

The Truth About Seventh-Day Adventism

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Part 2: What Seventh-Day Adventists Really Believe

Are the differences between Adventist and orthodox Christian doctrines sufficient to deny them fellowship?

We saw in our first article of the series something of the origin, growth and development of Seventh-day Adventism as a movement. Now we shall review briefly Adventist theology of today. The theology of Seventh-day Adventism can be divided into three separate sections, as follows:

1. Cardinal Doctrines of the Christian Faith: The doctrine of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, the perfect human nature of Christ during the incarnation, His eternal deity, the vicarious atonement of Christ on the cross for all sin, the bodily resurrection of our Lord from the grave, and His visible second advent to judge the world. On these basic fundamentals of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Seventh-day Adventists are solidly in the tradition of historic orthodox Christianity. And without hesitation they recognize the Bible *alone* as the inspired, inerrant Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice.

2. Alternate View on Secondary Teachings: The second section of theological beliefs concerns alternate views on biblical doctrines, either view being admissible from the standpoint of Christian belief and argument, such as Arminianism versus Calvinism, Historicist eschatology versus Futurist, etc., so that the Adventists find themselves at times on one side and at other times on the other side relative to theological issues that have never fully been settled throughout the history of the Christian Church.

3. Doctrines Peculiar to Seventh-day Adventism: The third division involves a relatively small group of doctrines which are peculiar to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and which are not held or shared by any other groups. These distinctive doctrines are: (a) The doctrine of

the heavenly sanctuary, (b) the investigative judgment, and (c) the restoration of spiritual gifts, including the “spirit of prophecy.”

A concise statement of what Seventh-day Adventists do believe from an authoritative source will probably serve to establish their adherence to the basic principles of Christian theology far better than a hundred articles by a non-Adventist. Therefore, the following statement, prepared by a group of leading theologians of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, appearing in a new book soon to be released by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, covers the subject quite thoroughly and is reproduced here by permission.

“Seventh-day Adventists believe that the unfolding light of Bible truth is progressive and is to shine ‘more and more unto the perfect day’ (Proverbs 4:18). And we have sought to walk in the advancing light of truth. We have never drive in formal creedal stakes, and said, ‘This is the truth; thus far and no farther.’ Ellen G. White, one of our leading writers, wrote in 1892: ‘New light will ever be revealed on the Word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed. The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the Word of God.’² The founding fathers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church over a century ago came out of various denominational backgrounds. While all were premillennialists, some were Trinitarian; others were Arian. The majority were Arminians; a few Calvinists. Some insisted on immersion; a few were content with sprinkling. There was a diversity on these points. And, as with various religious groups, our early days were characterized by transition and adjustment. A church was being brought forth. As these men were already born-again believers, the initial study and emphasis was placed upon the distinctive teachings of the movement. And they were similarly occupied in developing an effective organization.

“In those early years relatively little attention was paid to the respective merits of Arminianism in contrast to the Calvinist position. The historic differences of thought involved had reached back to Augustine and Chrysostom. They did not concern themselves with ‘absolute decrees,’ ‘divine sovereignty,’ ‘particular election,’ or ‘limited

atonement.' Nor did they, at first, seek to define the nature of the Godhead, or the problems of Christology, involving the deity of Christ and His nature during the incarnation; the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit; the nature, scope, and completeness of the atonement; the relationship of law to grace, or the fullness of the doctrine of righteousness by faith; and the like.

“But with the passage of years the earlier diversity of view on certain doctrines gradually gave way to unity of view. Clear and sound positions were then taken by the great majority on such doctrines as the Godhead, the deity and eternal preexistence of Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit. Clear-cut views were established on righteousness by faith, the true relationship of law and grace, and on the death of Christ as the complete atonement for sin.

“A few, however, held to some of their former views, and at times these ideas got into print. However, for decades now the church has been practically at one on the basic truths of the Christian faith.

“The very fact that our positions were now clarified seemed to us to be sufficient. Our teachings, we felt, were clear. And no particular statement of change from those earlier ideas appeared necessary. Today the primary emphasis of all our leading denominational literature, as well as the continuous presentations over radio and television, emphasizes the historic fundamental of the Christian faith.

“But the charges and attacks have persisted. Some continue to gather up quotations from some of our earlier literature long since out of date and print. Certain statements are cited, often wrested out of context, which give a totally distorted picture of the beliefs and teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of today.

“All this has made it desirable and necessary for us to declare our position afresh upon the great fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, and to deny every statement or implication that Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, was not One with the Father from all eternity, and that His sacrifice on the cross was not a full and complete

atonement. The present belief of Seventh-day Adventists on these great truths is clear and emphatic. And we feel that we should no longer be identified with or stigmatized for certain limited and faulty concepts held by some in our formative years.

“This statement should therefore nullify the stock ‘quotations’ that have been circulated against us. We are one with our fellow Christians of denominational groups in the great fundamentals of the faith once delivered to the saints. Our hope is in a crucified, risen, ministering, and soon-returning Saviour.”

It is true that there is still some literature in print and on the shelves of libraries that reflects some of the earlier positions just mentioned, but precautions are being taken to limit further circulation and to present a unified and true picture of Seventh-day Adventist adherence to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith.

In contrast to this development in Seventh-day Adventism, it is to be noted that there are many publications circulated today in evangelical bodies, dealing with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination that are seemingly unaware of or unconcerned with the present positions of the church. This writer read all of the anti-Adventist publications issued within the last fifty-seven years and listed in the catalogs of the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. Less than 20 percent of these volumes are now up to date or contain the true Seventh-day Adventist positions as they are stated and published in contemporary Adventist circles.

My research has uncovered the fact that not only have many unrepresentative quotations cited from earlier Seventh-day Adventist publications been expunged from the current editions of these publications, but that many of the critics of Seventh-day Adventism constantly make unethical use of the ellipsis—the deletion of parts of sentences, and sometimes whole paragraphs in between sentences—in order seemingly to indict the Adventists for holding beliefs that they most strenuously reject. The abuse of ethics by some Christian writers and publishers, both non-Adventist and Adventist, is shocking when one makes a close survey of the conflicting literature involved!

This writer is by no means a Seventh-day Adventist, nor do I as a Baptist at all hold their distinctive doctrines, which we shall discuss next, but an impartial study of the facts extending over a seven-year period, interviews with leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and a thorough acquaintance with a voluminous mount of Adventist and non-Adventist publications, has led me as research polemicist to believe that a reasonable re-evaluation of the positions of Seventh-day Adventism is called for in orthodox evangelical circles today. The need for abandoning the out-of-print quotations and questionable statements that have been repudiated by the Adventist denomination ought also to be recognized by Christian publishers who wish to present the truth. Surely none is interested merely in issuing books and pamphlets to sell and make money, irrespective of the truthfulness of their contents.

Seventh-day Adventists, then, assuredly accept the Bible as the inspired revelation of God to man, the sole rule of faith and practice. Their theology embraces the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, the deity and eternal preexistence of Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, His miraculous conception and Virgin birth, sinless human nature during the incarnation, vicarious atoning death on the cross, bodily resurrection, literal ascension, priestly ministry as Intercessor before the Father, and His second personal, premillennial advent to judge the world.

In addition to this, all reliable, representative Seventh-day Adventist literature holds to the fundamental doctrines of the new birth, justification by faith, progressive sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and salvation by *grace alone* through the blood of Jesus Christ, *apart* from the works of the law. Should anyone reading this article desire proof of the official Seventh-day Adventist position on these statements they should address a letter or postal card to: The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department I, Takoma Park, Washington 12, D.C., and confirmation sufficient to convince any honest investigator will be forth-coming immediately. In the early months of 1957 the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists will release a new book dealing with contemporary Seventh-day Adventist theology, which should supersede individual-author publications on the basis of authoritative theological positions, stating unequivocally the adherence of the General Conference, and of all true Seventh-day Adventists, to the fundamentals of the gospel just stated.

Seventh-day Adventism in 1956 is a far cry from the Adventism—rightly criticized in certain areas—of Dudley M. Canright in his book *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*. Whoever attempts to refute Adventism today by using Canright and by quoting him as authoritative in every area of his criticism of Seventh-day Adventism is tearing down a straw man. Where Canright deals with the divergent views of Adventism as they affect the historic Christian message, he is relevant. However, many of the earlier minority positions of Adventism have either been reversed or revised in line with the convictions of the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination that advancing light and progressive truth make necessary clarification and adherence to the cardinal truths of the gospel.

Dr. LeRoy E. Froom, one of the Secretaries of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, writing in a new theological publication to be released early in 1957, clearly states the Seventh-day Adventist denomination's repudiation of all extremist or personal positions of the past that misrepresent the clear teachings of the church and of distorted positions wrongly attributed to them. Writes Dr. Froom:

“We wholly reject the thought that the atoning sacrifice of Christ on Calvary was either insufficient or incomplete. We totally reject the concept of a dual atonement. We utterly repudiate the postulate that human works are in any way a ground of acceptance with God. And we reject the blasphemous and abhorrent suggestion that Satan plays any part in our salvation.”

He also lists popular “errors” in the religious world repudiated by Adventists: “We likewise reject the evolution hypothesis, the fallacy of a second probation, the fantasy of ultimate restorationism, or universalism, as well as spiritism, Unitarianism, pantheism, ritualism, antinomianism, and rationalism. And we reject the practice of infant baptism and baptismal regeneration.”

In addition, he states categorically: “And we similarly reject all such Roman Catholic doctrines as the superiority of tradition and the insufficiency of Scripture, the immaculate conception, the mass and transubstantiation, communion in one kind, purgatory, penance, veneration of images, indulgences, invocation of saints, absolution, and extreme unction.”

The positions presented in the covering statement by Dr. Froom, speaking as a leading authority on Adventist history and theology, are fully supported by the declarations of the General Conference of

Seventh-day Adventists. It is one more evidence that Seventh-day Adventists wish to correct all misrepresentations, and any misinterpretations of some in the past, and to fellowship with the other members of the body of Christ.

The Scapegoat Teaching

One of the common charges raised against Seventh-day Adventist theology is that it makes Satan a co-sinbearer with the Lord Jesus Christ. This charge is based upon Leviticus 16, where one goat was slain for a sin offering and the other goat was sent out into the wilderness in the Old Testament symbolism. The second goat's title was "Azazel," and Seventh-day Adventists, in company with a number of prominent scholars who are not Adventists, maintain that this goat represents Satan.

It is the Adventist teaching that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns from heaven with His saints at the close of the millennial thousand years, to end the great and terrible day of Jehovah, He will place upon Satan, or the devil, the full *responsibility* for Satan's role as instigator or tempter to sin. The Adventists reason that Satan is indirectly involved, where guilt is concerned, in that he was the originator of evil who caused our first parents to sin and ushered death into the world. Therefore it is only fitting, they believe, that according to the type he should be punished for *his responsibility* in bringing about the rebellion of both angels and men against the Creator, and he must therefore bear the retributive punishment for *his responsibility* in the sins of all men.

However, the Adventists repudiate completely any suggestion or implication that Satan is in any degree their "sin-bearer," pointing out that, in the Old Testament symbolism, only the *first* goat was slain as a vicarious offering. The second goat was not killed, but sent out into the wilderness to die. And they maintain that Satan similarly bears away to final annihilation *his part and responsibility* as the master criminal who plotted the development of sin and has sustained it throughout the period of God's grace toward lost men. To quote a recognized Adventist authority:

"Now concerning my sin, Christ died for *my* sins (Romans 5:8). He was wounded for *my* transgressions and bore *my* iniquities (Isaiah 53). He assumed *my* responsibilities and His blood alone cleanses *me* from all sin (1 John 1:7). The atonement for *my* sin is made solely by the shed blood of Christ, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission (Hebrews 9:22)."

The “scapegoat,” then, stands for Satan in Leviticus 16, according to Seventh-day Adventist theology. It is he who, in the final analysis, is to have rolled back upon his head not only his own sins but the *responsibility* for all the sins he has *caused* others to commit. In their theology Satan does not *vicariously bear* the sins of anyone! He has *no part* whatsoever in the already *completed atonement* of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Dr. Froom has succinctly said:

“Satan’s death, a thousand times over, could never make him a saviour in any sense whatsoever. He is the arch-sinner of the universe, the author and instigator of sin. Even if he had never sinned, he still could never save others. Not even the highest of the holy angels could atone for our sins. Only Christ, the Creator, the one and only God-man, could make a substitutionary atonement for men’s transgressions. And this Christ did completely and perfectly and once-for-all on Golgotha.”

The literature of Seventh-day Adventists in past years, and even occasionally in some current publications, has unfortunately not been altogether clear in this differentiation, when the scapegoat was discussed. But neither Ellen G. White nor the overwhelming majority of Adventist writers has ever held that Satan was in any degree a vicarious substitute or a sin-bearer, much less a co-worker with Christ in the atonement. All Seventh-day Adventists are in harmony with the teachings of the General Conference that Jesus Christ shed His blood upon the cross *once for all*, and it was on that perfect sacrifice alone, and Christ’s complete atonement, that they have rested, and do now rest, all hope for their salvation.

Salvation by Law or Grace?

In 1888 at an important convocation of Seventh-day Adventist leaders, Ellen G. White encouraged members of the denomination to stand forthrightly upon the clear scriptural teaching of salvation by grace *alone* through the blood of Jesus Christ *apart* from the deeds of the law. There had been some confusion on this point. But Mrs. White emphatically rejected the ideas of a certain segment of Adventist leadership at the time, which held that salvation was by grace, but was contingent in some respect upon the works of the law. The official position of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination declares:

“The law cannot save the transgressor from his sin, nor impart power to keep him from sinning. In infinite love and mercy, God provides a way whereby this may be done. He furnishes a substitute, even Christ the Righteous One to die in man’s stead making Him to ‘be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). That one is justified, not by obedience to the law but by the grace that is in Christ Jesus. By accepting Christ man is reconciled to God, justified by His blood from the sins of the past, and saved from the power of sin by His indwelling life. Thus the gospel becomes ‘the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth’ (Romans 1:16). This experience is wrought by the divine agency of the Holy Spirit, who convicts of sin and leads to the Sin-Bearer, inducting the believer into the new covenant relationship, where the law of God is written upon his heart, and through the enabling power of the indwelling Christ, his life is brought into conformity to the divine precepts. The honor and merit of this wonderful transformation belongs wholly to Christ (1 John 2:1-2; 3:4; Romans 3:20; 5:8-10; 7:7; Ephesians 2:8-10, 3:17, Galatians 2:20; Hebrews 8:8-12).”³

Seventh-day Adventists have reacted rather violently against the modern trend toward Antinomianism or the concept that the Christian has nothing to do with the moral law and especially the Ten Commandments. They maintain, and rightly so, that although one is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, wholly apart from the law, and while he is free from the condemnation of the law, he is certainly not free from the moral obligations of God’s moral law. For the Adventists (as for other informed Christians) it is just as wrong for a Christian in the Christian Era to lie, to cheat, to steal, to commit adultery, or to blaspheme now as it was for mankind to do so before Calvary. And it has been their emphasis upon this point, in the face of certain Antinomian tendencies in evangelical circles through the years, which has largely been responsible for characterizing them as “legalists.” That there are some legalistic tendencies in Adventism however, there can be no doubt. But whatever legalistic tendencies do exist, in no way impugn the fundamental adherence of Adventists to the gospel of Christ and the cardinal doctrines thereof.

Historically, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has ever emphasized the blood of Jesus Christ and His grace alone as the true basis for salvation, and their emphasis upon the law stems mainly from a desire to avoid the error of Antinomianism.

The Doctrine of the Heavenly Sanctuary

This particular doctrine, in its present form peculiar to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, was first promulgated by Hiram Edson, a prominent early Adventist, and a former Millerite minister. In the wake of the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, Edson reexamined the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 and the twenty-three hundred year-days, as ending in 1844. This examination culminated in what is today known, among Adventists, as the “sanctuary truth.” Hiram Edson came to believe that the Lord had imparted to him a clearer interpretation of Daniel 8:14 relative to the Heavenly Sanctuary, which Edson transferred from the earlier Millerite concept of the earth as being the “sanctuary,” to recognition of Heaven as the sanctuary, according to Hebrews 8 and 9. Instead of committing Miller’s error, however and stating that Christ was to come to earth in 1844 to cleanse the earthly sanctuary by fire, Edson believed that Christ at that time passed from the *first* apartment of the sanctuary in heaven into the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary in 1844. Christ then was to complete this final phase of His heavenly ministry, which commenced in 1844, and come back to this earth bringing rewards with Him at His glorious second advent—distinctly a future event. In a manuscript setting forth his life and experience, Edson records the event thusly:

“After breakfast I said to one of my brethren, ‘Let us go and see and encourage some of our brethren.’ We started, and while passing through a large field I was stopped about midway of the field. Heaven seemed open to my view and I saw distinctly and clearly that instead of our High Priest coming out of the Most Holy of the Heavenly Sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days, He for the first time entered on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary; that He had a work to perform in the ‘most holy’ before coming to this earth. That He came to the marriage at that time (as mentioned in the parables of the ten virgins); in other words to the Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom, dominion and glory; we must wait for His return from the wedding. . .

“While I was thus standing in the midst of the field, my comrade passed on almost beyond speaking distance before missing me. He inquired why I was stopping so long, and I replied, ‘The Lord was answering our morning prayers, by giving light with regard to our disappointment.’ “

In Edson’s mind then, and in the minds of many early Adventists, Heaven contained a literal sanctuary with a first apartment and a second apartment, constructed along the lines of the ancient Hebrew tabernacle. According to Edson, Christ entered the second apartment on the sanctuary in 1844 for the “first time,” to perform His final judgment work in the “Most Holy,” or second apartment, which would place Christ in the first apartment of the sanctuary from the time of His ascension until October 22, 1844.⁴

This second work that the Lord was expected to perform, and which He has been carrying out since 1844 according to Adventist theology, has been a work of “investigative judgment,” that is, a review of all believers, covering their lives, their works, etc., and when man’s probationary period is closed, the Lord Jesus Christ will come out of the heavenly sanctuary and return to earth, bringing all rewards *with* Him, and ushering in the great and terrible day of God Almighty.

We have reserved further discussion of “the heavenly sanctuary,” the “investigative judgment,” conditional immortality, annihilation of the wicked, and the Seventh-day Sabbath for our concluding article, which will deal particularly with those doctrines and give a summary of the reasons why, despite such views, the writer feels that it is still possible for us to have fellowship with Seventh-day Adventists.

The deviations from what is commonly called “historic orthodox theology” embraced by Seventh-day Adventism, will therefore be the subject of our final article. It has been the aim of this series of articles not to present an apologetic for Seventh-day Adventism, nor to whitewash their obvious deviations from the accepted theological views of orthodox Christianity, but rather to point out that all the evidence has not been considered where the Adventists are concerned, and what evidence has been presented has often been clouded by inaccuracy, lack of ethics, and distinct shortcomings of scholarly investigation. In order to have *something* to say against Adventism, many have been content to say *anything*! However, whatever else one may say about Seventh-day Adventism, it cannot be denied from their truly representative literature and their historic positions that they have always as a majority, held to the

cardinal, fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith which are necessary to salvation, and to the growth in grace that characterizes all true Christian believers.

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.
2. E.G. White. *Counsels of Sabbath School Work*. 1892, page 34.
3. "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists." Page 4, *Seventh-day Adventist Year Book*, 1956.
4. This literalist interpretation is contradicted by Hebrews 9:12. Christ had already entered in "once" into the holy places (Greek—*Hagia*, plural).

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Seventh-day Adventists are a global family of Christians who hold the Bible as the ultimate authority. There are, however, a few distinguishing characteristics that set them apart from many other Christian denominations. Let's look at a few core components of their collective identity, which can give you an idea of what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist. Adventists look to Jesus Christ alone for salvation. A foundational belief for Adventists is also shared by the majority of Christians around the world. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of humanity, is "the way, the truth, and the life." The theology of the Seventh-day Adventist Church resembles that of Protestant Christianity, combining elements from Lutheran, Wesleyan-Arminian, and Anabaptist branches of Protestantism. Adventists believe in the infallibility of the Scripture and teach that salvation comes from grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The 28 fundamental beliefs constitute the church's official doctrinal position. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has been called a cult by some and "fringe" Protestants by others. But are they either? This article hopes to enlighten readers with facts about actual SDA beliefs. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church is a Protestant denomination that began as an offshoot of the Millerite Movement. Question: How do Seventh-Day Adventists explain the suicide of mentally ill or handicapped people? Answer: The founder of the SDA church, Ellen G. White, had this to say: "Christ recognized no distinction of nationality or rank or creed." "He passed by no human being as worthless but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul." The Seventh-Day Adventists are an anomaly. Evangelical Christians have never been comfortable with them, but they have been unable to decide whether the SDA is a legitimate expression of Christianity or whether it is a cult, like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. The majority view among contemporary cult-watchers is that it is a cult. But the most authoritative cult expert in modern Christian history, Dr. Walter Martin (1928-1989), decided in 1965 that "it is perfectly possible to be a Seventh-Day Adventist and be a true follower of Jesus Christ, despite heterodox concepts." This conclusion The Seventh-day Adventist denomination expresses its official teachings in a formal statement known as the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Seventh-day Adventist theology has undergone development from the beginnings of the movement. Jon Paulien has identified four brands of Adventism "evangelists and frontier missionaries whose beliefs are traditional yet creatively expressed, scholars concerned with an accurate understanding of the Bible, the typical church member (including most of the younger, postmodern generation) who is most concerned with what is relevant to ordinary life and not concerned with most doctrines, and those in the Third World who are similarly concerned for a minimal belief set and passionate about their faith.[26]. Regional and cultural differences.