
Journey to the Church: A Professor's Story

by Reo Christensen

This is the odyssey of one who long maintained an adversarial relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but who finally made his peace with it. Perhaps the account will help others who are having deep misgivings about the church—perhaps the behavior of its leaders or even some of its doctrines—and are wondering where to go from here.

I was raised in a 7th Day Church of God home in which prayer, Bible reading, and Bible discussion were an important part of our daily lives. It was also a home that was hostile to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a hostility derived not from resenting the restrictions imposed by the church on its members, but from disagreeing with the practice of treating Ellen G. White's writings as infallible and the church's refusal to countenance any dissent on the issue. This approach to Ellen White had first led my father, then my mother, to leave the church and join the 7th Day Church of God.

At a rather early age, I saw examples of Ellen White's writings compared page by page with writings of historians of her day. The similarity of factual narrative and phraseology were striking and, to me, convincing evidence of plagiarism. My mother and father disagreed about the investigative

judgment, Ellen White's early views on the "Shut Door," and on the falling of the stars and darkening of the sun as prophetic fulfillments. In addition, my parents found no biblical support for vegetarianism. Instead of a new prophet arising in the last days, they cited Hebrews 1:1, 2, "God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." They scoffed at the notion that there would be a worldwide Sunday law (China? India?) and that our neighbors would someday massacre us if we continued to respect the Sabbath. Our family also stressed their belief that Christ was crucified on Wednesday and arose before Sunday morning.

In general, Adventists were ridiculed rather than viewed with respect. I recall no effort, when I was growing up, to balance the scales by acknowledging positive aspects of the Seventh-day Adventist Church or any willingness to concede that reasonable people might intelligently differ on various points of scriptural interpretation. Although a Seventh-day Adventist church was only three miles away, and no Church of God services were held within 70 miles or so, we never attended the Adventist church. We had Sabbath services in our own home instead.

In 1940, I left home and went to Los Angeles in search of work. Since an aunt and uncle lived in Glendale, I spent Sabbaths with them and started attending their

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Seventh-day Adventist church, largely because I wanted to meet Sabbath-keeping girls. After I was inducted into the army and assigned to Fort Rosecrans in San Diego, I often visited another aunt and uncle, also Adventists, while on weekend pass. Two of their daughters were taking nurses' training, and through them I met one of their charming classmates, with whom I promptly fell in love.

I had no intention of joining the church, but found church services to be less distasteful than I had expected. My would-be bride, a convert to Seventh-day Adventism, agonized over marrying a non-Adventist but, hopeful that I might come to see things differently, finally agreed to be my wife. Early in our marriage two children were born.

While I was obtaining an undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Redlands, we attended the Loma Linda church. By now I had made a number of Seventh-day Adventist friends who did not correspond to the negative stereotype I had acquired at home. They helped reduce some of the antagonism I initially entertained toward the church.

Later, attendance at other Seventh-day Adventist churches throughout the United States confirmed my favorable impression of Seventh-day Adventists as people—but church attendance was becoming increasingly uncomfortable for me.

I have always had an independent turn of mind, and I think it fair to say, a deep commitment to intellectual integrity. Many aspects of church services disturbed me profoundly, and did so more as time went on. The belief that everything Ellen White had published, over roughly 50 years of prolific work, was divinely inspired struck me as the most extraordinary claim in the history of Christendom. Although neither Ellen White nor the church claimed absolute infallibility, the church's attitude toward her works was tantamount to infallibility because no

statement or position of hers was ever disputed.

For decade after decade of subsequent church attendance, I heard not one critical word expressed about her writings. It was automatically assumed that a quote from her settled any controversy, unless someone cited another quote that put the question in a different perspective.

There was, moreover, a growing tendency to canonize Ellen White's life as well as her teachings. She was always presented as a paragon of virtue and righteousness. Not even Catholics, I often thought, held the pope in as much reverence as Seventh-day Adventists held Ellen White. This exasperated me.

There was also an unspoken but unmistakable understanding that Sabbath school existed for the sole purpose of confirming, but never of re-examining, the correctness of church teachings. To question the factual or scriptural validity of any church doctrine whatever was to exhibit a spirit of contentiousness, of intellectual pride, and of stubbornness in the face of inspired revelation. Such a spirit could only foster doubt, division, and dissension—from which no good could hope to come.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a limited amount of questioning was permissible—but only so long as the church's answers were then accepted. To persist in doubt was to cast a chill over the class, to label oneself as a troublemaker, a heretic, and to feel like a rather unwelcome "outsider." The atmosphere was such that I concealed my doubts lest I embarrass my wife and generate an unpleasant climate. Confronted with endless sermons, Sabbath school lessons, and class discussions that treated Ellen White and her words with unflinching reverence, I held my tongue for more than 20 years, a feat that sometimes strikes me as rather heroic.

After years of attending one church which, for me, offered especially unappealing services, I stopped going to church altogether.

For most of my churchgoing years, services had left me more irritated than spiritually strengthened. I usually felt a sense of vast relief when church was over.

The unedifying results of church attendance were, in part, my own fault. Had I brought a different attitude into the church, I could have found much to learn and much that could have been spiritually nourishing. But I was so obsessed with my doctrinal disagreements that I was unable to receive the spiritual help that I might have.

Meanwhile, I was firmly resolved that my children should not be exposed only to Seventh-day Adventist academies and colleges. I wanted them to see how non-Seventh-day Adventists lived and what professors and students not restricted to a rigid and narrowly conceived version of truth had to say. Given this broader experience, they could make some real choices rather than follow a predetermined groove leading to predetermined ends. Then, I said, if they still chose to be Seventh-day Adventists, I was willing to accept their decisions.

My wife was deeply distressed by all of this and profoundly apprehensive about the outcome. She felt that our 18-year-old daughter was too young to be plunged into a secular college environment and too vulnerable to the ravages of that intellectual and

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social milieu. But I could always marshal a formidable array of arguments as to why a different intellectual and social environment was all for the best, and why our children deserved the right to freely choose. My wife was far from persuaded, but finally yielded. Perhaps she should try to be "fair," she

thought, despite what her instincts told her.

Our daughter was most reluctant to attend Earlham, a nearby liberal Quaker school, but to please her father she agreed to try it.

The outcome was not at all what I expected or wanted. Before many months had elapsed, our daughter underwent an almost revolutionary intellectual and theological experience, one that left both my wife and me shaken to our roots. I will not go into detail, but the experience was the most traumatic of our lives. If you treasure both traditional Christian beliefs and the Sabbath as much as both my wife and I did, you will understand the shock of their abandonment by your firstborn.

This shattering experience drastically altered my outlook on many things. I had lost my supreme confidence in the trustworthiness of my intellect, the assurance that if I could win a debate I was therefore right. Overwhelmed with a remorse I never expect to have eradicated in this life (even though I believe God has forgiven me), I now wish with all my heart that I had said to my daughter: "You needn't believe everything the church teaches in order to remain a member and to profit from that membership. Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good, and cooperate with all that is constructive in the church because, whatever its faults, it does hold to the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

After facing my own errors in dealing with my daughter, I was able to attend church for the first time in many long years attuned not to its flaws (as I saw them), but receptive to its positive elements. My disagreements with many church doctrines remained, but I saw that those doctrines were a source of inspiration, strength, and consolation to many others. I could concede that confidence in Ellen G. White's works had given unity, direction, and effectiveness to the church and its programs. Always a moral conservative, I found satisfaction in the church's continued stand against the moral

flabbiness that was engulfing the media and infiltrating modern churches. I was pleased that, at a time when many mainline churches were doubting traditional and central Christian doctrines, the Adventist Church was unyielding.

Shortly thereafter, several developments furthered my metamorphosis. I was introduced to *Spectrum*. Before my incredulous eyes, thoughtful, knowledgeable scholars were writing articles that re-examined, with a critical but respectful eye, many church doctrines I had long questioned. Could this really be happening in the inflexible and theologically stagnant church I had always known?

I was particularly impressed by the fact that almost all of the writers for *Spectrum* were obviously loyal to the church and eager to refresh and strengthen it through open, honest and searching inquiry rather than trying to erode its foundations. They were following what Ellen White once counseled: "There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that . . . all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation" (*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 35).

From the beginning, the leadership must have been mightily tempted to regard *Spectrum* as a subtly subversive work of the devil, and to formally denounce it as such. But the church leaders, although wary and suspicious, exercised admirable restraint despite the appearance of articles that must have caused them great pain. Only after a recent article compared the leadership selection process to that in communist countries—a dubious provocation that brought an almost inevitable response—did Neal Wilson publicly disassociate himself from *Spectrum*. Even then, he did not make an unqualified condemnation of the journal, conceding the value of many of its articles even as he seriously questioned the direction he saw *Spectrum* taking.

Then, a second phenomenon occurred. Friends from Loma Linda were enthusiastic about the Sabbath school classes of Jack Provonsha. They sent my wife and me tapes of his classes. I found it downright exhilarating to hear so able a thinker and so articulate a speaker expound upon major theological questions, including many not customarily dealt with in the church—and yet remain faithful to the general outlines of church teachings.

None of these developments was conceivable (at least to me) 20 or 30 years ago. They have converted a church with a closed, collective mind into one which in many respects is prepared to engage in a period of theological growth and renewed vitality.

Provonsha was broadening, enriching and modifying, but not repudiating, church doctrines that I had previously heard presented in a rather cliché-ridden, mechanical fashion. People like Provonsha and the writers in *Spectrum* were trying to extend church horizons, offer new perspectives, challenge dubious interpretations—and still they were loyal to the church!

As one who has long believed that every institution needs thoughtful critics who call into question aspects of doctrine or behavior that may not be able to survive close examination, I was both astonished and gratified by what was taking place.

Attendance at the Kettering Seventh-day Adventist Church has also been encouraging. A number of Sabbath school classes proved stimulating and relatively open to fresh ideas and unorthodox interpretations. The presence of an exceptional pastor and assistant pastor, Edward Motschieder and Peter Bath, whose sermons and general attitudes personify devotion to the church along with an inquiring spirit and a breadth of vision, was also helpful.

Other developments struck me favorably. I was discovering less of an unhealthy

enmity toward Roman Catholics among church members, less stress on a dogmatic interpretation of investigative judgment, less emphasis on the absolute correctness of heretofore unchallenged interpretations of last-day prophetic signs, no mention of "dark counties," a greater willingness to read religious books by non-Seventh-day Adventist authors and to recognize that we can learn from other Christians as well as enlighten them, and less reluctance to join with other Christians in joint community endeavors.

For many, these will be seen as ominous signs; for me, they bespeak a church that is readying itself for larger service than some of its previously constricting characteristics made possible. (I assume that these developments may be hardly visible in many smaller churches and among many older members, but institutional renaissance usually follows this pattern.)

None of these developments was conceivable (at least to me) 20 or 30 years ago. They have converted a church with a closed collective mind into one which, in many respects, is prepared to engage in a period of theological growth and renewed vitality that augurs well for the future.

I am glad to associate with a church that:

- Holds firmly to the Sabbath, since that doctrine is solidly scriptural and has many unique values for modern man;
- Remains faithful to central Christian doctrines of the virgin birth, the divinity of Christ, his literal resurrection and his literal return to Earth again, baptism by immersion, and a day of final judgment;
- Has steadfastly held to conservative moral attitudes about drinking, smoking, marital fidelity, premarital sex, and the use of drugs for hedonistic purposes;

- Has sponsored an active missionary, medical missionary and astonishing educational work around the world;

- Promotes the Adventist Development and Relief Agency to give assistance to needy people around the world. With increasing numbers of Seventh-day Adventists living in relative affluence, the presence of a well-directed organization designed to encourage members to fill their undoubted obligation to the unfortunate around the world is especially heartening;

- Counsels its members not to bear arms (although I believe the church has failed to take anything like full advantage of Jesus' beautiful message that we should love our enemies rather than kill them);

- Is currently striving to allow more freedom for diverse viewpoints while resisting centrifugal tendencies that could have rending consequences.

I should add that the church leadership is faced with the cruelest kind of pressures and the most agonizing kind of decisions in walking a tightrope between repression and theological license. Following a prudent and judicious course when the church is passing through such a perilous transition is surely one of the most difficult assignments that organizational leaders can ever face. They deserve sympathy and understanding from all of us in their efforts to mediate between the totally rigid ultraconservative elements in the church, and those who are also committed to the church but believe that spiritual growth and enlightenment have not and must not come to an end.

The current combination of greater openness to new perspectives along with a firm attachment to central verities is not without grave hazards, but none so great as a church that looks only to the past for insight into its future course.