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Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission

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This abstract from Dr. Damsteegt's book of the same title* studies the missiological picture of Adventism at its foundations.

In order to dialogue amongst themselves, Christian groups of different persuasions must understand their respective missionary self-images. With this as a priori I here attempt to analyze the origins and basic theology which motivated Seventh-day Adventists for the last hundred years making it one of the most widespread Protestant churches today. This historical, theological and missiological approach will concentrate on the Seventh-day Adventist use of Scripture which is imperative in comprehending their missionary efforts.

The Interpretive Approach to Scripture

The political, social and religious context in the United States during the early 19th century was conducive to the development of new religious movements. American Protestantism provided the immediate religious context for the origins of the Seventh-day Adventist theology of mission. There was avid interest in the apocalyptic-eschatology teachings of Scripture which were generally interpreted by the historicist hermeneutical principles used by Protestants in the Reformation and post-Reformation era as well as in the primitive church.

Based on the presuppositions of *sola scriptura*, the unity and self-authentication of Scripture, it was believed that the Christian canon provided the context for interpretation and it was taken for granted that Scripture could be understood. Scripture was seen as

its own expositor, accepted as the ultimate norm. Analogy and typology principles were often used to understand biblical passages. Daniel and Revelation received special attention and their prophetic symbolism was taken as historicist reality, not figurative. Their imagery was seen as depicting the history of God's people till the end of time resulting in this historicist hermeneutic.

This approach to Scripture became popular as commentators interpreted historical events of the previous century as a fulfillment of symbolic prophecy. For example, "the time of the end" (Dan. 12:4) was associated with the French Revolution and the captivity of the pope in 1798. The 1755 earthquake of Lisbon (the strongest on record), the mysterious Dark Day of 1780 and the falling of the stars in 1833 (the greatest meteoric shower ever) were interpreted as the cosmic signs predicted by Christ to precede his return (Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12,13). Revivals in both the Old and New World happened as people expected eschatological events to occur.

Most Bible interpreters taught a postmillennial Second Advent (Christ's return at the end of the millennium) and held an optimistic view of society seeing historical and contemporary events as signs of the times heralding the imminence of a glorious millennium on earth. To premillennial historicists the Second Advent (Christ's return at the beginning of the millennium) and the divine judgment to follow was imminent for this sinful world. The message of the first angel in Revelation 14 was symbolic of those warning that "the hour of his judgment is come" (Rev. 14:7).

The Second Advent Movement

In this religio-political climate, premillennialists such as William Miller rapidly formed a larger interconfessional Second Advent movement. A theology of mission emerged interpreting this movement as important to salvation history. Feeling themselves participants in a prophetic movement whose task was to prepare the world for Christ's return, they felt an enormous sense of responsibility, missionary zeal and enthusiasm. Within a few years their religious publications were distributed worldwide.

The vigorous Adventist mission efforts brought reactions from both non-Millerite historicists and those with a historical-critical analysis of Scripture. A strong controversy developed ending any interconfessional movement. A polarization of positions brought an inevitable exodus from the established churches of those who continued to cherish Miller's convictions.

Central in the polemics between the Adventists (also called Millerites) and other Protestants was the interpretation of Daniel 8:14, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." Most post- and premillennialists felt this prophetic time period was about to be fulfilled, and consequently they expected the inauguration of some important event in salvation history. For many postmillennialists the termination of this time period pointed to an important event connected with the inauguration of the millennium. To the majority of premillennialists (Adventists) it signified the personal return of Christ.

Time Period Prophecies

Underlying this theological controversy was the interpretation of the little horn of Daniel 8. The majority of historicist hermeneutics identified the little horn as Islam, while the historical-critical analyzers saw Antiochus IV, Epiphanes as its fulfillment. Both interpretations were rejected by Adventists who saw no exact historical evidence for the verse's time period. They argued that the historicist interpretation of the little horn as the pagan and papal phases of Rome was most consistent with the available historical data and emphasized the application of the year-day principle (a prophetic day equals a literal day) as a key to the interpretation of time periods in apocalyptic eschatology.

It was this principle that led them to an exact time period with accurate historical evidence. Following a common concept that the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 represented the earth, the Adventists concluded that its cleansing could signify nothing else than the purification of the earth from sin at the beginning of the

millennium. Initially they supposed this event was to take place about 1843. Additional insights in biblical chronology and a study of the cleansing of the sanctuary (Dan. 8) in the context of the typological implications of the Old Testament Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) for Christ's high-priestly ministry (Heb. 8-9) led to the conclusion that the prophetic period of the 2300 days would terminate on October 22, 1844, the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish year (Karaite reckoning). At that date Christ was expected to come out of the heavenly sanctuary to return to the earth as Judge and cleanse the earth by fire.

Rejection of Miller's views by the established churches was seen as another sign of the times fulfilling biblical prophecy. When many Adventists were disfellowshipped from their respective churches, they considered themselves as proclaiming the first angel's message of Revelation 14 — warning of approaching judgment. Their attention turned then to the second angel's announcement of the fall of Babylon. The interpretation was obvious: the established churches had become Babylon because of their rejection of the glorious Advent message. The message of Revelation 14:8 was taken as reason enough to sever their connections with other churches. When Christ did not appear at the predicted time there was a great and traumatic disappointment among the adherents.

Coping With Failed Predictions

The Second Advent emphasis on the imminent parousia was a logical consequence of a consistently applied historicist hermeneutic to the premillennial 19th century understanding of symbolic prophecy. Both the predictions of William Miller regarding the Second Advent and those of his opponents about the inauguration of the millennium failed. In many instances these unfulfilled expectations contributed to a rejection of historicist hermeneutical principles and the growth of a historical-critical approach to apocalyptic-eschatology.

After the 1844 disappointment the Adventists were forced to

investigate the validity of their hermeneutical methodology. Some rejected it and with it the *raison d'être* of the 1844 Advent movement. Those who continued to affirm the validity of their prophetic interpretations either felt they had been mistaken in their time calculations or that their time calculations had been right but their understanding of the apocalyptic symbolism of the sanctuary had been wrong. This latter group was a minority who believed the study of the significance of the sanctuary service in type and antitype solved the mysteries of the disappointment of 1844. These new insights established great confidence in their past Advent experience and revealed the present and future missions of Adventists.

Comparing the earthly sanctuary with the new covenant these Adventists concluded there was a real sanctuary in heaven (Heb. 8-9). The earthly tabernacle built by Moses was a pattern of the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:5). At Christ's death the typical service ended. The "true tabernacle" in heaven was seen as the sanctuary of the new covenant. Because the termination of the prophetic time of Daniel pertained to a period under the new covenant, the term "sanctuary" in verse 14 was applied to the new covenant sanctuary in heaven.

The cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary was understood from the cleansing of the earthly sanctuary on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) and from a study of Hebrews. It was felt that Hebrews 9:22,23 clearly indicated that the heavenly sanctuary, like the earthly, had to be cleansed. The cleansing in the typical service was accomplished with the blood of animals, the heavenly service with the blood of Christ.

The earthly sanctuary had two apartments, each with a special ministry. The priest performed daily services in the holy place where repentant sinners would come, confessing sins which then were transferred to the innocent sacrifice. Sin was thus transferred through the shedding of blood from the sinner to the sanctuary. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the sins were removed from the sanctuary through a special cleansing ceremony performed by

the high priest in the most holy place.

Adventists felt that biblical evidence showed that the heavenly sanctuary, like its earthly type, also had two distinct ministries its holy places. Thus the priestly ministry in the holy place throughout the year typified the ministry in which Christ had engaged since his ascension. The blood of Christ provided pardon and forgiveness of sins for the repentant sinner, yet the sins remained upon the heavenly records. At the close of the yearly service in the earthly sanctuary there was the special atoning service; similarly, before Christ's redemptive mission would be completed there was to be a work for the removal of sin from the heavenly records.

This final ministry was seen to begin at the end of the prophetic time of Daniel. At that time Christ as high priest, entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary to perform the last phase of his heavenly ministry—the cleansing of the sanctuary. Thus instead of returning to this earth at the end of the 2300 days (years) as Adventists initially had expected, Christ now had begun the final phase of his high priestly ministry, the great anti-typical Day of Atonement, to cleanse the heavenly sanctuary from the record of sins by blotting them out. This phase was also seen to be illustrated by the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days in the context of the judgment (Dan. 7:9,10,13). Now Revelation 14:7 was no longer interpreted as the imminent judgment, but as a present ongoing pre-Advent judgment, because the text stated the “hour of his judgment is come.” This new interpretation seemed to affirm the validity of their historical hermeneutic, providing an explanation for the disappointment.

Seventh Day Sabbath Observance

At this time Seventh-Day Baptists, fearing a movement toward Sunday law legislation, had set aside days for fasting and prayer for divine intervention and restoration of the seventh-day Sabbath. Literature emphasizing the validity of all precepts of the Decalogue for Christians, the significance of the Sabbath as a sign between God and his people and the charge that the Roman

Catholic Church had changed the day of divine worship in Christendom was published and widely distributed.

Some Adventists from the above-described minority accepted these arguments and began observing the seventh-day Sabbath. Soon they began to associate the Sabbath with the 1844 Advent experience and the newly developed insights of Christ's high priestly ministry. 1). The Sabbath was associated with the idea that in the period following 1844 all biblical principles of the primitive church had to be restored among God's people before the Second Advent could take place. 2). The new perspective of the heavenly sanctuary made it easier to accept the Sabbath doctrine due to the fact that Christ's ministry during the anti-typical Day of Atonement called attention to the function of the Decalogue in the judgment. 3). Attention gradually focused on the third angel's message stressing the vital significance of obedience to God's commandments in contrast to loyalties to other powers (Rev. 14:9-12) which was interpreted in the light of Sabbath versus Sunday worship. Thus the seventh-day Sabbath became an integral part of the Advent experience of 1844 and its aftermath, transforming Adventists into Seventh-day Adventists.

The Third Angel's Sealing Message

By identifying the Sabbath with the seal of the living God, the third angel's message came to be called the "sealing message." The sealing-time — the time of the special mission of Seventh-day Adventists — was expected to terminate at the completion of Christ's sanctuary ministry.

The relevance of the third angel's message to the early Seventh-day Adventists needs to be associated with the previously mentioned angels' messages. These messages had played a significant role in the pre-disappointment period. Their specific proclamations succeeded each other chronologically, creating a distinct group of Adventists. Now in the post-1844 period the proclamation of the third angel brought to light a new message in regard to their mission to the world. It was felt that the unique

sequence of these angels' messages, their impact on the Advent movement, the 1844 Advent experience and the developing missionary thrust provided one of the strongest arguments for its genuine place in salvation history.

Seventh-day Adventists took the position that both Christ's ministry after the 1844 disappointment and the Sabbath doctrine provided a rationale for why Christ had not returned in 1844: Christ had to complete his high priestly work in heaven and a restoration of the Sabbath had to take place among God's people on earth before the Second Advent would occur. This explanation indicated to them a close interrelationship between the Sabbath, the 1844 Advent experience and the Second Coming. The third angel's message was the special message which integrated the restoration of the Sabbath into the Advent experience and became the central thrust of their theology of mission. The significance of the third angel's message therefore was its concise formulation of two principle elements of the *raison d'être* of Sabbatarian Adventists: 1). The proclamation of the validity of their 1844 Advent experience as an important phase in salvation history, and 2). The proclamation of the restoration of the Sabbath to prepare God's people for the Day of the Lord.

An Adventist Theology of Mission

During the formative years of Seventh-day Adventism when the theological foundations were ironed out, a system of doctrines was developed which became an integral part of their theology of mission. The apocalyptic-eschatological aspects of this theology, indicated by the three angel's messages, were central in the unique mission proclamation to prepare humankind for the Second Advent. The close interrelationship seen between these angels' messages led them to be designated as a "perfect chain of truth," and "anchor to hold the body," or a "solid immovable platform." From historical evidence it is clear that for Seventh-day Adventists Revelation 14:6-12 was the gospel message for our time and that the justification of their mission stands or falls with the validity of

their interpretation.

After years of contemplation and refinement the three angels' messages have been interpreted as a proclamation of restoration consisting of three progressive and interrelated phases of warning in the context of Christ's final mission in heaven and earth.

The first phase of warning, mercy and restoration was seen as the universal proclamation of "the everlasting gospel" (Rev. 14:6) in the context of the coming kingdom calling to repentance, "Fear God and give him glory ... and worship him" as the Creator (Rev. 14:7). The urgency was expressed by the imminence of the coming Kingdom—"for the hour of his judgment is come." This repentance was to lead to the restoration of true worship.

In imitating the mission of restoration of Christ who proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom and relieved suffering humanity, Seventh-day Adventists stressed in their mission the united efforts of the gospel ministry and the medical missionary. Thus while in mission the medical missionary phase displayed the practical dimension of the restoration of true worship, it was seen as the task of the gospel proclamation to restore a person's relationship with Christ. Everything was centered on revealing Jesus as Lord so that those who would hear the proclamation of the first angel's message would fall in love with Christ and accept him as their personal Savior.

A progressive insight was to be given to the convert in the significance of true worship under the new covenant as it related to obedience to God as expressed in his law. In this context the call of the first angel to worship the Creator was seen as the reason for worshipping God as creator. The ancient Decalogue, underlying the everlasting covenant relationship between God and persons, set apart the Seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial of creation. Seventh-day Adventists saw the call of the first angel to restore true worship by restoring the Sabbath in a world where lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3) had obliterated the knowledge of God's memorial of creation.

The proclamation of the first angel was placed in the context of

the imminent return of Christ. Since 1844, humanity was felt to be living in the great anti-typical Day of Atonement under the new covenant—signifying that Christ had entered his closing ministry for the salvation of persons, the pre-Advent judgment. An awareness of Christ's mission in heaven motivated believers to participate in Christ's mission of restoration of true worship on earth so that people could be prepared for the Second Advent.

The proclamation of the second angel provided the rationale for the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and explained its ecclesiological self-understanding. They felt that God through the Protestant Reformation wanted to terminate the persecution by an apostate church and gradually restore it to the purity of the primitive church. Initially the movement seemed successful, but after the death of the major reformers the process of restoration stagnated, leading into a period of Protestant scholasticism. It was generally understood by Seventh-day Adventists that the arrested Reformation continued through the worldwide Second Advent Awakening during the first half of the 19th century which inaugurated the prophetic flight of the first angel.

As a result of the rejection by the established churches of the historicist hermeneutics on which the predictions of an imminent premillennial personal return of Christ were based, Adventists lost their church affiliations and became a separate movement. In their minds the rejection of the Second Advent movement settled the position of the contemporary ecclesiastical organizations: the moral fall of Babylon had become a fact. From that time onward the proclamation of the second angel led to an exodus of people from the various religious organizations.

The third angel, they understood, directed the attention to the consequences of refusing to accept the first angel's message of restoration of true worship of God. It pictured vividly the final results of the choice between the true worship and that of the beast. Seventh-day Adventists felt the Bible prophesied that everyone was to make this choice of worship prior to the Second Advent when the world would be divided between those who had

participated in acceptable worship and those who had taken part in worshipping the beast and his image.

Comparative studies of 2 Thessalonians 2, Daniel 7 and Revelation 12-13 by historicist hermeneutics indicated to Seventh-day Adventists that the beast described by the third angel could be identified as the person of sin—lawlessness— (2 Thess. 2:3) who brought God's law into contempt. From historical evidence they showed that this power which took its position within the Christian church had created its own form of worship by changing the day of worship from the seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday, abandoning God's appointed memorial of true worship and Christ's Lordship (Mark 2:28). They also felt that this unsanctified, unblessed day of worship was brought about through intentional manipulation of the law of God (Dan. 7:25) and signified the acknowledged sign or mark of the beast's authority (Rev. 14:9,11). In this way the dragon, Satan, would be worshiped. This form of worship was totally unacceptable to God because it gave priority to the commandments of persons and not of God, seeking to achieve righteousness by the works of persons and not the righteousness of faith and obedience to God the Creator. Religious organizations that conformed to the kind of worship developed by the beast were seen to reflect the basic characteristics of the beast. Thus those worshipping on the seventh-day Sabbath would be subject to religious persecution (Rev. 13:15-17).

In order for these events to occur Seventh-day Adventists foresaw a gradual breaking down of the separation of church and state, with increasing involvement of Christians in politics and pressure from the major churches for government support. The result would be a repudiation of the principles of religious freedom in the American Constitution and a punishment of dissenters. Thus they saw their mission to defend the principles of religious liberty, otherwise their worldwide mission program would be seriously jeopardized.

Early Seventh-day Adventists believed that ultimately, mission was the work of God, not of persons—the *missio Dei* with its roots

in the New England Puritan tradition. Especially in an eschatological setting of God gathering his remnant together before the parousia, *missio Dei* was associated with God's providences and appeals were made to believers to keep up with the opening providence of God for missionary outreach. From the viewpoint of church growth it was important to direct special efforts in areas where as a result of God's influence the most good can be accomplished. Humans, besides being God's instrument in mission, were also designated the position of being co-workers with Christ. The concept of divine-human cooperation was seen as indispensable for satisfying people's basic need for happiness, character development and Christlikeness.

In retrospect, research on the Seventh-day Adventist theology of mission indicates that an important factor in their growth is the powerful influence of a historicist hermeneutic interpreting contemporary events as signs of Christ's coming within a harmonious theological system. Thus Seventh-day Adventists could successfully develop after the partial failure of the 1844 prediction.

Also their concept of present truth at a particular moment is not a static but a dynamic reality, with the principle of progressive revelation showing the fuller import of biblical texts. For Seventh-day Adventists, present truth is always in harmony with earlier truths, and is arrived at by their unfolding of these truths. This concept of revelation provides a rationale for emphasizing special truths which are of utmost importance for the salvation of the present generation even though such truths have not been advocated as normative by Christians in previous centuries. These truths form a part of their theology of mission and are a powerful motivation in their worldwide mission of restoration to other Christians and other religions.

Seventh-day Adventists do not consider themselves to be the only Christians on the earth; in fact they have come to realize that most of God's people are to be found in other churches. It was especially E. G. White, one of the most influential personalities

within the Adventist Church, who encouraged Adventist ministers to associate with ministers of other denominations, praying for and with them. She advised they agree with others as far as possible without violating their consciences, discussing mutually the truths of God's Word.

Today, a number of Seventh-day Adventists are anxious to dialogue with others, mutually exploring and reflecting upon their common spiritual heritage, their present mission and the special Bible truths for our times.