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The Associate Editor's

DESK

Gerhard Pfandl

The Relevance of the First Angel's Message

"Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'" (Rev. 14:6, 7).¹

The proclamations of the three angels in Revelation 14 are an important part of the Seventh-day Adventist message to the world. The first angel's message refers to judgment and worship. What is the relevance of the first angel's message for the 21st century?

Historical Background

Answering this question begins with going back a few years. During the 16th century, two great revolutions took place. On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed 95 theses, primarily against the sale of indulgences,

to the door of the church in Wittenberg, where he was teaching at the local university. This act started the well-known Protestant Reformation.

Maybe not so well known is the second revolution, which took place in the field of science. Ten years prior to Luther's act, in 1507, another monk, Nicolaus Copernicus, discovered that the Sun—not the Earth—was at the center of our planetary system. Until then, people thought that the Earth was the center of the universe (geocentric system). No, said Copernicus, we are only a planet circling around our sun (heliocentric system). This was quite a blow to the people's worldview and their self-understanding at that time. No longer was humankind the center of the universe.

Another man who contributed to the scientific revolution was the Italian Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Throughout the Middle Ages, science was part of religion. The church decided what was truth in all fields of human endeavor, including science. Galileo, however, said, in essence: Scientifically true is only what you can prove with your five senses (hear, see, smell, taste, and touch), not what the church teaches. Was he right? Scientifically speaking, he was right. When this kind of thinking was applied to religion and the Bible, however, Christianity came under attack because God and miracles cannot be verified scientifically.

In the 17th century, Rene Descartes, the French philosopher and mathematician, set philosophy on a new course. Until Descartes, philosophy, like science, was part of religion. The existence of God was assumed, and the starting point of philosophy was faith. Descartes' position was that the starting point of philosophy is doubt, not faith. And he began with what he could not doubt: his own existence (*cogito ergo sum* ["I think, therefore I am"]). From then on, human reason—not God—was the starting point in philosophy. Skepticism became an important part of philosophy and, in turn, also of religion. A result was the

rise of rationalism in the 17th century, which rejected miracles and prophecy and became a formidable opponent of Christianity.

In the 19th century, the theory of evolution launched an all-out attack on Christianity. Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* popularized the theory of evolution, which until then had existed only in the minds of some philosophers.

Then in 1966, Joseph Fletcher, who was ordained as an Episcopal priest, published the book *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, in which he taught that God's commandments are not absolute, that at times you have to break them. The only absolute law is love. Whatever you do out of love—stealing, lying, adultery, killing—is right. Fletcher later identified himself as an atheist.

Modern Times

The influence of these developments in popular thinking may be seen in the state of Christianity today:

- Science has become the ultimate authority for most Christians today. By and large, evolution is accepted as fact.
- The Bible is no longer the Word of God, but humankind's word about God—a history book, if you like.
- Everything must be questioned and tested by human reason. Anything not reasonable must be rejected.

Into this world of skepticism and unbelief God sends the first angel's message of Revelation 14, tailor-made for our times.

The First Angel's Message

"*Fear God and give glory to Him.*" How do we give God the glory? Ecclesiastes 12:13 says, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (KJV). In a world where most people have lost sight of God, where the Bible is no longer accepted as the Word of God, where God's commandments have been turned

upside-down, where in the name of love everything is permitted, God has a people who proclaim the message: "Fear God and give glory to Him" by keeping His commandments. Yes, the first angel's message is certainly relevant for today.

"For the hour of His judgment has come." To which judgment does John refer? The final judgment or some other judgment? In Daniel 7:9, 10, we read: "I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment *was* white as snow, and the hair of His head *was* like pure wool. His throne *was* a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened."

In vision, Daniel saw a judgment going on in heaven *prior* to the Second Advent, which we call the pre-Advent or investigative judgment. Even non-Seventh-day Adventists have recognized that this judgment is not the final judgment. The Roman Catholic theologian F. Düsterwald, for example, says concerning the judgment in Daniel 7: "What is described here is not as many older interpreters . . . have assumed the general judgment of the world, it is not God's judgment here on earth, rather the place of the judgment is in heaven. The context indicates that it is a preliminary judgment which is later confirmed in the general judgment of the world."² From the Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of Daniel 8 and 9, we know that this judgment began in 1844 and will continue until the Second Advent.

Hebrews 9:27 says: "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Just as death is the lot of all humanity, so every human being has to face the final judgment, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).

However, if we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior,

we have nothing to fear in the judgment because Jesus has taken our sins to the cross and died in our place. Paul says that Christ was made "sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (vs. 21), and that "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). At the Second Coming, the decisions reached in the pre-Advent judgment will be revealed and the saints of God will receive the kingdom (Dan. 7:27).

Some have wondered, *Why does God take so long for this judgment? Shouldn't He have finished long ago?* We need to remember that every day people die whose names come up in this pre-Advent judgment. This judgment will not be finished until the close of probation.

We live in the time just prior to the Second Advent. "The hour of His judgment has come" (Rev. 14:7) is present truth. It is the message the world needs to hear today. Again we recognize the relevance of the first angel's message.

"*Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.*" This is a call to worship the creator God, not a pantheistic or evolutionistic God. In a time when most Christians have accepted one form or another of evolution, God has a people who proclaim the creator God. Never before in history has this message been more needed; never before has it been more timely. Until the end of the 19th century, most Christians still believed in a God who created the world in six days. Today, only a small minority still does. Yes, the message of the first angel in all its aspects is very timely.

The message of the first angel is God's answer to the spiritual and moral condition of our time. Never before have these religious conditions existed as they do today. I am glad to be an Adventist. Are you? I believe in this church. Do you?

I believe that the messenger of the Lord was right when she said, "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall

forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. 1. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from *the New King James Version*.
2. 2. F. Düsterwald, *Die Weltreiche und das Gottesreich* (Freiburg: Herdersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1890), p. 177.
3. *Life Sketches*, p. 196.