

AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE TEACHING OF THE INCARNATION IN ADVENTIST LITERATURE

From 1844-1888. In the formative years of Seventh-day Adventist theology, there is found scarcely any reference of a specific nature to Christ's human nature. The pioneers were preoccupied with studying and establishing such distinctive teachings as the nature of man, the sanctuary, and the commandments of God. However, the first of these distinctive doctrines, the nature of man, was bound to lead Adventists to take a view on the nature of Christ out of harmony with the teaching held by the fallen churches.

Very early in our history, Mrs. White made a few brief references to the kind of human nature taken by the Saviour:

The angels prostrated themselves before Him . . . Jesus also told them that they would have a part to act, to be with Him and at different times strengthen Him; that He would take man's fallen nature, and His strength would not be equal with theirs. . . . "Early Writings," p. 150.

He [Satan] told his angels that when Jesus should take fallen man's nature, he could overpower Him. . . . "Ibid.," p. 152

Later, in a series of articles in the *Review and Herald* in 1874, Mrs. White wrote more definitely about Christ's human nature. The series is about Christ's temptation and victory in the wilderness, and in it the writer powerfully shows how Christ brought the possibility of overcoming to every member of the human family. A few brief extracts here will illustrate her train of thought:

The Son of God humbled Himself and took man's nature after the race had wandered four thousand years from Eden and from their original state of purity and uprightness. Sin had been making its terrible marks upon the race for ages; and physical, mental, and moral degeneracy prevailed throughout the human family. . . . In behalf of the race, with the weaknesses of fallen man upon Him, He was to stand the temptations of Satan upon all points wherewith man would be assailed. . . .

In order to elevate man, Christ must reach him where he was. He took human nature, and bore the infirmities and degeneracy of the race. . . .

The humanity of Christ reached to the very depths of human wretchedness, and identified itself with the weaknesses and necessities of fallen man, while His divine nature grasped the Eternal. "Selected Messages," Book 1, p. 267-8, 272-3.

Such penetrating and cogent statements on the human nature of Christ were confined to the pen of Mrs. White. Other Adventist writers had little to

say on Christology, and evidently taking too much for granted in their understanding of righteousness by faith, they continued on with their basic arguments on the state of the dead, the sabbath, the 2300 days, and prophetic exegesis. As one reads through about 40 years of the *Review and Herald*, one can understand Mrs. White's outburst in 1890: "As a people we have preached the law until we are as dry as the hills of Gilboa, that had neither dew nor rain." *Review and Herald*, March 11, 1890.

The Message of 1888: In 1888 there came to the Seventh-day Adventist Church a very definite awakening message on the theme of the righteousness of Christ. Concerning it, Mrs. White declared: "The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God." *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 91-2. The servant of the Lord went on to say that the message, if accepted, would bring the latter rain to the church and the loud cry to the world.

There is no record of the actual preaching of Jones and Waggoner at the historic Minneapolis meeting, but available sermons and writings from these men while they were still the Lord's messengers shortly after 1888 gives a fair idea of the nature of their message. What is immediately and strikingly evident is that here were men who had broken through the mere doctrinal outlines of Adventism, and had begun to explore the vast vistas of truth on the righteousness of Christ in the light of the third angel's message. The reader cannot help but be impressed with how much A. T. Jones had to say on the Incarnation. This was the foundation of his presentation on righteousness by faith [See Appendix]. Aside from a few statements from Ellen G. White, his was the first real preaching in the denomination on the subject of righteousness by faith in the light of the Incarnation. The messages of Waggoner and Jones were a practical application of the Incarnation to Christian experience. They

powerfully presented the reality of Christ's human nature, arguing that His flesh was the same as ours, that God came to dwell in our flesh in the person of Jesus, that Christ overcame by faith in His Father, and that the same victory and sinless life is available to us in the faith of Jesus. Jones unsparingly attacked the doctrine which postulates that the flesh of Christ was the flesh of the sinless Adam, pointing out that such a doctrine had its origin in the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. [See Appendix]

Thus, in the 1888 message, we find for the first time in Adventist teaching (outside of a few statements from Mrs. White) that the logic of the Adventist teaching on the nature of man was followed through to apply to the Incarnation and righteousness by faith. That Christ should have the same nature as man came as a surprise to some of the brethren, and being critical of the message of Waggoner and Jones, some even wrote to Mrs. White protesting the point. However, she rallied to the support of the doctrine that God had sent to the church through His chosen messengers. Referring to the controversy over Waggoner and Jones' message, she wrote:

Letters have been coming in to me, affirming that Christ could not have had the same nature as man, for if He had, He would have fallen under similar temptations. If He did not have man's nature, He could not be our example. If He was not a partaker of our nature, He could not have been tempted as man has been. If it were not possible for Him to yield to temptation, He could not be our helper. It was a solemn reality that Christ came to fight the battle as man, in man's behalf. His temptation and victory tell us that humanity must copy the Pattern; man must become a partaker of the divine nature. . . .

He withstood the temptation, through the power that man may command. He laid hold on the throne of God, and there is not a man or woman who may not have access to the same help through faith in God. "Selected Messages," Book 1, p. 408-9 (1890)

Thereafter, Mrs. White began making numerous statements on the human nature of Christ, statements which were clearly the complement of Waggoner and Jones's view on the Incarnation. It is interesting to notice from the *General Conference Bulletin* of 1895 that Jones quoted extensively from statements from Mrs. White which were fresh off the press.

Warning Against Extravagant Expressions: The prophet told the church that the message brought by Waggoner and Jones was precious light for God's people. She placed her full endorsement on the message in general. However, she also added: "No one has said that we shall find perfection in any man's investigations. . . ." *Review and Herald*, Mar. 25, 1890. Jones, being of a very positive

disposition, had a tendency to overstate his case. (See *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 377-8). There is some evidence that he did this in a few expressions on the human nature of Christ. [See Appendix]. Later, other Adventist writers began to express similar views on the Incarnation, and there is definite evidence that they were influenced by Jones' mode of expression. It is interesting to notice that the 1889 edition of *Bible Readings For the Home Circle* made no specific remarks on Christ's human nature. It was yet too early for the editors of the book to be influenced by Jones's teaching. But later editions of the book, prepared by a group of SDA Bible scholars, were a clear reflection of the teaching of Jones. [See Appendix]. While this position on the nature of Christ in humanity was basically sound, there appeared in Adventist literature a tendency to go overboard in stressing Christ's likeness to the fallen race. This called for some counsel from Mrs. White:

"Be careful, exceedingly careful as to how you dwell upon the human nature of Christ. Do not set Him before the people as a man with the propensities of sin. . . . Avoid every question in relation to the humanity of Christ which is liable to be misunderstood. . . . Never, in any way, leave the slightest impression upon human minds that a taint of, or inclination to, corruption rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption. . . . I perceive that there is danger in approaching subjects which dwell on the humanity of the Son of the infinite God." "SDA Bible Commentary," vol. 5, p. 1128-9.

These cautions were not made public to the church, but were filed under *Letter 8*, 1895. It seems that if the cautions had been more widely known they would have tempered some statements that appeared in denominational print. But in all fairness to Jones (and also others who wrote similarly), it should be noted that he clearly understood that the person of Christ Himself was without the propensities, passions, or inclinations to sin. Notice His words:

Thus in the flesh of Jesus Christ—not in Himself, but in His flesh, our flesh which He took in human nature—there were just the same tendencies to sin that are in you and me. "The Third Angels Message, Lecture 14, "General Conference Bulletin," 1895.

Now as to Christ's not having "like passions" with us: in the Scriptures all the way through He is like us, and with us according to the flesh. He is the seed of David according to the flesh. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh. Don't go too far. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh; not in the likeness of sinful mind. Do not drag His mind into it. His flesh was our flesh; but the mind was "the mind of Christ Jesus." "Ibid," Lecture 17.

So too with the other Adventist writers. They proclaimed emphatically that in thought, will, and affections, Christ was entirely without any taint of or inclination to corruption. Although they declared that in Christ's flesh were the same tendencies to sin that are in our flesh, this is not to

be taken to mean that they taught that Christ Himself had sinful propensities. A sinful propensity exists only in the heart, for the flesh of itself cannot act contrary to the will of God. However, our writers would have benefited if they had known and heeded the following counsel: "In treating upon the humanity of Christ, you need to guard strenuously every assertion, lest your words be taken to mean more than they imply, and thus you lose or dim the clear perceptions of His humanity as combined with divinity." *Letter 8*, 1895.

A Change In Teaching: Adventist teaching on the human nature of Christ has often been the subject of criticism and misunderstanding among non-Adventist Christians. True, matters have not been helped by some of the more extreme expressions found in our literature, but as long as there is a difference in our understanding on the nature of man, there must be a difference in our understanding on the human nature of Christ. A Baptist theologian shows that he understands the problem when he states: "Adventism's position on the two preceding subjects—those of Man and Death—determines its doctrine of Christ. This is inevitable, for Christ is man as well as God, and He, as well as we, has been subjected to death." Norman F. Douty, *Another Look At Seventh-day Adventism*, p. 48.

In the year 1950, a development began to take place in the circles of Adventist theologians, known as "Christ-centered preaching." It took real shape and direction at the Ministerial Association meetings at the pre-session of the General Conference Session of that year. The Secretary of the Ministerial Association, Elder R. A. Anderson, was one of the prominent leaders in this "awakening." Two delegates to the session, Elders Wieland and Short, appealed to the General Conference Committee that much of this "Christ-centered preaching" was in reality "anti-christ-centered preaching" which would lead us to the acceptance of the "Christ" of apostate Protestantism. The warning seemed too fantastic to merit any serious consideration, and was therefore summarily dismissed.

In 1956 a group of our leading theologians met with representatives of the "Evangelical" Protestant churches to discuss the points of doctrine that separated Adventists from the rest of the "Evangelical" Protestant churches. Dr. Barnhouse, one of the representatives from the "Evangelical" cause, records the results of the interview in the following words: "Immediately it was perceived that the Adventist were strenuously denying certain doctrinal positions which had been previously attributed to them." He goes on to mention how that one of

the main points under consideration was the human nature of Christ. It is clear that the Adventist representatives repudiated the position that Christ took the fallen nature of man after 4,000 years of sin. It is true that most of the statements referring to Christ's taking man's fallen nature appear in the book *Questions on Doctrine* (which book grew out of the discussions with the "Evangelicals"), but the writers of the book would fain make these statements merely to mean that Christ only took this nature in His redemptive act on the cross—i. e., that such a nature was only *imputed* to Christ. However, as an over-all result of these discussions, Dr. Walter Martin, the other "Evangelical" representative, came out before the world, stating: "True Seventh-day Adventism, despite its difference from us, is one with us in the great work of winning men to Jesus Christ and in preaching the wonders of His matchless redeeming grace." *Eternity*, Jan. 1957 (See *Witnessing A Metamorphosis* for a full documentation of these discussions).

While these things were taking place in our church in America, there were some significant developments in the Australasian Division. A certain conference President, Pastor R. A. Greive, also became very interested in a revival of "Christ-centered" preaching as a means of reviving the church. It appeared to this Adventist leader that the foundation of the disillusionment and discouragement of the Christian experience of many of the church members lay in what he supposed was the false teaching among us on the human nature of Christ. Having taken the position that Christ's human nature was wholly like that of Adam's before he sinned (except for some obvious physical weaknesses), he began to tell the church members that perfect obedience to God's law was neither possible nor necessary in this life. Some of the lay members were alarmed at such startling innovations to the Advent faith, but the ministry of the conference stood solidly behind the President. Subsequently, a few "heretics" were disfellowshipped, and the rest were frightened into submission. In 1956, R. A. Greive took up the position of President of the North New Zealand Conference. The concern of some people was aroused, and finally the leaders of the Division began to question some of the teachings of R. A. Greive. About this time, he received some encouragement from Elder R. A. Anderson who was at the General Conference. To bolster up support for himself, Greive circulated some of the correspondence which he received from the General Conference office. As this throws important light on what has been taking place, we cite the main parts of this correspondence here:

Ministerial Assoc. Gen. Conf. of S.D.A.
Washington 12, D.C.
January 19, 1956.

Pastor R. A. Greive,
North N. Z. Conference,
Box 8541, Upper Symonds St., P.O.
AUCKLAND, N. Z.

My dear Brother Greive:

This letter is long, long overdue and it carries sincerest apologies for what is an unpardonable neglect. At the time of your accident in New Guinea I was under a terrific pressure with appointments away from the office, and as you know when you get back things pile high, and some-how this was overlooked. I wrote to Stan Gander and it some-how was in the back of my mind that I had written you as well. How thankful we are that the Lord spared your lives, although it was a terrible experience.

Well now, brother, we are in the midst of a most interesting study. For your sake I wish you could be here in Washington right now. You remember the things we discussed in both Australia and Auckland, especially concerning the nature of Christ. Well, at that time some things that Sister White wrote more than half a century ago were kind of in the back-ground. Practically nobody knew of their existence although they were published in the *Review* and also in personal letters and counsels, etc. The pity of it is that these statements which throw a great deal of light on the subject had not been made available to our workers generally long before now.

As soon as I returned from Australia I was plunged into the thick of a very important series of counsels with some outstanding theologians belonging to several different groups, but remarkable Christians, each of them. They had been given the task of writing against us, and when they came down here to get first handed material they discovered that instead of our being a cult we were sound evangelical Christians. This discovery was a shock to them and after some days of study they openly and joyfully received us as brethren in Christ, gripping our hands in the spirit of fellowship. Their eyes filled with tears as they told of their remarkable change of concept and of how thrilled they were to discover that on the great fundamentals of Christianity we rang absolutely true.

One of the important features of discussion was the nature of Christ, and how thankful we were

that we could show from the Spirit of Prophecy a very clear position concerning the absolute sinlessness of Jesus.

Now this is just a wee note to tell you that while we have not yet finished our research and our work with these men, yet the present situation is very encouraging. What I am saying is not for publication right now, although doubtless within a few months we will be able to share these things with all our workers; and they should be shared. Brethren L. Froom and W. E. Read and I have been a trio working very closely with these men and it has demanded much of our time, for we have been studying to state our beliefs in terms that could not be misunderstood by the theologians.

You may remember drawing my attention to a book you were reading just as we were going into a meeting on the Sabbath morning there in Auckland. You read a fine paragraph from it; but I failed to take the name of the book or even the name of the author. We discussed Campbell Morgan and others, but this man I think was an English theologian and his statements seemed so clear. I would appreciate it if you could let me know the title of the book and the author for I would like a copy.

You are absolutely right in the contention that Jesus did not partake of our sinful nature. If I could put it simply it would be in these words: He partook of *human* nature but not *carnal* nature. He was made in the *likeness of sinful flesh*, not just sinful flesh, so that He could say to His apostles, "The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing (findeth no response) in Me."

Well, this opens up a very big question and in a very little while I will send you some things that I know will delight your heart. This is just a friendly letter to tell you how much I appreciated the many kindnesses you showed us and to express the hope that the Lord is giving you success in the leadership of that important field.

If I could drop one little sentence of friendly counsel it would be: Don't stress theology among your workers for the time being. Your best intentions can be and often are misunderstood. But be assured that some of these very points of discussion will be brought into the open, and then maybe you can give them the emphasis they will need.

Well God bless you. Give my greetings to all the workers there.

Sincerely your brother,

(Signed) R. Allan Anderson.

April 23, 1956

Pastor R. A. Greive,
Box 8541, Auckland,

Dear Brother Greive:

. . . It would seem from your letter that there are some out there in the Australasian field who have the impression that these questions and answers have been prepared by just a small group and because the General Conf. Committee has not passed action upon them that they are not authoritative. Actually, the General Conf. Committee does not rule on matters of faith and doctrine or church policy. All such matters must be dealt with at a General Conf. in session. Between such sessions, however, the General Conf. officers who represent the administration of the cause of God serve as a body of counsel on all such matters, but of course these brethren have no authority to change any teaching. It was to this group that these questions and answers were presented. A number of the leading officers with certain selected individuals have given much time to the study of these answers. In fact very careful attention has been given to every particular word. These answers therefore represent the painstaking effort of a large group of the most responsible leaders of the denomination, the General Conf. President being the chairman at every such meeting. . . .

One thing should be made clear: we are not trying to harmonize our beliefs with those of other Christian groups. In fact the ministers with whom we have been working represent different denominations, and are therefore in disagreement among themselves on minor points of faith, such as the mode of baptism, church organization, etc. But on the essentials of the gospel, as they relate to the person and work of Jesus Christ, they stand together. And when they have discovered that we stand with them on these vital issues, it has brought to them a great joy and satisfaction. Some of these men have been among the most able opponents of Adventism but that was because they did not know what we actually believe, having received their concepts from some of our older books. And of course, believing that Sister White had also taught these things, they regarded her as a false prophet and branded the whole denomination as a cult, eaten through and through with heresy. Their discovery of our understanding of real New Testament truth has made them our friends and has led them to a very deep and thorough study of our other points of faith which, as they point out, are not at the heart of the gospel but rather on the *periph-*

ery; they are works of righteousness which grow out of our relationship to Christ and not the basis of that relationship. *Such doctrines are the Sabbath, tithing, health reform, etc.*

You have asked concerning the nature of Christ during the incarnation. This is a point on which many of our writers and preachers have not been clear. . . . It is a point of faith in which our preachers and writers have expressed themselves very emphatically at times but usually on the wrong side of the truth. . . .

If you would suffer me this little word of counsel as a friend, I would suggest that you hold these thoughts in your heart and not make an issue of them until we as a people have come to the place where we understand this doctrine as clearly as we should, and as clearly as we do other points of faith. The fellowship of the brethren and the communion of saints is too precious an experience to have destroyed by the spirit of controversy. I am confident that the time is near when this great mystery of godliness will be understood better by us as a people. But until then it would seem wise if we could confine ourselves to a prayerful discussion of it between us as workers. While it is truth, we should be very careful not to set it before the laity until we are prepared to speak with a united voice. I think you will recall a suggestion I made to you on this point before and will not misunderstand my mentioning it again. . . .

In closing let me declare as my personal conviction that we have come to the time in our history and the history of the evangelical Christian church in general that we are moving into the experience of the Pentecostal outpouring of power. . . .

(signed) R. Allan Anderson

The sequel to the issue with R. A. Greive in Australia was that not long after receiving this correspondence from R. A. Anderson, he left the Seventh-day Adventist Church, gave up the Sabbath, and fully joined the "Evangelical" cause. In an article published to the world in 1958, called *In Chains of Seventh-day Adventism*, R. A. Greive explained his defection. First he came to the position that Christ did not take man's fallen nature. (He explained that this was the foundation). Second, he concluded from that, very logically, that it is impossible for us to be without sin as Christ was, and to render perfect obedience to His law. The third and final step was logical enough too—he gave up the Sabbath. In the article he triumphantly declared that the leading theologians of the church had also come around to his way of

thinking on the human nature of Christ. They have not followed him to the logical conclusion of giving up the Sabbath, but they have certainly followed him in the first two steps. [*In Chains of Seventh-day Adventism* available on request. Ed.]

Anyone who examines past and present positions on the nature of Christ will know that there has been a change. Even Dr. Anderson admitted this frankly to R. A. Greive in correspondence. In public statements we do not find such frankness, for rather than there being some public acknowledgment of a change, it is said that our past pronouncements somehow "slipped into" the books. Moreover, as the correspondence to Greive clearly bears out, it is regarded as poor procedure to let the laity know what is going on until the ministry is educated in the new position.

Conclusion: It may be wondered how the "new-view" was ushered in so easily. The Scripture says, "While men slept, the enemy sowed tares." It is well known that some of our fundamentalist theologians tried to defend the historic position of the church against the introduction of the "new-view." But the fundamentalists were caught off guard. They tried to defend the truth with some of the unsound arguments and extravagant expressions of the past. Those contending for the "new-view" were fully ready, using the almost unknown counsels of Mrs. White which speak out against "making Christ altogether human." Now "loyalty" to the church and the brethren prevents any public comment or protest. In fact, most of the fundamentalists have now become so used to the new teaching, that they have ceased to be alarmed. Meanwhile, the Secretary of the Ministerial Association is busy entrenching the ministry in the "new-view" the world around, and in this work he is being ably

supported by most of our institutions of learning, especially Andrews University.

Basically, the "new-view" of the Incarnation is erroneous. Our past writers and editors did not hesitate to brand such teachings as the doctrine of anti-Christ. [See Appendix]. It leads directly to the denial of God's purpose for the Advent Movement—the development of a community of saints who will render perfect obedience to the law of God through their personal application of the experience of the Incarnation. Yet the "new-view" is certainly not all error. There is much truth in it. We need to understand the perfect sinlessness of the human nature of Christ. But the facts of Christ's sinless human nature are wrongly applied. Christ's human nature was sinless because of its union with divinity, and in this we find the hope of the fallen race. In this we see demonstrated what our fallen natures might become when united to divinity. But the "new-view" draws disastrous conclusions from the sinlessness of Christ's human nature. It draws the conclusion that Christ took a superior and sinless human nature, something out of the reach of the rest of mankind. This places the obedience and sinless life of Jesus as something for which He was peculiarly adapted, and takes away the faith that will lead God's people to reflect the image of Jesus fully.

On the other hand, the position taken by the past writers and editors of the Advent movement is basically true, and it is the faith of Jesus that will lead to the development of the sealed saints. Yet sometimes, in an effort to stress Christ's complete victory in human flesh, the same writers did make some statements that tended to be extreme. The present agitation on the Incarnation will no doubt lead God's people to a more perfect and intelligent understanding of this vital truth that lay at the basis of the 1888 message.

By R. D. Brinsmead