

Desmond Ford and the Sanctuary Message

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From 1968-1970 I was a student at Avondale College in Australia where Desmond Ford was head of the theology department. He was a charismatic preacher with a phenomenal memory, who could quote from memory many Scriptures and statements of Ellen White. His dismissal in 1980 was a great disappointment to many of his students. The church in Australia lost about 100 ministers following Ford's removal because they could not believe that he was wrong.

Who was Desmond Ford and what did he teach that led to his removal? Ford was born in 1929 in Townsville, Queensland, Australia, into an Anglican family. He had a distant relative who was an Adventist and whose family befriended Desmond. He was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1946 at age 17. A few months later he resigned from his job at a newspaper office and at the beginning of 1947 he began his studies for the ministry at Avondale College. He was a brilliant student and a good speaker who participated enthusiastically in class discussions. His fellow students quipped, "New Testament Epistles was taught by Pastor Kranz and commented on by Desmond Ford."¹ Ford graduated from the Ministerial Course in 1950 and began his ministry in North New South Wales. In 1952, he married his college sweetheart Gwen Booth, who bore him three children.

¹ Milton Hook, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* (Riverside, CA: Adventist Today Foundation, 2008), 26. I am indebted to M. Hook for some of the details in the biographical part of the article.

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His articles in various church papers and a successful public debate with a Church of Christ minister on the Sabbath convinced the Australian leadership that Desmond Ford was a future college teacher. He completed his B.A. in theology at Avondale College in 1958, and in the same year the Ford family was sent to America where he studied first at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington (M.A., 1959) and then at Michigan State University where he completed a Ph.D. in Rhetoric in December 1960 about the Pauline epistles as written addresses. The family returned to Australia and for the next ten years he taught theology at Avondale, wrote many articles on theology, and was a sought-after preacher and camp-meeting speaker. In April 1970, Gwen lost her battle with breast cancer. After her death, Ford longed for a break from the relentless duties both on and off the campus. He applied for a study leave and was granted leave to go to the University of Manchester to begin a Ph.D. in New Testament under F. F. Bruce.

Ford completed his Ph.D. dissertation on the “Abomination of Desolation” in Mark 13 in 18 months and was back in the classroom at Avondale at the beginning of 1973. In the years following, complaints against Ford’s teaching on righteousness by faith, the inspiration of Scripture, Ellen White, and the nature of a two-apartment sanctuary in heaven mounted, and in 1977, therefore, it was thought best to remove Ford temporarily from the Australian scene and have him spend some time at Pacific Union College with which Avondale had an affiliation agreement. Dr. Ford began teaching at PUC in the autumn of 1977 and on Sabbath afternoon, October 27, 1979, he presented a lecture on the investigative judgment to the Angwin chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums in which he outlined the major problems that he perceived with this doctrine. The speech was entitled, “The Investigative Judgment: Theological Milestone or Historical Necessity?” Ford claimed that he had been granted immunity to speak his views publicly at this conference.² Nevertheless, the church’s leadership responded by summoning Ford to a meeting of over 100 theologians and church administrators at Glacier View Ranch in Colorado to evaluate his views. Before the meeting, he was given six months of paid leave during which he prepared a 991-page document entitled “Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement, and the Investigative

² [Http://www.goodnewsunlimited.org/bioford.cfm](http://www.goodnewsunlimited.org/bioford.cfm), accessed May 20, 2019.

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Judgment.”³ The Sanctuary Review Committee considered Ford’s document, it wrestled with its implications, but concluded that while Ford asked the right questions concerning the sanctuary teaching, his answers and conclusions were wrong.

Ford’s Sanctuary Theology

Basic to Ford’s understanding of prophecy was his conviction that all Old Testament prophecies should have found their fulfillment in the first century AD, including the antitypical Day of Atonement and the Second Advent. The fact that Jesus did not return, he believed, was due to the fact that the church did not “quickly grasp the gospel and proclaim it in its purity.”⁴ In response it has to be pointed out that (a) if this were true the book of Daniel would have been written differently. Its prophecies clearly point beyond the first century; (b) The New Testament does not indicate that the early church failed in its mission, quite the contrary (Col 1:6); and (c) the book of Revelation would be an afterthought, following the failure of the New Testament church. However, there is no indication that God inspired John to write the book because the early church had failed in its mission.

A second assumption of Ford was his conviction that the year-day principle is not biblical.⁵ Basic to the year-day principle is the fact that since the visions in Daniel 7 and 8 are largely symbolic, with a number of different beasts representing important historical empires (7:37; 8:35, 2021), the time periods (7:25; 8:14) should also be seen as symbolic.⁶ This has been the position of most Protestant interpreters until the late 19th century. Ford himself presented an able defense of the year-day principle in his first commentary on Daniel, published in 1978.⁷ In 1980, however, he no longer believed that it was biblical, although he saw it as a

³ It was later published under the same title, *Daniel 8:14: The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment* (Casselberry, FL: Euangelion Press, 1980).

⁴ Ford, *Daniel 8:14*, 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶ For a fuller explanation of the year-day principle see Gerhard Pfandl, “In Defense of the Year-day Principle” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 23.1 (2012): 3-17.

⁷ Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 300-305.

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providential discovery “after the Advent hope of the early church had faded away.”⁸

A third basic assumption was that Ford’s apotelesmatic principle is a valid tool for the interpretation of prophecy. This principle says that “a prophecy fulfilled, or fulfilled in part, or unfulfilled at the appointed time, may have a later or recurring, or consummated fulfillment.”⁹ By means of this principle he was able to accept multiple fulfillments and applications of prophetic symbols. For example, Ford could accept the little horn being fulfilled in Antiochus Epiphanes, in pagan Rome, in papal Rome, and in the future antichrist. This makes apocalyptic prophecy into a wax nose that can be bent in any direction the interpreter wants it to go. Hence Ford believed that preterists, historicists, futurists, and idealists are all right “in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny.”¹⁰ With few exceptions, the apotelesmatic principle has not been accepted by scholars inside or outside of the church.

At the heart of Ford’s sanctuary theology is his belief that Christ began his Day of Atonement ministry in AD 31 rather than in 1844. Several arguments led him to this conclusion:

a. Many New Testament texts indicate that since his ascension Christ is in the presence of the Father. For example, “For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb 9:24); and “Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Rom 8:34).¹¹ The argument goes something like this: Where is God’s presence in the Heavenly Sanctuary?—in the Most Holy. Therefore, if Christ is in the presence of God, he must be in the Most Holy, and he must have begun his Day of Atonement ministry in AD 31 and not in 1844.

While we agree that since his ascension Christ is in the presence of the Father, this does not mean he is performing the Day of Atonement ministry since AD 31. We do not know exactly what the heavenly sanctuary looks

⁸ *Idem*, *Daniel 8:14*, 294.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹¹ Other texts are Acts 7:55; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2.

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like,¹² but we do not believe that you can separate Christ from the Father through a curtain or door in heaven—Christ wasn't locked up for 1800 years. Fundamental Belief # 24 does not even mention compartments in the heavenly sanctuary—it refers to two phases of Christ's ministry. "He was inaugurated as our great High Priest and began His intercessory ministry at the time of His ascension. In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry."¹³ When Christ ascended he entered the presence of the Father and began the first phase of His ministry, the antitype to the daily service in the Old Testament sanctuary. In 1844, in addition to His intercessory ministry He began the second phase, the judgment ministry, the antitype to the yearly service.

Those who say Christ began the second phase in AD 31 must find room for the first phase because the type had two phases. Albion F. Ballenger, one of our earliest and most important critic of the sanctuary truth, wrote around 1911: "The ministry in the first apartment during the year was a type of the ministry in the heavenly sanctuary until the cross, and the ministry in the second apartment was a type of the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary from the cross onward."¹⁴ Ford, who followed Ballenger in this, similarly claimed, "The first apartment symbolizes the whole Jewish sanctuary during that age, and the second apartment the Christian era and its heavenly sanctuary."¹⁵ Thus, for Ballenger and Ford the first apartment of the earthly sanctuary symbolized the whole earthly sanctuary service during the Old Testament times and the second apartment

¹² The abiding place of the King of kings, where thousand thousands minister unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before Him (Daniel 7:10); that temple, filled with the glory of the eternal throne, where seraphim, its shining guardians, veil their faces in adoration, could find, in the most magnificent structure ever reared by human hands, but a faint reflection of its vastness and glory. Yet important truths concerning the heavenly sanctuary and the great work there carried forward for man's redemption were taught by the earthly sanctuary and its services. (Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950], 414).

¹³ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, second edition (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 347.

¹⁴ Albion F. Ballenger, *Cast Out for the Cross of Christ* (Tropico, CA: A. F. Ballenger, n.d.), 54.

¹⁵ Ford, *Daniel 8:14*, 151.

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of the earthly sanctuary symbolizes the heavenly sanctuary service since Christ's ascension.

The problem with this view is twofold. First, the Old Testament sanctuary becomes a type of itself, because the first apartment ministry becomes a type of the Old Testament ministry—364 days of the year. However, a type is never a type of itself; it always refers to something else. For example, the Old Testament sacrifices were types of Christ's sacrifice; the Old Testament sanctuary service was a type of Christ's ministry; David was a type of Christ. Never is a type a type of itself.

Second, in Daniel 8:11 what is taken away from the prince of the host (Christ) by the little horn (the papacy) is the tamid—the daily service—not the yearly service. In other words, prophecy says that during the Christian age (long after AD 31) the little horn will rule for 1260 years and during this time it will take away from Christ the “daily”—the intercessory ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary. We know this happened in history through the confessional and the mass. The ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary was put into the hands of human intercessors—the priests. It is important to remember that Daniel's prophecy says nothing about the yearly or Day of Atonement ministry. If Christ began the Day of Atonement ministry in 31 AD, how could the little horn take away the daily or first apartment ministry which stood for the Old Testament?

In order to change the teaching of the church on 1844, Ford had to change his understanding of Ellen White. During the 1960s he had been a strong defender of the authority of Ellen White, even dismissing a theology teacher who could not accept the writings of Ellen White as inspired. During the 1970s, however, he began to see her role only as pastoral for edification and exhortation without authority in doctrinal areas.¹⁶ In this way he could reject her support for and explanations of the investigative judgment in Daniel 8:14 beginning in 1844.¹⁷ Yet, there is no biblical evidence that some prophets had only pastoral authority while others had also doctrinal authority. Prophetic authority always included pastoral as well as doctrinal authority. The fact that Ellen White never originated a doctrine does not deny that she played an important role in their formation.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 368, 369, 406-408. Ellen White's explanations are found in *The Great Controversy*, 479-491.

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When the pioneers in their study of Scripture came to the point in their study where they said, “‘We can do nothing more,’ the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively.”¹⁸ This does not harmonize with the idea of a limited pastoral authority of the prophet of the remnant church.

Conclusion

Desmond Ford was a brilliant and influential teacher in the Adventist Church. His view that Christ began the second phase of his ministry in AD 31, however, was rejected by the church at Glacier View. It never became an accepted alternative view, as some have claimed. Ellen White compares false teachers in the church to “wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. 2 Peter 2:17.”¹⁹

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¹⁸ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 1: 206, 207.

¹⁹ Idem, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1973), 322.