

SOME THOUGHTS ON SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

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Seventh-day Adventists share some important beliefs with the Church of Christ. These include belief in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the creation and the fall of Adam, Christ's unique atonement for our sins, the physical resurrection of Christ, the necessity of God's grace for salvation, the second coming of Christ, and the verbal inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. There are, however, significant areas of disagreement that cannot be ignored.

The purpose of this paper is to set forth some of the doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with which I disagree and to state briefly the basis of that disagreement. I do this out of a commitment to the truth not out of a desire to attack those with whom I disagree. The main sources I relied upon for the history and doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed., Hank Hanegraaff general editor (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 517-608; Dale Ratzlaff,¹ *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists* (Sedona, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1996); Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations*, 10th ed., revised by Samuel S. Hill (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 33-40; and John H. Gerstner, *The Teachings of Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960).

Through my interest in creation science, I have been blessed with the (cyber) friendship of a number of SDAs. I hope they find that I have expressed my disagreement with the kind of courtesy and respect they regularly have shown to me.

Historical Background

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew out of a religious movement known as the "Great Second Advent Awakening" that swept America just before the middle of the nineteenth century. This movement, which was characterized by an emphasis on the second coming of Christ (also known as the "second advent" of Christ), stemmed largely from the activities of William Miller, a farmer in New York.

In January 1843, Miller published a document purporting to prove in fifteen different ways that Jesus was returning to earth between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. These so-called proofs were allegorical and symbolic interpretations of various

¹ Ratzlaff was a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist and was educated in Seventh-day Adventist schools from kindergarten through seminary. He taught Bible at a Seventh-day Adventist high school for seven years and pastored two Seventh-day Adventist churches. He left the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1981 because he could no longer in good conscience teach some of its doctrines. His book includes (Appendix A) the current version of "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," the official statement of the church's beliefs.

biblical texts (mainly in Daniel and Revelation), made with little regard for context and based on a chain of dubious assumptions.² When Christ did not return by March 21, 1844, Miller's associates claimed to have found a mistake in his calculations and predicted that Jesus would return for his saints on October 22, 1844. Miller reluctantly endorsed this revised prediction.

When Christ did not return on October 22, 1844, Miller's followers were devastated. Within a few days, however, one of them, a man named Hiram Edson, claimed to have had a vision that explained their disappointment. It was supposedly revealed to him that the predicted "coming" was not Christ's coming to earth but his moving for the first time from the Holy Place in the *heavenly* sanctuary to the Most Holy Place (from one room of the heavenly sanctuary to another). This move was made because Christ had a work to perform in the Most Holy Place prior to returning to earth.³ This work was subsequently defined as the beginning of the "cleansing of the sanctuary" and the "investigative judgment."

After the disappointment of 1844, the Millerite movement split into two groups. The group that became known as "open-door Adventists," which included Miller himself, rejected the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of the 1844 message and recognized that nothing really happened on October 22, 1844. The group that became known as "shut-door Adventists" accepted the sanctuary reinterpretation of the 1844 message and claimed, at least initially, that the door of God's mercy had slammed shut for all others. The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church came from this latter group.

Over the next seven years, the "shut-door Adventists" vacillated on whether God's mercy was available to those who were not already members of their group. Between October 22, 1844 and the end of December 1844, many "shut-door Adventists," including Ellen White (who is considered a prophetess by Seventh-day Adventists), concluded that

² The essence of the argument is summarized in Martin (1997), 525 as follows:

The entire superstructure of the Millerites' prophetic interpretation was based upon their view of the book of Daniel, chapters eight and nine, with particular emphasis upon Daniel 8:14 and 9:24-27. The Millerites believed that the prophecy of the seventy weeks of Daniel nine must date from the year 457 B.C., which, as recent archaeological evidence confirms, was the exact date of the decree of King Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem (Daniel 9:25). Tracing the seventy weeks of Daniel on the theory that, as the Hebrew indicated, it should be rendered "seventy weeks of years" or 490 years, the Millerites arrived at the date of A.D. 33; that is, from 457 B.C. to A.D. 33. Since this date generally corresponds with Christ's crucifixion, Millerites then linked it to Daniel 8:14 -- "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" -- with the seventy weeks of years prophecy, and the 2300 days became 2300 years. Thus, if you subtract 490 years (adding, of course, A.D. 1 to 33), the figure arrived at is 1843.

As virtually all scholars recognize, Dan. 8:1-14 is not a prophecy about the second coming of Christ but about Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), who defiled the Jerusalem temple during the intertestamental period.

³ The heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of the 1844 message was presented to the public by O. R. L. Crosier in *The Day Star Extra* of February 7, 1846 (in an article titled "The Law of Moses").

the door of mercy again was open. But then Ellen White's first two visions, which occurred in December 1844 and February 1845, corrected this "error" by teaching that the door of mercy indeed was closed for all who were not already members of their group. Despite this, in 1851 the "shut-door" doctrine was abandoned. Ratzlaff (1996), 117-152. In an attempt to maintain its credibility, the group suppressed, altered, and reinterpreted Ellen White's visions regarding the shut door (this is documented in Ratzlaff [1996], 144-152).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was the product of three streams of the Millerite movement, each with its own theological emphasis. From Hiram Edson and O. R. L. Crosier, it embraced the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of Miller's 1844 message. From James Bates, it embraced the observance of the Seventh-day (Saturday) Sabbath. And from James and Ellen White (the former Ellen Harmon), it embraced the ongoing gift of prophecy, especially as manifested in Ellen White.

In 1855 headquarters for the Adventist movement were established in Battle Creek, Michigan. In 1860 the group formally assumed the name "Seventh-day Adventist," and in 1863 the denomination was officially organized. In 1905 the denomination's headquarters were moved to Takoma Park, Maryland.

Within the modern Seventh-day Adventist Church, there are disagreements over how closely the denomination should identify with and hold to the original doctrines of the group. The "Historic (or Traditional) Adventists" hold firmly to the original doctrines and see the denomination as God's instrument for calling people to the truth in this "judgment hour." The "Evangelical Adventists" modify or abandon some of the original doctrines and do not view the group as the only people who are saved. At present, control of the denomination rests with the traditionalists. It is the teachings of this group with which this paper is primarily concerned.

The "Prophetess" Ellen White

Seventh-day Adventists operate with two sources of authority, two sources of truth: the Bible *and* the writings of Ellen G. White. They claim that Ellen White was a prophetess, and as such, her writings are considered an authoritative source of truth. To quote from "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists":

17. The Gift of Prophecy: One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, *her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth* which provide the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Joel. 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17, 19:10.) (emphasis supplied)

Adventists often claim that the final sentence of the above quote shows that the Bible is considered the higher authority and that it sits in judgment of the writings of Ellen White, but that is not entirely accurate. Because they believe Ellen White was inspired, her interpretations of the Bible are considered the correct ones. Very few "good Adventists" would ever admit that Ellen White's writings contradict the Bible. Rather, her writings are considered an "inspired commentary" on the Bible. That very term is used to describe them in a number of Adventist publications, including Morris Venden's defense of Adventist doctrine titled *The Pillars* (1980), an annotated Bible titled *The Study Bible* (1993), and a widely used "Sabbath School" curriculum (1994). That is why her writings are considered a *continuing and authoritative source of truth*.

As Dale Ratzlaff explains:

In practice, how does an "inspired commentary" work? If the Bible and the writings of Ellen White disagree, which one should be the final authority? We see the confusion already. If the "inspired commentary" of Ellen White gives a particular interpretation, then a "good Adventist" would be duty bound to take the interpretation of the "inspired commentary" over, say, an uninspired commentary by some scholar. Therefore, in practice, many SDAs give her writings supreme authority. (Ratzlaff [1996], 35)

I am persuaded, for reasons I will not develop here, that the Spirit ceased giving the gift of prophecy at an early point in the history of the church. But even if that were not the case, I could not accept Ellen White as a prophetess because she has testified falsely in the name of the Lord. There are a number of examples of this.

At numerous places in her writings, all of which are accepted by Seventh-day Adventists as part of the "Ellen G. White treasured heritage," Ellen White declares that William Miller was guided by God in reaching his conclusion that Christ was going to come in 1843. Writing *after* the "Great Disappointment" of 1844, she claimed that God directed the setting of the incorrect 1843 date as a kind of test and that he then concealed the error from Miller and everyone else! She wrote:

I saw that God was in the proclamation of the time in 1843. It was His design to arouse the people and bring them to a testing point, where they should decide for or against the truth. Thousands were led to embrace the truth preached by William Miller. (From Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 232, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 84)

The Lord showed me that the 1843 chart was directed by his hand, and that no part of it should be altered; that the figures were as he wanted them. That his hand was over and hid a mistake in some figures, so that none could see it, until his hand was removed. (From Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald* 1850-11-01, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 85)

Notice the illogic of this. She claims that God had Miller make a *false* prediction to test whether the people would decide for or against *the truth*. The only response *for the truth* when presented with a *false* prediction is to reject that prediction, yet Ellen White would have one choose the truth by embracing an error. She also claimed that ministers who rejected Miller's predicted date of Christ's coming had "the blood of souls upon them" and that Christ turned his face from churches that rejected that message (supporting quotes given in Ratzlaff [1996], 85). Ratzlaff is rightly incredulous:

But how are we to deal with the self-proclaimed authority of Ellen White? She says Miller was right, when he was wrong. She says he taught truth, when he taught error. She says that God guided Miller's mind and led him to his conclusions, which in retrospect were false. His chart, that proved to be erroneous, she said was just how God wanted it and no changes were ever to be made to it. More than that, she said that God had his hand over the mistake in Miller's chart. In so doing, she makes God a partner deception! Ellen White states that Jesus turned His face away from the churches which did not accept Miller's date-setting message, which proved to be wrong. (Ratzlaff [1996], 85)

Ellen White described Miller's "corrected" prediction that the Lord would come on October 22, 1844, as the "counsel of God" and "the light from heaven." She said that those who rejected this message manifested the "spirit of Satan" and were "working in union with Satan and his angels." Churches that rejected Miller's 1844 message were dubbed "Babylon" and were understood to be apostate, "fallen" churches (supporting quotes given in Ratzlaff [1996], 89-91).

The fact, of course, is that Miller's 1844 prediction was false. Seventh-day Adventists cannot avoid that conclusion by claiming the "coming" predicted for 1844 was fulfilled by Jesus "coming" into the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. Miller's prediction was that Christ would come *to earth* on October 22, 1844, and all are agreed that Christ did not do so. Therefore, the prediction was false. For Ellen White to label a false prediction as the "counsel of God" and to claim that those who refused to believe what was false were "working in union with Satan" establishes conclusively in my mind that she was no prophetess.

Ellen White endorsed completely the doctrinal errors in O. R. L. Crosier's presentation of the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of the 1844 message that appeared in the February 7, 1846 edition of *The Day Star Extra*. Crosier claimed in his article that Christ entered the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary *for the first time* on October 22, 1844 and then *began* completion of his atoning work. He misinterpreted the King James Version of Acts 3:19 to mean that Christians would not have their sins "blotted out" until some future date.⁴ He claimed this future "blotting out" began when Jesus moved into the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844.⁵

⁴ Acts 3:19 in the KJV reads: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." Crosier interpreted this to mean that the "blotting out" of sins, which he erroneously distinguished from the forgiveness of sins, was not to

The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus entered the Most Holy Place upon his ascension to heaven (see, Heb. 1:3, 6:19-20, 9:6-12, 9:24-26, 10:11-12, 10:19-22)⁶ and that sins are "blotted out" or forgiven when one becomes a Christian (see footnote 4). Crosier contradicts these truths, and yet Ellen White claimed that Crosier's teaching was from God. She wrote:

The Lord has shown me in vision; that Jesus rose up, and shut the door, and entered the Holy of Holies, at the 7th [Jewish] month 1844. . . .

I believe the Sanctuary, to be cleansed at the end of the 2300 days, is the New Jerusalem Temple, of which Christ is a minister. The Lord shew [sic] in vision, more than one year ago, that Brother Crosier had the *true light* on the cleansing of the Sanctuary, &c; [please note the "&c" (etc.) -- referring to the other points of his "truth"] and that it was his will, that Brother C. should write out the view which he gave us in the Day-Star, Extra, February 7, 1846. *I feel fully authorized by the Lord, to recommend that Extra to every saint.* (From *A Word to the Little Flock*, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 102)⁷

As noted above (footnote 2), the whole idea that Christ was "coming" *in any fashion* in 1844 (changed from 1843) was built on the false belief that Dan. 8:14 refers to the coming of the Messiah. It clearly refers to the reconsecration of the Jerusalem sanctuary after its defilement in 168-165 B.C. by Antiochus Epiphanes. This was accomplished in 165 or 164 B.C. when Judas Maccabeus and his troops took possession of the temple mount in the Maccabean revolt. The reconsecration of the sanctuary is still celebrated by Jews as the Feast of Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. In fact, Daniel 8

take place *until* "the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." As recognized by virtually all commentators (e.g., Conzelmann, Munck, Haenchen, Bruce, Marshall, Longenecker, Barrett, Fitzmyer) and modern translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, NIV, JB, NRSV), Peter is urging his hearers to convert for two purposes or results: (1) *that* their sins might be blotted out and (2) *that* (not *when*) the coming of the Lord might be hastened (by the spreading of the gospel's blessings). The blotting out of sins, which simply is another way of speaking of forgiveness (e.g., Ps. 51:1-2, 9; Isa. 44:22, 43:25), takes place at conversion.

⁵ To his credit, Crosier soon repudiated his sanctuary teachings, but they nevertheless became entrenched as a result of Ellen White's "prophetic" endorsement. See, Ratzlaff (1996), 103.

⁶ The biblical term "behind the curtain (or veil)" or "inside (or within) the curtain (or veil)" refers to the Most Holy Place (e.g., Ex. 26:33; Lev. 16:2, 12, 15; Num. 18:7), so Heb. 6:19-20 by itself disproves the claim that Christ did not enter the Most Holy Place until 1844. Instead of accepting that, Ellen White, without any biblical support, claimed that the term referred to the Holy Place (by claiming "the curtain" meant the curtain separating the Holy Place from the outer court of the temple). (Ratzlaff [1996], 186-187)

⁷ In *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 4, p. 308, Ellen White also taught directly Crosier's misinterpretation of Acts 3:19, claiming that it referred to the "blotting out" of sins that began when Jesus entered the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844. (Ratzlaff [1996], 208)

fits so tightly with these historical events that skeptics take it as proof that Daniel was written after the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.⁸

Since the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of Miller's 1844 message is based on the same misunderstanding of Daniel as Miller's original 1844 message (which was changed from his 1843 message), it is just as clearly false. So when Ellen White endorsed the reinterpretation as the teaching of God, she was wrong not only because Christ entered the Most Holy Place upon his ascension and because sins are "blotted out" at conversion, but also because the 1844 date was based on a false assumption.

Ellen White also taught that a Christian should never dare to say "I am saved." She wrote:

We are never to rest in a satisfied condition, and cease to make advancement, saying, "I am saved." When this idea is entertained, the motives for watchfulness, for prayer, for earnest endeavor to press onward to higher attainments, cease to exist. No sanctified tongue will be found uttering these words till Christ shall come, and we enter in through the gates into the city of God. Then, with the utmost propriety, we may give glory to God and to the Lamb for eternal deliverance. As long as man is full of weakness, -- for of himself he cannot save his soul -- he should never dare to say, "I am saved." (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, 1890-06-17, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 227)

Scripture, however, teaches that one can know that one is saved. Salvation is a present gift, though its fullness will be realized only when the Lord returns. Thus, John stated to his fellow believers, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). Numerous other passages speak of salvation in the past tense, as something that already belongs to the saints (e.g., Eph. 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:8-9; Tit. 3:5).

As explained in the section on historical background, Ellen White's first two visions taught that the door of God's mercy had closed for all who were not already members of her particular Millerite group. This doctrine was quietly abandoned by 1851, and the group then suppressed, altered, and reinterpreted Ellen White's visions to maintain its credibility on the matter (see, Ratzlaff [1996], 144-152). Ellen White's

⁸ A number of Seventh-day Adventist scholars have recognized that the denomination's teaching about 1844 is unfounded. Perhaps the best known example is Dr. Desmond Ford, who served for sixteen years as the chairman of the theology department at a Seventh-day Adventist college in Australia (Avondale College). In 1980 his ministerial credentials were removed after he presented to Adventist leaders a 992-page manuscript (what was later published as *Daniel 8:14: The Day of Atonement and the Investigative Judgment*) showing that the 1844 doctrine was unbiblical. See Ratzlaff (1996), 175-181, 245; Kenneth R. Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism," *Christian Research Journal* 11 (no. 1, 1988), 9ff (precise page number unavailable because article was taken from CRI website).

honesty is called into question by her denial that her early visions taught the shut door. She wrote:

For a time after the disappointment in 1844, I did hold, in common with the advent body, that the door of mercy was then forever closed to the world. This position was taken before my first vision was given me. It was the light given me of God that corrected our error, and enabled us to see the true position. (Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 63, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 186)

Not only did her early visions clearly teach the shut door, they were the basis on which that doctrine was accepted by the group until 1851! Her statement here is precisely backwards. The group initially believed the door of God's mercy remained open and then changed to the shut-door view when "corrected" by her visions. See, Ratzlaff (1996), 117-136. One cannot help but think that White's denial of this was in part due to the embarrassment of her so-called prophecy having been abandoned.

Ellen White's integrity further is called into question by the fact she plagiarized a significant portion of her writings. Adventist scholars such as Harold Weiss, Roy Branson, William Peterson, and Ronald Numbers produced historical research in the 1970's and 80's establishing that Ellen White borrowed material from other nineteenth-century authors. Adventist pastor Walter Rea charged that as much as 80 to 90% of White's material had been plagiarized. Rea was fired by the denomination because of his claim, but he later documented extensive plagiarism by White in his book *The White Lie* (Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982). (Samples [1988])

Finally, some of White's prophecies certainly seem bizarre. She claimed, for example, in *Early Writings* (p. 39-40) to have been given wings and been transported in the company of an angel to "other worlds." She wrote:

The grass of the place was living green, and the birds there warbled a sweet song. The inhabitants of the place were of all sizes; they were noble, majestic, and lovely. . . . I asked one of them why they were so much more lovely than those on earth. . . . Then I was taken to a world which had seven moons. There I saw good old Enoch, who had been translated. (Quoted in J. Mark Martin, "Seventh-day Adventism and the Writings of Ellen G. White," [1997] webbed at sda@sdaoutreach.org)

According to her husband, James White, this vision was of other planets in our solar system. He wrote:

At our conference in Topsham, Maine, last Nov., Ellen had a vision of the handy works of God. She was guided to the planets Jupiter, Saturn, and I think one more. After she came out of the vision, she could give a clear description of their Moons, etc. It is well known, that she knew nothing of

astronomy, and could not answer one question in relation to the planets, before she had this vision. (Quoted in J. Mark Martin, [1997])

The Cleansing of the Sanctuary and the Investigative Judgment

Historical Adventists teach that when Christ ascended to heaven he entered only the outer apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. From that time until October 22, 1844, he performed a ministry through which the sins of Christians were "forgiven" in the sense those sins were transferred from the believer to the records of the heavenly sanctuary. The penitent Christian was released from condemnation, but his or her sin was not finally canceled or "blotted out." Rather, it remains in the heavenly sanctuary until Christ's atoning work is completed. This is the work that was begun in 1844.

According to Adventists, when Christ entered the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary in 1844, he began an investigation of the lives of all professed believers, starting with the dead and proceeding to the living. Those found with any unforgiven sin (sins of which they have not repented) will be eliminated from the book of life. (Obedience to the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is considered a great test of loyalty, so despite denials by some Adventists, it seems Sunday worshipers will be weeded out.) When every person professing faith in Christ has come up in review, Jesus *then* will plead his blood before the Father on behalf of those who are found worthy and thereby blot out the record of their sins from the books of heaven. This completes the atonement, and Christ then transfers the sins of God's people to Satan (not to atone for them but to bear responsibility for his role as instigator of those sins). See, Ratzlaff (1996), 153-165; Martin (1997), 581-591.

I have already pointed out that the entire 1844 dating scheme is based (essentially) upon a misunderstanding of Daniel. The claim that Christ first entered the Most Holy Place in 1844 contradicts numerous passages in Hebrews and texts in other books that refer to Christ's having sat down at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:32-36, 5:30-31; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:21b-22; Rev. 3:21, 12:5). The notion that a Christian's sins, which have been "forgiven," somehow remain in the heavenly records to be "blotted out" at some point after 1844 creates a distinction between "blotting out" and "forgiving" that cannot be justified in Scripture (e.g., Ps. 51:1-2, 9; Isa. 44:22, 43:25; 1 Jn. 1:7). The claim that Christ in some way transfers the sins of God's people to Satan has no basis in Scripture.

It seems obvious that the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of the 1844 message was an attempt to salvage a failed prediction. But once Ellen White claimed the reinterpretation was from God, the Adventists were stuck with it. Many "Evangelical Adventists" are willing to abandon this doctrine as unscriptural and to accept that Ellen White was not a prophetess in any true sense, but the traditionalists who control the denomination cling to the teaching as the "foundation and central pillar of Adventism." This doctrine has been used to support other Adventist doctrines, so the leaders are very reluctant to discard it. As Ratzlaff puts it:

We see that the 1844 cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment message is, indeed, the heart of Adventist theology. This is not only evidenced by the EGW [Ellen G. White] quotations cited above, but can be seen by the title of a recent book by Roy Adams, associate editor of the *Adventist Review*. It is entitled *The Sanctuary: Understanding the Heart of Adventist Theology*. Could this explain *why* denominational leaders, who should know there is no biblical base for this doctrine, have apparently been so reluctant to discard this "truth"? It is intertwined so tightly with other "unique" aspects of Adventism that to cut out the "sliver" of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment would require removal of, or the painful separation from, a mass of connected, theological tissue. Or, to change the metaphor, the removal of this central pillar might cause the catastrophic crumbling of Historic Adventism. (Ratzlaff [1996], 273)

Sabbath Observance

Seventh-day Adventists claim that the Sabbath command of the Old Testament is to be observed today just as it was in Old Testament times. This means that Christians are obligated to worship on Saturday rather than Sunday and to set Saturday aside as a special day of rest.⁹

Sabbath observance was introduced to early Adventists by Joseph Bates, but like a number of other doctrines, it was cemented into Adventist theology by the visions of Ellen White. After the heavenly-sanctuary reinterpretation of Miller's message, Ellen White claimed to have had a vision of the Most Holy Place (after Jesus' 1844 entrance) in which the Sabbath commandment was exalted. She wrote:

After Jesus opened the door of the Most Holy the light of the Sabbath was seen, and the people of God were to be tested and proved, as God proved the children of Israel anciently, to see if they would keep his law. (Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1, p. 164, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 267)

But the Lord gave me a view of the heavenly sanctuary. The temple of God was opened in heaven, and I was shown the ark of God covered with the mercy seat. Two angels stood, one at each end of the ark, with their wings spread over the mercy seat, and their faces turned toward it. My accompanying angel informed me that these represented all the heavenly host looking with reverential awe toward the holy law which had been written by the finger of God. Jesus raised the cover of the ark, and I beheld the tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments were

⁹ Those who insist on observing the Sabbath are obligated to do so in the manner specified by God in the old covenant. They cannot choose to keep only part of it. The Sabbath was to be kept from sunset to sunset (Lev. 23:32), no load was to be carried (Jer. 17:21), no fire was to be kindled (Ex. 35:3), and no cooking was to be done (Ex. 16:23).

written. I was amazed as I saw the fourth commandment in the very center of the ten precepts, with a soft halo of light encircling it. Said the angel: "It is the only one of the ten which defines the living God who created the heavens and the earth and all things that are therein. When the foundations of the earth were laid, then was laid the foundation of the Sabbath also." (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol.1, p. 76, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 267-268)

The Sabbath commandment, shone above them all; for the Sabbath was set apart to be kept in honor of God's holy name. The holy Sabbath looked glorious -- a halo of glory was all around it. (Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 32, quoted in Ratzlaff [1996], 268)

Seventh-day Adventists attempt to support their Sabbath doctrine by arguing that Sabbath observance was ordained by God at creation (Gen. 2:2-3) and is therefore perpetually binding on mankind. They claim that Ex. 20:11 traces Sabbath observance back to creation and thereby confirms that God placed the obligation on mankind in the beginning. None of these claims are correct.

God did indeed "rest" on the seventh day of creation, and he blessed and sanctified that day, but no mention is made in Genesis of a Sabbath (a rest) for man. The seventh-day rest of Genesis focuses exclusively on God.¹⁰ There is no command for man to observe anything regarding the seventh day. In fact, the word *Sabbath*, which is the name given to the commanded observance of the seventh day by Israelites, never is used in Genesis. As Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna observes in *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 14:

The human institution of the Sabbath does not appear in the narrative. . . . [A]s we read in Exodus 31:13, 16, and 17, the Sabbath is a distinctively Israelite ordinance, a token of the eternal covenant between God and

¹⁰ What probably is blessed and sanctified in Gen. 2:2-3 is not simply the seventh day as a day of the week but the seventh day as the state of God's "rest," the goal toward which creation moves. It is a sign pointing to the ultimate rest of the people of God. As Andrew Lincoln comments:

The climax of God's creative activity is not the creation of male and female so much as his own triumphant rest. It is true that His blessing and hallowing of the seventh day are not meant to be considered simply in a vacuum but have some relation to the created world. What is crucial, however, is the nature of that relation. The seventh day is to be seen as representing the completion of the whole creation, and therefore in its blessing the whole creation is blessed. . . . Creation, therefore, is blessed with special reference to its goal, God's rest, which is set apart in some sense for all His creation including man and woman; but the precise sense awaits further unfolding. . . .

. . . The framework of Genesis 1 and 2 certainly indicates that there is a divine ordering of history, so that, as history moves toward its consummation, it moves toward the goal of God's rest. A. T. Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 348-349.

Israel. Its enactment would be out of place before the arrival of Israel on the scene of history.

Sabbath observance is first mentioned in Ex. 16:21-30, and it seems the Israelites were not familiar with it. This is consistent with the fact there is no mention of anyone observing the Sabbath prior to that time. In Ex. 20:8-11 Israel is commanded to remember the Sabbath day (that was given to them in Exodus 16) by keeping it as a special day separate from every other day and dedicated to God. Exodus 20:11 explains that God *at that time* (not at creation) blessed and sanctified the *Sabbath day* (the name of the seventh day as a day of rest *for man*) because it was analogous to the day of divine rest that he previously had blessed and sanctified at creation.

This understanding of Ex. 20:11 is supported by two considerations. First, Deut. 5:15 says the Sabbath commandment is based on a prior historical event: because God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, he therefore commanded them *at Sinai* to keep the Sabbath. Reading Ex. 20:11 in a parallel manner yields: because God rested at creation, he therefore blessed *at Sinai* the Sabbath.

Second, the Hebrew particle used in Ex. 20:11 and Deut. 5:15 and translated "therefore" normally is used "in the Pentateuch to connect causally an event in the past with a situation some time later (cf. Gen. 2:24; 25:20; 42:21; 47:22; Exod. 13:15; Num. 21:27; Deut. 24:18); hence, it is better translated 'consequently now' (in the sense of *post hoc* ['after this'] and *propter hoc* ['on account of this'])." Harold H. P. Dressler, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament," in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 38 (n. 43).

The fact Deut. 5:15 states expressly that the Sabbath commandment was based on God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (where they had no rest) makes clear that it was given after the Exodus and that it applied only to the people of Israel. Nehemiah 9:14 confirms that Sabbath observance was unknown to the Israelites prior to Exodus 16 by declaring that God made the holy Sabbath known to the Israelites *through his servant Moses*. Exodus 31:12-17 confirms that Sabbath observance was required only of Israel by specifying that it was *a sign between God and Israel*, a reminder of the covenant God had made with Israel upon delivering them from Egypt.

The Sabbath is part of the old (Mosaic) covenant that has been replaced by the new covenant in Christ. Christians are not required to obey (other than as an accommodation) commandments of the Mosaic law relating to circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days (such as the Sabbath), ritual purity laws, and food laws. Those in Christ now share by faith in the end-time rest of God, the goal toward which creation moves, though that rest will not be fully realized until Christ returns. The Sabbath rest of the Mosaic law thus is transcended by the Christian's participation in the divine rest (see, Heb. 3:7 – 4:11).

Paul makes clear in Col. 2:16-17 that Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath commandment. The context is Paul's admonition in 2:8-15 not to be taken

captive by certain false teachers who were presenting a manmade doctrine that centered on elemental spirits of the universe rather than on Christ.¹¹ The Jewish aspect of this heresy resulted in a tendency to impose old covenant rituals. It seems the false teachers were urging obedience to these rituals as a way to satisfy the spiritual powers so as to advance toward fullness with God.

Because God in Christ completely disarmed the spiritual powers by canceling the record of the Colossians' sin,¹² Paul commands the Colossians in 2:16 to let no one pass judgment on them with regard to food and drink or concerning a religious festival, a new moon celebration, *or a sabbath day*. He is referring here to Jewish kosher laws, extended to include wine (as they had been in Paul's day), and to Jewish holy days (see, Ezek. 45:17; Hosea 2:11). In other words, Paul specifically tells the Colossian Christians that they are not to yield to the pressure of the false teachers to abide by the Sabbath. It belongs to the shadow that has given way to the reality found in Christ (2:17).

Paul makes the same point in Gal. 4:8-11. In Gal. 3:1 – 4:11 Paul is explaining the foolishness of the Galatians' defection to the Judaizers' "gospel" (which really is no gospel at all).¹³ He reminds them in 3:1-5 that they received the Spirit by accepting his gospel, not that of the Judaizers. In 3:6-9 he points to Abraham's example of faith, and in 3:10-14 he explains that reliance on the Mosaic law yields a curse. In 3:15-18 he shows that the promise to Abraham was not affected by the giving of the Mosaic law, and in 3:19-29 he explains how the giving of the law is consistent with his gospel. In 4:1-11 he argues that submitting to the Mosaic law is a return to slavery.

In Gal. 4:8-11 Paul questions how the Galatians can even consider returning to slavery by accepting the Judaizers' gospel. He tells these Gentile Christians that before they were Christians they were enslaved to pagan gods, which are not really gods at all (but perhaps demons – see, 1 Cor. 10:18-22). For a Gentile to submit to the Mosaic law is for him to return *in principle* to his former enslavement. The law, rendered weak and beggarly (outdated) by the coming of Christ, has points in common with the pagan cultic requirements that formerly enslaved the Galatians, *particularly the observance of days, months, seasons, and years*. This undoubtedly refers to the Jewish holy days, including the Sabbath. Having been freed from analogous requirements by becoming Christians, by having been known by God, Paul asks how they can possibly return to that slavery by

¹¹ The "Colossian Heresy" had the following marks: (1) The teaching was set forth as "philosophy" (2:8), which implied some special insight or secret wisdom. (2) It claimed to be based on venerable "tradition" (i.e., of ancient and revelational character) and was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight (2:18, 2:23). (3) There was a keen interest in spiritual beings or "elements of the universe" (1:16, 2:18, 2:10, 2:20). (4) There were elements of mysticism (2:18), asceticism (2:16, 2:20-23), and *Judaism* (2:11-13, 2:16-17). F. F. Bruce suggests that the heresy was a Phrygian development in which a local variety of *Judaism* had been fused with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin, probably an early and simple form of gnosticism.

¹² The Colossians' sense of guilt and alienation from God was the only weapon the spiritual powers had for manipulating the Colossians into doing what the spiritual powers wanted.

¹³ "Judaizers" were Jewish Christians who taught that those who became Christians were required to submit to the Mosaic law to be saved (see, Acts 15:1).

submitting to the law. He obviously did not believe these Christians were obligated to obey the Sabbath.

In Rom. 14:1-12 Paul tells the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome that they must accept one another. Unlike the Judaizers, who insisted that Gentiles must submit to the Mosaic law to be saved, the Jewish Christians in Rome continued to practice ritual aspects of Judaism as a matter of personal conscience. Having been taught all their lives the importance of Jewish dietary rules and observance of holy days (especially the Sabbath), it was difficult for Jews who became Christians to accept in their hearts that these things no longer mattered to God.¹⁴ They tended to think that those Christians who did not abide by these rules were less faithful or less devoted to God and to hold them somewhat at a distance. Conversely, there was a tendency on the part of the Gentile Christians, who did not follow the Mosaic law, to look down on their Jewish brothers as unenlightened and arrogant.

Paul tells the Gentile majority that they are to welcome or receive the one who is "weak in faith," meaning the Jewish Christian who is weak in his grasp of the implications of the faith (who had underdeveloped convictions about what the faith allows). He tells the Jewish minority that they are not to judge (as inferior or less pious) the Gentile whose faith permits him to eat and drink what may be ritually unclean and to ignore old covenant holy days like the Sabbath. In saying this, Paul proves beyond question that Sabbath observance is not binding in the new covenant.

The inapplicability of the Sabbath command in the new covenant is confirmed by the fact it is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is not reiterated in the New Testament. Moreover, breaking the Sabbath is never mentioned in any New Testament listing of sins, some of which are quite extensive (e.g., Mk. 7:21-22; Rom. 1:29-32; Gal. 5:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:1-4). Neither Christ, the apostles, or anyone else in the New Testament commands Christians to keep the Sabbath. If Sabbath observance was obligatory in the new covenant, the issue would certainly have left some kind of trail in connection with the church's Gentile mission (as happened in the case of circumcision), but no such trail exists, either in the New Testament or in early church history.

The normative practice of the apostolic church was to assemble for worship on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection. This is evident from Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 16:1-2. Commenting on these verses, Gordon Fee states in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 814:

¹⁴ The Old Testament prohibited Israelites from eating certain kinds of meat (Leviticus 11, 2:25; Deut. 14:3-21) and any meat not slaughtered in such a way to drain the blood (Lev. 17:10-16, 19:26; Deut. 12:15-25). Scrupulous Jews sometimes would avoid all meat and wine when they were in an environment where they could not be sure how it had been prepared or used beforehand. These dietary rules and observance of holy days were considered very important matters of Jewish faithfulness.

All of this together, therefore, implies that [the first day of the week] is the day when believers from a very early time gathered for their specifically Christian celebration of worship, which included the Lord's Table. Thus, even though they were not necessarily to bring their gift to the assembly on this day, it was the fact that this day marked for them the specifically Christian day in their week that probably made it convenient for Paul to note it as the time for them to remember the poor among the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

The distinctiveness of Sunday as a day of Christian worship is confirmed by John's reference to it as "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). Early Christian literature leaves little if any doubt as to the identity of this day. See, Richard J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day" in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 227-232. Thus, "*kuriake hemera* [Lord's Day] in Rev. 1:10 is widely understood to be a new Christian designation for Sunday." David Aune, *Revelation 1 – 5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1997), 84. It is the day that belongs to the Lord in a special sense in that it is the day on which his people assemble specially to commemorate his death and resurrection by sharing in the memorial he prescribed.

Early church history corroborates the N.T. picture that Sunday was a regular day of Christian worship. As Bauckham summarizes the evidence in "The Lord's Day" (p. 236):

Sunday worship appears, when the evidence becomes available in the second century, as the universal Christian practice outside Palestine. There is no trace whatever of any controversy as to whether Christians should worship on Sunday, and no record of any Christian group that did not worship on Sunday. This universality is most easily explained if Sunday worship was already the Christian custom before the Gentile mission, and spread throughout the expanding Gentile church with the Gentile mission. It is very difficult otherwise to see how such a practice could have been imposed universally and leave no hint of dissent or disagreement. . . . The conclusion seems irresistible that all of the early missionaries simply exported the practice of the Palestinian churches.

So the claim by some Seventh-day Adventists that worshipping on Sunday was instituted by the Roman Catholic Church centuries after the New Testament era is incorrect.

Soul Sleep and Annihilation of the Wicked

Seventh-day Adventists deny there is any immaterial component of human beings that remains conscious after death of the body. They teach that death is an unconscious state in which all who die remain until the time for their resurrection. As put by one Adventist: "The grave is not a place of consciousness. Since death is sleep, the

dead will remain in a state of unconsciousness in the grave until the resurrection, when the grave (*Hades*) gives up its dead." (Quoted in Martin [1997], 557)

I am convinced that death is a conscious existence. It is portrayed that way in Isa. 14:9-10,¹⁵ Ezek. 32:21, 31, Lk. 16:19-31, and Rev. 6:9-11.

In Lk. 16:19-31, the godless rich man knows where he is, knows where Lazarus is, and knows that he has brothers back on earth. The "I" is still the "I" he was back on earth, and he still has memory. I agree that this probably is an example story (a subclass of parables), meaning that "[i]t teaches a lesson through comparison of a graphic hypothetical situation with true life. It depicts, not a single real event, but a representative one." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1365. The issue, however, is whether one can draw from this example story truths about one's state after death. I believe one can.

The main point of the story is to warn people of the danger of rejecting kingdom ethics (in this instance the ethic of concern for the needy), which is a rejection of God. If people are not conscious after death, then I do not see how Jesus could indicate to his hearers that they would face irreversible, conscious torment if they rejected God's will during their lives. In that case, he would be warning them by means of a threat that was untrue. I suppose one could argue that the portrayal of conscious torment was hyperbole designed to dramatize the horror of unconscious existence, but that would require one to prove that a first-century Jew would understand it that way. That seems an impossible task, given that among the beliefs about the afterlife in first-century Judaism was the belief that the spirits of the ungodly were tormented and the spirits of the godly were blessed in the period between death and the day of judgment (see, e.g., 2 Esdras 7:75ff).

In addition, Jesus told the crucified thief (or rebel) in Lk. 23:43 that he would be with him that day in "paradise." This carries a connotation of pleasantness that seems inapplicable to an unconscious state. As Bock (1996) notes (p. 1858), Jesus' reply "suggests that the criminal will be in some conscious, intermediate state until the resurrection, though this conclusion is implied, rather than explicit."

The fact "sleep" is used as a metaphor for death does not mean the deceased's soul/spirit is unaware of existence. The imagery of sleep is based on the appearance of *the body* in death. A person who is dead resembles a person who is sleeping in that his body lies motionless, and as a sleeping person rises in the morning, so too the dead will rise in the resurrection. The metaphor says nothing about the state of the soul/spirit that has departed the body. For information about that, one must look to other Scriptures, and they indicate that death is a conscious existence.

¹⁵ The inhabitants are referred to as "shades" or "weak ones" in that they are only a shadow or reflection of the full persons they were on earth.

Seventh-day Adventists also deny that Satan, demons, and unbelievers will exist in hell eternally. They teach that those condemned in the final judgment will be annihilated (go out of existence) after an appropriate period of suffering.¹⁶ The eternal existence of the condemned is indicated in several N.T. texts. In 2 Thess. 1:9 the penalty of eternal destruction is described as separation from the presence of the Lord. As Scot McKnight says, "separation from God's presence must be defined as nonfellowship, not annihilation. . . . A person exists but remains excluded from God's good presence." Scot McKnight, "Eternal Consequences of Eternal Consciousness?" in William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 155-156; see also, Douglas Moo observes in "Paul on Hell" in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106-108.

Revelation 14:9-12 is perhaps the most ominous passage in all of Scripture. The angel declares that those who choose Satan over God will be "tormented with fire and brimstone" and that the "smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever." As Jesus said, they are cast "into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mat. 25:41; see also, Rev. 20:15). Satan's followers thus share his destiny, which is to be "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

It will not do to claim that it is the smoke of unbelievers' *completed torment* that rises forever. Smoke will not rise forever without an eternal source of fuel. The rest of Rev. 14:11 confirms the point: "and they have no rest day and night." Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 168-169.

This is the eternal punishment of Mat. 25:46. McKnight closes his examination of that passage with:

We are driven to one conclusion. The terms for eternal in Matthew 25:46 pertain to the final age, and a distinguishing feature of the final age, in contrast to this age, is that it is endless, eternal, and temporally unlimited. It follows then that the most probable meaning of Matthew 25:46 is that just as life with God is temporally unlimited for the righteous, so punishment for sin and rejection of Christ is also temporally unlimited. Since it is unthinkable that God would punish an unconscious being, the final state of the wicked is conscious, eternal torment. I believe that Jesus

¹⁶ Seventh-day Adventists hold to a version of premillennialism. They believe that Jesus will return to earth twice. At his first return, the righteous dead will be resurrected, the righteous living will be transformed, the unrighteous living will be killed, and Satan will be bound (meaning confined to earth). Jesus and the righteous (resurrected and transformed) will then go to heaven, where for a thousand years (the millennium) they will judge the unrighteous dead to determine their appropriate punishment. At the end of the thousand years, Christ, the righteous (the saints), and the Holy City will descend to earth, which for the last thousand years has been populated exclusively by Satan and his angels, and the unrighteous dead will then be resurrected. Satan, his angels, and the resurrected unrighteous will surround the Holy City and will thereafter be annihilated. I believe Scripture teaches there is only one second coming, and the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked occurs at that time.

teaches this truth, and therefore I am obligated to affirm it. It is painful to me, yet in the words of John Stott, "our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth." We can be thankful to God that his Word transcends our fluctuations. (McKnight [1991], 157)

The testimony of Scripture is the reason the traditional view of hell "found an overwhelming majority among the early church witnesses" and has been espoused by the great majority of Christian theologians ever since. Kendall S. Harmon, "The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge" in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 200-201; Robert A. Morey, *Death and Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984), 199-201. It is not because of the Greek idea of inherent immortality of the soul, as annihilationists sometimes charge. The biblical view is that man's immortality is derived from God who alone is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). See, Peterson (1995), 176-178; Morey (1984), 218-219; and Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 74-79.

Eternal, conscious punishment is not inconsistent with passages that speak of the damned as "perishing" or suffering "destruction." These words can carry the sense of being ruined rather than the sense of being annihilated. Dixon (1992), 77-79; see also, Moo (2004), 104-105. For example, "destruction" is prophesied for "the beast" in Rev. 17:8, 11, but he is said in Rev. 20:10 to be "tormented day and night forever and ever." As annihilationist Harold Gullebaud candidly admits:

It is not denied, that *if* it were clear beyond question from Bible teaching elsewhere that the doom of the lost will be everlasting torment, it would be quite possible to understand 'death,' 'destruction,' and the like, as meaning a wretched and ruined existence. (Quoted in Peterson [1995], 166)

Neither is eternal, conscious punishment inconsistent with the use of fire in the imagery of hell. Contrary to annihilationist claims, the fire of hell is intended to convey pain rather than consumption. In Mat. 13:40-42 Jesus uses the fiery furnace to warn of suffering and describes it as a place marked by "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Hell-fire in this instance speaks of anguish, not extinction. Fire also refers to torment in Mat. 25:41 (with Rev. 20:10), Lk. 16:23-24,¹⁷ Rev. 14:10-11, and Rev. 20:10. See, Peterson (1995), 166-170.

Baptism

Seventh-day Adventists baptize believers by immersion upon confession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus. My disagreement is with their teaching that people are forgiven by faith prior to baptism. As indicated in "Some Thoughts on Baptism," I believe Scripture teaches that salvation is not received until one's penitent faith in Christ is expressed in confession and baptism. See, e.g., Mk. 16:15-16 (note textual issue); Jn.

¹⁷ The fact Lk. 16:23-24 relates to the intermediate state rather than to the final judgment does not nullify the fact it uses fire as an image of torment rather than consumption.

3:3-5; Acts 2:36-40, 22:16; Rom. 6:1-4; 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 3:26-27; Eph. 5:25-26; Col. 2:9-12; Tit. 3:5; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:18-21.

Church Government

Seventh-day Adventists have an elaborate form of church government. As described by Frank S. Mead:

The overall administrative body of the church is the executive committee of the general conference, chosen by delegates from the various church groups in the quinquennial sessions. Working under this general conference are three lesser governmental units: (1) 11 divisions, which administer church affairs on different continents; (2) 92 union conferences, which make up the divisional organizations; and (3) 441 local conferences, or missions, the smallest administrative unit.

Each unit has a large amount of autonomy in a highly representative form of government. Local congregations elect lay elders, deacons, and other officers; the local conference office supervises all local pastoral and evangelistic work and pays all pastors and other workers in its territory from a central fund. (Mead [1995], 39)

I do not believe this form of church government is biblical. I have sketched the reasons why in "Some Thoughts on Roman Catholicism."