

What Is the “Everlasting Gospel”?

Herbert E. Douglass

John the Revelator saw that sometime before the end of the world, before Jesus returned, a movement would arise, “having the everlasting gospel¹ to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come’” (Rev 14:6, 7).² Those who respond to this “gospel” are

¹ *Echonta euaggelion aiōnion*. Only here in the Bible is *aiōnion* connected with *euaggelion*. All biblical texts are taken from the NKJV.

² *Hōra* (“hour”) refers to a time when something will take place, here referring to the time of “His judgment.” In the context of the great controversy theme of cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan pervading the Book of Revelation, the basic issue is over the fairness of God and His laws. Satan has resisted God and made “war” against Him (Rev. 12). Throughout human history Satan has been charging that God is severe, exacting, unfair, and arbitrary. And God has been telling His side of the conflict through His messengers (prophets) and finally, most forcefully, revealed His character through an incarnated member of the Godhead, Jesus Christ. Men and women must see that God is not the kind of person Satan has made Him out to be. They must choose to ally themselves with Him against evil. The contrast between Satan’s charges and God’s loving and just ways must be clearly seen so thinking beings may make an intelligent choice, especially in the end-times when Christ’s second advent will end probation (the period of testing) for that last generation.

During the time of “His judgment,” events in heaven and on earth are bringing the controversy to its close. Soon intelligent beings will sing: “Great and marvelous are your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!” “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.” “Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power to the Lord our God! For true and righteous are His judgments.” (Rev. 15:3, 16:7; 19:1, 2). This kind of judgment about God by intelligent beings is exactly what God has been patiently waiting for. These declarations are made after the character and judgments of God have been examined and after the trust unfallen beings (and those fallen but faithful) have in their Creator has been confirmed. The controversy is ended when intelligent beings, wherever in the universe, join in the triumphant declaration, in the face of Satan’s accusations, that God has been transparently fair and merciful in His dealings with rebellious beings. Further, God will be declared just in His judgments regarding the redeemed because those He has chosen to live forever will have settled in their heads and hearts whom they will serve, so settled that they would never be moved to think and do otherwise. They have demonstrated before unfallen intelligences that God’s judgment in their favor has been “true and righteous.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

described in v. 12 as “those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”³

This “everlasting gospel” focuses on (1) God to whom worship and obedience are due and on (2) a people who “give glory to Him” during the time of His judgment.

Why is this emphasis on the “everlasting gospel” so timely, so important, so necessary? Apparently there was something about the “gospel” that had been muted or muddled for some time before the events seen in Rev 14, requiring this special heavenly intervention to set matters right, especially at this foretold time of “His judgment.”

A brief overview of church history for the past two thousand years highlights the remarkable confusion regarding the gospel that has existed since apostolic days. Where would one go during the Protestant Reformation to find the fullness of the “everlasting gospel”? With whom should we agree—Luther or Calvin or Zwingli, the Anabaptists, or the Papacy—when it comes to what is involved in the plan of salvation? In the nineteenth century, would we agree with Presbyterians, or Methodists, or Baptists?

Most Protestants and Catholics would agree that Jesus died for our sins. But this common agreement, in itself, did not (and does not) seem to spell out a common understanding of the gospel. If the gospel includes more than telling the story of Christ’s death, what is that something more? *And why was an end-time correction needed in order for God to get His final message across to seekers of truth before Jesus returns?* The question seems to stare us in the face: What is so helpful, so unambiguous about this “everlasting gospel” that it tells the truth about God and prepares a people for His coming?

One of my favorite gospel songs is “Because He Lives.” Its message is comforting. But the first stanza, true as it is, gives only part of the gospel: “He lived and died to buy my pardon.” By contrast, one of my favorite hymns, “Rock of Ages,” emphasizes the full gospel in its first stanza: “Be of sin the double cure: Cleanse me from its guilt and power.” We need a Great Physician to cure us of both the guilt of sin and its power over us.

This leads to a crucial question: Is the gospel (good news) primarily forgiveness (pardon), or is there more? One of the several ways of defining the “everlasting gospel” would be to ask three questions: Why did Jesus die? Why did He come to earth? And what is the purpose, or goal, of the gospel?

Why did Jesus die?

“[Jesus] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Here, what I like to call the ellipse of truth helps us to both achieve

³ *Tēroutēs* (present participle) suggests that these commandment-keepers are making a life habit of loyalty to the will of God, especially under conditions that call for *hupomonē* (“endurance”).

DOUGLASS: WHAT IS THE “EVERLASTING GOSPEL”?

a correct balance and maintain the wholeness of its components. Jesus died (1) to redeem us and (2) to purify His special people for good works. Not an exclusive focus on one aspect, not a circle of truth focused on the other, but a double focus embracing the integrity (or wholeness) of truth. The everlasting gospel must have both foci at its core; the bright cloud of teaching surrounding the two foci forms not a circle but an ellipse, an ellipse of truth.⁴

A very insightful writer amplified Paul’s good news: “How could He give you any stronger evidence of His love than He gave when He died for you on Calvary’s cross? He died that you might have power to break with Satan, that

⁴ A circle has one focus, or center. An ellipse is an oval (more properly a plane curve or conic section) with two fixed points (or foci) and meets the following condition: the sum of the distances from any one point of the curve to the two foci is a constant. The truth of many theological issues seems to reside in an evenly balanced dialectical synthesis of two good and true things (note that if we try to create an ellipse of, say, a good thing and an evil thing, we end up with dualism). Whether the two foci are so close that the ellipse is virtually circular, or so far apart that the ellipse looks like a hot dog, if you draw a line through the ellipse halfway between the two foci, both sides will be exactly the same size and shape. However, if one focus is emphasized more than the other, the ellipse is destroyed—the truth of the ellipse no longer exists. What is left is, perhaps, egg-shaped. In philosophy or theology, when objective truth (one focus) is over-emphasized at the expense of subjective truth (the ellipse’s second focus), or vice versa, we lose the ellipse of truth. Over-emphasizing one focus and rejecting or minimizing the other leads to heresy (i.e., a partial understanding of truth which, by its partiality, leads people astray). Truth in any area of thought, whether theology, philosophy, law, music, education, etc., must be understood in the form of an ellipse, rather than a circle. An ellipse always has two foci; the circle has one. This means that truth is the sum total of its objective and subjective elements, the two foci in the ellipse. Biblical truth unites (for one example) the two circles of revelation and human responsibility within the ellipse of salvation. Some call this interchange the objective, external Word meeting the subjective response of a person who says, “This truth is for me.” In other words, when someone appeals to the Bible as “truth” without an equal emphasis on personal responsibility rooted in relevance and personal meaning, we know that the ellipse of truth has become two circles.

Even as water cannot be divided between hydrogen and oxygen and remain water, so the objective and subjective elements of salvation cannot be divided and yet remain “salvation truth.” In a way, the divisions between various churches within Christianity, and even between Christianity and other world religions, have occurred when the ellipse has been replaced with unconnected circles. For example, an overemphasis on objective justification tends to lead to human passivity, with faith becoming primarily a matter of mental assent to revelation. This often leads to a *careless* use of such phrases as “Jesus paid it all,” or, “the atonement was completed on the cross,” etc. But an overemphasis on subjective sanctification leads to feeling and reason as the test of faith. This often leads a person to *minimize* the primary authority of the Bible and to make predominant such expressions as “It’s not truth for me unless I feel it or until it makes sense to me.” Faith thus tends to be measured in emotional terms, depending on how one “feels” about a given religious experience. Again, an overemphasis on objective justification tends to make imputed righteousness the most important element in one’s salvation, as if oxygen were the most important element in water. An overemphasis on subjective sanctification (imparted righteousness) tends to make human performance the basis of salvation, as if hydrogen were the most important element in water. For more examples, see the author’s *Messenger of the Lord* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1998), 204, 206, 260, 440, 573.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

you might cast off his hellish shackles, and be delivered from his power. Jesus paid your ransom with His own blood, and shall He have died for you in vain?”⁵

Notice the ellipse of truth again: He died that (1) we might have” power” over Satan as well as (2) that the “ransom” should be paid by His blood. As the hymn put it, cleansed from “its guilt and power.”

All this is surely good news! The “everlasting gospel” flows out of this elliptical gift of grace. To ignore either foci of the ellipse is to proclaim a limited, inadequate gospel. Throughout Paul’s letters, especially Romans, we hear the full-orbed gospel. Paul never tires of emphasizing how we are both “justified by His blood” and (2) “set free from sin and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Romans 5:9, 6:22).

The pity throughout Christian history is that various groups have concentrated on one focus of the ellipse of truth or the other. Mighty clashes have originated by well-meaning leaders who focused either on Christ’s gift of grace in terms of Sacrifice or on His gift of grace in terms of Example and Power to reflect His character. Both are right in what they emphasize, but dead wrong in what they omit or minimize. We often call these groups the Objectivists and the Subjectivists. At the risk of over-generalizing, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists would tend to be Objectivists, and Quakers, Pentecostals, and Wesleyan Methodists have tended to be Subjectivists.

The history of Christianity has been an oscillation, a see-saw, back and forth between prevailing sentiments of the Objectivists and the inevitable reaction of the Subjectivists. The Objectivists emphasize the objectivity of truth and the Subjectivists, its subjectivity. The Objectivists tend to emphasize unduly God’s sovereignty and irresistible grace; the result is most often a focus on doctrine and compliance with external requirements. For objectivists, the *primary* purpose of grace becomes the gift of pardon—certainly a gift we all need and are eternally grateful for—but not a gift that equally includes the transformation of the sinner’s life—certainly also a part of the plan of salvation. As some say, grace is God’s amazing objective gift, not linked to any subjectivity within the believer’s experience. The question remains: is there something more that *also* is done *in* and *through* the believer.⁶

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Youth’s Instructor*, March 2, 1893. In a letter to Elder and Mrs. Stephen Haskell, Nov. 28, 1898, she wrote: “God has given Himself to die for us, that He might purify us from all iniquity. The Lord will carry on this work of perfection for us if we will allow ourselves to be controlled by Him. He carries on this work for our good and His own name’s glory.”—*Manuscript Releases*, 4: 348.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 62, 63— “He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.

“More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith. You are to maintain this connection with Christ by faith and the continual surrender of your will to Him; and so long as you do this, He will work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. So you may

DOUGLASS: WHAT IS THE "EVERLASTING GOSPEL"?

Subjectivists react to what seems to be the Objectivist's scant regard for experience, reason, and feeling in the human response to Christ's atonement. However, Subjectivists often over-stress experience and reason as the test of truth. Though understandable, this response has too often minimized the authority of God and His revelation. Grace then tended to be defined in such terms as "This seems right for me" and "The Holy Spirit told me." Many modern gospel hymns emphasize this subjective response to God's grace, such as my earlier reference to "He Lives." But in so doing, the biblical emphasis on "doing" the will of God (Matt 7:21-29) is strangely muted.

Why Jesus Came

Another question that should be asked before we focus on the purpose of the gospel is, why did Jesus come to earth? Matthew notes that our Lord was called Jesus, "for He will save His people from their sins" (1:21). John wrote that "the purpose of the Son of God was . . . that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8); Jesus said that He came that "they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). And further, hours before Calvary, He affirmed one of His reasons for coming to earth: "I have glorified You on the earth, I finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

But Jesus was not yet finished with that magnificent prayer of John 17. For many reasons He then emphasized how His coming would benefit His believers: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You have sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (vs. 17, 18).

In light of these texts, we can better appreciate the following insight: "Jesus came to bring moral power to combine with human effort, and in no case are His followers to allow themselves to lose sight of Christ, who is their example in all things. . . . Jesus presents the truth before His children that they may look upon it, and by beholding it, may become changed, being transformed by His grace from transgression to obedience, from impurity to purity, from sin to heart-holiness and righteousness of life."⁷

Thus Jesus came, not only to die the sinner's death, but to live the sinner's transformed life, not only to be his Sacrifice but also his Example. He came not only to reveal the truth about God but also to reveal the truth about what men and women can be through His saving grace.

say, 'The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Galatians 2:20. . . . Then with Christ working in you, you will manifest the same spirit and do the same good works,—works of righteousness, obedience.

"So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us."

⁷ White, *Selected Messages*, 1: 262.

The Purpose of the Gospel

Again, the ellipse of truth helps us wrap together the two amazing purposes imbedded in (1) Christ's mission to earth, (2) why He died, and (3) the purpose of the gospel. The purpose of the gospel is to make plain why Jesus came and why He died. The "everlasting gospel" in the end-times restores the New Testament gospel in its wholeness, in its integrity. It explains God's plan to save men and women in such a way that their presence in the new earth would not jeopardize again the well-being and security of the universe.

Thus the gospel is not limited to the good news of His pardon and forgiveness. It presents the ellipse of truth that reveals the integrity of God's grace as including His forgiveness and His power to transform. This gospel ellipse is revealed beautifully in the book of Hebrews as "mercy" and "grace to help": "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). John expressed the same good news as "forgiveness" and "cleansing": "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Paul sang, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes [has faith]" (Rom 1:16).

The "everlasting gospel" adds much more to limited gospels that focus only on one half of the gospel ellipse. "The religion of Christ means more than the forgiveness of sin; it means taking away our sins, and filling the vacuum with the graces of the Holy Spirit. It . . . means a heart emptied of self. . . . The glory, the fullness, the completeness of the gospel plan is fulfilled in the life."⁸

So, listening again to Revelation 14, the "everlasting gospel" will get a fair and full hearing in the end-times. Limited gospels that ridicule adherence to God's expressed will as being outside of the gospel will appear inadequate beside the clear proclamation of the "everlasting gospel". Limited gospels that cry "legalism" at any attempt to embrace faithful obedience will be seen as contrary to the message of New Testament grace (Acts 5:31, 32; 6:7; 24:24, 25; 26:20; Rom 1:5, 16; 16:26).

According to John, those who respond to the wonderful truths in the "everlasting gospel" are described as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12). If the works of Satan (which Jesus came to destroy) are embraced in the word "sin," and if the "essence of sin is to allow ourselves to become a contradiction of God's will,"⁹ then those who respond to the "everlasting gospel" are most grateful for the "good news" of both God's pardon and power to destroy sin in their lives.

Thus, in the days when the "everlasting gospel" is heard again with New Testament precision and passion, Paul's constant refrain in all his epistles will be heard again: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove

⁸ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 419, 420.

⁹ White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5: 348.

DOUGLASS: WHAT IS THE “EVERLASTING GOSPEL”?

yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor 13:5). Only God’s magnificent grace can keep the vision of Christ’s sacrifice ever before the committed Christian. Only His marvelous grace can keep His sustaining power fresh daily as the Christian counts up the many reasons to be grateful for the “double cure.” Only God’s grace can “qualify” the redeemed to be safe to save.

Herbert E. Douglass, though officially retired, is currently vice president of Adventist Heritage Ministry. He holds a Th.D. from Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He has served as dean and president of Atlantic Union College and president, Weimar Institute; vice president, Pacific Press Publishing Association; associate editor, *Adventist Review*; head, Religion Department, Atlantic Union College, and associate professor of religion, Pacific Union College; and pastor in Illinois. Douglass has authored a dozen books and many periodical articles. douglass@newworld.net