

**Theological Threats
Facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church
According to Ted Wilson and Mark Finley
As Represented at the 2021 General Conference Annual Council
By
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Introducing a significant aspect of the most recent Annual Council of the General Conference Committee, Admiral Ncube, a Zimbabwean, wrote from Botswana:¹

A key moment at the 2021 General Conference Annual Council meeting was GC President Ted Wilson’s presentation of 14 theological threats to Adventism, or in his words, “Aberrations that so blatantly and grossly misrepresent God and His Word.” The 14 points, given in Wilson’s sermon, were later reduced to 10 by Mark Finley during the business sessions.

Ncube summarized the declarations of these speakers as follows:

Ted Wilson	Mark Finley
<i>The Word of God not accepted as authoritative</i>	<i>The authority of Scripture</i>
<i>Attempts to diminish the Spirit of Prophecy</i>	<i>Adventist identity (remnant motif)</i>
<i>Misconceptions of justification and sanctification</i>	<i>Prophetic interpretation</i>
<i>Denial of the urgency of the times</i>	<i>Creation and evolution</i>
<i>Humanism versus heavenly inspiration</i>	<i>Jesus and doctrine</i>
<i>Disregard for the sanctuary service and the Gospel message</i>	<i>Moral issues deviating from scripture (LGBTQIA+, divorce, remarriage, etc.)</i>
<i>Ecumenism versus The Shaking and Sifting of God’s Church</i>	<i>Advent fatigue</i>
<i>Congregationalism versus God’s worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Remnant Church</i>	<i>The Sanctuary and Pre-Advent judgement</i>
<i>Attacks against the Godhead</i>	<i>Ellen White and divine inspiration</i>
<i>Opposition to God’s Law and his Ten Commandments</i>	<i>Re-imagining of Adventism</i>
<i>Evolution versus biblical creation</i>	
<i>Aberrant lifestyle behaviour versus biblical view of sexuality</i>	
<i>Rejection of temperance versus God’s comprehensive health ministry and health reform</i>	
<i>Disastrous influences of Eastern mysticism</i>	

Although it is true that Finley “reduced” Wilson’s 14 theological threats to 10, he did not simply select these 10 from Wilson’s list. In fact, he has only 7 or 8 general ideas in common with Wilson.² These are, in my words:

¹ Material ascribed to Admiral Ncube appeared in “Crisis – What Crisis? Ted’s Theological Threats,” Spectrum, October 20, 2021 (<https://spectrummagazine.org/views/2021/crisis-what-crisis-teds-10-theological-threats>).

² I have indicated with italics what I consider to be these common ideas in the above table.

- Authority of the Bible
- Authority of Ellen White
- Sanctuary doctrine
- Creation vs. evolution
- Sexuality and gender
- Remnant doctrine
- Advent and end time
- Fixity of Adventism³

Accordingly, I take these common ideas to represent the core concerns of these Annual Council speakers regarding what they consider to be current theological threats facing Adventism.⁴ Let us examine at a few of them.

Authority of the Bible

It is appropriate that this heads the list. Adventist proposit to base all doctrine and practices on the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.⁵ If the authority of the Bible is in question, the rest of the doctrines and practices are also in question or, at least, should be.

Of course, the basic problem facing efforts to establish the authority of the Bible is that it is supported by believers using unabashedly circular reasoning. In his Annual Council sermon,⁶ Wilson does exactly that:

The Bible says in II Timothy 3:16-17, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

That is the classic argument! Apart from legitimate issues such as what the writer meant by “All scripture,” the main concern that any reader of this should have is: How can the Bible be taken as its own authority in defining itself? Of course, one can believe this about the Bible for whatever

³ Although I think that something like this lies behind Wilson’s Ecumenism versus The Shaking and Sifting of God’s Church and Finley’s Re-imagining of Adventism, they may have actually had different things in mind. Hence, my equivocation as to “7 or 8 general ideas in common.”

⁴ From the table above, one can see that Wilson uniquely also has concerns about: “Misconceptions of justification and sanctification,” “Humanism versus heavenly inspiration,” “Attacks against the Godhead,” “Opposition to God’s Law and his Ten Commandments,” “Rejection of temperance versus God’s comprehensive health ministry and health reform,” and “Disastrous influences of Eastern mysticism.” Likewise, Finley was uniquely concerned about: “Prophetic interpretation” and “Jesus and doctrine.”

⁵ The first of the Official. Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is entitled “Holy Scriptures” and contains this sentence: “The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.” (<https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/>).

⁶ References to and quotations from Ted N. C. Wilson’s Annual Council sermon (October 9, 2021), entitled “Trusting God’s Prophetic Word in the Coming Conflict,” are from Adventist News Network (<https://adventist.news/news/trust-gods-prophetic-word-in-the-coming-conflict>).

reasons or for no reason at all. But that, as Sportin' Life declared,⁷ does not make it so. One can find material in the Bible that may be deemed helpful in various personal or spiritual circumstances, but that does not mean ipso facto that everything in Old and New Testaments is verifiably true historically, scientifically, sociologically, or politically. Without such independent verification the Bible cannot be reasonably declared to be authoritative.

Wilson digs himself in even deeper when he tries to extend his circular argument by quoting the self-serving declaration of the writer of Revelation:

In Revelation 22:18-19, we read, "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." Clearly, the words of God are absolutely essential.

There is nothing whatsoever clear about this as establishing that "the words of God are absolutely essential." We have only the claims of an individual writer of Scripture about the significance of what he or she has written and the baseless and, likely, immoral threats about what God will do to those who see and practice things differently.

Authority of Ellen White

Adventists attempt to establish the role and authority of Ellen White by appeals to the Bible. But this is even less exegetically or rationally successful than trying to establish the Bible's authority. Wilson's attempt to validate this Adventist teaching involves something of the reverse of his effort to prove the Bible's authority. Here he first appeals to White's own self-understanding and expressed consequences concerning those who do not believe in her role:

Ellen White predicted there would be attempts to destroy God's work through her. In *Testimonies to Ministers*, page 51, she states: "The result of such work will be unbelief in the Testimonies, and, as far as possible, they will make of none effect the work that I have for years been doing." People do this by ignoring the Spirit of Prophecy, challenging it, or actually contradicting it.

This echoes the self-serving and threatening language in Revelation that we saw above. However, Wilson, as in the case of his trying to establish the Bible's authority from Scripture itself, must also turn to the Bible to validate Ellen White:

The Spirit of Prophecy was given by God through Ellen G White as special instructions to God's last-day church and is verified by Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 19:10.

This is the tired, nineteenth century, unconvincing, and linguistically unsupportable interpretation of two texts in Revelation. No competent, non-Adventist interpreter of these materials would reach anything remotely like the reading of Ted Wilson or Adventists generally.

⁷ A character in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Sportin' Life sang the song "It Ain't Necessarily So" – displaying his cynical view of the Bible.

In fact, it is almost like Ted himself is not completely convinced by the traditional “proof” texts and, therefore, must add his own “absolutely” authoritative declarations:

The Spirit of Prophecy is absolutely reliable and is to be believed and accepted in its entirety. Ellen White was absolutely a prophet of God and her ministry including strong messages from the throne room of God about apocalyptic prophecy and instruction are for all time. As we read the Spirit of Prophecy we are convinced of its accuracy, truthfulness, and relevancy.

Of course, one will believe these statements only to the extent that one believes in Wilson’s authority to make them. He may be convinced of White’s “accuracy, truthfulness, and relevancy,” but that itself does not make these things so. These declarations must be validated on their own merits.

What I said about the Bible can equally be said about the writing of Ellen White. One can find material in her writings that may be deemed helpful in various personal or spiritual circumstances, but that does not mean ipso facto that everything in the so-called “Spirit of Prophecy” is verifiably true historically, scientifically, sociologically, or politically. Without such independent verification White’s writings cannot be reasonably declared to be authoritative.

The Other “Threats”

It would be useful to explore and critique the remaining common “theological threats” to Adventism, as well as those unique to Wilson and Finley. However, for my present purposes, this is not necessary, because everything else in those lists derive from the two items we have already discussed, i.e., the authority of the Bible and the authority of Ellen White. Wilson’s dogmatic stance and that of Adventists generally depend on their interpretations of Scripture – including the attempted biblical establishment of the role and authority of White – and secondarily on White’s writings themselves. Furthermore, such readings of the Bible and White for most, if not all, of these other “threats” are unsupportable and, in some cases, downright disastrous.

I will note only one example – what Wilson identifies as “Disregard for the sanctuary service and the Gospel Message.”⁸ His evidence for this lies in two sentences from Ellen White:

There are those who have no regard or understanding of the beauty of the sanctuary and its services which point to the Gospel, the Lamb slain on the cross. We read in Last Day Events, page 177: “The enemy will bring in false theories, such as the doctrine that there is no sanctuary. This is one of the points on which there will be a departing from the faith.”

As for the biblical foundation of this doctrine, Wilson predictably offers Daniel 8:14, the “day/year principle,” and the “historicist approach” to the Bible’s predicting historical events:

Biblical prophecies are real and Daniel 8:14 is absolutely rock solid. Don't believe anybody who says, “Oh no, that was only 2,300 literal days and it ended with someone called Antiochus Epiphanes.” No, my friends, don't believe that. We use the biblical day/year

⁸ Finley calls this “The Sanctuary and Pre-Advent judgement.”

principle given to interpret prophecy. Allow the Bible to interpret itself. The historicist approach shows us that history has accurately unfolded according to His Word!

Of course, no competent, contemporary, non-Adventist student of Daniel or biblical apocalyptic agrees with any of this. Daniel 8:14 is not remotely related to what Wilson or Adventists claim. There is no demonstrable validity to the “day/year” or year/day principle for interpreting biblical so-called time prophecies. Historicism has long been abandoned as a means of understanding Daniel and Revelation, especially as it would make absolutely no sense to the original readers of these texts.

Conclusion

I write this on October 23, one day after the anniversary of the “Great Disappointment” and on the commemorative date of the so-called “Cornfield Vision” of Hiram Edson. The interpretation of the Edson event, supported by the young visionary, Ellen Harmon,⁹ became the basis for the differentiating of what eventually became the Seventh-day Adventist Church from the Millerite Movement. Although they remained Millerite in falsely understanding the chronology of Daniel 8:14 and the “day/year” principle as pointing to October 22, 1844, they became Edsonites in adopting the false notions of “cleansing the heavenly sanctuary” and the related “investigative judgement.”

Despite the fallacy of their adjustment of Millerism starting on October 23, 1844, Adventists were able to survive and thrive under the banner of new ideas. I can only hope that this day, 177 years later, would signal the embrace of new, valid, contemporary, and relevant ideas that would enable Adventism to move beyond not only the vestigial remains of Millerism, but also beyond Edsonism, Ellen White, Ted Wilson, and Mark Finley. We should not in a continuing sectarian manner be afraid of any of the ideas that abhor Wilson and Finley but should welcome opportunities to explore and test them and to adopt those that are valid for ourselves, our community of faith, and the world around us.

⁹ Ellen Harmon (later White) claimed to have received her first vision on December 1944, which, along with visions in 1845, seemed to confirm the essence of Edson’s experience. See Merlin D. Burt, “The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Heavenly Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White’s Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844–1849,” PhD, Andrews University, 2002, 170.