

**FORD and PAXTON**

**at LOMA LINDA**

**THE APPARENT TRIUMPH**

**of the doctrine of**

**UNRIGHTEOUSNESS COVERED BY FAITH**

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[Notes by editor of this electronic version, dated December 2009:

1. In the original, the author was listed only on the last page.
2. The original page numbering of this custom sized booklet is preserved by inserting the page number in brackets at the page break location, such as [[1]].
3. Underlined emphases have been changed to italics.
4. Minor punctuation editing and correction of misspelled words has been done.
5. All single brackets are original unless accompanied by "Ed.:".]

IT WAS AN AUSPICIOUS OCCASION. On the Sabbath afternoon of April 22, 1978, Geoffrey Paxton, an Anglican minister and author of the book, *The Shaking of Adventism*, was about to appear in the Loma Linda University Church together with some of the principal actors in the drama portrayed in his book. Overflow crowds had to be accommodated elsewhere, because every seat was taken well before the start of the meeting, which was to last for three and a half hours and was to be characterized by earnest, rapt attention throughout.

It was the climax of what had been an eventful Week of Devotion for the University conducted by Dr. Desmond Ford, who is the chief protagonist of *one* of the "two full-grown, distinct theologies" which Paxton sees as "now competing for the devotion of church members" in a time of "unprecedented polarization."<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly many of his hearers received spiritual blessing from his earnest, brilliant and winsome presentation of certain essential elements of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in this age when *any* of the elements of the gospel are seldom heard clearly. We can thank God for the many who were thus blessed during the Week of Devotion. Given the present state of theological ferment within the church, and the centrality of the issues in dispute, it would have been virtually impossible for Dr. Ford to have avoided strong polemical overtones in his addresses, even had he tried to do so. All can rejoice over the extent to which the polemics did not prevent the blessing already mentioned.

In an open meeting on Thursday afternoon, held especially for the ministers of the Conference, one of the principal "suggestions" advanced by Dr. Ford was that there was a sinister common link between four elements, *vis.*, (1) the fanaticism of our early years (in which people went about barking like dogs), (2) the "holy flesh" heresy in Indiana (in which, we were reminded, people felt that they were so holy that they didn't need to wear any clothes in their meetings together), (3) the Kellogg crisis and (4) the omega apostasy. The latter, the final omega apostasy prophesied of by Ellen White, it was clearly implied, would very likely be the deadly "error" of "perfectionism." The proponents of the "other side" in the controversy were pictured as teaching that before the end of time the saints would become so perfect [[2]] that they would become "little Christs," and that they themselves would become the gospel. It was then remarked that those who wish to really honor the King don't go around trying to act like kings, but like humble servants. These are grave charges. They were made in an atmosphere which in the judgment of some observers was rendered unnecessarily tense by the use of thinly-veiled ridicule and misrepresentation. This meeting had helped to set the stage for Paxton's appearance on Sabbath afternoon, as had the just-completed Week of Devotion.

## **GEOFFREY PAXTON**

With this background it is no wonder that crowds now thronged to the auditorium to see and hear Dr. Paxton himself. He was flanked by a panel which included two of the three men whom, Paxton felt, had been largely responsible for the two most favorable recent innovations in Adventist theology, *vis.*, Edward Heppenstall and Desmond Ford. In reviewing the previous decade, Paxton had written:

It is obvious that while there are some encouraging aspects in Adventism's articulation of the Reformation gospel in the 1960's, the real theological gains of the decade are to be found in the affirmation of original sin and the repudiation of perfection in this life.

This significant advance appears in the theology of men such as Edward Heppenstall, Desmond Ford, and H. K. LaRondelle.<sup>2</sup>

The meeting opened and continued smoothly in a spirit of brotherly love under the ever-gracious moderation of Louis Venden, pastor of the University Church. With great earnestness and eloquence Paxton spoke of the opportunity and challenge facing Adventists to make good their stupendous claim to be called of God to carry forward the work begun by the 16th century reformers. He shared his evident concern over the plurality of gospels which he has encountered in the Seventh-day Adventist church. He reiterated a previously-made challenge: "Will the real Adventists please stand up and be counted?" It is clearly his hope that it will become evident that the "real Adventists" are those who hold to what he believes to be a correct understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification, and who are in accord with the affirmation of original sin and the repudiation of perfection in this life.

Such a public forum is not a propitious theater for seriously attempting to resolve theological issues. Doubtless [[3]] there was little expectation that significant resolution would occur. What was probably by far the greatest overall result that could be expected from such a meeting was in the area of public relations, in the above-mentioned "competition for the devotion of church members." In this arena, the triumph of the only side that was strongly represented (indeed, almost exclusively represented)--that of Ford, Brinsmead and Paxton--was probably great. I dare say that not one in twenty of the audience had previously troubled himself or herself to delve into the issues deeply enough to have come up with the personal understanding that would be necessary to weigh the validity of the one side of the controversy that was there almost exclusively presented. I dare say that many were unable to grasp the nuances of the theological language employed, and that many more were inclined to suspect that the issues were merely technical, or semantic, or trivial and hair-splitting--in any event, not important enough to warrant embroiling the church in divisive controversy. Doubtless some of those present sensed that vital issues were apparently at stake, but were unable to perceive clearly what they were. Doubtless there were also representatives of that large group of modern sophisticates who tend to look with bemused tolerance upon the anachronism of people becoming exercised about "fine points" of doctrine--in this day and age!

## **IMPACT OF THE ENCOUNTER**

What general impressions were likely to have been carried away from the meeting by this large and diversified University congregation? It seems reasonable to conclude that the great majority of those present were reassured--during the course of the three and a half hours--on several counts:

First, Paxton himself probably came across to the majority, as he did to me, as a sincere and earnest Christian, dedicated to spreading the gospel as he understands it. He showed himself to be well versed in Adventist terminology and thought patterns, using such familiar expressions as "the third angel's message in verity." He even spoke as though he could find eschatological significance in the period beginning in 1844. He had sincere praise for Seventh-day Adventist health work and for certain other distinctive features of Adventism. He gave the impression that if SDA's can just get their act together (which he hopes they will) he would join [[4]] the church. He spoke highly of Ellen White, quoting her appropriately on several occasions. Throughout the

long meeting he comported himself as a Christian gentleman, revealing both becoming humility and great seriousness. With few exceptions, he fielded the many questions with clarity and forthrightness. All in all he was an impressive spokesman and salesman for the positions which he holds with such obvious sincerity.

Secondly, it seems likely that a great many people came away from the meeting reassured that the "new theology" advocated by Ford and, others since the fifties and sixties is essentially sound, and that its leaders are successfully adapting the everlasting gospel to the challenging needs of the present day without compromising, in any essential way, the faith of their fathers. This was doubtless the impression carried away by many. Several fairly strong statements on the importance of sanctification and on the power of the gospel to overcome willful sin in the life tended to allay fears that there might be anything antinomial in the newer teaching, so long as it be rightly understood.

A third result of the meeting may have been to acquaint more people with the impact which Brinsmead's publication, PRESENT TRUTH, is having upon the Evangelical world. Some may have been surprised to learn of the size of its active circulation and of Paxton's report of its favorable reception on almost all of the seminaries he has visited in North America. Paxton, as is well known, has been closely associated with Brinsmead in the publication of PRESENT TRUTH. Probably very few people noticed that one of the editors of that periodical was among the young men who were supervising the necessary work of sorting and screening the many written questions addressed to Paxton.

It is quite beyond the scope of this paper to go into the individual points dealt with in the various discussions between panel members or in answer to the many questions submitted from the audience. One of the panelists questioned whether Paxton had not given too exclusive attention to a single aspect of Reformation theology, viz., justification, to the neglect of other important aspects. He felt that he had not, because of the necessarily restricted scope of his work. An interesting upshot of this discussion was the revelation that it is generally recognized that the Reformers themselves sometimes used the term justification in a broader sense than [[5]] solely meaning to *declare* righteous, but also to *make* righteous. (Karl Barth clearly does this, also. See *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 95; and Vol. IV, No. 2, pp. 499-511.) This fact was in sharp contrast to the impression repeatedly given earlier by one of the other panelists [Ford]. Sometime during the meeting Paxton rightly reminded his hearers that justification and salvation are not synonymous terms, that the latter also includes regeneration and sanctification and glorification.

The relevance to the current controversy of Paxton's dramatic homily on the two worshippers, the Pharisee and the Publican, may not have been obvious to all. Although to capture our attention he showed how natural it is for all of us pharisees to identify ourselves with the Publican in the parable, the real point of the story as told by Paxton had quite a different twist. By pointing out that the Pharisee prefaced his self-gratulatory recital of his pious accomplishments by saying "I thank Thee", Paxton was saying in effect that those who are striving after character perfection and who yet protest that their striving is not righteousness by works because it is accomplished only by the indwelling Christ--*those are the real pharisees*, for they thank God that all is being done by His power working in them. Thus Paxton and company are portrayed as being the real publicans. They humbly see that they are sinners. They consequently insist that because of original sin they will necessarily keep right on sinning in some degree (not *willfully*, of course) right up until the day of glorification--covered always by the *imputed* righteousness of Christ, who, by His perfect living and dying, they have faith to

believe, has kept the law perfectly for them. They will, of course, always have been *hating* sin, and wanting to overcome it. But they will never be able to do so completely until mortality shall have put on immortality. Such is their belief and such is the nature of their gospel, their understanding of what constitutes the good news.

But is this a fair appraisal of their actual position? Have I not perhaps misrepresented them when I imply in the subtitle that these devout brethren are teaching that continual doing (in some degree) of what is known to be unrighteousness will have to be covered by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ--the perfect life He lived on earth--right up until the removal of original sin at the moment of glorification? Up until this past week I myself was not entirely sure that I [[6]] was not misreading and perhaps distorting their position. But Dr. Ford's Friday night sermon on Perfection cleared from my mind any lingering doubts as to where he really stands. Notwithstanding the reiteration of carefully qualified statements which could easily be interpreted as pointing in a different direction (such as that it is possible and necessary that the believer be cleansed from all unrighteous doing and thinking in this present life) Dr. Ford made it unmistakably clear to me that he does not believe that all sinning can be overcome in this life--either with, or without, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This point, I fear, has not been adequately grasped by many. It is basic to an understanding of the present theological controversy. Perhaps more than anything else, it accounts for the persisting, but thus far relatively muted opposition to the "new theology" that is present in our ranks, and among some of our top leaders.

## TWO KINDS OF SINS?

Basic to Ford's understanding of the subject of character perfection is his belief that Scripture distinguishes two kinds of sins. One kind is designated by one or more of the following adjectives: "willful," "deliberate," "cherished" or "presumptuous." Other expressions which generally denote this class of sins are "*practicing* known sin," or "*pursuing a course* of known sin," or "deliberately turning one's back on God," etc. From this class of sins, the Christian can be, and should be, completely and perfectly delivered, by the sanctifying grace of God. Total victory over this class of presumptuous sins, it is held, must be obtained in this life.

The second class of sins, sometimes referred to as hasty, impulsive sinning, is something else again. As an example, angry words, or sudden outbursts of temper, would probably fall into this category. They spring from our sinful natures. Although unwanted and striven against and never done deliberately they are none-the-less sinful, and *known* to be sinful by the person himself. During the course of sanctification the Christian will gain increasing *control* over these outcroppings of his sinful nature. It will be his *aim or goal* to eliminate them insofar as is "humanly possible." But he never reaches that goal in this life, according to the "new theology" [i.e., new to SDA's]. Consequently, he will need ongoing pardon for this class of sins right up until the moment [[7]] of glorification. Hopefully his transgression will become less *frequent*. Indeed, the proponents of this theology maintain that the Christian will overall be "moving in the right direction." They are fond of quoting an Ellen White statement which implies that this "general tenor of the life" is all that God really looks at.

Just what all should be included in this second category is not the point. Dr. Ford has indicated to me that covetousness is one of the inward sins which can not be entirely overcome in this life. He has publicly stated that the "respectable" sin of pride may be more serious in the

sight of God than that of adultery. This is doubtless true, for it was pride which excluded Lucifer from heaven. But this comparison-I'm sure that Dr. Ford would agree-is intended more to underscore the gravity of pride than it is to suggest the relative levity of adultery! What is the point, is that according to the new theology there are two classes of sins, one of which the Christian can be, and must be, completely freed from; and the other of which he can *never* be completely freed from in this present life. (We are here speaking not of *temptation* to sin, with its accompanying struggle, but of *committal* of sin. These two are by no means the same. They must be carefully distinguished, not only in theory, but also, and more importantly, in life. The former will be present throughout our earthly lives.)

The proponents of the new theology maintain that their classification is Biblical, for is there not mention of a sin unto death, and a sin which is not unto death? And does not David cry, "Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins."? From the fact that the Bible *does* recognize that there *are* presumptuous sins--and even that there is an "unpardonable sin" (which in the minds of these proponents amounts to essentially the same thing)-it does not necessarily follow that all *other* sins (i.e., all non-presumptuous sins) are of such a nature that they can not, by God's grace, be completely overcome in this life. Such reasoning would be fatuous.

## SINLESS LIVING IN SINFUL FLESH

Another way by which the proponents of the new theology attempt to bolster their anti-perfection position is by trying to link the subject to the correct Hebrew (and [[8]] SDA) concept of the unity of man as opposed to the psycho-somatic dualism of Grecian thought. The real thrust of this attempt is not readily apparent on the surface. What is being suggested, in effect, is that because man is a unitary organism one must not expect that a perfect character could be developed in an *imperfect* body. This, we are told, would be to fall into the trap of "anthropological dualism!" John Wesley effectively met this supposedly modern and sophisticated objection more than two hundred years ago, as he did several other objections currently being circulated. One of the heaviest moments in the three and a half hour meeting on Sabbath afternoon was when Paxton was directly pleading with Heppenstall not to try to combine a perfect thing (the gospel of our Lord's doing and dying *for* us, and outside of us) with the necessarily "*imperfect*" work of the Holy Spirit *inside* of the believer. This is but another way of saying what was noted above: Don't expect a perfect work inside of an imperfect body with an imperfect nature.

Paxton was at this point grappling, in his intense interaction with Heppenstall, with what in his book [p. 135ff] he calls "Breaking the Synthesis." This is something which he sees Ford as having successfully accomplished by the decade of the seventies--*but not yet Heppenstall and LaRondelle*. At least at the time of writing he felt that they had not yet made clear whether they have cleanly broken the synthesis. It is important to grasp what Paxton here means by the synthesis and its breaking, for the concept is central to understanding his challenge, "Will the real Adventists please stand up?" Paxton sees Adventist theology prior to the 1950's as having been a synthesis of Protestant and Roman Catholic elements. Naturally he wants to see this synthesis broken. He also speaks of this as a synthesis of justification and sanctification. Just what this actually means is made clearer by a careful reading of the lengthy note 44, on page 136 of his book, where there emerges just what it is that he objects to in LaRondelle's position, as given in his "Seventh-day Adventist Statement on Righteousness by Faith."<sup>3</sup> Paxton writes:

Here LaRondelle says that justification is "a judicial transaction of Christ as heavenly Mediator, but it is more than that. It implies the sanctifying impartation of the Holy Spirit of divine love within the heart of the justified believer (Rom. 5:1, 5; 8:14-16) or stated differently, the indwelling of Christ in the believer's heart (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:14-19)" (p. 2). Also: ". . . it can be said that justification [[9]] sets the repentant believer free from the guilt of sin and *delivers him at the same time from the bondage and defiling power of sin'* (p. 3)<sup>4</sup> [Italics supplied.]

Be it noted that Paxton objects to both of these statements by LaRondelle, that is, to the latter half of each of them. He wants the "righteousness" of the expression "righteousness by faith" to refer *only* to the perfect righteousness of Christ, i.e., to the doing and dying of Christ *for* us and *outside* of us, and not at all also to His work in the believer. The real issue in all of this concern over "the synthesis" centers about the question of character perfection, and the role which it properly plays--or does *not* play--in salvation. Otherwise, the whole matter could be seen as merely a problem of semantics and of definitions. But the battle against "perfectionism" was central to the whole drama as it unfolded from the 1950's onward, and as it has been so transparently laid out before the reader in Paxton's book, *The Shaking of Adventism*. This is evidenced by the following paragraph concerning Brinsmead *before* his conversion to the side of the anti-perfectionists:

This synthesis of righteousness by faith and sanctification was the weak spot in the theological "attack" of Heppenstall, Ford and LaRondelle against Brinsmead during the 1960's. Though these theologians took a strong anti-perfectionism position against Brinsmead's teaching, the fact that they still synthesized justification and sanctification in their understanding of righteousness by faith vitiated their anti-perfectionism emphasis. Especially was this so when we consider that Brinsmead could call upon Adventist tradition to support his perfectionism. So long as he saw the gospel as including in its essence the sanctification of the believer and then reflected upon this emphasis in Adventist history, he could not be moved from his belief of perfection in this life.<sup>5</sup>

Of course he couldn't, for as Paxton has correctly perceived, this had always been standard Adventist teaching prior to the appearance of the "new theology."

It can now be easily seen how almost all of the other disputed points of doctrine in the present controversy cluster about, and are closely related to, the question of perfection. Take the doctrine of original sin, for example, the strong affirmation of which Paxton sees as one of the two "real theological gains" of the 1960's--the other being the "repudiation of perfection in this life." It is the presumed presence of original sin which rationalizes, and makes plausible, and which indeed is seen as responsible for the imperfectability of the saints in this life. [[10]]

Or, as another example, take the much disputed question of the nature of Christ--whether at His incarnation He took the nature of Adam *before* the Fall, or his nature after it had been weakened by the Fall. As Gillian and Desmond Ford correctly point out in their document entitled "The Soteriological Implications of the Human Nature of Christ," the answer to this question is foundational to one's understanding both of the subject of perfection and also that of "righteousness by faith." If being born infected with the burden of original sin means that some degree of sinning is inevitable, then Christ must have been born with a different kind of

human nature than other men are, for He never once sinned. Furthermore, if we have equal access to the same resources which Christ employed in overcoming temptation in His daily life, and furthermore if we have the same human nature as He had, what, then, is there to preclude the saints eventually being perfected to where they will reflect the image of Jesus perfectly?

Thus it can be seen that both the question of original sin and the question of the nature of Christ bear directly upon the subject of character perfection, and that they derive much of their importance from their close relationship to it. We are being told that false views upon this subject will probably constitute the "omega apostasy." It would seem, therefore, that the subject is one of no small importance.

## FRUITS OF THE DOCTRINE

We have already considered one of the *Biblical* arguments of the proponents of the new theology, vis., that of there being two classes of sins. We have also mentioned one of their *philosophical* arguments, vis., that pertaining to the unity of man vs. Greek dualism. There remain to consider some of their experiential arguments.

The proponents of the new [to SDA's] theology apparently object to the teaching that man can be (and will be) completely freed from ongoing committal of *both classes* of sins (see above) while still in this world on the grounds of at least two fears: (1) They fear that such a teaching is an invitation to righteousness by works and that it will inevitably lead to at least a refined form of legalism. It will inevitably lead, they feel, to taking the eyes off of Jesus and placing them upon self, to trusting partly in what the [[11]] Spirit is working in the heart instead of trusting wholly in the finished work of Christ. (2) They fear that belief in character perfection will lead to pride. They fear that people might succumb to the temptation to think or to say, "I am holy. I am sinless." Both of these fears are legitimate. These dangers exist, and they should be recognized. But they should not be allowed to frighten people away from accepting and maintaining what is Biblical truth. Truth is often dangerous, but that it is dangerous is no good reason for not holding it. One must become aware of the dangers, and then seek to avoid them. But even the methods employed in safeguarding against the dangers must themselves be scrutinized, for some of them are as bad as, or worse than, the dangers which they seek to avoid. Let us look at one such method that is commonly employed by the advocates of the newer theology in order to avoid the particular dangers of which we have spoken. The method is simply as follows: Ostensibly in the interests of promoting a "very serious view of sin," the law of God is exalted to the highest heavens. Then there is no temptation to either works righteousness or to pride, for it becomes perfectly obvious that no human being could possibly reach such a standard in this life. By the phrase "exalting to the highest heavens" I mean the insistence, for instance, that "all mistakes are sins," or that all shortcomings are sins, that anything short of absolutely perfectly developed faith and love is sin, etc. This maneuver overlooks at least two considerations: First, that there is growth and development *in* perfection, both for the saints on earth as well as for the saints and the angels in heaven. God Himself is the only being who has absolute perfection in the sense of unimprovability in knowledge and in love. Although God alone has absolute perfection, it would not be correct to state that He only has "absolute sinlessness." The two terms are by no means equivalent. The second, and closely related, matter which is overlooked by the above maneuver of over-exalting the law is the consideration which prompted John Wesley to distinguish (quite correctly and necessarily, I believe) between "sins properly so called" and sins *not* properly so



called. The latter, he preferred to call mistakes--such as mistakes in judgment based upon incomplete knowledge, mistakes in grammar, etc. But the new theologians will have none of this. They fault Wesley, and all others believing as he did on this point, for having [[12]] "too low a view of sin," or of having succumbed to a "fateful anthropological dualism" in their hamartiology. Their strenuous objection to "dualism" at this particular point is very interesting in view of their insistence upon the above-discussed distinction between a class of totally conquerable sins and a class of sins that can never be fully conquered in this life. This selective opposition to a dichotomy at the one point and not at the other is seen to be not strange at all, however, when it is observed that the device of exalting the law as a safeguard against the dangers of legalism and of pride will only work if Wesley's distinction is considered invalid and is rejected. It is only as the standard is kept infinitely high, and therefore obviously unreachable by mortal man, that man can be kept from thinking that he might actually reach it--either by Pelagian or semi-Pelagian means, or even by the aid of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The strategy seems to be. Only exalt the law to an infinite height, and man will realize that he can never keep it perfectly, even with divine aid.

## WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

This is precisely the place, say these theologians, where all men must first be brought before they are ready to hear the glorious news of the gospel. They repeat Paul's statement that "The law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." So far so good. Now comes the parting of the ways in regard to an understanding of what the gospel really is--what the good news is really about. What the new theology says, in effect, is that although man is incapable of keeping the law perfectly in this life, Jesus Christ by His earthly living and dying has kept the law of God perfectly for him. His life of perfect righteousness is reckoned to his account. His perfect obedience is imputed to him. He is thus clothed with His righteousness. Out of gratitude for this grace extended to him, man will strive by the help of the Spirit to "run in the way of the commandments" and will strive to overcome all sin in his life. This is the goal toward which he labors, but which, of course, he can never reach in this life. This is what I understand to be the "gospel" according to the new theology.

In contrast to the above, the gospel according to traditional Adventism, i.e., the gospel taught among Seventh-day Adventists prior to the 1950's, is different. In it, the good [[13]] news is that *on the basis* of the finished work of Christ for me and *the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in me* I am enabled to completely overcome all known sinning in my life of whatever category, excluding only what Wesley would have called mistakes, or sins not properly so called. There are several things which this does *not* mean: (1) It does not mean that there would be no further growth and development *in* perfection. (2) It does not mean that there would be no further temptations or struggles. (3) It does not mean that I would become in any sense righteous *in myself, apart from Christ*--as this position is so often misrepresented as necessarily implying. I shall always need the benefit of *sustaining* grace (as I expect to also need it in the earth made new), even though after probation's close I shall no longer need *pardonning* grace, for then, if faithful, I shall not be committing known sin of any kind, outward or inward. Prior to glorification the *channel* will be corrupt, but the offering will be pure. Furthermore, because all of the work will be of Christ and not of myself, it can quite properly be said that it is acceptable to God only because of the sprinkling and fragrance of the merits of Christ's precious blood that

was shed for me, a sinner. (4) Finally, it does not mean that I shall ever in this life get to where I think that I am sinless, that I have advanced to where I am no longer a sinner, with a natural bent toward sinning, or that I have somehow reached a plane where I don't need to depend from moment to moment upon the sustaining grace of my Saviour. Quite the contrary: The nearer I come to Christ, the less will I see to esteem in myself, until ultimately self will be wholly swallowed up in Christ. As P. T. Forsyth has aptly remarked, "The holiest have ever been so because they dared not feel they were. Their sanctity grew unconsciously from their worship of His.... The height of sinlessness means the deepest sense of sin." Because of this paradox, true perfection is the farthest removed from spiritual pride.

It should now be apparent that the above two concepts of what constitutes the gospel bespeak two quite different understandings of what the phrase "righteousness by faith" really means. In the one case the word righteousness refers exclusively to *Christ's* righteousness--that which He worked out entirely apart from the believer, and which, in response to his faith, He reckons to his account for righteousness, because any righteousness wrought out within the believer [[14]] himself would be imperfect because marred by at least some degree of ongoing sinning. In the other case the word "righteousness" refers not only to the perfect righteousness of Christ which covers past sins (and present lapses when repented of), but also and equally importantly to the ultimately perfect righteousness wrought out by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer himself. One is Christ's righteousness *only outside* of the believer; the other is Christ's righteousness *both outside and inside* of the believer. The new [to SDA] theology would include only the former as the meaning of the expression "righteousness by faith." They would say that it is only the faith of the believer in the righteousness of Christ outside of the believer that is to be thought of as constituting righteousness by faith. In this they are entirely correct insofar as they mean no more than that this faith of the believer in Christ's righteousness is the sole basis for his *pardon and acceptance* with God (i.e., his justification). Thus far there is no difference between the understandings of the two "sides" in the controversy. Furthermore, both sides are in agreement that Christ's work in the believer (i.e., sanctification) is important and must accompany and follow justification. Only one would exclude, and the other would include, sanctification in the concept of righteousness by faith.

This is not all that is involved, however. If all other things were equal, and especially if there were essentially equivalent understandings of the nature and extent of the sanctification which is both possible and required of the believer in this life, then the dispute over whether sanctification should or should not be included in the meaning of the expression "righteousness by faith" would be merely a problem in semantics, and certainly not one which would warrant threatening the unity of the church. But such is not the case. These other things are not equal. Much more of substance is involved. It is not just a matter of definitions.

The proponents of the new theology are not antinomian--certainly not in the usual sense of the word. They are not so much antinomian as they are *antiperfectional*. They are not against the law, nor against trying to keep the law. Indeed, they encourage it. They are only against the idea that the law of God can be kept perfectly by mortal men in this life--even with the assistance of the indwelling Christ. To believe the latter, and to include this idea in one's concept of righteousness [[15]] by faith, is what they are calling the "error of perfectionism," and what Desmond Ford is suggesting is the "omega of apostasy." Right here is the real crux of the controversy. This is why Paxton sees the two great theological "advances" [sic] of the Adventist church in the last twenty years to be (1) a strong affirmation of original sin, and (2) "the repudiation of perfection in this life"--the one being based upon the other. One of the things

which he means when he challenges "Will the real Adventists stand up and be counted?" is will Adventists agree with his appraisal that the "repudiation of perfection in this life" is a great advance for the Adventist church, or will they cling to what these new theologians are calling the "error of perfectionism" and the "omega of apostasy?"

I stated earlier that the new theologians are entirely correct insofar as they mean no more than that the believer's faith in what Christ has accomplished for him and outside of him is the sole basis of his pardon and acceptance with God. But they do not stop here. They go on to say that this external righteousness is the sole basis not only of our pardon and acceptance with God, but also (1) of our present "assurance of salvation," and (2) of our future standing in the final judgment.

Let us first briefly consider the latter. The new theologians necessarily agree with Scripture that we are to be judged by our works. This cannot be denied. But they understand this to mean--if I mistake not--that one's works, and especially the general tenor of the life and the direction in which the believer is moving, are viewed as a confirmation or evidence that the believer's faith in the perfect righteousness of Christ, i.e., His perfect doing and dying, is genuine; and it is solely on the basis of *that* (the believer's faith in the latter) that he is accounted righteous in the judgment. Works may also figure in the final judgment as having a bearing upon the *degree* or *kind* of reward to be enjoyed in heaven. This idea is commonly taught in the Evangelical world, viz., that the degree of character perfection attained has nothing to do with whether a believer is saved or lost, but only with his degree of reward in heaven. This notion has some validity, for it is in line with the anticipation of how many stars there will be in one's crown. [[16]]

## ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

It is in regard to "assurance of salvation," however, that the new theology makes its greatest appeal, especially to the man or woman in the pew. This is where its impact is most significantly felt at the grass roots level. Let the theological experts wrestle with the intricacies and mysteries of the nature of Christ or of original sin, it is often felt; but the subject of assurance of salvation is readily seen as a practical, down to earth matter, which can make a real difference in the lives of struggling, and often discouraged, ordinary Christians. How often is heard the well-intentioned caution that we must not place the standard of actual performance that is required by God too high lest we discourage our young people!--or the older ones as well. We are reminded by the cautioners that the rigorous pursuit of a legalistic, works righteousness will tend to produce one of two evil results: either on the one hand pharisaism, or on the other hand discouragement, disillusionment, and finally despair, or even suicide. To be sure, this is all too true of a *legalistic* religion, but *not* of a genuine gospel of grace. Still, the fact that a legalistic religion does lead to one or the other of these two evils is often employed to heighten the appeal of the kind of "assurance of salvation" which is offered by the new theologians.

Just what is this assurance held out by the new theology? Here the reader should recall what was said earlier about the postulated difference between two classes of sins, the presumptuous, and the non-presumptuous. The latter are called deliberate, willful, or cherished sins. They involve a definite turning of one's back upon God, what in effect is a deliberate reversal of one's original commitment to follow Christ, and what is often compared to a divorce of marriage partners. This class of sins, if persisted in, will cause one to be eternally lost. But not so the other

class, the non-presumptuous sins. These are all "covered" by the believer's faith in the perfect righteousness of Christ, so long as the person is *desiring and striving* (correctly, out of gratitude, which is the true motive) to keep God's law the best he can within the limitations of his sinful nature (original sin). Of course he can not keep the law of God *perfectly*, but his blessed assurance is in the fact that Christ, during His earthly life, kept the law perfectly for him. His hope and comfort is in Christ's "substitutionary [[17]] obedience," as it is sometimes (but not always so boldly) called.

A book on New Testament Witnessing, by Elden Walter, which is widely used in Adventist circles and which has many good things in it, well illustrates what I consider to be this fatal flaw, which turns out to be foundational to virtually the entire book, and to his entire approach to witnessing. This does not become apparent, however, until one reaches page 94 (3rd edition) where the distinction between the two kinds of sins--the presumptuous and the non-presumptuous--becomes pivotal. Walter writes:

Deliberate disobedience cannot be entertained in a heart that is surrendered to Christ. This kind of sin quickly becomes an idol, the "choosing of another master," *Steps to Christ*, page 72, and thus a rejection of the pardon and grace which is the basis of assurance.

The difficulty in many minds arises from statements in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy which seem to indicate that ANY sin disqualifies one for eternal life. But we must always remember that such statements must be qualified by the plain teachings of the Bible as well as the Spirit of Prophecy; i.e., That when disobedience is the result of human weakness, it does not constitute a presumptuous sin and is therefore covered by the blood of the atonement.<sup>6</sup>

The bearing of the two kinds of sins to the question of the assurance of salvation is clearly seen from the above passage. The author next develops the analogy to marriage and divorce. So long as it is not terminated by divorce the marriage covenant remains intact and in force through all of the vicissitudes, and stresses and quarrels which might supervene. In his preface, the author acknowledges a "great debt of gratitude" to certain Presbyterian and Baptist ministers, from whom he states that he "learned eagerly." He thanks God that he has found these methods because they "work in our day." I am not here suggesting that methods developed by non-Adventist ministers are automatically to be held suspect, nor that Adventists have anything like a monopoly on methods that work. Indeed, they are as urgently searching for successful approaches to soul-winning as are many others. But I do believe that in this age when various false revivals are running rampant, the pragmatic test of whether a method "works" is not an adequate criterion of its Biblical validity.

I fear that the foregoing view of "assurance of salvation," while fully compatible with the new theology, and while undoubtedly attractive and comforting to the natural heart, is not a truly Scriptural view of this subject. It seems to me that the belief that non-presumptuous sins do not [[18]] seriously jeopardize our eternal salvation nor in themselves can cause us to lose it, is itself a presumptuous belief. If the assurance is false, then to trust in it could be a fatal error. Bible verses press to my mind to make me question this "comforting" view. "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy . . . ." "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their

sins." *All* of them? Or just the presumptuous ones? "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." *All*? In this present evil world? Does righteousness by faith (the "third angel's message in verity") mean *righteousness* by faith (wrought by Christ in the heart, based on His righteous life and substitutionary death)? Or does it mean, at least in some degree, *unrighteousness* covered by faith in Christ's righteousness? This is a serious question facing the Adventist church today. It can be obscured. It can be postponed. But it cannot be forever evaded. Sooner or later the church will answer it, one way or the other.

## PERFECTION: GOD'S STANDARD

It is the many Ellen White statements regarding the character perfection that will be expected of God's people, however, together with the devious methods the new theologians employ in trying to "get around" them, and their efforts to parry what seems so clearly to be their main thrust--it is this more than anything else which alarms me about the new theology. In my judgment, Paxton is entirely too charitable of Ellen White when he states that he believes that it is not *necessary* to read "perfectionism" into her writings. When one considers the corpus of her writings, and not merely a few scattered statements, it seems well-nigh incredible that one could arrive at any other conclusion than that she teaches the most rigorous form of what they are pleased to label "perfectionism." It is not necessary to burden the reader at this point with examples of her many, oh-so-difficult-to-misunderstand statements on this subject.

How are they "explained" and "gotten around?" Let us notice a few of the ways:

(1) It is stated that of course a prophet, or God Himself, could not be expected to hold up before the people anything [[19]] less than a standard of 100% perfection. What prophet, or prophetess, would be expected to get up and say, "Now brothers and sisters, I think that we ought to come up to 80% of the standard."? (Or 60%, or whatever.) Of *course* the standard must be 100%. But, the argument goes, the prophet well knows that no human being in his mortal, sinful state could possibly live up to 100% of the standard. So there is offered the wonderful provision for the imputation of Christ's righteousness, who *did* reach the standard for us in His sinless life. By this one stroke alone--if one buys this kind of logic--the whole body of her statements on character perfection is effectively emasculated.

(2) When one asks how one is to understand statements such as this one from the *Signs of the Times*, July 29, 1902:

Everyone who by faith obeys God's commandments will reach the condition of sinlessness in which Adam lived before his transgression. When we submit ourselves to Christ we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with garments of His righteousness. [Ed.: Current CD-ROM does not show this reference. The first sentence can be found in HP 146.5 and the last two in ML 311.4.]

When asked regarding such statements, the answer I have heard given by a leading theologian is, "Oh, that must be after glorification." (!) I suppose that a similar reply might be given to the following sentence from the *Bible Echo*, Vol. 10, No. 22, p. 172:

In this earth He performed His mission and fulfilled His office; and, by obedience to the law of God, He testified to all its immutable character, while at the same time proving that its precepts could be perfectly obeyed through His grace by every son and daughter of Adam. [Ed.: Current CD-ROM does not show this reference. Statement can be found in ST, March 14, 1895 par. 1.]

I shall here submit to the reader just one more passage from her writings for him to see how formidable and herculean would be the task of exonerating her from the "crime" of advocating the necessity of attaining a sinning-free character perfection in this life.

When He comes He is not to cleanse us of our sins, to remove from us the defects in our characters, or to cure us of the infirmities of our tempers and dispositions. If wrought for us at all, this work will all be accomplished before that time....

We are now in God's workshop. Many of us are rough stones from the quarry. But as we lay hold upon the truth of God, its influence affects us. It elevates us and removes from us every imperfection and sin, of whatever nature. Thus we are prepared to see the King in His beauty and finally to unite with the pure and heavenly angels in the kingdom of glory. It is here that this work is to be accomplished for us, here that our bodies and spirits are to be fitted for immortality.-2T 355. [[20]]

If belief in the attainability of a sinning-free character perfection in this life is the "omega of apostasy," as we are being told that it is, then surely Ellen White must have been an apostate. In view of the above quotations, I fail to see how such a conclusion could legitimately be circumvented. To my mind it would be impossible.

When the proponents of the newer theology fault their more traditionally minded brethren for holding a standard (or a view of sin) that is "too low"--as they often do--it can be revealing to consider closely just what all is being said in making such a charge. There is more than meets the eye at first glance. There opens up that which is reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland. What is meant by the statement, "Your standard is too low" is that it is "too low in comparison with my super high *ideal* standard-which only Christ has ever been able to reach. Now the standard which you understand that the believer is required to reach in this life, i.e., that which you consider to be an *attainable* standard and one that is ultimately required of the believer, is *higher* (not lower) than what I consider to be an attainable (and required) standard that can be reached in this life." This is what the believer in the newer theology might say to the believer in the older theology were he to state his understanding of the subject more fully. When he says "Your standard is too low" [i.e., too low in comparison to my *ideal* standard] he is at the same time saying "Your standard is *too high* in relation to my actual standard, the one that I consider to be attainable in this life." This calling (ideally) 'too low' what is felt to be (attainably) too *high* is very confusing to say the least. Especially is this confusing when one goes on to say, "I don't think that it is possible for anyone in this life to come up to what I am calling your 'too low' standard. Furthermore, I consider it to be a very grave error for you to think that it is possible for anyone to come up to your 'too low' standard. To so think is the error of perfectionism. It is the omega of apostasy." Is it strange that people get confused in this Alice in Wonderland world where too low is too high, and too high is too low? [[21]]

## CONCLUSIONS

We have by no means exhausted all of the specious arguments that are currently being advanced in support of the new theology, but I have attempted at least to touch upon some of the major ones. I hope that it will have become apparent to the thoughtful reader of this paper:

(1) That underneath the obscuring cloud of semantic confusion, the church is engaged in a life and death controversy over the question of what is the gospel. Paxton did not start the controversy. What he has done is to call it forcefully to our attention by spreading it out before us in a spectacle that is almost too painful to look at. *Present Truth* did not start the controversy; although it had much to do with it. What that periodical is now doing, and will continue to do to the embarrassment of the church, is spreading out its own view of the struggle before the evangelical world at large.

I hope, also, that it will have become evident from the foregoing:

(2) That the new theology has much going for it; so much so, indeed, that unless it be staunchly opposed it will almost certainly carry the day and become the established view. Some of the factors going for it are the following:

[1] It appeals to modesty, realism and common sense. Who wants seriously to maintain that human beings can be free from all sinning in this life?

[2] It is in accord with the majority view of evangelical Christendom, and therefore it has a reservoir of support from able proponents, both contemporary and historical, upon which to draw.

[3] The clinical experience of behavioral scientists generally will be enlisted to emphasize the "evils of perfectionism," both real and supposed.

[4] It is especially popular among young people. A recent poll of Adventist college students purports to show a three to one support for the new theology. The pre-1950 Adventist theology is increasingly being looked upon as obstructing the forward march of the church; and tolerance for it is rapidly diminishing among our restive youth, many of whom are understandably anxious to keep abreast of the times, and to hasten the coming of a "latter rain" revival. [See the *Criterion* for April 28, 1978.] [[22]]

[5] Another factor strongly favoring the new theology is the wide exposure it is being increasingly afforded [no pun intended], as evidenced by this Spring Week of Devotion, and the three and a half hour Sabbath afternoon meeting in the Loma Linda University Church. Further evidence of this wide exposure is the large circulation and Adventist readership of *Present Truth*, a magazine whose molding influence upon Adventist and evangelical thought cannot be lightly passed off. Then at the local level there is the *Salt Shaker*, concerning which it would be naive to suppose that it were non-partisan.

[6] Finally, the new theology is being aggressively carried forward by some of our most able, sincere and dedicated theologians. By now it is surely no secret that they enjoy the more or less covert support of several, but by no means all, of the leaders of our Adventist seminary.

The foregoing are some of the major factors which I see as favoring the advance of the new theology, and which lead me to conclude that unless somehow, somewhere, there be found people with the necessary discernment, courage and grace to effectively oppose it, then the apparent triumph of the doctrine of unrighteousness covered by faith will soon become an established reality. The idea has been expressed--I do not recall by whom--that all that is needed to insure the triumph of evil or of error is for good men to do nothing. Ellen White has similarly written:

If God abhors one sin above another, of which His people are guilty, it is doing nothing in ease of emergency. Indifference and neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as a grievous crime and equal to the very worst type of hostility against God.-3T 281.

Of course these strong words will be considered pertinent only by those who believe that vital issues are at stake in the present shaking of our church, and not by those who do not.

None should infer from the above that I consider the spokesmen of what I am terming the new theology to be evil or designing men, for nothing could be farther from the truth. I yearn and tremble for the safety of my brothers and myself in that fearful time when a class of shepherds will too late awaken to realize that not only have they themselves been deceived, but they have also unwittingly been deceiving and quieting the fears of their questioning flocks. [[23]]

## TWO DANGERS

In regard to the *not*-new theology, I see several factors which seem to be going against it, i.e., *against* its adherents standing up, not only to be counted, but also to be effectively heard. These considerations are serious and weighty. Among them are:

(1) The desire for unity. I believe that there are many who hesitate to speak their convictions boldly for fear of dividing the church. Sad to say, in the present circumstances in which the church finds herself, it is scarcely possible to state one's convictions regarding righteousness by faith and kindred subjects without being in fact divisive. If avoiding division (i.e., church unity) is given top priority in one's mind, then the only prudent course to follow in regard to certain subjects is to keep silent. If one's understanding of the issues is such that he does not see them as being of vital importance one way or the other, then it is not too difficult to keep silent. Indeed, such an one probably *should* keep silent, in the interests of church unity. But on the other hand if he is convinced that a right resolution of the issues is vital to the survival of the church, then to the extent that he truly loves her, and loves his Lord, whose body she is, he will not, and cannot, keep silent. He will speak out, even though in so doing he may *seem to be* a troubler in Israel, a promoter of divisions, and an accuser of the brethren. If he is convinced that an unseen angel is standing in the way, he may even consider dashing his beloved master's foot against a wall.

(2) The desire for peace. Many remain silent because they are naturally peace-loving. They instinctively recoil from anything savoring of controversy or of debate. They see the drawing of battle lines and the taking of sides as evils to be avoided at almost any cost. This love of peace is so wholly laudable in so many circumstances that it is sometimes hard to realize that there are exceptional times when it must give way and be superseded by a still greater love. When controversy does become necessary, how important it is that it not be fueled by pride of opinion, or by love of fighting, but that it be carried forward always with genuine love and [[24]] respect and concern for one's opponents! How important that it be entered upon with a certain reluctance and sadness, and never, as Francis Schaffer has well pointed out, with drums playing and flags flying!

## ONWARD TO VICTORY



A full understanding of Biblical perfection includes much more than its negative aspects, i.e., more than its promises of eventual liberation from all evil tempers, inward and outward. Positively, it includes the filling of the soul with virtues and goodness. Especially is holiness to be defined as joyfully fulfilling the great commandments to love the Lord with *all* the heart, the mind and the strength, and also to love one another as He has loved us. In practical, down to earth terms, it is also to be defined as the "cheerful performance of daily duties in perfect conformity to the will of God."

There are many who, when they think of "perfection," think of check-lists of "do"s and "don't"s, and who are thereby rightly repulsed by such a legalistic misunderstanding of what Biblical perfection really is. Legalism, toward which we all are naturally inclined, is a form of "perfectionism" which indeed must be shunned. So also, on the other side, is the device of super-exalting the law to the highest heavens [see above]. That this also is one of the varied forms of "perfectionism" is perceptively pointed out by Mildred Bangs Winkoop, a professor of theology in a Nazarene college, in her excellent book entitled, *A Theology of Love*. Starting on page 279 she writes:

But there is another and less obvious form of perfectionism which must be pointed out. It partakes of a dualism just as surely as any of the above views. *It separates between the ideal perfection of legal standing and the practical possibility of human perfectibility*. It cannot relate spiritual realities to the capacities of human nature. It teaches that character can be transferred from one person to another in this case Christ's character and our own. It redefines and then hides human sin behind the legal sentence of acquittal and supposes that men may continue in sin, yet profess Christ's own righteousness as their own. The dualism between fact and fiction is a serious concern to those who take moral integrity seriously.

This kind of perfectionism says that the soul is eternally secure regardless of its involvement in sin because man's legal status has changed in God's mind because of Christ. In effect, it abrogates law and moral obligation so far as soteriology is concerned. Though [[25]] usually a good moral life is encouraged, it is not considered necessary to salvation.... In the interest of a "serious view of sin" it includes all possible divergence from perfection in its concept of sin.<sup>7</sup>

In concluding her discussion of "Contemporary Evangelical Perfection Theories," she states: "Rather than Christian perfection standing in danger of perfectionism, it is the guard against it. Everything in Christian perfection stands in absolute contradistinction to perfectionism."<sup>8</sup>

I suspect that the Devil would like to force us into a sort of false antithesis, to where we think that in order to escape from being legalists we have to become anti-perfectionists. He would like us to accept the proposition that to believe that character perfection can be attained by God's grace in this life is necessarily to succumb to some form of legalism. I believe that this is not so. I believe that we can be protected from the errors both of legalistic perfectionism on the one hand, and of idealistic perfectionism on the other, by that true Biblical doctrine of perfection of soul and character which was faithfully taught by the majority of our earlier church leaders, and most explicitly by Ellen White.

In closing, I invite my readers, regardless of any individual differences in the views which we entertain, to join hands together in holding fast our confidence in Him Who is able to keep us

from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.  
[Jude 24]

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Loma Linda, California  
May 11, 1978

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1. Paxton, Geoffrey, *The Shaking of Adventism*, Zenith Publishers, Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 1977, pp. 127 and 147.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
  3. LaRondelle, H. K., *Perfection and Perfectionism*, Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1971, pp. 318 and 323.
  4. Paxton, p. 136.
  5. Paxton, pp. 135f.
  6. Walter, Elden, *New Testament Witnessing*, p. 94.
  7. Winkoop, Mildred Bangs, *A Theology of Love*, p. 279f.
  8. *Ibid.*, p. 283.