

How Then Can We Save?

A Response to “Present Truth for the 21st Century:
Toward an Adventist Theological Agenda” by Fritz Guy

Thank you, Dr. Guy, for mapping in broad yet bright strokes the contours of the major theological issues that Adventism faces today, and more importantly charting in bold, albeit dotted, lines the trajectory for the future.

As I read and re-read several times the draft of Dr. Guy’s paper that the respondents were given some time ago, I was struck by what seemed to be a puzzling omission, neglect, or at least inattention to the great debate within Adventism on salvation. What is the exact nature and purpose of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary? What is the relationship between law and grace? What did Christ accomplish on the cross? What does God expect of us as individuals and as a people for our salvation? These are great, even urgent, questions that Adventists have asked over the past 164 years and surely will go on asking in the 21st century. What do I make of this glaring oversight or daring disregard? Either way, the conspicuous absence of preoccupation with divining the Text and tradition as to what God did, is doing, and expects of us for our salvation points to a different way of thinking theologically about salvation and atonement.

Dr. Guy’s burden that comes through in this paper is for us to pay close attention to the lived, tangible, physical, and experienced realities and allow these realities to not only inform, but also transform our theology. Given that the Second Advent has not materialized after a century and a half of proclaiming its imminence, given that the traditional end-time scenario no longer seems plausible, but given that a radical ontological transformation is to precede an eternal ontological human existence, could it follow that salvation, in Guyan Adventism, is to be a lived and livable qualitatively transforming reality that is decidedly ~~this~~-worldly (because there is no other reality or “world”) that is based on a different sense of urgency – “the fierce urgency of the now”? Rather than re-engaging in the soteriological debates of the status quo, Dr. Guy’s theological realism moves us toward a focus on the function and efficacy of our beliefs and propositions about salvation in life – what salvation compels us to be as a people and ultimately how we live as agents of salvation in society and the world.

Could it be then that the salvific meaning of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is for us to be agents of reconciliation, advocacy, vindication, and restoration for a sinful and broken world? That, as a people of the sanctuary, Adventists are called to provide a sanctuary to the wounded, persecuted, misunderstood, and helpless, to engage in a thorough investigative judgment of the unjust and boastful oppressors of the world, and to proclaim the prophetic judgment upon the world. That, as individuals, we help our neighbors become connected, resolve disputes and conflicts, and exemplify acceptance and peacemaking. It is not enough that we know how we are saved and in whom we are saved. In that sense, Christ’s atoning act on the cross may be completely efficacious, but inadequate. Atonement is a process of partnership between the Temple who arose in three day and the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6), between the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world and the living sacrifices who are daily transformed in the Lamb (Rom 12), and between the High Priest and the royal priesthood with a high calling (1 Pet 2). Regardless of what one believes about the when and the how of Christ’s heavenly ministry (whether you believe that Christ entered the Most Holy Place in 1844 or 31, or perhaps that there was no such place to enter to begin with), the salvific meaning and efficacy of the sanctuary message remains intact for this people of the sanctuary. In real, tangible ways, we are a *sanctuating* community – inviting the world to a lived, physical, and experienced reality of salvation.

Could it also be that the salvific meaning of the Advent lies more with *adventizing* the Life which has already come than with preparing for the Life that is to come? The foundational “Christian” apocalyptic in Matthew 24-25 compels us to lift our obsession with the “when” and the “what sign” (for the only sure sign of the Advent is the Advent itself) and turn our yearning for Christ into a radical search for Him in eyes of every “one of the least of these.” And the foundational history of Christianity in the Book of Acts shows us that the Apostles’ burden, after receiving the promise of their Lord’s return, was to share the wonder of Life available in the Advent, rather than anticipating another one. Not a single sermon on the Second Advent is recorded in Acts! This challenges us – Adventists – even as we, of course, yearn for the Second Advent – to groan with creation and live as a salvific people that offers the reality of Life in the Advent which has already come. We know not the hour, the year, the century, nor the millennium of His coming. There may yet be another two, three or four millennia, or eons, until that final cosmic ontological transformation. Meantime, a salvific Adventist community is a good and faithful – and indiscriminately compassionate – *adventizing* community.

Finally, could it be that the salvific meaning of the Sabbath lies more in the work that we do to celebrate the Sabbath rather than the rest we find in it? The Sabbath compels us to consider the plight of the animals, the land, the children, and the workers of the world. In the sabbatical and jubilee extensions of the Sabbath, we are further compelled to re-examine our view of the economy and the eco-system. As a people of the Sabbath, we are called to be enablers of economic justice, environmental justice, immigrant care, children’s health, and animal welfare. The Sabbath leads Adventists to be champions for a social and environmental transformation. We cannot merely advocate our right to rest on the Sabbath. We are committed to be restless until this earth is filled with the salvific Shalom of the Sabbath. Can I say, then, a *shalomizing* community?

If these historic theological landmarks of Adventism have salvific, that is, existentially healing and transformative, meaning for us today, could we say then that the substance of our calling as the Remnant lies in being active, audacious agents of Shalom in the world? That we are called to a truly Ecumenical servanthood, reconciling, advocating, Adventizing, and empowering the people of the world today – and urging the world toward, as Dr. Guy has put it, “an actualization of literally everlasting life”? That actualization need not wait, in my mind, for cosmic death. It is necessarily a present process – in fact, it comes with that “fierce urgency of the now” – one in which God is intimately involved in. In this process of the healing of the nations and the world, Adventism – born in the 19th century and nurtured in the 20th – may be renewed in the 21st. Adventists must be actuators of salvation-healing in all things – both animate and inanimate.

Is this what you intended, Dr. Guy, in choosing to bypass the great soteriological questions of the past? Or have I dastardly re-appropriated (or bastardized) your reflections into something foreign and unrecognizable? I don’t know. But you sure keep us *thinking theologically*.

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