

# Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety: Patterns of Diversity within a Sect Reducing Tension with Society\*

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The Branch Davidians were linked to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by their historical roots, the source of their members, their name (officially the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists), their identity, and their apocalyptic preoccupations, idiom, and paranoias. This paper examines the responses within Seventh-day Adventism to the sudden notoriety of the Branch Davidians. In so doing, it sheds new light on the Branch Davidian tragedy: Because Adventist leaders focused on distancing their church from the stigmatized Davidians, the confusion and misconceptions surrounding the latter's practices and apocalyptic theology were not clarified, and information and resources that might have helped government officials play a more constructive role during the siege were withheld. However, the official response was only one of several within Adventism to the Branch Davidian saga. The paper isolates three divergent responses, which are used as a vehicle for exploring long-term trends within Adventism — its increasing diversity and the strains flowing therefrom. The uncovering of these differing responses opens the way for an investigation of the pattern of diversity that emerges in a sect that is, in the terms of Stark and Bainbridge, reducing its tension with society and moving toward denominational status.

On February 28, 1993, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) carried out a raid on "Mount Carmel,"<sup>1</sup> the compound of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, an urgently millenarian sect, in Waco, Texas. Their stated purpose was to search for illegal weapons and to check out reports of child abuse by the sect's leader, David Koresh, a proclaimed messianic figure who, it was said, claimed all the women on the compound, including pubescent girls, for his exclusive sexual use. In an exchange of gunfire, four agents and six of the Branch Davidians were killed (Labaton 1993a: A1). This bungled raid propelled the tiny, obscure sect to prominence on the national newscasts, where it remained for 51 days during a bizarre standoff with the FBI, which replaced the BATF. This standoff culminated in a second raid, when the compound was burnt to the ground and at least 75 sect members, including Koresh and 25 children under 15 years of age, were killed (Labaton 1993b: 11).

The Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists were linked to the Seventh-day Adventist (hereafter *Adventist*) Church by their historical roots, the origins of their members, their name, their identity, and their apocalyptic preoccupations, idiom, and paranoias. Organizationally, the distance between the two groups was two steps. The Branch Davidians

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1. This was irreverently dubbed "Ranch Apocalypse" by the media.

had been formed in 1959, when their parent group, the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, had splintered. The latter had itself originated as a schism from Seventh-day Adventism dating back to 1930, when its founder and prophet figure, Victor Houteff, was expelled by his Adventist congregation (Committee on Defense Literature 1955: 6).<sup>2</sup> All Davidian groups fixated on their Seventh-day Adventist roots, for not only did they continue to share a considerable amount with the Adventist Church both theologically<sup>3</sup> and behaviorally,<sup>4</sup> but they also continued to identify it as the true church and to think of themselves as part of it. However, they held that its apocalyptic expectations needed to be altered in accordance with their new light. Since it was their God-given purpose to share their particular message with Adventists, they concentrated their evangelistic efforts there, so that almost all their recruits were drawn from Adventist ranks. One of their chief strategies was to encourage such recruits to maintain their membership in the Adventist church in order to keep regular access to Adventists (Cottrell 1993a: 5, 6). They consequently became a familiar disruptive presence in many Adventist congregations and at Adventist camp meetings in many parts of the English-speaking world.<sup>5</sup> The Adventist church in Waco became a special target of the successive Davidian groups headquartered there (Harper 1993: 27; Branson and Haloviak 1993). The leadership of the Adventist Church recognized these continuing bonds when, in 1959, following the failure of a prophecy<sup>6</sup> by the then-leader of the Davidians, it engaged in lengthy but ultimately fruitless discussions with prominent Davidians in the hope of bringing the group back within the Adventist fold (Cottrell 1993a: 6-7).

The Branch Davidians continued this focus on the Seventh-day Adventist Church. David Koresh<sup>7</sup> had grown up as an Adventist, had attended an Adventist school, and was an active church member until he pressed divergent views too strongly and was disfellowshipped by his congregation, at which point he was drawn to the Branch Davidians (Claiborne and McGee 1993: 20-23; Haus and Hamblin 1993: 37-71). Nevertheless, he continued to speak in the "prophetic-apocalyptic idiom of Adventism" (Sandefur and Shoepflin 1994: 6). Under his leadership, the Branch Davidians had earnestly pursued Adventists, and were especially successful in gaining recruits in Hawaii, England, and Australia (Sandefur and Liu 1993: 30; Waite and Osei 1993: 34-35). Consequently, the vast majority of those living, and killed, at Mount Carmel at the time of the BATF and FBI raids had been drawn recently from the ranks of Adventists, where they had often played active and even prominent roles in their congregations. Following Davidian practice, the names of many of them were no doubt still on the rolls of Adventist churches; most of them had family members who were Adventists (Branson 1993: 2; Editorial 1993: 4).

The official name of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists and the Adventist origins of most of their members led the media to turn for information to Adventists, whose first impulse was to be helpful. It was therefore not surprising that the Branch Davidian links with the Adventist Church received prominent attention from the media in the hours

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2. Citing the minutes of a specially called business meeting at the Olympic Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Nov. 20, 1930, at which Houteff was disfellowshipped.

3. Such as a historicist approach to biblical prophecy and an eager expectation of events heralding the Second Coming of Christ.

4. Such as the observance of the Saturday Sabbath.

5. For example, I have vivid memories of their being expelled by police from Adventist campgrounds in Australia during the 1950s.

6. That the Jews and Arabs would be expelled from Israel, opening the way for the Davidians to migrate there.

7. Then known by his given name of Vernon Howell.

immediately following the BATF raid and that the two groups were confused in some of the coverage.

This paper examines the responses within Adventism to the sudden notoriety of the Branch Davidians and to the linking of the two groups by the media. It isolates three strongly divergent responses among Adventists, compares them, locates them within Adventism, and uses them as a tool to examine Adventism's pluralism and internal conflicts. It explains these in terms of the changes and tensions that emerge within a religious group moving from "sect" toward "denomination." Finally, it considers the configuration of the diversity that emerges in such a "denominationalizing sect."

## RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is a product of a large study of international Seventh-day Adventism. Over the past 10 years I have gathered data in 54 countries in all 11 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's world divisions, completing over 3,000 long, in-depth interviews with church administrators, pastors, teachers, hospital personnel, college students, and leading laypersons; I have also collected lengthy, probing questionnaires from interviewees and samples of college students and laity, gathered field notes from observation at church services and key meetings, and culled data systematically from Adventist periodicals, statistical reports, and secondary sources. My understanding of the three diverse streams within Adventism that are depicted in this paper is drawn primarily from interviews (where I explored their differing beliefs, goals, and strategies, and the tensions among them, at length), their publications (where all three, and especially, in recent years, the official church and the conservatives, have been at pains to distinguish themselves from the others), and observation in meetings. My understanding of the responses of all three Adventist streams to the sudden notoriety of the Branch Davidians is based on an analysis of articles and comments in the various publications, interviews with key figures who orchestrated these responses, a meeting in which Gary Patterson, the designated official spokesperson on the issue, described the development of the official response and analyzed its effectiveness, and a paper by Caleb Rosado (1993c), which first alerted me to the unpublicized fact that church leaders had hired professionals in damage control in their effort to prevent their church's reputation from being blemished through being associated in the media with the Branch Davidians.

### *Theoretical Focus*

Church-Sect theory, one of the key analytic tools used in the study of the sociology of religion, was developed first by Troeltsch in 1911 (1931). It proved especially stimulating once Niebuhr applied it to the religious scene in the United States in 1929 (1957), even though the absence of an established church and America's vast religious pluralism led researchers to change the theory's nomenclature — as they now compared *sects* with *denominations* rather than *churches*, and tested Niebuhr's contention that all *sects* were destined to be transformed into *denominations* (1957:54). However, there was some confusion because the lists of characteristics used to define *sect* and *denomination* often varied considerably from one researcher to another.

Stark and Bainbridge, drawing on an earlier insight by Johnson (1963:542)) put forward a single dimension with which to distinguish *sects* from *denominations*: "the degree to which a religious group is in a *state of tension* with its surrounding sociocultural environment" (1985:23). They defined a sect as a religious group having high tension with society — tension which flows from different behavioral characteristics that are scorned or punished by powerful elites in society — and showed that such differences could be measured statistically (49-50); in contrast, a denomination has low tension with society (51).

Over time, some sects compromise with the world, reducing the tension between themselves and society, and move toward denominational status. This usually occurs as there is some level of participation in the wider society and as influential members experience upward mobility and then find that the tension between their religious group and society is inconsistent with their interests (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:134, 99, 103). Consequently, Stark and Bainbridge classify denominations and sects across a six-point scale measuring degrees of tension with society, ranging from “low” to “extreme” tension (135).

Sects where tension is very high tend to be fairly homogeneous because they appeal to a limited social group — the poor — and stress and enforce the differences in behavior and belief that set them apart (49). On the other hand, denominations, where tension is much lower, are much more diverse, appealing to a much wider social spectrum even though their leadership is drawn from higher status groups, and tolerating considerable diversity in behavior and belief (51, 43). Recent studies focusing on the political polarization of American religion (Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988) could be construed as arguing that denominations have become more homogeneous, since they “tend to fall within one or another of the major camps” (Roof and McKinney 1987: 80). However, all the major denominations continue to be characterized by considerable diversity. On the one hand, “there is within the moderate and liberal Protestant churches a wide range of differences in doctrinal beliefs, moral views and social and political attitudes; theological and cultural pluralism not only reigns but is widely celebrated” (Roof and McKinney 1987: 52); on the other hand, the recent history of the major “conservative” denomination, the Southern Baptists, has been marked by “battles” that are rooted in the social and ideological diversity of the membership (Ammerman 1990), and “pluralism is very much a reality” for American Catholicism — “theologically, culturally, morally” (Roof and McKinney 1987: 226).

As a sect reduces its tension with society, and begins to move from *sect* toward *denomination*, it is likely to become more diverse. For example, Niebuhr realized that some members would become uncomfortable as their sect accommodated to society, and would hold fast to the traditional teachings, thus creating theological diversity within the ranks and risking, ultimately, a new sectarian schism. The new theological pluralism is likely to mirror social dimensions of diversity as, for example, some members rise in social status as a result of achieving higher levels of education than their forebears or accumulating some degree of wealth (Niebuhr 1957: 19-20, 54).

This has been the experience of Seventh-day Adventists in recent decades, especially in North America. The chief engine of change has been the development of large church-sponsored educational (kindergarten through university) and health-care systems. These have encouraged ever-increasing participation in society, such as accreditation and public funds for institutions and higher education at major universities for faculty; they have also produced considerable upward mobility among members, especially those raised as Adventists.

Consequently, when Stark and Bainbridge used data collected in the 1960s to categorize religious groups in America on their six-point scale measuring tension with society, they classified Adventists at point 4 (1985: 135). Although this was in the “high tension” half of the scale, indicating that they had found fairly high differences between Adventists and mainline Protestants in norms, beliefs, behavior, social encapsulation, and social distance (53-63), this category represented the lowest degree of tension of the three “sectarian” points on the scale. Stark and Bainbridge thus recognized that Adventism’s original level of tension with society had been lowered considerably by the 1960s (135).

Adventist tension with society has continued to decline since that time — and at a sharply quicker pace. In 1972 the church took the final step in de-emphasizing its teaching that members should avoid bearing arms in military service, which was always a possible

cause of scorn and legal difficulties (see below). The social status of American Adventists has climbed steeply: A recent survey showed that two out of three Adventist men hold professional, managerial, and white-collar jobs, and that the proportion who have completed some level of higher education is almost double that of the general population (Sahlin 1991: 17-18). Adventist hospitals are now eagerly establishing formal alliances with others in order to survive in an increasingly competitive market. Church leaders identify increasingly with corporate managers: They built a new headquarters in a corporate park in Silver Spring, Maryland, in the 1980s, and in 1994 recommended structural changes that would make the president of the General Conference, the head of the church, its "Chief Executive Officer."

Bryan Wilson agrees with this assessment: Although Adventists exhibit a "less emphatic denominationalism" than, for example, the Methodists, they, more than their fellow nineteenth-century American-born sects such as the Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses, "have gradually accepted a less intensely sectarian stance, and in some respects have come closer to a denominational position" (1990: 110, 140-141).

Wilson earlier isolated another factor that is significant to the case being made here. He found that those sects which he defines as "adventist," or apocalyptic, tend to move much more slowly from sect toward denomination than those he defines as "revivalist sects." The reason is that the former demand that converts have considerable knowledge before they are admitted, whereas the latter add new members rapidly without a great deal of prior training and socialization (Wilson 1959). In terms of this analysis, Adventism has shifted sharply toward becoming a "revivalist sect" over the past decade or so as it has made rapid growth its first priority.

As a religious group moves in this way from sect toward denomination, and develops diversity within its ranks, is this diversity like that of denominations or does it have a distinct configuration? The varied responses within Adventism to the sudden notoriety of the Branch Davidians provide a vehicle for exploring this question. These responses are now examined.

### THE OFFICIAL RESPONSE

Seventh-day Adventist leaders disagree with sociologists who categorize their church as a sect. Their publications have frequently rejected such a label in recent years:

Adventists have often been thought of as a sect or cult. . . . But Adventists have always looked upon themselves as being in solidarity with historic Christianity. . . . Seventh-day Adventists hold to the central core truths of Christian faith. . . . [they] meet all the criteria of an authentic church. The idea of cult or sect does not apply. (North American Division 1992: 71-72)

Over the past 30-40 years, as they have sensed that tension between Adventism and society has been diminishing, they have increasingly yearned for approval, influence and mainline status. Because they regarded the image and reputation of the church as important, they transformed the General Conference Press Bureau into a more sophisticated Bureau of Public relations in 1954, and then into a full-blown Department of Communication in 1973 ("Communication" 1976: 337-342). Most upwardly mobile American Adventist laypersons share such aspirations for their church.

There is an insecurity here, however: Adventist leaders covet acceptance, but they are not sure that they have it. They became so concerned with their image that in 1981 they trademarked the denominational name in an attempt to prevent any unsavory group from sullyng their church's reputation. The most celebrated case to follow from this action was a suit against Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, Inc., an "organization of gay and lesbian Seventh-day Adventists and their families and friends," in an unsuccessful attempt

to enjoin the group from using the church's name, and thus indicating the presence of homosexuals among church members (Lawson 1992b).

This concern for the acceptance of the Adventist church in society is all part of a pattern that has developed strongly in recent decades. The wish to win acceptance and accolades from the U.S. government led the church to transform its position on military service over time: It switched from a pacifist position during the American Civil War to one of working closely with the military in training Adventists for medical service in the armed forces during wars from World War II onward; from 1955 through 1973, as a result of encouragement from church leaders, 2,200 conscripted members who had registered as noncombatants volunteered for a special program designed for them, in which they served as human guinea pigs in germ- and chemical-war experiments; and ultimately, in 1973, church leaders voted to allow Adventists to train and serve with arms (Lawson 1992a). Once this pattern of ties to the military was established in the United States, church leaders in other countries with increasing frequency pursued exchange relationships with their own governments, especially with political dictators. In so doing they accorded the political leaders legitimacy in return for recognition and favors. For example, Adventists in Chile became known as "the friends of Pinochet" after the president of their college, at a televised ceremony welcoming the general to the campus, in a prayer thanked God for sending him "to save the nation." Such legitimation from a religious body was of great value to the dictator at a time when he was under attack from the Catholic Cardinal for murders, disappearances, and torture. He returned the favor by granting the college accreditation, which it had sought for many years (interviews). On some occasions church leaders have reported or denounced schismatic Adventists whose beliefs led them to reject cooperation with the state<sup>8</sup> rather than risk the tarnishing of the church's standing with the state as a result of being confused with them (Lawson 1991).

Given the concern of the Adventist leaders with the reputation and acceptance of their church, it is not surprising that they felt very threatened by the early media coverage of the Waco shootout, which often linked Adventists to what was being portrayed as a crazy, immoral, and violent religious cult. Adventists themselves contributed considerably to this coverage: The Communications Department at church headquarters issued overly detailed and defensive press releases, local church officials and pastors often eagerly answered questions from the press, and well-meaning church members called television and radio talk shows to correct what they perceived as inaccuracies. These responses cemented the perceived ties between Adventists and the Branch Davidians during the first week after the BATF raid. Ultimately assessing the situation as a major media crisis with international implications because of the varied origins of the Branch Davidians, and seeing that their Communications Department had proved itself ill prepared to handle it, the church leaders then chose, at the cost of \$75,000-\$100,000, to hire professional media consultants to distance Seventh-day Adventism from the Branch Davidians (Rosado 1993c: 9; Sandefur and Shoepflin 1994: 3-5, 15; Patterson 1994). They thus defined the situation as primarily a public relations problem, and focused their efforts on damage control: "the first item of business was to get the name of the church out of the story" (Patterson 1993: 6).

The official church paper reported that "hundreds" of members had phoned to express their shock and horror at seeing "the name of their church linked with a radical sect" (Newsbreak 1993: 7; McClure 1993: 5). Editors summarized a widespread sentiment:

If you're like me, you're sensitive about the public image of the church. You want to see it portrayed positively in the media. Any negative public notice upsets you. (Adams 1993: 6)

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8. For example, members of the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement in Nazi Germany, the True and Free Adventists in the Soviet Union, and followers of the "Small Committee" in Hungary during the 1980s (King 1982; Sapiets 1990; interviews).

From the shootout on February 28 to the inferno of April 19 we felt sick at heart as we saw and heard our name in the television and the news reports that dealt at length on this ghastly event. (Johnsson 1993: 4)

Adventist hospitals helped fund the costs of the media consultants and their campaign because they saw this as a way to help preserve their reputations, which they saw as endangered by the threat to the image of the church (Patterson 1994).

The consultants who hereafter orchestrated the press releases and press conferences described their goals as

To successfully distinguish the Davidian Cult from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, ensuring public support for Seventh-day Adventism as a mainstream religion, providing spiritual guidance, disaster relief, education and health care services to millions of people worldwide. (Sandefur and Shoepflin 1994: 19)<sup>9</sup>

The information they released was kept to a minimum and the chosen “spin” imparted to it. A typical press release, issued after the fire, stated:

Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church has no affiliation with the Branch Davidians or any other cult, our hearts go out to those who have lost loved ones in the Waco, Texas, tragedy. As compassionate, peace-loving people, our prayers are with these families.

The Adventist Church provides an array of services and programs which focus on Christ's caring model of meeting the needs of those around Him. These services and programs include: a worldwide network of hospitals, clinics and mobile health-screening vans; an international disaster relief agency to help victims of hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and other disasters; and the world's largest Protestant school system. (Haus and Hamblin 1993: 31)

In order to control this campaign, the consultants insisted that the church speak through a single spokesperson, whom they trained fully for his role. This meant preventing pastors and laity from attempting to use media questions as opportunities for evangelism — they were placed under a virtual gag order by the world president of the church (Patterson 1994; Rosado 1993c: 8-9; Sandefur and Shoepflin 1994: 16-17). In a further attempt to distance Adventism from the Branch Davidians, the pastor of the Adventist church in Waco, after consultation with church headquarters, organized a special offering for the families of the law enforcement officers killed in the BATF assault on Mount Carmel. He publicized this widely among Adventist churches, and also tried to gain participation from the churches of other denominations in Waco. There was no thought of helping the families of the Branch Davidians who had been killed (Branson and Haloviak 1993; interview).

The campaign was successful in persuading the media that the connection between the Branch Davidians and Seventh-day Adventists was remote. Adventists soon largely disappeared from accounts of the saga. The consultants used their contacts with the media to pull content about Adventists out of the stories, sometimes threatening to sue if incorrect information were reported: “the contacts and know-how of the consultants were vital” (Patterson 1994).<sup>10</sup> Church leaders concluded that the campaign had met their goals — the media crisis had been averted. However, the church publications never informed the membership that media consultants had been hired: although Caleb Rosado, an Adventist sociologist, wrote two articles in the church press analyzing the situation (1993a, 1993b), he reserved his account of the consultants and their media campaign for a paper presented at a professional meeting (1993c). The designated media spokesperson commented later that

9. Quoted from the crisis management plan created by Porter/Novelli for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

10. In contrast, church leaders in Australia, where no consultants were hired, were dismayed when the local edition of *Time* magazine added biographies of most of the Australians killed in the fire to the story that ran in the international edition, and all were shown to have come from Adventist families (1993a:42-43;1993b:43-44).

"there is always debate at the General Conference [Church headquarters] concerning how much to allow the membership to know" (Patterson 1994).

Although a book published by an official church publishing house commented that "because Davidian theology could be built only on Adventist theology, you had to have an Adventist understanding of the Bible even to understand what the Davidians were talking about" (Haus and Hamblin 1993: 69), Adventists chose, because of their policy of avoiding any action that would link them to the Branch Davidians, to refrain from offering to help the FBI in its theological negotiations with Koresh to end the standoff. This role fell instead to Southern Baptists from Baylor University, who did not speak the same theological language as Koresh.<sup>11</sup> Church leaders were also concerned that if they entered a highly publicized debate with Koresh over the meaning of Revelation's seven seals, an item where there is no unity of interpretation within the Adventist church, it could cause disunity among the church membership (Patterson 1994).

Adventists are well known for their support of religious liberty and, in the United States, for their advocacy of maintaining the constitutional separation of church and state. A special department of the church, which focuses on these matters, publishes a widely distributed magazine, *Liberty*, sponsors interdenominational religious liberty organizations and international conferences, and intervenes in relevant legislation and judicial cases. Although many other churches saw the federal attacks on Mount Carmel as unwarranted and therefore a major breach of religious liberty, Adventists were so taken up with protecting their reputation that they failed to consider this aspect of the crisis. The Adventist stance on religious liberty is fundamentally self-serving — staving off prophesied persecution from the state, especially in the United States, and easing problems encountered with their observance of the Saturday Sabbath. Concern for the issues of others, added more recently, was designed to give credibility to its position (Morgan 1992; Syme 1973). However, in this case distancing Adventists from Branch Davidians was the self-serving mode, and any indication of Adventist interest in the issue endangered this goal. However, when, after Waco, Adventists discovered that the crisis had created demands that the government exercise greater control over religious proselytizing and crack down on cults (a dangerously vague term), they suddenly became aware that their own religious liberties were threatened and returned to their usual alert stance (Haus and Hamblin 1993: 170-178; Boothby 1994: 15).

Some official publications ventured to ask why some Adventists had been vulnerable to the teachings of the Branch Davidians: "Why were Adventists among the victims?" (Haus and Hamblin 1993: subtitle). The latter suggested "the apocalyptic emphasis," "belief in a coming persecution," "openness to the idea of new light," and the extent to which some of Koresh's major themes were familiar to Adventists (146-151). Sociologist Rosado suggested that the recent muting of the traditional "strong emphasis on the prophetic message" rendered some Adventists vulnerable to the teachings of a new prophetic figure (1993a:16). Patterson, the designated church spokesperson on the issue, suggested in a retrospective discussion that it was the fundamentalists among Adventists — those wanting authoritative answers to all questions — who were vulnerable, and that the focus on unlocking imminent world events in Adventist evangelism, such as the "Revelation Seminars" that had played a key role in energizing Koresh, tended to attract such people to Adventism (1994). However, the editor of the *Adventist Review*, the official church paper, rejected the question: Although the Branch Davidians had targeted Adventists, they had won only 30 or 40 families from a world membership of over seven million; the Branch Davidians had "absolutely" no connec-

11. The success of two other theologians who chose to immerse themselves in Koresh's understanding of the Biblical book of Revelation in order to negotiate with him (only to have their agreement with him to bring the standoff to an end aborted by the impatience of the FBI) indicates the positive role that Adventists might have played earlier in the siege (Tabor 1994; Arnold 1994).



tion with Seventh-day Adventists, and those Adventists who followed Koresh did so because “they chose to do so” — Adventism was not to blame (Johnsson 1993: 4-5). Another editorial used the Branch Davidian experience to point up “the inherent dangers when extremist groups hold skewed interpretations of prophecy” — the official Adventist interpretations were, by definition, not “skewed” (Medley 1993:5). The president of the church in North America urged Adventists to “beware of anyone of any group that plays on paranoia, persecution, and enemies. . . . Dwelling on the terrors of the last days instead of on Jesus leads to diseased minds and a diseased theology” (McClure 1993:6) — a statement that ignored the vivid descriptions of coming persecution in the writings of Ellen White, the Adventist prophet (1888).

At the annual meeting of the North American Division of the church some months later, delegates discussed the unfavorable press coverage received as a result of the Waco crisis, and voted to appoint a study/commission “to study ways to enhance the image of the church” as “an offsetting measure to future calamitous events that might adversely effect the image” of the church. In introducing the discussion, the division president “gave the example of how the Mormons have changed their image from a church that practices polygamy to a church that encourages and supports the family” (North American Division Year-end Actions 1994:18).

### THE RESPONSE OF CONSERVATIVE ADVENTISTS

Although the official Adventist publications presented a picture of a united response to the Branch Davidian Crisis, with the laity eagerly supporting the church's media strategy, the picture was false. Patterson commented later that “we met major problems within the church community, because many disagreed with the strategy of distancing the church from the Branch Davidians. Some saw this as an opportunity to get our apocalyptic message out. We became the object of scathing attacks from some” (1994). The critics included both pastors and laypersons who accorded an opportunity to gain widespread media coverage of the Adventist message much higher priority than protecting the image of their church. Many of these were first-generation converts,<sup>12</sup> who had been attracted to Adventism by the traditional approach of Adventist evangelists, who continue to emphasize the nearness of the expected apocalypse, with lurid portrayals of prophecies of persecution of God's Sabbath-keeping elect at the hands of Roman Catholics and the state.<sup>13</sup> Other critics were drawn from the ranks of racial minorities, who tend to be more sectarian in their Adventist beliefs, partly because they face more tension in society and seek refuge in the church (Rosado 1993b). Others were long-term white Adventists, often with several generations of Adventist forebears, who have become increasingly upset over the official church's soft-pedaling of the beliefs they hold most dear. However, the most bitter attacks on the official strategy were leveled by some of the so-called “independent ministries,” which have recently grown increasingly rancorous in their critique of what they see as the abandonment by the official church of “historic Adventism,” with its urgent millenarianism, and its replacement by a “new theology.” These are mostly led by long-term white Adventists who were formerly pastors or played other prominent roles in the Adventist church.

During the 1970s and 1980s church leaders had reserved most of their barbs for independent liberal Adventist groups (see below). But in 1991-92 they opened a much stronger

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12. Pastors are being drawn increasingly from the ranks of recent converts.

13. Evangelists cling to this stance because those motivated to evangelize tend to be more traditional, and because the approach has proved to be more effective in attracting potential converts.

broadside against some of the conservative independent ministries,<sup>14</sup> whom they accused of provoking disunity through bitter attacks on church leadership and of causing a hemorrhage of funds at a time of shortage because of rapid Adventist growth among the poor in the developing world (North American Division 1992:7). In a large special publication (North American Division 1992), they focused on four groups in particular, but indicated that their critique applied to others also (83): "the General Conference has identified nearly 800 private organizations, most of which seek our members' financial support" (148). Several issues concerning the "dissident groups" were identified:

1. They accuse the Adventist Church of apostasy from the historic faith because the church does not accept their interpretation of certain theological positions.
2. They accuse denominational leadership of collusion in apostasy because they do not squelch teachings that the dissidents find offensive.
3. They accuse the ministry of introducing worldly, and even immoral, practices into the church, and denominational leadership of approving these practices.
4. They seek to set up a "church within a church," a true and poorer remnant that will remain when the apostates (those who disagree with them) will be shaken out.
5. Their methods result in loyal Adventist members sending tithe to them rather than to the church. (7)

One group, Hope International, was singled out as especially dangerous because its publication, *Our Firm Foundation*, is being translated into other languages and is being read widely by Adventists in many parts of the world — indeed, it was said that its circulation, much of which is sent out as free subscriptions, exceeds that of the *Adventist Review*, the official church paper (173). The turmoil was greatest, however, in North America.

Like the Branch Davidians, these dissident groups are urgently millennial and focus their message and recruitment efforts at Adventists. It was therefore important that they too distinguish themselves from the Waco cult and show that they have avoided the pitfalls into which the latter had fallen: "We abhor not only the Branch Davidian theology but also their behavior" (Monterrey 1993: 14; see also Ferrell 1993).

However, where the Davidians shared their negative evaluation of the state of the Adventist church, this gave the dissident ministries a club with which to beat church leaders. They affirmed that Houteff had been correct in seeing the Adventist Church as lax, and that the return of Christ would be delayed until a purer church was ready to receive him (Monterrey 1993: 14). Indeed, the seed for the unbalanced thinking of Koresh could be traced back to the Adventist church: "While the SDA church has the answers, its message is getting lost." They declared that their church had moved away from "present truth," the message it had been called to carry to the world: General Conference President Folkenberg had declared that Adventists had "too long" been putting what is "different and distinctive as the front line of approach," and that Christ should be at the forefront. This betrayal of the distinctive Adventist message would render it little different from that of any other church (Hodges 1993:2).

Moreover, Koresh, a "false messiah," was further proof that the world's end was imminent, for Jesus had warned of false christs. It was disturbing that, in spite of the clear warnings to Adventists, some of them had nevertheless followed this deceiver. The root cause of this was that the church is no longer preaching its message: "our close fraternization with the World Council of Churches, with the churches of Babylon, and with the local ministerial associations has nearly shut our mouths to giving to the world the distinct message that has made us God's remnant church in this last generation" (Spear 1993:29).

Furthermore, the apocalyptic Adventists resonated with the experience of the Branch Davidians, for Ellen White had prophesied that Adventists would be persecuted, especially by American government forces. If the Davidians could be treated this way, wouldn't Adventists be next? And so, unwillingly, they also identified with the Branch Davidians.

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14. They distinguished these from others they deemed to be supportive.

## THE RESPONSE OF LIBERAL ADVENTISTS

In the late 1960s there were, for the first time, numbers of Adventist graduate students at major universities such as Harvard, Columbia, the University of Michigan, and the University of California at Berkeley. These began to discover one another and to meet together to discuss issues growing out of their studies which impinged on their faith — issues that most congregations would likely have found threatening if they had been raised there. When church leaders, who had often expressed fear that education in “worldly institutions” would lead Adventist students to lose their faith, learned of the discussion groups, they encouraged the students to organize formally. The result was the formation of a series of “Adventist Forums,” which earned a reputation for addressing relatively daring topics and increasingly drew other like-minded Adventists from their local communities to their meetings. These soon federated as the Association of Adventist Forums (AAF), and began to publish *Spectrum*, an independent, academically oriented Adventist journal (Osborn 1980). Since this was a period of expansion in Adventist colleges, and many of these students went on to teach in theologically related and other academic departments there, they then founded new Forum chapters on these campuses. AAF thus brought together theologians with higher degrees from non-Adventist institutions, other academics, and other professionals interested in exploring issues related to Adventism.

Although church leaders had originally facilitated the formation of the Forum chapters, they soon became uncomfortable with a journal whose content they could not control. They criticized *Spectrum* for questioning aspects of Adventist theology (such as the six-day creation and short age of the earth [e.g., Ritland 1969; Hare 1979; Benton 1984; Hammill 1984]) and for publishing articles that opened issues they would rather have remained silent about (such as the uncertainty of early twentieth century church leaders concerning the inspiration of Ellen White, the Adventist prophet [Couperus 1979]). An open break between the then-president of the world church and *Spectrum* followed articles revealing that successful efforts by church leaders to build relationships with the Soviet government had been accompanied by their repudiation of the schismatic and highly sectarian True and Free Adventists, which had then opened the way for increased persecution of the latter by the state, and an editorial that likened the Adventist political structure and system of electing its leaders to those of the Soviet Union and Communist China (Sapiets 1981; Lepshina 1981; Dybdahl 1981; Daffern 1981; Wilson and Lohne 1981; Branson 1984; Board of the AAF 1984; interviews). As recently as 1992, Robert Folkenberg, the current world president, accused organized liberal Adventists of undermining “the authority of Scripture, our fundamental beliefs, and our distinctive end-time message” (1992:5-6). Since that time a second liberal journal, *Adventist Today*, which has more of a west coast focus and flavor, has begun publication.

Both liberal journals devoted issues to the Branch Davidian crisis and stated that their purpose was to help the Adventist church learn from the experience (Editorial 1993:4; Branson 1993:2). Several themes emerged from these two groups of articles.

These liberal Adventists are so different theologically from the sectarian Branch Davidians that they felt no compulsion to distinguish or distance themselves from them. Instead they emphasized the common Adventist connection, since both groups were part of a greater Adventism, and urged that Adventists show concern for them. They spelled out the connection in detail: It was both historical, in the schismatic origins of the Davidians and the 1959 joint meetings, and ongoing, through members who were recruited from Adventism and who often maintained their membership and participation in Adventist churches (Cottrell 1993a: 5-7). Not only had Koresh been shaped by his Adventist background (Claiborne and McGee 1993:20-23), but he could be regarded as suffering on behalf of Adventists:

a piece of us is inside the Waco compound. We have all been part of a religious family that has its dysfunctional side, and our black-sheep brother David is acting out the role of scapegoat very effectively for us. (Cooper 1993: 47)

The common sources of the two groups came through loud and clear in articles that examined what kinds of Adventists had chosen to follow Koresh. Those converted from a church in Hawaii were of diverse socioeconomic status, often active in the church, typically in their twenties, and recent converts to Adventism (Sandefur and Liu 1993:30-31); those from England were mostly educated black Adventists with a Caribbean background (Waite and Osei 1993: 34). Of those who had become Koresh's chief lieutenants, one held a law degree from Harvard, another had recently completed an M.A. in religion from Loma Linda University, an Adventist school, and a third had studied at Andrews University, home of the Adventist Seminary (Haloviak 1993: 39; Baldwin 1993: 11; Sandefur and Liu 1993: 30-31). Indeed, these categories were similar to those of many Forum members.

Moreover, the Branch Davidians had important things in common with Adventists:

Koresh's broadcast appeal referred to apocalyptic symbols and presuppositions embraced by traditional Seventh-day Adventism. His call to unlock the Apocalypse, to break the seven seals, and to anticipate the battle of Armageddon mirrors calls made by evangelists who attracted our grandparents, our parents, ourselves. (Teel 1993: 48)

Consequently, "this is an Adventist tragedy" (Warren 1993: 50).

A second strand criticized the official strategy of the church for failing to attempt to help the Branch Davidians:

Were we Adventists so anxious to save our reputation from the embarrassment of Koresh that we missed an opportunity to save the lives of the children . . . ? (Burse 1993: 51)

Why wasn't the Seventh-day Adventist Church searching for another way? . . . The Adventist Church may have been in a unique position to understand the torn psychology of some of the cult members. Where was the Church in the negotiations (between the FBI and Koresh)? (Warren 1993:50)

In giving first priority to protecting the name of the church, it failed to care for the members with relatives who had become Branch Davidians. (Nixon 1993)

It is certainly time, in their time of need, that we stopped distancing ourselves from our brothers and sisters who survived the Waco experience. (Warren 1993: 50)

A third issue was raised in the questions "How did Adventism contribute to this kind of tragedy?" and "Are there elements in the popular Adventist belief system that lend themselves to warped exploitation by charismatic leaders?" (Branson 1993: 2; Editorial 1993:4). Several authors commented on the similarity of Adventist and Branch Davidian apocalyptic thinking. Koresh's use of fear was reminiscent of the approach of many Adventist evangelists (Liu 1993: 8-9). Koresh had "solved" Revelation, just as many Adventists "thought — think — that we have Revelation solved" (Scriven 1993: 45). "Some Adventists are as urgently apocalyptic as the Branch Davidians" (Branson and Haloviak 1993). "The [Adventist] church was founded on a doctrine of 'present truth' which holds that God has special messages for today, or 'new light' that was not necessarily apparent in the scriptures nor essential for God's people in former times"; "Present truth" is inherently dynamic, but Adventists have frozen it since the death of their prophet in 1915; Koresh presented ongoing present truth: "He was reviving rather than contradicting the original spirit of Adventist theology" (Hokama 1993: 12). "With our religious addiction and bent toward our own kind of more dignified cultism, with the emphasis we have placed on apocalyptic — Day of Armageddon — theology, with its persecutorial paranoid overtones, we have inadvertently fed the dark side of the wounded and vulnerable souls like David Koresh" (Cooper 1993: 47).

Other authors blamed what they variously called “the proof-text method,” “fundamentalism,” and biblical “literalism,” which they saw as widespread within Adventism, for rendering Adventists vulnerable to Koresh:

Koresh, as with William Miller and a great cloud of Adventist witnesses, engages in a biblical interpretation that observers past and present characterize as “wooden literalism.” Comparing scripture line upon line and precept upon precept with less than a clear regard for historical context and using a (non)method that “lets the Bible serve as its own interpreter” leads inevitably to alarming consequences. . . . Quickly, leaders find themselves and their communities explicitly identified in the text. . . . when apocalyptic interpreters presume to label entire religious faiths as Babylon, while at the same time identifying their own community as constituting God’s True Remnant, the ground is laid for the sins of triumphalism, exclusivism, and pride. The abuse of authority blooms to full flower. Stir in a paranoid mindset that comes to anticipate — indeed, invite — persecution at the hands of those branded as Babylonian whores . . . and a self-fulfilling prophecy of destruction is set in motion. (Teel 1993: 48; compare Cottrell 1993b: 9; Scriven 1993: 45)

*Spectrum* concluded that “Koresh set the flame, but (Adventism) provided the materials” (Branson 1993: 2).

Finally, in view of the results of Koresh’s urgent millenarianism and of the similarity of the latter to what is often presented by Adventist evangelists, *Adventist Today* asked “Does the church’s emphasis on the ‘imminence’ of God’s kingdom need to be re-evaluated?” (Editorial 1993:4), and *Spectrum* published seven articles addressing the issue “What do we do with [the book of] Revelation after it has been so badly abused by someone like David Koresh?” (1993: 43-52). *Spectrum*, as it often does, included an array of articles, with some that represented a conservative viewpoint, upholding the Adventist apocalyptic, even though the fringe apocalypticists within Adventism “embarrass the mainline church”:

We may even wish to revise our apocalyptic stance. Aren’t we triumphalist in seeing ourselves as the one true church? Hasn’t the Sabbath/Sunday issue, so relevant when *The Great Controversy* was written, become obsolete in today’s secular society? Haven’t Adventists erred in focusing on the pope while neglecting to take a stand against oppressive dictators of the twentieth century? Shouldn’t we concentrate on the modern “beasts” of ethnic hatred, oppression of minorities, and abuse of the eco-system? Perhaps apocalyptic, with its sensationalism, represents an immature stage of Christianity. (Neall 1993: 46; compare Shea 1993)

Others, much more uncomfortable with the traditional Adventist apocalyptic, prudently avoided openly rejecting it in print. One argued that there was a standoff going on within Adventism

between those who see current events confirming Adventist interpretation of Revelation and those who see events like the Waco holocaust as confirming suspicion over the whole apocalyptic enterprise that has defined Adventism. . . . Were the followers of Koresh, faithful to death, precursors of a blind humanity soon to embrace the antichrist described in Revelation 13? Or were David Koresh and his flock an embodiment of the excesses of their Adventist heritage, too long grazing on the visions of Revelation? (Bursey 1993: 50-51)

“We’re in the midst of a standoff between those who attend Revelation Seminars and those who boycott them” (Bursey 1993: 50-51). Indeed, the issue has become so controversial that it can be dangerous to teach a course on the book of Revelation in an Adventist college: “On several North American Adventist campuses, biblical scholars studiously avoid teaching such a course” (Bursey 1993: 52).

A year later a professor of New Testament at the Adventist Seminary presented a paper on “The Impact of Waco on Adventist Teaching of Revelation at the Graduate Level” at the meeting of the liberal Adventist Society for Religious Study. He warned that “unsound interpretations and methods” were fostering “increasingly bizarre interpretations” of the book by “even mainstream figures” within the church, such as those running the popular “Revelation Seminars.” These could “become models for unstable people like Koresh,” with “life and death consequences for real people in the real world.” Moreover, Ellen White’s

comments were being widely misused, for it "was rarely her intention to do exegesis," and members were using concordances and computers to link "isolated snippets" of text to develop their own interpretations. He pleaded for the development of a "credible, text-sensitive . . . hermeneutic" (Paulien 1994).

## INTERPRETATION

There were thus three markedly different responses within Adventism to the tragedy of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians — responses that highlight the growing diversity of Adventism. This analysis has shown that these diverse orientations are located within different sections of the membership, and that the denominationalizing process and its opponents have well-marked constituencies that are not only ideologically distinct but also socially located.

The church leadership, together with much of the upwardly mobile American Adventist mainstream, urgently set out to protect their reputation by distancing their church from what was obviously a bizarre cult. Any link in the media between Adventists and Branch Davidians was an acute embarrassment. Having come so far from their sectarian origins, building admired institutions and experiencing considerable upward mobility, they sought recognition and acceptance as part of the religious mainstream. This concern for public image was in accord with the earlier trademarking of the denominational name and the court cases brought in attempts to enforce it. It also conformed with compromises made concerning military service; with authoritarian states; over attendance at schools on the Sabbath when demanded by such states; and with Adventist willingness to report schismatic groups, to avoid having their name besmirched as a result of being confused with them. Indeed, the one thing such Adventists seemed absolutely unwilling to compromise was their reputation.

The response of apocalyptic Adventists — traditional, conservative Adventists and especially the so-called "independent ministries" — to the Waco confrontation was complex. On the one hand, they felt the need to distance themselves from the Branch Davidians because of a sectarian need to distinguish themselves, the true "Remnant within a Remnant," from a counterfeit. Koresh and his followers were seen as clearly a counterfeit, for they were immoral (e.g., sexually, in their penchant for hoarding arms, in their devotion to rock music) and theologically heretical (e.g., in Koresh's claims to messiahship and in the details of their apocalyptic expectations). Yet they were similar to the conservative Adventists in their urgent millenarianism, and they drew their converts from the same pool. They were, then, surely a devilish counterfeit. It was all part of the "great controversy between Christ and Satan": Since the apocalyptic Adventists are, by definition, with Christ, Koresh was satanic. And yet, at the same time, Koresh was an important portent, for Jesus had warned that false christs were a sign of the end, and if the U.S. government had persecuted him, surely Ellen White's prophecy that Adventists would be forced to "flee to the mountains" was about to be fulfilled. Thus, while distancing themselves from the Branch Davidians, they also identified with them.

A small liberal strand, who are drawn especially from among the church's academics and are so different from the Branch Davidians in their beliefs that they were not threatened by similarities, were willing to recognize the latter as part of the pluralistic diversity of greater Adventism. They recognized that although the Davidians had broken away, or been pushed out of Adventism, three generations earlier, most of the Branch Davidian membership had been drawn immediately from Adventist ranks, albeit the traditional strand. These liberals therefore urged that the Branch Davidians be treated as brothers and sisters. They also used the catastrophe as an opportunity to address the question of what it is about Adventism that renders some of its members vulnerable to such a vision as that of Koresh.

Because Adventist leaders focused on distancing their church from the stigmatized Davidians, the confusion and misconceptions surrounding the latter's practices and apocalyptic theology were not clarified, and information and resources that might have helped government officials play a more constructive role during the siege were withheld. It is sobering, given what is now known through official inquiries concerning the circumstances of government raids on Mount Carmel (Labaton 1993a, 1993b), to realize that all three Adventist strands believed the initial official accounts — that is, the worst — about Koresh and the Branch Davidians, seemingly without question. This was gullibility, flowing from an Adventist respect for authorities and sensitivity to their own image. It occurred in spite of the Adventist concern for religious liberty and their own traditional expectations of persecution.

### **THE PATTERN OF DIVERSITY WITHIN A SECT REDUCING TENSION WITH SOCIETY**

It was noted above that extreme sects tend to be quite homogeneous, both in terms of social composition and in beliefs and behavior, whereas denominations are much more diverse along these dimensions. But what is the pattern that emerges in a sect once it begins to lower its tension with society and to become less sectarian and, ultimately, more denomination-like? The diversity uncovered in this paper is now used to explore this question. The Adventist experience indicates that such a sect is likely to become diverse as it becomes more denomination-like, but the pattern of its diversity will differ from that of an established denomination.

Several decades ago Seventh-day Adventism, as measured by the Stark and Bainbridge's criteria, was highly sectarian and in considerable tension with society. Marked differences from society, such as Adventist insistence on observing a Saturday Sabbath in a society where a six-day week was almost universal, its focus on the imminent return of Christ and end of the world as we know it, diet restrictions (vegetarianism; no coffee, tea, or alcohol), social life-style prohibitions (no theater, dancing, gambling, card playing, smoking, or reading of fiction), a commitment to "dress reform" and abstinence from jewelry and makeup, and a refusal to bear arms if conscripted, set Adventists apart. Its view of itself as God's Remnant people, the true church bearing God's final message in the last days, and its declarations that other religious groups were "apostate" and had become "the whore of Babylon," its brazen challenges to clergy of other denominations in its evangelistic meetings, and its expectation of persecution from other churches in collaboration with the state, all tended to create bitter antagonisms. These barriers were reinforced by the close ties that developed among Adventists, whose lives usually centered around their church, the subculture it created and fostered, and its mission, and who attended church schools, often worked for church institutions, and were frequently drawn by educational opportunities and economic and social ties to live in what became known colloquially as "Adventist Ghettos" or "New Jerusalems." They were also strengthened by rules, such as endogamy, and practices, such as their dietary and social prohibitions, that made it extremely difficult and/or uncomfortable to associate with others. Not only did Adventist differences attract scorn, but their Sabbath observance caused problems with employers and their refusal to bear arms had legal repercussions.

Such a degree of sectarian tension with society limited Adventism's diversity. For its first several decades the members of the small religious movement were remarkably homogeneous: white, English-speaking, rather poor, rural Americans. There was also considerable pressure to live the peculiar Adventist lifestyle and to embrace its eschatology and other beliefs. As Adventism began to spread geographically to other parts of the world following the establishment of its missions toward the end of the nineteenth century and especially during

the early decades of this century, its membership remained predominantly fairly poor adult converts who separated themselves to a large extent from society.

However, the level of tension between American Adventists and society has lowered markedly and at an increasing pace in recent decades. The growth and accreditation of their educational and medical institutions has encouraged participation in society and provided opportunities for upward mobility; Adventist medicine has become increasingly orthodox, and many of its hospitals have prospered and won friends; the coming of the five-day week has removed most of the major problems surrounding Sabbath observance; and Adventist dietary and smoking prohibitions have won increasing credibility as a result of medical research. At the same time, Adventism has lowered levels of antagonism toward others: It has sought good relations with governments, switched its position on military service, allowed its expectations of persecution to diminish, and begun to build better relations with other churches.

As tension with society was reduced, diversity grew among the members. The proportion who had inherited their Adventist identity increased, and because of the educational and career opportunities made available to them, they experienced considerable upward mobility, with many vaulting into the ranks of professionals. At the same time, Adventists expanded their evangelism and new, usually poor, racial and ethnic groups were converted in large numbers: first, especially after World War II, American blacks and then, increasingly, recent immigrants — West Indians, Hispanics, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. The highly educated members, led by theologians educated at famous divinity schools, often became less urgently apocalyptic, more questioning of peculiar beliefs, and less conforming in their life-style. On the other hand, many members, especially those who were less educated, including many recent converts, remained quite traditional, and these increasingly felt betrayed as church leaders put down roots in society and theologians backpedaled on their cherished beliefs and hopes. Urgently apocalyptic groups such as independent ministries or the Branch Davidians have focused on mobilizing such discontent. The message and purpose of Adventism has become less clear amid the growing disharmony.

In the early 1980s, partly to "prove" that God was still with them and partly to speed the fulfillment of their task of spreading the Adventist message and thus preparing for the apocalypse, church leaders chose to place much greater emphasis on growth, pressuring pastors and evangelists with high goals for new converts. These almost always used the traditional apocalyptic appeal because it was most successful, especially among the poor in developing countries and among new immigrants to developed countries. As a result, the world membership growth rate increased from 69.6% during the decade 1970-1980 to 92.4% during 1982-1992, with the total membership rising from 3.5 million in 1980 to 7.5 million in 1992 (Office of Archives and Statistics 1991, 1993). The most dramatic change in procedures as a result of the adoption of this new policy occurred in Africa, where would-be converts had previously been required to participate in baptismal class for two years before being admitted but were now typically baptized at the end of a three-week evangelistic campaign. Although the period of classes previously required in the United States and other parts of the world had not been as long as in Africa, the typical length of study before baptism was reduced sharply. Moreover, postbaptismal nurture often disappeared, as pastors were forced to turn their attention to attracting the next wave of prospective recruits. As noted above, Wilson found that rapid growth with lower levels of socialization for converts speeds the transition from sect to denomination.

The growth of the Adventist Church in North America<sup>15</sup> has been much more modest than that of the world church: The growth rate decreased from 37.5% during 1970-1980 to

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15. The North American Division comprises the United States, Canada, and Bermuda. In 1992, 94.3% of the Division's membership resided in the United States.



23.6% during 1982-1992, with the total membership rising from 604,430 in 1980 to 793,594 in 1992. However, the demographic profile of American Adventism has changed dramatically during this time. The white membership has declined and aged, with large losses among young inherited members in particular and few new converts. Meanwhile, there has been such growth among new immigrants that it is expected that whites will lose their majority status by 1998 (Branson 1994:2). Although some of the new converts respond to the traditional message because this is the thrust of Adventist evangelism, many others have received much less socialization than converts in preceding generations because of the pressure to make new members quickly. That is, American Adventism is becoming more diverse racially and theologically, and the upward mobility of the members inheriting their faith is being counterbalanced by an influx of poor members who are attracted by the apocalyptic solutions and close community offered to them at a time of great change and uncertainty in their lives and by word that Adventists often experience upward mobility (interviews).

As a liberalizing sect, Adventism has become increasingly diverse, but with a pattern that differs from that of denominations, because its membership is more mixed on some key dimensions, notably socioeconomic status and variety in beliefs and behavior. A major factor here is that it continues to have a substantial convert component to its growth, which flows from an evangelistic zeal that is related to its continuing level of sectarianism and sense that it has a special message to deliver. Because its message is apocalyptic, its converts are predominantly poor. Thus, while inherited members are rising in social status, an influx of new poor members is keeping Adventism very diverse in socioeconomic status. This, in turn, has an important impact on its beliefs/behavior profile. Although Adventism is, on the average, becoming more comfortable with society, the spread on this variable is wide, as the response to the notoriety of the Branch Davidians indicated. Although some members have become highly accommodated to society, others remain very otherworldly.

American Adventism is having increasing difficulty coping with this level of diversity, especially with the conflicts over beliefs and life-style. Extreme sects minimize such differences by expelling those with unorthodox views. However, as a liberalizing sect, Adventism has become more reluctant to do this. Church leaders feel embattled: The world president recently declared that "the church is being attacked from within by people on two extremes" (Folkenberg 1992: 5). More members are attuned to the various theological voices than would be the case in a denomination.

It is not surprising that Adventism, as a liberalizing sect, has experienced a number of schisms, of which Houteff's Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, the precursors of the Branch Davidians, was but one (Tarling 1981). These have all been at most modest in size: Adventism has not yet had to cope with a major split. However, church-sect theory would suggest that such a split is possible for a group that is facing tensions that grow out of rapid change, with an extreme sect (or sects) spinning off (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:99-108). The fault lines within American Adventism have become increasingly noticeable in recent years.

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