

NOTEWORTHY

NEW BOOK UNCOVERS THE ADVENTIST RELATIONSHIP WITH FUNDAMENTALISM

BY ALITA BYRD

Michael W. Campbell talks about his new book on the 1919 Bible Conference, arguments over the infallibility of Ellen G. White, and how the fundamentalist movement has shaped Adventism.

Question: In 1979, *Spectrum* was the first to publish the “lost” transcripts from the 1919 Bible Conference, where the inspiration of Ellen G. White was candidly discussed and argued over by a group of influential Adventist theologians and academics. You have studied the 1919 Bible

Conference extensively for many years and your new book, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism*, explores this event and its aftermath in even more detail. Why do you feel this event one hundred years ago deserves greater scrutiny and examination with a new book?

Answer: The first time I became aware of the 1919 transcripts was when my professor at Southern Adventist University, Ben McArthur, had us read the transcripts as published in *Spectrum* for a senior history methods class. Subsequently, as Dr. McArthur assigned senior history projects, he had me work further on this epochal event.

I believe the 1919 Bible Conference continues to have relevance because it lifts the curtains upon a crucial



Photos courtesy of Michael W. Campbell.

conversation our church leaders had about the nature of revelation and inspiration, and in particular, the relationship of Seventh-day Adventism to fundamentalism. Most concerning for me is how Adventist thought leaders during the time surrounding the 1919 Bible Conference, in their opposition to modernism, embraced the rising fundamentalist movement. This largely uncritical embrace of fundamentalism proved to be extremely problematic for Adventism.

Tell us what you think were the most significant discussions of the 1919 Bible Conference.

The bulk of the 1919 Bible Conference transcripts concerns how to interpret Bible prophecy. Many people would quickly lose interest over the rather technical and cumbersome discussions, but they had relevance for Adventists right after World War I. Of particular note during this global conflagration was that some Adventist evangelists, who predicted the role of Turkey as fulfilling Daniel 11, found themselves embarrassed when the British defeated the Ottoman Empire, which meant that they were wrong and furthermore lost credibility (even if some church leaders had tried to squelch such an interpretation). Adventist church leaders realized that they needed

to fine tune their eschatological understanding.

At the 1919 Bible Conference these discussions about prophetic interpretation turned to Ellen White's writings in order to resolve their differences. This led to four pivotal discussions about the nature and authority of Ellen White's writings — the first major discussions since her death four years earlier — for which the 1919 Bible Conference has become so well known.

As important as these discussions about Ellen White were, they also demonstrate the influence of the rising historical fundamentalist movement. In the Adventist enthusiasm to reject modernism and evolution, Adventists uncritically embraced inerrancy and other problematic aspects of fundamentalism.

The memorable discussions between history and Bible teachers at the end of the meeting with church president A. G. Daniells reveal that

at least some teachers recognized that if Adventism adopted a rigid view of inspiration this was incompatible with the traditional stance about revelation and inspiration, particularly as applied to Ellen White's prophetic ministry.

Why were questions over the nature of Ellen White's inspiration important to the Adventist Church in 1919? If this discussion was so significant, why wasn't it discussed more before the 1970s?

These discussions about Ellen White's inspiration were pivotal because they demonstrate two different ways of interpreting inspired writings. This was the first time, that I am aware of, that Adventists began to self-identify as "progressives" versus the "traditionalists" (the proverbial liberals versus the conservatives) in Adventist history.

During these meetings one participant recognized that if they didn't do a better job educating the church that there would be trouble in the future—this statement haunts me—and sure enough, after 1919 the Adventist Church tilted toward fundamentalism.

While this has not been uniform—one can see in the 1950s a parallel between the rising evangelical movement following the ministry of Billy Graham (a group of moderates)—once again Adventists paralleled this development

within Adventism, and discussions with key evangelical leaders led to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*. In a way, this struggle with fundamentalism (and later evangelicalism) has characterized most of Adventist theology all the way up to the present.

How did the transcripts come to be lost in the General Conference Archives?

My personal view is that the transcripts of the 1919 Bible Conference were simply forgotten. It is the kind of historical event that only becomes significant with the passing of time. This conference marked a very intimate moment so soon after the death of Ellen White when the church was at a crossroads—after which it effectively embraced fundamentalism.

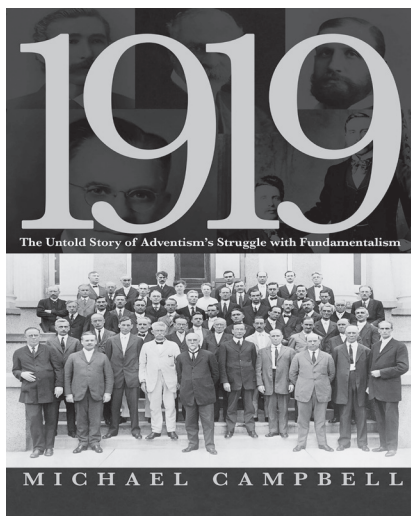
If the denomination "flirted" with fundamentalism in 1919, during the 1920s it grew into a full-

fledged affair. The main leader at the 1919 Bible Conference was the church president, A. G. Daniells, who by 1922 was removed from the church's top post. As the church became increasingly fundamentalist, particularly during the 1920s, the 1919 Bible Conference was simply forgotten. None of the participants felt it was necessary to leave behind memory statements, or believed it important to share with others that they were at this meeting.

The records were relegated to the basement of church headquarters, and remained there, until Don Yost [director of the General Conference Archives 1973–1995] stumbled across them. Discussions about revelation and inspiration in the 1970s suddenly made this much earlier conference very significant once again.

When the transcripts were discovered, why were they not published earlier? Were they seen as so controversial and potentially damaging to the church that only an independent publication like *Spectrum* could publish them?

I was fortunate to interview both Don Yost, who founded the GC Archives, and Don Mansell, who was working for the White Estate at the time the transcripts were found. As I understand it, from conversations with the two of them, Don Mansell first noticed several pub-



lished references in the *Review and Herald* about the 1919 Bible Conference as he was doing research for the very first edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (that came out in 1976). They planned to eventually distribute copies to Adventist research centers, but a copy was leaked, and *Spectrum* published it before they could make the transcripts available. It seems there was an effort to control how people would learn about this event, and gradually make people aware of it, so Yost and Mansell were rather chagrined when the most scintillating parts (at the end) about Ellen White were published in *Spectrum*.

When I interviewed the late Roy Branson, who was the editor of *Spectrum* during this time, he confirmed the same story although he did say that no one specifically told him he was not allowed to publish them either!

I dare say that the publication of those transcripts in *Spectrum* may be the most significant, or at least one of the very most significant things, that *Spectrum* has ever done. I've done a number of oral histories with influential church leaders from this time period who mention that when these transcripts were released it fell like a bombshell upon Adventism. It seems that within Adventist fundamentalism a mythology had developed that Ellen White was an individual who was a hundred years ahead of her time, when in fact, she was very much a product of her time. In other words, some individuals had stressed the supernatural aspects of her prophetic ministry to the exclusion of the very human element.

When *Spectrum* published these transcripts, it forced Adventist leaders to recognize that a much earlier generation of Adventist thinkers had wrestled with the same issues, and that, therefore, there was a great deal more complexity to this matter of revelation and inspiration than what appeared on the surface.

One other way it made a difference is that it forced Adventist historians to re-write Adventist historiography—something that we see has impacted the narrative of our Adventist past, whether that is Herbert Douglass on the far right (with his textbook, *Messenger of the Lord*) to Ronald L. Numbers who re-published the transcripts in the third edition of his book, *Prophets of Health*, on the other side. Most recently, George Knight has included it as a chapter in his thoughtful study, *Ellen White's Afterlife*, which every Adventist ought to read.

Do the transcripts tell the whole story of the meet-

ings? Do you think anything important has been left out?

The transcripts are at best only a partial record of the meetings. Of the more than 2,000 pages, approximately 1,300 are actually unique (that is, not duplicates of other pages in the records). We also know that at certain points the transcriptionists were directed to stop recording the minutes (because they included the request in the transcribed minutes!). In my estimation, we have less than a quarter to one-third of the 1919 Bible Conference, which means we have to extend a certain sense of humility by recognizing that, like all history, we have a limited view of what occurred at this historic event. With that caveat, it is amazing what a rich treasure trove the minutes actually are.

I should also mention that it appears to me, as I sorted through the originals, that someone removed some of the minutes. For example, the records at the General Conference are missing any presentations by B. G. Wilkinson, but interestingly enough, at least a small amount surfaced in the records of the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University. How they showed up there is a mystery, but apparently someone preserved them, and I recognized in going through some papers that these were some small portions from the 1919 transcripts that appeared in another collection. Now there are some notes in the minutes that Wilkinson apparently removed some material to review at some future point after the conference. Why he did this is unknown, but it does serve as a reminder that the transcripts are partial at best.

How did you first become interested in studying the 1919 Bible Conference? What form has your study taken?

After my experience as an undergraduate student at Southern that I already mentioned, I came back to the topic in graduate school. At the time I was thinking about a topic in twentieth-century Adventism since so much of Adventist history has been focused on the time period encompassing Ellen White's lifespan. I also had become very interested in scholarship on fundamentalism, having participated in a seminar by George M. Marsden at the University of Notre Dame. This challenged me to think about Adventist history in new and challenging ways.

As I continued to work with my adviser at the time, George Knight, he encouraged me to focus on one critical moment of the Adventist saga with fundamentalism, noting that I had the rest of my career to flesh out the rest of

the contours. So, I returned to my research, this time in much greater depth, on the 1919 Bible Conference as the focus of my PhD dissertation.

I decided, as we approach the centennial, to distill some of the most important findings into a small, approachable book so that the average church member—who may not be familiar with all of the little details—can hopefully learn about this important event from our Adventist past.

Your books and articles about the 1919 Bible Conference provide much of the information and scholarship around the topic. What points have you tried to make to people about 1919? What do you want everyone to know and understand?

I think one of the most important points is the danger of theological polarization. Both sides at the 1919 Bible Conference were much closer to one another than either one would have liked to admit, and at the end of the day, they had far more in common than they did in terms of their differences. Sadly, those who are closest to us can be the most difficult to get along with, and this proved true for Adventism at the 1919 Bible Conference. George Knight once said that there should be an eleventh commandment: Thou shall not do theology against thy neighbor. When we do theology by fighting others sometimes we push ourselves into the opposite extreme. This seems to be what happened in 1919 when church leaders “flirted” with the rising fundamentalist movement.

As Adventism became increasingly fundamentalist this had far-reaching consequences for Adventism in terms of race and gender, as well as theology (it paved the way for the promulgation of Last Generation Theology). And as we know, race and gender have been the two dominant issues over which Adventism continues to struggle up to the present day. So, I think there are many significant lessons that can be gleaned from 1919 and its aftermath, but most important of all, how we do theology matters and has far-reaching implications for the whole church.

Are you still making new discoveries and gaining new insights about 1919? Has your thinking about the conference changed at all over the years?

Absolutely! I love to learn new things and have made a number of significant discoveries since working on this as the focus of my dissertation. Some of the most helpful recent discoveries were made while I was facilitating

a doctoral seminar on Adventism and fundamentalism while at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) where I served for five years previous to teaching at Southwestern Adventist University. I think that global perspectives are really important, and I had a terrific cohort of students from around the globe. I think we need to be thinking more about how we do Adventist theology from a global perspective. And I’ve discovered that the issues raised in 1919 continue to resonate around the world.

As I reflect on my dissertation, the most significant expansion I have done is the chapter on the Trinity. While I discussed it in my dissertation, the 1919 Bible Conference was a watershed event and instead of listing it as one of several minor issues, I reserved an entire chapter in my book to talk about the Trinity because it is far more significant than I realized. (Perhaps also because in the world church there has been a resurgence of anti-Trinitarianism, too.)

I’m spending more of my time now examining Adventist theology between the World Wars (1918-1939), which I think is a crucial time period for the development of Adventist theology. The historical fundamentalist movement was far more nuanced, with thinkers within the movement spanning a continuum. Adventist progressives never embraced modernism or a liberal variety of Christianity, but they do parallel the more moderate fundamentalists. Similarly, we see those who became much more rigid over inerrancy on the right who again parallel similar trends within Adventist traditionalists. Both sides of Adventism saw themselves aligned with the rising fundamentalist movement, even if some of the pivotal discussions in 1919 also reveal that at least some recognized this would be increasingly problematic for Adventism in the future. In many ways, my work on 1919 has pushed me to more critically examine the Adventist struggle with fundamentalism, and the influence of ideas and culture upon Adventism.



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