

ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 133:
“Reflections on the 58th General Conference Session”
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General Conference Sessions are described as “business sessions” of the world church. They are convened to elect or re-elect the leaders of the church and to deliberate on church policies, programs, and beliefs. But the word “business” is misleading because it suggests that the primary purpose of such world gathering is rather mundane. The reality is different. General Conference Sessions are designed to equip our church to better fulfill our mission to prepare a people for the soon-Coming Savior.

Some of the past General Conference Sessions are remembered for major doctrinal decisions. For example, the 1988 Minneapolis General Conference is remembered for the debates on justification by faith. The 1995 Utrecht General Conference is known for its animated discussion on women ordination. The 2000 General Conference Session in Toronto, Canada spent considerable time debating the document on divorce and remarriage.

No major controversial issues were discussed at the 58th General Conference Session in St. Louis. The main document that was voted as an additional fundamental belief, is called “Growing in Christ.” This is a peaceful document that simply affirms the well-known truth that through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we can overcome the forces of evil that seek to control us. Such statement was requested by church leaders from developing countries where demon possession is prevalent.

In my mind what stands out about the 58th General Conference Session is its focus, not merely on the numerical growth of our church, but on the spiritual development of our members. The theme of the devotional talks “Transformed in Christ,” provided the basis for a reflecting on how some of our fundamental beliefs can help us experience more fully the transforming power of Christ’s grace in our lives. The theme served also as challenge to become more effective agents of Christ’s transforming power in our communities.

Within the overall theme of “Transformed in Christ,” a series of presentations were given on “Christian Leadership.” Various speakers

gave informative and inspiring presentations on what does it take to be an effective Adventist leader in the church and community.

Several subscribers to our Endtime Issues Newsletter have asked me to comment on what was said and done during GC 10 days session. This assignment poses two challenging problems. First, to comment on each presentation would be a lengthy and laborious task. Thus, my comments will be brief and selective of a few presentations which I view as noteworthy. No attempt will be made in this newsletter to comment on the talks on leadership. I might consider to examine them for the next newsletter, if you want me to do so.

This report is limited in scope, since it deals exclusively with the devotional presentations. No mention will be made of the “heavenly” music provided by the most gifted General Conference choir and concert. Truly I can say that their performance was superb. It was among the best sacred music I heard in my life. The same is true of the colorful mission pageants and encouraging reports.

Second, with a few exceptions, my comments will be based on the printed version of the presentations, since my obligation to man my booth, made it impossible for me to attend most of the live sessions. Frankly, I prefer to comment on the printed version of a meditation, because I can examine it at leisure without running the risk of forgetting or misinterpreting what was said.

For the sake of brevity, I will comment briefly on a few presentations, before examining at greater length Prof. Richard Davidson’s informative Bible study on the Sabbath, entitled “Transformed By Entering His Rest.” This is a timely Bible study that can help Adventists to understand and experience more fully the spiritual significance of the act of resting on the Sabbath. Most Adventists equate Sabbathkeeping with going to church, rather than going to work. They attach no special significance to the act of resting on the Sabbath. Yet in Scripture the act of resting for God on the Sabbath is a meaningful faith-response. We stop our work to allow God to work in us more fully and freely. Before sharing my comments on a few talks, let me post a few announcements.

This newsletter was prepared under considerable time pressure. I wanted to send it out before leaving tomorrow for Italy and then Germany.

If you find more mistakes and incoherences than usual, please be forgiving. My wife and I will be away for the next two weeks, so I wanted to share few thoughts about the GC session before leaving.

EXTENSION OF GC OFFER ON HITACHI PROJECTORS

In occasion of the General Conference Session, the HITACHI Corporation of North America agreed to offer their lines of projectors at a special ONE TIME OFFER, to help especially our churches and schools in developing countries.

The day before I left to set up my booth at the GC, HITACHI offered me 58 projectors CP-X870, 2000 lumens for the incredible price of only \$1600.00. The reason for this incredible price is that this model is discontinued. I never sold this model before because it is a very sophisticated and expensive. To give you an idea, while the standard 2000 lumens CP-X328, weighs 6 pounds, the CP-X870 weighs 13 pounds. It is loaded with such features as high definition, wireless connection, automatic zoom, focus, keystone, etc. It is designed for professional multimedia production.

People were so impressed by the demonstration of this projector at the GC booth, that in two days I sold all the 45 unit I brought along. I still have 9 CP-X870 left. If you church is interested in an outstanding projector at a bargain price

For the GC I bought a large supply of projectors at the special onetime offer. I do have a few projectors still available. For example, the SPECIAL GC OFFER on the HITACHI 2000 LUMENS CP-X328 HIGH RESOLUTION, is only \$1,495.00, instead of the factory suggested retail price of \$7,495.00. This projector has WON THE AWARD of the best projector in its class. Over 500 churches and schools have bought this projector for \$2000.00, that is \$500.00 more than the GC SPECIAL OFFER.

A similar discount is offered on all the HITACHI models, ranging from 1200 to 4500 lumens. Feel free to contact me by email or phone (269) 471-2915, and I will give you the special GC price on the model you wish to purchase.

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR AN EXCELLENT REMOTE FOR YOUR POWER POINT PRESENTATIONS?

If you are looking for an outstanding Remote for your Power-Point presentations, you will be pleased to know HONEYWELL has just come out with the smallest and most powerful remote in the market. You can view it at <http://www.powerremote.com/>

The size of the transmitter is smaller than a credit card. You can stick it inside the palm of your hand and nobody can see it. The operating distance between the remote and the receiver is officially 150 feet. But I tested the remote in an open environment, and the radio signal can go up to 400 feet of distance. IT IS INCREDIBLE! The transmitter has three button: forward, backward, and laser.

The brand new model is hard to find in the market, but I signed a contract with HONEYWELL to distribute it to our churches and schools. By buying 50 units at a time, I can offer this incredible remote for only \$120.00, postage paid. To order a remote, call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915 or email us your order at sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com

SPECIAL OFFER ON ALL MY RECORDINGS

At this time you can order the complete package of all my recordings for ONLY \$100.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$490.00. The package includes the latest 3ABN two hours interview on a DVD disk, ONE CD-ROM with all my research (over 7000 pages), ONE CD-ROM with all my PowerPoint lectures, TWO MP3 AUDIO disks with 22 popular lectures, and the FIVE DVD DISKS or FIVE VIDEO TAPES with 10 live PowerPoint lectures of my SABBATH/ADVENT seminars, taped few months ago by a TV crew at Andrews University.

The special offer is ONLY \$100.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$490.00. Read the details at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/Promotions/SPECIALPACKAGEOFFER.htm>. If you have a problem ordering the package through my website, just email us your order or call us at (269) 978-6878 or (269) 471-2915.

We will be glad to take your order by phone and mail you the package immediately.

UPCOMING WEEKEND SEMINARS

As a service to our subscribers, I am listing the date and the location of the upcoming seminars for the month of July and August 2005. Every Sabbath it is a great pleasure for me to meet subscribers who travel considerable distances to attend the seminars.

JULY 22: HAMBURG GHANAIAN SDA CHURCH - GERMANY

Location: Charlottenstrasse 24A. (About 200 meters from U2 Emillienstrasse banhof).

For information call Pastor Nyamaah Elijah at 4040197131

JULY 23: KRELLIGEN GHANAIAN SDA CHURCH - NEAR HANNOVER

For location and information, call Pastor Charles Dediako at 7115059807.

AUGUST 5-6: NEW YORK CITY SOUTH OZONE SDA CHURCH

Location: 120-20 140th Street, South Ozone park, NY 11436.

For information call Pastor Richard Bryant at (718) 622-4081

AUGUST 12-13: LOS ANGELES CENTRAL FILIPINO SDA CHURCH

Location: 777 East Colorado Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90042.

For information call Pastor Simeon Rosete at (323) 255-7718 or (323) 255-7149

AUGUST 26-30: HONG KONG

For location and information, call THE CHINESE UNION MISSION at (852) 2838-3991 or (852) 2441-8333.

In Hong Kong, I will speak first at a rally of Adventist believers, and then at a Lutheran and Baptist seminaries.

“Reflections on the 58th General Conference Session”**Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.****Retired Professor of Theology, Andrews University****PRESIDENT JAN PAULSEN’S CLOSING SERMON****Sermon delivered on July 9: Sabbath Morning**

The sermon of Pastor Jan Paulsen, President of our General Conference, delivered on Saturday, July 9, at the close of the 10 days session, stands out in my mind as the highlight of the GC. The last time I heard Pastor Paulsen preaching, was five years ago at the GC Session in Toronto. At that time I did not understand much of what he said because I was sitting far away at the fifth level of the Dome, where the acoustic was very poor. The Dome was packed with over 60,000 people. I went away assuming that part of the problem was message itself: too abstract and without passion.

My impression was radically changed when I heard Paulsen preaching in St. Louis on July 9, at the closing Sabbath service of the General Conference Session. This Dome was less crowded than in Toronto, with only about 30,000 people present on the final Sabbath. On the first Sabbath the attendance was even less—estimated at about 15,000 people. I was fortunate to find a good seat on the second level, relatively close to the platform. The video image on the multiple screens was very pale—hardly reflective of the advanced American technology. Apparently the technical team did not know that HITACHI projectors could have given a brighter and sharper image.

The clarity of the sound compensated for the poor quality of the image. I heard clearly and distinctly every word of Pastor Paulsen’s sermon based on 2 Chronicles 7. What impressed me about the sermon was both his insightful analysis of the passage and his eloquent delivery. He spoke energetically as youthful preacher, hardly revealing his 70 years of age. That gives me hope since I am nearing the 70 years mark (I am 68). He pleaded passionately throughout his sermon to open the doors of the church to youth, women, and all.

Paulsen equated Solomon’s temple to the Adventist Church today. In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon prayed that the Temple would be the

place where God will always hear the prayers of the people, despite their shortcomings. Throughout his sermon Paulsen frequently repeated God's response to Solomon's prayer: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn away from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal the land" (2 Chron 7:14).

God acknowledges as His people those who humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn away from evil. Paulsen said that an important trait of God's people is that they humble themselves before God in prayer. "When we serve God arrogance must go," he asserted. "God says 'I will hear. I will forgive. I will heal.' This is wonderful message of assurance that God hears," Paulsen said. "As a church leader I must remember that God is driven by a passion to save every man, woman, and child." He closed by appealing to the Adventist family around the world to be known as a compassionate family."

On a personal note, I remember Jan Paulsen as a fellow student attending the Andrews University Theological Seminary in 1961-1963. He was a brilliant, diligent, hard working student. In fact, he worked at night at a hospital while attending classes during the day. I recall the day when we were told that because of sleep deprivation, Paulsen had fallen asleep and would not wake up. Eventually he woke up at our local hospital.

Paulsen has served our Adventist church with distinction as a missionary, professor, college president, and church administrator. He is the only General Conference President to earn a Doctorate in Theology (from the prestigious Tubingen University). He brings to his office not only a vast administrative experience, but also a keen mind, trained to dig deep into the Word of God. It will be difficult for our church to find a man of his stature to replace him in the future. Let us pray that God will continue to bless him with wisdom, grace, and good health.

SABBATH SCHOOL LESSON "LORD OF OUR PRIORITIES" **Discussion Directed by Clifford Goldsten on July 9, Sabbath Morning**

The Sabbath School Lesson on Sabbath morning, July 9, featured, first a clipping from what is called "The Sabbath School University," and

then a discussion of the lesson by Clifford Godlstein. The Sabbath School University is a pre-recorded program, consisting of young professionals who respond interactively to questions posed by a moderator on the subject of the lesson. The participants spoke eloquently, but shared more of their *feelings*, rather than of their *findings* in the study of the lesson. This is often the case in young-adults Sabbath School classes, where members have hardly had time to study the lesson of the day. The value of these pre-recorded programs, is the inspiration derived from watching young professionals discussing the lesson of the day.

Clifford Goldstein, the Editor of the Sabbath School Lesson, laid a sound foundation for the discussion of the Sabbath School lesson of the day on “Lord of Our Priorities.” He explained eloquently how Christ has the right to our priorities because he has created perfectly, redeemed us completely, and will restore us ultimately.

For the discussion of the lesson he invited Pastor Shawn Boonstra, the new Speaker of *It Is Written*. To the question posed by Clifford, “How do you prioritize your day?” Boonstra responded saying in essence that in the morning he makes a list of the things to be done during the day. Then, he gives priority to those activities which are of a more spiritual nature, that is, more important to the salvation of his soul.

Boonstra’s comments caught my attention, because they reminded me of the Catholic dualistic mentality, where the spiritual life of the soul is seen as more important than the physical life of the body. Since saving the soul is more important than caring for the body, the goal of the Christian life is seen as cultivating the needs of the soul rather than the welfare of the body.

Historically, this dualistic view has envisioned the saints as persons who devote themselves primarily to *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), detaching themselves from the *vita activa* (secular life). Since cultivating the soul has been seen as more important than caring for the body, the physical wellbeing of the body have often been intentionally ignored or even suppressed.

This dualistic mentality is openly contradicted by the Bible which teaches us to glorify God in eating, drinking, and whatever we do (1 Cor 10:31). This means that we set our priorities at the beginning of each day,

in deciding, not what task is more spiritual, but how can I fulfill all our obligations in a God-centered way. For some people living a sedentary life like me, taking time for a physical work out, may be more important than attending a prayer meeting. Neglecting the physical needs of our body (as I often do), is just as serious as ignoring the spiritual needs of our soul.

The dichotomy between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, is still present in the thinking of many Christians today. Many still associate redemption with the human soul rather than the human body. We describe the missionary work of the church as that of “saving souls.” The implication seems to be that the souls are more important than the bodies.

The Gospel gives us no basis for a doctrine of redemption which saves the souls apart from the bodies to which they belong. The Gospel commission is not to save souls but whole persons. What God has joined together at creation, no Christian has the right to put apart. The Biblical wholistic view of human nature challenges us to be concerned about the whole person.

In prioritizing our daily life, we must meet not only the spiritual needs of the soul but also the physical needs of the body. This means taking time to cultivate good physical health. It means that we should not neglect the needs of the body. Proper diet, exercise, and outdoor activities should be seen as an important part of Christian living. (Unfortunately, I do not always practice what I preach. I spend far too many hours at my desk, meeting the many demands of my ministry, like preparing this newsletter).

PHILIP SAMAAAN, “TRANSFORMED FOR DISCIPLESHIP Delivered on July 7, Morning Devotional

Philip Samaan, Professor at Southern University, delivered a perceptive devotional talk entitled “Transformed for Discipleship.” The thrust of his meditation is that the challenge of the Advent Movement today is not merely to add members to our church, but primarily to make disciples, teaching them how to follow Jesus in their daily life.

Samaan said: “So the great and urgent challenge of the Church today is not merely adding more members but reproducing and multiply-

ing fruit-bearing disciples. Why is this fact so crucial? Remember that in the marching orders of Christ's Great Commission He did not say go and make members, but go and make disciples (Matt. 28:19). That was His only plan to propagate His message to the end of the world, He simply had no other. Making disciples was Christ's prevailing passion and priority throughout His ministry, and it must be our top priority right now. Either we follow Him or we fail Him."

Samaan continued explaining that Christ's strategy "to reach the world is sublime yet simple, and it is efficient and effective. As Jesus made disciples out of His followers they were to make disciples of others, and similarly we are to make disciples of others as well. Thus this divine strategy of making, reproducing and multiplying disciples engulfs the world. His sublime strategy of concentration leading to expansion. Concentrating on the few to reach the many."

Making disciples takes more time and efforts than bringing new members into the church through a three weeks crusade. The problem is that those who join the church without having been taught by precept and example how to follow Jesus in their daily life, lack the spiritual vitality needed to grow and to become disciple-makers. The result can be seen in the statistical report given at the GC Session by Bert Haloviak. He reported that during the past five years "for every 100 accessions, more than 35 others decided to leave. That total is considerably more than the 24 subtracted for every 100 added as reported at our last session in 2000."

The fact that the number of new converts leaving the Adventist Church has increased during the last five years from 24 to 35%, call for a reevaluation of our church growth strategy. Could it be that adding members has become more important than making disciples? Could it be that by adopting contemporary METHODS of church growth, our Adventist church has neglected how to teach the MESSAGE of how to become disciples of Christ?

GALINA STELE, "TRANSFORMED THROUGH HIS RESURRECTION"

Delivered on July 6, Morning Devotional

Galina Stele, a Russian Adventist lady, wife of Artur Stele, the President of the Euro-Asia Division, presented a learned Bible Study

entitled “Transformed Through His Resurrection.” The printed version of the study is 14 pages and reads like a professional paper presented at the annual meeting of scholarly societies. She knows the issues and discusses them with clarity and conviction.

Stele spends considerable time discussing the NT evidences for Christ’s resurrection. She argues with considerable dexterity that the numerous references to Christ’s resurrection and appearances differ in style from the known myths of the ancient world. She continues explaining at great length (6 pages) how the Disciples’ encounter with the Risen Savior, transformed them from frightened disbelievers into confident believers.

Stele perceptively observes that through His resurrection and appearances, Christ “taught the disciples and all future generations that although not every time they could see Him He will be always with them. He taught them not to be depended on feelings and senses but on the Holy Spirit and Scriptures. He taught them that absence of His physical body doesn’t mean His real absence. He taught them to live without Him and at the same time with Him.”

The talk was short on the meaning of the resurrection. She does mention that the resurrection represents Christ’s victory over the forces of evil and offers assurance of eternal life for every believer. But I wish that she could have mentioned the difference between the Adventist and the Catholic/Protestant view of Christ’s resurrection. For the latter the resurrection is celebrated **LITURGICALLY** on a weekly Sunday and Easter-Sunday, but for the former (Adventists) the resurrection is celebrated **EXISTENTIALLY** by living victoriously by the **POWER OF THE RESURRECTION**. With Paul we seek to know “the power of his resurrection” (Phil 3:10), not the day of that event. The phrase “Day of the Resurrection” is never used in the NT or in the early Christian literature until the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea in 325 A. D.

When I listen to a preacher expanding the Word of God, I always look for the personal understanding and application. What does the biblical truth being presented mean in the personal life of the speaker? In this case, what does the resurrection mean to Galina Stele herself? Since this question was not addressed in her talk, let me share with you what Christ’s resurrection means to me. This is a sample of theological reflection that appeals to me when I listen to a speaker expanding a biblical truth. In

the setting of a General Conference Session, academic speakers should remember that they are addressing, not scholars, but simple-minded fellow-believers coming from different parts of the world. Their personal understanding and experience of biblical truths, is more important to our believers, than what scholars may have to say about it.

WHAT CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MEANS TO ME

Samuele Bacchiocchi

(1) *Christ's resurrection tells me that truth is stronger than falsehood.* "You seek to kill me," Jesus said, "a man who told you the truth" (John 8:40). Jesus was put to death because He spoke and revealed the truth about God and His plan for our salvation. If Christ's enemies had succeeded in silencing Christ for ever, then falsehood would have been stronger than truth. For me the resurrection is the final guarantee of the indestructibility of truth.

(2) *Christ's resurrection tells me that good is stronger than evil.* The forces that crucified Christ were the forces of evil. Jesus said: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desire. He was a murdered from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth" (John 8:44). If Christ had not risen there would be no hope that goodness will ultimately triumph over evil.

(3) *Christ's resurrection tells me that love is stronger than hate.* It was virulent hatred that procured Christ's crucifixion. It was hatred that ascribed Christ's healing to the power of the devil. If there was no resurrection it would mean that human hatred had conquered God's love. The resurrection is the triumph of God's love over all what human hatred could do.

(4) *Christ's resurrection tells me that life is stronger than death.* If Jesus had not risen again, it would have meant that death had power even over the loveliest and best life that ever lived. Between the cracks of the ruins of a church in London bombed during the World War II, some corn plants came out. As the bombs could not destroy the life of the corn-seeds so death could not destroy Christ's life. The resurrection is the final proof that death cannot destroy God's gift of life.

(5) *Christ's resurrection tells me, not only that Christ died to pay the penalty of my sins, but also that He lives to empower me to live victoriously.* Some Christians focus on Christ's crib and other on His Cross, but ultimately it is His resurrection that gives us the reassurance that "He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). The resurrection tells me that Christ is not on vacation recovering from the exhaustion of His earthly mission, but He is actively working at the right hand of God (Eph 1:20) to bring to consummation the redemption he accomplished on this earth.

(6) *Christ's resurrection assures me that God preserves the identity and individuality of those who have fallen asleep until the Day of the resurrection.* The resurrected Christ was recognized by His followers, because He was the same Christ they had known before His death. In the same way the resurrected saints will be recognized by their loved ones because God preserves and will restore the identity of each person.

(7) *Christ's resurrection gives me reason to believe in my own resurrection on the glorious day of His coming.* Being "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20), Christ's resurrection has a profound eschatological meaning. The early Christians grasped this meaning when they greeting one another saying, "Marantha-the Lord is Coming." The Lord is coming because He is risen. His resurrection is the prefiguration of our resurrection.

Ultimately the meaning of the resurrection is an existential reality in the lives of those who experience "the power of his resurrection" (Phil 3:10) as the motivating force for living, loving, and serving the risen Lord.

The above theological reflection is intended, not to diminish but to expand and enrich Galena Steele's devotional on the transforming power of the resurrection.

RADISAANTIC, “TRANSFORMED THROUGH HIS PROMISED OF THE SECOND ADVENT”**July 8, Friday Evening Devotional**

Radisa Antic, Ph. D., Curator of the E. G. WHITE ESTATE and part-time teacher at Newbold College, presented an evening devotional entitled “Transformed Through His Promise of the Second Advent.” The talk is well-structured, looking at the Advent Hope from several perspectives.

First, Antic discusses the widespread rejection of the Advent Hope by citing such philosophers as Epicurus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Second, he turns to the prophet Hosea to show how God can transform the *Valley of Achor* (“Valley of Trouble”) into the *Gateway of Hope*. Applying the concept to our present world, Antic says: “The people of the Seventh-day Adventist Church around the world, in spite of all the hopelessness everywhere around us, dare to hope and to believe that the God of Israel will fulfil his promises and will transform the Valley of Achor into the Gateway of Hope.”

Antic continues showing that the Adventist faith in the Second Advent is based on the biblical teachings regarding the creation of the world, the resurrection of Jesus, the prophecies of the End, and Christ’s promise to Return.

The devotional is informative, reminding us of our main reasons for believing in the Second Advent. What is missing in this devotional is a reflection on the impact of the Advent Hope upon our lifestyle. After all the assigned topic was “Transformed Through His Promised of the Second Advent.” Thus, the basic question is: How should the Hope of a soon-Coming Savior affect our life, work, values, and decisions? This question is largely neglected. Only the two closing paragraphs deal with the “Sanctifying Hope of the Second Coming.”

Antic says: “The hope in the Second Coming has an impact on those who are waiting for its realization. Each passing day is a time of grace and the Lord expects from its followers to show specific ethical characteristics, such as holiness, humility, and love. Hope makes anxiety, fear of the future, worry and anguish fade away.”

I wish that Antic would have attempted to develop more fully this last section, explaining in concrete terms what does it mean to live in the joyful expectancy of a soon-Coming Savior? The answer to this question largely determines the relevance of the Doctrine of the Second Advent. Most Adventist believers attending a General Conference Session, seek for a fuller understanding and experience of the truths that we cherish.

In my book *THE ADVENT HOPE FOR HUMAN HOPELESSNESS*, I devote the last chapter to the practical implications of the doctrine of the Second Advent. The chapter focus on five distinguishing characteristics of an Advent-oriented life-style. For the sake of brevity, I will quote only a few paragraphs, from the first characteristic of an Advent oriented lifestyle, called “Living with a Forward Look.” If you like what you read, feel free to order a copy of the book *THE ADVENT HOPE FOR HUMAN HOPELESSNESS* by email <sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com> or by phone (269) 471-2915.

Living with a Forward Look

Samuele Bacchiocchi

“To be an Advent-oriented Christian means first of all to live with a forward look. Some people look back longingly to some past Golden Age. Others look with satisfaction to their present attainments or condition. By contrast, the Advent believer lives looking forward to the future New Age to be inaugurated at the Second Advent. Peter urges this forward look, saying: “Set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:13).

Paul eloquently expresses this forward look, saying: “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14). It is noteworthy that the Apostle finds the motivation for living and serving, not in his past life, part of which he spent ignorantly persecuting Christians, nor in his present attainment of perfection (“Not that I . . . am already perfect”—v. 12), but in the future goal of fellowship with Christ and fellow believers. The Apostle urges all mature Christians to have the same forward look: “Let those of us who are mature be thus minded” (Phil 3:15).

To live with this forward look means to view our present life as a pilgrimage, a journey to a better land. The writer of Hebrews notes that Abraham and all past true believers were pilgrims, with no permanent home on this earth. “They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:13-16, NIV).

Do we view ourselves as pilgrims or as permanent residents of this earth? Someone has said that twentieth-century Christians are “the best-disguised set of pilgrims this world has ever seen.” Most Christians hardly give the impression that they are just “passing through,” when they are working intensely, sometimes even at a second or third job, in order to have, like the Joneses, two cars in the garage and two chickens in the pot.

This does not mean that Adventists must have a world-denying attitude and live like hermits. Christ had a vivid sense of the imminence of the End, yet He enjoyed food and fellowship to the extent that His enemies characterized Him as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Matt 11:19). In His parables Christ shows unusual perception and appreciation for the world of nature, because He recognized that while His Kingdom was not of this world, yet this world is still God’s world.

To live with the forward look means then to enjoy the goodness of God’s creation still present in this world, while at the same time remembering that we are pilgrims passing through this world and journeying to the New Earth.

A forward look to the Coming of Christ affects our view of political and religious institutions. During the Middle Ages the Church succeeded in leading many people to believe that it was building the City of God on earth. Today, there are Christians who hope to establish God’s Kingdom upon this earth by improving existing social and political structures and by promoting economic and technological advancements which can benefit mankind.

The forward look to the future Kingdom of God challenges us not to invest present religious or political institutions with permanent value and functions because they are not the method by which the Kingdom of God is to be established. It challenges us to recognize that when Jesus comes all our human institutions, including our Christian ones, will come to an end.

We must build for future generations while recognizing that the future does not belong by right to what we build. This means that our institutions must not become fossilized structures, but must be capable of change in order to respond to new situations. We might say that institutions must express the same pilgrim quality of adaptability of the Adventist believers. The ultimate effect of living with a forward look is to view all our institutions and personal decisions in the light of the Advent of our Lord. (*THE ADVENT HOPE*, pp. 330-332).

RICHARD M. DAVIDSON, “TRANSFORMED BY ENTERING HIS REST”

July 1, Friday Evening Devotional

Richard Davidson, OT Professor at Andrews University Theological Seminary, presented on Friday evening, July 1, a perceptive and inspiring devotional entitled “Transformed By Entering His Rest.” The major objective of this study is to help believers understand the deeper meaning of the Sabbath rest as an experience of righteousness by faith.

Davidson says: “Every Sabbath, as we rest from our work, we proclaim our experience of righteousness by faith, that we trust not in our own works, but in the finished work of Christ in our behalf! The Sabbath becomes the outward sign of the “rest of grace” (7BC 928) that believers in Christ the New Joshua may experience all week long.” The notion of the Sabbath rest as a rest of grace” is a marvellous concept that our members need to understand and experience more fully.

The study begins by tracing the origin of the concept of entering into God’s rest in the story of Joshua. In contrast to the rebellious ten spies and the rebellious generation of Israelites, Joshua and Caleb believed in God and did enter into the promised land of rest together with the new generation of Israelites. Entering into the land of Canaan is equated in Hebrews 3 and 4 with entering into God’s rest.

Davidson does a masterful job in showing the typological correspondence between Joshua and Jesus. Both names are identical in Hebrew (Yeshua) and Greek (Iesous). Both men fulfilled a similar mission. Simply stated, Joshua functions as a type of Christ.

“In the New Testament,” Davidson points out, “Joshua typology finds its basic literal fulfillment in connection with Jesus’ first advent. As Joshua led Israel to Canaan after forty years (Josh 1-5), so the new Joshua entered heavenly Canaan after forty days (Acts 1:3, 9-11; Heb 1-2). It was no coincidence that Jesus remained here on this earth just forty days after His resurrection. He was consciously following in the steps of Old Testament Joshua, a day for a year, and at the end of the forty days in the wilderness of this earth, He ascended to the heavenly Canaan as the “captain” or “pioneer” of our salvation (see Heb 2:10). Just as Joshua conducted the conquest of Israel’s enemies (Josh 6-12), so Jesus leads out in the conquest of our spiritual enemies (Col 2:15). Just as Joshua appointed an inheritance for Israel (Josh 1:6; 13-21), so the New Joshua, Jesus, receives and appoints an inheritance for His saints (Heb 1:4; 9:15). Just as the major goal of Joshua was to bring rest to the people of Israel (Josh 1:13-15; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; etc.), so the antitypical Joshua said to His disciples, “I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28; see Heb 4:8, 9).

In the second part of the Bible study, Davidson explains how the Joshua typology serves in the Bible to represent the experience of entering into God’s rest. Hebrews explains that the wilderness generation of the Israelites did not enter into God’s rest because of unbelief (Heb 3:12-13, 18-19). For ancient Israel entering God’s rest meant entering into the land of Canaan.

Davidson continues, saying: “What actually is involved in God’s rest? The apostle who penned the book of Hebrews, whom I believe was none other than Paul himself, grasped the deep spiritual insights of the Old Testament regarding God’s rest. In sharing his epistle with the Jewish Christians to whom he was writing, pleading for them not to forsake Jesus, He unfolds the meaning of God’s rest. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament which Paul was quoting from in addressing his Greek-speaking Jewish audience living outside of Israel, the same word for “rest” that appears in Joshua for the rest in Canaan (katapau κ), is used of God’s rest from His work on the seventh day of creation week (Gen 2:1).

“The apostle elaborates upon the implication that emerges from the first mention of God’s rest in Gen 2. God rested by ceasing from his works on the Sabbath, and invited Adam and Eve to rest on that first Sabbath. From what were Adam and Eve resting? From their own works? No, they had just been created only hours before. They were resting in God’s finished work! Thus even before sin, there is a profound inference of the principle of righteousness by faith. And Paul draws the implication for believers in his day: “There remains a rest [*sabbatismos*, sabbath-rest] for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His” (Heb 4:9-10). Every Sabbath, as we rest from our work, we proclaim our experience of righteousness by faith, that we trust not in our own works, but in the finished work of Christ in our behalf! The Sabbath becomes the outward sign of the “rest of grace” (7BC 928) that believers in Christ the New Joshua may experience all week long.”

The Sabbath Rest as a Daily Rest of Grace

The notion of resting from our work on the Sabbath (Heb 4:10) to allow God to work in us more fully and freely, gives rich meaning and significance to our Sabbath rest. It makes the Sabbath, not merely a day of physical relaxation, but an act whereby we make ourselves free and available for God, in order to experience the awareness of His presence, peace, and rest in our lives.

Unfortunately the notion of the Sabbath as “rest of grace, “experienced all week long,” is often used by anti-Sabbatarians to negate the literal observance of the Sabbath. During the past few years over 50 former Adventist Bible teachers and pastors have left the Adventist church together with thousand of church members, because they argue that the rest of grace of the Sabbath is experienced every day — not by resting on the seventh day.

For example, in his book *THE SABBATH IN CRISIS*, Dale Ratzlaff, a former Adventist pastor and Bible teacher argues that the author of Hebrews is not thinking of the seventh day Sabbath rest but of the “rest of grace” experienced by believers every day. “The writer of Hebrews stresses the word ‘today’ on several occasions. In the New Covenant, one can enter into God’s rest ‘today.’” He does not have to wait until the

end of the week. . . . The New Covenant believer is to rejoice into God's rest continually" (p. 247).

Davidson's comment that the Sabbath is "outward sign of the 'rest of grace' that believers in Christ the New Joshua may experience all week long," must be properly qualified. Otherwise, Christians like Ratzlaff will use it to support their contention that for New Covenant Christians the Sabbath rest is a rest of grace experienced every day.

The Function of the Adverb "Today"

The function of the adverb "today—*semeron*" is not to teach a continuous Sabbath rest of grace that replaces literal Sabbathkeeping; it is to show that Sabbathkeeping as an experience of rest in God was not experienced by the Israelites as a people because of their unbelief (Heb 4:6). To prove this fact, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95:7 where God invites the people to respond to Him, saying: "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 4:7, cf. Ps. 95:7).

The "today" simply serves to show that the spiritual dimension of the Sabbath as rest in God still remains because God renewed the invitation at the time of David. To argue that "today" means that "New Covenant" Christians observe the Sabbath every day by living in God's rest is to ignore also the historical context—namely, that the "today" was spoken by God at the time of David. If Ratzlaff's interpretation of "today" were correct, then already, at the time of David, God had replaced the literal observance of the Sabbath with a spiritual experience of rest in Him. Such an absurd conclusion can be reached only by reading into the text gratuitous assumptions.

Three Levels of Interpretation of the Sabbath Rest in the Old Testament

In reading and rereading Davidson's devotional on entering into God's rest, I sensed that the average listener or reader of his devotional, may have difficulty to understand the connection between the Sabbath rest and entering into God's rest. Some who greatly enjoyed his presentation, told me that they did not quite understand this connection.

To shed some light on how the Sabbath rest in Hebrews 3 and 4, is connected with the land of Canaan, the seventh day of creation, and the Messianic rest, I will mention briefly three levels of meaning attached to the Sabbath rest in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature. In the Old Testament, we find that the Sabbath rest refers first of all to the physical cessation from work on the seventh day (Ex 20:10; 23:12; 31:14; 34:21).

Second, the Sabbath rest served to epitomize the national aspiration for a peaceful life in a land at rest (Deut 12:9; 25:19; Is 14:3) where the king would give to the people “rest from all enemies” (2 Sam 7:1; cf. 1 Kings 8:5), and where God would find His “resting place” among His people and especially in His sanctuary at Zion (2 Chron 6:41; 1 Chron 23:25; Ps 132:8, 13, 14; Is 66:1).

The fact that the Sabbath rest as a political aspiration for national peace and prosperity remained largely unfulfilled apparently inspired the third interpretation of the Sabbath rest—namely, the symbol of the Messianic age, often known as the “end of days” or the “world to come.”

How did the Sabbath come to be regarded as the symbol of the world to come? Apparently the harsh experiences of the desert wandering, first, and of the exile, later, inspired the people to view the Edenic Sabbath as the paradigm of the future Messianic age. In fact, the Messianic age is characterized by material abundance (Am 9:13-14; Joel 4:19; Is 30:23-25; Jer 31:12), social justice (Is 61:1-9), harmony between persons and animals (Hos 2:20; Is 65:25; 11:6), extraordinary longevity (Is 65:20; Zech 8:4), refulgent light (Is 30:26; Zech 14:6, 7), and the absence of death and sorrow (Is 25:8).

Summing up, the weekly experience of the Sabbath rest served not only to express the national aspirations for a peaceful life in the land of Canaan (which remained largely unfulfilled), but also to nourish the hope of the future Messianic age which came to be viewed as “wholly sabbath and rest.”

Three Levels of Interpretation of the Sabbath Rest in Hebrews

The existence in Old Testament times of three levels of interpretation of the Sabbath rest as a personal, national, and Messianic reality provides

the basis for understanding these three meanings in Hebrews 3 and 4 which Davidson attempts to explain. By welding two texts together—namely, Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:2—the writer presents three different levels of meaning of the Sabbath rest. At the first level, the Sabbath rest points to God’s creation rest, when “his works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Heb 4:3). This meaning is established by quoting Genesis 2:2.

At the second level, the Sabbath rest symbolizes the promise of entry into the land of Canaan, which the wilderness generation “failed to enter” (Heb 4:6; cf. 3:16-19), but which was realized later when the Israelites under Joshua did enter the land of rest (4:8). At the third and most important level, the Sabbath rest prefigures the rest of redemption which has dawned and is made available to God’s people through Christ.

How does the author establish this last meaning? By drawing a remarkable conclusion from Psalm 95:7, 11 which he quotes several times (Heb 4:3, 5, 7). In Psalm 95, God invites the Israelites to enter into His rest which was denied to the rebellious wilderness generation (Heb 4:7-11). The fact that God should renew “again” the promise of His rest long after the actual entrance into the earthly Canaan—namely, at the time of David by saying “today” (Heb 4:7)—is interpreted by the author of Hebrews to mean two things: first, that God’s Sabbath rest was not exhausted when the Israelites under Joshua found a resting place in the land, but that it still “remains for the people of God” (4:9); and second, that such rest has dawned with the coming of Christ (Heb 4:3, 7).

The Nature of the Sabbath Rest in Hebrews

What is the nature of the “Sabbath rest” that is still outstanding for God’s people (Heb 4:9)? Is the writer thinking of a literal or spiritual type of Sabbathkeeping? The answer is both. The author presupposes the literal observance of the Sabbath to which he gives a deeper meaning—namely, a faith response to God. Support for a literal understanding of Sabbathkeeping is provided by the historical usage of the term “*sabbatismos*—sabbathkeeping” in verse 9 and by the description of Sabbathkeeping as cessation from work given in verse 10: “For whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his.”

The meaning of “*sabbatismos*” has been long debated because the term occurs only once in the NT. The tendency has been to interpret the term figuratively as spiritual rest experienced every day, rather than the physical rest of the seventh day. This view has been challenged by the scholarly symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day*, produced by a team of American/British Sundaykeeping scholars at Cambridge University in England.

Professor Andrew Lincoln, one of the contributor to the symposium, found the use of *sabbatismos* in the writings of Plutarch, Justin, Epiphanius, the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul. He acknowledges that in each of the above instances “the term denotes the observance or celebration of the Sabbath. This usage corresponds to the Septuagint usage of the cognate verb *sabbatizo* (cf. Ex 16:23; Lev 23:32; 26:34f.; 2 Chron 36:21) which also has reference to Sabbath observance. Thus the writer to the Hebrews is saying that since the time of Joshua an observance of Sabbath rest has been outstanding” (p. 213).

Davidson fails to mention this latest research which provides compelling proof that the *sabbatismos*—Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, is the literal observance of the Sabbath.

The literal nature of Sabbathkeeping is indicated also by the following verse which speaks of the cessation from work as representing entering into God’s rest. “For whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his” (Heb 4:10). The majority of commentators interpret the cessation from work of Hebrews 4:10 in a figurative sense as “abstention from servile work,” meaning sinful activities. Such a concept cannot be read back into Hebrews 4:10 where a comparison is made between the divine and the human cessation from “works.” It is absurd to think that God ceased from “sinful deeds.” The point of the analogy is simply that as God ceased on the seventh day from His creation work, so believers are to cease on the same day from their labors. This is a simple statement of the nature of Sabbathkeeping which essentially involves cessation from works.

The Meaning of Sabbathkeeping in Hebrews

The concern of the author of Hebrews, however, is not merely to encourage his readers to interrupt their secular activities on the Sabbath,

but rather to help them understand the deeper significance of the act of resting for God on the Sabbath. The recipients of the book are designated as “Hebrews” presumably because of their tendency to adopt Jewish liturgical customs as a means to gain access to God. This is indicated by the appeal in chapters 7 to 10 to discourage any participation in the Temple’s sacrificial services. Thus, these Hebrew-minded Christians did not need to be reminded of the physical-cessation aspect of Sabbathkeeping. This aspect yields only a negative idea of rest, one which only would have served to encourage existing Judaizing tendencies. What they needed, instead, was to understand the meaning of the act of resting on the Sabbath, especially in the light of the coming of Christ.

This deeper meaning can be seen in the antithesis the author makes between those who failed to enter into God’s rest because of “unbelief—*apeitheias*” (Heb 4:6, 11), that is, faithlessness which results in disobedience, and those who enter it by “faith—*pistei*” (Heb 4:2, 3), that is, faithfulness that results in obedience.

The act of resting on the Sabbath for the author of Hebrews is not merely a routine ritual (cf. “sacrifice”—Matt 12:7) but rather a faith response to God. Such a response entails not the hardening of one’s heart (Heb 4:7) but being receptive to “hear his voice” (Heb 4:7). It means experiencing God’s salvation rest, not by works but by faith—not by doing but by being saved through faith (Heb 4:2, 3, 11). On the Sabbath, as John Calvin aptly expresses it, believers are “to cease from their work to allow God to work in them.” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965), vol. 2, p. 337).

This expanded interpretation of Sabbathkeeping in the light of the Christ event was apparently designed to wean Christians away from a too materialistic understanding of its observance. To achieve this objective, the author, on the one hand, reassures his readers of the permanence of the blessings contemplated by Sabbathkeeping and, on the other hand, explains that such a blessing can be received only by experiencing the Sabbath as a faith response to God.

It is evident that for the author of Hebrews the Sabbathkeeping that remains for Christians is not only a physical experience of cessation from work on the seventh day but also a faith response, a yes “today” response to God. It is an act of resignation to our human efforts to achieve salva-

tion in order to allow the omnipotent grace of God to operate more fully and freely in our lives.

Of all the commandments, the Sabbath offers us the most concrete opportunity to show our love to God because it invites us to consecrate our time to Him. Time is the essence of our life. The way we use our time is indicative of our priorities. A major reason why the Sabbath has been attacked by many throughout human history is that sinful human nature is self-centered rather than God-centered. Most people want to spend their Sabbath time seeking for personal pleasure or profit rather than for the presence and peace of God.

Believers who on the Sabbath stop their work to allow God to work in them more fully and freely, show in a tangible way that God really counts in their lives. They make themselves receptive and responsive to the presence, peace, and rest of God.

I trust that this expansion of Davidson's devotional, will help some to understand more fully how by resting on the Sabbath we can experience more fully the rest of divine grace.