

Setting the Stage

Every movement has its turning points, or what might more appropriately be called transitional decades.

Transitional decades

The 1950s was such a period theologically in Seventh-day Adventism. But it wasn't the first. One only has to recall the 1840s, when Sabbatarian Adventism arose from the ruins of Millerism. The latter part of the forties saw the development of those theological ideas upon which a unique religious movement would be founded in the 1850s and 1860s.

Then there was the decade surrounding 1888, in which the denomination went through a theological reorientation as powerful ideas related to righteousness by faith and the centrality of Christ received their proper emphasis as being both foundational and contextual for the doctrinal understandings developed in the 1840s.

A third transitional decade was the 1920s as Adventist thought leaders reflected on and reacted to the theological struggles between Modernism and Fundamentalism that were tearing American Protestantism into two polarized parties. Especially crucial in that struggle was the issue of the nature of inspiration, with the conservative wing of Protestantism becoming more adamant about verbal inspiration and inerrancy. The powerful social dynamics of the 1920s shifted Adventism in a very definite manner away from its often very moderate position on inspiration and toward the hardening line of the

Fundamentalists. The verbalist and inerrantist mentality had always had a presence in Adventism, but it had not dominated the field. As indicated by the 1919 Bible Conference, many of the foremost leaders, including the General Conference president and his closest associates, held moderate views of inspiration. The same was true of W. C. White, Ellen White, and nearly all of those who worked most closely with her. But by the early 1930s the denomination's predominant theology of inspiration had moved into the Fundamentalist camp. That move set the denomination up for the crisis over Ellen White's inspiration and work in the 1970s when it was "discovered" that she could not meet the tests of either inerrancy or verbal inspiration, both of which are nonbiblical views.¹

A fourth transitional decade in Adventist theology was the 1950s, in which salvational issues again came to the forefront. Here, in one way or another, topics related to 1888 resurfaced, sometimes in unhealthy ways that too often were fueled by emotion rather than calm historical/theological study and discussion.

Two aggressive movements related to the Adventist understanding of salvation arose in the 1950s. Their writings and the publications of those reacting to their ideas have dominated the denomination's dialog for the past six decades on salvational issues. The two movements, while being quite distinct in their approaches, shared at least two powerful ideas: namely, (1) that the leadership of the denomination had fallen short, or even apostatized, and was leading the church in the wrong direction; and (2) that Jesus would not or could not come until Adventism accepted their view of salvation, especially as it related to end-time events.

At the focal point of agreement between the two dissident movements that arose in the 1950s was "last generation theology," which held in essence that Jesus could not return until there was a generation of perfect (sinless) Adventists whose existence would not only falsify Satan's claims but justify God in the eyes of the universe. The first of those movements found its genesis in 1950 through the research and writing of Robert Wieland and Donald Short, at the time missionaries to Africa. Their starting point was the thesis that the denominational leadership had failed by not accepting the 1888 message of

Alonzo T. Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner.² The second movement found its genesis in M. L. Andreasen's reaction to *Questions on Doctrine* in the latter 1950s.³ Andreasen had been Adventism's most influential theologian and most popular writer in the 1940s. And his popular and widespread last generation theology had largely dominated Adventist understandings among both clergy and laity up through the middle of the 1950s.

Those two 1950s movements, as noted above, have set the stage for subsequent Adventist theological discussions related to salvation for the last six decades. And the debate and the agitation surrounding it show no signs of diminishing. In fact, I recently received yet another unsolicited book highlighting the denomination's apostasy and calling for repentance.

Three new books on salvation

With those facts in mind, it is crucial to seek to continue to better understand not only righteousness by faith and its relation to the three angels' messages but also last generation theology in its various formats. The good news is that at least three books are scheduled to be released in mid 2018 on these crucial themes. The first is titled *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*, a broad-based study of the major issues in salvation. Authored by nineteen of Adventism's foremost scholars on issues related to salvation, it is perhaps the denomination's most ambitious book on the topic.

The second volume is *God's Character and the Last Generation*. That book moves beyond the major theological issues related to redemption covered in *Salvation* and focuses quite specifically on topics connected to last generation theology. As a result, there is a sense in which *God's Character and the Last Generation* builds upon the basic ideas theologically developed in *Salvation*. Thus the two books complement each other as Adventism continues to seek a better understanding of God's plan to save humanity—the central teaching of Scripture and the reason Jesus came to earth. As with the first book, *God's Character* is a group effort of twelve scholars associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. And once again, *God's Character* stands at the forefront of books that

treat the major issues related to last generation theology.

The third 2018 volume aimed at helping the church to better understand salvation, particularly as it relates to those Adventist movements advocating last generation theology, is the present book. But whereas *Salvation* and *God's Character* treat their subject matter from a topical and theological perspective, the primary approach in *End-Time Events and the Last Generation* is historical. Thus it complements the other two volumes and adds a further dimension to the absolutely crucial understanding of salvation.

End-Time Events has four major sections. The first sets the stage. The second focuses on the 1950s and the rise of the movements that have sponsored last generation theology. The sections' three chapters deal with the rise of M. L. Andreasen and last generation theology, the role of *Questions on Doctrine* in the denominational conflict, and the birth of the 1888 theology of Robert Wieland and Donald Short.

Part III demonstrates how the dissident theologies of the 1950s, especially ideas related to last generation theology, have dominated Adventist discussion related to salvation for the past sixty years. The first chapter in this section deals with conflicting understandings of salvation that have grown out of the 1950s. The second chapter highlights four areas of concern at the core of those conflicting understandings: the nature of sin, perfection and sinlessness, the human nature of Christ, and His divine nature and the Trinity. The discussions in part III, it should be noted, are illustrative of the importance of each topic historically and do not seek to provide comprehensive coverage in terms of either participants or publications. Part IV is in part a suggestion related to how the differing segments of Adventism might find a foundation for understanding each other better.

A personal journey

At this point I should make a personal statement. After decades of studying the history of Adventist theology I have come to the conclusion that M. L. Andreasen was the most influential figure in twentieth-century Adventist theology. His last generation theology was so forceful that it could not be ignored. Individuals by the very nature of its pervasive influence have had to either stand with

Andreasen or to react against him. Neutrality was not an option for those who were serious about the plan of salvation. Either his ideas were right and needed to be advocated, or they were wrong and needed to be argued against.

Over time I have taken both positions. My initial glimpse of Andreasen took place soon after my September 1961 baptism. Wanting to understand better what I had gotten into, I visited the Central California Book and Bible House a couple of months after my turn from agnosticism. The first thing that I noticed was the importance of the Christian Home Library, the series that was being marketed as essential Adventist books. As might be expected, the most published author in the series was Ellen White. But I clearly recall that the series' second foremost author by a large margin was M. L. Andreasen, who had at least seven volumes in the Christian Home Library. I had no idea who Andreasen was or what he stood for, but I was impressed by his contribution to the church's literature. He certainly, I thought, must have something of importance to say to the church. Needless to say, I bought several Andreasen volumes along with a dozen by Ellen White in that first bookstore visit. He was at that early stage becoming something of an Adventist "hero" to me.

His centrality in my life and newfound faith soon became more prominent, although at that time I had no idea that the theology I was absorbing was related to Andreasen. But while I slaved away in the construction world, my wife began working for Pacific Press Publishing Association, then located in Mountain View, California. She soon came under the influence of a cadre of older workers who were greatly exercised over final generation perfection, betrayal in 1888, and how those ideas related to the human nature of Christ. Before long I was captivated by their theological perspective.

I still remember the impact of *Christ's Object Lessons*, page 69, on my life. "Christ," I read, "is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. *When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.*"⁴ That passage, along with those from Ellen White highlighting the fact that earth's last generation would stand without an intercessor during the time of trouble⁵ (which implied to my mind

at that time that they had to be sinlessly perfect), set my life in a new, highly charged direction. Within three months of my baptism I had accepted last generation theology and had promised God that I would be the first sinlessly perfect person since Jesus. All I had to do was try hard enough.

Consequently, by the winter of 1961/1962 I had become a firm advocate of final generation theology. But I still did not know much about Andreasen or his relationship to that theology. That would soon change. September 1962 found me a freshman theology major at Pacific Union College at the very height of the *Questions on Doctrine*/Andreasen crisis. Topics such as end-time events in relation to sinless perfection and the human nature of Christ were at the forefront of discussion. And complicating it all was the prevalent accusation that the General Conference leadership had betrayed Adventism for evangelical recognition. To top it all off, Andreasen's ordination credentials had been removed in April 1961, his books had been taken out of Adventist book stores, and he died in February 1962. The leadership, in the eyes of his followers, had created a martyr. And for many of us, Andreasen became a hero and his theology something to fight for.

Thus began my pro-Andreasen/last generation theology years. But they came to an abrupt halt *in March 1969* when *I finally realized that last generation theology did not work. After eight years of striving I was still messed up. Beyond that, I hadn't met even one sinlessly perfect Adventist.* As a result, I decided to leave the ministry, give up on Adventism and what I perceived to be Christianity, and eventually return to the hedonism that had shaped my first nineteen years.

For the next six years I avoided Bible reading and prayer and worked through a doctoral program in a secular field at a state university. I was finished with both Andreasen and Adventism. Or so I thought. However, in the spring of 1975 I experienced a series of events that led to a conversion to Jesus as a personal Savior. In 1961 I had become an Adventist, and fourteen years later I met Christ and got my Adventism baptized.

That put me on a new road. June 1976 found me back at Andrews University, where I taught courses in the philosophy and history of

education, including the Adventist variety. Those studies and the work of my PhD students in the history of Adventist education positioned me in 1985 for a move to the Church History Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, also at Andrews. The department had just opened a PhD program in Adventist Studies and needed someone to help guide it. That new appointment provided me with the opportunity to return to the history and theology of the last generation, the 1888 movement, and the great issues related to salvation. Needless to say, much of my energies returned to Andreasen and other writers of the 1950s who had led both a significant sector of the denomination and me personally down a less-than-biblical track. Based upon hard evidence, I had moved from being an advocate of Andreasen and last generation theology to being an opposer.

As a result, in the pages that follow, especially in chapters 5 and 6, my readers will discover that my treatment is not merely historical but also autobiographical in the sense that much of my scholarship and writing has been directed at ideas I had earlier supported. It is no accident that so much of my career has been aimed at helping people to see more clearly the plan of salvation and the unhealthiness of many of the ideas that became controversial in the 1950s.

A book's journey

I have written extensively on topics related to the theologies that arose in the 1950s, but *End-Time Events and the Last Generation* is a book I had no desire to write. The train of events that led to its publication began in 2015 with an invitation to prepare a series of three papers for a conference at Peruvian Union University's Lima campus. The lectures were published by the university's press as part of *El Remanente y los disidentes*,⁶ and I believed that was the end of the matter.

Then in the fall of 2017 Joel Iparraguirre contacted me on behalf of the Adventist publishing house in Mexico. He wanted not only the three papers but also an introduction and closing chapters that would form a stand-alone book. At that point I thought that if the material was helpful to Spanish Adventism perhaps it should

be published in English. As a result, I sent a proposal along with the three lectures to Dale Galusha, president of Pacific Press. He was enthusiastic but pushed me for more material on the ongoing relevance of the conflicts of the 1950s. I was excited and outlined the book as it now stands.

But, realizing that I was overcommitted, I decided to quietly shelve the project and just let it die a natural death. Galusha, however, kept writing me about how excited he was about the book and how needed it was, and I took that as a nudge from the Spirit. As a result, after being contacted by both Miguel Valdivia, vice president for product development at Pacific Press, and Scott Cady, the acquisitions editor, I relented and decided that I was not quite as retired as I wanted to be.

At this point I am happy that others encouraged me when I wanted to be left alone. I trust that *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* will be helpful to the church and a blessing to its readers.

1. See George R. Knight, “Old Prophet, New Approaches: 45 Years of Crisis and Advance in Ellen White Studies,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 17, no. 2 (2014), pp. 97–118; George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2000), pp. 184–188.

2. R. J. Wieland and D. K. Short, *1888 Re-examined* (Strafford, MO: Gems of Truth, n.d.), passim. Originally written in 1950.

3. M. L. Andreasen, *Letters to the Churches* (Payson, AZ: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, n.d.). Originally written in 1959.

4. Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1941), p. 69; emphasis added.

5. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1939), pp. 614, 649; Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1945), p. 48.

6. George R. Knight, Glúder Quispe, and Alberto R. Timm, *El Remanente y los disidentes* (Lima: Universidad Peruana Unión, 2015).