

# The Crime of Dissent: My Search for Integrity

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Jerry Gladson

The article below describes the faith journey of theologian and former Adventist pastor, Jerry Gladson.

Jerry Gladson is Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs  
The Psychological Studies Institute - Atlanta, Georgia.

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My agony of soul arises out of a painful, internal conflict within my denomination and a humiliating, public betrayal.

So personal and theological is what I am about to tell it will not be possible for me to narrate it without being consciously autobiographical and theological. My struggle is intensely entwined with everything I hold dear. It is the story of one 'coming of age' theologically, waking up to the harsh reality of denominational politics and vested interests. It is the story of an innocence lost and a maturity won at great personal sacrifice. It is the story of my life, a very personal kind of 'narrative' theology. Accordingly, it will be necessary for me to discuss several distinctive Adventist beliefs more fully than is the general practice in this volume. I hope the reader will forgive this aberration, but my story is inexplicable without it.

I am keenly aware of the risk involved in speaking this way about my church, and its leaders. Painfully looms the danger that, by so doing, I will sever-perhaps permanently - the already tenuous relationship I now have with church leadership. The leadership of my denomination, as is unfortunately often true of many religious organizations, does not like to hear about the pain its attitudes and decisions have exacted. It does not want to learn that any one has struggled with the core belief system it advocates, a core it thinks is literally beyond question. Yet my voice within the denomination is legion. My story is only one, but it stands for hundreds and thousands, not only in my generation, but before it, who struggled in my tradition with similar issues. It is for their sake I am willing to tell my story.

I will begin with my initial affiliation with the Adventist church, then tell the circumstances that led to my own painful 'dark night of the soul'. Finally, I will chronicle the events and reflection that led me to seek a vocational change outside the denomination.



**The Shaping of an Adventist Conscience**

At 13, as the result of an evangelistic meeting in Dalton, Georgia, I joined the Seventh-day Adventist church. Up until that time, I had attended a southern Baptist mission. Since I was just entering the teenage years, the Adventist faith, for all practical purposes, became my 'church of origin'.

Adventist evangelism, because it aims to persuade, presents a pared down, highly simplified version of the church's doctrine. Usually concentrating on the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation, Adventist evangelists portray the denomination as a prophetic movement raised up in the last days of world history to call Christendom and the world back to the teachings of the Bible. They ardently proclaim the seventh-day Sabbath, healthful living, and the renewal of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy manifested in Ellen G. White, as key elements in this renewal of biblical theology. As a result of the conjunction of these and other distinctive doctrines, Adventism sees itself as a movement standing uniquely apart from the rest of Christendom. A singular denomination, it represents, in the words of Ellen White, 'a standing rebuke to the Protestant world.'<sup>1</sup> This theology of separation shaped my early notion of Adventism. We were different-special-not like other people. I was proud of my church, of its pristine purity, its uncommon loyalty to the pursuit of truth.

In the American south, one of the strongholds of Adventism, where many churches have been raised up as the result of public evangelism, the theology of the laity basically parallels that of the Adventist evangelist. Denominational leadership in this region, often taken from the ranks of evangelists or from those strongly supportive of public evangelism, perpetuates this theology at an administrative level. Southern Adventists - especially leadership - downplay the real pluralism, from liberal to conservative, that exists in the wider Adventist world. Traditional Adventism is the only variety that counts.

To a large extent a traditional interpretation of Adventism has also guided the philosophy of world Adventist leaders. Adventist world leaders have refused officially to admit that real diversity exists in the Adventist theologians, who must deal with extremely difficult theological realities.

A mature religious community tries to provide a place where evangelism, or mission, with its basic kerugma, and theological reflection, which often progresses tentatively, may live in symbiotic peace. Just as any successful corporation allows place for research and development, as well as for aggressive sales, so evangelism and theology must live together in the healthy church. History proves this has never been easy. Because it has developed such a far-reaching, intricate web of theology, this has proven especially difficult for the Adventist community. If the denomination is inherently correct in most, if not all of its theological views, as the claim to be the remnant church implies, it is difficult to allow research to indicate alternative directions, either in polity or in theology. 'Doing theology in Adventism', one pastor remarked to me, 'is risky business'. Theology and evangelism often co-exist, and I don't think this is an exaggeration, in a state of cold war within contemporary Adventism.

When I attended Southern Missionary College (now Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists) near Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the early 1960's, instructors made little effort to make students aware of the internal debate that was then going on among Adventist theologians. While I was taking a class on the book of Daniel at Southern Missionary College, an ad hoc 'Daniel' committee at church headquarters in Washington, D.C. was puzzling over the many problems in the church's interpretation of the apocalyptic portion of Daniel 7-12. Eventually the committee would dissolve without any resolution, leaving the problems for my generation. I heard nothing of these discussions, nor did anyone else, so far as I knew. I do not say this as a criticism of the talented, dedicated professors I had in college. In all probability, they themselves did not know what was transpiring in Washington or if they did, did not think it important. They would have considered it inappropriate to have introduced their students to this kind of cognitive dissonance. As far as the 1965 graduates of Southern Missionary College were concerned, Adventism stood vindicated impeccable, in glistening purity before a waiting world.

I graduated at a time when the church's seminary, Andrews University, located in Berrien Springs, Michigan, was experiencing theological turmoil of its own. Even though church policy suggested local church conferences (statewide organizations of the Adventist denomination) sponsor ministerial graduates from denominational colleges for seminary training, due to the theological unrest at Andrews University, the Southern conferences often ignored the policy. They frequently placed graduates directly in the churches without any seminary training. At the time, I happened to agree with them. In any case, I wasn't eager to be exposed to 'liberal' views of Adventism. Besides, I couldn't spare any more time from direct ministerial labour to secure further academic training. Time was running out for the world, and I was needed in the field. I took the first position I could get and arrived in 1965 in Louisville, Kentucky, fresh out of college, to begin my ministry. A thoroughly convinced Adventist, I was anxious to do my part in taking the Adventist message to the entire world.

In Louisville, and later at Ashland and Williamsburg, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, I carried on the evangelistic tradition I had been taught. Since I had a studious bent, however, I occasionally winced at its uncritical nature, but for the most part implicitly believed what I was happily teaching and preaching. I thought my enchantment would never end.



### **Crisis of Confidence**

I can't pinpoint exactly when my confidence in the denomination started to erode. An occasional, isolated, inconclusive statement in a denomination magazine, the endless theological quarrels over insignificant matters that seemed one after another to wash over denominational life, the autocratic behavior of church leaders, all gradually left me with an uneasy, vague foreboding. Bit by bit things began to unravel. In an effort to shake off

the growing apprehension, I determined that in my preaching and teaching I would try to be as accurate as possible. Even if others couldn't, I would find a way to confirm Adventist teaching. I would seek the best biblical, theological, and historical information I could in crafting sermons and planning evangelistic topics. It seemed to me that if the Bible and theology could somehow speak for themselves, an Adventist interpretation would inevitably result. It would emerge quite naturally. I had no idea this notion, which was really a form of psychological denial - a defiance mechanism - would lead me into an agonizing conflict between the ideal church and the fallible reality I was experiencing.

Convinced I had to scrutinize the church's theology to achieve the certainty I craved, I started looking for an opportunity to graduate study in Bible. I realized I needed further training. Still unwilling to take time away from pastoral and evangelistic duties, I scouted for a seminary or university located nearby. I wanted to attend a non-Adventist seminary because intuitively I sensed, in an environment not dominated by Adventism, I could examine my faith more dispassionately. When we moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1969, I knew I had my chance. I immediately began working toward an M.A. in Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt, graduating in 1978.

For me, Vanderbilt relativised Adventism. I began to realize my formative relationship with the church had been uncritical and naïve. I had blindly accepted my tradition. I resisted this relativising process. I passionately argued with my professors and other students over whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch (a view they didn't accept), fought with them over the historical-critical method, all the while carefully keeping their theological conclusions at arms' length. I pitied my professors because they didn't know the truth as I understood it. Wisely, they put no pressure on me to accept their opinions. 'We would be disappointed if you changed your views,' James Crenshaw told me. 'We only want you to demonstrate you can use modern, scientific methods in analyzing the Bible. What you believe about those views is your own business.' Professor Crenshaw, a leading authority in Hebrew wisdom, was my dissertation adviser.

A highly complex methodology, the historical-critical method, or simply 'critical' method for short, uses the scientific method adapted to the study of ancient documents like the bible. A critical scholar analyses the history of the textual transmission, the literary forms, the development of theological concepts, and so on, all against the background of the ancient Near Eastern or Greco-Roman world, to ascertain more carefully the origin, meaning and significance of the biblical text. Conservative scholars, including Adventists, have generally opposed the critical method because historically it has assumed that all events in history, including the miracles and other supernatural events mentioned in the bible are explicable in terms of natural cause and effect. Rudolf Bultmann expresses this critical viewpoint as follows:

This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history.<sup>2</sup>

While I could not bring my self to accept this closed view of reality, and thus give up belief in a supernatural Bible, I would nonetheless see that critical scholars had noticed many details about the biblical text conservatives seemed to ignore. They pointed out that ideas of authorship in the ancient world differed from ours. In the ancient Near East, authorship tended to be a communal affair. An editorial modification, or even addition - sometimes even of extensive nature - in a writing did not disturb anyone. Regardless of who wrote it, ancient books were essentially communal products. I also saw, as critical scholars often indicated, there was a bona fide development of ideas within the Bible, and that, even when the canon reached its final status, these ideas were not reconciled. This meant that biblical faith was generally pluralistic, quite unlike the monolithic claims for the Adventism I knew. In inspiring Scripture, to borrow Luther's words from his characterisation of the Eucharist, God worked 'in, through, and under' human writing processes. The result was a book human and divine at the same time.

I gradually came to what I considered a 'modified' critical view, that is, a view of Scripture that fully affirms its divine element while, at the same, recognises the human methods that were used in its production. Eventually, I would discover that many other leading conservative scholars had already reach a similar conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

As with most internal conflicts, this simmered beneath the surface for a long time. I remember the day - almost the exact time - when it finally erupted. Sitting in an old stuffed chair, a remnant left over from a living room set we had long discarded, I was reading Rudolf Bultmann's essay, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?'<sup>4</sup> The reading was part of an assignment in a seminar on Bultmann, one of the last courses in my Vanderbilt curriculum. Bultmann pointed out that no one approaches the biblical text without presuppositions that are determined by complex factors in their life experience. One must take great care, however, not to allow these presuppositions to determine the interpretation of the text.

It suddenly dawned on me that all along I had been allowing my Adventist presuppositions to filter out any new insights - particularly of a theological nature - I might have gained from my graduate studies. As a result, I had not seriously listened to anything I had studied at Vanderbilt. I remembered a comment often made by one Adventist scholar who held a Ph.D. in theology from a non-Adventist university. 'For every page I was assigned in non-Adventist literature,' he boasted, 'I read one page in Ellen White to counteract it. As a result, I've come through my doctoral studies with my Adventist faith intact'.

Of course! He had deliberately closed his mind! If Adventists never listen seriously to other theologians, I wondered, how could they honestly expect these same theologians to take seriously their claims? The enormity of such a simple question, with all its implications, towered menacingly before me. If I wanted to be honest, should I not listen seriously, not only to Bultmann, but to my professors as well? At least, shouldn't I try to understand their point of view? As a result of years of Adventist conditioning, I instinctively grasped the dangers of such openness. Horror stories of those who had drifted from the church after earning non-Adventist university degrees flashed before me.

And I was seeking a non-Adventist doctorate in Bible! Already, my studies had generated numerous questions I couldn't answer. But I knew, if I really wanted to pursue truth, I had to take the risk. I had to get behind Adventist presuppositions to what one of my professors was fond of calling, 'the question beneath the question'.<sup>5</sup> That spring afternoon in 1976 was a turning point. It was a metamorphosis that would lead me to look at my church of origin in an entirely new-and disturbing-light. I had crossed the Rubicon. There could be no turning back. Little did I know then that my internal theological struggle would soon become a mirror of the experience of the whole Adventist church, and that I would be caught in the maelstrom.

That fall, with my doctoral course work now behind me, I taught a college course in Daniel. As preparation, I decided to re-examine Adventist teaching about crucial passages in Daniel. For several weeks I carefully poured over Daniel 7, 8 and 9, the core chapters in the Adventist claim that in 1844 a final work of human judgement had begun in Heaven. Reading and re-reading these chapters in the original languages, it gradually dawned on me how difficult it was to draw any definite conclusions from them. I realised why many scholars - Adventist and non-Adventist alike - had been completely baffled by the apocalyptic section of Daniel. Other possibilities than the traditional Adventist interpretation were certainly possible, perhaps even inescapable.

One evening I admitted dejectedly to my wife, Laura, 'Daniel doesn't convincingly support the Seventh-day Adventist claim. I can't find any compelling reason why the little horn of Dan. 7 has to be the papacy rather than the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, as other scholars generally suppose, nor why the 2300 days of Dan. 8:14 have to pinpoint a final divine judgement that started in 1844. At minimum, other interpretations are certainly practicable, and there are no clear criteria in the text, so far as I can see, that make it possible to decide between ours and other options'.

'What about Ellen White's support of our traditional understanding of Daniel?' Laura asked. Ellen White (1827-1915), considered co-founder of the Adventist church along with her husband, James White, is regarded as a prophetess by Seventh-Day Adventists. Since she wrote extensively about Dan. 7-9,<sup>6</sup> most Adventists regard her support of the denominational teaching as decisive.

'I don't know what to make of that. I know Ellen White often based her doctrinal teachings on the work of other contemporary Adventist scholars. It didn't originate with her. And if, as she insisted, we base our doctrines solely on Scripture, we couldn't use her to bail us out of exegetical problems like this. If this doctrine isn't compelling from the Bible alone, we have no right to make it a central teaching of the church. Certainly not a requirement of membership'.

'The implications of what you're saying are staggering', Laura replied. 'It would remove, at least in large part, the reason for the existence of the Adventist church. This is serious. I really hope you can find a solution'.

Her words jolted my memory. I recalled a comment made to me a few years earlier by a studious Adventist minister. 'If William Miller had known Hebrew', he challenged, 'would there have been an Adventist movement?' The Adventist church originated as one of the Christian denominations resulting from the revival led by William Miller (1782-1849) in the 1830s. Miller's views on Daniel, the basis of his proclamation the world would see an end, were decisive in shaping the church's teaching about 1844. In the depths of my tormented soul, I now excruciatingly realized what my minister friend had meant.

By putting all I'd discovered on hold, I somehow managed to get through the Daniel class, carefully dodging the major problems. I tried to be as honest as I could, admitting some of the difficulties but trying instead to focus the students on research the denomination seemed always to be carrying on about these matters. 'We're working toward a solution', I emphasised over and over. But I felt hollow, insincere, dishonest. One of Ellen White's statements kept haunting me. 'The greatest want of the world is the want of men-men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest'.<sup>7</sup>



### Crises in Theology

The placid surface of Adventist life changed forever in 1977. All the theological problems with which I had been wrestling, like suppressed memories deep in the denominational psyche, began rising one by one to the surface. Three people, two from Australia and one from the United States, became figures in these controversies: Geoffrey Paxton, Desmond Ford and Walter Rea.

As a thesis for his degree at the University of Queensland in Australia, Anglican scholar Geoffrey Paxton wrote and later published *The Shaking of Adventism*.<sup>8</sup> Paxton re-examined the Adventist claim that the denomination was, in essence, continuing the work of the Protestant Reformation by its proclamation of the gospel and its rediscovery of long-neglected truths such as the seventh-day Sabbath and the judgement in 1944. Instead of the usual exegetical arguments centring on the biblical passages in question, as most critics of Adventism have done, he held this claim up against one of the central themes of the Reformation itself: the question of justification, what Luther called the 'chief article' of Christian belief. Paxton's conclusion profoundly disturbed thousands of faithful Adventists, including me. While Adventism taught it was proclaiming the gospel of the Protestant Reformers, Paxton maintained, it was actually-perhaps unwittingly-expounding a Roman Catholic view of the gospel rather than a Protestant one.

To a casual observer, the difference may seem slight. It involves a major distinction, however, that pierces quickly to the heart of the Reformation dispute. The principal Protestant Reformers, especially Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their followers, carefully distinguish between justification and sanctification. Justification, in their view,

is an instantaneous, forensic, or legal act. It is an eschatological verdict from the future made a present reality in the believer's experience. It does not make the penitent sinner righteous. Rather, justification provides legal, right standing with God. Sanctification, not justification, makes a sinner righteous. Hence, Luther speaks of the status of the believer as *simul justus et peccator*, 'at the same time a righteous person and a sinner'. The critical difference is that the legal status conveyed by justification furnishes one's status before God. It is complete, whole, and final. The proportion of sanctification, or character transformation, does not affect this standing before God.

Since human salvation depends on justification, which is complete, rather than sanctification, which is ongoing, the gospel brings an objective, eschatological assurance of God's acceptance.

In contrast, Catholic theologians from the Reformation period tend to merge justification and sanctification and regard them both as internal processes. Divine grace at work in justification and sanctification brings about an actual, ontological change. God not only pronounces human beings righteous, but begins at the same time to make them so. Justification is making or becoming righteous. But this work of becoming righteous extends over a lifetime and is never complete.

This view fuses justification and sanctification as aspects of the same work. It implies that the believer, because he or she always possesses an incomplete, internal righteousness, is never completely sure of God's final acceptance, and must continue to concentrate on righteous living in order to eventually obtain God's final approval. The Protestant view, on the other hand, because it offers an objective assurance, liberates one from the struggle for salvation so that he or she can concentrate on ministry to others.

Paxton, while he found abundant echoes of this Catholic understanding of justification in Adventist literature, managed to detect only a faint, inconsistent glimmer of the Protestant. In view of this, how could Adventism claim to be the 'heir' of the Protestant Reformation while it seemed to deny one of the central Protestant principles? Although Paxton overlooked the Radical Reformation, with its slightly different understanding of justification, and thus missed a key historical factor in Adventist soteriology, his conclusion nonetheless shocked the denomination. Paxton's whirlwind tour of Adventist college campuses shortly after the publication of his book only made the problem more visible.

Although Paxton's study caused me to re-examine my own views of justification and to align myself more decisively with historic Protestantism, it was his inference that by claiming to be the heir of the Protestant Reformation, Adventism exposed its theological naïvete, that troubled me more.

I had already concluded that many of the problems in Adventist theology existed because the church, in its formative years, never possessed the skill necessary to avoid making excessive theological claims. That was nothing unusual. Almost all religious movements, like an adolescent trying to establish independence, start out by making what later

reflection will show to be unreasonable counterclaims against mainstream religion. Often, like Adventism, they stake their right to independent existence on their counterclaims. But eventually the adolescent grows up, and maturity produces the realisation that parents were far wiser than anticipated. Now that it was beginning to move beyond adolescence, as I was about to find out, the Adventist church would not be able to find the courage - or will - to examine its claims in the light of new information. Instead, beginning with Paxton, church leaders dug in their heels and refused to let the maturation process run its natural course.

Australian Adventist theologian Desmond Ford opened the next chapter in the church's debate in an area not related to the concerns of Paxton. Long an advocate of the Protestant view of the gospel, as Ford began to relate the concept of justification of his interest in the book of Daniel, he encountered difficulty. Since 1844 Adventists have understood the 2300 evenings and mornings of Dan. 8:14 to be a symbolic time period of 2300 solar years stretching from the seventh year of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (457 BC), to 1844 AD<sup>9</sup>. On October 22, 1844, the precise date being chosen on the basis of the Karaite Jewish Determination of the date of Yom Kippur in that year, Adventists believe Christ's intercessory ministry in heaven shifted from primarily a work of intercession to that of investigative judgement, on the analogy of Yom Kippur in the Old Testament (Lev.23:26-30). Yom Kippur is held to be the type of this great event. 'Investigative' is a metaphor taken from the legal arena to denote the idea that Heaven starts to examine the records of the human race to determine their eligibility for final salvation. The heavenly tribunal, in other words, began reviewing in 1844 the cases of all who have ever lived to see if they are worthy of eternal life. To symbolise this new phase, Christ moved from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place in the heavenly sanctuary. Although this judgement commences with the dead, at some unknown time it will pass to the living, making the present time one of ominous significance. Ellen White explains this relevance:

All who have truly repented on sin, and by faith claimed the blood of Christ as their atoning sacrifice, have had pardon entered against their names in the books of heaven; as they have become partakers of the righteousness of Christ, and their characters are found to be in harmony with the law of God, their sins will be blotted out, and they themselves will be accounted worthy of eternal life.<sup>10</sup>

The Adventist church not only gains a great deal of its urgency from this conviction, known in denominational parlance as the 'investigative judgement', but in large part defines its central mission on the basis of this doctrine. The denomination is absolutely unique in this teaching. Consequently; any hint the investigative judgement harbours theological problems constitutes a direct attack on the heart of Adventism.

If the investigative judgement is yet to determine who among the living is worthy of eternal life, how does that concur with the New Testament affirmation there is 'no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1)? Or with John? 'He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (Jn. 5:24)? Ford puzzled over these passages, wondering how the assurance that God in Christ had pronounced the believer

righteous, apart from works - an eschatological verdict - was consistent with the apparently opposite idea that the final decision on those who were to be saved still lay in the future?

This tension led Ford to re-examine more closely the biblical underpinnings of the Adventist teaching of the investigative judgement. His exegetical shovel struck all kinds of exegetical and historical problems, both in Daniel and in the book of Hebrews, which explicitly talks about the nature of Christ's heavenly ministry. Unfortunately, these issues are much too complicated to discuss here, so I refer the reader to Ford's own analysis of them.<sup>11</sup> In a lecture given in January 1979 to a packed audience at Pacific Union College, in Angwin, California, where he taught, Ford went public with his findings. The denomination, in startled response, probably because it wasn't sure what to do with a dissident theologian, gave him an administrative leave of absence from his teaching post. Denominational leaderships mandated the research and [asked him to] document his claims, then submit them to a panel of church leaders and theologians for final evaluation.

That meeting took place in the late summer, 1980, at a church youth camp at Glacier View, high in the picturesque Colorado Rockies not far from Boulder, Colorado. Church leaders there publicly admitted some of the theological and exegetical problems, but rejected Ford's resolution of them. They promised to set up a committee to inquire more deeply into the issues Ford had raised and recommend appropriate solutions. Then, in a dramatic, unanticipated private meeting chaired by Neal Wilson, President of the General Conference, church leaders stripped Ford of his ministerial standing.

Adventist theologians everywhere were outraged at what appeared to them to be a betrayal of honest scholarship. Although I had been at Glacier View for a theological conference following the debate over Ford's research and therefore had not heard any of the preceding discussions, I recognised the essential validity of Ford's diagnosis. I had encountered many of the same problems in my own research. My search for personal integrity now took on a new intensity.

With the revelation of Ford's conclusions, two related theological problems now swirled menacingly through denominational life: the problem of the denomination's understanding of justification and; the issue of the investigative judgement. They would soon be joined by a third.

In California, Adventist pastor Walter Rea discovered that Ellen White had apparently 'borrowed' more freely from other theological sources without giving credit than the church had previously admitted. In some remarkable instances she had attached the phrase, 'I was shown (by the Lord)' to the material she had borrowed or otherwise claimed to be the result of a vision.<sup>12</sup> Rea noted that this borrowing ran suspiciously through all Ellen White's published materials. Failing to get the necessary denominational cooperation he expected in revealing these findings to the Adventist public, Rea decided to publish independently a work he titled '**The White Lie**'.<sup>13</sup>

Church leaders again took swift action. They removed Rea from the ministry and commissioned Fred Veltman, a New Testament scholar at Pacific Union College, to investigate his claims. In what has to be a strange irony, Veltman spent the better part of the 1980's, using source criticism, a technique developed by historical-criticism, to examine closely a fifteen-chapter portion of the **Desire of Ages**, Ellen White's best-selling life of Christ, for traces of undocumented borrowing. In 1990, Veltman reported to the church at large his findings in two articles appearing in **Ministry** magazine.<sup>14</sup> Careful to point out he had examined only a small section of the book, thus making it difficult to generalise, Veltman concluded that Ellen White did use sources without giving credit, and that she, at times, even denied doing so. The book **Desire of Ages**, he noted, was basically dependent on secondary materials. On the whole, an average of about 31% of the fifteen chapters was in some way indebted to other material. Worse, her history, chronology, and theological interpretation - often cited confidently by Adventists - were not always reliable. For many in the church, Rea's findings, together with Veltman's later and much more careful analysis, raised serious ethical concern about Ellen White.

In the space of five years (1978-1983), the Adventist community had seen three of its key tenets, or as Peter Berger calls them, its 'legitimizing structures',<sup>15</sup> fiercely assaulted. The cumulative effect was nothing short of traumatic. The North American Adventist community buzzed with debate. Frenzied discussion of righteousness by faith, Daniel 8, and Ellen White quickly escalated into open theological warfare, with the churches and colleges serving as the battlefields. People chose sides. They branded each other. 'Fordite' got attached to anyone who acknowledged the legitimacy of any of the criticisms of the investigative judgement or Ellen White, or who affirmed the Protestant gospel. Those who stood by the traditional teachings were known as 'Traditionalists'. Neutral ground became increasingly hard to find. Adventism suddenly became a religious community intent on self-destruction.



### **Crisis at College**

Southern College found itself on the front lines of the conflict. In the late 1970's, Geoffrey Paxton spoke to an audience of more than 500 there. Ford, too, visited the campus, although prior to the famous lecture confessing his dissent with the church's teaching about Daniel 8. Walter Rea also came to the Chattanooga area and, although not permitted to speak on campus, held a meeting at nearby Covenant College, a Presbyterian school. A number of Adventists attended, and word of what he had said quickly spread. All the key participants in the theological crises paid visits to the Southern College vicinity.

What gave Southern College such high visibility during this theological crisis, however, was not so much visiting a personae non grata, but rather the persistent agitation of Florence Woolcock, an Adventist lay person unconnected to the college. Extremely concerned over what she perceived in the theological debates to a drift from the church's traditional moorings, Woolcock periodically distributed printed fliers to Adventist homes

surrounding the college. In these documents she berated members of the college administration and the religion department, accusing them of 'heresy'. By this method she eventually got the ear of several prominent College Board members, including one who had given generously to the college over a period of years. Through these board members, she was able to influence the thinking of college administrators, and especially the chairman of the board, Alfred McClure, who, to quell the rising fire of a handful of board members, began orchestrating a systematic "purge" of the college.

Frank Knittel, who had been president of Southern College for more than a decade, resigned under severe pressure. John Wagner replaced Knittel, but soon left for another college, a disillusioned man, unable to manage the bitter crisis unfolding before him. Don Sahly, who had been in Asia during the years of crisis in North American Adventism, succeeded him. Lorenzo Grant, the religion faculty's only black member, also succumbed and took a position as a chaplain in the Washington, DC area. The board fired Ed Zackrison, who had joined the religion faculty along with me in 1972, and brought in Gordon Hyde, formerly head of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference and a staunch 'traditionalist' as the new chairman. Grant, Zackrison and I were the members of the religion faculty most frequently denounced in the Woolcock broadsides for our candor about the theological controversies.

With Knittel, Grant and Zackrison eliminated, the pressure against me strangely seemed to lessen, at least momentarily. For two years (1984-86), I managed to hang on in what seemed an uneasy truce, a calm before a storm I intuitively knew had to come. As I continued to study the theological problems confronting the church, the conviction deepened that, as far as I could determine, there was no resolution short of a revision of key elements in traditional Adventist theology. The church would eventually have to reassess its soteriology, its eschatology, and its understanding of Ellen G White. My research also reinforced confidence in the historical-critical method. I realised, then some form of the critical method was necessary to account for the history and present form of biblical text. Try as I may, I found it impossible to go back to a fundamentalist or pre-critical view of Scripture.

Despite these troubling thoughts, I somehow managed to conduct my classes within denominational parameters, knowing such a policy to be my only hope of survival. This meant I had to try and circumscribe discussion in class, or at least keep it from getting too close to the controversial issues. At least one other religion professor eliminated student discussion entirely, turning his classes into monologues. This seemed to me to make a travesty of education. Consequently, in attempting to guide classroom discussion so closely, I began to feel uncomfortably dishonest, and finally gave up the effort. In my classes students found even controversial matters fair game, although I had consistently tried to point them to the church's traditional positions. Inner turmoil and the lurking possibility of an unguarded moment in class kept me under constant strain.

None of my religion colleagues appeared to be grappling with these same theological problems, or, if so, were unwilling to admit it. Fear gripped the department, paralysing theological dialogue. Since Zackrison's firing, everyone knew they could be next. That

chilly foreboding made a microscopic profile and publicly silenced top priorities. We hunkered down, watching each other warily. The need for survival crowded out every other impulse. What had once been a contented, progressive department in the early 1980s, now became a dreary frigid place. Genuine communication all but ceased. The department of religion at Southern College-once the pride of the college-grew increasingly dysfunctional. Don't talk, don't feel, don't rock the boat, be strong, good, right, and perfect - all the symptoms of dysfunctional family - reigned supreme.<sup>16</sup> To become angry at what was happening just wasn't permitted. This appalling transmutation of a once vibrant religion faculty imprisoned me in a continual state of depression. Fortunately, the support of other friends on the faculty and in the community sustained me during this time. Within the department, however, I struggled alone in my agonising, intellectual pilgrimage. I lived for the weekends.

In the fall of 1986, the pressures that had lain dormant for two years finally exploded in a dizzying series of events that were to play themselves out over the next nine months.



### **Final Crisis**

One day in November 1986, William Allen, Southern's academic dean and my next door neighbour, telephoned. 'I hate to be the bearer of bad news', he began reticently, 'but I need to tell you of a meeting held over the weekend in which Gordon Hyde, Al McClure, Jack Blanco and probably Gerhard Hasel - although I'm not certain he was present - drew up guidelines for the newly endowed chair in religion'. A private donor had given funds to the college to endow a special Ellen G White Memorial Chair in Religion. An ad hoc committee was considering the criteria that would apply to anyone nominated for the chair. Jack Blanco, a member of the religion staff, had been unofficially selected to succeed Hyde in the chairmanship of the department once the latter retired. Gerhard Hasel, dean of the Seventh-day Adventist theological seminary at Berrien Springs, Michigan, served as a consultant to the college in setting up the endowed chair. An Old Testament scholar, he was best known in denominational theological circles for his bitter opposition to the critical method.

'The committee is strongly considering making it mandatory that the person appointed to the chair oppose all forms of the historical-critical method', Bill continued. 'Sahly and I are very worried. We know Hyde wants to turn southern College into the "stronghold of orthodoxy" in the Adventist church but we think that to ban all forms of historical-criticism would eventually make it extremely difficult to attract qualified theologians to teach here'.

Suddenly, I felt nauseous. After two years of peace, would there now be a fresh outbreak of hostilities? Was 'keeping one's own counsel' impossible in Adventism? I realised that most Adventist scholars sanctioned forms of historical-criticism, deeming it consistent with the church's high view of the authority of Scripture. These scholars were firmly

committed to the Adventist church. But I also know in the church's highest administrative circles, for which Hasel often acted as theological spokesperson, there existed an intense, longstanding antipathy toward any form of historical-criticism. This inner circle considered anyone perceived to be sympathetic to historical-criticism as a saboteur of Adventism. The situation was not unlike that which exists at present in the Southern Baptist Convention. Gordon Hyde, while he headed the biblical Research Institute, had urged this viewpoint. He thought of any use of historical-criticism as a crossing of the 'Maginot Line' of Christian faith. Hence, it was logical Hyde and Hasel would insist opposition to historical-criticism be made a criteria for the endowed chair.

'What can I possibly do'? I immediately thought of the danger in which I would be.

'I know it's difficult', said Bill, 'but if you could use your influence to counter this attempt to make historical-criticism a criteria, we would appreciate it'. I agreed, but emphasised the futility of any effort I might make. Out of desperation, Bill was coming to me unofficially, 'off the record'. Although not a theologian, he knew to set Southern College on a theological course that would move it out of the mainstream of Adventist thinking would, in the end, prove disastrous, perhaps even fatal.

Bill's telephone call upset me for several days, but classes and other duties soon pushed it out of mind. I didn't give any further thought to the matter until Gerhard Hasel visited the campus to give the inaugural lectures to commemorate the founding of the chair. (No criteria had yet been identified, nor any appointment been made).

As part of the celebration, the religion department convened over pizza with Hasel in the department's library/conference room.

After the plates and glasses had been cleared away, Hyde presented a sheaf of thick documents he had received from the General Conference, entitled, 'Guidelines for Biblical Study'. This document, a thinly veiled censure of historical-criticism, had been in the making for more than a year. All of us had seen earlier versions, but this one was new.

'We have some business to do tonight', he spoke slowly. 'This is the latest version of the General Conference 'Guidelines for Biblical Study'. The General Conference would like us to approve this as soon as possible'.

He started passing the papers around the table. I recalled Bill Allen's telephone call. This was the very thing he had feared! With Hasel's presence and support, Hyde was going to try and get the department to approve the 'Guidelines' and thus pave the way for the historical-critical plank to be nailed securely into the criteria for the chair. I had to act quickly. But how?

Trembling, knowing I was totally alone in what I had to do, I hastily scanned the fourteen-page document.

'This is a complex document with a number of implications', I carefully chose my words. 'I don't see how we can adequately deal with this matter tonight before we've all had a chance to read carefully over what's here. This paper raises some serious issues that must be prudently evaluated. Only then can we give a fair, honest appraisal'.

A painful silence hung over the meeting. Everybody looked at me as if I had said the wrong thing. Ignoring their shocked expressions, I persevered. 'Notice here, the document implies that those who use historical-criticism have all but abandoned or, at least, jeopardised the historical Christian faith. Would that apply to C.S. Lewis? A literary critic by profession, he made use of critical methods of biblical study and conclusions in his writings. Yet his books have inspired millions'.

Another bewildering silence. Hasel broke the tension. 'The historical-critical method, I don't have to remind you, is based on the Enlightenment view that God does not intrude into human history. Hence, there can be no miracles - no inspiration. If we buy that presupposition, the Adventist faith will be destroyed'.

'I don't think it's necessary to accept that presupposition. It's possible to accept some of the insights of the critical approach without buying all its original presuppositions. We handle any theory this way. But if you aren't willing to use any type of historical-criticism, then how will you save Ellen White?' I replied. 'We all know she borrowed from contemporary authors and didn't give credit. The General Conference has commissioned a study, deliberately using source criticism, to analyse how and why she borrowed these materials. Without source criticism, one of the primary methods in historical-criticism, there isn't any way of accounting for what Ellen White did. In other words, without historical-criticism, you may eventually have to abandon Ellen White as a spiritual authority. Is there any other way to save her for Adventism?' I drove the point home, knowing it was my only chance.

Hasel looked at me coldly. Then, suddenly, he shifted the whole conversation. 'In Europe, where I grew up, we really didn't look upon Ellen White as an authority like Americans do. I was taught to ground my faith in the bible, so the Ellen White problem hasn't really bothered me'.

Stunned by Hasel's response, Hyde and the rest of the department staff quietly laid down their copies of the guidelines. The matter was tabled. Somehow, I felt, I had managed to avert a crisis. I had given Bill Allen and Don Sahly the support they needed. Little did I know the price I would pay.

Over the next few months, events again drifted back into routine, with a seemingly endless cycle of classes, staff meetings, papers, and grades. The matter of the Guidelines, either from the General Conference or for the endowed chair was not mentioned again.

Then, on March 3, 1987, I was summonsed to the home of Don Sahly, three doors up the street from where we lived. Bill Allen was also present. 'I've asked you here, rather than my office, because what I have to say concerns both of you', Sahly said. 'I feel that a

"head of steam" is building and we need to see what we can do about it so we don't repeat what happened with Zackrison three or four years ago'.

He mentioned complaints he'd received from students, church leaders, and Gordon Hyde concerning me, all centring around my theology. In view of this pressure, he indicated it might be best for me to take another position somewhere else. 'I'm not telling you to go', he stressed, 'but possibly the solution might be for you to move on'. I would hear variations on this theme many times during the two months that followed.

When I left Sahly's home and walked the half block down the street to my house, I was dazed. The denomination for which I had unstintingly laboured for twenty-two years was slowly, excruciatingly, betraying me. I had confronted both Hyde and Hasel on Sahly's behalf, and now he was turning on me. I felt abandoned and alone. Where was the church that believed in an uncompromising pursuit of truth? I could see it nowhere. All I had tried to teach my students about honesty and integrity seemed wasted, devoured on the pyre of political expediency. But at the same time, I felt a strange feeling of relief. Despite the hardship that lay ahead, I might soon be able to end the painful dissonance I had endured so long.

During March I had no fewer than five conferences with Sahly. At times, he lashed out in anger; then again, he would display calmness and serenity. I began to get the strong hint that I was the problem. If only Southern could get rid of me without too much difficulty, it could shake off its newly acquired 'liberal' label (the constant Woolcock theme) and restore its pristine reputation as a school of high Christian standards. I had become, in the parlance of the dysfunctional family, the 'scapegoat', the one to blame for all the institution's ills. Getting rid of me assumed a new, urgent intensity. In Sahly's behalf, it has to be recognised that he was acting under pressure from someone above him, possibly Al McClure or, conceivably, even the General Conference - I never knew which - and was fighting to save his own position. During these conferences, I proceeded cautiously, conferring almost daily with my attorney, Harry Burnett, a Chattanooga employment lawyer and active Presbyterian elder, who was well acquainted with Southern College. Harry advised me to meet with Gordon Hyde, since he appeared to be the source of most of the accusations, to try to find out the exact nature of the problem.

From the minute we walked into his office, only a week after Sahly's initial conference at his home, I could tell Hyde was uncomfortable and would rather have been elsewhere. I had invited Laura to come with me, both as a witness of what would be said and as a moral support.

'Gordon, we've come to ask why you want me to leave Southern College'. I wasted no time getting to the issue at stake. 'I thought things had been going smoothly within the department and with our constituency for at least a couple of years. Your sudden effort to pressure me to go therefore comes as a complete surprise. Do you mind telling me why you're doing this?'

Hyde folded his hands, leaned back in his chair, and responded patronisingly. 'Well, you're aware, aren't you, that the college has now embarked on a new direction. We have a new president, and we want to move the college away from the course it has followed in the past few years. Given that new philosophy, which I would call "conservative", you will have to ask yourself whether you would feel comfortable here in the future.'

'Isn't that a decision I should make for myself, rather than having it forced on me?'

'But your theological orientation is at odds with this new direction. Let me explain. You support a modification of historical-critical method. The philosophy of Southern College does not. That puts you at cross-purposes with what we're trying to do here'.

'Don't you realize', I responded, 'that most Adventist scholars advocate a modified version of historical-criticism - including our colleagues here in the religion department - and that to launch Southern College in a different direction will eventually make it a theological backwater in the Adventist system? In private conversations over a period of months, every member of the Southern College Department of religion has agreed with me about a modified version of historical-criticism'.

'I've talked with all of them, too, and they tell me they're opposed to historical-criticism. They've told me they disagree with you. They feel you're out of step with the rest of the department.'

'Don't you see', I replied, 'they're just giving the answer they know you expect'. I could see I was getting nowhere.

Hyde's expression hardened. 'That's precisely the problem, and you don't realize it. You see yourself as a 'bridge' between historical-criticism and conservative theology. Furthermore, you see yourself as a 'bridge' between not only one group of Adventists and another, but between Adventists and other Christian denominations. Such bridge-building - such toleration of diverse viewpoints - won't be acceptable here now or in the future. For your own good you'd better get out'.

I voluntarily left Southern College at the end of July 1987, taking a position as academic dean and professor of biblical and integrative studies at the Psychological Studies Institute in Atlanta, Georgia, a private graduate school specialising in the training of professional Christian counsellors. Leaving denominational employment in my church of origin after twenty-two years was the hardest decision I have ever had to make. It meant for my family and me the end of a whole way of life. We were now on our own, outside the 'womb' of Adventist system. I remain a member of the Adventist church, although my status is more that of an 'exile' than of an active congregant. My influence on Adventist life is now peripheral; I have been compelled to find spiritual nurturance elsewhere, among my Protestant friends, those to whom over my entire career I have sought to build bridges. But at least I no longer live under a denominational system that, at present, has little room for creativity, growth or change. As to the problems that created my anguish-justification by faith, the investigative judgement, Ellen White, historical-criticism-I have

no answers more acceptable to Adventist theology now that I did then. But now I can register my disagreement openly, and without fear. I am free, free to research, to think, to be. Paul Tillich, I had come to think sums up the struggle in which I found myself, and which brought the end of my denominational career: "The theologian is obligated to be critical of every special expression of his ultimate concern. He cannot affirm any tradition and any authority except through a "No" and a "Yes". And it is always possible that he may not take the risk of being driven beyond the boundary line of the theological circle. Therefore, the pious and powerful in the church are suspicious of him, although they live in dependence upon the work of the former theologians who were in the same situation. Theology, since it serves not only the concrete but also the universal logos, can become a stumbling block for the church and a demonic temptation for the theologian. The detachment required in one's theological work can destroy the necessary involvement of faith. This tension is the burden and the greatness of every theological work."<sup>17</sup>



### Concluding Postscript

In March, 1991, the Seventh Day Adventist North American Division, on the advice of Al McClure, refused to authorise the renewal of Jerry Gladson's ministerial license, ending an almost three-year effort to secure his ministerial standing. Unlike most church organisations, the Adventist denomination has no provision to authorise ministers who work outside the denominational structure, except for military and hospital chaplains. Gladson is now seeking a full ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ.



### References

1. **Testimonies for the Church** (9 vols.; Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:223.
2. **Existence and Faith** (New York: Living Books, 1960), p.292
3. E.g., Carl E Armerding, **The Old Testament and Criticism** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); G. Eldon Ladd, **The New Testament and Criticism** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967). Evangelical scholar R K Harrison writes: 'Many professional students of the Old Testament, including some scholars of the highest intellectual caliber, have come to the conclusion that it is becoming increasingly impossible to ignore or dismiss the results of honest scholarship and research any longer. Accordingly they have begun to devote themselves to the task of ascertaining as far as is possible the actual facts of the ancient Near Eastern cultural situation, and against such a background are making a strenuous attempt to interpret the literary and other phenomena of the old Testament'. (**Introduction to the Old Testament** [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], p.81).
4. *Existence and Faith*, pp. 289-97

5. The exact expression is: 'the problem beneath the problem of theological method' (Edward Farley, **Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality** [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975], p.3).
6. See E G White, **The Great Controversy** (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911; reprinted, 1950), pp.479-91.
7. **Education** (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1903; reprinted, 1952), p.57
8. (Wilmington, Delaware: Zenith, 1977).
9. The passage reads: 'For two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state; (RSV)
10. **Great Controversy**, p.483
11. Daniel 8:14, the **Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgement** (Casselberry, Florida: Euangelion, 1980).
12. Ron Graybill, former associate secretary of the Ellen G White Estate, and now on the faculty of Loma Linda University, cites an entry in Ellen White's diary (November 20, 1890) as an example of the prefacing of borrowed material with a claim that it had been received in a vision. In this case, she borrows a statement from Alfred Krumacher, **Elijah, the Tishbite**, pp.20-21 ('God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led if they could see the end from the beginning'). The citation of Krumacher without the visionary claim, and without credit to Krumacher, also appears elsewhere in the White corpus (**Desire of Ages** [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1905] p.479; **Prophets and Kings** [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1917], p.578). Like the Synoptics, a sentence in one place in White's corpus would often be copied elsewhere, often into a new context. Graybill summarizes the extent of her borrowing: 'The material borrowed by Mrs White included borrowed extra-Biblical comments on the lives of various biblical characters, often turning the speculation and conjectures [sic] of her sources into statements of positive fact'. (Transcript of a tape recorded lecture [1981], pp.3-4).
13. (Turlock, California: M & R, 1981).
14. ' "**The Desire of Ages** Project": The Date' (October, 1990) 4-7; ' "**The Desire of Ages** Project": The Conclusions' (December 1990) 11-15. A less widely circulated, photomechanically reproduced full report had been made previously available on a limited basis from the Ellen G White Estate.
15. **The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion** (New York: Doubleday, 1967, pp3-51.
16. On these symptoms, see Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, **The Addictive Organization** (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp 48-54.
17. **Systematic Theology** (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1965), 1:25-26.



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