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THE SALVATION PROCESS: DIVERGING EMPHASES

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Introduction

One of the most meaningful passages of Scripture is Romans 1:16–17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”¹ This passage became a major turning point in Martin Luther’s religious experience. At his “tower experience” and/or “theological breakthrough” (probably sometime between 1512–1515),² he realized that the “righteousness of God” referred to by Paul in this passage is a saving grace instead of a punitive retribution. Reflecting on that experience, Luther wrote, “There I felt that I was wholly born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”³

A clear understanding of the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8) should unite all born-again Christians to Christ and, consequently, also to one another; but unfortunately, this has not

¹ All Bible references not indicated otherwise are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

² Cf. Kenneth A. Strand, “Current Issues and Trends in Luther Studies,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 22/1 (1984): 155–156; Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 120–123.

³ Martin Luther, WA 54:186—“Hic me prorsus renatum esse sensi, et apertis portis in ipsam paradisum intrasse.”

always been the case. Over the centuries, many disputes and distortions of this crucial doctrine emerged within Christianity,⁴ as well as within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁵ Some studies have compared contemporary Adventist understandings of salvation with emphasis on their different nuances.⁶

The present study reassesses four approaches that each overemphasizes a specific aspect of the salvation process to the detriment of other equally important ones. These approaches are displayed largely in the chronological order in which they emerged within specific Adventist circles. Due to the shortness of this article, the use of sources is not exhaustive but only representative of each emphasis. These reflections provide a broader and more integrative approach that can help us to correct doctrinal distortions and avoid theological tensions derived from one-sided perspectives.

1. Emphasis on Sanctification and Perfection

The conversion experience places the repentant sinner in process of sanctification and perfection in Christ. The apostle Paul declared that “this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3) and “holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Christ Himself stated, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in

⁴ A helpful overview of the doctrine of justification by faith throughout the history of Christianity is provided in Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ On the development of the Adventist understanding of justification by faith, see, e.g., Bruno W. Steinweg, “Developments in the Teaching of Justification and Righteousness by Faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church After 1900” (M.A. thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1948); Norval F. Pease, *By Faith Alone* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962); Arthur Leroy Moore, *Theology in Crisis, or Ellen G. White’s Concept of Righteousness by Faith as It Relates to Contemporary SDA Issues* (Corpus Christi, TX: Life Seminars, 1980).

⁶ See John Reiber, “Three Current Views on Righteousness by Faith in the S.D.A. Church” (M.A. project, Andrews University, 1980); Martin Weber, *Who’s Got the Truth? Making Sense out of Five Different Adventist Gospels* (Silver Spring, MD: Home Study International Press, 1994); Merlin D. Burt, “Views on Salvation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” in Merlin D. Burt, *CHIS 674: Development of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 5th ed., 2nd print (Berrien Springs, MI: Center for Adventist Research, 2020), 217–226.

heaven” (Matt. 7:21, NIV). Sanctification is indeed an ever-growing but never fully attained experience, as well described by Paul,

Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus also laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let those of us who are “perfect” embrace this point of view (Phil. 3:12–15, NET).

Concerned with the Laodicean lukewarm condition of many church members (cf. Rev. 3:14–22), some Adventist authors have stressed that God’s people must reach sinless perfection prior to glorification. Their emphasis rests on the assumptions of (1) Christ’s human nature during the incarnation as having the same sinful propensities of all other human beings and (2) the final vindication of God’s character by the sinless condition reached by the last generation of God’s people. These views were emphasized by Ellet J. Waggoner (1855–1916)⁷ and Alonzo T. Jones (1850–1923)⁸ in the post-1888 years.

For Waggoner, Christ had to assume a sinful human nature to be able to die for the sinful human beings. In 1889 he argued,

Death could have no power over a sinless man, as Adam was in Eden; and it could not have had any power over Christ if the Lord had not laid on him the iniquity of us all... Christ took upon himself the flesh, not of a sinless being, but of sinful man,

⁷ Eric C. Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 157–247; Woodrow Whidden, *E. J. Waggoner: From Physician of Good News to the Agent of Division* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 193–210, 262–266; idem, “What Is Last Generation Theology? What Are the Historical Roots of Last Generation Theology?” in *God’s Character and the Last Generation*, ed. Jiří Moskala and John C. Peckham (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018), 26–31.

⁸ George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1987), 132–150.

that is, that the flesh which he assumed had all the weaknesses and sinful tendencies to which fallen human nature is subject.⁹

In 1901, Waggoner suggested that as Christ lived a sinless life in a sinful flesh, so the final generation can and will reach the same level of sinless perfection prior to the close of probation. In his own words,

If this power could not be manifested before probation ends, there would be no witness to the people; it would not be a testimony to them. But before probation ends, there will be a people so complete in him that in spite of their sinful flesh, they will live sinless lives. They will live sinless lives in mortal flesh, because he who has demonstrated [*sic*] that he has power over all flesh lives in them,—lives a sinless life in sinful flesh, and a healthful life in mortal flesh, and that will be a testimony that cannot be gainsaid,—a witness than which no greater can be given. Then the end will come.¹⁰

Likewise, A. T. Jones asserted in 1895 that “Christ’s nature is precisely our nature,” without any “particle of difference between him and you.”¹¹ “Now the flesh of Jesus Christ was our flesh, and in it was all that is in our flesh, — all the tendencies to sin that are in our flesh were in his flesh, drawing upon him to get him to consent to sin.”¹² Correlating sinless perfection with the final cleansing of the sanctuary (cf. Dan. 8:14), Jones argued,

Before He [Jesus] comes we must have been brought to that state of perfection in the complete image of Jesus. Eph. 4:7, 8, 11–13. And this state of perfection, this developing in each believer the complete image of Jesus—this is the finishing of the mystery of God, which is Christ in you the hope of glory.

⁹ E. J. Waggoner, “God Manifested in Flesh,” *Signs of the Times*, January 21, 1889, 39; see also idem, *Christ and His Righteousness* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 26–27.

¹⁰ Idem, “Sermon,” *General Conference Bulletin*, April 9, 1901, 147.

¹¹ A. T. Jones, “The Third Angel’s Message. – No. 13,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 19, 1895, 231, 233.

¹² Idem, “The Third Angel’s Message. – No. 17,” *General Conference Bulletin*, February 25, 1895, 328.

This consummation is accomplished in the cleansing of the sanctuary...

We are also in the time of the utter blotting out of all sins that have ever been against us. And the blotting out of sins is exactly this thing of the cleansing of the sanctuary; it is the finishing of all transgression in our lives; it is the making an end of all sins in our character; it is the bringing in of the very righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ, to abide alone everlastingly.¹³

In line with Waggoner and Jones, M. L. Andreasen (1876–1962)¹⁴ stressed the vindication of God’s character by the last generation.¹⁵ Andreasen declared,

The matter of greatest importance in the universe is not the salvation of men, important as that may seem. The most important thing is the clearing of God’s name from the false accusations made by Satan. The controversy is drawing to a close. God is preparing His people for the last great conflict. Satan is also getting ready. The issue is before us and will be decided in the lives of God’s people. God is depending upon us as He did upon Job.¹⁶

For Andreasen, “when Christ died on the cross, He had demonstrated in His life the possibility of keeping the law,” but “God has reserved His greatest demonstration for the last generation. This generation bears the results of accumulated sins.”¹⁷ “It is in the last generation of men living on the earth that God’s power unto

¹³ Idem, *The Consecrated Way to Christian Perfection* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 124.

¹⁴ Virginia Steinweg, *Without Fear or Favor: The Life of M. L. Andreasen* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979).

¹⁵ Raúl Germán Kruse, “Análisis comparativo entre la postura de Milian L. Andreasen y Morris Venden, respecto a la impecabilidad” (B.A. thesis, Universidad Adventista del Plata, Argentina, 2007), 15–41; Paul M. Evens, “A Historical-Contextual Analysis of the Final-Generation Theology of M. L. Andreasen” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2010); Whidden, “What Is Last Generation Theology?” 31–35.

¹⁶ M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1937), 296.

¹⁷ Ibid., 287, 289.

sanctification will stand fully revealed... In the last generation God is vindicated and Satan defeated.”¹⁸

On his turn, Herbert E. Douglass (1927–2014)¹⁹ not only underscored the last generation theology but also added to it the so-called “harvest principle.”²⁰ He quoted over and over again²¹ Ellen White’s statement, “Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.”²² For Douglass, Christ’s second coming is being delayed until God’s people reach the level of sinless perfection expected from those who will be translated to heaven without experiencing death. In his view, God requires “a higher character development from His church in the last generation” who will “be translated than from those in earlier times.”²³

These concepts are at the very core of the Last Generation Theology²⁴ prevalent in some more conservative Adventist circles, including independent ministries.²⁵ On one side, the emphasis on sanctification and

¹⁸ Ibid., 282–283.

¹⁹ Reiber, “Three Current Views on Righteousness by Faith,” 4–20; Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology*, 347–428.

²⁰ Herbert E. Douglass, *The End: Unique Voice of Adventists About the Return of Jesus* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1979), 65–82 (chap. “The Harvest Principle”).

²¹ E.g., Herbert E. Douglass, “Men of Faith—The Showcase of God’s Grace,” in *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility*, ed. Herbert E. Douglass et al. (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), 35; idem, *Why Jesus Waits: How the Sanctuary Doctrine Explains the Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 52 (n. 5); idem, *Jesus the Model Man*, Adult Sabbath School Lessons, April–June 1977, 66, 107; Herbert E. Douglass and Leo Van Dolson, *Jesus—The Benchmark of Humanity* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 127; idem, *Faith, Saying Yes to God* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 89–90; idem, *The End*, 65–82 (chap. “The Harvest Principle”).

²² Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1900), 69.

²³ Douglass, *Why Jesus Waits*, 48.

²⁴ Cf. Moskala and Peckham, eds., *God’s Character and the Last Generation*; Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Living Without an Intercessor in the Writings of Ellen G. White*, Biblical Research Institute Release 17 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020); Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Living Without an Intercessor,” *Adventist World*, June 2021, 22–23.

²⁵ North American Division, “The Seventh-day Adventist Church & Certain Private Organizations,” supplement in *Adventist Review*, November 5, 1992; idem, *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries* ([Silver Spring, MD]: North

perfection tries to help the church to overcome her Laodicean lukewarm condition and live closer to God's ideal for His children. But on the other side, it needs to be balanced by the equally important concepts of forensic justification (Eph. 2:1, 8–9; Titus 3:4–7) and the supreme vindication of God's character in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. In reality, "the life of Christ was a most perfect and thorough vindication of his Father's law."²⁶ In reality, "we have only one perfect photograph of God, and this is Jesus Christ."²⁷

Regarding the human nature of Christ during His incarnation,²⁸ Ellen White recognized that "Jesus accepted humanity when the race had been weakened by four thousand years of sin. Like every child of Adam, He accepted the results of the working of the great law of heredity."²⁹ "He took upon His sinless nature our sinful nature, that He might know how to succor those that are tempted."³⁰ But she also underscored that "in the fulness of time He was to be revealed in human form. He was to take His position at the head of humanity by taking the nature but not the sinfulness of man."³¹ And she warned,

American Division, [1992]); General Conference of SDAs, "Decision on Hope International and Associated Groups by a General Conference-appointed Committee," *Ministry*, August 2000, 28–31; George R. Knight, Glúder Quispe, and Alberto R. Timm, *El Remanente y los disidentes* (Lima, Peru: Universidad Peruana Unión / Centro de Investigación White – Peru, 2013).

²⁶ Ellen G. White, "Christ and the Law; or the Revelation of the Jew and Gentile to the Law," *Signs of the Times*, August 25, 1887, 513.

²⁷ Idem, "Laborers Together with God," Ms 70, 1899 (February 26), published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 7:906.

²⁸ For a more in-depth study of Ellen White's statements on Christ's nature during the incarnation, see Appendix B of the book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 647–660, republished in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 7A:443–456; Robert W. Olson, comp., *The Humanity of Christ: Selections from the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1989); Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on the Nature of Christ: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997).

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 49.

³⁰ Idem to "Brethren at Pacific Press," Lt. 67 (April 25), 1902; published in White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1932), 181.

³¹ Idem, "God's Purpose for Us," *Signs of the Times*, May 29, 1901, 3.

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. He is the second Adam. The first Adam was created a pure, sinless being, without a taint of sin upon him; he was in the image of God. He could fall, and he did fall through transgressing. Because of sin his posterity was born with inherent propensities of disobedience. But Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son of God. He took upon Himself human nature, and was tempted in all points as human nature is tempted. He could have sinned; He could have fallen, but not for one moment was there in Him an evil propensity. He was assailed with temptations in the wilderness, as Adam was assailed with temptations in Eden.³²

Thus, for Ellen White, Christ's human nature was at the same time degenerated (physically and morphologically) and immaculate (spiritually and morally), otherwise He could not be our sinless Savior (Heb. 4:15) and would even need a "savior" for Himself.

On the matter of sanctification, Ellen White declared,

Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime. It is not gained by a happy flight of feeling, but is the result of constantly dying to sin, and constantly living for Christ... So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained. Sanctification is the result of lifelong obedience.³³

Those who are really seeking to perfect Christian character will never indulge the thought that they are sinless... The more they discipline their minds to dwell upon the character of Christ, and the nearer they approach to His divine image, the more clearly will they discern its spotless perfection, and the more deeply will they feel their own defects. When persons claim that they are sanctified, they give sufficient evidence that

³² Idem to "Brother and Sister Baker," Lt 8 (Feb. 9), 1895, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 5:1128.

³³ Idem, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 560–561.

they are far from being holy... The greater the distance between them and their Saviour, the more righteous they appear in their own eyes... True sanctification is a daily work, continuing as long as life shall last. Those who are battling with daily temptations, overcoming their own sinful tendencies, and seeking for holiness of heart and life, make no boastful claims of holiness. They are hungering and thirsting for righteousness.³⁴

With these considerations in mind, we turn now to other distinct emphases, each in contrast to the one we just considered.

2. Emphasis on Forensic Justification

Whenever sinners accept Christ as Lord and Savior they are justified by His merits. The book of Genesis refers to Abram (later Abraham) in the following terms: “Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, NASB1995; cf. Rom. 4:1–5). The apostle Paul affirmed, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

Concerned with the strong emphases on sanctification and perfection, some Australian theologians and authors began to overstress the forensic nature of justification by faith.³⁵ For example, in 1959 Desmond Ford (1929–2019)³⁶ wrote,

The word “justification” has a forensic significance. That is to say, it has legal associations and it is vitally connected with issues of law. One definition would be “The declaring of a person to be righteous according to the law.”... Thus when the sinner personally and gratefully accepts Christ’s payment for his sins on Calvary, then God imputes to that sinner the righteousness of Christ instead of his own sins. This exceeds

³⁴ Idem, *The Sanctified Life* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965), 7–8, 10.

³⁵ Lowell Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism*, 2nd ed. ([Bermagui South, Australia]: Galilee Publishing, 2012), 187–203.

³⁶ Reiber, “Three Current Views on Righteousness by Faith,” 21–37.

pardon which implies guilt. The divine acquittal imputes innocence because of the sinner's acceptance of One who alone has perfect righteousness. Thus the whole transaction exalts not only the sacred standard of righteousness—the law of God—but also the love and mercy of the Great Judge.³⁷

In his book *Discovering God's Treasures* (1972), Ford explained that justification means that “the sinner is declared ‘not guilty’ before the sacred law, for Christ’s sake... because Christ kept the commandments perfectly and offers His righteousness to us, having also discharged by His death the debt for our sins.” For those who are in Christ, “sin remains, but does not reign.”³⁸ According to Ford, Christian perfection is a gift of God imputed to us. He declared, “God gives us the gift of a perfect standing before Him, when we receive Christ who is righteousness incarnate.” And he added, “When we perform every known duty, put away every known sin, and rely entirely upon the grace of Christ, then God imputes perfection to us.”³⁹

The emphasis on forensic justification received a much wider and controversial exposure within Adventist circles through Geoffrey J. Paxton's book, *The Shaking of Adventism* (1977).⁴⁰ As an Australian Anglican minister, Paxton used forensic justification as the sole criterion to assess the Adventist (un)faithfulness to the Protestant Reformation soteriology as he understood it. So, he was able to blame Adventism for subordinating justification to sanctification to such extent that “*sanctification becomes the predominant emphasis over justification.*”⁴¹ As one could expect, Paxton's biased assessment of Adventism was heavily criticized in Adventist academic circles.⁴²

³⁷ Desmond Ford, “Bible Question Service,” *Signs of the Times* (Australia), July 27, 1959, 2.

³⁸ *Idem*, *Discovering God's Treasures* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1972), 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey J. Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism* (Wilmington, DE: Zenith, 1977).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 135, 137 (italics in the original).

⁴² See, e.g., extensive book reviews by Fritz Guy, Herbert Douglass, Desmond Ford, and Hans LaRondelle in *Spectrum* 9/3 (July 1978): 28–57; Edwin R. Gane in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 16/2 (1978): 420–422; and William G. Johnsson in *Focus: The Andrews University Magazine*, Spring 1979, 27–35.

One of the most verbose appeals for forensic justification was the book *Judged by the Gospel* (1980) by Robert D. Brinsmead,⁴³ a former Seventh-day Adventist also from Australia. Without any constraint, Brinsmead overstressed forensic justification and denied both sanctification and the pre-Advent investigative judgment of God's people (Matt. 22:11–14; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 11:1). In his own words,

When we say “forensic,” we mean that the righteousness here demanded is not found in our repentance, faith, new birth, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our new obedience or anything else within us. It is a legal verdict outside us... So justification not only addresses the ultimate question, but by pointing exclusively to the historic work of Christ, it concerns God's ultimate act of redemption, which took place in the death and resurrection of Christ. And finally, justification by faith is God's ultimate verdict, because it means that by faith we now have the verdict of the day of judgment... Justification looks forward to the day of judgment and backward to the cross. These, however, are not two separate events. In the gospel they are seen as one. For Calvary was the end-of-the-world. The day of judgment took place in Christ's cross (John 12:31, 32).⁴⁴

Such unilateral emphases on forensic justification underscore what Christ did for us at the cross to the detriment of what He does in us when we accept Him as our Lord and Savior. The legal aspect of being *declared* righteous in God's stand needs to be balanced by the subjective experience of being *placed* in the process of sanctification. This subjective aspect is well-illustrated by the clothing of Joshua the high priest with “rich robes” (Zech. 3:1–5) and of the Lost Son with “the best robe” (Luke 15:22–24). The apostle Paul explained that justification implies the deliverance “from the power of darkness” and the conveying “into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13, 14), which results in “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). If the salvation process could be restricted only to forensic justification, then the assertion that without holiness “no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14) would become senseless.

⁴³ Robert D. Brinsmead, *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict, 1980).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

Ellen White correctly stated that “pardon and justification are one and the same thing.”⁴⁵ “But forgiveness has a broader meaning than many suppose... God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart.”⁴⁶ And she explains further, “The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.”⁴⁷ Actually, the overemphasis on forensic justification minimizes the transforming “power” of the gospel (Rom. 1:16).

3. Emphasis on Relationship with Christ

The whole saving experience is based on a personal relationship with Christ. In the analogy of the true vine and its branches (John 15:1–8), Christ declared, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The apostle Paul alludes to that relationship by the expression “in Christ.” He states, for example, that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1).

Concerned with the legalistic temptation of bringing human efforts into the sanctification process, Morris Venden (1932–2013)⁴⁸ stressed the relationship with Christ as both the very essence of true religion and the source of obedience as a “gift” from God. In his book *Justification by Faith and Your Will* (1978), Venden rejected “the idea that victorious living

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1979), 103.

⁴⁶ Idem, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1896), 114 (italics in the original).

⁴⁷ Idem, “Qualifications for the Worker,” *Review and Herald*, June 4, 1895, 353.

⁴⁸ Reiber, “Three Current Views on Righteousness by Faith,” 38–58; Kruse, “Análisis comparativo,” 42–72.

requires something we have to do ourselves *in addition* to faith.”⁴⁹ He saw a parallel between the passive Moabite War (2 Chr. 20:1–30) and the Christian experience of being saved by grace through faith. As the assembly of Judah was advised by the Spirit of the Lord not to fight in that war but only to “stand still and see the salvation of the Lord” (2 Chr. 20:14–17), so the Christian should not battle against the enemy and sin but only strive for his or her own relationship with Christ, and then wait for the victory that comes from Him.⁵⁰

In his daily devotional book *Faith that Works* (1980), Venden explained that “*sin is living a life without Christ. Sins are transgressions of the law.* Living a life apart from Christ (sin) is the cause of doing wrong things (sins).”⁵¹ But how can someone overcome his or her own sins? Based on the principle that by beholding we are transformed (2 Cor. 3:18), Venden argued that “if we look at our sins, we’ll become more like them, but if we behold Christ, we’ll become like Him.”⁵² “All our efforts toward fixing up the external, behavioral areas of our lives are of no avail, because they simply focus our attention on ourselves and draw our minds away from Jesus, who is the only source of power.”⁵³ “One of our problems in trying to live the Christian life is that we often are found trying hard to do that which God has told us we cannot do—fight sin and the devil. And we do not put forth effort to do that which He has invited us to do, that is, seek communion with Him.”⁵⁴

For Venden, obedience is a gift from God. “It is not our trying hard to make ourselves acceptable to God that makes us acceptable. Nor is it our trying hard to obey that makes us obedient. Both acceptance and obedience come as a gift from God, and are received only by faith, through the continued relationship with Him.”⁵⁵ While “the behaviorist would

⁴⁹ Morris Venden, *Salvation by Faith and Your Will* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 24 (italics in the original).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 77–82.

⁵¹ *Idem*, *Faith that Works*, Morning Watch Devotional (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 44 (italics in the original).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

define a cleansed heart in terms of actions, of victory over sinful deeds, ... the relationist would define a cleansed heart more in terms of relationship with the Lord Jesus.”⁵⁶ From a “relationist” perspective, Venden argued in his book *Obedience of Faith* (1983), “Because repentance is a gift, then obedience must also be one, for only genuine repentance makes true obedience possible. We obtain *both* by seeking fellowship and communion with Him.”⁵⁷

On the matter of spontaneous obedience, Venden argued in his book *Love God and Do as You Please* (1992) that “obedience is the fruit of faith.”⁵⁸ Consequently, we would want “to do good works because we have discovered the Good Person” and because “for the person who is really good, the one who knows Jesus as his or her personal friend, the good works spring forth spontaneously.”⁵⁹ And in the book *Never Without an Intercessor* (1996), Venden adds,

What do you try after you try relationship? There’s nothing else to try. Relationship is the end of trying. And that’s why it’s bad news. Because there’s nothing that you can do to earn or merit your obedience. It is a gift. And that’s bad news for the person who has done pretty well, on the outside, part of the time! It’s a humbling thing to realize that you are just as incapable of dealing with your present sinning as you are to deal with your sins of the past.⁶⁰

The relationship with Christ is definitely the basis of the whole salvation process. As stated by Ellen White, “If the eye is kept fixed on Christ, the work of the Spirit ceases not until the soul is conformed to His image.”⁶¹ But can we agree with Venden that obedience is “a gift from God” that “spring[s] forth spontaneously”? The answer to this question is more

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, *Obedience of Faith* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1983), 80 (italics in the original).

⁵⁸ *Idem*, *Love God and Do as You Please* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁰ *Idem*, *Never Without an Intercessor: The Good News About the Judgment* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 39.

⁶¹ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 302.

complex than a simple “Yes” or “No.” On one side, we are assured that “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). “When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience.” And more, “if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses.”⁶²

On the other side, however, we should recognize that, although the principle and motivation for obedience derive from the relationship with Christ, obedience in concrete terms is mediated by and learned from the Word of God; otherwise, the subjective relationship with Christ would end up replacing His own objective teachings—including His commandments and admonitions. One may accept Christ as our Lord and Savior and not yet start keeping the biblical Sabbath, returning tithe, following the health reform principles, etc. With the right motivation for obedience coming from God’s unmerited grace, the Christian still needs to study the Scriptures with the disposition, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9–10).

Another important question: Is the struggle for the relationship with Christ the only true effort of the Christian experience? Venden would be inclined to say “Yes,” but in this regard he should have taken more seriously into consideration his own advice that “Martin Luther should have paid more attention to the apostle James.”⁶³ Indeed, in James 4:7 we read, “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Within the context of the great cosmic-historical controversy, there is no easy life even for those completely committed to God. Struggling on our own strength, we will always lose; but submitting ourselves to God, we will be empowered by Him to overcome the powers of evil (Eph 6:10–20). In this sense, the battle is no longer ours but His.

⁶² Ibid., 668.

⁶³ Venden, *Love God and Do as You Please*, 35.

4. Emphasis on God's Love

The whole plan of salvation is an expression of God's unconditional love. Christ Himself declared, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). And the apostle Paul stated, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). But what does the expression "Christ died for us" actually mean?

The exponents of the so-called "moral influence theory" deny that Christ's death on the cross had to satisfy God's justice and that the penitent sinner is covered by the merits of Christ's righteousness.⁶⁴ For example, Jack W. Provonsha's (1920–2004) *God Is with Us* (1974) (re)defined reconciliation and atonement as "a continual and progressive, divine self-disclosure" aimed to "re-establishing the creature's faith in his Creator" and "the creature's faith in himself."⁶⁵ Instead of being covered by the righteousness of Christ, the penitent sinner merely dies "with Him through identification" with "the death of the Lamb of God."⁶⁶ In his book *You Can Go Home Again* (1982), Provonsha tried to stress God's loving character, claiming that the doctrines of substitutionary atonement and forensic justification were erroneous theories based on the Roman legal notion of justice and the medieval doctrine of merits.⁶⁷

In the same line, A. Graham Maxwell (1921–2010) suggested in his book *Can God Be Trusted?* (1977) that Christ "came to show how loving the Father is" and "died primarily to prove the righteousness of God in the great controversy"; indeed, that "God had told the truth when He warned that the wages of sin is death."⁶⁸ But in regard to Paul's assertion in Romans 3:25–26 that Christ died as a "propitiation" for the sins of the

⁶⁴ A classic historical overview on the atonement is provided by Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

⁶⁵ Jack W. Provonsha, *God Is with Us* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1974), 128–129.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁷ Jack W. Provonsha, *You Can Go Home Again* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 35, see also 23–43.

⁶⁸ A. Graham Maxwell, *Can God Be Trusted* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 85, 87–88.

world, so that He could “be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (NRSV), Maxwell preferred the version that speaks of “a sacrifice of reconciliation” to show that God “is upright himself, and that he makes those who have faith in Jesus upright also” (Goodspeed).⁶⁹ So, he excluded from this crucial Pauline passage the biblical concept of substitutionary atonement.

Under a subheading entitled “Who Needs Christ’s Merits?” (1986), Dick Winn suggested that “the concept of being accepted in Christ’s merits is simply one of heaven’s better illustrations of how God views man,” that is, of “God’s positive attitude toward humanity.”⁷⁰ An even more explicit moral-influence stand was taken by Charles Scriven (1945–) in his controversial article “God’s Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No” (1993).⁷¹ Accusing Martin Luther of supporting an “introspective, or privatistic, understanding of the cross,” Scriven aligned himself with the proponents of social justice and liberation theology in proposing that “any true account of atonement must—the necessity is absolute—*must* foster passion for community and social justice.”⁷² Under the assumption that “substitution is a metaphor when applied to the atonement,” he was not afraid of asserting, “But Christ was not our substitute. We are, with Christ, a community of fellow sufferers. The cross is laid on every Christian.”⁷³

Several Adventist theologians criticized the above-mentioned denials of substitutionary atonement.⁷⁴ Those denials do not only distort the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁰ Dick Winn, *His Healing Love*, Morning Watch book for 1986 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1986), 55.

⁷¹ Charles Scriven, “God’s Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No,” *Spectrum* 23/3 (October 1993): 31–38. Cf. idem, “No to Scriven’s ‘God’s Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No’” and idem, “Scriven Says Penal Substitutionary Atonement Is Still Unbiblical,” *Spectrum* 24/1 (July 1994): 62–64.

⁷² Idem, “God’s Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No,” 31–32.

⁷³ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁴ E.g., Norman R. Gulley, *Christ Our Substitute* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982); idem, “Model or Substitute? Does It Matter How We See Jesus?” 6-part series in *Adventist Review*, January 18, 1990, 8–10; January 25, 1990, 12–14; February 1, 1990, 19, 21–22; February 8, 1990, 8–9; February 15, 1990, 16–18; February 22, 1990, 8–10; George R. Knight, *My Gripe with God: A Study in Divine Justice and the Problem of the Cross* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1990), republished as *The Cross of Christ: God’s Work for Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008); Ángel Manuel Rodríguez,

meaning of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross (Heb. 7:27; 9:22, 28; 10:12) but also negate the relevance of His heavenly priesthood (Heb. 8:1-5; 9:23). If Christ died only to demonstrate God's love for us and His righteousness to the universe, why does Paul say that "Christ died for us" so that we may be "justified by His blood" (Rom. 5:8, 9)? Why did God offer His Son as "a propitiation by His blood" so that "He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25, 26)?

In the Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide for October–December 2012, Kwabena Donkor pointed out,

From the New Testament's point of view, Christ's redemptive death is sacrificial and substitutionary. He took our place, sacrificing Himself in our behalf, suffering our fate for us so that we don't have to suffer it ourselves. Though some reject this idea because they don't like the notion of someone suffering in place of another (especially in the place of someone who is guilty), that's the heart and soul of the gospel message.⁷⁵

As well-stated by Ellen White,

Under the mighty impulse of his love, he [Christ] took our place in the universe, and invited the ruler of all things to treat him as representative of the human family. He identified himself with our interests, bared his breast for the stroke of death, took man's guilt and its penalty, and offered in man's behalf a complete sacrifice to God. By virtue of this atonement, he has power to offer to man perfect righteousness and full salvation. Whosoever shall believe on him as a personal Saviour shall not perish, but have everlasting life.⁷⁶

Atonement and the Cross of Christ, Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, October–December 2008 (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDAs, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, 2008); George Reid, "Why Did Jesus Die? How God Saves Us," *Adventist Review*, November 5, 1992, 10–13; Aecio Cairus, *Substitutionary Atonement*, Biblical Research Institute Release 12 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015).

⁷⁵ Kwabena Donkor, *Growing in Christ*, Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, October–December 2012 (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDAs, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, 2012), 39 (Teachers' Edition, p. 54).

⁷⁶ Ellen G. White, "Address to the Church," *Review and Herald*, April 18, 1893, 241–242.

Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed."⁷⁷

Ellen White not only highlights the real meaning of Christ's atoning sacrifice but also warns us about Satan's attempts to undermine its relevance. She wrote,

Satan failed in his temptations to Christ in the wilderness. The plan of salvation has been carried out. The dear price has been paid for man's redemption. And now Satan seeks to tear away the foundation of the Christian's hope and turn the minds of men into such a channel that they may not be benefited or saved by the great sacrifice offered. He leads fallen man, through his "all deceivableness of unrighteousness," to believe that he can do very well without an atonement, that he need not depend upon a crucified and risen Saviour, that man's own merits will entitle him to God's favor.⁷⁸

In light of these amazing assertions from the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, we can only echo the words of the apostle Paul, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14, NIV).

Concluding Remarks

Our considerations have demonstrated that the salvation process is formed by various components and that one of them can be easily overemphasized to the detriment of other equally important ones. The Bible and the writings of Ellen White clearly teach (1) *sanctification and perfection*, but not perfectionism; (2) *forensic justification*, but never dissociated from the transforming power of God's grace; (3) *relationship with Christ*, but also obedience as mediated by and learned from the Scriptures; and (4) *God's love*, but never denying Christ's atoning sacrifice

⁷⁷ Idem, *The Desire of Ages*, 25.

⁷⁸ Idem, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:294–295.

on the cross. This means that each of the above-mentioned emphases needs to be corrected and/or balanced within the broader and more complex salvation process.

In her book *Steps to Christ*, Ellen White integrated all four emphases in an undistorted and balanced whole. For example, about *God's love*, she stated that "the heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death. In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift."⁷⁹ She recognized *justification* as God's work for us and in us. She declared, "Through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ the sons of Adam may become the sons of God."⁸⁰ "If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned."⁸¹ "We have nothing in ourselves of which to boast... Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us."⁸²

Ellen White underlines the importance of the *relationship with Christ* in the following statement: "As the flower turns to the sun, that the bright beams may aid in perfecting its beauty and symmetry, so should we turn to the Sun of Righteousness, that heaven's light may shine upon us, that our character may be developed into the likeness of Christ."⁸³ While stressing the need of *sanctification* and *perfection* in Christ, Ellen White also warned against the notion of sinless perfection or perfectionism. She explained, "The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan's delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ *Idem*, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

The Bible teaches us that we are *saved* by grace (Ps. 6:4; Isa. 55:1–4; Eph. 2:8–9), *justified* by faith (Gen 15:6; Hab. 2:4; Rom 5:1), and *judged* by our works (Deut. 28; Matt. 5:16–21; 25:31–46; Rev. 20:11–13). A correct and balanced understanding of the wide-ranging doctrine of salvation with its various nuances is foundational for us to avoid distorting God’s Word. But we should never forget that “a man may hear and acknowledge the whole truth, and yet know nothing of personal piety and true experimental religion. He may explain the way of salvation to others, and yet himself be a castaway.”⁸⁵ As attractive as our personal doctrine of salvation may be, it will be of no value for us if it does not exercise a sanctifying influence in our own lives (John 17:17). Let us understand *and* experience God’s amazing saving plan for us personally.

⁸⁵ Idem, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 682.