Chapter 23
Perceptions of Adventist Eschatology Among Teachers in Adventist Schools in Australia and the Solomon Islands

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From its establishment, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has understood the close relationship between education, eschatology, and redemption. Ellen White provides a mandate to develop the whole person, challenging teachers to see education as a capacious undertaking and a process that impacts the whole person.

> Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is a need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come. (White, 1903, p. 13)

White's references in this statement to "the whole period of existence possible to man" and to "the higher joy of wider service in the world to come" provide a hint of the eschatological dimensions of her thinking. This reference provides an inspirationally motivational view of life from the perspective of God's intended purpose (Gen. 1:26–28). In other words, she is viewing the purpose and value of life from the perspective of restored eternity. It is this kind of eschatological thinking that pervades not just Adventist ideas about education, but the whole of Adventist theology.

A reflection and analysis of the impact, understanding. and influence of eschatology on the perceptions of Adventist teachers in Australia

and the Solomon Islands will be provided in this chapter. Eschatology is the most important aspect of Adventist theology (Naden, 1996; Rice, 1985). It is concerned with the study of last things—things such as the judgement, the resurrection of God's people, the destruction of the wicked, and the second coming of Jesus. Eschatology is deeply ingrained in the Adventist psyche.

This chapter will provide a brief historical overview of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; the importance of eschatology and in particular the book of Revelation to the life, witness, and theology of the Church; the questions that were asked of teachers, including commentary and analysis of the responses; and a summary of this aspect of the research.

Brief Historical Overview of the Birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The history of the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a complex one. Its self-understanding is entwined in the historical roots of the sixteenth-century radical reformers, such as Anabaptists, and the nineteenth-century Restorationist movement among American Protestants (Knight, 2000). Adventists see themselves as continuing the heritage of the reformers, particularly in upholding and championing the tenets of the reformation.

Adventism was birthed in a period of millennial fever in nineteenth-century America (Damsteegt, 1977). This birthing process resulted in the fledgling movement's identity being shaped and informed by a host of socio-religious factors in the afterglow of the Second Great Awakening (1790–1820). These factors included such things as the expectation of the imminent end of the world, the temperance movement, and increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, coupled with a seeming decrease in morality (Knight, 1993).

The founding father of the movement was William Miller, a Baptist farmer turned preacher. From 1833, Miller preached that Christ would return in 1843 or 1844 (Damsteegt, 1977; Knight, 1993). According to Bull and Lockhart (2007, p. 39), the Millerite Advent movement "defined itself with reference to the future". Miller's preaching on a near-future event—the second coming of Christ—electrified communities of faith across the Eastern Seaboard of the United States of America. However, the expectation that Christ would personally return to Earth on 22 October 1844 did not eventuate. This

great disappointment of 1844 shattered the apocalyptic hopes of this unseasoned group (Knight, 1993).

Adventists and the Book of Revelation

Knight (2000, p. 39) contends that with time, "the unifying focal point" of the movement's theology was found in the apocalyptic core of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is now central to understanding Adventist eschatology (Anderson, 1974; Naden, 1996; Smith, 1904). It has aided in the development of a deeper understanding of doctrines such as the millennium (Rev. 20:1–7), the second coming (Rev. 1:7; 11:15; 14:14–16), the judgment and the annihilation of evil (Rev. 20:10–15), and the home of the redeemed (Rev. 21–22) (Stefanovic, 2002). Paulien states that "the Seventh-day Adventist Church derives its unique witness to Jesus Christ from a historicist reading of the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation" (2003, p. 15). He maintains that there are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that these books provide much of the content of Adventist theology, supply the core of Adventist identity and mission, offer a sense that God is in control of human history, and provide an impetus for mission (Paulien, 2003).

Commentary and Analysis

In this section the responses to questions in the survey that relate to teachers' understanding of eschatology are examined in order to discover in what form the apocalyptic viewpoint of the pioneers of Adventist education persists among current teachers in SDA schools in the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists (SPD). The following questions and responses address key aspects of Adventist eschatology, including the second coming of Jesus, the great controversy, the investigative judgment, the remnant, the role and function of Ellen White, the millennium, and the three angels' messages.

The survey questions relating to eschatology are examined one by one. Each question is introduced by a table that shows the number of respondents that chose the various answer options provided to them in the survey, together with a percentage that represents the proportion of respondents that chose a particular option. Please note that some questions were only asked in one branch of the survey, and other questions were repeated in two or more branches of the survey. This

explains why some respondents answered more questions than others. The headings in the tables include the number used to identify the question on the paper-based version of the survey to make it easy to find the question in the various appendices. The table heading also reproduces the wording of the statements to which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement.

Table 23.1
Jesus Will Return to Earth a Second Time

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I really don't know	6	3.8%	3	0.9%	0	0.0%
Strongly disagree	2	1.3%	1	0.9%	1	0.8%
Disagree more than agree	2	1.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Agree more than disagree	5	3.2%	2	1.8%	4	3.2%
Strongly agree	141	90%	103	95%	121	96%
Total	156		109		126	

Notes:
1. AUC = Australian Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
2. AUC tot = AUC teachers who are over 20 years of age and employed in an Adventist school or Conference
3. AUC SDA Attend = AUC teachers who answered "yes" to the question, "Are you a Seventh-day Adventist?" and indicated that they attend church at least once a week. See explanation in Chapter 27
3. Solomon Islands = Teachers in Adventist schools in the Solomon Islands Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
4. Freq = Frequency

Table 23.1 reveals that between 90% and 96% of the responses to the survey strongly agree that Jesus will return to Earth a second time. Less than 1.5% strongly disagrees with this statement (3 out of 282 respondents). This is a core Adventist belief and so a high affirmative response was expected. Indeed, the fact that over 94% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed more than disagreed testifies to the fact that an eschatological viewpoint is deeply woven into the religious fabric of Adventism (Knight, 2000).

Table 23.2

Responses to the Statement, "I expect the world as we know it to end in the near future and, in any case, within the next 20 years or so"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I really don't know	20	33%	20	33%	18	26%
Strongly disagree	5	5.8%	3	5.0%	10	14%
Disagree more than agree	6	7.0%	4	6.7%	5	7.1%
Agree more than disagree	20	23%	14	23%	13	19%
Strongly agree	27	31%	19	32%	24	34%
Total	86		60		70	

The responses reported in Table 23.2 elicited a much wider range of responses when compared to Table 23.1. While 31% to 34% strongly agree and 19% to 23% agree more than disagree (for a total of 52% to 55%), 26% to 33% said "I really don't know", perhaps suggesting that these respondents are adhering to the perspective of Jesus himself when says he does not know when the Son of Man will return (Matt. 24:36).

Table 23.3

Responses to the Statement, "All humanity is involved in a GREAT CONTROVERSY between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His love, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I have not heard of this/This question is not relevant to me	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Don't accept it	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Have major doubts about it	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	2	1.9%
Have some questions about it	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	1	0.9%
Accept it because the Church teaches it	8	5.3%	6	5.9%	12	11%
Accept it because it is probably true	14	9.3%	4	3.9%	56	52%
Embrace it wholeheartedly	127	84%	92	90%	37	34%
Total	151		102		108	

The Great Controversy or cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan is a core eschatological belief that lies at the very center of Adventist eschatology. It is also at the center of Ellen White's writings (Douglass, 2010). Ninety percent of AUC Adventist respondents who attended church regularly stated that they embraced the concept of the Great Controversy wholeheartedly. It has likely received this score because this teaching provides an overarching framework for Adventist eschatology in which some sense can be made of the existential reality of good and evil in the world and the reality of pain and suffering (Tonstad, 2007). This doctrine appears to be slightly less known among the teachers who teach in Adventist schools in the Solomon Islands.

Table 23.4
Responses to, "The INVESTIGATIVE JUDGMENT beginning in 1844"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I have not heard of this/This question is not relevant to me	3	2.1%	2	2.1%	0	0.0%
Don't accept it	2	1.4%	1	1.0%	0	0.0%
Have major doubts about it	12	8.3%	6	6.2%	4	3.9%
Have some questions about it	33	23%	21	22%	17	17%
Accept it because the Church teaches it	20	14%	10	10%	20	19%
Accept it because it is probably true	27	19%	18	19%	42	41%
Embrace it wholeheartedly	47	33%	39	40%	20	19%
Total	144		97		103	

It is surprising that two AUC respondents who declared themselves members of the Adventist Church and who attended church regularly did not know about the investigative judgment of 1844, because it is one of the pillar doctrines of the Adventist Church (Damsteegt, 1977). Between 4% and 8% of teachers have major doubts or questions about it. This outcome is not surprising since the SDA Church has experienced theological diversity in recent years (Johnson, 1995;

Provonsha, 1993). Furthermore, this doctrine has received much scrutiny from the Adventist scholarly community and historically has been questioned (Ford, 1980). It is therefore unsurprising that this teaching has the lowest positive percentage of all the questions on eschatology. However, it might have been assumed that this number would have been higher as there have been a number of recent scholarly and popular attempts to situate the doctrine better in the immediate and wider context of Scripture and align it closer to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Gane, 2006; Goldstein, 1988; Moore, 2010). It is possible that with the passing of time, especially since the doctrine postulates that Christ commenced a new phase of high priestly ministry in 1844, that some teachers have become disillusioned with this doctrine and do not see its relevance to their Christian experience. However, the clear majority of teachers believe this doctrine.

Table 23.5

Responses to the Statement, "The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days a REMNANT has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I have not heard of this/This question is not relevant to me	2	1.4%	1	1.0%	0	0.0%
Don't accept it	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Have major doubts about it	2	1.4%	1	1.0%	0	0.0%
Have some questions about it	15	10%	8	8.1%	2	1.8%
Accept it because the Church teaches it	17	12%	10	10%	8	7.3%
Accept it because it is probably true	16	11%	10	10%	56	51%
Embrace it wholeheartedly	93	64%	69	70%	44	40%
Total	145		99		110	

This statement, especially its focus on the notion of remnant, refers to religious identity. Religious identity is under renegotiation, particularly in Australia, Western Europe, and the USA. This is partly caused by the process of internal pluralisation in the West that has deepened over the last half century.

Seventh-day Adventists, who identity themselves as Protestant, have also self-identified themselves as the remnant of Revelation 12:17 because they keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus (Damsteegt, 1977). Furthermore, they see themselves as distinctively possessing the "gift of prophecy" of Revelation 19:10. About 10% of teachers in the AUC who identify themselves as Adventist and regularly attend church have questions or doubts about this notion of remnant. This number dwindles to 2% in the Solomon Islands.

Moreover, the USA and the rest of the Western World are transitioning to a post-Christian culture (Sweet, 1999). This is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society and the institutions that have traditionally expressed Christian beliefs decline in influence (Murray, 2001). According to noted management guru, Peter Drucker

> Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself—its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty year later, there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their parents were born. We are currently living through such a transition. (Drucker, 1993, p. 1)

The 10% of AUC teachers that have questions or doubts about this belief represent the cognitive dissonance that emerges during this transition, as identity is most affected (Knight, 2000). Having said this, about 87% of AUC teachers and 98% of SIM teachers accept the belief that the SDA Church constitutes a special remnant.

Table 23.6

Responses to the Statement, "Ellen G. White is an inspired messenger to the Adventist Church"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I have not heard of this/This question is not relevant to me	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Don't accept it	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Have major doubts about it	5	3.4%	2	2.0%	1	0.9%
Have some questions about it	11	7.4%	4	4.0%	1	0.9%
Accept it because the Church teaches it	13	8.8%	9	9.1%	2	1.8%
Accept it because it is probably true	23	16%	16	16%	54	49%
Embrace it wholeheartedly	95	64%	68	69%	53	48%
Total	148		99		111	

Between 2% and 6% of teachers have questions or doubts about this doctrine or do not accept it, while between 85% and 96% support it wholeheartedly or accept it because it is probably true. Ellen White is regarded as one of the co-founders of the denomination, so such an outcome is to be expected.

Table 23.7

Responses to the Statement, "After the millennium, God will restore the Earth as a home for the righteous who were resurrected or who were alive at his coming"

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
I have not heard of this/This question is not relevant to me	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Don't accept it	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Have major doubts about it	2	1.4%	0	0.0%	2	1.8%
Have some questions about it	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Accept it because the Church teaches it	8	5.4%	6	6.1%	4	3.7%
Accept it because it is probably true	17	12%	6	6.1%	54	50%
Embrace it wholeheartedly	120	82%	86	88%	49	45%
Total	147		98		109	

This question has a very high percentage of positive responses—86 (or 88%) of AUC teachers who attend an Adventist church regularly embrace the concept of the millennium wholeheartedly. This is a core Adventist belief and a strongly positive response would have been expected. One of the reasons for the positive response might be the perceived just nature of the doctrine in relation to human beings and their eternal destiny and the character of God in the cosmic conflict between good and evil. Adventists believe that prior to the second coming of Christ, demonic spirits gather the forces of evil for the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:12–16) and Jesus appears with the armies of heaven to vanquish his enemies (Rev. 19:11–21). This is the introduction to the seventh last plague. At the *parousia*, the righteous dead are raised along with the righteous living (1 Thess. 4:13–18). All are given immortal life (1 Cor. 15:51–54) and ascend to be with Christ in heaven (John 14:1–3); this is the first resurrection (Rev. 20:4). The priests of God (v 6) consist of all the righteous through the ages. All the redeemed meet God for the first time together (Heb. 11:39–40). At the same time, the wicked living are "slain by the brightness of his coming" (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:21). Their dead bodies lie on Earth to be consumed by vultures. The Earth is in an abysmal state. The great earthquake, hail, and wrath accompanying the *parousia* have destroyed the Earth and slain all its inhabitants (Rev. 16:18–21; *c.f.* Isa. 24:19–22; Jer. 4:23–27). Satan is figuratively bound on this planet (Rev 20:1–3), which has been reduced to its primeval state (Gen. 1:2). He, Satan, has no ability to deceive.

The millennial reign is in heaven and consists of a work of judgment (Rev. 20:4; 1 Cor. 6:2–3). The purpose of the millennium is to demonstrate that God is just and has been fair and transparent in his dealings with human beings. On the other hand, the millennium reveals the unchanging nature of Satan and those who still choose to follow him.

At the end of the millennium, the New Jerusalem descends to Earth (Rev. 20:9; 21:2). The wicked dead are raised to receive their final judgment (Rev. 20:12–13). Satan is now loosed from solitary confinement by the resurrection of the wicked. He deceives the nations to attack God's city. Then God appears on his great white throne, and judges them according to what is in the book of records (Rev. 20:11–13). Fire, which purifies the Earth, comes down from heaven and devours them all (Rev. 20:9, 14–15). Adventists do not believe in eternal torment in a place called hell. Rather, human beings

who deliberately aligned themselves with Satan or who chose not to know God will be destroyed—once and for all—by the fire, along with Satan, sin, and death (Rev. 21:4). In this regard, the millennium demonstrates the justice of God in relation to both the righteous and the unrighteous (Rice, 1997; Stefanovic, 2002). This brief overview of the doctrine of the millennium reinforces the position that it is in all likelihood the fair nature of the doctrine in relation to human beings and their eternal destiny, and the character of God in the cosmic conflict between good and evil, that has garnered the second-highest positive response rate.

Table 23.8
"In my thinking, the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 are":

	AUC tot		AUC SDA Attend		Solomon Islands tot	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
The context in which the Adventist Church should proclaim the eternal gospel	104	72%	77	79%	101	94%
Part of the rhetoric of church members in a previous generation	10	6.9%	5	5.2%	0	0.0%
Something about which I have only vague awareness	17	12%	7	7.2%	4	3.7%
I really cannot remember hearing or learning about the three angels' messages	3	2.1%	1	1.0%	3	2.8%
This question is not relevant to me	11	7.6%	7	7.2%	0	0.0%
Total	145		97		108	

The three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 are historically understood by Adventists as the final messages to be given to the world before the second coming of Christ. Adventist pioneers examined the literary flow of the passages in Revelation 12–14 and saw a progressive build-up in the development of the great controversy theme. Two beasts, one from the sea (Rev. 13:1) and one from the land (Rev. 13:11), attacked the remnant (Rev. 12:17). After this attack, God's people are seen following the Lamb (Rev. 14:1–5), and then the proclamation of the three angels' messages takes place (Damsteegt, 1977). The messages read:

> Then I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation,

> tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." A second angel followed and said, "'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries." A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name." This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.

Following the proclamation of these messages by the remnant, Adventist pioneers understood that Revelation 14:14–20 referred to the harvest of the Earth (Knight, 2000). From their perspective, it was the proclamation of the three angels' messages that was a harbinger of the end, the harvest of the Earth. Adventist eschatological belief is largely summarised in these messages and they are broadly supported by a majority of teachers.

Conclusion

It is evident from the responses to the survey that a majority of teachers in SDA schools in the Australian Union Conference and the Solomon Islands Mission support and believe the eschatological message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Having said this, an over-emphasis on the nearness of Christ's coming is polarising and perhaps not justified in the light of world mission. The doctrine of the 1844 investigative judgment secured the lowest score from teachers and it may need to be given a fresh voice to assist the 4% to 8% of teachers who have doubts or questions about this teaching. Perhaps this doctrine will always be the thorn in Adventism's eschatological side.

Adventist self-understanding as the remnant has garnered the second lowest percentage of support. The challenge of religious identity will continue as the liquid culture—the culture that is fast moving, constantly changing, technologically agile and adaptable to influence (Bauman, 2012). Apart from these three concerns, the doctrines about the great controversy, the second coming of Jesus,

and the millennium all received very strong agreement. These central eschatological doctrines will continue to provide coherence to Adventist teaching.

The books of the Bible that focus on eschatology, such as Daniel and Revelation, have this-worldly implications. Eschatology is not about a vision of escape from the practical realities believers face today in the real world. In this regard, hope is a significant feature of eschatology and provides meaning to life in the present (Stefanovic, 2002). Seventh-day Adventist Christians are a people of hope. They have within their ecclesiastical heart a longing for the second coming of Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). This blessed hope sustains their corporate identity in a popular culture that is often hostile, and reminds them that they are strangers and aliens in this world, pilgrims passing through on their way to a better home (1 Pet. 1:2–3) (LaRondelle, 1997). Furthermore, the doctrine of the great controversy between God and Satan provides a biblical and conceptual framework that provides some sense of meaning and hope to the inexplicable vagaries of life. Without this meaning and hope, Adventism simply becomes another "ism", another religious offering in the supermarket of religiosity.

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