

WORLDS APART

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(written circa 1980)

In 1963 Owen Barfield published an imaginary dialogue among specialists in various intellectual disciplines—a biologist, a philosopher, a physicist, a psychiatrist, a linguist, etc.—entitled *Worlds Apart*. For Barfield the title “convey[ed] a disagreeable impression of watertight compartments.” In fact, the book emerged as a result of Barfield’s “biting” discovery that “these [contemporary] minds never met at all.”

I have borrowed Barfield’s title, having made the same sort of biting discovery about Adventist theologians and their tendency to swim in “watertight compartments” rarely meeting to discuss their theological differences.

“**L**ightning continues to dart and play about Geoffrey Paxton’s *The Shaking of Adventism*,”¹ I wrote the PREXAD (General Conference President’s Executive Administrative Council) members of the General Conference following the Anglican clergyman’s speaking tour across Adventist America. The stimulus for my missive to Adventist leaders was a position letter initiated in the President’s Committee and mailed, over the North American Division President’s signature, to each of the North American Union Presidents, requesting them to dissuade their institutional leaders from allowing Geoffrey Paxton to realize his desire “to speak in a good many Adventist centers.”

Neal Wilson’s letter continued: “Tuesday, March 14, we discussed this situation in PREXAD. As a result, I feel it necessary to share some things with you. We do not feel that it would be wise to over react, because at this point we do not feel at all threatened and should in no way indicate any panic.

“As you know, Mr. Paxton is not a Seventh-

day Adventist. He does not have the interest of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at heart. There is little or nothing that he may do or say that will build the spiritual strength of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is evident from the way he has approached the writing of his book and the interviews he has had that the book is designed to embarrass and divide the church.”²

What is embarrassing is that *Time Magazine* and The Religious News Service received copies of the letter, presumably from some Adventist “deep throat.” It is difficult to decide who to be more disappointed in, the deep throat or the architects of a letter the mindset of which is the sectarian equivalent of Archie Bunker.

The polite disappointment I registered with church leaders expressed my concern that they had begun to look on the heart in presuming to know the motives of Geoffrey Paxton. I was not attempting to defend his theology.

Shortly before closing, Wilson wrote reassuringly to his highly positioned subordinates: “I should also let you know that a scholarly critique of Mr. Paxton’s book is being prepared so that our pastors and leaders and others will have some way of evaluating the content of his book and giving direction in connection with this matter.”

The question that leaps to mind is, “If our pastors and leaders and others cannot read and evaluate the book themselves, how will they make any sense of a scholarly critique?”

Only time will tell whether Paxton has ulterior motives. But his repudiation of the too-frequent dismissal of Adventists as a cult, or non-Christian

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sect, is uncommon and heartening: “No, whatever we think of this or that Adventist ‘distinctive,’ we have to recognize the movement as being Christian.”

The appearance of Paxton and his book and the response of PREXAD (the requests, even demands, that Paxton not be allowed to speak in SDA centers) is an indication of the tendency for Adventist leaders to politicize theology. The intentional separation of King and Priesthood in ancient Israel should warn us of the compromising dangers in mixing theology and polity. So far, for good or ill, this politicizing has had the unintended effect of advertising books and broadcasting viewpoints that probably would not otherwise have had nearly the hearing. It is fitting, in view of Paxton’s nationality, to say that it boomeranged. To the Adventist concerned for the free play of ideas, this is a positive result that over the long haul may provide heuristic benefits.

This politicizing, however, also results in strongly polarized theological loyalties. In my immediate community there is a church where the senior pastor and one of his associates held incompatible views on righteousness by faith. As a result the associate pastor left without the blessing of his senior who would read him out of the ministry altogether.

The same senior pastor has shrilly attacked one of Adventism’s prolific, old theologians both in print and public joust. The senior pastor maintains what some roughly label the *Review and Herald* position (see 1976 *Sabbath School Quarterly*, “Jesus the Model Man”), and any differences cannot rise to the dignity of error. Dissent from Revelation so final can only be willful and wicked.

Meditating on this theological and political struggle over Righteousness by Faith, the lapidary thought occurs that we who consider ourselves a prophetic—and prophetically anticipated—people

could fail to fill our end-time role as certainly as did the Children of Israel, and with all the attendant ignominy. Good SDA hermeneutic demands the possibility: all prophecy is conditional.

As most are aware, the theological doctrine lifted to attention of late by its politicization is Righteousness by Faith. Swords cross over the nervous question of assurance. What is the mechanism of Salvation? Are we saved by justification alone? or by justification and sanctification? Do they occur together? Does imparted righteousness gradually replace imputed righteousness?

A proper concern for personal salvation inspires the individual desiring assurance of a place in the Kingdom to request a direct and clear answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” In the current discussion seemingly contradictory responses are being provided. Faced with incompatible statements, all given with solemn authority and spiritual fervor, the typical churchgoer isn’t sure really whether to breathe or swallow.

Among fallen human beings it is unfortunate, but understandable, that discussions over an issue with such personal, eschatological significance often become verbal duels. But the Son of Man really did not come to bring a sword, but peace. Consequently, theologians—being theologians—tend to take long-range, passive-aggressive pot shots at each other’s theology when speaking to lay audiences, certainly not when their theological detractors are present.

A national magazine editor remarked, on hearing that \$600,000 had been allocated to gather in seclusion for one year twelve of America’s leading secular philosophers at Santa Barbara just to think about thinking, that the expenditure of \$50,000 odd per year apiece towards the withdrawal from public life of the average modern philosopher was a price America could ill afford not to pay. I am

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reminded, similarly, of the continuing plethora of denominationally sponsored conferences on Righteousness by Faith.

The most recent “consultation” was held in Washington, August 6-11, and included the most prominent exponents (Douglass, Ford, and others) of diverging opinion on the relationship of Justification and Sanctification to Righteousness by Faith. As with Middle East Summits, no agreements were reached, but negotiations will resume in February. (To get a brief glimpse of the discussants’ styles and viewpoints, see the responses to *The Shaking of Adventism* by Herbert Douglass, Desmond Ford, and Hans LaRondelle in the most recent issue of *Spectrum*.)³

To question the value of these conferences (or the thinkers who attend) is not necessarily to pander to the “worlds apart” phenomenon, because, unfortunately, when SDA theologians espousing tangential opinion do meet for discussion, it is at the request of Leadership whose overriding concern is for a united front, the desire to procrusteanize diverging views into a cozy bed of consensus. Besides, the attempt to arrive at theological consensus, rationally, via committee, is an effort to make theology (to borrow professor Oakshott’s phrase) “as the crow flies,” an enterprise largely foredoomed.

The freedoms the church desires to have in the world, which are elaborated continually in *Liberty* magazine, should the more surely be exemplified within the church body and its commitment to the knowing of truth and the freedom to pursue it. Indeed, Elder Neal Wilson told me in public forum that “truth will take care of itself” following my query whether he was any less uncomfortable since the North American tour of Geoffrey Paxton than he had been before his visit to our latitudes (an obvious

reference to my having read the leadership letter). He reiterated his assessment of Paxton’s motive to embarrass the church and the fact that he was not an Adventist, going on to say that leadership’s mistake was not in denying Paxton access to church-owned facilities, but in acting belatedly, after appointments had been scheduled. Moreover, he said that mail from the constituency had been running about ten to one in favor of leadership’s direction and counsel. Yet he could say, in the next breath, that truth will take care of itself.

In this context I would like to paraphrase Jefferson in his first inaugural address: “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this church or to change its spiritual form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where the Spirit reigns free to combat it.”

If we cannot look for freedom here In the Body of Christ we need not look for it long from the world. This entire cosmic controversy continues, as we understand it, over the issue of freedom—God desiring a universe that runs smoothly, happily, but freely. And what terrible lengths He has been willing to go to see that He is not seen as a despotic tyrant.

As Professor Richard Rice has pointed out, the soteriological branch of Christian theology has hardly found its way into the catalogue of discussions printed thus far in *Spectrum*. That it should now appear in some form is more a response to continuing politico-theological debate among the leaders and theologians than merely an attempt to round out the topical spectrum. It is appropriate, too (and could happen no other way), that the discussion of soteriological differences within the SDA church should appear in *Spectrum* which may be Adventism’s only functioning alembic—an instrument, we recall, that

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refines by a process resembling distillation—treated, however, more like a rumrunner’s bayou still, and a dissociation from which is a ritual exhibition of doctrinal purity.

Our Anglican friend from down under, and the response of church leaders to his efforts to dialogue with Adventists, has helped to advertise, within the church, the two widely held positions on Righteousness by Faith. Evidence of the deep interest among SDA membership concerning this issue was the healthy rejection of leadership’s effort to subvert Paxton’s appointments and the rapid sellout of the first printing (7,000 hard cover copies) of *The Shaking of Adventism*.

As Paxton wheeled across Adventist North America peddling salvation by Justification alone, and decrying what he termed the “synthesis” or the “Review and Herald position” (to Paxton its emphasis on Sanctification, or “victory life,” amounted to salvation by works or Tridentine or Roman Catholic theology), he took occasional shots at what he considered to be a third, developing theology within Adventism which he pejoratively and errantly labeled the Moral Influence theory of the atonement.

It is natural that the atonement should slip into the discussion when the question of salvation is faced. In fact, it is the opinion of the writer that the only possible way to resolve the uncivil war over Righteousness by Faith is to examine the atonement—the Cross itself—to discover how we are saved and how we can have real assurance.

This third theology that Paxton encountered in surprising preponderance as he toured the U.S. is a theology that interprets the atonement through distinctly Adventist eyes. When the discussion is shifted slightly from one aspect of Salvation to the central, historical, saving event, both the antagonists

over Righteousness by Faith—those emphasizing justification alone, and those wanting to include sanctification—find themselves making common cause, explicitly or implicitly, in a traditional, forensic understanding of the Cross. This over against what, again, Ford, Paxton, and others have mistakenly labeled the moral influence theory of the atonement.

Joining camps regarding what Jesus accomplished on Calvary, however, does not solve the two parties’ inability to agree on what is included in the concept Righteousness by Faith. What I do propose is that an open consideration and comparison of the two views of the atonement will illustrate the inane nature of the unseemly brawl over Righteousness by Faith.

As we examine cursorily these two vectors of theological thought within Adventism regarding the work of Christ on the Cross, we will seek to maintain the twin concerns for advance and prudence: simultaneously concerned with the shape of the ideal or paradigmatic theology toward which we must endeavor, and the pace with which it is imaginable to advance toward that ideal theology cognizant of the essential realization that any progress is necessarily asymptotic—that is, we cannot expect theological home runs and definitive answers. But then we shall be studying the plan of salvation we are told through all eternity.

One reason for bringing a critical abstract of these soteriological perspectives to the pages of *Spectrum* is to nudge them into dialogue. Because their most articulate exponents come together in real conversation no often than like magnet poles (Herbert Douglass is a notable exception), this theological gadfly is lofting a flying canard in the genuine hope of drawing theological flak. If it succeeds, and the theological guns are engaged, I will crouch behind the bags, field glasses raised,

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watching for truth to take the field.

Before describing and examining these two soteriological assertions, it is worth averring that neither view is heretical if we can be satisfied the common denominator which both affirm: the absolute centrality of Cross of Christ to the Divine management of History.

Historical precedence goes to those Adventist theologians who understand the Cross of Christ and our Salvation with the reformers, Luther and in particular, as a forensic or legal transaction. Among Adventist theologians who hold that viewpoint Dr. Desmond Ford is currently most visible. In this concern he shares the views of self-styled “Babylonian” Geoffrey Paxton.

The historical roots for this understanding of the atonement date at least to Anselm (1033-1109) who first systematically presented the satisfaction argument for the Cross in which “the ransom for sin was both required by God and paid by God.”⁴ Anselm’s views were broadened and elated more Biblically by Martin Luther and fully systematized by John in building on Eusebius’ three-fold office of Christ as Prophet, King, Priest.

For our present purpose it is most useful to note that Dr. Desmond understands the Cross as largely penal. He cites Romans 3 as “the central explanation in the New Testament on

the Cross of Christ,” and verse 26 to argue that God could not have been just while forgiving us without the death of Jesus. For Ford the Cross represents “a display of righteousness whereby it is shown that violations of the law can’t be winked at in any way.”⁵ (I’ve used and will continue to use Dr. Ford as the archetypal representative of Forensic theology, and here and there, Geoffrey Paxton. The primary exponents of the non-forensic view of the

atonement are Graham Maxwell and Jack Provonsha. They, too, in spots, will speak for themselves.)

Like the traditional, forensic position of Ford and others, the atonement theory of Maxwell and Provonsha affirms that we are saved by Grace through Faith in Jesus. It is different, however, in understanding the Cross primarily as a revelation. Citing Jesus’ parable Prodigal Son, Maxwell and Provonsha maintain that God has offered unencumbered Grace to sinners, and that it was man who needed the Cross, not God. In this last particular they follow Abelard (1079-1142) and, later, nineteenth century elaborations of the “Moral Influence Theory” whose main premise is that the Cross was given so that man might respond in love. The emphasis was on a badly needed change in man denying the need for any adjustment in God’s posture to men.

“Abelard maintained that there was nothing in the nature of God to the free exercise of forgiveness and that the only impediment to it was in men, not in God.”⁶ He advocated “that interpretation of the work of which sees in it supremely love enkindling love.”⁷

What is unique, and manifestly Adventist, in the expositions of the Cross by Maxwell and Provonsha, is their contention that Ellen White’s *Great Controversy* scenario provides both the context and the explanation for the necessity of Jesus’ death on Calvary. Although this position is most specifically Adventist in its explanation, it is not the position endorsed by church organs. Part of its problem of acceptance is its relatively low profile.

Maxwell and Provonsha argue that the Cross demonstrated a number of things (particularly the truly loving nature of God and the awful consequences of sin) that refuted the Devil’s accusations about God, His character and Government, and which

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countered the doubts Satan cast on God's warning that the consequences of sin is death. These and other questions were answered at the Cross.

The following outline contrasts *a few* of the major points of conflict between the Forensic and Demonstrative views of the Atonement.

(1a) In Forensic views of the atonement the emphasis is on the desperate need of the sinner to be justified or cleansed from guilt. Salvation, or a right standing, or acceptability with God, is contingent upon the penalty for our breaking the law being paid by Another (Substitution).

(1b) I have labeled the non-forensic understanding of the Atonement the Demonstrative theory because its proponents understand the Cross primarily as a revelation of many things which fit loosely under the word Grace. But because the term "revelation" comes with many semantic loadings, I have disqualified it as a title, opting instead for the Demonstrative theory of the Atonement. The detractors of this position label it Moral Influence theory primarily because it shares the belief that the Cross was intended to bring about a change in man, not in God.

(2a) Forensic theology of the Cross hangs on the concept of Substitution and Representation. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Christ took our place dying the death that the Law, or Justice, demanded.

(2b) Demonstrative thinking is good for its name at this point, enumerating several truths revealed clearly at the Cross: The Gracious love of God, the awful nature of evil, and the certainty that God can be trusted when He describes the consequences of disorderly living in His orderly universe.

(3a) The writings of St. Paul (particularly Romans the third chapter) are considered normative and

authoritative for Forensic interpretations of the Cross. Quoting Desmond Ford: "Romans is the central explanation in the New Testament on the Cross of Christ." "[Paul] synthesizes the whole weight of God's preceding revelation. The whole Old Testament is forensic."⁸

(3b) All sixty-six books of Scripture and the writings of Ellen White—interpreted in light of the life and teachings of Christ and the Great Controversy in which He was engaged—comprise the background and illumination for the Demonstrative explanation of what happened at the Cross.

(4a) A rather literal interpretation of the forensic metaphors in Scripture—particularly those of Paul in Romans—is demanded by exponents of forensic explanations of the atonement. When others suggest that Christ's teaching—particularly the Prodigal Son parable—sheds light on God's attitude toward sinners, Ford says, "I wouldn't be comfortable trying to take a parable to tell the whole story of salvation," and he cites the copious presence of forensic language in the *Desire of Ages* chapter on Gethsemane and Calvary and "all the forensic language there about surety, substitution, wrath."⁹

(4b) The Demonstrative advocates interpret the Old Testament sacrificial system and the forensic language of Paul as metaphors of Grace, realizing that the transcendent cannot be described apart from metaphor. This from an understanding of the Great Controversy and the view of God's posture to sinners taught by Christ through the parable of the Prodigal Son and even more profoundly demonstrated by the way Jesus treated sinners while He lived among us. God, represented by Jesus, did not become Gracious after the Cross, they contend.

(5a) The Forensic concept of sin tends to be objective. There is a tendency to ascribe ontological

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properties to sin; it is *something*. You can get it on you. “I have guilt upon me,” as Ford says. Sins, then, can be moved about in books. And the sinner has a “status” or a “standing” which only can be affected by Christ standing in the sinner’s place. Only Christ’s “work done for me matches the Holy Law,” says Ford.¹⁰

(5b) By great contrast, the Demonstrative approach to sin emphasizes its subjective nature. It is a severed or hostile relationship, a condition rather than a status, a state rather than a legal standing. This alienated condition called sin expresses its misery not only in estrangement from God but from our fellow humans and ourselves. The Demonstrative theory explains the Cross as necessary to heal sinners because only the Cross could repair the relationship broken by sin.

(6a) Speaking about “God’s holy law” and “the law accusing sinners,” the Forensic explanation of the law tends to objectify—even anthropomorphize—the law, giving it properties of its own, including the capacity to act as a prosecutor. Still, Dr. Ford says, “the law isn’t something outside [God]. The law is just what God is.”¹¹ But that leaves God accusing sinners instead of “the accuser of the brethren,” Satan.

(6b) The law of God—from the Demonstrative perspective—is the way God made the universe and its creatures to operate: the way things are. The Ten Commandments are seen as the human being’s owner’s manual, or service manual. Living out of harmony with the way we were optimally created to live, results, naturally, in a host of miseries ending in death, which Maxwell explains, “is the consequence of disorderly living in an orderly universe.”¹²

(7a) The Forensic view of the atonement would have to view the death of Christ as an execution—such as the wicked will receive at the end of the

age—since Jesus was made to be sin in our place and died the second death for us. Paxton speaks euphemistically about “the Father putting forward the Son to be a propitiation, but at the same time giving Himself in His Son.”¹³

(7b) The Demonstrative approach explains the second death of the wicked as the natural consequence of separation from God’s sustaining power brought on by intractable rebellion. God “gives them up,” or “lets them go.” Rather than paying the price or penalty for disobedience on the Cross, God demonstrated the terrible consequences of separation in Jesus who was made sin for us and cried out, “Why have you given me up?”

(8a) Ford, Paxton, and others, perceiving a lack of assurance of salvation among the Adventists they encounter, have attempted to rectify this doubt, this uncertainty, by preaching justification with a heavy legal, transactional emphasis. Reacting also to what they feel is a dangerous leaning toward a “Tridentine” theology of “salvation by works” or “imparted righteousness” or “salvation by sanctification,” they have been making it very clear that our assurance of salvation is based on what Christ did on Calvary, not what Christ is doing in me. And the argument rages whether Righteousness by Faith includes only justification or also sanctification.

(8b) Meanwhile, the Demonstrative adherents feel that the uproar over Righteousness by Faith is unfortunate since they believe, behind it all, “our assurance is based on the kind of Person God is,” and that a thorough study of Scripture fosters trust in statements like Paul’s in Romans 1:17 where the Righteousness of God is revealed as the good news of His power to heal and save. If we believe that, the doubt over assurance is unfounded.

Well, is the cross primarily a substitution? Or is

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it at its heart a revelation? Is it a legitimate method, for understanding the Cross and its purpose, to accept Paul's forensic language as normative, and to take that language quite literally? Or do we need to focus more on Christ's revelation of God and His central role in the Great Controversy? And should not the tendency for Paul to emphasize legal terminology be understood as—at least in part—a reflection of the period and culture in which he lived and to which he tendered his unprecedented message?

We will argue some of the contrasts between Forensic and Demonstrative views of the atonement in the space that remains, pretending in no way to be unbiased.

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Regarding the substitutionary or representative nature of the Forensic understanding of the Cross, Desmond Ford says “that God has chosen to see the human family as one. God's covenant arrangement in the beginning was that if Adam did the right thing all would be blessed; if he didn't, all would be cursed. There doesn't seem to be any [other] way of reading Romans 5:12-18 [“By the offense of one condemnation came upon all men.”].”¹⁴

But Paul goes on to say that the performance of One is reckoned to all—the performance, not the death. Paul is saying that if you love and trust the revelation of God in Jesus, He will consider you the way He considers Jesus: Holy, spotless, trustworthy—a son! This doesn't sound like God demanding that somebody pay the penalty for sin before He'll accept sinners back. No conditional Grace here. Just a statement to give us confidence, instead of dread, when we think of God and how He regards us. Provonsha makes the interesting point that “Enoch has to come back if somebody—in this

satisfaction theory—doesn't pay.” Not to mention Moses and Elijah.¹⁵

The notion of Grace implies free, unconditional acceptance, and is incompatible with the teaching that Grace is dependent on someone paying the price—a bargain. We sing a song that expresses the wonderful truth that we are saved by “Amazing Grace.” But Grace contingent upon a death—no matter whose—is not grace, by definition. But those Forensic theologians, including Ford, who argue that “it remains Grace because the payment cost Another much but us nothing,” immediately face the question: “Who is being paid?” Anselm, back in the eleventh century, suggested that God required and God paid. From this, very human perspective that seems rather masochistic of God, or even as if the Trinity were kidding itself; but what a painful kind of self-delusion.

It is as if the Trinity were to assemble in the Unity of Their Oneness—before the foundations of the earth—and vote an immutable law to the effect that if one of the creatures the Word is going to breathe into existence disobeys or rebels, One of Us is going to kill Ourselves before We will accept Our creation back into Grace.

That is a crass analogy, but it is the logical end point of the Forensic theology that demands a substitutionary death for acceptance with God. Crass analogies can serve as a sort of theological sonar, warning us, in our analytical fog, of the destination particular channels of thought will bring, or the shallow reef awaiting hasty exegesis, or the hidden shoals of a faulty hermeneutic. And the prudent sailor, forewarned, will consult the chart and take fresh sightings.

But Geoffrey Paxton, faced with the problem of a God who pays the demands of His own law by

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executing His Son, says, “Don’t blame me for the doctrine of the Trinity. It’s Biblical, and we have to live with it.”¹⁶

Some traditional, forensic thinkers say Justice demanded that the penalty for sin be paid. But Justice is an abstraction, not a person. This leaves us with God, again, as the embodiment of Justice, demanding blood. And here we encounter a profound, conceptual difference between Forensic and Demonstrative comprehensions of Divine Justice. Many are fond of saying that “Justice and Mercy met at the Cross,” as if the two were very different. Following Anselm’s logic, we have a Janus-faced God; His Justice face demanding the sinner’s blood, and His Mercy face providing itself in the sinner’s place.

This does not provide a very satisfying, credible picture of God. Certainly it is a different view than that painted in Christ’s parable of the Prodigal Son with the ever-anxiously waiting Father who has forgiven before forgiveness was even desired.

The error in forensic theology, at this point, is in equating the justice that is necessary in fallen human societies, to maintain order, with the Divine idea or dispensation of justice. Forensic theology, unwittingly, has identified the justice of God with the “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” system so notorious in the Middle East; the kind of thinking that leads to the inexorable seeking of revenge.

Mistakenly assuming God to be operating from a retributive system of justice has led some, inevitably, to tortured attempts to have a loving God—and a Cross—that could be taken seriously. As it is, the secular man, approaching traditional explanations of Calvary, sincerely, writes it off—if he’s thoughtful—to the credulity of a darker age, or simply writes it off.

Faced, in the context of this issue, with Christ’s declaration, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye

for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you . . . Love your enemies,” Desmond Ford says, “The only reason Jesus could advise us to turn the other cheek was because His own Atonement was to pay the legal demands of the law.”¹⁷ Geoffrey Paxton responded similarly to the picture of the Prodigal’s waiting Father saying, “That is a picture of the Father after the Cross.”¹⁸ Ford also says, “The reason Christ could say you can treat evil with a forgiving spirit, is because the price for evil has been paid.”¹⁹

Proponents of the Demonstrative view are troubled by this forensic tendency to require a change in God at the Cross. Elder Smuts van Rooyen, who “love(s) the concept of forensic justification,” states very clearly that something had to change in God’s attitude towards mankind at the Cross.²⁰ Ford suggests “what Smuts meant was that the Cross does not change

God’s feelings of love to the sinner but does change God’s actual relation to us.”²¹ The idea of God changing is disturbing to those who attempt to understand the Eternal Father as consistent, dependable, and trustworthy.

Strangely, it is on this very desire to have a Father who has always been gracious in His attitude toward sinners, that the Forensic expositors accuse the advocates of the Demonstrative theory of the atonement as merely following “the old Moral Influence Theory” of the atonement. Says Paxton, “The missionary book [*Can God be Trusted?*] is highly defective this year in its understanding of the Cross of Christ.”²² Ford is very clear: “Moral influence theory says that the Cross did not change God in any way in attitude, but it changes the sinner. That is the moral influence theory.”²³

The question is not so much what the Moral Influence Theory teaches as whether that is the

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essential teaching of Maxwell and Provonsha in the Demonstrative view. “Well, as far as it goes it’s all right,” says Maxwell of the Moral Influence Theory. “The Cross has a tremendous appeal to us,” he continues, “but it does not only reveal love—that’s overwhelming there—but it had something to say about sin, the consequences of sin, all the issues in the Great Controversy.”²⁴

Quoth Paxton, “The Moral Influence Theory seems to be raging in Loma Linda University at the present.” “There the Gospel is said to be the demonstration that God is eternally loving, and it’s hinted at best, and sometimes more explicit than that, and said that those who think that God requires satisfaction for wrong done to His law are actually mislead concerning the character of God, and I daresay by Satan.”²⁵

Dr. Maxwell identifies the problem in his kindly way: “How alone we are in this understanding of the great controversy over the character of God. Our good friends who are quoting the Reformers so much have that limitation. The Reformers had no Great Controversy over the character of God. So Luther’s best statements are said without any conception of a Great Controversy.” The essential core of the Demonstrative view is, as Maxwell sees it, that “everything God has done has been to say something. Calvary spoke to sin, death and God’s truthfulness.”

It is interesting that the liabilities in Abelard—although he dissected correctly a major weakness in Forensic atonement theory—are corrected, justified, if you will—by this distinctly Adventist contribution toward a workable cosmo-theological atonement perspective.

Individuals attracted to a Forensic or legal view of justification are jealous for the law of God, and are not only protective of it but attribute to it qualities

which it does not have. There is the tendency to anthropomorphize the law—giving it personal qualities—as a result of taking too literally such phrases as, “The Law demands,” “The law accuses,” etc. Also, it is spoken of sometimes as if it were something outside of God to which He, like us, must answer.

Rightly understood, God’s law is His style of being—His principles of operation expressed in the created reality of all matter and creaturehood.

The physical construction and rules relating to a modern freeway provide an appropriate analogy here: The freeway driver may choose to ignore the divider in the freeway and come to grief as a consequence—at worst he dies, at best his insurance premiums climb. We break the law when we speed, lose control in a curve and divide our car with a tree. But we are not punished arbitrarily for that infraction; we suffer the consequences of driving out of harmony with the system. Oh, yes, it appears that the analogy breaks down when I break the speed limit and a peace officer writes me a ticket and the judge fines me in court. I would suggest that the police and courts and fines are analogous, in their purpose, to God in the Old Testament trying to spare a stiff-necked people from the very final, and much more serious, consequences of continued disorderly living where the trust and freedom which enables societies to cohere does finally dissolve.

Another point of contention, we noticed, is the contrasting methods for interpreting the forensic language of Paul—particularly in Romans—and the symbols in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. The Demonstrative camp feels that there is more than a semantic difference between the kind of God who explains (by demonstration on the Cross) that the consequences of sin (separation from

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God) is death, and the God pictured as saying, “I’ll kill you if you disobey me.”

It is the difference, as Graham Maxwell likes to put it, between “the thundering on Sinai and the still small voice at the mouth of the cave.” “It is the same mountain,” he points out, “but the listeners are different.” God speaks differently to children and adults. How He speaks depends on our maturity, on our willingness to listen and be taught.²⁶

This difference is difficult to suggest without the Forensic theologians drawing the insulting inference that theirs is a theology for infants; that they are at the foot of Sinai. But the darers have gone first by targeting “deficient views of the atonement which blot out New Testament statements and metaphors.”²⁷ Ford also says, “It is dangerous to assume that we can come up with a whole batch of uninspired substitutes.”²⁸

Ford explains his basis for considering Paul’s forensic language normative: “[Paul] synthesizes the whole weight of God’s preceding revelation. The whole Old Testament is forensic. The expression ‘Covenant’ which covers both books, the Old and New Covenants (which we call Testaments), the use of the Ten Commandments, the Sanctuary imagery, the use of Mercy Seat, the Ark of the Covenant, the terms like Righteousness and so on; the terms are all forensic, there’s no dodging it.” Ford agrees that the forensic terms of Paul are metaphors, “but they are metaphors of reality,” he says, “not metaphors of metaphors.”²⁹

Provonsha reminds us “the old Testament sacrificial rituals were also metaphors (something explained in terms of something else). The Children of Israel were not saved by ritual,” he says, “rather by Divine Grace.”³⁰

So, when Paul uses forensic metaphors to

synthesize “the whole weight of God’s preceding revelation,” he is, in fact, using metaphors of metaphors. That is not in any way, however, to disqualify or minimize their theological significance.

The inability to discuss these transcendent ideas apart from metaphor leaves room for the variety of interpretations that exist. And it warns us, also, to follow cautiously and faithfully where the lines of logic our interpretation of the metaphors of salvation may lead us. What does our understanding of the language of Scripture say about God? Does it closely parallel the kind of Person revealed in Jesus’ life and teaching? If not, we should reexamine.

Those holding a Forensic emphasis to the Cross, and Salvation generally, would do well to consider the possibility that their theology of the atonement unintentionally implies a God whose character resembles the description of God in Satan’s accusations that God is arbitrary, harsh, and severe. It suggests—by following logic—that the character of God includes a law of retributive justice (an eye for an eye) that could not be consistent with itself, or just, or provide satisfaction—while saving sinners—unless someone paid the penalty. And, Provonsha reminds us, “the Reformers weren’t much help substituting Jesus for a Lamb to appease God.”³¹

But Ford sees it this way: “I think God needed the payment in this sense, that unless the price was paid, it would not be demonstrated that the wages of sin is death.” In that sentence, for a moment, he has it. He has equated the price that was paid with a demonstration—a demonstration that the wages of sin is death. Now if he could just replace the “wages of sin” with the “consequences of sin,” we’d be of one mind. Instead he backs away from that momentary insight to say that God’s “justice certainly involves that the law can never be sniffed at or disregarded or

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winked at. I think it was Spurgeon,” he continues, “who said he would never have felt comfortable if God had forgiven his sins without anything being done about them. I think that’s what we all know intuitively,” says Ford. “It’s the Cross that gives us the sense of relief that God could be just and forgive us.”³²

This last illustrates a central misunderstanding about the purpose of punishment. We all know children who have discovered the price for certain cherished misbehaviors. They indulge themselves, tolerate the punishment, and go away, guilt free, to indulge again—having learned nothing about the intrinsically damaging nature of their behavior. Neither was “the Cross,” Provonsha cautions, “something after which God felt better.” It was not a Divine catharsis.³³

God doesn’t need or wish to punish sinners. But as Provonsha points out, “Had God pardoned without the atonement, without reestablishing or repairing the broken relationship, sin would be immortalized.” He continues, “To forgive sinners without overcoming estrangement (leaving sinners in the pigpen), is to say nothing to the purpose (sinners are left in the pigpen).”³⁴ God did not forgive us but say someone has to die; Jesus died to tell us we are forgiven, if we want to be. Fellowship is available. The separation is over.

So often the traditional explanations of why Christ had to die imply a Medo-Persian God whose law knows no exception, or a Moloch who demands blood sacrifices from his subjects. However inadvertent this picture of God, it is there, inextricably woven into the theological scenery like the faces so many of us, as youngsters, picked out of the puzzle pictures in *Our Little Friend*.

Forensically-oriented Adventist theologians

understand hell to be the destructive fire of the last days. Demonstrative theology asks whether there isn’t a difference, that matters, between portraying God as using a Divine flame-thrower on the unrepentant sinner and a rendering that illustrates the awful consequences of intractable rebellion to be the sinner’s inability to tolerate the unveiled Glory of the returning Conqueror. “It has the same sizzling effect,” was the response of one forensic theoretician.

Demonstrative theology understands the death of sinners not as execution but as the natural, well advertised, consequence of rebelliously exercised freedom. The judgment is not a legal issue. If God’s basis for response to sin was legal, He could have exercised it immediately. The basis for judgment is: “Who can be trusted with immortality in a free Society?” And only those who are, as Maxwell and Provonsha so often put it, “safe to save” will be able to participate in “the free society of the hereafter.” (For a moving account of what God does to the unrepentant, read Hosea 11.)

So the Cross, according to Demonstrative proponents, is seen as the graciously appropriate response to the sin problem. If sin is understood as a condition which results in estrangement, or a broken relationship, then sins cannot literally be buried; confirming, what many have contended, that the forensic language, explaining the purpose of the Cross, is metaphorical. Keeping in mind our best understanding of sin as a damaged or broken relationship, it becomes useful to talk about the Cross as God’s attempt to induce men to bury the hatchet—to initiate peace talks. Even though it is men who estranged themselves from God, He came into the enemy camp, in Jesus, unarmed, as a gesture of good faith, and allowed Himself to be murdered, thereby demonstrating for the entire universe His truly loving

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nature and, simultaneously, exposing the hideous face of evil and all its destructive consequences.

G. S. Hendry speaks of the Cross of Jesus this way: “Death was inherent in His mission as the bearer of the forgiveness of God to men. Forgiveness has its reality in a personal relationship in which alienation is countered by an acceptance that transcends it. Opposition is opposed by a love that overcomes it. The encounter of Divine Grace and human sin has the nature of a collision, and as such it necessarily involves suffering. The Cross marks the climax of this suffering.”³⁵

“[Christ] came as the Bearer of forgiveness, which is the gift of the grace of God from all eternity. He dispensed forgiveness to men from the beginning of His public ministry, with never a suggestion that it was contingent upon any work that He did, but only that it was present in Him in a unique way. Nor did He ever suggest that only with His mission had God begun to be gracious, or that there had been no forgiveness for men before He came. Any such suggestion would be utterly at variance with the message of the Old Testament.”³⁶

How do we explain the swallowing distance between these two radically different approaches to God’s nature and the plan for saving humans? Should a reconciliation be attempted? Here are two nearly identical statements that expose the bedrock differences:

1.) The Forensic statement: God could not have been righteous (legally self-consistent) if He saved repentant sinners without the death of Jesus (paid penalty for sin).

2.) The Demonstrative statement: God could not have been seen as righteous (trustworthy, honest) if He saved repentant sinners without the death of Jesus (demonstration of alienation’s consequences).

Statement one portrays an authoritarian society where order is kept through strict legality: police state, marshal law.

Statement two provides for a free society whose members are trustworthy.

These two sentences are talking about two planets ruled by two different Gods—truly, Worlds Apart!

Speaking in Loma Linda, Geoffrey Paxton described Demonstrative theology as “bringing a far greater challenge—in certain respects—to the Adventist movement than I’ve really sort of brought.” He saw it as “extensive among the sort of lay professional stratum of Adventists,” and said, “I can see some prima facie reasons why that may be the case,” and explained that it is “easy for a harsh element—a demanding, cold, calculating, transaction-based type of approach—to enter into a lot of our preaching and teaching, and I think this offends sensitive spirits. I think that a person who is brilliant by nature tends to be very offended at this type of thing. So I see a great base there [for the demonstrative approach].”³⁷

But we follow the Australian chameleon from Loma Linda to Portland and see his colors change. What he had described as “a fairly unsophisticated portrayal of the meaning of the atonement,” in Loma Linda becomes in Portland “a complex and intricate approach the extent of which is debatable [but] more extensive than is healthy.”³⁸

Describing the two forms of salvation, he parodies the Demonstrative view of the Cross—“God saves us by revealing His love to us,” and his own Forensic method—“God reveals His love to us by saving us. There’s a big difference.”³⁹

And then he turns Jeremiah, predicting, “If this approach to the atonement gains supremacy in Seventh-day Adventism it will reduce Adventism to

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lawlessness, and it will mean the end of Adventism as it is historically. . . . Adventism will become a worse form of Babylonianism than at the beginning.”⁴⁰

But he’s not through. Siphoning off the sound of his own voice he announces “that this [Demonstrative] approach to the atonement finally reduces Adventism even to something worse than sloppy, sentimentalistic Babylonianism.” And then rejects the picture of God’s love portrayed by Maxwell and Provonsha saying, “It’s not an ooey, gooey, funny, sentimentalistic sort of throb in the heart of the pancreas somewhere.” It’s not an “airy, fairy, eternal attribute as such.”⁴¹

A few minutes later Dr. Glenn Ruminson kindly but properly chastened Paxton’s excesses this way: “The charging bull of rhetorical labeling has two horns; one horn is a horn which crystallizes concepts (the characterization allows us to see what is being said just by a phrase), the other horn is an emotional horn which for a person in favor of the subject encourages very strongly a movement in that direction, and for a person who seems not in favor, it clouds the issue. . . . [Let’s] turn back the rhetorical bull that’s been let loose in the barnyard.”⁴²

Glenn Ruminson’s “twin-horned, rhetorical bull”—a generic bull’s eye—describing the truth that although specific theologies come and go, rhetorical totalism hangs ubiquitously in the air, searching for the theologian-on-the-make.

Wherever he went Paxton made sport of Elder Don Neufeld whom he quoted as saying, “It is the genius of Adventism to have many gospels,” bragging that his response was, “I hope when the loud cry is given everybody doesn’t run in a different direction.”⁴³

Paxton has his fun, but the temptation at this point is irresistible to note that it isn’t only lady

prophets who are given “wax noses,” but male Reformers, too, by Desmond Ford and Hans LaRondelle—lobbing Reformation hand grenades back and forth in the pages of *Spectrum*. Crediting Paxton the phrasemaker, we might ask, “Will the Real Martin Luther please stand up?”

Confronted by the Janissaries of the Reformers, we may be consoled by Chesterton’s reminder that many dogmas are liberating because the damage they do when abused cannot compare with the damage that might have been done had not whole cultures felt their inhibiting influence.

Still, the pyrotechnical skills of a Desmond Ford, which have been described as a “theological avalanche,” and a “friendly machine gun”) would be better served—and could serve better—in the wider, more sophisticated context of Andrews University.

Theology, I have concluded, is largely a function of personality. Nevertheless, there are some rough guidelines that may warn of extremes in theology. For example, we must not fall prey to “chronological snobbery,” C. S. Lewis’ term for “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of one’s own age on the supposition that what is most recent is best.”⁴⁴ At the same time theology must be seen as more than the handing down of the *parerga* from generation to generation.

Also, when you listen to our theologians, listen for either manifestation of the theological nostrum peddler. Doubt him if he promises a remedy that is exclusively ours or for the dogmatic advertising of a theological elixir—a remedy for every sickness.

While the theologians need not agree they must avoid theological hubris, realizing that it is unseemly for any of them to suggest that their theological opponents be cast out. But it is helpful to understand at least why they disagree.

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Without falling victim to the solipsist's cynical conviction that truth is subjective, we must realize that within certain definable parameters—say the confines of Christian faith— theological tendencies are, at least in part, a function of the individual theologian's personality or temperament.

If the view of the Cross that attracts one is largely a function of personality, which view would draw the most to it? Or, could more adherents be attracted by maintaining both? Paul says if even an angel should come preaching another Gospel we should throw him out. Does Paul

demand, then, that we choose between Ford and Maxwell or Paxton and Provonsha, and having chosen, consider the others anathema? Probably not.

Each of these men has brought his personal life's history and chemistry to the reading of Scripture, and each understands the one, true, paradigmatic Gospel the way they have expounded it. One of them is probably more faithful to the true—and yet unseen—Fact of theology. Nevertheless, each pilgrim will always move toward a view that he or she finds most winsome.

When Jesus said, "If I be lifted up I will draw all unto me," He didn't mean just inadequate, or just authoritarian, or just passive-aggressive, or just schizoid personalities. He meant the whole hospital full of persons in need of healing. And woe unto him that bolts the door to the emergency room!

I hope—along with Don Neufeld—to be saying something more interesting (when defending the continued existence of a plurality of understandings of the one Gospel) than that variety is life's great spice. Although the Bible contains sufficient and saving Truth, it remains for any scholar—or group of scholars—to abstract its basic message to everyone's satisfaction, parsimoniously. And that fact is much

less a commentary on truth than on the capricious nature of human personality.

We all—but especially church leadership—must suppress the concupiscent longing for one correct theology the hunting for which is comparably disappointing to the search for pterodactyl eggs. Our leaders should busy themselves, instead, nurturing the remnant—Isaiah's important calling we are reminded.

Then perhaps we can shed the religious odium that clings to our Laodicean name (our drab institutional servitude) that Adventism might crystallize as the denomination where the worshipper truly became the church; a church whose expositors are most "concerned to describe . . . God in words which do the least damage to all the facts as given;"⁴⁵ and most importantly

to explain, understandably, in the idiom of our time, why it was that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and rose the third day.

Notes

- 1 Geoffrey J. Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism* (Baker Book House, 1978), 172 pp.
- 2 Neal C. Wilson to North American Division union presidents, March 16, 1978.
- 3 "Special Section: The Shaking of Adventism?" *Spectrum* 9:3 (July 1978), pp. 28-60.
- 4 Robert H. Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, (Eerdmans, 1966) p. 82.
- 5 Desmond Ford, author interview, August 5, 1978.
- 6 Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954) Vol. II, p. 213.
- 7 Augustine, *Sermon CXXX*, 2; Quoted by Sydney Cave, *The Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, (Hodder and Stoughton, first printed 1937, Fifth Impression 1959) p. 133.
- 8 Desmond Ford, author interview, August 5, 1978.
- 9 Desmond Ford.
- 10 Desmond Ford.
- 11 Desmond Ford.

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- 12 Graham Maxwell, "Atonement—Conversations About God" (audiotape #2-1).
- 13 Geoffrey Paxton address in Portland, Oregon (Tape 6), circa 1977.
- 14 Desmond Ford, Ministers' Meeting, April 1978, Chapel #1.
- 15 Jack Provonsha, "After Grace What?" audiotape, May 24, 1978.
- 16 Geoffrey Paxton.
- 17 Desmond Ford to Doug Hackleman, July 10, 1978.
- 18 Geoffrey Paxton.
- 19 Desmond Ford, author interview, August 5, 1978.
- 20 J. C. Smuts van Rooyen, "Grace finds a way," *Ministry* (May, 1980), pp. 4-7.
- 21 Desmond Ford to Doug Hackleman, July 10, 1978.
- 22 Geoffrey Paxton, address at Southern Missionary College, Spring, 1978.
- 23 Desmond Ford.
- 24 A. Graham Maxwell, Seminar [where?] (audiotape #1, 2), March 5, 1978.
- 25 Geoffrey Paxton.
- 26 A. Graham Maxwell, author conversation, circa 1978.
- 27 Desmond Ford, Ministers' Meeting, April 1978, Chapel #1.
- 28 Desmond Ford, author interview, August 5, 1978.
- 29 Desmond Ford.
- 30 Jack Provonsha, "Love Challenged and Vindicated" (audiotape #4), January 24, 1976.
- 31 Jack Provonsha, "The Time of the End" (audiotape #2), October 8, 1977.
- 32 Desmond Ford, author interview, August 5, 1978.
- 33 Jack Provonsha, "Love Challenged and Vindicated" (audiotape #5), January 24, 1976.
- 34 Jack Provonsha, "Love Challenged and Vindicated" (audiotape #4), January 24, 1976.
- 35 G. S. Hendry, *The Gospel of the Incarnation*, (Westminster Press, 1958) p. 142.
- 36 G. S. Hendry, p. 134.
- 37 Geoffrey Paxton, address to the Loma Linda Chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums, April 21, 1978.
- 38 Geoffrey Paxton, address in Portland, Oregon (tape 3), circa 1978.
- 39 Geoffrey Paxton, address in Portland, Oregon (tape 1), circa 1978.
- 40 Geoffrey Paxton.
- 41 Geoffrey Paxton, address in Portland, Oregon (tape 3), circa 1978.
- 42 Quoted in Geoffrey Paxton, address in Portland, Oregon (tape 4), circa 1978.
- 43 Geoffrey Paxton, address in Portland, Oregon (tape 3), circa 1978.
- 44 Quoted in Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 54.
- 45 Robert Farrar Capon, *The Third Peacock* (Image Books, 1972), p. 61.