For three decades, the “Brinsmead Agitation” challenged Adventist leadership on several continents. During the years I was growing up, the conflict over his teachings became so intense that showing any agreement with Brinsmead’s heresy could get one expelled—and this I saw firsthand. Many pastors lost their jobs or left the ministry voluntarily because they espoused Brinsmead’s theology. For his followers, even mentioning the name of Brinsmead could put one’s membership at risk. Moreover, much Adventist literature published in the 1970s was aimed at correcting Brinsmead’s influence. Then, in the late 70s, he began not merely “working within” but separating from Adventism, and by 1990, he had moved entirely out of the Christian faith.

Robert Brinsmead had begun his career as a conservative Adventist. As the years passed, however, he morphed, slowly becoming liberal, then radical, and finally moving from devotion to hostility against the church. Along the way, he covered much of the territory of Adventist thought that still flourishes today. Robert Brinsmead’s Awakening movement reveals not only a microcosm of Adventism but also gives insight into its nature.

Some say Brinsmead left Christianity because he abandoned Ellen White’s prophetic authority and the pillars of the Adventist faith. She had, after all, predicted that Adventists who rejected her would abandon God. In this study, I avoid that superficial analysis of Adventism but also gives insight into its nature.

Questions at Avondale

Robert Brinsmead was raised in Australia in a family of eight children who helped operate the family farm. In 1953, the 22-year-old Bob entered Avondale College in Cooranbong to earn his theology degree. As an energetic, earnest student, he was quickly recognized for his intellect and potential. While at Avondale, he also met his wife Valerie. Raised with a thorough knowledge of Ellen White’s writings and the Bible, he had a passion for the Adventist doctrines of the last days. Chief among these doctrines was the investigative judgment, and it became his focus for more than a decade.

While Brinsmead was at Avondale, Adventist leaders produced the book Questions on Doctrine (QOD) to answer the common evangelical accusation that Adventism was not a Christian evangelical movement. Conservatives felt that the book compromised or hid the core doctrines of Adventism in order to impress the evangelical world and to avoid the label of “cult.” Adventists believed they had been entrusted to proclaim the message for the last days—a gospel that spurned Protestantism had rejected. At the foundation of this last-day message were the nature of Christ and the atonement, and these two were points of contention with the evangelicals. Did Christ have a sinful or sinless nature, and was the atonement complete at the cross? When QOD was published in 1957, many historic Adventists felt that the church’s core message had been weakened. There were evangelical-sounding statements on the nature of Christ: “We emphasize again that in His human nature Christ was perfect and sinless.” Moreover, some statements on the atonement appeared to support the common Protestant understanding of a completed atonement: “Oh, Calvary, the all-sufficient atoning sacrifice of Christ was offered for our salvation.” However, this “all-sufficient sacrifice” did not include “the application of the benefits of the atonement made on the cross, to the individual sinner.” Did “all-sufficient” mean the atonement was finished, or merely that the sacrifice was sufficient? The book’s wording seemed to finesse the questions rather than to answer them clearly.

Biblical Worldview

GOD
- revealed by Jesus
- sovereign over creation
- God incarnate in human flesh but with unfallen nature
- Born with living spirit—never needed to be born again
- Jesus is the scapegoat
- Jesus died for sin; Jesus died, was buried, and was raised on the third day; mission complete
- Jesus’ blood was propitiation for our sin
- Jesus is the unmediating Son of the Trinity
- God incarnate in human flesh but with unfallen nature
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- Jesus’ blood was propitiation for our sin
- Jesus is the unmediating Son of the Trinity

JESUS
- eternal Son, second person of the Trinity
- God incarnate in human flesh but with unfallen nature
- Born with living spirit—never needed to be born again
- Jesus is the scapegoat
- Jesus died for sin; Jesus died, was buried, and was raised on the third day; mission complete
- Jesus’ blood was propitiation for our sin
- Jesus is the unmediating Son of the Trinity
- God incarnate in human flesh but with unfallen nature
- Born with living spirit—never needed to be born again
- Jesus is the scapegoat
- Jesus died for sin; Jesus died, was buried, and was raised on the third day; mission complete
- Jesus’ blood was propitiation for our sin
- Jesus is the unmediating Son of the Trinity

GOSPEL
- Jesus was born, was buried, and was raised on the third day; mission complete
- Jesus’ blood was propitiation for our sin
- Jesus is the scapegoat
- Jesus’ resurrection life is what brings our spirits to life
- we are saved by repenting and receiving Jesus Christ and His sacrifice
- we are sealed or marked by keeping the Sabbath
- we w ill stand without a mediator during the tribulation
- Jesus’ blood is “down payment” on our sin
- Satan is scapegoat
- we are saved when we perfectly reflect Christ’s character (the law)
- resurrection merely promises we will be re-created
- we are sealed or marked by keeping the Sabbath
- we will stand without a mediator during the tribulation

Great Controversy Worldview

GOD
- revealed by law
- argued against in heaven since 1844
- Jesus’ blood is “down payment” on our sin
- Satan is scapegoat
- we are saved when we perfectly reflect Christ’s character (the law)
- resurrection merely promises we will be re-created
- we are sealed or marked by keeping the Sabbath
- we will stand without a mediator during the tribulation

JESUS
- exalted to be equal with God making Lucifer jealous
- incarnate in sinful flesh with fallen nature
- possessed inherited tendencies to evil yet resisted sin
- our example showed us how to overcome sin
- paid the price for our past sins
- could have sinned, did not know He would rise
- mediation and intercession will end

MAN
- made in God’s physical image
- does not possess immaterial spirit (like an animal)
- born with inherited tendencies to evil and must learn to resist it
- without knowing if saved
- knowledge of salvation revealed at Jesus’ coming

GOSPEL
- Jesus died for sin; applies His blood in heaven since 1844
- Jesus’ blood is “down payment” on our sin (breaking the law)
- Satan is scapegoat
- we are saved when we perfectly reflect Christ’s character (the law)
- resurrection merely promises we will be re-created
- we are sealed or marked by keeping the Sabbath
- we will stand without a mediator during the tribulation