

Twenty-Five Years After Glacier View

*Abstract by Dr. James Stirling of a
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hat has happened in the Adventist church during

the 25 years since Desmond Ford presented his views at the Adventist Glacier View Ranch in Colorado? By now we may be able see more clearly just what happened and what difference it may have made in the church since—and what it might mean for the Adventist future. The full text of Dr. Patrick's paper can be obtained by going to the Adventist Today Web site, www.atoday.org.

I. A Short Definition of "Glacier View"

A lecture on Daniel 8 delivered by Dr. Desmond Ford on October 27, 1979, to a chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums at Pacific Union College (PU C) in California evoked both interest and concern throughout the Adventist world. Church papers carried word that a review committee would meet from August 11 to 15, 1980 at Glacier View Ranch. During July, 125 people were invited to attend, and they were given a 990-page manuscript to read before coming. (In printed form later it filled 694 pages.) Once there, the 115 who arrived engaged in five days of discussion. By the conclusion of the conference on August 15, 1980, the committee had produced, and voted approval of, two consensus statements relating to landmark doctrines within Adventism: the sanctuary, and spiritual gifts. Meanwhile, six attendees were asked by the General Conference president to define major points of difference between Ford's manuscript and traditional Adventist concepts. Their individual attempts, screened by a 28-member committee, were read to, but not discussed by, the large committee. The conference closed without further actions. Many of the delegates remained at Glacier View and were joined by others on the evening of August 15 for a further conference that would become known as Consultation I.

However, by the beginning of Consultation I, rumors were already spreading that a small number of administrators had met with Ford and wererecommending that the church's South Pacific Division (SP D), which included Australia, take decisive action. The next month, the executive committee of the SPD met in Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia, and terminated Ford's employment. That was the beginning of a process that within a decade would exert appreciable influence upon the dismissal or resignation of a large number of Adventist ministers, teachers and members in Australia and New Zealand.

II. The Primary Documents of Glacier View

The principal document received by the Glacier View conferees was written by Desmond Ford following his October 1979 Forum address and continuing until early July 1980. This was the last date that would allow committee members in distant parts of the world to receive the manuscript and have three weeks in which to assess it. Ford's six chapters embrace 425 pages of the printed version. Chapter 1 offers a history of the Adventist sanctuary doctrine, noting the way in which the church's writers have recognized certain interpretive problems. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 look at the way in which the Day of Atonement is presented in the biblical books of Hebrews, Daniel and Revelation. Chapter 5, "Rehearsal and Resolution of the Problem," prepares the reader for Chapter 6: "Ellen G. White, 1844, and the Day of Atonement." Then follow 269 pages of appendices either written by Ford or collected by him as having relevance for the issues under discussion.

The conferees also received "study papers on key topics, prepared by Seventh-day Adventist scholars, sent to delegates before, and read prior to the conference." In all, therefore, each delegate had about two thousand pages of "homework" to assess, in addition to meeting other demands upon their time, like employment, family commitments and travel.

According to Richard Hammill, the General Conference vice president who formulated the Sanctuary Review Committee, the initial invitees included 55 Bible teachers, six editors, 10 pastors, three ministerial secretaries, 11 college and university presidents, four local conference presidents, 11 union conference presidents, 10 division presidents, eight members of an earlier committee appointed to study the Book of Daniel, 12 General Conference headquarters employees, and nine retired General Conference officers. The longer of the two consensus statements developed and voted by the attendees related most directly to Ford's first five chapters; the shorter consensus statement focused directly on the content of his Chapter 6. Adventists were able to read the consensus documents in the church's "General Organ," *Adventist Review* (September 4, 1980, 4-15), and elsewhere.

III. River or Torrent?

While on a long journey during April and May this year (2005), I read Ford's Glacier View manuscript in full. I applauded the historical substance of the book, as well as the author's grasp of the problems that indicate the necessity of such studies. The marshalling of evidence is impressive. The manuscript is clearly the work of a person writing within a particular religious community as a believer-participant; that is, its tone is probing and constructive, not iconoclastic or vindictive. The consensus documents offer positive perspectives that invite ongoing communication and research in order to integrate conclusions and clarify a cluster of matters needing further consideration.

In short, any person who offers such a quality work deserves gratitude, respect and an ongoing role in the continuing dialogue and dialectic that is a healthy part of a religious community. Why, then, did Glacier View become Adventist shorthand for pain, dissension and division?

The first reason derives from the context of the time. Like a river that would nourish a land in ordinary times but cause destruction in flood times, the church was undergoing a deluge of new information. At the end of the Second World War, the long struggle between Fundamentalism and Modernism was ongoing for Adventism. For a movement that belonged in neither camp, many issues were potentially volatile. Some of these surfaced in the early phases of the

movement, spearheaded by Robert Brinsmead and his colleagues. The conversations between Adventists and Evangelicals during the 1950s signalled the ending of an era and the beginning of another phase of Adventist development, as did a sequence of events at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. By 1970, in Western cultures, the quantity of new information that required coherent incorporation into Adventist belief systems was rising toward flood levels. From 1972, the establishment of effective headquarters archives and regional research centers offered the church fresh resources to assist it in the task of assessing and interpreting new data coherently; but few busy administrators were able to use these facilities. By the end of the 1970s, Adventism was being inundated with new information. The Forum address at PUC and the Glacier View manuscript, taken together, may have been instrumental in breaching a levee bank, but they contributed only a stream to the torrent of new information that characterized the era. The overarching question of the time called for a coherent Adventist response: How should evidence function in the process of shaping and sustaining faith?

IV. The Division President and the Crisis: A Subjective Interpretation

Within this dynamic context, the process and outcome of Glacier View depended on one person more than any other, Pastor Keith Parmenter, president of the SP D. Parmenter's role as the hardpressed leader of the church during this era must be assessed carefully if there is to be any hope of interpreting Glacier View effectively. The following is my perspective.

Parmenter, as a competent, gracious chairperson did not have the time to assess the constant stream of new information or to utilize the facilities of the Ellen G. White/ Seventh-day Adventist Research Centre as a way of separating rumor from reality. I was director, and on no occasion do I recall him using the Centre's facilities for even one hour. The escalation of tensions in the church due to a range of controversies led Parmenter to adopt a position that he maintained consistently against both usual policy and direct suggestion: he decided to handle the issues "administratively" rather than with counsel from such advisory bodies as the Biblical Research Committee.

Parmenter did not attend the illuminating series of meetings offered early in 1982 by White Estate representatives Robert Olsen and Ronald Graybill. He chose not to acquaint himself with the 940 pages of documents made available at the 1982 Prophetic Guidance Workshop, the high-water mark of the intense discussion relating to Ellen White that began to escalate in 1970. Furthermore, he directed that these written materials and the tape recordings of Workshop discussions not be shared with the church at large. Additionally, he wrote a letter directing that my reports of the Workshop, written for the Division paper, were to be kept in "a personal file." His administration allowed no effective avenue for the correction of significant disinformation, as when a *Record* article suggested that Ellen White's use of the writings of other authors was "about 0.002 per cent."

I list these observations not to denigrate my friend, the president of the Division, but simply to illustrate Parmenter's resolute determination to control information relating to the life and writings of Ellen White and do his utmost to protect her from what he perceived as the potential effects of investigation in the light of newly available data. To the *biblical question* aired in the Forum meeting at PUC the leadership of the SPD gave an *Ellen White answer*; it became clear to me that Parmenter's stance indicated that, in his mind, the real issue of the era was the authority of Ellen White. The status of Parmenter's understanding of Ellen White's life and writings by the time of Glacier

View meant he could hardly be expected to handle the complex issues other than the way he chose to do. Essentially, to save Ellen White and the church from chaos, he believed that the Glacier View consensus statement had to be marginalized in favor of the ten-point summary. Next, Ford, and then all those employees whom Parmenter perceived as questioning the doctrinal authority of Ellen White, must be dismissed. Parmenter's conviction was so strong that he took the lead in the process of disregarding the essential adequacy of two letters Ford wrote. He expected Ford to renounce his convictions if he was to remain an employee of the church.

In short order, the same scenario obtained for scores of other ministers.

V. Three Options for Adventism: Reversion, Rejection, Transformation

After being away from Australia for nearly 16 years, I returned in 1973 to find that a significant pressure group, including former pastors, evangelists, and administrators, was committed above all else to achieving the dismissal of Desmond Ford. This was considerably due to the fact that his role at the time required him to understand and interpret the increasing volume of new information that was arriving on the church's corporate desk. I participated from 1974 in the effervescent (at times, stormy!) meetings of the Biblical Research Committee convened while Pastor Robert Frame was the church's Division president. I attempted to assess the outcome of events like the Palmdale Conference of 1976 and the much larger Righteousness by Faith Consultation of 1979. By now we have a clearer view of what happened.

Following the conflicts that gained intensity in the 1950s, during the 1970s the Adventist Church in Australasia made significant progress in better understanding and presenting "the everlasting gospel;" but it failed to win the support of certain older members. In addition, viewpoints similar to those of the Concerned Brethren were promulgated by a variety of independent groups. As a widely known advocate of the gospel emphasis, Ford attempted to offer suggestions – for what he believed (wrongly, as it turned out) would be a select audience at PUC – whereby the church might resolve certain important conflicts with reference to the interpretation of Daniel and Hebrews in particular. However, in the ensuing months, a vigorous *rejectionist* impulse further inflamed the already powerful *reversionist* impulse, in part due to the worldwide distribution of Ford's oral suggestions. A more thoughtful attitude was also identifiable at the time, well illustrated in Ford's Glacier View manuscript and the work of the Sanctuary Review Committee that met during August 1980. Now it seems imperative for the church to understand and nurture the demanding median stance, a *transformationist* response.

Intense conflict so overshadowed the constructive achievements of the church in the late 1970s and early 1980s and continued with such powerful momentum, that only slowly did the effects of the change that started in 1984 become apparent. It is important to observe initial perceptions of Glacier View as a backdrop for understanding factors that make the present era so different from the situation of the church at its nadir during the early 1980s.

VI. Using the Lantern: Interpreting Glacier View

Sabbatarian Adventism was born within a millenarian awakening, deeply informed by such apocalyptic writings as Daniel and Revelation. This matrix generated language and metaphors that critics used to describe and symbolize Glacier View, such as the Great Controversy theme with its series of vivid contrasts: Christ/Satan, light/darkness, good/evil, righteousness/sin, truth/error, orthodoxy/heresy, loyalty/apostasy, Jerusalem/Babylon, remnant church/fallen

church. Ellen White's writings were mined for her application of these: the omega of apostasy; stars admired for their brilliance going out; last-day deceptions; the shaking; signs of the end and more. Such terminology was employed most of all by those who would finally locate in the reversionist camp, but the same lexicon was adapted and used to some extent by both extremes in the continuing warfare. Ford was, for his opponents, the omega of apostasy, functioning like a *praying mantis* that conceals intentions and character in order to deceive and destroy. For others, the church was the villain, victimizing a knight in shining armor. Between the extremes was a more nuanced interpretation: Glacier View provided an instructive example of Adventist theological development. In the words of a prominent General Conference participant, "The speed of a convoy is the speed of the slowest ship."

It is important to assess all such immediate interpretations in the light of serious reflection by competent persons writing as historical perspectives became possible. The first history of Adventism to be written by a trained historian, Richard Schwarz (1979), was revised by Floyd Greenleaf (*Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 2000) and offers a useful overview of Glacier View in the context of the "Twentieth-Century Debate Over Fundamentals." For Richard Hammill, the General Conference vice president appointed to supervise the process leading up to the Glacier View, the conference involved a number of problematic elements: "a serious mistake in tactics;" official reporting that was at times "the opposite of the discussion on the committee;" the ignoring of crucial pieces of evidence; the perception by the church's Bible teachers that they had been "betrayed;" "hasty" action "due to the ineptitude of the Australasian Division officers" and more.

The core theological issue of the 1970s was that of salvation in Jesus Christ as viewed in the light of a discussion within Adventism that began to gather intensity two decades earlier. A new interest in understanding the General Conference of 1888 was flagged at the General Conference of 1950, spawning a major Bible conference, providing part of the context for the Adventist/Evangelical discussions, stoking the furnace of the Brinsmead Awakening and stimulating a plethora of publications. By the onset of the 1970s, a better exposition of Righteousness by Faith brought the Australasian church to the edge of a significant revival, with unprecedented numbers of young people rejoicing in the Good News and openly sharing their faith even on city streets. The General Conference presidency of Pastor Neal Wilson (1979-1990) included significant attempts to meet Adventist crises with large-scale councils; located at the top of an impressive list is the Righteousness by Faith Consultation that reported its findings with a statement titled "The Dynamics of Salvation" in *Adventist Review*, July 31, 1980.

The relaxing of tensions relating to the church's understanding of Righteousness by Faith carried a potential for resolving other issues, particularly the doctrine of the sanctuary and the prophetic ministry of Ellen White. Immediately after the Glacier View conference, during a retreat in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, I read *The Letter to the Hebrews* in my Revised Standard Version, with the Glacier View consensus statement open before me as a point of reference. "Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary" echoed and extended a teaching I had listened to by Edward Heppenstall and led me to muse that, for the first time in such a document, my church was actually helping me in a significant way to hear the heartbeat of Hebrews. It only remained for the fuller documentation and discussions of the 1982 Prophetic Guidance Workshop in Washington, D. C., to place a capstone on the edifice of faith that had been, for me, in a dynamic process since 1957. Thereafter my perception of the essential profile and mission of Adventism would be more sustainable, even though many small modifications would be necessary.

Today when we read the principal Glacier View consensus statement in the light of "The Dynamics of Salvation" statement, we find reason for cheer and hope to permeate the church. But there was no time for this connection to be explored effectively between the release of the "Dynamics" document on July 31, 1980, and the event that was, for many observers, a professional martyrdom, set in place on August 15, 1980. In hindsight, it is apparent that exterior circumstances were pressuring the church to ask frankly and openly how evidence should function in support of faith. The Glacier View consensus statement went a long way toward offering effective answers, with reference to the church's doctrine of the Sanctuary. Did the small cluster of administrators who met on August 15, 1980, perceive their decision as meaning that tradition was taking precedence over the quest for truth, and that the convictions of the church's scholars were being sacrificed to that end? In any case, their decision was a major factor in thrusting the church into an era of unprecedented controversy and tragic loss. Fortunately, it is now possible to better define the church's teaching on Righteousness by Faith and to highlight this understanding as one of the promising signs of a brighter day.

More than that, people now perceive more realistically that Adventist doctrine is not static; indeed, teachings develop in scope and clarity as God's people walk with him and search the Scriptures in the light of new circumstances. Fritz Guy expressed this reality succinctly in 1980. Since that time, Rolf Poehler has written a magisterial dissertation that offers a roadmap through this doctrinal development from Millerite times to the 1980s. Others have since continued this mapping process closer to the present, a task that must be undergoing. Such research needs to be expressed in language that engages the attention and commitment of the entire church; probably George Knight has achieved more in this regard than any other person.

VII. Gleams of a Golden Morning?

Adventism is, in essence, a quest for "the truth as it is in Jesus" presented in the Scriptures. The church must be open to every avenue for understanding the Bible, religion, and human beings. By 1980 an almost bewildering array of new evidence needed systematic incorporation into Adventist belief and practice. Twenty-five years later this demand continues. However, the church must now meet an additional imperative: postmodern society will listen to the church only if it has something meaningful to say. These twin demands, for evidence that sustains faith and for existential meaning, profoundly challenge Adventism and its mission within Western culture. In the lantern-light of history, how do the issues of 1980 appear in 2005, and what sort of report card does Adventism merit after 25 years?

First of all, the issues of 1980 have a *historical basis*. Insights from a cluster of studies now give the church a far better appreciation of its Millerite foundations, prophetic interpretation, and doctrinal development. The maturation of Adventist historiography means that the church in 2005 is in a far stronger position to bridge a chasm sometimes separating the present faith and understanding of its adherents from the realities of the church's heritage.

Second, the debate over *method in Bible study* that created tensions in 1980 and at the time of Consultation II can now be viewed in a much calmer light. The spiritual gifts of those men and women who have devoted their lives to the various aspects of biblical studies, taken together, help the church to hone and extend its appreciation of the Bible as its sole rule of faith and practice. The long years of study the church has devoted to Daniel and Revelation since 1980 have clarified major issues. The writings of a cluster of scholars move through and beyond the issues constructively.

Third, the entire agenda of 1980 was permeated with *theological content*. The way in which the church has understood and defined its

doctrine since 1844 is brilliantly illuminated in the scholarly dissertation by Seminary student Rolf Poehler and within the copious writings of one of his principal mentors there, George Knight. The church has also become more aware of how to do theology well, as recommended in the masterful manual provided by Fritz Guy. But in making such remarks we must be aware that enormous progress has been made in specific theological areas, such as that of Revelation/Inspiration, wherein the dissertation by Ray Roennfeldt offers a useful orientation. Clearly, in 1980, there was a great nervousness in Adventism that recognizing particular problems in its *investigative judgment* teaching might move it toward an inadequate conception of *the biblical theme of judgment*. This concern is now put to rest by several authors, not least in the winsome writings of Norman Young. Available are studies offering a cogent clarity on how Scripture portrays God as the faithful Judge who puts himself on trial in the cosmic struggle with “the accuser of the brethren.” Christ as Substitute and Surety is now portrayed with a biblical precision much lacking in the early experience of older Adventists.

Fourth, the issues of 1980 had enormous *pastoral significance*. Those who lead the church administratively are pastors to field ministers and people, and the frontline people who deliver pastoral care and nurture are the church’s evangelists and local ministers. There has been dynamic growth in the church’s perception of what effective pastoral care includes and how it is best delivered. There is now a stronger sense of the value of relationships in the church and a better appreciation that believers can learn to respect, value and even learn from a variety of perspectives. Such a perception augurs well for the process of building a community that is nurturing and focused on its daunting mission to offer the Good News “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Revelation 14:6, NIV).

Finally, the crisis of 1980 was in a considerable measure fed by misunderstandings over the content and implications of what is now *a maturing discipline*, *Adventist Studies*. Herein, Scripture is the foundation and Ellen White has special significance, due to the way she leads to “the greater light.” The church has moved from an unthinking certitude about Ellen White through an era of painful conflict about her life and ministry toward a time of more effective consensus about how to understand and apply her writings. We have learned through painful experience that there is no way the church can control information; rather, its role is to faithfully interpret the entire body of evidence. The writings of the church’s reversionist and rejectionist critics have increasingly been exposed as inadequate or unnecessary in the light of the primary documents that illumine the way the Lord has led and taught the church in the past. A brighter day is coming, as with greater understanding we walk by faith into the future.

VIII. Summary: An Analogy for Meditation and Application

There are many trails and roads by which people can get from Sydney to Avondale, where the Adventist school is. The Great Northern Walk is like the Appalachian Trail in the United States, challenging to hikers. Then there is a circuitous route, by way of the old convict road, and the meandering Pacific Highway, loved by motorcycle riders for its many curves. All of these require hours or days of travel. And now there is the F3 freeway, by which one can make the trip in an hour.

In his Forum talk and his Glacier View manuscript Desmond Ford suggested that to better fulfill its mission, Adventism needed to construct a freeway through the historical, biblical and theological landscape. It was no dishonor to the pioneers of Adventism that for most travelers the Northern Walk and the convict road had been superseded by the Pacific Highway, or that a freeway seemed a

necessity by 1980. After a quarter century we can see clearly that the church needed to assess, with the help of every available source of knowledge, whether a road could be constructed that was more efficient in fulfilling God’s purpose for the Advent Movement.

A quarter century later, some Adventists still prefer to persevere along the Great Northern Walk; others opt for the circuitous route through the Hunter Valley; while others choose the dangerous curves of the Pacific Highway. But in the light of detailed surveys and careful assessments of all the available data, with the support of a host of specialists, it is clear that a freeway was both needed and could be constructed. That some of Ford’s recommendations needed further consideration, adjustment, and change does not mean his contribution lacked profound significance for the church. Indeed, the freeway he proposed has already been partially completed, as people of goodwill have patiently invested their spiritual gifts to enhance understanding within their community of faith. Perhaps we can ponder and apply this analogy as we seek to travel more efficiently and directly in pursuit of Adventism’s twin goals: mission (the everlasting gospel to everyone) and readiness for the consummation (Christ’s glorious return). In this process, a paragraph from Richard Hammill’s final chapter, entitled “Reflections on My Own Spiritual Pilgrimage,” offers fitting guidance:

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, believers have found it hard to accept this double-edged principle—that true religion clings to the old that proves to be truth but reaches out also for new, more appropriate understandings, even as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount tried to explain.

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