

The Truth About Seventh-Day Adventism

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Part 3: Adventist Theology vs. Historic Christianity

Are there serious differences concerning cardinal doctrines of Christianity?

In the first two articles of this series on Seventh-day Adventism, we were concerned chiefly with the history and some of the theological doctrines of the Adventist denomination. We saw how Seventh-day Adventism developed from the Second Advent (Millerite) Movement following the Great Disappointment of 1844, and that the early Adventists came from varying religious backgrounds, some orthodox and some heterodox—that is, out of harmony with generally accepted doctrinal teaching in particular areas. Thus, it was some years before certain segments within the main body resolved their differences and consolidated their beliefs in a doctrinal platform acceptable to the majority.

We are concerned in this article with some of the differences between Seventh-day Adventist theology and the theology of “historic orthodoxy.” We have two questions: (1) Are there major differences regarding the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, between Seventh-day Adventist theology and evangelical orthodoxy? (2) Are the other differences that exist an insuperable barrier to fellowship between Seventh-day Adventists and evangelicals?

Extensive study reveals seven areas of disagreement. We shall note the seven areas, discuss them, and attempt to reach a conclusion based upon all available evidence, by-passing the morass of prejudice accumulating for almost one hundred years.

1. Conditional Immortality, “Soul Sleep” and Annihilation

The doctrine of “soul sleep” (unconsciousness in death) and the final extinction of all the wicked, is a cardinal tenet in the theological superstructure of the Seventh-day Adventists Church. This presents what is probably regarded as the greatest bar to fellowship between Adventists and their fellow Christians.

The doctrine of the “sleep of the soul”—though the term is seldom used by informed Adventists—involves the proposition that at the death of the body the spirit, or principle of life in man, returns to God who gave it, and man as a “living soul” (Genesis 2:7) lapses into a state of unconsciousness, oblivious of passing time, pending the resurrection of the physical body. The Adventists base this doctrine upon various texts in the Bible where the word “sleep,” in their thinking, is used as a synonym for “death.”

For example, “them that sleep in the dust of the earth,” “David is not ascended unto the heavens,” “David slept with his fathers,” “the dead know not anything,” “in death there is no remembrance of thee,” “Lazarus is not dead, but sleepeth,” “they which are fallen asleep,” etc., Seventh-day Adventists take to mean that man is in a temporary state of unconsciousness awaiting the resurrection, or call to life. They point out that the Bible never refers to “immortal souls,” that it is God “who only hath immortality” (1 Timothy 6:15-16), and that immortality is declared to be a “gift,” received from Christ at the resurrection and is applicable only to resurrected bodies.

Some thirty-five pages in my forthcoming book, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*, is allotted to a fuller study of this problem, and its solution and refutation. So at this time it will be unnecessary to go into detail. However, the Scriptures teach that to be “absent from the body is the present [or “at home”—Greek] with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8), and I for one do not see how any careful student of Greek today can read the first chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, especially verses 21 to 23, and not come to understand that the apostle clearly meant with his choice of words that it was far better for him “to depart and be with Christ” than to remain there in the flesh, although it was needful for the Philippian Christians.

In that context the inspired apostle indisputably maintained that “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” If man, as an entity, be unconscious until the resurrection, it certainly is *not* gain. Again, in 2 Corinthians 5:8 and that context where, although Paul states he would not desire to be “naked,” that is “unclothed,” until the resurrection, nevertheless, he definitely teaches that the soul will be conscious in the present of the Lord until the resurrection, and that at the resurrection the soul will be clothed with an immortal body (1 Corinthians 15), the very image of the resurrection body of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible

nowhere teaches what is commonly termed “soul sleep,” nor is the term ever mentioned in Scripture, and we believe the Adventists at this point are standing on weak ground exegetically.

However, it is only fair to mention that such noted scholars as William Tyndale, whose translation of the Bible was largely the basis for our King James translation; Martin Luther, great leader of the Protestant Reformation; and prior to them, John Wycliffe, himself a famous translator, all held to the doctrine of the sleep of the soul—as well as many other illustrious Christians through the centuries. This, of course, does not make the doctrine true. But, one should see that if we refuse to fellowship with Seventh-day Adventists on the basis of the doctrine of the unconscious sleep of the dead then we likewise will have to refuse fellowship with Tyndale, Luther, Wycliffe, and a host of other Christians who held essentially that same view.

As far as this writer is concerned, although he is in definite disagreement with the doctrine, it does not constitute a bar to our having fellowship with them, since the basis of fellowship is Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and coming again—“God manifest in the flesh”—and *not* the nature of man or the intermediate state of the soul pending the resurrection.

The doctrine of annihilation of the wicked is felt by many to be a purely rationalistic development in Christian theology. It assumes that in order for the universe to be “clean” all evil will have to be annihilated that good may eventually triumph. The fallacy in this thought, as I see it, is that God is not circumscribed by human concepts and methods of purging His creation. Further, what may appear perfectly logical to us, where a “clean universe” is concerned, may be just the opposite in the divine mind. As I see it, the Bible uses no terms which could be translated “annihilate” or “reduced to nothingness.” To argue, therefore, for the annihilation of the wicked is to argue contrary to the usage of the terms employed in the Bible to describe God’s final disposition of evil. Orthodox Christianity has commonly held since the early centuries of the Christian era that God intends to punish unto the everlasting ages of eternity those who commit the infinite transgression of rejecting Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh (Matthew 25:46, John 3:36, etc.) Seventh-day Adventists and their theological ancestors, historic Christianity contends, have brought forth no valid scriptural evidence to the contrary, but only a rationalist approach to what is admittedly a difficult but not insoluble problem.

In essence, then, when the Lord Jesus Christ said in Matthew 25:46, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment,” He meant precisely what He said, and to argue that in this text and others like it “everlasting punishment” *means* annihilation is contrary to the usage of the terms themselves. Insofar as historic orthodoxy is concerned, the teaching of the extinction or annihilation of the wicked is at best a speculative position, unsupported by systematic theology, good exegesis, and the application of the sound principles of hermeneutics.

2. The Doctrine of the Sanctuary and the Investigate Judgment

The Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary (discussed in my second article) holds that Christ is now in the heavenly sanctuary judging who are to be accounted worthy to reign with Him; and that when this work is completed Christ will return to earth, bringing His rewards with Him. Thus, say the Adventists, Christ is ministering the benefits of the atonement which He *completed* on the cross. As our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-15) Christ is interceding for us, “constantly forgiving and cleansing us from all sin (1 John 1:7, 9). The “investigative judgment” itself is a term and a doctrine peculiar to Seventh-day Adventism, and is based on an Arminian interpretation of the position of the believer as opposed to the Calvinistic doctrine of the eternal security of the believer. According to their interpretation of salvation the Adventists hold that they may lose the benefit of redemption through sin (Arminianism), and the investigative judgment is no more than a modified device of Arminianism, albeit unique.

The doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgment, which they base upon Hebrews 8 and 9, constitutes no real barrier to fellowship when it is understood in its symbolic meaning and not in the materialistic, and extreme literalistic sense in which some of the early Adventist writers set it forth. The Adventists themselves recognize that none of us can know of that these “heavenly things” (Hebrews 9:24) are composed. God is here talking to men in language adapted to their understanding. The earthly sanctuary, and its services, was but the “shadow of heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5).

Contemporary Seventh-day Adventist theology accepts the doctrine in the figurative sense as great heavenly realities, and teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ is still interceding for all Christian believers before the throne of His Father. It should be carefully observed here, that this doctrine of the investigative judgment in no way implies, in Seventh-day Adventist thinking, the concept of a dual or partially completed atonement; rather, Adventists emphasize a completed, final work accomplished by

Christ *alone* on Calvary for them as well as all believers, which atoning sacrifice is ministered or applied by Christ as our Great High Priest in heaven above (1 John 1:7, 9).

As Dr. Barnhouse pointed out in his article in September the investigative judgment is purely a speculative dogma, inherent within the structure of Adventist theology, and when properly understood, can offer no real objection to fellowship between Adventists and their fellow Christians.

3. The Scapegoat, a Teaching Concerning Satan

This particular doctrine was also discussed in the second article, where we saw that Adventists do not believe that Satan vicariously bears the sins of men. Rather, he bears only his own *responsibility* for the crime of tempting men to sin. It is not to be construed that he is a co-worker in the atonement with the Lord Jesus Christ. Though the scapegoat interpretation (of Leviticus 16), is peculiar in the light of the usual historic interpretation, it is not heretical. And since this area of Adventist theology does not involve a denial of the completed atonement made by Christ *alone*, it certainly cannot be cited as a legitimate reason for refusing to fellowship with the Adventists.

4. The Seventh-day Sabbath

This doctrine is just plain historical Sabbatarianism, which the Seventh-day Adventists took over from the Seventh-day Baptists. In the eyes of many it smacks of legalism, especially since the Adventist claim that if one does not observe the seventh-day Sabbath he is in disobedience to what they believe to be one of the express commands of the moral law, or Ten Commandments as they describe it. But the Adventists also teach that those who keep Sunday in good faith and are honestly living up to all of the light that they have on the issue do not have this disobedience imputed to them.

Contrary to this position, St. Paul tells us in the fourteenth chapter of Romans that one man esteems one day above another, others esteem every day alike and that each should be fully persuaded in his own mind, etc. In the second chapter of Colossians, Paul also tells us that days, feast, ceremonials, types, etc., have *all* passed away at the cross. And in Colossians 2:16 ad

17 the inspired apostle specifically mentions the Sabbaths, in the plural, clearly indicating that as far as he was concerned the Sabbath issued was closed at Calvary.

5. The Spirit of Prophecy

The Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the “spirit of prophecy” teaches that spiritual gifts did not cease with the apostolic church, but rather that they have been manifested through the years, and especially so in the writings and work of Ellen G. White, prominent early leader in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. The Adventists maintain that Mrs. White was specifically guided in penning counsel and instruction to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. They esteem her writings highly, which one cannot understand until one digests a sufficient quantity of them. They do not, however, put her writings on a parity with Scripture.

Adventists regard the “spirit of prophecy” counsels of Ellen G. White as counsels to the Adventist denomination, and there is no reason why this view should prohibit Christians of other denominations from having fellowship with Adventists, so long as Adventists do not attempt to enforce upon their fellow Christians the counsels that Mrs. White specifically directs to them.

6. Health Reforms (unclean foods, etc.)

The ministry of Mrs. White, throughout her many years of association with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, uniformly encouraged what has been called “health reform.” This term is much broader than the matter of diet. Mrs. White believed and taught that the Scriptures give the best outline for the care of the human body. Throughout her life she gave to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination frequent counsels on health principles, including dietary matters. Many individuals outside the ranks of Adventism, looking at these dietary restrictions covering what they call “unclean” foods (including pork, lobsters, crabs, and various other edibles, which were all forbidden under the Mosaic law), have reasoned that Adventists are legalists in this realm and ought instead to consider themselves “under grace” and free to eat all things, as based on Peter’s vision in Acts 10:15. Here Peter saw a great sheet filled with all manner of beasts, creeping things, and fowls. In this connection, the Lord speaking to him, said, “What God hath cleansed call not thou common or unclean.”

Adventists hold that this vision concerning the edibility of “all things” is symbolic, and they quote verses 24 and 34, where Peter says, “God hath showed me that I should not call *any man* common or unclean” and adds, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.”

In answer to the charge of Mosaic legalism, a prominent Adventist authority on the Old Testament, the Rev. W. E. Read, stated the denominational position when he wrote:

It is true we refrain from eating certain articles as indicated. . . but not because the law of Moses has any binding claims upon us. Far from it. We stand fast in the liberty wherewith God has set us free. It must be remembered that God recognized “clean” and “unclean” animals at the time of the flood (Genesis 7:2, 8; 8:20), long before there was a law of Moses. We simply reason that if God saw fit to counsel His people then that such things were not best for human consumption, and since we are physically constituted as are the Jews and all other people, that such things can hardly be the best for us to use today.

It is primarily a question of health. We attach religious significance to the question of eating insofar as it is vital that we preserve our bodies in the best health. This we feel is our duty and responsibility, for our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:10; 2 Corinthians 6:16).

It will be seen that, in the Adventist view, certain principles of the Mosaic law are still operative today regarding the question of goods, just as certain other features of the Mosaic law are operative today regarding other truths carried over from the Old Testament to the New Testament; but these are not forced upon Adventists in a legalistic way, except as they personally feel moral responsibility or where their conscience is concerned. That certain features of the Old Testament law are taught in the New Testament, no informed theologian will deny, and these are *not* abolished at Calvary. (See 1 Samuel 14:32-33; Deuteronomy 6:5, 10-12, 36 and compare with Acts 15:28-29; 21:25; Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14).

The membership of the Adventists, now past the million mark, is scattered over most of the countries of the earth. They consistently seek to use the best foods available in the various lands, as circumstances

permit, while conscientiously avoiding that which they regard as “unclean.” Should any doubt that the Adventists have some ground on which to stand, they may check the instances where some Mosaic injunctions were carried over as moral responsibilities in the New Testament.

We may not agree with Seventh-day Adventists on the problem of dietary health reforms, but St. Paul tells us, in Romans 14:2-4, that we ought not to judge another’s habits, etc., but leave such judgment unto the Lord. Further, that we ought to do nothing that would cause our brethren to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:15). Therefore, so long as Seventh-day Adventists do not attempt to enforce upon their fellow Christians these dietary restrictions this issue, too, fails to justify a refusal to fellowship.

7. The Remnant Church

The last area of conflict between Seventh-day Adventism and contemporary evangelical Christianity is the “remnant church” idea, espoused by early members of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Still taught in the denomination, though in a vastly different sense from its original conception, the idea is that Adventists constitute a definite part of the “remnant church,” or the “remnant people” of God, of the last days. But they just as staunchly maintain that God’s *true children*, scattered through all faiths, are likewise included in this “remnant,” in contradistinction to some early writers in the movement who maintained that the term “remnant” applied only to Seventh-day Adventists.

These early writers, in their formative days, developed the idea that the 144,000 mentioned in the book of Revelation, was the Seventh-day Adventist Church in literal numbers. Such restricted views have long since been repudiated by their leaders and the great majority of Adventists.

Today, the term involves a time element—the “remnant church” indicates the great last segment of the true Christian church of the Christian Era, existing just before the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Adventists further recognize that God’s true followers everywhere, whom He owns as *His people* are true members of this “remnant,” which will constitute the Bride of Christ at His glorious return to usher in the Kingdom of God.

If Seventh-day Adventist theology actually did maintain that they *alone* were the chosen or “remnant church,” and that other Christians were excluded, we might say that a definite reason existed for

hesitation, where fellowship with them is concerned. But the denominational position today clearly recognizes all true Christians as fellow members of the Body of Christ and part of the great last day “remnant people” to be manifested in the closing days of the age of grace. Some detractors still persist in quoting outmoded or unrepresentative literature and out-of-context quotations not in harmony with the true denominational position in an attempt to prove that the Adventists are rigid exclusivists on this issue. This assertion simply is not true!

Summary

As we draw this brief resume of current Seventh-day Adventist beliefs to a close, we feel that the two questions that we set out to answer at the beginning have been satisfactorily covered in the light of verifiable contemporary evidence. It is definitely possible, we believe, to have fellowship with Seventh-day Adventists on the basis of their clear fundamental allegiance to the cross of Jesus Christ, and to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, regarding which Seventh-day Adventists are soundly orthodox. Despite their somewhat “heterodox” theological ideas in some areas, they are most certainly true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As noted, the serious disagreement that might most naturally arise in three areas—sleep of the dead (and annihilation of the wicked); the Sabbath; and the sanctuary-investigative-judgment theory—can be greatly mollified by understanding the true Adventist position on these doctrines.

The leadership of the denomination is eager to see that this position be set forth in their literature and borne out in their activities throughout the world. There is no doubt that Seventh-day Adventists desire to receive and to extend the hand of fellowship to all truly within the body of Christ. The differences that exist between Seventh-day Adventist theology and accepted historic orthodoxy, do not justify the attitude which many have held toward Seventh-day Adventism of either the recent past, or the present. Were it not for the fact that many Christian writers and publishers have seemingly been concerned only with selling books, pamphlets, etc., and combating certain phases of what they believe to be theological error in Adventist theology, instead of digging out the true, verifiable facts and presenting the whole picture, the Christian public today would have a much clearer concept of the Seventh-day Adventist

Church. True Seventh-day Adventism, despite its differences, is one *with* us in the great work of winning men to Jesus Christ and in preaching the wonders of His matchless, redeeming grace.

Notes

1. The author was director of Cult Apologetics for the Zondervan Publishing House, contributing editor of *ETERNITY* Magazine, and a member of the staff of The Evangelical Foundation in Philadelphia.

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