Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism: Seventh-day Adventism

Ronald Lawson

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Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists trace their roots to the Millerite Movement during the early 1840s, which attracted upwards of 50,000 followers in the American Northeast. When the prediction of Baptist lay-preacher, William Miller [1782-1849], that Christ would return on October 22, 1844 proved false, his movement shattered. One fragment, whose leaders included a young - visionary, Ellen White [1827-1915], reinterpreted the prophecy: the pre-advent judgment had begun in heaven on that day. However, Christ's return was imminent, and Adventists believed that it was their God-given task to warn the world to prepare for that event.

Early Adventism was, to use a descriptive sociological term that does not imply a value judgment, highly sectarian. That is, it was in high tension in many ways with government, other churches, and society in general. Adventists observed Saturday as the Sabbath at a time when it was a regular workday in America, making it difficult for them to secure employment; they were so antagonistic to the U.S. Government, because it allowed slavery and had enacted laws criminalizing those who aided fugitive slaves, that they discussed whether they should refuse to vote as a sign of rejecting its legitimacy; their expectation of persecution from that government in collaboration with other Christian churches (which seemed confirmed when members were turned in by neighbors and prosecuted under the prevailing state "blue laws" for working on their farms on Sundays) and of the imminent end of the world meant that they rejected the American Dream; tensions with government were exacerbated when they announced that they were conscientious objectors and refused to serve in the military during the Civil War; and their observance of the Sabbath, their embrace of vegetarianism, and their rejection of most forms of popular entertainment and of the then current women's fashions separated them from others, making them objects of scorn.

Adventists sent out their first foreign missionaries in the 1870s, and soon built a network of missions in all continents. Wherever they went they tried, as part of their outreach, to establish schools and "sanitariums", which eventually developed into extensive networks of educational and medical institutions. Unlike the mainstream Protestant denominations, Adventist missionary work did not culminate in the spinning off of independent national churches, but instead helped build a highly centralized, and increasingly bureaucratized, multilayered system. Because tithes were not retained at the congregational level, but were passed up the structure, the hierarchy was able to redistribute funds from the wealthier parts of the world church to the newer and poorer segments, and thus to orchestrate expansion. The control of the American-

based hierarchy over finances and its voice in the choice of leaders at lower levels also enabled it to exercise considerable control over the operation of the church as a whole, in spite of its representative features.

As Adventism expanded both geographically and numerically, its educational and medical institutions created increasing opportunities for the upward mobility of members. Although, most converts were working class and poor, second generation members often gained professional qualifications. The clergy gradually came to think of themselves as professionals, and administrators as corporate executives. As time passed, Adventists sought positive relationships with governments, for example modifying their stance on military service in order to embrace patriotism, initiated contacts with other churches in which they presented themselves as fellow Christians, and pursued positive public relations. Their image was also helped as many societies adopted a five-day week, thus making Sabbath observance much less of a problem, and as medical research endorsed their rejection of smoking and the value of many of their diet and health-related practices. In short, they became much more comfortable with society, thus moving steadily from sect towards denomination as they closely followed the trajectory outlined by sociological church-sect theory.

Nevertheless, Adventists have remained sufficiently distinct, and therefore retained enough sectarianism to stoke the enthusiasm and commitment that fosters outreach and growth. This is especially so in much of the Developing World, where their members are mostly first generation converts and the process of upward mobility and accommodation to society is still in its early stages. Of a world total of 1,068,329 members added through baptism in 1999, 95.7% were in the Developing World. Consequently, the proportion of the world membership in the U.S., where Adventism was born, and indeed in the Developed World, has fallen steeply in recent decades: of a total of 11,496,912 members in September 2000, only 7.6% were in the U.S. and 10.6% in the Developed World.

Within the Christian World today, where most of the "Mainline Denominations" are declining in numbers, Seventh-day Adventists are one of our American-born religious movements, along with Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, which are expanding rapidly.

Developing an Adventist Hermeneutic

William Miller was a Baptist lay-preacher, and Ellen White had been raised in a Methodist home. That is, early Adventists were drawn from the milieu and membership of these "upstart sects," which had begun by that time to accommodate to society. They embraced the view of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, together with the biblical literalism and the methodology of proof-texting that were common at that time among such religious groups. To this they added a special emphasis on the apocalyptic books of the Bible, especially Daniel and Revelation. Since they did not include biblical scholars among their number and had not been trained in biblical languages, they were dependent on the King James Version of the Bible,

which was then in common use. For example, Miller's interpretation of Daniel 8:14, which had led him to expect the return of Christ in 1844, and also its reinterpretation by Adventists after the "Great Disappointment," were peculiarly dependent on the rendering of the verse in that version: modern translations all render it very differently.

Ellen White came to be viewed as a prophet and counselor to the Adventist Church, or "the messenger of the Lord," as she dubbed herself. She was a prolific writer who published 24 books and contributed over 5,000 articles to church magazines during her lifetime. Although she insisted that her writings were subsidiary to the Bible, her standing and their specificity made them highly influential in shaping the thought and behavior of Adventists.

Adventists initially focused on their special insights—their "message": the Sabbath, the unconscious state of man in death awaiting the Resurrection, the heavenly sanctuary and pre-advent judgment, their urgent apocalyptic and expectations regarding last-day events, and their rejection of the belief in eternal torment for the damned. They lived with diversity in other areas for several decades--for example, Trinitarianism versus Arianism--and were slow to embrace righteousness by faith and to place a personal relationship with Christ at the core of their whole belief system.

Because of their commitment to observing the Sabbath on Saturday, Adventists placed great weight on the belief in a literal creation in six days, for the two were inextricably linked in both the Creation story in Genesis and the fourth commandment in Exodus 20. They therefore rejected Darwin's theory of evolution, and came to view it as a scheme by Satan to muddy the waters just as they had been called by God to proclaim the forgotten commandment. Darwin's claim that the fossils were evidence that the world was a huge cemetery long before the presence of human beings was also seen as a direct challenge to their belief that all death was a result of human sin, and ultimately also to their apocalyptic. Similarly, Adventists gave short shrift to the rise of liberal biblical scholarship towards the end of the nineteenth century and its product, Higher Criticism, which seemed intended to undermine their whole doctrinal edifice. At the same time, however, they distanced themselves to some extent at that time from the conservative biblical literalists: White held that the thought of the biblical writers was inspired, but that Scriptures were not dictated by God, and she inevitably rejected the conservatives' opposition to the emancipation and enfranchisement of women, which they based on a literalistic reading of particular biblical passages, and their related attempts to reclaim the church for men and the image of God and Christianity as masculine.

The death of Ellen White in 1915 and the rapid growth of Adventism during World War I, as its public expositions of biblical prophecy attracted religious conservatives who had been drawn to apocalyptic issues by the times, helped change its face, for the newcomers were not aware of the earlier hermeneutical nuances. Adventist leaders therefore responded to the rise to prominence of the Fundamentalist movement as the champion of orthodoxy within American Christianity with a sense of relief, embracing it in large part for its affirmation of the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible and especially its rejection of Darwinism. Indeed, their unexpected

decision to replace their long-term president, A.G. Daniells [1858-1935], who had led Adventism from 1901-1922, with the more conservative W.A.Spicer [1865-1952] has been interpreted as symbolizing this. Francis Wilcox [1865-1951], editor of *Review and Herald*, the official church paper, declared that "Adventists should count themselves the chief of Fundamentalists today." With George McCready Price [1870-1963] as their champion, Adventists set the course of contemporary "Scientific Creationism"; a worldwide flood at the time of Noah became the chief bulwark in their defense of the beliefs that God had created the world through special fiat about 6,000 years ago and that all death—and therefore the fossils--was the result of, and therefore occurred after, Adam's sin. Similarly, they applied a literalistic hermeneutic, rooted in a proof-texting methodology, to the writings of White. Her authority was strengthened considerably at this time, with the issuing of a stream of books compiled from such sources as her magazine articles, whose excerpts were used with little concern for the context in which they were originally written.

However, the embrace between Adventism and fundamentalism was far from complete. In part, this was because of the deep antagonism felt by many fundamentalists towards Adventism because of some of its peculiar doctrines, especially its reliance on the writings of White as an extra-biblical source of authority and its perceived legalism, which led them to conclude that it was a non-Christian "cult"; they also resented its aggressive evangelism and persistent attempts to win their members. For its part, the Adventist Church also held back, in order to distinguish itself and the specialness of its message. It therefore challenged the fundamentalist champions of the infallibility of the Bible to obey it fully--including the Sabbath commandment.

Changing Relationships--and Hermeneutics

Coincidentally, the rise of the Fundamentalist movement occurred just as authority in American medicine was clarified and then organized. This obliged the Adventist medical school to seek accreditation, and this in turn forced the Adventist colleges to follow suit if their graduates were to be admitted to the medical school or receive certification as nurses or teachers. Consequently, the colleges were obliged to send their faculty members to study for higher degrees at secular universities, where they were exposed to concepts and interpretations from which they had previously been sheltered. Although, the biblical studies departments did not have to seek accreditation, it was inevitable that that faculty would not be left behind once others began to pursue graduate degrees.

The first steps were taken to upgrade the education of Adventist clergy with the founding of a seminary in 1937. Initially the faculty members from the biblical studies departments who were sent to graduate school were restricted to older men whose loyalty was certain, and their participation in their programs was limited by intermittent and part-time attendance. Moreover, such students initially restricted their studies to "tool" subjects such as biblical

languages, archaeology, church history, and rhetoric, and thus refrained from exposing themselves to the more threatening questions. Nevertheless, the founding of the seminary represented a major turning point in Adventist theology, for thereafter the formerly dominant "proof-text" approach to the scriptures became unacceptable among scholars, who replaced it with the "historical-critical" approach and began to teach this to their students. Thenceforth, their approach to the Bible was to use all available tools to discern what was meant when it was written rather than using it merely to bolster views that were already held.

The higher education of the biblical faculty began to make itself felt as early as World War II, when a group at one college, disturbed at the tendency of Adventist evangelists and publications to declare that the current headlines were a direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy, formed an "Eschatology Society" to share their research. This rapidly evolved into a "Biblical Research Fellowship" (BRF) embracing scholars at all English language colleges throughout the world. Although the independence of the BRF made church administrators so nervous that it was brought under the control of a General Conference department in 1952, the 10-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which was released between 1953 and1957 and whose authors were inevitably mostly BRF members, showed an openness to the historical-critical method. It presented Adventists for the first time with alternative interpretations of scripture, reflecting scholarly debate--even though the editors felt they could not include all the positions they themselves held and felt obliged to acknowledge traditional Adventist interpretations they felt were without biblical basis.

The accreditation of the Adventist colleges in the U.S. meant that opportunities for upward mobility among young members multiplied: an Adventist education, instead of being merely a route to church employment, increasingly opened the door to the professions. Tension between Adventists and the broader society relaxed more rapidly, as Adventism accommodated to it. The process of assimilation was perhaps best symbolized as colleges whose names referred to their mission at the time of their founding replaced them with titles better befitting the educational mainstream: the College of Medical Evangelists became Loma Linda University in 1945, Emmanuel Missionary College was transformed into Andrews University in1960, and Washington Missionary College was renamed Columbia Union College in 1961.

Meanwhile, Adventist leaders also sought opportunities to improve their standing with other Christians churches, especially with Evangelicals, with whom Adventists had most in common but where tensions had also tended to be greater. In 1955, Walter Martin, the director of cult - apologetics for Zondervan Publishing Company, who had earlier classified Seventh-day Adventism as a "cult" in his book, *The Rise of the Cults*, set out to make a comprehensive evaluation of Adventist theology for a new book that would focus solely on them. Donald Grey Barnhouse, a nationally-known Bible scholar and founder and editor of the Evangelical *Eternity* magazine, who had also written critically of Adventist theology, put him in contact with an Adventist pastor who had written him. The leadership of the General Conference had no wish

to have their church classified as a cult--it would be bad public relations and also, they felt, inaccurate, for they now felt much closer to the Protestant mainstream than to groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who had already received stern treatment at the hands of Martin. They therefore chose to cooperate closely with the researchers, appointing three men to work with them. After extensive research and many meetings, during which the Adventists answered Martin's written questions, and final meetings which included Barnhouse and his son, these Evangelicals reversed their opinions, concluding that Adventists were Christian brethren, a conclusion that they felt obliged to announce in an article in *Eternity* magazine, even though they predicted correctly that this would cost them circulation. Adventists published their answers to Martin in a volume entitled *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (1957), which disowned several positions embraced in earlier publications: for example, it now affirmed that Ellen White's writings were neither free of error nor equal to the Scriptures. Martin's volume, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism,* appeared in 1960.

The number of Adventist students seeking college education expanded sharply in the mid-1960s, greatly increasing demand for new faculty members in Adventist institutions. Consequently, clusters of bright young full-time graduate students appeared at such schools as Harvard Divinity School and the Graduate Theological Union. These now felt free to build on what they had learned in the Adventist Seminary by exposing themselves to more "daring" disciplines, such as theology and ethics. These young scholars formed both informal networks and a formal organization, the Association of Adventist Forums, which issued a journal, *Spectrum*, which was--and remains--both scholarly and independent of church authorities. When these scholars took up teaching positions at Adventist colleges they continued their interest in reforming church doctrine, and used their networks, journal and the annual meetings of their professional organization, the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, to keep abreast of and build on the work of one another.

Although, the more recent availability of doctoral degrees in various biblical and theological fields at Andrews University, the home of the Adventist Seminary, has allowed increasing numbers of teachers in religion to gain their entire education at Adventist schools, the majority of Adventist biblical scholars in the U.S. today have adopted a hermeneutic that is far from Fundamentalism, but has rather been strongly influenced by the historical-critical method. They typically consider the original context and intention of the writer and draw on the best available scholarship to understand this. Similarly, interviews with the science teachers at Adventist colleges in the U.S. show that while they continue to believe in a Creator God, the majority of them now personally hold that both the earth and life on it are very old and that the fossil record predates man. However, the antagonism of church leadership to the historical-critical method, and its misunderstanding of it, often led the biblical scholars to try to avoid the term in their teaching and writing, while many of the scientists are so afraid of landing in hot water that they disguise their personal stances in their teaching.

Internal Tensions

The international Adventist Church has become very diverse in recent decades: culturally, racially, in terms of social class and level of education, and inevitably in beliefs also. Church leaders fear disunity, and feel as if they have to do a delicate balancing act to keep the church from flying apart, for internal tensions abound. Since theology among Adventists in the Developing World, where new converts who have been attracted to Adventism by a kind of evangelism that features a proof-texting approach to the Bible are numerically dominant, is much more conservative than in the Developed World, and the conservative "historic Adventists" in the Developed World are very vocal, many of the church leaders are nervous about academics, fearing that they are intent on rocking the boat.

Two issues which have been prominent in recent years illustrate these tensions. Attempts at the General Conference Sessions of 1990 and 1995 to allow Adventists to ordain women pastors--a change that had gathered broad support within the U.S.--were overwhelmingly defeated because of strong opposition from delegates from the Developing World. The opposition stance was rooted in a literalist, proof-texting hermeneutic. This difference of opinion in turn ignited a bitter attack on the scholarship of Alden Thompson, who has become known for promoting the more liberal view of biblical inspiration, by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, a Ghanaian scholar resident in the U.S.

The Church hierarchy initially ignored the mounting evidence of Ellen White's gross dependence on other sources put forward during the 1970s by several scholars building on each others' work, some of the earliest of which was published by *Spectrum*. However, when the evidence of her plagiarism was revealed to the church membership at large in 1980 in a front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times*, which was then picked up, through the wire services, by the press across the nation and also abroad, with follow-up analyses in the major news magazines, it was obliged to enter the fray. Unable to refute the evidence, Church leaders chose to defend the Adventist prophet by arguing that she had only done what scholars have shown was common among the Bible writers. They thus embraced modern biblical scholarship for pragmatic reasons. However, this shift seems to have had little impact on the theological understanding and use of her writings.

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists, like other sectarian Christian groups in the mid-nineteenth century, held positions on the authority of Scripture and Darwinism that were similar to those later embraced by the Fundamentalist movement. They welcomed that movement when it emerged in the 1920s. However, as tension between Adventism and society diminished over time, -especially once Adventist colleges sought accreditation so that their faculty members were exposed to higher education at secular universities and the degrees they awarded their

students became a means for widespread upward mobility within American Adventism, Adventist biblical scholars and scientists increasingly adopted stances contrary to the earlier fundamentalist positions. This has exacerbated the tensions caused by increasing internal diversity. A bitter battle is currently being waged within international Adventism over the issue of whether or not it will be essentially fundamentalist in its approach.

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