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The Adventist Theological Society

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THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Where it's been; what it's doing; where it's going

In November 1987, a group of professors from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, met in a downtown restaurant in Boston in connection with the annual Society of Biblical Literature convention. While they sipped virgin pina colodas, the idea emerged to create a venue through which Adventist scholars and others especially anxious to uphold the fundamental Protestant hermeneutical principles of *sola Scriptura* and *tota Scriptura* could gather for spiritual fellowship, constructive theological

discussion, and the presentation of papers. During the next year, the nature and purpose of such a society was further discussed by scholars at Andrews University, who decided to call colleagues at Southern College (now Southern Adventist University) and share their ideas. By return phone, they learned that theologians there had been doing similar brainstorming, and were impressed to invite them to an organizational meeting. Both

**Richard M. Davidson is a past president of ATS; Jiri Moskala is the current president.*

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groups sensed the Holy Spirit at work prompting minds on both campuses, and accepted their invitation. Thus in the fall of 1988, the Adventist Theological Society was formally “born” as an international, professional, nonprofit organization established to foster biblical, theological, and historical studies supportive of spiritual revival and reformation within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Uplifting Goals

The goals established for the society were multifaceted: to uphold the fundamental biblical beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; promote sound biblical scholarship and interpretation among Adventist biblical scholars and other educated church members; create a spiritual and intellectual atmosphere for the exchange of ideas among members, offer them moral support and collegiality; and provide opportunity for reading, discussing, and disseminating scholarly papers through ATS meetings, seminars, and publications.

The founding fathers of ATS rec-

ognized the need to focus especially upon upholding key biblical doctrines that are being eroded within Adventism and the Christian Church at large. These crucial issues—derived from the 27 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Methods of Bible Study Committee report voted by Annual Council in 1988—were incorporated into the preamble to the ATS Constitution and the criteria of ATS membership. Their aim was to strengthen Adventist identity. They included: Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice; the full authority of Scripture; the rejection of all hermeneutical methods—including the historical-critical method—that undermine the principles of *sola Scriptura* and *tota Scriptura*; the literal reading of Genesis 1-11—including a literal creation in six 24-hour days and a global flood; the trustworthiness of the prophetic writings of Ellen G. White; the Seventh-day Adventist teachings on the heavenly sanctuary and the pre-Advent judgment beginning in 1844; the identification the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant movement called to pro-

claim the three angels' messages to prepare the world for the soon and literal return of Christ; and faithfulness to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by supporting it through personal effort and influence, as well as tithes and offerings. In harmony with the procedure of many other scholarly societies, the constitution of ATS encourages those who wish to become actively involved in affirming the criteria and promoting the goals of the society to join by signing the statement of affirmation and remitting annual dues.

Implementing Goals

During the past 15 years, the developing ATS has sought to implement the goals outlined by the charter members in the ATS constitution. Under the leadership of past presidents Jack Blanco, Gerhard Hasel, Ray Holmes, Ed Zinke, Richard Davidson, Norman Gulley, Jo Ann Davidson, and the current president, Jiri Moskala, the society has grown to an international network of several thousand members. While the society is organized and directed largely by theologians and biblical scholars, there is intentional concern to uphold the biblical and Reformation principle of the "priesthood of all believers" and not restrict theology to specialists. Thus the society's membership comprises not only Seventh-day-Adventist Theological Seminary professors, college Bible teachers from

around the world, and scholars from the General Conference Biblical Research Institute, but also encompasses many others interested in theology; world church officers, including General Conference and division vice presidents; union and conference presidents and other officers; scientists, including members of the Geo-Science Research Institute, and teachers at various Adventist educational institutions; pastors, and editors; physicians, lawyers, and other professionals; students from many Adventist schools; and numerous other lay thinkers interested in biblical-theological issues.

ATS produces a number of publications, including the refereed (double-blind peer-reviewed) scholarly *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* [*JATS*], translated intermittently into German, Spanish, and Russian, and a series of monographs, occasional papers, and dissertations. Randy Younker, professor of Old Testament and biblical archaeology at Andrews University, edits the biannual *JATS* as well as the annual newsletter, and Roland Hegstad (former editor of *Liberty* magazine) edits the quarterly venture *Perspective Digest*, which presents articles in a more popular format. A number of local conferences in the North American Division have sponsored *Perspective Digest* for all their pastors.

ATS accepts the beliefs of the Sev-

enth-day Adventist Church as its theological position. The Bible and the Bible alone is the foundation of its scholarship and activities. The society stands against all forms of theological extremism or perfectionism, avoiding both theological liberalism and legalistic or literalistic interpretations of the Scriptures. The society focuses on biblical theology and the biblical message, and defines its position as centrist, i.e., centered on the Word of God and avoiding right or left theological orientations.

Wrestling and Witness

ATS has not taken a position on such issues as the ordination of women or the nature of Christ, areas where the church has not taken a definite stand. ATS members are on both sides of these discussions, which makes for a healthy wrestling with issues based upon a common trust in the full authority of Scripture. All ATS meetings (except for the annual ATS business meeting) are open to the public. In the fall of each year, ATS scholarly meetings held in connection with the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) have provided not only time for collegiality and academic rigor among Adventist scholars, but also opportunity to fellowship with non-Adventist evangelical scholars who often attend our meetings. The schedule of ATS presentations is printed in the ETS program along with all the other sessions; the ATS is

the only denominational theological society afforded such a privilege! Frequently, there is standing-room only—mostly non-Adventist scholars—listening to presentations about the Adventist understanding of Scripture from a scholarly standpoint. In addition to meeting with the Evangelical Theological Society, for the past three years, ATS has been sending *JATS* to every member of ETS—more than 1,300 non-Adventist evangelical biblical scholars! All this is “scholarly bridge-building” at its best!

In conjunction with its fall scholarly meetings, ATS also holds weekend Bible symposia, in cooperation with local conferences, intended for pastors and lay members interested in studying the Bible in greater depth than most Sabbath services can provide. The November 2002 meetings in Ontario, Canada, focused upon the theme “Searching for Truth,” with the keynote address on Friday night given by the dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. The November 2003 meetings in Atlanta, Georgia, concentrated on the Cosmic Controversy theme—“The Warfare Worldview of Scriptures.” A main speaker was Larry Lichtenwalter, senior pastor of the Village church in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and new ATS president-elect, who presented a powerful, relevant message built on the interpretation of Revelation 6:9-11. Most ATS scholarly conventions

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and Bible symposia have been professionally videotaped and audio recorded; they are available from International Learning Systems (Andrews University) and American Cassette Ministries.

International Ventures

In recent years, ATS has been repeatedly invited by international division, union, and conference leadership to conduct Bible conferences/symposia for their pastors and lay members. Its first international Bible symposium was held at Montemorelos University, Mexico, in 1996, co-sponsored by the General Conference Biblical Research Institute, Montemorelos University, and the Inter-American Division, with all Adventist pastors of Mexico in attendance; and presenters from 20 countries. Since that time, in response to numerous requests from Adventist Church leadership, Bible conferences/symposia have been conducted around the world, including such countries as Philippines, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Austria, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Ghana, Rwanda,

Mauritius, Brazil, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Armenia, Georgia, Fiji, and Samoa.

Regional chapters of ATS are active throughout the Americas as well as in Europe (including a chapter for German-speaking countries), Africa, Asia, Australia, and Russia. A collegiate outreach of ATS, called CATS (Collegiate Adventist Theological Society) has been active on the campus of Southern Adventist University. ATS has also sponsored special projects. For example, ATS has contributed funds toward a new Russian contemporary translation of the Bible (the New Testament has already been published). ATS also offers scholarships for graduate students, and raises funds for Ellen G. White's writings on CD-ROM for Adventist colleges and seminaries worldwide.

In 1998, the year designated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the "Year of the Bible," the Adventist Theological Society joined with the General Conference Biblical Research Institute, *It is Written*, and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Semi-

nary Institute of Archaeology to cosponsor the First International Jerusalem Bible Conference, held in Jerusalem, June 8-14. The Bible conference made it possible for more than 200 Adventist Bible teachers, theologians, pastors, and other students of the Word from around the world to meet together for fellowship and exploration of the Bible in the setting of the Bible lands. Adventist theologians presented papers on vital biblical topics in the morning, while the afternoons featured tours exploring the biblically related sites in Jerusalem and its surroundings. Evenings included dynamic plenary sessions, with the keynote address given by the president of the General Conference. Pre- and post-conference tours, conducted by leading Adventist archaeologists and theologians, provided a comprehensive survey of the major biblical sites in Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt. A similar worldwide Bible conference is being planned for 2006, this time in Izmir, Turkey, with accompanying tours of the seven churches, Patmos, and other biblical sites.

Visionary Goals

ATS sees itself not as an independent ministry, but as a service organization, a resource for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The five-fold commitment in the masthead of *Perspective Digest* summarizes the focus of ATS: to seek the truth, to preserve it,

to love it, to live it, and to share it! Current ATS president Jiri Moskala envisions even closer cooperation between ATS and the church. Specific goals of the society include: promoting sound biblical scholarship and interpretation among Seventh-day Adventist scholars, theologians, teachers, pastors, and students; exploring revealed truth in order to better comprehend it; creating a spiritual and intellectual atmosphere for fellowship and dialogue among members and offering them moral support and collegiality; upholding the fundamental beliefs and piety of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in education, in church life, and in the completion of its mission; sponsoring Bible symposia and conventions in different parts of the world, and providing opportunities for the reading, discussion, and dissemination of scholarly papers; interacting with Bible scholars and theologians beyond the Seventh-day Adventist community of faith; publishing theological literature; and being a positive voice in the church and society at large.

We are currently working on a new design for our journals, a new ATS logo, and a Web site, which should be available for use in May/June 2004 (<http://www.atsjats.com>). For more information regarding the society, contact us at ATS, P.O. Box 86, Berrien Springs, MI 49103; telephone: (269) 471-1704; or by E-mail: ATS86@email.com. □