THE INVESTIGATIVE JUDGMENT: ARE WE PROGRESSING OR REGRESSING ACCORDING TO DESMOND FORD?

By Phumlani Majola, 2012-03-15

Introduction

It has been observed that there have been changes in the SDA theology of the Investigative Judgment. As will be seen in this article, some may describe the change as regressive/dismantling, while others may describe the change as progressive/constructive.

This article evaluates Dr Desmond Ford’s proposal that the SDA church is rightly and gradually dismantling its baseless theology of an “investigative” judgment. This article shows that Dr Ford is inconsistent with himself and with reality.

Dr Desmond Ford’s proposal

In his book “For the Sake of the Gospel: Throw out the bathwater, but keep the Baby” (2008) Dr Ford allocates a chapter to the notion that SDA theology is rightly regressive and in that way progressive. He entitles the chapter “The Reworking of the Investigative Judgment Doctrine”. His conclusion of the chapter on page 107 is,

The revisers have clearly begun a move in the right direction, and we can only wish them Godspeed as they hasten on to a biblical conclusion which fully honors the gospel as well as the rules of hermeneutics.

The “conclusion” he speaks of is the throwing out of the SDA theology of the Investigative Judgment as the “bathwater”, and the retention of the gospel is keeping “the Baby [Christ]”.

Dr Ford begins the chapter by comparing two statements that describe the Investigative Judgment. The first is from the book by Ellen White, “Great Controversy” (1888) and the second from the 1980 statement of Fundamental Beliefs. Dr Ford rightly notes that the second one puts the “stress on revelation rather than investigation”. However, he

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1 “There must be an examination of the books of record to determine who, through repentance of sin, and faith in Christ, are entitled to the benefits of his atonement. The cleansing of the sanctuary therefore involves a work of investigation – a work of judgment” (Great Controversy, page 422)

2 “In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2300 days, He entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgment, which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin, typified by the cleansing of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary on the Day of Atonement…. The investigative judgment reveals to heavenly intelligences, who among the dead are asleep in Christ and therefore, in Him, are deemed worthy to have part in the first resurrection. It also makes manifest who among the living are abiding in Christ, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and in Him, therefore are ready for translation into His everlasting kingdom. This judgment vindicates the justice of God....”
negatively notes that the second “still speaks of an ‘investigative judgment’ and speaks of some being ‘deemed worthy’”. Dr Ford calls the observed change “softening” and “an improvement” that is due to growth in the understanding of the gospel. Dr Ford continues to show disapproval of the first statement’s use of words like “to determine” and “are entitled”.

As a result of what he calls the “reworking” of the Investigative Judgment, he highlights the psychological benefits on page 106: “But the most significant result of the reworking is its impact on the spiritual psyche of the believer”. And then he affirmatively quotes a friend of his where the friend suggests that the “traditional teaching robs the believer of assurance” as sins are in the judgment “brought up against” them. The first statement from “Great Controversy” is described by Dr Ford’s friend on page 107 as “far away from our present fundamental [second statement]”. The first “terrifies people while the present fundamental gives hope in the gospel assurance of salvation when you first come to believe”.

Dr Ford further argues in this chapter on page 107 that there are two notions that lead to the throwing away of the Investigative Judgment: (1) the Cross of Christ provides all the necessary vindication of God, and (2) the omniscience of God is incompatible with the Investigative Judgment.

Dr Desmond Ford’s proposal evaluated and rejected

The concern of this article is not the rejection of Dr Ford’s conclusion per se (that the Investigative Judgment must be thrown out) but the greater focus is in the way he arrives at that conclusion.

First, let me point out the area in which I agree with him: I agree that SDA theology on the Investigative Judgment has experienced wording-changes that are psychologically beneficial to the reader in encouraging a sense of the assurance of salvation. It is true that many Adventists formerly understood and proclaimed the Investigative Judgment in a negative way that robs one of assurance. This is pointed out on page 334 of the annotated edition (2003) of “Questions on Doctrine” which was originally published in 1957,

Many mid-twentieth century Adventists appear to have been fixated on judgment as condemnation. But the past fifty years have seen a growing perspective on judgment as the vindication of the saints.

However, I would disagree with him when he makes this change regressive (which is progressive to him) and therefore implies that Ellen White’s statement in 1888 was erroneous. The change has resulted from a better understanding of the gospel and the recognition of a need for wording that better affects the psyche, but it does not undo
Ellen White’s statement. To be clear, nothing has changed in essence, save the expression.

The key is that one should understand the expressions of Ellen White anthropomorphically. Just as God came down to Sodom to “see” whether sin had really reached its limit in Sodom (Genesis 18:21), so too does Ellen White speak of God going through judgment “to determine” and “investigate”. This is done by God not for himself but for those who observe the process. Just as God vindicated/revealed the justice of his verdict of condemnation on Sodom in Abraham’s eyes, so too does God vindicate/reveal the justice of his verdict of judgment (justification or condemnation) to heavenly intelligences about professed Christians. It is the misunderstanding of statements like that of Ellen White that appears to have led many SDA’s to a skewed view of the Investigative Judgment. But the anthropomorphism key saves the day. There is therefore no need for any person loosing assurance just because of words like “investigative”.

Dr Ford affirmatively quotes his friend in a way that does injustice to SDA theology. His friend states that in the Investigative Judgment, believers’ sins are “brought up against them” (emphasis mine, page 106). This misrepresents what the two statements, that Dr Ford himself quotes, make clear, that genuine believers are not condemned because of their “faith in Christ” (Ellen White) and being “in Him” (1980 Fundamental Beliefs). Furthermore, the use of the words like “entitled” and “deemed worthy” have no legalistic connotation when associated with phrases like “in Him” and “faith in Christ”, as is the case in the two statements from Ellen White and the 1980 Fundamental Beliefs.

Dr Ford, in his chapter, also arrives at the conclusion of rejecting the Investigative Judgment in two ways that show him to be inconsistent: (1) he says that the Cross provides all the necessary vindication of God, but then he numerously says in his book that there is a future vindication of God and the saints at the Second Coming of Christ (pages 118 and 144). (2) Dr Ford uses the omniscience card that fails when you read the Investigative Judgment statements anthropomorphically.

**Conclusion**

The proposal made by Dr Ford that SDA theology is gradually dismantling itself on the Investigative Judgment is unfounded. He rejects the Investigative Judgment in questionable and inconsistent ways that discredit his conclusion of rejecting it.

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3 Dr Ford speaks of future vindication in other books as well – (1) “The Coming Worldwide Calvary: Christ versus AntiChrist”, 2009, page 12; (2) “The Time Is At Hand! An Introduction to the Book of Revelation”, 2009, page 19. In the second reference he even goes as far as to speak of the Second Coming in language similar to that of the 1980 Fundamental Beliefs that he tries to refute: “This global display of the fruit of both good and evil is essential for the ending of the great controversy. It will manifest to the principalities and powers of heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God...” (emphasis mine).
Bibliography


