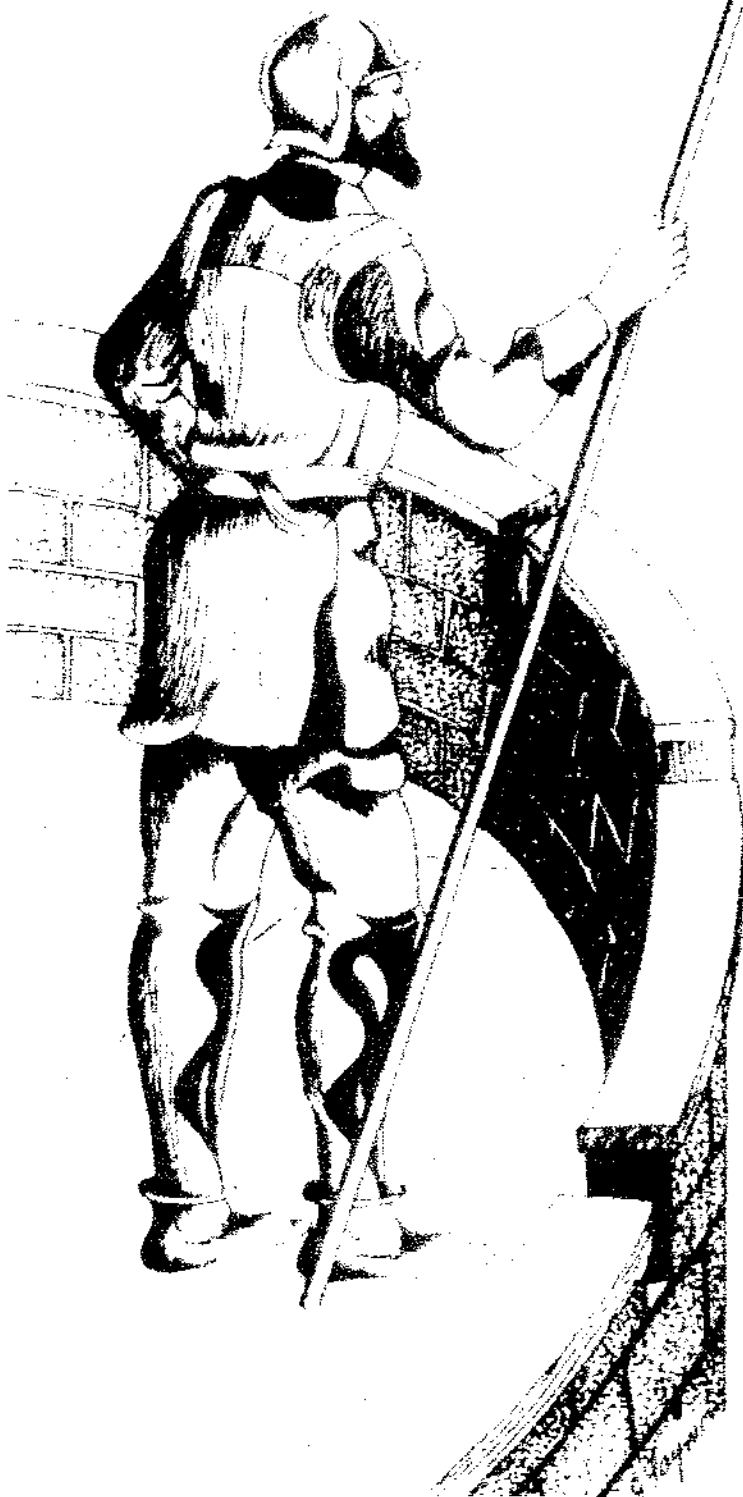


“*Watchman,
what of the night?*”

“*The hour has come, the hour is striking and striking at you,
the hour and the end!*”
Eze. 7:6 (Moffatt)



The Holy Flesh Movement

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Editor's Preface

The Holy Flesh Movement did not die after the confrontation at the 1901 General Conference Session. While there was musical extravaganza connected with the tent meetings and revivals conducted by the men in leadership, which did cease after the confrontation in 1901, and has only reappeared in recent years as a part of some Adventist church services, the doctrinal teaching regarding the Incarnation remained and is very much alive today. In 1985, the editors of *Ministry* printed essays giving the two divergent views held in Adventism today on the human nature that Christ assumed in becoming the Son of man, the pre-Fall or post-Fall nature of Adam. A year later Elder T. A. Davis responded with a resume of his book— *Was Jesus Really Like Us?* - giving what he called “an alternate view.” This “alternate view” was the exact view as had been promoted by the Holy Flesh men of Indiana. Davis wrote in his book, Christ’s “human nature was common only with those who have experienced a spiritual rebirth. . . . Let us express this another way: Of Mary, Jesus was born ‘born again’ ” (p. 30). This was followed by Ron Spear in his book, *Waymarks of Adventism*, p. 39, which was “blessed” by Dr. Ralph Larson (See Foreword). This was followed in 1986 by a called conference at Hartland Institute at which Davis presented his alternate view with only Dr. Herbert Douglass dissenting. Since then leading men of the SDA Reform Movement headquartered at Roanoke, Virginia, have been in conference with the leadership of Hartland, and are now holding this view of the Incarnation. Simply stated the Holy Flesh teaching on the Incarnation has again come to life and is being taught by Adventist dissidents. Those living in Australia should check out the new Standish school so as to know what their children will be taught.

The Holy Flesh Movement

In evaluating the Holy Flesh Movement which involved the Indiana Conference during the years from 1898 to 1901, too often, the emotional extravaganza which accompanied the movement is considered to be the movement itself. This is not true, and until the exterior façade is penetrated a proper evaluation of the lessons which this deviate movement in the history of the Church should teach us cannot be made. This movement was based on and involved some basic doctrinal concepts. In retrospect, Ellen White, in 1907, wrote these words:

During the General Conference of 1901, instruction was given me in regard to the experience of some of the brethren in Indiana, and regarding the *doctrines* they had been teaching in the churches. I was shown that through this experience and the *doctrines* taught, the enemy has been working to lead souls astray (Ms. 39, 1907; emphasis mine).

The two major doctrines which formed the basis of this movement were the teachings in regard to the Incarnation of Christ, and the perfection of the believer. The simple fact is, and might as well be admitted in any study, these two concepts cannot be separated. One's understanding of the nature which Christ accepted in becoming the Son of man conditions his belief relative to perfection. Because the special testimony given by Ellen White at the General Conference Session in 1901 in regard to the Movement in Indiana (*1901 GC Bulletin*, pp. 419-422) centered on only one of these doctrines – perfection in the flesh – the tendency is to equate the Holy Flesh Movement of Indiana with only this one teaching. However, the primary source material available by which to evaluate this Movement contains as much discussion in regard to the subject of the Incarnation as to the doctrine of perfection in the flesh. What did the leading brethren in Indiana teach as to the nature which Christ assumed in humanity?

The peak of the Holy Flesh Movement was reached during the camp meetings of 1900. The meeting at Muncie, Indiana, was attended by Elder S. N. Haskell and his wife, Hetty. Their experience at Muncie caused them to write a letter to Ellen G. White upon their return to Battle Creek. In his letter dated September 25, 1900, Elder Haskell wrote:

When we stated that we believed that Christ was born in fallen humanity, they would represent us as believing that Christ sinned, notwithstanding the fact that we would state our position so clearly that it would seem as though no one could misunderstand us.

Their point of theology in this particular respect seems to be this: They believe that Christ took Adam's nature before he fell; so He took humanity as it was in the garden of Eden, and thus humanity was holy, and this was the humanity which Christ had; and now, they say, the particular time has come for us to become holy in that sense, and then we will have "translation faith," and never die.

This doctrine of the incarnation as taught by the advocates of the "Holy Flesh" revival in Indiana is a forked road. They took one fork. If Christ did take the nature of Adam before the Fall, then men, by accepting Him and becoming conformed to His image, would receive the same nature He had. It was to be left to another generation of Adventist theologians to travel the other fork, that if Christ did take upon Himself a sinless humanity, it is impossible for the believer to overcome as Christ overcame. One doesn't have to have the externals, the "emotional extravaganza" (See *Selected Messages*, bk. ii, pp. 35-37), of the Holy Flesh Movement to teach and believe the doctrine of the Incarnation as the leaders of that Movement taught it.

Not only in 1900 was there the confrontation which occurred at the Muncie camp meeting, but in November and December of that year, the first editor of the *Review & Herald*, A. T. Jones, in a series of editorials on "The Faith of Jesus" wrote, "The condescension of Christ, the position of Christ, and the nature of Christ, as He was in the flesh in the world, are given in the second chapter of Hebrews more fully than in any other one place in the Scriptures" (Dec. 11, 1900). Thus the battle was to be drawn as to

what Hebrews 2:9-18 was stating in regard to the humanity Christ assumed in becoming man. Jones' position was the same as it had been, in 1888 and onward that Christ assumed the fallen nature of Adam in the Incarnation.

Elder R. S. Donnell, president of the Indiana Conference, responded in a series of articles which he placed in the *Indiana Reporter*. In his first article he quoted a sentence from an article in the *Signs of the Times* (June 13, 1900). It read, "Christ came to this earth and stood where Adam stood, overcoming where Adam failed to overcome." Then he commented:

Now Christ stood where Adam stood, and Adam stood there without a taint of sin. So Christ must have stood where Adam stood before his Fall – that is, without a taint of sin. This must be so, for Paul continues the subject, and in verse 11 he says: "For both He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified (not those he is going to sanctify, but they who are sanctified) are all of one; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren." Notice it is the sanctified ones who (sic) He is not ashamed to call brethren. Further it is the sanctified ones of whose flesh He partakes. "Forasmuch, then, as the children (or brethren, sanctified ones) are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise (just as the sanctified ones are partakers) took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil." Heb. 2:14 (*What I Taught in Indiana*, pp. 4-5).

In his "Article Two", Donnell continued this supposition. He wrote:

In taking up this subject we will begin just where we left off in our last [first] article. In that, when we closed we were considering the fact that Christ Himself took part of the flesh and blood, just as the children did. That is, He took part of the same flesh the children possessed. We found, also, that the children are the sanctified ones. Now the sanctified ones are surely those upon whom the truth of God and the power of the Holy Spirit has wrought – the ones who are new creatures in Christ Jesus, those who have been created unto good works, the same which God hath before ordained that they should walk in (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Why did Donnell assume the necessity of such a conclusion? He explains:

Men can continually do righteous acts only as God is incarnate in them; and it was God's purpose from

the beginning to dwell in every created being, so that good works, or He Himself, might always appear in them. But in sinful man Satan is incarnate, and God and Satan cannot dwell together. The only reason why God does not dwell in man is because sin is there, and in order for God to again dwell in man sin must be eradicated. The body of Christ was a body in which God was incarnate, and as God and Satan cannot dwell together, the body of Christ must have been a body from which even every tendency to sin must have been wholly eradicated (*ibid.*).

While the whole Conference Committee, and most of the ministry followed the leaders of the Movement (S. S. Davis, the conference revivalist, and R. S. Donnell, the conference president) one minister, Elder S. G. Huntington, voiced his opposition and gave form to his protest. He printed a tract on the "Mission Press, La Fayette," Indiana. The conclusion of this sixteen page tract read:

Now, since we have been studying the humanity of Christ, let none think that we would distract from or forget His *divinity*. Although Jesus "the sinbearer endured the wrath of divine justice, and for our sakes became sin itself" [D. of A., p. 907] yet, through His implicit faith in His Father, He was fortified so that His divine nature overwhelmingly triumphed over His sinful nature and hereditary tendencies. Thus from the cradle to Calvary, His days of trial and probation, He lived a pure, holy and sinless life. Thus He met the demands of the broken law, and became "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."

Now just as God in Christ, 4,000 years this side of Creation, lived a perfect, spotless life in sinful flesh, so through faith in Him, He will cleanse us from all our unrighteousness, impart to us His own righteousness, take up His abode in our hearts, and live the same kind of life in our sinful flesh six thousand years this side of Creation. Then we can truly say, "as He is [in character] so are we in the world" I John 4:17 (*The Son of Man*, p. 16, emphasis his).

In this same tract, Huntington scored the interpretation given by Donnell in regard to the "brethren" (Heb. 2:17) whose nature Christ supposedly took when "the Word flesh came to be" (John 1:14, Gr.). (Both sides quoted extensively from the Writings of Ellen G. White.) In a section captioned, "The Brethren," he wrote:

"But not to any class is Christ's love restricted. He identifies Himself with every child of humanity. That we might become members of the heavenly family He became a member of the earthly family. He is the Son of man, and thus a brother to *every son and daughter of Adam*. His followers are not to feel themselves detached from the perishing world around them. They are a part of the great web of humanity; and heaven looks upon them as brothers to sinners as well as to saints" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 638). Notice, His brethren are every child of Adam – sinners, men and women under the law, and not simply the spiritual seed of Abraham alone. Now if the spiritual seed of Abraham and the sanctified ones only are those referred to, and they being redeemed and no longer under the law, and Jesus was made like unto them, then it would be evident that Jesus was not made under the law at all. But the Scriptures, which cannot be broken [John 10:35] declare plainly that He was. So let God be true, and every man a liar Romans 3:4. (*ibid.*, p. 3; emphasis his).

The question between the men in Indiana was not the matter of whether the gospel provided men redemption from sin, or whether the power of the Holy Spirit could keep human beings from sinning. The question was the humanity of Christ – in what flesh did He come as the Son of man, the flesh of Adam after or before the Fall; and if after the Fall, in what likeness – "the likeness of sinful flesh" or the likeness of sanctified or "born again" humanity.

The demise of the Holy Flesh Movement came at the General Conference Session in 1901. The re-organization controversy at the Conference overshadowed the doctrinal conflict projected by the advocates of the "Holy Flesh" doctrines. Fifteen days after the session opened, Elder E. J. Waggoner was asked to give the evening message at 7 p.m. He chose for his text – Hebrews 10:4-10. Then he introduced a question that had been given to him which read as follows:

Was that holy thing which was born of the virgin Mary born in sinful flesh, and did that flesh have the same evil tendencies to contend with that ours does? (1901 *GC Bulletin*, p. 403).

In Waggoner's answer there was left little doubt as to what he was talking about. He mentioned the concept of sinless flesh, and declared it to be "the deification of the devil" (*ibid.* p. 405).

He stated very specifically as to when the change would come in the flesh, and what the results would be. His words were:

The flesh will be opposed to the Spirit of God so long as we have it, but when the time comes that mortality is swallowed up of life, then the conflict will cease. Then we shall no longer have to fight against the flesh, but that sinless life which we lay hold of by faith and which was manifest in our sinful bodies, will then by simple faith be continued throughout all eternity in a sinless body (*ibid.*, p. 406).

What then is the purpose of this earthly struggle? Waggoner continued:

When God has given this witness to the world of His power to save to the uttermost, to save sinful beings, and to live a perfect life in sinful flesh, then He will remove the disabilities and give us better circumstances in which to live. But first of all this wonder must be worked out in sinful man, not simply in the person of Jesus Christ, but in Jesus Christ reproduced and multiplied in thousands of His followers. So not simply in the few sporadic cases but in the whole body of the church, the perfect life of Christ will be manifested to the world, and that will be the last crowning work which will either save or condemn men; and greater testimony than that there is not, and cannot be, because there is none greater than God. When God is manifest among men, not simply as God apart from man, but as God in man, suffering all that man suffered, subject to everything that man is subject to, what greater power can be manifest in the universe than that? (*ibid.*)

During the sermon, Dr. Waggoner challenged those listening to settle it, each for himself, whether or not he was truly "out of the church of Rome." He then commented:

There are great many that have got the marks yet, but I am persuaded of this, that every soul who is here tonight desires to know the way of truth and righteousness, and that there is no one here who is unconsciously clinging to the dogmas of the papacy, who does not desire to be freed from them.

Do you not see that the idea that the flesh of Jesus was not like ours (because we know that ours is sinful) necessarily involves the idea of the immaculate conception of the virgin Mary? Mind you, in Him is no sin, but the mystery of God manifest in the flesh, the marvel of the ages, the wonder of angels, that thing which even now they

desire to understand, and which they can form no just idea of, only as they are taught it by the church, is the perfect manifestation of the life of God in its spotless purity in the midst of sinful flesh. O that is a marvel is it not? (*ibid.*, p. 404).

The next day, April 17, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg spoke at the morning meeting on the subject of the medical missionary work. At the close of the meeting, Ellen White arose and presented her testimony concerning the Movement in Indiana. (*ibid.*, pp. 419-422). The next day, the two leaders of the Movement, Donnell and Davis, made confession to the delegates. On the 19th three other members of the Indiana Conference committee added their testimonies. The Holy Flesh Movement as such was over; but the doctrinal teachings of this Movement regarding the nature of Christ's humanity, that He came "born – born again," or like His "brethren" – "the sanctified ones" has appeared again in the Church and is promoted by Tom and Margaret Davis, as well as being taught by certain "independent ministries," the Standish brothers and Ron Spear.

Even though the two leaders – Donnell and Davis – confessed their error and professed to accept the Testimony given, neither abandoned his belief in the Incarnation as he taught it during the Holy Flesh revival. Relieved of their ministerial responsibilities following the General Conference session, S. S. Davis retired to his home in Elnora, Indiana, and R. S. Donnell went there to live for a few years. In 1905, Elder Donnell was called to serve the church in Raleigh, Tennessee, near Memphis. He continued his contact with Davis by correspondence. On one occasion, he sent to him a ten page manuscript which he had written on the nature of Christ and man. In this manuscript, Donnell wrote:

For one I must say, and upon the authority of the Bible, that Christ never sinned, and if He never sinned, that man don't (sic.) live, and never has lived that can prove that He was in sinful flesh. The only way by which one can prove it, is to point out the sins, or even one sin that He committed. He took a body which showed by its deteriorated condition, that the effects of sin was shown by it, but His life proved that there was no sin in it. It was a body which the Father had prepared for Him (Heb. 10:5). Christ's body represented a body redeemed from its

fallen spiritual nature, but not from its fallen, or deteriorated physical nature. It was a body redeemed from sin, and with that body Christ clothed His divinity; thus by His life, on earth, He showed what humanity will do when filled with the divine mind. Then every member of the human race, who will renounce Satan and his works, and will permit Christ to clothe himself with his humanity, in that act, becomes a member of the family of heaven. That is just what it will be, if we will let the divine mind come into us. It will be divinity clothed with humanity, and that is just what Christ was. And thus clothed He did no sin. Is that putting it too strong? Well that is just the way that God wants it to be put ("The Nature of Christ and Man" – An unpublished manuscript in the Foundation Library).

In 1903, Elder I. J. Hankins, who succeeded Donnell to the presidency of the Indiana Conference, wrote to S. S. Davis in Elnora, Indiana, asking him certain questions about his beliefs. Of the eight questions asked, four of them involved the doctrine of the Incarnation. To these questions Davis responded. We shall list the question and the answer given:

Question #4

Please state in a few words your views on the nature of Christ?

Answer – Luke 1:35: "that holy thing."

Question #5

Did Christ's flesh have in it any weakness or natural tendency to sin as the result of the Fall?

Answer – Testimony No. 2 the last three words on page 201 and continued on page 202 – "was a brother in infirmities, but not possessing like passions." That is all on that point I care to say.

Question #6

Was Mary the mother of Jesus like all other women, sinful?

Answer – I could not say how full of sin she was but I suppose that she had her share, perhaps not as bad as some, and maybe more than some as there are degrees in heredity and depravity, and there is no evidence that she had an immaculate conception.

Question #7

Is every child born into the world naturally inclined to evil, even before it is old enough to discern between good and evil?

Answer - Yes, unless preserved from the law of heredity in conception by the power of the Holy Ghost. See Ps. 51:5 "Shapen in sin," also Eph. 2:3, "by nature children of wrath" (Letter: S. S. Davis to I. J. Hankins dated March 15, 1903).

Of all the men involved in the "Holy Flesh" Movement, only S. S. Davis never returned to the ministry of the Church. In 1920 the Davis family moved to Nebraska, where on September 26, 1926, S. S. Davis was re-ordained as a minister in the General Baptist Church (Copy of Ordination Certificate is in Foundation Library).

POSTSCRIPT - 1

While serving as pastor of the Marion Indiana Church, I had occasion to visit with Jesse E. Dunn, who at the time was residing near Rockford. He had served as the Book Agent for the Conference (later called the Publishing Department Secretary) during the time of the Holy Flesh Movement. Our conversation turned to the book, *Questions on Doctrine*, which had just been released. In discussing the change made in the Church's position on the Incarnation, Dunn commented, that this was what was taught by the leaders of the Holy Flesh Movement. This sparked my interest. He volunteered to help me reconstruct the story of what happened. Knowing S. S. Davis and members of his family well, he himself wrote to, and placed me in contact with individuals who could supply information as to the teachings and activities of the ministers involved in the Movement. Before his death he gave me a complete file of his own correspondence during the time of the initial research. Later, when teaching at Madison College, I asked one of the senior students, Eddie Barton, to continue gathering

documentation. When Madison College closed, and I was sent to Andrews University to complete work on a graduate degree, this research was brought together to meet the requirement for the course, Research in Theology, under the supervision of Arthur White, who besides presiding over the Ellen G. White Estate, also taught a class at Andrews on the Spirit of Prophecy.

In writing the initial paper on the Holy Flesh Movement, which later became the manuscript by that name published by the Foundation, I also received valuable assistance from Dr. E. K. Vande Vere, who was then chairman of the History Department at Andrews University. When completed in absentia, a copy was sent to Dr. Vande Vere. He wrote back -

Yesterday, I read the paper with care. It seems to me that you have wrung every bit of material possible from your sources. It's too bad that the whole episode could not have been written in 1905. Hence as matters stand, it is quite likely that no one else will ever shed more light on the affair than you have. I hope a copy of your paper will always be available at the White Estate or in the White Library for those who in the future might be interested enough to read.

This was not to be. Neither he nor I were aware at that time of the fact that the Indiana Conference published its own news letter - *The Indiana Reporter*. In this paper, Donnell placed a series of articles on the Incarnation in reply to A. T. Jones' series in the *Review & Herald*. Later when challenged as to his belief regarding the doctrine, Donnell brought the series together into a pamphlet captioned - "What I Taught in Indiana." This document was discovered by Jeff Reich, who kindly gave me a copy.

This addition to the data regarding the Holy Flesh Movement, and probably the last, helps to clarify the teaching which the men of Indiana held theologically on the Incarnation and Perfection.

Haskell, in his letter to Ellen White after returning to Battle Creek from the 1900 Camp Meeting in Muncie, set forth the belief

of the leaders of the Holy Flesh Movement as being that Christ took the nature of Adam before the Fall when He became incarnate. This was not an accurate summation. That position was not to be promoted until the book *Question on Doctrine* was written. S. G. Huntington in his tract - "The Son of Man" - stated clearly and challenged the concept as held by Donnell and Davis, that Christ took the nature of a sanctified person, in other words came "born, born-again." Thus the conclusion which links QonD with the Holy Flesh teaching and which is reflected in my original research based on Haskell's evaluation that Christ assumed the unfallen nature of Adam in the flesh, is faulty. There is, however, a direct parallel between the teaching of the men of Indiana in regard to the Incarnation and Perfection and the teachings of Tom and Margaret Davis which has been presented as "an alternate view" to the two divergent positions concerning which nature Christ assumed in the Incarnation - the pre-Fall or post-Fall nature of Adam. The "Holy Flesh" teachings have also been adopted and/or promoted by others - Ron Spear and the Standish Brothers - who profess concern for the direction the Church has taken doctrinally in recent years.

There are two aspects which marked the Holy Flesh Movement, one was the music, and the other was the doctrinal teaching concerning Christ's Incarnation. In the first article of this issue of WWN, we discussed only the doctrinal aspect. The lively music which accentuated the meetings involved Donnell's stepdaughter who was married to a Salvation Army Captain. She was accomplished in the use of the tambourine. At one of the Camp Meetings in 1900, she was asked by her father to lead the music by the use of the tambourine. Haskell wrote: "They are as much trained in their musical line as any Salvation Army choir that you ever heard. In fact, their revival effort is simply a complete copy of the Salvation Army method" (Letter 1, Sept. 25, 1900 to Ellen G. White). In Adventism today, we see the revival of both of the major marks of the Holy Flesh Movement of 1899-1901. While

those who are advocating the "born, born-again" theory of the Incarnation are not involved in the musical extravaganza which was a part of the Holy Flesh Movement and which has been introduced into Adventist worship services, some unite with their concepts a "perfectionism" which reflects the Holy Flesh teachings. It is confusion compounded, yet set forth as a part of the "firm foundation" which the Lord prepared for His people.

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In taking upon Himself man's nature in its fallen condition, Christ did not in the least participate in its sin. He was subject to the infirmities and weaknesses by which man is compassed, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses" (Matt. 8:17).

Selected Messages, Vol. 1, p. 256

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WEBSITES

<http://ourworld.cs.com/adventistalert>

<http://www.adventistlaymen.com>

E-MAIL

Editor - % webmaster@adventistlaymen.com
Webmaster, JO - adventistalert@cs.com

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Editor, Publications & Research

Elder Wm. H. Grotheer

Regional Contacts:

Australia - 1745 Cape Otway Rd., Wurdi-Boluc, VIC 3241

Canada - P. O. Box 117, Thorne, ON POH 2J0

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What Davis presented was opposed only by Dr. Herbert Douglass, even though both Elders R. J. Wieland and D. K. Short were present. Since then, I have learned that leaders of the SDA Reform Movement located in Roanoke, Virginia, have had discussions with the leadership at Hartland, and have come away believing the same heresy. Now with another "Standish" school being inaugurated in Australia, parents who are sending their children either to the new school or to Hartland, are placing them in danger's way and subjecting them to the teaching of the Holy Flesh Movement in regard to "the most marvellous thing that ever took place in earth or heaven - the incarnation of the Son of God" (7BC:904).

Postscript – 2

Prior to the 1888 Message Conference at Andrews University in August 1986, a group of "leading lights" within corporate Adventism who profess concern about the apostasy in "Israel" were invited to Hartland Institute in Virginia (See WWN XX-2) with the objective of finding common ground on certain doctrinal areas so as to speak with one voice. Among the names of the attendees as given to me, was Dr. Ralph Larson, and so I included his name in the WWN report of the conference. He wrote me immediately denying attendance because he had seen an advance copy of what Thomas Davis was going to present in leading the discussion on the Incarnation, and was not "comfortable with all the views expressed in it" (Letter to Editor dated, March 1, 1987). This is a conundrum. In 1981, Larson placed his blessings on a book written by R. D. Spear, *Waymarks of Adventism*, which taught the same thing that Davis was going to present. The bottom line is simply that the position Tom Davis presented on the Incarnation at the Hartland Institute conference was nothing else but the same concepts as taught by R. S. Donnell in 1900 when president of the Indiana Conference.