

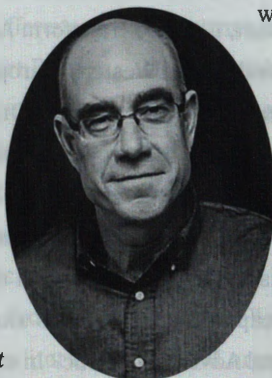
# Who defines ADVENTISM?

By Scott Moncrieff

*Who gets to define what Adventism is or what it should be?*

That's one of the core questions I asked myself as I read Gilbert Valentine's new book, *Ostriches and Canaries*, which recounts dozens of interactions between conservatives (or fundamentalists) and "progressives" during the General Conference presidency of Robert Pierson, 1966–79. Valentine uses the label "ostriches" to represent hiding one's head in the sand as a metaphor for denying reality, associated

with Pierson and the fundamentalist/conservatives; and "canaries" to represent liberal/progressive Adventists who were trying to adjust church paradigms to accommodate new data, in the way that canaries in the coal mines helped miners to know if dangerous gas was present—mostly by dying, sadly. This imagery "naturally" presents



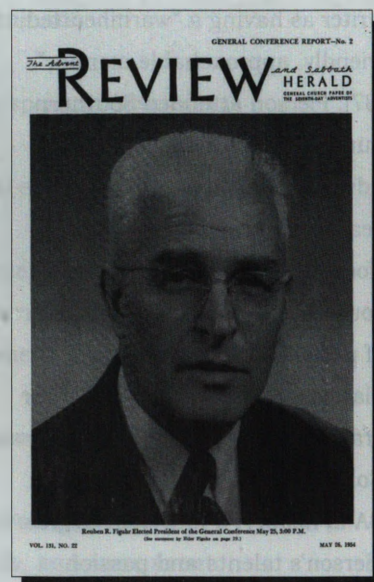
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conservatives as the problem and progressives as the answer. I wouldn't want to go so far, and Valentine himself adds nuance to this binary by acknowledging the inadequacy of labels, especially "conservative" and "liberal," because people who are conservative on one issue might be liberal on another, and there may be multiple positions on any particular issue, not just the two the labels provide. Though not without problems, these labels provide a useful framework for his narrative.

It's a lot of book, with an introduction, 13 chapters, a conclusion and an epilogue, and about 450 content pages. But I think the reader's labor will be well-rewarded. The first two chapters give background regarding fundamentalist elements in Adventism in the 19th century, a discussion of textual authority issues regarding the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, and how the 1919 Bible Conference shaped fundamentalism in the Adventist Church for the next several decades, a topic more fully developed in Michael Campbell's recent books *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism's Struggle With Fundamentalism* and *1922: The Rise of Adventist Fundamentalism*.

I found chapter three, "A Tale of Two Presidents," especially interesting. In it, Valentine

contrasts the presidency of Reuben Figuhr (1954–66) with that of Robert Pierson (1966–79). Under Figuhr's presidency, editor Francis D. Nichol and a team of scholars wrote the multi-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which gave the church, in Valentine's words, "a much more securely grounded understanding of Scripture, anchored in the study of language, literature, and history" (65). Figuhr, writes Valentine, was "progressively minded and committed to the pursuit of knowledge and truth" (66). Valentine quotes a tribute to Figuhr by Walter Beach, saying Figuhr "could see many tints and shades between the black and white of life," and that he had the ability "to concentrate on the essential rather than the trivial" (70–71). Valentine quotes Andrews University President Richard Hammill as saying that although Figuhr was not a trained scholar, he was "much interested in intellectual matters and was a strong supporter of Adventist educators" (72), as demonstrated by the development of graduate education under the Figuhr presidency, including the launching of Potomac University, the move of Potomac University to become Andrews University, and the formation of Loma Linda University. Figuhr also supported the development of the Geoscience Research Institute



(GRI) and, according to Hammill, the scholars Figuhr helped appoint to the GRI staff showed "the openness of his mind to new ideas and approaches" (82). Valentine concludes his section on Figuhr by stating: "He had committed to growth in understanding and was not threatened by the findings of science and the ongoing work of scholarship" (83). In a June 1966 *Review* article at the end of his presidency, as Valentine points out, Figuhr recommended "the middle of the road" as "the place where constructive work is done, not on the side of extremes or of liberalism, but in the middle of the road."

Pierson, Valentine says, "was not a deeply thoughtful youth given to intellectual pursuits. Rather, he was a doer, an activist, a promoter and organizer, and a keen sports enthusiast" (84–85). He was described by a *Review*

writer as having a “warmhearted, friendly, approachable manner” (87). Pierson attended Southern Junior College (now Southern Adventist University) for a two-year ministerial course that “focused primarily on Bible courses with a large component of pastoral training and field placement activities” (86). Figuhr graduated from Walla Walla College (now University) with a BA in history, a four-year degree. Pierson’s talents and passion lay in the area of evangelism and church planting, according to Valentine. He is described by Chuck Sandefur as being “a much-loved pastor, deeply appreciated for his compassion and spiritual nature” (87). In contrast to Figuhr, Valentine says, Pierson was troubled by problems identified by church scholars, and “many of the church’s theologians would see Pierson not as staying by the middle of the road but veering off to the right and adopting a reactionary stance that would seriously retard the church in its theological development” (99).

The heart of the book, chapters 4 through 13, contains a more detailed look into various episodes of the Pierson presidency. There is a pattern to the chapters: Pierson and his associates become anxious about some problem or problems with the liberals; he writes letters, applies pressure, asks

his associates what can be done; he writes articles, gives speeches, convenes meetings, maneuvers behind the scenes, and meets with failure or temporary success at ousting a “liberal” individual or progressive practice, at the cost of the long-term health of the denomination. Again, one must remember that this book focuses on Pierson’s interactions with progressives, not a general review of his presidency, which might lead a reader to different perceptions.

It seems that the core issue of contention is the nature and comprehensiveness of Ellen White’s authority, with Pierson’s camp upholding her as basically inerrant and verbally inspired, the final authority on every subject she addressed, in contrast to the “progressive” thinkers, who tended to see her as an inspired gift to the Church but also fallible in the composing process of her books, sometimes incorrect in her representations of history and science, and valuable but not complete in the interpretation of Scripture. To the conservatives, these limitations rob Ellen White of her authoritative power; to the progressives, using Ellen White as the last word on some matters requires closing one’s eyes to plentiful alternative evidence.

One of the issues that most troubled Pierson was the evidence for a long earth

chronology. He held strongly to the 6,000-year figure, originally derived from Ussher’s chronology and supported by multiple confirmations from Ellen White and a few conservative Adventist scientists, such as Frank Marsh. Meanwhile, progressive Adventist physicists, paleontologists, geologists, biologists, and historians of the 1960s and 1970s seriously considered data that supported a much longer chronology and a different paradigm. Pierson felt that to accept any long-earth data undermined the authority of Ellen White and was a direct challenge to the Church. However, that didn’t make alternative forms of evidence and the questions they raised disappear. There was no resolution to the problem during his presidency—or in Adventism during the present time.

Other questions of contention included:

- Was Paul the author of Hebrews?
- Did fewer than two million Israelites cross the Red Sea?
- Does Daniel 8, properly interpreted, support the Church’s sanctuary position?
- Did Jesus create fermented wine at Cana?
- What methodology or methodologies of Bible scholarship should be utilized?
- Should Loma Linda University

and its doctors be allowed to go off the denominational wage scale?

- Should non-Adventist speakers be invited to speak to Adventist audiences?
- Is there ever a situation in which “situational ethics” are appropriate?
- Should Adventist educational institutions accept government funds and thus be liable to some level of government regulation?
- To be appropriately modest, how long do women’s skirts have to be?
- Should seminary students (or faculty) be allowed to wear beards?

Taking that last question for a moment, it’s ironic that while many of our male Adventist pioneers wore beards, and our current


General Conference president strongly encouraged his male colleagues to grow beards to celebrate our Adventist heritage in 2018, Pierson was anxious about beards in the 1960s (as were many deans and administration figures at Adventist schools across North America). It goes to show that rather than having a universal meaning, wearing a beard means different things to different people in different times and places. It also illustrates the need for and the difficulty of achieving a wise leadership perspective—knowing which battles to pick, separating important from peripheral issues.

Valentine’s book is exceptionally educational because we are privy to key resources that weren’t publicly available at the time: the correspondence of Pierson and those who wrote to him, personal interviews with some of the

protagonists conducted by the author, and the diary of Andrews University professor and pioneering archaeologist Siegfried Horn. Valentine also draws from extensive writing in *Spectrum*, which published many more scholarly examinations of Adventist history,



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science, and theology in the decades following its first issue in 1969.

Valentine has done a very considerable work to locate—and in some cases create—all these resources and weave them into a coherent narrative. For instance, I learned a considerable amount about the desire of the General Conference to influence the composition of faculty for the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and in particular, the strong pressure to push Gerhard Hasel into a leadership position specifically because of his conservative positions—in addition to his recognized scholarly ability. It was also interesting to see that when Pierson worked to remove Roy Branson

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from the Seminary, one of six graduate students who signed a letter to President Hammill supporting Branson's orthodoxy and loyalty to the Seventh-day Adventist Church was Ted Wilson, the son of then-North American Division President

Neal Wilson (371).

In defense of Pierson, I can imagine few jobs more difficult than being a good General Conference president. Adventists represent such a wide spectrum of nationalities, languages, educational and class backgrounds, and other kinds of diversity that pleasing everyone would



be next to impossible. With such diversity of backgrounds, there is considerable diversity of perspective. Of course, this great diversity can be a tremendous strength in Adventism—as long as it is so recognized. But, sadly, a surprising number of Adventists have trouble acknowledging, respecting, and welcoming other Adventists who think differently from them. Pierson got regular signed—and anonymous—letters from possibly well-meaning Adventists complaining about supposed liberal practices at this or that Adventist college or university. Some such letters were grossly inaccurate. Many had an incomplete or unbalanced perspective. In almost all cases, the writer had ignored the suggested procedure of Matthew 18: going directly to the brother or sister in question instead of bad-talking them behind their back. Of course, the advice in Matthew is for “if your brother *sins* against you” (my emphasis), but if anything, the response should be milder for “if you *disagree* with your brother or sister.”

With so many sources to weave into a coherent narrative, Valentine definitely had his work cut out for him, and in my estimation, he did an excellent job. There are occasional editing errors, such as referring to James Hayward as “Haywood” (341), Herold Weiss as “Weis”

(102), and, in a section about the Wedgwood Trio, we are told that before the group played on the *It Is Written* telecast, “the bass player, Bob Summerour, had to shave off his beard” (275). As far as I know, Jerry Hoyle was the bass player. While on the subject of sources, Valentine necessarily uses brief excerpts of letters and other documents in order to make his work as efficient as possible. I was curious as to the overall tone of some of the letters, from which I read tiny excerpts. It would be interesting to include at least one or two full Pierson letters in an appendix to see how a Valentine excerpt appears in context.

I’m a natural audience for this book because I feel very personally involved in the story. I have heard many of the protagonists speak in public—Jack Provonsha, William Peterson, Frank Knittel, Herold Weiss, Gerhard Hasel, Arthur White, Robert Pierson, Roy Branson, Leona Running, and others. I have served as a longtime faculty advisor for the *Student Movement*, the Andrews University student newspaper, which figures prominently in the book. As a faculty member at Andrews, I have seen many points of contention from the era of this book pop up, during my 30-plus years as an educator. With so many points of contact and investment in the issues Valentine is discussing, I couldn’t put the book down, and sadly, I unintentionally broke a

long Wordle streak because I was so engrossed. B-l-a-s-t!

That said, I think this would be an excellent book for any Adventist who desires a greater understanding of recurrent issues in our church and how they have been handled. It’s quite helpful to see how issues Adventism faced in the 1920s came back in the 1960s and 1970s, and how many of them are cycling back again. Thank God for dedicated Adventist historians who are giving us the opportunity to better understand our past, which can help us better understand our present. And thank you to Oak & Acorn and Pacific Press for taking on these vital historical projects.

One of the lessons I can draw from Valentine’s book is that so-called conservative scholars and administrators need to have more open-minded and respectful dialog with so-called progressive scholars and administrators. To carry out its mission, a car needs a gas pedal, brakes, and a neutral gear, each working together; the Church needs broad judgment and perspective in discovering present truth, retaining that which is vital, and accepting that some issues are presently unresolvable and that’s okay. We don’t have to have all the answers, and it is important to our humility to accept this. Yes, it can be difficult to work with those who have strong

differences with us on specific matters of faith, but many of us don't even try. We just huddle closer within the comfortable circle of the like-minded and take potshots at the other side. We can and must do better. We are informed by yesterday's and today's experiences, but tomorrow's challenges will inevitably be a bit different. Accommodating to a changing environment is a necessary feature of a living organism. Our institutions of higher learning are the front lines for critical (rigorous) thinking, knowledge creation and innovation within the Church, and the training of future leaders. They need to be valued and supported.

Richard Ritland, a biology professor at Andrews University at the time, wrote a 1968 letter of concern to Andrews President Richard Hammill in the aftermath of one Seminary professor being told he wouldn't be rehired. He sent a copy of the letter to North American Division President Neal Wilson, along with a handwritten note. In part, the handwritten note reads: "It worries me if we begin a heretic purge that might become general, when indeed, we may discover too late and to our chagrin that the heretics were closer to the truth than we" (201). Our Church needs a broad spectrum of thinkers respectfully working together. What a sign of God's grace that will be.



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Who gets to define what Adventism is or should be? Certainly, General Conference presidents and other leaders will and should have a strong influence. But it's also up to

every individual church member, you and me, to shape the future definition of the Church, to help it fulfill its mission, and to model the love that should be our calling card.

## CORRECTIONS

### Vol. 50, no. 1:

**C**arolyn Winchell writes, "Thank you for the informative and fascinating article, "We, Too, Sing America: African American Seventh-day Adventist Healers in a Multicultural Nation." Growing up in the home of my grandparents, the I.F. (Irvin) Blues (who served in India from 1914-1939), I often heard of early Adventist missionaries to India. I met a number of them and heard many wonderful stories, especially over Sabbath dinner.

I was puzzled when the article stated that Anna Knight was the first female missionary to India. Indeed she was a missionary, and I remember hearing stories of her time there. Upon checking with the *SDA Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, I found two entries of interest. The *Encyclopedia* states that in 1895, Georgia Burrus Burgess sailed for India, where she (and later her husband) served until 1934 (aside from some time in the U.S. due to health issues the couple encountered.)

The *SDA Encyclopedia* states:

Georgia will be remembered as the first Adventist missionary to the Indian subcontinent, and the first single Adventist woman to venture into a non-Christian country.

The *SDA Encyclopedia* also states:

In the fall of 1901, Knight and her fellow workers set sail for Calcutta. She thus became not only the first African-American female Seventh-day Adventist missionary sent anywhere but also the "first black woman to be sent to India by a mission board of any denomination."

Thank you for the excellent article.

### Vol. 50, no. 2:

**G**ary Fordham corrects a photo caption in Sari Fordham's "Arriving in Uganda." It states "my father's students at Bugema Missionary Training School." The institution's name should read, Bugema Adventist College.

*Spectrum* welcomes all correspondence, especially grammar and fact corrections.