

The Great Controversy Theme and the Gospel

By Rodney Nelson

The GCT and Adventism

Dr. Herbert Douglass, retired president of Weimar Institute, recently wrote an article in Ministry (December 2000) entitled, “The Great Controversy Theme: What it means to Adventists” (pgs. 5-7). In it Douglass develops the key arguments for the proposition that the Great Controversy Theme (GCT) is the “seminal, governing principle” (5) of Adventist theology and teaching. “For Seventh-day Adventists, the GCT is the core concept that brings coherence to all biblical subjects” (5). Adventist distinctives and uniqueness originates from this teaching. Using the GCT as the “core truth” of SDA theology, Douglass seeks to demonstrate how “Seventh-day Adventists have been given. . . a perspective which provides a ‘theory of everything.’ It introduces us to the ‘mind of God” (6).

THE Hermeneutical Principle

Douglass maintains that GCT provides the matrix for understanding the “intent of biblical writers when they used words such as righteousness, salvation, gospel, etc.”, as well as “work(ing) our way through centuries of theological contusion over the meaning of such realities as justification, sanctification, atonement, obedience, and works” (6). What the GCT provides is the hermeneutical principle for understanding all the diverse elements of Biblical revelation and uniting them into a coherent whole. “This ‘grand central thought’ provides unity, coherency, transcendence, and lasting relevance to all the pieces of information found in all the books of the Bible” (6). Clearly implied is that “all the pieces of information found in the books of the Bible” were not understood clearly prior to Adventism “receiving” (5,6) this theological key to understanding the Bible.

Without the GCT, all would remain divided over such subjects as the importance of the Old Testament sanctuary service and the New Testament view of Christ as our High Priest/Mediator, the meaning of faith and grace, the place of obedience in relation to legalism, why Jesus came the first time, why He came the way He did, and when He will return. (6) This is a big claim to make as well as an indictment of historic Christianity. Certainly it provides for Adventism the reassurance they are specially called to reveal this “last day message” to the world in a way no one else can.

The “Grand Central Thought”

What is the central message of the GCT? Douglass, quoting Ellen White, identifies it as redemption in restoring the “human soul (to) the image of God” (6; quoting from White, Education, 1903, pgs. 125,126). What does this mean? Douglass explains it as “not just one concept among many” but as making “sense of all other biblical subjects or concepts” (6). Without this “grand central thought”, Christianity has taught a “limited gospel” for 2,000 years resulting in a fragmented Christian Church (6). Specifically, it means that merely preaching

forgiveness as the essence of the gospel is limited because it fails to point higher to mankind's "restoration" and "uplifting" as the purpose of the grace of God, undoing everything that sin has damaged" (6).

Making a Difference

The GCT makes a difference in how one understands the whole Biblical message because it "focuses on the reason for the controversy and how it will be resolved" (6). What is the controversy about? It is over whether God's plan of obedience to Him and His Son is better than Satan's plan of "individual self-determination" (6). The scope of the controversy encompasses the universe (6). It centers on Satan's charges that God is "unfair, unforgiving, and arbitrary" (6). Through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, God "revealed His character and trustworthiness... so that all inhabitants throughout the universe as well as on earth are able to make up their minds as to who has been right or wrong in the controversy" (6). As stated elsewhere, "Christ's life vindicated God's justice and goodness and demonstrated that God's law and government were fair" (Seventh Day Adventists Believe, Review and Herald, 1988, pg. 105). It is to answer Satan's charges that God's law is "impossible to obey" and that "law works against the best interests of created beings" (SDA's Believe, pg. 102). Finally, Satan "attempts to overthrow God's government and even God Himself" by "constant and insidious undermining of the law" (SDA's Believe, pg. 102).

An Adventist Contribution

The GCT illuminates the plan of salvation, according to Douglass, by uniting the "separated components" surrounding truth (7). Douglass qualifies this idea by stating that terminology conventionally used within traditional theological systems (Calvinist, Lutheran, Wesleyan Methodists) should not be read into Ellen White's usage of them (7; footnote 11). In other words, she must be allowed to say what she says rather than imputing other meanings to her terminology and concepts. Given this qualification, the GCT (as explained by Ellen White) becomes a "distinctively Adventist" insight "compared to the partial insights of conventional theological systems" (7). Therefore, the GCT provides a uniquely Adventist contribution to Christian understanding of salvation as "restoration."

Affected Areas

Douglass lists thirteen areas where the GCT illuminates Christian understanding of theology, especially in our understanding of salvation (7). They range from the relationship of law and gospel, to imputed and imparted righteousness, to faith and works, to God's work and human work in the salvation process, etc. (7). Douglass believes all Adventist doctrine is informed by the GCT (7).

The Gospel Assessment

Is the theme of the Bible the plan of redemption whereby the image of God is restored to the human soul? How to restore mankind to a right relationship with God is certainly the pulsating beat of scripture. However, Douglass asserts the gospel is contained within a larger issue. The central thesis of the GCT is that God is concerned with His reputation. Is He loving, fair, just, or

arbitrary? God on trial is the thesis of the GCT. Douglass asserts that the GCT is the truth which bonds together all the disparate elements of the plan of redemption. Yet, what is the GCT itself but an attempt to put upon scripture an understanding that scripture does not support.

Douglass fails to point out that all the varied descriptions of the gospel describe what was accomplished on the cross, rather than disparate components lacking an integrating theme. Justification, redemption, adoption, reconciliation, etc., are descriptions of what resulted from what Jesus did on the cross, not mere components of a yet to be revealed theme. No one term or metaphor could comprehend or capture the work of God through the death/resurrection of Jesus. Paul's proclamation of the gospel declares what God has done for sinners, not Himself. Whatever description Paul or other Bible writers use to describe the gospel, all of them focus on one key fact: the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). What does the gospel reveal? "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:17). Prior to this revealing the gospel was a mystery (compare Matt. 13:11, Mark 4:11-12; Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:9-10; 3:2-6; 6:19; Col. 1:25-27; 2:2-3; 4:3). What is the mystery that has been revealed, notably to Paul? The mystery of the gospel is Christ, called the mystery of Christ (Col. 2:2-3; 4:3).

The gospel is the overarching theme of the Bible. It is the gospel that the Old Covenant held in prospect, and which the New Covenant possesses in fulfillment. The gospel is about the power of God for salvation that is described by various terms in the New Testament epistles. The GCT is not the gospel, nor is the GCT the rationale for the gospel. Paul was very clear what the central point of his preaching was: Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2; cf 1:23). The reason for the cross is basic: the salvation of sinners, not vindication of God's love. It was because of God's love that salvation was offered (John 3:16). That love was directed toward mankind's salvation and benefit, not toward God's salvation and benefit.

The GCT in effect turns the plan of redemption on it's head in terms of the motivation for effecting it. The atonement is the center of Christian theology in revealing the love of God. As our substitute, Christ revealed the mystery of the gospel; that God Himself would become man to take upon Himself the sins of His creation. There is no hint here of self-interest or self-vindication. It reveals a God who is self-less and infinitely loving. Douglass reaffirms the GCT centers on the question of whether the universe will judge whether Satan or God is right; whether God's will prevails or Satan's "notion of individual self-determination." **In effect, the GCT** makes God out to protect His integrity. The gospel declares that God set about to solve the problem created by man, not Himself.

In the early days of Good News Unlimited a response by Smuts van Rooyen to a letter regarding the moral influence theory of the atonement was printed. He writes:

The Bible does teach a controversy concept but is this the hub of Scripture? Is the Bible basically about how God saves himself or about how he saves people? I would venture to say that if it is the former then his character should be questioned. what impresses me about God is his magnificent disregard for himself in saving man. With the possible exception of Revelation, I do not see a New Testament book that has as its central theme the vindication of God's character. And vindication most certainly was not the burden of the early church. The salvation of man is, despite denials in some quarters, the burden of Scripture.

Allow me to reaffirm other positions of van Rooyen in this same response.

- (1) The GCT is specific where the Bible is not.
- (2) The GCT mistakes the real issues in Scripture.
- (3) The GCT makes central what is not central in Scripture.
- (4) The GCT treats the trustworthiness of God as something that is yet to be established.
- (5) The GCT downplays the substitutionary atonement on the cross by establishing the intent to be vindication of God's character and integrity.

In Summary

The gospel stands on its own and requires no additional rationale or detail. The gospel is the "good news" of what God has done and accomplished through Jesus Christ. None of these accomplishments required vindication of God's character before His creation. The incident recorded in Job 1:6-12 is often cited to prove a GCT motif. However, it does not focus on God's justice or character, but upon His protection of one man (Job). The controversy regards what Job would do should God's protection be lifted with Satan allowed to have his way short of killing Job. Would Job deny God and prove faithless should God no longer protect him? The controversy centered on Job, not God. And in the end the test proved Satan flunked, not Job, and certainly not God. Likewise, when Jesus returns in His Father's Glory he will not return in triumphal vindication of His character, but in triumphal victory over His enemies who have attempted to destroy His people.

Christians would do well to uphold the belief that God's sovereignty is preeminent in all matters and that He is in control. Because He is in control believers can rest assured that He is trustworthy and flawless in character. The test resides in our belief about God, not God's vindication of Himself.