

The Shaping of Adventism

The Case of W. W. Prescott

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of the book (a task made easier by the material already submitted by Prescott).

Froom and Howell concluded that because the book did not “represent the Seventh-day Adventist viewpoint or sound historical . . . fact,” an attempt should be made to stop its circulation. Wilkinson defended his position vigorously, but that did not change the mind of the brethren who reaffirmed their recommendation. Although copies of the book continued to circulate, the issue was slowly forgotten. The conflict inflicted scars on Prescott, however, that took some time to heal. Some of the leading brethren became increasingly wary of him.

666 and a Wrongly Titled Pope

Another illustration of Prescott’s educational efforts that resulted in his being regarded as a trouble-maker and suspected of heresy concerned the interpretation of the number 666 in Revelation 13:18. Early during his time on *The Protestant Magazine*, the professor’s research on Catholic issues had led him to the position that the church’s traditional application of this number to the phrase “Vicarius filii Dei” was incorrect. He had shared his findings with the General Conference Committee and found a sympathetic response.

Sometime later, Prescott again brought the matter to the attention of the committee. This time he had reason to be disturbed. He had asked evangelist C. T. Everson of England to visit the Vatican museum and to take photographs of the tiara used at the Pope’s coronation. Prescott wanted the photographs to illustrate an article. The title “Vicarius Filii Dei” was not anywhere on the tiara or on any other crown used by the Pope. The pictures were still useful enough for Prescott to publish anyway. Sometime later, when the Southern Publishing Association published the revised edition of Uriah Smith’s *Daniel and Revelation*, Prescott was horrified to find that his photographs had been used and that an artist had added the words “Vicarius filii Dei” to the coronation tiara. Confronted with the incriminating evidence, the General Conference gave immediate orders to stop the printing of the book until the fraudulent photograph had been removed. Such forgery was just as bad as anything the Catholic church itself might have attempted, Prescott argued. “When we are

driven to such conduct as this to prove some of our theology, we had better stop."¹⁹

The episode was not widely known and was soon forgotten. "Vicarius Filii Dei" was a neat fit to Rev. 13:18, and it continued to be the popular interpretation. But in 1935 the matter raised its head again when F. D. Nichol, editor of *Present Truth* magazine, was challenged by *The Sunday Visitor*, America's most popular Catholic magazine. Nichol had published an article alleging that "Vicarius Filii Dei" was the Pope's official title. The *Visitor* alleged in reply that Adventists relied on biased and dishonest anti-Catholic sources to make their claim. One correspondent went so far as to claim that by using Adventist's "ingenious method of reckoning" the number 666 could be made to apply to almost anything including "Ellen Gould White," and he demonstrated how.

Nichol had asked Prescott for any proof that he knew of to help him justify the claim. The professor had responded that there was no proof. The claim, he said, was based on a discredited forgery, "The Donation of Constantine" published in *The Decretum of Gratian*. The actual title of the Pope was "Vicarius Christi" which could not be made to apply to 666. Furthermore, although gematria (the practice of expressing numbers by using consecutive letters of the alphabet) was used in the Hebrew and Greek languages, it was not used in Latin. It, therefore, did not work when used for a Latin title. In this case the Latin title was not even correct. He observed to Nichol that Adventists would complain bitterly if their opponents made claims about their church beliefs based on what their critics or opponents said. Adventists, therefore, should treat others as they themselves would like to be treated.

With the matter out in the open again, Prescott requested an opportunity to make a presentation on the topic to the General Conference officers. His careful research and weighty evidence convinced at least Watson and Evans, but others thought the issue needed further study. In the meantime a decision was taken to recommend that "the interpretation should not be repeated."²⁰ It seems very few ever heard anything about the decision. The use of the number continued to be popular, and right up to his last days Prescott was still corresponding with authors who advocated it. He felt deeply disturbed that people continued to apply 666 to a non-existent title of the pope.

No doubt some leaders, burdened with administrative responsibility, wished that Prescott would not respond so vigorously to problems like this. If he would not take them so seriously, maybe the problems would just go away. Prescott, of course, was not inclined to share this viewpoint. As he saw it, if no one spoke up, the church would go backwards and he could not allow his church to do that, even if it was over a minor point of prophetic interpretation. Not all of Prescott's reinterpretations were considered to be over minor points. Some things the brethren took much more seriously.

Defending the Sanctuary

There was no question what Prescott believed with regard to "the daily" or the counterfeit Catholic doctrine of the Mass. Everyone knew. What he believed with respect to the church's central teaching on the sanctuary, however, was somewhat of a puzzle. Leaders knew that Prescott had his own thoughts on aspects of the sanctuary teaching, or at least that he appeared to. But were these views really just on minor points? The brethren were not sure. The fact that Prescott should be a little bit different at all was unsettling. As European Division president L. H. Christian observed at one point during the 1930's: "Nobody quite knows where Prescott is."²¹

Whether the professor had adopted such vagueness as a deliberate defense mechanism, or whether it was simply that fellow church leaders were too limited in their thinking to understand the problems and solutions he wrestled with, can be debated. C. B. Haynes was inclined to think it was the latter. Prescott was "one of the greatest men in the denomination," he remarked to W. G. C. Murdoch on one occasion and then added unflatteringly, "unfortunately he had to contend with a lot of peanuts."²² Whatever the reason, Prescott's reflections on the church's sanctuary teaching caused quite a number of the younger generation of leaders to be apprehensive about him.

Prescott had taken a special interest in the doctrine of the sanctuary. He recognized its importance to the church and was especially interested in seeing that it was explained and defended correctly. In 1905 he had been appointed one of the committee to hear A. F. Ballenger, and four years later had written a series of articles replying to Ballenger's interpretation of Hebrews. He had declined in 1911 to write a critical review of Ballenger's book

²⁷WWP to WHB & IHE, Feb. 9, 13, 1934.

²⁸WWP to WHB & IHE, Feb. 13, 1934.

²⁹GCO Min, Mar. 2, 4, 1934; IHE [memo] to WWP, Mar. 5, 1934. The memo was not sent to Prescott and seems to be for Evans own records.

³⁰GCO Min, Mar. 4, 5, 8, Apr. 18, 1934; IHE to WHB & JLS, Mar. 9, 1934; WHB to IHE, Mar. 15, 1934.

³¹EMC Bd Min, Apr. 15, 1934; see also EMC Bd Min, Mar. 15, May 17, 1934.

³²IHE to WWP, May 9, 1934.

³³WWP, "Statement to Officers," Sep. 14, 1934.

³⁴IHE & WHB to WWP, Sep. 18, 1934; GCO Min, Sep. 14, 18, 1934.

Chapter 18

¹ERP to CHW, Jan. 4, 1931.

²WWP to CHW, Jul. 19, 1932; *The Spade Confirms the Book* (N.Y., 1933), pp. 214-215.

³LEF to AGD, May 16, 1927.

⁴LEF to LHW, May 11, 1931.

⁵MEK to WWP, Feb 24, 1936.

⁶WWP to WAS, Sep. 13, 1929; GCO Min, Nov. 13, 1930.

⁷WWP to WAS, Sep. 13, 1929.

⁸Ibid; WWP to AOT, Dec. 3, 1929.

⁹AOT to WAS, Nov. 25, 1929.

¹⁰WWP to AOT, Dec. 3, 1929.

¹¹AOT to WAS, Nov. 27, 1929.

¹²ALB to CVL, Feb. 11, 1930; ALB to WMR, Feb 13, 1930.

¹³WWP to AOT, Dec. 3, 1929.

¹⁴WAS to WWP, Jan 14, 1930.

¹⁵ALB to CVL, Feb 11, 1930.

¹⁶AOT to WWP, Jul. 14, 1930.

¹⁷ALB to WWP, Jul. 14, 1930; W. G. Wirth to WWP, Jul. 30, 1930.

¹⁸JLMc to Union and Local Conference Presidents, Jul. 27, 1930.

¹⁹WWP to FDN, Oct. 16, 1935.

²⁰"Meeting with Elder W. W. Prescott" [transcript], Apr. 16, 1936.

²¹GCO Min, Dec. 18, 1938.

²²WCCGM Interview, May 4, 1981.

²³Ibid.

²⁴WWP to EEA, Dec. 5, 1911; AGD to WCW, Jul. 10, 1912.

²⁵M. R. Thurber Interview, Mar. 24, 19816

²⁶D. E. Rebok to GMV, Feb. 3, Nov. 18, 1781.

²⁷JSW, "The Trinity" [1940]; JSW to JLMc, Ju8. 2, 1940.

²⁸D. E. Robinson to JSW, Apr. 25, 1940.