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Bruce Bauer
bbauer@andrews.edu

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WITCHCRAFT, THE OCCULT, AND THE CHURCH

BRUCE L. BAUER
Professor of World Mission
bbauer@andrews.edu

Abstract

This paper suggests that fear, unwillingness to talk about witchcraft issues, ignorance concerning the protecting power of God, embrace of a powerless Christianity, a weak grounding in the Word of God and several other factors and conditions have permitted witchcraft and occult practices to exist among members in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Several practical steps are then listed that can be taken to reduce such practices.

Keywords: fear, witchcraft, occult, practices, practical, steps, ignorance, Church, Christianity, Seventh-day Adventist.

Introduction

From the very beginning, Seventh-day Adventists have strongly emphasized the doctrine of soul sleep and the Hebrew concept of people in death—namely, that no immortal soul survives beyond death. This history raises the question of how it is possible that there is a growing problem within the church of people either living in fear of evil spiritual powers or continuing to frequent the services of occult practitioners, diviners, and mediums.¹ This paper will examine some of the factors and conditions that have allowed or enabled spiritualism and occult practices to infiltrate the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it will also discuss some practical steps that can and should be taken to reverse this tendency within Adventism.

Factors and Conditions Permitting Spiritualism within Adventism

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is unique in many parts of the world for its emphasis on a mortal soul. Most other churches teach that at a person's death, the individual's soul continues to live—a concept that fits well with worldviews that believe that ancestors continue to influence the well-being of families and communities, and also fits well with the recent increasing interest in

¹See especially chapter 1—"Spiritualistic Manifestations Challenging the Adventist Church in Africa," in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. Kwabena Donkor (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 11-22.

communicating with dead friends and relatives.² Harry Potter books and movies and a constant bombardment by the media on occult themes have created a curiosity and appetite for spiritualism in much of the Western world,³ and unfortunately also among some Adventist church members. It seems that the Adventist Church has not done a thorough job of educating its members and even clergy in this area of biblical instruction. In Africa, both pastors and church members alike continue to experience fear of witchcraft, evil spirits, and capricious ancestors. In many Western countries, Adventists who are not strongly grounded in biblical content are bombarded with occult themes in movies, media, and the Internet that can cause curiosity and even involvement in occult activities. Notice eight factors that have contributed to this situation:

Fear

Among many African groups, fear of witchcraft and evil spiritual forces cause many to seek protection from non-biblical sources. Fear of evil spiritual forces is often solidly grounded in worldview assumptions, and it is this fear that is a primary factor that causes many Seventh-day Adventists to engage in occult activities that even they would admit are not biblical. Many of those involved in such activities do so secretly,⁴ because they realize that visiting a diviner or seeking help from a fetish priest goes against biblical teaching.

Fear on the Part of Pastors

One of the saddest facts coming out in recent research among Adventists is that even pastors have so much fear of the spirits that they often refuse to discuss this topic in public for fear of attracting attacks from the evil one on them or their families. Let me share a few stories to illustrate this.

When a Doctor of Ministry student from Africa was preparing his proposal for his doctoral project, he planned to team up with the religion faculty from three Adventist universities in West Africa to present seminars on the dangers of dual allegiance and involvement in witchcraft practices. He found that the professors were willing to talk about the topic one-on-one, but they were not willing to stand in front of church members to present on witchcraft or evil spirits. Why? They feared that they or their families might be attacked by evil spirits, so they chose not to get involved.

²See chapter 11—“The Evidence: Potter Fans Turn to Witchcraft” in Steve Wohlberg, *Exposing Harry Potter and Witchcraft: The Menace Beneath the Magic* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2005), 115-124.

³Ibid., 118-120.

⁴Charles H. Kraft, “Spiritual Power: A Missiological Issue,” in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 361.

Another student from an African tribe known for its witchcraft practices had been a pastor for many years and taught at an Adventist university before coming to Andrews University to work on his doctorate. He told me that until he had spent several years at Andrews researching biblical and Spirit of Prophecy responses to evil spiritual powers he was always fearful of speaking openly about the topic with church members.

I have talked with other well-educated, committed Adventists who have indicated that one of the reasons they do not want to return to Africa to work after completing their degree in the West is because they do not want to live in an environment where their families may be subjected to curses and other witchcraft attacks—another indication that they continue to fear the power of evil spiritual forces.

Fear on the Part of Church Members

If pastors, church leaders, and religion teachers are themselves fearful in this area, what are the chances that the average lay person in those parts of the world would have a biblical perspective on witchcraft and spiritualism? Joseph Ndisya's doctoral research documents that some church members and even church leaders in Kenya live in such fear of the occult that many visit diviners and fetish priests in order to get protection from curses and witchcraft.⁵ Their cultural worldview assumptions and values have not been transformed by biblical truth, so even though they know it is wrong, their fear of witchcraft is stronger than their fear of sinning by going against biblical principles.

Avoidance of the Issue in Public Discussions

Fear on the part of church leaders and members keeps this topic from being placed on the table for open and frank discussions. In many African countries Adventist church leaders forbid discussions on witchcraft. Without an opportunity to clearly hear what the Bible teaches, the cycle of fear cannot be broken. I have always felt that the antidote to almost all problems associated with spiritualism and occult practices is good biblical instruction and teaching. In the West, many young people are taken in by movies that focus on vampires, mediums, and other Halloween themes.⁶ Rarely are there open and frank discussions in our churches that present the dangers of dabbling in these types of media themes.

⁵Joseph Ndisya, "An Analysis and Response to the Fear of Evil Spiritual Forces among Kamba Christians in the Light of Biblical and Ellen G. White Teachings" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2014).

⁶Wohlberg, *Exposing Harry Potter and Witchcraft*, 118.

Ignorance Concerning God's Way of Protecting His People

It seems that there is also a poor understanding of God's capacity to protect his people. In those parts of the world where spiritualism and occult practices are ingrained in a culture's worldview, there needs to be a much stronger emphasis on how angels guard and protect God's people (Ps 34:7) and on stories about how angels deliver people from danger (Acts 5:19; 12:1-19). Sermons and Bible studies on what the Bible says about angels should be prominent in those cultures.

There is also a weakness in believers' understanding about the power and protection of the Holy Spirit. Rarely in Western settings is emphasis given to 1 John 4:4, which says that the indwelling Spirit is greater—greater in power, strength, and protection—than the evil one who is in the world. How much time do we spend teaching people about the power and authority that God's people have over evil spirits? Very few Adventists realize that people in relationship with Jesus Christ have enormous power and authority over the forces of evil. Instead, too many are intimidated and fearful of the evil one.

Ellen White certainly had a worldview that included a realistic understanding of how evil spirits attack and harass God's people.⁷ She is also very clear that God's people who live connected with God have nothing to fear. More emphasis could be given in sharing these types of situations.

Worldviews that are Uninformed Concerning the Supernatural

Forty years ago, many Western missiologists believed that animistic practices would soon disappear and that Christianity and Islam would become the dominant religions among tribal peoples.⁸ There has been great competition between Christianity and Islam, but instead of animistic practices disappearing, we now talk about Folk Islam and Folk Christianity, both of which involve rampant dual allegiance. What happened? Is it possible that both Christian and Muslim witnesses greatly misjudged the hold that supernatural worldview values have on people? Is it possible that the Enlightenment and Western missionary attitudes about power and the supernatural caused many to underestimate the hold of spiritualism?

The Global Mission Issues Committee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church recommended on April 9, 2002 a new fundamental belief that contained strong language concerning fear of evil spirits and God's protecting power, but in the end the statement was watered down and combined with the need for a

⁷Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:959.

⁸Alan Tippett, *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 9; Phil Elkins, *Toward a More Effective Mission Work* (Dallas, TX: Christian Publishing, 1964), 10.

devotional life.⁹ I have often wondered why these issues have gone unaddressed for so long. Perhaps it is because most Western pastors and theologians do not have a good understanding of how pervasive and widespread occult practices are in the majority world. I have been studying this topic for more than thirty years, and I am only beginning to realize the tremendous hold witchcraft practices have on so much of the world's population.

Lest we believe that occult activity is just a problem in Africa and Asia, I have personally been involved with several people in the Berrien Springs, Michigan area, who were being harassed by evil spirits. When they requested help from Adventist pastors, they were turned away since the pastors did not want to get involved or did not know how to help. I felt the same way the first time I met a demonized person. Early in my ministry a young girl after a Friday evening vespers approached me and hissed, "I am Satan." Her eyes did not look human and her face was twisted and ugly. I took a step back and said, "I'll be praying for you." Not having any background on how to deal with this issue left me without any understanding on how to help that girl find freedom in Jesus.

When one stops to consider the fact that all the theological training programs and schools around the world have been patterned after Western programs, with the same mix of classes and topics, it is little wonder that spiritualism and occult practices are invading our church. When I ask master and doctoral level students if they have had even one lecture on how to deal with demonization, fewer than five percent ever respond that they have. I have asked this question in Nigeria, in India, in Kenya, in England, and in America, and the response is always the same. So, one of the factors that has caused the problem is that nowhere in Adventist theological training does a pastor learn how to deal biblically with this issue. If pastors do not know how to teach and lead their members to respond to these issues from a biblical perspective, how will positive change ever take place?

Growing Acceptance by Society of Occult Practices

Another factor that is impacting Seventh-day Adventists around the world is the growing acceptance of occult practices as just a regular part of everyday life. It used to be that occult activities were kept under cover, hidden, not out in the open, but not anymore. Billboards openly advertise psychic hot lines, and Halloween has become a prime promoter of vampires, demons, and ghosts. In Nigeria, diviners advertise their services¹⁰ just as openly as psychics do in South

⁹Global Mission Writing Committee, "2002 Recommendations and Approved Statements," in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, 2007), 2:95, 96.

¹⁰Kelvin Onongha Okey, "Towards a Missiological Model for Worldview Transformation among Adherents to African Traditional Religion in Yorubaland" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2014), 139, 140.

Bend, Indiana. Researchers have found that “belief in occult forces is growing in Europe.”¹¹ Santeria is alive and well in the Caribbean and in the USA, and spiritualism is quite wide-spread in many parts of South America. These societal attitudes also invade the church. Young people in Western nations are bombarded by a constant barrage of information about the occult.¹² They are curious, and if they are not solidly grounded in a biblical understanding of the ways that Satan deceives people, their curiosity can lead them to access material on the web that can result in occult harassment.

Societal and Parental Pressures

We who live in the individualistic West probably will never comprehend the pressure that family and society can apply to force conformity. In Asia, family pressure is strongest when it comes to maintaining the family shrine. In Jonghyun Ryu’s dissertation (2014), he reported that a long-time church member in Japan performed a Buddhist ritual prayer every day for her husband who had passed away more than thirty years before.¹³

In many parts of Africa and Asia, there is no such thing as individual identity. The concept of self is so tied to the identity of the group that a person would find it very difficult to go against societal norms and expectations.¹⁴ If an individual breaks taboos or fails to meet the community’s expectations, that person’s actions not only brings shame and dishonor on the individual himself but also on the whole family, clan, and community. These are the types of pressures many Adventists face when they decide not to honor their ancestors or perform required ceremonies. Sometimes, as demonstrated by the Japanese church member, shrines are secretly kept in closets in the home, or rituals are performed in secret, or the old practices continue long after baptism.

In addition to the matter of honoring ancestors, another area where parental and societal pressure is applied is when couples are still without children after several years of marriage. In such cases, tremendous pressure is exerted on the couple to visit a fetish priest. Even long-time church members are known to

¹¹Nicholas C. DiDonato, “Europeans Increasingly Drawn to the Occult,” 2012, accessed January 10, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceonreligion/2012/12/europeans-increasingly-drawn-to-the-occult/>; Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, “Survival of Occult Practices and Ideas in Modern Common Sense,” *Public Understanding of Science* 20, no. 3 (2011): 292-302.

¹² Wohlberg, *Exposing Harry Potter and Witchcraft*, 118, 119.

¹³Jonghyun Ryu, “Equipping Church Members for Contextualized Discipleship in the Osaka-Central Adventist Church in Japan” (D.Min. dissertation, Andrews University, 2014), 43.

¹⁴Ron Coody, “Surmounting Community Honor and Islamic Law in Muslim Culture,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2014): 140, 141.

recommend certain diviners who have a reputation for curing barrenness. Not everyone caves in to these pressures, but they are certainly a factor in some members slipping into occult practices.

A good friend of mine who is an Adventist pastor in Africa shared how after he and his wife had passed several years of marriage without children, his father visited a *marabout* (a Muslim healer) to ask for his help concerning the lack of children in the son's family. The *marabout* contacted the father the next day and said that he had seen in a dream that an evil person was preventing the pastor's family from having children. He offered to counteract that evil person's influence and gave the father a black liquid that the pastor and his wife were to use to bathe with. He also prescribed animal sacrifices the pastor's family was to make. The pastor's father asked his son and daughter-in-law to use the liquid, but when the pastor told him that he was not going to use it, the father called one of the pastor's elder sisters to put more pressure on him. The family members told my friend that they knew a pastor of another denomination who did what he was asked to do, and that pastor had had children; thus, the family did not understand why my friend was refusing. The father asked the pastor three times and three times he said no. My friend told me that three things helped him withstand the parental pressure: the grace of God, his faith that God's will was best for him and his wife, and the fact that he and his wife were financially independent. What was really shocking was that sometime after that experience, a church member approached one of the pastor's friends and offered to introduce the pastor to a traditional healer who could do something to allow the family to have a child. This again shows that some Adventists are willing to seek help from any source, even unbiblical ones, in order to get out of situations that are considered shameful in their communities.

Seeking to Meet Needs Regardless of the Source

Compromise of biblical principles is a problem in every country of the world. Many Adventists seek to meet their needs even if it means going against the Word of God and the principles of the Church. Recent research conducted by Kelvin Onongha has found that some church members believe that people visit the diviners because they get quicker answers to their needs than when they pray and ask God for his help.¹⁵

In 2000, while I was working in Cambodia, an old church elder came down with cancer. He was prayed for and anointed; however, his condition continued to deteriorate. For weeks, his extended family continued to pressure him to visit the *krukamai*, the shaman, to allow him to perform the traditional healing ceremonies. Finally, in his desperation for healing, the elder gave in and allowed the three-day ceremony to be conducted. He died a few days later.

¹⁵Onongha, "Towards a Missiological Model," 147.

I later used this story in Cambodia when I talked with other Adventists to ask them if they would go back to the evil one's power source if they were facing the same type of situation. I wanted the new Cambodian Christians to realize that there were two very different sources of spiritual power. Many people in societies where spiritual power is a core belief are constantly looking for more or greater power. Unless there is clear teaching about God's power and Satan's power, many do not make the distinction. I have even heard it cynically said that if a barren Adventist couple receives a child from the devil by seeking the services of a fetish priest, they can still raise the child for God. In other words, the ends justify the means.¹⁶

Weak Grounding in the Word of God

We have mentioned seven factors that have allowed spiritualism and occult practices to be practiced in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: (1) fear, (2) not talking openly and publically about the problem, (3) not stressing how God helps and protects his people, (4) open and growing acceptance of the occult in society, (5) theological training that fails to deal with supernatural worldview values, (6) parental and societal pressure, and (7) seeking to meet one's needs regardless of the power source. These are all factors that have not only allowed the problem to exist, but which also seem to have fostered an increase in this type of syncretism in the Church.¹⁷ However, perhaps the biggest factor that has contributed to the situation is weak grounding in the Word of God. Discipleship practices are not what they used to be. Evangelistic meetings are much shorter, and instruction before baptism has been reduced, such that people are baptized much more quickly than sixty or seventy years ago. Post-baptismal care is often lacking. As a consequence, many of those entering the Seventh-day Adventist Church do so with incomplete grounding in the Word.

Practical Steps to Reduce Occult Practices in the Church

How should the Adventist Church react to this growing problem? What changes could make a difference in reducing the percentage of people who dabble in spiritualism or occult practices? This section of the paper will suggest several practical steps that could easily be taken to begin to reduce these kinds of incidences in the Adventist Church.

¹⁶See also *ibid.*, 143.

¹⁷Max Douglass, "Demand for Exorcists Skyrocket as Occult Activity Increases," 2016, accessed July 6, 2017, <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/lack-of-exorcists-an-emergency>.

Take the Issue Seriously

First, the Adventist Church must take this issue seriously. The Adventist Church has traditionally believed that an increase in spiritualism and occult activities would increase just before the return of Christ.¹⁸ Yet, the question begs an answer, what has the church done to prepare its members to meet this onslaught? Every union and every conference should place an immediate emphasis on highlighting biblical principles to counteract the recent upsurge in occult practices among Adventists.

There are very different types of spiritualism that afflict the Adventist Church. In the West, people play with Ouija Boards and watch media presentations that promote occult activities. In other parts of the world, the issue is much more involved with worldview values associated with the ancestors. Most of the Adventist literature dealing with soul sleep and the state of people in death is written from the perspective of the Western problems in this area and very little deals with ancestors.

Open and Direct Bible Teaching

Teach on Christus Victor

Adventists correctly teach on the atonement from a penal substitution perspective. This metaphor is certainly helpful in many parts of the world, but among animists and people whose primary focus is spent in searching for ways to protect themselves from the fear of evil spiritual forces, such an approach often does not inspire any great interest in hearing the gospel message.

The metaphor which does stir the heart of the animist is that of Christ, the triumphant one, who defeats the principalities and powers. In his death, Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities” and “made a public display of them” (Col. 2:15 NASB). Conversion, therefore, is not simply personal salvation but also “cosmic redemption” from the powers (Bruce 1984, 113). This metaphor is the classical doctrine of the atonement, reintroduced to Western theology by Gustav Aulen in *Christus Victor*.¹⁹

In animistic societies in particular, the penal substitution model of the atonement should be balanced by the *Christus Victor* model. Such an emphasis could help fearful Adventists realize that Jesus Christ, in his humanity, came to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8), “destroy the one who has the power

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 588, 589.

¹⁹Gailyn Van Rheen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 141.

of death, that is the devil,” and to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb 2:14, 15).²⁰

Teach on the Indwelling Holy Spirit

Adventists often teach that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8), guides people into all truth (John 16:13), regenerates us (John 3:4-8), reveals Christ to us (John 16:14, 15), leads us (Rom 8:14), produces fruits of the Spirit in us (Gal 5:22, 23), and gives us spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:4, 8-10). Perhaps the area where we are weakest is in not emphasizing the incredible power that the Holy Spirit makes available to every committed follower of Jesus Christ. It is God’s Spirit that empowers us (Luke 4:14; 24:49; Rom 15:19; Acts 1:8), anoints us for ministry (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38), dwells in us (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Tim 1:14; John 14:17), gives us access to the Father (Eph 2:22), and allows God’s people to cast out evil spirits (Matt 12:28). Many of the Cambodians I interacted with and who lived in fear of evil spirits were amazed that the Holy Spirit wanted to live in them, and once they came to know his power they realized that he truly was greater than the spirits they had feared before.

Teach on the Protecting Care of Angels

As mentioned earlier, in 2002, Børge Schantz made an impassioned plea to the Global Mission Issues Committee for Adventists to add an additional fundamental belief concerning angels. He made that plea specifically in connection with the need for animistic people to better understand how God protects, guides, and helps people overcome fear of evil spiritual powers and beings.²¹ That emphasis is still needed. I am not sure we need a fundamental belief, but it is strange that the theological issues facing the Western world are often the issues the Adventist Church focuses on, whereas the issues facing the majority world are often neglected.

²⁰Greg Boyd, “The ‘Christus Victor’ View of the Atonement,” 2008, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://reknew.org/2008/01/the-christus-victor-view-of-the-atonement/>.

²¹Børge Schantz, “Ethno-Religionists and Adventist Fundamentals: Are Their Spiritual Needs Met?” in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Needs*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, 2007), 2:74-79.

Teach on the Authority and Power of God's People

People from the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, secular, and postmodern segments of society are often involved with principalities and powers. The weapons of our warfare are not better strategies or more elaborate plans. We need the power and authority of Jesus Christ in our ministries and activities. I am often amazed at how little Seventh-day Adventists understand the delegated authority and power they have as committed followers of Jesus Christ. Most Adventists who still fear evil spiritual powers do not realize who they are in Christ and that they have been given authority and power to drive out evil spirits. In our fear of Pentecostalism, Seventh-day Adventists have neglected careful biblical teaching on the authority and power available for God's people.

Teach on Total Commitment Regardless of the Situation

Christians live in a wicked world where sickness, suffering, death, disease, and problems of many types afflict God's people. Bad things happen to good people. When adversity strikes, when prayers and medication do not heal, when crops fail and businesses go under, Adventist members need to understand that the solution is not to search out an alternative power source, but to stand clearly on God's side and say like Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 15:13). Adventists need to understand the issues of the Great Controversy so clearly that they will reply like "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up'" (Dan 3:16-18). Until Adventist members have this conviction, the Church's responsibility to teach, disciple, and nurture is unfinished.