

Good News Bursting Forth

On the 10th anniversary of his defrocking,
Desmond Ford remembers.

*Transcribed by Daisy Stanley
Edited by Roy Gee*

Desmond Ford, whose membership remains at the Pacific Union College Seventh-day Adventist Church, is the president and speaker of Good News Unlimited, a nondenominational gospel ministry. Ford, who has two doctorates, including one in New Testament from Manchester University in England, has written more than 15 books.

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Cleary: Hello, there, and welcome to *Sunday Night Talk* on ABC Radio, right across Australia. John Cleary with you, from now until midnight, where it's your turn to join me—and my guests—for just that: a little *Sunday Night Talk*. [Music]

This Sunday night actually the program is going to be a tad shorter. At eleven o'clock we're taking you to the cricket in the West Indies. Great time, the cricket in the West Indies this time. I guess I'll be here through the night with a lot of you.

But for now, my guest this evening is an Australian who has been instrumental in turning a church of some 6.4 million people on its head—theologically speaking, that is.

Until the death of Azariah Chamberlain in August 1980, few Australians had heard of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; and if they had, it was usually in association with conservative, clean-cut, healthy, mom-dad-and-apple-pie American Christianity. And, perhaps, that they'd some connection with the giant Sanitarium Health Food Company, purveyors of Weetabix and Marmite [Vegemite].

Some may also have known that Seventh-day Adventist run large hospitals, are teetotalers, vegetarians, and had the unusual Christian practice of going to church on Saturdays.

Well, the controversy which surrounded the Seventh-day Adventists during the Chamberlain affair hit newspapers worldwide. That, and later the film *Evil Angels*, starring Meryl Streep, brought from Australia all the negative publicity any church could handle.

But not so (it seems), for during much of the past 20 years, a controversy largely centered on another Australian has been threatening to split the church worldwide, and in a fashion which makes the Chamberlain tragedy a passing piece of human interest. The controversy of which I speak goes to the heart—and very reason for being—of Adventism.

In the 1840s, it seems, the church's founding prophet, Ellen G. White, rallied the group that became known as the Adventists, following what was called 'the Great Disappointment' of the 22nd of October, 1844, the date when thousands of Protestants in the United States expected the second coming, or advent, of Jesus to occur. When it didn't happen, White (claiming to be a messenger of God) had two visions: one stating that on the 22nd of October, Christ had entered the sanctuary of heaven to begin investigative judgment of the lives of all believers. That's sitting down, going through the big Book of Life, and adding up those who had done

wrong against those who had done right, and seeing how the sums came out.

The second vision confirmed the necessity of Saturday worship, hence, *Seventh-day* Adventists.

And so it remained for some 100 years, until recently—when both Ellen White and the meaning of her visions have come under scrutiny, even from within the church itself.

In 1982 it was revealed that much of what Ellen White said and wrote during her life was not inspired by God so much as borrowed and plagiarized from other writers. Perhaps more substantially, an Australian Seventh-day Adventist theologian, Dr. Desmond Ford, the holder of two Ph.D.'s, and following years of patient study, concluded that the theology coming from Ellen White's teachings was not supported by, and was—in some places—not consistent with the Bible itself.

Ford was defrocked in 1980, the year the Chamberlain story broke. Well, the imbroglio stirred up by Ford and others has seen a church in search of its soul, with the emergence of liberal, evangelical, and traditional sides seeking to redefine what it is to be an Adventist, and where Adventism stands in relationship to the rest of Christendom. Is it a sect forever outside, or a growing part of the wider Christian church?

It's my pleasure to welcome to *Sunday Night Talk* this evening, that Australian: Dr. Desmond Ford. Des, welcome.

Ford: [On phone] Thank you so much, John.

Cleary: I hope my summary of the situation wasn't too inaccurate.

Ford: No, it was very accurate.

Cleary: The controversy of which you are a part is still rather deep, it seems. News of your visit to Australia came from the Seventh-day Adventist college at Avondale; and yet, when church officials were informed of your participation in tonight's program, they withdrew

rather than appear with you. Why is that?

Ford: Perhaps, because I have been an embarrassment to the church in suggesting, along with the majority of its scholars—who speak to themselves rather than to administrators—who have said that there is necessity for doctrinal revision on its eschatological teachings about the judgment. And I have voiced these. So my crime was that I voiced what the scholars of the church have long thought. So that's been an embarrassment to the church.

Cleary: It seems to be that not only is it an embarrassment, but there are people sufficiently sensitive about it to feel that perhaps the church is really dealing with fundamental issues here, and you can't be nice about it. You have to either withdraw or accept.

Ford: Well, not everybody in the church knows that changes are taking place in the direction that I suggested they should be made....

I have several things before me, printed by the church, where there is a great shift already begun. But it has to be admitted, John, that most Adventists who do not read a lot aren't even aware of these progressive changes.

Cleary: Perhaps the PR [public relations] department of the Adventist church here at Sydney ought to catch up with a little of it.

What led you to your stand? What were the fundamental things that you found? Was it something that you found through your own studies, or was it part of your cultural interaction with other churches as well?

Ford: It really began in my teens, before I was an Adventist. No one can read Hebrews 9 without seeing clearly that it teaches that Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension was the antitype of the Jewish Day of Atonement (when the high priest went into the very presence of God symbolized by the sec-

ond apartment of the Jewish sanctuary). The book of Hebrews clearly teaches that Christ fulfilled this in his ascension into the very presence of God.

Now the traditional teaching of Adventism had Christ in the first apartment until 1844—and then moving within the veil into the second apartment to do a work of investigative judgment. Of course, through the years, this has become less and less literal, and we have talked about two phases of ministry; but none of that's to be found in Hebrews. The fact is, John, that Adventist scholars have known it for decades. I can document it very clearly from top Adventist leaders, where they say that scholars have known that the Adventist teaching on the judgment wouldn't hold water. And they've known it for most of this century.

Cleary: And that's not the only problem, is it? You've come at it from the theological angle; but also other people have started to look at what Ellen White said in her writings, and

Adventism's emphasis on the fourth commandment in our frenetic age, our madly driven age where everyone is like a harassed, driven leaf tossed to-and-fro in the wind, I think Adventism's call to worship and to taking a day for the family and for God is a very healthy spiritual and social emphasis.

have found that, in fact, there is some question about what she wrote and how she arrived at it.

Ford: Yes, Ellen White certainly taught the traditional view of the Investigative Judgment. Her chapters on it in her chief book, *The Great Controversy*, mainly draw from two other Adventist writers, Uriah Smith and John N. Andrews.

It's not so much the way Ellen White put it as what Adventists have done with it. So many Adventists have lacked assurance of salvation. In a large Adventist church some time ago, its 800 members were asked were they sure that heaven would be theirs if they died that very day. Only two raised their hands out of 800! Now, it wouldn't be that way in every Adventist church; but it's tragic that it should be that way in *any* Adventist church.

My objection to the traditional teaching on the Investigative Judgment is that it has robbed many people of the assurance that they can have that they are right with Christ this very moment, if they are trusting in his merits. And, interestingly enough, Ellen White also believed what I have just said: that people can be assured here and now if they're trusting in the merits of Christ.

So that was my main objection actually—not *just* the technicalities that the New Testament says Christ has entered the very presence of God and that our justification before Christ gives us the verdict of the last judgment now without any attenuated judgment process beginning 150 years ago. But my objection is that many people have been robbed of the joy, the hilarity, the gladness of knowing that in Christ they have acceptance right now. They have eternal life from the moment they believe.

Cleary: Instead of having somebody sitting there in heaven at some point in time going through and weighing...

Ford: Even the *Review*, which is the official church paper, put out an article about the time of Glacier View on the Investigative Judgment. Here are some of the expressions it uses: "It seems clear...It seems clear...assuming...suggest that...the Scriptures do not offer a detailed explanation of the work that was to begin in heaven in 1844...it is reasonable to assume...the term 'Investigative Judgment' is not found in the Bible..." Hardly a tone of definiteness for what was considered a pillar of Adventist doctrine.

So the church is certainly making progress. Immediately after Glacier View, the church published an article in its ministerial magazine, for the first time in its history, granting that the expression "within the veil," used in the book of Hebrews, means what it says: that Christ went into the very presence of the Father at his ascension. That was a first. So progress is being made; but not all Adventists know it.

And it's one great thing about the Adventist Church: that they are students of the Bible and they are looking for light. They have made considerable changes. Originally, the church was anti-Trinitarian, no longer so.

Cleary: Seventh-day Adventists is the topic. We're on *Sunday Night*



Talk, right around Australia. John Cleary. My guest this evening: Dr. Desmond Ford, an Australian born in Queensland; still considers himself an SDA at heart, but has provoked considerable controversy over the last few years by challenging the church's biblical views (or views on the Bible).

Now, there's another element to this controversy that surrounds the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A few years ago, 1982 to be exact, another pastor, Walter T. Rea, of Patterson, California, in the course of doing a Ph.D., stumbled in his research across some long-buried writings by forgotten divines that matched huge swatches of prophet Ellen White's books. Accusations of plagiarism began to surface. Des, what's your attitude to that? Is Rea credible in what he's saying?

Ford: Rea is acknowledged by church leaders—Adventist church leaders—to be correct in the sources that he names that Ellen White used. They would question the fact of it being plagiarism, because the first American laws about plagiarism in prose didn't come in until after Ellen White had written most of her books...

Cleary: Whether it's legal or not, she borrowed extensively.

Ford: She certainly did. There's no question about that. The church does acknowledge it. However, it should also be said that she acknowledged it too. She only wrote one introduction to any of her books, and in that book she said she had used other writers but hadn't given sources because she did not want it thought she endorsed everything they said.

So the Adventist church admits the accuracy of Walter Rea's selection of sources that Ellen White used. For example, Adventist have pointed out that in their chief doctrinal book by Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, at least 50 percent are the words of other writers.

Cleary: Fifty percent is a rather large wedge, isn't it?

Ford: Yes, but it's a historical book. Nevertheless, all the major books of Ellen White draw very largely from other sources, and she recommended some of those sources through the church paper. I do not think she was being dishonest, myself, because she very loudly proclaimed the necessity for church members to read some of the very books she was reading. That's in print in the church paper.

Cleary: What is her status? Is she regarded as having some sort of semi-divine insights?

Ford: Traditionally, Adventists have regarded Ellen White as a prophet on a similar level to the prophets of the Bible. The modern position, in this time, in the 1990s, has switched from that: rather, that she had a special gift such as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14, a gift of prophecy—not to be placed as a parallel with that of Daniel and Isaiah, but a gift to rebuke and to counsel. That makes her a good pastor.

More and more Adventists are teaching that. For example, the latest issue of the *Ministry* magazine published by the church, says that Ellen White should not be used as an authoritative commentator on the Bible. So here's the official journal for all its ministers—the latest edition—in an article by George Knight, condemning Adventists who use Ellen White as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Now that's a direct reversal of the practice of Adventists for over a hundred years.

Cleary: It's extraordinary! I mean, what the church is saying is that perhaps even though its founder gave them some enormous benefits—Ellen White gave them enormous benefits—that the church has for a hundred years been theologically wrong in the path it has been pursuing, and needs to get

back towards mainstream Christianity.

Ford: You're right; and of course it wasn't really Ellen White's fault. She told them, "Don't quote my writings as long as you live until you know what the Bible teaches." There are over 100 quotations from Ellen White saying the Bible and the Bible only should be used for doctrine.

You know, Lutherans use Luther, Wesleyans use Wesley, and Adventists can use Ellen White; but only the Bible should be used for doctrine. That was her position, too.

Cleary: Let me just ask a more general question. It does seem that much of what this controversy is about is rather esoteric, and damaging to a church (which in certain areas may have some eccentric edges), but on the whole has been seen to be one offering enormous social good to people right around the world.

Ford: Yes, and not only social good.

Number one, it's as true as steel to the great evangelical verities at its heart. It has—as you have rightly said—some esoteric fringes that can tend towards cultism, particularly on its misuse of Ellen White and also its teaching on the Investigative Judgment, all its scholars are pretty well agreed—the vast majority agree—is not biblical.

But it does have a lot to offer. I think even its emphasis on the fourth commandment in our frenetic age, our madly driven age where everyone is like a harassed, driven leaf tossed to-and-fro in the wind, I think Adventism's call to worship and to taking a day for the family and for God is a very healthy spiritual *and* social emphasis.

And then its stress on the body as the temple of God—that's a great and important teaching. For centuries we were led by middle-aged . . . er, the Middle Age theologians who taught that the soul was the only

precious thing in a sack of dung, and that it didn't matter what happened to the body. Well, Adventists have gone back to the biblical teaching (and more and more scholars are acknowledging that it is the biblical teaching) that the body-soul is precious and sacred, and we should present the body as a precious sacrifice to God, dedicated to him.

Adventism has much to offer; and it offers hope because this world is careering toward the fate we all are fearful about. But Adventists point to the blessed hope of the return of Christ.

It is not in the business of setting dates. It gave that up. Adventists have never set them. William Miller was not a Seventh-day Adventist. Adventists have rejected date-setting; but it does offer the blessed hope and that's a good thing.

Cleary: I'm talking with Dr. Desmond Ford, Seventh-day

The church is certainly making progress... It's one of the great things about the Adventist Church; that they are students of the Bible and they are looking for light. They have made considerable changes. Originally, the church was anti-trinitarian, no longer so... Adventists have rejected date-setting; but it does offer the blessed hope and that's a good thing.

Adventist—something of a rebel within his own camp, but still loyal to the cause, obviously, from what he is saying.

You're on *Sunday Night Talk*. John Cleary with you; Seventh-day Adventists are the topic . . . and I will give you some numbers to call.

In a few moment, perhaps in about 10 minutes, you can line up and we'll take your calls, but I'll give you the number now. If you need to go away and get a pencil, do so, if you'd like to join us.

If you're an Adventist, have been, would like to be—or just simply interested, here's the number: 008 022 266. It's toll-free from wherever you are in Australia, except Western Australia (where, don't call because time's beaten you).

008 022 266 to join us here on *Sunday Night Talk*, this Sunday night before the cricket—where we're talking Seventh-day Adventism with Dr. Desmond Ford, an Aus-

T*he heart of Adventism is the phrase, "the everlasting gospel," found in Revelation 14:6. Adventists declare that is their charter; and the heart of Adventism should be the affirmation that the cross of Christ is the center of all true religion; and trust in his merits is the only adequate motivation to a holy and true Christian life. The best of Adventists see it that way.*

tralian who has established quite a reputation within Adventist circles, as somebody who's tried to nudge the church towards more mainstream biblical faith as accepted by—I guess—those groups who'd associate themselves with mainstream Councils of Churches. Would that be the area that you're heading towards, Des?

Ford: Certainly towards the evangelical teachings of the Reformation as expressed in modern mainline churches—yes.

Cleary: How, in that sense, can you call yourself an Adventist then? I mean, isn't Adventism defined by Ellen White?

Ford: No. The heart of Adventism is the phrase, "the everlasting gospel," found in Revelation 14:6. Adventists declare *that* is their charter; and the heart of Adventism should be the affirmation that the cross of Christ is the center of all true religion; and trust in his merits is the only adequate motivation to a holy and true Christian life. The best of Adventists see it that way.

Cleary: Uh huh. OK, let's talk about a couple of the things that Adventism is famous for. The emphasis on health you have already mentioned; the Sanitarium; the health food company. Now, that's an enormous investment worldwide. Does the church get a direct profit out of that? And what sort of service? Where's the theology behind that?

Ford: The theology behind it is that the traditional teaching of Christendom—that there is something mystical called the soul that can function without a body—is not a scriptural teaching.

There are approximately 1,646 references to *soul* and *spirit* in the Hebrew and Greek scriptures; and in not one of those is it said that the soul or spirit can function consciously without a body. So Adventists are really up-to-date with where the best theologians

are. If we look at the most modern encyclopedias of theology, such as Alan Richardson's, if we look at Kittel—the vast majority of them today concede that the Jewish view of man was as a body-soul unity. The Jews knew nothing about a mystical, immaterial part of man known as the soul.

And scholars on Paul say he took the same position. So does Christ, who stressed the resurrection.

There is nothing in the Bible about the intermediate state, except a parabolic story by Christ which cannot be taken literally. So, the trend of modern theology supports the view that the body-soul is important; and therefore we should care for it, as good stewards of health. And Adventists, by and large, live longer than non-Adventists—that is, genuine Adventists who are vegetarians or lacto-ovo-vegetarians.

Cleary: Now I could have an argument with you over this. See, my background's with the Salvation Army; and the Salvation Army's very strong on sort of teetotalers, and sort of . . . You know, we could probably get into the merit of whether playing in a brass band helps you more than sort of eating your Weetabix every morning.

Ford: (Laughter) Well, possibly so. I think that's probably right. But, John, we'd agree with you about being teetotalers, you see? And we would add tobacco in as well, and we have done that for over 100 years. We were ahead of all the Royal Commissions.

Cleary: OK, look, I can see there's room for a mutual admiration society here. But there's also a lot of people who want to talk about this, and we want to give you a chance in just a few moments.

If you would like to give us a ring, 008 022 266.

Now, Des, you're in Australia to give some lectures, but you're taking up a thing which I can see has a connection to the health aspect of

SDA belief—that is, the New Age.

Ford: Yes, the New Age, with its holistic health teachings—you know, which is a mixture of good and evil. Even a clock that's stopped tells the truth twice a day. There are some things that are truthful in the New Age teachings about health, when it stresses the influence of the mind on the body.

But a lot of its other things are weird, nonscientific—and sometimes, anti-scientific—positions. You may remember Carl Sagan wrote an article called "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection" in the magazine *Parade*, in which he berated some of these New Age teachings—and correctly so. It's a mixture of science and superstitions; fads, facts, and fancies. So I am speaking on it.

Cleary: But, ultimately, the religious quest is one where you're stepping outside a scientific view of the world, aren't you?

Ford: Yes, but not necessarily anti-scientific. Rather, beyond: trans-scientific. There's a difference between the two.

True Christianity shouldn't be anti-scientific, though it goes beyond science.

Cleary: So you would say that those things where science can demonstrate that it has facts on its side through the rational method, we should accept?

Ford: Yes. We should accept it. God's laws are written in nature.

Cleary: How do you line up with things like creationism then?

Ford: Well, I'm not altogether in favor of many things that modern creationist groups have said. Those that have contended for a short aged earth have not a leg to stand on, either biblically or scientifically. So I'm not at all in favor of that.

But I'm very much in favor of the fact that the world is a planned affair. It's not an accident. It's a ship, it's not an iceberg. I agree with the stress on creation given by Adventists,

though I do not agree with those extreme Adventists who want an earth only 6,000 years old and who deny the geological column.

Cleary: What about evolution as a hypothesis? Do you have a problem with that?

Ford: Well, I don't think any Adventist scientist denies micro-evolution. What they do deny is macro-evolution, because of the complete lack of transitional forms between the major phyla. So, micro-evolution, all Adventist scientists agree with; macro-evolution, pretty well all Adventist scientists would deny.

Cleary: Somebody like Stephen Jay Gould, though, would offer a view that . . .

Ford: "punctuated equilibrium," yes. Which is just a guess to supply the lack of transitional forms.

Cleary: Sure. But wherever there have been lacks in the past, they have eventually been filled in, haven't they?

Ford: Often so. We don't want to just worship a god of the gaps, that is true. Nevertheless, there have been a thousand guesses, and not all of them have been fulfilled; so we'll wait for the evidence before we're committed.

Cleary: OK. Another topic: the worldwide growth of Adventism.



It's one of those religions which sprang up . . . er, classified out of America in, I guess, the middle of the 19th century with groups like Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism. They all had an enormous—if you like—frontier spirit. They captured that frontier, adventuring, pioneering spirit, wedded to evangelicalism, which made them very strong missionary religions. So there is a cultural similarity between them even though their theology is widely divergent. Now, does that still hold in Adventism?

Ford: Well, the genuine Adventist is challenged to share his faith. The great drawback is so many Adventists lack assurance of salvation, they're not good missionaries. The average Adventist doesn't give one Bible study a year. Why share their uncertainties?

My ministry for the last 20 to 30 years has been on the gospel of righteousness by faith: that by sheer trust in the merits of Christ, one can have the verdict of the Last Judgment right now—and that's known as justification. We're not talking about once-saved-always-saved; but we're saying that while trusting in Christ alone, and thereby fleeing from sin, one can have assurance one is right with God.

This is a rising stress [emphasis] in Adventism even among administrators. For example, in this division. The local division recently sent a complaint to American headquarters that the Sabbath School *Quarterly* for the world church has twisted the doctrine of righteousness by faith.

So that is something that is very good. Here in the Australasian [South Pacific] Division, its administrators are trying to give the gospel its right place. I am pleased about that.

Cleary: How fast has the church grown worldwide, do you know?

Ford: It is growing chiefly in the third world. Of course, that is true of

the mainline churches even to a greater degree. In some parts of the world—America, Europe—the church is not growing that much at all, keeping up with the dead, hardly. But in third world countries Adventism, along with pentecostalism and other groups, is growing rapidly.

Cleary: Pretty much in the same vein as mainline churches.

Well, let's take some calls. Time to say hello to you at home and see what you'd like to have to say on Seventh-day Adventists, tonight on *Sunday Night Talk*, right around Australia. 008 022 266 if you'd like to give us a call. We're talking to Dr. Des Ford. . . .

And let's say good evening. Hi, there! How are you?

Caller 1: [Unintelligible]

Cleary: Yes. Welcome to the program.

Caller 1: Oh, yes.

Cleary: Great. Would you like to talk to Des Ford?

Caller 1: Yes. I was wondering what his views were about the very

conservative element within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. There's quite a fundamentalist, and dare I say anti-intellectual, element which would not respond very willingly to the changes which he is espousing. And I was wondering. . . .

Ford: You're quite right.

Caller 1: Yes. I was wondering in the long term what sort of changes could develop within the Adventist church.

Ford: You are quite right in what you are saying. The Adventist church is more afraid of what it calls the 'lunatic fringe' (which is an unkind denomination [name] of the conservatives, the extreme traditionalists) than it is of those it would classify slightly liberal. They are usually perfectionistic. The church is afraid, deadly afraid, of the extreme narrowness, the fundamentalism, the lack of biblical literacy, that exists in these fringe groups.

Caller 1: Yes, but don't these fringe groups have a very strong hold on the grass roots within the Adventist church?

Ford: Oh, you're quite right. The decision at Glacier View was triggered by them. The fringe groups put so much stress on the local division president here, who then put stress on the General Conference president in America, that it precipitated the decision after Glacier View.

You are quite right; but since then, leaders in the church are becoming more and more allergic to such influence. I think that now the battle is turning against those conservatives. For example, another Australian who is very prominent in this area [conservatism], who runs a self-supporting college in America, has recently had his credentials removed by the world church leadership.

Caller 1: Very interesting.

Cleary: Thanks, Glen. Des, would it be always the case that church leadership, because of its

very nature, tends toward taking pressure from the more conservative elements rather than the more liberal elements? It's far easier to stay where you are than to make a decision which takes you into uncharted territory.

Ford: Tragically, that is true. It is probably why Ellen White said that the greatest sin in the church is neutrality in a religious crisis. She was exiled to Australia because she disagreed with the head administrators of the church.

Cleary: Ellen White actually spent time in Australia, did she?

Ford: Oh, yes. She was here for many years.

There was a revival on righteousness by faith in 1888, and she (along with just a few other of the administrators) took the right side on the gospel—stress on the gospel rather than just on law. Because of that the leaders of the church exiled her to Australia.

Cleary: Some people can't win. (Laughter.) Where did she live while she was here?

Ford: She lived mainly near Avondale College, which is a very fine school.

It's a college of advanced education about 35 miles south of Newcastle; about 70 miles north of Sydney.

It has an excellent faculty. I was there. I've been there about a third of my lifetime, actually. It's a very great college.

Cleary: She died in what, 1915, didn't she?

Ford: Yes, that's correct.

Cleary: How much of that time did she spend here in Australia?

Ford: I would say that at least a good decade of [Ellen White's] significant work was done in this country.

This is where she wrote some of her best books: *Desire of Ages*, *Christ's Object Lessons*, *Mount of Blessing*—which are beautiful books, by the way. If a person followed them they could not but be

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She had a great deal of impact on the establishing of this college, which has sent people, missionaries, to all the mission fields of the Pacific; and also to India, and to Africa, indeed, all around the world.

Cleary: OK. To David, now. Hi there, David. How are you?

Caller 2: I've been interested to follow the discussion and I am all in favor of Dr. Ford's fellowship. I am pleased to see he has readjusted his view of the SDAs on the basis of his profession. But personally I don't think he goes far enough, because in actual fact there is now a very respectable historical argument that suggests that Jesus never actually existed at all. So no church, of any shape or color, would really be justified in being in existence on that basis.

Ford: May I answer that one, John?

Cleary: Sure.

Ford: There isn't a respectable historian in the world who would agree with you. Until the 18th century, it was popular to deny the historicity of Christ. But it has not been now for probably 200 years. If you look at any encyclopedia—though the majority of the writers are not evangelical Christians—they do not deny the historicity of Jesus Christ. He is a more established historical figure than Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great.

Caller 2: Well, I have to disagree there.

Cleary: Where are you getting your background on this, David?

Caller 2: I have an interest in history and I teach history. I must say that I recognize what Dr. Ford is saying there. There was a challenge about 200 years ago. But in actual fact Professor George Wells of London University has put up a very comprehensive case in the past 20 years or so. And yet, as is evident from Dr. Ford's comments, they

don't seem to be very widely recognized at this point.

Cleary: I certainly think that would be true amongst the wider Christian denominations as well. Even those most radical, liberal scholars—particularly so in the past 40 years—wouldn't agree with that position. They'd at least accept the historical personage of Jesus.

Ford: It would have taken a Christ to invent a Christ. The words are so unique. No committee could have ever come up with them.

Caller 2: Well, er...I would say that's debatable too. In that to take one small example, I mean it could be argued that it is very difficult to discern exactly what Christ's ethics were. And one could point to examples where Christ didn't actually observe his teachings.

Ford: David, I think that would be a difficult project.

We have 5,300 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament; we have nearly 10,000 of the Latin Vulgate; many ten thousands of

other versions, and over all, we have a fairly competent summary of what he taught.

To my mind, there are some things he said that are self-validating, self-authenticating. Let me give you one: "Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away" [Mt 24: 35; Mk 13: 31; Lk 21: 33]. There isn't another person in the five thousand million on the planet that could say that; and there isn't a person of the millions or billions of the past who could say that.

I would suggest to you that one statement alone is a self-authenticating one about the authenticity and historicity of the One who said it.

Caller 2: Well, it does, er...I grant you, it does imply an enormous degree of confidence. But, er, very briefly...we haven't time to go into this in much depth, but very briefly, the argument hinges on the dates of the very early Christian writings.

Cleary: Without getting into this, David, because you've raised this before on the program some months ago, I think, it's almost impossible to get into an argument on the historicity of Christianity when we're talking about Seventh-day Adventism. So give us another ring on another night. We'll have to push on. Thanks for that.

Let's push on. I'm sorry for that, Dave, but things do need to push on, on a night like this.

Graham in Melbourne. Hi, there Graham, how are you?

Caller 3: I am well, thank you. I would like to just ask a question of Dr. Ford. I don't know if he will remember me. He was my teacher back in the late '60s.

One of my concerns was as a current—and I am a current Adventist minister—was that so many young ministers left the Adventist Church in the early '80s. So many of them were not able to make a transition to another faith, they dropped out of Christianity altogether. It al-

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most seemed as though it was Adventism or nothing.

Des, I'd just be interested to know what your comment would be on that.

Ford: I find it very sad indeed, Graham, that it's happened.

I think it's the result of not taking at face value the biblical teaching about man. The Bible forbids us to trust in man or in human institutions. "Cursed is the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, whose heart departeth from the living God" [Jer 17:5].

You see, human institutions are only enlarged individuals; and the visible church is not the church of God. The church of God is the church invisible, "Fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners" [Song 6:10]. But the church visible is a human institution, full of follies, frailties, weaknesses, and often denials of its Lord. If ministers make an idol of their church,

then they invite a great deal of disappointment.

Caller 3: Yes. I couldn't agree more. It just seemed to be one of those tragic things. Those sort of things happen.

Cleary: Could I ask something here of you both?

It seems to me that when you get an organization like the Seventh-day Adventist—or any other group—that's had to fight for its existence, built up a powerful tradition through a hundred years—then for people born into it, the culture is as *strong* as anything could possibly be.

The bond is not just for this world. It's for the world beyond; and to separate oneself from it must require an *enormous* personal wrench. I mean, Des, how did you find it when you were shown the door—as it were—back in 1980? Was that a deeply disturbing personal experience for you?

Ford: No, it really isn't, because I haven't lost a friend, hardly, through the upheaval.

Many of the church scholars and even some of its administrators keep in communication with me, and they are my very good friends. And that's at all levels.

From very early as a Christian I came to believe that the true church was a very big family. It wasn't limited to any denomination. Christ is no polygamist. He is married to one bride, not to 600 churches. (Laughter)

Caller 3: Yes.

Ford: So, I am first of all a Christian, and secondly an Adventist. And I think every true Adventist is the same.

Cleary: Graham, how do you respond? What about your friends who are left?

Caller 3: I would agree with Des on that. I would feel much more comfortable in regarding myself as a Christian first and an Adventist second.

From my experience going through those times and being regarded as somewhat of a disciple of Des Ford (whether that's good or bad) you know, just because he happened to be my teacher way back in the '60s and so on—there were difficult times.

And it was very necessary to re-evaluate a whole lot of things. And I think for me too it was necessary to work out why I was an Adventist. Some of the old reasons didn't hold true too much. You had to re-focus again on what Jesus Christ meant to you.

Ford: Amen.

Cleary: Thanks for that, Graham. We'll have to push on.

To Steven in Sydney. Hi, there, Steven, how are you?

Caller 4: G'day, how are you? I'm a bit nervous, so I will try to get this out as sanely as possible.

Back in the '80s I was looking for a...not a religion to join, but something to believe in. I come across a mate who had recently joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was just around the time of the breakup. I would go to the church's meetings every Saturday, and so forth, but after all the venom that used to come out of some of these church meetings, just drove me away.

I thought, "Well, this can't be the true church, if this is how they are." Especially when they got on to the Catholics. You know, I don't class myself as a Catholic, even though I was baptized as one. I think now I am more an atheist than anything. But some of the stuff I used to hear them spiel out at their services—I just thought it was just pure hatred. And I thought, "Ah well, these aren't the right mob," and—there I was gone again.

Cleary: Sectarianism. A continuing problem?

Ford: John, can I comment on that.

Cleary: Sure.

It's true that Adventists do not do enough of social work; but it is not true that they don't do any. They have a whole department of the church that is dedicated to helping in time of tragedy, tornado, flood, and the like. It is a very vigorous department that operates in Third World countries, including Thailand and Cambodia.

Ford: I think most Adventists would say that their opposition to Catholicism is to the teachings and not the people. A large number of proselytes to Adventism are from Roman Catholic circles—that's number one.

The second thing that should be said: according to one Adventist publication, Good Samaritan Institute, near Chicago, at the Merikay legal case, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists said, "We have consigned to the garbage the former hatred against Roman Catholics; and it's no longer a part of Adventist teaching."

Now, of course, that statement of the General Conference (which was affirmed afresh by the public relations director Herbert Ford, at the latest General Conference [session] in Indianapolis) would be news to most Australian Adventists—who have been taught strongly an anti-papal theology.

But even in that theology it has always been against the system and not against the people. No true Christian hates any other person. They can hate evil but they cannot hate people.

Cleary: It can be a handy device though, can't it?

Ford: Yes, tragically.

Caller 4: The other thing I thought that the church was was an elitist religion.

It was more interested in social standing. Not so much social values, but that was a part of it, but social standing: possessions, the nice house, the car, the job.

I always remembered where they've got that hospital up there at Wahroonga, I think it is, somewhere. It seemed to me that it was a private hospital, though the Catholics have one at St. Vincent's. But I could never ever see where the Seventh-day Adventists were down there doing a job like the Salvation Army at the Cross, with the Wayside Chapel (or whoever did that)—try

ing to round up the drug addicts, the prostitutes, the AIDS victims. In fact, they seemed to shun that kind of thing

And the other thing that got me was the continual harping on the Sabbath law, how it was "Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day." And the Catholics and all the others mostly went on the Sunday. And lo and behold, I get to Tonga one day, and here are all the Seventh-day Adventists running up to church on Sunday and not Saturday. And I thought, "Oh, well, forget it," you know.

Cleary: (Giggle) Alright, there's a few there, Steven. Thanks for that. Des?

Ford: Yes, if I may.

It's true that Adventists do not do enough of social work; but it is not true that they don't do any. They have a whole department of the church that is dedicated to helping in time of tragedy, tornado, flood, and the like. It is a very vigorous department that operates in Third World countries, including Thailand and Cambodia. If anyone has been with the Adventist missions in the South Pacific, they do a marvelous job of cleaning up the places to which they go.

I agree with my friend that we

don't do enough. But it's not true that we don't do any.

As regards the Sabbath: no true Adventist thinks he is saved by a day. He believes he is saved by Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. The Bible says, "We which have believed do enter into rest" [Heb 4: 3]. The physical rest of the seventh day—to an informed Adventist—is a symbol of the rest of conscience they have all the week because they trust in the merits of Christ.

Cleary: There are a couple of things that come up there.

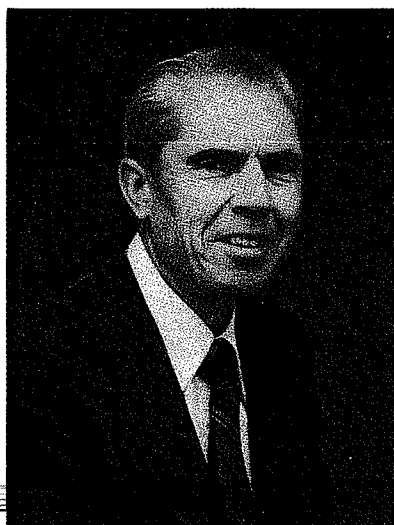
For instance, there has been criticism over the years of Seventh-day Adventism—and if you like, American cultural imperialism (if I can use a somewhat dated term but I still think one that's useful)—the governing structures of the church are very tight, very hierarchical, originating in America, and not very easily accessible by other communities. So there's a question there about the domination of American values...

Ford: Yes, you're right...

Cleary: ...and a second question there about whether or not the flavor, if you like, of SDA theology has been very positivistic; and that the sacrificial dimension, the costly dimension, of Christianity—sort of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer dimension—is not emphasized so much?

Ford: On number one: the General Conference president has admitted on oath that Adventism is a hierarchical structure, which, of course, is quite opposed to the New Testament teaching. The New Testament teaching is that "All ye are brethren," [Mt 23: 8] "He who would be first among you, let him be as the least" [Mt 20: 27]—and so on. The Bible forbids any such thing as a hierarchical church structure.

The second thing: when you talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I think Adventists do believe in sacrificial living. They're probably among the best donors in the world in Christian churches. Pretty well all of them are



tithe payers; and some of them give a second tithe—and they are very generous in many other offerings besides.

But your suggestion—and the previous speaker's—that we haven't been sacrificial enough with our needy neighbors in the big cities, that is tragically true. We have a lot of room for progress there.

Cleary: I mean, it's a criticism that can be made of a lot of western Christianity generally. I mean, the prosperity gospel, if you like. To what extent has that made inroads into...

Ford: Not very much. The prosperity gospel is well-entrenched in charismatic churches, but Adventism is the other extreme from the charismatic church.

Adventism is sometimes so cold you can skate down the aisle. (Laughter.) It needs to learn from the charismatic churches to have more joy, more happiness—without losing grip of the kingly power of reason sanctified by divine grace.

Cleary: OK, time for one more call. It's from Roy in Sydney. Hi, there, Roy, how are you?

Caller 5: I was listening with interest to your program.

If I can just pose a question to Des Ford. He mentioned earlier that his doctrine had changed; that at one stage they were anti-Trinitarian, and now were Trinitarian. Now to me that is a fairly dramatic change in a

person's belief.

I was just curious to know what would prompt something like that. Was there something that was taken from the Bible that would dramatically change, you know, the overall concept of that?

Ford: The Adventist church was Arian; that is, the belief that Christ was a created being and the Spirit was a person, right through the 19th century.

It was only when Ellen White wrote a very beautiful life of Christ called *The Desire of Ages*, which set forth the doctrine of the Trinity very clearly, saying there "never was a time when Christ was not, from the days of eternity he was one with the Father"—it was only after that book was written at the end of the 19th century the church became Trinitarian.

Caller 5: Right.

Cleary: Thanks for that, Roy. We're rapidly running out of time.

Caller 5: Thanks very much.

Cleary: Only time for one question there.

Des, we've only had time for a brief skate around the thin ice.

Ford: I've appreciated the skate.

Cleary: (Laughter.) It's been great to have you on the program.

Ford: It's been a privilege.

Cleary: How long are you in Australia for?

Ford: Just another two weeks and then I have meetings outside Australia. And then back to America.

Cleary: Where are you going to be talking?

Ford: I'll be speaking in Perth, and then Adelaide tomorrow night. I'll be in New Zealand.

Just recently I had the privilege of speaking to some of the biggest Adventist churches in the world. Sligo, which is the second biggest Adventist church in the world, I think, Capital Memorial Church, and Loma Linda University. Adventism's fears, I think, are breaking up to some degree, and so there are many encouraging things on the Adventist scene.

Cleary: In 30 seconds, how do you think the direction is going? Is there a traditionalist revival back to Ellen White? Or is it moving toward mainstream Christianity?

Ford: No, that will never fully revive. The idolatry of Ellen White is gone forever in Adventism. It can never revive.

It's like that serpent that was lifted up on the brass pole: when it was worshiped it was ground to powder. So that will never revive.

But there is an increasing emphasis on the everlasting gospel of grace—that we are saved by grace through faith alone, and that works are only the fruit and never the root of salvation. That is spreading in Adventism, and so it should. That is the essence of true religion.

Cleary: Dr. Des Ford, thank you very much for joining us on *Sunday Night Talk*.