

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism

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Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, Seventh-day Adventism (SDA) has remained extremely controversial among evangelical Christians (evangelicalism being defined as that movement in modern Protestant Christianity which emphasizes conformity to orthodox theology, evangelism, and, particularly, the new birth). There was, in fact, something of a consensus among evangelical scholars that SDA was little more than a non-Christian cult until the 1950s, when Donald Grey Barnhouse and Walter Martin began a comprehensive evaluation of Adventist theology. After thousands of hours of research and extensive meetings with Adventist officials, Barnhouse and Martin concluded that SDA was not an anti-Christian cult, but rather a somewhat heterodox (i.e., departing from accepted doctrine) Christian denomination.

Gradually, the climate of evangelical opinion began to change in favor of Barnhouse and Martin's view, though there were always many dissenting opinions. As the 1960s dawned, SDA enjoyed an unprecedented openness with evangelical Protestantism. Ironically, this openness also raised some very difficult issues as certain key teachings of traditional SDA were challenged from within the denomination.

By the mid 1970s, two distinct factions had emerged within SDA. Traditional Adventism, which defended many pre-1950 Adventist positions, and Evangelical Adventism, which emphasized the Reformation understanding of righteousness by faith. This controversy soon gave way to a full-blown internal crisis which severely fragmented the denomination. By the early 1980s, severe denominational discipline against certain evangelical Adventist leaders left many Adventists disillusioned.

These events have led a number of evangelicals to question whether SDA should retain the evangelical label. The purpose of this article is to address this question head-on as we review the controversial evangelical/SDA dialogues of the 1950s, as well as trace the doctrinal issues which have contributed to Adventism's crisis of identity.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

EVANGELICAL/SDA DIALOGUES OF THE 1950s

Included among those evangelicals in the 1950s who considered SDA a non-Christian cult were such capable scholars as Louis Talbot, M.R. DeHann, Anthony Hoekema, J.K. Van Baalen, John Gerstner, and Harold Lindsell.¹ Walter Martin, at that time the director of cult apologetics for Zondervan Publishing Company, had classified SDA as a cult in his book *The Rise of the Cults*. And Donald Grey Barnhouse, nationally-known Bible scholar and founder and editor of *Eternity* magazine, had written critically of SDA theology. Barnhouse, having encountered some fanatical SDAs earlier in his life, considered evangelicalism and Adventism to be mutually exclusive.

Ironically, Barnhouse's first contact with Adventist leaders came when T. Edgar Unruh, SDA minister and administrator, wrote to Barnhouse commending him for several lectures he had delivered on the subject of justification by faith. Barnhouse was puzzled that an Adventist, who in his mind accepted works righteousness, would commend him for preaching the Reformation gospel. Though still very suspicious, Barnhouse suggested that the two men talk further in regard to Adventist doctrine.

Several years later, Barnhouse mentioned Unruh's name to Walter Martin, whom he charged with the task of thoroughly researching SDA for *Eternity*. Martin approached Unruh about receiving representative materials of their theology and the opportunity to interview certain Adventist leaders. Unruh supplied Martin with the documentation he was looking for and arranged for him to visit the General Conference head-quarters, at that time located in Takoma Park, Maryland. The General Conference, which is the governing body for SDA, received Martin warmly and were very cooperative in supplying him with primary source materials. With the blessing of R.R. Figuhr, the General Conference president, Unruh arranged a formal conference between Martin and several Adventist leaders.

Martin had specifically asked to speak with Adventism's leading historian and apologist, Leroy E. Froom. Froom, the author of such well-known books as *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* and *Movement of Destiny*, requested that two other Adventist leaders participate: W.E. Read, Field-Secretary for the General Conference, and Roy Allan Anderson, Secretary of the Ministerial Association of the General Conference and editor of *Ministry* magazine. These men were joined by T.E. Unruh, who acted as chairman. An associate of Walter Martin, George Cannon, professor of Greek at Nyack Missionary

¹ See, for example, Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

College, assisted Martin in his research at this historic conference. When the meetings later shifted to Pennsylvania, Barnhouse also became an active participant.

Questions and Answers

The format of the conference essentially involved the Adventist scholars answering questions which were being put to them by the evangelicals. Martin, in particular, submitted dozens of questions which had arisen from his study of SDA primary sources. One of the first major issues that the evangelicals brought up was the tremendous amount of Adventist literature which clearly contradicted other official SDA statements. For example, along with orthodox statements regarding the person, nature, and work of Christ, Adventist publications also contained other articles which espoused Arianism (the view that Christ was a created being), a sinful nature of Christ, incomplete atonement theory, Galatianism (salvation by law keeping), and extreme sectarianism. Martin stated that he could supply numerous quotations which were unequivocally heretical. The Adventist scholars were both shocked and appalled at some of the documentation presented.

Because of Adventism's strong emphasis on progressive scriptural understanding, they have been reluctant to adopt any formal creed. Even their doctrinal statement known as the "27 Fundamental Beliefs" allows for change and revision. Historically, this lack of a formal creed and emphasis on progressive biblical understanding has given place to a wide spectrum of doctrinal interpretation among Adventists. In the 1950s, as today, this tolerance of divergent and sometimes heretical views has hurt the unity and doctrinal soundness of their denomination. This was a critical issue for the evangelicals, who could not hope to accurately represent the position of Adventism to the evangelical world if the Adventists themselves lacked consensus as to those positions.

At the 1955-56 conference, Martin accused the Adventists of, at worst, speaking out of both sides of their mouths, or, at best, not properly policing their ranks. The evangelicals asserted that if the General Conference allowed heresies such as Arianism and Galatianism to continue in their ranks they would be deserving of the title "cult." To their credit, all of the Adventist scholars present repudiated the positions mentioned above, and promised that aberrational teaching which was at variance with expressed SDA doctrine would be investigated by the General Conference. They also asserted that most, if not all, of these doctrines were not representative of SDA theology, but expressed the opinions of a few who belonged to what Froom referred to as "the lunatic fringe."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Essential Orthodoxy?

As the conference progressed, the evangelicals became more and more impressed with both the sincerity and the general orthodoxy of the Adventist leaders. It now appeared that the structure of SDA theology was essentially orthodox. Adventism affirmed the inspiration of Scripture, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and Christ's deity, virgin birth, vicarious atonement, bodily resurrection, and second advent.² Martin, who had written extensively on the subject of American-based cults, immediately recognized that this was not the doctrinal statement of a typical cult. He began to believe that SDA, at least as these men represented it, had been very misunderstood by evangelical Christianity.

Though Martin was impressed with their commitment to the essentials of the faith, there were still a number of distinctive Adventist doctrines which long had stood in the way of accepting them as Christian brethren. Most of the evangelical scholars who had written negatively regarding SDA centered their criticisms on these few distinctives, which they believed undermined whatever orthodoxy Adventism might have. Martin, who was determined to understand SDA accurately, requested a thorough explanation of these peculiar beliefs.

Heterodoxy or Heresy?

Because these controversial doctrines convey the uniqueness of Adventist theology, and because reaching an understanding concerning them was important to the Barnhouse/Martin evaluation, a brief discussion of them is necessary. Unfortunately, space limitations preclude an in-depth treatment, so we will discuss three of the distinctives which have been a major source of misunderstanding.³ The Evangelical/SDA Conference revealed that Adventist theology differed from mainstream Christianity on the following three issues: the Sabbath, the authority of the sect's leading figure, Ellen G. White, and the "investigative judgment" doctrine.

Sabbatarianism. SDA teaches that the keeping of the Seventh-day Sabbath, as a perpetual memorial to creation, is obligatory for all Christians as a mark of "true obedience" to the Lord. Unlike some extreme Adventists, however, the Adventist scholars at the conference asserted that the keeping of the Sabbath did not procure salvation, and that non-Adventist Christians who observed Sunday in good conscience were not excluded from the body of Christ.

² *Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1957), 21-22.

³ For a complete analysis of Adventist distinctives see Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Though Sabbath-keeping has never been the official position of historic Christianity, the evangelicals concluded that to keep, or not keep, a Sabbath was permissible within the context of Romans 14:5-6. Other Christian denominations, such as the Seventh-Day Baptists, had taken this position as well. The evangelicals vigorously disagreed with the Adventists' conclusion regarding the Sabbath, but they did not see this as an issue which should divide them.

Ellen G. White and the Spirit of Prophecy. The development and very existence of Adventism is literally incomprehensible apart from Ellen White and her voluminous writings. No Christian leader or theologian has exerted as great an influence on a particular denomination as Ellen White has on Adventism. During her lifetime, Mrs. White is credited with writing over 46 books totalling some 25 million words, which touched virtually every area of Adventist belief and practice.

SDA believes that the gift of prophecy mentioned in I Corinthians chapters 12 and 14 was uniquely manifested in the life and writings of Ellen White. Her alleged visions and words from the Lord were interpreted as being an identifying and qualifying characteristic of God's remnant church. The writings of Ellen White have often been described, as she herself put it, as "a lesser light" pointing to "the greater light" of Scripture.⁴

Because SDA considered the writings of Ellen White as "inspired counsel from the Lord," the evangelicals were concerned about what relationship her writings had to the Bible. The question put to the Adventist scholars was: "Do Seventh-day Adventists regard the writings of Ellen G. White as on an equal plane with the writings of the Bible?"⁵ The Adventist leaders gave the following reply:

- 1) That we do not regard the writings of Ellen G. White as an addition to the sacred canon of Scripture.
- 2) That we do not think of them as of universal application, as is the Bible, but particularly for the Seventh-day Adventist church.
- 3) That we do not regard them in the same sense as the Holy Scriptures, which stand alone and unique as the standard by which all other writings must be judged.⁶

⁴ *Questions on Doctrine*, 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

While the evangelicals openly rejected the Adventists' view of Ellen White's writings, they concluded that as long as her writings were not viewed as 1) being on a par with Scripture, 2) infallible, or 3) a test of Christian fellowship, this issue need not be divisive.

The Sanctuary Doctrine/Investigative Judgment. Perhaps the most distinctive of all Adventist beliefs is their doctrine of the sanctuary. This doctrine came about as an explanation for the failure of the Millerite movement in 1844. Baptist minister William Miller (1782-1849), using the day-year interpretation of Daniel 8:14, predicted that Jesus Christ would literally return to earth 2300 years after the beginning of Daniel's 70 weeks (Dan. 9:24-27), which he interpreted as being the time span of 457 BC - AD 1843. When 1843 passed without seeing the Lord's return, the Millerite movement made a minor adjustment and declared that October 22, 1844, would be the date of Christ's second advent. When this prediction also failed the Millerite movement suffered what is known historically as the "Great Disappointment." For many this spelled an end to the Advent movement, but for a few it had just begun.

In the wake of the Great Disappointment, another individual, Hiram Edson, reexamined the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 after allegedly receiving an illuminating vision about this matter in a corn field. Edson, with help from O.R.L. Crosier, concluded that Miller's error rested in the nature of the event, rather than the calculation of time. Miller had interpreted the "cleansing of the sanctuary" (as referred to in Dan. 8:14) as a prophecy that Jesus Christ would return to the earthly "sanctuary", that is, to the earth itself. Edson, in light of his vision, came to believe that Christ, rather than returning to earth in 1844, actually entered for the first time into the second compartment of the heavenly sanctuary. Edson believed that there existed a heavenly sanctuary which had been the pattern for the Old Testament earthly sanctuary, complete with the dual compartments known as the holy place and the most holy place. 1844, according to Edson, marked the beginning of the second phase of Christ's atoning work.

The work which Jesus was to perform in the most holy place was later developed into the doctrine of the investigative judgment. Early Adventists understood Jesus' atoning work to be accomplished in two phases. This two-phase ministry of Christ could best be understood as an antitype of the work of the Old Testament priests.

Under the old covenant, they argued, the daily priestly duties were confined to offering sacrifices within the holy place (**forgiving** sin), but once a year on the day of atonement, the high priest entered the most holy place and cleansed the sanctuary by sprinkling the blood of a slain goat on the mercy seat (**blotting out** sin). After the cleansing of the sanctuary, the sins of the people were on the scapegoat who was banished into the wilderness.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

According to Adventism, Jesus had been **forgiving** sin since His vicarious death on the cross; however, on October 22, 1844, Jesus began His work of **blotting out** sin. From His ascension until 1844, Jesus had been applying the forgiveness He purchased on the cross in the first compartment of the sanctuary, but in 1844, He entered the second compartment and began to investigate the lives of those who had received forgiveness to see if they were worthy of eternal life. Only those who passed this judgment could be assured of being translated at His coming. This doctrine gave rise to what later became known as the sinless perfection teaching (perfect commandment-keeping in order to find acceptance in the judgment). Following the investigative judgment, Christ would come out of the heavenly sanctuary and return to earth bringing to every man his reward, and ushering in the great and terrible day of the Lord. It is 1844, and the events described above, which mark the beginning of SDA. Upon hearing of this peculiar doctrine, Barnhouse described the sanctuary doctrine as nothing more than a face-saving device that was created to bail them out of the Millerite error. The evangelicals repudiated these two doctrines as having no biblical support. The question remained for the evangelicals however, whether these two doctrines stood in the way of genuine fellowship. The primary concern was whether these doctrines minimized Christ's atoning work, or reduced it to an incomplete atonement. After a critical evaluation, the evangelicals concluded that this doctrine of the investigative judgment "constitutes no real barrier to fellowship when it is understood in its symbolic meaning and not in the materialistic, and extreme literalistic sense in which some of the early Adventist writers set it forth."⁷ They stressed that in contemporary SDA thinking the doctrine did not imply a dual or partially-completed atonement, but rather that the once-for-all atonement is being applied by Christ as our High Priest in heaven.

As far as the evangelicals were concerned, the three doctrines of Sabbatarianism, Ellen White's authority, and sanctuary/investigative judgment, though erroneous, if properly interpreted would not prevent fellowship between the two camps.

Other distinctive Adventist doctrines such as conditional immortality, annihilation of the wicked, health reform, and the remnant church concept were discussed and evaluated by the evangelicals. Their conclusion was that though these doctrines were out of the evangelical mainstream, and in some cases without any clear biblical support, the explanation given by these Adventist scholars would not prevent them from being genuine followers of Jesus.

After evaluating thousands of pages of documentation, and participating in extensive question and answer sessions with several of Adventism's most competent scholars,

⁷ Walter Martin, "Adventist Theology Vs. Historic Orthodoxy," *Eternity*, Jan. 1957, 13

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Walter Martin, speaking for the evangelicals, concluded that SDA "is essentially a Christian denomination, but that in the overall perspective its theology must be viewed as more heterodox than orthodox, and that its practices in not a few instances might rightly be termed divisive."⁸

Aftermath of the Conference

The decision to reclassify SDA as a heterodox denomination, rather than a non-Christian cult, was very controversial. Barnhouse and Martin received considerable criticism within evangelical circles. In fact, after they revealed their findings in several editions of *Eternity* magazine, 25 percent of the magazine's subscribers withdrew their subscriptions!

This climate of opinion began to change, however, with the release of the Adventist publication *Questions on Doctrine* (hereafter *QOD*).⁹ This volume was produced directly from the question and answer sessions with the evangelicals, with both sides contributing to the precise wording of the questions. The expressed purpose of this book was to clarify Adventist doctrine by showing the areas of common belief and distinct differences with evangelicalism. The Adventist scholars who put *QOD* together emphasized the fact that this book was not a new statement of faith, but rather an explanation of the major aspects of SDA belief.

To insure that this volume was truly representative of SDA theology, and not the opinion of a select few, the unpublished manuscript was sent out to 250 Adventist leaders for review. Upon receiving only minor criticisms, the 720-page manuscript was accepted by a General Conference committee and published by Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1957. While this volume in recent years has become a source of controversy in Adventism, it is interesting to note that R.R. Figuhr later stated that he considered *QOD* to be the most meaningful accomplishment of his presidency.¹⁰

Several years later, in 1960, Martin's book *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* was also published and received wide acceptance. Many who had initially criticized the Barnhouse/Martin evaluation began to take a new look at SDA because of the extensive documentation revealed in Martin's book. (Though this book has long been out of print, Martin's evaluation of SDA has remained available through his later book *The Kingdom of the Cults*.) Adventist leaders also stated publicly that Martin's book accurately

⁸ Walter Martin, "Seventh-day Adventism," *Christianity Today*, 19 Dec. 1960, 14.

⁹ The exact title is *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, but it is better known as *Questions on Doctrine*.

¹⁰ "Currents Interview: Walter Martin," *Adventist Currents*, July 1983, 15.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

represented Adventist theology. One present-day Adventist scholar made this statement: "Martin's book is the work of an honest investigator and a competent theologian. He understood and reported accurately what Adventists told him they believed, and he cited their proofs exhaustively."¹¹ Thus, according to the leadership of SDA, both *QOD* and *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* accurately represented their theology in the late 1950s, though, as we shall see, acceptance of that theology in SDA was far from universal.

Much has changed, however, since *QOD*, and so we now turn our attention to those events which have shaped Adventism's present-day crisis.

THE BEGINNING OF CONTROVERSY

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of great turmoil and doctrinal debate within SDA, with the common denominator being the question of Adventism's uniqueness.¹² Would Adventism continue in the same direction established under the Figuhr administration in *QOD*, or would the denomination return to a more traditional understanding of the faith? The debate over this question would give rise to two distinct factions within SDA: Evangelical Adventism and Traditional Adventism.¹³ We will now look at these two groups and compare their views on those doctrines which divided them. Those doctrines consisted of righteousness by faith, the human nature of Christ, the events of 1844, assurance of salvation, and the authority of Ellen White.

Evangelical Adventism

The roots of Evangelical Adventism can certainly be traced to the Adventist scholars who dialogued with Barnhouse and Martin. When *QOD* repudiated such commonly held traditional doctrines as the sinful nature of Christ, literalistic extremes of the heavenly sanctuary, and the writings of Ellen White as an infallible doctrinal authority, they laid a critical foundation for those who would later carry the torch for this reform movement. Former editor of *Evangelica*, Alan Crandall, comments: "The seeds of this movement were sown within the denomination via the book *QOD* in 1957, and the seed-plot was watered by the public ministries of such men as R.A. Anderson, H.M.S. Richards, Sr., Edward Heppenstall, Robert Brinsmead, Desmond Ford, Smuts van Rooyen, and others."¹⁴

¹¹ Gary Land (ed.), *Adventism In America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 187.

¹² See Land, 215.

¹³ Desmond and Gillian Ford, *The Adventist Crisis of Spiritual Identity*. (Newcastle, CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982), 20-28.

¹⁴ Alan Crandall, "Whither Evangelical Adventism," *Evangelica*, May 1982, 23.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This movement continued to grow and evolve throughout the 1970s, with the main spokesmen being two Australian SDA scholars named Robert Brinsmead and Desmond Ford (Brinsmead had earlier held to a form of perfectionism, but later repudiated it). Brinsmead and Ford, by means of their writing and lecturing, were the major catalysts of a revival of the doctrine of justification by faith which was receiving a wide hearing, particularly in the Australasian Division of the Adventist church. The movement was supported mainly by young Adventist pastors, seminarians, and laymen. There were also a good number of American Adventist scholars who were sympathetic to the Brinsmead/Ford position.

The major doctrinal issues which united this group were:

- 1) **Righteousness by faith:** This group accepted the reformation understanding of righteousness by faith (according to which righteousness by faith includes justification only, and is a judicial act of God whereby He declares sinners to be just on the basis of Christ's own righteousness). Our standing before God rests in the imputed righteousness of Christ, which we receive through faith alone. Sanctification is the accompanying fruit and not the root of salvation.
- 2) **The human nature of Christ:** Jesus Christ possessed a sinless human nature with no inclination or propensities toward sin. In that sense, Christ's human nature was like that of Adam's before the Fall. Though Christ certainly suffered the limitations of a real man, by nature He was impeccable (i.e., incapable of sin). Jesus was primarily our substitute.
- 3) **The events of 1844:** Jesus Christ entered into the most holy place (heaven itself) at His ascension; the sanctuary doctrine and the investigative judgment (traditional literalism and perfectionism) have no basis in Scripture.
- 4) **Assurance of salvation:** Our standing and assurance before God rest solely in Christ's imputed righteousness; sinless perfection is not possible this side of heaven. Trusting Christ gives a person assurance.
- 5) **Authority of Ellen G. White:** Ellen White was a genuine Christian who possessed a gift of prophecy. However, neither she nor her writings are infallible, and they should not be used as a doctrinal authority.

Traditional Adventism

While *QOD* is considered to be the origin of Evangelical Adventism, it also fueled the fire for those who supported Traditional Adventism. Following its publication, M.L. Andreasen, a respected Adventist scholar, severely criticized *QOD*, stating that in his

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

opinion it had sold Adventism down the river to the evangelicals.¹⁵ Several years later, under Robert Pierson's administration, two prominent scholars, Kenneth Wood and Herbert Douglass, declared that the publishing of *QOD* had been a major mistake.¹⁶

The crux of Traditional Adventism would certainly appear to rest squarely upon the authority of Ellen G. White. This group would strongly defend those doctrines which were distinctive Adventist beliefs, especially those which received their stamp of approval from Ellen White's prophetic gift (e.g., sanctuary doctrine, investigative judgment). Support for this group came mainly from the older clergy and laymen, and most importantly, they seemed to have gained the favor of the majority of Adventist administrators. Then, as now, the leaders who ran the denomination are not well informed theologically, but they were responsive to the very vocal Traditionalist segment.

The following positions were taken by Traditional Adventism in response to the doctrinal debates:

- 1) **Righteousness by faith:** Righteousness by faith included both justification and sanctification. Our standing before God rests both in the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ (God's work for me and in me). Justification is for sins committed in the past only.
- 2) **The human nature of Christ:** Jesus Christ possessed a human nature that not only was weakened by sin, but had propensities toward sin itself. His nature was like that of Adam after the Fall. Because of His success in overcoming sin, Jesus is primarily our example.
- 3) **The events of 1844:** Jesus entered into the second compartment of the heavenly sanctuary for the first time on October 22, 1844, and began an investigative judgment. This judgment is the fulfillment of the second phase of Christ's atoning work.
- 4) **Assurance of salvation:** Our standing before God rests in both the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ; assurance of salvation before the judgment is presumptuous. As Jesus, our example, showed us, perfect commandment keeping is possible.

¹⁵ Ford, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

5) **The authority of Ellen G. White:** The spirit of prophecy was manifest in the ministry of Ellen White as a sign of the remnant church. Her writings are inspired counsel from the Lord and authoritative in doctrinal matters.

It should be noted that volumes have been written on each of these doctrines, on both sides. The brief description given above is only meant to provide an accurate synopsis of the two groups' views. It is important to realize that during the 1970s, as today, not every Adventist would fit neatly into one of these two groups. Neither of these groups were totally unified in their doctrinal beliefs. For example, not everyone in the Traditional camp held to the sinful nature of Christ doctrine, though the majority certainly did. Among Evangelical Adventists, there were differing opinions regarding the understanding of a pre-advent judgment. As well, there were Adventists who did not feel a need to identify with one side or the other.

It should also be mentioned that, though small, there was and is a segment in Adventism which could be described as being theologically liberal.

FROM CONTROVERSY TO CRISIS

As the above doctrinal comparison showed, the differences between these two factions were indeed significant. The differences could essentially be reduced to: 1) the question of authority (**sola scriptura** vs. Scripture plus Ellen White), and 2) the question of salvation (imputed righteousness vs. imparted righteousness). Adventism, in fact, was debating the same basic issues that provoked the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

As the 1970s came to a close, this doctrinal controversy gave way to a real crisis within SDA. First, two books were released which challenged traditional Adventist positions on justification by faith and the events of 1844. *The Shaking of Adventism*, written by an Anglican scholar, Geoffrey Paxton, traced the struggle in SDA over the doctrine of justification by faith. He asserted that if Adventists were, as they claimed, the special heirs of the Reformation, then they must accept the Reformational understanding of righteousness by faith. Arriving at a proper understanding of this critical doctrine had plagued Adventism throughout its history. The second book, Robert Brinsmead's *1844 Reexamined*, repudiated the traditional Adventist understanding of 1844 and the investigative judgment. These two books focused on two of the critical issues of Adventism's crisis of identity.

Shaking the Foundations

Undoubtedly, the most explosive issue that arose during this period was the disclosure of Ellen White's tremendous literary dependence. Adventist scholars such as Harold

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Weiss, Roy Branson, William Peterson, and Ronald Numbers all revealed historical research that showed that Ellen White had borrowed material from other nineteenth-century authors. The most controversial disclosure, however, came from an Adventist pastor named Walter Rea. Rea charged that as much as 80 to 90 percent of White's writings had been plagiarized. Because of the tremendous influence White's writings have had on the denomination, and because Adventists had been taught that her writings were taken directly from her visions (a view promoted by the denomination), this disclosure shook the very foundation of SDA.

Initially, the White Estate denied this evidence, but later admitted that sources were used in her writings. *Review and Herald*, the denomination's official organ, argued in White's defense that her literary borrowing was much less than Rea had alleged, and that her use of literary sources did not invalidate the inspiration of her writings. After all, they reasoned, some biblical writers used sources. Rea, who later thoroughly documented his charge in the book *The White Lie* (M. & R. Publications), was fired by the denomination.

The question of Ellen White's inspiration and authority has been a source of controversy throughout Adventism's history, but the plagiarism charge had brought about doubt as to her integrity and veracity. Some even charged that the White Estate had known about this problem for some time and attempted to cover it up. This issue was also important in regard to the question of Adventism's unique identity. Because many of the doctrinal distinctives had received confirmation through her prophetic gift, to question her was to question the uniqueness of SDA itself.

Challenging the Heart of Adventism

Two of the doctrines that had received confirmation through the prophetic gift were the sanctuary doctrine and the investigative judgment (i.e., the events of 1844). These two distinctives were at the center of a controversy that would ultimately lead to a sharp division within the Adventist ranks. Desmond Ford, for 16 years the chairman of the theology department at Avondale College in New South Wales, Australia, challenged the biblical validity of the traditional understanding of these doctrines. He argued that the literalistic and perfectionistic understanding of these doctrines promoted by traditional Adventism had no biblical warrant, and were accepted primarily because of Mrs. White's vision, which confirmed them. Ford stated that though the writings of Ellen White were essential to SDA development, they should be understood as pastoral in nature and not canonical. Though he argued that 1844 had no biblical significance, he did believe that God had indeed raised the SDA denomination up to emphasize, along with righteousness by faith, such doctrines as sabbatarianism, creationism, conditional immortality, and premillennialism.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Because of the controversy over Ford's doctrinal beliefs, Adventist leaders agreed to give him a six month leave of his duties in order for him to prepare to defend his views. A committee would later meet and evaluate his views in light of SDA doctrine. Ford, a careful and prolific scholar, prepared a 990-page manuscript entitled *Daniel 8:14: The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment*. In August of 1980, 126 Adventist leaders met at Glacier View Ranch, Colorado, to discuss these provocative issues. After a week of meetings, the leaders declared that Ford's views were at variance with expressed SDA doctrine. Because Ford would not recant his convictions, the denomination removed his ministerial credentials.

14

The firing of Desmond Ford, who some consider the father of evangelical Adventism, angered many and led to a mass evangelical exodus from the denomination in favor of independent Adventist and mainline evangelical churches. As well, as many as a hundred evangelical Adventist leaders and Bible teachers were later fired or forced to resign because they supported Ford's theology.

Needless to say, the 1980s have been a time of crisis for SDA. And though it would appear that the most traumatic period is over, the scars of this struggle still remain. While the decisions of the General Conference seem to convey their support of Traditional Adventism, the denomination has denied that it actively sought to eliminate all evangelical influences. Many former Adventist pastors and Bible teachers would vigorously contest this statement. It would appear that there are still large numbers of Adventists who are of evangelical persuasion, but certainly not as vocal after Glacier View.

EVALUATING SDA TODAY

Because of the controversy that has raged within SDA over the past few decades, many who are aware of the Barnhouse/Martin evaluation in the 1950s have asked if this position should be revised or significantly changed. Because of the action taken against Desmond Ford, Walter Rea, and many others, some have asked if present-day SDA should be regarded as a non-Christian cult.

It is our position that the evaluation given by Barnhouse and Martin still stands for that segment of Adventism which holds to the position stated in *QOD*, and further expressed in the Evangelical Adventist movement of the last few decades. Though some within this group hold to doctrines which are not part of the evangelical mainstream, they do affirm the foundational doctrines of historic Christianity, particularly the Pauline or Reformation understanding of justification by grace through faith alone (Rom. 3-4). To this group, however many still remain, we extend a hand of fellowship and encouragement. We applaud their courage in standing firm for the gospel.

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Traditional Adventism, on the other hand, which seems to have gained the support of many administrators and leaders (at least at Glacier View), appears to be moving further away from a number of positions taken in *QOD*. While Adventist officials have stated that the denomination stands by *QOD*, some of these same leaders have disfellowshipped scores of Adventists for affirming portions of *QOD*. Instead of upholding *QOD*, some leaders within the denomination have referred to it as "damnable heresy."¹⁷

As ironic as it may seem for a group that vociferously condemns Catholicism and claims to be the special heirs of the Reformation, the traditional Adventist position on righteousness by faith is more like that of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent than that of the Reformers.¹⁸ Because this doctrine is so crucial to a proper understanding of law and gospel, their aberrant view of equating justification with sanctification leads to several other unbiblical concepts (lack of assurance, perfectionism, etc.). It is no wonder that Luther thought everything hinged on the proper understanding of this doctrine.

Besides their compromising stance on justification, Traditional Adventism seems bent on making Ellen G. White the infallible interpreter of Scripture. Though this has never been the official position of the church, in a practical way many leaders within Adventism have asserted this. Lyndon K. McDowell makes this insightful comment: "In practice, if not in theory, the writings of E.G. White have been elevated to an almost verbally-inspired touchstone of interpretation which has resulted in an essentially biblically illiterate membership."¹⁹ Unfortunately, many Adventists see the writings of Ellen White as an infallible shortcut to scriptural understanding. Adventists must understand that if they elevate Ellen White to the position of infallible interpreter, then the dramatic irony of the ages has come true — SDA has a Pope.

Is Traditional Adventism Cultic?

With respect to the charge that Traditional Adventism is a non-Christian cult, it must be emphasized that the structure of Adventism is largely orthodox (accepting the Trinity, Christ's deity, virgin birth, bodily resurrection, etc.). Presently, however, it would appear that Traditional Adventism is at least aberrant, confusing or compromising biblical truth (e.g., their view of justification, the nature of Christ, appealing to an unbiblical authority). It must also be stated that if the traditional camp continues in its departure from *QOD*,

¹⁷ Geoffrey Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 153.

¹⁸ See Paxton, 46-49.

¹⁹ Lyndon K. McDowell (Adventist scholar), cited in "Quotable Quotes from Adventist Scholars," *Evangelica*, Nov. 1981, 37.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and in promoting Ellen White as the church's infallible interpreter, then they could one day be fully deserving of the title "cult", as some Adventists recognize.

In the late 1970s, SDA was at the crossroads between becoming quite evangelical, or returning to the traditionalism of the past. The crisis of the 1980s makes it plain that many in Adventist leadership are attentive to the vocal traditionalist segment, and, unfortunately, have headed Adventism in the wrong direction. If those in Adventist leadership who love the Reformation gospel (and there are still many) do not speak up and stand for their convictions, Adventism has little hope, because Traditional Adventism is theologically bankrupt. Its perverted gospel robs Adventist Christians of assurance and puts them on a treadmill of trying to measure up to God's holy law in order to be saved.

Our criticism of Adventism should not be interpreted as an attack from an enemy, but rather concerned words from a friend, who earnestly prays that the present leaders of SDA will honor Scripture and the gospel of grace above their own denominational distinctives.

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