

Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?

A NEW LOOK AT SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

By DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE

In the past two years several evangelical leaders have come to a new attitude toward the Seventh-day Adventist church. The change is a remarkable one since it consists in moving the Seventh-day Adventists, in our opinion, out of the list of anti-Christian and non-Christian cults into the group of those who are brethren in Christ; although they still must be classified, in our opinion, as holding two or three very unorthodox and in one case peculiar doctrines. The steps in our change of attitude must be traced and the justification of our changed attitude documented. Adventists who read this should realize that evangelical readers have been conditioned through the years for thinking that Adventists must be classified as non-Christians. This present article will explain reasons why this should no longer be so.

Our change of attitude goes back to our acquaintance with a young man whom I first knew in New York City as a member of my weekly Bible class there. When I first knew him, the Rev. Mr. Walter R. Martin was still in his early twenties, busily engaged in his study of American religious history. He is at present a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in New York University, working on his thesis in the field of non-Christian religions that had their beginning in America. Of these the best known are Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Unity, and up until very recently Seventh-day Adventism.

Already Mr. Martin's volumes *Jehovah of the Watchtower*, *The Christian Science Myth*, *The Rise of the Cults*, and a textbook, *The Christian and the Cults*, have become standard works in their field.* Mr. Martin joined the staff of ETERNITY magazine first as consulting editor on the cults and now as a full-time member of the staff of the Evangelical Foundation.

A little less than two years ago it was decided that Mr. Martin should undertake research in connection with Seventh-day Adventism. We got into touch with the Adventists saying that we wished to treat them fairly and would appreciate the opportunity of interviewing some of their leaders. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.

Mr. Martin went to Takoma Park, Washington, D. C., the headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. At first the two groups looked upon each other with great suspicion. Mr. Martin had read a vast quantity of Adventist

literature and presented them with a series of approximately forty questions concerning their theological position. On a second visit he was presented with scores of pages of detailed theological answers to his questions. Immediately it was perceived that the Adventists were strenuously denying certain doctrinal positions which had been previously attributed to them. As Mr. Martin read their answers he came, for example, upon a statement that they repudiated absolutely the thought that seventh-day Sabbath keeping was a basis for salvation and a denial of any teaching that the keeping of the first day of the week is as yet considered to be the receiving of the anti-Christian "mark of the beast." He pointed out to them that in their book store adjoining the building in which these meetings were taking place a certain volume published by them and written by one of their ministers categorically stated the contrary to what they were now asserting. The leaders sent for the book, discovered that Mr. Martin was correct, and immediately brought this fact to the attention of the General Conference Officers, that this situation might be remedied and such publications be corrected. This same procedure was repeated regarding the nature of Christ while in the flesh which the majority of the denomination has always held to be sinless, holy, and perfect despite the fact that certain of their writers have occasionally gotten into print with contrary views completely repugnant to the Church at large. They further explained to Mr. Martin that they had among their number certain members of their "lunatic fringe" even as there are similar wild-eyed irresponsibles in every field of fundamental Christianity. This action of the Seventh-day Adventists was indicative of similar steps that were taken subsequently.

The next phase of the discussion moved in August, 1955, to a place in the country outside Philadelphia. There, four of the leaders of Seventh-day Adventist thought came for a two-day conference in the home of the editor-in-chief of ETERNITY. Here they, together with Mr. Martin and Professor George Cannon of the Nyack Missionary College, spent two full days going over the approximately hundred pages of the Seventh-day Adventist answers to Mr. Martin's questions. At the outset the seven of us, on our knees, prayed together approaching God through the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

At that time I made a statement to these men approxi-

* These are all available from ETERNITY Book Service.

mately as follows: I want to explain to you my attitude toward Seventh-day Adventism. In the providence of God I was born in a little town in California about forty miles away from Mountain View where Ellen G. White, revered teacher in the Adventist movement, had her headquarters. At that time the followers of the Adventist movement that came into our town and others of the region were, from our point of view, colossally ignorant fanatics. We considered them to be the descendants of the Millerites who in 1844 were supposed to have gone on top of a hill to await the Second Coming of Christ on a certain night, and who were utterly deceived and discredited. We understood that the Seventh-day Adventists believed the devil to be the sinner,* that a person had to keep Saturday in order to be saved,* thus denying the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Later on all of my bad opinions about the Adventist movement had been confirmed and established, I thought, by books which had been written by men who had been Adventist preachers and who had left the movement; notably, there was a series of works by E. B. Jones which showed that he had been a Seventh-day Adventist layman missionary and had believed a long list of horrible things which he had since abandoned now that he had been "saved."

I went on to state to my guests that in many conversations with Walter Martin through the previous year and through reading their prepared statements I had come to see that, beyond question, there were sober, sane, truly regenerated men among the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist church. While they still held positions which were totally alien to my thinking and which I had to repudiate, I was ready to admit that some of these positions had been held in the past by noted Christians (Martin Luther held one of these positions which with the modern Lutheran church I repudiate), and that I was ready to extend a hand to these men as Christian brethren though I still reserve the right strenuously to refute the two or three positions which evangelicals hold to be in error.

These leaders accepted my explanation and acknowledged that they understood the difficulties.

The seven of us worked through the Adventist statement for two days. Mr. Martin had further conferences with the Adventist leaders in Washington, D. C., and in Glendale, California. He was invited to preach in two of the large Adventist churches in the country and spoke to their theological seminary and to the employees of the *Voice of Prophecy* broadcast. In May, 1956, the same group of Adventist leaders returned to my home in Pennsylvania for another two-day conference.

Now the time has come to make known to the general public the results of the hundreds of hours of labor that have been expended by Mr. Martin and the similar time

* Absolutely repudiated in Seventh-day Adventist theology today we are now informed.

that has been put forth by many Adventist leaders.

Mr. Martin's book on Seventh-day Adventism will appear in print within a few months. It will carry a foreword by responsible leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the effect that they have not been misquoted in the volume and that the areas of agreement and disagreement as set forth by Mr. Martin are accurate from their point of view as well as from our evangelical point of view. All of Mr. Martin's references to a new Adventist volume on their doctrines will be from the page proof of their book, which will appear in print simultaneously with his work. Henceforth any fair criticism of the Adventist movement must refer to these simultaneous publications.

The position of the Adventists seems to some of us in certain cases to be a new position; to them it may be merely the position of the majority group of sane leadership which is determined to put the brakes on any members who seek to hold views divergent from that of the responsible leadership of the denomination.

(1) Notably, the Adventist leadership proclaims that the writings of Ellen G. White, the great counselor of the Adventist movement, are not on a parity with Scripture. While the Adventist church claims to have received great blessing from the ministry of Mrs. White, they admit her writings are not infallible, but in all fairness they do revere her writings as special counsels from God to their movement. Her writings incidentally are *not* a test of fellowship in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

(2) While the Adventists keep Saturday as the Sabbath, they specifically repudiate the idea that Sabbath-keeping is in any way a means of salvation. They acknowledge freely that Christians today who keep Sunday in good faith are as much members of the Body of Christ as they are.

(3) To avoid charges that have been brought against them by evangelicals, Adventists have already worked out arrangements that the *Voice of Prophecy* radio program and the *Signs of the Times*, their largest paper, be identified as presentations of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The Adventists specifically repudiate any teachings by ministers or members of their faith who have believed,

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Have the Seventh-day Adventists been proselytizers? During the course of our dealings with Adventist leaders we brought up the complaints, common on the mission field, that Adventist missionaries and workers have been proselytizers. The leaders affirmed vehemently that they have been doing everything possible to prevent such proselytizing, and, while there may have been such cases in the past, they hold that such methods are not now in use. In cooperation with them we will gladly receive from any missionaries in the world fully-documented instances of such proselytization that have taken place during the past two years. Such documentation, if any, sent to the Rev. Mr. Walter R. Martin, in care of ETERNITY, will be forwarded to Adventist leaders, who have promised a thorough investigation.

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proclaimed, and written any matter which would classify them among Arians. That is to say, they hold that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God, second member of the Godhead, eternally existing with God as God, and they repudiate absolutely any concept that Jesus was a created being. While many of their Bible teachers have shown that "the angel of Jehovah" in the Old Testament is none other than Jesus Christ, this position is one that I myself have taken and taught in my book, *The Invisible War*. The word "angel" means "messenger" and Christ's action as a "messenger" did not and does not make Him a creature or less than God. This declaration on the part of the Adventist leaders specifically removes them from classification with Jehovah's Witnesses who are Arians in the modern sense, and the Adventists totally repudiate the Jehovah's Witnesses' concept of Christ. The Adventists take their place in the very center of traditional Christianity's Trinitarian doctrine as accepting the Christology of the New Testament of the Fathers, the Reformers, and all true evangelicals.

(4) The Seventh-day Adventist position on salvation is Arminian, classifying them with Wesley and the modern groups such as the Holiness and Nazarene movements. I discovered, however, in our long talks together that these brethren have what I think is a misconception of Calvinism. They would not find it too hard to get along with the modern Calvinism which is held by most evangelical Baptists and Presbyterians today and vice versa.

We discovered that there are still some sharp areas of disagreement. To my mind, the most important of these is the Adventist belief in "conditional immortality." They believe that death brings unconscious "soul-sleeping" and that the lost are to be annihilated, thus denying the doctrines of hell and eternal punishment. When we realize, however, that both Martin Luther and William Tyndale held this doctrine, we cannot on this ground alone divorce the Adventists or sever them from the true Body of Christ. We most heartily disagree with them on these doctrines and pray that they will soon move to a position of belief with the vast majority of evangelical Christians throughout the centuries.

We also disagree on the question of the Seventh-day Sabbath. A great amount of time was spent in our early meetings to spell out the fact that Adventists do not believe in legalism as a part of salvation though everything in their practice seems to indicate that they do. They recognize clearly that some of their teachers have taught the contrary, but they take a position (to us very illogical) that the Ten Commandments are to be obeyed, but that their teaching has no part whatsoever as a down payment or a part payment toward salvation which they and we in common confess to be by Christ alone on the basis of His expiatory death on Calvary.

The final major area of disagreement is over the doctrine of the "investigative judgment," which is a doctrine never known in theological history until the second half of the nineteenth century and which is a doctrine held exclusively by the Seventh-day Adventists. At the very beginning of our contacts with the Adventist leaders, Mr. Martin and I thought that this would be the doctrine on which it would be impossible to come to any understanding which would permit our including them among those who could be counted as Christians believing in the finished work of Christ. In order to understand this doctrine of "investigative judgment" it is necessary to devote a few paragraphs to Adventist history.

In the early nineteenth century there was a great increase in the study of Bible prophecy. Dr. LeRoy Froom, the eminent Adventist historian, in his monumental four-volume history of the development of Adventist teaching on prophecy, shows clearly that innumerable Bible students from a score of denominational affiliations were carried away with date-setting for the Second Coming of Christ. The reason for this is (what I believe to be) a false interpretation of Daniel's prophecy of 2,300 days. In Daniel 8:14 a figure is given of 2,300 days. In the early nineteenth century it became fashionable to equate this with 2,300 years, interpreting this verse by association with Ezekiel 4:6 where it is stated, "I have appointed thee each day for a year." Since 2,300 years from Daniel would fall toward the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, thousands of people believed that the Second Coming of Christ would take place in that period. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc. spent extraordinary amounts of time and effort in figuring out the chronologies, and ultimately the consensus agreed on 1844.

It should be realized that there was no Seventh-day Adventist church at that time. All of these "Adventists" were in the major denominations. One William Miller of Baptist background even placed the advent between specific months. The newspapers of America were filled with headlines concerning the matter. A historical study of the events demonstrates that these people were serious-minded students who were definitely self-deceived. The story that they dressed in flowing white robes and went to the top of a hill has been exploded. Hoodlums did dress up in flowing robes and in ribald fashion mock these people, but they themselves were dreadfully sincere.

Dr. Froom, in the fourth volume of his work, describes these events as "The Great Disappointment." Out of the "Great Disappointment" grew the Seventh-day Adventist church. It will be impossible to understand the movement unless it is realized that most of the Adventists before 1844 kept Sunday were found in dozens of denominations and had no common doctrine or organization. In their disappointment little segments of these disillusioned people drew together. One of the segments kept Saturday as the Sabbath. Still another of the segments believed in conditional immortality and soul-sleeping and a third segment fell upon the doctrine of "the investigative judgment." The latter doctrine, to me, is the most colossal, psychological, face-saving phenomenon in religious history! It would further seem to me that the various segments, each with a distinctive doctrine not held by the majority Christendom, drew together and consolidated on the basis of the acceptance of each other's peculiar heterodox teachings. The error of conditional immortality and the error of Sabbatarianism are both well known. That of the "investigative judgment," however, now requires further explanation.

On the morning after the "Great Disappointment," two men were going through a corn field in order to avoid the pitiless gaze of their mocking neighbors to whom they had given their final witness and had said an eternal goodbye the day before. To put it in the words of Hiram Edson (the man in the corn field who first conceived the peculiar idea), he was overwhelmed with the conviction "that instead of our High Priest coming out of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month at the end of 2,300 days

He for the first time *entered* on that day the *second* apartment of that sanctuary, and that He had work to perform in the Most Holy before coming to this earth." It is to my mind, therefore, nothing more than a human, face-saving ideal! It should also be realized that some uninformed Seventh-day Adventists took this idea and carried it to fantastic literalistic extremes. Mr. Martin and I heard the Adventist leaders say, flatly, that they repudiate all such extremes. This they have said in no uncertain terms. Further, they do not believe, as some of their earlier teachers taught, that Jesus' atoning work was not completed on Calvary but instead that He was still carrying on a second ministering work since 1844. This idea is also totally repudiated. They believe that since His ascension Christ has been ministering the benefits of the atonement which He completed on Calvary. Since the sanctuary doctrine is based on the type of the Jewish high priest going into the Holy of Holies to complete his atoning work, it can be seen that what remains is most certainly exegetically untenable and theological speculation of a highly imaginative order. What Christ is now doing, since 1844, according to this version, is going over the records of all human beings and deciding what rewards are going to be given to individual Christians. We personally do not believe that there is even a suspicion of a verse in Scripture to sustain such a peculiar position, and we further believe that any effort to establish it is *stale, flat, and unprofitable!* This doctrine is linked with that of the scapegoat (Azazel) of Leviticus 16, whom Seventh-day Adventists, in company with not a few recognized non-

Adventist Hebrew scholars, believe to be Satan. It should be noted, however that the transaction with the scapegoat is in no way to be construed as part or completion of the atonement which Adventists believe Christ alone vicariously made on Golgotha. The meaning of the "scapegoat" teaching is that Satan merely bears away into final annihilation his responsibility in tempting man to sin, much as the master criminal who must pay a penalty for plotting and directing a crime though he never actually committed it. This concept while admittedly strange is not heretical because it is divorced from the doctrine of the atonement in Adventist theology so that it becomes only a kind of "legal transaction" *not* in any sense a *vicarious bearing of sharing* in the sin atonement of Christ on the Cross. This editor, of course, flatly rejects such an interpretation and reserves the right to consider it as a somewhat bizarre excursion into the field of speculative theology.

To sum up, I would say that the differences between other evangelicals and the Seventh-day Adventist position are three:

(1) The unimportant and almost naive doctrine of the "investigative judgment."

(2) The more serious doctrine of Sabbath-keeping, which is not sufficient to bar Seventh-day Adventists from the fellowship of true Christians but which makes such fellowship very difficult because of the overtones of legalism that has a tendency to gnaw at the roots of the truth of sovereign grace to unworthy sinners; and

(3) Finally, the most serious difference, to me, is their belief in conditional immortality (i.e., soul-sleeping and the

annihilation of the lost). The fact that they can name the names of famous Christian theologians or thinkers who have believed this error is no justification for our believing it, since it so thoroughly contradicts the historic biblical position. "To depart" is not to be unconscious in sleep, but to be *with* Christ "which is far better." (Phil. 1:21-23). I will save the detailed refutation of this doctrine for a further issue.

In conclusion, I should like to say that we are delighted to do justice to a much-maligned group of sincere believers, and in our minds and hearts take them out of the group of utter heretics like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Scientists, to acknowledge them as redeemed brethren and members of the Body of Christ. It is our sincere prayer that they may be led to consider further the points on which they are so widely divergent from the rest of the Body of Christ and in so doing promote their own spiritual growth and that of their fellow Christians.

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