

ESCHATOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE: INSIGHTS FROM ADVENTIST INTERCHURCH CONVERSATIONS¹

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Unlike many other bilateral theological dialogues, the interchurch conversations in which Seventh-day Adventists were involved contain substantial discussions about eschatological themes. This paper presents a first thematic analysis of the denomination's dialogues; it focuses on some aspects of those papers that deal with aspects of eschatology and suggests that this theme, and continued Adventist participation in bilateral conversations, can be fruitful for ecumenical dialogue.

Introduction

The debate on constructive interchurch relations emerged as a theme of its own relatively late in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.² This is not surprising and similar for many other churches. Often denominations which started as movements inside other churches or as interdenominational revivals, and then went their own way, needed time to organize and define themselves before being able to connect with other church organizations in dialogical ways. In the case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it took about a century until the first significant attempts were made to relate to non-

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² The first Adventist book-length publication on ecumenical issues is Bert B. Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1974).

Adventists in an official manner¹ and, more specifically, in the mode of theological conversations.²

In spite of a general Adventist ecumenical hesitancy, positive relationships to other Christians as individuals have always existed, and resolutions and documents clarifying the Adventist attitude to other churches were drafted even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ This paper, however, focuses on Adventist theological dialogues (often termed 'conversations' by Adventist representatives). In this setting the denomination encountered other Christians officially and in a manner that expressed mutual respect

¹ One important instance of Adventist conversations with representatives from other churches will not be discussed here because it did not take place as an official dialogue between two organizations. These conversations with North American Evangelicals in 1955–1956 have already received significant scholarly attention; see Tobie E. Unruh, 'The Seventh-Day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955–1956,' *Adventist Heritage* 4/2 (Winter 1977): 35–46; Paul Ernest McGraw, 'Born in Zion? The Margins of Fundamentalism and the Definition of Seventh-Day Adventism (Walter Martin, Donald Gray Barnhouse)' (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 2004); and Juhyeok Nam, 'Reactions to the Seventh-Day Adventist Evangelical Conferences and "Questions on Doctrine", 1955–1971' (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2005).

² The first such dialogue began with representatives from the World Council of Churches in 1965; cf. 'The World Council of Churches / Seventh-Day Adventist Conversations and their Significance,' *Ecumenical Review* 22/2 (April 1970): 163–169; also published separately: *Seventh-Day Adventist Conversations and Their Significance*, Faith and Order Paper 55 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1970).

³ In 1870, the denomination's General Conference passed the following action: 'Resolved, that for the sake of our blessed Redeemer we desire to cultivate fraternal feelings, and maintain friendly relations, with all who name the name of Christ; and in particular with those who in common with us hold to the unpopular doctrine of the second advent of our Saviour near' (GC Business Proceedings, March 15, 1870, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Archives and Statistics, Silver Spring). An official statement on the Adventist relationship with other denominations originated in the context of missionary activities in East Asia around World War I; see Stefan Höschele, 'From Mission Comity to Interdenominational Relations: The Development of the Adventist Statement on Relationships with Other Christian Churches,' in Borge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma (eds.), *Exploring the Frontiers of Faith: Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Jan Paulsen* (Lüneburg: Advent-Verlag, 2010), 389–404.

and implied the recognition of others being sincere Christians.¹ Thus these conversations represent a distinct new phase in the history of Adventist interchurch relations. The fact that this phase began about two generations ago but has not yet generated any overall evaluation² warrants an analysis of the content of these dialogues and of their implications. This is what this paper attempts to do; a major focus is eschatology. The sources for this study are papers presented in Adventist theological dialogues and dialogue reports.³ While most reports have been published,⁴ many of the papers have remained unpublished and are somewhat scattered.⁵

¹ While space does not permit to discuss the different dynamics developing in the various Adventist dialogues, they were all similar (and differed from other types of bilateral dialogues) in that mutual understanding was the major goal, not doctrinal consensus or structural unity; cf. also the clarifications in section 3 and note 3, page 44.

² Until recently Adventist interchurch relations and dialogues have led to very little academic discussion. Among the few recent publications, one is a general reflection on Adventism and ecumenism: Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, 'Adventists and Ecumenical Conversation: How Adventists May Choose to Relate to the Existing Models of Ecumenism,' *Ministry* (December 2003): 5–10, 28. Three others focus on specific dialogues: Risto Saarinen, 'Adventisten und Lutheraner im Gespräch: Ein Erfahrungsbericht,' *Ökumenische Rundschau* 50/4 (2001): 475–489; Rolf Pöhler, 'Adventisten und Lutheraner im Gespräch: Eine Rezension,' *Spes Christiana* 12 (2001): 163–167; and Rolf Pöhler, 'Der adventistisch-römisch-katholische Dialog. Erste Schritte: Adventisten und Katholiken im Gespräch,' *Freikirchenforschung* 16 (2007): 135–152. For a comprehensive overview and some historical analysis of Adventist dialogues (which does not focus on theology but the development and types of these conversations), see Stefan Höschele, 'Adventistische interkonfessionelle Dialoge,' *Spes Christiana* 21 (2010): 139–154.

³ This study focuses on the final version of the papers and reports. I also observed one day at the Adventist-World Evangelical Alliance dialogue in Prague 2006. In other dialogues, observers are often not admitted.

⁴ Dialogue reports have been collected in Stefan Höschele, *Interchurch and Interfaith Relations: Seventh-Day Adventist Statements and Documents*, *Adventistica* 10 (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2010), 99–160 (part II).

⁵ The only set of dialogue papers published in book form is contained in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation: Report and Papers Presented 1994–1998* (Silver Spring: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists; Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2000). A few are found on the website of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day

The question behind the inquiry was what elements of Adventist dialogues are most significant both for the whole of the denomination's interchurch conversations and for the body of bilateral dialogues in general. Eschatology has emerged as *the* crucial element; therefore, the approach taken in this article is to provide an overview of Adventist dialogues (section 2), to demonstrate the importance of eschatology in them and to point to questions this theme raises for bilateral dialogue at large (section 3), and finally to formulate some preliminary insights that can be derived from Adventist dialogue activities (section 4). Because of the importance of eschatology in this denomination's bilateral conversations—and indeed in the Ecumenical Movement in general—the opening section 1 presents a discussion of the role of the theme in other dialogues with the intention of making the Adventist colours more clearly discernible in the overall picture.

1. Christian Eschatology: A Neglected Field in Bilateral Dialogues

The role of eschatological themes in the context of bilateral dialogues becomes more clearly visible when surveying the overall configuration of themes in international interchurch conversations during the twentieth century.¹ Such a survey reveals that there has been a strong leaning toward issues of ecclesiology, the Eucharist, the ministry,²

Adventists [hereafter BRI]; many others are unpublished and are partly available at the BRI, the Council on Interchurch-Interfaith Affairs, and the General Conference Archives, all located in Silver Spring, Md., USA. Some are only available from authors or dialogue participants.

¹This survey and the next paragraph are based on the thematic indexes in the German volumes that parallel the three *Growth in Agreement* tomes (*Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung*, which cover the years until 2010; hereafter abbreviated DwÜ I-IV and GinA I-III [for the English version]). The English versions cover differing years but present much of the same material; however, they do not have such indexes. A helpful, but partial, overview of themes is also presented in *Confessions in Dialogue: A Survey of Bilateral Conversations among World Confessional Families, 1959-1974* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), 142-229.

²Harding Meyer, 'Wer ist sich mit wem worüber einig? Überblick über die Konsensustexte der letzten Jahre,' in Peter Lengsfeld and Heinz-Günther Stobbe (eds.), *Theologischer Konsens und Kirchenspaltung* (Stuttgart:

baptism, authority, and marriage. This is not surprising, for these are the questions that divide churches most when one looks at denominational divisions from a practical and institutional point of view. Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, mission and the Holy Scriptures (the latter together with issues of hermeneutics, authority, the canon question, and the issue of Bible and tradition) were also of significance in the dialogues, but clearly represent a second level of importance as far as how often they occurred in the dialogue reports and consensus texts is concerned.

When looking for eschatological topics, one can observe an interesting orientation in the body of dialogue texts. In the overwhelming majority of reports, hardly any aspect of eschatology is discussed,¹ even if they do contain some *en passant* references to the eschatological nature of the church and the Eucharist, Jesus' ministry, and Christian life. In total, even themes such as the diaconate and Mariology appear considerably more often than discussions of eschatology as an independent theme. Without the Adventist dialogue reports, the quantity of references to substantial deliberations parallels such topics as excommunication, the veneration of saints, religious orders, speaking in tongues, and religious liberty. Fewer references are found, e.g. regarding healing (in the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue), the Sabbath (only in Adventist dialogues), euthanasia, and homosexuality.

This short overview shows that crucial Adventist interests are somewhat underrepresented in theological dialogues as a whole. This, of course, is understandable; some typically Adventist concerns such as the Sabbath (or the significant Adventist emphasis on health) are non-themes for many other bodies and traditions. As for Eschatology, it hardly seems to be a divisive issue for many ecclesial bodies—at least at a first glance. Perhaps it is because dialogue discussions commonly address theological problems to be overcome that themes

Kohlhammer, 1981), 21, already observed that these three are the most prominent themes.

¹There are also a few regional dialogues in which eschatology has been debated. Among them are the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, Round XI (2005–2010); see Jeffrey Gros, 'Hope for Eternal Life: The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46/2 (2011): 259–269; and the Roman Catholic-Southern Baptist scholars' dialogue of 1978; see Frank Staggs, 'Eschatology,' *One in Christ* 17/3 (1981): 255–270.

such as the judgment, the parousia, resurrection, the state of the dead and particular views on the end-time do not rank high on the agendas of ecumenical dialogues.

Where eschatology does appear as a significant theme in the almost 200 international dialogue reports and consensus texts, one finds in several cases either a focus on personal eschatology and the role of the dead for the church¹ or on the general importance of an eschatological perspective for Christian life.² Only three texts on eschatology, arising from dialogues apart from those with an Adventist participation, offer more comprehensive treatments of the topic. One comes from the Old Catholic-Eastern Orthodox dialogue of 1987.³ This emphasizes the eschatological nature of the Christian faith and of the church, pointing out that we live in the end time since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Both the resurrection of the dead and Jesus' second coming are affirmed, as is 'the renewal of the world' and the judgement. The declaration further asserts doctrines that Adventists would reject—the 'eternal punishment of the wicked' and life after death implying 'fellowship between the living and those who have passed on.'

The second significant treatment of eschatology appears in the 2001 Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue report.⁴ It is most interesting for Adventists because of its closeness to their thought on the last things and the way in which several main themes are presented. While placing the whole discussion in a pneumatological framework ('Spirit, Kingdom and Eschatology'), what features most prominently are the parousia and an understanding of the kingdom in which the church is

¹ GinA II, 96–97 (Anglican-Orthodox 1984 Dublin Declaration, with a section on the 'Communion of saints and the departed'); and section 5.2 (no. 290–308) of the long 1993 document 'Church and Justification' (Lutheran-Roman Catholic; GinA II, 485–565), which discusses the 'Communion of the Church on Earth with the Perfected Saints' and the relationship between 'The Church and the Kingdom of God'.

² The Porvoo Common Statement of Anglicans in Great Britain and Ireland and Nordic and Baltic Lutherans, 1992, affirms, among many other articles, the common eschatological hope and its significance for Christian existence; a similar wording is contained in the Reuilly Declaration of Anglicans in Great Britain and Ireland and Lutheran and Reformed Churches in France, 2001.

³ GinA II, 264–266.

⁴ GinA II, 552–554.

its preliminary instrument rather than an entity in its own right. The text also refers to the biblical teachings of the resurrection and the new earth, as well as the 'dynamic tension between the "now" and the "not yet" of the fulfilment of God's kingdom'.¹ Moreover, both the Reformed emphasis on Christ as judge and the Pentecostal premillennialism mentioned in the document represent interesting parallels to Adventist teaching.

The third report that includes significant discussion on an eschatological theme focuses on the Kingdom of God and contains a noteworthy theological and historical discussion of this topic.² Thus it parallels the significant Kingdom of God discourse in the Faith and Order Movement and the eschatologically oriented outlook of ecumenical conferences such as the Evanston assembly of the World Council of Churches.³ Yet on the whole the relative paucity of extended discussions on eschatology in interchurch dialogue texts is remarkable. Admittedly, the last two decades have seen a slightly increased interest in the issue.⁴ Still, given the importance of

¹The report of the fifth phase of the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue also has a few sections that highlight eschatology and refer to some motifs with similarities to Adventist thinking; see DwÜ IV, 938 (no. 169), 943-944 (no. 183), and 965 (no. 246).

²'The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God,' a report of the third phase of the International Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1998-2005), published in *Reformed World* 57 (2007): 105-207. This report also contains an excellent appendix on 'The Theme of Kingdom of God in International Ecumenical Dialogue.'

³ Cf. *Christ—The Hope of the World: Documents on the Main Theme of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Evanston, August 15-31, 1954* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1954). A major general discussion of the nexus of eschatology and ecumenism is found in Emmanuel G. Clapsis, 'Eschatology and the Unity of the Church: The impact of Eschatology in Ecumenical Thought' (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1987). For an overview on eschatological issues important for Protestant-Roman Catholic dialogue, see Harald Wagner, 'Probleme der Eschatologie: Ökumenische Perspektiven,' *Catholica* 42 (1988): 209-223.

⁴ While DwÜ I contains no reference to eschatology as a theme in its index, DwÜ II contains two and DwÜ III four (in addition to two in texts with Adventist participation). DwÜ IV lists significantly more, even though most of these refer to instances in which eschatology is not an independent theme.

eschatology both in the New Testament and in the ancient creeds, one would perhaps expect at least some more affirmations of what Christians hold in common in this matter.

Perhaps the lack of specifically eschatological content is partly due to the potential in the Christian doctrine of the last things of relativizing some of the very issues that are commonly held as important in ecumenical encounters: inherited church structure, peculiar understandings of Communion, and traditions of ministerial or priestly offices. By pointing to their preliminary nature, the eschaton has an enormously critical potential, which might shift the ecumenical discussion from the second last to the last things, thus redefining debates and centring them more on God's future than the present with all its human ingredients. A continued Adventist participation in such dialogues, therefore, might help Christians of other backgrounds to rediscover this potential. With its roots in an interdenominational apocalyptic-inspired revival, the Millerite Movement,¹ such a contribution would certainly be consistent with the origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2. Adventist Distinctives: A Necessary Aspect of Theological Conversations

Before turning to a reflection on some aspects of eschatology in Adventist interchurch conversations, a short overview of the dialogues conducted so far by this denomination is helpful as a context in which these themes were discussed. This overview reveals a certain heterogeneity: among the twelve dialogue partners, two were very small sabbatarian churches (COG7D; AOY),² others large interdenominational organizations (WCC; WEF; WEA). Some partners represented regional church entities (PBC; PCUSA) and others Christian World Communions (SA I, II; LWF; WARC; PCPCU).

¹ Cf. Stefan Höschele, 'On the Ecumenical and Separating Potential of Revivals: A Case Study of the Millerite Movement,' in Peter de Mey, Andrew Pierce, and Oliver Schuegraf (eds.), *Mission und Einheit: Gemeinsames Zeugnis getrennter Kirchen?—Mission and Unity: Common Witness of Separated Churches?* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 337–355.

² For these and the following abbreviations, see Table 1, p.38 below.

In a few cases, there were no reports (COG7D, SA I, AOY, WEF),¹ and for a number of dialogues no papers can be traced so far (SA I, AOY, PBC, WEF), possibly because in some of these no formal paper presentations were scheduled. The most important dialogues, therefore, were those seven with larger churches or interchurch organizations that led to a significant outcome in terms of documentation (WCC, LWF, WARC, PCPCU, SA II, WEA, PCUSA). Hence the following analysis focuses mainly on these. The dates and presented papers available are listed in Table 1 (page 38).²

A broad classification of the 50 Adventist papers and 35 papers presented by the dialogue partners yields the categories set out in Table 2 (page 39).

This overview leads to several observations on the theological content and foci of Adventist interchurch conversations.

(1) In addition to general introductions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its doctrine (category 1) and a few presentations specializing in topics relevant to particular situations (category 7), five areas emerge as major (and almost equally important) themes of discussion: eschatology, scripture, ecclesiology and mission, social issues, and soteriology and the law. Thus one can conclude that several major areas of Adventist theology and of the Adventist ethos are well represented in the dialogues.³

(2) There are also areas which were hardly discussed at all: creation, christology, pneumatology, the doctrine of God, and personal ethics. This is understandable when one bears in mind that these contain—or

¹ SA II has an unofficial report, which remained unpublished because the Salvation Army General so decided. See Council on Interchurch/Interfaith Relations Minutes, January 17, 2008, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring.

² Most of the details of dialogues and dates were gathered from the Council on Interchurch/Interfaith Relations Minutes, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring.

³ For a denominationally commissioned overview of Adventist theology, which also reflects these areas, see Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology* (Silver Spring: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2001).

at least appear to contain¹—little potential for interdenominational conflict, at least in the context of such dialogues.

	<i>Dialogue Partner</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Papers (SDA/ partner)</i>
1.	World Council of Churches	1965–1971	WCC	7 / 2
2.	Church of God (7th Day)	1980–1986	COG7D	2 / 1
3.	Salvation Army (I)	1980, 1985	SA I	
4.	Assemblies of Yahweh	1984	AOY	
5.	World Evangelical Fellowship	1985	WEF	
6.	Polish Bishops' Conference	1985–2000	PBC	
7.	Lutheran World Federation	1994–1998	LWF	9 / 9
8.	World Alliance of Reformed Churches	2001	WARC	5 / 5
9.	Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity	2001–2003	PCPCU	3 / 2
10.	Salvation Army (II)	2004–2008	SA II	12 / 11
11.	World Evangelical Alliance	2006–2007	WEA	5 / 1
12.	Presbyterian Church in the USA	2006–2011	PCUSA	6 / 4
			Total:	50 / 35

Table 1

¹ The understanding of creation and issues of personal ethics, which are often strongly contested between 'conservative' and 'liberal' parts of denominations, would certainly pose a challenge in some dialogues. The reason why such themes are not very prominent in interchurch conversations may be precisely because there is little unity on them inside many churches.

	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Adventists</i>		<i>Partners</i>	
1.	<i>General (Adventism, Doctrinal overviews)</i>	10	4xSA, 3xPCUSA, 2x WARC, PCPCU	5	2xSA, PCUSA, WCC, WEA
2.	<i>Eschatology</i>	7	3xLWF, SA, WARC, WCC, WEA	3	3xLWF
3.	<i>Scripture and Hermeneutics</i>	7	2xWCC, LWF, SA, PCPCU, PCUSA, WEA	5	2xLWF, PCPCU, PCUSA, WCC
4.	<i>Ecclesiology and Mission</i>	8	3xSA, 2xLWF, 2x WCC, WEA	9	5x SA, 3xLWF, WARC
5.	<i>Social Issues</i>	7	3xSA, 2xWARC, 2x PCUSA	6	3x WARC, 2xSA, PCUSA
6.	<i>Soteriology, Law (including the Sabbath-Sunday issue)</i>	7	2xLWF, COG7D, SA, PCUSA, PCPCU, WEA	6	2xLWF, SA, PCPCU, PCUSA, WARC
7.	<i>Exegetical Papers and Miscellaneous</i>	4	2xWCC, COG7D, WEA	1	COG7D

Table 2

(3) The themes that were discussed frequently played different roles: social and public issues served mainly as common ground, thus providing a platform for mutual acceptance and agreement; ecclesiology and mission were unavoidable topics in interchurch dialogues; the area ranging from soteriology through the law to the Sabbath was necessary because of the Adventist Sabbath teaching and the question as to what the Adventist view of the law means for its Protestant identity.¹

¹ It is somewhat surprising that the Sabbath appears as underrepresented: only two Adventist papers on the Sabbath have been identified so far, both presented by Ángel Rodríguez (LWF and PCPCU), plus one on the Lord's Day

(4) Both general Christian doctrine and the most distinctively Adventist teachings¹ were present in the dialogues. Altogether, these two groups of doctrine are represented in a meaningful balance.

(5) Eschatology, being the original impetus for the existence of the denomination and one of its most marked features, took considerable space in several of the dialogues. Thus one can conclude that Adventists remained true to their central theological concern in their way of conducting theological conversations.

(6) The discussion of the role of the Bible and, directly connected with it, of hermeneutics, emerged as a central issue in several of the conversations, especially in the WCC, LWF, and PCPCU dialogues. The relationship between eschatology and hermeneutics in the papers is significant: a discussion of the one area mostly leads to the other and vice versa.²

3. Eschatology and Apocalyptic: A Crucial Theme in Adventist Dialogues

Before a closer look is taken at those dialogue contributions which include eschatological content, a short overview of Adventist eschatological emphases will provide a background to the

by a Roman Catholic scholar (PCPCU). This may be explained, however, by the fact that the discussions mainly placed the Sabbath issue into the larger context of law and grace.

¹E.g. 'remnant' ecclesiology, the sanctuary/pre-advent judgement, the prophetic ministry, a holistic view of humans, and the Sabbath. For concise summaries of these, see the pertinent sections in Dederen, *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, and their respective bibliographies: Hans K. LaRondelle, 'The Remnant and the Three Angels' Messages' (857-892); Angel M. Rodríguez, 'The Sanctuary' (375-417); George E. Rice, 'Spiritual Gifts' (610-650); Aecio E. Cairus, 'The Doctrine of Man' (205-232); and Kenneth A. Strand, 'The Sabbath' (493-537).

²This is highlighted in a particular way in Lukas Vischer, 'Analysis of Discussion on "Apocalyptic Prophecy",' *Ecumenical Review* 22.2 (April 1970): 167-169. Vischer, whose text arises from the WCC-SDA conversations in the late 1960s, indicates that the relative importance, specific interpretation, and predictive nature of passages in Daniel, Matthew 24, Revelation, etc., as well as the eschatological nature of other doctrines, was much debated between the two sides.

observations that follow.¹ While Seventh-day Adventists are best known for their sabbatarian views and practice, their origin was a nineteenth century revival movement emphasizing the imminent parousia on the basis of a premillennialist interpretation of the books of Daniel and Revelation. The attempt to maintain a sense of immediacy regarding the Second Coming resulted in an emphasis on Christ's present high priestly ministry (the 'sanctuary doctrine'), connected with a peculiar interpretation of God's final judgement beginning *before* the awaited advent, thus implying a special urgency of proclamation and mission.

These various elements are summarized, together with Christology and other pertinent doctrines, in a model of salvation history commonly called 'the Great Controversy.' The concomitant rejection of the doctrine of an eternal torment may be understood as an affirmation of the conviction that the history of God with humans must come to a real end; thus the Adventist preference of the biblical language of a 'second death' (and, likewise, an emphasis on the 'new earth' rather than 'heaven') is an alternative both to the traditional view of 'hell' and to a universal salvation position. Altogether, it is probably not an overstatement that most of Adventist theology is impregnated with eschatology.²

The seven Adventist dialogue presentations on eschatology³ and other pertinent Adventist materials in the dialogues reveal a broad

¹ Among the vast literature on Adventist eschatology, the following study—the first major scholarly study of any aspect of Adventism by a Roman Catholic—is most interesting in the context of interchurch dialogue: Cosmas Rubencamp, 'Immortality and Seventh-Day Adventist Eschatology' (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1968).

² One fourth of the denomination's 'Fundamental Beliefs' deal with eschatology and apocalyptic (the last five: 'Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary' [24]; 'The Second Coming of Christ' [25]; 'Death and Resurrection' [26]; 'The Millennium and the End of Sin' [27]; 'The New Earth' [28]; and two others: 'The Great Controversy' [8]; and 'The Remnant and Its Mission' [13]). Several other doctrines are traditionally also given an eschatological slant. For an exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs, see *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe ...: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed., Silver Spring: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005.

³ This paper only deals with the *Adventist* side, for no eschatology papers were presented by representatives of the denominations involved in dialogues with

spectrum of themes.¹ Some of the papers are biblical or exegetical studies (Cottrell on end-time events, Paulien on Rev. 12 and 13, Shea on the judgement, Gane on the heavenly sanctuary).² Others offer systematic-theological reflections that utilize more of the Christian and Adventist dogmatic traditions to present a particular position: Heinz's treatise on the importance of eschatology in general and in Adventist theology, Andreasen's discussion of individual eschatology, Adams's interpretation of the book of Revelation as a cry for and promise of ultimate justice; and LaRondelle's paper, which aims at reuniting soteriology and eschatology.³ Taken together, these studies

Adventists except by Lutherans. As Adventist eschatology is closely connected with the interpretation of some apocalyptic biblical texts, 'eschatology' is used here for both the systematic-theological reflection and the specific Adventist tradition of exegesis on these apocalyptic texts.

¹ A short survey of Adventist eschatology is found e.g. in George W. Reid, 'Seventh-Day Adventists: A Brief Introduction to their Beliefs,' paper presented at the Roman Catholic-Seventh-day Adventist informal consultation, Geneva, 8-9 May 2001.

² To simplify references, last names indicate the respective papers from here onward. The full references for the papers mentioned here are: Raymond Cottrell, 'The Eschaton: A Seventh-Day Adventist Perspective,' paper presented at the Ecumenical Consultation between Select Representatives of the World Council of Churches and Seventh-day Adventists, Berrien Springs, March 4-5, 1970; Folder 'WCC Consultation,' BRI); Jon Paulien, 'Eschatology and Adventist Self-Understanding,' in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 237-253; William H. Shea, 'Seventh-Day Adventist Teaching on the Judgment,' in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 254-275; Roy E. Gane, 'Christ at His Sanctuary: Toward Adventist-Evangelical Dialogue,' paper presented at the Adventist-World Evangelical Alliance dialogue, Berrien Springs, August 6, 2007; online: <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/World%20Evangelical/Gane,%20Christ%20at%20his%20sanctuary.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2011.

³ Hans Heinz, 'Eschatology in the Adventist Faith,' in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 216-236; Hans K. LaRondelle, 'The Seventh-Day Adventist View of the Relationship of Justification-Sanctification-the Final Judgment,' in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 122-133; Roy Adams, 'The Apocalypse: God's Answer to the Human Cry for Ultimate Justice,' paper presented at Reformed Churches / Seventh-day Adventist Church Dialogue, Jongny sur Vevey, April 1-7, 2001; Folder 'Reformed-Adventist,' BRI. Niels-Erik Andreasen's presentation on 'Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication' in the Salvation Army-Seventh-day Adventist dialogue, Jackson's Point, March

present a fairly comprehensive picture of Adventist teachings on the last things and of the themes in Christian eschatology in general.

When examining the role of eschatology in these papers and the dialogue reports, one can discern several dimensions of the way the theme was handled:

(i) Eschatology emerges as *the most important issue* between Adventists and other denominations. By way of contrast, general hermeneutical assumptions differ significantly between Adventists and only some churches (Roman Catholics, Lutherans) or at least many of their representatives,¹ and soteriology is an important issue, but not one that causes much divergence between Adventists and other Protestants. While Sabbath beliefs and practices are not shared by most other denominations, the dialogues do not reveal opposition to this tenet of Adventist theology—only to the question of its importance. Adventist remnant ecclesiology may not find acceptance among other Christians, but many other denominations also consider themselves the ‘true church’ or at least ‘truest church’ of some kind, thus representing analogous cases.

In the case of eschatology, not only is the relative silence of dialogue partners (except Lutherans) striking. In addition to the Adventist presentations, the dialogue reports also clearly state how far the conversing parties were apart in this field in some respects. The WEA-Adventist dialogue report, for instance, in spite of affirming ‘extensive commonality of belief and spirituality’ and noting that Adventists ‘subscribe to the WEA Statement of Faith,’ which includes Jesus’ ‘[p]ersonal return in power and glory’ and a resurrection before the final judgement, also highlights several ‘areas of disagreement.’ Among them are the Adventist view of a heavenly sanctuary and the pre-advent judgement.²

10, 2005, was not based on a manuscript but on other materials produced by Andreasen including his contribution to the *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*.

¹ Because of an Adventist *tota scriptura* emphasis, they generally view the Lutheran *was Christum treibet* principle with some suspicion; their *sola scriptura* emphasis implies they disagree with Roman Catholics regarding tradition.

² ‘Joint Statement of the World Evangelical Alliance and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, 2007,’ online:

The Lutheran-Adventist and WCC-Adventist dialogue reports each devote several pages to the general agreement and specific differences on eschatological views.¹ While a detailed discussion of these texts would necessitate a study of its own, especially so many years after they were written, one can easily summarize their main concern. Both reports affirm the importance of eschatology and biblical apocalyptic as well as far-reaching agreement on what could be called the overall structure of New Testament eschatology, i.e. the present and future dimensions and the idea of salvation history. However, they also document considerably diverging views about the importance of (a) interpretations of particular texts and (b) appropriate approaches to understanding biblical prophecies. The root issue, therefore, is clearly a hermeneutical one.

(2) Both *explication and mediation*² appear to be Adventist dialogue principles. While interchurch conversations often aim at consensus or at least a differentiated consensus, the organizers and participants of Adventist dialogues have commonly considered mutual understanding as the major goal³ and did not aim at reaching formulas implying a doctrinal recognition of some sort.

<http://www.worldevangelicals.org/news/WEAAdventistDialogue20070809.pdf>, accessed February 1, 2012; published also in Höschele, *Interchurch and Interfaith Relations*, 164–167.

¹ See *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 18–21 (section III of the final report), and Vischer, ‘Analysis of Discussion on “Apocalyptic Prophecy.”’

² Mediating elements are seen in most papers: Heinz stresses continuity with the ancient church, the Reformation and revival movements (‘Eschatology in the Adventist Faith,’ 227); Paulien confesses that ‘we can learn balance from each other’s testimony’ (‘Eschatology and Adventist Self-Understanding,’ 238); Shea observes the importance of the judgement doctrine in many Christian traditions (‘Seventh-Day Adventist Teaching on the Judgment,’ 254–256); Adams does not emphasize Adventist distinctives but the general importance of the parousia (‘The Apocalypse’); Gane explicitly states common ground with Evangelicals and takes it as a point of departure (‘Christ at His Sanctuary,’ 1–4); and Cottrell includes a subsection on ‘The Problems and Pitfalls of Belief in an Imminent Advent’ (‘The Eschaton,’ 55–57), thus honestly sharing Adventist difficulties.

³ Similar goals are visible in the Pentecostal approach in the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, in which this orientation even translated into a peculiar dialogue method: the ‘Hard Questions’ method, which meant that

At the same time, an emphasis on common ground and mediating lines of argument are seen in numerous dialogue presentations. Among those dealing with eschatology, two may suffice as examples. Hans Heinz asserts that ‘Adventists assume a really ecumenical standpoint’ by preserving and emphasizing the Christian eschatological heritage.² This point is worth considering, for it declares the very arena of greatest differences as a field of ecumenical relevance. Of a similar nature is the suggestion by LaRondelle that the Adventist sanctuary doctrine with its view of ‘the ongoing mediatorial work of Christ during the Last Judgment’ can resolve a paradox which is vexing for Protestant thinking: that a Christian is ‘saved by faith as a present reality, while he will be judged ultimately according to works as a future reality.’³

(3) The bulk of the material presents *traditional Adventist doctrine*: premillennialism connected with an expectation of an imminent parousia, often including detailed exegesis that attempts to demonstrate the validity of some denominational point of view. Yet some papers are of a more *experimental kind* or include details of a more *preliminary nature*. Due to the highly official manner of representation since the 1980s⁴ and the lacking search for consensus

participants started their conversations on the basis of difficult and controversial questions to be formulated at the beginning of dialogue sessions. Cf. Jelle Creemers, ‘How Hard Questions Can Soften Relations: Dialogical Method in Pentecostal Ecumenical Involvement,’ paper presented at the conference ‘Where We Dwell in Common: Pathways for Dialogue in the 21st Century,’ Assisi, April 20, 2012. For a more extended discussion of the aims of Adventist dialogues and references to relevant sources, see Höschele, ‘Adventistische Dialoge,’ 143, 146.

¹ Heinz, ‘Eschatology in the Adventist Faith,’ 227.

² Cf. the related approach of LeRoy E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946–1954), who attempts to show the continuity of many Adventist convictions with earlier interpreters from the Church Fathers to the nineteenth century, even if he does not draw any conclusions for interchurch dialogue.

³ LaRondelle, ‘The Seventh-Day Adventist View,’ 131.

⁴ The denominational ‘Council on Interchurch Relations’ was founded in 1980 and officially coordinated subsequent dialogues, as opposed to the 1960s

formulas from the Adventist side, theological dialogues are evidently not the preferred place for their creative theologizing to take place.¹ Thus even those instances where Adventist representatives made some limited novel suggestions must be considered to be noteworthy.

Beyond the two voices of mediation mentioned above, two instances of uncommon views with far-reaching consequences can illustrate this point. Paulien's description of 'The Biblical Concept of End-Time Deception' narrows down the final crisis of history before the parousia to a deception of all the five senses, which 'will suggest that the counterfeit trinity is the true God.'² This certainly goes significantly beyond what is established Adventist doctrine. On the other hand, a novel approach to apocalyptic in the Adventist context is provided by Adams, who suggests using both what he calls the denotative (historicist exegetical)³ and connotative (reader-focused) approach to the study of the book Revelation. He observes that while the denotative approach has been typical for Adventism, a too heavy reliance on historicist interpretation of apocalyptic literature is problematic because it can 'ignore the meaning of the text to those who first received it, and so arrive at unwarranted ... applications of the symbolism'.⁴ While this statement may sound non-innovative in the general Christian context, it articulates a position inside the Adventist denomination that reflects the increasing discussion on the hermeneutics of apocalyptic and its eschatological consequences.

These observations lead to questions raised by and problems inherent in the same eschatology papers.

(i) The presentations raise questions of *fundamental theology* which are rarely referred to directly but nevertheless play a crucial role in interchurch discussions. Beyond the innovative aspects mentioned,

dialogue with the WCC, which was initiated in Europe and mainly relied on personnel available in the region.

¹ Pöhler, 'Adventisten und Lutheraner im Gespräch,' 166, observes the lack of theological innovation and novel perspectives in the Adventist-Lutheran dialogue.

² Paulien, 'Eschatology and Adventist Self-Understanding,' 250.

³ An overview of the tenets and origin of the historicist approach is found in Kai J. Arasola, 'The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament' (Ph.D. diss., University of Uppsala, 1989).

⁴ Adams, 'The Apocalypse,' 2-4, here 3.

some papers—evidently mainly the exegetical ones—take positions (here on apocalyptic interpretation) that do not represent official denominational doctrine.¹ Other statements made in the papers may be details that somehow constitute a part of common Adventist thinking but do not appear in the denomination's Fundamental Beliefs of 1931 or 1980 (e.g. an expected end-time persecution due to Sabbath keeping).² Such items raise the question as to how one is to determine what are significant Adventist traditions, what are mere exegetical details commonly accepted or inherited in the denomination, what are theologoumena, and what (if anything) is in some way 'official' or theologically binding beyond the Fundamental Beliefs. In a church that continues to confess that the Bible is its only creed but that has developed both agreed theological statements and a tradition of theological discussions, the unconscious theological hermeneutical assumptions inherent in these developments need considerably more discussion and clarification.

(2) A related, but distinct problem concerns the *role of eschatological teachings for Christian theology* in general and for the Adventist view of other Christians. To what degree can the strong Adventist interest in eschatology and the denomination's specific interpretative tradition be taken as a measure for other Christian theologies? The latter may be lacking eschatological focus when assessed from an Adventist perspective; however, the question is whether the perspectives presented in the dialogues can help change this situation. One example: After a thorough exegesis of connectors between Daniel 7, 8, and 9, Roy Gane wonders, 'Why don't more people accept the eschatological aspects of sanctuary teaching, including a pre-Advent judgment taking place now?'³ According to him, the last of seven possible reasons is '[t]he fact that interpreting the time prophecies of Daniel is a rather complicated process.'⁴ This honest admission leads

¹ E.g. regarding the interpretation of Gog and Magog in Rev. 20 (Cottrell, 'The Eschaton,' 43-44) or finer points in the interpretation of Revelation 12-13 (Paulien, 'Eschatology and Adventist Self-Understanding,' 242-247).

² Cottrell, 'The Eschaton,' 33-35; Ángel M. Rodríguez, 'The Adventist Church and the Christian World,' in *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 174-175.

³ Gane, 'Christ at His Sanctuary,' 16.

⁴ *Ibid.* 17.

to the question of how important some specific details of eschatological interpretation really are—a question that can, of course, be asked of many other church-dividing doctrines.

(3) A third issue arises when eschatology is related to the hermeneutical basis on which Adventist interpretations are built. All Adventist dialogue papers dealing with hermeneutics¹ stress the *sola scriptura* principle and reject any external interpretative norm. Gane, Merlin Burt and Denis Fortin all stress that the denomination's 19th century prophethood, Ellen White, did not play a noteworthy role in formulating Adventist doctrines or interpretations.² At the same time, Fortin does liken Ellen White's writings to the writings of other denominations' founders and those churches' confessions of faith; he

¹ I.e. those by Davidson, Dederen, Heinz, Rodriguez, and (with a focus on Ellen White) Burt and Fortin. Bibliographic details: Richard M. Davidson, 'Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-Day Adventist Hermeneutics,' paper presented at the Roman Catholic-Seventh-day Adventist informal consultation, Geneva, May 19–21, 2003, online: <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/documents/interp%20scripture%20davidson.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2011; Raoul Dederen, 'Revelation and the Bible: A Seventh-Day Adventist Perspective,' paper Presented at the Ecumenical Consultation between Select Representatives of the World Council of Churches and Seventh-day Adventists, Geneva, November 23–25, 1970, Folder 'WCC Consultation,' BRI; Hans Heinz, 'Seventh-Day Adventists' Approach to the Bible,' *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*, 42–57; Ángel Rodriguez, 'Adventist Biblical Interpretation,' paper presented at the Salvation Army-Seventh-day Adventist dialogue, Silver Spring, January 8, 2004, Folder 'Salvation Army 2004,' BRI; Merlin D. Burt, 'Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura,' paper presented at the Seventh-day Adventist Church-Presbyterian Church USA Conversation, Louisville, August 23, 2007, online: <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/conversations%20with%20presbyterians/Burt,%20Ellen%20White%20&%20Sola%20Scriptura.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2011; Denis Fortin, 'Ellen G. White's Ministry in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church,' paper presented at the Adventist-World Evangelical Alliance dialogue, Berrien Springs, August 7, 2007, online: <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/World%20Evangelical/Fortin,%20EG%20White%20Ministry%20in%20SDA%20church.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2011.

² Gane, 'Christ at His Sanctuary,' 16; Burt, 'Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura,' 9–11; Fortin, 'Ellen G. White's Ministry,' 8–17.

actually speaks of the ‘secondary authority’ that these writings have.¹ Cottrell even includes Ellen White’s writings in his ‘basic assumptions’ in the sense that they convey ‘information and instruction from God for Seventh-day Adventists, designed to enable us to relate wisely to the problems and challenges of our day and to cooperate intelligently and effectively with His purpose in events leading up to the second coming of Christ.’² From Cottrell’s thinking one can deduce that many facets of Adventist eschatology are fixed because Ellen White commented about them. However, whether or to what extent this thinking can be reconciled with the *sola scriptura* principle is a contested question even inside Adventist theological discourse.³

4. Insights

Beyond the observations and perceived problems mentioned above, the eschatology parts of Adventist dialogues shed light on the importance of this denomination’s engagement in interchurch conversations. Such conversations represent an open space for contributing to the whole of ecumenical conversation and provide an opportunity of benefitting in various ways. Among the gains from a continuing Adventist participation in dialogue are the following:

(1) *An emphasis on exegesis.* A twofold danger in the dynamics of theological dialogues between denominations is that each side presents its positions either to insist on their correctness or to look for consensus formulas that may be acceptable to both parties but cannot necessarily be deduced from the biblical foundations of the Christian faith. Adventists are not immune to this; however, their approach to interchurch dialogue may help dialogues to increase in biblical content and exegetical foundations. Adventists may thus even contribute to a modified understanding of theological dialogues as an ecumenical practice: they would become more of a search for truth than processes of compromise, mere mutual information, or

¹ Fortin, ‘Ellen G. White’s Ministry,’ 21. He further reflects, ‘One contribution I believe Adventists can make to dialogues with Evangelical Christians is how to interface the primacy of Scripture’s authority with the secondary authority given to writings of church founders and professions of faith.’ (Ibid.)

² Cottrell, ‘The Eschaton,’ 7.

³ For a useful discussion of this complex, see Rolf J. Pöhler, ‘Adventisten, Ellen White und das Sola-Scriptura-Prinzip,’ *Spes Christiana* 17 (2006): 45–68.

recognition of the Christian character and good will of the respective partners. Of course this does not mean that a systematic-theological approach should become underrepresented (and it is not in Adventist dialogues, not even in the eschatology papers). But actual Bible study, in spite of hermeneutical differences with other Christian traditions, is one of the strengths of Adventism, and certainly one that can steer theologians involved in interchurch conversations back to the basic theological task: listening to the Word. Thus the very dialogical principle in interchurch conversations can also redirect the attention from merely speaking with other Christians to a living dialogue with the Bible.

(2) *An emphasis on learning together.* Dialogues are not only exercises in mutual understanding; they are also always learning experiences. Adventists, who have strong convictions they want to share with others, entered theological dialogues with the aim of being better understood and of listening to others. Whether they are ready to learn from the Other in addition to listening to him or her will probably also make a difference to the successful communication of their own convictions, which needs mutual trust and understanding as a basis. Moreover, the Adventist emphasis on the Bible and its study can initiate processes in which dialogue partners learn from the Scriptures *and* each other's perspectives, a process that is well-known to Adventist because their weekly 'Sabbath School' emphasizes exactly these dynamics. Seen from this perspective, theological dialogues mirror a crucial Adventist worship practice in a larger setting.¹

(3) *An emphasis on eschatology.* One of the strengths of many dialogues is also their weakness: thorough discussions of churches and their theologies as they are—i.e. of penultimate realities. Adventists are among the heirs of a quasi-ecumenical movement of its own kind, the Christian Connection of the nineteenth century, which rejected denominationalism, church traditions, creeds, and various aspects of

¹For an insightful discussion of the Adventist Sabbath School by a non-Christian anthropologist, which emphasizes these elements of searching for truth from the Bible and from each other in Christian fellowship, see Eva Keller, 'Towards Complete Clarity: Bible Study among Seventh-Day Adventists in Madagascar,' *Ethnos* 69/1 (2004): 89–112. Keller calls this manner of finding religious truth 'Socratic' because of the similarity to the ancient philosopher's method which she sees in Adventist Bible study practice.

theology perceived as unscriptural.¹ In this movement, as in the Millerite Movement, penultimate ecclesial realities were radically questioned. The Millerites added a most powerful motif to this critical and relativizing stance—the near advent—and developed an ecumenical character of its own kind. In spite of their denominationalization, Seventh-day Adventists as their major heirs can contribute to the dialogue between the churches a concern of both antecedent movements: a focus on ultimate things.

¹The Christian Connection was a distinct part of the larger Restorationist Movement in nineteenth century America, which is today often called the ‘Stone-Campbell Movement’; see Thomas H. Olbricht, ‘Christian Connection,’ in Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 190–191. Several of the leading early Adventists had been Connectionists.

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