence], Son of man [humility and sovereignty], water of life [baptism, foot-washing], way—truth—life, (faithful) witness [spirit of prophecy], and word of God [Holy Scripture].

<sup>6</sup> Among such central foci or themes he mentions God’s holiness (Strong), magnificence (Erickson), reign (Rice); union with Christ (Calvin), the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), the indwelling God (Ritschl), theological anthropology (Rahner); and themes like covenant, kingdom, justification, liberation etc.

<sup>7</sup> Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 145–148.

Australian Adventist pastor), Hans K. LaRondelle has proposed some basic principles of eschatological hermeneutics. Central to them is the thesis that Christ and his church—not political geography (Palestine, Armageddon, or the river Euphrates as symbol for Turkey, Russia, or China)—is the true focus of biblical prophecy. Still, until today, Adventists are rather prone to relate striking world events—like the two recent gulf wars—to specific apocalyptic prophecies of the end times, without obvious regard for a Christocentric approach.

Another example involves the interpretation of Rev 12–13, the very heart of the Apocalypse and of Adventist eschatology. Influenced by the groundbreaking work of Kenneth R. Strand and his structural analysis of the book in the 1970s, many Adventist scholars have come to see in the satanic trinity of Rev 12–13 (dragon, beast, false prophet) a parody of the divine trinity (father, son, holy spirit). However, these and other insights from a structural analysis of the Apocalypse have not had any strong impact on the Adventist interpretation of the book. How the historicist view can be informed by a Christ-centered approach to the book lies outside the purview of this study. Still, the challenge to exegetes and dogmatic theologians remains.

### **The Landmarks of the Adventist Faith**

In 1889 Ellen White identified the “old landmarks” with the three angels’ messages, including the doctrine of the cleansing of the sanctuary, the teaching on the (Sabbath) law, and the belief in the non-immortality of the wicked.<sup>8</sup> Some years later, she called them “the special points of our faith.”<sup>9</sup> These teachings were the doctrinal core of Sabbath-keeping Adventism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; they still are central to the Adventist understanding of truth, if understood in the light of the New Testament teaching on the gospel.

In contrast to the present-day elaborate statement of fundamental beliefs, these *landmarks* reflect the development of early Adventist theology and are intentionally limited to what was then considered essential—and distinctive—truths.<sup>10</sup> For this very reason, they do not answer to the broadening and shifting doctrinal understanding of the church in more recent times. In their pre-1888 form, these specific doctrines did not yet mirror the crucial Christ-centered shift of Adventism that came about since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> They can also be helpful in memorizing the distinctive doctrines of Adventism. For example, it is possible to sum them all up under six headings, each beginning with the letter “S”: Sabbath, Sanctuary, Second Coming, SDA Church, Spirit of Prophecy, State of the dead. These contain the gist of what characterized early Adventism.

century. Thus, they cannot without conscious reflection and interpretation qualify as the doctrinal heart of Adventism today.

### **Christ's Atonement on the Cross**

In the wake of the General Conference of 1888, a new awareness dawned upon Adventists, which had a lasting impact on the way the church read Scripture, understood its message, and expressed her faith. The focus shifted from the end of history to that historic moment when salvation was once for all completed at the cross. This involved a changed theological emphasis, for now it was no longer the second coming of Christ—and the events related to it (like the sanctuary and the judgment)—that received the undivided attention of Adventists, but also—and even primarily—the first coming culminating in the redemptive sacrifice on Calvary. Ellen White played a leading role in this shift. “The atonement of Christ,” she wrote, should be “presented as the grand, central theme for consideration.”<sup>11</sup>

The importance of this refocusing of Adventist thought can hardly be exaggerated. Now, for the first time in their history, Adventists were recognizing and adopting a single theological focus that was in tune with the New Testament emphasis on Calvary and, at the same time, congruent with their own emphasis on the high priest's atoning work in the sanctuary. It may be credited to the prophetic insight of Ellen White that, apparently, she understood the crucial role and importance of this biblical-theological motif for presenting the Adventist faith.

### **The Gospel of *Justification by Faith***

The same can be said about another biblical motif that came to be seen as synonymous with one of the central theological concerns of Adventism, namely, justification by faith. According to the sixteenth-century Reformers, this teaching is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the teaching on

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<sup>11</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1948), 77 [first printed in 1898]. Her best-known statement to this effect dates from 1901: “The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light which streams from the cross of Calvary, and in connection with the wondrous, central truth of the Savior's atonement. Those who study the Redeemer's wonderful sacrifice grow in grace and knowledge.

“I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption—the Son of God uplifted on the cross of Calvary. This is to be the theme [*Gospel Workers/Evangelism*: foundation] of every discourse given by our ministers” (Ellen G. White, MS 70, 1901; quoted in idem, “Ellen G. White Comments—John,” SDABC 5:1137; cf. idem, *Gospel Workers*, rev. and enlarged ed. [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1915, 1948], 315; and idem, *Evangelism* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946], 190).

which the church of Christ is firmly grounded. Without it, there is no gospel, no salvation, no church. Vice versa, where the gospel of righteousness by faith is preached, and the ordinances instituted by Christ (i.e., baptism and the Lord's Supper) are administered, there the church, the community of believers (i.e., of sinners saved by grace) is visibly present.

Today, even the Roman Catholic Church officially recognizes the truth of the biblical teaching on salvation by grace alone through faith. The Joint Declaration signed by Lutherans and Catholics in 1999 describes the doctrine of justification as an indispensable criterion or norm of the Christian faith, which directs the entire teaching and practice of the church constantly towards Christ. To be sure, this remarkable agreement has not led to the weakening, let alone abandonment, of any Roman Catholic doctrine; neither has it opened the door to eucharistic hospitality and joint communion services, which Protestants had expected and hoped for.<sup>12</sup>

Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Seventh-day Adventists increasingly came to recognize the crucial importance of the Pauline teaching on divine grace and human faith. To them, justification by faith denoted, not only the judicial act of imputing Christ's righteousness to the sinner, but also the renewal of the heart and life accompanying and succeeding that legal transaction. Justification and sanctification were regarded as inseparably related, sometimes even interchangeable, terms.

This emphasis on living and dynamic *faith*, rather than on formal obedience to the *law*, led to a reconsideration, and reformulation, of the heart of Adventism. Again, Ellen White was instrumental in this Adventist *aggiornamento*. She even went so far as to identify the new emphasis with the very heart of Adventism. "Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel's message, and I have answered, 'It is the third angel's message in verity.'"<sup>13</sup>

On this basis, it can be argued that justification by faith is the doctrinal hub of Adventism, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae adventisticae*. The implications of this view for Adventist hermeneutics—the reading and interpretation of the Bible—I have outlined elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> While Protestants regard justification by faith as the doctrinal heart of the Christian church, Roman Catholics consider the church and its priesthood, based on apostolic succession, as crucial tenets of faith. This has led to an ecumenical impasse, inasmuch as the doctrinal agreement reached did not remove the obstacles between them.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen G. White, "Repentance the Gift of God," *Review and Herald*, 1 April 1890, 193; quoted in idem, *Evangelism*, 190.

<sup>14</sup> See Rolf J. Pöhler, "Die Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben als hermeneutisches Prinzip: Christozentrische Schriftauslegung und adventistische Theologie," *Spes Christiana* 11 (2000): 46–60.



### Trinitarian Confessions of Faith

Does the (re)focusing of Adventist theology have any impact on the way the teachings of the church are presented or expressed? One possible way of letting theology influence, if not determine, our religious language is the (re)formulation of doctrinal beliefs in a manner congruent with one's theological understanding. This can be done, for example, by structuring an Adventist confession of faith along the lines of the biblical view on the triune God.

The Trinitarian structure of the creeds of the early church (like the Apostles' Creed and the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum) may serve as a model for the attempt to focus church teaching on a theological center. In spite of their Trinitarian composition or, rather, because of it, these confessions are not totally consistent in their approach. After confessing God, the Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ, the mention of the Holy Spirit serves as a kind of heading for the doctrines of the church, of forgiveness, and of the resurrection. The latter might as well have been subsumed under the second entry, dealing with Christ's redemptive work.

In addition, these creeds are limited to doctrinal issues, totally bypassing the baptismal candidates' faith response and their desire to follow Christ in baptism and in everyday life. Judging from the New Testament writings (particularly the letters of Paul), to restrict Christian faith to the acceptance of doctrines, ignoring ethical and lifestyle issues, must be regarded as deficient. But if you include the latter in a confessional statement, you will probably break up the stringent Trinitarian structure of the historic baptismal confessions.

In practical terms, a Systematic Theology written from an Adventist perspective might follow a Trinitarian outline, as a number of Catholic and Protestant theologians have done in the past. It may also be helpful to develop an Adventist baptismal vow structured along Trinitarian lines. It could replace the thirteen questions currently listed in the *Church Manuel*, which lack a clear focus and structure by merely summarizing the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs in question form. A carefully crafted baptismal vow may help new and old believers develop an awareness of the systematic, coherent, and focused structure of their faith.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Such a baptismal confession may read like this (I use the confessional approach rather than a question format):

I believe in God, the father, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who suffered and died for our sins, who was buried but rose from the dead on the third day and is now pleading for us at the right hand of God, soon to return in glory to raise the dead and bring about God's everlasting kingdom.

### The Great Controversy Motif

Another possible way of demonstrating the inner coherence and unity of Adventist beliefs is the use of biblical motifs that are characteristic of Scripture and, at the same time, typical of the Adventist faith. Clearly, no theological notion can illustrate this point better than the *great controversy* motif, which has shaped Adventist theology more than any other single idea. First introduced by Joseph Bates in the 1840s and popularized by Ellen White since the 1860s, this notion is more than just one among twenty-eight biblically based Adventist beliefs (Fundamental Belief no. 8). Rather, it constitutes the theological matrix which has decisively and lastingly shaped the doctrinal views of the church. However, it is not unchallenged among Adventists.

According to church historian George R. Knight,

the genius of Seventh-day Adventism does not lie so much in those doctrines that make it distinctive or in those beliefs that it shares with other Christians. Rather it is a combination of both sets of understandings within the framework of the great controversy scheme found in the apocalyptic core of the book of Revelation running from Rev 11:19 through the end of chapter 14. It is that prophetic insight that distinguishes Seventh-day Adventists from other Adventists, other sabbatarians, and all other Christians.<sup>16</sup>

If this is true, then the *great controversy* motif may serve as one of the key ideas, which help to express and preserve the essence of Adventist faith.

### Key Texts and Themes of Scripture

Still another way of looking at the inner heart of Adventism is the identification of key texts and themes of Scripture, which have played a major role in Adventist thinking and are able to hold its theology together in some real and meaningful way. Among them are the following, each of which is related to the distinctive doctrines of the church that have developed out of Adventism's intense involvement with biblical apocalyptic literature. What has been said on the *landmarks* of Adventism (see above, pp. 22–23) is

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I believe in the Holy Spirit who makes us aware of our sin and of God's grace and gives us power for a new life.

I recognize the Word of God as the rule of my life and gratefully want to obey all the commandments of God.

I want to preserve my body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, honoring God in my behavior and appearance.

I want to support the church by my means and talents, preparing myself and others for the coming of Christ.

I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and want to confess my faith publicly, confirming my covenant with God in baptism.

<sup>16</sup> George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 204.

equally applicable here: In order to serve as possible *unifying centers* of Adventist theology, these texts and themes need to be interpreted in the context of the New Testament message, the gospel of justification by faith and of Christ's atonement.

*Daniel 8:14—The Sanctuary*

This verse, as no other, has shaped Adventist history and teaching. Its proper meaning has been the subject of intense study and debate—even until today. According to Ellen White, “the correct understanding of the ministration [of Christ] in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”<sup>17</sup> Unquestionably, the sanctuary theme is one of the key ideas of Scripture; it deserves close investigation and theological reflection. It does not easily lend itself, however, to a contemporary application—in contrast to the early church, which made creative use of it (see the letter to the Hebrews for the prime example). On the other hand, the notions of restoration (putting things right again) and judgment (establishing righteousness), which are prominent in the book of Daniel, may well serve as powerful images appealing to present-day people in the search for justice and a better world.

*Revelation 14:6–12—Sabbath, Advent, and Remnant*

“Properly understood, the sabbath [sic!] is the capstone of Adventist theology and potentially its most valuable contribution to the larger Christian world.”<sup>18</sup> This statement by Richard Rice contains a formidable challenge to Adventist theologians of every field. It also suggests that the Sabbath is a kind of glue, which holds together the different facets of Adventist theology. “It has an important bearing on every aspect of Christian faith.”<sup>19</sup> Seen in this light, it is an excellent tool for expressing the core of Adventism.

Arguably, something similar could be said about the biblical teaching on the return of Christ, which also figures prominently in the denomination's name—Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Ellen White's view, “all the discourses that we give are plainly to reveal that we are waiting, working, and praying for the coming of the Son of God.”<sup>20</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of her comment on the crucial importance of the atonement for Adventist preaching and theology. Without this teaching, Adventism would not be the same.

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<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, Letter 208, 1906; quoted in idem, *Evangelism*, 221.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985), 356.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen G. White, Letter 150, 1902; quoted in idem, *Evangelism*, 230.

Apart from Dan 8:14, no text of Scripture has played a more important role in Adventist history than Rev 14:6–12. Here Adventists have first heard the *everlasting gospel*; here they have come to understand their identity and mission to the world (cf. the remnant motif in 12:17); here they found the judgment-hour call, inviting all to worship the creator by keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.<sup>21</sup> This passage is deeply engrained in the Adventist mind, having become almost a *chiffre* for what Adventism is all about. But, exactly because of this, it needs again to be reread, reinterpreted and recontextualized for today.

### ***The Reign of God***

In his college textbook on the Adventist faith, Richard Rice has chosen “the reign of God” as his guiding theme, without letting this reference point “dominate the discussion of each topic” as would be expected in “a more rigorously systematic work.” Therefore, he basically follows the traditional sequence of topics and does not allow his *Leitmotif* to shape or modify the doctrinal content in any significant way. “This theme provides us with a means of focusing and integrating our reflections, but it remains clearly subordinate to the various doctrines we examine, rather than the other way around.”<sup>22</sup> To Rice, the reign of God is “sufficiently comprehensive, or fundamental, to help us pull together all the major Christian doctrines.” At the same time, it reflects “some of the distinctive concerns” of the Adventist church.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, he has chosen it as the central idea of his work.

As seen by Norman Gulley, Rice is the first scholar to publish a systematic theology from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective. After all, “the highest test of theological skill is the task of drawing the different aspects of Christian faith together to form a unity.”<sup>24</sup> Working under his chosen restrictions, Richard Rice’s *The Reign of God* does not allow us to evaluate the full impact a *Leitmotif* will have on Adventist theology when employed in a systematic, consistent, and rigorous way.

It remains to be seen which guiding idea, principle, or truth other Adventist theologians will use in the future: Christ, the atonement, justification,

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<sup>21</sup> From 1851 until 1938 the *Review and Herald* quoted Rev 14:12 on its masthead to express the church’s core belief. It can be argued that the early Adventists held only two articles of faith: the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. The latter was understood as encompassing the entire New Testament. The “church covenant,” used in forming local congregations, also referred to this text as expressing the essence of the Adventist faith. See Rolf J Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development*, Friedensauer Schriftenreihe, Series A, Theology, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Lang, 2000), 124.

<sup>22</sup> Rice, xv–xvi.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

judgment, the Sabbath, the advent, the sanctuary, the Trinity, the remnant, the great controversy...or perhaps still another one?

### **Rethinking Adventist Theology**

In this essay, I have taken the position that theology—being a rational, coherent, and focused exercise of faith—naturally looks for some theological idea, principle, or truth, which helps to express the underlying unity of Christian beliefs. This also holds true for Adventist theology. We have also seen that in the Adventist tradition a number of such *focal points* have been advanced, everyone of which, in one way or another, has tried to express the inner heart of the Adventist faith. In conclusion, I will argue that Adventist theology indeed has, and needs, a unifying center; that it can be, and needs to be, refocused; and that it needs to distinguish central from peripheral issues.

#### **Adventist Theology *Has* and *Needs* a Unifying Center**

The understanding of a text—being a form of communication—always takes place in a circular fashion, moving from the whole to its parts and from there again to the whole. This so-called *hermeneutical circle* is foundational to all human understanding involving spoken or written language or any other signs. It also applies to theological reasoning and insights. To grasp the meaning of a single word or phrase, one needs to have some kind of pre-understanding of the whole sentence or book; vice versa, the meaning and message of the Scriptures as a whole requires some knowledge of its individual parts (books, passages, sentences, ideas, words, etc).

Because of this condition of the human mind, to even talk of *Adventist theology* in any meaningful sense necessarily implies something that can be reasonably described as such, no matter how varied and manifold it may be in itself. At the same time, this so-called *Adventist faith* may well consist of different insights and even diverse ideas. Like a puzzle consisting of many pieces, it still presents an identifiable image and conveys a basic idea. The question, therefore, is not whether Adventist theology conveys an overall message or *truth*, but rather which one it actually communicates. If Adventist theologians—as they certainly should—work in a rational, coherent, and focused manner, they will present a clear *depiction* of what Adventism is really all about. Otherwise, they simply would not have done their job properly.

Scripture itself, consisting of sixty-six vastly different *books* written by more than forty authors, finds its unifying center in the story of redemption, frequently told and retold in its pages. Its readers likewise should not miss

the forest because of its many trees. The older testament focuses on God's salvific acts in the history of Israel, while the newer one centers around the person and work of the incarnated Son of God. Jesus himself had a clear focus in his preaching and teaching, viz., the kingdom of God. In his letters, Paul emphasized the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for individual and communal Christian living. The New Testament writers also consistently read and interpreted the Old Testament in a Christocentric and, consequently, ecclesiocentric manner. A theology that deserves the label *biblical* will, therefore, have an understanding of the overall message of the Bible. Adventist theology claims to be such a theology.

### **Adventist Theology *Can Be* and *Needs to Be* Refocused**

Our brief survey of Adventism's theological history has revealed the existence of a number of different *conceptions*, which want to express the heart and soul of Adventist belief. Varied as they are, they all deal with the same basic subject matter, though looked at from different angles and employing different terms, notions, and concepts. While there may be different perspectives from which one looks at the Adventist faith, they all focus on the same phenomenon. Thus, the underlying unity and inner coherence of Adventism, which is implied in its fundamental beliefs and baptismal confession, may be expressed in a variety of ways, describing not a multiplicity of opposing *Adventisms*, but a multi-faceted Adventist faith. Scripture itself—consisting of sixty-six different books and a diversity of viewpoints—bears this out.

It is crucial to recognize that each approach is trying to describe, not just a particular segment, but the whole of Adventist faith, the essence of its doctrinal belief. Unlike the story of the blind men touching different parts of an elephant, the refocusing of the center of Adventist beliefs is not involving ever new and differing portions of the whole, but always describing the whole. For example, the doctrine of justification by faith (soteriology) describes the essence of Christianity just as a Trinitarian approach (doctrine of God) would want to do. The Sabbath can properly be used as *Leitmotif* of the Adventist faith, while a reflection on theological anthropology may also do the job. These approaches are, therefore, not mutually exclusive or contradictory, but rather inclusive and complementary in nature. *Pars pro toto*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This insight has been quite helpful to me in teaching systematic theology. Rather than seeing the different dogmatic loci as mere segments and parts of a larger whole, I have come to understand each of them as expressing the Christian faith in its entirety. Thus, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and so on all deal with the Christian faith in its totality—each looking at it from a particular and important angle.

There may, therefore, be as many useful approaches as there are valid perspectives on revealed truth. The choice we make will, and should, depend on the audience we are trying to reach. For example, a traditional Adventist congregation should be addressed differently from a contemporary church steeped in postmodern culture or an audience in a Muslim country. Adventist missiologists are seriously reflecting on this insight; they have also begun to implement it in unusual and creative ways. It is time for theologians in general as well as the church as a whole to grapple with the serious challenges and the exciting opportunities involved in the responsible contextualization of the Adventist faith.

### **Adventist Theology Needs to Distinguish Central from Peripheral Issues**

If Adventist theology needs to be refocused in order that the *everlasting gospel* can be adequately expressed and contextually understood, it must also make an intelligent decision as to what constitutes the indispensable heart of faith and what may be regarded as peripheral, or even outdated, issues. To use an analogy again, it is not a matter of cutting off the tail of the elephant, which we as blind men consider superfluous, while, in fact, it is useful for the animal. Rather, we are talking about those pieces of the puzzle, which obviously do not contribute in any relevant way to the overall picture. While no one would want to remove them from the finished product, they still may be seen as peripheral, while others are easily recognized as indispensable. Even with our bodies we realize that some parts are (much) more important than others, which does not cause us to remove the lesser parts.

Though Martin Luther regarded the letter of James and the Apocalypse as inferior to other portions of the New Testament (like the Gospels and the writings of Paul), he still translated and included them in his German Bible. Distinguishing between essential truths and peripheral notions does not mean to narrow down the Scriptures—or the doctrinal teachings of the church, for that matter—to their bare essentials. We should recognize, however, that there are core beliefs, which are crucial for the Christian faith, while others are not of equal importance. Speaking of a *canon within the canon* is not tantamount to calling for a reduced Bible; it may simply imply that there is a center or heart even in canonical—as in all—truth.<sup>26</sup>

To use a final illustration: no one would be as foolish as to try to remove the shallow waters at the banks of a river where ships are unable to sail. But

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<sup>26</sup> In Roman Catholic theology, this insight is expressed by the notion of a “hierarchy of truths.” The closer a doctrinal statement is attached to the foundation of the Christian faith, the more important and indispensable it is.

no one should make himself a fool by declaring that he can make as much headway at the banks of a river as he does in the center of the stream, where the water is flowing the fastest. As theologians we are called to be wise men and women. We should, therefore, sail where the water is deep, so that we may not one day run aground. May God help us to be faithful pilots who steer the ship of the Adventist church to the deep and refreshing fountain of life.



To this point Adventists have not probed the subject of worship deeply, being satisfied to adapt concepts and forms received from other Christians, for we think of our primary work to lie in other areasâ€”to sound the message of the Redeemerâ€™s soon return in glory and how to prepare for that grand event.â€” Dr Holmesâ€™ work has contributed significantly to this paper. He is regarded currently as the pre-eminent Adventist authority on worship. More recently yet, we are witnessing an in-creased interest among Adventists in worship.â€” What remains to be done is to formulate a theological underpinning of what worship means for Adventists. This paper hopes to contribute to. that task in a preliminary way. So where do we as Adventists fit in all this? We stand alone amidst this sea of theological perspectives as the one people who have successfully developed a methodology for doing theology with the Bible alone. Beginning with William Miller and then further developed by our pioneers (with the help of Ellen White,) and continuing on to this day, we have deciphered a set of coherent and Biblical principles that make possible something no one else figured out how to do or even believed it possible to do; an objective methodology for a true Sola Scriptura theology, independent of. Historic Adventists have tended to promote their message through independent ministries, some of which have had a strained relationship with the official church.[2][3] "Last Generation Theology" shares some elements with Historic Adventism, yet considers itself to have "expanded" the beliefs of Adventism to their logical conclusion.[4] Historic Adventists are seen as at the opposite end of.â€” It is widely accepted that present historic Adventism emerged in response to the Adventist-Evangelical discussions that occurred in the spring of 1955 to the fall of 1957. These dialogues were initiated by evangelicals Donald Barnhouse and Walter Martin