

# GOD'S CHARACTER AND THE LAST GENERATION



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# Great Controversy Issues

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**G**od is love. This recognition is central to theology as a whole and plays a crucial role in the great-controversy motif, which is itself a crucial component of Adventist theology.<sup>1</sup> Put broadly, the great controversy refers to a conflict between God and Satan regarding the character of God and God's moral government. Just how God's character is vindicated over and against the claims of the devil is an important matter in Adventist theology. How one approaches and understands this issue has far-reaching ramifications for many other areas of theology and practice. Therefore, to provide a better understanding of the questions and issues that will be addressed in the following chapters of this book, this chapter provides a brief introduction to the great controversy and the issues raised relative to God's character and the last generation within that context.<sup>2</sup>

## **The cosmic conflict over God's character**

According to the Adventist understanding of the great controversy, the devil has charged and continues to charge that God is not wholly loving and good and that His government and law are not fair.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this conflict is not one about sheer power or brute force. Since God is all powerful (omnipotent), no one could stand against Him were He to exercise His power to quell rebellion. Yet no show of

force would effectively answer the charges raised against God's character and government. Since the cosmic conflict is a conflict about character, it cannot be settled by force, but only by a demonstration of character that refutes the charges raised against God's character.

This is due, in large part, to the nature of love. In this view, love by its very nature must be freely given; it cannot be compelled or determined.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, God has granted significant (but also limited) freedom of will to creatures, which He will not revoke because doing so would be against the principles of His character and government of love.<sup>5</sup> This cosmic conflict originated when the devil, created by God as a perfect angel, exercised his free will to rebel against God, slandering God's character in heaven as a means to usurp God's rule, leading some angels to rebel along with him (see Ezekiel 28:12–18; cf. Isaiah 14:12–14; Revelation 12:4, 7–9).<sup>6</sup> Satan then appeared as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, who questioned and slandered God's character (Genesis 3:1–5).<sup>7</sup> In doing so, he led Eve and Adam into distrusting and disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit, introducing sin and evil into this world (verses 6–19). Ever since, all humans, as descendants of Adam and Eve, have struggled with sin and the devastating consequences of evil.

But even in the midst of the Fall, God revealed His plan of redemption—that Christ would finally defeat the serpent and redeem humanity (verse 15). Indeed, God “so loved the world” that He has made a way for “whoever believes” in Christ to be saved (John 3:16). Christ Himself, the Second Person of the Godhead, would become human, live a life untainted by sin, and willingly die on the cross as a perfect sacrifice in the place of sinners (John 10:18; Philippians 2:5–8), simultaneously upholding God’s law and definitively demonstrating God’s completely righteous character of love (Romans 3:25; 5:8).

Broadly speaking, this concept of a cosmic conflict between God and Satan is by no means unique to Adventist thinking, but it is uniquely essential to Adventist theology. It provides a great deal of the framework within which many doctrines of Adventist theology make sense, including, but not limited to, the doctrine of last things and the second coming of Christ (eschatology) and the nature of God’s judgment and the sanctuary doctrine.

### **Differing understandings of the great controversy**

Although the basic features of the great controversy outlined above are generally accepted among most Adventists, there are significant departures among some regarding just how the controversy over God’s character is settled and the part that humans are to play in this cosmic drama of the great controversy, in which, as Paul puts it, “we have become a spectacle [or theater] to the world, both to angels and to men” (1 Corinthians 4:9).<sup>8</sup> This book aims

to address these questions in order to help provide a clearer picture of God’s character and the last generation for the benefit of the church.

On one hand, many Adventists affirm that God provides for Himself the means and grounds of victory in the great controversy, by definitively defeating Satan at the cross. Christ’s work provided sufficient and effective grounds to refute the charges of the enemy and thus fully vindicate God’s character before the onlooking universe. In this view, the role of humans is a missional role of proclamation and witnessing to the truth of God’s unimpeachable character, spreading the good news, and reflecting God’s character as a means to help people to recognize that God truly is wholly good and loving and thus cause them to give themselves unreservedly to Him. While this missional role has real and significant ramifications in helping people to recognize God’s love and to choose to receive His free gift of salvation, the activity of humans does not provide any *grounds* for the vindication of God’s character or God’s victory in the great controversy. Humans merely proclaim and witness to the vindication of God’s character, helping people to recognize God’s perfect character without contributing in any way to actually making it true that God’s character is perfect (cf. Romans 3:4). The essential point here is that God Himself wins the victory in the great controversy, and this victory is not contingent upon something added by mere creatures. Christ effectively refuted Satan’s false charges against God’s character, law, and moral government by His perfect life and death and has thus

defeated the enemy (Revelation 12:10).<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, some Adventists affirm what has come to be known as last generation theology (LGT). The following chapter will provide a historical and theological overview regarding just what LGT is. For now, we might minimally define it as the view that there must be a last generation of humans who become absolutely sinless and “perfect” in order to provide the grounds to vindicate God’s character and win the great controversy. In this regard, generally speaking, LGT affirms that an additional phase of atonement is necessary, beyond the ministry of Christ, in order to finally defeat Satan. Specifically, there must be a final, entirely sinless generation of humans that, by completely overcoming sin, provides the grounds for the vindication of God’s character, playing a crucial role in deciding the victor in the great controversy.<sup>10</sup> In this view, then, Satan was not defeated at the cross; some group of humans must become perfectly sinless in order for Satan to be defeated.

### **Issues and questions pertinent to LGT**

This approach of LGT raises a number of issues that have far-reaching theological implications. For one thing, LGT makes God’s victory in the great controversy dependent upon the fidelity of mere creatures, thus requiring the view that divine revelation and action are insufficient to win the great controversy but must be supplemented by human action.

Further, the idea that at least some group of humans must be sinlessly “perfect” prior to the Second Coming in order to provide the grounds for the vindication of God’s

character requires one to believe that it must be possible for humans to become absolutely sinless prior to glorification—that is, prior to the transformation of the redeemed by Christ at the Second Coming (1 Corinthians 15:52–55). But this raises significant questions relative to the human condition, particularly to the doctrine of sin. If sin is thought of only as actions that are freely chosen, then one might become sinless by the force of one’s will. If, on the other hand, sin is more than freely chosen actions, if it is also a bent disposition of the human condition with unchosen propensities toward evil, then it seems humans would not be able to *perfectly* overcome sin (in this broad sense) by the force of their will because the human will would itself be infected by sin.

Bound up with these issues relative to overcoming sin, many concerns and confusions arise regarding the conditions and process of salvation. In this regard, whereas many Adventists understand justification to be a forensic or legal declaration of righteousness, some advocates of LGT argue that justification is not merely forensic; it also includes the process by which the believer is made righteous (i.e., sanctification).

More disagreement and confusion arise when it comes to the nature of sanctification, which many Adventists view as the process of becoming more and more holy or growing in one’s character to love more completely even as God does. In this view, whereas justification is a declaration of God made in a moment, sanctification is the work of a lifetime, yet both are by faith and depend upon the primary and prior (or

“prevenient”) action of God. In this view, Christians may achieve character “perfection,” but this kind of perfection is not the same as the absolutist conception of perfection fostered by Greek philosophy.

On the other hand, last generation theology advocates perfectionism, which maintains that humans can become absolutely sinless. This tends to place the emphasis on human works and suggests that one might reach a point prior to glorification when one is perfectly “sanctified” and thus no longer in need of the imputed righteousness of Christ. In this view, one can follow in Christ’s footsteps to become absolutely (morally) perfect.

Just how one views the conditions and process of salvation, particularly regarding the issue of “perfection,” has abundant implications for what one considers to be holy living. Adventists generally agree that Christians should aim for Christlikeness and holiness, but there is considerable disagreement over what such holiness looks like and how it might be achieved.

Some emphasize external obedience and focus on abstaining from committing sins by the sheer, disciplined exercise of one’s will. Others recognize the importance of obedience and of abstaining from committing sin but also emphasize that obedience and the overcoming of sinful *actions* can be accomplished only by a work of God in us that we embrace by faith, while our sinful inclinations will remain until glorification. In this latter view, abstaining from committing external sins is not enough; our sinful nature itself must be reckoned with, and when it comes to sins, there are not only sins of commission but also sins of

omission. In this regard and many others, there are wide differences of belief regarding how Adventists should live in light of the soon coming of Jesus.

All this closely relates to one’s perspective concerning the struggle with sin, which has significant ramifications for mental health. I have personally encountered and ministered to many Adventists who have tried—and failed—to be absolutely sinless and perfect (in the perfectionist sense described above). Because they believed they *could* achieve this absolutely sinless state if they simply made the right decisions and had to do so in order to have an assurance of salvation in the last days, their failure to achieve this state had devastating consequences for their faith and well-being.

Many had been taught that they *can* and *must* be just like Jesus in order to be worthy of salvation. Some came to believe that if they failed in doing so they were lost and that even doubting that they could and should become absolutely perfect in this sense amounted to doubting God’s power and goodness and the effectiveness of Christ’s ministry for and in them.

This relates closely to a common LGT argument: we can be absolutely sinless *even* as Jesus was absolutely sinless. In order for Christ to be our example, it is argued, He must have been *just like us*. Specifically, the claim goes, Christ must have inherited the same sinful condition and inclinations toward sinning that plague us; if He did not, then He was not fully human like us. If Christ was just like us, it is argued further, the fact that He never sinned (which is generally agreed upon by those in this discussion [see 1 John 3:5; cf. John 14:30]) demonstrates that

humans may also overcome sin and achieve a state of perfect sinlessness.

Others, however, while agreeing that Christ was absolutely sinless, question whether Jesus was really *just like us* in accordance with the premises of LGT that (1) in order to be *fully* human one must inherit the sinful condition, and (2) Christ would need to be *just like us* in order to be our example. This relates closely to the aforementioned doctrine of sin. If sin is a condition that requires salvation from outside and Christ inherited this condition, then it seems that He would Himself be in need of a Savior. But this cannot be so.

In this regard, in at least some forms of LGT, the perfect example of Christ is considered to be insufficient to demonstrate that God's law is perfect and just. The argument, as some put it, is that a generation is needed who is in a *worse* situation than Christ, having inherited even further moral degeneration than LGT claims Christ did, in order to demonstrate that God's law can be kept perfectly by humans who possess a terribly deteriorated and sinful human nature.<sup>11</sup>

This raises many questions relative to just what Jesus accomplished on the cross and whether Christ's atonement was and is actually sufficient for us. In this respect, there are related disputes among Adventists regarding whether the atonement was complete at the cross, with some arguing (as noted earlier) that a further phase of human action is required for atonement and for God to win the great controversy, whereas others argue that atonement is complete through what Christ accomplished on the cross while atonement is

not yet "completed" in reference to its application to humans.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, much of this discussion centers upon how and by whom the great controversy is finally resolved. This includes debates over the depiction of the state of the last generation in Revelation and elsewhere. If the last generation of believers is to be blameless and spotless (cf. 2 Peter 3:14), those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes (Revelation 14:4), does that mean that they are absolutely sinless? If they "must live in the sight of a holy God without an intercessor," does that mean that they must have fully overcome sin, in all respects, prior to glorification and in a way that they no longer need the work of Christ on their behalf?<sup>13</sup>

In these and other aspects, LGT argues, Christ's work alone is not sufficient to vindicate God's character from the slander of the enemy. In addition to Christ's work, there must be a group of humans who become perfectly sinless and thus provide the grounds for God's character to be vindicated by demonstrating that God's law can be perfectly kept by fallen humans.<sup>14</sup> In this view, Christ has not returned yet because He is waiting for this group to provide the sufficient grounds to close the great controversy.<sup>15</sup>

### **Addressing the issues:**

#### **The remainder of this book**

Much more could be said about issues and implications that arise in relation to LGT, which will be taken up in more detail in the following chapters. To begin this discussion, in the next chapter, Woodrow Whidden provides a historical and theological

overview that addresses the question, What is last generation theology?

Following this, in chapter 3, Martin Hanna takes up the question, What is sin? This is a crucial question because, as briefly explained above, some advocates of LGT tend to reduce sin to merely actions and choices whereas other Adventists emphasize that sin includes choices but is more than merely that which humans choose. This has massive implications regarding what it means to have victory over sin and how that is accomplished.

With this understanding of sin in the background, the discussion turns in the following chapters to just how to understand the salvation of sinners. Similar to the way in which sin is variously understood, the ideas concerning the nature and mechanics of how humans are saved vary depending on how one views sin, among a host of other factors. In chapter 4, Richard Davidson begins this discussion of salvation by addressing the nature of justification and how it functions, taking up questions such as: What does it mean to be justified? How can a sinner stand before the perfectly holy God?

Denis Fortin then moves to a discussion of the process of sanctification and issues related to “perfection” in chapter 5. As noted earlier, one’s understanding of perfection and perfectionism is closely bound to one’s understanding of the nature and process of sanctification. Here Fortin not only provides a discussion of what sanctification means and does not mean—emphasizing the proper ground of salvation in Christ and by faith alone—but he also takes up such crucial questions as, What does it

mean to be “perfect”? In what sense does God command humans to be perfect?

After this, in chapter 6, Ante Jerončić addresses the issue of holy living, particularly how we might inhabit the kingdom of God. In this chapter, Jerončić deals with the questions of what it means to be holy and how we should live in light of the soon coming of Jesus. In the next chapter, Peter Swanson contends with the psychology of perfection, discussing how we should understand our struggle with sin and how might it affect our mental health. In this chapter, he addresses the struggle in the mind of sinners as they attempt to overcome sin and, particularly, the danger of becoming so discouraged that they give up.

Chapter 8 turns to a discussion of the nature and work of Christ; the latter of which is expanded upon in the chapters that follow. In chapter 8, Darius Jankiewicz explains how Jesus, as both fully divine and fully human, can be our Savior as well as our example. In the discussion over LGT, much attention has been given to the humanity of Christ, and Jankiewicz takes up this issue, asking whether Jesus was really just like us and indeed whether He needed to be just like us in order to be our example.

In chapter 9, Félix Cortez explains the work of Christ at the cross, addressing the question: What did Jesus accomplish on the cross? Here Cortez explains how the cross provides the solution to the problems that arose from the Fall, how Jesus defeated the enemy at the cross, and how the cross provides the supreme manifestation of God’s love and righteousness. Jiří Moskala follows up this discussion in chapter 10 by providing a treatment of the significance,

meaning, and role of Christ's atonement. This chapter addresses the thorny issue of whether and when atonement was complete and the questions raised by LGT over the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work.

In chapter 11, Ranko Stefanovic takes up the question: What is the state of the last generation? Here Stefanovic provides an analysis of the biblical portrayal of the generation who will be alive at the Second Coming, addressing disputes—among other things—on whether this final generation is depicted as absolutely sinless. Jiří Moskala follows this in chapter 12 by introducing and addressing five myths in Adventism that have contributed to the misinterpretation of end-time issues and that have caused

some Adventists to have a shortage of confidence in the assurance of salvation.

Then in chapter 13, Jo Ann Davidson concludes the discussion of last things (eschatology) by addressing the issue of the “delay” of Christ's second coming, taking up such questions as: Why hasn't Jesus returned yet? Has Christ not yet returned because He is waiting for a final generation of absolutely sinless humans who will demonstrate to the universe that it is possible for fallen humans to be perfect, thus winning the great controversy? Finally, chapter 14 will conclude the discussion by briefly revisiting the issues and questions raised and addressed throughout the book, emphasizing the final triumph of God's love.

#### Endnotes

1. Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief 8, on the great controversy, reads as follows: “All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God's adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distorting of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the time of the global flood, as presented in the historical account of Genesis 1–11. Observed by the whole creation, this world became the arena of the universal conflict, out of which the God of love will ultimately be vindicated. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation. (Gen. 3; 6–8; Job 1:6–12; Isa. 14:12–14; Ezek. 28:12–18; Rom. 1:19–32; 3:4; 5:12–21; 8:19–22; 1 Cor. 4:9; Heb. 1:14; 1 Peter 5:8; 2 Peter 3:6; Rev. 12:4–9).” Seventh-day Adventist Church, “The Great Controversy,” [https://www.adventist](https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/salvation/the-great-controversy/)

[.org/en/beliefs/salvation/the-great-controversy/](https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/salvation/the-great-controversy/).

2. For more on the Adventist understanding of the great-controversy motif, see the collection of essays in Gerhard Pfandl, ed., *The Great Controversy and the End of Evil* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015). See also Frank B. Holbrook, “The Great Controversy,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2000), 969–1009; Richard M. Davidson, “Cosmic Metanarrative for the Coming Millennium,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, nos. 1–2 (2000).

3. The first such recorded charge is found in Genesis 3, when the serpent insinuates that God is a liar and does not have Eve's best interests in mind (verses 1–5). Elsewhere, Satan challenges God's judgment regarding Job's character. In this and other ways, the devil (*diabolos*, which means “slanderer”) antagonizes God and His people throughout Scripture, functioning as “the accuser of our brethren” who “accuses them before our God day and night” (Revelation 12:10). All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

4. One should be careful not to conflate “determined” and “compelled.” Many who believe in de-



terminism also agree that God does not “compel” but believe that God does determine everything that happens, including the very will and choices of all creatures. On the nature of love, see John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

5. As Ellen G. White puts it, “The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known.” Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 22. This is not to say, however, that human beings possess an unfettered free will. Although God never compels the will, due to the Fall all humans have a sinful nature or bent to sin, which will be discussed further in Martin Hanna’s chapter.

6. See Richard M. Davidson, “Ezekiel 28:11-19 and the Rise of the Cosmic Conflict,” in Pfandl, *The Great Controversy and the End of Evil*, 57–69. See also Richard M. Davidson, “And There Was Gossip in Heaven,” *Adventist Review*, January 24, 2013, 22–24.

7. In this narrative, the serpent subtly raises a question about God’s character (Genesis 3:1) and then explicitly asserts that God is a liar and has a nefarious motive for lying when he declares, contrary to what God had said, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (verses 4, 5).

8. By “we,” Paul refers specifically to the apostles, but the idea that this world is a “theater” to both angels and men applies more broadly in the context of the great controversy.

9. “When Christ died on Calvary’s cross, he exclaimed in his expiring agony, ‘It is finished;’ and Satan knew that he had been defeated in his purpose to overthrow the plan of salvation.” Ellen G. White,

“The Unchangeable Character of the Law,” *Signs of the Times*, September 23, 1889, 577. While Christ has won the victory at the cross, the enemy’s rule continues for some time after the cross event until the final consummation and execution of judgment. In this regard, see Jo Ann Davidson’s chapter on the “delay” of Christ’s second coming.

10. As M. L. Andreasen puts it, “To complete Christ’s work and make it efficacious for man, such a demonstration [of the perfection of the last generation saints] must be made. It must be shown that man can overcome as Christ overcame.” M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1948), 59. In his view, “the last generation of men living on the earth . . . will [demonstrate] that it is possible to live without sin.” Further, it is in “the last generation that God is vindicated and Satan defeated.” M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1947), 302, 304.

11. See the discussion of this issue in Woodrow Whidden’s chapter in reference to writings that appeared on Larry Kirkpatrick’s website in 2007.

12. See the discussion of this issue in Jiří Moskala’s chapter on the atonement.

13. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1950), 614.

14. This is attractive to some Adventists, particularly devout young Adventists, because it provides a concrete mission and goal to achieve for God and thus usher in the Second Coming.

15. As one advocate of LGT puts it: “God will wait for the maturing of Christian character in a significant number of people as the chief condition determining those events, such as the latter rain, loud cry, sealing, and Sunday law, which affect the time when probation for the world shall close and thus the time of the Second Coming.” Larry Kirkpatrick, “LGT14: The 14 Points of Last Generation Theology,” Last Generation Theology, <http://www.LastGenerationTheology.org/lgt/ori/ori-lgt14.php> (website discontinued).