

Perspective Digest

The Everlasting Covenant

Throughout its pages, Scripture portrays an eternal covenant among the members of the Trinity and the members of the human race.

Peter M. van Bemmelen



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Throughout its pages, Scripture portrays an eternal covenant among the members of the Trinity and the members of the human race.

The expression “the everlasting covenant” is a distinctly biblical expression. It occurs 16 times in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. The Hebrew phrase translated as “everlasting covenant” is of uncertain derivation; it is generally translated in English with the word *covenant*. It can refer to an agreement between two human beings as in Genesis 21:27.

More frequently, however, it refers to a covenant between God and humanity. But, as becomes evident from a careful study of the Scriptures, the deepest meaning of the concept of the everlasting covenant is found in the covenant relationship among the Persons of the Godhead. This intra-divine covenant relation is foundational to all divine-human covenant relationships.

The Everlasting Covenant in the Old Testament

It is widely recognized that the covenant is a very prominent concept in God’s dealings with humanity. Of the some 285 occurrences of the word translated as “covenant” in the Hebrew Scriptures, the large majority have to do with the covenant relationship between God and His chosen ones. The 16 occurrences of the expression “everlasting covenant” all belong to this category.

The first reference to “everlasting covenant” is in Genesis 9:16: “The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”¹ This everlasting covenant is initiated by God, as is clear from Genesis 9:8 to 11. Verse 9 is very emphatic: “As for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants [margin: seed] after you.” The

promise of this covenant is that there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth (vs. 11). To confirm the certainty of this promise, God sets the rainbow in the clouds as a token of the covenant. This covenant pertains to all generations from the time of Noah until Jesus' return. Other promises included in this covenant are reminiscent of the original promises given to Adam and Eve but with certain qualifications and restrictions as a consequence of human sin (Gen. 8:15–9:7; 1:3-30).

In context, not much is said by God about the foundation of this covenant. It is mentioned earlier that “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8), and from this it may be deduced that the everlasting covenant that God established with Noah and his seed is rooted in the grace of God.

The next three references to an “everlasting covenant” are found in Genesis 17. Already in Genesis 15:18 and 19 we are told that “the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates,’” but it is not until years later that there is an extensive account of the Lord’s covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 17:1 to 22. The initiative, as in the case of the covenant with Noah, is entirely with God. The Lord appeared to Abram (vss. 1, 2) and said to him, “‘I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.’”

The word *covenant* occurs no fewer than 13 times in chapter 17 of Genesis. In the covenant, God makes a number of promises to Abram, whose name is changed to Abraham because God will make him the father of many nations (vss. 4, 5). Genesis 17:7 and 8 seems to express the heart of the covenant promises when God states clearly the scope and purpose of His covenant in these words, “‘I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.’”

God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants (or seed) structures the relationship between Yahweh and His people. Through Abraham and his descendants, God intends to bring blessing and salvation to all the nations on earth, in other words, to the entire human race. This purpose is stated first to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:18), and is repeated to his son, Isaac (26:4), and to Isaac’s son, Jacob (28:14). Of special significance is the expression “‘in your seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed,’” which is interpreted by the Apostle Paul to refer to one seed, namely Christ (Gal. 3:16). It is evident from Galatians 3:26 to 29, however, that the covenant promise of blessing applies to all who through faith in Christ are counted as seed of Abraham. In Christ, they all are one (vs. 28) and are accepted as children of God. In and through Christ, the purpose of the everlasting covenant with Abraham is realized.

Though the explicit references to God’s covenants with Abraham are found mainly in Genesis chapter 17, the promises made by the Lord throughout Abraham’s life are all included in the covenant. It is, therefore, scripturally sound to say that the promises of Genesis 12 and 22 are covenant promises, though the word *covenant* does not occur in these chapters.

That God’s promises are basic to the covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants did not mean that the human recipients were to remain passive. God expected a response. An important aspect of this response was circumcision. God said to Abraham, “‘This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. . . . He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant’” (Gen. 17:10, 11, 13). Any male who was not circumcised had broken the covenant and should be cut off from His people (vs. 14). The covenant relationship meant total trust in God and commitment to God. The Lord said to Abraham, “‘I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless’” (vs. 1).

It is evident from the New Testament that circumcision is not required of Christians. This is the clear decision of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:24-29) and is stressed by the Apostle Paul in his letters (1 Cor. 7:10-19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Col. 3:10, 11). What implications does this have in regard to God’s eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed? Does the abolition of circumcision mean that God’s covenant promises to Abraham also have come to an

end?

To the contrary! The Lord's covenant with Abraham and the covenant promises pertain to all who have the same faith as Abraham. Jesus, marveling at a Roman centurion's faith in the authority of Christ's word, declared that many who would manifest such faith "will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). The Lord clearly included Gentile believers among the recipients of the covenant blessings. This, of course, is fully in harmony with the original promises of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham that in him and in his seed "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 22:18).

Jesus' words indicate that faith as the human response to the promises of God is crucial to the covenant relationship. Such faith manifests itself in trust in God's mercy and obedience to God's will. God testified of Abraham to his son Isaac, "Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" (26:5). These words were spoken hundreds of years before God proclaimed His commandments, His statutes, and His laws to Moses and the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus. Though the Book of Genesis does not specify the content of God's commandments, statutes, and laws, which Abraham obeyed, there is no reason to doubt that this referred primarily to the law of the Ten Commandments and included laws on sacrifice and circumcision.

Several centuries later, when the Israelites, the descendants of the patriarchs, were in bondage in Egypt, the Lord remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and called Moses to lead God's people out of Egypt and to bring them to the promised land (Ex. 6:2-8). The Lord repeated that the purpose of His covenant with the patriarchs and with the Israelites was to establish a special relationship. "I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (vs. 7).

At Sinai, the Lord reminded the Israelites of the fact that He had indeed delivered them as he had promised and then invited them to accept the covenant relationship. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4-6). In other words, God was asking the Israelites to accept the everlasting covenant that He had established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The covenant promises and conditions were essentially the same for the Israelites as for their forefathers. The ultimate purpose was also the same.

The fact that God promised that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests signified that He intended to reveal Himself and His salvation through Israel to the other nations of the earth. This salvation was revealed both through prophets who prophesied of a Redeemer to come and through the sanctuary with its priesthood, sacrifices, and sacred feasts. Eventually, God added to these the promise made to King David, that from him would come a seed, a son, whose kingdom would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16). David recognized the extraordinary greatness of the promise made by God and humbly accepted it, fully trusting in the veracity of God's words (vss. 18-29). At the end of his life, David referred to this as an everlasting covenant that the Lord had made with him (23:5). Undoubtedly, God's covenant with David was understood by David as fully in harmony with the everlasting covenant God had made earlier with the patriarchs and with Israel (1 Chron. 16:14-18; Ps. 105:7-11). But the realization of this everlasting covenant, confirmed by God to succeeding generations, was still future.

In the Book of Psalms is found intimations that the Son of David, who will rule forever, not only over Israel but also over all the earth, would be more than merely a human being. Psalm 2 speaks of the kings of the earth and the rulers rebelling against the Lord and against His Anointed, determined to cast off their rule. The Lord responded to this rebellion with the declaration, "I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion" (vs. 6); and the Son declared the decree, "The Lord has said to Me, "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession"" (vss. 7, 8). Psalm 110 speaks of this same relationship, but here the promised King is referred to as Lord and priest: "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool." The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! The Lord has sworn and will not relent, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek"" (vss. 1, 2, 4).

It is not possible to deal here with critical questions that have been raised in regard to these announcements. It is clear, however, that according to the New Testament, the words of Psalm 110:1 are understood by Jesus as referring to Himself (Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42) and are applied to the risen Christ in the rest of the New Testament, either by direct quotation (Acts 2:33, 34; Heb. 1:13) or by allusion (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12, 13; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). The words of Psalm 2 are also quoted as referring to Christ (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:4; 5:5), as is the declaration of Psalm 110:4 (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17, 21). On the basis of Psalm 110:1, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the enigmatic question how the Messiah could be both the Son of David and yet be acknowledged by David as Lord. They had no answer to that question, because they did not want to acknowledge that Jesus was more than a mere man, nor that He was the long-expected Messiah.

Further Light on the Everlasting Covenant Through the Prophets

It must be admitted that in the Old Testament the primary focus of the expression “the everlasting covenant” is the covenant that God makes with His chosen ones: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the people of Israel, and David. It is also clear that the ultimate goal of this covenant is universal in scope; the Lord intends that through Abraham and his seed, all nations of the earth will be blessed. The initiative is completely with God, but the covenant relationship requires a response of faith and obedience. This was true for Abraham (Gen. 15:6; 26:5) and for all his descendants (Deut. 5:26-29). Unfortunately, throughout their history, the people of Israel many times turned away from God and broke the covenant. But even in times of near general apostasy, the Lord reconfirmed the everlasting covenant. God’s faithfulness to His covenant is a prominent feature in the messages of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

The Prophet Isaiah prophesied in the kingdom of Judah in a time of widespread apostasy. Through His prophet, the Lord strongly rebuked rulers and people for their unfaithfulness, their rebellion, and their hypocritical religion. There were also stern messages for many other nations, including Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Tyre. The prophet announces that the Lord will bring His judgments upon the earth. In Isaiah 24, the prophet announces a universal judgment on the earth and its inhabitants and utters the divine indictment: “The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant” (vs. 5). Though this prophecy may have had a primary application for Isaiah’s own time, the universal scope of its language suggests that it has a wider global application. And, if the Lord indicts the inhabitants of the whole world for breaking the everlasting covenant, then it is clear that the everlasting covenant includes the entire human race.

A remarkable feature of Isaiah’s prophecies is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the fulfillment of the covenant promise. Isaiah predicts the fulfillment of the Lord’s everlasting covenant with David (Isa. 55:3, 4), the everlasting rule of a special Child, a Son, whose name is unique: “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). He will govern “upon the throne of David and over His kingdom” (vs. 7), yet “the Gentiles shall seek Him” (11:10).

In the latter part of Isaiah’s prophecies, there are predictions of the Servant of the Lord, who is to bring Jacob back to God and to gather Israel to Him. But that is not enough. The Lord’s purpose is global and includes all nations: “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). The promised King and the promised Servant are the same Person, even the promised Seed of the everlasting covenant.

Through later prophets further light was revealed in regard to the everlasting covenant, especially through the prophet Jeremiah. Though Jeremiah witnessed the collapse of the kingdom of Judah and the demise of the house of David, he predicted, like Isaiah, that the covenant promise of the Lord to David would yet be fulfilled. “Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:5, 6).

It was through Jeremiah that the Lord announced His intention to make a new covenant. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31). Though the Lord stated that this covenant was not according to the covenant He made with their fathers at

the time of the Exodus, the promises and the purpose of the new covenant do not seem to differ from those of the everlasting covenant. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (vss. 33, 34).

In fact, in a later prophecy, while Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the king’s prison during the final siege of Jerusalem, the Lord referred to this new covenant as an everlasting covenant. He promised that, after the people of Israel had gone into captivity, He would gather them and bring them back to their place. “They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me” (Jer. 32:38-40). In a second message to Jeremiah in prison, the Lord repeated the promise that a Branch of righteousness from David would rule. He then compared His covenant with David with His covenant with the day and the night. Neither of them can be broken (33:20, 21, 25, 26).

The Everlasting Covenant in the New Testament

The expression “everlasting covenant” occurs only once in the New Testament (Heb. 13:20). It is evident, however, that the everlasting covenant that God established with Abraham and his seed, with the people of Israel, and with King David, finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is highly significant that the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, begins with these words: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Immediately, the New Testament focuses on Jesus as the seed, promised by God when He established the everlasting covenant with Abraham and later with David.

Though the expression “everlasting covenant” occurs only once in the New Testament, a Greek word occurs 33 times that has been translated in most early versions as “testament” but is more accurately translated as “covenant” in later versions.

In the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she would conceive and bear a son who was to be called Jesus, he declared, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32, 33, NRSV). In other words, God’s eternal covenant with David was to be fulfilled in Jesus, the son of Mary. A similar thought is expressed in the words of Zechariah, the priest, who, moved by the Holy Spirit, prophesied that the Lord God of Israel had raised up a horn of salvation for His people in the house of His servant, David (vss. 67-69), and “has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham” (vss. 72, 73, NRSV). Again, God’s eternal covenant promises to David and Abraham are recognized as meeting their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospels are permeated with evidence that in Jesus Christ the covenant promises are coming to fruition, although the word *covenant*, besides the one reference in Luke 1:72, is only found in Jesus’ words to His disciples at the last supper: “He took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:27, 28, NRSV). Or, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20, NRSV). From this we may conclude that Jesus referred to His death on the cross, when His blood would be poured out on the earth, as the decisive event by which the new covenant would be confirmed.

The disciples, however, did not grasp the significance of Christ’s words until after His crucifixion and resurrection. On the evening of the resurrection day, Jesus appeared to His disciples in the upper room. He reminded them of the words He had spoken before, that “everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44, NRSV). Next, He showed them from the Scriptures that “the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (vss. 46, 47, NRSV). Then they began to understand that the promises of the everlasting covenant, of which Moses, David, and the prophets had written,

were fulfilled through their Lord, Jesus the Christ. That understanding would grow under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit who, according to Jesus' promise, would guide them into all truth (John 16:3).

Throughout the rest of the New Testament there is ample evidence that the apostles believed that the promises of the everlasting covenant, as revealed to patriarchs and prophets, had been and were being fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly intercession of Christ at the right hand of God the Father—also, in the proclamation of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, first to the Jews and then to all nations.

Peter on the day of Pentecost showed that God's covenant promise to David had been fulfilled in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus at the right hand of God (Acts 2:22-36). Soon after, Peter in another address to the people of Israel, repeated that "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus" (Acts 3:13), and that the predictions that the Christ (the Messiah) should suffer had been fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus (vss. 13-18). Peter then reminded them that they were "the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, "and in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed"" (vd. 25, NRSV). Peter proclaimed that the promises of the eternal covenant found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The Everlasting Covenant in the Pauline Writings

The word *covenant* may not occur very often in Paul's letters, but the concept was certainly in his thought and ministry. It is evident that the death and resurrection of Christ are central to Paul's theology. He wrote to the Corinthians, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4, NRSV). In the same letter, Paul reminded his readers of the words of Jesus at the last supper when He gave them the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (11:25, NRSV). God has called and enabled him and his fellow workers "to be ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6, NRSV) to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were ambassadors for Christ, for God through Christ gave them the ministry of reconciliation, namely that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19, NRSV).

In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul further developed the idea that the covenant that God made with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (3:15-18). According to Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, the wonderful news of the gospel is that Gentiles who believe in Christ are no longer "strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12, NRSV), but as Paul assured them, "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (vs. 13, NRSV). From these passages may be deduced that the blood of Christ, which represents the death of Christ for our sins, is the blood of the new covenant of which God has made Paul a minister.

The fullest development of covenant theology in the New Testament is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is evident that no other New Testament book treats the theme of the covenant so fully or provides a deeper understanding of Christ's death and high priestly ministry as fulfilling the promises of the new covenant. Because Jesus Christ lives forever and is holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens, He is the surety and High Priest of a better covenant than the covenant made at Sinai because it "has been enacted through better promises" (Heb. 8:6, NRSV).

This better covenant is the new covenant that was announced by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah (Heb. 8:8-12). As High Priest, Christ ministers in the greater and more perfect tabernacle, even the heavenly sanctuary, where He presents "his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (9:12, NRSV). It is highly significant that the blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, is in the same Epistle referred to as "the blood of the eternal covenant" (13:20, NRSV). This shows that the new covenant is identical with the everlasting covenant. Though it was already clear from the Book of Jeremiah that the promises and purpose of the new covenant were the same as those of the everlasting covenant, it is in Hebrews that is revealed that it is Christ's blood and His heavenly intercession as High Priest that brings those promises and that purpose to fulfillment.

It is evident that no other New Testament book deals so fully with the subject of the everlasting covenant. At the same time, there is good reason for investigating whether other books throw more light on the nature of that covenant without explicitly using the expression "everlasting covenant." Especially passages referring to the

significance of the blood of Christ and the realization of God's purpose through Christ, one may expect further insight into the subject of the covenant.

More Light From the New Testament

The blood of Christ is the blood of the everlasting covenant. The Apostle Peter spoke about that blood. He wrote, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Peter 1:18, 19, NRSV). Peter is talking about the blood of the everlasting covenant. Immediately he added, "He [Christ] was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake" (vs. 20, NRSV). The Greek word translated as "was destined before," can be translated as "was chosen before" (NIV) or as "was preordained" (KJV).

This suggests that before the foundation of the world, before the human race was created, it was foreordained or destined beforehand that Jesus Christ would shed His blood, would die to redeem human beings from sin and its fatal consequence—eternal death. A similar thought is expressed by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1:3 to 8. Here it is said that God the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to be His children through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will. This was accomplished because in Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.

These two passages show that the redemption through the blood of Christ was foreordained, was and is the outworking of God's eternal purpose. This means that the everlasting covenant is primarily a covenant between the Father and Christ—that Christ would take human form and shed His blood to redeem humanity from sin. According to Ephesians 1:5, this divine purpose is rooted in God's love. It is not accidental that the announcement of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31 to 34 is preceded earlier in the chapter by a revelation of God's everlasting love (vs. 3). The most famous text in the Bible—John 3:16—seems to reveal the same sequence. "For God so loved the world"—His everlasting love—"that He gave His only Son"—His everlasting covenant—"that whoever believes in Him"—result of the proclamation of the everlasting gospel—"should not perish but have eternal life"—everlasting redemption through the blood of the everlasting covenant. John 3:16 does not use explicit covenant language, yet it sums up the essence, the root, and the fruit of the everlasting covenant.

Appendix: Ellen White on the Everlasting Covenant

Ellen White referred quite often to the everlasting covenant. Such references can be found throughout her writings, but it is in the latter part of them that her fuller explanations of the expression "everlasting covenant" are found. In the earlier references, the phrase "everlasting covenant" occurs mostly in Scripture quotations containing that phrase. In volume 3 of the earliest version of her Great Controversy series, *Spiritual Gifts* (4 vols., 1858-1864), there are such quotations from the Book of Genesis (Gen. 9:16, p. 74; 17:7, p. 102; and 17:19, p. 103). In the first volume of this series, there is an interesting reference to the everlasting covenant in connection with the final deliverance of the saints shortly before Christ's second coming. "And as God spake the day and hour of Jesus' coming, and delivered the everlasting covenant to his people, he spake one sentence, and then paused, while the words were rolling through the earth. The Israel of God stood with their eyes fixed upwards, listening to the words as they came from the mouth of Jehovah, and rolled through the earth like peals of loudest thunder. It was awfully solemn."²

It is in writings from a later date that Ellen White elaborated on the deep significance and eternal nature of the everlasting covenant. In an article entitled "Christ our Hope," she placed side by side the expressions "covenant of redemption," "covenant of grace," and "everlasting covenant," and appeared to use them as synonyms: "The terms of this oneness between God and man in the great covenant of redemption were arranged with Christ from all eternity. The covenant of grace was revealed to the patriarchs. The covenant made with Abraham four hundred and thirty years before the law was spoken on Sinai was a covenant confirmed by God in Christ, the very same gospel which is preached to us. [Next, Galatians 3:8 and 9 is quoted.] The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant."³

In another article she wrote, “The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has existed from all eternity, and is called the everlasting covenant.” Then she added this intriguing and very comforting thought: “So surely as there never was a time when God was not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity.”⁴

The everlasting covenant was first and foremost a covenant made between the Father and the Son. Ellen White describes how the angels, looking upon Christ dying on the Cross, asked with intense emotion, “Will not the Lord Jehovah save him?” In response to that question these words were spoken: “The Lord hath sworn, and he will not repent. Father and Son are pledged to fulfill the terms of the everlasting covenant. God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”⁵ She then added this explanation: “Christ was not alone in making his great sacrifice. It was the fulfilment of the covenant made between him and his Father before the foundation of the world was laid.”⁶

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

2. *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, pp. 205, 206.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times* (August 24, 1891).

4. *Ibid.* (June 12, 1901).

5. _____, *The Signs of the Times* (January 16, 1907).

6. *Ibid.*

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When Seventh-day Adventists claim to be the remnant for the end times, they must do so with deep humility and understanding.

Seventh-day Adventists claim to be the remnant church of biblical prophecy. Following the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, they see themselves as the end-time remnant predicted in Revelation 12:17. Specifically, they see their movement meeting the identifying marks of the remnant in the Book of Revelation. These marks include commandment keeping (vs. 17), having the testimony of Jesus (vs. 17), perseverance (14:12), having the faith of Jesus (vs. 12), and proclaiming the three angels' messages (vss. 6-12). Adventists teach that one should keep all the commandments of God, believe in gift of prophecy manifested through the writings of Ellen White, persevere, have the faith of Jesus (the truths of the Bible that Jesus believed and taught), and preach the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12 that prepare God's people for the Second Advent.

With the passing of time, however, some Adventists have become more hesitant about their identity as the remnant. Although they are aware of the identifying marks of the remnant, they find it increasingly difficult to understand what makes them the remnant and to explain it to other Protestant Christians. To them a simple exegetical exposition of the identifying marks of the remnant in Scripture does not suffice. After all, other Protestant Christians interpret these texts differently. Moreover, how could the keeping of the Sabbath, having a manifestation of the gift of prophecy in the writings of Ellen White, and preaching the gospel in the context of the three angels' messages make Adventism the only true visible expression of God's church on the planet? After all, other Protestant Christians keep the commandments, even the seventh-day Sabbath. They also have manifestations of the prophetic gift, persevere in the faith of Christ, and preach the gospel. If Adventists and Evangelicals preach the same gospel, other Christian denominations also should belong to the visible church as the body of Christ, and therefore, to the remnant.

Protestants generally consider the "church" as the spiritual, invisible, interdenominational body of Christ. From

this perspective, they must find the idea that one denomination claiming to be the true, visible church of Christ is odd, misguided, unbiblical, and perhaps presumptuous. Clearly, a simple declaration that Adventism is the remnant church because it fits the identifying marks of the remnant presented in the Book of Revelation is insufficient both for church members and for fellow Christians.

The Remnant Church

In Scripture the nature and existence of the remnant is embedded in the history of salvation and becomes a synonym for the people of God, both as Israel and the church. Paul clearly conceived the Christian Church as the remnant of Israel (Rom. 11:16-26). He saw the emerging Christian Church as “grafted,” “nourished” (vs. 17), and “supported” (vs. 18) by faith in God’s covenant with Israel. As Israel, the church stands on its faith in God’s Word and covenant with Abraham. As branches, both belong to the same cultivated olive tree, and receive by faith their nourishment from its “holy root” (vss. 16, 17). The church is a “cultivated tree” that stems from a “holy root.” This strongly states that God has not rejected Israel (vs. 1) and suggests that the “cultivated tree” is the concrete remnant of Israel, chosen by God’s grace (vs. 5) and constituted by the faith response of part of Israel (vs. 23). In this way, Paul described the emerging Christian Church to which he belonged (vs. 1) as the remnant of Israel, God’s tenderly cultivated olive tree. Paul’s view suggests that the eschatological remnant described by John in Revelation 12:17 is not to be understood as an entity different from the church but as the church itself, the historical-spiritual continuation of the church as remnant of Israel.

The biblical anticipation of the emergence of an end-time remnant and the description of its identifying marks alert Christians to its appearance and mission. The remnant, however, should not be thought of as an entity that will come into existence only at the end time before the second coming of Christ. Instead, the remnant should be thought of as a biblical designation applied to the historical and spiritual development of God’s people, both Israel and the church, throughout the history of salvation. The remnant, then, is a qualifier describing the historical-spiritual reality of God’s church throughout the history of redemption. In fact, there is an end-times remnant because the historical nature of God, His covenant, and the history of salvation require and open up the future for His faithful people, the church.

The Essence of the Remnant

Because of their historical nature, the people of God always existed as a remnant, that is, as the rest, residue, or last ones to join the long history of believers who no longer exist. Additionally, because their commitment to God is always under attack by the forces of evil (Eph. 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8; Rev. 12:16, 17) it can survive only by holding fast through faith to God’s Word and covenantal promises (Eph. 6:13-19). These facts help to understand why in Scripture the word *remnant* not only names the eschatological church but also and mainly describes the essence of the church as historical and faithful to God’s revelation in Scripture.

Within the broad context of the history of salvation, covenant, and divine election, two essential characteristics of the people of God (Israel, church, and eschatological remnant) are faithfulness and mission. The remnant church was, is, and will be the community faithful to God’s call. The existence of the church depends and stands on her faithfulness to God’s Word (Ps. 78:8; Acts 11:21-23; 16:5). Without faith in God’s Word in Scripture, the church becomes a human organization.

The origin of the Christian Church took place because the God of the Old Testament fulfilled His covenantal promise to the world (Gen. 3:15) and to Abraham (12:3) by revealing His being and character in Jesus Christ’s life and death on the cross (Matt. 16:16-18; John 14:8-10). More precisely, the Christian Church emerged as a faithful remnant of God’s people who by faith embraced God’s revelation in the Old Testament, and Christ’s revelation in the New Testament (Heb. 1:1, 2). Thus, the church is the historical-spiritual community that gathers around, coheres in, stands on, and testifies of Jesus. The church exists because of her faith in Christ and her witnessing Christ to the world. In the most real sense, the church exists in Christ. Her existence is spiritual. It takes place as a historical, communal relationship of faith in His Word and His mission as revealed through the history of salvation and recorded in Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the history of salvation, then, the eschatological remnant is not something new but rather is the continuation of the Christian Church as remnant of Israel. Her nature and existence revolve around her spiritual faithfulness to

Christ's Word and mission. Consequently, to move beyond only the claim of being the end-times remnant on the basis of its identifying marks to actually being the remnant that God will use in the end time, Adventists should examine their faithfulness to Christ's Word and His mission.

The Emergence of Tradition

Soon after the apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the revelation of God in Jesus Christ among them in the New Testament writings, Christians began to use them not only as rule of faith but also as spiritual food. Together with the revelations God gave previously during Old Testament times, these writings became the theological and spiritual ground for the Christian Church.

The process of receiving, appropriating, and spiritually internalizing God's Word, however, always involves interpretation. Because of many and complex historical reasons early in her history, the Christian Church progressively adapted her teachings and liturgical forms to Greek philosophy. Christian leaders facing the world of culture, science, and reason, decided for various reasons not to reject the leading scientific culture of their days. Many historians of Christian theology label this process the "Hellenization" of Christianity. By adapting to the cultural trends of their days, early Christians progressively and radically replaced the interpretive presuppositions that New Testament writers took from the Old Testament canon. In doing so, undoubtedly Christians thought they were faithful to God and desired to advance His mission on earth. Unfortunately, they progressively neglected Isaiah's injunction to use scriptural teachings as interpretive principles to evaluate new spiritual events (Isa. 8:20). Moreover, they also failed to follow Christ's practice of interpretation when He used Old Testament teachings and categories as principles necessary for a proper explanation to His disciples of His salvific ministry and death on the cross (Luke 24:27).

The replacement of Old Testament interpretive principles with those derived from Greek philosophical categories led to the development, consolidation, and dominance of Christian tradition at all levels of Christianity, such as scriptural interpretation, theological constructions, ministerial practices, liturgical forms, and missionary strategies. As this situation ruled unopposed for more than a thousand years, a systematic mingling of philosophical views about God, human nature, reason, and the world permeated all levels of Christian thought, life, and action, becoming ingrained in Christianity itself. For spiritual purposes, Scripture was replaced by the sacramental system of liturgy and worship.

Although Scripture was never absent from Christian tradition, the new philosophical methods of interpretation decisively distorted its teachings and weakened its power. Eventually, it contributed to the church's self-understanding as being the replacement of Israel rather than as being its remnant.

The Emergence of Scripture and the Anonymous Remnant

The "synthesis" between Greek interpretive principles and biblical data on which Christian tradition stands sheltered a fateful conflict that sooner or later was bound to create theological and spiritual inconsistencies. Martin Luther, for example, noticed a glaring irregularity: Clearly, the system of meritorious works did not fit experience or the clear teachings of Scripture. With a God-given conviction and staunch determination, he turned to Scripture to resist tradition and reform the church. Scripture was emerging from tradition.

With the passing of time, Luther's and Calvin's "turn to Scripture" intensified throughout Europe and America. In the process, mainline and radical reformations progressively rediscovered and integrated forgotten biblical teachings into the fabric of Christianity. Notably, English Puritan theologians during the 17th century and John Wesley during the 18th century used Scripture to challenge tradition. Simultaneously, the discovery of further biblical teachings produced an ever-increasing doctrinal and theological fragmentation of Protestant Christianity.

Ironically, the "turn to Scripture" by mainline and radical reformations did not challenge but assumed and used the interpretive principles Christian tradition had drawn from Greek philosophical ideas. This little-noticed fact buried deep in the history of Protestant and Evangelical experiences may explain why the emergence of Scripture that followed in the wake of the Reformation did not produce a unified alternative to Roman Catholicism but rather an ever-increasing fragmentation of Christianity in doctrines, practices, and denominations that still goes on unabated.

Nevertheless, from an historical perspective the Protestant "turn to Scripture" involves the progressive emergence of an emerging "anonymous" remnant. It is a remnant because it springs into existence from faithfulness

to Scripture rather than from tradition and philosophy. It is anonymous because, lacking the features or marks that characterize and identify the remnant, it cannot be recognized as such. Finally, it is emerging because it exists in an embryonic stage of development. Consequently, the anonymous remnant is a provisional stage in the process of the restoration of the church back to its biblical nature as the remnant of Israel.

Because the church stands on Christ as revealed in Scriptures, the Protestant turn to Scripture initiated the emergence from tradition of the biblical remnant albeit in a “stealth” or “anonymous” way. The anonymous remnant was unstable because the Protestant commitment to Scripture did not challenge the presuppositions on which Christian traditions had built their theological and ecclesiological systems. Because Protestantism still shares these basic guiding assumptions with Roman Catholicism, its turn to Scripture is partial and produces systemic and theological inconsistencies that unavoidably generated an ever-increasing ecclesiological fragmentation. Because of this situation, Protestantism became unable to emerge fully as the biblical remnant church. Instead it became shaky and in need of theological answers and ecclesiological stability. With the passing of time this search for answers will cause the anonymous remnant to pave the way to the rise on one side of the emerging remnant, and, on the other side, of the emerging church.

The Emerging Eschatological Remnant

During the 18th century, the anonymous remnant intensified and expanded throughout the American frontier beyond the restraints imposed by tradition and established denominations. In this environment the Protestant turn to Scripture generated two revivals of practical piety among common people and shaped the culture of the times. During this period, growing grassroots dissatisfaction with doctrinal inconsistencies generated by the Protestant Reformation motivated serious Bible students to search for a way to overcome tradition and ecclesial fragmentation through a deeper and more inclusive understanding of Scriptures.

Unlike that of the Magisterial Reformers (16th century) and the English Puritans (17th century) this search did not originate with the professional clergy and theologians, but with the laity. It grew from the basic conviction that Scripture can interpret itself.

This radical view implicitly departed from the interpretive perspective of the Magisterial Reformers that set the patterns, limits, and interpretive principles of what is known today as Protestant or Evangelical theology. The refusal to use tradition as a source of theology and an interpretive guide could be traced back to the Radical Reformers’ call for a restoration of biblical, mostly New Testament, Christianity. In 18th-century America, various groups embraced this approach to Christian theology in an attempt to overcome what had gone wrong with the Catholic Church and historical churches of the Reformation.

In this environment and out of the second American revival (1800-1830), interest in the study of the long-forgotten apocalyptic prophecies of the Old and New Testaments intensified. In consequence, attention shifted from the first to the second coming of Christ. By a careful application of the well-established historicist method of prophetic interpretation to the study of Daniel 8 and 9, an ecumenical movement emerged mostly out of laity belonging to various Protestant denominations, predicting the visible and historical coming of Christ on October 22, 1844.

Out of the Great Disappointment that crushed the sincere expectations of the Millerites, a small number of believers sought answers in Scriptures for their predicament. When on October 23 they turned their eyes to the reality of the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ since His resurrection and ascension had been ministering salvation to human beings, they found the explanation for their disappointment. Christ was not coming to earth in 1844 but entering in the most holy place in the heavenly sanctuary. Eventually, this discovery gave rise to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its claim of being the remnant church of biblical prophecy.

In turning their attention to Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, however, the group of evangelical believers that later became the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not discover a new doctrine unknown to Christians. Rather, to the contrary, Protestant theologians had also recognized the New Testament belief that Christ, since His resurrection and ascension, sat at the right hand of His heavenly Father in the heavenly sanctuary, where He has been ministering continuously for our salvation. Adventist historians have long recognized that Adventist doctrines were known as such in earlier periods of church history and notably during the emergence of the anonymous remnant.

With the passing of years, however, new generations of Adventists concluded that early pioneers had

discovered the biblical doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment prior to Christ's second coming. If this is the case, are these "distinctive" doctrines enough to sustain the claim of being the remnant? Many Adventists and non-Adventists correctly wonder whether the "discovery" of the sanctuary doctrine is enough to sustain the claim of being the remnant church at the end time. For them, having a few "distinctive" doctrines is not enough to back such a far-reaching claim.

During the first six formative years that followed the Great Disappointment, early Adventist pioneers continued their search for biblical truths beyond the interpretation of prophecies and the doctrine of the sanctuary. Their genius was not to discover these truths, most of which had already been recognized and accepted by many in the anonymous remnant. Instead, they made a small step that would generate a gigantic theological revolution in Christianity: They used their newfound insights into the way in which prophecy and the sanctuary interrelate in Scripture as the hermeneutical presuppositions needed to understand the entire Bible, the whole range of Christian doctrines, and the mission of the church.

Perhaps Ellen White summarized this epoch-changing experience best when she explained, "The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God's hand had directed the great advent movement and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people."¹

In their determination to understand prophecy, the Protestant "turn to Scripture" had finally advanced from the initial phase, when new discoveries in biblical research progressively generate anomalies. Now it moved to the decisive time of "extraordinary theology," when the old paradigm is replaced by a new one. When Adventist pioneers used their understanding of apocalyptic prophecies and the sanctuary as an interpretive paradigm, they effectively replaced the interpretive paradigm that Christian tradition had drawn from extra-biblical, philosophical ideas. This shift in interpretation made possible the emergence of the visible remnant from Scripture. The visible remnant church had finally arrived to challenge the theological and ecclesiological *status quo*. The Protestant "turn to Scripture" embraced by the anonymous remnant eventually had given way to the biblical interpretive turn embraced by the emerging visible remnant.

Recent developments indicate that a large portion of the anonymous remnant is becoming the Emerging Church. This "church" emerges from tradition. By embracing tradition, evangelical leaders attempt to overcome the theological contradictions and ministerial irregularities by dividing further the already fragmented Protestant tradition. By failing to apply the "turn to Scripture" to interpretive principles, and fully embracing the non-biblical interpretation of the principles of "early" Christian tradition, the Emerging Church is returning to Rome.

Nonetheless, at this time not all the anonymous remnant is embracing the Emerging Church movement. A large sector remains wholly committed to the "turn to Scripture," yet they still implicitly and inadvertently assume the interpretive paradigm of Christian tradition. Consequently, this sector remains unstable because it is unable to overcome the contradiction between their theological data and interpretive presuppositions. Eventually, as its members may join the Emerging Church or the emerging remnant, the anonymous remnant may vanish.

Even so, the biblical interpretive turn of early Adventist pioneers, revolutionary as it was and is, only signals the birth of the remnant, not its fully developed existence. The history of Adventism so far makes this development possible, not actual. The biblical remnant, then, exists not as a finished reality but as the ongoing process of becoming the church that Christ gathers around Him by His presence and words. In its essence, the remnant church exists and grows in its becoming and being as Christ generates its message and mission.

Christ, Interpretation, and the Remnant

One indirect way to see how the turn from tradition to Scripture relates to ecclesiology is to consider the influence of interpretive presuppositions on the doctrinal system of the church. In this approach, interpretation relates to ecclesiology by generating alternate understandings of the entire ensemble of Christian doctrines and practices, thereby producing two incompatible ways of understanding Christianity.

The incompatibility between the traditional and Adventist theological systems stems from the conflicting views assumed by Christian tradition and Adventists about the nature of reality. Christian tradition embraces the view of reality inspired and mediated by Greek philosophy. Adventists implicitly embrace the view of reality expressed and assumed by biblical writers. The former places the reality of God, His acts, and human spirituality outside the realm

of time, space, and history. The latter places the reality of God, His acts, and human spirituality inside the realm of time, space, and history. These opposite views about reality become unavoidable assumptions in interpreting Scripture, understanding its doctrines, and fulfilling God's will and mission. The difference and conflict between them could not be greater. Only one can be the actual church of Christ.

Churches based on tradition ignore and replace the views of God and reality revealed in Scripture. In so doing, they distort the biblical teachings about God, Christ, and salvation. This disqualifies them from representing the God of Scripture and the claim of being Christ's visible church on earth. This first approach, however, deals indirectly with ecclesiology, via the doctrine and practices of the church. Yet there is a direct way in which interpretation conditions the essence of Christian ecclesiology.

In general, most Christians agree that by essence the church is the spiritual community of Christ on earth that exists because of her faith relationship with the real presence of Christ. Ecclesiological disagreements revolve around the way in which Christians interpret the real presence of Christ as the ground and center of the Christian Church. Any perception of the presence of Christ depends on one's understanding of the nature of God, human beings, and Christ assumed by the interpreter. And these, in turn, depend on the understanding the interpreter assumes about the general nature of reality as a whole.

Roman Catholics and a large sector of mainline Protestant denominations believe that after Christ's ascension to heaven, we have access to His real presence in or through the sacraments. Christ's presence in the sacraments, then, is the essence, center, and foundation of the Christian Church.

This belief springs from the assumption that God's spiritual reality and our spiritual realities are neither temporal nor material. Within this assumption, God can relate directly to separate souls (souls without a body, as the angels are, according to tradition) but not to souls incarnated in material bodies. Since human souls exist in an essential connection to a material body, God needs to use a material element to reach the soul. Thus, to become present to incarnate souls, God uses a material element to bridge the gap that exists between God's non-historical reality and the non-historical reality of the human soul. In the case of Christ, His body is the material vehicle that God used to make His spiritual non-historical nature present in the times of the disciples. After the ascension and spiritualization of Christ's body to heaven, God used other material vehicles (wine, water, bread, etc.) to communicate the presence of Christ's divinity and humanity to the Christian Church.

Tradition teaches, then, that Christ's spiritual, non-historical, divine presence becomes real to us through material signs and symbols (sacraments) that we apprehend via our bodies with our spirits. It is important to bear in mind that the divine presence mediated by the sacraments is the same that the disciples experienced through the human body of Jesus Christ. This relation takes place in the "spiritual" timeless realm outside the everyday flow of historical events. The sacraments, then, provide the material element God needs to become present to our embodied souls.

According to tradition, then, God relates to our immaterial souls without the need of the historical mediation of Christ as revealed in the New Testament. The human Christ is no longer God incarnated but the sacrament necessary for the eternal timeless God to communicate His spiritual presence directly to our souls. Thus, through the sacraments, Christian believers do not relate to the incarnated Christ ministering for them in heaven but directly to God's own transcendent unmediated non-historical being.

Radically departing from this view, Seventh-day Adventism believes that since Christ's ascension to heaven, believers experience His real historical presence in the heavenly sanctuary by faith through prayer, study, and obedience to His words.

Adventists are not the first Christians to adopt this view but are the first to take the revolutionary step of using this biblical belief as the key of the interpretive presuppositions required for the entire theological system and for the biblical understanding of the real presence of Christ, the center and ground of the church. By taking this small step, Adventists effectively rejected the understanding of the nature of being on which traditional churches stand and replaced it with a view of God in His sanctuary relating historically to historical temporal beings. In so doing, Adventists radically depart from traditional conservative and modern Protestant and Evangelical theologians. When understood historically, the resurrected and ascended Christ cannot be at the same time present in or through the sacraments and bodily in the heavenly sanctuary. To claim He is present in the sacraments involves the spiritualization of Christ.

Therefore, in Adventism the heavenly-sanctuary-word-prayer-personal relational dynamics replaces the impersonal ritualistic mechanics of the sacraments as the essence, center, and foundation of the Christian Church as the remnant of biblical history and prophecy. Believers no longer experience the presence of Christ in and through the mediation of the liturgical rituals of the church. Instead, through the understanding of Scripture and prayer, believers encounter the presence of Christ as an historical living person in heaven and mediator between God's transcendent being and His creatures. Moreover, He is also the merciful High Priest, ministering salvation and providentially guiding believers. In this ontological context the remnant church exists and stands as the spiritual and visible community that grows out of the redemptive-mediatory work that Christ performs in the heavenly sanctuary. By accepting His love and sovereignty in faith and obedience, the church accepts Christ's given mission to proclaim His gospel of the kingdom of God to the world.

The acceptance of the doctrine of Christ's historic and bodily presence in the heavenly sanctuary produces a radical change in the basic understanding of the nature of being in Christian theology and ecclesiology. The scriptural view of the nature of being definitively replaces the timeless, non-historical view of Christian tradition. The interpretive consequences of this shift are momentous. Its consistent application by Adventists believers to the entire system of Christian theology, worship, and ministerial practices amounts to a major paradigm shift at the very foundation of Christian theology. It initiates a period of extraordinary theology and sets the stage for the emergence of the eschatological remnant of biblical prophecy.

The Bread of Life

The church as a spiritual, visible community exists because it receives its nourishment from Christ, its center and foundation. Teaching in the synagogue, Christ taught: "I am the bread of life. . . . The one who eats this bread will live forever" (John 6:35, 58, NRSV). Some churches have interpreted Christ's teachings on the "Bread of Life" in a sacramental way. They see Christ teaching that by partaking in the bread and wine, Christians actually eat His real body and soul, which are "spiritually" present "in" the bread and wine. According to this view, the soul of the believer actually "feeds" from the very substance of the transcendent God. It "feeds" from the actual power of divine life. The feeding does not take place in the realm of everyday life but in the "parallel realm" of spiritual substances (God and the soul). This transaction, therefore, is mechanical and impersonal.

The radical paradigm shift in the view of the nature of being that generated the remnant church dictates a different commitment that leads to interpret Christ's teachings on the "Bread of Life" historically and personally. According to biblical ontology, the bread of life is the real incarnated Christ who came down from heaven (John 6:33, 39). After returning to heaven (vs. 62), He now feeds us the words of life He spoke personally and through the prophets (vs. 63) and by the teaching ministry and providences of His representative the Holy Spirit.

According to Scripture, then, the feeding on Christ that generates the church does not take place mechanically in and through the sacraments as an impersonal encounter with God's transcendent reality. Instead, the feeding on Christ that generates the remnant church takes place as a historical experience that involves the whole being in and through the words of Scripture as a personal encounter with the incarnated Christ in heaven. The spiritual feeding that Christ speaks about, then, takes place in the realm of our everyday lives within the sequence of time and the spatiality of our bodies, not in the ethereal, non-historical, non-spatial realm of traditional Christian spirituality. In short, a personal spirituality centered directly in Christ's words and historical acts replaces an impersonal spirituality centered in the transcendent, non-historical substance of the divinity mediated through human intercessors.

The Message

Precisely because according to Christ, believers feed from His words of revelation in Scripture, the spirituality of the remnant church is essentially and indissolubly connected to its message. Adventists talk much about their "message." But a message is a communication addressed to a recipient. Clearly, the recipient is the world, but what is the content of the communication that God expects the remnant to deliver to the world? Progressively, Adventists have answered this question in various ways, generating confusion.

In speaking of sending a message to someone, it is usually understood as something short and to the point. Not surprisingly, most Adventists think about the message of the church as something brief. Some believers may find difficulty in identifying it. Others may readily identify the message of the Adventist Church with some of the so-

called distinctive truths, as, for instance, the seventh-day Sabbath, the Second Coming, health reform, the gospel, or the three angels' messages. Is the message of our church something short that can be delivered quickly, as a postal worker may deliver mail?

According to Ellen G. White, the message God gives the remnant church essentially the same gospel commission that Christ gave to the disciples before His ascension to heaven. This being the case, one wonders about the contents of Christ's commission to the disciples. Is the gospel commission the proclamation of divine grace? Certainly, but the proclamation of "the mysteries of the grace of God," requires the inclusion of "the whole counsel of God," "the saving truths of the third angel's message,"² and "the special truths that have separated us from the world and made us what we are."³

The message that God gives the church is about God's grace. But grace is not a thing or a power but an essential characteristic of God's person, who by nature is merciful and gracious (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 4:31, Ps. 116:5). Grace, then, is revealed and experienced through divine actions. Consequently, the mission of proclaiming God's grace requires that the church should make all of God's acts as revealed in Scripture known to the world. The proclamation of God's grace, then, coincides with the proclamation of His acts.

Moreover, according to Paul, the message that the church proclaims includes nothing less than "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, ESV). God's counsel refers to the "thoughts of his heart" for all generations (Ps. 33:11, NRSV). By the free decision of His will, He predestined us for salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:11). This includes, among other things, Christ's incarnation and ministry (2 Cor. 2:7; 1:30), the goal that human beings should become holy (Eph. 1:4) and transformed in the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) through Christ's redemptive sacrifice (Eph. 1:7), forgiveness of sins (vs. 7), and adoption into the family of God (vs. 5). The proclamation of "the entire counsel" of God, then, coincides with the proclamation of the entire plan of salvation.

The "saving truths of the third angel's message" include, among other things, the eternal gospel, the fear of the Lord, God's judgment hour, the worship of God the Creator, the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14: 6-13). The proclamation of "the saving truths of the third angel's message," then, identifies special aspects of God's message that His church will emphasize before His second coming.

The truths that have separated us from the world and made us what we are include issues like the sanctuary doctrine, the non-immortality of the soul, the law of God, the Sabbath, and the three angels' messages. These truths are special because they provide the biblical foundations to interpret, the saving truths of the third angel, the whole counsel of God, and the mysteries of God's grace.

On the one side, this brief exploration into the contents of the message of the remnant shows that it is not something brief that can be swiftly processed and disseminated without much personal involvement. On the other side, many may find this extended notion of the message complicated, disconnected, and overwhelming.

At first glance, the message so described seems complicated, because having various parts it requires closer attention. The message seems disconnected because its many parts appear to stand as independent components detached from one another. The message seems overwhelming because its perceived intricacy and lack of connections are difficult for those with a superficial knowledge of Scripture. The message has many truths. Unfortunately, some deal with this disquieting feeling by simplifying the message and reducing it to the truth or truths with which they are more comfortable. The result is an emasculated message and the loss of the power, unity, and mission in the church.

This situation arises with the failure to perceive the way in which all the parts of the message interconnect and form a perfect, complete, and harmonious system of truth. Through Bible study and prayer, however, anyone can perceive the complete and perfect harmony of the biblical message as the pioneers did. Then its complexity will become accessible to students of the Word and lead them to experience the most rich and satisfying personal encounter with Christ.

How can one perceive the inner theological, spiritual, and experiential harmony that exists among the manifold components of the Adventist message? This may be achieved by using the "landmarks" or "pillar truths" of Adventism as interpretive tools to understand how the Bible "unfolds a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy."⁴ This biblical system of theology and philosophy articulates all the contents of the remnant church's message. The message of the remnant, then, is a complete system of theological and philosophical truths that replace the system of theological and philosophical truths of tradition. This is the reason that the remnant church

stands in discontinuity to and replaces the churches of traditional Christianity.

Presuppositions of the Message

The biblical message of the remnant church stands on three major methodological principles of theology and the practice of ministry. The first fundamental principle makes Scripture the only source of knowledge of God, the *sola, tota, prima Scriptura* principle. Its application leads to the second and third principles. The second principle is that of reality. According to this principle, ultimate reality is historical rather than timeless, spaceless, and non-historical, as tradition assumes. The third principle is that of articulation. This principle deals with the way in which the manifold components of historical reality interconnect, forming a whole. The historical Christ “connects” the whole of reality historically, thereby replacing the “chain of being,” “order of being,” or “pyramid of being” that tradition uses to articulate biblical contents and spiritual realities. The consistent application of the second and third principles helps the remnant church to go beyond the theological and ecclesial fragmentation that followed the Protestant “turn to Scripture” and its failure to overcome the hermeneutical rule of Christian tradition.

The conviction that the Bible is the only source from which the community can derive its knowledge of God is clearly stated in the first Fundamental Belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Scholars refer to this principle under the label of the *sola* and *tota Scriptura* principles. These principles replace the multiplicity of sources of Christian tradition and unleash the two principles of method that give rise to the remnant church. Meanwhile, the leading sector of the anonymous remnant still grounds its interpretive principles on tradition.

At this point, a question arises: Does Adventism have a principle of reality and a principle of articulation? The answer to this question is Yes, though Adventist theologians have not explicitly identified and formulated them as such. Though Adventists are not used to thinking about the reality and articulation of their message, they have since early days operated assuming biblically defined notions about them. These pre-understandings arose from the pioneers’ hope of Christ’s personal historical second coming, and, after the Great Disappointment, by relying on His priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

Adventists assume that reality is historical both for human beings and for God. They also presuppose implicitly that the whole of reality is the common history of God with His creatures. By understanding reality as existing in one single historical level where God and humans as spiritual beings interact, Adventists effectually rejected and replaced the Greek cosmological dichotomy between the realms of spirit (heaven) and history (creation). Finally, Adventists have always assumed that the historical, incarnated, resurrected, and ascended Christ is the principle of articulation of all realities in the vast universe from past to future eternity.

Message as System

By using these principles, Adventist pioneers discovered a “complete system of truth, connected and harmonious.”⁵ The remnant came to existence not because they came to a correct understanding of prophecy but because the sheer beauty and power of the complete system of connected and harmonious truth they discovered in Scripture left them no other option before God.

The system brings all the teachings of Scripture together into a harmonious whole, centered and articulated by the living historical person of incarnated Christ, who died, rose again, ascended to heaven, ministers for our salvation, and will come to take us home forever. Adventists know this system as the “Great Controversy” theme. Yet the Great Controversy is much more than a biblical theme or motif. The Great Controversy is the gospel-message-system, because it unfolds the history of God’s love for the world and the universe.

Adventists preach essentially the same gospel that the disciples proclaimed after the resurrection. “They had a gospel to preach—Christ in human form, a Man of sorrows; Christ in humiliation, taken by wicked hands and crucified; Christ resurrected, and ascended to heaven, into the presence of God, to be man’s Advocate; Christ to come again with power and great glory in the clouds of heaven.”⁶ The incarnated Christ, then, “His character and work, is the center and circumference of all truth. He is the chain upon which the jewels of doctrine are linked. In Him is found the complete system of truth.”⁷ Within the “golden chain” of Christ, historical acts from predestination before Creation to the consummation of salvation in the restoration of the new earth, the Cross is the great central truth around which cluster: (1) all biblical truths, (2) Christ’s work of atonement in the soul of the believer, and (3) the

history of the church in heaven and earth. In short, the historical resurrected Christ Himself “The Son of God is the center of the great plan of redemption which covers all dispensations.”⁸ He is the center of all doctrines. The completeness of the system of truth revealed in Scriptures includes everything Christians need to know in faith and practice.

Moreover, the system of which Christ is the center includes not only the intellectual level of doctrines but through them also the spiritual level of the soul’s union with Him on which the biblical church stands and exists. The biblical system of truths Christ articulates into a harmonious whole is the spiritual bread that nourishes and unites the soul with Christ, thereby generating the existence of the church. In other words, through the teaching ministry and providences of the Holy Spirit, the complete system of divine living truths centered in Christ penetrate, cleanse, and sanctify the soul. In this way the church gathers around Christ “the center of all love and light.”⁹

The History of God’s Love

Adventists have a history to tell to the world. The biblical history of God’s love is their message. By living this message in everyday life, they become part of God’s history of salvation as the eschatological biblical remnant. They are God’s visible remnant church because they experience spiritually and proclaim this history to the world. This history is the complete harmonious system of biblical truths centered in the historical acts of Christ from before the creation of the world to the unending ages of future eternity. As noted earlier, Adventists refer to this history as the “Great Controversy between Christ and Satan.”

Many Christian denominations have neglected, forgotten, or rejected this history because interpretive assumptions have led them to spiritualize it. Christian tradition assumes that there is no place for God to act historically as an agent among other historical agents, as Christ did during His life and ministry in Palestine. Thus, the Great Controversy became spiritualized as the story of Christ’s “descending” from the Father (incarnation) and “ascending back” to the Father (“decarnation”). The history of God became a mere story.

In this story, the personal historical relationship of Christ with His disciples when He lived on earth is replaced by the platonic idea of communion as participation. Since the Resurrection, believers are thought to relate directly with God. Tradition understands “participation” as a “sharing-in-being,” “mutual indwelling,” and “mutual interpenetration” of the timeless non-historical reality of God with the soul. Participation, then, defines communion as the relationship of the soul with the timeless God through the ascended Christ. Thus understood, communion with God frees human souls from their present association with matter and historical events and unites them with the timeless realm of the Trinitarian life. Clearly, participation in the being of God replaces the biblical personal, social, spiritual, face-to-face, fellowship (“communion”) with the incarnated historical Christ that lies at the foundation of the Great Controversy.

Calvin, arguably the leading systematic thinker of the anonymous remnant, also spiritualized the history of God’s Great Controversy with Satan by translating it into Neoplatonic categories. This becomes apparent, for instance, in that Calvin spiritualized the obvious historical meaning of communion with Christ in Scripture by embracing the traditional notion of participation. Communion with Christ, according to Calvin, cannot be understood in terms of fellowship or society basic to the Great Controversy but rather as the “unity by which the Son of God engrafts us into His body, so that He communicates to us all that He is. We so draw life from His flesh and His blood, that they are not improperly called our food.”¹⁰ The invisible remnant’s strong and unremitting dependence on Calvin’s theological system prevents it from embracing the biblical history of God’s love and, therefore, from becoming the visible remnant of biblical prophecy.

However, more conservative and biblically minded Evangelical denominations do still think historically and have not surrendered completely to the spiritualization of God’s history of love. Yet the influence of traditional ideas of interpretation still operates in the background of these denominations, leading them to reduce the history of God chiefly to the history of Christ’s incarnation on earth. In the practice of spirituality, the history of God’s love is reduced to Christmas and Easter. And even this history is understood as a symbol of a non-historical spiritual reality that transcends and leaves behind human history.

As the opposite of tradition, the history of God’s love takes place within the temporal, spatial, and material realm of creation. Spiritual communion with God occurs as a historical-social relationship between creatures with the ascended, incarnated, historical Christ ministering from the heavenly sanctuary. Christ is the center of human reality,

and therefore, of human and cosmic history. Ellen G. White's five-volume theological commentary on Scripture, *The Conflict of the Ages* series, begins and ends with the words "God is love." God's history reveals His loving merciful being and character.

According to Scripture, the history of God's love in creation and redemption is an extension of the eternal history of love of the three persons of the Godhead. We can trace the origins of this history back to the time before the beginning of Creation when through divine infinite wisdom, the three persons of the Trinity planned the design of the universe. From love and through love They thought to share Their life by opening Themselves to their creatures.

Before the beginning when God created the universe, Christ was appointed to be the great center of creation (Prov. 8:22, 23), to play the role of Mediator between the Trinity and the creatures to be. According to God's design, all things in the universe will hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17). In other words, Christ was appointed to be the center of the system of reality that God was about to create. God's love prompted Him to relate directly with His creatures through the mediatory presence of Christ in their future life and history. God's love is direct, personal, and historical. Through Christ's mediation, God's wisdom and law will become the basis of spiritual order among free beings created in the image of God.

Also, before the creation of the world, God knew in detail what would take place after He created the universe. He knew His creatures would rebel against the spiritual order centered in Christ. God also knew about the suffering and death that would follow as a consequence of the new spiritual order their creatures would generate by rejecting Christ's mediatory role in creation. Yet God created the universe anyway. Many Christians who question God's love forget that God allowed for the provision that Christ, the center around which all things cohere in the universe, should become a human being and die in the place of His rebellious creatures. God's love in Christ's incarnation and death was the way to respond to His creatures' challenge to Christ's sovereignty and restore the spiritual harmony in the universe.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth even though He did not need to do so. Yet, in love, He did. When God created the historical reality of the universe, perfect spiritual harmony existed until controversy arose in heaven and on earth. In love He allowed the "other-than-Himself" to exist to the point of challenging His love and sovereignty. Only a God of love could create a universe that would cause Him infinite suffering while still pursuing the wellbeing of His creation. Through the rebellion of His creatures, the history of God's love became the history of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan.

Ever since the rebellion against God's government by spiritual creatures in heaven and on earth, the history of God's love carried on with the aim to restore creation to its original spiritual harmony articulated through His law and eternal love. Beginning with Satan's rebellion in heaven and its expansion to the Garden of Eden, Christ has continued to be the heart around which all things cohere.

Christ is the historical agent of the great acts of God's covenant of salvation. The preaching of the gospel before the Flood, the call to Abraham, Christ's presence and revelation at Sinai, His incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly ministry are some of the actions in history of the second Person of the Godhead to achieve full restoration of the perfect spiritual harmony that existed in the beginning of creation.

The history of the universe thus revealed in Scripture and articulated in the person and work of Jesus Christ helped the biblical visible remnant to understand the long and deep history of God's love for His creatures. It integrates all the teachings of the Scriptures and doctrines of Christianity into a comprehensive and harmonious whole.

Understanding this history has profound implications for Christian theology because it refutes the perspective that tradition draws from classical and modern metaphysics or postmodern metanarratives and metahistories. As a biblical historical metanarrative, the history of God's love enlarges and reinforces the "biblical interpretive turn" that helped Adventist pioneers to free themselves from the dominion of Christian tradition and overcome the inconsistencies and ambiguities generated by the anonymous remnant's "turn to Scripture." With the passing of time, the theological and spiritual strength of the historical metanarrative of the Great Controversy brought about the emergence of the biblical visible remnant church. This ensures faithfulness to the gospel of Christ.

Understanding the history of God's love also has profound implications for Christian spirituality because it facilitates a deep and steady personal relationship with God. When by faith the believer understands and obeys

God's words, he or she feeds on Christ the Bread of Life. God's words through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit penetrate deep in the heart of believers, transforming them in the image of Christ. Communion with God is no longer participation in His being experienced through the liturgical mechanics of the sacraments, leaving the heart empty. Instead, communion with God is a personal ongoing dialogue with the incarnated, ascended Christ ministering in the heavenly sanctuary. This dialogue is very real and takes place in everyday life through Bible study, prayer, obedience, and mission. This experience that unites each believer in fellowship with Christ and simultaneously with one another is the spiritual ground on which God's visible remnant church on earth stands.

The Mission of the Remnant Church

When through faith and obedience believers accept Christ's message and fellowship with Him in everyday life, they become His disciples (John 8:31) and through adoption (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:4) share in the history of God's family (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 3:15) and its mission (Matt. 28:19, 20). Thus, in the spiritual relation of the believer with Christ, His message and mission belong together and are essential to the existence of the church. Without this message, the mission of the church is powerless. Without this mission, the message of the church is fruitless. The church as a spiritual entity exists, then, when believers unite around Christ by experiencing in their lives His message and mission.

The mission of the church is to share Christ's message to the world. The message of Christ includes the history of His love from before Creation, through the history of sin, to the restoration of the original harmony in love among all creatures and God. Adventists discovered this message through a series of historical experiences that they saw reflected and announced in the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

As explained earlier, their discovery of the system of "present truth" sprang from their unwavering commitment to the *sola Scriptura* and *tota Scriptura* principles inherited from the anonymous remnant, and the change in biblical interpretation and doctrinal thinking they discovered. In short, they found out the way in which all biblical doctrines belong together in a complete and harmonious system of present truth based only on scriptural interpretive assumptions.

This philosophical and systematic achievement became the message that originated the existence of the remnant church. Arthur White characterized the few formative years of Adventist thinking after the Great Disappointment as a "scattering time" (1845-1850) when "the invulnerable structure of truth to present to the world" was discovered by way of "thorough Bible study and the confirming work of the Spirit."¹¹ By the end of this period, when everything in experience and biblical understanding fit together, Ellen White confidently wrote: "We know that we have the truth."¹² Adventist pioneers referred to this system of truth under the label of "present truth," the "three angels' messages," and the "platform of truth."

After this initial discovery, Ellen White enlarged this system of truth in considerable detail in her voluminous writings. After Ellen White's death, Adventist believers found it easier to draw the message of the church from her writings than from Scripture. On the positive side, this practical procedure allowed successive generations to keep the message and mission of the church alive. However, on the negative side, this practical procedure distanced the church from Bible study and the unwavering commitment of early Adventist pioneers to the *sola* and *tota Scriptura* principles.

Though some Adventists found it easier to retrieve the message from the writings of Ellen White, others turning to Scripture found it harder to prove Adventist doctrines and practices only from Scripture. Correctly convinced that Adventism should build only on Scripture, the latter group eventually de-emphasized the message of the remnant and, with the passing of time, replaced it with the message they found in the Protestant churches. As a result of this, an increasing number of Adventists no longer experience or proclaim the coherent system of biblical truth that the pioneers discovered and that Ellen White expanded in her writings. They reduce the mission of Adventism to the dissemination of present discrete doctrines, practices, and services that fail to include the coherence of all biblical data, doctrines, and history in the living person of the incarnated Christ. Consequently, the message and mission of the remnant no longer depart from the message and mission of Christian tradition and the anonymous remnant. The

remnant no longer aims at establishing “Christianity upon an eternal basis.”¹³

Instead, some Adventists in our days assume that the message and mission of Adventism and the anonymous remnant is one and the same. Not surprisingly, deep doctrinal divisions within Adventism generate spiritual disunity, a declining mission, and uneasiness among some sectors with the “inherited” claim of being the visible remnant church of God on earth. These developments endanger the very existence of the remnant and the success of its mission.¹⁴

In spite of this situation, Adventism continues to emphasize the global mission of the church, albeit in increasing disconnection from the complete and harmonious system of biblical truth. Even those who identify the mission of the remnant with the “three angels’ messages” or “present truth” tend to miss the inner coherence of the biblical system and its unifying and transforming power. They do so by proclaiming the “distinctive” doctrines of Adventism but failing to use them as the key that opens to view the whole and harmonious system of biblical truth. In so doing, they stop short from experiencing and communicating the message of Adventism and from accomplishing its mission.

In this environment, the mission of the church shrinks to baptisms and numbers as the measure of its success. The history of God’s love turns into a few distinctive disconnected doctrines. Consequently, the remnant misses the spiritual power of God’s message and replaces it with ideas and methods devised by human minds. When the remnant no longer understands its mission as the restoration of Christianity to its eternal biblical basis, it risks becoming institutionalized and pursues its mission in unbiblical ways following the lead of tradition.

The question arises: Is it possible to ground the Adventist message, as discovered by the pioneers and expanded by Ellen White, on the Bible alone? Would Adventists be able to discover the history of God’s love from Scripture alone without quoting from Ellen White? The call to being the remnant demands a positive answer to this question.

Because of the present development of Adventism in the world of scholarship, this question must be answered at the level of theological and scientific scholarship. This task involves all sectors and levels in Adventism and calls for a renewed commitment to (1) the *sola, tota, and prima Scriptura* principles (the turn to Scripture away from tradition and culture), and toward (2) the interpretive role of the Adventist pillar doctrines (the biblical interpretive turn) embraced by Adventist pioneers. Moreover, it requires that Adventist scholars, pastors, administrators, and laypersons recognize the philosophical nature of the biblical hermeneutical turn and the systematic nature of the “invulnerable structure of truth”¹⁵ discovered by the pioneers. This aspect of the task implies a substantial broadening of current theological practices to include the as-yet-untested areas of biblical philosophy and biblical systematic theology. Simultaneously, current ministerial and missionary practices also need substantial broadening to include the areas of education and discipleship.

The implementation of these tasks will allow Adventists to experience in their lives the discovery of the harmonious and complete system of truth by themselves. By understanding in spiritual depth the history of God’s love and becoming part of it, Adventists will obtain a firsthand experience on being God’s visible remnant church. They will also grow spirituality in union with Christ and with one another, which are the necessary conditions for success in the final mission of proclaiming and sharing God’s history of love in Christ’s historical acts of salvation from past to future eternity.

The mission of the remnant consists in sharing the message and spiritual experience that grounds its existence as the visible community of Christ. Mission cannot exist without message, and message cannot exist without mission. While the mission describes the experience of the message, the message outlines the nature and contents of the spiritual experience of union with Christ. The summary and essence of the message-mission experience of the remnant centers in the entire biblical system of theology and philosophy that the pioneers labeled under the rubrics of the “three angels’ message,” “present truth,” and the “platform of truth.”

Mission is not merely the sharing of doctrines but also of the spiritual historical experience articulated by them. Thus, God’s people understand and live in their daily lives the message they share and proclaim. Moreover, they understand their experience of being the remnant as part of the actual history of God’s love in the Great

Controversy.

The mission-message of the remnant is broad and all-inclusive. It helps disciples to discover the inner coherence of the entire Bible and all its doctrines. Moreover, it brings intellectual, spiritual, and existential coherence to the brokenness brought on by sin and rebellion against God. Here lies the power of the gospel to restore life and hope. The mission-message of the remnant meets well the needs for meaning and spiritual coherence of postmodern culture. At the same time, it implies a veritable and wholesale departure and replacement of the theological and philosophical systems and spirituality embraced by Christian tradition and the anonymous remnant. In so doing, the mission of the remnant is established on an eternal basis.

Summary

Adventists claim to be the visible remnant church of Christ because they see themselves fulfilling the identifying marks of the remnant included in the Book of Revelation. Yet, the church exists in Christ. Her existence is spiritual because of her faith in Christ's words and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, her engaging in Christ's mission to the world as recorded in Scripture.

Moreover, Scripture applies the "remnant" designation to the historical and spiritual development of God's people, both Israel and the church, throughout the history of salvation. Consequently, the eschatological remnant described by John in Revelation 12:17 is not different from the church but is the church herself, the continuation of the New Testament Church as the remnant of Israel. The nature and existence of the remnant church, therefore, is grounded on her spiritual faithfulness to Christ's Word and mission as recorded in Scripture.

Early in her history, however, the Christian Church progressively abandoned the hermeneutical presuppositions New Testament writers took from the Old Testament canon and replaced them with Greek categories on the nature of being. This use of Greek philosophy distorted biblical teachings and produced the reinterpretation of Scripture and its teachings.

Further, it led Christian tradition to replace Christ's presence in the heavenly sanctuary with the liturgy and sacraments of the church. In this way, the church chose to stand on a new alien spiritual ground thereby rejecting the biblical spiritual ground on which the New Testament Church as the remnant of Israel stood. Although Scripture was never absent from Christian tradition, the new philosophical interpretation decisively distorted its teachings and weakened its power. Eventually, it contributed to the church's self-understanding as being the replacement of Israel rather than as being its remnant, to ground its existence on the sacraments, and to the claim of apostolic succession.

Although the mainline and radical reformations' "turn to Scripture" led to the discovery of forgotten biblical teachings, they stopped short from challenging the interpretive principles of Christian tradition. This fact prevented the churches of the Reformation from becoming a unified theological and ecclesiological alternative to Roman Catholicism. Instead, the Protestant "turn to Scripture" fragmented the Christian Church into an increasing number of denominations.

Yet, in spite of these shortcomings, the discovery of biblical truth and emphasis on the biblical Christ brought about by the Protestant "turn to Scripture" generated an "anonymous remnant." In other words, disseminated among the denominational fragmentation of Christian tradition the remnant church began to gather around the Christ of Scripture anonymously and without a physical presence.

Following the pattern of scientific and theological development outlined by Thomas Kuhn and Hans Küng, the anonymous remnant's "turn to Scripture" intensified leading to the unavoidable paradigm shift generated by early Adventist pioneers. Seventh-day Adventist identity as the remnant church, then, does not stand on the scriptural marks of the remnant, or the teaching of isolated Christian doctrines, such as the seventh-day Sabbath, the manifestation of the gift of prophecy, the sanctuary, or the three angels' messages. Instead it stands on Scripture, alone (*sola*), completely (*tota*), and interpretively (*prima*). According to Scripture, the remnant exists in spiritual union with Christ. This union flows from the discovery, acceptance, and spiritual internalization of the complete and harmonious biblical system of theology and philosophy that the biblical interpretive turn opened to view.

More precisely, as the biblical interpretive turn replaced the interpretation of Christian tradition and the

anonymous remnant, the spirituality of Scripture centered on the presence of the historical incarnated Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. It also replaced the spirituality of Christian tradition centered in the imaginary presence of Christ in the liturgy and sacraments of the church. The remnant church, then, stands on the same biblical spiritual ground on which Israel and the remnant of Israel in the New Testament Church stood. In this way, the biblical remnant of Israel church of the New Testament emerged from Scripture in eschatological times. The anonymous remnant developed into the visible eschatologically biblical remnant church.

The challenges facing the remnant are epochal. Being the remnant is not easy, but Christ brings it about through His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and the providential work of the Holy Spirit. Being the biblical remnant is not a possession or badge of honor to boast of, but responsibility, service, and mission. Believers do not inherit the church but bring it into existence through faithfulness to the Christ of Scripture and His salvific mission. The remnant exists as the unfinished process of reviving and reforming of the Christian Church out of the wilderness of human traditions.

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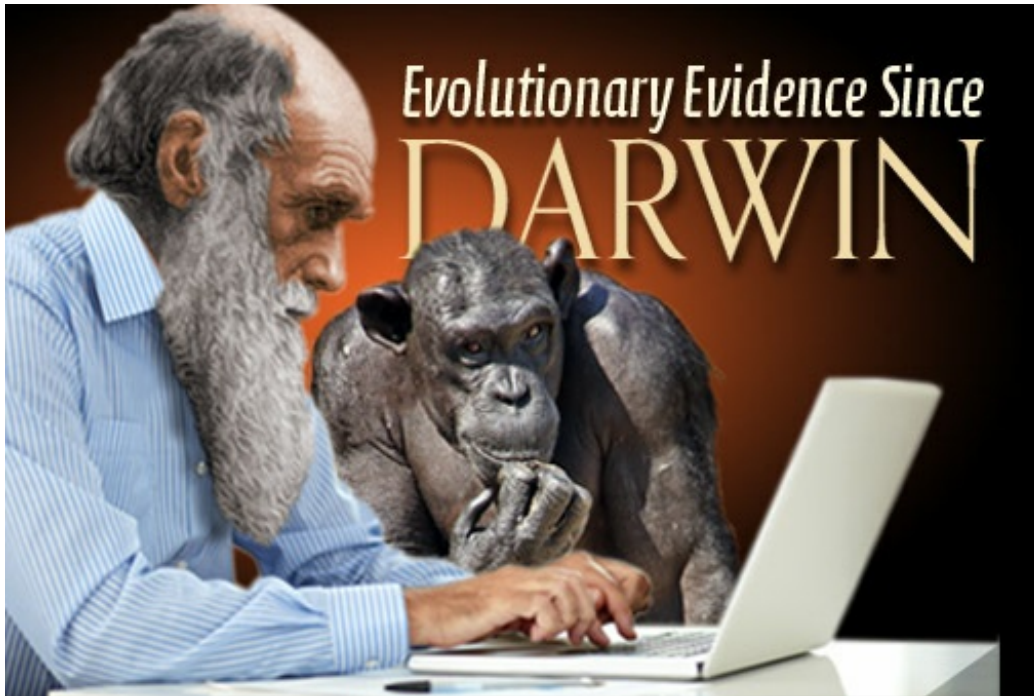
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Significant challenges to large-scale evolution continue to multiply.

In the 19th century, Charles Darwin and his contemporaries put together the core of the modern theory of evolution. In Darwin's era, virtually nothing was known about molecular biology or about DNA and mutations. But as Darwin observed generation after generation of some animals, he noticed that slight variations began to show up. As he considered the implications of those variations, he realized that some of them would make the animals that were better suited to survive in their environment, while others would decrease their ability to survive.

This realization led to the logical conclusion that the better-adapted organisms would live longer and produce more offspring than would the more poorly adapted organisms. Thus, the more helpful variations would tend to survive and increase with the organisms they aided. Darwin called this process "natural selection," and he concluded that it was this process, acting upon generation after generation of living organisms through long periods of time, that resulted in the evolution of all types of plants and animals.

Philosophical trends already at work in the 19th century, combined with Darwin's careful maneuvering in the academic world of the sciences, prepared the way for acceptance of this theory. Most 19th-century scientists weren't convinced that natural selection was powerful enough to explain all the forms of life that this world contains, but the mass of evidence Darwin presented in support of his theory—from fossils, observations of variation and selection in domestic animals, and biogeography—convinced many scientists that life could have arisen and developed without a creator.

Further, the laws of genetics that Gregor Mendel had discovered in the 1860s through extensive research were rediscovered in the early 20th century, leading to a great growth in the understanding of genetics. Developments in the field of genetics clarified the power of natural selection. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, a group of biologists, paleontologists, and mathematicians combined what was then known about genetics, fossils, anatomy, natural selection, and the mathematical analysis of genetic changes in populations of organisms. The more advanced and

sophisticated version of evolution that these scientists developed became known as the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, or the Neo-Darwinian Synthesis. At this point, most biologists considered Darwin's process of natural selection as the driving force in evolution, and neo-Darwinism was regarded as the theory that could explain all that was needed to know about the evolution of simple organisms into the extraordinarily widespread and diverse biological world we see around us.

In the 1950s, two developments added to the growing confidence in evolution. One was the description by James D. Watson and Francis Crick of the structure of DNA, which increased our understanding of how DNA functions as the source of genetic information in all organisms.¹ This discovery was a significant addition to the neo-Darwinian theory. Stanley Miller and Harold Urey's experiments also showed that natural processes could make amino acids (the components of proteins) in the conditions presumed to exist on the primitive Earth.² In the eyes of many scientists, this made the naturalistic origin of life more plausible. God now seemed truly to be unnecessary.

Scientists then envisioned the chance formation of one-celled organisms in a primordial chemical soup to be a relatively simple matter. These primitive organisms, then, were the material on which evolution could work, enabling the neo-Darwinian processes of random mutation and natural selection to produce increasingly complex plants and animals. The mutations are random in the sense that the mutation process doesn't know what the organism needs. But ultimately, the process isn't really random because natural selection tips the scale in favor of the survival of beneficial mutations and against the survival of harmful mutations. This is the process that, it was said, added improvement to improvement and thus produced the most complex creature of all—humans. There was enthusiastic confidence that this fully naturalistic process could satisfactorily explain biological origins and the evolution of life forms with increasing variety and sophistication of form and function.

The word *evolution* has a variety of meanings, and confusing them should be avoided. Changes in life forms such as the development of resistance to antibiotics in bacteria and the adaptation of mice to different environments by changes in the color of their fur are also called evolution. These micro-evolutionary processes of adaptation and the development of new species are not contrary to biblical creation and are supported by a lot of evidence.

When microevolution results in small changes that keep two populations of plants or animals from interbreeding, these two populations are considered, by definition, to be two differing species. This process is easily within the types of change that have occurred within created groups. There are approximately one thousand species of rats and mice, and they illustrate this process of speciation since the creation.

Creationists' objections to the theory of evolution, however, have to do primarily with large-scale evolution—the evolution, for instance, of worms, reptiles, and humans from a common ancestor.

Evolution and the Fossil Record

The theory of large-scale evolution uses the fossil record as a history book that documents the story of the evolution of increasingly more complex organisms through deep time (many millions of years). This history book begins with marine invertebrates, which are preserved in Cambrian rocks. From that beginning, the passage of time is recorded in the rock layers stacked on top of the Cambrian layer, each successive layer containing fossils of new, more complex life forms. Fish are found quite early in the record, then amphibians, and later, reptiles, which are followed by birds and mammals, with humans being one of the last types to appear as fossils. The order in which these animal groups appear in the fossil record fits the theory of evolution quite well.

There is a problem, however, in the fossil record that Darwin agonized over because he realized it could compromise his theory. In most cases each group of organisms appears as fossils *without a series of intermediate forms showing how they evolved from their supposed ancestors*.³ This is still a serious problem for evolution, although some vertebrate fossils have been found that can be interpreted as filling evolutionary gaps between living vertebrate groups.

Creationists have alternative explanations for most of these presumed evolutionary links, but a few are quite puzzling. We don't have the answers for all of the questions, but that's OK. No one has the answers to all his or her questions about unobservable ancient history.

Cracks in the Theory

Confidence that evolution will triumph over creationist ideas has increased, and this theory is universally

proclaimed in textbooks, popular media, public schools, and now often in Christian pulpits, too. And those who disagree are commonly portrayed as ignorant and poorly educated. This confidence results as much or more from a deepening commitment to the philosophy of naturalism than from the accumulation of more solid evidence, although many scientists proclaim that the evidence is overwhelming.

In reality, there are cracks in the naturalistic edifice, and they are growing. Those holding the naturalistic worldview are attempting to fill the cracks with many eloquent words, but those looking on from the outside of naturalism can see that the plaster isn't sticking, and the cracks are becoming more obvious.

One of the deepest cracks runs through the attempts to explain the origin of life. After publication of Miller and Urey's experiments, it was enthusiastically proclaimed that it would soon be known how life arose independent of any intelligent creator. Since then, more careful thinking and experiments have shown that the Miller and Urey scenario wasn't realistic.

However, the origin of life by natural processes, with complex biological molecules forming and gradually accumulating to become the first living cells, is still textbook orthodoxy. Those holding to naturalism must believe it happened that way. However, a few scientists, even some bona fide naturalists, admit that how life arose is still unknown.⁴

Intelligent Design

As a result of some scientists' awareness of the cracks in naturalistic theory, a movement began during the 1980s that called attention to the need for better explanations. This Intelligent Design movement (ID) was begun by a highly qualified group of scientists and philosophers led by Phillip Johnson, a law professor at UC Berkeley. The ID movement emphasizes that the origin of life can be explained only as the work of an intelligent agent.

Some conservative Christians are critical of ID because ID proponents don't mention the Christian God as the creative agent and don't address questions of the fossil record or of the evolution of life through time. These criticisms are missing something significant about ID. The ID movement has limited itself to one issue of critical importance—the essentiality of a designer/creator to the origin of life. This is a matter of science as well as of philosophy and theology. That is, current scientific evidence for the beginning of life is best explained by design, and there are valid reasons for believing the origin of life cannot be explained without that designer/creator. But science can't determine who the designer is, and so ID leaves that determination to others (although some ID leaders are young-life-on-Earth creationists).

By limiting itself to the one central issue that science can address, ID is working toward filtering the unnecessary and damaging philosophical assumptions of naturalism out of science. Increasing people's awareness of the difference between objective science and naturalistic assumptions is a necessary first step toward opening minds to the realization that an unbiased study of the origin leads to the conclusion that there must have been a designer. Those who have made the study of ID their concern have a full plate. They have to leave the next step—demonstration that God is that designer and that His Word is a reliable record of the history of life—up to others.

Two Components

Science has helped us to recognize the amazing laws of chemistry and physics that God uses to operate His universe. If a boulder is pushed off a cliff, gravity will determine the outcome. No intelligent thought is required to make the consequences of this action consistent with those of other, similar actions.

What then is so unique about life? Don't we operate within the same laws as the rest of the universe?

Yes—but only up to a point. Books are made of two very different components, one being the physical paper and ink, or, more recently, the screen and electrons, that bear the letters that books contain; and the other being information—the meaning carried by the sequences of letters that form words and sentences. There is no law that specifies the order in which the letters are placed on the paper. The order of the letters is determined by ideas, by information; and ideas and information are the province of an intelligent mind. Information originates only in intelligence.

Like books, life is comprised of two components: physical molecules and the information contained in the sequences of those molecules. Simple biological molecules, like amino acids, will form by the unaided action of chemical laws. But amino acids by themselves don't make anything alive. These simple molecules, and many

others, must be arranged in the proper sequence to function properly. The sequence of amino acids in a protein is controlled by the sequence of another kind of simple molecules—nucleotides—also found in DNA. These amino acids and nucleotides are like bricks. Bricks alone won't make a palace; there must also be an engineer and a blueprint. And just as no natural law sets the sequences of letters and words on this page, no natural law sets the sequences of amino acids and nucleotides in the living cells that make up our bodies. All of these sequences of molecules contain and communicate information that is directly comparable to the information contained and communicated in the sequences of letters in a book or in the letters and lines on a blueprint.

Crystals can be very beautiful, but they are simple, non-living structures composed of a very repetitive sequence of a few elements. Their law-governed chemical composition can be represented by a sequence of letters, such as AFR AFR AFR AFR. In contrast, biological molecules are extremely complex. There are, for example, thousands of types of proteins in every cell, and each type of protein is composed of thousands of subunits that must be in the right sequence for the protein to do its job. Just as the sequence of letters in the phrase "God loves you" conveys information, so do the sequences of molecules that make up the proteins that enable the living cell to perform its function. This is why crystals and living cells are radically different from one another.

Life exists because every life form contains a massive amount of information recorded in an incredibly complex and wonderful instruction book inside its cells—DNA. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that there is no adequate explanation for such information other than that an intelligent "inventor"—in this case, God—put it there. The only alternative is pure chance, and the probability of all that information appearing in a cell spontaneously is so remote as to render this alternative a dead end. Mainline science denies that such complexity demands a Creator, but if the mind is open to think about it carefully, that denial doesn't ring true.

The ID movement is drawing attention to the distinction between information, on one hand, and law-governed phenomena on the other. This movement is having an influence, opening the minds of those who are willing to see beyond modern, dogmatic naturalism, which they see that science doesn't need.

Molecular Biology

Next, there is the crucial issue of the presumed large-scale evolution of life forms—the progression from bacteria to worms and other invertebrates, and then from those creatures to fish, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals—and, finally, to humans. The structures, physiology, and brain functions of each life form are governed by information in DNA. Each step in the proposed evolutionary sequence requires a large amount of new DNA information. The origin of the first simple life forms and the unguided evolution of more complex life forms like starfish, reptiles, and humans, all require the origination of volumes of new biological information. Are random mutations and natural selection up to the task? Mainline science insists Yes, but that answer depends upon assumptions. Here also the cracks are becoming wider—largely because of advances in molecular biology.

Darwin and his contemporaries had no idea how complex a living cell is. The scientists who put together the neo-Darwinian synthesis in the 1940s also knew relatively little about the nature of life. In their day, almost all the modern discoveries in molecular biology still lay in the future. Unfortunately, their view of life's origins, based on naturalistic theories, became entrenched in the scientific mindset before scientists knew enough to make an objective evaluation of those theories. And since that approach has become deeply imbedded in the thinking of an entire community, changing it is difficult.

More than a decade ago, at an annual meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontologists, a prominent evolutionary scientist said that the neo-Darwinian synthesis needs to be redone, and "this time we aren't going to blow it." Only now is his meaning finally becoming evident. Over the past several decades, molecular biology research has revealed increasing levels of sophistication in the operation of every cell in the human body. King David marveled that we are so "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14, NKJV), and he knew only the most basic functions of this marvelous machine, the living body. How he would marvel now!

Research has revealed that the cell's mechanisms for correcting mistakes in the duplication of DNA are vastly more precise than previously thought. And it is also now known that cells have many sensors that monitor their environment, gathering information that enables them to make needed alterations in their function. So the DNA's control of the cells is not an automatic, one-way operation. Those environmental sensors provide feedback that can alter how the information in DNA is interpreted in the making and the operation of an organism.

In fact, the environment that we grow up in even makes what are called *epigenetic* changes in how the DNA is interpreted. These epigenetic changes don't alter the DNA, but they do influence how that DNA blueprint is interpreted, changing the offspring of those organisms. Those changes may be passed down several generations. And if the environment returns to what it was originally, the organisms can go back to interpreting the information in the DNA in the original way.

In other words, because of epigenetics, the conditions in which a baby is born and raised can affect it and its offspring negatively or positively for several generations. This makes one think of the biblical statement, "The Lord . . . punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Num. 14:18, NIV). It seems that He who inspired the Bible writers knew something about epigenetics.

One eminent evolutionary biologist involved in these discoveries describes the genetic system as doing what he calls "natural genetic engineering."⁵ He points out that cells and organisms don't passively carry out fixed genetic instructions. Instead, they assertively use environmental information from their sensors to determine the most effective way to use the information in DNA. The genetic system "decides" what modifications will best serve the organism of which it is a part.

This same author states that these new discoveries about the genetic system leave no room for the random mutations proposed by Darwinian theory. This author is not a creationist; he is clearly committed to the evolution of life through deep time. The evidence has convinced him, however, that this must happen through some mechanism other than the random mutations of conventional Darwinian theory. When more traditional evolutionists, believers in Darwinian random mutation and natural selection, criticize him—and they do—he responds that "their position is philosophical, not scientific, nor is it based on empirical observations."⁶ He also admits that he has no idea how this genetic system evolved. Even scientists who don't believe in creation, if they're open to the evidence, can see that the sophistication of a living cell is mind-boggling.

There is much more that could be said about the difficulties faced by evolution theory because of advances in molecular biology, molecular genetics, the human genome project and its spin-offs, and careful analysis of population genetics. These difficult challenges to large-scale evolution will likely multiply.

The cracks in this part of the naturalistic worldview are growing wider and more menacing in the field of biology. Perhaps this is why the more vocal opponents of creationism are becoming increasingly aggressive. The increasingly difficult challenges facing evolutionary theory don't mean that creationists have answers for all of the questions that still remain for creation. Many things in nature are so evil that they are hard to explain, even though it is accepted that the work of the enemy, Satan, lies behind them. Geology poses questions, however, that are even more challenging than those posed by biology.

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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

Clinton
Wahlen



Together, the four Gospels of the New Testament offer a full picture of the meaning of justification.

There are a number of ways that the subject of justification in the Gospels could be approached. On the one hand, the discussion could be very brief since the word translated as “justification” never occurs in the Gospels and only twice in the rest of the New Testament (Rom. 4:25; 5:18), a fact belying its great importance to Christian theology. On the other hand, the *concept* of justification is found comparatively frequently in the Gospels.

Another approach would be to look at various stories of characters illustrative of the concept in some way, such as the paralytic (“Your sins are forgiven,” Mark 2:5),¹ Zacchaeus (“Today salvation has come to this house,” Luke 19:9), and the woman caught in adultery (“Neither do I condemn you,” John 8:11).

Parables that illustrate the concept could also be examined. The inherent danger in a study of this kind is to read the Gospels through the eyes of Paul or, conversely, to find no commonality whatsoever between them. Despite the obvious attraction of a more wide-ranging study of the concept of justification, the approach taken here will be more limited, concentrating on the use in each Gospel of the Greek words linguistically related to the Greek word for “justification” (translated into English as “righteous,” “righteousness,” “justify,” and “justly”).

Justification in Matthew

Matthew focuses not on the process of justification but on the result. Jesus is the righteous king, and those who belong to His kingdom should have kingdom righteousness, which is most fully described in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a righteousness unlike that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). This is interesting because later Jesus describes the Pharisees as being righteous (9:13). As Matthew makes clear, however, this is a righteousness that can even co-exist with lawlessness because it is only external (23:25-28). Kingdom righteousness, by contrast,

internalizes the law, as the antitheses describe, by banishing anger, lust, virtually all divorce, and oaths, and by insisting on giving more than is required and loving one's enemies—in short, exemplifying the ethical perfection of heaven (5:21-48). Thus reference is made in 6:33 to seeking *God's* righteousness, which is also described as doing the will of the Father (7:21). Kingdom righteousness impacts religious devotion because outward piety is meaningless. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting should be done secretly because one's real reward is not on earth but in heaven and based on trust in the heavenly Father (6:1-32).

No human standard of righteousness can ever be the basis for entering the kingdom. Matthew's Jesus "points to a requirement that is impossible for us to achieve. Impossible though it may be for us to achieve it, it is nevertheless demanded."² Within Matthew's Gospel, it becomes clear that this kingdom righteousness cannot be *achieved*; it can only be *received*. The work of Jesus, like that of John the Baptist, results in a division within Israel into believers and unbelievers, with believers largely coming from the disenfranchised, including the proverbial "sinners" (tax collectors and prostitutes) who are successfully entering the kingdom of God ahead of the chief priests and elders who did not believe Jesus or John (21:31, 32). This believing is connected with repentance in the immediate context and demonstrated by godly living, i.e., "the way of righteousness."

On the other hand, references in Matthew to entering the kingdom are frequently to a future event (5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23, 24). And several parables unique to Matthew place the separation between the believing and the unbelieving, the righteous and the unrighteous, at the final judgment (13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 25:1-13, 31-46). There is even reference to justification in connection with this judgment: "I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (12:36, 37). Though this fits the typical Jewish understanding of future justification, its connection in Matthew with a present justification corresponds more closely to Paul's schema and to New Testament eschatology more generally. At the same time, it should not go unnoticed that the immediate context connects the acceptance of the kingdom proclamation of Jesus with repentance (12:41; 11:20, 21), paralleling the call to repentance given by John the Baptist. In other words, justification in Matthew closely parallels both the present and future aspects of entering the kingdom of God, which comes through full acceptance of the proclamation of Jesus.

Justification in Mark

Besides the mention of Herod's perception of John the Baptist as a righteous man (Mark 6:20), the only other occurrence of the word translated as "righteous" relevant for this study appears to be an ironic reference to the scribes and Pharisees as righteous. To the question of why He eats with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replies, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (2:17). The passage is significant in characterizing Jesus' ministry as one directed at bringing outcasts back into fellowship within Israel, illustrating the theme of newness announced in 1:15 and further described in 2:18 to 22.

In the structure of the chapter, forgiveness (Mark 2:1-12) precedes fellowship (vss. 13-17). The saying of Jesus reinforces this idea, drawing on a familiar proverb. Adopting the premise of His accusers for the sake of the rebuttal, the "sinners," those who are sick, are the ones who need the physician's "healing," that is, forgiveness. This call or invitation of Jesus for sinners to enter the kingdom "suggests that the basis of table-fellowship was *messianic forgiveness*, and the meal itself was an anticipation of the messianic banquet."³ Therefore, the implicit link between forgiveness and healing in the first story is here made more explicit. The story of the paralytic interprets the call of sinners to fellowship and vice versa. In other words, Jesus' healings comprehended not just physical restoration but also "a return to wholeness within Israel and a sign of the redemption that his kingdom proclamation offered."⁴ As so often in Mark, irony is utilized to make an important point: Those who are *truly righteous* respond to the call of Jesus and thereby receive forgiveness, fellowship, and full restoration within the community of faith.

Justification in Luke

In Luke, Jesus calls sinners “to repentance” (5:32), a seemingly innocuous clarification until it is noticed that, in the announcement of the “new wine” ministry of Jesus that follows, only Luke includes the protest of some traditionalists that “the old is better” (5:39, author’s translation). Of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke alone identifies the “leaven of the Pharisees” as hypocrisy (12:1). He also mentions that the lawyer was “wanting to justify himself” with the question “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29), and so follows the parable of the Good Samaritan in which the priest and Levite pass by the half-dead man to preserve their ceremonial purity. Likewise, in the parable of the lost sheep, there is “more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (15:7), and the parable of the lost son is also about the self-righteous older brother whose response to his father’s love is left open (15:31, 32).

Jewish piety appears prominently from the outset perhaps to appeal especially to other such “older brothers” in Israel that they might see in Jesus the fulfillment of their hopes. Zacharias prophesied that when finally delivered from their enemies, Israel would be able to serve God without fear (1:74, 75). The angel Gabriel, announcing the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 and 6, indicated that part of John’s purpose in paving the way for Jesus would be to call “the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17). Simeon uttered a similar prophecy when taking baby Jesus in his arms to bless him (2:25), that the child would bring God’s salvation (2:30).

One of the most poignant appeals for pharisaical Jews to comprehend the reason for Jesus’ attitude toward those with a sinful reputation is Luke’s account of the anointing of Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Responding to Simon’s unspoken doubts, Jesus defends the woman’s actions (in contrast to the host’s lack of hospitality toward him) as arising from her gratitude at being forgiven. Her love demonstrates that she has been forgiven much. Significantly, Jesus’ assurance both to Simon and to the woman that her sins stand forgiven is in the perfect tense (7:47, 48), indicating a “state of forgiveness, which Jesus recognizes and declares. . . . Jesus does not deny that her sins have been ‘many,’ but . . . she is no longer under the burden of them.”⁵ This is evident from his concluding words to her: “your faith has saved you; go in peace” (vs. 50, NRSV). It is fitting that this story in Luke is introduced by the description of Jesus as “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” and the affirmation that “wisdom is justified by all *her* children” (vss. 34, 35), suggesting a group different from Simon and the complaining children of verse 32. The meaning of the word translated as “justified” in verse 35, as with that in verse 29, is “show or pronounce to be righteous, declare or admit to be just.”⁶

Another passage, aimed even more directly at self-righteousness, is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). According to Luke, Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised everyone else” (vs. 9, author’s translation). The Pharisee in the parable distinguished himself by his arrogant behavior: “he took up a prominent position”⁷ to pray; he thanked God that he was not like the rest of humanity; he then proceeded to spell out how bad everyone else was: “thieves, rogues, adulterers”; he was not “even like this tax collector”; next he enumerated his supererogation: fasting twice a week, tithing everything he received (even the smallest herbs, 11:42). In dramatic contrast to this proud Pharisee is the self-abasing attitude of the tax collector: he stood at a distance; he did not venture even to lift his eyes to heaven but kept beating his breast (“or more accurately the heart, as the seat of sin”)⁸; his prayer was short, simple, and straightforward: “Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (like the Pharisee also in a class by himself and yet not like him). The prayer is a plea for propitiation and forgiveness (Rom. 3:24, 25).

The authoritative pronouncement by Jesus that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, left justified, “*accounted as righteous, accepted,*”⁹ is startling, because God has said, “I will not justify the wicked” (Ex. 23:7). Yet such a surprise ending is typical of Jesus’ parables. To ask what sin the Pharisee had committed or what reparations the tax collector had made to prove his repentance misses the point as the focus here is on the inward attitude of the two worshipers evident from their words and even their body language (as well as the concluding proverb of verse 14). The tax collector even quotes the opening words of Psalm 51, which repeatedly considers the inner condition of the penitent (vss. 6, 10, 17). Thus, the meaning reflects a changed state inwardly as well as outwardly—a change attributable solely to God’s grace, which remains *His* justifying righteousness. Justification in this sense can never be meritorious but is always purely God’s gift.

Justification in John

Seldom does the Gospel of John mention righteousness, but when it does it is almost always connected with judgment. The most important, yet obscure and controverted passage is John 16:8-11. The dominant interpretation of this passage is in an exclusively negative sense, as a forensic judicial prosecution of the world; but such an interpretation overlooks the larger concerns of the Fourth Gospel, most notably its purpose to bring people to faith in Jesus (20:31) through the work of His disciples, which is modeled after the work of Jesus (17:18, 20). This is also the work of the Holy Spirit, since He is the continued presence of Jesus in the world (14:16-18; 16:12-15).

Jesus is the true Light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world (1:9). Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him (3:17). Light brings everyone to the point of decision, some loving darkness because their deeds are evil while others come to the light (3:19-21). The latter include Samaritans who recognized in Jesus “the Savior of the world” (4:42), Jews recognizing him as “the Prophet” (6:14), the man born blind (9:17, 33, 38), apparently some Greeks (12:20, 21), and even “the world.” Accordingly, Jesus said, “I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind” (9:39). Since the Holy Spirit is to do a work similar to what Jesus had done, we should expect that the description of John 16:8 to 11 would have differing outcomes in accordance with differing responses.

The verb translated as “convict,” or “convince” means “to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance.”¹⁰[10] This meaning has its Jewish antecedents in God’s disciplining and educating human beings through convicting, chastising, testing, and judgment. If this is the meaning here, then the Holy Spirit would convict the world: (1) of sin, because of their failure to believe [vs. 9] and their need to believe in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [1:29]; (2) of righteousness, because, through the “Spirit of truth” [14:17; 15:26; 16:13], Jesus sets people free from sin [8:31-36] and has ascended to the Father victorious to be their Advocate [20:17; 1 John 2:1]; (3) of judgment, because the ruler of this world is condemned and cast out through the judgment at the Cross, by which Jesus will draw all people to himself [12:31, 32].

The foregoing interpretation makes more sense of the “high priestly prayer” of John 17, where Jesus intercedes for the “Holy Father” to “keep” and “sanctify” the disciples (vss. 11, 15, 17) as well as those who will believe in Him through their word (vs. 20). In this context, Jesus also speaks of the Father as “righteous” and that He has made His name known to them in order that “the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (vs. 26). This echoes the work of Jesus in John 5:30, whose judgment is righteous because it is based not on His own will but that of the Father (7:24).

That the convicting work of the Spirit is not exclusively negative but can be positive, depending on people’s response, is seen also in connection with Jesus’ words to Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). From the subsequent narrative, it seems clear that Nicodemus ultimately accepted this teaching, believed in Jesus, and experienced this birth “from above” (7:50, 51; 19:39), while others of the Jewish rulers believed but hid the fact because they “loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (12:43, NKJV).

The concept of justification, broadly considered, is present to a greater or lesser degree in all four canonical Gospels:

- In Matthew, justification is correlated with the righteousness of the kingdom, which alone is sufficient to enter it. This righteousness proclaimed by Jesus involves an internalization of the law. Since it is *God’s* righteousness, it can never be *achieved* by human attempts at scrupulosity. It can be *received* only through an intimate acquaintance with the Father—in advance of and as an assurance of vindication in the final judgment.

- Justification in Mark includes the forgiveness available to sinners as they respond to the messianic invitation to kingdom fellowship and full restoration within Israel.

- Luke’s Gospel comes closest to Paul’s concept of justification, highlighting the danger of self-righteousness and the need for repentance to receive forgiveness, acquittal, and inner peace. It also involves an inward change manifested outwardly in humility, gratitude, and love to God for this gracious gift.

- John’s Gospel views justification, as well as its negative aspect of condemnation, in terms of the Cross—

which, with the conviction brought about by the Spirit-Advocate working through the disciples, brings people to a point of decision. Being sanctified through the word and Spirit of truth involves such a complete change that it is pictured as a new birth, which is the means of entering the kingdom of God and experiencing unity with the Father and the Son.

In all four Gospels, justification is closely connected with the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and it is perhaps for this reason that both present and future aspects of justification are in view. In Matthew the two aspects are fairly evenly balanced. The present aspect predominates in Mark and Luke, while a “perfective” element seems to pervade the Gospel of John, whereby the decisive victory at the Cross is made a reality through the Spirit, who brings conviction, faith, and transformation.

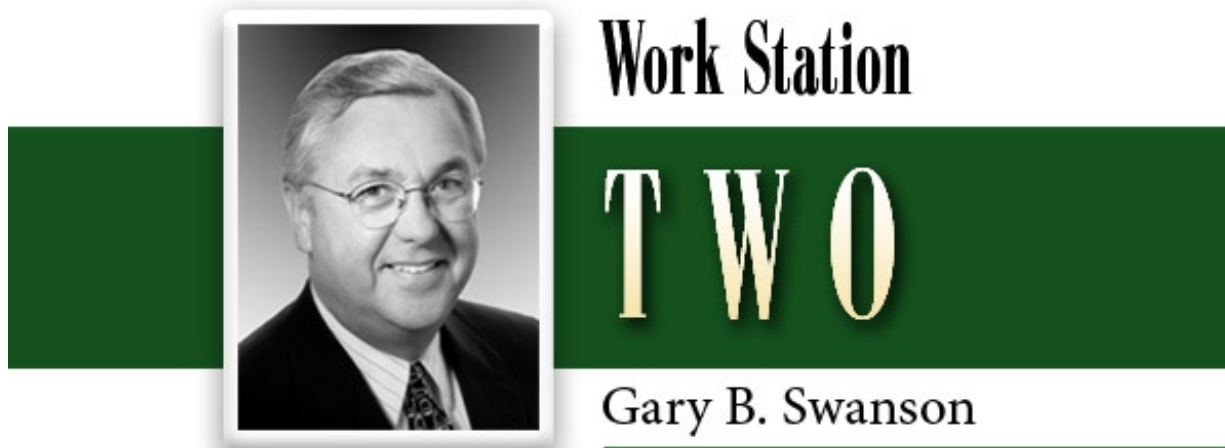
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The Balance of (Human) Nature

The Greek physician and philosopher Hippocrates is considered by historians as the father of Western medicine. It was his school of thought that developed the study of medicine as a distinct discipline. And he is, of course, the thinker after whom the Hippocratic Oath is named, which includes the pledge to “do no harm” and the commitment to physician-patient privilege.

But Hippocrates, who lived about four centuries before Christ, actually knew relatively little about the human body. He thought, for example, that the veins carried air rather than blood and that disease was caused by vapors secreted from undigested food. But whatever other mistaken ideas he may have taught, Hippocrates’ chief contribution to the field of modern medicine was his belief—a radical one at the time—that the medical treatment of a human illness had to take into account the entire body, rather than simply the immediately affected part.

Both before and since the time of the ancient Greeks, the study of the human body has been a source of the closest study—and wonder. Even centuries before Hippocrates, the psalmist David sang, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Ps. 139:14, NIV). It doesn’t take a physician—or scientifically trained physiologist—to realize that being made in God’s image means that humanity occupies a unique place in the earthly ecology. Even a lowly shepherd boy like David could appreciate “full well” God’s wonderful works.

And notice that David’s focus was not on how amazing the human body was, but on how wonderful God had made humanity. At the end of five days of awesome creativity in which God merely spoke “and it was so,” with a decidedly different—concrete—creative touch, God sculpted from “the dust of the ground” the first human being and breathed “into his nostrils the breath of life,” and he “became a living being” (Gen. 2:7, NKJV). This, after all, is certainly one of the most important points of the creation account: God loves us enough to mold us physically into His own likeness with His own hands into a wholistic organism.

This wholeness is all-ecompassing. “The Hebrew word for ‘being’ means life or person, not some eternal separate entity. In the Bible people do not *have* souls, but *are* souls/beings/persons.”¹

It could be said, then, that Hippocrates’ understanding of physical wholeness was preceded on an even more comprehensive scale by Scripture’s representation of the wholeness of the human being to include the physical *and*

the spiritual.

Ask any group to make a list of the organs of the human body, and they will usually begin with the heart and brain—maybe the lungs and the stomach, the kidneys and liver and pancreas. Very often, however, they will forget that even the skin, too, is considered by physiologists to be one of the organs of the body. This big, form-fitting suit that we walk around in every day is as important to our health as any other organ. Just think where we'd be—not to mention what we'd look like—without it.

A square inch of skin can include as many as:

- 20 blood vessels,
- 78 nerves,
- 13 cold sensors,
- 78 heat sensors,
- 165 pressure sensors,
- 650 sweat glands, and
- 1,300 nerve endings.

With all this microscopic infrastructure humming along under the coordination of the brain, it's clear to see that the skin isn't just for looks. And Job must have recognized this when he remembered that God had “‘clothed me with skin and flesh, and . . . knit my bones and sinews together’” (Job 10:11, NLT). At the time, Job was desperately groping for an explanation for his pain and disappointment, and he was wondering why God would have gone to such trouble to create him as such a wondrous being if he were just meant for a life of suffering.

A story is told of a woman who was suffering from prolonged, almost crippling, depression. She had become so apathetic and withdrawn that she never left the house. It just became so much emotional effort for her even to rise and care for herself that she retreated into an ever-darkening world of isolation. She was experiencing the disillusionment of the biblical character Job, though she could not specifically identify in her life any of the more obvious adversity that he had endured.

After her physician had tried many other conventional approaches—all to no avail—a package arrived in her mailbox from the office of her physician. Although she was so indifferent that she was inclined not even to open the package, she noticed a note written on the outside wrapping: “Open this package and use what is inside for at least ten minutes each day.”

Somehow this cryptic message sparked her curiosity just enough that she opened the parcel. Inside was an ordinary magnifying glass. Listlessly, she glanced through the glass at the blanket covering her bed, and something very small and oddly interesting woke within her. This led, over the next few days, to her ever closer examination of the single half apple she ate for breakfast next morning, the soap bubbles formed when she washed her hands an evening later, the small spider crawling along her dusty windowsill, the dandelion bloom in her unkempt backyard lawn. And ultimately she was able to respond more positively to the other treatments prescribed by the physician through her growing sense of wonder and gratitude.

She was finally able to come to a realization in her life that, as one writer has put it, “at creation we were made in the image of God, implying—among other things—that we have the same . . . sensibilities as He does.”²

And these sensibilities reflect a wholeness that even Hippocrates had not imagined. As was typical of the culture of his time, the father of Western medicine still did not recognize the indivisible nature of the physical and the spiritual. Indeed an increasingly impressive number of studies in today's scientific literature are indicating, however, that these two human qualities are “organic” to one another.

Being created in the image of God “points to physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual endowments that would be needed for humanity to fulfill God's purpose for them.”³ And the decision to embrace God's purpose for us, to submit to His intention for our ultimate happiness, will bring the fulfillment of human wholeness. This is where Job arrived after his ordeal: “I know that you can do all things,” he proclaimed, “and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2, NRSV).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Andrews Study Bible* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2010), p. 8. Italics in the original.
2. Richard Willis, in Miroslav Pujčić and Sarah K. Asaftei, eds., *Experiencing the Joy: 42 Bible Talks* (Stanborough Park, England: Seventh-day Adventist Church in the British Isles, 2010), p. 283.
3. *Andrews Study Bible*, op cit., p. 7.

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The President's

DESK

Tom Shepherd

Sometimes Addition Is Subtraction

If you are facing a situation in which someone wants to control your life, the Book of Colossians is a good read. Paul wrote Colossians probably at the time of his first Roman imprisonment around A.D. 60-61 and sent the letter to the church of Colossae via two trusted workers, Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9). Colossae was located at the eastern end of the Lycus Valley in a section of what is today western Turkey. About 10 to 15 miles distant were the larger and more famous cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. But it is Colossae for which a book of the Bible is named. It is the smallest town to which Paul wrote for which there is record.

Paul wrote to encourage the church members, but more particularly to counter heretical teaching that was sneaking in. Just what this heresy was is a matter of some debate among scholars. The false teaching included a rather odd conglomeration of such diverse characteristics as Jewish feasts, philosophical speculation, worship of angels and ascetic practices (2:8, 16-23). The false teachers were quite controlling in their approach. They condemned people who did not follow their dietary and festival practices (vs. 16). They disqualified Christians who did not do things according to their ways (vs. 18). And they insisted on their own dogmatic view of regulations (vss. 20, 21). On top of all this, they seem to have been not a little pompous regarding their spiritual insights and wisdom (vss. 18, 23).

How should a Christian, particularly a pastor, respond to this sort of imposition on believers? Paul takes the high road and begins the Book of Colossians with an amazing emphasis on the power and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Two central passages in Colossians 1 and 2 deal with this. The first is the famous Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15 to 20. Here Paul emphasizes two main concepts: Christ is the Creator, and He is the Redeemer. The central term the apostle uses to describe our Lord in both cases is "Firstborn." Sometimes people confuse this to mean that He was a created being. But counter such an idea are the clear words of 1:16 that Christ created all things.

In reality, for people in Paul's day, the term *Firstborn* contained two ideas, first in birth order or supremacy of position, and it is the latter of these ideas on which the apostle focuses attention. This fact is emphasized in the first part of the Christ Hymn (1:16) by Paul's litany of the Lord's creation of all things visible and invisible including thrones, lordships, rulers, and authorities. He is above them all.

Then Paul speaks of Christ as the Firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18). Jesus was not the first person ever raised from the dead, so He is not "firstborn" in that temporal sense of the term. But His resurrection holds primacy of position because of who He is (God in the flesh, 2:9) and because of what He did (died for our sins, vss. 11-15). His resurrection life empowers our conversion and assures our resurrection from the dead at His return.

The second key passage where Paul emphasizes Christ's power and all-sufficiency is Colossians 2:11 to 15.

Here the apostle presents five amazing word pictures of redemption. Space does not allow explanation of these in depth, but we can highlight what they focus on. The first borrows a concept from Judaism (circumcision) and indicates how conversion is a setting aside of the old ways of the flesh (vs. 11). The second word picture focuses on baptism and how it is burial and resurrection with Christ (vs. 12). The third picks up the idea of death and uncircumcision and indicates that God makes us alive with Christ by forgiving our sins (vs. 13). The fourth picture speaks of God wiping out the debt of sin, removing its condemning power by nailing it (in Christ) to the cross (vs. 14). And the fifth picture presents the triumph of Christ over the spiritual forces of evil in the ironic twist of the shameful cross becoming His victory chariot (vs. 15).

This wonderful theology of Christ and salvation forms the backdrop for Paul's argumentation against the false teachers in Colossians 2:16 to 23. Verse 16 begins with *therefore*, indicating that what follows is rooted in the salvation pictures of verses 11 to 15. Because of what Christ has done, because of our experience of that salvation, we should not let others condemn us (vs. 16). Not condemn us for what? Paul says, "Do not let someone condemn you in a matter of eating and drinking or in regards to a feast or new moon or Sabbath."¹

This text is a source of confusion for many. Though it cannot be explained in detail here, the following points may be made. Paul rejects the false teachers' condemnation of the Christians at Colossae who have found salvation in the full work of Christ. The apostle is not discarding things like food laws or observance of holy days in themselves. He goes on to call them shadows of things to come (vs. 17)—that is, they have a role pointing toward Christ. Likely the Sabbaths being described in verse 16 are ceremonial Sabbaths, since it is these that pointed forward to Christ, whereas the weekly Sabbath points back to creation (Ex. 20:8-11) and is not a shadow.

But the point to keep clearly in mind concerning Colossians 2:16 to 23 is actually something different. Paul indicates that the false teachers' controlling ways are out of step with the salvation work of Christ. How so? Likely what was going on in Colossae was that the false teachers were adding on requirements as some way of assuring success in salvation. This may not have been simply a doctrinal issue, but rather a sense of needing to submit to various spiritual forces above us, lining up with their requirements so as to ensure our salvation. This fear of the spiritual forces and the desire to avoid offending them is why Paul emphasizes over and over that Christ is supreme, that the fullness of divinity resides in Him and that He has overcome all forces against Him (Col. 1:15-20; 2:8-15).

Here is where the Bible Math comes in. It goes like this: When you add on something to Jesus, you actually subtract from Him.² If more than Jesus is needed for salvation, then we say that He is not enough. We subtract from Him and from His saving work so beautifully described in Colossians 2:11 to 15.

The false teachers were putting the cart before the horse based on their trust in their practices as some sort of "fire insurance" against what spiritual forces could do to them. But if you have Jesus, your salvation is secure. Obedience to Him is a result of that relationship, not a gateway to it. We live our discipleship in obedience to Christ, not to gain salvation but because of what Jesus has done for us. He has provided all we need. Do the math.

NOTES

1. My own translation.

2. It was my Ephesians and Colossians teacher, Ivan Blazen, back in the 1980s at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, who shared with our class this beautiful summary of Paul's point.

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