

What is...

Last
Generation
Theology?

*Legacy Edition
In Honor of
Carlye Hummel-Strever*



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Carlye Hummel-Strever



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Introduction

What is Last Generation Theology?

Perhaps you've heard the term. Perhaps you haven't. Possibly you've wondered if it's just another partisan label dividing the church into another set of camps. Maybe you're like many who find themselves asking, "Why can't I just be a plain Seventh-day Adventist, rather than a hyphenated one?"

I understand the concern of those who wish to get beyond labels, divisiveness, and distracting controversies. But as Bible-believing, Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we have an obligation to measure everything of a spiritual nature by the written counsel of God. Isaiah 8:20 is still in the Bible: "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."¹ Like the noble Bereans in the New Testament, it is our duty, when confronted by any teaching or practice, to search the Scriptures in order to learn what is right and what is wrong (Acts 17:11).

So what in fact is Last Generation Theology? Perhaps you've heard of the Five Points of Calvinism. Following are what may be called the Five Points of Last Generation Theology:

1. That human beings become sinners by choice, not by merely being born with a fallen nature.
2. That Jesus was born into this world with a fallen human nature, and in that nature lived a perfect life through the same divine power available to you and me.
3. That salvation is accomplished by both the justifying and sanctifying righteousness of Jesus.
4. That justifying (forgiving) righteousness both declares and makes us righteous.
5. That through the same divine power used by Jesus while on earth, human beings in this life can live without sinning, and that when a generation of believers achieves this experience through God's power, God's character will be vindicated before the universe and Jesus will return.

Our study will address each of the above points from the evidence of Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White.

But first, a few historical notes. Some have mistakenly alleged that this theology is primarily the product of three individuals in Adventist history—A.T. Jones, E.J. Waggoner, and M.L. Andreasen.² But without wishing to denigrate or diminish the role played by these men in the church's theological experience, what has come to be known as Last Generation Theology is far

more pervasive and deeply rooted in the doctrinal worldview of classic Adventism.

Such early Adventist luminaries as Joseph Bates,³ James White,⁴ Stephen Haskell,⁵ D.T. Bordeau,⁶ and W.W. Prescott⁷ presented key aspects of this theology in their preaching and writing. Much of this has been documented by the late Herbert Douglass in his book *Why Jesus Waits*.⁸ An even longer list of Adventist notables in support of this theology is documented by Douglass in his later book *A Fork in the Road*.⁹

In later years, such prominent Adventist thinkers as W.H. Branson,¹⁰ who served as president of the General Conference from 1950 to 1954, Herbert E. Douglass,¹¹ C. Mervyn Maxwell,¹² Dennis E. Priebe,¹³ and J.R. Zurcher¹⁴—the latter serving for many years as dean of the Adventist seminary in Collonges, France—have made these teachings a centerpiece of their ministry. Zurcher's 1999 book *Touched With Our Feelings*,¹⁵ as well as Ralph Larson's *The Word Was Made Flesh*,¹⁶ have demonstrated the pervasiveness—throughout a century of Adventist history—of the post-Fall view of Christ's human nature, a key feature of Last Generation Theology.

The late General Conference President Robert H. Pierson, who served in that position from 1966

to 1978, was likewise a strong advocate of this view, writing at one point:

God's last-generation people are to reveal the character of Jesus to the world. They will overcome as He overcame. They will be victorious, living representatives of the Master. The enabling power to live this life, to achieve this character, comes from Jesus. Only through His imputed and imparted righteousness can we prevail.¹⁷

It is easy to understand how, after surveying over a century's worth of Adventist literature, Anglican scholar Geoffrey Paxton could write in 1977:

The doctrine of the perfecting of the final generation stands near the heart of Adventist theology.¹⁸

Two more recent historians—one a former Adventist, the other from an Adventist background but who was never baptized—are equally emphatic on this point:

If Christ had an unfair advantage, how could individuals be expected to follow his example in living a perfect life? The problem was particularly acute since perfection had been suggested by Ellen White as the goal of the Adventist people: "While our great High Priest is making the atonement for us, we should seek to become perfect in Christ." Her call to perfection was urgent: "Jesus does not change the character at His coming. The work of transformation must be done now." ...

Prior to [Edward] Heppenstall, no important Adventist writer denied the possibility of perfection. Ellen White had been unequivocal: “As the Son of Man was perfect in His life, so His followers are to be perfect in their life.”¹⁹

So whatever one’s view may be of Last Generation Theology, outside witnesses have affirmed its pivotal role in Adventist thinking since the start of our movement. It cannot, therefore, be fairly ascribed merely to one or several individuals, and certainly not—as some have suggested—primarily to persons who, for whatever reason, have found themselves disgruntled or marginalized within the Adventist family.

Our Supreme Authority

The Bible presents itself as a unified, self-interpreting document. The apostle Paul declares that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). The apostle Peter writes that “no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Elsewhere we read that what the Spirit inspires is to be understood by comparison with it-

self—“comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:13-14; see also Isa. 28:9-10).

Ellen White both echoes and elaborates on the Bible’s self-interpretive quality:

The Bible is its own expositor. One passage will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the word. By comparing different texts treating on the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.

Many think that they must consult commentaries on the Scriptures in order to understand the meaning of the word of God, and we would not take the position that commentaries should not be studied; but it will take much discernment to discover the truth of God under the mass of the words of men.²⁰

The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme—of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should

understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for the supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy to the great consummation.²¹

The Bible is its own interpreter. With beautiful simplicity one portion connects itself with the truth of another portion, until the whole Bible is blended in one harmonious whole. Light flashes forth from one text to illuminate some portion of the Word that has seemed more obscure.²²

Scripture is the key that unlocks scripture.²³

This is how Seventh-day Adventists demonstrate the unity of Scripture when confronted with Bible verses which appear, on the surface, to teach such doctrines as the abolition of God's Ten Commandment law at Calvary, the abrogation of the seventh-day Sabbath so far as Christians are concerned, the once-saved-always-saved doctrine, the immortality of the soul, the eternal torment of the wicked, the secret rapture, and other concepts denied by the Biblical consensus. When we consider both the context of such passages and the overall message of the Bible, the meaning of these apparently contradictory verses becomes clear.

It is imperative that we apply the same principle for the understanding of inspired writings to issues inside Adventism as we do to issues between Adventists and other Christians. Considera-

tion of context and the overall message of both Scripture and Ellen White's writings is the key to demonstrating the harmony between passages which seem to teach contrary positions. Unless an explanation of inspired writings on any subject is able to account for all inspired statements relative to that subject, the explanation is invalid. Hence the value of such apologetic works as F.D. Nichol's *Answers to Objections*²⁴ and Mark Finley's *Studying Together*.²⁵

According to Ellen White, her writings are to be interpreted in the same way as Scripture: "The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture."²⁶ While she depicts her writings as "a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light,"²⁷ this is not because her writings function at some lesser level of reliability, or some lesser claim on the conscience, but because the Bible is the foundation and source of all she teaches. In her own words: "Additional truth is not brought out, but God has through the testimonies simplified the great truths already given."²⁸

God does not have junior prophets. No distinction can be found in Scripture between the authority of prophets whose writings were later canonized, and the authority of prophets whose writ-

ings were not later canonized. (It helps to remember that certain non-canonical prophets gave written as well as oral messages to God's people [1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22], just as canonical prophets did.) A prophet is not authoritative because he or she is first canonical. Rather, a prophet is canonical because he or she is first authoritative.

No evidence exists in the Biblical record that prophets such as Deborah, Nathan, Elijah, and John the Baptist exerted any less authority over the beliefs, worship, lifestyle, and spiritual obligations of the faith community than did Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or the apostle Paul. This reality is not often considered in many of the continuing discussions in contemporary Adventism regarding Ellen White's authoritative role.

The following statements are exceedingly clear regarding the role of Ellen White's prophetic gift in Adventist doctrinal controversies:

God has, in that Word (the Bible), promised to give visions in the last days, not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.²⁹

The Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people. It is light that they should have, line upon line, precept upon

precept, here a little and there a little. This is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors, and to specify what is truth.³⁰

Serious errors in doctrine and practice were cherished.... God revealed these errors to me in vision and sent me to His erring children to declare them.³¹

At that time one error after another pressed in upon us; ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.³²

There are those in contemporary Adventism who object to Last Generation Theology because of allegedly bad experiences they have had, either in trying to achieve this theology's standards in their own lives or observing what they consider to be its negative impact in the lives of others. But claims of this kind are always problematic, primarily because God alone knows people's hearts (1 Kings 8:39). The personal and circumstantial baggage surrounding the oft-repeated statement that a particular theology "doesn't (or didn't) work for me" is too complicated and subjective to take seriously when the claims of a particular doctrine are considered. It is far better to simply

permit the self-explanatory words of Inspiration to draw the difference between truth and error.

The following sober warnings are offered by Ellen White with regard to experience-driven spirituality:

The plainest facts may be presented, the clearest truths, sustained by the word of God, may be brought before the mind, but the ear and heart are closed, and the all-convincing argument is, “my experience.” Some will say, “The Lord has blessed me in believing and doing as I have; therefore I cannot be in error.” “My experience” is clung to, and the most elevating, sanctifying truths of the Bible are rejected for what they are pleased to style experience.³³

Eve was beguiled by the serpent and made to believe that God would not do as He had said. She ate, and, thinking she felt the sensation of a new and more exalted life, she bore the fruit to her husband. The serpent had said that she should not die, and she felt no ill effects from eating the fruit, nothing which could be interpreted to mean death, but, instead, a pleasurable sensation, which she imagined was as the angels felt. Her experience stood arrayed against the positive command of Jehovah, yet Adam permitted himself to be seduced by it.³⁴

She goes on to say, in the same context:

In the face of the most positive commands of God, men and women will follow their own inclinations, and then dare to pray over the matter, to prevail upon God to allow them to go contrary to His expressed will. Satan comes to the side of such persons, as he did to Eve in Eden, and impresses them. They have an exercise of mind, and this they relate as a most wonderful experience which the Lord has given them. But true experience will be in harmony with natural and divine law; false experience arrays itself against the laws of nature and the precepts of Jehovah.³⁵

It is my prayer that the self-interpreting words of Scripture and the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy—not human opinion, human scholarship, or human experience—will determine our view of the doctrinal issues considered in this study.

Sinners by Choice

The doctrine of original sin teaches that because of Adam's disobedience, all of his descendants have been sinners because of what he did, prior to any sin they themselves have committed. The Bible, however, teaches quite the opposite: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son" (Eze. 18:20). If all human beings bear the iniquity of their father

Adam, as held by the doctrine of original sin, this verse from Ezekiel would be wrong.

The Bible is also clear that the inner urge to sin with which fallen human beings are born is not the same as sin itself. Scripture declares on this point:

Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then lust, when it hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin (James 1:14-15).

Ellen White agrees:

There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men; but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt and no other is defiled by their influence.³⁶

Some have mistakenly concluded that Romans chapter 5 teaches that all human beings are automatic sinners because of the sin of Adam. But in fact this chapter teaches no such thing. Romans 5:12 declares: “For as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” In other words, death—and both life and death are eternal, not temporal, in this context (see verse 17)—has passed on all humanity because all have chosen to participate in Adam’s sin. True, Adam’s example has in fact led all men and women into sin, which is why the Bible

tells us that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23; 5:12). But it is still their choice to do so.

Ellen White agrees:

Human beings have degenerated. One after another they fall under the curse, because sin has entered into the world, and death by sin.... We may choose God’s way and live; we may choose our own way, and know that sin has entered into the world, and death by sin.³⁷

Although sin was the awful thing that had opened the floodgates of woe upon the world, He (Christ) would become the propitiation of a race that had willed to sin.³⁸

Notice how she says the human race has *willed* to sin. It hasn’t been forced into it by being born after Adam.

Other passages in her writings are clear that sin is a choice, not an involuntary state received at birth:

It is not in the power of Satan to force anyone to sin. Sin is the sinner’s individual act. Before sin exists in the heart, the consent of the will must be given, and as soon as it is given, sin is triumphant, and hell rejoices. But there is no excuse for sin, either big or little.³⁹

The light of life is freely proffered to all. Every one who will may be guided by the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness. Christ is the great remedy for sin. None can plead their circumstances, their education, or their temperament as

an excuse for living in rebellion against God. Sinners are such by their own deliberate choice.⁴⁰

If the consent of the will is necessary in order for sin to exist in the heart, no newborn baby can qualify as a sinner. And if everyone is born a sinner because of Adam, that would certainly seem to be a circumstance one could cite as an excuse for sin. But according to the above statements, becoming a sinner is a choice, not an inevitable condition. Ellen White is clear in another statement that our inborn fallen nature is not an excuse for sin:

There are many who in their hearts murmur against God. They say, "We inherit the fallen nature of Adam, and are not responsible for our natural imperfections." They find fault with God's requirements, and claim that He demands what they have no power to give. Satan made the same complaint in heaven, but such thoughts dishonor God.⁴¹

Elsewhere she writes:

As we see the condition of mankind today, the question arises in the minds of some, "Is man by nature totally and wholly depraved?" Is he hopelessly ruined? No, he is not. The Lord Jesus left the royal courts and, taking our human nature, lived such a life as everyone may live in humanity, through following His example. We may perfect a life in this world which is an example of righteousness, and overcome as Christ has given

us an example in His life, revealing that humanity may conquer as He, the great Pattern conquered.⁴²

What is especially significant about the above statement is that it doesn't deny that human beings are "by nature totally and wholly depraved" solely because they can be born again. Rather, it states that humans are not totally and hopelessly depraved "by nature" because Jesus came to earth in "our human nature" and lived the life we are commanded to live through His power.

Thus our study proceeds to the next topic: Jesus' humanity.

What Jesus Proved

Perhaps the most controversial subject in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today is the human nature of Christ. But it shouldn't be. Both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White explain themselves very well, once we permit them to define their own vocabulary.

The Bible tells us that Jesus "condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4). The same epistle tells us earlier that Jesus was "made of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3). In another passage we read of how Jesus "took not on

Him the nature of angels, but took on Him the seed of Abraham” (Heb. 2:16). The context of the earlier verses from Romans 8 is clear that the “flesh” being described isn’t talking about what covers our bones, but is rather speaking of a human nature that is hostile to the will of God (Rom. 8:4-13).

The apostle Paul writes elsewhere: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same” (Heb. 2:14). In another passage Paul speaks of how “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). Obviously this isn’t saying that physical tissue can’t go to heaven, as Jesus was clear after His resurrection that He possessed a real body of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). When we put all these verses together, it becomes clear that when Paul is speaking of the “flesh,” he is talking about a fallen human nature. It is in this human nature that Jesus condemned sin (Rom. 8:3). It is on this basis that the same author declares that our Savior “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Ellen White echoes these Biblical teachings in such statements as the following:

It would have been an almost infinite humiliation for the Son of God to take man’s nature, even when Adam stood in his innocence in Eden.

But 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. What these results were is shown in the history of His earthly ancestors. He came with such a heredity to share our sorrows and temptations, and to give us the example of a sinless life.⁴³

For four thousand years the race had been decreasing in physical strength, in mental power, and in moral worth, and Christ took upon Him the infirmities of degenerate humanity.⁴⁴

The first two levels of degeneracy in Jesus' human nature are not controversial in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Everyone agrees that Christ took a physical and mental nature less strong and acute than the one Adam had before he fell. It is the third level of degeneracy that some in contemporary Adventism refuse to accept. But the above inspired statement is clear that Jesus took fallen human nature at all three levels—physical, mental, and moral.

Some will point our attention to certain Ellen White statements which speak of Jesus not having evil propensities or like passions as we.⁴⁵ But these and all other statements about Jesus' humanity must be understood in light of the Biblical teaching regarding lower and higher forces in hu-

man nature (Matt. 26:41), an arrangement which calls for the will to be in charge and bodily urges kept under control (1 Cor. 9:27). Ellen White speaks in one statement of how “the will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power.”⁴⁶ This is how she can write in certain statements of Jesus “not possessing the passions of our human, fallen natures,”⁴⁷ while in other statements saying that “He had all the strength of passion of humanity.”⁴⁸ The first set of statements speak of urges exhibited, while the latter speak of urges resisted.

The internal nature of Jesus’ struggle with temptation is affirmed in such passages as the following:

Some realize their great weakness and sin, and become discouraged. Satan casts his dark shadow between them and the Lord Jesus, their atoning sacrifice. They say, It is useless for me to pray. My prayers are so mingled with evil thoughts that the Lord will not hear them.

These suggestions are from Satan. In His humanity Christ met and resisted this temptation, and He knows how to succor those who are thus tempted.⁴⁹

His (the Christian’s) strongest temptations will come from within, for he must battle against the inclinations of the natural heart. The Lord knows our weaknesses.⁵⁰

And how does He know our weaknesses?

He knows by experience what are the weaknesses of humanity, what are our wants, and where lies the strength of our temptations, for He was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).⁵¹

By experiencing in Himself the strength of Satan’s temptations, and of human sufferings and infirmities, He would know how to succor those who should put forth efforts to help themselves.⁵²

Ellen White speaks of how “at the opening of the great controversy Satan declared that the law of God could not be obeyed.”⁵³ This accusation of the devil applied to fallen beings as well as to the unfallen. In another statement we read that “Satan declared that it was impossible for the sons and daughters of Adam to keep the law of God, and thus charged upon God a lack of wisdom and love. If they could not keep the law, then there was fault with the Lawgiver.”⁵⁴ Jesus thus came to prove that even human beings possessing fallen natures can in fact, through the same power He used, live perfectly obedient lives. In Ellen White’s words:

The Lord now demands that every son and daughter of Adam, through faith in Jesus Christ, serve Him in human nature which we now have. The Lord Jesus has bridged the gulf that sin has made. He has connected earth with heaven, and

finite man with the infinite God. Jesus, the world's Redeemer, could only keep the commandments of God in the same way that humanity can keep them.⁵⁵

Jesus revealed no qualities, and exercised no powers, that men may not have through faith in Him. His perfect humanity is that which all His followers may possess, if they will be in subjection to God as He was.⁵⁶

By His own obedience to the law, Christ testified to its immutable character and proved that through His grace it could be perfectly obeyed by every son and daughter of Adam.⁵⁷

The following Ellen White statement identifies both the nature of Jesus' inherited humanity and the nature of the trials He confronted:

But many say that Jesus was not like us, that He was not as we are in the world; that He was divine, and therefore we cannot overcome as He overcame. But this is not true; "for verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham... . For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:16-18). Christ knows the sinner's trials; He knows his temptations. He took upon Himself our nature; He was tempted in all points like as we are. He has wept. He was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.⁵⁸

Notice how the human nature Jesus is described as taking, and the temptations He is described as undergoing, are represented by the seed of Abraham—which of course constitutes fallen human nature. Even more pointedly, the above statement says that “Christ knows the *sinner’s* trials; He knows his temptations.” The temptations of the sinless Adam in Eden are clearly not in focus here. It is the sinner’s trials, the sinner’s temptations, that Jesus is described in this statement as having experienced. Sinners are tempted from within, from the urges of a fallen, fleshly nature. This is how, according to the above statement, our Lord proved it is possible for us to overcome.

Sinless Obedience Through God’s Power

Such words as “sinless” and “sinlessness” have become very unpopular in certain circles of contemporary Adventism, at least with regard to fallen human beings and their potential here on earth, even when empowered by the grace supplied through conversion and sanctification. But the Bible is very clear that through God’s imparted strength, it is possible for men and women to cease committing sin. The following verses bear witness to this clear Biblical teaching:

Stand in awe, and sin not; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still (Psalm 4:4).

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are they that keep His testimonies, and that seek Him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways....

Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee (Psalm 119:1-3,11).

Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it (Psalm 34:13-14).

Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forevermore (Psalm 37:27).

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.

That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

Awake to righteousness, and sin not (1 Cor. 15:34).

Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds. Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it. That He might sanctify and cleanse it through the washing of water by the Word. That He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19).

For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in His steps. Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth (1 Peter 2:21-22).

Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin (1 Peter 4:1).

But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.... If we confess our sins, He is faith-

ful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7,9).

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory, with exceeding joy (Jude 24).

Indeed, there are more verses in the Bible that teach the possibility of living without sin through heaven's power than are found upholding the claims of the seventh-day Sabbath!

Ellen White is also clear, in words too plain to be misunderstood, as to the possibility of sinless obedience in this life, through the transforming power of God:

In our world, we are to remember the way in which Christ worked. He made the world. He made man. Then He came in person to the world to show its inhabitants how to live sinless lives.⁵⁹

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." When you come into this position, the work of consecration will be better understood by you both. Your thoughts will be pure, chaste, and elevated, your actions pure and sinless.⁶⁰

To everyone who surrenders fully to God is given the privilege of living without sin, in obedience to the law of heaven.⁶¹

Christ bore the sins of the whole world. He was the second Adam. Taking upon Himself human nature, He passed over the ground where Adam stumbled and fell. Having taken humanity, He has an intense interest in human beings. He felt keenly the sinfulness, the shame, of sin. He is our Elder Brother. He came to prove that human beings can, through the power of God, live sinless lives.⁶²

The Saviour is wounded afresh and put to open shame when His people pay no heed to His word. He came to this world and lived a sinless life, that in His power His people might also live lives of sinlessness.⁶³

In the day of judgment the course of the man who has retained the frailty and imperfection of humanity will not be vindicated. For him there will be no place in heaven. He could not enjoy the perfection of the saints in light. He who has not sufficient faith in Christ to believe that He can keep him from sinning, has not the faith that will give him an entrance into the kingdom of God.⁶⁴

This final statement makes it especially clear that the question of whether God's power is able to give men and women a sin-free life is very much a salvation issue, despite what some allege. After all, Biblical salvation is all about being saved from sin (Matt. 1:21). According to the Bible, this process of being saved from sin in-

cludes both justifying and sanctifying righteousness (Eph. 1:7; 2 Thess. 2:13), both Christ's work for us and His work in us (2 Cor. 5:21; Titus 3:5). Thus Ellen White describes the ground of our salvation as including both these aspects of Christ's righteousness:

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.⁶⁵

In another statement she further clarifies the imperative of practical perfect obedience so far as the Christian's salvation is concerned:

Christ came to this earth and lived a life of perfect obedience, that men and women, through His grace, might also live lives of perfect obedience. This is necessary to their salvation.⁶⁶

Some believe that justification only declares people righteous, and does not in fact make them righteous. But Biblical justification does both. When God declared at the creation, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), it didn't stay dark. When Jesus said to the leper who came to Him for healing, "Be thou clean" (Matt. 8:3), he didn't stay unclean. Justification—God's forgiveness—works in exactly the same way. Thus Ellen White declares:

To be pardoned in the way that Christ pardons, is not only to be forgiven, but to be renewed in the

spirit of our mind. The Lord says, "A new heart will I give unto thee." The image of Christ is to be stamped upon the very mind, heart, and soul.⁶⁷

The grace of Christ purifies while it pardons, and fits men for a holy heaven.⁶⁸

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. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10.⁶⁹

Perfection and the Last Generation

The Bible speaks with particular strength regarding the need for the total expulsion of sin from the lives of those who will see Jesus come the second time. The Old Testament anticipates this demonstration in such passages as the following:

The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid (Zeph. 3:13).

The apostle Paul states on this point:

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and

soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23).

Peter wrote the same thing, making it clear the actions of God's people in this regard not only prepare them for Jesus' return, but hasten His return as well:

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness,

Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? ...

Wherefore, brethren, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless (2 Peter 3:11-12,14).

The apostle John agrees:

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

When we read the messages of Jesus to the seven churches of Revelation, all the promises are given to those who overcome (Rev. 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). But only the church of Laodicea—his-

tory's final generation of Christians—is promised an overcoming experience identical to that of Jesus:

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne (Rev. 3:21).

And echoing the verse cited earlier from the prophet Zephaniah, John writes in Revelation of those translated without seeing death:

And in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God (Rev. 14:5).

It is on the basis of these Bible verses that Ellen White declares, in perhaps her best-known statement on this subject:

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.⁷⁰

This, of course, is by no means the only Ellen White statement that affirms this truth. Countless others teach exactly the same thing. Following are just a few:

Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above, are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the

blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil. While the investigative judgment is going forward in heaven, while the sins of penitent believers are being removed from the sanctuary, there is to be a special work of purification, of putting away of sin, among God's people upon the earth....

When this work shall have been accomplished, the followers of Christ will be ready for His appearing.⁷¹

I also saw that many do not realize what they must be in order to live in the sight of the Lord without a high priest in the sanctuary through the time of trouble. Those who receive the seal of the living God and are protected in the time of trouble must reflect the image of Jesus fully... . I saw that none could share the "refreshing" (latter rain) unless they obtain the victory over every besetment, over pride, selfishness, love of the world, and over every wrong word and action.⁷²

Those who come up to every point and stand every test, and overcome, be the price what it may, have heeded the counsel of the True Witness, and they will receive the latter rain, and thus be fitted for translation.⁷³

Not one of us will ever receive the seal of God while our characters have one spot or stain upon them. It is left with us to remedy the defects in our characters, to cleanse the soul temple of every defilement. Then the latter rain will fall upon

us, as the early rain fell upon the disciples upon the day of Pentecost.⁷⁴

When He comes, He is not to cleanse us of our sins, to remove from us the defects in our characters, or to cure us of the infirmities of our tempers and dispositions. If wrought for us at all, this work will be accomplished before that time. When the Lord comes, those who are holy will be holy still.... The Refiner does not then sit to pursue His refining process and remove their sins and their corruption. This is all to be done in these hours of probation.⁷⁵

The Vindication of God

Echoing the words of the penitent David following his sin with Bathsheba, the apostle Paul writes:

God forbid; yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That Thou mightest be justified in Thy sayings, and mightest overcome when Thou art judged (Rom. 3:4; see Psalm 51:4).

The first angel's message declares: "Fear God, and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment is come" (Rev. 14:7). When we compare the above two verses, it becomes clear that not only are the people of God being judged, but in their judgment, God Himself is on trial.

The following passage is clear that in the victory of God's saints over evil, God Himself is vindicated:

I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel caused to be profaned ...

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate My holiness before their eyes (Eze. 36:21-23, RSV).

And how will this vindication of God through His people be accomplished?

You shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to observe My ordinances (verses 25-27, RSV).

It is safe to say this vindication never happened in the experience of God's ancient people, else the plan of salvation would have turned out much differently. This prophecy, therefore, re-

mains to be fulfilled, in the experience of final victory by the Last Generation saints.

The following Ellen White statement is one of the most remarkable in declaring why human beings were brought into existence:

We were brought into existence because we were needed. How sad the thought that if we stand on the wrong side, in the ranks of the enemy, we are lost to the design of our Creator.⁷⁶

The following statements articulate still further the reason we were brought into existence:

If there was ever a people in need of constantly increasing light from heaven, it is the people of God that, in this time of peril, God has called to be the depositories of His holy law, and to vindicate His character before the world.⁷⁷

Let all remember that... angels are recording in the book of remembrance every word that vindicates the character and mission of Christ. Of those who testify of the love of God, the Lord says, "They shall be Mine ... in that day when I make up My jewels." Malachi 3:17.⁷⁸

His heart of sympathy goes out to all earth's sufferers, and with every one who works for their relief, He co-operates. As with His blessing health returns, the character of God will be vindicated, and the lie thrown back upon Satan, its originator.⁷⁹

The very image of God is to be reproduced in humanity. The honor of God, the honor of Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people.⁸⁰

The cold heart is to be quickened and glow with divine love. It is to beat in unison with the heart of the Redeemer. The honor of Christ must stand complete in the perfection of the character of His chosen people. He desires that they shall represent His character to the world.⁸¹

Some have said that the only vindicating of God's character remaining to be done since the cross is of a strictly missional nature, not anything needed to convince the universe of God's justice. The latter, it is claimed, was finished at Calvary. However, the following Ellen White statement is clear that the vindication of God through His people at the close of time is for the benefit of the unfallen universe as well:

New territory is to be added to God's kingdom. New tracts of moral vineyard are to be cultivated as the garden of the Lord. The honor of the law of God is to be vindicated before the unfallen worlds, before the heavenly universe, and before the fallen world. The bitterest persecution will come, but when Zion arises, and puts on her beautiful garments, she will shine forth in the beauty of holiness.⁸²

Some are telling us that Jesus alone disproved Satan's claims regarding the law of God, and that no further vindicating of the divine character is needed on the part of the Last Generation or anyone else. But the following inspired statement is clear that the work of refuting Satan's lies about God's requirements is not the work of Christ alone, but of both Christ and all His followers:

Unselfishness, the principle of God's kingdom, is the principle that Satan hates; its very existence he denies. From the beginning of the great controversy he has endeavored to prove God's principles of action to be selfish, and he deals in the same way with all who serve God. To disprove Satan's claim is the work of Christ and of all who bear His name.⁸³

In the original promise of salvation recorded in Scripture, God declared to Satan: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her Seed; It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise His heel" (Gen. 3:15). But according to the apostle Paul, Christ isn't the only One who is expected to bruise Satan. Writing to the church, Paul declares: "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly" (Rom. 16:20). If Jesus had done all the bruising necessary, this promise by the apostle would be quite unnecessary.

Ellen White echoes the words of the apostle Paul on the bruising of Satan by God's people in the following statements:

The church will yet see troublous times. She will prophesy in sackcloth. But although she must meet heresies and persecutions, although she must battle with the infidel and the apostate, yet by the help of God she is bruising the head of Satan.⁸⁴

God help us to take heed to ourselves or we shall certainly lose heaven. Little departures from right, little indulgences, seem a trifling thing at present; but Satan will lead us on a track that will separate us from righteousness and from God. We want not our ways but God's ways. We want to strive with all the powers of being to bruise Satan under our feet and be sure that we are right with God, that we have a clear title to our immortal inheritance.⁸⁵

The consummate task of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to hoist yet again her Lord's transcendent standard, with a piety deeper and more comprehensive than that of any former generation of believers. One recalls the words of the poet Edgar Guest: "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day," or the lament of James Baldwin, "I can't believe what you say because I see what you do." Those who encounter history's final generation of believers will both see and hear God's last message to humanity. The majesty and

splendor of this demonstration is forecast in the following statements:

When trees without fruit are cut down as cumberers of the ground, when multitudes of false brethren are distinguished from the true, then the hidden ones will be revealed to view, and with hosannas range under the banner of Christ. Those who have been timid and self-distrustful, will declare themselves openly for Christ and His truth. The most weak and hesitating in the church, will be as David—willing to do and dare. The deeper the night for God's people, the more brilliant the stars. Satan will surely harass the faithful, but, in the name of Jesus, they will come off more than conquerors. Then will the church of Christ appear "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners."⁸⁶

The church, being endowed with the righteousness of Christ, is His depository, in which the wealth of His mercy, His love, His grace, is to appear in full and final display.... The gift of His Holy Spirit, rich, full, and abundant, is to be to His church as an encompassing wall of fire, which the powers of hell shall not prevail against. In their untainted purity and spotless perfection, Christ looks upon His people as the reward of all His suffering, His humiliation, and His love, and the supplement of His glory.⁸⁷

The Saviour is wounded afresh and put to open shame when His people pay no heed to His word.

He came to this world and lived a sinless life, that in His power His people might also live lives of sinlessness. He desires them by practicing the principles of truth to show to the world that God's grace has power to sanctify the heart.⁸⁸

In the words of Nelson Mandela: "Everything is impossible until it happens."

Last Generation Theology and the Remnant Church Theology

In reality, Last Generation Theology is just another term for the remnant church theology. Throughout the Old Testament we read of a faithful, obedient, and victorious remnant arising at last among God's professed people (e.g. Isa. 11:11; Joel 2:32; Micah 2:12; 4:7; 5:3,7-8). We have already seen this promise in Zephaniah 3:13, which of course is echoed in Revelation 14:5.

As we noted before, the messages to the seven churches of Revelation help us better understand how the victorious experience expected of the Last Generation is to be greater than that of former generations. All the promises given to the seven churches are given to the overcomers (Rev. 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). But only the church of Laodicea, the last of the seven, is promised an overcoming experience identical to that of Jesus:

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am sat down with My Father in His throne (Rev. 3:21).

This commandment-keeping remnant, pure and triumphant through Jesus' transforming righteousness, is described in the following verses, so central to classic Seventh-day Adventist teachings, with which we close our study:

The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid (Zeph. 3:13; see Rev. 14:5).

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 12:17).

Here is the patience of the saints. Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible texts are from the King James Version.
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3. Joseph Bates, "Midnight Cry in the Past," *Review and Herald*, December 1858, p. 21.
4. James White, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 29, 1857; *Life Sketches of James and Ellen White*, p. 431.
5. Stephen N. Haskell, "A Few Thoughts on the Philadelphian and Laodicean Churches," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 6, 1856, p. 6.
6. D.T. Bordeau, "Sanctification or Living Holiness," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 2, 1864.
7. W.W. Prescott, "The Gospel Message for Today," *General Conference Bulletin*, April 2, 1903, pp. 53,54.
8. Herbert E. Douglass, *Why Jesus Waits: How the Sanctuary Doctrine Explains the Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1976), pp. 47-49.
9. _____, *A Fork in the Road: The Historic Adventist Divide of 1957* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2008), p. 19. Leading Adventist proponents of Last Generation Theology referenced here include C.P. Bollman, C. Lester Bond, F.G. Clifford, J.B.

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10. W.H. Branson, *Drama of the Ages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1950), pp. 155-161.
11. Douglass, "Men of Faith: The Showcase of God's Grace," *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Assn, 1975), pp. 13-56; *Why Jesus Waits: How the Sanctuary Doctrine Explains the Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1976); *Jesus—The Benchmark of Humanity* (With Leo Van Dolson) (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Assn, 1977); *The End: Unique Voice of Adventists About the Return of Jesus* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 1979); *The Heartbeat of Adventism: The Great Controversy Theme in the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 2010).
12. C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Assn, 1975), pp. 141-200.
13. Dennis E. Priebe, *Face to Face With the Real Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 1985).

14. J.R. Zurcher, *Touched With Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Human Nature of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1999).
15. Ibid.
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21. _____, *Counsels to Teachers*, p. 462.
22. _____, *Our High Calling*, p. 207.
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27. Ibid, vol. 3, p. 30.

28. _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 665.
29. _____, *Early Writings*, p. 78.
30. _____, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, p. 32.
31. _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 655-656.
32. _____, *Gospel Workers*, p. 302.
33. _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 71.
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36. _____, *That I May Know Him*, p. 140.
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38. _____, *From the Heart*, p. 253.
39. _____, *Signs of the Times*, Dec. 18, 1893.
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43. _____, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 49.
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57. _____, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, p. 49.

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59. _____, *Evangelism*, p. 385.
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