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November 27, 2003 GreatControversy.org Column by David Qualls

QOD 2003 Annotated Edition Series

QOD: Minor Aberration, or Manifesto of the New Theology?

A brief look at the big picture context surrounding *Questions on Doctrine* (QOD) and its implications for our times.

Just what is the problem with the 1957 book *Questions on Doctrine*?¹ Why all the fuss about a volume that most Adventists have probably never heard of, much less read? Those who have taken the time to read its pages might wonder what all the controversy is about. That is unless they are aware of some significant factors surrounding its publication.

Picking up the book and perusing its 720 pages, one will find much that is standard Adventist doctrine. If one is looking for a boiling cauldron of deadly heresy swirling out of every page, one will not find it. Let's face it, the book says a lot of good things. So again, why the tumult?

A pastor/evangelist friend of mine is fond of asking his prophecy attendees: "We don't want to settle for 80% truth do we? What about 90%? 95%? 99%?" You get the picture. Satan has mastered his beguiling arts to such a degree that the very elect are in danger of being deceived (Matthew 24:24). Such is the case with the publication of QOD and many of the events surrounding it.

Unquestionably, QOD contains errors that are dangerous and far-reaching (for an analysis of some of these errors, see Larry Kirkpatrick's [Walter Martin's Trump Card: *Questions on Doctrine*, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Atonement](#)). However, QOD in its own right, is not as objectionable as when placed in its historical context. The climate in which it was produced, the legacy it has spawned, and the philosophy it symbolizes, imparts to QOD a significance and reputation tarnished beyond repair.

Why the controversy? If the book is not teeming with error, if it's not teaching Sunday-sacredness or unconditional immortality of the soul or something of that nature, then, why the fuss? Isn't QOD just some minor aberration that we should ignore and forget about?

To assist us in answering this question, we turn to the evangelical friends who encouraged the Adventist authors of QOD to produce it in the first place. We can sense the enormous significance they have placed on the book by quoting from an article published by the Christian Research Institute (CRI) Journal in 1988.

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great turmoil and doctrinal debate within SDA [their abbreviation for Seventh-day Adventism], with the common denominator being the question of Adventism's uniqueness. Would Adventism continue in the same direction established under the [R. R.] Figuhr administration in QOD, or would the denomination return to a more traditional understanding of the faith? The debate over this question would give rise to two distinct factions within SDA: Evangelical Adventism and Traditional Adventism... It is our position that the evaluation given by Barnhouse and Martin still stands for that segment of Adventism which holds to the position stated in QOD, and further expressed in the Evangelical Adventist movement of the last few decades.²

Unquestionably, the prestigious evangelical CRI Journal identifies QOD as the watershed event in the emerging new views within Adventism. QOD is the dividing line; it is seen as the basis and foundation for all that has transpired in the division of Adventism into the two camps spoken of above. It is the manifesto of the new views. Of course, the reference to Dr. Donald Gray Barnhouse and Walter R. Martin refers to their work in the 1950s to reclassify the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a "Christian" denomination rather than a non-Christian cult. This was a direct result of their dialog with a small group of leaders of the Adventist church and the subsequent publishing of the book QOD.

But more is revealed in this audacious article. An ominous threat is leveled at a certain group within the church who persist in holding to the "traditional understanding of the faith." The CRI Journal lays down the gauntlet to Seventh-day Adventists: either come in line with QOD and all that it implies or face the dreaded threat of being reclassified a cult.

“Happy day!”

The events surrounding the publication of QOD are not totally obscure. One of the most prominent and vigorous proponents of the new view was none other than Adventist scholar and church historian Le Roy Edwin Froom. In his large volume, *Movement of Destiny*,³ Froom lays out a painstaking case for the publication of QOD and related material. Devoting a whole chapter to the subject of QOD, he speaks glowingly of the events surrounding its publication.

But earlier in the book, Froom gives us a snapshot preview of his spin on the history of Adventism as it culminates in QOD.

We started out as a 'Little Flock,' ...under a distinct handicap. In our formative stage we as a people were clear and united on our special separative doctrines—the 'testing truths' that made and have kept us distinct from all other Christian bodies... our 'Present Truth' message for the world today... These specific doctrinal truths... were sound and true...

But it is equally true that we were not at first united on certain of the saving provisions and Divine Persons of the Everlasting Gospel... There were variant views of the Godhead, the Deity of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and on aspects of the Atonement, as well. ... A majority of our founding fathers had a true concept of the

eternal Christ and the Godhead... And they sensed the atoning *Act* as made on the Cross, with its benefits then ministered by Christ as our Heavenly High Priest.... Ellen White was of this group. But a minority of strong minds held and came to teach publicly certain variant views on these great gospel primaries ...[T]hese were their personal views. And decades were required before we came into unity thereon. [capitalization and emphasis in the original].⁴

Notice how he lumps the authentic Adventist view of the atonement (which he characterizes as a “variant” and “personal view”) in with the anti-trinitarianism and Arianism that was found in certain of our earlier pioneers. Later in the book, Froom will include the “sinful nature of Christ” in with this set of “variant views.” Continuing,

Though long since repudiated, these early defective views, because they were found upon the pages of certain of our published books, came to be regarded by non-Adventist critics as constituting the real...Adventism.

It was this unhappy situation that gave rise to the widespread misconception, bandied about in the theological circles of the religious world, that we were actually an ‘anti-Christian cult’—for a cult, according to the definition of many Evangelicals, is a religious body that denies (1) the eternal pre-existence and complete Deity of Christ, (2) that His *Act* of Atonement was completed on the Cross. [capitalization and emphasis in the original].

Other divergencies might be noted, but these were the two primary points by which the Christian integrity of a religious group was judged. It was the variant views among us *on these two points*— more than our Sabbathkeeping, ‘soul sleep,’ and ‘investigative judgment’ positions—that constituted the real reason for such a regrettable classification and castigation, with resultant prejudice and ostracism. [emphasis in original].

We have come, thank God, to a new day of frankness and soundness, with resultant better understanding, recognition, and acceptance that is preparing the way for the tremendous world witness and triumph that now lies shortly before us. We are no longer regarded as mere doctrinarians and legalists, but increasingly as true Christians, with our hope and our teachings centered wholly in Christ and the fullness of His Deity, His complete *Act* of Atonement on the Cross, His atoning ministry in heaven, and with salvation by faith in Christ and His righteousness as primary in the broadest and fullest sense of the term. Happy day!⁵

In examining the voluminous writings of L. E. Froom, an overriding theme emerges. Dr. Froom's writing career is intent on proving that Seventh-day Adventism is legitimate, belonging well within the stream of true Christianity. This is demonstrated in his massive 4-volume *Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, his 2-volume *Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, his 700 page *Movement of Destiny*, and his involvement in the publishing of *Questions on Doctrine*. In all of these works, Froom sets out to prove from history that the truths of the Advent movement had, at least to some degree, good company in the shared beliefs of Christians down through the centuries.

This same tone is carried into his book, *Movement of Destiny*, except here, he sets out to show that the Adventist faith has traced a line from its beginning distinctive truths toward a more mainstream Christian viewpoint. His burden seems to be to demonstrate that Adventism is on course to move toward the conservative, evangelical viewpoint, at least in certain areas such as the centrality of the cross as the atonement, the pre-fall, sinless nature of Christ, the eternal deity of Christ, the “correct” relationship of faith and works, law and gospel, and the “right place” of the Spirit of Prophecy in relation to the Bible.

There is no disputing that Froom's contribution to Adventist scholarship has been invaluable. His tracing of Adventist truths down through the history of Christianity provides much in the way of valuable proof that our message is not some last minute concoction of a few people tucked away in the small states of New England.

However, it is one thing to plead our true Christianity by shedding our anti-trinitarian and Arian past (held by a minority of our early pioneers). It is quite another, when we go beyond that and begin to tamper with truths that God has given, that inspiration has clearly confirmed, that Adventism had clearly expounded for 100 years (as of that time).⁶ But that is how the adversary of truth works. He is not content with our doing a good thing; he inserts himself into the action and incites us to take it a step further, make what are to us apparent improvements that will garner the approbation of our fellow Christian brethren.

On a side note, it is interesting that George Knight takes a similar approach (as in Froom's *Movement of Destiny*) in his book, *A Search for Identity, The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*.⁷ Knight walks us through Adventist history, dividing it up into major eras as follows: What is Adventist in Adventism? (1844-1885), What is Christian in Adventism? (1886-1919), What is Fundamentalist in Adventism? (1919-1950), Adventism in Theological Tension (1950- ?). Knight's burden seems to be to demonstrate the great progressive nature of Adventism from its simple roots to its much more mature expression by the 1950s and beyond. Interestingly, both *Movement of Destiny* and *A Search for Identity* contain a preface from Neal C. Wilson. Dr. Knight acknowledges in his book that L. E. Froom's *Movement of Destiny* is the closest published work to that of what he was setting out to do in his work.⁸ Dr. Knight is the author of the annotated comments in the now newly published *Questions on Doctrine, Annotated Edition*.

A Facelift for Adventism

Later in the book, Froom gives a lead-in chapter to the QOD publishing event. The title of this chapter, "Changing the Impaired Image of Adventism," belies its theme. In the mind of Froom, Adventism needed a facelift. Among items needing to be remedied were the "*complete and eternal Deity of Christ*," the "*Act of Atoning Sacrifice completed on the cross*," removal of the "last standing vestige of Arianism," and "the lingering 'sinful-nature-of-Christ' misconception" that "was remedied by expunging the regrettable note in the revised *Bible Readings* of 1949."⁹

Froom goes on to describe how that once these issues "were cared for," the Adventist church began to receive inquiries from prominent non-Adventist theologians, vital contacts with outside scholars, and invitations to speak from the religious world.¹⁰ These invitations came from "non-Adventist churches, colleges, universities, seminaries—and even secular organizations." He then continues with an impressive list of these churches and prestigious universities who extended invitations, with "gratifying results."¹¹

How sad. What doubtless began as a legitimate desire to improve our standing in the eyes of non-Adventists, turns into a sell-out to those who are most persistent in demanding changes in our understanding of truth. Once we start down that road of looking to man for our legitimacy and acceptance, once we have tasted of that "gratifying" feeling of meeting the standard of non-Adventist theologians, once we seek for

the approbation of the wise men of apostate Babylon, it won't be long before we find ourselves in a most dangerous place.

History has truly borne this out. Instead of the “tremendous world witness and triumph that now lies shortly before us,” the Seventh-day Adventist Church was plunged into some of the most turbulent times it has faced since its inception. When Froom in 1970 triumphantly penned these words, little did he know that Adventism was about to experience some of the most bruising battles, controversies, internal dissensions, and scandals of its existence.

We needn't review in detail the events of the past 33 years to understand that this has not been Adventism's finest hour. Thankfully, there have been exceptions. But from open attacks on Ellen White, the sanctuary doctrine, the everlasting gospel, church standards, worship styles, to open financial scandals, outright rebellion, and a host of other failings, the church has endured upheaval at unprecedented levels.

The following passage in QOD, seems prophetic when we look out upon the landscape of our current situation:

Today the primary emphasis of all our leading denominational literature, as well as the continuous presentations over radio and television, emphasizes the historic fundamentals of the Christian faith... And we feel that we should not be identified with, or stigmatized for, certain limited and faulty concepts held by some, particularly in our formative years.... We are one with our fellow Christians of denominational groups in the great fundamentals of the faith once delivered to the saints.¹²

So the emphasis of this body heaven raised up as its end-time remnant transitions from the distinctive present truth message of the Advent movement, toward the same message being delivered by the other Christian denominations. In the thinking of the new-modelers, the Adventist church was on track toward shedding its cult image and becoming acceptable to the other churches. What a goal for the movement that God had raised up in humble obscurity to give the Elijah message! This Elijah was now journeying over to dialog with Baal's school of prophets.

Doubtless, our leaders in that era believed they were doing God and the church a service by “changing the impaired image of Adventism.” Surely, they had no idea of where this might lead or into whose hands they were placing themselves. Nor did the evangelicals miss the opportunity. Despite some initial struggle convincing their colleagues of the authenticity of Adventism's Christianity, the evangelical leaders welcomed this new face of Adventism as a ripe fruit falling into their hands. What better favor could they ask for than to have the church that was called to be a standing rebuke to fallen Babylon, soften and subdue their God-given message?

We return to the 1988 article by Samples for his description of the trend line coming down to us from QOD:

The roots of Evangelical Adventism can certainly be traced to the Adventist scholars who dialogued with Barnhouse and Martin. When QOD repudiated such commonly held traditional doctrines as the sinful nature of Christ, literalistic extremes of the heavenly sanctuary, and the writings of Ellen White as an infallible doctrinal authority, they laid a critical foundation for those who would later carry the torch for this reform movement.¹³

This amazing portrayal of events unabashedly traces the modern evangelical movement within Adventism (essentially the New Theology) to the QOD event. Notice the lineup of “traditional doctrines” that had to be repudiated. The “repudiation” of the sinful nature of Christ destroys the true gospel and tarnishes the truth of what Christ is trying to do with His people to prepare them for the final hour. The “repudiation” of “literalistic extremes of the heavenly sanctuary” greatly alters the distinctive truths of the sanctuary and the prophetic significance of 1844. The “repudiation” of the “writings of Ellen White as an infallible doctrinal authority” (code phrase for our high regard for her doctrinal authority), is an obvious attack on the Spirit of Prophecy, one of the identifying characteristics of the Remnant. Some of these were not “repudiated” quite as vigorously in QOD as they would later be by other means. *Questions on Doctrine*, was nevertheless the starting point, the opening wedge, the manifesto that set the new order moving on its way.

Continuing, the article tells us:

Former editor of *Evangelica*, Alan Crandall, comments: ‘The seeds of this movement [Evangelical Adventism] were sown within the denomination via the book QOD in 1957, and the seed-plot was watered by the public ministries of such men as R.A. Anderson, H.M.S. Richards, Sr., Edward Heppenstall, Robert Brinsmead, Desmond Ford, Smuts van Rooyen, and others.’ This movement continued to grow and evolve throughout the 1970s, with the main spokesmen being two Australian SDA scholars named Robert Brinsmead and Desmond Ford...¹⁴

This amazing admission is most revealing. *Questions on Doctrine* was the means of sowing the seed. But QOD by itself was not enough. That is why it is a mistake to take the book, examine its contents, declare that it is not really that bad, and castigate those who find serious fault with it. We must recognize that the mature poisonous plant came from a small, benign seed. *Questions on Doctrine* links to the theology of Desmond Ford and the Robert Brinsmead of the 1970s (and beyond). In light of these facts, why would any true friend of the Remnant church choose to dust off a 40 year old controversial book and republish it?

Perhaps the associate editor of *Ministry* magazine unwittingly frames the problem best when she announces the reason for our relations with “our evangelical brethren in Christ” from whom “we are trying to learn some lessons.” Those words come from an editorial titled, “Adventism's New Milestone.”¹⁵ Trying to learn some lessons from our evangelical brethren? Of course, we should always be humble and willing to learn from anyone, including from outside our church. But never, ever should we go to our evangelical brethren to “learn” how to water down our distinctive doctrines and the finer points of the truths entrusted especially to this church by God Himself so as to meet with their standard of approval.

What starts out as an admirable and desirable thing (demonstrating to non-SDAs that we are legitimate Christians and not a cult) can easily turn into a sell-out. Having once tasted of the gratifying effects of convincing non-SDA scholars and others that we are indeed not a cult, the temptation to take a step further becomes overwhelming. In our dialoging, we end up making changes that we never otherwise would have made. Our books change, our beliefs are modified, our direction alters. The bright line of distinction between Adventism and the other churches begins to blur. The sharp focus of the picture of our unique beliefs grows fuzzy. In place of truth, we substitute an emotional experience of “brotherly” love with our evangelical friends. Our mission suffers. Our reason for existence diminishes. We settle down to life in this world, living comfortably alongside our fellow Christians.

Oh sure, we don't give up the Sabbath or the state of the dead or any of our other fundamentals. In fact, we may fancy ourselves as strengthening our belief statements. But in reality, we have lost the life of these unique truths; we have lost our focus; our very calling. Such is the legacy of QOD and the events surrounding its publication. Such is the legacy that some among us want to promote today. Are we repeating history? Have the events of the last 50 years not been sufficient to teach us? God have mercy upon us.

God is in control. He will bring all of these machinations to naught and will at last uplift His glorious truths in their pristine purity. In that last movement that is just before us, God will have a people who will not be turned by the threats or the approbation of man. He will have a people who have taken Him at His word and in simplicity and humbleness will cooperate with Him in the uplifting of Christ, His sacrifice and atonement, His work of cleansing and blotting out of sins in the heavenly sanctuary, His demonstration of what He can do in and through His people, and ultimately join Him in His soon return. In *that* day, Adventism's "impaired image" will be restored. Not because of our maneuverings, but because Christ has finally reproduced His own image in a group of people, His faithful Remnant.

"Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12). That, at last, will truly be Heaven's "happy day"!

ENDNOTES

1. *Questions on Doctrine*, (Washington DC : Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957).
2. Kenneth R. Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism," *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1988, Vol. 11, Number 1, p. 9, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/web/crj0005b.html>, accessed November 24, 2003, 10:28am, PST.
3. LeRoy E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, (Washington DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1971).
4. _____, *ibid.*, p. 35.
5. _____, *ibid.*, pp. 35-37.
6. Ralph Larson, *The Word Was Made Flesh*, (Cherry Valley, CA: Cherrystone Press, 1986). This book demonstrates that Adventism had spoken consistently with one voice concerning the nature of Christ from its inception to the 1950s.
7. George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, p. 465.
10. _____, *ibid.*
11. _____, *ibid.*, pp. 465-467 (and to the end of the chapter).
12. *Questions on Doctrine*, pp. 31-32.
13. Samples, CRI Article.
14. _____, *ibid.*
15. Louise C. Kleuser, "Adventism's New Milestone," *Ministry*, April 1957 (as quoted in J. R. Zurcher, *Touched With Our Feelings*, (Hagerstown, MD : Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1999), p. 159).



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