

Adventist Identity Workshop:

Title: 'Why the Restrain of Coercive Power is What Defines Adventists.'

Blurb: Adventism's greatest strength lies in restraint of power. As long as Adventist's identity is based on grand explanation of the time and space brokenness, that is on what we call in theological jargon 'the great controversy,' Adventist identity will intrinsically be tied to restraining from any use of coercive power. It is because coercive power is at the stakes in the great controversy. In the world which increasingly seeks authoritarian solutions, Adventism could well become an interesting alternative.

Why the Restrain of Coercive Power is What Defines Adventists

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This workshop is a reflective workshop about the nature of Adventism. As such, it will rely on historical analyses of Adventist theology, people and situations.

There are several key places in our Adventist theological literature which we have to visit and analyse them. Some will be Scriptural other writings of pioneers and of Ellen White. In fact, the last mentioned has contributed to the specific shape of Adventist identity of restraint of power more than anybody else and so, we'll have to listen to the logic of her words.

(1) The Theology of the Great Controversy

Adventist overarching theological framework has often been referred to as that of the Great Controversy. Seventh-day Adventism has recognized the importance of this teaching by including it in the official confession of the church, its Fundamental Beliefs:

± *The Great Controversy* 8

All humanity is now involved in a great controversy ***between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty*** over the universe. This conflict ***originated in heaven*** when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in ***self-exaltation became Satan***, God's adversary, and led into ***rebellion*** a portion of the angels. He introduced ***the spirit of rebellion*** into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distortion of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the

time of the global flood, as presented in the historical account of Genesis 1-11. Observed by the whole creation, *this world* became the arena of *the universal conflict*, out of which the God of love *will ultimately be vindicated*. To assist His people in this controversy, Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation. (Gen. 3; 6-8; Job 1:6-12; Isa. 14:12-14; Ezek. 28:12-18; Rom. 1:19-32; 3:4; 5:12-21; 8:19-22; 1 Cor. 4:9; Heb. 1:14; 1 Peter 5:8; 2 Peter 3:6; Rev. 12:4-9.)

What it says is that: ±

- (1) who is involved in the conflict – Christ versus Satan
- (2) What it is about – The character of God, his law and sovereignty
- (3) Where did the conflict start – in heaven
- (4) Where it is now – in this world, even though it is said that it is universal
- (5) What is the problem – the spirit of rebellion against God
- (6) Who will win it and when – God will be vindicated in the future
- (7) What is the role of people – they are caught up in the conflict and are aided by Christ, Holy Spirit and angels

There are perhaps few other points that could be highlighted, like how and when it came into our world (through the sin of Adam and Eve) and what did it do to it already (distorted the image of God in humans, distorted the nature and devastated the world by the flood).

As you read all this and think about the main emphases, do you get a good understanding of the great controversy? Would a person not using our language and concepts get the essence of the teaching? Does this statement help us, or other people hermeneutically to understand the Bible better?

The statement on one hand is helpfully summarizing the main contours of the teaching, yet on the other hand it does not really explain the essence of the controversy, does it? I am surprised that when it comes to such a core theological framework as the great controversy motif, we choose to mention the surface of the issues, then quickly digress into defending historical account of Gen 1-11 and then make a last generation remark about the future vindication of God in the controversy.

This is surprising, not only because the doctrine is so central to us, but also because there is rich literature and importantly, excellent language by Ellen White who contributed in key chapters of her books massively to the subject. For whatever reasons, the statement does not tap into any of the language and concepts that exist on this subject in our past and present literature.

So what really is **the essence of the great controversy**, what would you say is the core issue? Three specific suggestions are mentioned by the statement – God’s character, the law and God’s sovereignty over the universe.

I’ll take that the last means His rule or dominion, whether God has the right to rule.

Again, the law and whether it is possible to keep it and what is its function and role for the created beings, how sufficient it is for the good of the universe – all these are major themes in Adventist theology, but the statement does not elaborate on them (and neither does no19, *The Law of God*).

And then there is God’s character. Is He a God of love or a God of manipulation? An attention-craving and glory-demanding God, or a generous God of giving the best to His creation? Is He a God who uses force to get what he wants from His creation, or a God who shies away from putting any pressure on the loyalties of creatures?

These are indeed the fundamental questions of the doctrine and focusing on these issues and questions when we read the Bible may indeed provide a useful hermeneutical lens.

Now, let’s put these issues into a sharper analytical focus after which we can do a bit of reflection about the nature Adventist ecclesiology and one of its defining features – its resistance to use any force.

(2) Great Controversy and Restrain of Power in Ellen White

While the main contours of the Great Controversy were first laid down by Joseph Bates, it was Ellen White who actually gave it serious content and unique theological perspective. There are some major formative chapters in her work which we have to mention to comprehend where she is coming from and what effectively then formed Adventist ecclesiology.

The Initial Stage of the Great Controversy

Why was sin permitted chapter 1 *Patriarchs and Prophets* –

± ‘Mercy and truth go before His face. Psalm 89:14. PP 34.2

The law of love being the foundation of the government of God, the happiness of all intelligent beings depends upon their perfect accord with its great principles of righteousness. God desires from all His creatures **the service of love**—service that **springs from an appreciation of His character. He takes no pleasure in a forced obedience**; and to all He grants **freedom of will**, that they may render Him voluntary service. PP 34.3

This is in the context of the great controversy. Hence embedded in this theology is our view of God who is one of love, freedom, mercy and no coercion.

Another issue that stands out from the Great Controversy theology is the issue of the position of the Son of God. This is a major issue of contest in the Gospels and the rest of the NT. John says who denies that Jesus is the Son of God is an antichrist.

Early Adventism develops the sentiment quite clearly too and it is embedded in the theology of the Great Controversy.

*±To **dispute the supremacy of the Son of God**, thus impeaching the wisdom and love of the Creator, **had become the purpose of this prince of angels**. To this object he was about to bend the energies of that master mind, which, next to Christ's, was first among the hosts of God. PP36.1*

*He [the Son of God] shared the Father's counsels, while Lucifer did not thus enter into the purposes of God. "Why," questioned this mighty angel, "**should Christ have the supremacy? Why is He honored above Lucifer?**" PP36.3*

Furthermore, we can discover that a major issue in the controversy was the issue of perplexing God's purposes. There is a mystery in how sin worked its way through the mastery of subtle arguments of Satan.

± It was his policy **to perplex with subtle arguments** concerning the purposes of God. Everything that **was simple he shrouded in mystery**, and by **artful perversion** cast doubt upon the plainest statements of Jehovah. And his high position, so closely connected with the divine government, gave greater force to his representations. PP 41.3

God could employ only such **means as were consistent with truth and righteousness**. Satan could use what God could not—**flattery and deceit**. He had sought to falsify the word of God and had misrepresented His plan of government, claiming that God was not just in **imposing laws** upon the angels; that in **requiring submission and obedience** from His creatures, He was **seeking merely the exaltation of Himself**. It was therefore necessary to demonstrate before the inhabitants of heaven, and of all the worlds, that God's government is just, His law perfect. Satan had made it appear that he himself was seeking to promote the good of the universe. The true character of the usurper and his real object must be understood by all. **He must have time to manifest himself** by his wicked works. PP 42.1

Deceit and flattery are means of coercion. Subtleness and muddling of purposes of others and own.

*± He [lucifer] worked with mysterious secrecy, and for a time concealed his real purpose under an appearance of reverence for God. He began to insinuate doubts concerning the laws that governed heavenly beings, intimating that though laws might be necessary for the inhabitants of the worlds, angels, being more exalted, needed no such restraint, for their own wisdom was a sufficient guide. **They were not beings that could bring dishonor to God; all their thoughts were holy; it was no more possible for them than for God Himself to err.***

*The exaltation of the Son of God as equal with the Father was represented as **an injustice to Lucifer**, who, it was claimed, was **also entitled to reverence and honor**. If this prince of angels could but attain to **his true, exalted position, great good would accrue to the entire host of heaven; for it was his object to secure freedom for all.** PP 37.1*

This is like from the manual of a revolutionary. All I am pursuing on your behalf is freedom for you, because you deserve it. I deserve to have the chance to lead you to better existence. You cannot do wrong, so why the restriction. The only reason for it must be that the author of it has some malicious purpose with it by keeping you back from your full potential? All the evidence points this way.

What is God's response to the mysterious working of Lucifer? What are his perverted and insinuating arguments against the way God runs the universe?

*± Therefore **God permitted him to demonstrate** the nature of his claims, **to show the working out of his proposed changes** in the divine law. **His own work must condemn him.** Satan had claimed from the first that he was not in rebellion. The whole universe must see the deceiver unmasked. PP 42.2*

*± Even when he was cast out of heaven, Infinite Wisdom did not destroy Satan. **Since only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence.** *The inhabitants of heaven and of the worlds, being unprepared to comprehend the nature or consequences of sin, could not then have seen the justice of God in the destruction of Satan. **Had he been immediately blotted out of existence, some would have served God from fear rather than from love.** The influence of the deceiver would not have been fully destroyed, nor would the spirit of rebellion have been utterly eradicated. For the good of the entire universe through ceaseless ages, he must more fully develop his principles, that his charges against the divine government might be seen**

in their true light by all created beings, and that the justice and mercy of God and the immutability of His law might be forever placed beyond all question. PP 42.3

The working out of Satan's rule, its effects upon both men and angels, would show what must be the fruit of setting aside the divine authority. Pp42.4

Note: The argument of Satan implodes on itself. **It is permitted by God to fully defeat itself.** It will not work or be defeated if it is removed by force. It must be permitted to implode.!!!

The Messianic Stage of the Great Controversy

The Desire of Ages

The angels of glory find their joy in giving,—giving love and tireless watchcare to souls that are fallen and unholy. Heavenly beings woo the hearts of men; they bring to this dark world light from the courts above; **by gentle and patient ministry they move upon the human spirit**, to bring the lost into a fellowship with Christ which is even closer than they themselves can know. DA 21.1

± The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, **Satan's deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God's government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority.** Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. DA 22.1

± **God could have destroyed Satan and his sympathizers as easily as one can cast a pebble to the earth; but He did not do this. Rebellion was not to be overcome by force. Compelling power is found only under Satan's government. The Lord's principles are not of this order. His authority rests upon goodness, mercy, and love; and the presentation of these principles is the means to be used. God's government is moral, and truth and love are to be the prevailing power.** DA 759.1

The 1888 Lessons

The 1888 showdown of two Adventisms. One working with the principles of love and restraint of power, including power of language to deceive and flatter and the other using a spirit and means of coercive influence. The problem was that the one using the coercive influence over the people - mixed congregation, i.e. Adventist and non Adventists - was the leadership of the church....

± When they came into the meeting in the morning I was surprised to hear Elder_____make the kind of a speech he did before a large audience of believers and unbelievers—a speech which I knew could not be dictated by the Spirit of the Lord. He was followed by Elder_____, who made remarks of the same order, before Brother Morrison began his talk, which was all calculated to create sympathy which I knew was not after God's order. It was human but not divine. And for the first time I began to think it might be we did not hold correct views, after all, upon the law in Galatians, for the truth required no such spirit to sustain it. 9MR 220.3

(3) The Bible Perspective

Biblically we see the aspects of the great controversy in the key biblical narratives. The serpent narrative.

Gen 3:1-6 - (NKJV) *“Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’”*... Genesis 3:4-5 (NKJV) *“You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

The serpent is raising the same issues as in White’s description of the heavenly conflict.

(1) His problem is God, not Eve. He is suggesting that God’s purpose with them is not fully pure.

(2) He speaks flatteringly as if he was working on their behalf. They are missing out on something, he is the one who stands up for their rights, opens their eyes to their true and full potential.

(3) his speech is shrouded in mystery – using half-lies to move her in his direction of thought.

(4) He is openly using black or white statement – contradicting openly God’s command, suggesting nothing will happen to her/them if they break it.

(5) he is very careful not to coerce by force at this stage. It’s only by manipulation. However later on, right in the next chapter, there is lots of power used, just like in the showdown chapter 13 of Revelation.

Rev 12

± Revelation 12:7-9 (NRSV) *7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

Revelation 12:13 (NRSV) 13 So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he **pursued** the woman who had given birth to the male child.

Revelation 12:17 (NRSV) 17 *Then the dragon **was angry** with the woman, and went off to **make war** on the rest of her children, those who keep **the commandments of God** and hold **the testimony of Jesus**.*

Mentions basic elements, but does not elaborate on them. So mentions war in heaven, but not why, what were the issues. Mentions who is involved, but not the rationale for their involvement. Commandments stand out and Jesus.

Importantly, the pursuing, persecuting of the dragon and his anger. The persecution and use of power is visible in chapter 13 and the parallel chapters of 16 and 18.

Deuteronomy 32:4 – ‘...a God of truth and **without iniquity**, just and right is He.’

Note: One can read ‘without iniquity’ as *without misuse of power or force*.

Exodus 34:6-7 (NRSV)

*± 6 The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a **God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness**. 7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,*

John 12:31, 32 - “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.”.

*The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but **before all the universe** it would **justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan**. It would establish **the perpetuity of the law of God** and would **reveal the nature and the results of sin**. PP 68.2*

By submitting to the law of love and following its rationale that sin leads to death, Jesus by letting sin do its thing on him, by not resisting evil has from within destroyed the argument of Satan against God being unjust and hiding something. The argument of Satan has imploded.

(3) Implications of the Great Controversy for Adventist Ecclesiology of Power

We can look at the issue from the perspective of the two main characters and what they tell us about the issues.

± On one hand we see **Lucifer or Satan**. His idea of governance is based on

- (1) Law – obsolete, holding us back, an instrument of power use by God
- (2) Use of mystery and secrecy to advance his agenda.
- (3) Manipulation and half-truths/lies
- (4) Subtle and gradually less subtle coercion ending in
- (5) Massive use of power
- (6) Overall, obedience to his vision at all cost is what matters. The-end, justifies the means policy.

± On the other hand, **God and the Son of God** use different governance ideology.

(1) The law is the law of love – it is to aid and contribute to the happiness of all the creation. It is not an artificial instrument to keep the creation in control or demanding from them blind obedience. Unselfish service to others is the foundation of the law of God. It's the only way to happiness and well-being of the universe. A no-law policy is a no-go policy, it only leads to selfishness, hatred, strife and violence. It does not keep the universe together, it does not enable the creation to grow into greater co-existence.

± (2) There is no secret agenda of God with creation. God has an openness policy – he reveals things in advance and explains what happens if. The only way to unmask the mystery of Lucifer's governance is to give him time. Evil needs time to show its true face. Force does not help to reveal the true face of anything.

± (3) God does not use manipulation to get us where he wants us to be. There is no subtlety and half-truths. There is however massive amounts of freedom and grace he grants to his creation. He gives Lucifer time to develop and present his rival view, even though he knows it is going to bring lots of pain for Him and others too. But is there any other way?

± (4) God then shies away from use of power and coercion in any form. This is a key hermeneutical horizon arising from the great theology narrative. It is central to some of our local reading of difficult stories in the Bible. But even

± (5) Consider the evidence – the main players who are advancing God's governance agenda in the fallen world are one after another not power players or users of coercive power. Consider Moses, who was called one of the humblest men who ever lived. So was David, the first king whom God had chosen according to his own heart. Saul was in a different category, but he was the choice of the people. In David we see an incredible restraint of power.

What about Jesus, who is said to be the express image of God (Hebr 1:3)? What kind of governance and dealing with people we see in his dealing with people and his enemies.

±What does it mean for Adventist ecclesiology? If the controlling theological metaphor for this community of faith is the great controversy, then it must have visible ecclesiological

consequences or implications on our very policies, processes and actions. The test of what kind of policies and governance we propagate is most visible in the ‘controversy’ context. In the context of despite and how we deal with those who are seen as being in divergence. If can’t show in such context, the principles of Divine governance of not coercing the conscience, not manipulating and using any form of coercion, then we are failing in the great controversy. Then we have not yet come fully out of the darkness. ‘God is light and in Him is no darkness at all,’ says John as a witness to the actions of God (1 John 1:5).

Have you noticed, we refer to those who are in important administrative position as those ‘in power.’ This is unfortunate, it does not reflect the theology of the great controversy and changes the perception of the ecclesiology in the eyes of people.

± At the end, our Adventist story needs to be about God, we need to present God as a good God who gives all for the happiness of his creation. We need to preach this message also though our ecclesiology, indeed through our very processes, policy and governance.

How we behave as leaders in whatever role or capacity we serve therefore is at the core of the great controversy. This is where we win or loose our case. This is how and where God wins or looses his case. He however wins his case because he does not coerce anyone to love him. We all do it because we want to do it, because we are convinced in our hearts that he is the best God and we cannot imagine doing otherwise.

The best we can for the gospel is to align our ecclesiology with the theology of the great controversy.

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