13. Beliefs about Personal Salvation held by Teachers in North American Seventh-day Adventist Schools

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Salvation is a precious and undeserved gift. It is ours only because of the boundless love and mercy of God. We can do nothing to bring about our own salvation or even change our standing before God. Instead, God, seeing our great need has done what we cannot do. This concept lies at the very heart of the Christian message but Christians often understand salvation in different ways. How one understands the doctrine of salvation will ultimately affect one's approach to, and understanding of, the mission of the church. It is thus fitting that a survey of institutional workers concerned with the perceptions that workers have of both the mission of their institutions and the Adventist Church as a whole, also takes the time to examine beliefs about salvation.

This chapter provides a reflection on the responses of teachers employed in North American Seventh-day Adventist Schools to questions related to their basic concept of salvation in the context of historical discussions about salvation. The survey questions being reviewed did not deal with terminological issues. Words such as justification and sanctification were completely absent from the survey. Rather, the survey focused on broader concepts of salvation. In particular core issues related to the nature of salvation, belief, obedience and assurance of salvation were considered.

Brief Survey of the Doctrine of Salvation in Adventist History

Disagreements about salvation are not limited to differences between denominations. Despite the centrality of salvation to their beliefs as Adventist Christians, Seventh-day Adventists have frequently disagreed with each other regarding the interpretation and importance of various aspects of salvation. These disagreements have resulted in unhealthy tensions between proponents of differing ideas, and confusion for others who have not had the time, skills or access to information needed to resolve the issues for themselves. Such diverse understandings about salvation within the Adventist Church have been encouraged by several historical factors.

We begin with the theological context for the early Adventist theology of salvation. Ellen White's views relied heavily on Methodism, and especially the views of John Wesley (Whidden, 1995). Two areas of Wesley's thinking particularly influenced White's views: his Arminian approach to salvation and his emphasis on a life of holiness (Whidden, 1995).

The Arminian approach to salvation emphasises God's love and his desire to be in relationship with human beings (Olson, 2011). Arminians claim that salvation is offered to everyone, although not all are saved. Thanks to the prevenient grace of God, humans are enabled to choose whether to accept the salvation that God freely offers (Olson, 2011). However, while God is the instigator and provider of salvation, this choice introduces a human element into the determination of salvation rather than leaving everything to God's sovereign choice. Consequently, the adoption of a largely Arminian approach to salvation by Adventists has resulted in some asking whether individuals can ever have genuine assurance of salvation (Whidden, 2018a).

A second factor impacting Adventist views on assurance are statements made by Ellen White about assurance. Particularly influential, is a statement from *Christ's Object Lessons* which reads, "Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved" (White, 1900, p.155). Taken in isolation, this has been interpreted by many to mean no one should ever say 'I have been saved'. However, the

literary context of this statement suggests that her concerns were directed primarily against self-confidence and presumption arising from thinking that salvation was guaranteed regardless of a person's relationship with God. In her wider corpus of writings White in fact considers the necessity of present assurance and does so in the context of an ongoing connection with Christ. For instance, in *Signs of the Times*, April 4, 1892, she wrote, "We are not to doubt his mercy, and say, 'I do not know whether I shall be saved or not.' By living faith we must lay hold of his promise …" (White, 1892a). In the same year she claimed that "It is essential to have faith in Jesus and to believe you are saved by him" (White, 1892b, p.1)

The strong apocalyptic focus of the Adventist Church added further challenges to the notion of a genuine assurance of salvation. For many, a pre-Advent investigative judgement in which the life of each individual is reviewed renders the notion of forgiveness meaningless, and makes assurance of salvation impossible (Jankiewicz, 2018). Desmond Ford and many of his followers suspended belief in an investigative judgement beginning in 1844, claiming that it denied the finality of atonement at the cross and consequently "the reality of saving faith" (Ford, n.d.). A misunderstanding of focus on the judgment further jeopardized any form of assurance. So long as our own works are understood to be the primary focus of the investigative judgment, rather than the believer's relationship with Jesus, there will be a fear that we can strive in vain (Knight, 2008). Nevertheless, a careful reading of Scripture affirms that the Christian can indeed have assurance of salvation based on the complete and perfect sacrifice of Christ (e.g. John 6:47, 1 John 5:13).

The Restorationist roots of Adventism led to the prioritizing of biblical teaching over tradition and called forth an attempt to return to the truths found in the early church (Knight, 2000). In the context of salvation, this meant that faith was to be accompanied by obedience. Thus, the Adventist interest in holy living was combined from the beginning with an emphasis on the eternally binding nature of the law, particularly the command to observe the seventh-day Sabbath.

In the face of strong apocalyptic expectations of the soon return of Jesus, these issues became paramount in the teachings of Adventist pioneers such as Joseph Bates (1792–1872) and Uriah Smith (1832–

1903), who was the first Secretary of the General Conference. George Butler, who served as the president of the General Conference (1871–1874; 1880–1888), was equally convinced of the absolute necessity of obedience for salvation. The third angel's message was inextricably linked in their thinking to the necessity of obedience, and hence preaching the three angels' messages meant teaching Christians to obey the law in its entirety (Knight, 2000). It was only as the church matured that its leaders, particularly James and Ellen White, realized that the strong emphasis on law had led many Seventh-day Adventists largely to ignore the fact that salvation was secured by faith alone.

A major turning point occurred when the doctrine of salvation came into the spotlight at the 1888 General Conference. Alonzo Jones and Ellet Waggoner preached about righteousness by faith to the consternation of many of the other leaders. Their strong emphasis was on Christ as our righteousness and they viewed obedience as a manifestation of receiving Christ's righteousness. This was in stark contrast to the views of Bates, Smith and Butler who claimed the message of righteousness by faith led to the neglect of obedience, and with it, the betrayal of the call to preach the three angels' messages (Knight, 2000). Although she did not agree with everything they said, White sided with Waggoner and Jones and called ministers to focus on the righteousness of Christ (White, 1890b). She also responded to the concerns about the three angels' messages when she clearly identified the message of righteousness by faith as "the third angel's message in verity" (White, 1890a, p. 1).

The tension between the emphasis on obedience to the law of God and salvation by grace alone did not end here. It has remained as a touch point in the Seventh-day Adventist church throughout its history (Knight, 2009) and lies close to the heart of many theological disputes within the church.

Obedience to the law was crucial to the Last Generation Theology developed by M. L. Andreasen, one of Adventism's most influential theologians from the 1930s to the 1950s. Built in part on the post 1888-theology of Waggoner, Andreasen claimed that the last generation of believers will demonstrate sinless perfection in their lives, and in doing so will vindicate God's character and in particular his requirement for perfect obedience to the law (Whidden, 2018b).

Although Andreasen's views lost ground during the 1950s, especially amongst academics, his influence was long-lasting and many continued to hold to his ideas. Variations of his thinking survived in the works of Herbert Douglass and Mervyn Maxwell.

The tensions within the Adventist church in relation to salvation escalated again in the 1970s due to the teachings of both Robert Brinsmead and Desmond Ford (Knight, 2000). The theology of both men moved the focus away from sanctification and the role of human effort towards the sinlessness of Christ and justification by faith. Brinsmead initially tried to synthesize the ideas of Andreasen and the Protestant view of original sin, which resulted in a unique view that perfection was somehow infused during the cleansing of the sanctuary (Bull & Lockhart, 2007). However, the more he tried to maintain a view of perfection in the face of the human condition, the more impossible it seemed. Brinsmead went on to deny not only the need for perfection, but the process of sanctification itself (Bull & Lockhart, 2007). Consequently, he preached justification by faith alone. Desmond Ford, for his part, understood the term righteousness by faith to refer only to justification (Knight, 2000). Ultimately however, the studies of both men led them to reject the uncertainty associated with the investigative judgment.

The doctrine of salvation has thus been central to many discussions within the church from its very beginnings. Most of the tensions have been about the nature of what Christ has done for us, and the relative role of the law and obedience in relation to sanctification. The escalation of tensions in relation to this doctrine between the 1950s and the 1980s continues to impact the church, as does the resurgence of Last Generation Theology. In addition to these tensions, the combination of theological understandings in Adventist doctrine has led many to wonder whether assurance of salvation is possible. Consequently, the responses to questions about salvation in the North American Division (NAD) Teachers Survey are expected to demonstrate a diversity of ideas.

Methodological Notes

The survey and study methodology of this research project have already been described in Chapters 6 and 7 and will not be repeated

here except to clarify why this chapter reports a smaller data set than many of the other chapters in this book. While there were 1,095 usable surveys returned by NAD teachers, the survey contained five different branches in order to avoid an excessively long survey and to allow for it to be completed by any non-Adventist employees of the institutions. Seventh-day Adventist teachers were able to complete any branch of the survey. The questions relating to the topic of salvation were primarily located in Branch C of the survey, while two questions also appeared in Branch E of the survey. Consequently, the maximum data set is limited to those who completed branch C (n=145) for a majority of questions, and for a combination of branches C and E (n=293) for three questions.

Most questions on the topic of salvation asked participants to rate their level of agreement or disagreement in relation to statements worded to reflect different approaches to salvation. These Likert-style questions were supplemented by two questions specifically related to the assurance of salvation.

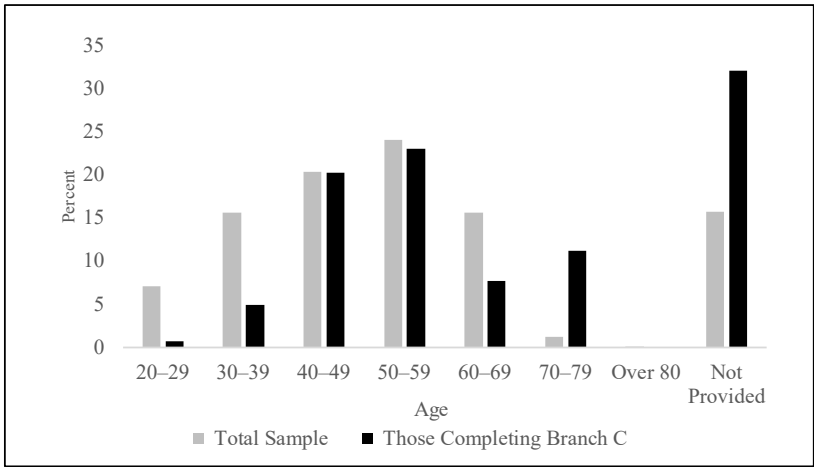
Results

Demographics

Section C of the survey contained most of questions on salvation. The group that completed Section C closely matches the full cohort in relation to gender balance, with approximately two thirds of respondents being females and one third males. However, those completing the questions on salvation who were willing to reveal their age appear to be slightly older on average than the full sample. Those completing Section C were twice as likely to provide no information about their age than the total cohort.

All but one respondent reported having made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important to their life. Furthermore, 100% of respondents are baptised Seventh-day Adventists. Ninety-five percent report holding membership in the church for more than 16 years. Ninety percent attend services once or more per week and only about two percent attend church less than once a month.

Figure 13.1. The Age of Respondents



Overall, the subgroup whose beliefs are examined in this section displays a strong commitment to both Christ and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Given the length of time the majority of respondents reported active church membership, it is likely many of them have been exposed to some of the disagreements about salvation that have divided the church.

Question 62b and 86a: I believe in a personal God who seeks a relationship with human beings

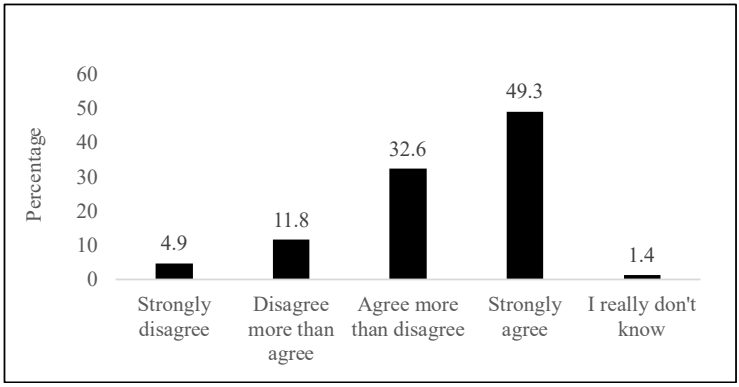
A majority of respondents (98.3%, n=295) agree or strongly agree that they believe in a personal God who seeks a relationship with human beings. Only one individual disagreed strongly while four others indicated that they did not really know.

Question 62e Christianity is about Jesus giving me the power to live a righteous life.

When asked about the key role of Christianity in their lives, 49.3% strongly agreed and 32.6% agreed more than disagreed that it was about Jesus giving them the power to live a righteous life. This result is intriguing given that a focus on power in relation to Christianity is usually more prevalent in Christians from Pacific and other animistic cultures than in western cultures such as in North America (Kraft,

1989). In these cultures, individuals choose to follow the god or spirit that demonstrates the most power. Of course, Paul clearly links the ideas of salvation and power, including the fact that God's power can destroy strongholds (2 Cor 10:4). However, his focus is on the cross as a sign of God's power in general (e.g. 1 Cor 1:17, 24) and more specifically the power it has to deal with the consequences of sin and to bring about our status as new creatures.

Figure 13.2. Christianity is about the power to live a righteous life (n=144)



The significant support of the strongly-agree option in this question likely reflects the strong emphasis on holy living and obedience which has permeated Adventist culture from its beginning and which has had a resurgence with the recent growth in popularity of Last Generation Theology. Power is required to enable the obedience these theologies require.

There is nevertheless a large group of respondents who are not fully convinced that this statement outlines the key focus of Christianity, but they chose to agree more than disagree because of some important elements in the statement. This result likely stems from a lack of other meaningful alternatives presented in the survey.

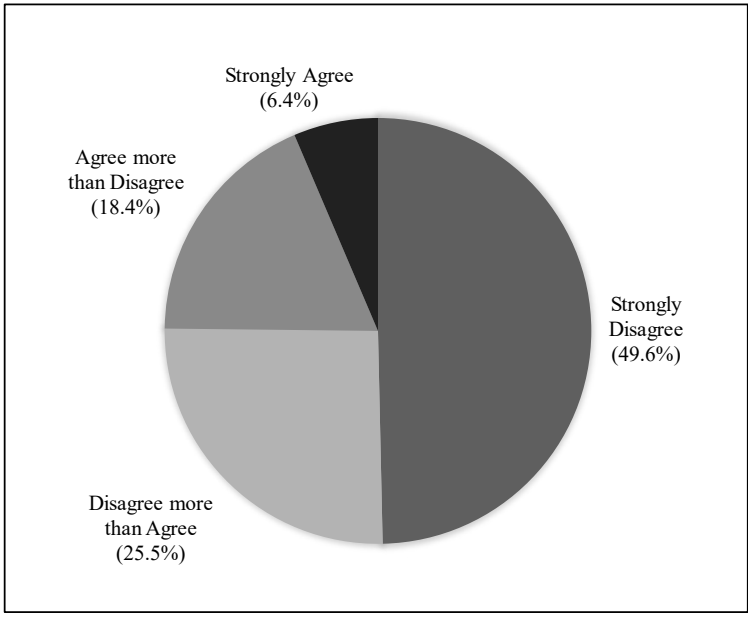
A similar question was asked in the 2013 Global Member Survey. Forty-three percent of NAD respondents strongly agreed that Christianity was about power to conquer sins in their life with a further 34% agreeing more than disagreeing (Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry, 2013). There is no mention of this question in the 2017 NAD Global member report. NAD teachers appear to be slightly

(6%) more likely than NAD members in general to see Christianity to be about power.

Question 62a I should be all right in the end if I am a morally good person

When provided with the statement, "I should be all right in the end if I am a morally good person", just under a quarter (24.8%) either agreed more than disagreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This question is one of two that was designed to tease out what participants believe about the role of Christian behavior and their relationship with Christ in relation to salvation. The results suggest that about a quarter of respondents appear to prioritize behavior rather than relationship as the major factor in salvation. The 49.6% of the respondents who strongly disagree are very clear that behavior is not the key factor in salvation. The remainder, while not entirely certain, lean away from a behavior-oriented approach to salvation.

Figure 13.3: I should be all right in the end if I am a morally good person (n=141).



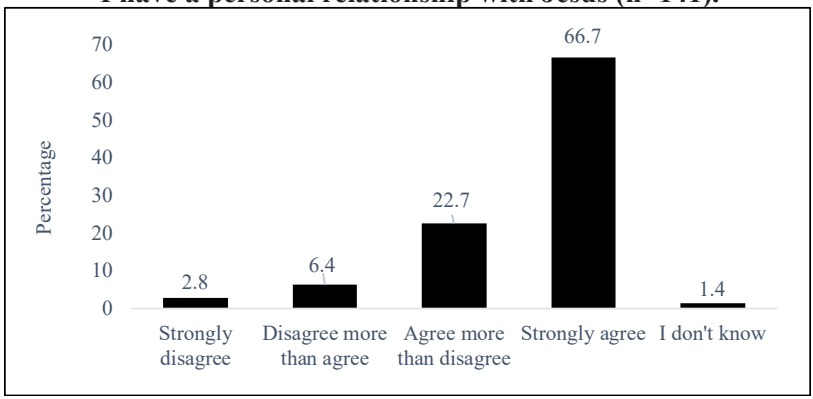
The wording of this question mimics statements commonly heard in secular society. Our inbuilt sense of justice demands that a person who lives in a right way should benefit from doing so. However, scripture presents a countercultural approach to salvation which emphasizes the fact that we are saved by God's grace and mercy (Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:4–5) and not because we live a morally good life. It is thus a matter of concern that one quarter of Seventh-day Adventist Christian teachers would agree with it to some degree.

A matching question in the NAD Global Member Survey in 2013 noted a similar pattern in the general church membership with 28% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they should be all right if they are a morally good person (Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry, 2013). Thus, teachers closely reflect the NAD membership in their understanding that moral living is enough to determine their destiny.

Question 62d I will make it to heaven only if I have a personal relationship with Jesus

The distribution of responses to the statement, "I will make it to heaven only if I have a personal relationship with Jesus," provides another glimpse into the role of relationship in the attainment of salvation. About two-thirds of respondents strongly agree with the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. Another significant group (22.7%) agree more than disagree, taking the total of respondents who agree to 90%. However, the fact that nearly a quarter are reluctant to agree strongly with the statement suggests that in their consideration there might be some competing priorities in regard to how salvation is attained. One in ten either disagree with the need for a personal relationship with Jesus or admit that they do not know if it is necessary. While this is a small portion of the group surveyed, since they are teachers this means that their views could be passed on to students.

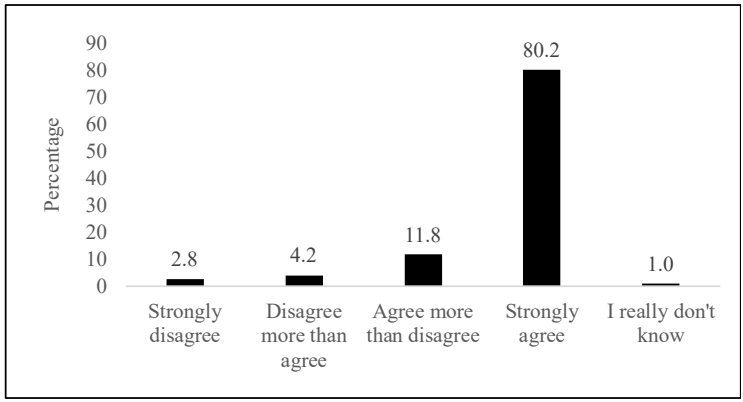
Figure 13.4: I will make it to heaven only if I have a personal relationship with Jesus (n=141).



Question 62f / 86c I am saved the moment I believe and accept what Jesus has done for me.

When presented with the statement, "I am saved the moment I believe and accept what Jesus has done for me", 80% strongly agreed and almost 12 % were in partial agreement, while 8% either disagreed or indicated that they did not know. These results, in the context of the background provided, suggest that those who disagree may think that acceptance of Jesus as Saviour needs to be accompanied by some sort of behavioral response.

Figure 13.5: I am saved the moment I believe and accept what Jesus has done for me (n=288)



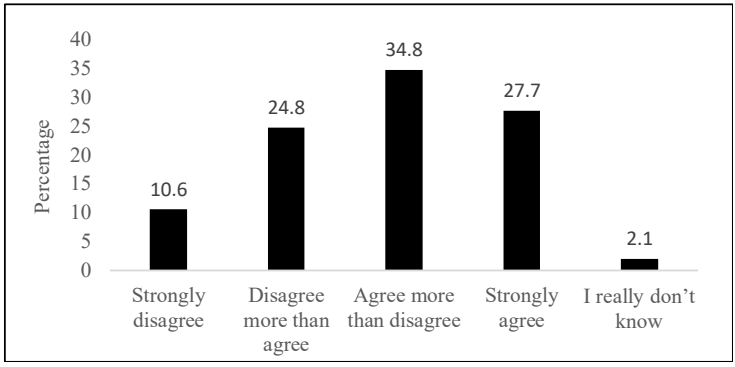
This question was also asked in the 2013 Global Member Survey. The NAD results from that survey revealed that 63% of members

strongly believed that individuals were saved the moment they accepted what Jesus had done for them while another 24% agreed more than disagreed (Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry, 2013). In the 2017 Global Member Survey, 90% of NAD members are reported as either strongly agreeing or agreeing more than disagreeing that individuals are saved the moment they accept Jesus (Činčala, Trecartin & Brantley, 2017). These results suggests no major change in understanding between member surveys. While the total percentage of agreement with this question by teachers and church members is similar, the Teachers in the NAD have a significantly higher percentage of responses that strongly agree with the statement. They thus appear to be more convinced of the immediacy of salvation than those in the pews. This difference may be the result of the religion classes that SDA-trained teachers must complete.

Question 62i I will not get to heaven unless I obey God's law.

In the responses to the statement, "I will not get to heaven unless I obey God's law", 27.2% strongly agree and 34.8% agree more than disagree that we must obey God's law to get to heaven. This means that approximately two-thirds of respondents consider the law of God plays or probably plays an important role in salvation. However, the spread of responses is of special interest. Only 38.3% of respondents indicated that they are sure one way or the other, that is, they either strongly agree or strongly disagree. The rest are not fully convinced but lean one way or the other.

Figure 13.6: I will not get to heaven unless I obey God's law (n=140)



The response to this question thus provides more evidence of the confusion teachers have in relation to the relative role of the law in

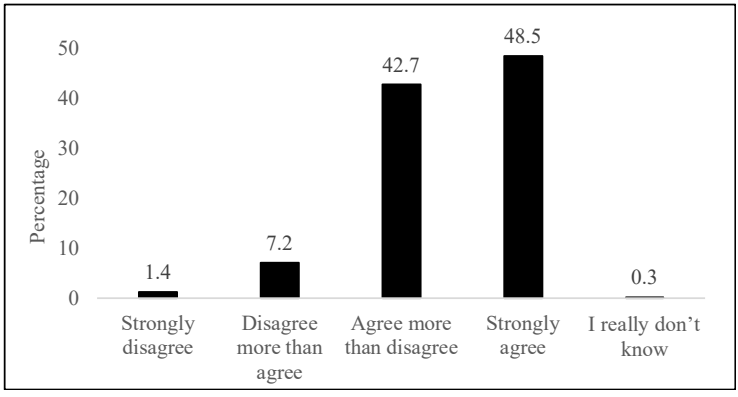
relation to salvation. While Adventists have consistently upheld the ongoing relevance of the law of God, the debates about righteousness by faith, Last Generation Theology and the emphasis on holy living in the writings of Ellen White have led to confusion rather than helped to provide a clear and unambiguous message about salvation.

This question is similar to question 4.10 in the 2013 Global Member Survey. The NAD data from that survey also showed a wide spread of responses indicating ongoing division over the role of the law in relation to salvation. However, the percentage of responses in the strongly disagree category (25%) in the member survey was more than double that found amongst the NAD teachers, and the total percentage who disagreed (51%) is 15% higher than the teachers data (Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry, 2013). Teachers are thus more likely than the general membership to see obedience to the law as necessary. The wording of the question was changed in the 2017/2018 Global member survey to read "I will not get to heaven unless I obey God's law perfectly." This difference makes the results hard to compare with the responses from the NAD teachers.

Question 62j There are clear and absolute standards for what is right and wrong.

When further challenged about whether there are absolute standards about what is right or wrong nearly nine percent of respondents disagreed with the premise or proclaimed they did not know if there were clear standards of right or wrong.

Figure 13.7: There are clear and absolute standards for what is right and wrong (n=293).

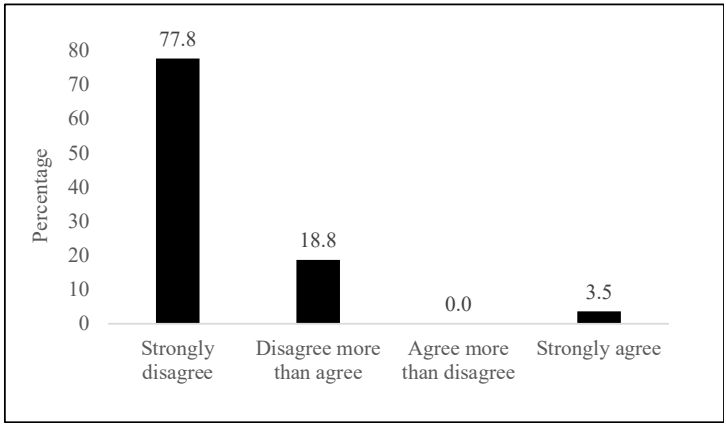


While Scripture provides clear indications of what is right and wrong, it does not, and clearly cannot, discuss every decision that can be made. It is possible that this ambiguity in relation to some situations accounts for the 50% who neither strongly agree nor strongly disagree. Nevertheless, if teachers consider that there are not clear and absolute standards for right or wrong, we need to ask where they are directing students to find such answers.

Question 62k I can only be saved through the church.

Question 62k considers the role of the church in salvation and makes a claim that is most consistent with Catholic views of salvation. As early as the third century, Cyprian taught that there is no salvation outside of the church. The Catholic Church has continued to teach that there is no salvation outside the church since Christ established the church and continues as its head. Therefore, from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, those who know about the church and refuse to either enter or remain in it cannot be saved (Vatican II Council, 1964).

Figure 13.8: I can only be saved through the church (n=144).



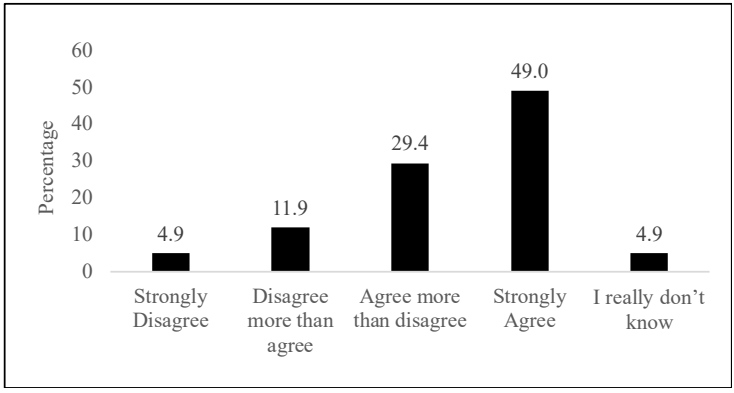
The statement that I can only be saved through the church elicited a disagreement from 96.5%. Thus almost everyone rejected the Catholic viewpoint about the role of the church in salvation. It is clear from the responses that NAD teachers have received a much clearer message about the role of the church in relation to salvation than they have in relation to the role of the law and salvation.

Question 62n When you get down to it, there are only two kinds of people in the world: the righteous who will be rewarded by God and the rest who will not.

Almost 50% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that there are two kinds of people in the world: the righteous who will be rewarded by God and the rest who will not be so rewarded, while another 29% agreed more than they disagreed. With only half willing to agree strongly, there seems to be some reluctance to divide humans into these two groups. There may be several reasons for this reluctance. First is the biblical claim that none are righteous (Rom 3:10). The question does not indicate clearly that the righteousness being discussed is God's and not human. Second, the question uses the word reward for the righteous when Scripture indicates that salvation is an undeserved gift (Eph 2:8–9) and not a reward for our actions.

However, if these are not the reasons for the ambiguity of response, there are nonetheless some significant implications in relation to mission. In particular, the reluctance to see two groups of people in the world could mean that significant opportunities for mission are overlooked.

Figure 13.9: When you get down to it, there are only two kinds of people in the world: the righteous who will be rewarded by God and the rest who will not (n=143).

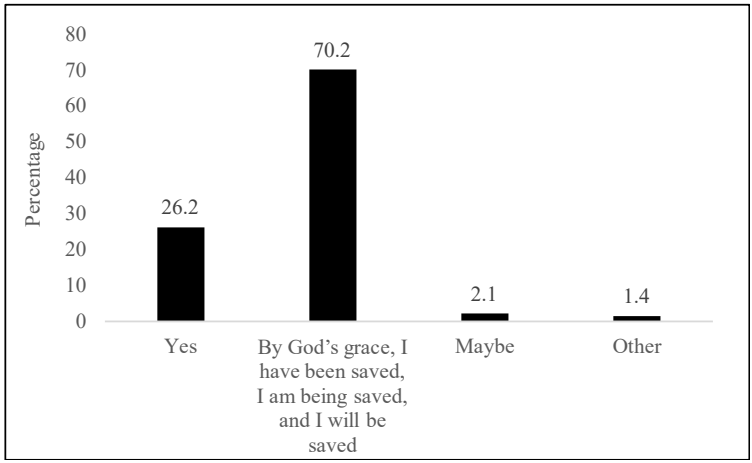


The same question was asked in the 2013 Global Member Survey. The strongly agree and strongly disagree percentages are almost identical in both surveys (Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry, 2013). No similar question is reported in the 2017 NAD Global Member Survey for a more recent comparison.

Question C67. Which of the following is something you would say in answer to the question, "Are you saved?"

About a quarter of respondents were willing to state that they believed they were saved while 70% opted for the more-tentative response, "By God's grace I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved." A small number were not sure or thought the question was too complex.

Figure 13.10: Which of the following is something you would say in response to the question "Are you saved?" (n=141)



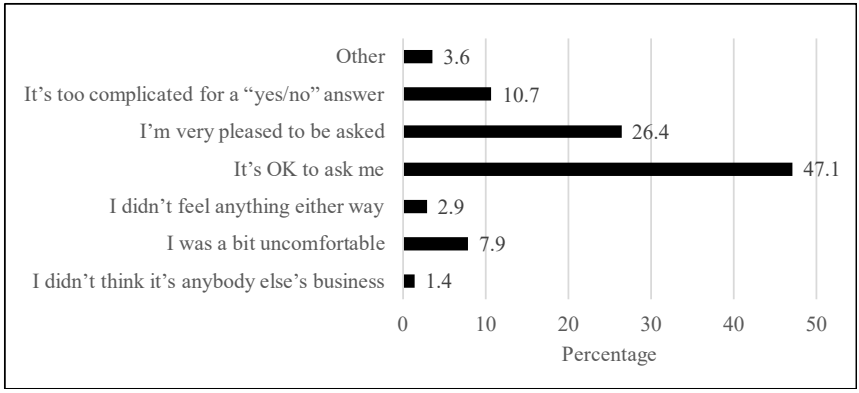
It is pleasing to see that the response for "maybe" is quite low given the complex theological factors that have influenced Adventist perceptions of the assurance of salvation. Nevertheless, the great majority are reluctant to state outright that they have assurance of salvation. The response "By God's grace, I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved" appears to reflect the general perception that was addressed in the historical section that individuals should not state definitively that they are saved.

Question C68. What was your reaction when you are asked the previous question?

When probed further about their reaction to being asked if they are saved, about a quarter were pleased to be asked the question. Perhaps these were those who had assurance of salvation. At this time a statistical correlation between the responses to questions has not

been performed. Another 45 % thought it was OK to ask but some felt uncomfortable or believed the answer was more complex than could be answered by a simple "yes" or "no."

Figure 13.11: What was your reaction when you were asked the previous question? (n=140).



Conclusion

The findings of the NAD Teachers' survey outlined in this chapter suggest that teachers in Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America are committed to the church they represent. A majority of them are clear that they are saved the moment they accept Jesus and have clarity in relation to the role of the church in salvation. However, they also confirm that the disagreements about aspects of salvation emerging through Seventh-day Adventist history continue to impact the current generation of Adventist teachers in the North American Division. The issue in which this is most clearly demonstrated is seen in the diversity of responses about the role of the law and obedience in relation to salvation. The impact of the concerns about assurance are also visible with only a quarter of respondents willing to agree that they have assurance of salvation.

These findings raise several important concerns. First, students are likely to receive mixed messages about the role of the law and behavior in relation to salvation. There is a real risk that students will be exposed to a works-based understanding of salvation, and that God's amazing grace will be lost amongst these confused messages.

Second, because most teachers are reluctant to say definitely that they are saved, students are unlikely to be taught that they can have present assurance of salvation. Third, because a significant number of teachers do not believe the Bible provides clear and absolute standards of behavior one wonders what basis will be used to construct an ethic for Christian living.

Given the centrality of salvation to the mission of the church, it is important that both the church and school present clear and consistent messages about key aspects of salvation. Even if there are disagreements about the minor details of salvation, nothing should get in the way of a knowledge of God's wonderful and underserved grace.

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