

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD'S LOVE: THE OPTIMISTIC, THEOLOGICAL THEODICY OF ELLEN G. WHITE

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Introduction

When one begins to read through the voluminous writings of Ellen G. White (1827–1915), it is evident that she was not a systematic theologian. She is more accurately classified as an occasional or “narrative” expositor of theological themes. But simply because she was not a systematic writer, does not mean that she lacked a “center” or a key organizing theme.

The Central Organizing Theme

The various major themes in her theological development emerged from her Biblical expositions, historical narrations, and claims to visionary revelations from God. In these expositions she sought to explain the problem of evil (theodicy)¹ that was provoked by the challenges that Lucifer (the biblical Satan, or the Devil) brought against God's governance of his created universe, all with a special focus on the way he has dealt with his “personal” created beings (angels, relational beings on other worlds, and humans).²

The initial phase of Lucifer's rebellion began in heaven as he unleashed the charge that God was unfair to require created beings to obey his law. This provoked a ready response from the second person of the Godhead (Christ) who sought to dissuade Lucifer to drop his charges and cease his budding rebellion. But when such efforts came to naught, Lucifer was cast out from

¹Ellen White's efforts to construct an explanation for the problem of evil has anticipated more recent efforts in the mid- to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to do the same. Among the mid-twentieth-century efforts was C. S. Lewis' *The Problem of Pain* (London: MacMillan, 1946). But possibly the most notable recent efforts in this direction have been spear-headed by Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) and Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning: Contemporary Responses to the Problem of Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). For a concise description of these more recent works by Rice and Boyd, see Richard Rice, “An enemy hath done this: Cosmic conflict theodicy,” *Ministry* (March 2015): 6-9.

²Commenting on Christ's expiring cry at Calvary, Ellen White says: “To the angels and unfallen worlds the cry, ‘It is finished,’ had a deep significance. It was for them as well as for us that the great work of redemption had been accomplished. They with us share the fruits of Christ's victory” (*The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898, 1940], 758).

heaven, along with one-third of the angels. And thus it is this narrative that has come to be variously referred to as “The Great Controversy,” the “Cosmic Controversy,” or the “Conflict of the Ages” theme. Such terminology is reflected in the title of one of her best known books, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (1888, Revised 1911),³ and the overall title of the series in which it appeared, the “The Conflict of the Ages Series.”⁴

The larger plot ultimately unfolds from the narrative of God’s efforts to prove, through Christ’s patient demonstrations of God’s love, that Lucifer’s claims were false. God could have immediately destroyed Lucifer and his sympathizers. But such a response would have led the unfallen beings of the universe to serve God out of craven fear, rather than from a connected line of evidence that would patiently set forth persuasive, loving demonstrations of the justice of destroying Lucifer and his loyalists.

We will have more to say regarding the substantive core of God’s sustained response to Lucifer’s fall in the context of Christ’s incarnate, hand-to-hand battle with Satan. But before we do so, we need to trace the broader theological influences and doctrinal themes which shaped the thought of Ellen White as she developed her key integrating theme. And finally, we will attempt to show how each key theological theme and doctrine has provided the theological substance that has emerged during the various occasions which have enabled God’s love to be demonstrated. And finally this series of loving demonstrations will unfold in such a way that God will then be fully vindicated as he has, in Christ, progressively confronted the problem of evil fomented by Satan’s revolt.

³This theme began to unfold in the late 1840’s (see *Early Writings* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1882, 1945], 133ff.) and *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915], 161, 162), but then it took on a more concerted developmental form following her famous Lovett’s Grove, Ohio vision in 1858. The key chapters where this theme has been given its clearest and most concise expositions are the following: *Patriarchs and Prophets*, the chapter entitled “Why Was Sin Permitted?”, 33-43; *The Desire of Ages*, the chapter entitled “It Is Finished,” 758-764; *The Great Controversy*, the chapters “God’s Law Immutable,” 433-450, “The Origin of Evil,” 492-504; and “The Controversy Ended,” 662-678.

⁴This series contains (in logical, narrative order, not the chronological order of their production by Ellen G. White) the following volumes: *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890): narrates the Conflict from the fall of Lucifer to the time of King David; *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1916): was published posthumously and narrates the story of Israel from the time of Solomon to the end of the OT; *The Desire of Ages* (1898): narrates the life of Christ; *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911): provides an overview of New Testament history and writings from the time of Christ’s ascension through the book of Revelation; and the aforementioned *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1888, 1911): traces the conflict from the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 until the time of the heavenly New Earth of Revelation 20-22.

Theological and Ideological Influences

The following trends and movements emerged as the predominant shaping ideological/theological contributors to White's thought. We will commence with the more general background factors of the longer Christian theological tradition and then close out this section with a resume of key themes and doctrines which she utilized to shape her cosmic metanarrative.⁵

The Larger Context of Christian Theology

From the first five centuries of Christian theological discourse, Ellen White would ultimately appropriate the larger contours of the Trinitarian perspective on the Godhead. This factor will receive more focused attention later on, especially in relationship to her efforts to become more Christo-centric and grace oriented in her Adventist theological context. And with her efforts to be more Christ and grace oriented, she will ultimately come to strongly affirm the influence of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and its four great "Sola" themes—*Sola Scriptura*,⁶ *Sola Fide*,⁷ *Sola Gratiae*,⁸ and *Sola Christi*.⁹

But while she was heavily indebted to these sixteenth-century Magisterial Reformation themes, she did not affirm these Reformers' strongly predestinarian, irresistible grace predilections which emerged from the powerful influence of Augustine of Hippo on the Protestant Reformers. She would, instead, drink deeply from the fountains of evangelical Arminianism which was vouchsafed to her through her early-nineteenth-century Wesleyan/Methodist heritage.¹⁰ This perspective featured a strong dose of "responsible

⁵What follows in the next sections is mainly drawn from George Knight's *A Search For Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 17-81.

⁶Among Ellen White's strongest affirmations of the Bible and its authority are in *The Great Controversy*, 593-602 and *Selected Messages, Book One*, 15-23.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 300-400 lists numerous selections that give a clear and forceful testimony to justification by faith alone in the imputed, reckoned merits of Christ.

⁸*Ibid.*, also speak forcefully to the grace of God which calls, convicts, converts, justifies, sanctifies, and ultimately glorifies believers.

⁹The acknowledged literary masterwork of Ellen White is *The Desire of Ages* which is suffused with the theme of the all sufficiency of Christ to save sinners from sin—from the "guttermost to the uttermost" (a phrase drawn from audio tapes of Desmond Ford's classroom lectures).

¹⁰For her most positive affirmation of John Wesley and his theology, see her chapter in *The Great Controversy* entitled "Later English Reformers," 245-264. In this chapter is the following, succinct expression of her view as to what constitutes the right relationship between justifying and sanctifying grace: Wesley, following his much noted heart-warming experience at Aldersgate in London (1738), would continue "his strict and self-denying life, not now as the *ground*, but the *result* of faith; not the *root*, but the *fruit* of holiness. . . . Wesley's life was devoted to the preaching of the great truths

grace” perspectives that reflected a potent emphasis on “free grace,” especially in her embrace of “prevenient grace” which God employs to creatively and redemptively draw sinners to Christ.¹¹ Such categories are more popularly known as Wesleyan “free will,” especially when contrasted with the more deterministic themes of the Reformed/Calvinistic tradition in England and New England.

The other key feature emanating from her Wesleyan heritage was its strong emphasis on sanctifying and perfecting grace.¹² When this emphasis was more carefully integrated with the strong accentuation of the heart-felt individual and social concern of Puritanism in personal experience, it would create a potent blend of intense Christian doctrinal convictions and piety.

Yet Ellen White would also become the beneficiary of two other manifestations of nineteenth-century American Revivalism: Restorationist Primitivism and Millerite Adventism.¹³ These last two confluences would feature a strong emphasis on the restoration a self-conscious Biblicism, pre-millennial eschatology (being strongly opposed to the reigning social and political optimism of post-millennial eschatology) and apocalyptic prophetic interpretation. Inherent in the latter themes was a strong perspective which viewed the world as being enveloped in a Miltonian (John Milton) cosmic conflict between the supernatural forces of Christ and the powers of darkness inspired by Satan and his malevolent minions.¹⁴

Among the remaining key factors which rounded out the key lineaments of Ellen White’s conceptual world, were her steady affirmations of anthropological holism (known for its rejection of Greek pagan dualism), with its embrace of conditional immortality and soul-sleep,¹⁵ the rejection of the idea of an ever-burning hell (known technically as annihilationism), and seventh-day Sabbatarianism. This latter factor seemed to be inherently accompanied by a strong emphasis on the eternal authority of the Ten Commandments and steady opposition to any themes that smacked of

which he had received—justification through faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit upon the heart, bringing forth fruit in a life conformed to the example of Christ,” 256.

¹¹One of the clearest examples of her articulation of “prevenient grace” (though she never used these exact theological terms) is found in *Selected Messages, Book One*, pp. 389-392.

¹²For a somewhat detailed tracing of this theme, see Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), especially pp. 119 ff.

¹³On the themes of Primitivism and Millerism in the life and thought of Ellen White and Adventism, see George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*, 30-32 and 38ff.

¹⁴For a good sampling that traces the roots of her views on prophetic interpretation, see *The Great Controversy*, 299-408.

¹⁵For a clear exposition of her views on the conditional immortality of the soul and hell, see *The Great Controversy*, 531-562.

antinomian tendencies in spiritual formation.¹⁶ Thus, when all of these suggestive factors were integrated within the setting of a detailed exposition of the millennium of Revelation 20,¹⁷ they thus provided the essential ingredients which helped to portray the varied scenes and themes which provided the essential backgrounds and grist for the portrayal of the Cosmic Controversy scenario.

In order to grasp the integrative power of Ellen White's Cosmic Controversy theme, we must get a steadier handle on her essential Christian identity. And with this perspective in hand, this meta-narrative theme can then display its full explanatory/God-vindicating power.

The "Christian" Identity of Ellen White

As has been previously noted, the distinctly "Adventist" core of Ellen White's theology emerged out of her embrace of the fervent eschatology of Millerism. But as positive as all the previous doctrinal developments appeared to be to her, some very disturbing and fascinating misdirections had infected these "truth"-confessing, prophetically-informed Seventh-day Adventists! Somehow, Christ had lost his place as the centerpiece of their collective doctrinal focus! And it is in the context of this strange turn of events, that Ellen White commenced her most distinctive and decisive theological contribution to Seventh-day Adventist theology and piety.

This contribution can best be collectively characterized as "The Uplift or Focus on Christ" campaign.¹⁸ Beginning in the late 1870s, Ellen White, along with her husband, James White, launched a sustained attempt to redirect Adventism's faith focus towards Christ, His divine and human natures, and the dynamic outpouring of his free grace, which is now being mediated through his intercessions as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. Though staggered by the premature death of her talented and supportive husband in 1881, Ellen White was determined to pursue these important doctrinal and spiritual adjustments and the hoped for seasons of revival and evangelistic/mission advance.

While space does not permit a detailed account of the crucial doctrinal developments associated with the "Uplift Christ" movement, the major dynamics of this campaign played out within the larger orbit of the conflicted events and aftermath of the historic 1888 Seventh-day Adventist General Conference session held in Minneapolis, MN (USA). And it was in the controversial aftermath of this important series of events, especially during the notable accomplishments of the nine years Ellen White spent in Australia (from 1891 to 1900), that she developed her most decisive and enduring theological legacy. It was during this stressful epoch that she most forcefully

¹⁶Ibid., 423-450.

¹⁷Ibid., 653-678.

¹⁸This campaign has been narrated by Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation*, 69-148.

articulated the themes of “Christ and His Righteousness,” or the notable revival of the doctrines and experience of “Righteousness by Faith.”

The Key Themes of the “Uplift Christ” Movement

The main result of this renewed focus on the person and work of Christ would be her extensive writings that clarified the right relationship between justifying (forgiving) and sanctifying (transformative) grace. This was articulated in a manner that sought to maintain the eternal authority of the Ten Commandments and the always evident sanctification themes. But there also emerged a much greater accent on the biblical doctrine of justification by grace, through “faith alone.” Ellen White thus felt inspired to infuse a strongly grace-laced doctrinal and spiritual element into Adventism’s proclamation of its more distinctive doctrines.

Clarifications of the key themes of salvation by faith would emerge as a synergistic complement to another crucial theme—a steady unfolding of Trinitarian clarity for an Arian and semi-Arian infested SDA rank-in-file (both ministerial and lay). These emphases proved to be a Christianizing antidote for the persisting ravages of legalism and spiritual declension. Thus this emerging Trinitarian clarity functioned as a complementary, enriching force for her more intentional focus on Christ and the dynamics of personal salvation. And a brief review of this history will yield interpretive perspective on how the more unique Adventist doctrines and the recovery of basic “Christian” teachings would be effectively integrated within the larger narrative of the “Cosmic” or “Great Controversy” theme.

Trinitarian Developments and Salvation By Faith

Jerry Moon has laid out the evidence for the development of Ellen White’s understanding of the Godhead. He suggests that it is important to distinguish between Ellen White’s earlier “personal beliefs” and “what she received through her visions.”¹⁹ While her earlier comments on the Godhead could be characterized as “ambiguous,” capable of either a Trinitarian or non-Trinitarian interpretation, there was clearly evident a steady tendency to embrace the essentials of “a biblical view of the Trinity.”²⁰

By 1869 she bluntly declared that Christ “was equal with God”²¹ and in 1872 she made the forthright claim that Christ was not created.²² This earlier

¹⁹Jerry Moon, in Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His plan of Salvation and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 205.

²⁰Ibid., 206.

²¹*Testimonies for the Church*, Volume Two (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 200.

²²*Review and Herald*, Dec. 17, 1872.

period of her ministry was capped off by her first designation of Christ as the “eternal Son.”²³

But it was in the midst of the great revival of devotional and theological focus on Christ (especially from 1888 onward), that further Trinitarian affirmations (and clarifications) were set forth. She claimed that Christ is “one with the eternal Father,—one in nature, in character, and in purpose²⁴ and “one in power and authority.”²⁵ His deity was not derived from the Father,²⁶ and the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead.²⁷

But the most decisive affirmations came in the 1898 publication of her most revered book, *The Desire of Ages*, and its statements that “In Christ is life, original, un-borrowed, and underived”²⁸ and that the Holy Spirit is the “Third Person of the Godhead.”²⁹ And finally this progressive parade of Trinitarian witness was summarily encapsulated in the following 1901 and 1905 declarations: The Godhead was referred to as the three “eternal heavenly dignitaries,” the “three highest powers in heaven,” the “three living persons of the heavenly trio” and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in nature, character, and purpose, yet distinct in their persons.³⁰

What, however, was most striking in this developmental trend is that the clearest Trinitarian testimony came in the context of her campaign to uplift and focus upon the eternal person of Christ and the saving power of his atoning sacrifice and intercessions. Therefore, if there had been no unfolding Trinitarian clarity, there most likely would have been no stirring revival of the great theme of Christ and His righteousness.

Thus it is that these complementary themes provided the framework for her understanding that Christ is a Savior who (1) justifies by faith alone (a powerful recovery of the Protestant emphasis on *sola fide* and *sola Christi*) and (2) also effectively converts and sanctifies the penitent, responsive sinner. Such teachings clearly reflected a persistent integration of “salvation by faith alone” themes with the holiness, transformational themes of her Wesleyan heritage.

Therefore it seemed quite inevitable that Ellen White, with no apologies to the semi-Arians in her own tradition (the ones most afflicted with legalistic tendencies), forthrightly made an unmistakable connection between a

²³Ibid., Aug. 8, 1878.

²⁴*The Great Controversy* [1888], 493.

²⁵Ibid., 495.

²⁶*Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890), 36.

²⁷*Special Testimonies*, Series A (1897) and B (1905) (n.p., 1906), 37.

²⁸*The Desire of Ages*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 530.

²⁹Ibid., 671.

³⁰Manuscript 145, 1901; *Special Testimonies*, Series B, No. 7 [1905], pp. 51, 62, 63; *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 422. These statements from 1901 and 1905 have been re-published in the compilation, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 614-617.

biblically informed doctrine of personal salvation and a clear affirmation of the full deity of Christ: “If men reject the testimony of the inspired Scriptures concerning the deity of Christ, it is vain to argue the point with them. . . . None who hold this error can have a true conception of the character or the mission of Christ, or of the great plan of God for man’s redemption.”³¹

Therefore, it seems more than coincidental that the developments in her salvation thought roughly coincided with her unfolding views on the deity of Christ and the Trinity. As already pointed out, by the late 1870s and early 1880s she had become more intense in her expositions of the key themes of salvation, with the most notable manifestations appearing during the 1883 Battle Creek General Conference. Thus what began as a swelling stream in 1883 became a floodtide of publications in the aftermath of the previously mentioned Minneapolis, MN conference of 1888. In fact, roughly forty percent of all that she ever had to say on the subject of justification was published during the four years after 1888.

Furthermore, though she had always taught justification in terms of forgiveness, the emphasis after 1888 featured a strong accent on justification as the imputation (legal accounting) of the merits of Christ to repenting sinners. This theme became particularly emphatic as she began to correlate the experience of justification with Christ’s intercessory work in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. A striking expression of this was that Christ’s merits make up for the “unavoidable deficiencies” of true believers.³²

While there would always be a continuing emphasis on transforming, perfecting grace, such emphases did not compromise her clear teaching that justification is the work of Christ who reckons, or imputes his merits to the legal records of penitent, responsive believers. Clearly, the 1890s witnessed the climax of the “Uplift Christ” campaign.

Human Depravity

The final general “Christian” doctrinal emphasis of Ellen White related to her views on the sinfulness of human nature. And it was such views that provided a foundational complement to the salvation emphasis so essential to the “Uplift Christ” campaign.

Her views on “sin,” “depravity,” “corruption,” and “guilt” were more in the Augustinian than the Pelagian tradition.³³ She defined sin as acts of transgression against God and a condition of “depravity” which involves

³¹*The Great Controversy* [1888] (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1888), 524.

³²*Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 3:196.

³³Pelagian refers to emphases on natural human goodness. For a convenient introduction to White’s views on sin, see Woodrow W. Whidden, *Ellen G. White on the Humanity of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997), 18-24. For a developmental study of Adventism and “Original Sin,” see Edwin H. Zachrisson, “Seventh-day Adventists and Original Sin: A Study of the Early Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of the Effects of Adam’s Sin on His Posterity” (PhD dissertation: Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1984).

humans in “inherent” sinful “propensities,” “inclinations,” and “tendencies” to sin. While Ellen White was clear that all humans inherit the condition of sinful depravity from Adam, she was mainly concerned with how they can overcome their guilt and besetting sins through the saving grace of God.

But the most telling contribution of Ellen White’s doctrine of sin emerged with her teaching that human sinfulness, including how the effects of the sinful “corrupt channels” of penitent “true believers,” make even their best, grace-empowered efforts to be meritoriously unacceptable. In other words, unless the obedient actions of “true believers” are legally “purified by” the blood of Christ (that he is “moment by moment” ministering for them in the heavenly sanctuary), there is no genuine assurance of salvation.³⁴ Thus it seems justified to conclude that this idea of sinful nature nullifying any justifying merit for the believer’s acts of obedience was a telling, even inevitable doctrinal development of the focus on Christ and his righteousness.

Therefore, with Ellen White’s focus on the divine/human Christ, his redemptive grace and her ongoing support for the unique Adventist doctrines, all would then be carefully integrated within the framework of her “Great Controversy,” or “Cosmic Controversy” theme. And with this development, the full maturity of Ellen White’s theology unfolded as an “optimistic theological theodicy.” Thus what follows represents a demonstration of how her “Cosmic Controversy” theodicy unfolded as a significant, doctrinally integrated narrative of divine self-vindication.

The Matured Dynamics of the “Cosmic Conflict” Theme

As was previously pointed out, the title of the book *The Great Controversy* suggests that Ellen White clearly accepted the biblical account that Christ is the pre-existent, divine Son of God and that the devil and his angels are real (not mythical) supernatural beings who have fallen from their exalted status as loyal heavenly beings. Moreover, the most telling development of her narrations of the “Cosmic Conflict” focused on the fortunes of God’s essential nature of “love.” These maturing expositions (especially from 1890 onward) commence with the emphatic statement that “God is love” (the first three words of *Patriarchs and Prophets*), and conclude with the declaration that “from the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love” (the very last words of the book *The Great Controversy*,³⁵ the final book of the five volume “Conflict of the Ages” series).

Yet, more fundamentally, the theological core of her entire exposition of the “Cosmic Conflict” (as theodicy) is encapsulated in her portrayals of Christ’s life and atoning death and their significance for the ultimate resolution of the long-running “Conflict.” Thus the very heart of the “Great

³⁴*Selected Messages* (1958), 1:344.

³⁵*The Great Controversy*, 678.

Controversy” theme reaches full conceptual maturity in her book *The Desire of Ages* (1898) and its chapter entitled “It is Finished.”³⁶

The Contested Principles in the “Cosmic Conflict”

In the opening of the controversy, before the creation of the world, Lucifer charged God with being unjust in requiring obedience to his law from all intelligent, relational beings. On the surface, this sounds a bit simplistic. But undergirding Satan’s charge were foundational principles of decisive importance.

According to Ellen White, Satan claimed that the tensions between the mercy and justice of God’s love were so great that God the Father could not be the moral governor of the universe. And in this diabolical challenge lurks the genesis of Lucifer’s rebellion and his startling claim to supplant God as the rightful ruler of the worlds. In this narrative, Lucifer was thus fully emerging as the devil and Satan!

Beginning with the charge that it was impossible for all intelligent, free-will beings to perfectly keep God’s law, the drama intensified. The gist of Lucifer’s challenge was that God’s law should be abolished and it was his refusal to accept the authority of the law that caused him to be cast out of heaven. His expulsion was then followed by the special creation of this world and a literal Adam and Eve. And when they “fell” for Satan’s deceptions, he then claimed vindication and sought to usurp God’s dominion over his creation.

Satan, however, not only claimed that the law should be annulled (that is, mercy should completely nullify the justice of God—especially the requirements of His law), he also brought forward another claim: Since God’s justice stipulated that the wages of sin is death, the loving Creator could not forgive Adam and Eve and still be a God of justice (thus justice should completely nullify mercy). In support for his claim that God could not forgive Adam and Eve, he added a further caveat: since God did not forgive him and the other fallen angels, neither should He forgive Adam and Eve. So what was God to do in this demon hatched predicament?

The Godhead’s solution was to send Christ to the earth to become the divine/human Redeemer who would generate and demonstrate the graced provisions which can reconcile lost humanity to God (atone for sin) through Christ’s perfect manifestation of justice and mercy. In answering the charge that obedience to God’s holy law was impossible, Christ, as a genuine human being, without any advantages being drawn on by him from his inherently divine powers, demonstrated perfect obedience to the law. Thus the incarnate life of Christ vindicated God’s justice in requiring perfect, active obedience to his law of love.

Then, based on the justice of his perfect obedience, Christ, with the sins of the human race imputed or reckoned to him, perfectly met the claims of God’s justice that the wages of sin is eternal death. And he did this through

³⁶*The Desire of Ages*, 758-764. See especially 761-764.

his vicarious self-sacrifice (he died in the place of sinful humans). So Christ, as the sinless substitute, bore the just penalty for sin in order to fully satisfy the demands of God's retributive justice. And in doing this he manifested a merciful love that has enabled the Godhead to perfectly forgive repentant humans for their sin(s) without sacrificing divine justice (both the demands for perfect, active obedience to his law and the demands of executionary justice). Since the wages of sin is death, Christ thus passively obeyed the will of his Father by bearing the penalty of the broken law as a just satisfaction to the claims of divine, retributive justice.

It is then that Ellen White claimed that God, in Christ, manifested divine justice that was fully congruent with Godly mercy:

God's love has been expressed in His justice no less than His mercy. Justice is the foundation of His throne, and the fruit of His love. It had been Satan's purpose to divorce mercy from truth and justice. . . . But Christ shows that in God's plan they are indissolubly joined together; the one cannot exist without the other. . . . By His life and His death, Christ proved that God's justice did not destroy His mercy, but that sin could be forgiven, and that the law is righteous, and can be perfectly obeyed. Satan's charges were refuted. God had given man unmistakable evidence of His love.³⁷

After Christ's resurrection, Satan then presented his final challenge: he claimed that God's mercy was so manifestly revealed in Christ's death for lost sinners that Godly mercy has done away with God's law. Thus Satan had effectively come full circle in his arguments—he had returned, in principle, to his original charge that “mercy destroyed justice, that the death of Christ abrogated the Father's law.”³⁸ Ellen White then suggested a succinct response to Satan's repeat maneuver:

Had it been possible for the law to be changed or abrogated, then Christ need not have died. But to abrogate the law would be to immortalize transgression, and place the world under Satan's control. It was because the law was changeless, because man could be saved only through obedience to its precepts, that Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Yet the very means by which Christ established the law Satan represented as destroying it. Here will come the last conflict of the great controversy between Christ and Satan.³⁹

Thus we have the detailed dynamics of the “Cosmic Controversy” between Christ and Satan. And it is within the framework of this cosmic meta-narrative that the rest of Ellen White's theology unfolds. In other words, Christ not only had made atoning provision for the salvation of lost humanity, but his work also provided the decisive demonstration that will ultimately vindicate the Godhead in every phase of its response to the emergence of the evil inherent in Satan's cosmic rebellion.

³⁷Ibid., 762.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 762, 763.

Love Overcomes Evil

With her presentation of the clarifying implications of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for the “Great Controversy” in hand, what remains to be seen is how this fully matured theme opens the way for a more thorough integration with and explication of the other key doctrines in Ellen White’s attempt to demonstrate the vindication of God’s loving governance. Therefore, what follows is a preliminary demonstration (drawing on Ellen White’s ideas) as to how God’s love is vindicated in the face of Satan’s propaganda campaign and its baleful fruitage.

This integrative demonstration commences in the context of her most central “Christian” and “unique Adventist” doctrines.

The Doctrine of God as Love

The most fundamental of all Christian doctrines addresses the nature of God. And Ellen White, drawing on her Wesleyan/Arminian theological roots, clearly held that God was Trinitarian, with the three persons of the Godhead having co-eternally pre-existed as beings who have been existing and working together in mutually submissive, overflowing, creative and redemptive love. And with this accent on creative and redemptive love, immediately the Adventist Sabbath doctrine comes to mind as the weekly memorial to God’s creative and saving actions. Clearly, the God who creates and redeems humans in love has sought a freely chosen relationship with them. And thus at the very heart of this relational love (the social Trinity), both divine and human, is the concept of freedom of choice. Only a context of free choice, inherent in the Wesleyan view of divine love, could create a context that could birth a “Cosmic Controversy” theodicy.

By way of stark contrast, the deterministic categories of Augustine of Hippo’s thought, as reflected in Magisterial Protestantism (especially Calvinism), have largely rejected any concept of freely given human response to God’s offer of saving power. And thus it comes as no surprise that the most fierce opposition to Methodist/Wesleyan free grace⁴⁰ and Ellen White’s “Great Controversy” meta-narrative has always arisen from the Augustinian/Reformed tradition. Therefore, God as a loving Trinity is absolutely essential to any concept which presupposes the acceptance or rejection of God’s loving offer of redemption. To put it simply—no grace-granted free choice, no “Great Controversy” scenario!

The Doctrine of Sin

On the issue of sin, there was significant agreement between the Augustinian/Reformed thinkers and the Protestant free-choice teachers (the Wesleyan/Arminians). Both agreed that sinful depravity was so deeply seated in human

⁴⁰For a more recent portrayal of this seemingly ongoing, irreconcilable fracture between the Reformed/Calvinistic and the Wesleyan/Arminian Traditions, see Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

nature that only God's grace could heal it.⁴¹ Therefore, when humans sinned, their natures were corrupted, even to the point that they could not initiate a saving relationship with God. But James Arminius, many Anglicans (from the sixteenth century on), John Wesley, and their admirers (including Ellen White) claimed that God's love reached out to recreate human freedom so that a genuinely free response became possible. This "freed will" concept has been the very opposite of the Augustinian/Calvinist meta-narrative which has consistently claimed that God's saving love is irresistibly bestowed on the "elect" who have been pre-determined by the inscrutable will of God alone.⁴²

Thus for Ellen White, God was conceived to be lovingly persuasive, not irresistibly powerful in determining the make-up of the "elect." Saving faith is created when grace-influenced sinners are enabled (not forced) to freely embrace God's saving offer. Sin is thus persuasively counteracted in love, not deterministically eradicated. And these ideas bring us to the very dynamics of saving grace.

Sin and Free Salvation by Faith

For Wesley and Ellen White, salvation was understood to be a delicate balance between forgiving and transforming grace. Thus those who are enabled to freely respond to God's convincing and converting grace will become the beneficiaries of not only Christ's forgiveness, but also his power to change attitudes and character patterns. Those whom God forgives are also the ones that He co-operatively converts and continually transforms. Without forgiveness, there can be no transformation of character and acceptance of forgiveness will be inevitably and surely accompanied by a co-operant process of character change (sanctification).

This latter concept is absolutely essential to Ellen White's highly elaborated, Bible-based doctrine of end-time judgments according to works, especially the pre-advent investigative judgment and the subsequent millennial judgments of the lost. If the "root" of salvation is faith, the "fruit" of salvation will be a life which features a consistent pattern of evident obedience to God's revealed will. And the "fruit" of faith (or no faith) will be on full display as reflected in the celestial records during all phases of final judgment.

And once more Sabbath keeping, as a revelation of true faith, will play an important role in the final testing crisis of earth's history. According to Ellen White, the Sabbath will provide the great test in the final "seal of God" versus the "mark of the beast" crisis foretold in Rev 13 and 14. Those who receive the "seal of God" will keep the Sabbath, even in the face of a universal death decree (Rev 13:15).⁴³

⁴¹For a succinct and readable exposition of Wesley's doctrine of sin and its close similitude with Reformed understandings, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 19-46.

⁴²Ibid., 47-68.

⁴³*The Great Controversy*, 563-612

Thus the issue will come down to the concept that the Sabbath commandment is the only requirement of God's law that can be kept by "faith alone"! And this conclusion is based on the idea that the only reason to keep the Sabbath is based on the settled belief that God is the source of life (Creator of life on earth) and of everlasting life (Re-Creator for eternal existence in the everlasting kingdom of heaven).

Furthermore, in the coming great and final testing crisis, if God is to be truly trusted as the Giver of everlasting life, then the faithful will not worry about the remnants of life in time since God is intent on life in eternity for his sealed, loyal end-time believers. It just makes no sense to keep the particularly stipulated seventh-day Sabbath if it does not reveal a faith in God as Creator and Savior. Faith in God as both Creator and Savior has always formed the basis of trust in God's revealed commands. The supreme test will therefore finally come down to this: Whom do you trust—yourself (or some other creature) or the gracious Creator/Redeemer?

Therefore the revelation of true faith on the earth will be reflected as the final evidence of testing, saving faith during the investigative judgment in heaven. And when every case is revealed, then the pre-advent judgment phase ends and the judgments of execution commence.⁴⁴

In the totality of their sweep, these detailed histories (recorded in heaven) will provide public evidence of unmistakable patterns of responsive obedience (or sin) that will witness to the character of each person's faith experience. And in these revelations, both in the judgments of the professed followers of Christ (pre-advent) and lost sinners (during and at the end of the millennium), God's judicial decisions will be on public display in order to fully vindicate his judicial fairness before all of the relational intelligences of the universe.

Once more, while the saved are justified by faith alone and the lost will be damned by no faith, the faith of all persons will never be "alone" or isolated from the inevitable fruit of their respective character patterns. Such is the evidential grist of the divine, vindicating judgments of investigation and review.

Some further comments on Ellen White's developed judgment sequence teachings will prove helpful in clarifying how her judgment theology has contributed to the integration of her salvation thought with her eschatological teachings. But before turning to those important clarifications, there is one other key doctrine that supplies a critically important presupposition for the logic of the sequence of these various phases of final, vindicating judgment.

Final Judgment, Conditional Immortality, and "Soul-Sleep"

This mostly peculiar Adventist doctrine of "conditionalism" (the non-immortality of the soul) offers key implications for the timing of God's final judgments. And this has mainly to do with the teaching about the unconscious

⁴⁴Ibid., 479-491.

state of the soul in death and the utter annihilation of the lost at the time of the final executionary judgments of God. The rationale goes like this:

Christians have long been divided (especially since the sixteenth century Reformation) as to when the final judgment will take place—at the moment of death or at the end of the age? Luther, in his opposition to the doctrine of purgatory, upheld “soul sleep,” thereby claiming that there would be no second chances for completing the salvation process after death and before the judgments of the “last day.”⁴⁵ Thus no created being will go to their ultimate reward (heaven or hell) immediately at death (thus if they did go, such would logically assume that each soul is judged at the moment of death and thus immediately proceeds to either heaven or hell).

Ellen White clearly opted for a version of Luther's basic position and accepted it as one of Adventism's “peculiar, or “distinctive” doctrines. And thus judgment for both the dead and the living is effectively postponed until just before the second coming when all will have their ultimate fate definitively decided (thus after the second coming, nobody's salvation status changes). Now this concept also vitally affects the timing and finality of hell, which will be clarified after further explanatory comments as to the reasons for and the timing of the three phases of the “last day” judgments of God. Therefore, without the doctrine of death as a deep, but temporary state of “sleepy” unconsciousness, there will be no last day judgments of review (once more, why would there be such an event if each person had already been instantly judged and eternally rewarded at the moment of death?).

The Three Phases of Final Judgment

Drawing on the “peculiarly” unique Adventist doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the prophetic sequences of Dan 7–9, the first phase of final judgment is heavenly and pre-advent. It will thus be immediately followed by the second coming when God consummates the revelation of His love for the redeemed. The second phase is heavenly, post-advent and unfolds during the millennium. And the third will be primarily revelatory and takes place at the end of the millennium on the earth, just before the final execution of the lost in the “Lake of Fire” (hell) and the re-creation of the earth (the “earth made new”—cf. Rev 21) as the administrative center of the everlasting “Kingdom of God.”

As previously suggested, each of these three phases of judgment features investigations and revelations of evidence that are then punctuated by judgments of execution that had been determined in the three judgment phases of revelatory investigation. Thus the whole process can be summarized as follows:

The pre-advent judgment takes place in heaven and concludes just before the second coming when the righteous dead are resurrected, the living saints are translated without tasting death, and all are caught up to be with God

⁴⁵For more on Luther and “soul sleep,” see L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol II (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965), 64–87.

in heaven for the one thousand years. But for the living rejecters of God's grace, the second coming will be a preliminary judgment of deadly execution as they will be destroyed by the "brightness" of Christ's appearing and will be entombed, with the rest of the dead on earth for one thousand years. At this same time, Satan and his angels are bound to the desolated earth for the duration of the millennium, left to contemplate their ultimate fate, a destiny that will be executed on them at the end of the millennium.⁴⁶

The end of the millennium will then feature the final "Great White Throne" judgment of execution for the lost. But this final execution will only take place after the cases of the lost have been carefully reviewed by the redeemed (along with the unfallen beings of the universe) during the heavenly millennium. It will be during this millennial judgment that God will carefully reveal to the redeemed the detailed histories of the choices and action of the lost before their imminent final execution (damnation) in the "Lake of Fire." But there is one more judgment scene at the end of the millennium which takes place just before the "Lake of Fire" engulfs the condemned of all ages.

After the "camp of the Saints" (the New Jerusalem) descends from heaven to the earth, and the wicked dead are raised, a "Great White Throne" convocation occurs where the lost (angelic and human) are arraigned before God's enthroned presence to see a panoramic, revelatory review of their faithless lives passing before them in great detail. And with this sobering revelation, even the lost will then finally and fully admit that God is true, just, and righteous in consigning them to the "Lake of Fire" and its retributive, annihilating judgments.

Referring to the providential purposes of this detailed sequence of last judgments, especially those of cosmic investigation (pre-advent, millennial, and at the end of the millennium), Ellen White has this to say:

The working out of Satan's rule in contrast with the government of God has been presented to the whole universe. Satan's own works have condemned him. God's wisdom, His justice, and His goodness stand fully vindicated. It is seen that all His dealings in the great controversy have been conducted with respect to the eternal good of His people and the good of all the worlds He has created. . . . With all the facts of the great controversy in view, the whole universe, both loyal and rebellious, with one accord, declare: "Just and true are thy ways, Thou King of Saints."⁴⁷

Hell, the Final Act of Vindicating Justice and Mercy!

But what about the justice of hell as an act of annihilation, rather than a process of endless torment? Here is where, ironically enough, the death of Christ on the cross and the "Great Controversy" theme converge to reveal their balanced, logical revelation of God's justice and mercy. Ponder the following sequential rationale inherent in Ellen White's views.

⁴⁶For Ellen White's key exposition on the millennium, see *The Great Controversy*, 653-661.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 670, 671.

She claimed that the Bible teaches a preliminary, fiery destruction of the living wicked at the second coming of Christ. But the final “Lake of Fire” hell, the time when all the persistently rebellious angels and humans will be eternally annihilated, comes at the end of the millennium. Furthermore, this destructive power purifies the earth of not only sin and sinners, but also purges away all the scarring effects of sin as a fitting preparation for the re-creation of the “earth made new” as the eternal abode of the redeemed. So where is divine love in all of these judgments of executionary wrath?

First of all, the most basic ideas of human justice seem to be ignored in the doctrine of the endless, conscious torment of the lost. For Ellen White, from her teen years on, this thought was completely unacceptable. Simple biblically revealed justice, for her understanding, points to the “wages of sin” being an eternal death, not an eternal dying of endless suffering—both physical and mental. Furthermore, hell as annihilation is not only just, but it is also merciful in the sense that if God allowed the unrepentant sinners to live on, their lives would be a miserable blot on a universe now ruled by unselfish love. All that the lost have ever persistently sought for was the gratifications of self-love and its evil fruit. Thus their evil influence would inflict a “hellish” misery on the redeemed and the unfallen beings of the universe.

Furthermore, even if God allowed the lost to hang around the edges of heaven, the place would be a hellish torment for them. Holiness and its righteous atmosphere has always been a turn-off for persistent sinners. Therefore, it only made sense to Ellen White that they would be forever put out of their self-inflicted misery and prevented from spreading their misery to others. Additionally, even if not exposed to the holy ones, they would still find only misery in endless self-indulgence.

But ultimately an ever-burning hell just makes no sense in the light of Christ’s death on Calvary. If the “wages of sin is death” and by death is meant eternal conscious torment in some place called hell, how could Jesus bear such a penalty on the cross and then be resurrected to intercede, judge, and rule the everlasting kingdom of grace? If an ever burning hell is true, then Christ could only rule from his prison of agonies in hell. Thus it is only logically self-evident that if the wages of sin is eternal torment, then Christ did not satisfy the demands of God’s retributive justice. But the Gospels clearly report that the death of Christ on the cross, as the just and merciful sin-bearer, came to a relatively quick end. Thus divine justice was completely satisfied by the infinite quality of Christ’s substitutionary suffering, not some endless quantity of the wreaking of torturous vengeance.

Therefore, when the “Great Controversy” is finally settled with the complete vindication of God, Ellen White claims that the thoughts of the redeemed will once more come full circle to a vision of the merciful manifestation of love in “the great sacrifice made by the Father and the Son in man’s behalf.”⁴⁸ “The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity. In Christ glorified, they will behold Christ crucified. . . . That the Maker of all the worlds, the Arbiter of all destinies

⁴⁸Ibid.

should lay aside His glory and humiliate Himself from love to man will ever excite the wonder and adoration of the universe. . . .” Therefore “the mystery of the cross explains all other mysteries. . . . Mercy, tenderness, and parental love are seen to blend with holiness, justice and power. . . .”

And finally, “it will be seen that He who is infinite in wisdom could devise no plan for our salvation except the sacrifice of His Son. . . . The result of the Saviour’s conflict with the powers of darkness is joy to the redeemed, redounding to the glory of God throughout eternity.”⁴⁹

Such is the sum and substance of the “Optimistic Theological Theodicy” of Ellen G. White.

⁴⁹Ibid., 651, 652.