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New look at SDA's
offers limited views

By HANS K. LARONDELLE

Calling himself "a sympathetic critic," Geoffrey J. Paxton tries to evaluate the Seventh-day Adventist teaching and preaching from a new perspective that has never been adopted before. This book, *The Shaking of Adventism*, which is an outgrowth of his thesis presented to the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland, Australia, intends to be "an examination of the real heart of the movement," which is the Adventist claim to understand and preach the everlasting gospel" (p. 11).

Paxton is deeply impressed and fascinated by a number of statements in Adventist literature which say that the Advent movement understands itself to be "the second great Reformation, continuing and completing the work of the first Reformation of the sixteenth century" (p. 22). Repeatedly, Paxton calls this a "stupendous claim" (pp. 18, 28, 29); "a stupendous consciousness" (p. 21); an "astounding conviction" (p. 24); an "astounding claim" (p. 24). The whole book (172 pages) is nothing but an investigation whether this Adventist claim can stand the test, that is, Paxton's test.

Paxton is highly appreciative of Ellen White's emphatic statements that the mission of Adventists is the proclamation of the gospel of righteousness by faith (pp. 24-27). Also, of the fact that the Adventist Church has "been preoccupied with the gospel" for some ninety years since 1888. Paxton regards this already as no small justification for "the validity of the Adventist claim to maintain the gospel of the Reformation." (p. 29).

In the Appendix to Chapter 1, Paxton gives a brief historical sketch (pp. 30-34) of the dramatic way in which Adventist authors and leaders have evaluated the church's response to the revival messages of Pastors Jones and Waggoner at the 1888 General Conference sessions. He calls this the "drama" of 1888, "A Thorn in the Church's Flesh." But, he recognizes also the fact that in 1973, GC leaders acknowledged the guilt of the whole church for being still in the Laodicean condition (p. 33).

Chapter 2 deals with the "The Heart of the Reformation" (pp.

35-39). It tries to articulate theologically, the "heart," of the Reformation gospel, which is the doctrine of "justification by faith alone." He qualifies this "heart" by three characteristics:

1. The reformers' "unanimity" regarding *sola fide*;
2. The "unqualified centrality" of this doctrine; and,
3. Their interpretation that justification meant solely and exclusively: "to be pronounced righteous."

Paxton sees the "whole conflict" between Rome and the Reformation concentrated on this interpretation of justification as the mere external *declaring* righteous of the repentant sinner by God. He states: "Whereas Rome taught that justification means to *make* the believer just by the work of inner renewal in his heart, the Reformers taught that justification is the *declaration* by God that the believer is just on the grounds of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is outside the believer" (p. 39). He clarifies his understanding of the reformers' meaning of justification by saying that it had two sides, a *negative*: The acquittal of sins; and, a *positive*: "God credits Jesus' perfect fulfillment of the law to the believer" (pp. 39-40).

There is no doubt that Paxton presents here the very keystone of the whole Protestant Reformation, on which both Luther and Calvin were firmly united. Unfortunately, Paxton gives hardly any attention or space to the Reformers' equally vital interpretations of "faith" as a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. The result of such a serious omission is inevitably that "faith" seems to be only an act of man himself, "empty" as it may be.

Paxton's one-sided stress on distinctions, out of fear for Romanism (is that a criterion?), causes his concept of the "heart" of the Reformation gospel to become a cold rationalistic abstraction too impersonal, and without power. A heart cannot stay alive when it is disconnected from the total person. The gospel for the apostle Paul was, even in his short description of Romans 1:16-17, "the power of God for salvation!" Justification is, indeed, forgiveness of sins, the legal declaration of being set right with God because of Christ. But is this the totality of justification for

Luther and Calvin stress that justification is *both* free imputation and acceptance into union with Christ. It certainly brings no insight to state merely: "The Reformers acknowledge that faith in the righteousness of Christ in heaven is never present *without* regeneration and renewal, and that good works follow as a consequence of faith" (p. 45). The matter at issue is their structural theological relationship for the Reformers. That is not dealt with, because the "righteousness of Christ" is taken too much apart from the living person of Christ. Therefore, any relationship between justification and sanctification can only become an artificial synthesis of an "inseparable connection."

At the end of his book Paxton recognizes: "The crux of the problem in modern Adventism lies in understanding the relation of justification and sanctification. It was their proper relationship which stood at the heart of the Reformation" (p. 48). It is hard to understand why a man who is so concerned about the Adventist understanding of the proper relationship of justification and sanctification, *fails* to discuss such a relationship in the Reformation gospel, the very norm he measures us with.

What is even more disappointing is the lack of a chapter on the *biblical* relationship of justification and sanctification. In this matter every Adventist is seriously interested. Only such a gospel discussion is really valid to him as focusing on the absolute norm. Only the biblical gospel in the power that can and will shake him into the right position with God and will create in him the living heartbeat of the full justification experience.

What can we learn from Paxton's book? That Adventists as a people have not given to the vital gospel teaching of justification that central place and predominant emphasis which the Reformers gave it.

Secondly, that there is no doctrinal and religious unity among us concerning the different functions of justification and sanctification, as well as their organic interrelationship. Yet, we also feel, in basic agreement with Paxton's appreciation for our historic struggles, that ever since 1888, the Adventists are seeking to understand the gospel of God better in its saving apostolic purity and its sanctifying power.

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