

Evangelical Reflections on Seventh-day Adventism: Yesterday and Today

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This brief essay presents some broad reflections on the history and theology of Seventh-day Adventism, specifically focusing upon issues relevant to the evangelical-Adventist dialogues of the 1950s. It also offers some comments on how the theological content of those interactions still carries important lessons for today concerning the biblical gospel of grace.

As this conference clearly confirms, the writings of the evangelical Baptist theologian and apologist Walter Ralston Martin (1928-1989) significantly shaped the way most evangelical Protestants came to view Seventh-day Adventism. So I'll begin by briefly tracing how I became acquainted with Adventism through my relationship with Dr. Martin, the central figure in the ongoing evangelical-Adventist discussions through the decades.

An Evangelical Perspective on Adventism

Of all the religious groups that emerged in nineteenth century America—including the Mormons, Christian Scientists, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, among others—I have found the Seventh-day Adventists to be the most intriguing. As a student and an interested observer for more than twenty-five years, my first studies in Adventist history and theology came about when I was an undergraduate student at Concordia University (a Missouri Synod Lutheran educational institution in Southern California). Enrolled in a religion course that focused upon cults and new religious movements, I wrote a term paper on Seventh-day Adventism. In particular, I evaluated the controversial position taken by the evangelical counter-cult specialist Walter Martin. He claimed that Seventh-day Adventism should not be classified as a non-Christian cult but rather as a somewhat heterodox Christian church body.¹

A few years later I had the privilege of working closely with Dr. Martin at the Christian Research Institute (CRI), an evangelical apologetics organization that specializes in the study of cults and new religious movements. My duties included assisting Martin as a research specialist on Seventh-day Adventism. With Martin's encouragement and support, that research ultimately led to my writing an updated evangelical appraisal of Adventism in CRI's *Christian Research Journal*. After Martin's untimely death, I also wrote "The Recent Truth About Seventh-day Adventism" for *Christianity Today*.² These articles led to opportunities to dialogue with Adventist scholars, pastors, and administrators at such places as Loma Linda University, La Sierra University, and here at Andrews University. I also interacted with the former editor of the *Review and Herald* and dialogued with a large number of Adventist pastors from the Southeastern California Conference.

In light of the "Questions on Doctrine 50th Anniversary Conference," I'd like to publicly thank my Adventist friends for inviting me to participate and for their continued openness to discuss issues relating to biblical truth. I hope this conference leads to more open and frank discussion about where evangelical Protestants and Seventh-day Adventists agree and disagree on important theological matters.

Before remarking specifically about some of the theological issues relevant to the relationship between Adventists and evangelicals, I want to provide a few personal insights about Walter Martin and his relationship to Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895-1960). I will also offer a

brief qualification of Martin's personal theological views in contrast to Barnhouse. In addition, I also want to note Martin's view of the Adventists leaders that he met with in the 1950s and convey the significance that Martin placed on those historic meetings.

I've come to conclude that Walter Martin viewed Barnhouse in much the same way I view Martin. One of Martin's early teachers in the Christian faith, Barnhouse not only served as Martin's boss at *Eternity* magazine, but was also a spiritual and intellectual mentor and a supportive friend. Martin viewed Barnhouse as a courageous and insightful Christian thinker, preacher, and apologist.

Walter was one of my first teachers in the Christian faith. In working with him, he was a type of mentor to me as well as to many other young evangelicals interested in studying new religious movements. Many consider him today to be the father of the counter-cult apologetics movement within evangelicalism. I especially admired Martin for his courage to stand up for the truth of historic Christianity.

A number of Adventist sources have identified Barnhouse and Martin as being Calvinistic in their theology as well as embracing certain dispensational doctrinal distinctives.³ While that description holds true for Barnhouse, it is not true of Martin, at least not the Martin I knew since the late 1970s.

When it came to the classic Calvinism-Arminianism theological debate, Martin was quite fond of referring to himself as a "Cal-minian." As long as I knew him, he was always very critical of the traditional Reformed theological system. I know this because I am a card-carrying Calvinist (a member of the conservative United Reformed Churches of North America, URC) and Martin and I differed over some of the relevant theological issues. I think Martin's understanding of, and appreciation for, the more Wesleyan-Arminian tradition within Christian history allowed him to relate more easily to Adventist theology. Martin was certainly more sympathetic to non-Calvinistic theological systems than were 1950s evangelical scholars Anthony Hoekema and J. K. Van Baalen who were staunchly Reformed in their theology.

Martin was also quite critical of the eschatological distinctives of traditional dispensationalism. For example, he rejected dispensational premillennialism in favor of the historic premillennialism as set forth by the evangelical New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd.

Martin spoke very highly of his Adventist friends, specifically leaders such as Leroy Froom, W. E. Read, and especially R. A. Anderson. Though Martin vigorously differed with them over some important doctrinal issues, he considered these men to be genuine brothers in Christ. He respected their intellectual and spiritual integrity. Martin once said that he considered the evangelical-Adventist dialogues and his subsequent theological assessment that Seventh-day Adventism was a heterodox yet Christian church body to be one of the most significant accomplishments of his career and ministry. I think he would be both surprised and pleased to hear of this conference.

Adventist Theological Development

One of the most intriguing features about Seventh-day Adventism is that unlike Mormonism, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses; the Adventist movement has shifted toward historic Christian and biblical orthodoxy. Some contemporary Seventh-day Adventists would no doubt be aghast to discover that their church was once widely considered a theological cult (at least in conservative evangelical circles). A liberal Adventist scholar once even scolded Martin and me for making judgments about his church's orthodoxy.

However, theologically speaking, the Adventist pioneers made some very bold claims that according to Scripture must be tested for their compatibility with biblical faith (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1-4; Jude 3). These early Adventists proclaimed to be “a special people, with a special message, for a special time!” They also declared themselves to be the “remnant church” that uniquely kept the commandments of God. In addition, they asserted that God was providing unique guidance to the early Adventists through the prophetic voice of Ellen G. White.

However, closer historical and theological examinations reveal that the beliefs that coalesced to form primitive Seventh-day Adventism, in the wake of the failed Millerite movement, were far from biblically orthodox. The theological views of the primitive Adventist movement (though hardly unified and systematic) reflected a non- or anti-Trinitarian view of God, a semi-Arian Christology, a message of restorationism, and a strongly legalistic understanding of the gospel. From the standpoint of historic Christian or creedal orthodoxy, the primitive Adventist movement was a theologically cultic movement or a heretical sect in its basic theology. Several present-day Adventist scholars have clearly documented that these sub-Christian doctrinal views were present, if not prominent, at various stages within early Adventist history.⁴

And yet, the next century saw Adventism’s doctrinal views undergo analysis and change. Ellen G. White apparently played an important, if not critical, role in helping the Adventist church move toward theological orthodoxy. It has ultimately embraced a fully Trinitarian theology with an orthodox understanding of the person and nature of Christ and a belief that Christ’s righteousness in the atonement is granted to the believer through faith alone.⁵

This movement toward historic Christianity on the part of Ellen G. White and Seventh-day Adventism sets them apart from the heretical sects of the nineteenth century. Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Charles Russell were leaders of religious movements that repudiated historic Christianity. They desired to implement a heretical restorationism accompanied with a replacement prophet and often a new text of scripture.

Walter Martin saw a stark contrast concerning White and Adventist theology in his research of the religious movements of nineteenth century America. While he rejected White’s prophetic claims, Martin viewed her—unlike Smith, Eddy, and Russell—as a genuine Christian believer. And while I do not accept Mrs. White’s claim to have the spirit of prophecy, I do believe she, at minimum, had some good biblical and theological instincts.

Martin’s conviction remains my own—that one cannot be a true Jehovah’s Witness, Mormon, or Christian Scientist and be a practicing Christian in the biblical sense of the word. Those sects proclaim a different God, a different Christ, and a different gospel (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-9). But it is possible to be a Seventh-day Adventist and a true follower of Jesus Christ despite certain distinctive Adventist doctrines that most evangelical Protestants respectfully consider to be unbiblical. I think many Adventist scholars would return the favor and say something similar about me and my conservative Reformed theological views.

Evangelical-Adventist Dialogues of the 1950s

It is ironic that the discussions between the evangelicals and the Adventists in the 1950s, while intending to bring unity, actually succeeded in sparking increased controversy both in the evangelical ranks and within the Seventh-day Adventist church. Some evangelical scholars on cults and new religious movements (both fifty years ago and today) are not completely persuaded by Martin’s assessment of Adventism,⁶ though for the most part his position has carried the theological day among evangelicals.

Within Adventism, the book *Questions on Doctrine*, in the words of Adventist historian George R. Knight, “easily qualifies as the most divisive book in Seventh-day Adventist history.”⁷ It appears that much of the doctrinal controversy that divided Adventists into competing “traditional” versus “evangelical” camps in the 1970s and 1980s can be traced to issues addressed in that book.

While fifty years later the doctrinal issues raised by the evangelical-Adventist dialogues are still being debated, at least four positive features resulted from those historic discussions:

1. Martin and Barnhouse set a good example for how to properly engage in Christian apologetic and doctrinal discussion with other religious bodies. Namely, go to the source. Martin could have played the role of an armchair apologist and critic of Seventh-day Adventism and written his books without any serious interaction with the Adventists. But what he did was attempt to practice what I call the golden rule of apologetics: “Treat other peoples’ beliefs and arguments the way you want yours to be treated.”

A genuine Christian theological critique of the viewpoints of others should be characterized by honesty, fair play, and by the willingness to give your opponent the benefit of the doubt. This approach involves a willingness to read their statements of belief in the best and truest light possible. However, to fulfill this high scholastic calling, interaction is required. To be candid, as a non-Adventist, I sometimes struggle to understand, let alone convey, the details and subtleties of Adventist doctrine and practice. I’m therefore grateful to the numerous Adventist scholars, pastors, and administrators who have helped me better understand Seventh-day Adventism.

2. Martin and Barnhouse demonstrated rare apologetic courage in publishing their controversial assessment of Adventism when they knew it would undoubtedly create quite a stir in the conservative Protestant evangelical ranks. Martin said that when they revealed their findings in several editions of *Eternity* magazine, 25 percent of the magazine’s subscribers withdrew their subscriptions. How many Christian publications today would be willing to take such a risk? Evangelical Christian organizations often avoid controversial doctrinal issues lest they lose financial support.

3. The basic openness and honesty of the Adventists who met with Martin in the 1950s should be applauded. While I’m aware that some Adventist scholars today believe that “Freada” were less than completely candid in representing certain Adventist distinctive doctrines (for example, the fallen nature of Christ),⁸ I think they were engaged in a difficult task and overall represented the diversity of Adventism well. The central goal of *Questions on Doctrine* was to answer questions posed by evangelicals, not to necessarily set forth a systematic statement of Adventist beliefs (such as is found in the later book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*).

As an educator, I’m impressed with the question-and-answer format represented in *Questions on Doctrine*. As well, I appreciate the careful summary of where Adventists agree with other conservative Christian groups and where their views are distinctly their own.

4. As an interested outsider with my nose pressed to the window, I see quite a bit of theological diversity within Seventh-day Adventism. In some ways it reminds me of present-day evangelicalism. One strand of Adventism appears quite traditional, another very liberal, and still another distinctly evangelical. There also seems to be a segment that is atheological in nature and reflects what I would call a cultural Adventism.

The strand of Adventism that Martin and I most identified with is evangelical Adventism. If the use of the word “evangelical” is too self-serving on my part, then maybe I could call it a

“gospel-oriented” Adventism. The word “evangelical” comes, of course, from the Greek *euangellion*, which means gospel or “good news.”

Gospel-oriented Adventists are indeed genuine Adventists. They believe deeply that God raised the Seventh-day Adventist church up for a special purpose—to usher in the Second Coming of Christ. They also deeply respect and honor the seventh-day Sabbath. In addition they believe that Ellen G. White possessed the spirit of prophecy. However, gospel-oriented Adventists owe their final allegiance to the authority of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*). Ellen G. White’s writings are tested by Scripture and not the reverse.

The doctrinal feature that sets this branch of Adventism apart is its view of the gospel. Gospel-oriented Adventists believe that their right standing before God rests not in their own obedience to the Law of God, but rather they place their complete confidence in Jesus Christ and in his perfect substitutionary atonement for their sins on the cross.⁹ These evangelically oriented Adventists believe that salvation comes solely by grace, through faith alone, and only in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9). They also believe that the Christian life is lived out passionately in gratitude to God for his precious gift of salvation (Eph 2:10).

Evangelical Adventists also recognize that Adventism’s important doctrinal distinctives of Sabbatarianism, the spirit of prophecy, and the belief in the imminence of Christ’s Second Coming are only made truly meaningful when a person fully embraces the gospel of grace. Evangelical Adventists insist that if God raised their church up for a special purpose, then they definitely can’t afford to get the gospel message wrong.

The roots of this robust type of Adventism go back to the nineteenth century and can be traced through the Adventist leaders who dialogued with Barnhouse and Martin. I also see it clearly articulated in the gospel presentation found in the classic Adventist source known as *Questions on Doctrine*. As the Seventh-day Adventist church continues its rapid growth in the twenty-first century, I pray that God will bless the church with an increasing number of Adventists who believe, teach, and live out this grace-oriented understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Just before he died, Walter Martin expressed to me a few concerns about the theological state of affairs within Adventism, as he saw it. He wondered whether Adventism really stood behind the book *Questions on Doctrine*, and, if so, why the book had been allowed to go out of print. He also expressed concern about whether Adventism had come to view Ellen G. White as the infallible interpreter of Scripture. He was also perplexed by the fact that leading evangelical Adventists such as Desmond Ford and others had been fired by the church. Finally, he told me that he was planning to write a new book on Seventh-day Adventism, and he asked me to assist him on that project. The Lord willing, I am planning to write a book that will offer an updated evangelical assessment of Adventism that will build upon Martin’s important work.

In retrospect, Walter Martin had a significant and abiding influence upon the Adventist church itself. He also greatly influenced how an entire generation of evangelical Christians came to view Seventh-day Adventism.

In closing, I would like to publicly thank my friend Julius Nam for writing an excellent dissertation on the evangelical-Adventist dialogues. I would also like to thank George Knight for his work in getting *Questions on Doctrine* back into print and for his helpful introduction and notes contained in the volume. Walter Martin, a friend and critic of Seventh-day Adventism, would be quite pleased to see the new edition of this book. Thank you.

¹ See Martin's assessment in Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960).

² Kenneth R. Samples, "From Controversy To Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism," *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1988, 9-14; Kenneth R. Samples, "The Recent Truth About Seventh-day Adventism," *Christianity Today*, February 5, 1990, 18-21.

³ George R. Knight, "Historical and Theological Introduction to the Annotated Edition" in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, ed. George R. Knight, annotated ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), xxix-xxxii.

⁴ See the explanatory note in Knight, *Questions on Doctrine*, 44-46 n10; Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 69.

⁵ See Richard W. Schwartz, "The Perils of Growth, 1886-1905," in *Adventism in America*, ed. Gary Land (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 109; See also the explanatory note in Knight, *Questions on Doctrine*, 44-46 n10.

⁶ For varying views expressed by knowledgeable evangelical scholars on Seventh-day Adventism, see Philip Johnson, "Apologetics, Mission and New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach (Part Two)," *Sacred Tribes Journal of Christian Missions to New Religious Movements*, Summer/Fall 2002, <http://www.sacredtribes.com/issue1/apolog2.htm>; James Bjornstad, "Seventh-day Adventism," Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, http://www.ankerberg.com/Articles/_PDFArchives/apologetics/AP1W0999.pdf (accessed August 4, 2007).

⁷ Knight, *Questions on Doctrine*, xiii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xv-xvii.

⁹ See Michelle Rader, David VanDenburgh, and Larry Christoffel, "Evangelical Adventism: Clinging to the Old Rugged Cross," *Adventist Today*, January-February 1994, <http://www.atoday.com/magazine/1994/01/evangelical-adventism-clinging-old-rugged-cross>.