

Palmdale Conference (1976)

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A historic theological consultation involving nine scholars and church administrators from Australia and eleven from the United States, the Palmdale Conference convened in the high desert town of Palmdale, California, during April 23-30, 1976. The purpose of the consultation was to consider a highly disputed question causing widespread pastoral problems in churches both in America and in Australia: the meaning of the Pauline expression, “righteousness by faith.” Did the biblical phrase refer only to justification or did it also include sanctification? The issue lay at the heart of a vigorous debate over sinless perfectionism and the doctrine of Christian assurance.¹

Background to the Conference

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Robert Brinsmead, a theology student at Avondale College in New South Wales, Australia, began to agitate an unorthodox teaching on end-time sinless perfectionism. The distinctive emphasis on perfectionism claimed to be the logical extension of the “last generation theology” of prominent Adventist theologian M. L. Andreasen.² The teaching appeared to present a solution to the widespread lack of Christian assurance of salvation among church members arising from the traditional teaching about the Christian life and end-time judgment. Brinsmead taught that in Christ’s final work of cleansing the sanctuary begun in 1844, human sinful nature would be physically eradicated, “blotted out” from the subconscious mind of the believer just prior to the close of probation in a final cleansing of the “soul temple.” Thus, a believer could become sinless and be able to live without need of a mediator after the close of probation.

Brinsmead’s agitation led to the forming of a schismatic group known as the Sanctuary Awakening Fellowship which developed a strong following in both the South Pacific and North America.³ The Australian “awakeners” took courage from the quiet endorsement of American religion teachers such as Herbert Douglass at Atlantic Union College and Peter Jarnes at Union College.⁴

The first direct public response in Adventism to Brinsmead’s teaching on sinless perfection came from British-born Edward Heppenstall, a leading teacher at the church’s seminary, who argued that such teaching negated grace because “sinless people do not need grace.” He also argued that such teaching resulted from a fundamental misunderstanding of the New Testament teaching on justification by faith.⁵ Heppenstall was joined

by other scholars such as Norval F. Pease and Harry W. Lowe.⁶

In the South Pacific region of the church, Desmond Ford, a former student of Heppenstall, became the primary respondent to Brinsmead's schismatic movement and its perfectionism. Through a strong program of preaching and teaching from Paul's epistle to the Romans, Ford emphasized that justification by faith was the cardinal meaning of righteousness by faith and recommended that Brinsmead would benefit from a careful study of the Protestant reformers.⁷ These were the key themes in his approach with his students at Avondale College (Australia).

As both Gerhard Pfandl and Gilbert Valentine document, while Ford emphasized justification, he did not undervalue sanctification nor separate the two, though he did distinguish between them. Justification addressed the relationship of being righteous by faith and this was the ground for sanctification as the inevitable fruit of the life of faith.⁸ During the 1960s, this emphasis effectively protected Avondale from the Awakening movement. Pfandl, among others, observes that Ford's emphasis on righteousness by faith was "a necessary course correction to the prevailing perfectionism of the 1960s."⁹ In 1971, Brinsmead abandoned his esoteric ideas of perfectionism in the light of his study of scripture and the Protestant reformers. He became a strong advocate of justification by faith, presenting it as a core teaching of the sixteenth century Reformation.

Ironically, as the influence of the Sanctuary Awakening Fellowship gradually subsided, advocacy for traditional last generation perfectionism spread more widely and intensified, fostered by those who adhered to the teaching of Andreasen. Church members persuaded by Andreasen's "last generation theology" came to perceive Heppenstall and Ford as teaching "cheap grace" and felt the need to defend against what they saw as an undermining of the distinctive Adventist teaching on obedience to the law in preparation for the end times. Large numbers of church members responding to Ford and Heppenstall, on the other hand, felt released from legalism and feared that the emphasis on Andreasen's teaching would take them back into a form of spiritual bondage. The debate intensified in the 1970s.

In 1973, after a two-year leave for doctoral study at Manchester University in the United Kingdom, Ford returned to Avondale to find the discussion of perfection and the meaning of righteousness by faith both on campus and in many Australian churches much more polarized. Brinsmead, in turning away from perfectionism in the early 1970s, had introduced into the debate, through his magazine *Present Truth*, the writings of the second-generation sixteenth-century Lutheran reformer Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586). The use of Chemnitz's writings served to highlight the sharp difference between the Protestant understanding of soteriology and Roman Catholic teaching.¹⁰ According to Chemnitz, Protestant soteriology saw justification at its core as a forensic concept and stressed the imputed righteousness of Christ. Catholic expression of the doctrine, on the other hand, fused imputed and imparted righteousness together and thus, made sanctification part of the ground of salvation. In Chemnitz's understanding this was a corruption of the gospel akin to that codified by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and was quite foreign to both the apostle Paul and Martin Luther

(1483-1546). The use of the Chemnitzian framework to discuss the issues sharply polarized the Adventist debate and led to accusations that those who adopted a view of righteousness by faith that included sanctification were advocating a Roman Catholic view of salvation.¹¹

Pushing back against the Ford-Heppenstall emphasis on soteriology, the *Review*¹² editor Kenneth Wood, with the assistance of Herbert Douglass and Don F. Neufeld, published in 1974 a special edition of the *Review* on the topic of righteousness by faith, which strongly advocated the M. L. Andreasen perspective.¹³ The *Review* editors claimed to have the support of General Conference president, Robert H. Pierson, and others in his administration who were intent on “reversing” things back to “solid historic Adventist thought.”¹⁴ In Australia, the special issue of the *Review* complicated the pastoral task of the Australasian Division leadership who interpreted the publication as a veiled attack on Avondale and Dr. Ford. In mid-1975, the two opposing sides in the debate were further highlighted in the publication of *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* by Southern Publishing Association. The volume carried two carefully and civilly argued positions on each side of the question.¹⁵ The book appears not to have changed any minds, at least publicly.

In 1973, the righteousness by faith discussion became complicated by other theological issues. At this juncture, in Australia a number of retired pastors and evangelists became troubled by what they perceived as “worldly influence” associated with rising academic standards at Avondale and the growing emphasis on the need for teachers with terminal degrees. They became highly critical of the recently returned Ford, perceiving his emphasis as a form of antinomianism at variance with official church teaching and as a serious departure from historic Adventism.¹⁶ The group circulated pamphlets and lodged formal complaints with the division officers. The charges alleged that Ford’s introducing students to problems associated with the traditional concept of biblical inerrancy and the weaknesses of Ussher’s chronology for the age of the earth unsettled them and was also a departure from orthodox Adventism.

In February 1976, a two-day meeting of the Australasian Division Biblical Research Committee (ABRC), with all local and union conference presidents attending, heard the complaints of a committee of Concerned Brethren (CBs), the principle voices of an anti-Ford faction. They also heard Ford and other faculty respond that Avondale was in fact teaching a moderate Adventist position. Ford documented his oral defense with citations from Adventist literature demonstrating that he was not out of step with other Adventist colleges or other published authors. The Australasian Division president, Robert Frame, reported to the General Conference president, Robert H. Pierson, that Alwyn Salom, senior pastor of the headquarters church and former Avondale professor, also “completely ‘scotched’ the arguments” of the CB’s position.¹⁷ Some participants in the hearing suspected that personal animus against Ford motivated the complaints—a charge vehemently denied by the CB group and that was subsequently withdrawn.¹⁸ The ABRC hearing concluded with a vindication of Ford’s teaching and that of his Avondale colleagues. For diplomatic reasons, Avondale faculty were asked to use language in their lecturing and preaching that might be more commonly understood in the field. Unhappy with the outcome of the ABRC hearings, the CBs continued to agitate against Ford and Avondale and through personal

correspondence took their complaints to Pierson and *Review* editor Kenneth Wood.

The ongoing debate led to the *Australasian Record*, under the editorship of Robert H. Parr, taking a defensive stance toward both the Avondale faculty and Ford, and an opposing stance to the soteriological position of the *Review*. Division leaders in Australia, “alarmed by the promotion of perfectionism in American SDA literature,” appealed to the General Conference for a consultation to resolve the issue of whether the biblical term “righteousness by faith” referred to justification only or to a fusion of both justification and sanctification.¹⁹ The Pierson administration in America regarded the theological differences as merely semantic and was at first reluctant to comply with the request. However, the Australian leadership insisted that the increasing ferment in Australia was damaging the church and the theological question, though it might seem pedantic, was a decisive issue for determining the orthodoxy of sinless perfectionism.²⁰

The Conference

The American delegation attending the eight-day conference was led by President Robert Pierson and included two scholars from Andrews University, two editors from the *Review* and four representatives from the General Conference administrative team and the White Estate. General Conference Vice President Duncan Eva chaired the meeting. The Australian participants included Robert R. Frame, the Australasian Division president; Desmond Ford and Alwyn Salom of Avondale College; the editor of the *Record*, Robert H. Parr; and five representatives from the administration.²¹

A dispute over the composition of the delegation arose in Australia when the committee of Concerned Brethren insisted that two of their membership be included among the Australian participants. They appealed to Pierson who supported the suggestion. However, the Australian leadership declined to include them considering that they had already been given a fair hearing.²² In response the two medical doctors in the CB group, Russell Standish and John Clifford, hastily wrote up a 130-page manuscript based on their ABRI presentation, listing many points on which they differed with Ford’s soteriology, and forwarded it independently to Pierson, Eva, and Wood, asking that it be read at the conference. The paper was not read, though the three recipients acquainted themselves with its content during the conference.²³ Affirming letters of appreciation were later sent to the authors by Pierson and Wood, which were perceived by the two medical doctors as encouraging their work. The Australian administration perceived the letters as undermining their position.

Ten formal papers were read and discussed at the conference although devotionals and sermon topics also addressed the question more generally.²⁴ Formal papers were as follows:

D. F. Neufeld, “Word Studies in the area of Righteousness by Faith”

A. P. Salom, “The Concept of Righteousness in the New Testament”

R. W. Olson, “E. G. White’s Concept of Righteousness by Faith”

R. Dederen, "Justification by Faith as understood by the Reformation Leaders"

D. Ford, "The Scope and Limits of the Pauline Expression 'Righteousness by Faith'"

K. H. Wood, "The Historic Adventist Concept of Righteousness by Faith"

H. K. LaRondelle, "The Eschatological Dimensions of Righteousness by Faith"

A. S. Jorgensen, "A Conspectus of the Righteousness of God"

D. Ford, "The Relationship between the Human Nature of Christ and Righteousness by Faith"

K. H. Wood, "The Historic Adventist Concept of the Human Nature of Christ"²⁵

Though the primary concern of the consultation was the meaning of the Pauline formula, "righteousness by faith," two papers addressed the problem of the sinful/sinless nature of Christ, a topic considered important because it undergirded the Andreasen last-sinless-generation theory. Salom's word study on *dikaiosyne* addressed the Chemnitzian-framed tension in Australia most directly. Salom demonstrated that in scripture the term clearly meant that righteousness is "essentially a matter of right status in the sight of God," and that to introduce a meaning that the term also embraced the idea of "to make righteous" was a Catholic interpretation, not Protestant.²⁶

Delegates concluded the conference with a statement that they did not wish to be taken "as an official pronouncement by church leaders" but rather "as a statement of consensus." It was published a month later as a two-and-a-half-page fine print article in the *Review*.²⁷ The statement began with a clear assertion in its first paragraph that "we agree that when the words righteousness and faith are connected (by 'of' 'by' et cetera) in Scripture, reference is to the experience of justification by faith. God, the righteous Judge, declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus and repents. Sinful though he may be, he is regarded as righteous because in Christ he has come into a righteous relationship with God. This is the gift of God through Christ."²⁸ The paragraph was a direct affirmation of the unanimous understanding of the Australian delegation.

However, three paragraphs further down into the document the statement conceded ambiguously that "Seventh-day Adventists have often used the phrase 'righteousness by faith' theologically to include both justification and sanctification." As Pfandl notes, there was no explanation as to whether such usage was even appropriate or biblical, or whether such usage should continue or not.²⁹ The balance of the statement addressed the two perspectives on the human nature of Christ without expressing a judgment on the correctness of either. Subsequently both sides of the conflict claimed that the consensus statement supported their position.

Outcomes of the Conference

Upon return to Australia, Frame and Ford and the other participants reported on the conference at Avondale and at meetings in the Pacific Islands. The clarifying first paragraph was presented by the Australian delegation as a clear affirmation that the stance Avondale and Desmond Ford had adopted to address the error of sinless perfectionism was theologically sound. In the United States, Kenneth Wood published a series of four “FYI” editorials in the *Review* on the Palmdale statement that emphasized the concession about Adventist past usage as legitimating the inclusion of both justification and sanctification in the term “righteousness by faith.” On that basis he defended the Andreasen and Douglass theory of last generation perfectionism through victory over sin. There were also disputes over whether the statement had included or had intended to include the word “only” at the end of the first sentence, which would have invalidated the *Review*’s interpretation of the document.³⁰ Despite the Palmdale consensus statement, opposition to Ford continued in Australia.

The affirming responses from both Pierson and Wood to Standish and Clifford were taken as a green light for them to circulate their document.³¹ “Anyone reading your booklet with an open mind and a prayerful spirit would find it helpful,” wrote Wood. Clifford and Standish therefore revised and enlarged their manuscript into a 165-page book, *Conflicting Concepts of Righteousness by Faith*, which evangelist George Burnside published on his private press. The book circulated widely in Australia and America. The publication offended the Australasian Division leadership who saw it not just as a discussion of an alternative theological interpretation, but as an attack on their own integrity, an attempt to denigrate and discredit Avondale, and as a personal vendetta against Ford, completely misrepresenting what he taught. Again, the ABRC considered the document and rejected it because of its tone, its misinformation, and its misrepresentation of church workers. The Australasian Division field secretary, A. S. Jorgensen, issued a strong letter of rebuke on behalf of the ABRC and requested Ford to write a reply. This they endorsed and published as an authorized response.³² The behind-the-scenes support offered by the editors of the *Review* to the authors of *Conflicting Concepts* distressed the Australasian leadership and complicated their attempts to calm the ferment. The editor of the *Record* felt the need to continue a defense of the first paragraph and what he saw as biblical orthodoxy. Division President Frame again wrote to the General Conference leadership and to the *Review* and *Herald* informing them of the decision of the ABRC, and protesting the access that Pierson and Wood seemed to be granting to the two doctors. Frame felt he needed to “do justice to the church in Australasia by stating the viewpoint of the leadership and of the Biblical Research Institute (Committee).”³³

Aware that Ford had inescapably become a lightning rod for the theological opposition of the CBs, in 1977 the Australasian Division officers completed arrangements for a two-year teaching exchange at Pacific Union College in California under the terms of the accreditation agreement between Avondale and PUC. In August 1978, a further six-days of discussions were convened at the General Conference with a smaller group of officers and scholars, half of whom had been at the Palmdale Conference. The meeting was another attempt to achieve a more unified understanding on the soteriological issues dividing the church. However, this time no formal

consensus statement was attempted. According to Gordon Hyde, the secretary of the General Conference BRI, the only agreement achieved by the group was a recognition by each side of the fears of the other. “There was general agreement that in the relationship to the provision of justification by faith in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ some have a real and deep fear of ‘cheap grace,’ antinomianism, and any other attitude that tends to lower standards of Christian living . . . On the other hand, there were a number who articulated the somewhat opposite fear of a form of legalism that gives nominal assent to the initial need for justification by faith but then becomes absorbed with the performance of good works. . . .”⁵⁴ The disagreement and lack of consensus continued and still continues in the church.

Conclusion

The Palmdale Conference was an important attempt to clarify and articulate a common understanding of and approach to the Adventist doctrine of Christian assurance and perfection—central soteriological issues. It failed to do this, as did a follow up meeting in 1978. During the 1980s and 1990s, the polarization between the two perspectives sharpened and became intertwined with controversy over the meaning of the pre-Advent judgment and 1844. A surge of perfectionist “last generation” independent ministries emerged and peaked in the late 1990s.

Two distinctive soteriological understandings and emphases continue in the church. The debate, though vigorous, had become less sharply divisive by the second decade of the twenty-first century. Independent ministries frequently advocate “last generation” perfectionist themes but have become less inclined to pursue separationist paths. Nevertheless, the continuing wide appeal of these teachings prompted publication of several works in 2018 directly challenging the orthodoxy of the popular emphasis on the state of perfection in the final generation of believers needed to bring about the eschaton.³⁵

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NOTES

1. A concise summary of the issues at stake can be found in Gerhard Pfandl, "Desmond Ford and the Righteousness by Faith Controversy," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27, no.1-2 (2016): 346, 347.

2. M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 59; and *The Sanctuary Service* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 299-304, 310-321.

3. In 1971 the movement counted 225 fellowship groups, a donor list of 10,000 and a mailing list of 20,000. See Robert Gardner, "The Awakening: A religious Movement in the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (MA Thesis, Loma Linda University, 1971), 84, 92, 102.
4. H. E. Douglass to C. L. Conley, January 19, 1963 cited in Lowell Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism* (Barragga, NSW: Galilee Publications, 1981), 200; Peter Jarnes, *The Sanctuary Restored* (Lincoln, NE: Peter C. Jarnes, 1968), accessed November 29, 2018, <http://awakeandsing.com/Sanctuary%20Restored/sres.pdf>.
5. Edward Heppenstall, "Is Perfection Possible?," *Signs of the Times*, December 1963, 10-11, 30.
6. Norval F. Pease, *By Faith Alone* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962).
7. A synopsis of these events is given in Gilbert M. Valentine, "The Reformation and the Shaping of Conflict over the Meaning of 'Righteousness by Faith' in Seventh-day Adventism. 1960-1978" in *Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-day Adventism*, ed. Rolf J. Pöhler (Möckern-Friedensau, Germany: Institute of Adventist Studies, 2018), 287-310.
8. Pfandl, 345; Valentine, 294.
9. Pfandl, 350.
10. The background to this new development is discussed in Valentine, 298, 299.
11. An example of the kind of comparison chart can be found in Valentine, 309 and *Present Truth*, May 1972, 5.
12. During the time period discussed in this article, the *Adventist Review* was officially entitled the *ARH*, except for a period from 1961 to 1971 when it carried the title *Review and Herald*. The name was changed to *Adventist Review* in 1978. For clarity, this article uses the *Review* to refer to all three titles.
13. "Righteousness by Faith: Special Issue," *ARH*, May 16, 1974.
14. H. E. Douglass to Paul von Wielt, March 11, 1975, cited in Milton Hook, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* (Riverside, CA: Adventist Today, 2008), 140.
15. Hans La Rondelle and Edward Heppenstall argued against and Mervyn C. Maxwell and Herbert Douglass argued the case in favor.
16. Russell R. Standish and A. John Clifford, *Conflicting Concepts of Righteousness by Faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church-Australasian Division* (Wahroonga, NSW: George Burnside Press, 1978), 1.
17. R. R. Frame to R. H. Pierson, July 12, 1976, copy in author's possession. See also Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism*, for an observer's account of developments during this period.

18. Russell R. Standish and Colin D. Standish, *Adventism Challenged: The Gathering Storm* (Rapidan, Virginia: Hartland Publication, 1983), 111.
Ford's personal charisma and exceptional preaching gift was perceived by some critics to have too strong an influence on his students.
19. L. C. Naden to R. R. Frame, November 13, 1975, cited in Hook, 158, 159.
20. Gordon Hyde to R. R. Frame, January 20, 1975; W. J. Hackett to D. Ford, September 30, 1975; Gordon Hyde to Desmond Ford, November 13, 1975; cited in Hook 169.
21. The full consultation group comprised Duncan Eva, (Chair) Raoul Dederen, Hans K. LaRondelle, Robert H. Pierson, N. R. Dower, W. J. Hackett, Gordon M. Hyde, Kenneth H. Wood, Don F. Neufeld, Robert. R. Frame, Desmond Ford, A. P. Salom, A. S. Jorgensen, C. D. Judd, L. C. Naden, Robert H. Parr, C. R. Stanley, and S. M. Uttley.
22. Standish and Standish, 116, 117.
23. "Conflicting Concepts of Righteousness by Faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church-Australasian Division" (April, 1976) claimed erroneously that it was a BRI paper and was marked "for limited distribution only."
24. See for example L. C. Naden's address, "Righteousness by Faith," RG 12, "Palmdale Folder," General Conference Archives.
25. Copies of the papers are available in *Documents from the Palmdale Conference in Righteousness by Faith* (Goodlettsville, TN: Jack D. Walker, 1976). The collection includes "Ellen G. White and Righteousness by Faith," by D. Ford which was prepared for but not read at the conference.
26. A. P. Salom, "The Concept of Righteousness in the New Testament," in Walker, 18, 20, 22.
27. "Christ our Righteousness," *ARH*, May 27, 1976, 4-7.
28. Ibid.
29. Pfandl, 349.
30. Standish and Standish 122-124.
31. R. H. Pierson to John Clifford, May 6, 1976, and Kenneth Wood to Russell Standish, June 7, 1976, cited in Standish and Standish, 118-120.
32. A. S. Jorgensen to Officers, Australasian Division et al (All Union and Local Conference Presidents, Department Directors and Officers of Division and Union Conference Institutions) July 19, 1976. A copy is in the author's possession. The paper implied that it was an approved ABRI paper, an implication protested as misleading.
33. R. R. Frame to R. H. Pierson July 12, 1976, copy in author's possession.

34. Gordon M. Hyde, "Righteousness by faith consultation in Washington," *Adventist Review*, September 7, 1978, 944.

35. George R. Knight, *End-time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018); Jiri Moskala and John C.

Peckham, eds., *God's Character and the Last Generation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018); Reinder Bruinsma, *In All Humility: Saying No to Last Generation Theology* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn, 2018).

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