



Making Distinctions about Sex and Sects

Sex and the Church

I APPRECIATE THE responses in the "Feedback" section of the most recent issue of *Spectrum* (spring 2008) to my article "Examining the Biblical Texts about Homosexuality" in the previous issue. Pro or con, they represent contributions to a conversation the *Spectrum* articles were meant to elicit.

Given our fixation today on homosexuality as a particular phenomenon, it is perhaps understandable that certain of our readers have seen my article as being about such a construct in toto—a misapprehension abetted by the article's title, which does not derive from me. Ritchie Way has rightly caught what the article is "about": fidelity versus promiscuity, rather than all of homosexuality versus all of heterosexuality.

Jim Miller's very cogent observations especially invite further reflection. He is on to something important in his finding that the Hebrew term *zera'* ("seed," whether designating semen, offspring, or simply the seeds of plants) provided a root metaphor around which a particular category of ancient Hebraic thought clustered itself. This, surely, is the key to the associations that hold verses 19–23 of Leviticus 18 together. Sacrificing one's offspring to Molech clearly fell under an overarching category that we might term "mis-allocation of one's seed," and was *on this basis* a profaning of the divine name. This has nothing to say about the unspeakable horror of child sacrifice and everything to say about the near-magical powers that were attributed of old to blood (especially menstrual blood) and to semen. Modern constructions of "homosexuality" as a thing-in-itself, pertinent to both sexes, projected back upon the scriptural texts, simply miss the profound cultural gap between our thought world and that of the ancient Hebrews. One of the great values of Miller's analysis is that it casts this gap into sharp relief.

The question, of course, is the extent to which such material/magical thinking is to carry forward beyond Cal-

vary and beyond the bounds of ancient Judaism. If we take recourse to Clement and other early interpreters to illustrate this mental framework's applicability to Christianity, we are then forced to give Romans 1:26 a heterosexual interpretation: the wrongness of the female conduct is in their consorting with the wrong males—thereby misappropriating their semen. (Had verse 26 referred to sexual conduct between females there would have been no wrong, in this view, simply because no semen is involved.) By prolonging the Old Testament into the New, then, such Christianity preserves a definition of homosexuality solely in male terms, predicated simply on a sacral view of male "seed."

But if, in Christ, the ritual distinctions between male and female no longer hold (Gal. 3:28), we find ourselves standing on the new ground of true morality—of which ceremonial purity laws were but a transitory foreshadow. On that genuinely moral ground, double standards based on material/magical notions give way to a deeper accountability to the Kingdom's one overarching principle of responsible love toward God and fellow humans. We learn this, in great part, from Paul himself. So if we see in Romans 1:26, 27, a vestige of the old Hebraic worldview, this simply provides further evidence that at this point in his rhetorical strategy Paul is deliberately invoking pre-Christian attitudes. He is bringing to the surface the old Jewish judgments precisely to pull the rug out from under them when Jews and Gentiles, men and women stand together at the foot of the Cross.

A couple of quick little clarifications:

(1) I am not among those who deny that homosexual rape is intended in the stories of Genesis 19 and Judges 19. My second endnote cites D. Sherwin Bailey as an example of those who do deny this. In this essay as it was originally written as a chapter in *Christianity and Homosexuality*, that endnote continues:

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CONVERSATIONS ■ people

Prophetess of Health Reappears

Alita Byrd Interviews Ronald L. Numbers



More than thirty years after Ronald L. Numbers, one of the "founding fathers" of the Association of Adventist Forums, published *Prophetess of Health*, his controversial history on the health message of Ellen G. White, the book is being reprinted.

This new third edition features a new preface and two key documents that shed further light on Ellen White and her work.

Spectrum talks to historian of science Ronald Numbers about the fuss kicked up in the Adventist Church and in his family when the book was first published, and how he thinks the new edition will be received.

Questions and Answers

Spectrum: *Why is Prophetess of Health being republished after thirty-two years?*

Numbers: This third edition started out to be a thirtieth anniversary edition, but the publisher held it up because it is going to publish a new William Miller biography at the same time and promote the books together.

This time around, *Prophetess of Health* is being published by Eerdmans, which interestingly turned me down in the mid-1970s when I was shopping for a publisher. Now Eerdmans has a series of American religious biographies.

Two new appendices have been added to this edition: the first is transcripts of the trial of Elder Israel Dammon in 1845, and the second is an edited version of the 1919 Bible Conference—the parts that relate to Ellen White's authority.

But back to your question, let me ask: Have you ever written a book?

You don't want it to go out of print. Once you invest so much time, you are partial to seeing it circulate.

The book was out of print for several years, and I frequently got requests for it.

Q: *How many books have you written altogether? How many copies have they sold?*

A: Six, but if you include books I have edited, a couple of dozen.

I have no idea how many copies have been sold. My first book (which was published second) was *Creation by Natural Law*, and about two thousand copies were sold. *The Creationists* has sold well, but Random House holds the rights and gets all the reports on numbers.

I think Harper and Row published either 5,000 or 7,500 copies of *Prophetess of Health*.

Spectrum inherited some of the remaindered copies of that book, to be used for promotional purposes.

Q: *What led you to write Prophetess of Health?*

A: Several factors converged about the same time.

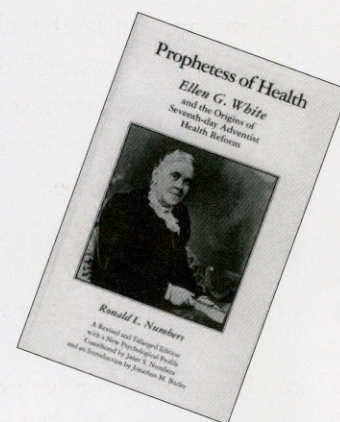
I spent my first year out of graduate school teaching at Andrews University and came to know Bill Peterson, Donald McAdams, Herold Weiss, and a few others who were interested in this stuff, which piqued my interest. My cousin Roy Branson was also there.

I went out to Loma Linda University after fifteen months at Andrews because I was asked to teach at the medical school.

I was asked to design a course for medical students on science, medicine, and Western thought from antiquity to the present. The class was two hours long.

These students had just gotten out of college, and the last thing they wanted was a remedial course on medical history. It was a disaster. Before I had even started on the first day, a student circulated a flyer to the class, petitioning to get rid of such a ridiculous requirement.

I decided that if I had to teach there for another year, I



at least had to make the subject more interesting. So I thought I would research the importance of the health message for the Adventist Church. At first, I was just going to prepare four lectures for my course.

But that was the beginning of the book.

Q: *There was controversy between yourself and the White Estate about the book. What was the primary conflict?*

A: The so-called conflict evolved over time. At first, there was no problem. The White Estate was as open with me as anybody else—not particularly open, but not hostile either.

But after I had written several chapters, somebody leaked them. The White Estate saw that what I was writing was going to be a contextual study, not an apologetic one, and that scared Arthur White and some others. After that he went out of his way to make sure I didn't get crucial material.

I was a historian—a young one, but still a historian—convinced that context was absolutely crucial, so I had a predilection to look at contemporary influences and context, instead of just saying something came straight from God. I didn't think it was appropriate for a historian to appeal to the supernatural. I didn't care whether anyone else believed or not, but it was not appropriate for me. I started out with: How much can I explain without invoking God? Of course that got me into trouble in some quarters.

Early on, I discovered some books in the Loma Linda library on health reform. Some books from John Harvey Kellogg's library were kept locked in the librarian's office and one had to get permission to inspect them.

In one of those books, I saw that Kellogg had made marginal notations in a distinctive—if not unique—handwriting. I couldn't find anyone to tell me what kind of shorthand he was using, but it had some numbers. After a while (and this is why my Andrews experience was so important), I thought: I bet these pages refer to Ellen White's writings. After a week or two of research, I found they matched an out-of-print book, I think it was called *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, from 1890. When I located the references, I found that the content of those passages from the (older) book belonging to John Harvey Kellogg and the Ellen White passages were the same.

That is called "double inspiration." I thought: No one does this just once.

I was friends with Vern Carner in Loma Linda's School

of Religion, and he is the one who talked me into writing a book. I thought the Church wouldn't publish it, and no one outside the Church would be interested, but Vern said he would "guarantee" to find me a good publisher.

He did. But he screwed me at the same time, too. He had made contact with Harper about a book called the *Roots of Adventism*—which was my idea. I suffered bitterly for a few days, but it all turned out okay, because he got the door open for my book on Ellen White.

The Church held up publication of the book for six months while the White Estate assembled a team of researchers to check everything.

They went to New York to convince Harper and Row not to publish it, but told the editor not to show me any of their criticism, because it would annoy me.

The publisher saw no sense in that, and eventually a compromise was reached where Richard Schwarz of Andrews University and Ronald Graybill came to Madison to take me through their line-by-line criticism. They were right: it did make me irritated.

The White Estate had thought they could destroy Harper's confidence in the manuscript enough so they wouldn't have to face me again.

As the three of us went through the book manuscript, I adopted a rule of thumb: If I could convince one of them that I was correct and the point was valid, I would leave it in, but if both Schwarz and Graybill disagreed with me, I would take it out.

One upsetting thing was that Schwarz had written a response to the manuscript for the White Estate based on an early draft. After we combed through the manuscript, I made a lot of changes that the White Estate was asking for. But when Schwarz reviewed the book for *Spectrum*, he based his review on the early draft. I got no credit for all the changes I made.

One interesting note: I was in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins when Graybill was studying for his Ph.D. He used to come up every week and stay with me. He spent the rest of the week working at the White Estate.

When my book came out, the White Estate sent him to camp meetings and college campuses to denounce me. The most memorable phrase he used about me was: "A wildly irresponsible historian."

The White Estate's initial response to my study was a set of looseleaf notebooks, which it then condensed into a printed document and distributed widely, including to

Harper. The publisher got his copy of this abstract just as he was going to some lecture, where he sat next to the religion editor of *Time* magazine. Bored with the talk, they started looking at the White Estate's statement. The upshot was that *Time* devoted its entire religion section to my book.

So the White Estate's response really helped. I could not have paid for that kind of publicity.

Q: *Your book also caused controversy after it was published. How were you viewed in the Church?*

A: I was disappointed with the response within the Adventist Church. I was getting pretty positive responses outside.

A reviewer for the *Journal of American History* called me and asked whether the book had been authorized by the Adventist Church. To non-Adventists, the book appeared so benign; they couldn't see why there would be any hullabaloo over it.

But Adventists by and large ran for cover, including some of my friends, which I wasn't too happy about.

I lost my job. In the late spring of 1974, the board at Loma Linda voted not to retain me. I was on leave at the time at Johns Hopkins University doing a fellowship in the history of medicine.

On July 4, the chair of the board, Neal Wilson—who was also a family friend—called and said: I guess you know you won't be back.

But eventually, a deal was negotiated: If I would write a letter of resignation, I would get a year's severance pay. Some poor historian down the road will be confused by this, I think.

For the second (paperback) edition of the book, Jonathan Butler wrote a very thoughtful historiographical introduction about the reaction to the book.

Q: *Your family has a long church history—your father was a minister, your uncle was an administrator in the General Conference, and your grandfather had been president of the General Conference. How divisive was your book in your family?*

A: One of my uncles, Roger Wilcox, was asked to head up a General Conference committee to handle me. I had fairly well-known Adventist relatives on both sides of my family.

Glenn Coon was my uncle on my father's side. He just

assumed that I had paid a publisher in order to get the book published. He offered me ten thousand dollars to co-author his next book, if I would abandon my book. He was weird, but my favorite uncle.

For several years, my father would not be seen in public with me. A few people contacted him and asked how he could be a minister in good standing if he couldn't control own family. He took early retirement—he was thoroughly embarrassed.

My father had been left in a terrible situation when my study came out. He knew that I wouldn't lie, but he knew what I was saying couldn't be true. So in traditional Adventist thinking, he believed Satan had somehow got control of my mind. It was not a warm relationship.

And then I remember *Spectrum* published a cluster of reviews. One was by my friend Fritz Guy, who ventured into psycho-biography, suggesting I had ventured into this as a reaction to the rigid religion of my father. That hurt my father. And it wasn't true. We disagreed a lot, but we always had totally open communication. My father was getting it from both the conservatives and the liberals.

My mother about that time was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, which of course some of the brethren attributed to the terrible experience of my leaving the Church, or not accepting Ellen White. But the silver lining was that the experience of caring for my mother brought the family together—we forgot Ellen White and rallied around Mother.

Then *Spectrum* saved our relationship when Molleus Couperus published transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference that discussed the inspiration of Ellen White. I had given my father a copy of *Prophetess of Health*, but I never saw it in the house. But after the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts came out, I saw my book in the living room the next time I visited my parents' house.

My father was so disappointed that church leaders had known about the questions surrounding Ellen White in the early twentieth century but had covered them up. It was the lack of courage two generations before that had made our family suffer.

My father passed away in 1983.

Q: *Do you ever regret publishing the book?*

A: No, I have no regrets.

Q: As you are a historian, what else can you tell us about your own history and relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

A: I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1974, after losing my job at Loma Linda. My marriage was breaking up.

I thought maybe it would be good to attend the local church. I don't know how orthodox I was then; I was largely motivated by a quest for historical continuity.

The principal of the junior academy in town had gone to my academy in Tennessee. He asked what I had been doing, and I told him I had been working on a book about Ellen White. He invited me to come and speak at the school. I said: No, I don't think you would want that. He got scared, and talked to the local conference officials, who contacted the General Conference, which sent Robert Olson out to hold a series of meetings to expose the heresy in their midst.

I decided that if my presence was that disruptive, I wouldn't have anything more to do with the Church.

Q: So you do not consider yourself an Adventist?

A: When Olson was here to hold the meetings, we met in the hallway. He said: Brother Numbers, do you believe that the Investigative Judgment began on October 22, 1844?

I said something flip like: I don't know, and I don't care.

He said: Then you are not really an Adventist. He said it, so I thought then I may as well not act like one.

I don't consider myself an Adventist, however, I am still a member of the Loma Linda University Adventist Church because I promised friends I would not voluntarily step down. They wanted to use me as a test case on failure to believe the Spirit of Prophecy.

It's not that I never go into an Adventist Church. My nephew is a minister, and I like to hear him speak. But when I have to identify myself, I identify myself as an agnostic.

Q: What kind of reaction do you expect to get from the new edition of *Prophetess of Health*?

A: I really don't know. I don't expect much reaction from Adventists.

But the subject of Ellen White has made its way into American religious history. When the second edition

(paperback) of *Prophetess of Health* came out, some people teaching American religious history used it.

Maybe some Adventist schools will use the book. I am a very bad judge of the current temperature of Adventism. Friends of mine tell me that what I said is now largely passé, but then I pick up some books that suggest nothing has happened historiographically since the 1970s. My own feeling is that among Adventist academics the book has had a fair amount of influence, but that influence has not gone very deep, to the people in the pew. Maybe this is my chance to go to camp meetings!

I do expect Eerdmans to promote *Prophetess of Health* and the William Miller book together, as they are hoping to get a little synergy out of the two biographies. I am just happy to get it in print. Authors like to see their books in print.

Q: How long did it take you to write *Prophetess of Health*?

A: It took fifteen months to write the book. Since my second year of teaching at Loma Linda had been reduced to just four lectures, I really had a year to write the book full-time. I have never been as consumed as I was writing that book. I will never write another book as exhilarating and life changing.

Q: You have written extensively on the conflict between religion and science. Do you consider that your primary work? How does *Prophetess of Health* fit in?

A: A lot of non-Adventists wouldn't even know that I "dabbled" in religious history.

I went through all the standard histories of religion in America in the period. Ellen White almost never appeared in anything. But after the mid-1970s, she became known. No one had written a scholarly book on her before my book was published. I had thought it would be hard to get published because there was no interest.

But by the time I was looking for a publisher, the fringes were becoming mainstream. People were interested in Mormons, Shakers, and Adventists more than they were interested in Episcopalians and Baptists. So it came along at a good time historiographically. For years, *Prophetess of Health* has been the only non-apologetic place

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