

Seventh-day Adventist Church

By Timothy Oliver

Organization Structure: Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Organized as representative democracy. Lower echelons elect representatives to higher units; determination and administration of policy, enforcement of doctrinal orthodoxy, imposed from top down. President, and Executive Committee of General Conference are standing chief administrative offices. Lower administrative units are the General Conference, Divisions (over continents), Union Conferences, local Conferences, and congregations. Several small Universities and Colleges and numerous well respected hospitals are maintained worldwide.

Unique Terms: “Investigative Judgment,” “Spirit of Prophecy,” “Coming into the Truth” (believing and living the full SDA message and lifestyle), “Remnant Church.”

HISTORY

The world was predicted to end in 1844 with the Second Coming of Christ, by William Miller, a New England Baptist itinerant preacher. Miller’s followers condemned all the churches of the day as apostate and “Babylon,” and warned Christians to come out of them. A great many did, and the “adventist” movement was born and grew rapidly.¹

Christ did not appear in 1844. After this “Great Disappointment,” one “little flock” still insisted the date of their original predictions had been correct. They decided the event marked by 1844 was not the Second Coming, but the entrance of Christ into the Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Sanctuary. There, they said, He began the “Investigative Judgment.” This doctrine was received and endorsed by Ellen G. White.²

From 1844 to 1851 the group taught the “shut door” doctrine, based on Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins. Anyone who had not accepted the Adventist message by the time Jesus entered the Holy of Holies was to be shut out permanently, as were the five foolish virgins. Cut off from the Bridegroom, they could not join the Adventists or have any hope of eternal life. Ellen White not only approved and taught this doctrine, but her first vision experience was largely responsible for its being received by the Adventist group.³

By 1846 the group had adopted the Seventh-day Baptists’ view that the Saturday Sabbath must be observed by Christians. A highly elevated form of this doctrine, together with the doctrine of the Investigative Judgment, became the hallmarks of Seventh-day Adventism. In 1850 James and Ellen White began publishing a magazine, *The Review & Herald*, to disseminate adventist and sabbatarian doctrines. This helped many of the remaining “Millerites” to coalesce into a distinctive body which adopted the name of Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1860, and formally incorporated in 1863, with approximately 3,500 members in 125 congregations.⁴

Ellen White never held official title as the head of the church, but was one of its founders and acknowledged spiritual leader. She rather disingenuously declined to claim the title of “prophet,” calling herself a “messenger” instead.⁵ But she claimed to have the “spirit of prophecy,” and that her messages were direct from God for the guidance and instruction of the church. With her knowledge and consent others called her a prophet, and even “the Spirit of Prophecy.”⁶ Having only a third grade education, Ellen White said for years she was unable to read, bolstering the claim that her beautiful prose was inspired by God. However, it has been discovered that she not only read, but plagiarized other Christian authors throughout virtually

all her writings. The sad facts of this matter have been thoroughly and indisputably established in several books.⁷ Ellen White died in 1915 at age eighty-eight.

Historically, evangelicals have had difficulty defining and categorizing SDA. Much SDA doctrine is biblically orthodox. Within its ranks are many true Christians, some even in positions of prominence. At various points in its history, most notably in the 1888 General Conference, the SDA church has been shaken by the biblical gospel. In the 1970s this became quite intense.⁸ Unfortunately, it produced a polarization. The church administrators generally became more entrenched in the unorthodox positions of traditional SDA, while some pastors and even whole congregations left or were asked to leave the SDA church.⁹ In official publications the SDA church continues to defend Ellen White legends, and maintain there was no difference in the degree of inspiration she received from that received by Bible writers.¹⁰ In their June, 2000, General Conference they voted to more aggressively affirm and support the “Spirit of Prophecy through the ministry of Ellen White.”¹¹ They also teach a number of other doctrines clearly irreconcilable with the biblical gospel (see “Doctrine,” below). So long as these things continue, evangelicals must persist in questioning the status of the SDA church organization in Christianity, and much more, her claim to be God’s only true, end-time “Remnant Church.”

DOCTRINE

SDA teachings most clearly contrary to the gospel and unorthodox in nature are its insistence on water baptism as an essential prerequisite to salvation, its teaching about the end time significance of sabbath observance to identification of true believers, and its doctrine of the Investigative Judgment.

Baptism: “...Christ made it clear that He required baptism of those who wished to become part of his church, His spiritual kingdom.” “In baptism believers enter into the passion experience of our Lord.” “...[B]aptism also marks [a] person’s entrance into Christ’s spiritual kingdom...it unites the new believer to Christ.... Through baptism the Lord adds the new disciples to the body of believers — His body, the church.... Then they are members of God’s family.”¹²

The Sabbath: “...[T]he divine institution of the Sabbath is to be restored... The delivering of this message will precipitate a conflict that will involve the whole world. The central issue will be obedience to God’s law and the observance of the Sabbath....Those who reject it will eventually receive the mark of the beast.”¹³

In one of her most revered works, Ellen White wrote that Sabbath observance would be the “line of distinction” in the “final test” that will separate God’s end-time people who “receive the seal of God” and are saved, from those who “receive the mark of the beast.”¹⁴

Describing a supposed vision direct from God, Ellen White wrote, “I saw that the Holy Sabbath is, and will be, the *separating wall* between the true Israel of God and *unbelievers*.”¹⁵ She also wrote of some Adventists failing to understand that “Sabbath... observance was of sufficient importance to draw a line between the people of God and unbelievers.”¹⁶

The Investigative Judgment:

In 1844...[Christ] entered the second and last phase of His *atonement ministry*. It is a work of investigative judgment which is part of the ultimate disposition of all sin... It also makes manifest who among the living are abiding in Christ, *keeping the commandments of God* and the faith of Jesus, and in Him, *therefore*, are ready for translation into His everlasting kingdom. This judgment *vindicates the justice of God* in saving those who believe in Jesus. It declares that those who have remained loyal to God shall receive the kingdom.¹⁷

...[O]ur High Priest enters the holy of holies [in 1844]...to perform the work of investigative judgment and to *make an atonement* for all who are shown to be *entitled* to its benefits... Every man’s work passes in review before God and is registered for faithfulness or unfaithfulness... The law of God is the standard by which the characters and the lives of men will be tested in the judgment... As the books of record are opened in the judgment, the lives of all those who have believed on Jesus come in review before God... Names are

accepted, names rejected... as they have become partakers of the righteousness of Christ, and their *characters are found to be in harmony with the law of God*, their sins will be blotted out, and *they themselves* will be accounted worthy of eternal life... Jesus does not excuse their sins, but *shows their penitence and faith*, and, claiming for them forgiveness, He lifts His wounded hands before the Father... Sins that have not been repented of and *forsaken* will not be pardoned and blotted out of the books of record, but will stand to witness against the sinner... [Christ] had kept His Father's commandments, and *there was no sin in Him...* *this is the condition in which those must be found who shall stand in the time of trouble.*¹⁸

According to Ellen White one must believe this doctrine to be saved.

Those who would share the benefits of the Savior's mediation should permit nothing to interfere with their duty to perfect holiness in the fear of God... The subject of the sanctuary and the investigative judgment should be clearly understood by the people of God. All need a knowledge for themselves of the position [in the Holy of Holies] and work [investigative judgment] of their great High Priest. *Otherwise it will be impossible for them to exercise the faith which is essential at this time* or to occupy the position which God designs for them to fill. Every individual has a soul to save or to lose. Each has a case pending at the bar of God... All who have received the light on these subjects are to bear testimony of the great truths which God has committed to them. The sanctuary in heaven is the very center of Christ's work in behalf of men... It is of the utmost importance that all should thoroughly investigate these subjects... The intercession of Christ in man's behalf in the sanctuary above is as *essential* to the plan of salvation as was His death upon a cross. By His death He *began* that work which after his resurrection He ascended to *complete* in Heaven.¹⁹

Other distinctive SDA teachings include vegetarianism and other "health" issues; the doctrine of "soul sleep," a misnomer for the belief that between death and resurrection one is essentially *non-existent* except in the memory of God; the annihilation of the wicked (as opposed to conscious torment for eternity).

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Baptism: (Rom. 3:21–26, 28; 4:4–6, 23–24; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:26; 5:1–6; Eph. 2:4–10; Col. 1:13–14; 2:13–14). These passages make it clear that salvation is entirely by God's grace alone, apart from any works, and laid hold of by faith alone. Baptism is mentioned in close proximity to some of these passages, but the New Testament uses the word *baptism* in various ways. Clearly, the "one baptism" (Eph. 4:4–5) that is essential is the baptism of the Spirit. If a passage makes baptism essential to salvation it can only refer to the baptism of the Spirit, or it would conflict with other Scriptures which plainly teach salvation is apart from any human work.

The Sabbath: The quoted statements above, particularly Ellen White's, are crystal clear. Sabbath observance, not trust in Christ alone for complete forgiveness of sins and eternal life, is to be the dividing line between the saved and the lost in the end time. This is certainly antithetical to the gospel defined by the passages above. (See also, Rom. 14:5–6; Col. 2:16–17). The Old Testament Sabbath was never anything more than a shadow of the substance. The reality of the New Testament Sabbath rest of God, which Paul and the writer of Hebrews make clear, is Christ Himself, and the rest one experiences from one's own works when one enters into Christ (Heb. 4:1–10).

The Investigative Judgment: the whole concept of the investigative judgment is antithetical to the Gospel. Jesus did not wait until 1844 to enter the Holy of Holies in heaven (Heb. 1:3; 6:19–20; 8:1; 9:6–12, 24; 12:2). Neither is he still making an atonement in heaven (Heb. 9:25–26; 10:11–14). The investigative judgment proposes to "vindicate the justice of God in saving those who believe in Jesus," by showing they were "loyal," "penitent," and "faithful" commandment keepers. This is an outrage. God's justice in saving sinners is vindicated by Christ's death on the cross, period (Rom. 3:24–26).

Even when speaking of being saved by the righteousness of Christ, Adventist writers refer to *imparted* righteousness, seldom to the biblical concept of *imputed* righteousness. Calling it “Christ’s righteousness,” while insisting on the believer’s perfection of character as a prerequisite to salvation, is at worst a thinly veiled works salvation, or at best an attempt to mix grace and works, something the Bible says is impossible to do (Rom. 11:6). Mrs. Whites words are crystal clear—one will not be forgiven until all sins are eradicated from one’s life and one’s character is perfected. Precisely the same heresy is found (besides many others) in Mormonism. It is not the salvation by grace alone through faith alone offered in the Bible.

The error is compounded by the teaching that this latter day 1844 event must be believed in to exercise the proper faith necessary to be saved. When Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished,” i.e. *completed, paid in full*, it cannot be that there is yet another salvation event more than 1800 years later, just as essential to salvation as Christ’s death on the cross, in which one must believe in order to be saved. This is clearly “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6–9).

Other doctrines: Some of the SDA health message may actually be helpful, and it does not conflict with the gospel except when, as is often the case, spiritual stigma is attached to non-observance of its asceticism (Gal. 2:11-16). The soul-sleep doctrine conflicts with the gospel because, closely examined and fully understood, it actually constitutes a denial of the resurrection (though it is doubtful any SDA understands it to be so). Notwithstanding a smattering of “proof-texts,” the annihilation doctrine is definitely aberrant from the teaching of the Bible. It leaves the sinner facing no eternal consequences for his sin; *angst* over annihilation will not survive annihilation. Indeed, many people today think annihilation preferable to even this life. They live on only because they cannot shake the conviction that there is “hell to pay.” God has set eternity in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11).

RECOMMENDED READING

The Sabbath in Crisis by Dale Ratzlaff. Excellent book by a former SDA pastor, covers virtually every aspect of the Sabbath question. 345 pages, include. scripture index.

The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists by Dale Ratzlaff. Probably the best popular, overall, treatment of Seventh-day Adventism, and especially the 1844/Investigative Judgment/Sanctuary doctrine, ever penned. Leaves no doubt. 384 pages, four appendices, incl. bibliography.

Sunday Facts and Sabbath by Dr. Russell K. Tardo. Presents 25 Reasons Why the Christian Church Worships on Sunday. 144 pages.

Notes

- ¹ Melton, J. Gordon, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Vol. 2, 21–22.
- ² *Ibid.*, 680.
- ³ Robert D. Brinsmead, Robert, *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism*, 130–33.
- ⁴ *Encyclopedia of American Religion*, Vol. 2, 681.
- ⁵ P. G. Damsteegt et. al., *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...*, 224.
- ⁶ Maurice Barnett, *Ellen G. White & Inspiration*, 5–17.
- ⁷ e.g., see; Walter Rea, *The White Lie*; and *Judged by the Gospel*, 361–83.
- ⁸ See: Geoffrey J. Paxton, *The Shaking of Adventism*.
- ⁹ “From Controversy to Crisis,” *CRI Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 9–14.
- ¹⁰ *Review & Herald*, 4 October 1928, 11; “Source of Final Appeal,” *Adventist Review*, 3 June 1971, 4–6; G. A. Irwin, *Mark of the Beast*, 1; “The Inspiration and Authority of the Ellen G. White Writings,” *Adventist Review*, 15 July 1982, 3; *Ministry*, October 1981, 8; see also, *Judged by the Gospel*, 125–30.
- ¹¹ *Adventist Today*, [online: July 2000].
- ¹² *SDA’s Believe...*, 182, 184, 187.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 262–63.
- ¹⁴ *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, 605.
- ¹⁵ *Early Writings*, 33; emphasis added.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ¹⁷ *SDA’s Believe...*, 312; emphasis added.
- ¹⁸ *Great Controversy*, 480, 482–84, 486, 623.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 488–89; emphasis added.



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