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Comments by a Left-Wing Neo-Andreasenite

We all owe much to those who convened this conference. Julius Nam, Jerry Moon, Michael Campbell and their colleagues did what no one else in fifty years could do. Theirs is an amazing accomplishment. Congratulations! Thank you! We can hardly wait for your next conference!

I wish that my father, Ralph S. Larson, an outspoken critic of *Questions on Doctrine* who died on August 19, could have been here. If that had been possible, some might have been surprised that sometimes we agreed! Partly in jest, I liked to think of him as a right-wing Neo-Andreasenite and me as a left-wing one. We had more in common than some might suppose.

Some might think that QOD disappointed only those who viewed it from our denomination's theological right. This is not so. Many on Adventism's theological left also found it less than completely helpful. But whereas people like my father publicly criticized it, most of those with whom I have been most closely associated throughout my ministry virtually ignored it. They weren't conversing with scholars like Donald Barnhouse and Walter Martin. They were interacting with people like Charles Hartshorne, Paul Tillich, Langdon Gilkey and James Luther Adams. From that vantage

point it was difficult to take the QOD debates very seriously. They looked too much like squabbles among fundamentalists.

With respect to the human nature of Jesus, my father vigorously assailed the historical accuracy and theological value of QOD. He held that the teaching that it was that of Adam [and Eve?] before the Fall coheres with neither Scripture nor our theological heritage. I wholeheartedly concur; however, for me this doctrine is also philosophically and scientifically doubtful.

The jury is still out on these theological issues. It may never be able to render a lasting verdict because the contesting alternatives rest upon a complex interaction of many diverse variables, including the temperaments of people. But the verdict is already in on the historical allegations: QOD is guilty as charged.

As George Knight demonstrated in its second edition, QOD is not an entirely reliable guide to our denomination's theological history. I find it ironic that of all people he is the one who has most persuasively exhibited QOD's historical shortcomings. After all, Knight has spent much of his ministry challenging the theology he learned in my father's evangelistic meetings in Northern California through which he became an Adventist! Not long before my father's death, I explained this surprising development to him. "Praise God!" he whispered. Knight gets high marks from me for being an honest scholar. Thank you, George!

I

Framing the issues in terms of whether Jesus had a “fallen” human nature hurt both sides. On the one hand, those who answered this question with a “yes” should not have done so because they left the impression that Jesus was blameworthy in some way, something that they repeatedly and explicitly denied. On the other hand, those who answered “no” should not have done so because they left the impression that Jesus was so unlike us that his life was exemplary in no way, something that they explicitly and repeatedly denied. This was not the best way to proceed.

Some on each side faulted the other side not merely for its doctrines but also for the alleged implications of these doctrines. But the history of Christianity includes cases where the “obvious” implications of a doctrine did not occur in real life. It seems “self-evident” that extreme Calvinists who believe that all things in this life and the next are predetermined by God will passively comply with God’s solemn decrees, for example. But contrary to all “obvious” expectations, these Christians have been among the most active and aggressive on earth, sometimes for good and sometimes for evil. This shows how dangerous it can be to identify with certainty what the practical out workings of someone else’s beliefs will be.

These debates took place with little reference to what was happening at the same time in the rest of the theological world. The period between and after the two World Wars was a time of much fruitful theological scholarship throughout the whole of Christianity.

Some of these results will not stand the test of time but some will. Yet we seemed to have been almost oblivious to these developments. It would have been instructive to notice the constructive political uses to which Reinhold Niebuhr put the doctrine of “original sin,” for example. This would have placed the entire discussion on a different and higher plane.

These debates continued with hardly anyone on either side checking with experts in philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and neurobiology, even though specialists in these fields spend their entire professional lives studying human nature. It would have cost no one anything to invest an afternoon discussing these issues with them. Neither would it have obligated anyone to accept what these specialists said. But not even to ask, not even to pick up the telephone and make a call, was an unfortunate oversight.

As evidenced by their frequent references to our sinful propensities and impulses, negative assumptions on both sides about human sexuality appear to have plagued the debates. It is doubtful that these references applied to our proclivities to breathe, eat, drink, exercise and sleep. The problem seems to have been our profound and persistent sexual urges. Some on one side of the debates apparently held that from his infancy Jesus Christ wholly eradicated these urges by the power of God and so should we. Some on the other side apparently believed that this is impossible for us but possible for Jesus because he differed from us so greatly from the start. It seems that both groups would have disqualified Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior if they learned

that he experienced sexual dreams and nocturnal emissions, for example. This assumption deserves another look.

II

If we still want to try to make some progress I believe that we will have to *proceed very differently*. When good scientists debate something for fifty years to no avail, they don't keep hammering away at each other. They pause, put the issue on the shelf for a while and *seek fundamentally new ways* of looking at the problem. I believe that we have reached this point and that we will not advance any further until we *radically reconsider* our premises.

For too long we and other Christians have allowed concepts that we have uncritically accepted from some of the ancient Greeks to frustrate our attempts to understand. The almost universally acceptance of the dubious distinction between substances and accidents is only one of these. It deserves our thorough review.

One of the ways to get at this is to imagine what we would be discussing if Christianity had reached us by way of Asia rather than Europe. It is doubtful that we would be talking about the things we are now considering. For example, if our beliefs had been as permeated by Buddhism as they were by Plato and Aristotle, we probably would have regarded inquiries about the human nature of Jesus as distractions from more important things. In part this would have displayed our preference for the practical. It

would also have exhibited our belief that human “nature” is not an enduring substance about which we can ask questions such as “Is it fallen?” Human nature is not a thing. It is no-thing. It is nothing. The human person is a flow of constantly aggregating and changing phenomena. It is not a block of ice; it is a bubbling stream.

If we accepted this major change, our discussions of the human nature of Jesus would be different in at least three important and overlapping ways. First we would presume that throughout his life he *changed substantially* such that what might have been sinful at one stage need not have been at a different one. Second, we would attend to the *many relationships* in his life that helped constitute his identity. Third, we would talk about the “person” of Jesus Christ in terms of his “work,” holding that they are *one and the same*. Jesus Christ is not first Being and then Act. Neither is he first Act and then Being. His Being is his Act and his Act is his Being.

The relational feature of human life deserves emphasis. By longstanding philosophical definition a substance is that which makes anything what it is without regard to changes in time and apart from all relationships. If this could be said of human nature, people would first establish their identities and then enter into discretionary relationships. But this is not how things work. From the beginning and continuing to the end, each individual is a constantly changing convergence of non-discretionary and discretionary relationships that partly constitute his or her identity. *This means that every relationship that Jesus experienced throughout his entire life helped make up who he was up to that moment.* Jesus could have had the human nature of Adam [and Eve?] before the Fall

only if every person with whom he ever had contact also possessed it. Even Judas would have had to be immaculately conceived!

Although it is more Hebraic than Hellenistic, the puzzled and sometimes irritated reactions we receive when we develop our understandings of Jesus Christ along these lines demonstrate how thoroughly we have all uncritically accepted the habit of thinking in terms of substances and accidents. Most of us find this implausible in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation that asserts that the substance of the bread and wine change in the Mass even though their accidents remain the same. Why, then, do we proceed as though in Jesus the substance of his nature remained the same and only the accidents changed? Despite their opposite claims, in both cases we are dealing with the same problematic premise.

In addition to these philosophical issues, thinking in terms of substances and accidents becomes less and less credible with every new scientific discovery about human life. Research in all the relevant disciplines is rapidly catching up with the Buddhist insight that a human person cannot be thought of as an enduring substance. It is not a thing. It is no-thing. It is nothing. It is a constantly changing relational flux.

We can understand why many specialists in other fields increasingly distinguish human beings from other animals by what we can *do* rather than by what we *are* when we recall that we share more than ninety percent of our genes with primates and fifty percent of them with ordinary household yeast. This is true of you and me and it was

true of Jesus, if he was truly human. What human beings *are* is not that much different from what other animals *are* but what these small differences enable human beings to *do* as compared to what other animals can *do* is beyond measure. This is why many now think in terms of forms and functions rather than substances and accidents.

We may have spent fifty years debating the nature of some-thing that was no-thing in the first place. Because we are reluctant to look at things from *radically different* points of view, even when we are obviously stuck, we may continue doing this. This may be our sorry fate.

III

Yet this is not the whole story because QOD provided opportunities for subsequent theological developments. One issue concerns how we should do our theological work. Some seem puzzled by the fact that QOD copiously quotes Ellen G. White plus many other writers from the history of Christian thought even though it says that we base our beliefs on Scripture alone. Yet this is exactly how it should be!

Scripture is our sole source of truth in the sense that it alone is supremely authoritative. This does not mean that we refuse to study anything other than it or that we refuse to allow what we learn elsewhere to help us interpret and apply what it says. The idea that we base our beliefs on nothing but the Bible is as descriptively false and prescriptively undesirable for us as it is for every other denomination.

Of course Ellen White is authoritative for us. Of course we make judgments about what other resources in Christian history are also authoritative for us. Of course we learn everything we can from all the sciences and humanities. And of course we are perfectly transparent about this and wholly unashamed because this is precisely how we should do our work. None of this is out of order unless we refuse to let others assess our sources, methods and conclusions. QOD makes this plain, in fact if not also in principle. We would all move forward today if on this issue we all moved backward to it.

Turning to a second matter, QOD advances a “wider” or “different” theory of atonement and this gives us a present opportunity. Although a number of its technical points need to be updated along the lines that it advocated regarding atonement as a continuing process rather than a single event, its central message is clear and convincing. This is that we should not view the cross as the only place at which God atoned for the sins of the world. Scripture does not leave the impression that God did nothing to reconcile human beings to themselves, each other and God before the cross and nothing again after it, as though the atonement on the cross was the singular exception to the way God typically does things. Far from it! At the cross we can see most clearly that always and everywhere God fosters at-one-ment. The cross is not God’s only at-one-ing event. It is God’s most revealing one.

On a third issue, QOD’s distinction between the “seventh-day-ness” and “sabbath-ness” of the Sabbath helped to prepare us for explorations of its meaning as well as its timing, something that had previously preoccupied us. It is impossible to exaggerate

how much our understanding of Sabbath time has deepened and widened since the publication of QOD, partly because of this distinction. It is also difficult to overestimate the power of Sabbath time to keep us together. From its beginning to its end we can share what we have in common as children of God who are all trying to understand and follow God's leading. Sabbath time is for us what the Mass is to Roman Catholics. It makes us. It keeps us. It directs us.

The seventh-day-ness of the Sabbath has always been as important to society at large as its sabbath-ness has been to the communities of faith. This is especially pertinent in our time when increasing numbers of thoughtful people are worried about the creeping Constantianism in some nations that have long stood for religious liberty. Celebrating the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week in defiance of violent Christian hegemony has long been a daring protest against the kind of amalgamation of religious and political power that occurred in the Roman Empire during the fourth century after Christ and often from then on. This protest is needed now more than ever.

QOD's unabashed advocacy of our understanding of human life with respect to body and soul provided another opportunity. This is what we used to call the doctrine of "the state of the dead" and what we now more frequently refer to as the "psychosomatic unity of the human self," or better yet "the state of the living." Despite this radical change in wording, we are talking about the same doctrine; however, we have made it deeper, wider and more pertinent to contemporary issues. This doctrine now makes decisive contributions to medical, sexual and business ethics that others beyond our

denomination notice and appreciate. We can say the same thing about our interpretation from Ellen G. White of the image of God as “the power to think and to do.” Many have been glad to learn how Adventists often use this theme when dealing with difficult theoretical and practical bioethical questions about life and death.

Although it sometimes wavered, QOD’s defense of genuine human freedom and the conditional function of prophesy provided another opportunity for further theological development. This established a basis for the “Openness of God” movement that started with our own Richard Rice and is now active in many denominations.

When the history of Christian theology in our time is written, this movement which appropriately started in our circles will be recorded as one of its most significant schools of thought. Some think its denial of complete divine foreknowledge unduly restricts God. This is not so. It teaches that without a single exception God knows everything that can be known. The issue is not about God. It is about the actuality of human freedom and the conditionality of the future. On these matters QOD was moving in the right direction even though it did not go far enough.

A sixth theme from QOD presents a more challenging opportunity. Although we are starting to do some good work that streamlines and makes more pertinent to our time the doctrine of the sanctuary without losing its central message, we need to do much more. Instead of focusing so much on the technical aspects of a few disputable verses, we need to step back and see the sanctuary theme as it threads its way throughout all

of Scripture from the Torah to the Apocalypse. This doctrine is a gold mine overflowing with theoretical and practical riches that we are just beginning to discover.

Such work does not abandon our doctrine of the sanctuary any more than our more recent emphasis on the state of the living forsakes our doctrine of the state of the dead. The central truth of the sanctuary doctrine today is precisely what it was at the time of QOD, in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the time of Jesus and in the days of ancient Israel. It is the good news that God is with us: Immanuel! This is not about “us” as SDAs or Americans or members of the middle class or any other such grouping. It is about “us” as all living beings throughout the entire universe.

Those who were disappointed on October 22, 1844 needed the reassurance that God had not abandoned them. Even if they did so in ways that embarrass some today, those who launched our movement heard this good news and moved forward to accomplish great things. Millions of people who are living in all parts of the world in our time need to hear this good news too. Most of them don't have the time or resources to master all the minute and controversial details of prophetic interpretation with which we make it virtually impossible for them to hear it. This is not right. The doctrine of the sanctuary does not belong to us. It belongs to them. It belongs to all who are as filled with despair as were our pioneers at the Great Disappointment. They need its central message, they need it straight and they need it now. Who are we to stand in their way?

As I see it, QOD was a small and partially flawed part of our denomination's huge attempt in the last half of the twentieth century to improve the quantity and quality of our theological resources. Publishing the SDA Bible Commentary was another. Strengthening and relocating our first true seminary, and thereby creating Andrews University, which now offers credible doctorates of its own, was too. So was sending our people to places like Berkeley, Fuller, Claremont, Chicago, Andrews, Vanderbilt, Duke, Princeton, Drew, New York, Columbia, Yale, Boston, Harvard, London, Cambridge, Oxford, Manchester, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Strasbourg, Basle, Tübingen, Rome, Cape Town, Sydney, McQuarrie and Brisbane. Despite its many disappointments and disasters, some of which were the predictable results of rapid change in a small group, the endeavor as a whole has been an overwhelming success. Few denominations have accomplished so much in so little time and with so few resources. Although I don't believe in many miracles, I believe in this one. QOD was a part of this larger miracle and for that I am grateful.