

THE TEACHINGS OF MORRIS VENDEN

HARVEST INSPIRATION DISCOVERIES LECTURE SERIES

WWW.PRODISCOVERIES.COM

CHAPTER TWELVE- REVIEW OF 'NEVER WITHOUT AN INTERCESSOR' BOOK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER TWELVE-REVIEW OF 'NEVER WITHOUT AN INTERCESSOR' BOOK.....	2
Introduction	2
Experience-Driven Theology.....	5
Imbalance.....	6
The Role of Human Effort	7
1. "By faith alone."	9
2. The "fight of faith" and the "fight of sin."	9
3. God "does not need my help."	12
4. "Sin" and "sins."	14
5. "Not One Thread of Human Devising."	15
6. Denial of Self-Examination.	15
7. Practical Confusion.....	16
Christ's Intercession: Confusion and False Issues	17
1. Living "on our own power."	17
2. Other Purposes for Mediation.	18
3. Last-Minute Christians.	19
In defense of his view that some Christians after probation's close will still fall and fail,	20
Other Matters.....	23
Two of Venden's comments on the nature of Christ also merit a response. At one point he writes: 23	
The following Ellen White statements are certainly hard to reconcile with Venden's insistence that "Jesus never strove against sins"	23
The following Ellen White statements directly contradict Venden's view:	25
Conclusion: Fanatical Moderation	25
In one of the saddest, most destructive articles ever to appear in an Adventist publication	25
Who was an early supporter of Morris venden?? His name was Dale Ratzlaff,	26

CHAPTER TWELVE-REVIEW OF 'NEVER WITHOUT AN INTERCESSOR' BOOK

Introduction

A Response to Morris L. Venden's, Never Without An Intercessor, (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 1996).

Morris Venden will doubtless be remembered as one of the most curious yet tragic figures of modern Adventist history.

If for no other reason, many Adventists in the second half of the twentieth century can thank the ministry of Morris Venden for inspiring them to take seriously their personal walk with God, and to start a regular devotional life of daily Bible study.

Yet the fundamental errors of Morris Venden's salvation theology and his view of the church's spiritual priorities continue to prevent clarity of understanding among many contemporary Adventists, and bear perhaps a larger blame even than the teachings of Desmond Ford for the spiritual state of the modern Seventh-day Adventist Church. Never Without An Intercessor, demonstrates the continuing problem his theology poses for the perceptions and travail of God's end-time people.

In his 1975 book Sail Your Own Seas, George Vandeman repeated a warning of C.S. Lewis which many Adventists seem to have missed.

In a chapter titled "Fire Trucks and Floods," Vandeman cites Lewis's reference to a demon called Screwtape, whose scheme was to get people "'running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood.' Get people to crowd to the side of the boat that is already nearly under. When people are lukewarm and apathetic, get them stirred up about the dangers of enthusiasm and emotion. If they are lazy, talk to them about the hypocrisy of the working community. If they are cruel, warn them against the evils of sentimentality. . . . In other words, let them hear loudly and repeatedly the warnings they don't need."¹

The theology of Morris Venden perhaps best epitomizes the modern Adventist obsession with the dangers of legalism. (We will sidestep for a moment the issue of what legalism is and is not, according to Inspiration. For now it will suffice to consider whether or not the all-consuming preoccupation with rules and behavior which Venden finds so noxious is really the church's present danger.) It doesn't seem to matter that Inspiration depicts a far different peril as dominant in the end-time church.² Nor does it seem to matter that today's Adventism is a far different universe from the finger-pointing, obedience-saturated subculture in which (from his writing one would think) Venden had been raised.

The swelling floodwaters of worldliness and laxity in today's church remain insufficient to persuade Venden and others like him to put away their fire extinguishers. Such persons persist in the assumption, despite the clearest contrary evidence, that modern Adventists remain just as works-centered, law-obsessed, and pharisaical as they have ever been. The book under discussion

contains a chapter titled, "Good News for Legalists" (pp. 115-127), and another titled, "Good News for Pharisees" (pp. 129-137). Most would see these two as one and the same. There is no chapter titled, "Good News for Liberals," or anything comparable. Despite his brief attention to Sadducee-style liberalism (pp. 130-135), Venden apparently doesn't see the liberal threat as sufficiently serious to warrant an entire chapter.

Throughout the pages of Never Without An Intercessor, Venden makes plain the spiritual time warp where his theology remains imprisoned. He even writes at one point: "Sometimes we get in too much of a hurry to take people's names off the church record" (p. 106). Perhaps this was true in Venden's youth, and perhaps in some places now, but a fair number of contemporary church members could attest to the reality of the exact opposite problem. The spiritual matrix of Venden's nurturing perhaps best described in a sermon of his I heard years ago was one in which "self-appointed religious watchdogs" (his words) stood at the church door handing typed rebukes from the Testimonies to various members. Today's church is one in which many First World Adventists, especially the younger ones, hear the Testimonies quoted hardly at all judiciously or otherwise, in context or out of context.

Elsewhere Venden writes:

"From the cradle on up, every one of us have had to live with the system of merit" (p. 15).

"It has been a universal disease of humanity that we want to be worthy" (p. 17).

"We are disciples of the make-your-own-way, the pull-your-own-way system. We are capable, self-reliant, high-achieving" (p. 26).

"Most of us continue to work hard, trying to be overcomers" (p. 99).

A sensible man in the street, unfamiliar with the cross-currents of Adventism's past or present, would likely find it more than a bit strange to characterize our contemporary society as obsessed with spiritual worthiness or to characterize such a quest as a "universal disease of humanity." (Trying to be worthy in our own strength is certainly a disease, but can this truly be said about the very desire for worthiness?) To speak of our contemporary culture as "capable, self-reliant, high-achieving" likewise belies much of the societal reality confronted by modern First World Adventists those who generally comprise Morris Venden's audiences.

The world of the Adventist pioneers not to mention the family heritage and spiritual climate of Venden's childhood was a world inhabited by gutsy missionaries, unpopular faith, and hard work vastly beyond the experience of a society in which dinner is ready at the buzz of a microwave and global data available with the click of a mouse! (The mention on pp. 17-18 of the dying missionary with family buried in distant lands may be relevant to the Adventism of Venden's early life, but it is hardly familiar to a generation whose fleeting brush with mission service involves little more than teaching in a language school in pleasant surroundings with ample funds from home.)

Put simply, the world of Adventism's past was tailor-made for a theology which emphasized duty and diligence. By contrast, today's culture of credit cards, instant orange juice, and quick

gratification in a thousand forms is tailor-made for a very different theology--one providing effortless security and the gleeful abandonment of painful toil.

Theologians, like politicians, have a difficult time admitting error. Listening to Venden through the years, including my reading of the book under discussion, reminds me of Harvey Cox, the liberal Harvard theologian who years ago wrote a book called The Secular City, which insisted that modern man had outgrown religious faith and that religion's capacity to impact society in any serious way was over. Not long thereafter, it seems, Cox had second thoughts. He wrote another book called Religion in the Secular City, which acknowledged that in fact religion was not dead, but still very much possessed of social and political strength. But since it would have been too embarrassing to just say, "I was wrong," Cox continued to place his new awareness in the framework used before. He couldn't bring himself to admit that the "secular city" was a mistaken perception. Despite growing evidence to the contrary, he insisted on depicting the power of contemporary religion in the context of a society he still holds to be secular. Cox demonstrates what can happen when reality crashes in on cherished thought patterns.

The theology of Morris Venden demonstrates the same problem. Because he has long convinced himself that legalism is Adventism's big problem, he refuses to permit the rising tide of liberalism and worldliness in the contemporary church to change his basic perception. He can't simply admit that legalism is merely one of the church's current problems; he maintains without any inspired authority that all the church's problems are manifestations of legalism. He speaks of "traditional legalists" and "gospel legalists" (p. 50), "scarlet legalists" and "black legalists" (p. 116). He even insists that we were all "born legalists" (pp. 116,119). (First we have original sin; now original legalism?) Again, these pronouncements are made without any inspired basis, either in Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy. Never mind that Scripture speaks of the great end-time conflict in terms of obedience to God's commandments or the lack thereof (Rev. 12:17; 14:12; 22:14), or that Ellen White declares that "obedience or disobedience is the question to be decided by the whole world."³ Venden persists, despite the absence of inspired proof, in painting the final conflict in darker or lighter shades of legalism.

Many contemporary Adventists defend the approach used by Venden and others in this regard, because they maintain that the presumed legalism of our past is largely responsible for the worldliness and ambiguity of the present. Zealous to "lay the ax at the root of the tree," they set about to demolish what they claim to be the legalistic foundation of the church's current problems. We can't deny that to a degree this concern is justified. Sacred history offers numerous cases of how, when religious symbols and landmarks are taken for granted, God permits them to be challenged or even lost. The ark of the covenant and Solomon's Temple are two good examples. But we need to be careful here. Unless we know from Inspiration what legalism truly is, the cure can wind up worse than the illness as indeed it has! Moreover, to assume that the modern Adventist rebellion against our Bible-based doctrines and standards could have been avoided if only we had given these aspects of our faith a more Christ-centered focus, gives more credit to human judgment and experience than the inspired sources allow.

Our Dale Carnegie-like obsession with winning friends and influencing people tends to overlook the reality of the sacred record that the most consecrated of God's messengers through the ages, including the Master Himself, faced rejection and revilement by the majority. Can we truly be

safe in concluding that this rejection occurred because their flawed humanity got in the way? We might be safe in concluding this if all except Jesus had experienced this rejection. But since the Personification of love Himself "came unto His own and His own received Him not" (John 1:11), we must beware of deciding too quickly that the rejection of truth is most likely the fault of those presenting it. Too often, when I hear yesterday's legalism denounced as the root of today's liberalism, I wonder if the true core of this analysis is a trust in people ("if only we had treated them right, they wouldn't have done this") not warranted by the message of Scripture.

Careful students of Inspiration on both sides of Adventism's current divide find it a truly herculean task to harmonize the anti-legalist obsession of the contemporary church with the pattern of emphasis found throughout the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. It is little wonder that Venden remains one of the few thought leaders in contemporary Adventism who still promotes easy salvation while simultaneously adhering to a professedly conservative view of the inspired sources. To those promoting such a message, logic and the weight of evidence matter little. The nonexistent middle ground is sought with a fanatical persistence reminiscent of Francisco Coronado's search for the Seven Cities of Gold. One recalls the observations of Texas radio host Jim Hightower that all one finds in the middle of the road are "yellow stripes and dead armadillos."

Experience-Driven Theology

Venden rightly offers the following warnings:

"One of our biggest temptations is to adjust our theology to match our experience, instead of finding out how to change our experience to match God's theology" (p. 33).

"Trying to decide truth on the basis of experience is a very dangerous thing. It's called 'existentialism' and will lead you into error" (p. 76; see also p. 122).

And without question, the following observations are pointedly accurate:

"The dialogue concerning the investigative judgment and related topics within our church today seems primarily an attempt to settle on our beliefs concerning sin and righteousness and salvation. The investigative judgment, as an historical and eschatological event, is not really threatening. . . . It's not our lack of understanding of how Daniel 8 relates to Leviticus 16 that causes the sleepless nights. It's our lack of understanding of how the apparent bad news of the judgment relates to the good news of the gospel" (pp. 7-8).

"And in spite of our attempts to hide our real concern, we would have to admit that it isn't so much what Ellen White said about the geological formation of volcanoes, for instance, that we're having trouble with. The problem is what she said about sin and righteousness. I don't think that people are so worried about whether she borrowed material from William Hanna or Alfred Edersheim or Uriah Smith. I think they are worried about what she had to say concerning sin and righteousness" (pp. 33-34).

Quite true. But neither Scripture nor Ellen White is fully considered in Venden's own theology of sin and righteousness, as we will see. And as for theology based on experience, Venden has veered into such paths himself. Speaking of the signs of Jesus' coming, Venden writes:

"The time is just about up, and we're still not overcomers" (p. 33).

Perhaps we need to beware of judging others by ourselves. More people may be overcoming "by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11) than we realize.

Elsewhere Venden writes:

"When I remember all the efforts to overcome that I have put forth in the past, from my teenage years on, it is wearisome just to think about it. I had seven sins at one time. And I was working hard on them when someone sent me a list of one hundred more to work on" (p. 102).

It seems that Venden's deep revulsion at the role of human effort in salvation, which we will examine shortly, is based more on his own experience than on the careful study of Inspiration. Vast reaches of inspired material, which flatly contradict his cherished views, are left unexplained in this and his other books.

Imbalance

Venden's review of a number of Christ's parables reveals an exclusive mention of one variety with utter silence regarding the other. Nearly the entire first chapter of Never Without An Intercessor is devoted to the parable of the eleventh-hour workers and the equal pay given to all despite the hours worked (pp. 12-20). This parable is again cited alongside that of the lost sheep and the prodigal son, together with pointed jibes at the ninety-and-nine sheep and the jealous older brother (pp. 25,28).

Such an emphasis is not inappropriate, to be sure. But Jesus told other parables in addition to these. **He told of a man who finds a treasure hidden in a field, who must sell all he has in order to purchase that field (Matt. 13:44). He told of another who sells all his possessions to buy a pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45-46). He told of a man cast into outer darkness for not putting his talent to the exchanges (Matt. 25:27-30), and of the sheep and goats whose eternal destiny is determined by their treatment of fellow humans (Matt. 25:31-46). In commenting on the parable of the pearl, Ellen White brings together the emphasis of Scripture on salvation as a gift and those parables which present man's responsibility in the saving process:**

"In the parable the pearl is not represented as a gift. The merchantman bought it at the price of all that he had. Many question the meaning of this, since Christ is represented in the Scriptures as a gift. He is a gift, but only to those who give themselves, soul, body, and spirit, to Him without reserve. We are to give ourselves to Christ, to live a life of willing obedience to all His requirements. All that we are, all the talents and capabilities we possess, are the Lord's, to be consecrated to His service. When we thus give ourselves wholly to Him, Christ, with all the treasures of heaven, gives Himself to us. We obtain the pearl of great price."⁴

In other words, those parables which emphasize God's initiative in salvation (such as those in Luke 15 on the seeking of the lost) help us understand that God is the exclusive source of the power and grace which saves us. Those parables which emphasize man's responsibility (like those in Matthew 13 and 25) help us understand that God's grace cannot save us without our active cooperation. And since all the gifts we possess at any time belong to God, we cannot claim credit

for our cooperation with God's grace any more than we can for the grace itself. As King David declared, "All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Venden's desire to debunk what he calls the "merit system" of salvation is laudable, but doing so does not require the removal of human effort from the saving process. It only requires the acknowledgement that all self-discipline, backbone, and talents of all sorts with which a person is born are as much the gift of God as the power bestowed at conversion. To understand this is to recognize the utter foolishness of claiming credit for cooperating with God's power in the work of overcoming. Ellen White explains this point at great length in the first chapter of Faith and Works, where she writes: "So the satisfaction of creature merit cannot be in returning to the Lord His own, for it was always His own property to be used as He in His providence should direct" (read entire section for context).⁵

In Ellen White's words: "God gives the talents, the powers of the mind; we form the character."⁶ The two sets of parables, like all inspired counsel, fit together beautifully. But when one set is emphasized and the other ignored, imbalance will surely result. Morris Venden's theology is Exhibit A of such imbalance.

The Role of Human Effort

The most basic error of Venden's salvation theology, the one whose implications have been most tragic for the contemporary church, is represented by the following statements:

"If you follow this (Eph. 2:8) through to its logical conclusion, then you don't become involved in an effort to keep from sinning, either. Your attention is not on your behavior, any more than your attention is on trying to make yourself have faith" (p. 81).

"The third condition for overcoming known sin is to find out how to engage in the right fight and to fight the battle where the battle is, instead of where the battle isn't. . . . And no one will ever overcome sin until he or she understands the difference between the fight of faith and the fight of sin. Testimonies for the Church, 5:513 says, 'If you fight the fight of faith with all your will power, you will conquer.' Which means that if I'm using all of my willpower in the faith relationship, I have no willpower left to fight sin or the devil" (pp. 82-83).

"We have been wasting time and energy trying to 'sin not,' when the time and effort and energy is supposed to go toward abiding in Him" (p. 85).

"It is not true that Jesus does it all, because Jesus cannot seek Himself for us. Here is where our will and our willpower and our human effort has to go, toward seeking Jesus in an ongoing relationship with Him day by day. He does not do it all. He cannot seek Himself for us. But Jesus has promised that if we will seek relationship with Him, He will work to keep us from falling. And what Jesus has promised, He is able to perform. He does not need my help for that. So it is very crucial in coming to the place of overcoming sin that we understand clearly the difference between the fight of faith and the fight of sin" (pp. 85-86, italics supplied).

"I'd like to remind you that overcoming is God's department; it's not yours. Obedience is God's department. It comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ. It isn't something we achieve; it's something we receive. Victory isn't something that we strive for, try for, or work hard to get" (p. 99).

"No, we don't overcome the devil. We never have overcome the devil or any of his manifestations. James 4:7 says, 'Resist the devil.' But it tells us how. We resist the devil by 'drawing nigh to God,' and submitting unto God. But we, per se, never overcome the devil or any of his manifestations.

"So, what this text (Rev. 3:5) is talking about overcoming is the real sin problem: living life apart from God. . . . Please underscore, in this text, the difference between a behavior-centered interpretation, overcoming our sins or bad behavior, and a relationship-centered interpretation, overcoming the relationship problem of living life apart from God" (pp. 102-103, *italics original*).

Venden's exclusion of cooperative effort from the overcoming process is perhaps most emphatic in the following statement:

"Even if I go so far as to say, 'Well, God is going to have to help me,' as long as I rely on myself to do any part of it, my end product is going to be, to any extent I am involved, filthy rags. Any kind of righteousness or obedience or victory or overcoming that I am in any way trying to produce is going to be imperfect. . . .

"For a long time the church has held two incompatible beliefs. One is that we can keep God's commandments, that we can overcome. Some have even suggested things like perfection. The other is that while we do need God's help, we are supposed to work hard on our own obedience. Those two are incompatible" (p. 125).

This "relationship" theology, in its varied forms, lies at the heart of contemporary Adventism's doctrinal chaos, moral vacillation, and loss of purpose. The logic it produces is simple: Why disturb the saints by preaching on obedience when obedience isn't their responsibility anyway? One might well ask why both Scripture and Ellen White spend so many column inches exhorting believers on the specifics of personal holiness if this isn't where our focus belongs. If this "relationship" theology were true, it's hard to see why God didn't do the church a favor by leaving such specifics completely out of the inspired documents, thus leaving such matters to be defined solely by each Christian's personal relationship with God.

There is another popular Adventist revivalist, who takes an approach similar to Venden's on these issues. He had preached a sermon with great emphasis on the verse where Paul states, "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2). For this speaker, "any thing" seemed to include discussions of doctrine and behavior as well as the human philosophizing clearly addressed by Paul in context. Yet if this were so, why does Paul then spend nearly all of the subsequent chapters giving the Corinthians a detailed lecture on correct Christians beliefs and conduct? Obviously for the apostle, preaching Christ and Him crucified meant the most decided proclamation of the doctrinal and moral substance which in God's Word defines what Christ is all about.

Inspiration so strongly contradicts Venden's view of the overcoming process that one is amazed more haven't noticed. What follows are a number of areas where this is most obvious:

1. "By faith alone."

Venden's denial of the role of human effort in the battle with evil is based on a common misconception--an evangelical fallacy which decades ago found its way into modern Adventism--that salvation "by faith alone" (p. 99) means faith as distinct from the obedience faith produces. The idea is that when the Bible says we aren't saved by works (Rom. 3:20,28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9), this supposedly means any human activity, including what is done in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. But the Bible never teaches, in contrast with evangelical theology, that the works which don't save include Spirit-empowered obedience. The Bible is clear that the renewing and sanctifying of the Holy Spirit is indeed part of the saving process (2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:5), and that salvation is accomplished through man working out what God works in (Phil. 2:12-13; Col. 1:27-29).

What the Bible teaches about faith and works is easily understood once the Bible is permitted to explain itself, devoid of the confusion imposed upon it by theologians and those seeking accommodation for their experience. Scripture is as clear as possible that gaining eternal life is conditional on obedience (Matt. 19:17; Luke 10:25-28; Rom. 2:6-10; 8:13; Heb. 5:9). But the Bible is equally clear that this condition cannot be fulfilled in our lives apart from faith (Heb. 11:6; see also Rom. 14:23). After Jesus declared to the rich young ruler that commandment-keeping was the condition for receiving eternal life (Matt. 19:17), the disciples asked, "Who then can be saved" (verse 25). Jesus answered, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (verse 26; see also John 15:5). In this sense salvation is like reaching a destination by car. In order to reach my destination I must get in my car and drive where I need to go. But unless I have gas in the car, this is impossible. The gas in the car is faith. Driving the car is obedience. The latter is the condition for reaching my destination, while the former is the means whereby fulfilling this condition is possible.

Over and over again, Ellen White defines "legal religion" as ritual religion, trying to fulfill God's law in our own strength.⁷ Never is legal religion, or legalism, ever defined by Inspiration as trying to be saved through divine-human cooperation. The modern Adventist "righteousness by faith" movement, epitomized in many ways by the teachings of Morris Venden, has failed to make Inspiration's clear distinction between religious activity apart from conversion and religious activity produced by conversion. This failure has resulted in the widespread de-emphasis of the particulars of obedience in the pulpits and publications of the church, the consequence of which has been widespread personal and institutional disregard for the written counsel of God.

2. The "fight of faith" and the "fight of sin."

This distinction has been a staple of Morris Venden's theology for years. As the above quotations demonstrate, the so-called "fight of faith" involves effort toward maintaining a relationship with Jesus through prayer, Bible study and witnessing. Here is where all inspired statements which speak of effort in the Christian life are restrictively applied, regardless of what the statements actually say. By contrast, the "fight of sin," as Venden calls it, involves direct confrontation with sin and Satan, which he claims the Christian must leave entirely to God.

But the Bible makes no such distinction. The apostle Paul declares: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Of course he proceeds to explain that this is to be done through taking the armor of faith (verses 13-17). But the passage gives no hint that taking this armor means someone else will do the fighting for us. Verse 12 is clear that we wrestle against principalities and powers; God doesn't do the wrestling for us. God provides the power, but it remains ours to exercise. For Venden to insist that "we don't overcome the devil" (p.102, italics original), that "if I'm using all of my willpower in the faith relationship, I have no willpower left to fight sin or the devil" (p. 83), is to contradict the plain statements of Scripture. Paul is unmistakably clear in Ephesians six that God empowers us to fight the devil; He does not fight the devil in our place.

Venden's claim that "we don't overcome the devil" (p. 102) is hard to reconcile with 1 John 2:13-14, which in the space of two verses declares twice, "Ye have overcome the wicked one." Paul writes: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). Of course it is faith which makes this overcoming and self-cleansing possible (1 John 5:4-5). But nowhere does the Bible define man's faith-relationship with God the way Morris Venden does as a struggle to "abide in Jesus" through prayer, Bible study and witnessing, while Jesus does all the dirty work of defeating sin and Satan.

Regarding a similar verse, Venden writes:

"James 4:7 says, 'Resist the devil.' But it tells us how. We resist the devil by 'drawing nigh to God,' and submitting unto God. But we, per se, never overcome the devil or any of his manifestations" (p. 102, italics original).

But the verse doesn't say that submitting and drawing nigh to God mean we no longer resist Satan, supposedly relinquishing this responsibility to God while we keep out of His way. Rather, the verse is clear as is Ephesians 6:12-17 that submission and drawing nigh give us power to resist, much as the armor of faith gives this power. In no way do these Scriptures imply, especially as we place them alongside other passages, that faith means the total abandonment by the Christian of the struggle with sin, letting Christ do it all in our place.

Morris Venden professes great respect, in this book and others, for the writings of Ellen White. He speaks of how both the investigative judgment and the Spirit of Prophecy are under attack in the church today (p. 33). Yet he seems not to have considered the extent to which Ellen White's writings explicitly contradict his view regarding God's part and man's part in salvation.

Venden sees the "fight of faith" and the fight against sin and Satan as two different things. Yet Ellen White says they are one and the same:

"The Christian life is a warfare. The apostle Paul speaks of wrestling against principalities and powers as he fought the good fight of faith."⁸

"We must come, we must resist the Devil, we must strive to enter in at the strait gate, we must run the race with patience, we must fight the fight of faith, we must wrestle with

principalities and powers, we must agonize before God in prayer, if we would stand blameless before the throne of God. We must have the faith that works, or it will be powerless."⁹

No hint of any kind can be found, in these or any inspired statements, that God will fight sin and wrestle against principalities in our place so long as we pray and have faith.

Other Ellen White statements make it as clear as possible that while God's imparted strength is essential to the conquest of evil, the work of conquering evil remains our work.

"The fact that Christ has conquered should inspired His followers with courage to fight manfully the battle against sin and Satan."¹⁰

"Our part is to put away sin, to seek with determination for perfection of character. As we thus work, God cooperates with us."¹¹

"It is left with us to remedy the defects in our characters, to cleanse the soul temple of every defilement."¹²

"Each day he [the Christian] must renew his consecration, each day do battle with evil. Old habits, hereditary tendencies to wrong, will strive for the mastery, and against these he is to be ever on guard, striving in Christ's strength for victory."¹³

"We have a work to do to resist temptation. Those who would not fall a prey to Satan's devices must guard well the avenues to the soul; they must avoid reading, seeing, or hearing that which will suggest impure thoughts."¹⁴

"There must be a constant, earnest struggling of the soul against the evil imaginings of the mind. There must be a steadfast resistance of temptation to sin in thought or act. The soul must be kept from every stain, through faith in Him who is able to keep you from falling."¹⁵

One must defy the simplest rules of grammar and syntax to read into these statements the idea that man's only struggle in the saving process is to keep "in relationship" while any direct confrontation with sin or Satan is to be left completely to God. The above passages repeatedly declare the opposite that in fact we are to struggle with sin and Satan, using the strength God gives us.

Venden's determination to subtract human effort from the overcoming process causes him to add his own words to one of Ellen White's well-known passages about living without a mediator during the time of trouble. To the statement in Great Controversy, p. 425, which states: "Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil," Venden adds in parentheses after the word "effort" ("to continually receive the grace of God") (p. 71). Thus Venden seeks to force the thoughts of Inspiration into the "relationship" mold, as if Ellen White taught his own theory that striving to receive God's grace and striving against evil through that grace are two different things. It is most dangerous to add our own theological opinions to the words of Inspiration. We do well to remember Ellen White's warning:

"In reading the Testimonies be sure not to mix in your filling of words; for this makes it impossible for the hearers to distinguish between the word of the Lord to them and your words."¹⁶

3. God "does not need my help."

Venden writes:

"Jesus has promised that if we will seek relationship with Him, He will work to keep us from falling. And what Jesus has promised, He is able to perform. He does not need my help for that" (p. 85).

Perhaps not. But whether God needs our help or not isn't the issue. Ellen White's commentary on the resurrection of Lazarus helps us understand that while God doesn't need our help, He gives us the chance to cooperate actively with Him as a means of teaching responsibility:

"'Take ye away the stone.' Christ could have commanded the stone to move, and it would have obeyed His voice. He could have bidden the angels who were close by His side to do this. At His bidding, invisible hands would have removed the stone. But it was to be taken away by human hands. Thus Christ would show that humanity is to cooperate with divinity. What human power can do divine power is not summoned to do. God does not dispense with man's aid. He strengthens him, co-operating with him as he uses the powers and capabilities given him."¹⁷

To insist, as does Venden, that God "does not need my help" in the work of overcoming sin is to miss the point. God doesn't need our help to witness for Him either something Venden holds to be very much a Christian duty. Angels could do a far better job of carrying the gospel to the world. But God has given this task to human beings, to be performed in His strength. The same is true of salvation.

As we have seen, Venden denies emphatically that humans have any cooperative role with God in the battle with sin. Again we note his insistence:

"Even if I go so far as to say, 'Well, God is going to have to help me,' as long as I rely on myself to do any part of it, my end product is going to be, to any extent that I am involved, filthy rags" (p. 125).

Yet the Bible is just as emphatic that we are to be involved in this work.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

Elsewhere Paul makes it clear that this working out of our salvation is not simply our letting God do the work, but is in fact our active cooperation with God's work. Writing in the next epistle of "this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), and of his goal to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (verse 28), he declares concerning his own life: "Whereunto I also labor, striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily" (verse 29). No wonder Ellen White writes, concerning this truth: "Man is to work out that which God works in."¹⁸

Elsewhere Ellen White speaks even more clearly that the work of overcoming is not to be left entirely to Jesus, as Venden claims:

"Man must work with his human power aided by the divine power of Christ, to resist and conquer at any cost to himself. In short, man must overcome as Christ overcame. . . . This could not be the case if Christ alone did all the overcoming. Man must do his part; he must be victor on his own account."¹⁹

In the context of a statement we've quoted already, Venden tries again to explain what our part is in salvation, as well as God's part:

"It is not true that Jesus does it all, because Jesus cannot seek Himself for us. Here is where our will and our willpower and our human effort has to go toward seeking Jesus in an ongoing relationship with Him day by day. He does not do it all. He cannot seek Himself for us. But Jesus has promised that if we will seek relationship with Him, He will work to keep us from falling. And what Jesus has promised, He is able to perform. He does not need my help for that" (p. 85).

But Jesus stated quite clearly that seeking is not enough, that we must strive also:

"Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able" (Luke 13:24).

Ellen White comments as follows on this verse:

"We are to strive, to agonize, to enter in at the strait gate; for many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able. It will take something more than mere seeking to enter in at the strait gate; for the gate to death is wide, and the road broad, and easy of access, and many there be that go in thereat."²⁰

And what is this work we must do, which involves more than seeking?

"When we read that many will seek to enter in and shall not be able, then we want to understand what we shall do in order to succeed. This to us is a mournful statement, that there are those who will fail to enter in at the strait gate because they only seek to enter in, and do not strive. . . .

"The pitying Saviour stands right by your side to help you. He would send every angel out of glory while you are struggling to overcome sin, so that Satan cannot have the victory over you. Christ . . . took man's human nature upon Him that He might come right down to man in the temptation wherewith man is beset. The pitiful Redeemer knows just how to help us in every one of our strivings."²¹

Elsewhere Ellen White again affirms that our part in salvation is the putting away of sin, through active cooperation with God's power:

"In the work of salvation the grace of Christ is united with a willing and obedient service, on the part of man. The sincerity of our profession of love to God will be made manifest by our earnest endeavors to fulfill the requirements of His law. Those who are the servants of God will renounce all evil habits and associations. There will be constant and earnest efforts made to lift up the soul from its defilement. . . .

"We are not to be altogether passive, thinking that there has been no task allotted to those who would win immortality. No, no; God calls upon us to do our best with the powers that He

has given us to put to the stretch every faculty, and exercise every ability, that we may not fail of everlasting life. That man can be saved in indolence, in inactivity, is an utter impossibility. There is a constant conflict before those who would win eternal life. Faith and works go hand in hand. That man has nothing to do but to believe, is a fallacy and a most dangerous doctrine. . . .

"You are to open the door of the heart. You are to clear away the rubbish from the portals, and throw wide the door, that the heavenly Guest may find a welcome and an entrance. Christ will not enter a heart that is defiled with sin. It is our work to put away all iniquity."²²

Again we recall Venden's claim: "Overcoming is God's department; it's not yours. . . . Victory isn't something that we strive for, try for, or work hard to get" (p. 99). Reading the above inspired statements, we are forced to decide: Will we believe human theories, or the explicit counsel of God?

4. "Sin" and "sins."

Venden's effort to read Hebrews 12:4 and through his own doctrinal lenses likewise takes him away from the Biblical consensus. Hebrews 12:4 declares, "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin." Venden comments as follows on this verse:

"Jesus is our example here. And Jesus never strove against sins. . . . He didn't struggle with sins, but He did struggle with Sin, unto blood. And the devil pushed all the way, trying to get Jesus to separate from His Father, which is the real issue in Sin" (pp. 110-111, italics original).

But the Bible nowhere makes a distinction between "sins" and "Sin." The Bible nowhere teaches that first we separate from God, then commit specific acts of sin. Just the opposite is the teaching of Scripture:

"But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:2).

Venden spends an entire chapter insisting that Revelation 3:5, which speaks of overcoming sin as a prerequisite for retaining our names in the book of life, must be viewed through a "relationship-centered interpretation" rather than a "behavior-centered interpretation" (pp. 102-103). Once again, this is a distinction of which the Bible knows nothing. While Venden is correct in stating that the white raiment described in this verse refers to imparted rather than imputed righteousness (p. 103), he seems not to understand the implication of his reference to Revelation 19:7, which speaks of how "the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready" (p. 103). He goes on to indicate correctly, again that modern translations are more accurate than the King James Version in stating that "the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (RSV) (pp. 103-104). The bride making herself ready sounds like considerable effort, as I suspect most brides would attest! Yet it is effort performed with joy, as efforts to overcome will be for every converted Christian.

5. "Not One Thread of Human Devising."

Venden quotes Ellen White's statement that the robe of Christ's righteousness "has in it not one thread of human devising" (p. 104).²³ He then comments: "None of our work is mixed up in it at all. It is totally God's robe" (p. 104). Without question it is totally God's robe, but to say the absence of human devising means the absence of human effort is to make Ellen White contradict herself. On the previous page Venden quotes Ellen White's statement that "by the wedding garment in the parable is represented the pure, spotless character which Christ's true followers will possess" (p. 104).²⁴ And how is this character formed, according to the same author in the same book?

"God gives the talents, the powers of the mind; we form the character. It is formed by hard, stern battles with self. Conflict after conflict must be waged against hereditary tendencies. We shall have to criticize ourselves closely, and allow not one unfavorable trait to remain uncorrected."²⁵

Her reference here to hereditary tendencies and unfavorable traits makes it impossible for Venden to explain this statement about "battles with self" as anything other than direct struggles with sin, as his "relationship" theology seeks in vain to do. The lack of "human devising" in the robe of righteousness simply means God gives all the directions and all the power including the power with which we were born (1 Chronicles 29:14).²⁶ But this power, as the above statement makes clear, remains ours to exercise.

After quoting Ellen White's reference to "the pure, spotless character which Christ's true followers will possess" (p. 104).²⁷, Venden states: "It doesn't say 'have to' or 'must' possess" (p. 104). But elsewhere Ellen White does say "must" regarding the believer's possession of such a character. She writes:

"So perfect is the character represented which men must have in order to be Christ's disciples that the infidel has said that it is not possible for any human being to attain unto it. But no less a standard must be presented by all who claim to be children of God."²⁸

Without wishing to sound insulting, it is truly dangerous to write books and preach sermons without thoroughly doing one's homework in the inspired documents.

6. Denial of Self-Examination.

Any careful scrutiny of personal behavior seems anathema to Morris Venden's theology. He writes:

"One of the main reasons why it takes so long for the fruit to develop is that we insist on swinging back and forth between two extremes first looking to Jesus and depending on His power but then checking ourselves to see how we're doing" (p. 39).

But the Bible commands us: "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). How can one see this self-examination as anything other than the scrutiny of one's conduct, especially when the Bible is clear that the genuineness of our faith is shown by our works (James 2:18)? Ellen White is likewise clear on the need for moral self-scrutiny by the Christian:

"Closely criticize the temper, the disposition, the thoughts, words, inclinations, purposes, and deeds. How can we ask intelligently for the things we need unless we prove by the Scriptures the condition of our spiritual health?"²⁹

"Every follower of Christ should daily examine himself, that he may become perfectly acquainted with his own conduct. There is with nearly all a neglect of self-examination. This neglect is positively dangerous in one who professes to be a mouthpiece for God."³⁰

"The daily review of our acts, to see whether conscience approves or condemns, is necessary for all who wish to arrive at the perfection of Christian character."³¹

7. Practical Confusion.

Error always creates needless dilemmas and blurred awareness of spiritual reality. The confusion created by Venden's theology in many Adventist minds is illustrated by what he calls the "blue letter," apparently sent to him by one confused by the practical implications of Venden's "let go and let God" teachings. Following are some lines from this letter:

"How does one go about fighting his appetite? Does he just tell God he can't control it, ask him to control it for him, and give Him his will? And then let God make him not want to eat?"

"In the meantime, when he's hungry, should he take diet pills to help God out? . . .

"Should I go ahead and eat while I wait for God to take away the desire? . . .

"I have read a lot of answers and promises, in the Bible and spirit of prophecy and other places. I've experienced the solution to many problems--but this time I'm baffled. Maybe I'm impatient or looking for an easy way out. But I think I'm being honest with God and myself. How literal are these instructions? I am anxious for your reply because the hang-up hangs on! (pp. 120-121).

I would suggest that perhaps the true source of this person's confusion is the "other places," in addition to the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, where she is getting her ideas about Christian living. Venden accentuates this confusion by his own response:

"Soon after I received the 'blue letter,' I took it with me to a minister's meeting and began to ask around for some answers from my colleagues" (p. 122).

How about answers from Inspiration? How about putting this entire "relationship" theology under the microscope of Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy? To be sure, practical dilemmas are not absent from a life strictly obedient to what God says. But dilemmas created by mere human ideas are quite unnecessary. At the bottom line, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out just how absurd this "let go and let God" theology really is, from the standpoint of simple logic as well as inspired counsel. This "blue letter" illustrates this lack of logic all too well. If God is assumed to do "all the work" of overcoming our sins, just what does this mean? Is the one struggling with diet, temper, lust, or any number of problems to expect God to make them feel like doing right, subduing their fleshly desires without effort on their part? If so, where does such a promise exist in the

inspired writings? Are we talking about the obliteration of fleshly desires in the Christian something Inspiration flatly denies will happen?³²

We see yet again a compelling argument for abandoning all theology-based and experience-driven theories about Christian living, and basing our views entirely on the written counsel of God regardless of the experiential and spiritual discomfort this might bring.

Christ's Intercession: Confusion and False Issues

Venden's claim, represented by the title of the book in question, that Christians are "never without an intercessor" even after probation's close, is fraught with irrelevant statements, misperception of historic Adventist views, and the mingling of truth and error.

Three points in Venden's discussion of Christ's mediatorial work deserve attention:

1. Living "on our own power."

Venden makes the following statements about the historic Adventist belief that God's people, during the great time of trouble, will live without an intercessor:

"A lot of people believe, based on a couple of paragraphs in the book *The Great Controversy*, that during the time of trouble that follows the close of probation, Christians are going to have to live on their own power.

"Have you heard that? Have you heard that you'll have to live without an intercessor? . . .

"Some have gotten the idea that we're going to need enough righteousness stored up in our batteries, or enough righteousness by habit or momentum, to kind of carry us through this time, when we'll be on our own" (p. 58).

"Don't tell me that there has to be a time, during the time of trouble ahead, when we'll live on our own steam. That is just not possible" (p. 59).

"He's still holding to His original promise, 'Lo, I am with you alway.' Does He say, 'Even till the close of probation?' No! He says, 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world' (Matthew 28:20)" (pp. 60-61).

Of all the Adventists I'm familiar with--now and throughout our history--who have taught final-generation perfection, I know of absolutely none who have ever taught that Christians after probation's close will "live on their own power" (p. 58). The only thing living without a mediator has ever meant in any writings or teachings of such persons that I've known is living without the continuous availability of forgiveness. Herbert E. Douglass, one of the more prominent advocates of this theology in late twentieth-century Adventism, makes this point as clear as possible:

"During this reign of Satan the Christian who has reached the moral perfection that God says can be attained in this life will be saying No, as Jesus said No to all temptations. There will be no stopping place where the Christian may relax his guard or when he may no longer need the sustaining grace of the Holy Spirit."³³

Venden's insistence that we'll always need Christ's mediation because of our past, even after the close of probation, is beside the point. No one has ever denied this. But after probation's close our past sins "have gone beforehand to judgment,"³⁴ and have been totally vanquished in believers' lives.³⁵ Thus no continuous mediation is necessary on account of these past failings.

Christ's promise to be with us till the end of the world (Matt. 28:20) is in no way negated by forgiveness no longer being available after probation's close. We will still need Jesus as well as the Holy Spirit for power, even if forgiveness is no longer continuously available.

2. Other Purposes for Mediation.

Venden quotes Ellen White statements which speak of Christ's mediation benefiting unfallen beings (p. 62),³⁶ as well as keeping us from falling (p. 62).³⁷ Here we see why Ellen White says concerning the use of words by inspired writers: "Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea."³⁸

Certainly the mediatorial work of Christ preserves the unfallen worlds, since what Christ is doing helps to answer any questions the unfallen universe may still have about God's justice. And certainly the forgiveness provided by this mediation for sinners also keeps those sinners from falling, since Biblical forgiveness is not merely a matter of record-keeping. Ellen White indicates this in the following statement:

"God's forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin, but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.' Psalm 51:10."³⁹

But it remains a fact that the unfallen worlds would not need Christ's mediation were it not for the questions raised by the intrusion of sin. No mediator at all would have been needed had sin not entered God's universe. While it is true that all God's creatures are sustained by His power, this power is not necessarily the same as His grace and mediation. Ellen White speaks of how Adam before the fall could form a righteous character by obedience, but that after the fall, not only forgiveness but a changed heart is needed to render such obedience.⁴⁰ In both cases the power comes from God, but in the latter case we are talking about a special kind of power not needed by unfallen beings.

The presence of a mediator in any dispute implies the presence of differences. So long as General Motors or Chrysler get along with the United Auto Workers, mediators are not needed. In the case of God and His people, differences are called sins. So long as sin exists in Christian lives, a mediator is needed (1 John 2:1). If sin has been overcome, a mediator is no longer needed. But in no way does this imply that those mediatorial benefits other than forgiveness are no longer needed by overcomers. Despite Venden's insinuation, Adventists who have taught (and continue to teach) the necessity of living without an intercessor during the time of trouble are extremely clear as to what this means: living without the continuous availability of forgiveness, not living without the need for imparted power.

3. Last-Minute Christians.

Here we see a new error introduced into the church regarding the final generation, based on inspired evidence which must be termed dubious at best. Venden asks:

"What about the people who come to Christ thirty minutes before probation closes? They haven't had a lifetime to become transformed by grace and to become overcomers. Will they need any forgiveness during the final time of trouble? Is it possible that someone might lose his patience and need forgiveness for simply wanting to punch out a right-wing Christian Coalition person during the time of trouble? The thief on the cross didn't have any time to grow" (p. 64, italics original).

Though he doesn't come right out and say it, Venden clearly implies that this group will in fact continue to sin after probation closes. Without any Biblical support, he assumes that the reference to the "righteous" and the "holy" in Revelation 22:11 refers to two distinct groups among the saved who endure the time of trouble not seeming to consider that John, like the other Hebrew writers of Scripture, uses words parallel to each other which mean the same thing. Nowhere does the Bible give evidence that these two words mean two separate things, despite the ramblings of some theologians. Ellen White is certainly clear that righteousness and holiness are one and the same thing:

"Righteousness is holiness, likeness to God; and 'God is love.'"⁴¹

The "holy" described in Revelation 22:11, according to Venden, "are holy because they're overcomers, and they're not falling anymore" (p. 65). But the group called "righteous," in his view, are righteous like presumably the thief on the cross "because of Jesus' imputed righteousness" (p. 65). According to Venden, "this group includes those who accept Christ thirty minutes before the close of probation. Are they righteous? Yes. They are covered by Christ's righteousness" (p. 65).

Notice that Venden is careful not to say explicitly that this "righteous" group are still sinning, but that is clearly what he implies, especially when his description of the "righteous" is placed alongside his description on the same page of the "holy," who he claims are "not falling anymore" (p. 65). The implication is obvious: the "righteous" are still occasionally falling.

What about these "thirty minutes to deadline" Christians Venden talks about? First, we need to remember that God is not a slave to time. The close of probation is not arbitrary. It happens only after all have been given sufficient time to adequately respond to the light given. Regarding those who come in at the last during this time, Ellen White has written:

"Some of us have had time to get the truth and to advance step by step, and every step we have taken has given us strength to take the next. But now time is almost finished, and what we have been years learning, they will have to learn in a few months."⁴²

In other words, God is not going to arbitrarily close probation on people who haven't had the time to develop the maturity essential to stand without a mediator as part of the final demonstration of perfect holiness. Venden is here creating a completely false issue.

He says, "The thief on the cross didn't have any time to grow" (p. 64). He needs to go back and read The Desire of Ages. Concerning the penitent thief, Ellen White comments:

"This man was not a hardened criminal; he had been led astray by evil associations, but he was less guilty than many of those who stood beside the cross reviling the Saviour. He had seen and heard Jesus, and had been convicted by His teaching, but he had been turned away from Him by the priests and rulers. Seeking to stifle conviction, he had plunged deeper and deeper into sin, until he was arrested, tried as a criminal, and condemned to die on the cross. . . .

"He calls to mind all he has heard of Jesus, how He has healed the sick and pardoned sin. He has heard the words of those who believed in Jesus and followed Him weeping. . . . The Holy Spirit illuminates his mind, and little by little the chain of evidence is joined together."⁴³

In other words, this man didn't need a lot of time to grow. He already knew the truth about Jesus and His mission, and through circumstances and events was at last brought to accept it. There is no inspired evidence at all that God is ever shortchanged by time or place in the work of bringing sinners to a knowledge of truth. To be sure, millions who have died sinning ignorantly will be saved, and Scripture is clear that God winks at the times of our ignorance (Acts 17:30; see also James 4:17). But regarding the sins we already know about, God provides sufficient power in His commands for us to obey them if that power is brought into our lives through conversion and acceptance of the truth. Neither the uncertainties of life nor anything else can force God into improvisational judgments where some celestial "insurance policy" is invoked to cover people who supposedly haven't had time to live the truth they know. In Ellen White's words:

"As long as there is hope, until they resist the Holy Spirit to their eternal ruin, men are guarded by heavenly intelligences."⁴⁴

In defense of his view that some Christians after probation's close will still fall and fail,

Venden quotes an Ellen White statement often used by supporters of the New Theology to "prove" that the final generation isn't quite sinless even during the great time of trouble:

"It is needful for them to be placed in the furnace of fire; their earthliness must be consumed, that the image of Christ may be perfectly reflected."⁴⁵

After quoting this statement, Venden writes:

"Evidently God has a purpose for the stress that His people go through. Under such stress, those who came to Christ thirty minutes before the close of probation may grow as much in a short time as others did in years" (p. 68).

But is this earthliness sin? Other Ellen White statements provide a clue. When seeking to understand Ellen White's writings, we need to remember her stated method of interpretation: "The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture."⁴⁶ Speaking of those at the end of time, Ellen White writes elsewhere:

"In the last great conflict of the controversy with Satan those who are loyal to God will see every earthly support cut off."⁴⁷

In another statement, using language similar to the "earthliness" statement in Great Controversy, she writes:

"We can never perfect a round, full Christian experience until every earthly support is removed, and the soul centers its entire affections upon God."⁴⁸

To acquire strength and sustenance from earthly support (family, friends, material needs, etc.) is not sin. God does not forbid the Christian to have earthly support systems. But our faith will not be ultimately tested and proved unless such support is no longer available, and we must rely completely on God. The above statement about the cutting off of earthly support in the final conflict is stated in the context of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, when He was deprived of both physical nourishment and human sympathy. The other statement advised someone to learn to trust God instead of human friends for daily strength. It isn't sinful to desire physical food or human companionship. But at times God must teach us that even these innocent, seemingly essential support systems must be withdrawn so that our dependence on Him will be total, as Jesus experienced in the wilderness of temptation.

Venden isn't wrong to imply that God's people during the time of trouble still need to grow. In fact, the above inspired statements are clear that this growth will be needed by all the saved at this time, not just the "last-minute" believers Venden talks about. But because they need further growth doesn't mean they are still sinning in any way. In fact, Ellen White is clear that growth in Christian perfection doesn't cease even when Jesus comes, but in fact continues throughout eternity.⁴⁹

It is important to note that Ellen White's reference to those who "have to learn in a few months"⁵⁰ what others have taken years to learn, is followed by this statement: "Those who would not receive the mark of the beast and his image when the decree goes forth, must have decision now to say, Nay, we will not regard the institution of the beast."⁵¹ In other words, those who learn what they must "in a few months" are still facing the choice between the seal of God and the mark of the beast, which is before probation closes. Several pages later, Ellen White states with unmistakable clarity the preparation needed before probation's close:

"I also saw that many do not realize what they must be in order to live in the sight of the Lord without a high priest in the sanctuary during the time of trouble. Those who receive the seal of the living God and are protected in the time of trouble must reflect the image of Jesus fully."

"I saw that many were neglecting the preparation so needful and were looking to the time of 'refreshing' and the 'latter rain' to fit them to stand in the day of the Lord and to live in His sight. Oh, how many I saw in the time of trouble without a shelter! . . . Those who refuse to be hewed by the prophets and fail to purify their souls in obeying the whole truth, will come up to the time of the falling of the plagues, and then see that they needed to be hewed and squared for the building. But there will be no time then to do it and no Mediator to plead their cause before the Father. . . . I saw that none could share the 'refreshing' unless they obtain the victory over every besetment, over pride, selfishness, love of the world, and over every wrong word and action. We should, therefore, be drawing nearer and nearer to the Lord and be earnestly seeking that preparation necessary to enable us to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord."⁵²

In other words, total victory over every wrong word and action is essential in order to receive the latter rain and to be ready for the great time of trouble. When we put all the above statements together, it becomes clear that whatever growth and development remains necessary after probation's close is something beyond the removal of sin from the life.

Venden moves perilously toward the beliefs of the New Theology when he assures us that the reason sin won't continue in heaven is that "three problems that give us so much trouble, the world, the flesh, and the devil, will be gone forever when heaven comes" (p. 64). Apparently this is why he is confident that "those righteous dead who haven't finished growing up in Christ" as well as "those living who come in thirty minutes before probation closes" (p. 64) stand in no danger of reintroducing sin in Paradise. Again we assert our rejection of any view of divine providence which sees God taken by surprise either by death or the final close of probation. Inspiration is crystal clear that the God who is unwilling that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9) will guard the lives and souls of those for whom hope remains.⁵³ But Venden's idea that the absence of fleshly desires and worldly allurements in heaven together with our being "so enthralled by constant dependence upon a loving, visible God" (p. 64) will make sure sin won't re-emerge, is belied by the reality that sin first emerged in the perfect society of heaven where the world, the flesh, and the devil did not exist.

"Constant dependence upon a loving, visible God" had been heaven's experience for eons when sin finally marred God's universe. The New Theology belief that all God needs to do to make sure sin is eradicated from Christian lives is to abolish our sinful natures is contradicted by the fact that sin got started when no one had a sinful nature. Sin is a matter of the will. And unless it is demonstrated that even under the severest pressure our will blended with God's will can resist the slightest departure from purity, the danger of sin rising again remains. No wonder Ellen White declares, regarding what God will not do when Jesus comes:

"The Refiner does not then sit to pursue His refining process, and remove their sins and their corruption. This is all to be done in these hours of probation."⁵⁴

Perhaps a word should be said about the issue of unknown sin. Venden confines his discussion of victory over sin to known sin only, stating:

"It is possible for people to overcome known sin even though they still have sinful natures and even though they may still have unknown sins in their lives" (p. 72).

He leaves unanswered the question of whether those after probation's close will still have unknown sin in their lives. But Inspiration is clear that the intercession of Christ in heaven deals with sins of ignorance:

"The minds of all who embrace this message are directed to the most holy place, where Jesus stands before the ark, making His final intercession for all those for whom mercy still lingers and for those who have ignorantly broken the law of God. This atonement is made for the righteous dead as well as for the righteous living. It includes all who died trusting in Christ, but who, not having received the light upon God's commandments, had sinned ignorantly in transgressing its precepts."⁵⁵

So the intercession of Christ for sin in the heavenly sanctuary includes intercession for ignorant sin. But at the close of probation Christ ceases to forgive sins; the saints now have spotless

characters,⁵⁶ and are victorious "over every wrong word and action."⁵⁷ If ignorant sins require forgiveness, and if the close of Christ's intercession means forgiveness is no longer offered, we must conclude that sins of ignorance in the lives of God's people have all been revealed and overcome by the time probation ceases.

Other Matters

Venden spends little time in this book with issues involving the nature of sin and the nature of Christ. But a few comments will suffice in addressing the points he does make. At one point he writes:

"When we talk about overcoming known sin, we are not talking about being sinless. If a person were able to stop sinning today, he would still not be sinless because of his sinful nature" (p. 79).

But neither Scripture nor Ellen White teach the involuntary presence of sin on account of a sinful nature. The Bible declares:

"Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin" (James 1:14-15).

In Ellen White's words:

"There are thoughts and feelings suggested and aroused by Satan that annoy even the best of men, but if they are not cherished, if they are repulsed as hateful, the soul is not contaminated with guilt, and no other is defiled by their influence."⁵⁸

Two of Venden's comments on the nature of Christ also merit a response. At one point he writes:

"Jesus never strove against sins. Please underscore that Jesus didn't have trouble wanting to do sins. If you'll research this carefully, you'll find out that sins (what we usually call sin), were disgusting to Jesus" (pp. 110-111).

If so, we might well ask why Jesus declared, "I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me" (John 5:30). Why do we read elsewhere that "Christ pleased not Himself" (Rom. 15:3)? The implication is clear from these verses that for Christ to seek His own will or to please Himself would have been contrary to God's will, and therefore sin.

The following Ellen White statements are certainly hard to reconcile with Venden's insistence that "Jesus never strove against sins" (p. 110):

"There were those who tried to cast contempt upon Him because of His birth, and even in His childhood He had to meet their scornful looks and evil whisperings. If He had responded by an impatient word or look, if He had conceded to His brothers by even one wrong act, He would have failed of being a perfect example."⁵⁹

"Satan led the cruel mob in its abuse of the Saviour. It was his purpose to provoke Him to retaliation if possible, or to drive Him to perform a miracle to release Himself, and thus break up the plan of salvation. One stain upon His human life, one failure of His humanity to endure the

terrible test, and the Lamb of God would have been an imperfect offering, and the redemption of man a failure."⁶⁰

One cannot read these statements and come away with the idea that it was no struggle at all for Jesus to avoid impatience and retaliation.

Elsewhere Venden raises the common though fallacious argument about the presumed impossibility of Christ being "tempted in all points like as we are" because of temptations of which His life experience knew nothing, such as television, wife-beating, etc. (p. 74). Such arguments are simply born of bad reasoning, if nothing else. Television obviously didn't exist in Jesus' time, but the Roman world offered plenty of comparable amusements and diversions, as any visitor to the ruins of Pompei can attest. Nazareth being the place it was (John 1:46), it isn't hard to imagine the variety of temptations available to Jesus during His youth and young adulthood. True, Jesus didn't have a wife, and thus couldn't have been tempted to spousal abuse, but again, numerous comparable irritations were present throughout His life to prompt Him to impatience and retaliation, as the above inspired statements make plain. Despite the advances of science and technology, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16) are fundamentally the same in the age of the Internet as in the age of the horse and chariot.

Venden spends several pages responding to a recent Pacific Press book titled *Ten Who Left*, which contains testimonies from former Adventists detailing the reasons they left the church.⁶¹ If the testimonies in this book truly reflect the thoughts of those interviewed, the book should have been titled, *Ten Who Need Conversion*. Some of the experiences cited by the interviewees are so extreme as to lose any relevance to a serious discussion of growing up Adventist like one who speaks of a home where no fires were allowed in the fireplace on Sabbath,⁶² and another who describes an academy principal who went around reaching up girls' blouses to see if they were wearing bras!⁶³ As a born and bred Adventist myself, deeply immersed in the culture of the church's conservative wing, I can truly say I have never heard of anyone not using their fireplace on Sabbath especially in view of an Ellen White statement which places in context the Biblical command in this regard,⁶⁴--nor can I imagine a school principal who stuck his hand inside girls' dresses as remotely typical of even the most eccentric SDA school administrators of which I confess to have known a few! Such comments reduce the value of the testimonies given almost to the level of frivolity. Without meaning to sound harsh, the credibility of church officials is not enhanced when such material is printed by an Adventist publishing house.

One could be forgiven for concluding that this book offers a convenient excuse for practically every dispute with Adventist theology or lifestyle standards to be printed on an Adventist press, all in the name of listening to former members. Is it mere coincidence that nearly every doctrinal, behavioral, and liturgical complaint voiced by liberal Adventists--from 1844 and Ellen White to jewelry, homosexuality, and women's ordination--just happened to find its way into this book? Frankly, I find myself bothered less by these ten who had the honesty to leave than by many others who hold identical beliefs but persist in living a lie by choosing to stay!

Venden claims to have read this book "in about one sitting" (p. 106). The following comment by him gives evidence that he probably should have taken a bit more time:

"As I read the book, my heart ached as I realized that too much of the time our primary emphasis is on roasting the Catholics, getting everybody keeping the Ten Commandments and going to church on Saturday, and getting them all baptized. Yet we wonder why we have two million former members and why so many of the dropouts feel that they were manipulated into joining the church" (p. 107).

But the fact is that every one of the former members interviewed for this book, according to their own testimony, were raised Seventh-day Adventists. Evangelistic techniques of one sort or another are not the issue here, since none of the former Adventists in question became Adventists through evangelism. Again we sense that Venden remains so immersed in the doctrinaire world of his evangelist-father and uncle that he can't seem to adjust to a church where the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge especially for the younger generations has long since ceased to be a priority.

Venden veers into an utterly strange concept, one totally contrary to clear inspired statements, with the following paragraph:

"But the interesting thing is that even those who might have been manipulated in, who never did come to Christ, who came only to the church and made a profession, are written in the book of life. Apparently those names are written down in heaven. God is so anxious to get everyone in that He'll write down those who only profess to come. Amazing! Really amazing!" (p. 109).

Amazing indeed! Where is the Biblical evidence for such a concept? Venden offers not a single Bible verse in support of this astounding claim.

The following Ellen White statements directly contradict Venden's view:

"Names are registered upon the church-books upon earth, but not in the book of life."⁶⁵

"You might be thought excellent in character. Your name may be registered on the church book, but it is not written in the Lamb's book of life,"⁶⁶

"Joining the church is one thing, and connecting with Christ is quite another. Not all the names registered in the church books are registered in the Lamb's book of life."⁶⁷

"Names may be registered in the church books upon earth, and yet not be recorded in the book of life above."⁶⁸

Conclusion: Fanatical Moderation

In one of the saddest, most destructive articles ever to appear in an Adventist publication, the wife of a college religion teacher details her pilgrimage away from our core beliefs--a testimony replete with doctrinal ambiguity, generational stereotypes, and emotional recollections.⁶⁹ In this tragic manifesto of the growth in one experience of modern Adventist liberalism, the author speaks of one who seems to have guided her pilgrimage early on. She writes of how she "listened with astonishment to a Week of Prayer by Morris Venden on righteousness by faith. Although I had always been sincere about religious life, I had never before found the pure grace of God offered to me."⁷⁰

We have seen, certainly in the book under discussion, that Venden's idea of "pure grace" is not the doctrine of grace taught by Inspiration. But none can discount the reality that the teachings of Morris Venden were the first step in the journey of many modern Adventists away from the Biblical faith and lifestyle witness of their church. Probably more than anyone else, Venden has driven a wedge in the Adventist mind between the Christian's walk with Christ and the more definitive, soul-piercing features of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity. Instead of viewing a personal relationship with Christ as the means of achieving faithfulness to Inspiration's doctrinal and moral benchmarks, Venden's teachings have spawned a trend in the church which views such a relationship as transcending the need for such faithfulness.

More so than the doctrine of original sin, the theoretical bottom line of the New Theology, the "relationship" theology of Morris Venden paved the way for the teachings of Desmond Ford.

Who was an early supporter of Morris Venden?? His name was Dale Ratzlaff,

who was removed from the ministry for denying the sanctuary doctrine. He has recently written a book attacking the seventh-day Sabbath⁷¹ and another which denounces the investigative judgment as a "cultic doctrine."⁷²

Venden may well lament these developments, much as Karl Marx would doubtless have lamented the distortion of his ideology by Lenin and his successors. But the trajectory of modern Adventist history offers clear evidence that it was Venden's teachings which took the first initiative in breaking and fertilizing the Adventist soil for the later seeds of evangelical and liberal theology. Venden's theology has facilitated the capacity of Adventists to assume the possibility of an encounter with God not contained or defined by the doctrinal and moral parameters of Scripture.

Years ago another religion teacher wrote in a college newspaper of how learning the difference between "knowing the right things" and "knowing the right Person" enabled scholars such as himself to question the relevance and truthfulness of various Adventist beliefs.⁷³ (While "knowing the right things" superficially will save no one, one cannot read such Scriptures as Hosea 4:6; Matt. 4:4; John 8:31; and 2 Thess. 2:13 and not conclude that the internalized knowledge of truth (see Duet. 30:14; Psalm 119:7; Jer. 31:31-33; Heb. 8:8-10) is in fact what salvation is all about.)

In short, when the unscriptural distinction between relationship on the one hand and truth and obedience on the other was transmitted to Adventist minds, the tragedy of modern Adventism commenced.

Without Venden, I believe it can safely be said that the internal challenges to Adventism of both evangelical and liberal theology would not have been possible.

Yet unlike most contemporary Adventist thought leaders of a similar bent, Venden refuses to follow his own logic. He cannot acknowledge the natural antipathy between his extreme view of grace and the pillars of Adventist belief, nor will he submit his darling "relationship" paradigm to the scrutiny of the inspired consensus. He persists in the pursuit of fanatical moderation a middle ground between historic Adventism and the alternatives which is both contrived and irrational.

One denominational editor recently complained of "The Vanishing Middle" in the church's continuing dialogue over various issues.⁷⁴ To such I reply, Stay tuned. It will get worse.

NOTE: FOR ANY REFERENCES NOTED , GO TO MAIN DOCUMENT.