

## **Adventures in Public Relations: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Masquerades as Evangelical**

*“Our laborers should be very careful not to give the impression that they are wolves stealing in to get the sheep, but should let the ministers understand their position and the object of their mission—to call the attention of the people to the truths of God's Word. There are many of these which are dear to all Christians. Here is common ground, upon which we can meet people of other denominations; and in becoming acquainted with them we should dwell mostly upon topics in which all feel an interest, and which will not lead directly and pointedly to the subjects of disagreement.” ~ Ellen G. White (Ev 143-4)*

During the 1990 session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, held in Indianapolis, IN, a group of conservative Adventists distributed a booklet warning the good citizens of the host city that God was about to destroy them. The reason? They must accept the seventh-day Sabbath as the seal of God and stop worshipping on Sunday, a day that represents the Mark of the Beast in Adventist theology. In addition, the pamphlet identified the Pope as the Beast who would persecute the God's faithful church prior to Christ's second coming.

When confronted by the religion editor of the *Indianapolis Star*, the public relations representative of the General Conference pointed out that the booklet was not a publication of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. The editor was unimpressed. Would the SDA Church repudiate the offensive views contained in the publication? Under the pressure of the moment, the PR man replied, “Probably not one one-thousandth of our people believe this way.” The answer was false. Adventism does teach that the Pope is the Beast of Revelation, and that an unholy alliance between the Catholic Church and conservative Protestantism will usher in a worldwide Sunday law which will force everyone to choose between the law of God and the Mark of the Beast.

The apparent repudiation of standard Adventist doctrines caused a small uproar inside the SDA Church, and the PR man insisted that he had merely misspoken. He had intended to say, “Probably not one one-thousandth of our people believe *in approaching the public* this way.”<sup>1</sup>

As the PR gaffe illustrates, Adventists don't like to present certain doctrines to the general public. Why? Because if the traditional SDA teachings were widely known, the Adventist Church would be considered a fringe Christian group at best, and Adventist evangelism has greatly benefitted from widespread acceptance of SDAs as evangelicals. Most Christians believe that while Adventists are a bit odd in some beliefs, they are orthodox on fundamental Protestantism. SDA evangelists promote the Protestant connection to establish their validity—then they begin attacking the beliefs of other churches, wooing fellow Christians into the SDA baptismal tank.

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Moore, *The Crisis of the End Time: Keeping Your Relationship with Jesus in Earth's Darkest Hour* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1992), 191-192.

## Sheep Stealing and Remnant Theology

Actually, Adventist evangelists shouldn't be blamed for stealing "sheep"—their behavior comes from their presuppositions. Adventists view themselves as God's remnant church, imbued with a salvational message for all Christians. The remnant identity is derived by misappropriating a few lines from the book of Revelation. They begin by citing Revelation 12:17: "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." SDAs find two identifying marks of the remnant in this text. First, the remnant must keep all of the Ten Commandments,<sup>2</sup> including the Sabbath<sup>3</sup> of the fourth commandment. In addition, the remnant must possess the testimony of Jesus. Adventists then point out that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy," according to Revelation 19:10.<sup>4</sup> What church has both marks of the remnant? A few churches join Adventists in observing the seventh-day Sabbath, but which church possesses the testimony of Jesus, defined as the spirit of prophecy? Adventists have a prophetess<sup>5</sup> named Ellen G. White, whose writings are routinely referred to as the Spirit of Prophecy.<sup>6</sup> By this reasoning, Adventists have both marks of the remnant church.<sup>7</sup>

If the Adventist Church is God's remnant people, then it is utterly logical to proselytize other Christians in order to save them. Essentially, any group considering itself a special remnant can't afford to play by ecumenical "rules"; they observe the proper niceties to break down prejudice, and then they do what they believe they must do. Instead of blaming Adventists for their aggressive evangelistic practices, perhaps some of the blame should fall on evangelical Christians who fail to discern the Adventist

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<sup>2</sup> See "The Law & the New Covenant" <http://www.sabbatismos.com/law-and-covenants/the-law-the-new-covenant/#sthash.OWe5VipH.dpbs>

<sup>3</sup> See "Jesus Christ: The Sabbath Rest of the New Covenant" <http://www.sabbatismos.com/the-sabbath/new-covenant-sabbath-rest/#sthash.0hf6BE2c.dpbs>

<sup>4</sup> James White, "The Testimony of Jesus," *Review and Herald* (Dec. 18, 1855), 92. James White (Ellen's husband) was the first to make the connection between the testimony of Jesus and the spirit of prophecy. See P. Gerard Damsteege, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1977), 195. See also *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1988), 162, 221.

<sup>5</sup> See "Ellen G. White and the Pillars of Prophetic Validity" <http://www.sabbatismos.com/pillars-of-prophetic-validity/#sthash.r9Bw5oTy.dpbs>

<sup>6</sup> An early series of books by Ellen White is called *The Spirit of Prophecy*.

<sup>7</sup> "As Seventh-day Adventists we believe that we are the remnant church—the church with God's message to this last generation. We further believe that the Lord's messenger, Ellen Gould White, was endowed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of prophecy. We are convinced that the Lord means us in the words: 'the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ' (Rev. 12:17), this 'testimony of Jesus' being 'the Spirit of prophecy.'" L.H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts* (Washington: Review & Herald, 1947), 15. See also J.N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1905), 468-469. See also W.E. Read, *The Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the Church* (Washington: Review & Herald, 1952), 103-104. See also T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1955), 464.

threat to the gospel of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> That said, the SDA Church bears a great deal of responsibility for representing itself as something it is not.

## Sheep's Clothing

The denomination originally obtained evangelical acceptance by misrepresenting its true teachings. In 1955, Dr. Walter Martin, who was writing a book entitled *The Rise of the Cults*, visited several leaders at the General Conference headquarters in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup> Martin's visit initiated a dialogue seeking to clarify four major points: the completed atonement, salvation by faith alone, the eternal pre-existence of Christ, and Christ's human nature.<sup>10</sup> As a result of these discussions, the General Conference leadership published *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (1957), and Dr. Martin affirmed the SDA Church as a Christian denomination in *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* (1960).<sup>11</sup>

However, according to Dr. Herbert Douglass, a leading conservative Adventist scholar, Walter Martin was misled into believing "that Adventists had changed their teachings" while at the same time, the SDA laity "had to be convinced that we had not changed our teachings."<sup>12</sup> Internal GC communications quoted by Douglass reveal a fierce struggle within the denomination. According to one Adventist leader, Martin was being "double-crossed," and the church must "take adequate measures *now* to clear the atmosphere *before* Martin's book is published, and to set forth in [*Questions on Doctrine*] a clear exposition of [Adventism's] true position."<sup>13</sup> One group of disgusted SDA leaders actually gathered around a basin of water and washed their hands of all responsibility for QOD.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the QOD discussions, Walter Martin was deceived, and the Adventist Church came to be accepted among the ranks of evangelicals; however, it is time for a re-evaluation.

A correct understanding of Adventism is essential for any determination of its place in Christianity. Some experts identify Seventh-day Adventism as a cult. However, I consider the Seventh-day Adventist Church a non-standard Christian group. It is certainly neither Protestant nor evangelical due to its reliance on Ellen White as an extra-biblical source of authority. According to the official statement of SDA theology,

"One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the

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<sup>8</sup> See "Adventism and the Gospel" <http://www.sabbatismos.com/the-gospel-1/adventism-the-gospel/#sthash.rXX86jO1.dpbs>

<sup>9</sup> Herbert E. Douglass, "Thoughts on the Republished *Questions on Doctrine*," *Ministry*, August 2004: 16. The GC headquarters is now in Silver Spring, MD.

<sup>10</sup> Woodrow W. Whidden, "*Questions on Doctrine: Then and Now*," *Ministry*, August 2003: 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Martin's widely read *Kingdom of the Cults* provides a rationale for the non-inclusion of Adventism as a cult.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert E. Douglass, *A Fork in the Road* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2008), 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. QOD is the standard SDA abbreviation for *Questions on Doctrine*.

Lord's messenger, **her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth** . . . They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”<sup>15</sup>

Even though the Bible is given official precedence in Adventist theology, the presence of Ellen White's writings as “a continuing and authoritative source of truth” means that the Adventist Church does not adhere to the Bible and the Bible ONLY. The SDA Church has an additional source of truth aside from the canon of scripture. Therefore, the Adventist Church can be neither Protestant nor evangelical.

### **Is the SDA Church the Remnant?**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not the remnant, nor are faithful Adventists the core of the remnant, as some Adventists believe. In addition, the Adventist message is not the remnant message. The Christian church disappears from Revelation at the end of Chapter 3, and the church does not conclusively reappear until Revelation 19, the depiction of the wedding supper of the Lamb. If the church is not the focus of the mid-section of Revelation—containing the outpouring of God's tribulation judgments—then who is the focus of Revelation 4-18?

Over and over, God identifies His tribulation focus as the nation of Israel. The 144,000 are all Israelites (Rev. 7:4). Adventists identify the 144,000 as the Adventist (or mostly Adventist) remnant, but not so fast, guys! The 144,000 are men whom the Bible describes as “virgins” (Rev. 14:1-4). Clearly, according to the Bible, the 144,000 are a group of Jewish men selected by God for a special witness during the tribulation.

Another example of the Israel-centric message of the mid-section of Revelation is the location of the two witness of Revelation 11, who prophesy in the city “where also our Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8, KJV). Of course, this city can be none other than Jerusalem. The two witnesses are murdered, their bodies lie dead in the city for three and a half days, and then they are raised to heaven with an accompanying earthquake that kills seven thousand in Jerusalem. At this point, the Bible says that “the *remnant* were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven” (Rev. 11:13, KJV).

So, who are the remnant of Revelation? Let's look at Revelation 12, where the focus continues to be the people of Israel. Adventists believe the woman of Revelation 12 is the remnant church—basically the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Revelation 12:5 states, “And she [the woman] brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron....” Who is the “man-child” destined to rule all nations? Jesus Christ! (see Rev. 19:15). Did the church give birth to Jesus? No! Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom of the church! Clearly, the nation of Israel gave birth to the Messiah. Therefore, the woman is Israel, not the church, and the remnant of her seed are Israelites. The identification of

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<sup>15</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* 216.

the remnant as believing Israel is utterly consistent with the focus upon Israel in the mid-section of Revelation (144,000 and the location of the two witnesses in Jerusalem).

What characterizes the Jewish remnant? “And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:17, KJV). The remnant of Israel’s seed “keep the commandments of God,” which should be understood in terms of the New Covenant which God promised first to Israel and then to the church (see Jer. 31 and Heb. 8). Notice how the apostle John defines commandment keeping for New Covenant believers: “And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment” (I Jn. 3:23, KJV).

Actually, being descended from the woman who gave birth to Christ, keeping the commands of God, and having “the testimony of Jesus Christ” makes the remnant Messianic Jews, not Seventh-day Adventists!

## **The Testimony of Jesus**

What does Revelation 19:10 mean by referring to “the testimony of Jesus” as “the spirit of prophecy”? Clearly, all prophecy derives from the gospel as preached by Jesus. Christ’s gospel provides the spirit that motivates the prophets. Influenced by the terminology of this text, Adventists named their prophetic writings the Spirit of Prophecy, but that doesn’t make those writings the genuine spirit of prophecy as envisioned by John. If Ellen White is a prophet, then she must be true to the full gospel of Christ.<sup>16</sup> Setting her claims aside for the moment, it is out of harmony with the message of Revelation to insist that the testimony of Jesus was intended by John as the exclusive domain of a particular prophetess who called her writings the Spirit of Prophecy. All Christians who have the gospel of Jesus may exercise the spirit of prophecy predicted in I Corinthians 14:31: “For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.”

## **Conclusion**

Much must be misinterpreted regarding Revelation 12:17 and 19:10 if the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to be identified as the remnant. Such an approach is completely unjustified, but the underlying assumptions serve as an explanation for Adventism’s aggressive evangelism of other Christians who are, according to the SDA mindset, completely unprepared to be part of God’s end-time remnant people. In urgent pursuit of conversions, the Adventist Church represents itself as an evangelical Protestant organization—albeit one whose defining mark is its adherence to the writings

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<sup>16</sup> See “Salvation According to Whom?” <http://www.sabbatismos.com/ellen-g-white/perfection/#sthash.sdHEa0xj.dpbs>

of a non-canonical prophetess. Ironically, the defining mark of the Spirit of Prophecy must be one of the foremost reasons to exclude the Seventh-day Adventist Church from evangelical communion.