

# Whose Church Is It, Anyway?

By Loren Seibold

Like most bookish people, I occasionally find books in my library whose presence there I can't account for. Such was a volume called *Will the Real Seventh-day Adventist Please Stand Up?* As I recall (for I have since passed it along to an owner more congenial to its sentiments) the author of *Will the Real Seventh-day Adventist Please Stand Up?* had no doubt who the real Seventh-day Adventist was.<sup>1</sup> Most of us have appreciated far more varieties of

Seventh-day Adventist than he appeared able to appreciate, and, unlike him, would hesitate to declare some impostors. Yet I can't help but appreciate a man with the courage of his convictions, and I willingly grant the author a right to his opinions that I suspect he would not reciprocate with me.

And he raises a legitimate question. I think of it every time someone calls for doctrinal tolerance in the Church. Every time another calls for doctrinal standardization. Every time George Knight reminds us again of the doctrinal fluidity of early Adventism. And every time an evangelist preaches in such a way as to imply a neatly prepackaged Adventist doctrine, dropped from heaven in tidy installments between 1831 and 1915.

Who is the real Seventh-day Adventist? Or, perhaps, who ought to be the real Seventh-day Adventist? Whose church is it, anyway?<sup>2</sup>

For me, any definition that forms along issue lines (for or against women's ordination, for example) does little to solve the problem. I have met women's ordination advocates who were

intolerant and almost un-Christian, and opponents who were gracious and accepting, even toward the occasional female pastor they met.

I find the labels "liberal" and "conservative" rather soggy, and the newer "traditional" and "progressive" only a little livelier, all wanting of definition each time they're used. My own way to think about Adventism along a continuum of two poles (already a huge simplification, and admittedly only barely more defensible than liberal and conservative) is to ask, "What kind of God is implied by this idea, or this expression of the idea?"

As I think about the varieties of Seventh-day Adventists I've known, I find on one end of a continuum those whose beliefs suggest a God greatly concerned about details, and how studiously we attend to them. This God places a premium on specific pieties; he loves all people, to be sure, but measures their response to him by their beliefs and actions. Although salvation is by faith, his free and generous grace never applies without conjunct requirements.





Details like which denomination you belong to are important to him, and he is willing to overlook the inherent deficiencies of church organization as long as the Church promotes the beliefs and behaviors he values. He is by nature a micromanager, though we're not always sure what he's up to, and in fact may have to decode his mysteries, sometimes even mathematically.

On the other end of the spectrum are those whose God sees the big picture. Rather than being primarily concerned with details, he is more likely to offer us principles (the usual ones, like love and kindness, though he is supposed to have a special fondness for freedom of thought) that inform us in our effort to live rightly and usefully in the world.

He finds himself only loosely defined by traditional doctrinal statements and conventional church activities. He is less attached to a particular group than he is to humanity generally, and is terribly tolerant of our difficulties in relating to our Creator. As for salvation, his grace makes him broadly inclusive and not especially judgmental except, perhaps, of human judgmentalism and our damnable proclivity for cruelty.

Each of these points of view has its strengths and weaknesses. Those whose God sees the big picture may forget that a relationship with God has within it individual actions and choices. They may become so charmed by the satellite view that they don't see the dust on the coffee table. Those whose God is mostly concerned with questions of detail sometimes describe a rather petty God, one whose attitude toward humanity is that of a parent to a small, moderately stupid child.

The question is not who is most spiritual, for I've known people on each side of this issue who are deeply good and sincerely godly. The question is what kind of religious understanding is most essentially Seventh-day Adventist?

## History

William Miller's movement, let us recall, was not over big questions of orthodoxy but over interpretations of neglected prophecies. Had he been right in what he predicted, there would certainly have occurred a big picture change in human history. Since he was not, the movement's arguments became ones of detail: how prophetic days and weeks translate into years, dates of ancient happenings, the order and meaning of eschatological events in the Revelation, which members of which groups were eligible for salvation, and what was

meant by previously obscure biblical concepts like "the cleansing of the sanctuary."

There is much in a name, and it is noteworthy that when our church got to the point of needing one, our ancestors chose a name that would define not the heart of their Christian faith (they rejected James White's preference, the "Church of God") but our very specific innovations upon it. Whatever discussions those folks might have had about the deeper concepts of Protestant Christianity didn't define the movement, because those weren't our main arguments with the rest of Christendom.

Our interest was in becoming ready for the Second Advent and its prequel, persecution; Saturday worship was what we were to do differently from other Christians that would make us ready. The list of needful disciplines about which God had opinions quickly increased over the next generation, embracing, in addition to the usual moral standards, such specifics as apparel, food, and membership in labor unions.

Although there were probably big-picture thinkers in this early phase of the Church just as there are now, their contributions didn't have the lasting impact of those who detailed prophecy and behavior. Adventism grew not because we were better believers in the grace of Christ, but because we were more correct about details to which other Christians were paying little attention.

I have found much wisdom in the writings of those who talk about the personality of relational systems, such as families and churches, and how the attitudes of our ancestors will persist from generation to generation, long after the first shapers of the system are gone.<sup>3</sup> We ought to be cautious about planning the future by the past. However, if the attitudes of our Adventist past can be used to extrapolate even the approximate vectors of our future, then it ought not to be terribly surprising that we struggle with those who try to take a broader view of God than our ancestors did.

## Growth and Revival

I have been interested to see how a well-done evangelistic series that promises answers to prophetic mysteries continues to appeal to people. Couldn't we (our gospel-oriented members ask) be as successful preaching Christ and Christ alone? Better evangelists than I (and that covers nearly all of them) say "no." Christian basics are covered very well by churches with less distinctive names and less distinctive messages than ours, they say.



Our converts are made with the details: prophecy, eschatology, the Sabbath, health. Some Adventist pastors in the Western church have tried evangelistic approaches that did not rely so heavily upon these distinctives alone, with only mediocre success.

The kind of believers we create when we grow is a clue to the soul of the denomination. Our denomination is growing rapidly, particularly in those places

North American church is all clustered around its institutions. From his experience it seemed that way, I'm sure, given the concentration of talent, money, and learning in those places. But these places are not representative of all the North American church. Our colleges and universities are the beds in the garden that we have prepared, enriched, and protected to display a broader range of intellectual flora.

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once denominated the Third World. As we break new evangelistic ground, we generally have not seen that new ground populated with big-picture Adventists. The conflicts along the First World-Third World fault apparent at each recent General Conference session remind us that our church is growing over there along traditional lines, with a continuing appreciation of Seventh-day Adventist fundamentalisms.

Although the North American church is often accused by the rest of the Adventist world of being "liberal," it is not uniformly so. Last summer a group of young people trained and sponsored by ASI held old-fashioned evangelistic meetings in my church.<sup>4</sup> These folks were deeply dedicated and wonderfully kind, and we grew to love them. Yet their understanding of our denominational theology differed from that of many in my largely professional, progressive congregation. Theirs was the traditional Adventist faith of a God concerned with prophetic and behavioral details. Those who responded to their advertising and presentations appeared to see God similarly.

Yet ASI is arguably the most vitalized segment of the North American Adventist laity right now. As I discovered, this was true not only in matters of evangelism. In addition to sponsoring citywide crusades, in their short time in our city ASI folks volunteered at the Ronald MacDonald house and soup kitchens and hospitals. (Even here, their work was characterized by a dutiful attention to detail: the goody packages distributed to terminal cancer patients at Columbus's Children's Hospital contained, the organizer was careful to report, not chocolate but *carob* bonbons.)

A friend who has served as an Adventist college teacher and administrator for most of his professional life once remarked to me that the strength of the

When we leave those oases, we find ourselves in a church still connected to its nineteenth-century origins. Were my friend to sit on a conference committee making decisions about the operation of ordinary, noninstitutional churches, he would find that the enthusiasm for a traditional Seventh-day Adventist theology hasn't abated. This is true (at least partially) because the systematic theology of most of the Church is not shaped by its professional theologians—their reach is limited—but by the evangelists who preach soul-winning meetings in hamlets and burghs across the United States.

### Support

Who really loves this church? Many of us insist that we do. Yet actions speak louder than words. And it is axiomatic among pastors that you're likely to find your most generous church members among your most theologically traditional church members, particularly in those areas that most directly advance our fundamental beliefs. The reason isn't hard to understand: if God cares about this particular denomination and its beliefs, then so should its adherents. If God has a much broader view of faith, then one needn't be quite as concerned about how generously you contribute to one particular denomination.

More importantly, it is those with the most traditional view of the Church who are most likely to participate in evangelistic efforts to grow the Church. The big-picture people are frequently shy of the parochialism necessary to sell their church to others, especially





should it involve making unfavorable comparisons to other churches.

All of this—our historical beliefs and their continuing influence over the Church, the orientation of the people we attract and win, the kind of Adventism that emerges in fields of growth, the kind of Adventists who support the Church most cheerfully—makes me suspect that whatever liberalizing we may see in some

At the very least, this reminder might help us not to be quite so surprised each time a professor, author, or pastor who wants to broaden the Church's thinking comes under attack. The system is, after all, by history and development, a faith of prescribed details. Given our history, perhaps our church administrators have not been amiss to most often protect its traditionalism over its more adventurous expressions.

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parts of the Church, over the course of our evolution Seventh-day Adventism collectively tends always to be strongest among those who follow the God of the details, rather than the God of the big picture.

So why bother with this question of ownership? I think because it is so often the unvoiced uncertainty lurking behind our conflicts. It is the question behind the effort of a well-intentioned church administrator to "clean up" a well-intentioned college theology department. It is there when a church member expresses doubts about his pastor's orthodoxy, or when another leaves the Church because she's outgrown the kind of Christianity she hears there. It is behind those poles-apart points of view in Sabbath School classes. It comes into play in the debates of each General Conference session. Whose church is it, anyway, when we think of it so differently? Yours, or mine?

A thoughtful friend once asked me (during a good-natured argument), "Who are you to tell me what a Seventh-day Adventist should be?" He contended that a Seventh-day Adventist was anyone who wanted to be one, and could do so with a clear conscience. I want him to be right. Yet experience has shown that some varieties of Adventist thrive better than others, and may be more productive to boot. They are like the plants in my garden that appear to be completely at home, that thrive and produce blossoms and fruit.

There are other plants I have tried that simply did not do well in my soil and climate. They are nice to have, and add much beauty, but they don't perform like the natives. We might as well admit that we have inherited a soil and climate in which certain kinds of believers take root and grow and reproduce (at least evangelistically) better than others.

The Adventist Church, in our early life, hosted a variety of theologies. But we are no longer young, and we're likely even less limber than we were. No system is endlessly adaptable or easily reeducated. It is not clear how far we will be able to stray from our early history and still maintain strength and purpose, for no matter what our more progressive thinkers are thinking, so much of the Church keeps finding itself most at home with a traditional formulation of Seventh-day Adventism.

### A Dangerous Observation

This is, I suspect, a dangerous observation to make in print. Though I've intended to be broadly descriptive, not prescriptive, someone could read here that I think we ought to allow in the Church only one kind of very traditional religious thinking. Of course, there are many "big picture" believers in the Adventist Church. Some are born, some evolved, some have had this expansion of thought thrust upon them in the fertile climate of higher education. (Seldom is it given them by evangelistic meetings, which tend to create the other kind of believer.)

Could we, perhaps, enrich more of the Church as we have our universities and colleges, and so create more "big picture" Adventists? Perhaps. But somewhere in the process we will still find ourselves having to decide how many of the traditional details we can redefine before the name of the Church (and the rest of the detail-thick theology that is implied by that name) ceases to be a meaningful description.

I think the best we can hope for is that those who accept my argument that the Church has been and will always be most congenial to those who live and believe it in its more traditional forms—that it is, in a



sense, their church—will not think it desirable to expunge the rest from the Church. I hope they realize that parthenogenic growth rarely serves any population well, including a religious one. The most dedicated and useful, unchallenged by different points of view, lose vigor.

I think we are quite reasonable to expect our denomination to create room for big-picture believers. I hope even the most traditional Seventh-day Adventists will realize that the Church will be poorer should they allot room within it only for those who think precisely like themselves. But we are probably not wise to expect the Church ever to become something quite different than it set out to be. With a name and history like ours, I fear we haven't been left as much room to maneuver as we might have liked.

## Notes and References

1. Ronald D. Spear, *Will the Real Seventh-day Adventist Please Stand Up?* (Eatonville, Wash.: Hope International, 1987). For those too young to remember, "please stand up" made its way into our cliché vocabulary via a 1960s game show called *To Tell the Truth*. Three contestants claimed to be the same person (generally someone with a curious life story). Four celebrities (the ones I remember were Orson Bean, Kitty Carlisle, Peggy Cass, and Tom Poston, though I have no idea what any of them were otherwise famous for) questioned the contestants and voted for the one they thought was genuine. Then host Bud Collyer would say, "Will the real [name of contestant] please stand up?"

2. A friend, reading my title, said, "It isn't our church or theirs; it's Christ's church." And of course he's right, and I wish that's all we needed to say about it. Were it only the case that the right answers would transcend human differences! Saying it is Christ's church, though, still begs the question: what does Christ want his church to be like?

3. For example, Edwin Freedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985); and Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

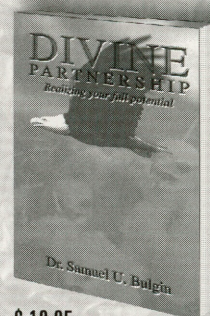
4. ASI is Adventist Layman's Services and Industries, a parachurch organization that has become very active in promoting traditional evangelism and service projects. Our young evangelistic team was trained at the Black Hills Mission College (now located in Gaston, Oregon).

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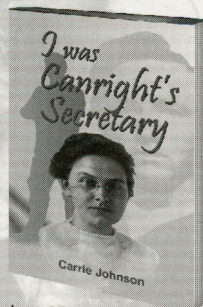
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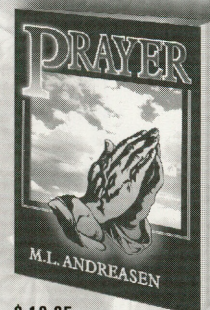
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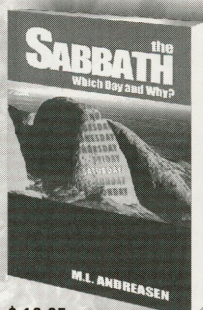
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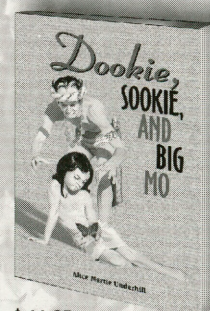
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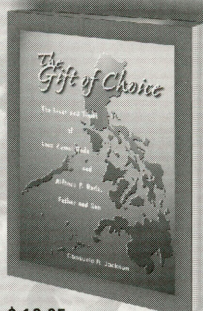
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