

The Three Angels' Messages: An Adventist Imperative

L. James Gibson

Geoscience Research Institute

The year 1844 was an important one. The Millerites experienced the Great Disappointment, leading to a thorough restudy of the prophecies concerning the Second Advent. The increased understanding of the Scriptures that resulted from that study led to the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist church. That same year, Charles Darwin completed a summary of his ideas on evolution by natural selection. He called it an abstract, but it was more like a small book. Darwin did not publish his “abstract” that year, however. Also in 1844, Robert Chambers anonymously published a book, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. This book boldly speculated about the possibility of evolutionary change over long ages of time. It has been said that this book had a greater impact on the public than Darwin’s book had some 15 years later. The public reaction was so intense to

Chambers' work that Darwin held off his for another 15 years.

The irony here is obvious: the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its emphasis on the biblical six-day creation, coincided with the public presentation of evolutionary thinking. Was this a coincidence? I think not.

Seventh-day Adventists have seen themselves as commissioned to present a special message to the world, which we call "The Three Angels' Messages" of Revelation 14:6-12. Our purpose here is to explore the meaning of these messages and its relationship with the doctrine of Creation.

The First Angel

The context of Revelation 14 indicates an eschatological setting, sandwiched between the persecution presented in chapters 12 and 13 and the "harvest" of the end of chapter 14. Adventists understand the three angels' messages of Revelation 14 to represent the final movement preparing the world for Christ's second coming. Seventh-

day Adventists expect to play an important role in proclaiming these messages. Hence, we need to understand what they say.

These three messages follow one after another, and that's because there's an underlying link between them. One link is the doctrine of creation as recorded by Moses; another link is righteousness by faith. The church cannot successfully preach the three angels' messages without faith in the scriptural account of creation, which is foundational to these messages and key to our mission.

The first angel (Rev. 14:6) is described as having the "everlasting gospel." The gospel is the good news of salvation, which is needed because of man's fall. The creation story forms the basis for understanding that fall: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12, NASB cf 1 Tim. 2:13-14).

The first angel's message consists of two parts. The first part is (paraphrased): "Fear God and give

Him glory, because of judgment.” This message was emphasized in early Adventist history, in the doctrines of the investigative and executive judgments. The second part is (again paraphrased): “Worship Him who created.” In Hebrew writing, an idea was often expressed twice, using different words. This is a way of emphasizing a point. The first angel’s message can be treated as such a parallelism:

- Fear God because of judgment, and
- Worship God because of creation.
- To fear God is to reverence Him, and implies worship:
- “Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
- For You alone are holy;
- For all the nations will come and worship before You,
- For Your righteous acts have been revealed.”
- Revelation 15:4, NASB

Judgment is one of God's righteous acts. To many, the emphasis on judgment does not seem like good news. Why should we regard the coming judgment as "good news" (gospel)? And what is the relationship of creation and the good news? Let us consider these questions as we examine the parallelism in the text.

To "fear" God means to give Him reverence, or worship. This is the first part of the parallelism. God is worthy of worship because He is both Creator and Judge. "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, . . . for You created all things . . ." (Rev. 4:11, NASB). Being Creator demonstrates God's authority and gives Him the right (responsibility?) to judge.

What is the parallelism between judgment and creation? Who is the Creator? Who is our Judge? It is Jesus, who created us, who will also be with us in the judgment. The good news (gospel) is that creation and redemption are linked in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Creator (John 1:3), as well as our Advocate in the judgment (1 John 2:1). God has both created us and saved us through Jesus (Col. 1:13-17). Because of

this relationship, the judgment is good news to the Christian.

Although strongly endorsed by the church, the creation part of the gospel angel's message has only recently begun to receive the attention given to the concept of judgment in the early history of our church. There was less need to emphasize God's creatorship because virtually all Christians accepted the biblical creation record, but this is no longer the case.

The biblical story of creation is that humans were created perfect, in the image of God. Due to their own wrong choice, they fell into sin. God could not merely excuse their sin and remain just, so instead, God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, came to earth to die in our place. Thus God could be just and the justifier of him who believes (Rom. 3:26). This means that salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8).

The judgment of humanity is closely linked with the creation story. Our accountability is based on the fact that at creation human beings were

perfect. Without a fall from perfection, there is no accountability to God for sin, and no need of a Savior. Judgment will include accountability for the condition of the world (Rev. 11:18), a responsibility given at creation (Gen. 1:28). Creationists must be good stewards of the earth's resources.

The Second Angel

The second angel states (Rev. 14:8) that "Babylon is fallen." Why does the second message come only after the first message? Could rejection of the first message be the final step in the fall of Babylon? Babylon represents fallen world religions, including churches in Christendom that have fallen away from Christ. The church is impure. Fornication implies something is taking the place of Christ. The Scriptures often represent the relationship of Christ and the church as a marriage (cf Rev. 19:6-9, the marriage supper of the Lamb). The husband (Christ) is identified as the Creator in Isaiah 54:5. This text suggests that substitution with some other "creator" would be fornication. Any church that makes such a choice has fallen. The message of the second angel

can be considered to be a response to the reaction of the Christian world to the message of the first angel regarding creation and judgment.

In the biblical story of creation, Adam and Eve were created perfect. Their fall introduced sin and death into this world. Jesus, as Creator and Judge, offered Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for our salvation. Salvation is thus purely a matter of grace; thus, we can only accept it as a gift, or reject it.

What about other creation stories? Some have proposed that we as a race are improving through evolution. There was no Adam and Eve, no fall, and no substitutionary death. Jesus came to earth only to show us how to live. If we are impressed by His life, if we can imitate Him, and, if we work hard enough, we can qualify for salvation. Jesus did not take our place by His death, but gave us an example of how to earn salvation.

The Bible has bad news about this kind of gospel: no matter how hard you work, no matter how much your life resembles the life of Jesus, it is not enough.

The kind of perfection is not good enough! There is no way for us to earn our own salvation. We do good works, not to become saved, but because we are already saved. Babylon is based on righteousness by works. Heaven is a gift of grace alone.

The Third Angel

The third angel's message (Rev. 14:9-12) is a warning: "Do not worship the beast or receive his mark." Those who disregard this warning will face judgment and punishment. Notice the word "worship," again linked with judgment. To worship the beast rather than God would be spiritual fornication. The mark of the beast is a sign of spiritual fornication and a spiritual fall. This fall comes as a result of rejection of the message of the first angel: worship God the Creator, and accept His offer to declare you "not guilty" in the judgment. Apparently, those who reject the first angel's message will unite to "mark" those who disagree with them. They will even resort to force to prevent anyone from accepting the message of the three angels.

We understand that the worship of the beast and the reception of his mark will involve controversy involving the seventh-day Sabbath. Observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is based on the biblical account of the six-day creation (Ex. 20:11). By observing the Sabbath, we witness and give evidence of our acceptance of the first angel's message: worship the Creator. By worshiping on Sabbath we witness that we accept the Bible as the ultimate authority. By worshiping on Sabbath we testify that we accept salvation by grace alone, based only on the merits of Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice.

Discrediting the creation story would remove the basis for observing the seventh-day Sabbath, and much more. What better way to destroy the seventh-day Sabbath than to discredit the six-day creation, the very basis for its observance? And what purpose for a judgment if there were no fall into sin? Without the doctrine of a six-day creation, the three angels' message loses its meaning.

**THE THREE ANGELS' MESSAGES:
RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH ALONE**

The unified message of the three angels is righteousness by faith. Righteousness comes by faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. This death is necessary because God, in His justice, could not excuse the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. The Fall of Adam and Eve was the result of their own choice to believe the evidence of their senses rather than to believe the word of God. The term “Fall” implies a previous state that was better. Adam and Eve were not created through some process of gradual improvement, but they were created in a state of sinless perfection. The story of their creation is found in Genesis 1.

Some would urge us to accept another story of creation, one that is more in harmony with the ideas of leading scientists and theologians. It is unpopular to accept the words of an old book rather than the latest ideas in science. To those who urge us to abandon our faith in the six-day creation of Genesis, we should say--Tell me the story of Jesus and salvation. Does science have a story that includes Jesus and salvation? Only the Bible shows the way to

salvation and the basis for that pathway.

The three angel's message reveals Jesus as Creator, Advocate in judgment, and Redeemer. This is why the Genesis creation account is so important. Genesis presents the most detailed account given in Scripture of the creation of our world. The creation story is the basis for worship of God, the reason for His authority in judgment, and the contentious issue behind the mark of the beast. The creation record in Genesis is a unifying theme of the three angels' messages.

In view of the significance of creation and the flood to the three angels' messages at the end of time, it is sobering to consider Peter's warning of scoffers in the last days: "Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.' For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was

formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:3-7, NASB).

According to Peter, scoffers will deny both creation and the flood. This is happening now, not only in the world but even within the church. The three angels’ messages must be given, even in such an atmosphere of skepticism. When all the world has been reached, the end will come. And then the Creator will again exercise His power in creation, this time to restore that which was lost because of sin. “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13, NASB)