

"Watchman,  
what of the night?"

"The hour has come, the hour is striking, and striking at you,  
the hour and the end!"

Eze. 7:6 (Moffatt)

# THE BOTTOM RUNG OF THE LADDER

THE RENEWING OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE INCARNATION IN  
THE COMMUNITY OF ADVENTISM

## Editor's Preface

The title of the essay for this Special issue refers to Jacob's dream in which he saw a ladder, "set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven" (Gen. 28:12). Jesus alluded to it as being Himself in His conversation with Nathaniel (John 1:51). The significance of this ladder is stated by Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). Today, Jesus Christ is being denigrated by those who would deny His eternal Oneness with God, while others would seek to rob Him of the great victory He achieved as the Son of man. This study is primarily concerned with the bottom rung of the ladder, and its being set up *on the earth*. It is as difficult for many today, including the larger portion of the Adventist Community, to believe that Jesus lived "in the likeness of the flesh of sin" (Rom. 8:3, lit. Gr.); as it was for the Jews of Biblical times to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Eternal One, the Logos who had been with God from the beginning.

Dr. Harry Johnson, in his book, *The Humanity of the Saviour*, defines "fallen human nature" as that nature "which has been affected by the sin and rebellion of previous generations, a nature which produces temptation in all of its seductive power, a nature with dreadful power and potentialities for evil." He wrote that the position he would advocate in his book was that this "fallen human nature...was assumed by the Son of God at the Incarnation, and that 'sinlessness,' understood in terms of obedience, and an unbroken relationship with God, refers to the incarnate life of Jesus." Then he succinctly summarizes - Christ "assumed what was imperfect, but He wrought out of it a life that was perfect." (p. 27)

It is when we truly realize how imperfect we are, that we begin to appreciate the marvelous victory which Jesus obtained in the flesh. He achieved this victory "on the earth" in the realm of the flesh, and now in Heaven, He at the Throne of Grace, can be touched with the feelings of our infirmities.



# The Lowest Rung of the Ladder

This year the Review & Herald released a publication titled, *Ellen G. White on the Humanity of Christ*. It was authored by Dr. Woodrow W. Whidden II, a professor of religion at Andrews University. The title is a misnomer. While the book discusses in detail what Ellen G. White wrote in regard to the Incarnation, the Writings are used to sustain what Whidden believes about the Incarnation, and thus should have been titled - *Whidden on the Humanity of Christ*.

The thrust and intent of the book is reached in Chapter Ten which is addressed "To 'Historic Adventism': A Proposal for Dialogue and Reconciliation." By "historic" Adventism one can but conclude, Whidden is referring to two sectors of the Adventist Community; those involved with Dr. Ralph Larson, and those associated with the 1888 Study Committee, as he quotes both Larson and Wieland as interpreting what Ellen White has written contrary to the way he sees it.

Whidden describes himself as "a self-confessed former post-Fall perfectionist." (p. 79) Basically, what he is saying is: "I was once out there where you "historic" Adventists are, and I have seen the light. Therefore, you see the light that I have seen, and come let us be reconciled into a once-again happy Adventist family." Further, he is suggesting that since you "historic" Adventists quote Ellen G. White, for the most part, to sustain your doctrinal positions, come now, I have gathered together all that she has said on the subject, and here is what she teaches, so let us unite around Ellen G. White.

This is flawed from the start, and is absolutely contrary to the very teachings of Ellen G. White herself. In the book, *The Great Controversy* (p. 595), it is clearly and emphatically stated that "God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrine" (Emphasis supplied). If Whidden really wanted to set forth the doctrine of the Incarnation in its true light, he would have approached his subject so that the book could have been titled - *The Bible on the Humanity of Christ*. I am sure that such an approach would have been welcomed by Wieland, but how Larson would have reacted is open to question.

The publication of this book by a convert to "the new theology" on the Incarnation, as well as another event this year in the Community of Adventism, appears to set a pattern borrowed from the past. During the year, Willard Santee, Minister of Reconciliation for the Oregon Conference, was sent to Florida by the General Conference to "reclaim" John Osborne. Santee himself had in the past fervently proclaimed the declension of the Church from the truth in his series of taped recordings - "The Circle of Apostasy." After an experience in the "Deliverance Ministry," he performed the necessary "penance" and was received back into the ministry of the Church. He was successful in his mission to Florida, for John Osborne was re-baptized into the Church in July of this year. A similar policy followed the break-up of the Holy Flesh Movement in Indiana in 1901. One of the first acts of the newly formed conference committee was to select a pastor for the Indianapolis Church which had been deeply involved in the "holy flesh" exercises. An Elder Arthur W. Bartlett was invited to serve as the pastor. He himself had recovered from an experience in 1878-79 very similar to the "holy flesh" idea. (See *The Holy Flesh Movement*, p. 25) The policy in and of itself is not wrong, but one has to consider which is the direction of the flow; from truth back into apostasy, or is it really a return to truth? In the current circumstances, one has to add the factor of the human ego. There can be no question that Osborne's erratic movements were indicative of an inflated ego trip, and the fall out of the busted balloon can be measured in the souls of men, and lost life-savings' accounts. One must also ask himself the question - Could Whidden ever have become a professor of religion at Andrews University and continued as a "post-Fall perfectionist"?

Whidden's thesis is simple. He uses two terms, "uniqueness" and "identity." He holds that when Ellen White spoke of Christ as a sinless Substitute, she was "pre-Fall" but when emphasizing His "identity," she was "post-Fall. Here are his words:

*"When it came to Christ as a fully sinless, sacrificial substitute, she was pre-Fall. But when she wrote of His ability to sustain in times of temptation, she emphasized His identity and spoke largely in post-Fall terms. A careful balancing of the terms uniqueness and identity seems to reflect more accurately the profoundly rich tensions involved in this heavy theme." (p. 75; emphasis his)*

By linking the term "identity" with the humanity of Christ, Whidden has failed to take into consideration the identity Ellen White gives Christ, even though the book is supposedly her position. She wrote:

*The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from*

*there is no reason to fear, and indeed the most pressing grounds for requiring, the ascription to Christ of a manhood standing under the effects and consequences of the Fall. At any rate, it is clear that this is Paul's view of Christ's person, and that it is essential to his whole understanding of His redeeming work.* (Quoted from The Body, a Study in Pauline Theology, pp. 37-38)

In Adventist nomenclature, we describe Protestants as apostate and fallen. It seems that these eminent Protestant theologians have now espoused the position held by Adventism from its beginning. Would it not seem advisable now to apply this designation we give to Protestants to certain Adventist theologians of recent decades?

#### A Recent Reassessment

Obtaining the book, Ellen G. White on the Humanity of Christ, by Dr. Whidden, I started reading beginning at the "Preface." After concluding the first chapter, "Where Have We Been and How Shall We Proceed," checking carefully his footnotes, I became very disturbed with certain of his assertions, as they did not jibe with facts as I knew them and the documentation did not sustain the conclusions drawn. Without reading further, I wrote directly to Dr. Whidden. He replied, sending me a copy of his presentation, which he gave at the Sanctuary Bible Conference held in Berrien Springs, Michigan, in June of this year. In sending this paper, Whidden explained that "it contains an even more advanced version of my thinking on Christology than does my book, though I did draw heavily on certain portions of my book in that presentation." (Letter dated July 21, 1997) It does; and also brings to light views held on the Incarnation by certain "historic" Adventists such as Dennis Priebe and Vernon Sparks. One thing it must be said to Whidden's credit (and there are other plus marks) is that he does not hesitate to name names.

First in this paper, Whidden states plainly his present position in contrast to where he stood as "a confessed former post-Fall perfectionist." He stated - "It should come as no surprise that I resonate with the 'Alternate Christology' pioneered by Heppenstall and supported by the authors of Seventh-day Adventists Believe," (p. 18) What does he mean - "Alternate Christology"? On one side of the question, regarding the humanity Christ assumed in becoming man, are those who believe He took the unfallen nature of Adam - pre-Fall or the Pre-lapsarian position. On the opposite side are those who hold that Christ took the fallen nature of Adam - post-Fall or Post-lapsarian position. The first is also considered in Adventism as "The New Christology" while the latter is noted as "The Traditional or Historical Christology." In between is the "Alternate

Christology" introduced in the book, SDAs Believe..., adopted from the Anglican clergyman, Henry Melvill. He considered his view of the incarnation - "the orthodox doctrine." (p. 57, footnote #13) It was a compromise between the pre-Fall and post-Fall positions. As Melvill stated it:

*Christ's humanity was not the Adamic humanity, that is, the humanity of Adam before the fall; not the fallen humanity, that is, in every respect the humanity of Adam after the fall. It was not the Adamic, because it had the innocent infirmities of the fallen. It was not the fallen, because it had never descended into moral impurity. It was, therefore, most literally our humanity, but without sin.*" (p. 47)

By "innocent infirmities," Melvill meant "hunger, pain, and sorrow." (See footnote #13)

Tim Poirier, an assistant secretary in the Ellen G. White Estate, has shown that Ellen G. White "borrowed frequently" from one of Melvill's collections of published sermons, a book she had in her library. The sermon in question, from which the conclusion as stated in SDAs Believe... was titled, "The Humiliation of the Man Christ Jesus." "In writing her article, 'Christ, Man's Example' for the *Review and Herald* of July 5, 1887, she drew extensively from this sermon." However, Poirer had to admit "we have not found that Ellen White directly borrowed any material from this digression" on the nature of the humanity of Christ in Melvill's sermon. (*Ministry*, Dec., 1989, p. 7)

Today in Adventist schools - colleges, and universities - the Melvill position is the prevailing belief. According to Whidden there is no one that he knows "currently active in ministry and teaching" in the Church who holds to the pre-Fall view of the Incarnation. (Paper presented to Sanctuary Bible Conference, June 11, 1997, p. 15) This needs to be carefully noted, as this is a transition from the position adopted as a result of the infamous compromises made at the SDA-Evangelical Conferences of 1955-56. This would make the whole question revolve around just two positions, the post-Fall view, and the "Alternate" view based on Melvill's defining. However, this cannot be as there is another "alternate" view being promoted within the ranks of those who seek to place themselves in the category of "historic" Adventism.

Whidden in his paper observes -

*Sometimes it is hard to differentiate figures like Vernon Sparks and A. Leroy Moore from A. T. Jones, Joe Crews, Kevin Paulson, and possibly Dennis Priebe. What is held in common by Sparks, Crews and Priebe is that they all teach something to the effect that Christ was born converted... (p. 13)*

statement is made that Jesus told the unfallen angels of heaven He would "take man's fallen nature, and His strength would not be even equal with theirs." (p. 25) At this very time the Roman Catholic Dogma on the Immaculate Conception was formulated in 1854. Thus parallel till into the 1930s, the two contending forces were at work in the world - one to whom was committed the everlasting gospel, and one whose coming was after the working of Satan. The Adventist position was not only contrary to the Roman Dogma but was heresy in the eyes of the Protestant world.

A change first occurred in the 1931 Statement of Beliefs. The phrase - "the nature of the seed of Abraham" was made to read - Christ "took upon Himself the nature of the human family." As innocuous as this change may appear to be, it softened the force of the previous statements with no apparent reason for doing so, except for one thing: the purpose and motivation for this new Statement in 1931. If Froom's account in Movement of Destiny can be believed, the objective behind this new Statement was to clarify misrepresentations and "distorted caricatures" of Adventist positions (p. 410). No statement had been placed in the Yearbook since 1914. This 1914 Statement took the same position in regard to Christ's humanity as had the 1872 Statement.

Froom notes the year 1931 as "a really momentous yet little-heralded transition point" in Adventist doctrinal formulation (p. 409). In fact, he writes - "While 1931 was the crucial year, it was more accurately the decade - embracing the years 1931-1941 - that marked the pivotal turn of events for unity of belief in our post-1888 history" (p. 415; emphasis his). While his emphasis in discussing this epochal period in two chapters is primarily focused on the doctrine of the Godhead, he closes the discussion by noting a change in Bible Readings for the Home Circle in 1949, well after the decade being discussed. Froom alleged that the note in the chapter on "A Sinless Life" which read that "Christ partook of our sinful, fallen nature" (p. 115) was an "erroneous minority position" which D. E. Rebok corrected in his revision of the book. The question arises as to why Froom would introduce this change at the close of these two chapters discussing the decade, 1931-1941, if during this period, the question of the incarnation had not arisen.

Froom, in discussing this period, also makes another interesting allegation. F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review*, wrote the draft for the 1931 Statement. Froom states that Wilcox turned the draft over to "his able young associate editor, Francis D. Nichol... asking his opinion as to its adequacy and accuracy as a suggested outline, or reflection, of Adventist beliefs" (pp. 413-414). In an enlarged publication

of Answers to Objections, Nichols would write:

*Adventists believe that Christ, the 'last Adam,' possessed on His human side, a nature like that of the 'first man Adam,' a nature free from any defiling taint of sin, but capable of responding to sin, and that that nature was handicapped by the debilitating effects of four thousand years of sin's inroads on man's body and nervous system and environment. (p. 393; 1952 edition)*

If Nichol, as alleged, was asked for advice on the 1931 Statement, his position in this book could cast light on what is meant by "taking on the nature of the human family" in that Statement. It is essentially the Whidden position.

Further, at the 1952 Bible Conference, no assignment for a presentation involving a discussion of the Incarnation was made. The planning committee included both D. E. Rebok and F. D. Nichol. Perhaps some research into the epochal decade, 1931-1941, and its aftermath needs to be made to verify Froom's allegations, and to see if more light might be shed on the discussion of this vital doctrine of the Incarnation during that period.

During this same time as Adventist theological thinking was drifting Romeward, leading Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultman, Oscar Cullman, J. A. T. Robinson, as well as others, were coming in their thinking toward the position on the humanity of Christ as was first held by Seventh-day Adventists. Dr. Jean R. Zurcher in his book, Le Christ Manifeste en Chair, soon to be released in an English translation - Christ Manifest in the Flesh - by the Review & Herald Publishing Association, in citing these Protestant thinkers comments - "How interesting it is that the Christology of [the Adventist pioneers] is now confirmed by the elite theologians dealing with contemporary Christology."

One observation by J. A. T. Robinson quoted by Zurcher, illustrates the views of these men noted above. Robinson is an Anglican bishop, who in his study of what Paul meant by "body" stated:

*The first act in the drama of redemption is the self-identification of the Son of God to the limit, yet without sin, with the body of the flesh in its fallen state. ...*

*It is necessary to state these words because Christian theology has been extraordinarily reluctant to accept at face value the bold, and almost barbarous phrases which Paul uses to bring home the offence of the Gospel on this point. Traditional theology, both Catholic and Protestant, has held that Christ assumed at the Incarnation, an unfallen human nature. ... But, if the question is restated in its Biblical terms,*

*there is no reason to fear, and indeed the most pressing grounds for requiring, the ascription to Christ of a manhood standing under the effects and consequences of the Fall. At any rate, it is clear that this is Paul's view of Christ's person, and that it is essential to his whole understanding of His redeeming work.* (Quoted from The Body, a Study in Pauline Theology, pp. 37-38)

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Then he quotes Priebe, as he considers him "quite typical of this school of interpretation," - "The solution that I favor is that because of the supernatural birth of Christ through the Holy Spirit, He was born much as we are re-born. Because the power of the Holy Spirit was directing His life from birth, He did not develop the sinful habit patterns or propensities which we develop from birth." (*Face to Face with the Real Gospel*, p. 55)

Automatically certain questions arise: What difference is this concept from the one put forth by Froom in his unpublished manuscript? (Review Froom's position as stated on p. 3, col. 1 of this essay) Further, did Christ come to save sinners, or was it just "born-again" sinners? Was "the Ladder" set up "on the earth," or slightly above the earth? All of these perceptions are downgraded from the Roman Catholic Dogma, trying to accomplish the same objective, which is in reality the denial of Christ's victory in the condemnation of sin in the flesh. It has been developed because of a confused soteriology (the study of salvation), a failure to recognize "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24), and the gift of "the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:57). We need to understand that justification is doing for the repentant sinner, what *he cannot do* for himself, and that sanctification is "revealing to man what is his real nature, that *in himself* he is worthless." While we are on this point, we need to observe the basic factor on man's part in true soteriology - the victory is not won by *human power*, but comes from *surrender*, the greatest battle that ego-centered men will ever have to fight - the surrender of self to the will of God. Until we can get this straight, we will continue to put a false Christology together with a false Soteriology.

There is another facet to this "born-born again" teaching by Priebe. The first one, to my knowledge, that introduced this "alternative" concept on the incarnation was Tom Davis in his book, Was Jesus Really Like Us? It was introduced into "independent" ministry circles by Colin Standish who invited a group to come to the Hartland campus to discuss the incarnation as well as other topics. Elder Tom Davis presented his "alternate" view at this meeting. Dr. Ralph Larson was also invited, but declined to attend because of the Davis' presentation. He didn't want to have open conflict with him. And truly, the position which Larson set forth in *The Word Was Made Flesh* was in conflict with Davis. However, the picture now ends in hopeless confusion as Larson has endorsed, *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe...* as setting forth "the true doctrine of the nature of Christ." (OFF, Sept., 1991) So instead of accepting Davis' "Alternate" Christology, Larson has opted for the Church's.

Here again, we have a major problem. Tom Davis'

"alternate" position is the same as that which was taught by the Holy Flesh leaders in Indiana. To assess accurately this identity of Davis's position on the Incarnation with the position held by the leading voice of the Holy Flesh Movement, some background needs to be noted. The Movement reached its height in 1900. One of the series of Campmeetings held in Indiana that year was at Muncie, Indiana. Elder S. N. Haskell attended, and from his observations wrote to Ellen G. White in Australia concerning their teaching on the Incarnation:

*Their point of theology in this particular respect seems to be this: They believe that Christ took Adam's nature before he fell. (Letter #2, Sept. 25, 1900)*

Whether Haskell did not take the time to completely understand what the men in Indiana taught, or whether he considered both positions - theirs and his conclusion - identical, we cannot determine. He does leave the door open as to what they actually believed - "seems to be this." When we researched this subject and published the manuscript - The Holy Flesh Movement - we were unaware of the series of articles in the Indiana Reporter, which we have since obtained. We took Haskell's conclusion in discussing their teaching on the doctrine. However, there were men who opposed the teachings of the Movement's leaders. One, G. A. Roberts, observed that "Hebrews 2:7-14 was used to prove that Christ was born with flesh like 'my brethren' and 'the church' would have after they passed through the garden [of Gethsemane] experience," in other words, converted and cleansed. (E. G. White Estate Document File #190)

In our original research, we had in our possession an essay which R. S. Donnell, who had been president of the Indiana Conference, later sent to S. S. Davis, the Movement's founder, after their dismissal. It stated:

*Christ's body represented a body redeemed from its fallen spiritual nature, but not from its fallen, or deteriorated physical nature."*

Apart from the use of the word, "redeemed," this position is identical with the Melvill "orthodox" position as set forth in SDAs Believe... Melvill does not explain how the mixture of the pre-Fall and the post-Fall was accomplished in Christ. The use of the word, "redeemed" resonates the teaching of Thomas Davis.

First, for careful comparison between the position of R. S. Donnell, and that of Thomas A. Davis, let us compare what each has written. Donnell wrote in the Indiana Reporter, quoting Hebrews 2:11:

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Notice it is the sanctified ones who He is not ashamed to call brethren. Further, it is the sanctified ones of whose flesh He partakes. "For as much, then as the children [or brethren, sanctified ones] are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise [just as the sanctified ones] are partakers of the same;..." Hebrews 2:14.

Now let us read Davis:

*It is a particular group - those who are being "sanctified" - who are referred to as Christ's brethren. Who are these people? Romans 6:22 tells us: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life." (RSV) No proof is required to state that those "set free from sin" are those who have been regenerated, born again. It is, then, those born-again ones, those being sanctified, whom Christ is not ashamed to call His brethren - and no others... But we read in Hebrews 2:17 that Jesus was "made like unto His brethren [the born-again, sanctified ones] in every respect. (Ministry, June, 1986, pp. 14-15)*

This position, Davis reiterates in his book, Was Jesus REALLY Like Us? There he wrote:

*Now carefully consider the following statement from Hebrews 2:17, and as you read, emphasize the word in capital letters: "Therefore he had to be made like his BRETHREN in every respect." The point that presents itself so forcibly here is that Jesus was not incarnated with a nature common to all men. He did not come to this world to be in all respects like all men, The human nature He was endowed with was not like that of unregenerate sinners. His human nature was common only with those who have experienced spiritual rebirth. Let us express it another way: of Mary, Jesus was born, "born-again." (p. 30)*

If the "holy flesh" of Indiana could hear Thomas A. Davis, they would rise up and call him blessed. They could not have articulated their position any better than Davis has done. BUT, how could Mary give to Jesus this sanctified nature, and your mother and mine did not? This brings us back to "square one" again, and to Froom's question - How did Jesus escape the taint of sinful heredity?" And he said there is only one answer - a divine intervention! Another minister of Indiana who opposed the Movement knew full well the basis of all such teaching. He wrote:

*In adopting the theory of sinless flesh, though its advocates have ever been loathe to admit it, they are nevertheless unconsciously led into the papal error of the Immaculate Conception and other errors of the Catholic church. The theory of sinless flesh is pre-eminently papal - the foundation upon which the Catholic church stands. Remove this, and the*

*whole structure of the Papacy, as a religion, falls to the ground. The expression, "sinless flesh," is nowhere found in the Bible; then why adopt such an expression... The record says that Christ was "made in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3), "Of the seed of David" (Rom. 1:3), "Of the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16). Then let us believe that it was just that way without trying to spiritualize these plain declarations to suit a perverted fancy, and by so doing entangle ourselves in an inextricable web of inconsistencies. (S. G. Huntington, The Son of Man, p. 12)*

In the Ellen G. White Estate Document File #190, is to be found a statement attributed to Ellen G. White, while specifically addressed to the Holy Flesh teaching, is apropos to all the theories discussed in this special issue of WWN, including Melvill's. She is quoted as saying in Indianapolis where she attended the "burial" of the Holy Flesh Movement - "When I am gone from here, none are to pick up any points of this doctrine and call it truth. There is not a thread of truth in the whole fabric."

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Note: Beginning with the regular issue of WWN for December, we anticipate giving a condensed version of the Seminar presentations on the Godhead, Incarnation, and Atonement.

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"Watchman, What of the Night?" is published monthly by the Adventist Laymen's Foundation of Mississippi, Inc., P. O. Box 69, Ozona, AR 72854, USA.

In Canada, write - The Adventist Laymen's Foundation of Canada, P. O. Box 117, Thorne, ON POH 2J0.

In Australia, write - The Adventist Laymen's Foundation, P.O. Box 846, Belmont, Victoria 3216.

Caribbean Contact - P. O. Box G M 537, Castries, St. Lucia

Editor

Elder Wm. H. Grotheer

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Our 800 Number is 800-4-LAYMEN (800-452-9636)  
FAX - 501-292-3745 Regular Calls - (501) 292-3721