

Adventist theology 1844 to 1994

George R. Knight

Our search for identity and the threat of polarity



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What is Adventism? What does it mean theologically to be an Adventist? The most intelligible framework for understanding the historical development of Seventh-day Adventist theology is to see it as a *search for identity* moving through four basic stages.

Stage 1: "What is Adventist in Adventism?" (1844-1886)

The search for identity was violently and abruptly thrust upon all Millerite Adventists on October 23, 1844. Up to that time they had known who they were, and they had had little doubt about their place in God's cosmic plan. But the October disappointment left the bewildered Adventists in a chaotic condition. Millerism in late 1844 and for most of 1845 needs to be seen as a seething and chaotic mass of confusion. It would take years for the theological confusion to clear up, and various Adventist groups would eventually come to different conclusions on the meaning of their experience.

Some eventually concluded that they had been right in the event predicted in Daniel 8:14 but wrong on the time. For this group the cleansing of the sanctuary still pointed to the second coming of Christ and the cleansing of the earth by fire. But October 22, 1844, was not the date. Christ's coming was yet future. This group evolved into the Advent Christian denomination and several related bodies.

Others held that both the event and the time had been correct. Christ had indeed returned on October 22, but the

coming had been spiritual rather than literal. Fanaticism easily arose in the ranks of these spiritualizers, as they were called.

Yet a third group of disappointed Millerites held that they had been correct on the time, but wrong on the event. That is, something had taken place on October 22, 1844, but it was not the second coming of Christ. Rather, after a thorough study of Scripture using Miller's concordance approach, they concluded that the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 was God's heavenly temple rather than the earth. Thus, Christ had entered a new phase of ministry on October 22, 1844. This interpretation formed the initial insight that led to Seventh-day Adventism.

After the Great Disappointment, each of those Adventist groups had to redefine its identity. This period in the development of Seventh-day Adventism might best be thought of as a time when the denomination's founders sought to determine *what was distinctively Adventist in Adventism*.

By 1848 or 1849 our Sabbatarian forebears had concluded that Adventism's distinctives centered on their message of the heavenly sanctuary, the seventh-day Sabbath and the law of God, the premillennial and visible second advent of Christ, the conditional nature of human immortality, and the revival of the gift of prophecy as evidenced in the ministry of Ellen G. White. These theological items were packaged in the end-time framework of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

Those who became Seventh-day Adventists were overjoyed with their conclusions about what was Adventist

in Adventism. For the next 40 years they boldly preached their distinctive theology to the world around them. Feeling little need to emphasize such items as faith, grace, or other beliefs shared with the larger Christian world of the day, they emphasized their distinctive beliefs—especially the law of God and the seventh-day Sabbath.

Unfortunately, 40 years of emphasizing what is Adventist in Adventism led them into a disjunction with basic Christianity. That problem would come into bold relief between 1886 and 1888.

Stage 2: “What is Christian in Adventism?” (1886-1920)

The magnitude of the theological groundshift taking place among Adventists in the late 1880s and the 1890s is no secret to anyone with the slightest interest in the development of Adventist theology. Suddenly the denomination was faced with a new theological emphasis, a new vocabulary, and a new question as to religious identity.

It had all started simply enough. Two relatively young editors from California—A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner—had challenged the traditional Adventist interpretation of the 10 horns of Daniel 7 and the nature of the law in the book of Galatians. But G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, the official leaders of the denomination, interpreted their challenge as an attack on the integrity of historic Adventism. As a result, they became aggressive with Jones and Waggoner and did everything in their power to keep the younger men from getting a hearing in the denomination.

The confrontation between the two sides came to a head at the Minneapolis session of the General Conference in the autumn of 1888. That meeting witnessed a meanness of spirit on the part of those defending historic Adventism that led Ellen White to declare that they were seeking to win the battle by using the spirit of the Pharisees. She deplored such tactics. To her the 1888 session was the “most incomprehensible tug-of-war we have ever had among our people.” Again, she looked back at the session as “one of the saddest chapters in the history of the believers in present truth.”

Both the spirit and the theology of the denomination’s leading ministers, she

soon concluded, lacked a crucial element—Christ and Christlikeness. As a result, she recalled: “My burden during the meeting was to present Jesus and His love before my brethren, for I saw marked evidences that many had not the spirit of Christ.” And on October 24 she told the delegates: “We want the truth as it is in Jesus. . . . I have seen that precious souls who would have embraced the truth have been turned away from it because of the manner in which the truth has been handled, because Jesus was not in it. And this is what I have been pleading with you for all the time—we want Jesus. . . . All the object I had was that the light should be gathered up, and the Saviour come in.”

Coupled with Jones and Waggoner, Ellen White uplifted basic Christian themes at Minneapolis and in subsequent years. They especially uplifted Jesus and righteousness by faith in Him.

That new emphasis was reflected in Ellen White’s writings by a new direction in her literary effort. The first book-length contribution to her new emphasis came in 1892 as *Steps to Christ*—a volume she refused to put out to denominational publishing houses because she did not trust those in charge to present her gospel message to the people in its unadulterated form. Rather, *Steps to Christ* was published by Fleming H. Revell, Moody’s brother-in-law. Of course, she also hoped to reach a broader audience by publishing with Revell.

Steps to Christ would be followed by *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* in 1896 (also published by Revell), *The Desire of Ages* in 1898, *Christ’s Object Lessons* in 1900, and the opening chapters of *The Ministry of Healing* in 1905.

The new emphasis was also reflected in the vocabularies of Waggoner, Jones, and W. W. Prescott as they preached Christ and His saving grace to the denomination’s clergy and members. Whereas these younger men emphasized words like “Christ,” “faith,” “justification by faith,” and terms related to Christ’s righteousness, the denomination’s older theologians put the emphasis on such words as “works,” “obedience,” “law,” “commandments,” “our righteousness,” and “justification by works.”

The 1888 meetings set the stage for a major theological shift in Adventism.

Between 1888 and 1900 the denomination would arrive at a better understanding of salvation in Christ, the Trinity, the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and a fuller understanding of the divine nature of Christ that would begin to displace Adventism’s semi-Arianism. In addition, certain of its theologians initiated interpretations regarding the human nature of Christ being exactly like the nature of the fallen Adam that would set the stage for conflict in the 1990s, and the church would be treated to forceful attempts by Ellen White to make the Bible—rather than her own writings—the determinant of Adventist theology.

The new theological emphasis raised at Minneapolis had caused an earthquake in Adventism. In essence the earthquake had been brought about by a new question. The tectonic plate of the old question “What is Adventist in Adventism?” had run smack-dab into the tectonic plate of the new question “What is Christian in Adventism?”

Unfortunately, most of those who had spent their lives preaching the answer to the first question saw the second as a threat to the first rather than as an enrichment. Thus the 1890s saw war in the Adventist theological camp at the very time when necessary enrichment was what was being advocated. After all, Seventh-day Adventism at its best is both Christian and Adventist in its identity. That insight, however, was not obvious to the denomination’s theological gladiators in the late 1890s and has yet to dawn upon many of their heirs in 1994.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of 1888 and the post-Minneapolis period is that the denomination’s theologians had become polarized and no longer served as healthy checks and balances on each other’s viewpoints.

The Adventist brethren on the different sides of the theological fence had failed to learn one of the great lessons of the 1888 General Conference session—that they needed each other if they were to maintain theological balance. The condition of things among Adventist theologians in 1892 led Ellen White to write in that year that Satan “has a hellish jubilee” “when he can divide brethren.” She and others in the 1890s would repeatedly point out that many of the serious problems in Adventism could have

been avoided had the two sides learned to learn from each other. Having achieved that, they could have pulled together toward Adventism's theological and experiential center.

Unfortunately, between 1888 and 1900 Adventism kind of rocked along without bringing full unity to its theology. In other words, the marriage between what was Adventist in Adventism and what was Christian in Adventism was never successfully consummated. Theological polarity was a better descriptor of the Adventist theological world in the early 1890s than was that of unity or mutual respect. The identity crisis continued, even though it seems to have been masked by a pragmatic harmony and excitement in the area of the unprecedented spread of Adventist missions.

But even that outward harmony would be shattered soon after the turn of the century as the denomination faced multiple theological crises in the forms of the holy flesh movement, pantheism, and A. F. Ballenger's teachings on the sanctuary doctrine.

The polarity among Adventism's theologians during the 1890s left the denomination theologically off center and ill-prepared to meet the challenges of the new century. Thus the early years of the 1900s witnessed Adventism in the turmoil of a major identity crisis and schism. Many issues in that crisis would be moving toward resolution by 1920, only to be faced by new challenges that would contribute their own complicating heritage for Adventist theology in 1994. Out of the new challenges of the 1920s would come a new crisis in Adventist identity and a new question regarding the essential nature of Adventism.

Stage 3: "What is fundamentalist in Adventism?" (1920-1956)

The new question in Adventist identity in the 1920s would be "What is fundamentalist in Adventism?" The 1920s form a watershed in American religious history. For more than a half century forces within Protestantism had been building toward a major break between what were coming to be known as

liberalism and fundamentalism. The battle would come to a head in the early 1920s around at least eight issues, with the fundamentalist holding for verbal inspiration and an inerrant Bible, the historicity of the virgin birth, the necessity of the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the historicity of Christ's resurrection from the dead, His premillennial return, the authenticity of miracles, the uniqueness of the Christian revelation in the plan of salvation, and divine creation by fiat as opposed to theistic evolution. The liberals, of course, held to the opposite position on those eight points. In reality, the fundamentalists were reacting vigorously to the liberal formulations of those doctrines.

The Adventist brethren on the different sides of the theological fence had failed to learn one of the great lessons of the 1888 General Conference session—that they needed each other if they were to maintain theological balance.

Adventists had traditionally held seven of the eight theological positions set forth by the fundamentalists. But the denomination had never officially espoused verbal inspiration or an inerrant Bible, even though such theological leaders as S. N. Haskell, A. T. Jones, the early W. W. Prescott, and many others certainly did. The General Conference during its 1883 session had gone on record as accepting thought rather than verbal inspiration. And inerrancy had never been a formal issue. Yet in spite of the moderate official stand of Adventism on inspiration, a great deal of discussion took place as if the denomination did have a verbalist and inerrantist view. That viewpoint would be extended and become even more explicit and more

consistently expressed during the 1920s.

During that decade, Adventism was literally forced into the arms of fundamentalism in the face of the unprecedented polarization taking place in Protestantism. At this point it is crucial to recognize that there was no neutral theological ground in the 1920s. Either one was a liberal or a fundamentalist, and Adventism certainly had much more in common with the fundamentalists than with the liberals. In the frenzy of the times, Adventism was thrust toward fundamentalism in spite of its traditionally more moderate view on inspiration—a moderation definitely supported by the recently deceased Ellen White.

The magnitude of the groundshift in Adventism over inspiration during the 1920s is evidenced by the fact that the leaders who spoke out openly for a moderate view of inspiration at the 1919 Bible conference lost their positions in the 1920s. In fact, the inspiration issue became a major lever at the 1922 General Conference session to unseat the powerful A. G. Daniells, who had been the denomination's president since 1901.

On the other hand, B. L. House, who argued against the more moderate view of inspiration at the 1919 meetings, would be selected to write the denomination's college-level Bible doctrines textbook that appeared in 1926. House held not only for "verbal inspiration," but that "the selection of the very words of Scripture in the original languages was overruled by the Holy Spirit," as was the selection of historical data. A similar perspective was set forth by other denominational publications in the 1920s.

The more rigid view of the inspiration of both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White would shape Adventism for decades and would not face significant challenge within Adventism until the late 1970s and 1980s. Now, in the 1990s, it has become a major factor in Seventh-day Adventist theological dialogue.

Meanwhile, another contribution to the 1990s dialogue would be developed by M. L. Andreasen in the 1930s as a full-blown "final generation theology"—a theology that emphasized that the sec-

ond advent of Jesus was dependent upon a behaviorally perfect Adventist Church. Final generation theology was still in seed form in the 1890s, but it would move to center stage between the late 1950s and 1990s.

That brings us to the mid-1950s and the latest groundshift in Adventist theology.

Stage 4: "Adventism in theological tension" (1956-1994)

A new crisis and theological alignment erupted with the 1956 publication of Donald Grey Barnhouse's *Eternity* magazine article entitled "Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?" In that article, with the apparent approval of L. E. Froom and R. A. Anderson (foremost Adventist leaders), Barnhouse publicly relegated M. L. Andreasen (Adventism's leading theologian in the 1930s and 1940s) and his theology to the "lunatic fringe" of Adventism and inferred that Andreasen and his type were similar to the "wild-eyed irresponsibles" that plague "every field of fundamental Christianity." Meanwhile, the denomination, under the influence of Froom, Anderson, and W. E. Read, published *Questions on Doctrine*, a book that fanned the flames of the developing controversy.

Andreasen retaliated with his *Letters to the Churches*, in which he charged the denomination with rejecting both the writings of Ellen White and historic Adventism. Andreasen's reward was the removal of his ministerial credentials and the withdrawal of his books from denominational bookstores.

Then in 1960 Zondervan Publishing House released Walter Martin's *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*. In the book's foreword Barnhouse indicated that a major split in Adventist ranks had arisen over *Questions on Doctrine* and evangelical recognition. He went on to write that "only . . . those Seventh-day Adventists who follow the Lord in the same way as their leaders who have interpreted for us the doctrinal position of their church are to be considered true members of the body of Christ."

At that point the stage had been set by both Adventist insiders and outsiders for a split in Adventism's theological ranks.

I would suggest that since the mid-1950s Adventism can best be defined as being in theological tension. All the old

questions are still being asked in 1994, but now they are being asked at the same time by differing factions and individuals. Some, for example, are inquiring: "What is distinctively Adventist in Adventism?" They tend to focus on Andreasen's perfectionistic theology coupled with insights offered by Robert Wieland and Donald Short, who in the early 1950s shocked the denominational leaders by suggesting that their forerunners had led Adventism astray by rejecting the message of Jones and Waggoner at Minneapolis in 1888 and subsequent years.

As of 1994 the "Adventist Adventist" faction of Adventism emphasizes the sinful post-Fall nature of Christ, the necessity of what amounts to some sort of sinless behavioral perfectionism, final generation theology, and what it increasingly refers to as "historic Adventism." In theological method it practices a very heavy reliance upon the writings of Ellen White and often sees Jones and Waggoner as having the final word on righteousness by faith. The Adventist Adventists tend to be weak in their use of the Bible.

Present-day Adventism also has a major theological faction asking: "What is Christian in Adventism?" At its best this group uplifts the centrality of Christ and the cross in salvation, views the basis of assurance as being "in Christ," with the saved Christian being both justified and in the process of being sanctified; and seeks to place the Bible at the center of its theological methodology. While it firmly upholds the distinctively Adventist doctrines, this faction emphasizes those doctrines within the context of basic Christianity.

Also alive and well in Adventism's 1994 theological world are those who are asking: "What is fundamentalist in Adventism?" This faction may hold views in common with either those emphasizing that which is Adventist in Adventism or those stressing that which is Christian in Adventism, but their special burden is the fundamentalist concerns of the 1920s.

Those divisions in the present-day Adventist theological world would be serious enough, but they have been aggravated by the multiple shocks to the certitude of Adventist identity resulting from the Numbers, Rea, Ford, and Dav-

enport crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s, plus the fact that the aging Adventist movement has arrived at its 150th birthday, and by the same unfortunate polarizing effects that did so much to weaken the denomination in the 1890s. *One cause of the polarity problem is that in a desire to escape from one sort of perceived error, people are liable to back into the polar opposite.*

In Adventism in 1994, theological activity is shaping up along two fronts, with all the old questions providing the dividing lines. Thus, in the confrontation between those emphasizing that which is Adventist in Adventism and those emphasizing that which is Christian in Adventism there is the ever-present danger that the opposing forces will become ever more one-sided in their interpretations.

The crisis issue for the Adventist Adventists is that they will lose contact with basic Christianity as they focus on nonbiblical sources for theological authority and force a true biblical concept of perfection into a sort of itemized sinless perfectionism. At the other extreme is the ever-present danger that in seeking to avoid the Adventist Adventist error some will be tempted to deny their Adventism through one-sided emphases and thus become "Christian Christians." *I suggest that there is adequate defensible middle ground for those who might be designated as "Christian Adventists" if and only if they keep their eyes on the Bible and avoid the distorting dynamic built into the very process of doing theology, when doing theology becomes primarily an exercise in doing theology against one's opponent.* The distorting factor comes into action when individuals consciously or unconsciously place a primary emphasis on putting mere distance between themselves and what they consider to be error and when they conclude that they can learn nothing of value from those who differ from them.

The Adventist Adventist versus Christian Adventist polarizing effect was present in the 1890s, but in 1994 Adventism is also being challenged by a second polarizing dynamic. While some individuals fear liberalism and appear to be reaching for the fundamentalism of the 1920s (apparently confusing it with
(Continued on page 25)

Adventist Theology 1844 to 1994

From page 13

the mind-set of pristine Christianity in the process), other Adventist thought leaders (in their desire to escape what they consider to be the theological errors and extremes of fundamentalism) are in danger of backing into an advocacy of the liberal Christianity of the 1920s. At the basis of this polarization are hermeneutical/epistemological issues of the first rank—especially that of the primacy between revelation and reason. But it should be recognized by all parties, that a modernist view (as was espoused by the liberals in the 1920s) that has adopted the enlightenment emphasis on the supremacy of human reason above Scripture is no more healthy than the fundamentalist error that confuses 1920s rigidities with the mind-set of Christ and

the apostles.

Valuable lessons

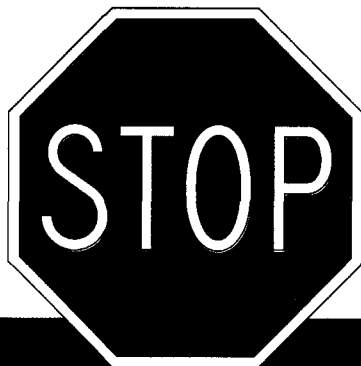
In closing, I would suggest that Seventh-day Adventist theologians in their search for identity face the same basic dynamic in 1994 that they faced in the 1890s—the dynamic of polarization. Of course, in 1994 the dynamic is more complex since the conflict is being fought by more actors and, more important, on two distinct but overlapping fronts at the same time. But the dangers are the same.

Any religious group is in trouble if and when its theology is being formulated primarily in opposition to a real or perceived polar position. That very dynamic sets the stage for more rapid strides toward both further polarization and additional theological distortion. One must be aware of those dynamics as he or she seeks to do biblical theology in the spirit of Christian Adventism at its best.

We learn not only from the dangers faced by Adventist theologians in the 1890s, but also from the possible solu-

tions that lay at their fingertips. The main lesson for us is one that our forebears failed to grasp—that *the advocates of Adventism's polar positions need each other*. It is difficult and probably impossible for any individual or group to be totally wrong or totally correct. All of us have captured important aspects of truth as well as portions of error. And all of us can learn from those holding theological positions contrary to our own. But in order so to learn, it is mandatory that we internalize the spirit of Christ—a spirit that not only thinks the best of others, but one that maintains an openness to truth from all sources.

One key to theological health is to keep our eyes focused on the seeming intent of Scripture and the essentials of both Christianity and Adventism. A second key to theological health is to learn from each other and to back away from ideologically defensive positions as Adventist theology seeks to continue guiding the church in its extended and ongoing search for identity. ■



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