

The *Questions on Doctrine* Saga: Contours and Lessons

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The Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955-1956 were a landmark event in the history of the relationship between Adventists and evangelicals. For the first time in history, the conferences brought the two parties together for a series of serious dialogues that resulted in major evangelical figures embracing Adventism as a Christian church. The conferences also led to the publication of *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* through which Adventists expressed their beliefs in the most systematic manner up to that point. These events generated the initial series of intense reactions among evangelicals and Adventists between 1956 and 1971. During this period, each side was sharply divided in their reactions. For evangelicals, their primary concern was whether or not Adventism could be accepted into evangelical fellowship. But for Adventists, their debate lay with the question of whether or not *Questions on Doctrine* properly represented Adventist beliefs. As a result, four major camps emerged in reaction to the conferences and the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*: (1) pro-Adventist evangelicals; (2) anti-Adventist evangelicals; (3) pro-*Questions on Doctrine* Adventists; and (4) anti-*Questions on Doctrine* Adventists.

Pro-Adventist Evangelicals

The pro-Adventist camp among evangelicals was limited to Donald Grey Barnhouse, Walter Martin, E. Schuyler English, and Frank Mead. Among the four, Martin was by far the most active and prolific in his defense and promotion of Adventism as an evangelical Christian church. In his articles in *Eternity* and *Our Hope* in the 1950s and his books published in the 1960s, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* and *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Martin maintained the conclusion that he and Barnhouse had reached in 1956 regarding Adventism—that the movement needed to be removed from the list of non-Christian cults that evangelicals had agreed upon through consensus. Martin insisted that the Adventism of mid-twentieth century was essentially different from that of the nineteenth century.

The crux of Martin's argument lay in his analysis that Adventism's adherence to historic Christian orthodoxy as propounded in *Questions on Doctrine* was sufficient to de-classify the denomination from the catalog of cults. He divided Adventist teachings into three categories: (1) those adhering to the cardinal doctrines of historic Christian orthodoxy, (2) those held as a minority position among orthodox Christians, and (3) those held uniquely by Adventists. He argued that Adventists find their Christian identity in claiming those teachings belonging to the first category. He asserted that the beliefs belonging to the second and third categories, while heterodox, did not offset the essential orthodoxy of Adventism. Adventists, he insisted, had the right to differ from other Christians on those doctrines belonging to the second and third categories. Throughout this period, Martin never deviated from this conclusion.

Anti-Adventist Evangelicals

Those who opposed Martin in his quest to include Adventism among evangelicals were numerous and quite vociferous in their opposition. Following the lead of William Irvine and others from the first half of the twentieth century, evangelical writers such as Donald Hunter, Louis Talbot, M. R. DeHaan, Harold Lindsell, Herbert Bird, John Gerstner, Norman Douty, Russell Spittler, J. Oswald Sanders, Jan Karel Van Baalen, Anthony Hoekema, Gordon Lewis, and Irvine Robertson reflected the anti-Adventist sentiment that prevailed among evangelicals.

Writing for major evangelical publications and publishing houses, these critics attacked the basic premise laid out by Martin in his writings. These writers could not see Adventism as presented in *Questions on Doctrine* as evangelical. Rather, they saw the book largely as a recasting of Adventism of old which Protestant anti-cult specialists had always deemed cultic. While they did come to recognize that certain teachings of Adventism (such as the teachings on the Trinity and the divine nature of Christ) had been mischaracterized by evangelicals, the evangelical critics disagreed with Martin on how the doctrines of Adventism belonging to Martin's second and third categories ought to be viewed. In contrast to Martin, these critics (all of them Calvinists) were in essential agreement that these teachings counteracted the orthodox claims of Adventism and thus presented in themselves insurmountable barriers to fellowship with evangelicals.

Pro-Questions on Doctrine Adventists

Adventists who were involved in the conferences with evangelicals and the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* were naturally favorably disposed toward these events and the beliefs expressed through them. As the Adventist-evangelical conferences progressed and *Questions on Doctrine* was published, R. R. Figuhr, president of the General Conference, was personally involved in the process and gave his unequivocal support for the efforts made toward rapprochement with the evangelicals. Though some concerns were raised by a few leaders in the pre-publication phase of *Questions on Doctrine*, Adventist leaders in general viewed these events as a positive breakthrough that raised the standing of the Adventist church in the Christian world.

In the years between 1957 and 1971, Leroy Edwin Froom, W. E. Read, and Roy Allan Anderson, the three primary participants of the dialogues and key contributors to the original draft of *Questions on Doctrine*, were particularly active in their defense of the conferences and the book. In response to Adventist critics who felt that the book had deviated from historic Adventist orthodoxy, they were quick to assert that *Questions on Doctrine* did not teach any new doctrine, but was simply a new presentation of the same historic teachings that Adventists had long held. At the same time, the Adventist leaders responded to the evangelical criticism that the book contained the same heresies of Adventism's past by minimizing the theological deviations of Adventist pioneers and insinuating incorrectly that mainstream Adventists had always subscribed to the teachings contained in *Questions on Doctrine*. In concert with the pro-Adventist evangelical party of Martin, Barnhouse, English, and Mead, the pro-*Questions on Doctrine* Adventist leaders supported their church's attempt at rapprochement with evangelicals and at the redefinition of Adventism as an evangelical denomination.

Anti-Questions on Doctrine Adventists

Though there apparently were a number of Adventists who had grave concerns about *Questions on Doctrine*, M. L. Andreasen was a singular figure who voiced consistent opposition to the book and his church's move closer to evangelicalism. After reading Barnhouse's September 1956 article on Adventism in *Eternity* and Froom's February 1957 article on the atonement in *Ministry*, Andreasen began to hold the suspicion that the Adventist-evangelical conferences and the forthcoming publication of *Questions on Doctrine* were parts of a conspiracy to change traditional Adventist teaching on the atonement. When *Questions on Doctrine* was finally released, his suspicion that the General Conference leaders were emphasizing the place of the cross at the expense of the investigative judgment and its final generation implications was confirmed.

Thus, between 1957 and 1962 the elderly theologian waged a war against the General Conference with the goal of revising *Questions on Doctrine*. His primary mode of attack was the distribution of a series of open letters that contained sharp criticisms against Froom, Figuhr, and *Questions on Doctrine*. In the course of his campaign, Andreasen added the book's support for the prelapsarian view of Christ's human nature as another feature which needed to be excised. This latter point was particularly important for him in that he needed to have Christ possessing a human nature that is identical to all other human beings in order to establish his "final generation" theology. This theology, promulgated in Andreasen's earlier works, argued that it was possible to live a sinless life since Christ, sharing the same nature as all other human beings, lived a sinless life. In 1962, Andreasen, nearing the end of his bout with a terminal illness, reconciled with Figuhr and the General Conference leadership on his deathbed. This, however, did not mean theological reconciliation or resolution, but merely an act of emotional closure to five years of bitter struggle.

The Four Camps beyond 1971

With the publication of Froom's *Movement of Destiny* in 1971, the series of reactions by the original participants of the four camps came to a close. Evangelicals and Adventists proceeded differently in the years that followed. With each new printing of *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Martin reaffirmed his assessment of Adventism as evangelical, though he remained critical of the heterodox element within Adventism. A majority of evangelical anti-cult writers eventually followed suit and removed Adventism from the list of non-Christian cults. By the time of Martin's death in 1989, Adventists were being accepted by most evangelicals as fellow Christians, though not without questions about the peculiarities that set Adventists apart.¹

The two Adventist camps, on the other hand, have not found a resolution to the struggle that began in the 1950s. Part of the problem has been the ambiguous stance taken by General Conference leadership on *Questions on Doctrine* since the election of Figuhr's successor, Robert Pierson. Since the Review and Herald Publishing Association discontinued the printing of the book in 1975, the General Conference has neither repudiated the book nor defended it. While the status of the book as a whole may be uncertain within the church, it is clear that the book's stance on the atonement has been

affirmed by the majority of the church. The church's statement of fundamental beliefs adopted by the General Conference in session in 1980 affirmed *Questions on Doctrine's* emphasis on the centrality of the cross and the delineation of Christ's post-1844 heavenly ministry as an application of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.² Furthermore, since 1971 the relationship between Adventists and evangelicals has increasingly improved as the latter gradually came to embrace Adventists into their fellowship. The resulting self-understanding of these Adventists has been to view Adventism within the larger flow of biblical Christianity and to regard themselves as evangelicals.

However, the theological heirs of Andreasen have found such developments deeply troubling. Since 1971, several independent ministry groups have arisen within the Adventist church that have self-consciously embraced Andreasen's postlapsarian views and the accompanying theology of the final generation, which they believe is supported by the writings of Ellen White. Since their inception, these groups have warned against the evangelicalization of Adventism and have issued calls to the church at large to return to the Adventism of the pre-*Questions on Doctrine* era. Like Andreasen, they have seen the Adventist-evangelical conferences and the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* as the beginning of the end-time apostasy. From the perspective of these groups, the prelapsarian view advocated by *Questions on Doctrine* and embraced by many Adventists is another sign of the apostasy that continues in the church. They view Adventism as a movement that is to be deliberately separate from other groups such as evangelicals. Their vision of Adventism is a movement that is preparing the final generation of Christians who will ultimately overcome sin.³ Clearly, the debate over the self-understanding and mission of Adventism continues, and it remains to be seen if and how the two seemingly irreconcilable camps will achieve resolution of the issues and come to theological reconciliation within the household of Adventism.

Observations

An analysis of the four camps that emerged in the aftermath of the Adventist-evangelical conferences and the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* yields some interesting observations.

First, the evangelicals that Adventist leaders were interacting with were, without exception, adherents of Calvinism and theological heirs of the Protestant fundamentalism of the 1920s. Much like their fundamentalist forebears, these evangelicals assessed other Christian groups with a rather rigid set of criteria. For the evangelicals that Adventists were interacting with, these criteria included Calvinism. As they applied the fundamentalist-Calvinist grid to Adventism, the Adventist views on the law and the investigative judgment consistently fell out of line from the grid. Martin's key innovation lay in his recognition of Adventism's Arminian beliefs and his refusal to include his own Calvinist beliefs among the criteria for determining orthodoxy.

Second, the fundamentalist-Calvinist evangelicals that Adventists were interacting with represented the most conservative wing of evangelicalism and the brand of evangelicalism which was the closest to the Adventism of the 1950s. Though these evangelicals and Adventists differed in several areas of belief, the two groups were similar in their commitment to a literal interpretation of Scripture and a conservative approach to lifestyle. This means that fundamentalist Christians would have been natural

targets for Adventist evangelists who appealed to the biblical literalism of fundamentalists in convincing them, for example, of Saturday as the true biblical Sabbath. For the leaders of these evangelical communities, Adventists must have seemed like the antichrist—a group close enough to pass as an evangelical church, but dangerously dissimilar. Thus, it is not surprising that most fundamentalist evangelicals were so vehement in their opposition to Adventism. The definition of Adventism as a non-Christian cult was in essence an act of self-preservation for these evangelicals.

Third, the evangelicals that Adventists were interacting with were in fact the only Christians who showed an interest in defining cults. Mainline, liberal Christians, on the other hand, showed no interest in defining cults or engaging in polemics of any sort. As Paul McGraw has suggested, fundamentalist evangelicalism—as the most conservative wing of evangelicalism—was preoccupied with compiling the cult catalog to solidify its self-appointed place as the defender of the fundamentals of evangelical Christianity.⁴ By defining Adventism and such groups as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, and Unity as non-Christian cults, fundamentalism was not only legitimizing its place in evangelicalism, but also asserting its place as the true center of evangelicalism.

Fourth, the inter-relationships between the four camps reveal three unlikely points of agreement between otherwise warring parties. The first such point of agreement centered on the question of whether *Questions on Doctrine* represented a change to Adventist theology. In the course of his attack against *Questions on Doctrine*, Andreasen concurred with Martin that the book represented a certain change in Adventist belief. For both, this assertion was central to their arguments, though for widely divergent reasons. Next, anti-Adventist evangelicals and General Conference leaders found themselves agreeing with one another that the book did not represent a change in Adventist theology. Their appraisal of historic Adventism, of course, was diametrically opposite—with the evangelicals calling it heretical, and the Adventist leaders asserting that Adventism had always been staunchly orthodox. Finally, the third unlikely point of agreement is found between anti-Adventist evangelicals and Andreasen. Even while asserting that *Questions on Doctrine* was a rehashing of old heresies, these evangelicals were happy to agree with Andreasen that the book was a deceptive ploy to present Adventism in a more presentable light.

Fifth, the Adventist-evangelical conferences that led to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* were a process driven by the Adventist conferees' (particularly Froom's) desire to bring Adventism into evangelical fellowship. As such, an imbalance of power existed in favor of the evangelical conferees who assumed the role of adjudicators from the beginning. Exactly how much this imbalance of power in favor of the evangelical conferees and the desire of the Adventist conferees to please them affected the content of the book is impossible to ascertain fully. It does not seem that Martin and Barnhouse overtly flaunted such power or acted manipulatively in their interactions with the Adventists. However, the strong desire to present Adventism in a manner that was acceptable to the two evangelicals is readily discernible in the correspondence among Adventists involved in the editorial process of *Questions on Doctrine*. It seems that this dynamic must be taken into account when interpreting *Questions on Doctrine*.

Sixth, another problem associated with the *Questions on Doctrine* controversy among Adventists was the deliberate dismissal of evidence. This problem can be seen in

both *Questions on Doctrine* itself and in Andreasen's writings in response to the book. In compiling quotations from the writings of Ellen White on Christ's human nature, the writers and editors of *Questions on Doctrine* left out many quotations that did not support the prelapsarian view. In addition, the editors' insertion of such subheadings as "Took Sinless Human Nature" and "Perfect Sinlessness of Christ's Human Nature" aggravated the problem since such conclusions were seen by some Adventists as a distortion of the overall witness of Ellen White on the issue. Such selective quoting would be pointed out by Andreasen and numerous others who followed him and would lead to the discrediting of the entire document by many. Andreasen, however, was also guilty of unfair use of the evidence. Even when Figuhr pointed out convincingly that Ellen White, Froom, and Andreasen himself essentially agreed on their view of the atonement on the cross, Andreasen dismissed them and essentially manipulated Froom's words to support his own arguments. In both cases, it seems that the zeal to demonstrate a certain point led to selective use and manipulation of evidence.

Seventh, the Adventist reactions surrounding *Questions on Doctrine* reveal a real difference in the way their history is viewed. As manifested in his 1971 book, *Movement of Destiny*, Froom saw Adventism on an epic journey of theological growth and enlightenment. He saw the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis as an epochal moment in Adventist history which provided a much-needed corrective to the theological errors held by the pioneers. And he saw *Questions on Doctrine* as another epochal event which affirmed Adventism's enlightened commitment to Christian orthodoxy and growing understanding of God's truth. Others have not shared such a rosy view of Adventism's theological history. While giving a positive assessment to some of the theological corrections that have been made over history, Andreasen and his followers have rejected Froom's evolutionary view of Adventist history and have opted for a more pessimistic assessment, believing that *Questions on Doctrine* represented a serious regression from and corruption of the pristine theology of the pioneers of Adventism.

Eighth, another question that lies at the crux of the debate is the question of change—if *Questions on Doctrine* represented a change in Adventist theology and if change—whether it happened or not—is a positive or negative thing. Though many evangelical critics charged that Adventism had not really changed—that it was the same legalistic, non-Christian cult of the previous 100 years, Barnhouse and Martin never budged from their position that the Adventism of the 1950s was indeed Christian and devoid of the heresies that had disfigured nineteenth-century Adventism. By portraying what had happened in the intervening years as "changes," they were attempting to justify their acceptance of Adventism as Christian and to convince other evangelicals to change their attitudes toward Adventism. Meanwhile, the Adventist authors and backers of *Questions on Doctrine*, in the mid-1950s stood firm in their position that nothing of the essence had changed in their doctrines. Conveying the idea that no change had been made was even more critical for Adventist leaders since any change would be perceived by many rank and file Adventists as compromise and even apostasy. Already by early 1957, charges were being made that Adventist leaders were changing and misrepresenting historic Adventist beliefs on Christ's nature and atoning work.⁵ Thus, it was important for Adventist leaders to declare unequivocally that no change had been made.

At the same time, it was equally important for them to explain to their evangelical counterparts that the Adventism of 1956 was indeed different from either the Adventism as portrayed in contemporary cult apologetics literature or the Adventism of generations past when dissenting positions were given space in denominational publications. This dilemma of having to please both the Adventist and evangelical critics is evident in Anderson's letter to Martin immediately following the publication of Figuhr's article in the December 13, 1956, issue of *Review and Herald*.⁶ Anderson attached a copy of the article with the letter and preempted the potential disappointment that Martin might feel with this warning: "You may wonder why [Figuhr] is stating so definitely that this is not a modification or alteration of our beliefs, et cetera." Such a statement was necessary, he explained, because of "a man or two here and there that is inclined to feel that what we are doing is something that will seriously change our position, et cetera." Still, Anderson wished that Figuhr's statement "might have been worded just a little differently." After reproducing Figuhr's line—"The answers [by Adventist leaders] therefore are not in any sense a modification or alteration of what Seventh-day Adventists proclaim to the world as their beliefs"—Anderson proceeded to offer what he would have written, "The answers therefore are not in any sense a modification or alteration of the real truth Seventh-day Adventists have been called to proclaim to the world." This statement "would be more in harmony with facts," he wrote Martin, "because you know and I know that some statements have been made publicly and have appeared in print which are not in harmony with the actual truth" Then he concluded by reassuring Martin that the Adventist leaders were "very conscious of" the problem. At the same time, Anderson reminded Martin that "it will serve the best interests of all concerned if we help our own people to know that there is no serious movement to change our belief, but rather to clarify it."⁷

In essence, it appears that Adventist leaders such as Anderson were engaged in a double entendre involving the word "clarify." They assured fellow Adventists that the church was merely clarifying—i.e., making clear—the traditional teachings of Adventism. Then, to Barnhouse and Martin, they asserted that they were in the process of clarifying—i.e., clearing away unorthodox elements from—Adventist teachings. This shows what an awkward position the Adventist leaders placed themselves in. Nonetheless, they were jubilant over the agreement that they reached at least with Barnhouse and Martin on a crucial point—that Adventism as it stood in 1956 was an orthodox, Christian denomination and should be welcomed into evangelical fellowship. Whether the Adventist leaders were honest and forthright in this process and whether *Questions on Doctrine* represented a change in beliefs or merely expressions would consume much of the ensuing discussions over the book.

Ninth, the *Questions on Doctrine* controversy illustrates the importance of the spirit of inclusiveness and of heeding voices of concern, particularly in relating to those on the other side of the theological spectrum. The editors and writers of *Questions on Doctrine* solicited critiques from others, but it appears that they largely ignored the detailed responses that did arrive. For example, Raymond Cottrell's critiques and warnings, which might have prevented much of the upheaval that followed the publication of the book, were mostly unheeded. Again, it is impossible to ascertain whether the tension between Froom and Andreasen resulted in the latter not being consulted in the editorial process of *Questions on Doctrine*. Even if the "snubbing" of

Andreasen was not intentional, he could have been taken more seriously once he began writing *Figuhr* with concerns. But almost immediately Andreasen was seen as a nuisance and a hindrance to the process rather than a potential resource. It seems that Froom, Read, and Anderson were more interested in producing a document that would be acceptable to evangelicals than in crafting a consensus response that truly represented Adventist beliefs. As such, the opinions of those who disagreed with them either in method or perspective were dismissed—resulting in a continuing legacy of discord. While the tension between the two evangelical camps have subsided over the course of the past fifty years, that between the two Adventist camps has continued into the present time in diverse ways. Regardless of where one stands in the debate, the Adventist-evangelical conferences and *Questions on Doctrine* remain as important reference points of contemporary Adventist theological self-understanding. It is our task today to learn from history and to think, wrestle and pray together as a community at this great Adventist theological potluck.

¹See, for example, Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone, *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions, and You* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1977); idem, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990); J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992); Edmond C. Gruss, *Cults and the Occult*, 3d ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994).

²See *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . : A Biblical Exposition of the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1988), 312.

³See, for example, Ralph Larson, *The Word Was Made Flesh: One Hundred Years of Seventh-day Adventist Christology, 1852-1952* (Cherry Valley, CA: Cherrystone Press, 1986); idem, *Apostasy Is the Issue* (Wichita, KS: Steps to Life, 1993); Ron Spear, *Adventism in Crisis* (Eatonville, WA: Hope International, 1987); J. E. Ballagas, *The Seventh-day Adventist Crisis Confronted* (Mayaguez, PR: The Author, 1988); Colin D. Standish and Russell R. Standish, *Deceptions of the New Theology* (Hartland, VA: Hartland Publications, 1989); idem, *Adventism Challenged*, 2 vols., 2d ed. (Eatonville, WA: Hope International, 1990); idem, *The Evangelical Dilemma* (Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, 1994); John J. Grosboll, *None Dare Call It Apostasy* (Wichita, KS: Steps to Life, 1992).

⁴Paul McGraw, “Born in Zion? The Margins of Fundamentalism and the Definition of Seventh-day Adventism” (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 2003), 92-100.

⁵See J. Korlvinka to Brethren in Christ [General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists], 6 January 1957, TL, RG 11, box 3738, General Conference Archives; H. O. Olson to A. V. Olson, 27 February 1957, RG 11, box 3738, General Conference Archives; M. L. Andreasen to R. R. Figuhr, 7 March 1957, TL, box 11355-11357, General Conference Archives; M. L. Andreasen to R. R. Figuhr, 11 March 1957, TL, box 11355-11357, General Conference Archives.

⁶R. R. Figuhr, “A Non-Adventist Examines Our Beliefs,” *Review and Herald*, 13 December 1956, 3, 4.

⁷R. Allan Anderson to Walter R. Martin, 11 December 1956, TL, ADF 3773.06c, Ellen G. White Estate Loma Linda Branch, Loma Linda University.