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BY HERBERT E. DOUGLASS *

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY THEME

**Strangely, few Adventists realize the part this
“theory of everything” played in joining long-separated
truths into a coherent whole.**

Theologians, philosophers, and scientists share a common quest: They seek that one paradigm that explains everything.¹ Einstein thought he was on the way to it with his theory of relativity. But being on the way is not being there. Noted scientist Stephen Hawking explained why the search for an overall concept is pursued with such ardor. In his 1988 book, *A Brief History of Time*, he wrote that were scientists to discover the long-sought “theory of everything,” which would explain the workings of the varying

mechanisms of the universe, “we would truly know the mind of God.”

Seventh-day Adventists have long

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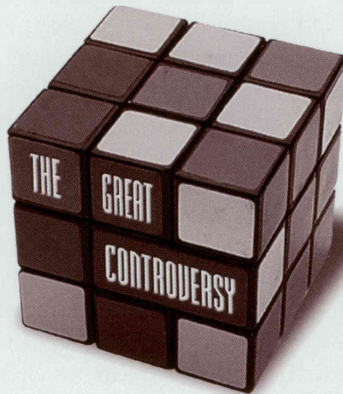
had such a paradigm. They call it the Great Controversy Theme (GCT). Though it embraces events preceding the war in the heavens and following restoration of God's one rebel world to its place in a united universe, they would hardly insist that it enables the creature to know the mind of the Creator! The Great Controversy Theme does, however, explain the overall message of the Bible as it focuses on the person Jesus Christ and the impact of His mission on the destiny of humanity. Thus the GCT is the paradigm that explains the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.² It provides the coherency that unites its theology, health principles, education, missiology, ecclesiology, social relations, environmental stewardship, etc.³

Though the GCT does not derive from Ellen White, much of its systematically developed message is enriched by her over-arching view of the Bible. "The central theme of the Bible," she said, "the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God. . . . He who grasps this thought has before him an infinite

field for study. He has the key that will unlock . . . the whole treasure-house of God's word."⁴

She further challenged her fellow Adventists to study the Bible "as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. . . . [in order to] gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption." Adventists, she emphasized, should "understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their workings through the records of history and prophecy."⁵ "From the opening of the great controversy," she said, "it has been Satan's purpose to misrepresent God's character and to excite rebellion against His law."⁶

The cosmic dimensions of the "war in the heavens" didn't escape her notice. "The plan of salvation had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the



character of God before the universe.” “The very essence of the gospel is restoration,” she emphasized.⁸ Restoration, not only forgiveness! God’s plan, which we know as the “gospel,” shows how serious God is about removing sin from the universe by restoring rebels into grateful, trustworthy sons and daughters.

In clarifying the “everlasting gospel,” which the world needs to hear in these last days (Rev. 14:6, 7, KJV), Seventh-day Adventists not only transcend the age-old controversies that have deeply divided Christianity but also present the “good news” in such a way that even non-Christian religions can grasp its freshness and simplicity.

Elliptical Truths

Adventists generally think of Ellen White’s contribution to the GCT in terms of her book *The Great Controversy*, which describes the cosmic parameters of the struggle between Christ, the great Warrior Prince, and Lucifer, who sought to usurp the very prerogatives of Deity. Her greatest contribution, however, may be the manner in which she applies the theme to resolve the either/or controversies that have rent Christendom and on a number of occasions, threatened the doctrinal and relational unity of the emerging Seventh-day Adventist Church. In approaching her “applied theology,” it would seem useful to

consider contending theologies and philosophies as two circles of partial truths. The GCT changes these opposing circles into an ellipse—each, however, retaining its treasured truths, which, in the ellipse of truth, are greatly enhanced.

In philosophy and theology, the two circles are generally known as “objectivism” and “subjectivism.” Towering theological and philosophical thinkers can be found in both circles. For example, in the “subjective” circle (truth is to be found in reason, feeling, research, etc.) would be such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, etc. In the objective circle (truth comes from outside humanity) we find Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth, etc., all with the Bible and its transcendent truths forming their presuppositions. The history of the Christian Church is a record of whichever circle is predominant at the moment. Overemphasis on transcendence (leading to cold orthodoxy untempered by relevance) invariably awakens overemphasis on immanence (leading to the hot autonomy of reason and feeling, untempered by revelation).

Many will feel more at home with the above paragraphs if they think of the objectivist circle as “conservative” and the subjectivist circle as “liberal”—unfortunate labels, to be sure, which tend to produce more heat than light. Each circle, however,

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emphasizes something correct and timely.

Key words for conservatives (for which they will fight to the death) are: *transcendence, authority, law, structure, security, and grace*—all good words to hold on to. The historic weakness of objectivism (conservatism) is to often misunderstand the character of God (e.g., Calvin and his sovereign God, leading to predestination, eternal hell, etc.), which, in turn, leads to misunderstanding faith. When faith is misunderstood, “only believe,” in some form or another, becomes the blind pathway to “correct doctrine” and the suppression of relevance.

Key words for liberals (for which they will fight to the death) are: *immanence, responsibility, reason, flexibility, meaning, relevance, and faith*—also good words to hold on to. The historic weakness of liberalism lies in its subjectivity. Pietists, mystics, rationalists, charismatics, and whoever else puts human autonomy before divinely revealed truths, base their security on reason, intuition, or historical research.

Absolutes are rarely appealed to. Faith again is misunderstood, but in subjectivism, it describes religious feeling and/or reason as the basis of autonomous tests of truth.

Inevitable Consequences

So does the Great Controversy Theme fit into one circle or the other? Or does it transcend them and thus offer an elliptical unity? How did Ellen White utilize the GCT to settle theological disputes within the Adventist Church? Though not using the terms *objectivism* or *subjectivism*, Ellen White understood the historical standoff between these two circles: “The progress of reform depends upon a clear recognition of fundamental truth. While, on the one hand, danger lurks in a narrow philosophy and a hard, cold orthodoxy, on the other hand, there is great danger in a careless liberalism.”²⁹

“Hard, cold orthodoxy” and “careless liberalism” are the inevitable consequences of letting truth remain in two circles rather than letting truth be truth in its elliptical form. Ellen White transcended these

“We have not held up before the people the righteousness of Christ and the full significance of His great plan of redemption. We have left out Christ and His matchless love, brought in theories and reasonings, and preached argumentative discourses.”—Ellen G. White.

two circles by uniting authority and responsibility, doctrinal security and heart assurance, so that the Seventh-day Adventist Church need not rehash the theological arguments that have divided Christendom.

Transcending Impasses

Her concept of the GCT as an elliptical paradigm helped Ellen White transcend conventional theological impasses. An example: She was instrumental in keeping the denomination together during the 1888 General Conference session and the years following. She helped the church rise above the 19th-century objectivists (with their overemphasis on doctrine), and 19th-century subjectivists (with their overemphasis on feeling and human autonomy).

“While one class pervert the doctrine of justification by faith and neglect to comply with the conditions laid down in the Word of God—‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments’—there is fully as great an error on the part of those who claim to believe and obey the commandments of God but who place themselves in opposition

to the precious rays of light—new to them—reflected from the cross of Calvary. The first class do not see the wondrous things in the law of God for all who are doers of His Word. The others cavil over trivialities and neglect the weightier matters, mercy and the love of God.

“Many have lost very much in that they have not opened the eyes of their understanding to discern the wondrous things in the law of God. On the one hand, religionists generally have divorced the law and the gospel, while we have almost done the same from another standpoint. We have not held up before the people the righteousness of Christ and the full significance of His great plan of redemption. We have left out Christ and His matchless love, brought in theories and reasonings, and preached argumentative discourses.”¹⁰

Elliptical Harmony

In numerous other areas Ellen White applied the principles of the GCT to bring seemingly irreconcilable truths into elliptical harmony. Among them, the relationship

between:

- Christ's work on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit;
- Christ's role as Sacrifice/Saviour and as High Priest/Mediator;
- Believing in Christ and abiding in Him;
- Christ's free gift of remission of sins and His free gift of His attributes in the development of Christian character;
- Imputed and imparted righteousness;
- Objective authority and subjective responsibility in the faith experience; and
- God's work and humanity's work in the salvation process.¹¹

Theology does matter. Correct theology matters most. Ellen White's emphasis on the Great Controversy Theme had much to do with developing the Adventist awareness that joined long-separated truths into the coherent, intellectually satisfying, heart-affirming statement that John saw as "the everlasting gospel." □

REFERENCES

¹ Among examples of conceptual paradigms that determine one's theological or philosophical systems are Plato's idealism, Calvin's sovereignty of God, Schliermacher's immanency of God, and Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy.

² See John Cobb, *Living Options in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962). After reviewing several seminal thinkers of the 20th century, Cobb wrote: "In

each case we have seen that the philosophy employed profoundly affected the content as well as the form of the affirmation of faith. Furthermore, the implication of the whole program is that Christian faith depends for its intelligibility and acceptance upon the prior acceptance of a particular philosophy. In our day, when no one philosophy has general acceptance among philosophers, and when all ontology and metaphysics are widely suspect, the precariousness of this procedure is apparent" (p. 121).

³ See Joseph Battistone, *The Great Controversy Theme in Ellen G. White's Writings* (1978). Battistone recognized the centrality of the GCT in the writings of Ellen White. He pointed out how this central theme directly affected her religious philosophy, as well as her teachings in health, education, history, and science. He used her *Conflict of the Ages* series to reveal the manner in which this controversy engaged men and women from Eden to the Second Advent. His book is a treasure house of homiletical gems for Adventist preachers.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), pp. 125, 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁶ _____, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1913), p. 338; see also pp. 69, 331, 596.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁸ _____, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1940), p. 824.

⁹ _____, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1942), p. 129.

¹⁰ _____, *Faith and Works* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1979), pp. 15, 16.

¹¹ See *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671; *The Great Controversy*, p. 488; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 517; *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762; *Steps to Christ*, p. 63; *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 112; see also *The Desire of Ages*, p. 347; and *Faith and Works*, pp. 26, 27.