Theological Trends

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Question asked

Please share with me what you feel are one or two of the most significant theological trends of the past 10-20 years. If you know of a good resource as an article or book which addresses this subject, please list it. The questionnaire was sent to an international group of theologians, pastors, administrators, etc. Most are Seventh-day Adventists, but a number are from other denominations. Approximately seventy-five responded.

Organization of responses

The responses were grouped and summarized in the categories presented. The order is according to the number of responses received, with the highest number listed first.

A. Doctrine of God

1. Nature of God—focus on process theology (power of persuasion instead of coercion) and openness of God theology (that God knows the probabilities)

2. Anti-Trinitarianism
   • That the Holy Spirit is the power of God and not a person or “an influence”
   • Jesus is the begotten Son of God, but not co-eternal with the Father
   • In response to these attacks, others have been emphasizing the Trinity

3. Nature of Christ
   • The nature of Christ in the context of the doctrine of perfection
   • Some notice the elevation of the doctrine of Christ
   • Some notice emphasis on the divinity of Christ
   • Rediscovery of the Jewishness of Jesus

B. Ecclesiology

1. “The majority of our people do not have a clear view of why we exist as a church. Our mission and purpose seems to be a feel warm and fuzzy and entertain the saints! If we don’t turn this around we will, ere long, be totally marginalized by our culture.”
   • Congregationalism
   • Influence of mega-church philosophy; “watering down” of the message by the megachurches
• Tithe diversion to local needs is a non-issue for some members and pastors and is encouraged by calling it “local tithe”

2. The concept of remnant and ecclesiology

3. Diversification/polarization especially in North America—one example is ASRS & ATS

C. Role of Theology and Theological Studies

1. Undervaluation or even resistance to theology—community is in and theology is out because “theology is perceived to be divisive to community”
   • Emphasis on “theology of success”
   • Liberation theology with emphasis on relationship with society

2. The relevance of the sanctuary/investigative judgment/1844 doctrine to our Christian experience today

3. Exegesis is the key word now in theology while among Seventh-day Adventists there seems to be a decreasing interest in exegesis

4. Too much dependence on Ellen White in the development of our theology

5. The theological resources of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (trained theologians, biblical studies, etc.) have increased dramatically

6. The emergence of, awareness of, and the acceptance of Islam into countries traditionally considered to have Christian majority

D. Secularism / Postmodernism

1. The emerging influence of postmodern attitudes and perceptions of the church (increasing rejection of absolute truth and adoption of a moral relativism)

2. The challenge of postmodernism to theology

3. Less emphasis on doctrine and theology and more emphasis on “turning theology into biography”

4. Postmodernism & worship

5. Individual judgement in position of final authority

E. Prophecy

1. A new emphasis on prophecy, not based on the rich Protestant theological heritage, but individual interpretation and skyrocketing book sales
2. A new awareness among Seventh-day Adventists of their role in the great controversy and the understanding of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation

3. Emphasis on more careful reading of the literary and contextual issues in the interpretation of prophecy

4. New interpretations of prophecy (that 2300 days begins at the end of the 70 weeks) with some focusing on Islam rather than papacy

5. A shift from the historicist approach to eschatology

F. Worship

1. “Libertine worship” or “feel good worship” is almost entirely devoid of strong biblical and theological girding; people seem to go to the “best” show in town rather than seeking God—little connection between church, community, and people

2. Worship and worship styles; ultraconservatives who are certain that we are allowing the devil’s influence if there is anything with a beat or drums are used and the extreme takes the opposite view

3. Music has become a point of contention and it seems to be based on personal preference rather than what is right and wrong

G. Independent Groups

1. Growth of independent groups; they seem to have an axe to grind with a focus on changing the church and not on presenting the church to the community

2. Pastors promoting their own independent ministries with emphasis on Trinity, feast days, country living, home schooling, veganism, etc.

3. Theology of church that allows harmful independent groups to use the congregations for their goals

4. Spirit of anti-higher education (suspicion of our system) with emphasis on minimal training for ministers

5. Congregationalism encouraged by administration by focusing on institutions rather than congregations

H. Mission

1. Global mission concept of interacting with other religions, secular and postmodern

2. Churches that are growing are evangelical or charismatic
3. Discovering the mission nature of the church in North America and recognizing North America as a fruitful mission field

4. Fear of “social gospel” makes some Christians segregated from the world

   I. Atonement

   1. Atonement—shift from objective atonement to subjective—emphasis on persuasive power of God’s love and the human mind to choose to be renewed by the inner working of the Holy Spirit

   2. Less emphasis on 1844 and more emphasis towards the meaning of Christ’s intercessory work

   3. Portraying God as friend and adaptation of the moral influence theory of the atonement

   4. Tendency to move away from substitutionary view of the atonement in favor of Christus Victor, representative or moral influence view

   5. The nature of the atonement and how the subjective models are being touted as the primary reading of the atonement

   J. Salvation

   1. The emphasis on assurance makes religion more positive and attractive

   2. The issue of end-time perfection tied to the post-fall human nature of Christ

   3. Increasing tendency to universalism

   4. The way that justification and sanctification relate to one another in the flow of God’s attempts to communicate the benefits of the atonement to a sinful world

   K. Emphasis on Spirituality outside the church

   1. Shift in the theology of the church (more people are “spiritual” but fewer are affiliating with a denomination or local church)

   2. New Age—no such thing as a transcendent God and thus some place “spirituality” over Christianity (Singer who describes herself as spiritual, earns monthly $750,000 and she budgets $5,000 to charitable causes)

   3. “Individualized religion,” or buffet line that enables each to choose their own religion; all religions are equally valid and therefore we choose which we will follow

   L. Revelation and Inspiration

   1. The nature of Scripture—is it revelation or merely a witness to revelation
2. Articulation of the doctrine of revelation and inspiration, thus an enhanced understanding of the role of Biblical prophets and a better understanding of the role of Ellen White in relation to the Bible and Church.

3. Inspiration with specific examples of Ellen G. White and understanding of Genesis 1 & 2.

4. The emergence of liberation theology has provided lenses where we can read the Scripture through the eyes of the marginalized.

M. Creation

1. Challenge to a short chronology of the earth; one individual told the respondent that “On Sabbath he believes in creation as the Bible says, but when he goes to work on Monday morning as a scientist, he lives in a different world.”

2. The role of creation.

N. Second Coming

1. The emphasis on the Second Coming is more Christ-centered.

2. Commitment to mission (including non-Christian religions) and preparation for the Second Coming of Christ.

3. The Second Coming and the challenge of matching the prophecies and the signs.

O. Gender Issues

1. The need to understand the role of gender in ministry and leadership with emphasis on female role in calling, work, and service.

2. Greater participation by the world church in theological issues; one example is the rejection of ordination of women.

3. In some parts of the world having a woman as a pastor is a theological issue.

P. Church Member Issues (Family, Youth, etc.)

1. Youth taking the Word of God seriously.

2. Family issues such as divorce, abortion, etc.

3. Matching the ideal of the Bible and the church position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.
Q. Southern Shift of Christianity

1. The spectacular explosion of the Christian faith in the global south

R. Uniqueness of Christianity

1. The uniqueness of the Christian faith—hesitancy to press the uniqueness of Jesus

2. Power anti-Christian upsurge of well-known atheists

S. Sabbath

1. The concept of Sabbath rest without concern for a particular day

2. Sabbath is a “glue” that keeps the church together, but Ellen White who used to be such a “glue” is no longer largely due to the printing of compilations

T. Medical Issues

1. Medical ethics (reproductive technology, genetics)

2. Theological response to new scientific breakthroughs—abortion, euthanasia, end-of-life, bioengineering, etc.

U. Liberty Issues

1. Less emphasis on religious liberty issues

2. Church and state issue with emphasis on the evangelical push in this area

V. Eschatology

1. The trend in liberal theology in North America and England of rejecting scientific eschatology and endorsing a biblical new creation concept based on the physical resurrection of Jesus—they refer to the death of evolution

W. View of Christianity

1. Shift among 19-29 year-olds from having a positive view of Christianity to a negative perception—“You no longer look, act, or behave like Jesus!”

X. Feast Days

1. Interest in keeping Annual Jewish Feast Days

Y. Ecology

1. Awareness of the importance of ecology as a priority
Resources listed by the respondents


