
Interview

Kenneth Wood on the State of the Church

by Ron Graybill

We are pleased that Kenneth H. Wood agreed to an interview for SPECTRUM, conducted by Ron Graybill, an associate secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate. As editor of the Adventist Review for the last 16½ years, Wood joins a select group of five men whose extended tenures as editors-in-chief insured that they were major forces shaping the substance and tone of discourse within the church: James White, 16 years (1850–1881, with intermittent absences); Uriah Smith, 38 years (1855–1903, with nine or ten intermittent years of absences); F. M. Wilcox, 33 years (1911–1944); Francis D. Nichol, 21 years (1945–1966); Kenneth H. Wood, 16½ years (1966–1982).

Born in Shanghai to missionary parents, Wood brought to the editorship extensive pastoral and departmental experience, including five years as

director of lay activities, Sabbath school and public relations in the Columbia Union. For ten years he served as assistant, then associate editor of the Adventist Review.

In addition to the internationalization of the Review, to which Wood refers in this interview, he will be remembered for inaugurating the letters to the editor and “speaking out” sections. Like his predecessors, he has seen to it that the Review was engaged in most of the theological debates taking place in the church during his editorship.

Wood’s voice and influence will continue to be strong. Although William G. Johnsson’s name, for the first time, appears as editor on the December 2 issue of the Review, Wood retains the key post of chairman of the board of the White Estate.

—The Editors

Graybill: I was attending my first General Conference session in 1966 when you became editor of the *Adventist Review*. In what ways has the *Review* changed, if any, since those days?

Wood: I had been one of the editors of the *Review* for nearly 11 years before I became editor. The major difference is that before I became editor we published merely a weekly magazine. Now we have added not only a monthly magazine in English that is the Inter-American Division church paper, but a French edition in Haiti, a Portuguese edition in Sao Paulo, and Spanish editions printed in Buenos Aires and Mountain View. We have tried during this period to internationalize the church paper so that it could become a greater force for unifying

our believers. When I became editor, the church had only about a 1.5 million members. Now it is 3.8 million strong. So the problem of unity becomes ever greater.

Graybill: What is the circulation of the *Review* in North America?

Wood: North American circulation has run as high as 110,000. That included subscriptions the Columbia Union purchased for all its members. Now that the Columbia Union no longer provides those subscriptions, the circulation stands at 75,000, of which 10-12,000 are still being bought by the Southwestern Union to send to its members.

Graybill: Roughly, what would the circulation of the *Review* now be in all editions, in all languages?

Wood: I presume that it would be somewhere between two and three hundred thousand. Our surveys have always shown that about four people, on an average, read any given copy, which means to me that we could reach a million to 1.5 million Adventists on a regular basis.

Graybill: Do the foreign language editions print the same articles that appear in our weekly *Review* here, or do some articles appear in the foreign language editions that we never see in English?

Wood: Some things appear in all of the magazines, such as the monthly message from the General Conference president. Beyond that the foreign language editions lift out four pages of our regular monthly edition, provide their own localized news, and mix in some general articles from their local authors.

Graybill: To what extent is the *Review* the official voice of the church?

Wood: Well, this depends upon whom you are talking to. In spite of all of our disclaimers about its being an official organ, throughout its history the *Review* has been the “unofficial” official voice of the church. My predecessor used to speak of it as the “Authentic Voice of the Advent Movement.” I would say this, that while the editors have complete freedom to publish whatever they feel is in the best interest of the church, they try as nearly as possible to reflect the theological positions of the church and to be constructive. So, while there was a short period of about six years when the phrase “Official Organ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” appeared on the cover of the *Review*, I took the initiative in removing it and returning the expression “General Church Paper of Seventh-day Adventists.” Recently, by request, we changed to “General Organ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” In a political climate like we live in today, church leaders need to be able to disassociate themselves from positions in the magazine that they do not agree with, or that have not been officially voted.

Graybill: Are you under pressure to

print whatever General Conference officers submit?

Wood: We’ve never felt that kind of pressure. We have felt that we had a special responsibility to General Conference leadership, because the total church had elected these people to their positions. When they have sent beneficial articles, we have tried to put them in the best form possible and publish them. On occasion we have returned material to the leading brethren and usually, after some dialogue, they recognized that what they had said could have been thought out more carefully, or might create embarrassment some place.

Graybill: There has been a feeling that you have grave fears for our colleges. Where do you think our colleges are headed, and how might their service to the church be improved?

Wood: Well, it’s interesting that a single editorial can establish an editor as being on one side or another of an issue. The only editorial that I ever wrote that expressed any concerns about our educational system, at least so far as I can recall, was one entitled “Colleges in Trouble.” In that editorial, I was simply pointing out that our colleges do not exist in a vacuum and that the things that trouble other church-related colleges tend to bother us too. The further we get away from the pioneers, the more we need to constantly review where we’re going and what we’re teaching. I suppose what I was really saying was that young people who have not really sorted things out, as they may in later years, shouldn’t be exposed to ideas that they are not ready to handle. It merely shakes their faith and confuses them. So our schools, if they do what they should do, ought not also just to throw a potpourri of ideas at young people, but rather help them sort these out in line with Adventist beliefs.

The point that was lost sight of, apparently, was that I have always been one of the most loyal supporters of our schools, from the elementary grades right on up through our graduate programs. I have sent our children and our grandchildren to Ad-

ventist schools, and I myself never had one day in a public school. So I believe very much in our educational program. But I don't think that we ever ought to get to the place where we feel threatened when somebody says, "Are we doing everything in the best way possible?" That's really all that I was saying.

Graybill: If you were living in Chattanooga today and your children were college age, would you still send them to Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists?

Wood: Yes, I would. In fact, I have recently been contemplating encouraging a young person to attend that very school. I believe that the environment of our schools is the best environment for our young people, even if there may be some theological controversy. So, I wouldn't hesitate at all to send a young person to any of our schools.

Graybill: I know that General Conference and *Review* people get letters from all sorts of people. One person who has written to me and to you and others, feels that many of the teachers in our Bible departments ought not to be teaching there. She apparently got a letter from you which some are interpreting as endorsing her efforts to remove these teachers. How do you feel about people who are trying to get specific teachers dismissed?

Wood: Well, I've never been one who tried to zero in on any particular person, whether faculty member or administrator. I do feel that, in general, our church has always been very gentle and kind to what we might call "liberals," but has been very hard on conservatives. And I use the term "conservative" to describe people who feel that there should be a work of revival and reformation going on in the church. There's a tendency to dismiss these people as fanatics, or crackpots, or extremists, or something of this kind. Now, in my correspondence, I have tried to encourage the faith of people who have concerns about what's happening in the church, and to help them see that they're not alone in this

feeling, but that the Lord, above it all, has never turned over to the undershepherds the full responsibility for the church. He is still the Chief Shepherd of the sheep. I have tried to encourage them to be patient and not despair, for truth has a way of succeeding ultimately. And so, I think that my correspondence probably could be interpreted as supporting those who at times are critical of the church, but it isn't that I'm supporting their criticisms so much as I'm trying to keep them from losing faith in the fact that this is God's church and that He's still leading it.

Graybill: So you don't necessarily endorse the tactics that some of them use?

Wood: No, indeed.

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Graybill: I was distressed at the little paper *Pilgrims' Waymarks* for printing all of these parodies and poems. Do you think it is helpful to publish that sort of thing?

Wood: Well, as an editor of the *Review* for a long time, my feeling has been that a lot of judgment needs to be applied to what you publish. Whatever we publish should be responsible and should be constructive. Obviously, some things should not be given wide exposure because to do so only strengthens whatever is being expressed. I certainly am as concerned as anybody about parodies, whether they are verbal or artistic, but I think it's irresponsible to publish them simply because they exist. Now, I don't know a great deal about *Pilgrims' Waymarks*, but I think that Vance Ferrell's theological positions, in general, have been fairly sound—in line with historic Adventism. But I would feel it is a mistake for him to publish some material, such as on the search for the ark of the covenant. This is the sort of topic on which many people do not have the information with which to make a proper evaluation. And once it's published,

of course, it merely takes on added momentum. And I feel that's true with some of these parodies, too.

Graybill: When I read Walton's *Omega*, I felt that it was unbalanced in its tendencies toward perfectionism—that it stressed the importance of works and sanctification to the almost total exclusion of grace and justification. Looking back on *Omega* now, what do you feel were its strengths, and did it have any weaknesses?

Wood: So far as perfectionism is concerned, this is probably a very misunderstood word. There are people who try to attach the label of perfectionism to anything that gives any emphasis at all to what Christ is able to do through the life of a person, by way of victory. I believe that both the Bible and the spirit of prophecy teach that, at the end of time, it is possible for individuals to be so fully committed to God that they will be willing to give their lives, rather than to yield to the religious political forces. Certainly, they will have come to the place where they consistently say, "Yes," to God, whatever He asks, and "No," to the devil. Now, I don't think that that's an extreme position, and I don't think that Walton is extreme in that. Some people read what he says through their own frame of reference. If they are thinking very, very strongly of grace, then naturally they're going to feel that he has stressed works too much. On the other hand, there are people in the church who are so legalistic that they would feel that his book was far too easy on sinners and didn't demand enough of Christians.

Graybill: I haven't met any of those.

Wood: You haven't? Well, there are those, believe me.

Graybill: That specifically criticized Walton's book?

Wood: That type of book. They feel that even the *Review* is far too liberal. As for Walton's interpretation of history, here again, I think that people shouldn't have become nearly so stirred up. They should simply recognize that this is the way he looked at it. They could write their own book with a different view.

Graybill: But they wouldn't have the funds to send it out to all of the . . .

Wood: Well, that was only a minor portion of the circulation, maybe 2,000 copies out of the 70,000 or so, that were sold. You know, I feel about the critics the way one writer said. He said, "Where were they when the page was blank?" You know, they've got their own blank pages, why don't they write their own book? In spite of the criticism of the book, I think the book has done a lot of good to alert people to get to thinking for themselves. And, of course, that is one of the ultimate objectives of good writing.

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Graybill: Is there a place for a magazine like SPECTRUM in the church?

Wood: I happen to believe that a thing ought to be either fish or fowl. The criticisms that have come to me through the years about SPECTRUM are based on the fact that the magazine contains many respected Adventist names on the masthead and the term "Adventist" is part of the name of Forums; consequently many of our members wonder whether this is an official magazine on the same basis as the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry*. I have no objection to a magazine publishing anything it wants to, but I do think that, when it purports to be Seventh-day Adventist, it ought to be faith-building and constructive. I think that that's always possible with any kind of information that we discover. But when material is published that tends to sound cynical, or sounds as if it's undermining faith, or taking issue with basic Adventist beliefs, then I think it ought not to be identified as "Adventist."

Graybill: I have felt that SPECTRUM is almost the only place where one could appropriately print in-depth reports on such topics as the Davenport matter and the law suit against the Pacific Press. I found a lot of information there that I didn't find in any other Adventist journal. Was SPECTRUM out of line to publish this? Could some other Adventist journal have published that sort of coverage?

Wood: I think the real question is, What other journal would have considered it beneficial to its readers? The *Adventist Review* could publish every line of a story of that kind, but we have found through the years that only about one percent of SDA's are interested in the kind of nuts-and-bolt story that documents the church's deficiencies. What they are interested in is the progress of the church. They know that in a world like ours, there are going to be some mistakes, some lack of perfect judgment, but to dwell on those mistakes at length, they probably don't think is all that profitable. You're right that SPECTRUM is probably the only magazine that would have published it, but only because other magazines would have felt that ultimately it wouldn't contribute that much to the welfare of the people. It's for the curiosity seekers, the voyeurs, you might say.

Graybill: Yet when people around the General Conference building gather together and compare notes, they like to know some of those kinds of detail, they like to understand what really went on.

Wood: Right, but don't you think that the officers of the General Conference are willing to explain all of that and rehearse it, as they often have at the close of the General Conference Committee? What we're talking about is whether this kind of information should be primarily for those who are involved, or whether it should be scattered through the membership.

Graybill: I think it builds confidence for leadership to be able to discuss those things openly with the membership.

Wood: True, but I think that magazines have a certain market. I'm not questioning

at all the right of disseminating information. I just don't think that the *Review* would maintain its circulation very long if it dwelt on that sort of thing. That is a specialized market.

Graybill: And you feel that the market for the kinds of things that SPECTRUM publishes is probably one percent?

Wood: Definitely, because look, the present subscription list of SPECTRUM is, what, 7,000? Well, with 3.8 million church members, I was generous when I said one percent.

Graybill: Shifting gears now, what is your feeling about a separate division for North America?

Wood: I haven't heard all of the discussions on the question so I can't say that I'm as knowledgeable on the issues as many people are. I will say that from the information I have, I have ambivalent feelings. I believe that the Lord raised up the Advent Message here in North America for a certain reason. It's provided a wonderful base for our world work. I have problems when I look around these days and see more and more people considering their own needs rather than the world-wide needs. You remember how Mrs. White got after the people in Battle Creek because they seemed to think that was the hub of the world there, and she tried scatter them to get out. I'm concerned when I see us spending enormous amounts of money for conference offices, let's say. This increases the overhead of a field, but may not improve performance. The same is true of our educational institutions, our medical work, our publishing work, or whatever. I think the Lord is interested in the whole world, and the only anxiety I have about a North American division as a separate entity is that I feel it might tend more and more to a kind of empire building.

North America provides the major share of the support financially for our world work. Money is a factor in leadership and in authority, and I think the happy combination of the General Conference and North America here has given greater

strength to General Conference leadership. In other words, separation might work to the advantage of North America, but it might work to the disadvantage of the total world church.

My fear is that if we push this separation to the ultimate, the General Conference might be in a kind of weak, advisory capacity, and North America might be so strong that, if it lost its vision, the world work would be weakened everywhere.

Graybill: Speaking as specifically as possible, what do you enjoy most about being a Seventh-day Adventist?

Wood: I can't narrow this down to just one item. Many people in the world feel that life has little meaning. They question whether what they believe is true and whether their work has any value. As a Seventh-day Adventist, I have absolutely no doubts about the truth of our message nor the worthwhileness of what I am doing. Every Seventh-day Adventist can be excited by knowing that he is a link in the chain let

down from heaven to save a lost world. What could be more challenging than this?

Second, Ellen White points out that our first responsibility is self-development. In my way of thinking, the Advent message enables a person to reach his full potential spiritually, intellectually, socially, and physically. Adventism puts no ceiling on a person's opportunities to grow up to one's full stature in Christ Jesus as a son or daughter of God.

Third, as a part of all this, I enjoy most the immediacy of a personal relationship that Adventism offers. I never feel alone, because I sense the presence of Christ with me by his Holy Spirit. I never feel uncertain about my salvation, for I have committed my life to the victorious Christ who represents me before the Father. With the pioneers of the past, I enjoy looking to the future, contemplating the day when Jesus shall return, a day that I believe is not far away.