

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Who are “True” Adventists?

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The answer to this question is not an easy one. Within the Seventh-day Adventist church are several streams of theological understanding.¹ While the following descriptions are an oversimplification, and many Seventh-day Adventists would not precisely fit any of these categories, they will serve for purposes of communication. The three main branches of Adventist theological understanding we will call: Historic Adventism,² Liberal Adventism, and Evangelical Adventism.

1

Historic Adventists

Historic Adventists continue to hold to the “unique truths” that were “given” to Adventism. They believe that the SDA church was raised up by God to proclaim a special message to the world. This unique message is the three angels’ messages taken from Revelation 14:6-12. This is a judgment hour proclamation of the “eternal gospel;” a warning to come out of “Babylon,” which they believe to be the “fallen” Protestant churches of Christendom.³ The Sabbath for SDAs is the seal of God, and Sunday worship, they believe, will become the mark of the beast. Therefore, the seventh-day Sabbath holds a place of vital importance in their thinking and message. They see the hand of God moving in SDA history as the light of God’s “truth” for the last days keeps unfolding before their view. Historic Adventists believe the writings of Ellen G. White are “a continuing and authoritative source of truth.” They believe Ellen White was a messenger of God, and her writings are often considered an “inspired commentary” on Scripture. Very few “good Adventists”⁴ would ever admit that Ellen White’s writings contradict the Bible, or contain serious theological error. This group strongly supports the doctrine of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment.

Liberal Adventists

Within Adventist circles Liberal Adventism is often used to describe those who hold the “moral influence theory” of the atonement. This stream finds its center in the Loma Linda

¹ See the journal, *Adventist Today*, January/February 1994.

² Some would call this group Traditional Adventism.

³ Those who teach the immortality of the soul and Sunday sacredness and/or reject the “truth” of the seventh-day Sabbath.

⁴ A term often used by Historic Adventists to refer to those who observe all the lifestyle rules laid down by Ellen White.

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area of Southern California. It teaches that the substitutionary, forensic view of the atonement is primitive and does not correctly represent the character of God. Liberal Adventists would say that the forensic view of the atonement served its purpose in Bible times, but is inadequate today. Paul taught this view because it was a framework the people of his day could understand. Modern Christians, however, have progressed in their understanding of the character of God to the place where the sandbox models are no longer adequate. To picture God requiring a blood atonement, they would say, is to see Him in barbaric terms. The forensic model of the atonement is no longer valid.

2

Rather, Liberal Adventists teach that salvation is to *know God*.⁵ Their emphasis is on understanding the character of God. The cross of Christ, they say, proves that men could do whatever they wanted to the Son of God, and He would love them still. In other words, there is no reason to be afraid of God. Knowing His character engenders trust, and this trust in God is really what God is looking for. When we truly trust God enough, then we are “safe to save.” One recurring theme of the Liberal Adventists is that God is not going to punish the wicked. They revolt at the very idea of a painful destruction of the wicked, to say nothing of an ever-burning hell. Communicating to others the loving character of God is to them the proclamation of the gospel. Often, these Liberal Adventists use the writings of Ellen White—at least portions of them—to support this theology.⁶

Evangelical Adventists

Evangelical Adventists are more gospel-centered than either Historic Adventists or Liberal Adventists. In fact, most Evangelical Adventists do not believe in a literal interpretation of several points in the *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh Day Adventists*. Evangelical Adventists do not believe SDAs will be the only people saved in the last days. They do not see the Seventh-day Adventist church as the only true remnant church. And most importantly, Evangelical Adventists believe the gospel of grace. Justification by faith is their keynote. Good works will follow the genuine experience of faith in Christ, but these works do not enter into the foundation for salvation.

Evangelical Adventists are in disagreement in their understanding of Ellen White. Some continue to believe that Ellen White demonstrated the true gift of prophecy, while at the same time disagree with many of her statements. Others, at least in private, reject her writings as an inspired source of truth.

⁵ “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.” John 17:3.

⁶ This description is a summary of my personal talks with those who are considered Liberal Adventists. See also *Adventist Today*, January/February 1994.

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Most Evangelical Adventists do not believe that all Christians must, or will, observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Some still see the seventh-day Sabbath as important, but non-essential, others hold that the old covenant Sabbath prefigured the true “rest” of grace revealed in the gospel.⁷ This latter group is gaining influence at the grass-root level within the SDA church and poses a serious threat to Historic Adventism.

A possible fourth group within Adventism

Some have said that there are four groups within the Adventist church, and have defined the fourth group as those who don't care about the issues and don't want to get involved in the discussion of them. They just want to keep peace. These we will call Social Adventists.⁸

Fuzzy lines of demarcation

We should not think that the lines between these groups within the SDA church are always clear and distinct. I was born into a Historic Adventist home and fully believed the Adventist teachings. After I discovered the gospel,⁹ my progress in moving from a Historic Adventist, to an Evangelical Adventist, and finally to a non-Adventist, was in small, incremental steps. From my recent conversations with other Adventists at various stages of the journey, I see the same thing taking place.¹⁰

⁷ The information cited here comes from recent (1994-1996) personal conversations with Evangelical SDA pastors who wish to remain anonymous.

⁸ See *Adventist Today*, January/February 1994.

⁹ I did not learn the clarity of the gospel from Adventist sources.

¹⁰ Ratzlaff, Dale (2009). *Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventism: An Evangelical Wake-up Call*. Cape Verde, AZ: LAM Publications, pp. 25-29.