

**SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM, SEMI-PELAGIANISM, AND
OVERLOOKED TOPICS IN ADVENTIST SOTERIOLOGY:
MOVING BEYOND MISSING LINKS AND TOWARD
A MORE EXPLICIT UNDERSTANDING¹**

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“Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists have tended to promote Semi-Pelagian views of salvation, although the latter have been moving more toward orthodox Protestant Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century.”² Such are the thoughts of Baylor University’s Roger E. Olson.

While the nasty sounding implications of that statement are modified somewhat by Olson’s claim in his *Arminian Theology* that “today, semi-Pelagianism is the default theology of most American evangelical Christians,”³ it is still important to examine his accusation, since he has singled out Adventism for special mention on the topic. So, we need to ask, is Olson correct or incorrect in his statement regarding Adventism’s semi-Pelagianism and its shift toward orthodoxy in the second half of the twentieth century? Is he right? Or is he wrong? The answer is an unqualified yes to both questions, as an examination of Adventist documents on salvation will demonstrate.

Before beginning that examination it should be stated that the data banks are immense.⁴ Thus, I limited my focus largely to the twentieth century, and within that time frame I decided to focus on two types of documents: (1) the officially voted statements of the fundamental beliefs of the denomination, and (2) selected representative Adventist books on salvation. In line with Olson’s suggestion, I have divided those two categories into early and later twentieth-century contributions. Prior to those major segments of my study, I supply some operational definitions crucial to the study, briefly overview nineteenth-century Adventist theology on the central topics in the discussion, and highlight Ellen White’s beliefs on the relevant issues.

Foundational Definitions for the Discussion

The definitions in this section are pivotal in the discussion of both salvation and the differences that have arisen over the topic throughout church history. The definitions provided are not comprehensive but are adequate to provide a

¹Paper presented at “Arminian Symposium: Celebrating Our Soteriological Heritage,” Andrews University, October 14-16, 2010.

²Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 275.

³Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 30.

⁴Here is an excellent topic for a Ph.D. dissertation, or two or three.

frame of reference for our study. I have allotted them significant space because they are crucial in evaluating Adventism's understanding of salvation.

Central to all topics in the realm of soteriology is the definition of sin. Different definitions of sin lead directly to varying approaches to solving the problem. Perhaps the best concise definition comes from Augustus Strong, who views sin as the "lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in *act, disposition, or state*."⁵ All three of the aspects of sin in that definition inform theological discussion even though some writers highlight only one or two of them.

Foundational to any discussion of sin is the concept of original sin. Since the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century, the concept of original sin has been an important topic in theological discussion. Calvinists and most Arminians have sided with Augustine, who held that original sin, stemming from the sin of Adam, includes both (1) the transmission of guilt and the liability to punishment, and (2) the inheritance of a fallen and corrupt human nature.

Closely related to original sin is total depravity. Total depravity does not mean that people are as wicked as they could be, but rather, suggests H. Orton Wiley, that "depravity is total in that it affects the entire being of man." One effect is that "depravity renders man totally unable in spiritual things."⁶ Thus, people are helpless even to seek God. Because the effects of original sin on human nature are universal, so is total depravity—a teaching shared by Calvinists and Arminians.

Intimately related to original sin and human depravation is the bondage of the will. Calvinists and Arminians are agreed that post-Fall humans in their natural state do not have free wills in the sense that they can choose to follow God. Yet the two theological traditions differ on the solution to that inability. Calvinists have God overriding the will through the unconditional predestination of individuals to salvation, while Arminians, who hold that "the human will ultimately determines whether the divine grace proffered to man is accepted or rejected," believe that God predestined Christ to become the potential Savior for every human being who would believe and repent.⁷ But that is where the problem comes in. Given the facts of the effect of original sin on human nature, including depravity and bondage of the will, there is no way that individuals can choose for God. Something has to wake them up to spiritual realities and enable them to choose. As we will see below, that something is called prevenient grace, the grace that works in a person's life before they accept saving grace. The result of prevenient grace's enabling

⁵Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1912), 549, emphasis supplied.

⁶H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1952), 2:128; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1946), 177.

⁷Wiley and Culbertson, *Introduction*, 263; for a helpful summary of the Arminian debate, see Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 454-472.

power through the Holy Spirit is a “freed will”—“one which, though initially bound by sin, has been brought by the prevenient grace of the Spirit of Christ to a point where it can respond freely to the divine call.”⁸

The remedy for sin and fallenness in all their forms, both theological traditions assert, is grace. But, it is important to note, grace has many aspects. Most basic of all is common grace—defined by Millard Erickson as “grace extended to all persons through God’s general providence” in such things as “his provision of sunshine and rain for everyone.” Thus, common grace provides the theological foundation for civil justice in secular societies in spite of human depravity. But Arminius and his followers “did not believe common grace alone was sufficient for willing the good.” Rather, Olson points out, “a special infusion of supernatural . . . grace is required for even the first exercise of a good will toward God.”⁹

Arminius and John Wesley identify that special infusion of grace as prevenient grace. Prevenient grace in its many facets is that convicting, calling, enlightening, and enabling grace that is provided before conversion and makes repentance, faith, and the freed exercise of the will possible. Without prevenient grace, even accepting God’s offer of salvation by faith would be both a human work and an impossibility for fallen humans. Thus, prevenient grace, so to speak, is the work of the Holy Spirit to wake up those dead in sins and to prepare them for the acceptance of saving grace. In other words, prevenient grace unbinds the will so that it can make a choice for God.

Thomas Oden points out that prevenient grace “antecedes human responsiveness so as to prepare the soul for the effective hearing of the redeeming Word. This preceding [prevenient] grace draws persons closer to God, loosens their blindness to divine remedies, strengthens their will to accept revealed truth, and enables repentance. Only when sinners are assisted by prevenient grace can they begin to yield their hearts to cooperation with subsequent forms of grace.”¹⁰ Thus all of salvation from beginning to end is by grace alone. One final point needs to be noted before we move away from prevenient grace, notably that just as the results of Adam’s sin are universal, so in the justice of God is the gift of prevenient grace through the Holy Spirit a universal gift to every person.

The mention of “other forms of grace” and “cooperation” brings us to a topic that has been divisive in the extreme between the Calvinists and Arminians, but one crucial in soteriology. While both groups agree that salvation is by grace alone received by faith alone, they differ as to human participation. The theological divide runs along the line of *monergism* versus *synergism*. Monergism is the belief that God is the sole agent in salvation and that human beings have absolutely no part in cooperating with God in their

⁸Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 164. Thomas C. Oden calls the freed will “grace-enabled freedom” (*The Transforming Power of Grace* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], 95).

⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 69; Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 42.

¹⁰Oden, *Transforming Power*, 47.

salvation. Calvinism, with God predestinating everything by his sovereign will, takes the position of monergism. Synergism, by way of contrast, “is any belief that salvation is a cooperative project and process in which God is the superior partner and the human person being saved is the inferior but nevertheless crucial partner.”¹¹

Arminians hold to synergism, partly because as they see the biblical evidence, both imputed and imparted righteousness are in evidence in the biblical teachings on justification and sanctification. Humans who have been justified by faith and have freed wills daily choose to cooperate with God through the empowering grace of the Spirit. Thus, they follow Paul’s injunction to work out their salvation as the Spirit works within them (Phil 2:12-13). Unfortunately, the Calvinists of Arminius’s day equated synergism with Roman Catholicism and condemned all forms of synergism. That attitude has been kept alive among many dogmatic Calvinists, even though Luther himself demonstrated his synergism in expounding upon both imputed (forensic) righteousness and transforming righteousness in his essay on “Two Kinds of Righteousness.”¹²

The final terms we have to deal with are Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Pelagianism arose about the year 400 when Pelagius began to seek to raise ethical standards in the church. He affirmed freedom of the will and that all humans have the power not to sin. The choice is theirs to follow Adam’s evil example or Christ’s good one. Pelagius not only denied original sin and its results, but also assertively taught that humans have a natural ability to live sinless lives apart from empowering grace. In short, humans are morally neutral with the power to choose good and evil. Sin is a problem of the will rather than being rooted in human nature. Following that line of thought, Hans LaRondelle points out, “sinless perfection after baptism was not merely possible but a duty to achieve.”¹³

Such teachings were met aggressively by Augustine, who championed the sovereignty of God, original sin, total depravation, bondage of the will, and related theological themes.

Semi-Pelagianism, Olson suggests, “embraces a modified version of original sin but believes that humans have the ability, even in their natural or fallen state, to initiate salvation by exercising a good will toward God.” He notes insightfully in another place that semi-Pelagianism appears most often in what Christians fail to say about salvation rather than in what they actually

¹¹Olson, *Mosaic*, 277.

¹²Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 201.

¹³Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 168-169; see also his 4th ed. (1985), 206-207; Edwin Harry Zackrisson, “Seventh-day Adventists and Original Sin: A Study of the Early Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of the Effect of Adam’s Sin on His Posterity” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1984), 108-113; H. K. LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1971), 290-291.

say.¹⁴ That is undoubtedly so in the case of some Adventists. Preventive grace is the means Arminians use to escape the problem of semi-Pelagianism.

I have spent considerable time on definitions in this paper because I am addressing a largely Adventist audience and Adventists have by and large neglected discussion of those aspects of soteriology that have divided Calvinists and Arminians. The reason for that neglect is not hard to discover: The warring Dutch camps were primarily interested in the beginning of salvation in individuals, whereas Adventists with their concern with the law and the eschaton largely neglected beginnings and focused on how people ought to live and what they had to do to be ready for the coming of Christ.

*Early Adventism on Sin and Related Topics*¹⁵

That insight is reinforced by Edwin Zackrisson's doctoral dissertation on Adventism and original sin. Early Adventists, he notes, were more concerned with the answer to the problem of sin rather than its depth. The possibility of overcoming sin early became a focus. Doing, and not theological abstractions, was their interest. That point is illustrated by Joseph Bates, the denomination's founding theologian. Bates moved beyond semi-Pelagianism and Pelagianism into legalism when he repeatedly asserted that keeping the commandments "saves the soul." Original sin and related topics did not even surface in his thinking. He appears merely to have assumed freedom of the will, human ability, and choice as the major religious determinants. His focus was on what people needed to do in order to be ready for Christ's coming.¹⁶

Up through the late 1880s, Zackrisson demonstrates, Adventists tended to follow Bates's lack of concern with such issues as total depravity, original sin, and the bound will, even if they often avoided his bold legalism. For them, humanity was morally neutral. Original sin in early Adventism was viewed as Adam's transgression. What they inherited from Adam was death. Thus their main concern with *the* original sin (of Adam) was tied to an illustration and defense of their belief in conditional immortality. But the punishment that came upon all humanity was not a result of Adam's sin. Rather, all die because of their own sin.¹⁷

While Adventist writers in the denomination's earliest decades spoke of human depravity in such terms as "the natural man," "the flesh," and the "law of sin and death," they tended not to emphasize the word "depravity" itself. Nor did they identify depravity as original sin. "The depraved nature,"

¹⁴Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 17-18; idem, *Mosaic*, 274.

¹⁵This section is largely based on Zackrisson's study of original sin in early Adventism.

¹⁶Zackrisson, 405, 399; George R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 83-88. On early Adventism's emphasis on overcoming and being ready for the Advent, see also Paul M. Evans, "A Historical-contextual Analysis of the Final-generation Theology of M. L. Andreasen" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2010), 13-116.

¹⁷Zackrisson, 396, 403, 397, 398, 328, 329.

Zackrisson summarizes, “is the result of the separation of the race [from God] caused by Adam’s sin but is not a state for which man is held responsible. What he *does* in his depravity decides man’s eternal destiny.” Depravity itself was not viewed as sin, but rather as a bent or inclination to sin stemming from the imitation of Adam. “While,” Zackrisson writes, “some SDA writers stressed a radical view of man’s sinful nature in such a way that it appears ‘satanic’ most seem not to be as concerned with exploring the depths of man’s sin as they are with stressing the message of God’s deliverance and the possibility of overcoming.” Christ as an example was an important motif. Earliest Adventism definitely fit into the semi-Pelagian camp.¹⁸

The decade of the 1890s, in the wake of the 1888 emphases on salvation in Christ, witnessed a sharpening of soteriological vocabulary and concerns. Such emphases as humans having no hope without God, their partaking of Adam’s fallen nature, and being born spiritually blind found a larger place in Adventist literature. And sin came to be seen by some writers more in Reformation terms, being viewed as not merely an act but a condition of the heart, and “inherited depravity” coming directly from Adam.¹⁹

The shift toward a more sophisticated soteriological discussion set the tone for Adventist theology in the twentieth century, which is the main focus of this study. But before turning to that era we need to briefly examine Ellen White’s thinking on issues related to semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism. She definitely had a belief akin to what most Protestants think of as total depravity. Near the turn of the century, for example, she wrote that “through sin the whole human organism is deranged, the mind is perverted, the imagination corrupted. Sin has degraded the faculties of the soul. Temptations from without find an answering chord within the heart, and the feet turn imperceptibly toward evil.” In another connection she directly ties the human condition to the fall of Adam when she writes that “because of his sin our natures are fallen and we cannot make ourselves righteous.” Even prayers and confession must pass through what she calls “the corrupt channels of humanity.”²⁰

Thus, in her basic understanding of human inability she is in the Arminian camp. Another aspect of her Arminian soteriology expresses itself when she describes the human will as “the governing power in the nature of man.” Taken out of its context, that statement might lead one to think she was espousing semi-Pelagianism. But the same paragraph modifies her emphasis on the unfettered freedom of the will when it asserts that “you cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections.”²¹

¹⁸Ibid., 403, 398, 329, 399, 412.

¹⁹Ibid., 395, 337-339.

²⁰Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 451; idem, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), 62; idem, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:344. See also Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on Salvation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), 41-46.

²¹White, *Steps to Christ*, 47; cf. 34, 43-44, 48, 62.

Those connections are made even clearer earlier in the same book when she notes that

it is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin. . . . Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart. . . . There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ. His grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness.²²

In that passage she definitely illustrates the linkage between human inability and prevenient grace. In a very explicit statement on the latter topic, she writes:

Many are confused as to what constitutes the first steps in the work of salvation. Repentance is thought to be a work the sinner must do for himself in order that he may come to Christ. . . . Yet the sinner cannot bring himself to repentance, or prepare himself to come to Christ. . . . The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent. . . . Repentance is no less the gift of God than are pardon and justification, and it cannot be experienced except as it is given to the soul by Christ.²³

Before moving away from White's understanding of human inability and prevenient grace, we need to examine her teaching that at the Fall "the divine likeness was marred, and well-nigh obliterated," but not totally destroyed. Expanding on that topic, she writes that "not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, a desire for goodness, exists in every heart." It should be noted that that statement, which some see forming the basis for semi-Pelagianism in her theology, is given in a context implying just the opposite. For example, immediately preceding the sentence on every heart having a desire for goodness and spiritual power, she writes that "through Christ . . . every soul receives some ray of divine light." And following her positive commentary on human nature she pens that "there is in [every person's] nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist" and that humanity's only hope is in Christ. Thus, her seemingly positive view of human ability is couched in a context of human inability and prevenient grace.²⁴

John Wesley made the same general point when he claimed that every person sooner or later desires good and that "every one has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world." That spark of goodness, Wesley points out, is due to the fact that no person is in "a state of mere nature" or "wholly void of the grace of God." Each has prevenient grace.²⁵ Arminian

²²Ibid., 18.

²³White, *Selected Messages*, 1:390-391.

²⁴Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 15, 29.

²⁵John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson,

theologian H. Orton Wiley agrees when he writes that “everything which can be called good in man, previous to regeneration is to be attributed to the work of the Spirit of God. . . . That state or nature in which man exists previous to regeneration, is in some sense a state of grace—preliminary or prevenient grace.” And Roger Olson makes essentially the same point in his treatment of Arminianism. Both Wesley and White base their thoughts regarding a spark of goodness residing in every person on John 1:9, which expresses the idea that Christ “lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”²⁶

Even such a devoted teacher of human depravity and inability as John Calvin asserts that a “residue” of God’s image remained in humans after the Fall, “some sparks still gleam” in the “degenerate nature.”²⁷ With that sentiment in mind, one should not view White’s seemingly positive statements regarding human nature as providing the basis for semi-Pelagianism. Of course, once a person has been led to Christ, she is quite affirmative about the place of cooperating, synergistic grace in the daily life of believers.

This short review of White’s understanding of selected foundational Arminian themes indicates one possible basis for avoiding a semi-Pelagian theology for twentieth-century Adventism, especially since the denomination’s leaders looked to her writings for guiding ideas. We will now turn to twentieth-century Adventism as we seek to better understand the denomination’s soteriological leanings.

Twentieth-Century Official Statements of Belief

The twentieth century saw Seventh-day Adventists vote to accept two statements of fundamental beliefs. The first statement was officially accepted at the 1946 General Conference session, even though it had been published in the denomination’s official literature since 1931. Before the 1931/1946 statement there had been no doctrinal statement voted upon by the church. That first official statement would be superseded by actions taken at the 1980 General Conference session.

On the topic of sin, the 1931/1946 statement of fundamental beliefs²⁸ provides no definition and no understanding of sin as inheritance or human inability. It only mentions that Jesus died for our sin, forgiveness of sin, and that sin leads to death. As might be expected, given Adventism’s nineteenth-century history, it emphasized Jesus as example, the transformed life, obedience, the Ten Commandments, living a godly life, and final judgment. In terms of ideas related to prevenient grace and semi-Pelagianism, article 7 speaks of those who come to Jesus with no explanation of anything outside of the human will stimulating the act of coming. Article 8 highlights

1984), 6:512.

²⁶Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:352; Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 154.

²⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), bk. 2, chap. 12.

²⁸The 1931/1946 statement was published in the denomination’s *Church Manual* up to 1980.

justification by faith after noting that the law cannot save or provide power to keep one from sinning. It goes on to state that “by accepting Christ, man is reconciled to God,” justified, and “saved from the power of sin by His indwelling life.” That is followed by a synergistic statement, emphasizing that the Holy Spirit convinces individuals of sin and leads them to the Sin Bearer and subsequently provides enabling power to live a life conformed to the divine precepts.²⁹

Overall, the 1931/1946 statement is orthodox in that it avoids a full-blown Pelagianism. But in what it does not say it not only implies semi-Pelagianism but seems to suggest it by advocating that individuals need to come to Christ. Nowhere does it treat sin as human nature, the issue of depravity or sinful tendencies, or human inability. And when it discusses the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, it is in the context of sin in the life of a believer rather than that of initial salvation. One is left with the impression that the initial moves toward salvation are up to the individual. Of course, semi-Pelagian assumptions are not explicitly stated. Rather, any inherent semi-Pelagianism in the document meets Olson’s dictum that “semi-Pelagianism appears more in what Christians do not say about salvation than in what they actually do say.”³⁰

The 1980 statement of fundamental beliefs³¹ makes significant strides in avoiding semi-Pelagianism. Article 7 takes a giant step forward when it not only talks about Adam’s sin, but the fact that his “descendants share this fallen nature and its consequences. They are born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil.” Thus, human inability, depravity, and the inherited sinful tendency aspects of original sin are implicit even though they are not defined explicitly in that terminology.

In the prevention grace and avoidance of semi-Pelagianism arena, similar changes are found. Article 5, for example, asserts that the Holy Spirit “draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms.” Article 10 also expresses the Holy Spirit’s leading to be quite in harmony with prevenient grace. Number 18 has a similar statement, adding that “salvation is all of grace and not of works.” While article 18 may be speaking of the post-conversion experience, there is not the slightest doubt

²⁹Article 8 does state that the Holy Spirit “convinces of sin and leads to the Sin Bearer, inducting the believer into the new-covenant relationship.” But that statement is embedded in a discussion of sanctification. The section on justification notes that “by accepting Christ, man is reconciled to God.” The implication is that that “accepting” is based on free will. The Holy Spirit being brought into the discussion to convict of sin and to lead sinners to Christ to repent in the context of sanctification is a pattern followed by many Adventist authors in the twentieth century. The context is nearly always one of sanctification and not of an individual’s initial coming to Christ. In summary, despite the declaration about the Holy Spirit’s leading in article 8, it provides no clear statement of prevenient grace or even the need for such grace in a person’s initial coming to Christ.

³⁰Olson, *Mosaic*, 274.

³¹The 1980 statement has been published in each edition of the denomination’s *Church Manual* since 1980.

that number 5 is a clear statement of prevenient grace even though it does not use that term.

In summary, as far as the official statements of the church are concerned there is a definite shift between the 1931/1946 statement and the one in 1980 on the topics of human inability and the need of prevenient grace. Thus, Olson's assertion in this area of Adventist theology is definitely true. Adventism in its official statements did move explicitly "toward orthodox Protestant Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century."³² The picture is more confusing among its theological authors.

Adventist Authors During the Early Twentieth Century

The rest of this paper will examine themes related to topics on Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism set forth in books on salvation by influential twentieth-century Adventist authors. Of necessity, the coverage has to be selective. In my treatment of both halves of the twentieth century I have sought to highlight authors who represent the various strands of Adventist thinking.

One helpful book in illustrating Adventist beliefs on human ability, prevenient grace, and semi-Pelagianism is William H. Branson's *How Men Are Saved* (1941). Branson, who served as General Conference president from 1950 to 1954, has at least half of the equation right in that he notes that people are born with both inherited tendencies to sin and Adam's guilt. Thus, he accepted both of the major teachings on original sin. That in itself is interesting since he is only one of two authors that I have discovered in the entire history of Adventism who accept original sin as original guilt. But with his teaching on the inheritance of sinful tendencies from Adam he is in company with most twentieth-century Adventist thinkers.³³

For Branson, sinners have no power to change their condition or do right. "*The sinner cannot save himself.*" Sin renders people "absolutely helpless to do good." They are "hopelessly lost" and there is nothing they can do about it. Their "every act" is "polluted by sin."³⁴

Having highlighted human inability, Branson brings his readers right up to the border of prevenient grace when he writes that "had not the omnipotent and gracious God intervened, hope never could have been revived in the human heart." But having arrived at the frontier of prevenient grace he fails to pass over. Rather, Branson repeatedly asserts that it is up to individuals to choose and accept God's plan of salvation.³⁵ Thus, he ends up with an implied semi-Pelagianism that contradicts his teaching on inherited sin and human inability.

³²Olson, *Mosaic*, 275.

³³William Henry Branson, *How Men Are Saved: The Certainty, Plan, and Time for Man's Salvation* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Assn., 1941), 8. On original sin as original guilt, see Robert W. Olson, "Outline Studies in Christian Perfection and Original Sin," *Ministry Supplement*, October 1970.

³⁴Branson, 9-10, 19.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 10, 18, 23, 27, 29.

I. H. Evans, a General Conference vice president, in his *This Is the Way* (1939) moves beyond Branson in his understanding, but still expresses some inconsistencies in his soteriology. Midway through his first chapter he seems to reject any acceptance of a bound will when he writes that human beings choose God's way or Satan's. It is only those who choose to disobey who are no longer free. But three pages later he concludes his presentation with a description of human fallenness that leaves sinners without spiritual vision, their concept of right perverted, possessing a propensity toward evil, and enslaved to Satan. Chapter 2 moves on to conclude that "man has no way to undo wrong"; that the "only remedy is faith in Christ."³⁶

In his fourth chapter, Evans reverses his understanding on free will when he writes that Adam's sin "changed his very will and nature," disabilities that were passed on to the human race. Although he avoids using the words "original sin," Evans does assert that "man's nature had become depraved" and that there was no hope for humans to change for the better, since all their "desires were carnal" and their "very will and choice was evil." "Total depravity carries with it total impotence and helplessness."³⁷

Having arrived at total inability, Evans seemingly reverts to implying that it is up to people to accept and believe. For a time it appears that he might exit the issue in the same way as Branson. But in the next chapter Evans clarifies his understanding. Beginning with a restatement of his convictions on human depravity and "bondage to sin," he claims that "something must get hold of the sinner's mind that will lead him to change his view of God, or he cannot turn to the Lord."³⁸ From that conclusion he moves to a clear statement of the need for prevenient grace when he argues that "there must be some power outside himself that will win the carnal heart to seek after God. . . . The sinner cannot find God of himself, because by nature he is in rebellion" against God. Evans then moves on to the drawing power of God, a quotation from White on prevenient grace, and the role of the Holy Spirit leading individuals into "the experience of conversion."³⁹

Thus, by the late 1930s we find a clear presentation not only of human inability, but also of prevenient grace. It appears that Adventism was arriving at an understanding that could move it beyond semi-Pelagian tendencies. But, we should note, the theology of men like Branson and Evans was comparatively weak in influencing the Adventist public when compared to the real theological powerhouse of Adventist theology in the late 1930s and early forties—M. L. Andreasen.

Andreasen would have his own convictions on the soteriological issues important to Adventism. His focus would downplay events and conditions

³⁶I. H. Evans, *This Is the Way: Meditations Concerning Justification by Faith and Growth in Christian Graces* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1939), 15, 18-19, 31.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 39-40.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 45, 47-48, 51-52.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 53-54.

at the beginning of Christian experience and emphasize obedience and end-time soteriological concerns.

Perhaps the best avenue into Andreasen's theology is through his view of the cross and substitution.⁴⁰ Christ's death on the cross and the shedding of blood was important for Andreasen, but it did not in itself play a dominant role in his theology. For him, the death of Christ accomplished at least two important goals—it restored communion between humans and God, and it provided for forgiveness. "Forgiveness," he wrote, "is not merely a matter of God's overlooking our faults, forgiving and forgetting them. Every sin required blood atonement; every transgression meant the death of an innocent victim. God can and does forgive, but the cost is Calvary."⁴¹

So far, so good. This sounds like a general evangelical understanding. But forgiveness and the restoration of communion play a minor role in Andreasen's theology of the cross. The real point for him is that God instituted sacrifice "to impress upon the sinner the sinfulness of sin." When an Israelite "plunged the knife into the innocent victim, he realized as never before the heinousness of sin and its great cost. *He doubtless resolved never to sin again, which was the very effect God wanted to produce.*" Likewise, if Christ's death did not produce in Christians "the same determination as it did in the Israelite, to go and sin no more, then to that extent Christ has died in vain."⁴²

Andreasen's understanding of substitution reflects the same obedience-oriented perspective. Throughout the OT, he points out, God's complaint was that the Israelites "substituted offerings for obedience. . . . Christ came to do God's will, to render obedience to His commands; not to offer sacrifices for having broken them." Thus, "Christ came, not primarily to do away with sacrifices, but to substitute obedience for sacrifice, to teach the people that 'to obey is better than sacrifice.' . . . *He came to do away with sin, to substitute*

⁴⁰Here is a topic of central importance for understanding Seventh-day Adventist historical theology. Thus far, the only extended scholarly study of Andreasen's theology is Paul Evan's Ph.D. dissertation. But the focus of that dissertation was on the antecedents to Andreasen's final-generation theology in Adventist history. He did a good job in accomplishing his purpose, but a study of Andreasen's beliefs in terms of the larger issues of theology is yet to be done. And no issue is of more importance than his understanding of the cross and substitution. Here is a key that will probably unlock the full implications of Andreasen's perfectionism and final-generation understanding. It should be noted that Roy Adam's Ph.D. dissertation also gives significant space to Andreasen's understanding of the sanctuary service (*The Sanctuary Doctrine: Three Approaches in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* [Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1981], 165-235). Adams concluded that Andreasen gives the impression that what happened on the cross was not of central importance and was "of lesser importance" to other events in salvation history (228).

⁴¹M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 19, 21; M. L. Andreasen, *Prayer* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1957), 104.

⁴²Andreasen, *Prayer*, 103, emphasis supplied.

obedience for sacrifice. Doing away with sin canceled the law of offerings” and the sacrificial system.⁴³ For Andreasen, the focus of the sanctuary service was not primarily Christ as the sacrificial lamb, but obedience.

That conclusion is in line with his threefold understanding of atonement. In the first phase, Christ lived a perfect life. In the second, which included the cross, he annulled the sins of humanity and destroyed the power of the devil and apparently the results of sin in a person’s life (see his view on original sin below). That leads to the third phase, in which God’s end-time people will demonstrate that, like Christ, they can live a life completely victorious over sin.⁴⁴

Andreasen’s emphasis on obedience in substitution and the atonement leads us to the questions of human ability and original sin in his writings. While he speaks of “inherited tendencies” and feelings of hopelessness, weakness, and lack of mental control as well as the fact that even with “the best of intentions” humans are “unable to do” what they know to be right, Andreasen doesn’t have all that much to say on the topic.⁴⁵ His focus is on human victory over sin rather than human disability in the face of it.

An interesting exception to his neglect of original sin is his belief that even though children suffer for the sins of their forbearers, *if they “turn from their evil ways, the law of heredity is no longer operative.”* Paul Evans in his doctoral dissertation on Andreasen picks up that point when he claims that “Andreasen understands forgiveness to result in a neutralization of the effects of sin, so that the believer stands in a similar condition to that of Adam before the fall.”⁴⁶ Here it seems that we find what we might call a form of post-justification Pelagianism that leaves the Christian will completely neutral.

Andreasen’s belief on a neutral will after people come to Christ is clear enough, but, we need to ask, how do they initially come to Christ if their mind is limited and if the best of their intentions are inadequate? Here we find what appears to be a blank section in his theology. He provides no bridge between human disability and coming to salvation. He just assumes that faith is the human act of choosing on the basis of evidence to accept Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the removal of human disabilities.⁴⁷ Thus, he teaches a semi-Pelagian perspective.

Once a person comes to Christ, Andreasen is quite clear on the major function of the Savior in Christian living. People, he claims, “are to follow His example and prove that what God did in Christ, He can do in every human

⁴³M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 430-431, emphasis supplied.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 58-60.

⁴⁵Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 312, 300.

⁴⁶M. L. Andreasen, *The Faith of Jesus and the Commandments of God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1939), 343, 353; Paul Evans, 302, emphasis supplied.

⁴⁷Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 300; *idem*, *Faith of Jesus*, 353; *idem*, *What Can a Man Believe?* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1951), 1-8.

being who submits to Him.” Following Christ’s example will lead to a life of perfect obedience and the same sort of sinlessness that Christ had. Those thoughts lead us to the topic of the nature of sin in Andreasen’s theology.⁴⁸

He saw sin as having both an inward and an outward aspect. “Sin begins in thought. It ends in act. If the beginning can be controlled, the end will take care of itself. It is the mind, the heart, that needs purifying. When these are clean, all is well.”⁴⁹

Is it? we need to ask. What about sinful nature? That, as we noted above in discussing his view of original sin, is a nonissue for Andreasen since the results of the Fall are neutralized when a person accepts Christ. In the area of sin, Andreasen’s major focus is transgression of the law in both its inward and spiritual (illustrated by covetousness) and outward aspects. Thus, sin “is not only *doing* something wrong; it is *thinking* something wrong,” including “*wanting*” to do wrong. But for the converted Christian sin is not a matter of human nature. For that reason Darius Jankiewicz concludes his study of the doctrine of sin in Andreasen’s writings by noting that if he had “accepted a broader definition of sin,” his idea of its total elimination in human life “would be strongly jeopardized.”⁵⁰

Even though Andreasen viewed sin as having both spiritual/inward and outward aspects, he tended to view overcoming both subsets of sin as actions, or more specifically, a series of actions. That is certainly true in his most influential treatment of the topic. In his discussion of victory over sin in the chapter on “The Last Generation” in his *Sanctuary Service* in the same paragraph he links gaining the victory over something (an outward action) with overcoming such spiritual/inward aspects of sin as pride, ambition, and love of the world. When individuals gain the victory over all those sins they are declared to be “without fault” and “ready for translation,” having demonstrated to the universe that “it is possible to live without sin.”⁵¹

Obedience is central in Andreasen’s writings. While justification and forgiveness are important, they only provide the first step as one moves toward sanctification and sinless living. “The plan of salvation,” he writes, “must of necessity include not only forgiveness of sin but complete restoration. Salvation *from* sin is more than forgiveness *of* sin.” Andreasen at times presents salvation from sin as a series of victories in a sequence of increasingly difficult tests by which character is developed. In such a scenario, of course, believers are following the example of Christ who showed the way.⁵²

⁴⁸Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 299; idem, *Hebrews*, 58-60.

⁴⁹Andreasen, *Faith of Jesus*, 441.

⁵⁰M. L. Andreasen, *The Sabbath: Which Day and Why?* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1942), 124; Darius W. Jankiewicz, “The Doctrine of Sin Within Its Soteriological Context in the Writings of M. L. Andreasen,” (seminar paper, Andrews University, 1996), 29-30.

⁵¹Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 302.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 300, 299; Jamie Kiley, “The Doctrine of Sin in the Thought of George R. Knight: Its Context and Implications,” (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 2009), 41;

Andreasen illustrates the relative place of justification and sanctification in his theology by an appeal to the sanctuary service. He notes that the first-apartment ministry of forgiveness was not enough. It had to be completed by the second-apartment ministrations that led to complete holiness. “Forgiveness,” he wrote,

operates after transgression, when the damage already has been done. True, God forgives the sin, but it would have been better had the sin not been committed. For this the keeping power of God is available. To forgive the transgression after it has been committed is wonderful; but it is not enough. There must be a power to keep from sinning. “Go, and sin no more” is a possibility of the gospel. But to “sin no more” is sanctification. This is the eventual goal of salvation. The gospel is not complete without it.

For that reason believers needed to “enter with Christ into the most holy” place so that they can eventually be declared “without fault before the throne of God.”⁵³

The obedient life is central to Andreasen’s soteriology. It is from that perspective that he claims Christianity is primarily “a *life*, a changed life, a life dedicated to the service of God and humanity. The Christian does not merely spend his time *being good*; like his Master, he goes about *doing good*.”⁵⁴

In summary, Andreasen’s widely accepted theology encouraged semi-Pelagianism and even Pelagianism among many Adventists at mid-century. His teaching that God expected a sinless final generation⁵⁵ would leave an indelible impression for the rest of the twentieth century among both those who agreed and disagreed with him. Now that we have overviewed Andreasen’s theology, we are ready to examine the semi-Pelagian and Arminian aspects of Adventist soteriology in the second half of the twentieth century.

Adventist Authors During the Later Twentieth Century

Reactions to Andreasen’s soteriology would be many. One of the most widely heard would be that of Desmond Ford. He put his finger on the nerve center of Andreasen’s understanding when he wrote that one of the problems in Adventist theology was “an imperfect recognition of human sinfulness as it exists both before and after conversion.” The effects of Adam’s sin, “innate depravity,” and human inability were foundational to Ford’s theology of salvation.⁵⁶

Andreasen, *Hebrews*, 58.

⁵³Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 49.

⁵⁴M. L. Andreasen, *A Faith to Live By* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1943), 63.

⁵⁵Andreasen, *Sanctuary Service*, 299-321.

⁵⁶Desmond Ford, cited in Arthur Leroy Moore, “Theology in Crisis: or Ellen G. White’s Concept of Righteousness by Faith as It Relates to Contemporary SDA Issues” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1979), 28.

In combating the theology of those who emphasized sanctification (and sinless perfection) as the heart of the gospel, Ford uplifted forensic justification as the sum total of righteousness by faith. While Ford himself highlighted sanctified living as essential in the justified Christian life,⁵⁷ many of his followers came to view justification as the entire gospel of salvation and downplayed sanctification. Those following Ford also tended to reject Arminianism, Wesleyanism, and all forms of synergism and, in line with many doctrinaire Calvinists and post-Trent Lutherans, identified those who held those beliefs as being “arm in arm with Roman Catholicism” in its understanding of salvation and denying salvation by grace alone.⁵⁸

Thus, while Ford and his followers recaptured the understanding of sin and human inability held by Arminius, they differed from both him and previous Adventist theology in their proposed solution to the sin problem. As a result, Ford’s teachings stimulated as many theological reactions as did those of Andreasen. Adventist soteriology in the late twentieth century would largely be dominated by the controversy over those two polar positions on sin and salvation.

One of the most closely reasoned responses to Ford’s understanding of sin being rooted in human nature and his downplaying of synergism and sanctification would come from Dennis Priebe. In his *Face-to-Face With the Real Gospel*, Priebe argues that the pivotal issue in the controversy is the nature of sin, since the gospel is all about how we are saved from it.⁵⁹

Priebe asserts that the true Adventist understanding of the gospel “revolves around the issue of free choice. . . . The issue to be resolved is how fallen and unfallen beings . . . will *choose* in the great controversy, either for God or for Satan.” Sin, argues Priebe, is not “the way man *is*, but the way man *chooses*. . . . Sin is concerned with a man’s will rather than with his nature. If responsibility for sin is to have any meaning, it cannot . . . be affirmed that fallen human nature makes man an inevitable sinner. . . . Thus sin is defined as choosing willfully to rebel against God in thought, word, or action.” Christ, of course, always chose to be obedient to God. And human “sinlessness is our willful choice *not* to rebel against God in thought, word, or action.” Furthermore, “if Jesus’ obedience was based on the Holy Spirit’s control of His life, then I can also choose that control for my life, and I can come to live a life of total obedience,” and have a “sinless character.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷Desmond Ford, “The Scope and Limits of the Pauline Expression ‘Righteousness by Faith’” (unpublished paper, presented at the Palmdale Conference on Righteousness by Faith, Palmdale, California, April 23-30, 1976); idem, no title (unpublished transcriptions of chapel talks, Avondale College, Cooranbong, Australia, May 18, 25 1976).

⁵⁸Milton Hook, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* (Riverside, CA: Adventist Today, 2008), 161, passim. See also, Olson, *Story*, 455.

⁵⁹Dennis E. Priebe, *Face-to-Face With the Real Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 11-12.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 16-18, 20, 56, 69, 70.

While Priebe, along with nearly all Adventists, rejects original sin as original guilt, he does believe that humans “inherit negative tendencies from Adam, which lead [them] to do wrong.” Having said that, like Andreasen, Priebe expects people to choose Christ and the right, but provides no explicit method for doing so. But we still need to ask, How is this to be done? Priebe’s answer is based upon Christ being born with the same sinful tendencies as us. Yet He made the right choices. So can other humans. On the other hand, sin “is the choice to remain ignorant of God’s will. It is the choice to be careless of one’s abilities and responsibilities.”⁶¹ Thus, Priebe ends up, like Andreasen, suggesting a theology that is semi-Pelagian for the unconverted and what appears to be a Pelagian-like neutral will after conversion.

In harmony with Priebe, Colin and Russell Standish define sin as being the “*willful or negligent violation of God’s law*,” whereas “the proponents of the *new theology* present sin as any departure from the infinite will of God and as any weakness or frailty,” or ignorance of the divine will. If that were true, they perceptively note, “then no created beings could live in perfect sinlessness.”⁶² Once again, in their theology the untrammelled will is the key to living sinlessly.

A writer who stood over against Andreasen’s theology was Arnold Wallenkampf, who before retirement worked in the denomination’s Biblical Research Institute. From an Arminian perspective, his 1988 book, *What Every Christian Should Know About Being Justified*, starts out in the right direction, with chapter titles such as “The Battle of the Will,” “Kinds of Sin,” and “The Destructiveness of Sin,” which precede his fourth chapter entitled “Justification.” Wallenkampf early on makes the point that “a defective concept of sin inevitably leads to a lack of appreciation of justification and salvation.” He then moves on to point out that even though Adam originally had free choice, “he jumped, as it were, with all his posterity, from freedom under God into slavery to Satan.” Without the new birth, he asserts, every person is hopelessly lost, “since he is by temperament an enemy of God.” Wallenkampf is also clear on the fact that “sin resides in the mind and manifests itself in one’s choices.”⁶³

Thus, he is clear on total fallenness and original sin consisting of inherited sinful tendencies. But, as usual, we need to examine his presentation of how a person makes choices and comes to salvation. Interestingly, early in his presentation he comes to what looks like an insightful treatment of prevenient grace when he writes that Abel chose to be born again because he followed “the promptings of God’s Spirit.” But having come up to the frontier of prevenient grace, the rest of his treatment of the will and initial salvation highlights a free will, semi-Pelagian approach. “Everyone born into

⁶¹Ibid., 28, 13-14, 41.

⁶²Colin D. Standish and Russell R. Standish, *Deceptions of the New Theology* (n.p.: Hartland Publications, 1989), 77, cf. 79.

⁶³Arnold Valentin Wallenkampf, *What Every Christian Should Know About Being Justified* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1988), 12-14, 16.

the world,” he asserts, “lives under the imperious demand that the faculty of free choice imposes on him—that of deciding where he will turn his will.” No one, he writes, can make our moral choices for us. God curtails his omnipotence in order to give “intelligent, free-willed, moral beings” space in which to operate. He concludes his chapter on the will by noting that it is up to us whether we will follow Christ’s or Adam’s example.⁶⁴

Wallenkampf makes a strong presentation of common grace, in which he develops the concept of a probationary period during which sinners can come to God. But he fails to extend common grace into an explicit presentation of prevenient grace. To the contrary, he writes that by this common grace “God purposes to give sinners a chance to choose to come to Him.” Whereas Christ made salvation possible for all, “we as individuals personally choose and confirm our salvation.”⁶⁵ Thus Wallenkampf ends up with an essentially semi-Pelagian presentation, even though he gives hints that he would move toward prevenient grace.

Another interesting case study is that of Edward Heppenstall, who for many years taught at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, from which position he uplifted Christ’s righteousness and the cross in opposition to the perfectionistic theology of Andreassen and his followers. If any one person helped move Adventism toward a more adequate view of grace and salvation in the second half of the twentieth century it was first of all Heppenstall.

Heppenstall’s *Salvation Unlimited* (1974) opens with a discussion of the “problem” of human nature. In good Adventist fashion, he notes that the will is all-important in the struggle between good and evil. He then moves on to discuss the helplessness of humans in the face of sin. Unlike many Adventists, Heppenstall does not stay away from the words “total depravity,” pointing out that total merely means that no part of a person is exempt from the problem of sin. He moves on from that insight to the conclusion that “man has nothing, absolutely nothing, in himself that he can use to solve the problem of sin and death.”⁶⁶

Having made those points, a reader would expect a movement toward prevenient grace. But in Heppenstall’s presentation initial grace is represented as God’s gift of special revelation. Thus, “sinful men are dependent upon what God has revealed. . . . For man to be redeemed and transformed there is need of a divine agency, but with the solemn endowment of freedom of choice.” In his discussion, it is free choice that allows humans to choose to follow God’s gift of special revelation. That choice between the word of God and the words of human beings forms the core of the rest of the chapter.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Ibid., 14, 17, 16, 18.

⁶⁵Ibid., 34-35, 39, 42.

⁶⁶Edward Heppenstall, *Salvation Unlimited: Perspectives in Righteousness by Faith* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1974), 14-15, 18, 17.

⁶⁷Ibid., 23-25. Heppenstall’s understanding of initial grace is in many ways similar to that of Pelagius, who also emphasized an aspect of initial grace “to be external

In later chapters, Heppenstall reiterates the fact that the response of faith is needed to accept God's gift, but here faith is merely an "attitude on the sinner's part that signifies acceptance" of that gift. So far it looks as if faith for him is merely another word for choosing to believe God. But several pages later it appears that we might find a clear statement of prevenient grace when he asks "what is the starting point for faith? Where is the right place to begin?" He goes on to note that faith "is not self-generated," but is the gift of God. Here Heppenstall has led his readers to the very frontier of an explicit statement of prevenient grace. But at that point he reverts to his earlier concept that initial grace comes through God's special revelation in Jesus, which he earlier noted must be responded to by free will.⁶⁸

Still later in his presentation, Heppenstall notes that the gift of faith is available to those "who earnestly and sincerely seek God according to the Scriptures," once again presenting a position of human initiative at the center of the beginning of salvation. He goes on to quote a theologian who definitely expresses an understanding of prevenient grace, but comments on the passage with another assertion of initial seeking after God by individuals. He does make what in a different context would sound like a clear statement of prevenient grace when he notes that "under the moving influence of the Holy Spirit we turn ourselves completely over to Christ," but that statement comes in the context of a semi-Pelagian desiring and seeking after God. Other statements in *Salvation Unlimited* definitely show Heppenstall's belief that it is the Holy Spirit that wakes people up to their true condition and their need to repent. Such statements could be interpreted as firm statements of prevenient grace, but the order of his chapters muddies the water on his understanding of the order of salvation and on whether he is treating Holy Spirit-generated repentance in the context of an already made faith-choice on the basis of free will.⁶⁹

Interestingly enough, no place in his early discussion of total depravity did he discuss the bondage of the will. To the contrary, he talked as if free choice were an option once God's revelation had made the way to salvation clear. Thus, even though Heppenstall circled all around the soteriology, anthropology, and hamartiology that undergird the necessity of prevenient grace, he never made an explicitly clear statement on the topic. On the other hand, he definitely left the impression that fallen individuals had free choice in the face of God's special revelation.

That failure in explicitness is not found in Heppenstall's successor in the soteriological chair at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Dutch-born and -educated Hans LaRondelle was well aware of the theological struggles that had earlier divided the Calvinists of his native land. The

enlightenment provided for humanity by God." See Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 83.

⁶⁸Heppenstall, 66, 71, 23.

⁶⁹Ibid., 78-79, 106, 190.

opening chapter of his *Christ Our Salvation* (1980) is titled “Divine Election and Providence.” In it LaRondelle makes it clear that “the initiative of our salvation . . . is not with man but with God.” It is God who starts the process by “calling” humans “to the saving knowledge in Christ.” Humans respond by coming. At that point humans “receive freedom to follow” God and cooperate in His purposes.⁷⁰

But even though initial grace searches us out, LaRondelle asserts, “it is not bestowed in fullness against our will.” By grace we choose to accept God’s gift. “Faith in Christ begins with Christ’s own initiative.” For LaRondelle, “*by grace*” sums up the plan of salvation.⁷¹

With LaRondelle, we have come to an explicit and clearly stated theology of prevenient grace, even though he chose not to use that label in *Christ Our Salvation*. He left that privilege to me in my 1992 *Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness* (revised as *Sin and Salvation* in 2008) during a discussion of the fallen will.⁷²

With that usage, I came face to face with a temptation to Arminian pride in what I thought was my firstness of the use of the term in a full-length Adventist book on salvation. But I have recently been rescued from the necessity of a messy intellectual repentance by my discovery in researching this paper that Edward Vick in his *Let Me Assure You* had used the term in 1968. He begins to speak of the initiative of God and human helplessness in his very first paragraph. And by page 12 he gives God’s initiative a name, stating that “‘*prevenient grace*’ emphasizes God’s grace as the source and origin of anything and everything that has to do with the reconciliation of man with God.” Then, after getting humans saved, he turns to “*cooperating grace*,” an Adventist favorite.⁷³

Before moving to our conclusions, we need to briefly examine the theology of Robert Wieland, Donald Short, and Jack Sequeira. These influential Adventist pastors have confused universal prevenient grace with what they call universal legal justification. They have stepped off the Arminian/Wesleyan soteriological platform by denying the provisional nature of justification. Sequeira states the case concisely when he writes: “I believe the Bible teaches that God actually and unconditionally saved all humanity at the cross so that we are justified and reconciled to God by that act. . . . I believe that the only reason anyone will be lost is because he or she willfully and persistently rejects God’s gift of salvation in Christ.” This understanding of righteousness by faith, claim Wieland and Short, is different from and

⁷⁰Hans K. LaRondelle, *Christ Our Salvation: What God Does for Us and in Us* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980), 12-14, 16-17.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 17-20.

⁷²George R. Knight, *The Pharisee’s Guide to Perfect Holiness: A Study of Sin and Salvation* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 82-84; *idem*, *Sin and Salvation: God’s Work for and in Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 73-74. See also Kiley’s thesis on my understanding of sin and its implications referenced in note 52 above.

⁷³Edward W. H. Vick, *Let Me Assure You: Of Grace, of Faith, of Forgiveness, of Freedom, of Fellowship, of Hope* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1968), 1, 12.

“greater than what the Reformers taught and the popular churches understand today.”⁷⁴

In this understanding, they are correct about the initiative of God in salvation and the unconditional, universal nature of the gift of God in Christ. But they are confused on the nature of the gift itself, defining it as legal justification and not prevenient grace. To the contrary, Sequeira claims that all humanity was “born uninhabited by God’s Spirit.” Christ bore “our sinful nature” on the cross and the human race was raised “*in Christ* with a glorified body, totally cleansed from sin” and its results. The end product is not only a semi-Pelagian beginning point, but an Andreasen-like Pelagianism. In line with that conclusion is Sequeira’s claim that vicarious substitution makes the gospel “unethical,” a “legal fiction,” and the root of “cheap grace.” The remedy is to follow Christ’s example. The final end of this theology is a final-generation perfectionism, in which, claims Short, the last generation will prove that “there is no reason for failure and sin.” “The unveiled message of Calvary is that Christ’s death is a death to sin” in our lives.⁷⁵ And with that theology, popular in many Adventist circles today, we have come back to the semi-Pelagian if not Pelagian ideas that have formed a strand of Adventism throughout its history.

Concluding Remarks

So what about Olson’s claim that “Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists have tended to promote Semi-Pelagian views of salvation, although the latter have been moving more toward orthodox Protestant Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century.”⁷⁶ Is he right or wrong? The answer is yes.

It depends on where you look and what Adventists you are talking about. Certainly the denomination’s official statements have moved in the direction suggested by Olson. But in terms of books on salvation it is a mixed bag, with authors on both sides of the semi-Pelagian issue in both halves of the century. Having said that, it appears that a larger portion of the books in the second half of the century have had a more sophisticated approach to both sin and semi-Pelagianism. But here we have a divided camp, with several sectors of Adventism, led largely by pastors and lay leaders, firmly rooted

⁷⁴Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, *1888 Re-examined*, rev. ed. (Meadow Vista, CA: The 1888 Message Study Committee, 1987), preface, [ii, iv]; Jack Sequeira, *Beyond Belief: The Promise, the Power, and the Reality of the Everlasting Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 8. In fairness, it should be noted that Sequeira and his colleagues do believe in a justification by faith that makes their legal justification effective (see *ibid.*, 43). But that claim only illustrates the muddledness of their theology, which has everyone “unconditionally saved” at the cross (8).

⁷⁵Jack Sequeira, *Saviour of the World: The Humanity of Christ in the Light of the Everlasting Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1996), 145-146; *idem*, *Beyond Belief*, 41-42; Donald Karr Short, “*Then Shall the Sanctuary Be Cleansed*” (Paris, OH: Glad Tidings Publishers, 1990), 70, 76-78, [96].

⁷⁶Olson, *Mosaic*, 275.

in semi-Pelagianism and even advocating forms of Pelagianism. As to the Adventist public, I would have to agree with the sentiment of Olson, who believes that “most people who call themselves Arminians are really semi-Pelagian.”⁷⁷ The majority of Adventists, it appears, are in good company.

Meanwhile, the task of the denomination’s theologians is clear. They need to move away from the perpetual interest in the relative places of justification and sanctification in salvation and from an overemphasis on how to live the Christian life and what it means to be ready for Jesus to come. Conversely, they need to move toward creating a soteriological discussion that provides balance between both the beginning and ending of salvation as well as in life between those two points.

Such a discussion should include several elements. First, it needs to be more self-consciously definitional in its treatment of sin in all its forms (e.g., original, nature, motivational, act), the will in both its possibilities and its limitations, grace in all of its flavors (e.g., common, prevenient, transforming, empowering), and the meaning(s) and implication(s) of depravity and the *imago Dei*. Beyond more breadth and depth in foundational definitions and concepts and their interrelatedness, Adventism needs to broaden its interest in topics related to soteriology. For example, Adventist writing in the area of Christian anthropology needs to move beyond its perennial focus on conditionalism and the unity of the human soul and toward topics that intersect with soteriology and the broader issues of theology. Likewise, Adventist writing on pneumatology should focus on more than topics such as the latter rain, spiritual gifts, and the fruit of the spirit. In short, Adventist theology needs to make more of an effort to capture the integrative themes and connections that run throughout and across the boundaries of the various formal aspects of theology.

Beyond those tasks, Adventist theology needs to explore more fully the relationships between Pelagian and semi-Pelagian views of sin and the divisive topic of the human nature of Christ. The two topics are integrally related. And divisions on them have led to two quite distinct Adventist soteriologies and eschatologies—in fact, two different theologies that overlap in some places, but consistently and predictably diverge in others.

Finally, I would suggest that Adventist theology has too often been developed in isolation from an adequate knowledge of historical theology. Adventist writers need to realize more consistently that they have not been the first to raise most of these issues, and that they can learn from the struggles and conclusions of others, even if they end up disagreeing with them on some points.

So Olson’s assertion regarding semi-Pelagianism and Adventism is both true and false. But no matter what its truthfulness, any effort to investigate it leads one into the various theological flavors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

⁷⁷Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 10.