

AN ADVENTIST THEOLOGY OF THE EARTH IN LIGHT OF THE END TIME

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1. Background to an Adventist Theology of the Earth

The purpose of this paper is to propose an Adventist theology of the earth in the light of an impending end time. Before addressing this matter directly, I will review the traditional and contemporary positions of Christians in general and Seventh-day Adventist Christians in particular with regard to the theological aspects of ecological responsibility.

1.1. Christians and the Earth

For most of its history, Christianity has shown little interest in nature as anything other than the context in which humans live and the support system for their lives. Typically, Christians saw nature as something that God gave humans to dominate. They usually understood this dominion to be the right of exploitation. In this regard, Christians saw themselves different from those they considered pagans and from adherents of other, particularly Eastern, religions whose ties to nature are thoroughgoing and spiritual. On one occasion, a Christian missionary asked Gandhi what he wanted to achieve in the world. Gandhi replied, "To identify myself with all creation." The missionary left disappointed.¹

In the last third of the 20th century many writers began to blame the present environmental crisis on the formative impact of Western Christian theology and ethics on the development of science and technology and the resulting Industrial Revolution.² The germinal study in this regard was published by Lynn White in 1967. In this oft-quoted essay, White argued that "our present science and our present technology are . . . tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature."³ For White, such Christianity therefore "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the present ecologic crisis. Eastern Christians, non-Christians, aboriginal peoples, and New Agers are often seen to be more committed to environmental responsibility than Western Christians.⁴

In the last thirty years, Christian theologians and other writers⁵ have begun to seriously address this issue, not only acknowledging, like Santmire, the ambiguous heritage of Christian theology in this regard, but also exploring ways that contemporary Christian theology and ethics can creatively foster environmental responsibility and renewal.

Even White acknowledged a minority tradition in Christianity that showed concern for the natural world. This has typically been associated with Francis of Assisi, whom White proposed as "a patron saint for

¹Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "Introduction: Identification or Mastery?" in *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 1.

²For a discussion of this tendency, see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1-12. See also Jo Ann Davidson, "Creator, Creation, and Church: Restoring Ecology to Theology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45, no. 1 (2007): 101-22.

³Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7.

⁴See Loren Wilkinson, "New Age, New Consciousness, and the New Creation," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, 6-29.

⁵For a comprehensive bibliography on Christianity and ecology from the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, see http://fore.yale.edu/files/christianity_bibliography_July2014.pdf.

ecologists.”⁶ If Francis is the patron saint of ecology, his “Canticle of Brother Sun” is its doxology. One of Santmire’s concerns in *Travail of Nature* is to document this early minority tradition with particular reference to Irenaeus and Augustine of Hippo. No longer is Christian stewardship being seen merely as faithfulness in the giving of tithes and offerings.

Unfortunately, we have recently seen something of a reversal of this progress by Christians in the United States, especially among Evangelicals. This has appeared in the latter’s uncritical support for and endorsement of not only the general policies of the present executive branch of the federal government but especially its stance and actions concerning the environment. These have included things like the renewal of offshore petroleum drilling and support for fracking, the rejection of the Paris Agreement, the approval of major pipeline projects, and the revitalization of the coal mining industry.

1.2. Adventist Christians and the Earth

Seventh-day Adventists, like most Christians, have historically displayed little interest in ecological matters.⁷ The traditional fascination of Adventists with nature is not based on any developed theology of the natural world. Rather, it is associated with the commitment to health and the belief that time spent in nature will positively affect the mind, body, and spirit. One notable exception to this, of course, was the radical pantheism of John Harvey Kellogg and others, with its virtual deification of nature.⁸

For Ellen White,⁹ nature seemed important largely for its educational¹⁰ and restorative values. She did not have a doctrine of environmental responsibility. Yet, she did offer some insights that are fundamental to an Adventist theology of the earth. In a generic way she spoke of “the unity of man with nature.”¹¹

While her numerous references to stewardship consistently refer to the wise management of finances and abilities, she occasionally viewed stewardship in a somewhat broader sense. Even when discussing financial stewardship, she sometimes wrote of the more general responsibilities of humans as God’s stewards.¹²

In perhaps her most specific consideration of an ecological theme, Ellen White wrote on the treatment of animals, albeit in 19th century terms:

Few realize as they should the sinfulness of abusing animals or leaving them to suffer from neglect. He who created man made the lower animals also, and “his tender mercies are over all his works.” The animals were created to serve man, but he has no right to cause them pain by harsh treatment or cruel exaction.

It is because of man’s sin that “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together.” Suffering and death were thus entailed, not only upon the human race, but upon the animals. Surely, then, it becomes man to seek to lighten, instead of increasing, the weight

⁶White, “Historical Roots,” 1207.

⁷“Christians have been slow to respond to ecological concerns. Unfortunately, even we Seventh-day Adventists often neglect to link our theology with our ecology.” Jo Ann M. Davidson, “And It Was Good,” *Adventist Review* 185 (Aug. 21, 2008), 8.

⁸For a biography of Kellogg, see Richard W. Schwartz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1970).

⁹For a brief survey, see Cindy Tutsch, “Ellen White and the Environment,” *Adventist World* (Jan. 13, 2018), 24-5. This is also available at <https://www.adventistworld.org/ellen-white-and-the-environment/>.

¹⁰*Education* 99-120; *The Ministry of Healing* 261-8.

¹¹*Education* 100.

¹²*Testimonies for the Church* 9:246.

of suffering which his transgression has brought upon God's creatures. He who will abuse animals because he has them in his power, is both a coward and a tyrant. . . . A record goes up to heaven, and a day is coming when judgment will be pronounced against those who abuse God's creatures.¹³

Here Ellen White links God's creation of humans and animals and notes that human sin brought suffering and death to both, while negatively impacting their earthly environment. Humans are to care for the needs of animals and not to abuse them. Such abuse is cowardly and sinful and will result in divine judgment against the perpetrators.

About 1970, Seventh-day Adventist authors first began to address the issue of Christian responsibility for the conservation and renewal of the earth. These include discussions of the growing ecologic crisis, efforts at developing an environmental conscience among Adventists, and insights on the relationship between theology and ecology.¹⁴ While some writers feature a few elements of Adventist theology, no one has developed a distinctly Adventist theology of the earth.¹⁵ As we might expect, several see the Sabbath as a time for not only celebrating the Creator but also reminding us of our environmental responsibilities.¹⁶

Various organizations have conducted conferences on the theme of Adventists and ecology. For example, in 1993 the Andrews [now Adventist] Society for Religious Studies devoted its annual meeting to the topic of "Adventists and Environmental Responsibility." The Women's Resource Center at La Sierra University hosted the 2nd Annual Young Women & the Word '09, with the conference theme "Adventist Women & the Earth: A Response to Ecofeminism," April 24-26, 2009. Loma Linda University sponsored a conference on "ENTRUSTED Christians and Environment Care," April 26-27, 2013.¹⁷

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has issued several official declarations on environmental issues. In 1980, the church included a statement on stewardship, with a reference to "the earth and its resources," in the list of "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists." However, despite the inclusion of this phrase, the

¹³*Patriarchs and Prophets* 443.

¹⁴One of the earliest Adventist publications is Jonathan Butler, "Pity the Planet, All Joy Gone," *Insight* 1 (October 13, 1970): 3-7. *Spectrum* 22 (January 1993) was thematically devoted to the topic of ecology and contained a collection of articles on the subject: Alvin Kwiram, "Adventists and the Good Earth," 28-35; Glen Coe, "The Compelling Case for Nature," 36-37; Roy Benton, "Earth in the Balance," 38-40; Brian W. Harper, "Resurrection of the World," 41-44. It also had an editorial note by Roy Branson and five short pieces on what various groups of Adventists are doing practically to address the issue. For a bibliography of Adventist writings on theology and ecology, see <https://adventistwomenearth.wordpress.com/recommended-reading/bibliography-of-adventist-writings-on-ecology/>.

¹⁵One of the more comprehensive efforts at summoning Adventists to environmental responsibility based on elements of Adventist teachings is A. Joseph Greig, "Adventists and the Environment," *Adventist Review* 167 (April 19, 1990): 15-18. In this short article, Greig invokes the doctrines of creation, Sabbath, "nonimmortality of the Soul," healthful living, and concern for the poor. Some of the most scholarly efforts have been those of Davidson ("Creator, Creation, and Church") and Sigve Tonstad (*The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists* [Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2017]). See also Floyd E. Hayes and William K. Hayes, "Seventh-day Adventist Faith and Environmental Stewardship" in *Biology: a Seventh-day Adventist Approach for Students and Teachers*, ed. H. Thomas Goodwin (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2014), 141-60.

¹⁶See, e.g., Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980), 204-14; Barry Casey, "Let the Wilderness Be Glad! The Apocalypse and the Environment," *Spectrum* 13, no. 3 (1983): 40-41; Benton, p. 39; Kwiram, p. 31; Greig, pp. 16-17. Two articles deserve special mention: Sheryll Prinz-McMillan, "Feminists, Ecology, and the Sabbath," *Spectrum* 23 (April 1994): 13-19; Niels-Erik Andreasen, "A Sabbath Rest for the Whole Earth," *Adventist Review* 173 (August 29, 1996): 18-21. "We might say that the sabbath provides the basis for a theological ecology; it calls for respect for our environment." Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 407.

¹⁷See the related book, S. Dunbar, L.J. Gibson, and H.M. Rasi, eds., *ENTRUSTED Christians and Environmental Care* (Mexico: Adventus - International University Publishers, 2013).

statement is thoroughly money-oriented. Subsequently, the Ministerial Association of the General Conference published a book, which discusses these beliefs. Its chapter on stewardship contains a small section on this issue.¹⁸

The first comprehensive official statement by the church on the subject of environmental responsibility was voted by the Annual Council of the General Conference in 1992.¹⁹ Theologically, the statement is distinctly Adventist only in its reference to the Sabbath as emphasizing “the importance of our integration with the total environment.” Philosophically, it is anthropocentric; politically, it supports the concept of sustainable development.

In 1995 and 1996, the church issued three additional statements relating to Adventists and the environment.²⁰ These statements were voted by the General Conference Administrative Committee. Two are almost identical statements indicating that humans are stewards of “the natural environment” and that they have badly failed in this responsibility. The third statement discusses climate changes caused by industrialized countries and calls for governments to take specific political actions. All three end with a similar paragraph that describes the commitment of Seventh-day Adventists to environmental responsibility.²¹

The number of Adventist publications and pronouncements on the topic of environmental responsibility is impressive. However, most are short, incomplete treatments of the issue. Furthermore, none attempts to set out a comprehensive Adventist theological position. It is time for Adventists to move beyond this consciousness raising and unstructured theological musing, as important and necessary as these have been. Adventists need to focus these scattered ideas into a comprehensive and systematic theology of environmental responsibility, a theology that is not only Christian but uniquely Adventist—an Adventist theology of the earth.²² Unless they engage in this task, Seventh-day Adventists in general will not take the issue seriously. Some will practice ecologically responsible activities, such as paper and glass recycling and water conservation, for social or political reasons. A few will do such things because of religious convictions. Most will continue to live with little or no regard for the status or fate of the environment. However, there will be no general movement of Adventists toward responsible ecology until they have a well-developed

¹⁸*Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd edition (Washington: Ministerial Association, 2005), 307. After noting the pollution and manipulation of the environment caused by industry and technology, the writer states that Christians as stewards of the earth should keep “the ecological balance intact.”

¹⁹For the text of the statement, see “Caring for God’s Creation,” *Adventist Review* (December 31, 1992): 13. This statement served as the basis for part of Charles E. Bradford’s discussion of environmental responsibility in “Stewardship,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 664-65, 662, 667-68.

²⁰These are “A Statement on the Environment” (released June 29-July 8, 1995), “The Dangers of Climate Change: A Statement to Governments of Industrialized Countries” (December 19, 1995), and “Statement on Stewardship of the Environment” (released October 1-10, 1996). These seem to be the last such official Church statements. For the text of these statements, see <https://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/Statements-2010-english.pdf>.

²¹The following is the text of the paragraph in “A Statement on the Environment”:

Seventh-day Adventists advocate a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled consumerism, goods-getting, and production of waste. We call for respect of creation, restraint in the use of the world’s resources, reevaluation of one’s needs, and reaffirmation of the dignity of created life.

²²Among the major subjects “that so far have received only minimal and preliminary Adventist attention but deserve, and will reward, sustained theological effort include . . . the relevance of environmental concern to Adventist thinking,” according to Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1999), 86. Also, according to Guy (“Being Adventist in 21st Century Australia,” a presentation in the Avondale College Church, September 2002), “We could develop a theology of *ecology*; this would seem to be a subject of intrinsic interest to people who celebrate God’s creative goodness every Sabbath.”

theological basis for such behavior. Furthermore, without such a developed theology, Adventist will not be taken seriously by others in the Christian community and beyond.

2. A Paradigm for an Adventist Theology of the Earth

Therefore, as an initial step in this direction, I propose that Seventh-day Adventists develop an Adventist theology of the earth within a paradigm of five basic affirmations and two symbols. While none of these affirmations or symbols is entirely unique to Adventism, the assemblage is particularly characteristic of Seventh-day Adventist thought and practice.

2.1. Five Affirmations

The five affirmations reflect a trajectory of cosmic time that is central to Adventist theology—a temporal expanse from creation to re-creation, from Eden to eternity, from “in the beginning” to the eschaton. Adventists sometimes have called this “the drama of the ages” or, expressed more negatively though with an anticipated positive outcome, “the great controversy” or “the cosmic conflict.”

2.1.1. Creation

The first affirmation concerns creation—God created and sustains the physical world, all its systems, and all its human, animal, and plant life. The foci of this affirmation are God the engaged Creator, God’s comprehensive and magnificent creative achievements, God’s satisfaction with the results, and God’s partnership with humans in creative activities and in the preservation of the created order.

The narrative in Genesis 1 describes a progressive emergence of order from a state of dark, watery chaos. At the word of God, light dispels the darkness, firmament separates the water, land further divides the water and produces plants, special lights appear in the firmament, creatures emerge in the firmament and in the water, and animals spring forth on the land. This culminates in the creation of creatures in the image of God—male and female humans. To these humans, God gave dominion or trusteeship over all the creation. At each stage, God saw that the outcome was good. In a final summary assessment of this creation, the writer observed, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”²³

The writer of Genesis 2 describes God’s creation from a different perspective. This primordial chaos was a desert-like cosmos without plants or animals. Water came from the ground. Then God made the body of a creature from the soil and activated it with life, producing a human being. God next put this human into an environmental setting that he was to protect but with limitations that he was not to exceed. Similarly, God proceeded to create “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” and “every animal of the field and every bird or the air” out of the soil.²⁴ God shared the creation process with this human by having him give names to all the animals. From the male human, God created a female counterpart.

Together, these stories convey several important insights that must be part of an Adventist theology of the earth in the context of the affirmation of creation. (1) The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is the source of all the physical universe and its systems and life forms, particularly the humans, plants, and animals of the earth. (2) God intentionally brought the earth and its creatures into being. (3) God was overwhelmingly satisfied with the creation, declaring it to be “very good.” (4) Humans, plants, and animals share a common physical relationship to the soil—to the earth itself. (5) Humans are not dualistic entities but are monistic beings that exist only when life is combined with their physical bodies. (6) God made humans to be like God, at least in

²³Gen 1:31. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

²⁴Gen 2:9, 19.

part, by involving them in the creation process and by making them responsible for the well being and protection of the physical world with its plants and animals. (7) God made humans with physical, rational, spiritual, and spatial dimensions. (8) In creation, God established an order of authority and relationships of responsibility with limitations. (9) Humans and animals are dependent on the plants of the earth for food and thus the continuation of life.

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who affirm the doctrine of creation will acknowledge God's ownership of the earth and all its life forms, the inherent goodness of all aspects of God's creation, their common relationship along with the plants and animals to the physical world, the goodness and necessity of their bodies and all bodily functions, their assignment as trustees or stewards of the well being of the earth and all of its life forms, their spatial dimension as part of the holistic understanding of human life, and the order of human authority and limitations with regard to the earth.

2.1.2. Deterioration

The second affirmation concerns deterioration—human rebellion against God resulted in the degradation of the physical world and all its human, animal, and plant life. The initial source material that supports this affirmation is the narrative in Genesis 3. This foundational story narrates the origin of sin and evil in the world.

The narrator links this story to that of Genesis 2 by describing how the recently created humans rationally decided to exceed the boundaries of the divinely imposed limitations. One of the animals helped to facilitate this rebellion by creating doubt and distrust of God. The humans were beguiled and immediately felt shame and fear toward God and alienation and blame toward each other. After searching for the hiding pair and finding them, God told them of the consequences of their choice and actions. Everyone and everything involved would suffer as a result. The snake would be humiliated and crushed by the woman's offspring, even while biting his heel. The woman would suffer pain and humiliation. The man would experience the difficulty of extracting food from the earth. The earth itself would become hostile to human life²⁵ and eventually claim humans in death.²⁶ Finally, God further extended the boundaries of limitation for the humans by removing them from their original pristine habitat. Yet, God intervened to provide clothing of animal skins to help protect the humans from the hostile environment and left the restricted tree of life as a symbol of hope.

This story conveys several important insights that must be part of an Adventist theology of the earth in the context of the affirmation of deterioration. (1) Even during the time of deterioration, humans are still dependent on the physical world with its animals and plants for life. (2) Stewardship for the earth is even more important, because humans must now work harder to care for the earth. (3) The spiritual, mental, physical, and spatial dimensions of the humans are all negatively affected by the human rebellion.²⁷ (4) The ultimate result of deterioration is death, which for humans means nonexistence. (5) Even in deterioration God provided hope.²⁸

²⁵The theme of the environmental effects of breaking God's covenant continues in Isa 24:5-6; Jer 9:7-10; Hos 4:3; Joel 1:17-20; Zech 7:9-14.

²⁶The story of Cain and Abel that follows (Gen 4:1-16) graphically shows how immediate and personal this outcome would be.

²⁷See Scott Christiansen, *Planet in Distress: Environmental Deterioration and the Great Controversy* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2012), who explores sin and the destruction of the world from scientific and biblical perspectives.

²⁸God continued to act tangibly to preserve human and animal life through the events of the flood (Gen 7-8), covenants with humans and animals (Gen 9:8-17; Hos 2:18), the benefits of Sabbath rest for both humans and animals (Exod 20:8-10; Deut 5:14), God's care for the land (Deut 11:11-12; 2 Chr 7:12-14), and God's promise of environmental restoration (Isa 11:6-9).

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who affirm the doctrine of deterioration will acknowledge that humans are still dependent on the earth for the continuation of life, that they are now even more responsible to God and themselves for the care of the earth and its life sustaining elements, that their spatial along with their other dimensions have suffered because of human rebellion, that they will die and no longer exist, and that their only hope for ultimate life resides in God.

2.1.3. Salvation

The third affirmation concerns salvation—God in the form of Jesus Christ provided for the end of the deterioration of the physical world and all its human, animal, and plant life and for their ultimate restoration. The glimmer of hope contained in the foundational story of deterioration and subsequent biblical material was fanned into a burning torch of expectancy in the history of God’s communications and interventions in the lives of the Hebrew people and recorded in their Scriptures. However, it was not until the incarnation of God into humanity itself that the full blaze of divine revelation and fulfillment burst on the human scene after millennia of deterioration. This is an affirmation of the saving act of God in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The first to write an interpretation of Jesus and his meaning for the salvation of humans and their world was Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenistic Jewish convert to the Jesus Movement. Later, other writers gave their own accounts and interpretations of Jesus, especially those who composed what eventually came to be called the Gospels. In particular, the Gospel writers provided extensive accounts of Jesus’ teachings and supernatural activities, edited to convey the meaning of Jesus for various groups of Christians in different parts of the Hellenistic world.

The stories, discourses, expositions, and interpretations of these writers convey several important insights that must be part of an Adventist theology of the earth in the context of the affirmation of salvation. (1) Jesus’ incarnation shows God’s solidarity with deteriorated humans and their world. (a) Jesus came with a deteriorated human body.²⁹ (b) Jesus overcame the hostile deterioration of nature.³⁰ (c) Jesus defeated disease and death.³¹ (d) Jesus announced the arrival of “the kingdom of God” as a present reality and a future certainty.³² (2) Jesus’ death showed God’s love for deteriorated humans and their world as Jesus experienced death—the ultimate effect of human deterioration.³³ (3) Jesus’ resurrection showed God’s power over the effects of deterioration on humans and their world. (a) God defeated death by raising Jesus from the dead.³⁴ (b) Jesus defeated the hostile cosmic powers through his resurrection.³⁵ (4) The good news is that in Jesus, God saved the whole world and all its people³⁶ and that to be saved those who rebelled against God need only believe in Jesus and accept the good news.³⁷ (5) God saves humans holistically including their spiritual, mental, physical, and spatial dimensions.³⁸

²⁹John 1:14; Phil 2:5-8; Heb 2:17.

³⁰Mark 4:35-41 and 5:1-20 are examples of Jesus’ nature miracles and his numerous healings respectively.

³¹Mark 5:21-43 is a complex story that contains a healing and a resurrection by Jesus. In vv. 23, 34, Mark uses the verb *σώζω*, which often means “to save,” with the more literal meaning “to make well.”

³²Luke reflects both aspects of the kingdom (e.g., 17:20-21; 22:16-18).

³³John 3:16; Rom 5:8.

³⁴1 Cor 15:20-26.

³⁵Col 2:15; 1 Pet 3:21-22.

³⁶2 Cor 5:18-19; Rom 5:18.

³⁷Acts 16:31; Gal 2:15-16.

³⁸1 Thess 5:23; 2 Pet 3:13.

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who affirm the doctrine of salvation will acknowledge that Jesus came in deteriorated human form to show God's solidarity with humans and their world, that Jesus demonstrated his power over the hostile forces of nature and human diseases and death, that Jesus proclaimed the beginning of God's renewed administration of the world, that Jesus died to demonstrate the depth of God's love for deteriorated humans and their world, that God defeated death and the cosmic powers by raising Jesus from the dead, that deteriorated humans may experience salvation by believing in Jesus and accepting the good news that God has saved the world and all people, and that God's salvation involves all the human dimensions including the spatial dimension of the earth.

2.1.4. Anticipation

The fourth affirmation concerns anticipation—God in the form of the Holy Spirit provides the first installments of the restoration of the physical world and all its human, animal, and plant life. This affirmation focuses on the interim period in salvation history between the definitive acts of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the completion of that history in the future restoration to occur in association with the second advent of Jesus. It comes after the defeat of death and the cosmic powers by Jesus through his death and resurrection but before their destruction. It lies between the “already” and the “not yet” aspects of the “kingdom of God”—between its inauguration and its consummation. It is the time between the definitive battle and the end of the war.³⁹

During this interim, believers in Jesus have both privileges and responsibilities. According to the New Testament, they are privileged to have hope and confidence in God's future restoration because of what God has already done in Jesus.⁴⁰ They can even face death with confidence in a future bodily resurrection because God raised Jesus from the dead.⁴¹ They are also privileged to begin experiencing in advance some important aspects of that restoration. Physically, they can even now “know that [they] have eternal life”⁴² and start to experience the quality of endless existence by a health conscious lifestyle. Spiritually, they can begin to undergo a significant, though incomplete, transformation. This is what the New Testament writers variously describe through metaphors like justification, sanctification, redemption, reconciliation, adoption, expiation, forgiveness, and salvation.⁴³ Intellectually, believers can develop their minds toward greater depths of understanding even if short of perfect knowledge.⁴⁴ However, such experiences in advance would be incomplete if they did not also include the fourth dimension of holistic humanity—the spatial dimension. Accordingly, Paul declares that the earth itself languishes in its deteriorated state and eagerly anticipates its restoration.⁴⁵ While God has promised to re-create the physical world in the future,⁴⁶ believers may even now

³⁹The “already” and “not yet” characteristics of the kingdom of God were extensively developed by George Elton Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959) from ideas he credits to Geerhardus Johannes Vos and others, including Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G., 1946). In the English translation, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1962), Cullmann writes as follows: “*The decisive battle in a war may already have occurred in a relatively early stage of the war, and yet the war still continues.* Although the decisive effect of that battle is perhaps not recognized by all, it nevertheless already means victory. But the war must still be carried on for an undefined time, until “Victory Day,” (p. 84); “It is already the time of the end, and yet is not *the* end. . . . The present period of the Church is the time between the decisive battle, which has already occurred, and the ‘Victory Day’” (p. 145).

⁴⁰Rom 5:1-5.

⁴¹1 Thess 4:13-14; 1 Cor 15:20.

⁴²1 John 5:13.

⁴³E.g., 1 Cor 1:30; 6:11.

⁴⁴Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 13:9-10.

⁴⁵Rom 8:18-23. The earth also mourns the human condition of evil and immorality (Hos 4:1-3).

⁴⁶2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:5.

begin not only to prepare for that restoration but also to live an environmentally conscious and active lifestyle. God not only acted definitively in Jesus to overcome the deterioration of humans and their world caused by the rebellion but also in the form of the Holy Spirit acts in the interim to provide this hope and to give believers this advance experience of the future restoration of all things.⁴⁷

During the interim, believers in Jesus also have responsibilities. These involve witness and work. The New Testament records Jesus call for his followers to be his witnesses—to tell others about what God has done, is doing, and will do in their lives and in their world.⁴⁸ He also asks them to do tangible things to help achieve God’s purpose of restoration. This means they are to work with the Spirit to facilitate not only their own spiritual, mental, and physical renewal and development in anticipation of their future restoration but also the preservation and recovery of the physical world and its life forms from further deterioration.⁴⁹

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who affirm the doctrine of anticipation will acknowledge that during the interim between God’s salvation event in Jesus and God’s future restoration they are privileged through the Holy Spirit to have hope and confidence in the ultimate restoration of the deteriorated earth and all its life forms and to experience in advance some important aspects of that restoration, including the proleptic restoration of their spatial dimension in the physical world. They will also acknowledge that during the interim they have responsibilities to inform others of God’s coming restoration of the earth and its commencement already and to work diligently to help bring it about by tangible acts of restraint, reuse, and renewal with respect to the earth and its resources.

2.1.5. Restoration

The fifth affirmation concerns restoration—God will restore the physical world and its human, animal, and plant life to their pristine state for eternity. This affirmation focuses on the goal of salvation history and the climax of the cosmic drama. It looks to an event in the drama that is yet to come. However, its certainty is established by God’s historical act of salvation in Jesus and by the first installments of the restoration in the activity of the Holy Spirit in the present time of anticipation.

Even during the time of deterioration before the act of God in Jesus, God had promised to “create new heavens and a new earth.”⁵⁰ God repeated this promise to the followers of Jesus, who himself had spoken of the end of the present heaven and earth.⁵¹ This restoration of the earth and its celestial environment will be comprehensive. Humans will be restored holistically to endless physical life, to perfect spiritual relationships with God and each other, to unlimited intellectual achievement, and to a perfect spatial environment. Animal and plant life will be restored to perfect harmonious existence.⁵² The earth itself will be restored to its pristine state. All that has been negatively affected by rebellion against God will be made perfect in the restoration.⁵³ However, this is more than merely a zero sum prospect. The restoration will bring humans and their world to a state even beyond their original condition. For humans, this means a degree of understanding God’s love that was never possible before the rebellion and God’s act of salva-

⁴⁷Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:22.

⁴⁸Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8.

⁴⁹Gal 5:22-23; Rom 8:22-23.

⁵⁰Isa 65:17; cf. 66:22.

⁵¹Rev 21:1; Mark 13:31.

⁵²Isa 65:25 describes harmony in nature as part of the cosmic setting of Israel’s restoration.

⁵³Rev 21:5.

tion in Jesus. For the earth, it means a level of God's presence that was not characteristic even of the world after creation.⁵⁴

The first followers of Jesus described in the New Testament were apocalypticists. They shared the basic world view of contemporary Jews that spiritual and social deterioration of their world and its society had reached such disastrous levels that only God's direct intervention could change things. God would bring the present world and its history to a dramatic end and would replace it with a new world. There would be a judgment of human behavior, and only those vindicated as followers of God would enter the new world. Through an end time resurrection, these would include the believers who had died.

If taken in isolation from the other affirmations, an apocalyptic understanding of the restoration will usually lead to a depreciation of a positive theology of the earth. According to the typical apocalyptic theology, God will replace the present world with a new world. Therefore, inhabitants of the present world may feel no responsibility to protect or preserve the present world.

However, when seen as the final part of a trajectory of affirmations that span the time and stages from Eden to eternity, belief in God's dramatic re-creation of the earth becomes the ultimate catalyst for a theology of the earth. God made the earth and everyone and everything on it perfect. The consequences of human rebellion against God brought about the deterioration of the earth and all its human and other life forms. In Jesus, God achieved salvation for humans and the world and made restoration possible by defeating the powers of evil and rebellion. Through the Holy Spirit, believers in Jesus now live in anticipation of the future restoration, are privileged to share some of its benefits in advance, and are expected to work tangibly towards its realization. The final affirmation of restoration of humans and the earth is the capstone of this trajectory. This is apocalyptic in that God will dramatically terminate the history of human rebellion and all its consequences of deterioration and will comprehensively restore everything to its original perfect state.

The bodily resurrection of believers in Jesus who die before his return will be a significant means of linking the old earth with the new. It will also confirm the monistic understanding of reality and the ultimate goodness of matter in God's creation.⁵⁵ Once again, humans will be linked in solidarity with the earth.

These resurrected believers, along with others, will continue to depend on the earth for life. This is figuratively implied in the restoration story, which, in reminiscence of the second creation account, describes a "tree of life" beside the "river of the water of life."⁵⁶

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who affirm the doctrine of restoration will acknowledge that, after the return of Jesus, God who bought the earth and all its human and other life forms into perfect existence will fully restore them from the comprehensive deterioration they have experienced, that the believers in Jesus who have died will live again through resurrection of the physical body, and that matter and the material world will continue to be positively part of the divine plan, and that humans will still depend on the earth and its resources for life.

⁵⁴Rev 21:2-3; 22:1-5.

⁵⁵The "spiritual body" of 1 Cor 15:44 is clearly a "body," i.e., a physical reality. It is "spiritual" in that it is restored to perfection and no longer subject to death (vv. 42-43; 51-53).

⁵⁶Rev 22:1-2; cf. Gen 2:9-10.

2.2. Two Symbols

The symbols represent two of the most central concepts within Adventist theology and understanding. While contemporary Adventism is more well known for the first of these, the second is actually more foundational in Adventist history. Furthermore, the first is better understood and accepted by most Adventists today. Nevertheless, the second, although controversial, remains an important motif in Adventist thought. These symbols contribute to an Adventist theology of the earth in conjunction with the five affirmations.

2.2.1 Sabbath

The first symbol is Sabbath—God rested as an example to humans and gave them the Sabbath as an special interlude in ordinary time. It is their day to rest from work, recover from stress, contemplate and worship God, enjoy fellowship with family and friends, and experience renewal for the following week.

Sabbath is a symbol related to creation. The first creation narrative climaxes with the introduction of the Sabbath as the crowning act of the Creator.⁵⁷ God rested, not from fatigue at creating—how tired can one get from giving a single order on each of six days—but in satisfaction at the outcome of the creation. It was good, and God celebrated. Because God made humans godlike, they too would rest in celebration of the perfect creation with all of its wondrous life forms and its glorious physical environment. It was to be their special time to remember and worship the Creator and to recall their privileges and responsibilities regarding God's world.⁵⁸

Sabbath is a symbol related to deterioration. When humans rebelled, God instituted another functional symbol to remind them of their state of alienation from him and their fate of death. He informed the rebel humans that they would have to work to survive, not a pleasant, leisurely effort, but labor that would be difficult, demanding, and exhausting.⁵⁹ This is the opposite of the rest, which the Sabbath represents. Yet, even in the setting of rebellion and the continuum of labor, the Sabbath was a reminder to humans of the glorious creation in the past and the promise of restoration in the future. In the context of deterioration, God gave laws to humans that included regulations concerning the Sabbath. Humans were told to rest from work in celebration of God's creation and to share the rest with everyone and everything in their households, including their employees, guests, and animals.⁶⁰ Even the land was to have a renewing Sabbath rest from production every seven years.⁶¹ If God's special people failed to grant the land this rest, they would be punished with deportation, and the land would eventually get its Sabbath rest anyway.⁶²

Sabbath is a symbol related to salvation. Ancient Israel understood the Sabbath as a reminder of its deliverance from Egypt and of the God who could make them holy.⁶³ As an act of restoration from the physical deterioration that resulted from human rebellion, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and defended his actions.⁶⁴ He declared the Sabbath to be a gift from God for humans while defending his disciples' right to

⁵⁷Gen 2:1-3.

⁵⁸Exod 20:8, 11; 31:17.

⁵⁹Gen 3:17-19.

⁶⁰Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:13-14.

⁶¹Lev 25:1-7.

⁶²Lev 26:34; 2 Chr 36:21.

⁶³Deut 5:15; Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:12.

⁶⁴E.g., Luke 13:10-17. On the linguistic relationship between healing and salvation, see footnote 31.

eating casually plucked and life sustaining grain on the Sabbath.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he used the concept of a Sabbath-like rest from work to describe figuratively the saving renewal that he brought to deteriorated humans.⁶⁶ Finally, Jesus rested in the earth on the Sabbath before his resurrection in solidarity with all who die and with the earth itself, from which the resurrected dead emerge. The apostle to the Hebrews used the metaphor of entering God's rest for the experience of salvation—an experience that ultimately eluded ancient Israel but is experienced by all who believe in Jesus.⁶⁷ Because God saves humans holistically, including their spatial dimension, the Sabbath as a commemoration of that salvation likewise memorializes the saving of the earth itself.

Sabbath is a symbol related to anticipation. While Sabbath provides rest from the work of the past six days, it also means renewal for the experiences of the next week. It is an interim between past and future—a time to remember and a time to anticipate. It is, therefore, an appropriate symbol for believers in Jesus who live in the reality of his past act of salvation and in the certainty of his future coming to restore. The Sabbath rest is a foretaste of that restoration. Since the restoration will be comprehensive, the foretaste of it should be as well. Thus, Sabbath is both a reminder of the future restoration of the earth and all its human and other life forms and a time to share this good news and do tangible things to help bring it about.

Sabbath is a symbol related to restoration. In the new earth envisioned by Isaiah, restored humans will worship God each Sabbath.⁶⁸ The comprehensive restoration of everything that deteriorated because of human rebellion, including the earth itself, is a Sabbath-like rest that awaits both restored humans and their earth.⁶⁹

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who embrace the symbol of Sabbath will acknowledge that when they rest from work they commemorate God's creation and sustenance of the earth and all its life forms, that Sabbath is a gift of rest for both humans and the earth itself, that Sabbath is a reminder that God saves not only humans but also the earth, that they rest now in anticipation of the earth's ultimate renewal, that they must work tangibly now to advance that renewal, and that the ultimate rest of eternity will include the restoration of the earth from deterioration.

2.2.2 Sanctuary

The second symbol is sanctuary—God has a presence among humans. This suggests that God considers not only humans to be important but also values their physical environment. Furthermore, God is serious about humans and the roles and responsibilities they have received, including their responsibilities regarding the well being of the earth and all its life forms. In the end, God's seriousness involves what the Bible calls a judgment in which humans are held accountable for the discharge of their God-given responsibilities and in which they are vindicated because of their belief in Jesus.

Sanctuary is a symbol related to creation. The creation accounts in Genesis picture God as intimately involved in the creation—contemplating, making, forming, planting, instructing, resting. God shared the creation process with humans by involving them in naming things. The text describes God, like an estate owner,

⁶⁵Mark 2:27.

⁶⁶Matt 11:28-30.

⁶⁷Heb 3:18; 4:3.

⁶⁸Isa 66:22-23.

⁶⁹Heb 4:9; Rom 8:22-23.

walking around the property at the end of the day.⁷⁰ God was serious regarding the care of the earth and gave responsibilities to humans regarding it.

Sanctuary is a symbol related to deterioration. While human rebellion affected God's relationship to the world, it did not eliminate God's presence in it.⁷¹ God was present in the experiences of personal worship and devotion and eventually among a particular people. The physical locus of this latter presence was a sacred tent that in time was replaced by a permanent shrine in Jerusalem—one that God shared even with nesting and singing birds.⁷² God's seriousness about human responsibilities, including the care of the earth, and the means of vindication were centered in the religious events of ancient Israel, especially the annual Day of Atonement.

Sanctuary is a symbol related to salvation. God's definitive act of salvation involved the incarnation of divinity into humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. According to the opening hymn of the Fourth Gospel, this "Word became flesh and lived among us."⁷³ He was "God with us."⁷⁴ God came to share the human spatial dimension not only by living in the world of material things but also by sharing the human physical reality. Jesus taught humans to entrust the care of their most important needs to God, who provides for the birds, flowers, and grass.⁷⁵

Sanctuary is a symbol related to anticipation. God's presence in the world during the interim between the act of salvation in Jesus and the restoration at Jesus' return is in the form of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is a reminder of the historical presence of Jesus in the past and a first instalment of the physical presence of God in the future. The Spirit leads believers to the truth about God's seriousness and points to the time of judgment when God will hold humans responsible for their actions, including their sins against the earth.⁷⁶

Sanctuary is a symbol related to restoration. The ultimate achievement of the restoration will be sanctuary—God will again dwell with humans in a restored earth.⁷⁷ Only then will the presence of God be fully realized since creation and the interlude of human rebellion. The unlimited presence of God will transform the natural world into a place fitting not only for restored humans but also for a perfect God.

Accordingly, Adventist Christians who embrace the symbol of sanctuary will acknowledge that from the beginning of creation God has been present in and identified with the earth and all its human and other life forms, that God's presence continues to grace the earth after humans rebelled, that God's presence reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that humans and the earth continue to experience God's presence in the form of the Holy Spirit, that God's presence with humans and the earth will be complete when all things are restored to their pristine perfection, and that God will hold humans accountable for how they have fulfilled their responsibilities to care for the earth.

⁷⁰Gen 3:8.

⁷¹Ps 139:7-12.

⁷²Exod 25:8; Ps 84:1-4.

⁷³John 1:14.

⁷⁴Matt 1:23.

⁷⁵Matt 6:25-32.

⁷⁶John 16:8-11, 13; Rev 11:16-18.

⁷⁷Rev 21:3.

3. Summary

In recent years, Christians in general have begun to develop creative theologies of the earth, ecology, and environmental responsibility. Seventh-day Adventist Christians need to do the same. Adventists have produced an admirable number of official statements, educational materials, journal articles, books, and scholarly investigations and conducted several conferences on ecological topics from an Adventist perspective. However, there remains the need for a comprehensive and systematic theology of the Earth that draws on distinctive Adventist theological and biblical insights. This paper has taken a preliminary step in that direction. I have proposed a paradigm for an Adventist theology of the earth that is based on five affirmations of the Adventist doctrine of the Great Controversy— creation, deterioration, salvation, anticipation, and restoration—and two characteristic Adventist symbols—Sabbath and sanctuary. I assert that such a theology of the Earth is both complementary to an Adventist eschatology and necessary for it.