Seventh-day Adventists in Conflict: A Nineteenth-century Religious Movement Meets the Twentieth Century

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Introduction - 2018

During the first half of the 1980s, conflict within Seventh-day Adventism received a great deal of attention in the press. The titles of some of the articles included "The Shaking up of Adventism?" [*Christianity Today,* 1980a]; "Theologian Told to Defend his Views" [*Los Angeles Times*, 1980a]; "Seventh-day Adventist Controversy: Plagiarism Found in Prophet Books" [*Los Angeles Times,* 1980b]; "A False Prophetess?" [*Newsweek,* 1981]; "The Adventist Showdown: Will it Trigger a Rash of Defections?" [*Christianity Today*, 1980b]; "The Church of Liberal Borrowings: Plagiarism and fraud charges rock the Seventh-day Adventists" [*Time Magazine,* 1982]; "7th-Day Adventists Face Change and Dissent" [*New York Times,* 1982]. Headlines such as these front-page newspaper stories and newsmagazine accounts dramatized the fact that Seventh-day Adventism was experiencing serious self-examination, challenge, and re-assessment at that time. This paper explores the issues that were at the core of the conflict, its dynamics, and the outcome.

It was written when my friend Maren Lockwood Carden and I were considering launching a study of Adventism in the USA and Canada. We did this, and I spent the academic year 1984-5, while on sabbatical leave, traveling 28,000 miles around the North American Division, visiting churches, educational, medical, and publishing institutions, conference, union, and General Conference headquarters, and the 1985 General Conference Session in New Orleans. It was my attendance at the latter Session that persuaded me that any serious historical and sociological study of Adventism had to be global in scope, considering the growing proportion of the membership in the Developing World and the consequent growing power of those regions within the world church. This decision sadly forced Maren Carden to drop out, for she was unable to travel abroad, since she had a young son for whom she was responsible.

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Adventist Showdown: Will it Trigger a Rash of Defections?" [*Christianity Today*, 1980b]; "The Church of Liberal Borrowings: Plagiarism and fraud charges rock the Seventh-day Adventists" [*Time Magazine,* 1982]; "7th-Day Adventists Face Change and Dissent" [*New York Times,* 1982]. Recent headlines such as these page one newspaper stories and newsmagazine accounts have dramatized the fact that Seventh-day Adventism is experiencing serious self-examination, challenge, and re-assessment.

The Seventh-day Adventist church, which currently has 3.9 million members worldwide, 600,000 of whom are in the United States, traces its roots back to the Millerite Movement of the 1840s. William Miller, a Baptist lay-preacher, taught throughout upstate New York and New England that the world would end with the second coming of Christ in 1844. The failure of his prophecy, which is known within Adventist circles as "the Great Disappointment," brought jeers from without and disillusionment to many within the circle of his followers [Festinger *et al,* 1956, 12-23]. Some, however, encouraged by the visions of Ellen (Harmon) White, a young woman who was soon to attain the status of a prophet, reinterpreted Miller's prophecy and went on to found Seventh-day Adventism [Nichol, 1944]. Adventists believed that they had been appointed to preach God's final message of warning to a doomed world. This message was summarized in the name they adopted: Christians should prepare for the return of Christ, which was imminent--indeed, the "investigative judgment", which must immediately precede the second *advent*, had begun in the heavenly sanctuary in 1844; and all should return to the observance of Saturday, the *seventh day*, as the biblical Sabbath, which was to be a mark of the faithful awaiting Christ's return.

Adventism, like all sects, was prone to divisions and conflict during its early decades. Since it lacked trained biblical scholars but contained many members with a great enthusiasm for amateur Bible study, differing interpretations of theological issues were rampant. Because of her authority and a good ear for the way the wind was blowing, Ellen White became the key arbiter of conflict. However, the prophet apparently felt no great urge to consistency, so that to her may be traced two quite different doctrinal faces of Adventism that we have dubbed "sectarian" and "mainstream." While, for example, in some of her writings she was lashing out at "apostate Protestantism" while portraying the central role Adventism was to play in the final scenes of "the great controversy between Christ and Satan", she was in other writings (it has been shown recently) boldly plagiarizing the leading Protestant authors of her time to develop themes taken straight from mainstream Christianity (White, 1888; Rea, 1982). Although she did grow towards the mainstream, especially after a doctrinal upheaval in 1888 in which she sided with those introducing "righteousness by faith" to Adventism and against those continuing to stress a legalistic "last generation perfectionism,[1] if she saw what she felt to be the roots of

[1] At the crux of this issue lay an esoteric controversy with far reaching implications over the nature of Christ--whether He came with "sinful flesh" (i.e., with a fallen nature, and so predisposed to sin like all human beings since the Fall) or "sinless flesh" (i.e., human but with the nature of pre-Fall humankind). The traditional, sectarian Adventist position had stressed sinful flesh, and extrapolated from this that since Christ had been able to triumph over His nature and live a sinless life, then His saints could do so too in the last generation once their destinies were settled in the Investigative Judgment and they had to stand before God without a mediator. This doctrine produced a very legalistic, guilt-ridden religion because of the Adventist belief that the Investigative Judgment was already far advanced. In contrast, the 1888 position affirmed that Christians were *always* totally dependent on the righteousness of Christ, claimed through faith, for their justification and acceptance before

Adventism or her own authority being challenged (by, for example, allegations that the biblical support for the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the 1844 investigative judgment was weak), then she grimly defended sectarianism. A result of Ellen White's inconsistency has been that participants on both sides of Adventist doctrinal controversies have always been able to appeal for support to the authority of the prophet.

Many of the questions that had been current during the lifetime of Ellen White were raised again from time to time after her death in 1915. However, church leaders became more adept at keeping such disputes under covers, and therefore often papered over and unresolved, with the result that the typical Adventist throughout the period 1915-1970 understood church doctrine as a unified belief system. That is, the period was, on the whole, stable.

This paper is concerned with two time periods: first the quiescent years, 1915-1970, and second 1970 to the present, a time of renewed questioning and conflict. We ask two questions. Why were challenging issues not raised effectively during the earlier period? And why did they come to the fore in the late-1970s and early 1980s? We argue that in recent years a social movement has emerged within the formal organization of the church.[2] Following Tilly (1978), we identify two conditions that encouraged the mobilization of this social movement. First, organization: the existence of individuals sharing certain characteristics and linked in some form of communication network (1978: 62-63). We will show that Adventist scholars undergoing training in biblical and related fields in preparation for teaching posts in the Adventist seminary and Adventist colleges in the late 1960s developed both components of organization. Second, interests: the emergence of shared goals beyond the specific characteristics that encouraged them to come together in the first place (1978: 54). Here we will show how these young scholars, who were ideologically committed to pursuing truth, saw in their joint situation opportunities to update Adventist beliefs. Neither the networks nor the opportunities existed during the preceding quiescent period. This nascent movement led those who saw themselves as the guardians of traditional Adventism to organize defensively and, eventually, to counter attack. The result was open conflict.

Research Methods

The data for this paper have been gathered through participant observation at national meetings of Adventist theologians and biblical scholars in 1979 and 1982, at national and local meetings of an organization of Adventist scholars and other professionals, the Association of Adventist Forums, since 1978, and at the quinquennial session of the General Conference of

God. Because 1888 marked a watershed in the thinking of Ellen White, what she wrote on these matters differed considerably fore and aft that date. However, the internal contradictions were not admitted because everything she wrote was deemed to be inspired. Consequently, both sectarians and mainstreamers were able to continue to find support for their positions on these issues from her writings.

[2] A number of recent studies of religious groups have, like the present study, analyzed churches as formal organizations [Beckford, 1973; Lehman, 1981; Ofshe, 1980; Schoenherr and Sorensen, 1982]. Zald and Berger [1978] have suggested that intra-organizational conflict often has the dynamics of a social movement.

Seventh-day Adventists in Dallas in 1980; from in-depth interviews with administrators and scholars; and from a search of both official and unofficial publications. The paper also draws upon the lifetime experience of one of the authors as a member of the church--who comes from a family tied closely to church leaders, and has been active personally in local churches, in organizations of Adventist university students, and in the Association of Adventist Forums and its chapters.

Why was Serious Conflict Avoided in the Period 1915-1970?

Encapsulation in a Theological and Social System

One factor which helps to explain the relative absence of conflict in the years 1915-1970 was the extent to which Adventists were separated from the larger society. There were two facets to this separation. The first was their doctrinal beliefs, which clearly marked them off from other Christians. Adventists saw themselves as having been singled out for the special task of preaching God's last message of warning to a doomed world, and especially to the rest of Christendom. They taught a complex theology. In 1844, Christ had not returned to the earth as Miller had predicted. However, an important event had taken place at that time: Christ, in heaven, began the final phase of His work preparatory to His second coming--the "cleansing" of the heavenly sanctuary. In the process, He began to judge all Christians, beginning with the dead, to determine which of them should be with Him in heaven. The process would soon reach the living, and at that time their probation would close and their destiny be settled. Once this "investigative judgment" was complete, there would be a short period of persecution for Adventists here on earth followed by the long-awaited second coming of Christ. Ellen White had drawn these "closing events" of "the great controversy between Christ and Satan" in considerable detail (White, 1888).

In addition to religious belief, a second factor separating Adventists from others was their social distinctiveness. As "God's peculiar people," members set themselves apart from the larger society and, consequently, avoided the interpersonal exchanges that might have made them question and reevaluate belief. Strict observance of the Saturday Sabbath was a focal point of both belief and behavior. No work was done. Church members attended services, participated in Sabbath School for adults as well as children, engaged in family prayers, made visits to needy church members, and joined in proselytizing activities. The restrictions of the Sabbath, the demands of "missionary" and other church activities during the week, the peculiar diet (which omitted coffee, tea and meat), and official proscriptions of many typical non-Adventist recreational activities (ranging from alcohol, and smoking to dancing, theater and all "worldly amusements") made it both convenient and congenial for Adventists to spend their free time with one another. Thus, the sense of specialness learned from church teachings was underscored by social experience.

Specialness was further enhanced by attendance at church schools and colleges, which were established in large numbers after 1890 to train the youth of the church along lines that would

be useful to its mission while at the same time protecting them from "worldly" influences. Nine of the current 11 senior colleges in North America were founded between 1891 and 1901, while the number of elementary schools run by the church climbed from 14 in 1890 to over 1,000 by 1918.[3] A substantial minority (one in nine in North America by 1919) of church members remained within the church fold even while at work: they were employed in Adventist hospitals, publishing houses, and food factories (all established both to further the mission of the church and, incidentally, to provide jobs for members at a time when few other employers allowed them to take Saturdays off) as well as in church administration, schools and colleges. And since these institutions were typically built in rural settings, these members usually found themselves living in Adventist communities with few non-Adventist neighbors (Oosterwal, 1979: 5, 21). Moreover, before World War II few laypersons went outside the Adventist community either to qualify or to practice in the professions. Those with professional aspirations generally became doctors or dentists who trained in the church's medical school and later often practised in Adventist hospitals.

The clergy, who might be expected to have a broader social and intellectual experience than the laity, were, in fact, equally likely to grow up and continue to live encapsulated within the world of the church. They were trained by Adventist teachers in Adventist "missionary colleges" with a curriculum that carefully excluded "worldly" courses such as Shakespeare or novels, and where biblical studies stressed the peculiarly Adventist doctrines. A seminary was founded in 1937, but it was not until 1945 that a degree program in divinity was begun, and it was 1953 before a year's study beyond the B.A. was required of all ministerial students. As pastors, they rarely mixed with non-Adventists except when engaging in evangelism—for example, they typically bypassed the contact with ministers of other denominations that membership of inter-denominational organizations would have afforded them.

Thus, for much of its history Adventism formed an internally consistent, self-contained theological and social system. Those who accepted the system also accepted a comprehensive statement of what their lifestyle should be. Surrounded by like-minded people, committed members rarely encountered the intellectual challenges or ideas that would make them question their beliefs. Moreover, the resistance of the system to change was greatly enhanced by the fact that its details had been endorsed by the prophet, Ellen White. This became especially true after her death in 1915.

The Idealization of Ellen White

The Seventh-day Adventist church teaches that proof for all its beliefs is to be found in the Bible, which is "the only unerring rule of faith and practice" [Church Manual, 1971, 32]. Ellen White, like the ordinary Adventist, studied her Bible and looked upon it as the source of all religious authority. However, she holds a central position in the church as the major explicator of its beliefs and as one whose work was inspired by God. In her writing she gave a "clearer

[3] By 1982 there were 1,161 elementary schools and 90 day and boarding secondary schools in North America, all financed by church members (General Conference Annual Report, Education, 1982).

understanding" of God's Word. In her explication of the Bible she was aided by heavenly visions in which God's messengers explained His will. Often her role was that of an arbitrator. When the social and theological questions of her day were taken to her, she passed judgment. While she lived, Ellen White played a key role in developing Adventist doctrine: the teachings about the heavenly sanctuary, the investigative judgment, and Sabbath observance were among those for which her visions provided support. In addition, she was always at the center of church organization, guiding and working with officials on matters of religious practice, administrative policy, and many other issues. In response to frequent requests for comments on specific issues, she elaborated the church's religious system into a complex, harmonious whole that incorporated judgments about current events, the history of mankind, the creation of the earth, diet, worldly entertainment, and many other social and theological topics.

Throughout the history of Adventism individual members have been troubled by the claims put forward for Ellen White. Few in the past raised the full list of criticisms that are currently being put forward, but periodically one or more of them surfaced. At different times Ellen White has been accused of copying from contemporary works, allowing others to re-write and even compose her materials, incorporating as "inspired" ideas that were part of the social climate of her time, reporting visions that were contradictory and, in recounting her visions, putting words used by contemporary authors into the mouths of heavenly beings.

All leaders of religious groups are vulnerable to accusations of worldly frailties and, as we might expect, Ellen White was no exception. Most such groups agree with Luther that the message of a prophet should be judged independently of his or her personal qualities. But even if Adventists were to argue that only the spirit of Ellen White's work is inspired, the church's special doctrines create problems since the church and its members have often resorted to her to justify them.

Thus, throughout the lifetime of Ellen White church members depended on her to bring together their religious and social system, and therefore tended to impute more authority to her words and writing than she herself claimed. She declared repeatedly that she was the "lesser light": the Bible was the source of authority, and her mission was to help people understand what God had already stated there. Yet Adventists sought her advice on a multitude of topics, and viewed her word on them all as decisive.

After Ellen White's death an important change took place in her authority: her writings were now the only source of her advice, and no new ideas could be introduced. If two people disagreed, their dispute was settled on the basis of who had interpreted the prophet correctly. If someone disagreed with Ellen White, the dispute was settled in her favor. The tangible result of this shift in her authority was the demand for publication of more and more of her manuscript materials. At the time of her death in 1915, 29 volumes of her work had been published. However, after 1915 an additional 33 volumes compiled from letters and other manuscripts were produced. Analysis of the *Sabbath School Quarterly*, which is intended to direct the devotions of members throughout the week, shows the same process of increased concern with the writings of Ellen White. Lessons for 1915 were taken exclusively from the Bible, although members were expected to read from Mrs. White in the course of their week's study. By 1925,

each issue of the *Quarterly* included a "lesson help" quotation from the Adventist prophet designed to supplement the recommended Bible reading; by 1945 the lessons were more clearly directed towards her writings and, by 1955, the extracts from her work far exceeded Bible verses. The changed Sabbath school lessons and the demand for Ellen White's works demonstrated the church members' increasing dependence on her writings for guidance. Although Ellen White had stated that the revelation of truth would continue to be progressive, the belief system of the church became much more static as the prophet's role was routinized, for although her writings contained two distinct strands, they were appropriated by the sectarians to support traditional Adventist doctrinal positions. In these circumstances it became progressively more difficult to question the doctrines with which she was so closely associated.

Nevertheless, college teachers and many church leaders were uneasy with the exalted view of Ellen White held by the great majority of church members. Participants at a major Bible Conference held in 1919 aired their frustration concerning this: "We have stressed the importance of the spirit of prophecy [Ellen White's writings] more than the Bible"; "We have claimed more for her work than she did"; "Is it well to let our people in general go on holding to the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies (of Ellen White)?" [Minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference, 1979a:44, 48, 46] But these same men feared that church members would object strenuously to a change in the position accorded Ellen White: "Woe be to the man out where I am who does not line up with the view" that her Testimonies were verbally inspired; "I shall be discredited if I go back and give this view"; "People say that the church leaders do not believe the Testimonies"; "People who do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies are discredited right away" [Minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference, 1979b:40, 37, 39]. Some of the teachers at the conference asked the church leaders to take the lead in openly discussing the over-dependence on Ellen White--they stated that only then would they feel free to take up these issues in the classroom. However, while the administrators who had known her personally agreed with the sentiments expressed, they feared that the members at large would be too disturbed by the news of such a critique. Consequently, they made no promises, and ultimately the stenographic record of the meeting was not released. It came to light by chance only in 1979. By refraining from bringing the issue into the open, church leaders, by default, made a decision to allow Ellen White's authority to remain unquestioned by the great majority of church members.

The leaders could justify this conclusion in religious terms: it was better that church members should remain convinced of the Adventist message and spiritually prepared for the heavenly kingdom than that they should become embroiled in questions that might prevent them from being counted among the faithful. The church leaders' emphasis on saving souls was consistent with the behavior that had taken them into administrative positions. The typical administrator had, in his younger days, served in American parishes and particularly in foreign missions. After years of vigorous efforts as a pastor to bring people into the Adventist fold, administrators were not likely to adopt policies that threatened to drive people away.

Church officials have to coordinate the different interest groups within their organization so that, together, they can fulfill the objectives of the church. For Adventists, the central objectives

were maintenance and growth of the church. If current members were retained and new converts added, leaders could reassure both themselves and their members that they were administering the church effectively. On balance, both leaders and rank-and-file members were bothered less by the doctrinal error of the idealization of Ellen White than by the thought that if they trifled over details souls might be lost.

However, a small minority drawn from among college teachers, editors of church publications, and administrators remained uneasy with the position taken by the majority of administrators. Men[4] from each of these groups had expressed their doubts at the 1919 Bible Conference. During the next four decades the same questions were repeated privately by others, while a few were outspoken. Two leaders, in particular--one in Europe, the other in Australia--challenged the doctrine of the sanctuary. Both were forced out of the church (Wallenkampf and Lesher, 1981: 588-591). While an occasional dissident could emerge in other countries, U.S. dissidents could not avoid the more direct control of the hierarchy. Since skeptics were scattered throughout the church's 11 colleges, 3 publishing houses and the administrative and pastoral staffs of the multitude of entities within the North American church, they were isolated from each other. In daily life they had little support for their views, and knew that any open expression of doubts would elicit stern disapproval from conservative colleagues, equally conservative administrators, and the influential, extremely conservative, right-wing groups within the church. Moreover, the questioning liberal faced far more than church restrictions on his intellectual exchanges with like-minded Adventists: his livelihood and career often depended upon continued church approval. Because of their limited formal education and their lack of experience outside the Adventist community, such dissidents had little hope of finding an equivalent position elsewhere. Loss of job was a serious enough concern, but other sanctions could follow: anyone whose commitment was judged "shaky" by other church members was suspect in the Adventist community. He and his family could be rejected by their life-long associates, thus removing a major support for their whole way of life.

In the years between 1915 and the early 1960s, many American Adventists lived in an isolated social system which consistently discouraged the growth of deviant beliefs. Within this system most members came to respect the writings of Ellen White over the authority of the Bible in two senses. First, Ellen White provided numerous specific, eminently understandable suggestions concerning how to lead one's spiritual and everyday life, while the Bible's general guidance had less immediate applicability. Second, because they accepted Ellen White's interpretation of obscure biblical passages, rather than insisting that the Bible interpret itself, Ellen White in effect became the arbiter of doctrine. Officials of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the church's ruling body, tacitly accepted the over-emphasis on Ellen White: officially they asserted that Adventist belief was based wholly on the Bible, while unofficially they allowed pastors, members and committees that judged church employees and members to treat Ellen White as the central authority of the church. The few scholars and others who opposed this position were scattered throughout the Adventist community with little

[4]"Men" because no women were publicly involved in any of these discussions.

opportunity to exchange ideas with each other or with non-Adventists. In their near-isolation they could scarcely be expected to raise questions that would threaten not only their traditional beliefs but also their livelihood and sense of belonging to a special community.

We see, therefore, that in the period 1915-1970 those who questioned Adventist doctrine were not organized. Without the opportunity to exchange ideas, most could not articulate their questions effectively. The few who did lacked any base of support in the Adventist community and were relatively easily moved into positions without influence, dismissed from the ministry, or even removed from the church altogether. Nevertheless, the situation was gradually changing and the sources of later conflict emerging.

Changing Adventism: The Sources of Later Conflict

Adventism becomes Less Isolated

The Adventist commitment to educational and health services became the bridge that broke down the isolation of the church from the rest of society. Although the full impact of these changes was not felt until after World War II, they were the result of decisions made much earlier in the century. At the turn of the century Adventists established a medical school, the College of Medical Evangelists, to meet the staffing needs of their hospitals and clinics around the world. However, this move soon forced them to accommodate their educational system, both in curriculum and education of faculty members, to the standards of accrediting bodies, as first the medical school was forced to obtain accreditation, and then Adventist colleges were obliged to follow the same path if their graduates were to be admitted to the medical school or receive certification as nurses or teachers. The need for accreditation forced the colleges to send faculty members to secular universities for graduate education, where they were exposed to views and debates from which they had previously been sheltered.

The educational and employment opportunities available at the church institutions enhanced chances for upward mobility. Young Adventists, whether or not they wished to work for the church, were especially attracted to such professions and medicine and dentistry, whose practice did not conflict with Sabbath observance since it was "lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Even the initial thrust towards professionalism disturbed church leaders: as early as the late-1920s General Conference President W.A. Spicer complained that the church institutions were training professionals rather than missionaries, that the imminence of the second coming was being lost, with young people thinking of 10-15 years, and looking for careers that would yield a higher and more comfortable standard of living rather than training for the ministry (Davis, 1983: 58). The church itself had fed this problem when it chose to set separate, higher, wage scales for medical personnel in order to attract them into church service. Between 1914 and 1982 the medical school at Loma Linda in southern California graduated a total of 5,723 physicians. The work ethic prevailed in spite of the millenarian doctrine: indeed, to quote Edwin Scott Gaustad, "seldom while expecting a kingdom of God from heaven, has a group worked so diligently for one on earth" (1962:115). Education and upward social mobility

exposed Adventists to the values of the broader society, and led them to value social respectability. Adventism, in turn, prospered financially from the tithes and offerings of these more wealthy members, and built "representative" churches and institutions which revealed a more self-assured self-image. The new prosperity and, with the five-day week, the virtual disappearance of serious employment problems for its members, resulted in a greater sense of ease with the rest of society. The earlier expectations of persecution began to be replaced by expectations of co-existence.

Meanwhile, a series of events had begun to reduce Adventist theological isolation. The initial catalyst was the rapid expansion of Adventist missionary activity around World War I. Adventist theology, reflecting its origins in nineteenth century America, had room initially for only Catholics, Protestants, and the Adventist "Remnant". Because Adventists saw themselves as charged with delivering a special [sectarian] message to persons who were already Christians, the latter were the focus of their missionary activity, even in Third World countries. Consequently, when non-Christians unexpectedly came to missionaries wanting to be baptized, the latter realized that they had not resolved many of the basic questions within Christianity, and so wrote to headquarters seeking guidance on what to teach. The General Conference appointed a committee in 1930 to deal with this issue, which subsequently drew up a mainstream-oriented basis of belief. However, since committee members realized that their document would not survive deliberations within a General Conference session because of the predominant sectarianism of the church at that time, the chair avoided that route and instead had it published in the Year Book in 1931, where it thereafter became an annual feature, and then in the *Church Manual,* thus according it legitimacy without it being voted upon (Oosterwal, 1979: 8-14).

In 1937 the first steps were taken to upgrade the education of the clergy with the founding of a seminary, with the result that biblical scholars both there and in the colleges began to enroll in doctoral programs, especially after World War II. Although such programs were not forced to seek accreditation, the biblical scholars became uneasy with their status as the lowest educated faculty. Initially the biblical faculty 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, archeology and church history, 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 fulfilment 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 (Cottrell, 1978). 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 written by BRF members and released between 1953 and 1957, showed a commitment to the historical-critical method and, consequently, for the first time in Adventist history, presented Adventists with alternative interpretations of scripture, reflecting scholarly debate--even though the editors felt they could not include all the positions they themselves held to and felt obliged to acknowledge traditional Adventist interpretations they felt were without biblical basis.

The years 1954-1966 were a period of greater openness under the General Conference presidency of R.R. Figuhr, who chose to leave theology to the scholars. Adventism moved towards the mainstream during these years because of the freedom given to serious scholarship, greater contact with other Christian churches, and, with what was seeming more and more like the indefinite delay of the second coming, a greater concern for broader issues. Simultaneously, scholars and pastors were de-emphasizing a number of traditional Adventist teachings such as those linked to the Great Disappointment of 1844--the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment--and also the heavy anti-Catholicism. Belief was changing by neglect rather than decree. Not everyone in the church was content with the changes: it was no accident that all the groups that seceded from Adventism during the 1915-1970 period were from the right, and that they did so declaring that the church was abandoning landmark beliefs [Tarling, 1981].

In 1957 this liberalizing process received official acknowledgment. Two well-known Evangelical scholars, Walter R. Martin and Donald Grey Barnhouse, who were in the process of writing a series of studies on Christian cults, had begun researching Seventh-day Adventism. 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 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 who were "ahead of their time" and who had had, for Adventists, a great deal of ecumenical contact to work closely with them. The presentations of these men were given credibility by the 1931 statement of belief, which had finally been passed by a session of the General Conference, in spite of the conflicting views in Adventist publications that Martin could point to. Although their answers to Martin, which were published in a stout volume entitled *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (*QOD*), came out for Christ having been born with a sinless nature (thus disowning the sinful nature bulwark of last-generation perfectionism), Ellen White writings that were neither free of error nor equal to the scriptures, and a brotherhood of Christians that denied that Adventists alone comprised the biblical Remnant[5] the volume won, with the support of General Conference president Figuhr, the consensus of 250 world leaders (Unruh, 1977; Hackleman, 1983; Wood, 1978). Martin and

[5] When the position on the Remnant was agreed to by General Conference officers, one of the three negotiators came out saying exuberantly, "Thank God! There goes the Remnant!"

Barnhouse recognized "that the Adventists were strenuously denying certain doctrinal positions which had been previously attributed to them" [Barnhouse, 1956], and that *Questions on Doctrine* acknowledged a new theology. The positions adopted by *QOD* were given a massive sales job in advance of publication, with supporting statements from Ellen White's writings published in *Ministry* (the journal for Adventist clergy which was then edited by one of the three negotiators), an additional volume to the Bible Commentary, and an appendix to *QOD* itself. Some felt betrayed by the new formulation of belief [Andreason, n.d., 34], but when Martin's book, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism*, declared that Adventists were not a cult but were "brethren" of the Christian Evangelicals, their complaints were, for the moment, forgotten amid the ebullience resulting from the favorable publicity and acceptance. However, the General Conference soon began to back away from Martin as it became sensitive to the criticisms that he did make. It reneged on its promise to sell his book in Adventist Book Centers, and issued a reply to his criticisms. Later it allowed *QOD* itself to go out of print.

One of Martin's criticisms repeated that the Adventist doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment lacked biblical basis. At that time one of the Adventist publishing houses was revising an old but popular book, *Bible Readings for the Home Circle,* for a new edition, and was endeavoring to bring it into line with the Bible Commentary. The editor with responsibility for the prophetic chapters, Raymond F. Cottrell, with Martin's critique in mind, set out to show that a biblical basis for the doctrine existed--and failed to do so. On taking the matter to the senior editor, he was encouraged to send a questionnaire to the leading biblical scholars--whereupon he found that all 27 polled agreed with his finding (1958). This result led President Figuhr to create a committee, known as the Daniel Committee (1959-1966), to address the problem, but it eventually could only agree to disagree and not issue a report. Three of the members would not agree to issue an "encouraging report" that would gloss over the problems; the others would not agree to issuing majority and minority reports that would have announced the problem to the membership at large (Cottrell, 1982:15-16).

The Martin/Barnhouse conferences, attendance of Adventists at Vatican II, dialogue with the World Council of Churches, graduate degrees from famous seminaries, the backing away from preaching traditional anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant interpretations of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, and the admission by *QOD* that the Remnant extends beyond Adventism all point to the impact of ecumenism on Adventism during the period following World War II. During this period, then, the majority of Adventists began to give up some of their detachment from the larger society. In their occupations, their intellectual lives, and their religious lives they moved somewhat towards the mainstream of American society. Then, as now, their church remained distinctly conservative, but elements of change had been introduced. These changes were one set of factors contributing to the emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of a new group of scholars even closer to the mainstream. Meanwhile, the second factor restraining conflict, the idealization of the writings of Ellen White had, on balance, changed little as yet. While the negotiators with the Evangelicals had made some concessions on this front, the selling of their statements to the Adventist membership had stressed her authority.

The Emergence of a New Group of Scholars

In the mid-1960s, as the Adventist colleges and seminary expanded to accommodate the baby-boom generation, the demand for teachers also increased sharply. The colleges met the need by sponsoring large numbers of graduate students in doctoral programs. Because of the urgency of the need, these students were, unlike their predecessors, young graduates who attended the famous secular universities full-time and felt free to build on what they had learned at the Adventist Seminary by exposing themselves to the more "daring" disciplines such as theology and ethics. They had already been alerted to many of the issues facing Adventism in the Seminary, but now they were moved further by their training and the issues of the 1960s.

Many of these young scholars found that, in addition to the intellectual demands of graduate school, they were for the first time facing the challenge of living in a non-Adventist world. Not surprisingly, those that were clustered together in such academic communities as Cambridge-Boston, the San Francisco Bay area, Ann Arbor, and New York City got together to discuss their experiences and to reaffirm their Adventist heritage. Their meetings came to be called Forums. Soon the separate groups proposed that a national organization be created, and the Association of Adventist Forums (AAF), a national federation of local chapters, was founded in 1968. Although the Forums began in graduate schools, their membership quickly expanded to include other professional laypersons who, like the students, had been exposed to broader influences (Osborn, 1980: 43, 45).

The Forum chapters inevitably attracted liberal Adventists. The more conservative graduate students could become involved in churches near their universities and, for much of their time, remain within the Adventist community. Those who, in contrast, tried to live as Adventists within a non-Adventist society were more interested in exploring the ideas to which their studies and their social experience were exposing them. The Forum provided its members with the rare opportunity for open discussion of issues that were important to them--it was an exhilarating experience that created close bonds.

The graduate students' interests in continuing as practicing Adventists within the university communities led not only to the creation of Forum chapters, but also to academic research on Adventist subjects. Young men steeped in the church and destined to teach in Adventist colleges chose to write papers and dissertations on Adventist history, theology, health reform, and the writings of Ellen White. This research began the re-discovery and development of the theological issues that had been raised by previous generations of scholars. Most Adventist graduate students took the problems in stride. Supported by other Adventists in the Forum, they expressed their sincere involvement in both their religion and the Adventist community by returning to teach at church colleges after completing their degrees.

Eventually the members of the Forum formed the core of a social movement within the church. They represented a nation-wide network of people who were, for the most part, deeply committed to Adventism and to the search for religious truth. Many, especially the biblical scholars among them, published in *Spectrum,* founded by the AAF in 1969 as the first serious journal for Adventists that was independent of official control. *Spectrum* enabled them to share

their thoughts on the implications of their research for Adventism with the broad community of Adventist intellectuals. It also allowed them to build on the work of one another: several, for example, began to explore the extent to which Ellen White was dependent on the ideas and even the wording of other writers of her time. The president of Southwestern Adventist College assessed the significance of *Spectrum* to this issue with the comment: "Just as scientific periodicals were essential for the 'Scientific Revolution,' *Spectrum* has been essential for the development of Ellen White studies" [McAdams, 1980, 27].

When the Adventist graduate students had conceived of the idea of forming AAF, they had approached church leaders and won their acceptance of the concept. It would have been difficult to turn down these students, for they were in a new situation and their needs were compelling. They had impressive scholarly and personal credentials, and many of the founders came from families long known for their distinguished service to the church. Moreover, the official objectives of the Forum--to promote fellowship, evangelism, liaisons between graduate students and the church, pastoral guidance of students, and the exchange of ideas between Adventist and non-Adventist scholars--had been tailored to be non-threatening [Osborn, 1980:46]. Many of the church leaders had second thoughts as the Forum grew and showed its independence, but it was difficult to attack it because its journal represented sound scholarship, its meetings attracted many of the better educated Adventists, and it remained independent of official control. Moreover, its members, while often employed by the church, were relatively independent of it. With doctorates from nationally known universities and recent experience in the non-Adventist world, they could, if necessary and while academic positions remained relatively plentiful, find employment elsewhere. This economic independence gave these Adventist scholars an intellectual freedom which no previous generation had known. Thus, they pursued truth relatively freely and instead of dropping out prepared to reform the church.

By the early 1970s the Adventist liberals had created a distinct but loose network organization of the kind described by Gerlach and Hine for the black power and Pentecostal movements (1970:33-78), although, in the Adventist case, the network was formed within an existing denomination. Members of this network by no means shared identical views, but they did share a willingness to question both doctrine and church authorities. Their discussions covered a broad range of topics including belief, the legitimacy of the highly centralized church authority, race relations, the social gospel, creationism, and the Adventist way of life. Both their publication and their chapter meetings attracted attention, with the result that circulation and membership broadened. However, these bold directions were taken by the young biblical scholars just as key forces within the General Conference were adopting more activist, but conservative, positions.

Conflict!

Sectarians had been dismayed by the directions taken within Adventism during the 1950s and 1960s: they had been made very uneasy by the *Bible Commentary*, they felt as if the core of Adventism had been betrayed by *Questions of Doctrine,* and now the emergence of the Forum movement was seen as presenting a new and major threat to truth as they held it. However, by

the late 1960s prominent conservatives found themselves in a stronger position, with a more sympathetic General Conference president (R. H. Pierson, 1966-1978) and control of the official church paper, the *Adventist Review.* Pearson soon showed that he was determined to stop the erosion of traditional Adventism, which he saw as being led by scholars using the historical-critical method. The stage was set for conflict, with both sides organized.

In 1969, President Pearson, declaring that theology should be done by administrators, not scholars, tried to exclude the latter from the Biblical Research Committee (BRC), the body responsible for doctrinal directions. Resistance from the scholars initially thwarted him, but the next year he was successful in expanding the membership of the committee and packing it with administrators. Meanwhile, the new chairman of both the BRC and the Board of Andrews University and Seminary had, in his maiden speech, "expressed doubt concerning the integrity of the 'intellectuals' of the church, and in a cloakroom conversation the following day had said it was his intention to 'clean up' Andrews University and Loma Linda University, and named some of the teachers who 'must go'." In 1972 an administrator also seized control of the meetings that scholars had been holding for 15 years prior to the annual convention of the Society for the Study of Biblical Literature. The scholars resented this, and late in the decade responded by forming an independent society (Cottrell, 1982:5-8).

In 1973 the General Conference leadership found out that the AAF was planning a special report to cover a suit brought by two female employees of Pacific Press because of discriminatory pay scales. The official church media had not reported on this case, and in an endeavor to keep it secret the president of AAF, a seminary professor, was warned that he would be fired if the report appeared. Unwilling to have the Forum curbed in this manner, but not wishing to sacrifice his career, he resigned his post, allowing a vice-president who was not church-employed to take control of AAF and publish the report. Thereafter the Forum recognized that none of its chief officers should be church employees (Osborn, 1980:53). Three years later Forum members in the seminary and college religion and science departments demonstrated and protected their independence by leading a successful fight to block an attempt by church leaders to impose "loyalty oaths" on teachers, where they would have been obliged to declare their orthodoxy across a range of doctrines (Hackett, 1977; "An Adventist Creed?", 1977:36).

Meanwhile, however, the church moved doctrinally back towards perfectionism, with the *Adventist Review* refuting the position adopted by *QOD* by publishing articles affirming the sinless nature of Christ. The church hierarchy also chose to ignore the mounting evidence of Ellen White's gross dependence on sources put forward by several scholars building on each other's work, although two of the authors were pushed out of church employ. AAF also caused bitterness when *Spectrum* published the long-secret minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference. In spite of rising tensions and some reporting of events in *Spectrum*, the conflicts did not attract widespread attention within the church until 1979-80, when church members were rudely shaken by reports in the national press. This surge of interest was the result of the work of two men who were not in fact central participants in the Forum but whose ideas were spread by means of its network to an interested and often sympathetic audience.

Desmond Ford, a charismatic preacher and New Testament scholar, had for years been criticized by conservative groups, particularly in his native Australia, for, among other things, his preaching of righteousness by faith and his stand against the traditional Adventist positions on perfectionism and legalism. During the 1970s he was transferred to the U.S. and was promised that he would then become a member of a committee to study the sanctuary doctrine, which was the center of many of his questions. However, this promise was not kept. Consequently, when it was announced that he would speak on this subject at a Forum meeting at Pacific Union College in 1979 he drew a huge audience. He too argued that the doctrine of the investigative judgment could not be proved from the Bible, and he also questioned the doctrinal authority of Ellen White because of her support for this doctrine--positions which immediately drew fire from conservative quarters. The church leadership responded to this very visible attack by furloughing Ford from his post and arranging a public trial for him. At this trial church leaders did not appear to comprehend the wide support given by the biblical scholars to Ford's view that biblically Christ could have returned in the first century, and instead insisted on the sectarian position that 1844 was the only possible interpretation of Daniel. Ford lost his job and his ordination.

The questions raised by another pastor, Walter Rea, were, like Ford's, spread first among the liberal network. Rea built on the earlier research of others, carefully questioning the idealized picture of Ellen White that most Adventists accepted. He argued that she had borrowed from other published writers, her assistants had written some of the material published under her name, and not all her visions were authentic. Eventually a committee was sent by the General Conference to meet with Rea in California, and its members were blown away by his data, and recommended that he be invited to further his research in Washington. However, when church leaders reneged on this recommendation, media publicity suddenly informed the church at large in a most unwelcome way. Church leaders tried to cushion Rea's publication of *The White Lie* (1982) by pre-empting it with *The White Truth* (Robertson, 1982); this, however, turned out to be a white-wash. Rea, too, was rapidly dismissed from the ministry.

The ideas of Ford and Rea were by no means original: they had surfaced many times throughout the history of Adventism, and were held quite widely among scholars by the 1970s. The presentations of the two men were, however, both extensive and forceful. They attracted so much attention on issues that threatened church leaders that they were dismissed. Ford's suspension led also to the firing of over 100 clergy, the majority of whom were in Australia and New Zealand, the formation of many independent congregations, and the polarization of many others. Reverberations continue to be felt with, for example, witch-hunts among the faculty at several colleges.

From the point of view of this paper, the significant part of these events is that neither man would have had much influence had the liberal network not existed. Their ideas were passed back and forth along this network. People could discuss and assimilate the ideas, and a generally supportive or at least interested following was created.

Neither Ford nor Rea was a leader of the network: each simply contributed ideas for discussion. Consequently, the network was not necessarily less effective after they were sanctioned. Indeed, one of the advantages of the network is that, although some participants are better known than others and some have assumed more Forum responsibilities than others, it has no outstanding leaders. Like other reticulate social movements, this network is far less vulnerable to external threats than one with an identifiable leader or group of leaders (Gerlach and Hine, 1970: 35-36).

Church leaders were very threatened by the publicity given to Rea's findings, and then disposed of him rapidly. On the other hand, they made a show of weighing Ford's position carefully before a large conference. This could be interpreted as an attempt to build consensus around their actions against him, which sought to leave the traditional doctrinal positions in place. These events were followed by the appointment of a number of conservatives and ultra-conservatives to leadership positions in the central administration, seminary and colleges. Such appointments are taken as attempts to quiet liberal sentiment and to reassure the conservative wing of the church.

In assuming a conservative stance, church leaders have balanced the interests of a wide variety of constituents possessing a great range of views. The liberal end of the continuum is by no means a cohesive block willing and able to confront the church authorities. It remains a collection of more or less sympathetic people--a network concentrated especially in the intellectual Adventist community. The extent to which this network will mobilize in the future depends on the church's resolution of the doctrinal questions already raised, the kinds of issues or common interests which the liberals next raise collectively, and the opportunities they have to express and demand satisfaction of those interests.

In the midst of this controversy, the waters were further muddied when an Adventist businessman declared bankruptcy, and it was found that $20 million in church funds that had been invested with him under questionable circumstances were involved, together with several more millions invested by individual Adventists on the advice of church officers. This scandal, which also received widespread publicity, helped shake the credibility of church leadership and make future events even more difficult to predict.

The unanswered question at this point is: Where will the dust settle? The credibility of Ellen White, the linchpin of the Adventist belief system, has been undermined significantly. It is likely that more members will gradually realize that the traditional positions have become difficult to hold. It seems certain that the church will be very different within the space of a few years. Can it, while evolving, contain the increased diversity in points of view that is likely to accompany this process? Will the Adventist symbols evolve new meanings, or must the church either split or be reduced to its conservative core?

Conclusion

In the interest of pursuing the organizational goals of maintaining membership and bringing more sheep into the fold, officials of the Adventist church were able, while for decades their community remained intellectually and socially isolated, to quash questions concerning doctrine. Those people who did have doubts found themselves isolated and, if they did reveal their thoughts, that they were subject to criticism and ridicule, and also risked losing their church employment, their community, and their way of life. That is, they lacked one of the most basic prerequisites for mobilization--communication networks. The second prerequisite for mobilization, common interests, did exist in the form of questions about the Adventist belief system. However, without communication networks, the scholars could not act as a body and thus could not act at all.

When educational and social mobility eroded Adventist isolation, and especially when practical considerations demanded that young Adventist scholars obtain graduate degrees from non-Adventist universities, the situation was ripe for the emergence of a social movement within the church. Once scholars and educated laypeople created a network of like-minded people who supported each other as they seized opportunities to raise doctrinal questions, the church's system of controls, which had relied on the isolation and economic dependence of questioners, became less effective. Only when Ford and Rea burst into the spotlight as a result of the spread of their ideas through the network were church leaders able to apply restraining sanctions successfully. The departure of the two men from the church and the resignation of others has not reduced the effectiveness of the network appreciably, although it has resulted in unwillingness to express divergent views for fear of reprisal. While questions about Adventist belief and the Adventist lifestyle remain and the network is intact, new challenges are likely to occur at any time.

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