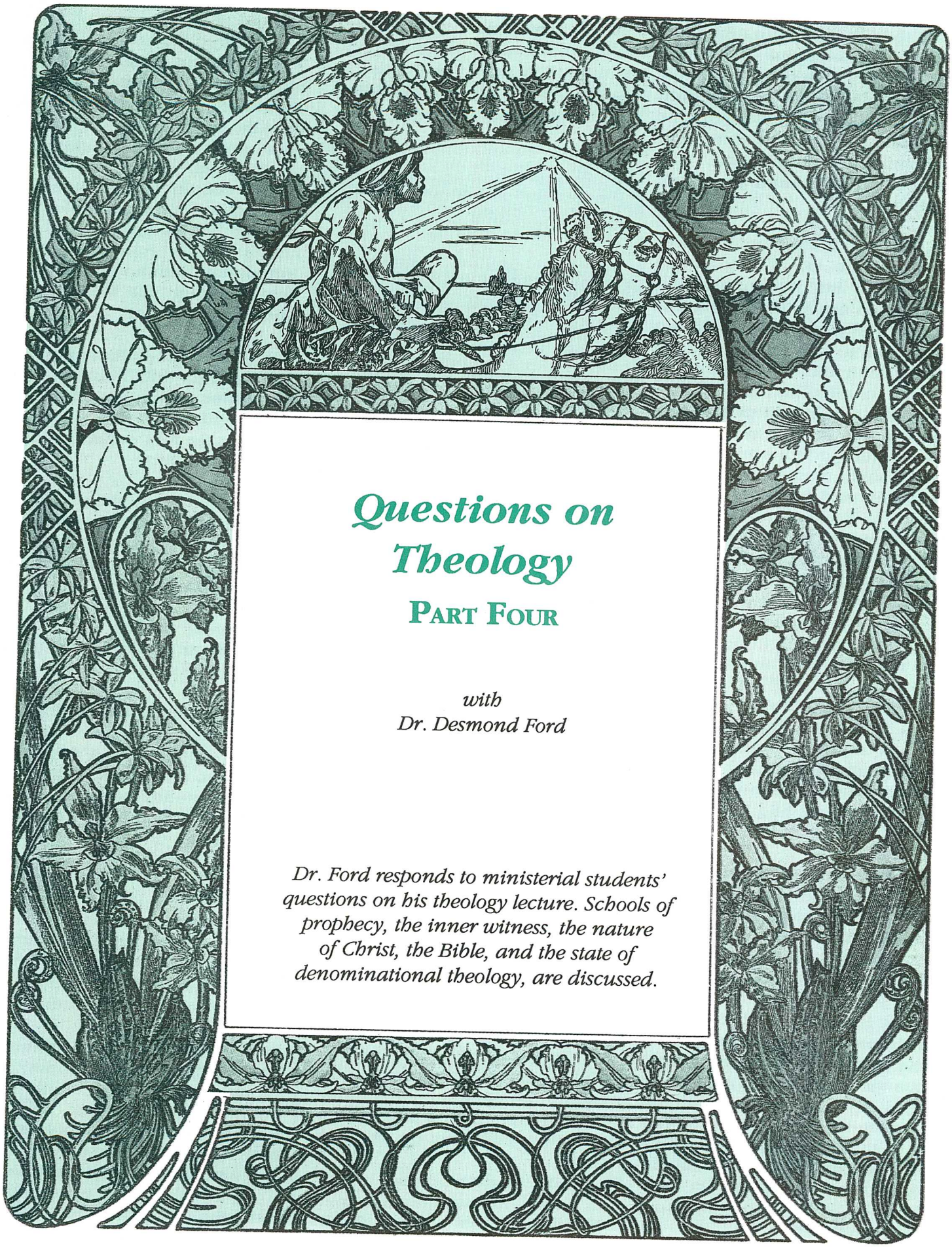


Questions on Theology

Part Four

with
Dr. Desmond Ford

Dr. Ford responds to ministerial students' questions on his theology lecture. Schools of prophecy, the inner witness, the nature of Christ, the Bible, and the state of denominational theology, are discussed.

Questioner 1: Would you say it's a good thing to try to recognize truth among various strains of theology that disagree with one another? In your interpretation of prophecy you grant certain benefits in preterist, historicist, and futurist methods of interpretation. You seem to put your arms around all of them.

Dr. Ford: The various schools are usually right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. My method is heuristic, which means selecting the best from a wide variety. There is no one group that is infallible. There is no church that is infallible, no system, no person. So, **all of us** are in on the hunt. We will find things to accept and things to reject in every system. The heuristic approach is best. We need to read widely. Students, **read widely**.

Wesley said he was the man of one book. He wrote about 200, and read thousands. He often read while riding his horse and was often thrown into the mud [laughter]. That takes dedication.

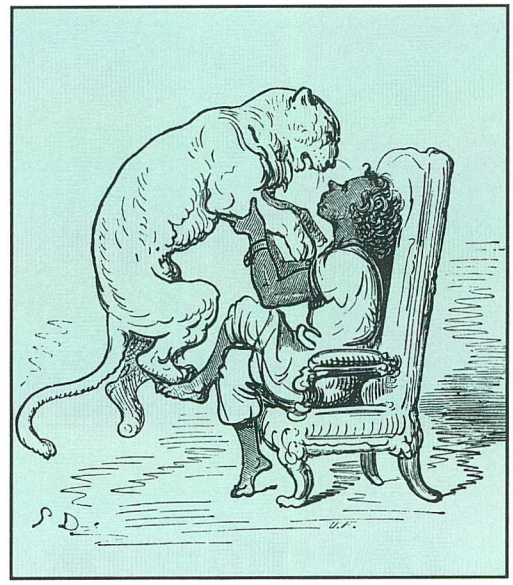
There is another thing I will mention. You'd expect me to mention it as I've made so many mistakes in this regard. Be careful of the main tool you're using in theology—yourself!

A person with poor digestion is often gloomy in his theology. Some of Calvin's biographers think that his theology came from the fact he had all the diseases in the book! I don't think they're correct, but the principle is valid.

If you want to be a happy preacher of the gospel, you need to care for your health. It's so very easy to abuse your health. I've done it a thousand times. As you get older, you realize how stupid you've been.

If you want to be a good theologian, it takes a lot of good health to be able to concentrate for hours a day. Your power of concentration depends upon your health. Once your health begins to wear, your power of concentration will be lessened. You cannot be a good theologian without hours of concentration every day. (I use 'every day' as a general expression. There should be Sabbaths when you don't have to concentrate.)

Good health is very important. Let me say again, good health is mainly what you eat, what's eating you, and whether you move. Learn how to handle stress. I could recommend a good book to you about that, but it would not be humble [much laughter]. There are other books, of course. Hans Selye is the expert. For Christian purposes I've tried to summarize the best that could be skimmed from other writers in the field in my book *How to Survive Stress and Distress*—the title's something like that. It will be on sale at Tom's church tonight [laughter].*



Questioner 2: Do you believe in "the inner witness"?

Dr. Ford: You are referring, I think, to the verses, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (1 Jn 5:10 KJV). "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:16 NIV). "You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph 1:13).

The first epistle of John is a letter of assurance. "By this we know ... We know ... We know." John uses "know" about twenty times in its original Greek form. Yes, a Christian can have certainty.

But not logical certainty.

Logically, all we can have is weight of evidence. Once you get into the real world, you are beyond complete demonstration.

We talked about science. What the scientific method does is make a cut-off point with coincidence and non-coincidence. Science decides matters upon the weight of evidence, which is about as accurate as you can get in the real world.

The Christian may not have absolute certainty in the sense of logical certainty. But the Spirit of God witnesses with your spirit—the *testimonium*. There's a good book by Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit*.

Your comments indicate that this isn't the real world. Would it be better to use terms like 'objective proof' and 'subjective evidence'? Isn't that the real world, the Spirit witnessing within?

By real world I mean everything apart from geometrical patterns on the chalkboard. By real world I mean the objective reality of things and people and God and the angels.

It sounds to me as if the *testimonium* is something other than the real world.

I am talking about something subjective. However, because it comes from the Holy Spirit, who is a very objective Person, and because that witness comes to me—and I am also an objective person—I believe it is also an objective event.

It has subjective overtones. For example, if you are courting a young woman and she says, "I love you," that's an objective statement from an objective person. But it has tremendous subjective reverberations. I think the *testimonium* works like that. It comes from the Spirit based on the Word.

Christian thought is an interweaving of subjective with objective. But the objective must always do the testing. That's true even of the *testimonium*. If I had a conviction that when Tom falls asleep in class, I should offer him as a sacrifice, I've got to say, "Lord, objectively, you tell me otherwise." Even the *testimonium* must be

objectively tested.

We can say that the *testimonium* comes objectively from the Holy Spirit, comes from an objective Person to us. We also are objective persons. We are also subjective. Thus the message has subjective overtones, but must be in harmony with the objective witness of Scripture. Thank you for that very important question.

Would you add to what you've said about the subjective and objective methods of doing theology?

Yes. I tried in this lecture to warn that our subjective selves are a morass of prejudices. This is unavoidable to some extent, because we can't get outside our own skins. Whatever I do, it's still **me** doing it. I may think I've shed all my biases, but the very ones I've shed are determined by other biases.

This is where I think Van Till has a problem. He denies that there are any empirical elements. There is the empirical; and there is the subjective. The subjective has its place, but it should never be first place in the ascertaining of truth. We have to go to the objective Word—the Bible.

The Bible is to be studied inductively, not deductively. For example, the doctrine of inspiration should never be settled deductively, only inductively. What does the Bible itself indicate about the nature of its inspiration?

The Bible says such things as, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31 NIV). This tells us inspiration's purpose.

My doctrine of inspiration is that it's perfect for its purpose; and its purpose is that you might know Jesus as the Christ. It's not perfect for teaching science. For example, the mustard seed is not the least of all seeds (Mk 4:31); the hare does not chew the cud (Lev 11:6 KJV); the sun does not rise and set (Ecc 1:5); there aren't four corners of the earth (Rev 20:8).

If you use deductive logic to exegete, you'll end up with a doctrine of inspiration I think is erroneous. We must do our best to be objective, though we can't avoid the subjective altogether. Let's avoid the procrustean method. That's where we bring our straitjacket of theology to a text and force the text to conform, cutting off whatever doesn't fit in. I've done it many times, and still tend to do it.

Questioner 3: You mentioned before about sinful nature. What did you mean by that concerning Christ and temptation?

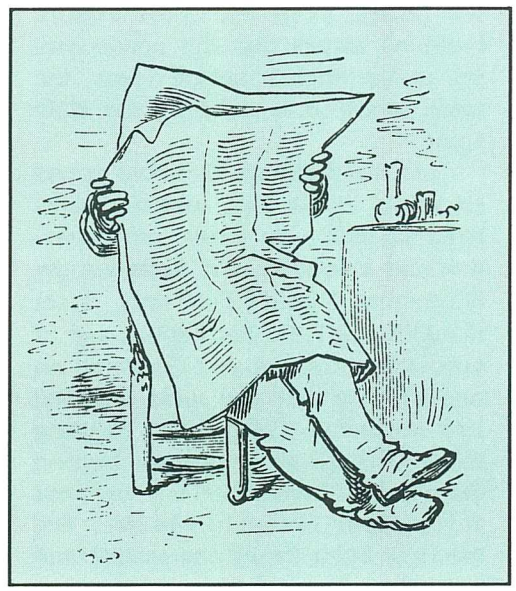
You are asking, "Could Christ sin?"

Yes.

My statement did have bearing on that, though I didn't answer the question whether Christ could or couldn't sin. Was he peccable, prone to sin? Let me ask you (and this is one viewpoint many will disagree with, and I might be mistaken), let me ask you, "Could you murder your mother?"

No ... Yes.

You mean, physically, you could; but, psychologically, you could not. Physically, Christ could have sinned. Psychologically, it would have been against everything that was in him. You may not agree with that. It's one man's viewpoint.



When I say Jesus was sinless, I mean he did not have the perversion of human nature that is ours because we are born without the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the product of the Spirit's creative energies working on the tissue in Mary's womb. In that union of divinity with humanity, the Holy Spirit was never lacking or missing for one second, or in one particle.

You and I are born without the Holy Spirit: perverse, corrupt, degenerate, in need of being born again. Jesus never needed to be born again. He was that 'holy thing' (Lk 1:35 KJV) who knew no sin. In him is no sin. He is without spot or blemish, holy, harmless, and undefiled (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26; 1 Pe 1:19; 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5).

He is that 'holy thing.' Sin is no part of true human nature. Sin is an invader, entering in Eden. Jesus is truly human. We are not. We are all shadows, perverted remnants. There isn't a human being here. Some of the image of God is still left in us, but it's very badly marred.

Questioner 4: Are there any tenets of original fundamentalism you disagree with?

Dr. Ford: Name the five for me, please.

1) Inspiration of Scripture. 2) The virgin birth. 3) The substitutionary atonement of Christ. 4) The second coming of Christ. What's the fifth one? Oh, 5) The Resurrection of Christ.

I believe all of those.

In that sense you are a fundamentalist?

That is so. But remember, the men who wrote the books *The Fundamentals*, were not like the fundamentalists we have known since the 1920s in this country.

So it's an attitude. You would distinguish between this fundamentalism and that fundamentalism?

That fundamentalism is ignorant. It does not read, except its own stuff. It has a very narrow viewpoint. It is very bigoted, very biased. It majors in minors. It is pharisaic, legalistic, rigid, not learning, not unlearning. It is an attitude; an attitude characterized by failure to study and adjust.

The men who originally wrote the twelve books on fundamentalism were very learned men. Those are great books. I am much in harmony with the theology of those books.

Questioner 5: What is the greatest danger in modern theology?

Dr. Ford: The danger of denying supernaturalism. The watershed in all thinking today is between naturalism and supernaturalism. That's also the watershed in theology.

Many scholars in theology are not supernaturalists. They don't believe in a living, personal God who can work miracles in the incarnation and the inspiration of Scripture. Do these theologians believe that nature is all there is? Or do they believe in a personal God, too? Many theologians believe the first, but not the second.

Questioner 6: About your view on biblical inspiration. It sounds as though it's on the liberal end of the spectrum to me. Am I correct?

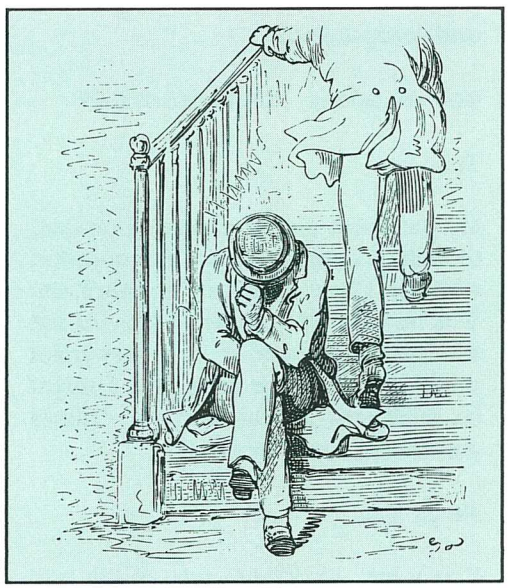
Dr. Ford: I'm glad you raised the question. My view may sound like that, but it isn't really on the liberal end of the spectrum. I'm glad you asked. I didn't express myself well.

I believe our doctrine of inspiration should come from the Bible, not from a creed. I believe such a doctrine will show that the dictation theory of inspiration is inaccurate and not biblical. The plenary doctrine of inspiration **may** be tenable, be holdable, as long as we define what we mean.

For example, whatever inspiration is, its major purpose is not to teach us how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven. In the Bible, theology is not subordinated at any time to history, science, or mathematics. That's why in the Synoptics, in one case, Jesus heals **one** man—one Gadarene—and, in another report, it's **two** men who are there. In one Gospel you see a man going **into** a certain city, and in another Gospel you see him going **out**. The man could have done both, of course, but that might not really be the answer.

Sometimes, when the same incident is recorded in different Gospels, we find words in the form of a statement; then elsewhere it's a question. The order of events sometimes differs in different Gospels. This is because the purpose of the Gospels is theological.

The fundamentalist, or believer in the dictation theory, has the idea that



the Bible is an "Inquire Within" on every matter. He or she believes the Bible is trying to speak 100 percent on every topic it may touch.

I believe in the law of 'the closeness of relation.' This law (I believe it was formulated by one of the Niebuhr brothers) means that the nearer you get to the Bible's central focus, the more precision is used by the Holy Spirit.

Let me illustrate. (I would spend six weeks on this topic with my ministerial students—six weeks on inspiration and revelation, and these are the illustrations I used.) Paul says, "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else)" (1 Cor 1:14-16 NIV). Did the Holy Spirit forget one minute and remember the next?

"When they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs" (Jn 6:19 KJV). Did the Holy Spirit not know how far the disciples had rowed? Perhaps the Holy Spirit doesn't care? Am I saying the Holy Spirit doesn't care?

No. I'm saying the main purpose of Scripture is theological. Everything else is subordinated to that.

Now, because of the false impression I may have given, let me say that I believe everything in the Bible is just what God wanted. I believe all we have recovered from the original manuscripts is what God wanted, every jot and tittle. But God's purposes for the Bible are not what we've always said they are.

I believe in the supernaturally inspired Bible. It is inspired in such a way that it reveals Christ and the gospel. Every point gives priority and emphasis to that.

The Bible often speaks in the language of humanity. Calvin said, "God is like a tall man who bends down to lisp to us like little children." The Bible says God repents (Gen 6:6 KJV). It does not mean God changes his mind. The Bible is speaking as to children. We know that repent means changing the mind. But the Bible is using an anthropomorphic term. The Bible uses the language of appearance, which, by the way, is just as legitimate as scientific language.

The Bible is given in human language. It is given for practical purposes. If we take it as it reads, no one need be lost. But if I try to impose upon the Bible my personal desires as to the way it should be written, I will surely be mistaken.

I hold to two things: 1) I don't believe in the dictation theory of inspiration; 2) I don't believe the Bible is attempting to give complete information, the total truth, about everything it discusses.

Some of the Greek in the book of Revelation is atrocious. It violates all the laws of Greek grammar. It's certainly not perfect, but most fundamentalists don't read Greek anyway, so it doesn't matter.

The Bible is not perfect in everything it touches, but it is perfect for its purpose. And its purpose is that by believing we might have life in Christ's name.

That's one aspect. The other is that not one jot or tittle crept into the original Bible except under the permissive sovereignty of God.

There are additions found in the King James Version that are not found in

the ancient manuscripts. For example, the last verses of Mark 16 (vv. 9-20), and the story of the angel that stirred the pool in John 5:3-4. They are all additions. A good discussion of this is in Carnell's book, *The Case for Orthodoxy.* I recommend Carnell's books—he was a great scholar. I recommend Bernard Ramm's books, and George Eldon Ladd's. But none of them is infallible.

Christ came and put on Jewish garments and taught in the Jewish language of his day, Aramaic. The Bible, too, is the union of the human and the supernatural. It speaks divine things in the language of humanity. It is given for practical purposes.

Just as God's great revelation in Christ is a test for people, so the Bible is a test. The Bible tests people. God has left plenty of things in the Bible that, if we are looking for "outs," we can find them.

Questioner 7: What about the Bible statements on time, and the genealogical lists?

Dr. Ford: Many things in the Bible we take as chronology are not chronology, but chronography. Chronology is a precise time line. Chronography is a pattern. The genealogies are certainly not chronologies. Archbishop James Ussher [1581-1656] thought they were, and came up with 4004 B.C. for the year of Creation. He hadn't even read of the extra Cainan in Luke 3:36 and 37. This is also true of the time in the Daniel 9 prophecy. It had its first application in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes. It is as much chronography as chronology.

Questioner 8: What is the theological situation within Adventism and the Church of God (7th Day) regarding the areas you've discussed?

Dr. Ford: Well, I suspect both denominations ignore epistemology. Apologetics? I don't know how it's taught here.

Out in the churches there are those who do read more than average. But I would think that apart from what you do here at Summit, your congregations are probably much like those in Adventism. The norm leaves something to be desired. There are some very intelligent professors in the colleges, just as you have here.

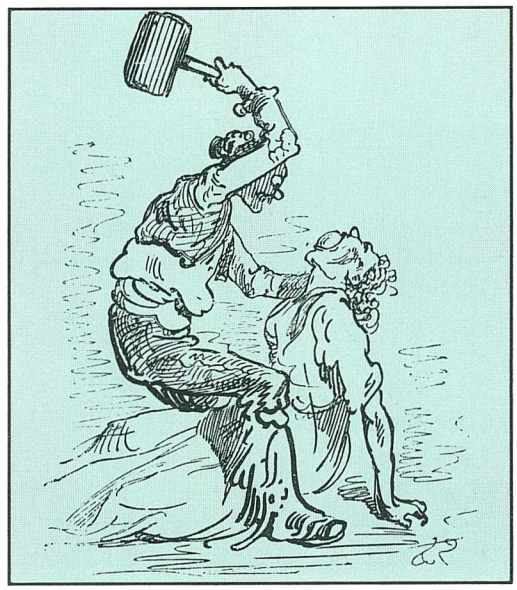
Exegesis? *The SDA Bible Commentary* was a great milestone in Adventism. It tried to apply the laws of exegesis. Many of its comments wiped out fundamental pillars of Adventism. The Investigative Judgment was really discredited by that commentary. It tore down many of the supports for the doctrine of the Investigative Judgment. So, exegesis has made progress in Adventism, though not enough, as Glacier View indicates.

Church history? Adventism takes church history rather seriously. It has had a somewhat purist approach at times, as though originally there was a perfectly pure church; then the church went into darkness—pure darkness—only to come out in great purity again with Luther. That's a rather simplistic approach that's not quite accurate. Adventism has made much progress though. I don't know what the situation is in your church regarding church history.

Philosophy? That's a no-no in your church; and a no-no in most of Adventism.

Biography? A little bit is done in recreational reading.

I don't know how fair my evaluation is. It's just one man's impressions.



There seems to be less turmoil in the Church of God (7th Day) over theological matters. The gospel is making good inroads.

The main reason for progress in your denomination is many of you are younger, and have taken hold of the gospel with your whole heart. Tradition is no longer sacred—only Christ and the gospel are sacred. This has made a great change in your church today. The process has been going on longer in Adventism, and similar things are happening. But in both churches it is far from complete.

And we have whole generations in both churches that resent the gospel inroads.

What needs to be worked on?

First of all, preaching the gospel. Not who wrote Hebrews, or even who Antiochus Epiphanes is. But the gospel. The gospel.

If people take hold of the gospel, other things don't matter so much. The gospel is a wonderful simplifier of life's problems. I dare not tell you who said that, but it impressed me when I first heard it: The gospel is a wonderful simplifier of life's problems.

If our church people would get the gospel, it would make all the difference for them. The gospel is what people need. It's so freeing.

By freeing, I don't mean free of God's law as a guide, or antinomianism. The gospel doubles, multiplies, our debt. There should be no more conscientious, scrupulous people than gospel men and women. They should be far more fastidious about the jots and tittles of duty than the most rabid legalist.

I sometimes have fun with the legalists. If we are saved by law-keeping as they think, then we are to obey all the laws of health. We should be getting enough rest, enough exercise, should not eat junk food, and so on, down the line. Not one of them is doing it.

The gospel intensifies our zeal. God's grace doesn't lessen zeal. Cheap grace is not the gospel. ❖

* Dr. Ford's book is actually called *Coping Successfully with Stress and Distress.* $5.00 + $1.75 shipping and handling. Dr. Ford's best- known book on the Christian and good health is *Worth More Than a Million.* $19.95 + $2.50 s&h.

Both books are available from Desmond Ford Publications, 7955 Bullard Drive, Newcastle, CA 95658.