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Seventh-day Adventists: What Do They Really Believe?

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Our subject this morning is Seventh-day Adventism. The most common question people ask about this group is whether or not we should classify them as a cult. It's a loaded question.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Walter Martin was arguably the most well-informed expert on quasi-Christian cults. He wrote a string of books on the subject, starting in 1955 with *The Rise of the Cults*. He wrote individual volumes on Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. Walter Martin's best-known book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, is a thick resource, published in 1966. It is still one of the standard works on what the cults believe.



In the early 1960s, Walter Martin was working closely with Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of the leading radio preachers of that era. Barnhouse was pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, and founder of *Eternity* magazine.

At the time, Seventh-day Adventism was almost universally classified as a cult. In fact, one of the other standard works on the subject is a book first published in 1963 by Anthony Hoekema, titled *The Four Major Cults*, and Hoekema listed Seventh-day Adventism as one of the four quintessential quasi-Christian cults. (The others he dealt with were Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism.)

But Donald Grey Barnhouse and Walter Martin said one of these groups is not like the others, and starting sometime in the mid-1950s they undertook a study of Seventh-day Adventism, specifically to see whether it was proper to list this group as a cult. They met with Seventh-day Adventist leaders and read modern Seventh-day Adventism books, and they came to the conclusion that Adventism is Heterodox, meaning they teach several unbiblical doctrines, and they even muddle some of the central doctrines of Christianity—but not so much as to be classified as a heretical "cult." After all, Seventh-

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day Adventists don't deny the deity of Christ, like the Jehovah's Witnesses. They don't have a fanciful or extrabiblical view of the supremacy and eternity of God, like the Mormons. They aren't gnostics teaching some empty philosophy after the fashion of Christian Science. Walter Martin said the differences between evangelicalism and Seventh-day Adventism are really no greater than the differences between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. So (Martin and Barnhouse said) the label "cult" doesn't really fit here.

They made this opinion known in a famous article in *Eternity* magazine in 1956. Titled, "Are the Seventh-day Adventists Christians?" The article essentially gave a "yes answer" to that question. They said, "Adventists hold all the basic doctrines of Christianity." *We shouldn't be so quick to classify them as a cult.*

At the time, that article was extremely controversial. In fact, it unleashed a debate that has lasted even until now. It became one of the biggest controversies Barnhouse was ever embroiled in. But over time, it seems to me, the view of Barnhouse and Martin has more or less become the dominant opinion.

Almost a decade after that article in *Eternity*, Walter Martin's most famous work, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, included a section that contains a relatively mild critique of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, and Martin sounded almost apologetic for including it. He wrote, "It is perfectly possible to be a Seventh-day Adventist and be a true follower of Jesus Christ, despite heterodox concepts." At times, over the years, he sounded like a defender of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. In fact, most of the Seventh-day Adventist websites that are online today like to quote Walter Martin in defense of their movement.

The 1970s became a time of significant turmoil within the Seventh-day Adventist movement, essentially dividing the movement into two factions. A huge debate was provoked when some leading Seventh-day Adventist teachers began to adopt more evangelical doctrines, and they started asking hard questions about the trustworthiness of the movement's main prophetess, Ellen White. Some Adventists reacted by digging in deeper. Others adopted more flexible teachings designed to sound more evangelical. But no one who stayed in the movement overtly *rejected* Mrs. White's prophecies or renounced her influence in shaping the movement's beliefs.

Walter Martin watched that conflict in the Seventh-day Adventist movement unfold, and he was disappointed that the majority of Adventist leaders actually stiffened their necks and became more hostile than ever toward evangelical principles. The ultimate effect was a revival of interest and emphasis on the writings of Ellen White. She was repeatedly appealed to as more or less *authoritative*. The arguments inside the movement were

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always about how to interpret her pronouncements, not about whether she was a false prophet. The debates always ended before anyone in the movement would ever repudiate anything she said. So in a 1985 television interview, Walter Martin said this:

I fear that if [the Seventh-day Adventists] continue to progress at this rate, then the classification of a cult can't possibly miss being reapplied. ... [In the writings of Ellen White, they] have an interpreter of Scripture, a final court of appeal that tells [them] what Scripture means. ... [They] judge Scripture by that, [even though she] has made doctrinal errors in the past, even on the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the atonement and on other things.

It's folly, he said, to raise someone like that to a position of authority. As far as Walter Martin was concerned, the Seventh-day Adventists deserved to be classified as a cult if they were going to put the writings of a modern rogue prophet on the same level as Scripture.

But today the question is still asked all the time: Should we classify Seventh-day Adventism as a cult? The problem with that question is, *it depends on how you define the word cult*. Here's how I would define it:

A cult is an authoritarian and elitist sect who teach that salvation hinges on membership in their group, and yet they depart from one or more essential points in the ancient ecumenical creeds.

Frankly, I don't think it's too far-fetched to classify Seventh-day Adventists as a cult based on that definition.

I realize, of course, that lots of people (including virtually all Seventh-day Adventists) will argue that Adventism *doesn't* fit that precise definition. And the truth is, if you don't want to label them a "cult," I am not going to argue over terminology. But I think that's a terribly misleading and useless point to make. Whether you label Seventh-day Adventism cultish or not, they are a dangerous and sub-Christian faction that steers people away from the simplicity of the true gospel. They saddle their people with the yoke of the law in precisely the same way the Galatian heretics were doing. They try to blend works with grace. And as the apostle Paul says in Romans 11:6, **"If [salvation is] by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace."** Galatians 2:21: **"If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."**

In short, the "gospel" preached in Seventh-day Adventist circles is a damning and damnable false doctrine, and that's what I want to show you.

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Let's start with *THE HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT*. And the point I hope you will see is that the roots of Seventh-day Adventism are corrupt to begin with. It grew out of false teachings, false prophecies, false promises, and false excuses for those failed prophecies. It was based on an almost fanatical expectation that the Lord would return to earth on a specific day—and when that didn't happen, the movement nearly died, and *would* have died, until Ellen G. White, a very deluded woman who claimed to be a prophet, concocted a new explanation for what really happened on the day they believed Christ would return. Her prophetic pronouncements became the glue that bound a remnant of fanatical followers together—and even though many of her pronouncements were demonstrably wrong, she managed to gain the unwavering devotion of a desperate remnant, and on that rickety foundation, the whole movement was founded.

So the movement *began* in a decidedly cult-like fashion, and in my judgment, even though it has managed to give itself a veneer of respectability, it still retains all the distinctive features of a cult.

Here's how it all came about: In the middle of the 19th century, just before the start of the American Civil War, there was a widespread awakening of interest in the second coming of Christ. Talk of the second coming penetrated every level of American society. The energy of so much expectation even exceeded what we saw in the 1970s, when Hal Lindsey's book was at the top of the best seller list.

There was a profound interest in "the signs of the times." People were saying all the same things we hear today: *The Lord's return must be soon. The state of the world could hardly get worse than it is. The signs of coming judgment are all around. Surely the Lord will return soon.* But the expectation was intense. People scoured Scripture for clues about the timing of the second coming.

One of those who took a keen interest in the subject was a New England farmer, Army captain—and sometime Baptist preacher—named William Miller. Miller was raised as a Baptist but in his late twenties he rejected his religious upbringing and embraced Deism. About the same time, he became a deist, the War of 1812 began and Miller joined the army. During the war, a bomb exploded nearby, injuring four of his fellow soldiers (one of them fatally), but he escaped injury. He believed he had been kept from injury by a miracle, but that was impossible to reconcile with the deistic view that God is remote and uninvolved.

After the war he pondered death and the afterlife and began to move gradually away from deism and back in a Baptist direction. Hung between those two systems, he

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decided to undertake a verse-by-verse study of Scripture with the idea of harmonizing the contradictions in his own thinking. In the process of making that study (*while all the culture around him was becoming obsessed with the second coming*) Miller said he came to the conclusion that Scripture reveals the exact time of Christ's return.

He read Daniel 8:13-14: "**Then I heard one saints peaking, and another saint said unto that certain saint which spake, How long shall be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden under foot? And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.**" By the way, that prophecy was literally fulfilled in history. Twenty-three hundred days is about six-and-a-half years. That is exactly how long the persecution led by Antiochus Epiphanes lasted, and afterward the Temple was cleansed. That event is what is celebrated at Hanukkah, the Jewish Feast of lights.

But William Miller had no training, no qualification to teach, and no real skill in theology, Bible history, or hermeneutics. William Biederwolf, an early 20th century Presbyterian evangelist, wrote a book on Seventh-day Adventism, and he says Miller "*was as ignorant of Hebrew as a Hottentot is of the Klondike.*"

William Miller read that passage from Daniel and decided that the 2,300 *days* in verse 14 really stand for 2,300 *years* and the cleansing of the sanctuary, he said, refers to the judgment of the world by fire at the second coming. Miller also decided that the place to start counting was 457 BC, the date of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem by Artaxerxes I of Persia. If you subtract 457 from 2,300 you get 1843. It's that simple, he said. Christ will return sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844.

Some of Miller's followers declared that all the churches that rejected William Miller's teaching on the second coming were "Babylon," and they began to urge Christians to leave the established churches. One of Miller's most influential followers, Charles Fitch, preached a sermon on Revelation 18:4-5: "**Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins.**" He told people, "If you are a Christian, come out of Babylon [meaning, leave any church that does not follow the Millerite doctrine. He said:]. If you intend to be found a Christian when Christ appears, come out of Babylon, and come out now. . ."

If a lot of that sounds familiar, it should. Basically, William Miller was the Harold Camping of his day. Here was an unqualified Bible teacher with an overabundance of self-confidence and a much bigger audience than his message deserved. And multitudes were swept up in the excitement.

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March 22, 1844 came and went without the return of Christ. Miller was devastated. He said he knew he had made a mistake, but as he reviewed his calculations he couldn't see where the error was. Miller's followers suggested several alternative interpretations of Daniel's prophecy: Perhaps the date should be reckoned by Kara-ite Jewish calendar instead of the rabbinical calendar. One Millerite named Samuel Snow finally proposed a new deadline about seven months later. He declared with an aura of great authority that the return of Christ would occur on "the tenth day of the seventh month of the present year, 1844." Reckoning with a Kara-ite calendar, he determined that date to be October 22, 1844. That became the new Adventist orthodoxy. This, they said, was the latest possible date for the return of Christ. Miller pushed his rhetoric up a notch. *"This is God's truth,"* he said; *"It is as true as the Bible."* *"There is no possibility of a mistake in this time."* *"Those who reject this light will be lost."* *"Those who do not accept this argument are backsliders."*

Here's how one Seventh-day Adventist resource describes what happened:

Adventists sold their land. businessmen closed their shops. Farmers left their farms idle. Potatoes remained in the ground unharvested. Apples rotted in the orchards. "Yours in the blessed hope," many signed their letters.

The message went from city to city, town to town, village to village, to the farthest part of the land. Every Millerite waited with joyous longing for Jesus to return to Planet Earth.

As October 22, 1844, dawned, believers assemble in their homes, tents, and churches praying, praising, and waiting. *It won't be long,* they thought. *The Bridegroom will appear!* But the Bridegroom did not appear. The day had ended, and Jesus hadn't come! What had happened? What had gone wrong? Their hopes dashed, they wept unashamedly till dawn the next day.

Adventists refer to that event as "The Great Disappointment." It decimated the movement. By most accounts, the majority of disillusioned followers drifted into other dissident groups rather than return to the churches their fellow Millerites had dubbed "Babylon." Many of them joined the Quakers. Others became Deists. Others concluded that all religion was a sham.

But a small remnant—mostly fanatical Millerite believers—stayed together and began to investigate alternative explanations for the Great Disappointment.

Miller himself seemed to try to back quietly out of the limelight and acknowledge that he had been wrong. He gave up trying to predict the date of the Lord's return, and he didn't seem persuaded by any of his hard-core followers' theories about what may have

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happened in 1944. He never gave up his belief that the bodily return of Christ was near. He seemed to lean to the view that there was some kind of error in the biblical chronology, perhaps a scribal error that got the numbers wrong.

Miller died five years after the Great Disappointment. On his gravestone, it says, "At the time appointed, the end shall be."

The whole movement might have faded into obscurity, except for the rise of a self-styled prophetess who took over leadership among most of the remnant and shaped Seventh-day Adventism into the movement that endures today. (There's a smaller sect that also traces its roots back to William Miller's Adventism, the Advent Christian Church, but it's a very small movement, more orthodox than the Seventh-day Adventists. They aren't sabbatarians, but like Seventh-day Adventists, they reject the doctrine of hell.)

The woman who assumed leadership among most of the original Millerites was Ellen Gould White. Her maiden name was "Harmon." She was raised in a Methodist family, but at the height of Millerite excitement, her parents embraced Miller's views on the second coming and the family started regularly attending Millerite meetings. At the time of the Great Disappointment, Ellen Harmon was a 17-year-old girl. Within a month after the final failed deadline, Ellen claimed she had a vision in which she saw faithful Adventists filing into heaven. Her claim was immediately embraced by the faithful Adventist remnant as a true prophecy, and in the words of John Gerstner, she "had a job for life as a seer, and the Adventists had new assurance. Until her death in 1915, she was the outstanding Adventist leader."

This marked a significant change in direction for the Adventist movement, and it was not a turn for the better. Let me quote John Gerstner once more. He says:

Miller was succeeded in the leadership of the Adventist movement by a person who was in every respect different from him. For one obvious difference, it was a woman, Mrs. Ellen G. White, succeeding a man. For another thing, it was a visionary succeeding a rather sober student.

Where Miller always attempted to ground his witness on his exposition of the Bible, Mrs. White went beyond the Bible with her numerous revelations. Where Miller was mistaken and admitted it, Mrs. White denied any error.

While Miller was frankly disappointed, Mrs. White turned defeat into victory by reinterpretation.

There are photographs of Ellen White at several stages of her life, and I have to say that I think she has a kind of creepy look. She has crazy eyes—kind of a piercing stare—and

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she preferred to look heavenward and off to the side rather than directly into the camera lens. Everything about her prophetic words, and her mannerisms, and even her facial expressions more or less fits the caricature of what you would think the self-important founder of a weird cult might be like.

And she was not lacking in brazenness, from the start to the finish of her career. Near the end of her life, she would write, "I am now looking over my diaries ... there is one straight chain of truth, without one heretical sentence, in that which I have written."

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Now, obviously, when you have a living prophet whose declarations and interpretations of the Bible are supposedly authoritative, Scripture cannot really function as your final authority. Ellen White became the last nail in the coffin that sealed the cultish character of the Adventist movement from its earliest years.

When she was 19 years old, Ellen Gould Harmon married an Adventist preacher, James White. At the time, Adventists worshiped on the first day of the week like virtually all other Christians beginning with the apostolic church. But not long after they were married, the Whites read a tract written by a Seventh-day Baptist, and they were persuaded that all the Old Testament Sabbath restrictions are binding on Christians, and that the church should meet for worship on the Jewish Sabbath rather than the first day of the week. One of Ellen's famous visions soon confirmed the matter: she said she saw the heavenly sanctuary with the fourth commandment marked by a halo. This was sufficient to persuade the early Adventist movement that the Sabbath law is the greatest of all the Ten Commandments.

It wasn't until nearly 15 years later that the group adopted their official name: Seventh-day Adventists. Then two years later, in 1863, the group formally incorporated. At the time, the denomination boasted 125 congregations comprising 3,500 followers.

Ellen White consistently claimed for her visions and prophecies an infallible authority equal to that of Scripture. She published a magazine, *The Review and Herald*, and each issue featured a prophetic letter from her. In an 1882 article titled "The Testimonies Slighted," she wrote, "In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper, expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision, the precious rays of light shining from the throne."

James White died in 1881. Ellen was 54 years old at the time and by then she had led the Adventists for nearly four decades. She set to work on her best-known book, *The Great Controversy*. She claimed the book recorded what she had received in some of her most important visions. She introduces the book with this claim: "In this vision at Lovett's

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Grove (in 1858), most of the matter of *The Great Controversy* which I had seen ten years before, was repeated, and I was shown that I must write it out."

Ellen White, like William Miller, was a dilettante theologian. She had no qualification to teach or make doctrinal pronouncements. She herself made a great deal of claiming that she had only a third-grade education. In fact, she told people for years that she was unable to read. She said her ability to produce written material of a fairly high caliber was proof that her prophecies came from God. Later researchers have proved that she could actually read quite well. And, as it turns out, large portions of her work were clearly plagiarized from other authors. Now, to be fair, Seventh-day Adventist apologists will point out that in the introduction to *The Great Controversy*, she acknowledges that she has made use of others' published works, sometimes even quoting without documenting her sources. (She seemed to think that was an acceptable practice. Adventists like to refer to it as "literary borrowing" rather than plagiarism.)

But to be perfectly candid, Ellen White and her Adventist apologists grossly understate the amount of material she borrowed without documenting her sources. She was a pathological plagiarist.

A few other inconvenient facts further debunk Mrs. White's claim that she was a prophet. For one thing, she frequently revised or contradicted her own prophecies. One of the big ones came with her very first vision in 1844. She claimed that the door of mercy was now shut for everyone outside the original Millerite sect. Even the Millerites who abandoned their hope after the Great Disappointment would now be permanently shut out of heaven. In effect, Ellen White (and most of the original Adventists) were saying that no one who was outside their sect could *ever* be saved. The door of salvation was permanently closed.

Of course, the more time that passed, the more that prophecy put them in an awkward position. The group needed to add followers, and they couldn't do that if the day of grace had passed. In an article written in 1883, she made this admission: "I did hold, in common with the advent body, that the door of mercy was then forever closed to the world." But, she said, it had now been revealed to her that the way of salvation was still open.

She had another vision in which she was told that Adventist women needed to wear a certain style of outfit, known as the "Reform Dress." It was basically a black dress with parachute pants underneath. There are pictures on the Web, and it makes a fairly ridiculous-looking costume. It was bulky and uncomfortable. But in 1867, she said, "God would now have His people adopt the reform dress, not only to distinguish them from the world as his peculiar people, but because a reform in dress is essential to physical and mental health." She warned her sisters in the faith not to neglect her words on this:

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I have done my duty; I have borne my testimony, and those who have heard me and read that which I have written, must bear the responsibility of receiving or rejecting the light given. If they choose to venture to be forgetful hearers, and not doers of the work, they run their own risk, and will be accountable to God.

Clearly, she was claiming these were God's own instructions.

One Seventh-day Adventist pastor from that era wrote this about Mrs. White's dress restrictions:

I was married at Battle Creek in 1867, to a young sister of nineteen. It was at the height of this short-dress craze. Of course, as a minister's wife, she reluctantly put on the dress and wore it for eight years. So I know all about it. It was a shameful thing and brought ridicule everywhere.

On the street, people would stop and gaze at her and mock. I have seen troops of boys follow her, making fun, till she would step into a store to hide from them. We were both ashamed of it; but God's prophet said it was his will, and we must bear the cross!

The issue was clear. ... Reject the light and meet the frown of God! So, quite largely, the faithful ones put on the dress. But it was a failure. The pants were hot in summer, and in winter the ankles were wet with snow.

Husbands were mad, brothers would not go out with their sisters, and outsiders sneered and called them freaks. Girls with this dress on in school were avoided and ridiculed.

But for eight years Mrs. White wore it and urged it. I have often sat in the desk with her when she wrote it and preached on it as a Christian duty. If God ever gave her a revelation about anything, he did about that, for so she said strongly over and over. But at length she saw it was a mistake and a failure. So she went away to California and quietly laid it off herself, and never wore it afterward. Of course she was plied with requests for explanations; but she simply refused to give any.

There are websites listing many more of Mrs. White's failed prophecies. There are books that document her plagiarisms. Most objective people would write her off as a charlatan, and many of the conflicts within Seventh-day Adventism that took place in the 1970s and 1980s stemmed from the fact that virtually all research into her history discredits her in one way or another. But cult loyalty is hard to break, and the end result of all those debates has been a renewal of loyalty to Mrs. White among those who have stayed in the

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movement. Seventh-day Adventist apologists have found various ways to defend, or explain away, or reinterpret, or make excuses for the many discrepancies in Mrs. White's work. But the controversies have nevertheless left the movement deeply shaken.

If you want to study the various controversies of recent years, let me recommend an article titled "The Shaking of Adventism," by Geoffrey Paxton. Another good place to start is the Wikipedia entry on Desmond Ford. He was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Australia who began to question some of the church's core teaching. He came very close to evangelical orthodoxy but has never really let go of some of Adventism's anomalies. He was excommunicated and now has an independent ministry. He's much closer to truth than where he began, but he still rejects what Scripture teaches about hell, still teaches the doctrine of soul sleep, still holds to Seventh-day sabbatarianism, and most significantly, though he acknowledges many significant errors in the writings of Ellen White, he declines to call her a false prophet. He says he regards her writings as "pastoral," but "not canonical."

And therein lies the difficulty in critiquing Seventh-day Adventism. Beliefs within the movement seem to be very pliable. Even when they acknowledge (as all reasonable people are forced to do) that the roots of the movement were seriously tainted with erroneous claims, false prophecies, and unfulfilled predictions, they are loath to reject the tradition, and unwilling to leave the group. That kind of blind, unshakable loyalty—a fear of leaving the movement behind—is itself one of the main characteristic of all cults.

But the distinctive doctrines of Seventh-day Adventism are where the movement's most sinister effects are seen. As you might detect from my brief historical overview, the dogmas of the movement are pretty subject to individual interpretation. Though Ellen White is revered as a prophetess, and she is without controversy the chief architect of the denomination's dogmas, *no one* really believes everything she said. She made countless ridiculous pronouncements about health, clothing, diet, and quack medicine. She said, for example, that eating butter, eggs, and meat would keep your prayers from going high. She forbade the use of tea, coffee, pickles, mustard, pepper, and cinnamon.

She must have been a lousy cook!

But she was either dishonest or totally inconsistent. She said in one place, "No butter or flesh-meats of any kind come on my table. Cake is seldom found there." A year later, she wrote in a letter to her family, "We had a quarter of venison cooked, and stuffing. It was as tender as a chicken. We all enjoyed it very much." About five years after that, she wrote, "Two years ago I came to the conclusion that there was danger in using the flesh of dead animals, and since then I have not used meat at all. It is never placed on my table." But

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she went on to describe eating fish, drinking beef broth, cooking with chicken broth, and devouring oysters.

Just a decade or so later, she declared without qualification, "I do not preach one thing and practice another. I do not present to my hearers rules of life for them to follow while I make an exception in my own case." But then three years after that, Mrs. White's secretary, Fannie Bolton, described an incident where she got separated from Mrs. White in a train depot. She writes, "Eld[er] Starr hunted around till he found her behind a screen in the restaurant very gratified in eating big white raw oysters with vinegar, pepper and salt." The secretary was understandably confused and disillusioned. She wrote:

I kept thinking in my heart, 'What does this mean? What has God said? How does she dare eat these abominations?' On the cars out to California, W. C. White came into the train with a great thick piece of bloody beefsteak spread out on a brown paper and he bore it through the tourist car on his own two hands. Sarah McEnterfer, who is now with [Ellen] White as her attendant, cooked it on a small oil stove and everyone ate of it except myself and Marian Davis, *who I found out afterwards was more the author of the books purported to be Sr. White's than she was herself.*

If that eyewitness testimony is true (and there's no reason to doubt it), it seems clear that Mrs. White was a thoroughgoing phony.

No one today would regard most of Mrs. White's medical advice as anything other than the typical superstitions of that era. But her ideas about diet and healthy living nevertheless left a mark, and that's why so many Adventists today are vegetarians, health-food aficionados, practitioners of alternative medicine, and purveyors of holistic health fads.

There's a document online with this curious title: "*A History of Seventh-day Adventist Work with Soyfoods, Vegetarianism, Meat Alternatives, Wheat Gluten, Dietary Fiber and Peanut Butter.*"

All of that is deeply rooted in Seventh-day Adventism's hopeless entanglement in Old Testament ceremonial and dietary laws. It's an arbitrary and highly selective application of Moses' law, but it is a very close modern equivalent of the Galatian heresy. Remember, the apostle Paul had that very error in mind in Galatians 1:8-9, when he wrote, "**Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.**" In other words, this is damnable heresy. It is the rankest form of legalism, and virtually every significant doctrinal error found in Seventh-day Adventist writings is in some way derived from this legalistic tendency.

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Let me give you just a brief overview of some key Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, and I'll start with what they get *right*.

First of all, they do generally hold to an essentially trinitarian view of the Godhead. They don't deny the deity or true humanity of Christ, though they put a twist on Christ's humanity that I think is full of mischief. I'll try to come back to that before we are finished.

They believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ and (of course) His literal, visible second coming. They are basically literalists when it comes to interpreting Scripture. They are six-day creationists. They are also premillennialists, teaching that Christ will establish a literal earthly kingdom on earth and rule and reign for a thousand years. They teach baptism by immersion and formally affirm the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. And let's be honest: that's a lot of important categories where they would agree with what we teach. It's easy to see why some would be reluctant to classify them as a cult. It's quite true that they aren't nearly as far off track as any of the other major cults.

But we have this against them: *in one way or another, they compromise, corrupt, or confuse virtually every key doctrine of the Christian faith*—including those doctrines that they formally affirm.

For example, their confession that Scripture is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative is severely compromised by the notion that Ellen White was a prophetess who received fresh revelation from God, and her "revelations" become the lens through which the rest of Scripture is interpreted.

It gets worse.

One of the major conflicts regarding Mrs. White's prophecies in the 1970s controversy dealt with her teaching that Satan, not Christ, bears the ultimate penalty for the sins of redeemed people. (This, in my view, is the grossest of all the blasphemies in Seventh-day Adventist teaching.) In *The Great Controversy*, Mrs. White writes,

As the priest, in removing the sins from the sanctuary, confessed them upon the head of the scapegoat, so Christ will place all these sins upon Satan, the originator and instigator of sin. The scapegoat, bearing the sins of Israel, was sent away "unto a land not inhabited"(Leviticus 16:22); so Satan, bearing the guilt of all the sins which he has caused God's people to commit, will be for a thousand years confined to the earth, which will then be desolate, without inhabitant, and he will at last suffer the full penalty of sin in the fires that shall destroy all the wicked. Thus the great plan of redemption will reach its accomplishment in the final eradication of sin and the deliverance of all who have been willing to renounce evil.

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So Satan, not Christ, is the ultimate sin-bearer.

That, of course, nullifies the biblical teaching that the work of Christ on the cross resulted in full atonement for the sins of His people. Seventh-day Adventists are forced to reinterpret Christ's statement in John 19:30, "**It is finished.**"

They can't make good sense of Hebrews 10:12: "**When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.**"

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In fact, the central, distinctive (and most novel) doctrine of Seventh-day Adventism is the idea Ellen White concocted to explain the Great Disappointment. She claimed that on October 22, 1844, Jesus began a whole new phase of His atoning work. Here's how the Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal statement says it: "In 1844, at the end of the prophetic period of 2,300 days, [Christ] entered the second and last phase of His atoning ministry. It is a work of investigative judgment which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin, typified by the cleansing of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary on the Day of Atonement."

What do they mean by "investigative judgment?" The idea is that Christ is now judging the lives of professing Christians, both living and dead. This idea was an offshoot of the original view that the door of salvation was already shut and the return of Christ very near. It's been modified and reinterpreted in various ways that seem to co-mingle justification and sanctification. But if you lay it alongside Ellen White's statements in *The Great Controversy*, it's impossible to avoid the conclusion that this doctrine encourages the most oppressive kind of works-based and perfectionistic thinking. Ellen White said, for example,

Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God *and their own diligent efforts* they must be conquerors in the battle with evil.

See how she mingles works and grace? That's the very idea Paul cursed. Nevertheless, Ellen White says,

He who is found wanting is cast out, but all who upon examination are seen to have the wedding garment on are accepted of God and accounted worthy of a share in His kingdom and a seat upon His throne. This work of examination of character, of determining who are prepared for the kingdom of God, is that of the investigative judgment, the closing of work in the sanctuary above.

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When the work of investigation shall be ended, when the cases of those who in all ages have professed to be followers of Christ have been examined and decided, then, and not till then, probation will close, and the door of mercy will be shut.

So as long as this "investigative judgment" is still going on, no one's justification can possibly be a settled issue.

Adventists are therefore made to believe they need to work for Christ's final approval. Quoting Mrs. White again:

While the investigative judgment is going forward in heaven, while the sins of penitent believers are being removed from the sanctuary, there is to be a special work of purification, of putting away of sin, among God's people upon earth.

So justification hinges on complete sanctification—just like in Roman Catholicism. And like Roman Catholicism, Seventh-day Adventism has no place for justification as a past-tense, settled guarantee.

That means *there is no possibility of true assurance!*

According to Mrs. White, "It is impossible that the sins of men should be blotted out until after the judgment at which their cases are to be investigated."

Adventist teaching thus destroys the possibility of settled faith. It saddles people with the yoke of the law. And by polluting the gospel message with law, it demolishes the truth of divine grace. It fails to see the atoning work of Christ as finished and fully sufficient, and it muddies every doctrine it touches.

There's much more to say. Seventh-day Adventists reject the doctrine of eternal punishment, deny the immortality of the human soul, and teach the doctrine of soul sleep. The idea is that every human soul dies or goes out of existence at death, and Christ simply resurrects those souls whom He judges worthy of eternal life.

I mentioned earlier that Seventh-day Adventist teaching on the humanity of Christ is twisted. Ellen White insisted that Christ took on fallen humanity's sin nature. She said he *didn't* sin; he resisted every temptation, but his nature was as fallen as yours and mine. In her words, "He took upon His sinless nature our sinful nature ... [He] bore the infirmities and degeneracy of the race. He took our nature and its deteriorating condition."

That's really bad theology. It corrupts not only the doctrine of Christ's humanity, but also the doctrines of original sin, the priesthood and mediatorial work of Christ, the principle

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of substitutionary atonement, and the glory of Christ as God incarnate. It also contributes to the works-based soteriology of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, because the basic idea of the teaching is that Christ's ability to completely overcome sin, even with a fallen nature, demonstrates the possibility of living in perfect obedience to God's law. Christ's life therefore becomes merely an example for us to follow.

Seventh-day Adventism is full of that kind of confusion, clumsy errors and contradictory ideas. It's inevitable when people who are unskilled in doctrine, unstable in the faith, untrained in the Bible's original languages, and untaught in basic hermeneutical principles imagine that they are hearing directly from God and have the arrogance to invent a whole new religion. It's a muddled mess, and the recent turmoil within the Seventh-day Adventist movement is the predictable fruit of that.

It's foolish for true evangelicals to relax their guard and think Seventh-day Adventist errors are minor flaws that can be smoothed over with a little nuancing.

If the Galatian heresy was a damnable error (and the apostle Paul was as clear as possible on that), the Seventh-day Adventist teaching is likewise damnably wrong and whether we call this movement a cult or not, we have a duty to warn people away from such confusion and twisted, legalistic works-based doctrine. It obscures the simplicity of the gospel, undermines the authority of Scripture, and dishonors Christ. That's reason enough to reject it emphatically.

Now, you have probably noticed that I barely mentioned the Sabbath issue and didn't really address that error much at all. There's a reason for that. Frankly, if the worst error of the Seventh-day Adventists was their insistence on observing Saturday as the Sabbath, I would be happy to treat that as an indifferent matter. In Romans 14:5, Paul says, "**One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.**" In Colossians 2:16, he says, "**Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.**"

But the Adventists go much further, often implying that Sabbath-keeping is the essential mark of every true believer, and Sunday worship is basically the mark of the beast. Mrs. White wrote, "The holy Sabbath is, and will be, the separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers", and she claimed that was revealed to her in one of her famous visions. *In short, the Sabbath is to Adventists what circumcision was to the Galatian heretics!*

But as I hope you can see, quarreling about the Sabbath with Adventists doesn't even address the biggest problems with their doctrine. The biggest problem is that their

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doctrine essentially eliminates the biblical promise of justification by faith alone—the principle of *sola fide*.

They're *wrong* on the Sabbath, of course, and if you want my arguments on that, download a message I did a few years ago on the fourth commandment. Here's my short answer: When Seventh-day Adventist doctrine makes the fourth commandment the most important of all God's laws, they contradict Scripture. Mrs. White claimed Roman Catholicism wrongly changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. She said, "The Pope has changed the day of rest from the seventh to the first day, and ... has thought to change the greatest commandment in the decalogue, and thus make himself equal with God, or even exalt himself above God."

Notice she expressly calls the Fourth Commandment "the greatest commandment in the decalogue." But what did Jesus say about that? Remember? In Matthew 22:35, **"a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"** What was Jesus answer? Matthew 22:37-38: **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment."**

Remember that the Pharisees made Sabbath observance the token of their system. It's fitting that Seventh-day Adventists have done the same thing, because their doctrine has everything in common with the teaching of the Pharisees.

"They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders." They "plac[e] a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." It is a pernicious form of legalism, and the distilled essence of works-religion. Let's not be quick to soft-sell their errors.

For those entangled in this system, it is an oppressive, spiritually stifling, enslaving, fear-inducing, faith-stealing form of religion.

Seventh-day Adventists have always been very media-savvy. The growth of the cult during the 20th century is largely attributable to the influence of a daily radio broadcast called "Voice of Prophecy." Their publications have blanketed the globe. Many Seventh-day Adventist preachers are gifted communicators, and for the past 50 years or so, they have desperately been trying to gain acceptance in the evangelical movement. To a very large degree, they have succeeded in that goal.

What your Seventh-day Adventist friends desperately need to hear is the gospel, with a clear articulation of the principle of justification by faith alone, and a clear affirmation that the atoning work of Christ is finished. This is, in fact, the very thing the Sabbath

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pictured: That there is "a [true] Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." That's Hebrews 4:9-10, and it's talking about the rest we enter into by faith in Christ—a rest from the very kind of works that get so much stress in the Seventh-day Adventist system.

Christ is not *judging* us; he is *making intercession* for us! He's not working to complete the atonement in the heavenly sanctuary; He "**offered one sacrifice for sins forever, [then] sat down on the right hand of God**" He is seated there, according to Scripture, "**until [God makes His] enemies a footstool for [his] feet.**"

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The Seventh-day Adventist system is quite simply a whole new religion—nothing like the early church believed—unknown in any era of church history until the 19th century.

Its message is a totally new and different gospel, and that means it is an accursed system. Whether it is proper to call it a cult or not is totally beside the point. It's a system of deceit and confusion. It leads people astray. It's wrong to gloss over such an error and pretend it is of no real importance. It is *eternally* important, because what is at stake is the gospel—and *that* is truth we can never compromise.

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