

Primacy of the Gospel Committee - Report

A final report of a General Conference committee which for four years met with leaders of the 1888 Message Study Committee to review theological issues.

Introduction

In pursuing matters raised in a small group—which included Robert S Folkenberg and George W Reid from the General Conference and Robert J Wieland, Donald K Short, and Gerald Finneman who are leaders in the 1888 Message Study Committee—the Administrative Committee appointed a committee to consider in depth the biblical doctrine of righteousness by faith. The particular focus of the committee was to give attention to the special understanding of this doctrine that has been advanced over the past 50 years by Robert J Wieland and Donald K Short, joined now by additional persons of the 1888 Message Study Committee. Included was an effort to relate the doctrine to the events of the 1888 General Conference Session in Minneapolis and subsequent events which reflect major concerns of the 1888 Message Study Committee.

The Primacy of the Gospel Committee (ADCOM-S) was appointed on May 17, 1994. Its original members were as follows:

Calvin B Rock, Chairman; Robert L Dale, Vice-chairman; George W Reid, Secretary; Richard Davidson, Gerald Finneman, Lloyd Knecht, George R Knight, Angel M Rodriguez, Donald K Short, Peter M Van Bemmelen, Mario Veloso, Nancy J Vyhmeister, Robert J Wieland, and Kenneth H Wood.

To provide a favorable environment for understanding one another, the committee membership was composed of leaders from the 1888 Message Study Committee and from the General Conference, including theologians from two General Conference educational institutions—the Andrews University Theological Seminary and the School of Religion at Loma Linda University. Of the original members, Kenneth H Wood asked to be released and Robert L Dale retired. The following additional persons were added to strengthen the group: Ivan Blazen, Robert J Kloosterhuis, Sidney Sweet, Woodrow Whidden, and Brian Schwartz. Robert J Kloosterhuis occasionally served as chairman.

Beginning with an initial meeting on May 24, 1995, the committee met 8 times, generally for 2½ days each, for an equivalent of 15 full days. It studied prepared papers and held extended discussions on a variety of subjects identified by the 1888 Message Study Committee as important to their understanding of righteousness by faith as presented in Minneapolis.

The concluding session, held February 8, 2000, at Loma Linda University, spent the major portion of its time examining a summary report from the nearly five years of committee discussions. Although this report was reviewed by the entire committee during the final meeting and corrections were made, only the first section titled "Areas of Agreement" represents overall concurrence of the entire group. This full document should be understood as a report to the Administrative Committee by the General Conference, Andrews University, and Loma Linda University members of the committee.

Areas of Agreement

1. *Emphasis on God's Initiative in Salvation.* We agree that salvation is always at God's initiative and that the Church needs constantly to give that message to the world.
2. *Emphasis on the Saving Merits of Jesus.* We agree that God unconditionally made provision for the salvation of all.
3. *Emphasis on Faith in Accepting God's Gift of Salvation.* We agree that by faith we believe, appreciate, trust, and receive the objective truth of God's salvation. The experience of eternal life begins when individuals exercise faith in Jesus Christ.
4. *Emphasis on Salvation by Grace Through Faith Being Intimately Connected with a Transformed Life and the Keeping of all the Commandments of God.* We agree that the new birth takes place at the very moment when a person comes to Jesus and is justified by faith; and that in the new birth experience God through the Holy Spirit gives Christians a heartfelt desire to live God's will through His imparted grace.
5. *Emphasis on Agape.* We agree on the centrality of agape in the Christian's life and on its foundational role in Christian living.
6. *Emphasis on the Inability of Humans to do Right in and of Themselves.* We agree that human beings are incapable of doing right in and of themselves or of initiating their personal salvation.
7. *Emphasis on the Nearness of God to the Sinner.* We agree that the good news is that God is on the side of sinners rather than being against them and that He draws near to them in Christ Jesus.
8. *Emphasis on Bringing People to Christ.* We agree on the fundamental importance of bringing people to Christ as our response to the gospel commission.
9. *Emphasis on Repentance in the Body of Christ.* We agree that, for the sake of and in fellowship with the crucified and risen Christ, the Christian believer experiences a deep identification with the sins of others, knowing that they could be his or hers but for the grace of the Saviour. Such identification leads to calling the unrepentant to repentance and to new life in Christ. We further agree that the more pervasive this spirit of identification within the body of Christ, the more intensely will he felt and experienced the outpouring of the Spirit of God.
10. *Rejection of Universalism.* We reject universalism, defined as the belief that every person will be saved independent of personal commitment to the Lord.
11. *Emphasis on the Primacy of the Bible in the Formation of Christian Understandings.* We agree that the teachings of the Bible represent the center of any theological process.
12. *Emphasis on the "Most Precious Message" Set Forth by Jones and Waggoner.* We agree that studying the "most precious message" presented by Jones and Waggoner is important. Ellen White has provided us with a summary of the essential elements of that message in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, pp 91-93:

"The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God. Many had lost sight of Jesus. They needed to have their eyes directed to His divine person, His merits, and His changeless love for the human family. All power is given into His hands, that He may dispense rich gifts unto men, imparting the priceless gift of His own

righteousness to the helpless human agent. This is the message that God commanded to be given to the world. It is the third angel's message, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure.

"The uplifted Saviour is to appear in His efficacious work as the Lamb slain, sitting upon the throne, to dispense the priceless covenant blessings, the benefits He died to purchase for every soul who should believe on Him. John could not express that love in words; it was too deep, too broad; he calls upon the human family to behold it. Christ is pleading for the church in the heavenly courts above, pleading for those for whom He paid the redemption price of His own lifeblood. Centuries, ages, can never diminish the efficacy of this atoning sacrifice. The message of the gospel of His grace was to be given to the church in clear and distinct lines, that the world should no longer say that Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ.

"The efficacy of the blood of Christ was to be presented to the people with freshness and power, that their faith might lay hold upon its merits. As the high priest sprinkled the warm blood upon the mercy seat, while the fragrant cloud of incense ascended before God, so while we confess our sins and plead the efficacy of Christ's atoning blood, our prayers are to ascend to heaven, fragrant with the merits of our Saviour's character. Notwithstanding our unworthiness, we are ever to bear in mind that there is One that can take away sin and save the sinner. Every sin acknowledged before God with a contrite heart, He will remove. This faith is the life of the church."

Areas With Disagreement

1. *Application of Ellen White's Remarks Related to 1888.* There is disagreement on how to understand many of Ellen White's remarks related to 1888 and how they apply to the condition of the Church today. We believe these must be read in the context of the blatant legalism held by Butler, Smith, and their colleagues in beliefs. One must be extremely cautious in applying statements that were made in one context to a later period in which some of the factors have changed. Only a fuller understanding of the public teaching of the leading brethren of the Church in the pre-1888 period will enable readers in the 21st century to understand the impact of Ellen White's commendations and condemnations related to 1888 events and personalities.

2. *Primacy of the Bible.* While we affirm the intent of the 1888 Study Committee to uplift the primacy of the Bible, it appears to us that this is not consistently applied. At times it appears that the scriptural evidence is being examined through the theological understandings of Jones and Waggoner.

3. *Ellen White's Endorsement of Jones and Waggoner.* Ellen White's repeated endorsements of Jones and Waggoner did not mean that she agreed with all their teachings. It would be helpful if the 1888 Study Committee would seriously examine the many areas in which Ellen White differs with Jones and Waggoner or is virtually silent on topics or on a theological linkage that they emphasize.

It would also be informative to enumerate and explore the ramifications of those areas in which Ellen White *explicitly* commends (rather than alludes to) specific items in the writings of Jones and Waggoner (TM 91-93 is one example of this). Such explorations might help avoid giving Jones and Waggoners' theology an across-the-board endorsement. On the other hand, it would heighten the importance of those issues she specifically commended. Jones and Waggoner need to be read as theologians who had a "most precious message" that the Church desperately

needed to hear, rather than as prophets or infallible guides—even in areas related to righteousness by faith.

4. *Historical Accuracy.* At times we sense a lack of historical accuracy when claims are made about Jones and Waggoner. History must speak for itself, even if it disagrees with Jones and Waggoner's evaluation of certain details or modern interpretations of them and their teachings.

5. *Corporate Repentance.* The impression should not be given that Ellen White ever called for corporate repentance in respect to events in 1888 or 1893, or that the General Conference administration of O A Olsen took the same position in regard to Jones and Waggoner as the Butler/Smith administration. The 1888 conflict witnessed a turnover in the leadership of the Church because of problems relating to the Minneapolis meeting. The new administration gave prominence to Jones and Waggoner throughout the 1890s. After 1888 it was Smith and Butler who were on the "outs" with the General Conference administration. Ellen White continued to call individuals to repentance, but did not call the denomination to repentance.

6. *Universal Legal Justification.* It is confusing to state that everyone is legally saved until they have "chosen to resist the saving grace of God," and then turn around and say that one needs faith in order to have saving (rather than legal) justification. For example, 1888 *Re-examined* claims that "Christ's sacrifice is not merely provisional but effective for the whole world, so that the only reason anybody can be lost is that he has chosen to resist the saving grace of God" (p vi). Interestingly, Ellen White is quite content to say that "the *provisions* of redemption are free to all; [but] the *results* of redemption will be enjoyed by those who have complied with the conditions" (PP 208).

7. *The "in Christ" Motif.* We believe that the Pauline phrase "in Christ" expresses a relational rather than a legal concept. Romans 5, for example, is tied to the experience of justification by faith in the once-for-all work of Christ that is so central to the first five chapters of Romans, rather than being a legal declaration of something that happened to every person when Christ died on the cross. Such a view seems to imply that when a person is born he or she is born legally justified before God. However, the "many" who "will be made righteous" of Romans 5:19 must be understood in the context of Romans 1:16-17; 3:25-26; 4:1-5:1 and Paul's thesis that we are justified by faith rather than justified "in Christ" independent of a personal faith-commitment. It is important to see the "in Christ" and "in Adam" concepts as spiritual conditions rather than as a legal status. A merely legal interpretation of the "in Christ" motif has not led to a proper understanding of the biblical concept of corporate solidarity.

8. *Nature of Christ.* We accept the admonitions of Ellen White to "avoid every question in relation to the humanity of Christ which is liable to be misunderstood" and that "the incarnation of Christ has ever been, and will ever remain a mystery" (5BC 1129). Here every human being must tread softly. It is important to treat fairly *everything* that the Bible and Ellen White have to say on this topic, realizing that neither of those sources necessarily gives the human nature of Christ the same prominence as did the post-Minneapolis Jones and Waggoner. The interpretation that Jones and Waggoner gave to the biblical materials on the human nature of Christ is not necessarily supported by Ellen White's full understanding of Christ's human nature.

9. *Jones and Waggoner and the Reformers.* We believe that on the subject of justification by faith Jones and Waggoner should not be set against the great reformers. To do so would contradict both Waggoner and Ellen White (Waggoner, *Gospel in the Book of Galatians*, p 70; White, Ms 8a. 15, and 24, 1888). The fuller understanding needs to be framed in terms of relating righteousness by faith to the third angel's message rather than to salvation itself.

10. *The Old Covenant*. It appears that the first time that the old covenant is explicitly mentioned in the Bible it is equated with the Torah of Sinai (2 Cor 3:14-15). We believe that the Bible describes the Sinaitic Covenant as a covenant of grace which the people willingly accepted as expressing God's will for them. The misunderstanding and misuse of the covenant by the people as a means of salvation does not alter the fact that it was never God's intention to institute a covenant of works with Israel.

11. *Attitude of Criticism*. Although 1888 Study Committee members consistently and genuinely express loyalty to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the overall effect of their criticizing of the Church body and its leadership, along with their separatist activities, has probably been one of the most powerful forces in moving large numbers of Adventists into schismatic criticism and activities. The committee has organized itself legally as a separate organization; presents as crucial certain positions that differ from those held by the body of the Church, leading at times to confusion and even conflict within congregations; holds its own convocations; publishes its own materials; authorizes its own speakers; and supports activities across the world, often without approval of the acknowledged leaders of the Church in those fields.

The historical study of similar developments in the formation of new denominations (as in the Wesleyan movement between 1738 and 1800 in Britain, and between 1870 and 1900 in America) is extremely informative here. At any rate, many Seventh-day Adventist schismatics initially cut their teeth on 1888-type criticisms. Church history tells us that the first generation of many movements had no intention of forming a new religious body, but subsequent generations, having been nourished on so-called "constructive criticism," merely follow the logic to its natural conclusion.

12. *The Church and the Message of Justification by Faith*. The church in its official documents has stated clearly its understanding of salvation through faith in Jesus.

"He [Christ] suffered and died voluntarily on the cross for our sins and in our place, was raised from the dead, and ascended to minister in the heavenly sanctuary in our behalf" (Fundamental Belief# 4).

"God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their Maker" (Fundamental Belief #7).

"In Christ's life of perfect obedience to God's will, His suffering, death, and resurrection, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life" (Fundamental Belief #9).

"Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God's sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin. Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God's law of love in our hearts, and we are given the power to live a holy life" (Fundamental Belief #10).

"Salvation is all of grace and not of works, but its fruitage is obedience to the Commandments" (Fundamental Belief #18).

A comparison between the understanding of the Church and that of the 1888 Study Committee reveals significant differences that have contributed to confusion and in some cases division among church members.

Beyond question, the Church is in constant need of revival and reformation. Unless the gospel of justification by faith takes control of the life of each church member, transforming the person,

we will remain in a state of lukewarmness. It is important for the Church, as it fulfills its mission, constantly to listen to the message of the True Witness (Rev 3:14-22).

Observations

The charges raised by the 1888 Study Committee against the leadership of the Church are very serious. If the Church is proclaiming a false gospel, it has no right to exist. A partial understanding of the gospel, as they claim the Church to have, is not a true understanding of the gospel. If they are the only ones who have a *clear and complete* understanding of the gospel, then everyone else is proclaiming a false gospel. They are implicitly accusing the Church, or at least the leaders of the Church, of apostasy. We have found such accusations to be groundless as evidenced in the official statements of beliefs of the Church.

Therefore, we firmly believe that the 1888 Study Committee should discontinue its claims that the true message of righteousness by faith was rejected by the leaders of the Church, that they never genuinely accepted it, and that they have intentionally kept it away from the Church and the world.

An Appeal

We do not question the sincerity of the leaders of the 1888 Study Committee, but we do question the wisdom of the current course of action. If the committee chooses to continue its work outside the organized Church, we appeal to it to adopt the pattern of what is described as a supportive ministry. Such groups seek places to work where, in harmony with and under guidance of Church leadership in that field, they carry out activities that are part of the planned program for that field. Almost always their efforts are designed to reach out to unbelievers, calling them to Christ and His righteousness, and enlisting them among His remnant people. Supportive ministries promote harmony in both doctrine and relationship with the Church. We desire this as the outcome of our prayer and study together.