

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

10 Questions about Adventism

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Last week, I posted [an article](#) (with an embedded video) about Seventh-day Adventism. As might be expected, not everyone was pleased with my perspective, and some of the responses were quite heated.

In the comments on Facebook, I was called a “counterfeit preacher,” a “Jesuit infiltrator,” an “antichrist,” “one of Satan’s forerunners,” and a “liar and the truth of God is not in him.”

While unfounded name-calling doesn't bother me, especially on Facebook, a few of the critics complained that I had misrepresented Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Some accused me of violating the ninth commandment, and intentionally bearing false witness about what Seventh-day Adventists believe.

Since my desire is *not* to bear false witness, I decided to write one more article regarding SDA doctrine. While I doubt it will appease my critics, I hope it will bring additional clarity to my previous post.

With that in mind, I would like to revisit ten miscellaneous points I made in my previous article. I will do so in the form of ten questions, with corresponding explanation and citation from various sources.

Did Seventh-day Adventism arise out of Millerism?

Yes. According to the Adventist author Francis D. Nichol: “We admit freely, and without the slightest embarrassment, that we grew out of the soil of Millerism” (*Answers to Objections* [reprint, 2014], 266–67).

Did early twentieth-century evangelical theologians view Seventh-day Adventism as a cult?

Yes. For example, evangelical scholars like Louis Talbot, J. K. van Baalen, Harold Lindsell, and Anthony Hoekema viewed the SDA movement as either a cult or a heretical sect. The first prominent evangelical to argue that the SDA movement was not a cult was Walter Martin (though he was highly critical of certain SDA doctrinal distinctives).

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Do Seventh-day Adventists teach that Christ is performing a second work of atonement in heaven?

In contending that SDA is not a cult, Walter Martin argued that Seventh-day Adventists believe Christ's atonement was fully completed at the cross, and that His current work in heaven simply involves making an application of the benefits of His atonement to individual believers. To support this assertion, Martin primarily relied on an Adventist document entitled *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, which was published in 1957.

Yet, even after *Questions on Doctrine* was published, not all Adventists agreed with the explanation of the atonement that it articulated. Two of the more vocal opponents were twin brothers, Russell and Colin Standish, who insisted that Ellen White actually taught that Christ's atoning work was *not* completed at the cross. In their words:

Speaking of 1844, Sister White stated: "So when Christ entered the holy of holies to perform the closing work of the atonement, He ceased His ministration in the first apartment." (GC 428) It can be seen perfectly well from this statement that Sister White does not close the atonement at the cross. She is referring, of course, to Christ's entry into the holy of holies in 1844, to complete the work of the investigative judgment and to make atonement for the sins of His people. As we have seen, the book, *Questions on Doctrine*, is a most unsafe guide to Adventist doctrine, for it was written in order to please a group of Evangelicals who had no faith in the full doctrine of the atonement. (*The Storm Bursts* [reprint 2000], 359)

While the Standish brothers may not represent the mainline Adventist position, they do illustrate the confusion over this issue that has existed within Adventist circles—going back to Ellen White herself.

Additional statements from Mrs. White can be cited that seem to depict a second work of atonement by Christ in heaven. Here are just a few:

Today He [Christ] is making an atonement for us before the Father (*Manuscript 21*, 1895)

Now, while our great High Priest is making the atonement for us, we should seek to become perfect in Christ. (*The Great Controversy*, 623)

Attended by heavenly angels, our great High Priest enters the holy of holies, and there appears in the presence of God, to engage in the last acts of His ministration in behalf of man, —to perform the work of investigative judgment, and to make an atonement for all who are shown to be entitled to its benefits. (*The Great Controversy*, 480)

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Such statements suggest that Christ's work of atonement was not completed at the cross (cf. *The Four Major Cults*, 116–117).

The SDA's official doctrinal statement, *Fundamental Beliefs*, describes the heavenly aspect of Christ's work as "the second and last phase of His atoning ministry" which He began on October 22, 1844. Though described as a second *phase* rather than a second *work*, such an explanation still places an eighteen century gap between Christ's death on the cross and the culmination of His atoning ministry. Such is problematic for reasons I noted in my [previous article](#).

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Does the SDA doctrine of Christ's Investigative Judgment mitigate against the doctrine of justification through faith alone?

The SDA movement insists that it teaches salvation by grace alone through faith alone. However, evangelicals like Hoekema have questioned whether or not the doctrine of Investigative Judgment is consistent with the Reformation principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Hoekema quotes Adventist author William Henry Branson to illustrate his concern. Branson writes:

A Christian who through faith in Jesus Christ has faithfully kept the law's requirements will be acquitted [in the investigative judgment]; there is no condemnation, for the law finds no fault in him. If, on the other hand, it is found that one has broken even a single precept, and this transgression is unconfessed, he will be dealt with just as if he had broken all ten. (*Drama of the Ages*, 351)

Branson's assertion—that salvation can be lost by even one unconfessed sin—is clearly at odds with the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Those who do not view the SDA movement as a cult (such as Walter Martin) have suggested that this emphasis on works is similar to an Arminian soteriology—in which salvation is received by grace but can be forfeited by disobedience. Yet, such explanations do not fully account for some of the legalistic emphases inherent in SDA theology (see #7 below).

Do Seventh-day Adventists elevate Ellen G. White as an authoritative prophetess?

Yes. Ellen White is regarded as both an inspired and authoritative prophetess. In fact, in Adventist literature she is compared to the biblical prophets. Here are several examples:

The Review and Herald, October 4, 1928: "Seventh-Day Adventists hold that Ellen G. White performed the work of a true prophet during the seventy years of her public ministry. As Samuel was a prophet, as Jeremiah was a prophet, as John the Baptist was

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also a prophet, so we believe that Mrs. White was a prophet to the church of Christ today.”

George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White*, 20: "Ellen White was acutely aware of her prophetic call and of her commission to guide Gods people through her speaking and writing. She firmly believed that God spoke through her voice and pen in the tradition of the biblical prophets."

John J. Robertson, *The White Truth*, 61: "The influence of the spirit of prophecy is woven into the warp and woof of Adventist faith, life and organization What we are as a church is a reflection of our faith in the divine authority evident in the writings of Ellen G. White."

SDA *Fundamental Belief* #18: "The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and we believe it was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. Her writings speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church."

Do Seventh-day Adventists say that Ellen G. White is an authority equal to or greater than Scripture?

Seventh-day Adventists insist that the Bible is their only creed.

But that claim is difficult to reconcile with their simultaneous commitment to Ellen White’s prophecies as being both inspired and authoritative. After all, she is regarded as a prophet like Samuel or Jeremiah.

That is why, in practice, some Seventh-day Adventists place White’s prophecies *over* the Bible because they use her as an *authoritative lens* through which to interpret the Bible.

Though he views it negatively, Seventh-day Adventist historian George R. Knight recognizes that this reality exists in SDA circles:

Some Adventists have seen Ellen White as an infallible Bible commentator in the sense that we should use her writings to settle the meaning of Scripture. Thus one of the denomination's leading editors could write in the *Review and Herald* in 1946 that "the writings of Ellen G. White constitute a great commentary on the Scriptures." He went on to point out that they were unlike other commentaries in that they were "inspired commentaries, motivated by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and this places them in a separate and distinct class, far above all other commentaries" (RH, June 9, 1946). (*Reading Ellen White*, 25)

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Elsewhere, Knight adds:

Too many Adventists have tended to put Ellen White in the place of Jesus. He, not Ellen White, is our example. To shove Ellen White's example to the forefront of our religion is cultic rather than Christian. (Ibid., 52)

Former Seventh-day Adventists similarly testify to the elevated devotion to Ellen G. White they observed when they were part of the SDA movement. Here is just one example:

Henry E. Neufeld, *When People Speak for God* (2007), 109: Because I grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, I have had a lifelong interest even in modern prophetic writings and their authority in particular communities. SDAs have Ellen G. White whose voluminous writings are regarded as authoritative by the vast majority of church members. They would not call this an addition to the canon of Scripture, though with many it is hard to tell the difference. After I was no longer an SDA myself, I recall getting involved in the peripheries of an argument. One person peppered me with Ellen White quotations even though she knew I was no longer a church member. She then offered to send me a compilation of even more such statements. She treated Ellen White as part of the canon, not only authoritative for her personally, but also for me.

Accounts like that have led some evangelical observers to note that the Adventist commitment to Ellen White's prophecies represents a departure from the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*. To cite Anthony Hoekema again:

Though Seventh-day Adventists claim to test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, they insist that the gift of prophecy which she possessed, and with which she therefore enriched their group, is a mark of the "remnant church." This means that this gift sets the Seventh-day Adventists apart from all other groups. But other Christian groups also have the Bible. What, therefore, sets the Seventh-day Adventists apart is what they have in addition to the Bible, namely, the gift of prophecy as manifested in Mrs. White. But if they test Mrs. White's writings by the Bible, as they say, and if the Bible is really their final authority, what do they really have which sets them apart from other groups? It is quite clear at this point that Seventh-day Adventists do not really test Mrs. White's writings by Scripture, but use them alongside of Scripture, and find in their use a mark of distinction that sets them apart from other groups. (*Four Major Cults*, 104)

Do Seventh-day Adventists insist on the necessity of Saturday (Sabbath) worship?

Yes. They teach that the Fourth Commandment is binding on Christians today. *Fundamental Belief* #20 states:

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The fourth commandment of God's unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship, and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.

For Seventh-day Adventists, worshiping on Saturday is not a matter of Christian liberty (cf. Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:17). It is seen as a binding requirement on all believers.

On the one hand, Seventh-day Adventists deny that keeping the Sabbath is a way of earning salvation. At the same time, however, they teach that knowingly breaking the Sabbath (as with any of the Ten Commandments) will prevent one's entrance into heaven. As Adventist author Francis Nichol explains: "[We] conclude that although Sabbathkeeping cannot secure us admission into heaven, Sabbathbreaking will certainly prevent our entrance" (*Answers to Objections*, 248).

From the perspective of many evangelicals, the SDA position constitutes an unbiblical form of legalism, in which Sabbath-keeping is seen as necessary for maintaining one's salvation. In the words of Harold Lindsell:

If men now or later must keep the Sabbath to demonstrate their salvation or to prevent their being lost, then grace is no more grace. Rather, we are saved by grace and kept by works. ("What of Seventh-day Adventism?" 15; cf. Hoekema, *Four Major Cults*, 126)

Did Ellen G. White teach that Sunday worship is the mark of the beast?

Yes. However, I did have to edit my [earlier article](#) on that point. White's teaching was that the mark of the beast would be received by those *in the end times* who worshiped on Sunday. In the meantime, those who worship on Sunday now are not condemned (at least not until they come to understand the obligation to observe the Sabbath on Saturday).

To cite Ellen White:

No one has yet received the mark of the beast. The testing time has not yet come. There are true Christians in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion. None are condemned until they have had the light and have seen the obligation of the fourth commandment. But when the decree shall go forth enforcing the counterfeit sabbath, and the loud cry of the third angel shall warn men against the worship of the beast and his image, the line will be clearly drawn between the false and the true. Then those who still continue in transgression will receive the mark of the beast. (*Evangelism*, 234–235; Cf. *The Great Controversy*, 449)

In *The Great Controversy*, White further underscores the importance of Sabbath from the SDA perspective:

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The enemies of God's law, from the ministers down to the least among them, have a new conception of truth and duty. Too late they see that the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is the seal of the living God. Too late they see the true nature of their spurious sabbath and the sandy foundation upon which they have been building. They find that they have been fighting against God. Religious teachers have led souls to perdition while professing to guide them to the gates of Paradise. Not until the day of final accounts will it be known how great is the responsibility of men in holy office and how terrible are the results of their unfaithfulness. Only in eternity can we rightly estimate the loss of a single soul. Fearful will be the doom of him to whom God shall say: Depart, thou wicked servant. (*The Great Controversy*, 640)

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Do Seventh-day Adventists teach the doctrines of soul sleep and annihilationism?

One Facebook commentator, who self-identified as a Seventh-day Adventist, offered this retort to my video: "Doctrine of annihilation and soul sleep? Where did he pull that out of? Never heard of it. I can tell he never step[ped] foot in a seventh day Adventist church lol."

Since the objection was raised, I thought it might be worth noting that both of those doctrines are taught in the official Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal statement (though using different terminology). Regarding soul sleep (the unconscious state of the dead prior to the resurrection), *Fundamental Belief* #27 states, "Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people."

Regarding the annihilation of the wicked and conditional immortality (that punishment in hell will be temporary because immortality is conditional and given only to believers), *Fundamental Belief* #28 states, "The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected, and with Satan and his angels will surround the city; but fire from God will consume them and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners forever." (See also *Fundamental Belief* #9.)

Is Seventh-day Adventism a cult?

As noted above, there is disagreement among evangelicals as to what label ought to be used to describe the SDA movement. Those looking for both sides of the issue may be interested to read *Kingdom of the Cults* by Walter Martin (which argues that SDA is not a cult) and *The Four Major Cults* by Anthony Hoekema (which argues that it is).

As for me, my view of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is more negative than positive. Consequently, I stand by my conclusion in [last week's article](#):

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The primary issues that separate Seventh-day Adventists from biblical Christianity are (1) their unorthodox view of Christ's work of atonement; (2) their illegitimate elevation of Ellen G. White's prophecies; and (3) their legalistic insistence that believers are bound to observe the Sabbath and Mosaic dietary laws.

All three of these issues touch fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. It is for that reason that evangelicals ought to view SDA theology with great caution. Upon examination, its doctrinal distinctives fall short of biblical orthodoxy.



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<https://blog.tms.edu/10-questions-about-adventism>, Retrieved: May 17, 2021

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