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Words Matter

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Have you ever experienced the circumstance that either you or somebody else agreed with someone else’s statement in content but disliked the wording?



▲ Denis Kaiser

It may feel like it is just about semantics, or that the one disagreeing is a stickler for details. While one can certainly go into extremes, we have to admit that words do matter. An interesting historical example illustrates that point.

Nowadays members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church refer to themselves as “Seventh-day Adventists” and we generally presume that the church adopted that name by vote or common consent at a meeting in Battle Creek, Mich., on October 1, 1860. The facts are nevertheless more complex. David Hewitt (1805–1878), also known as the “most honest man in town,” moved the initial resolution “that we take the name of Seventh-day Adventists,” yet his resolution did not find full support due to its wording. The words “we take the name” sounded too much like “*let us make us a name*,” words chosen by the builders of the tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:4). If there was one thing that the early Adventists wanted to avoid, it was becoming like Babylon. So, Ezra A. Poole (1807–1894) suggested a new resolution—“That we call ourselves Seventh-day Adventists”—which was eventually approved. However, Poole’s resolution applied only to the attendees of the meeting and had no binding force for Sabbath-keeping Adventists in other places. Therefore, Moses Hull (1836–1907) moved that “the name we have chosen” be recommended “to the churches generally.” The motion was carried (*Review*, Oct. 23, 1860).

The name “Seventh-day Adventists” had not arisen in a vacuum though. While Sabbath-keeping Adventists had referred to themselves by various autonyms and were identified by others with multiple “names,” the term “Seventh-day Adventists” was in use for years among the ministers and church members in some areas, such as in the vicinity of Jackson, Mich. In March 1853, Samuel T. Cranson (1822–1855) from Tomkins, near Jackson, shared his experience of meeting for the first time “seventh-day Adventists” and embracing the truths of the Sabbath and sanctuary (*Review*, April 14, 1853). More examples could be given for its use in the years prior to 1860, yet its final adoption hinged on the precise wording—“[to] take the name” or “to call ourselves.”

Subsequently, the congregations in various places followed the recommendation and adopted that name so that it eventually became the common name of the denomination at large. Later, Ellen White reminisced that “God [had] ruled in that meeting.” She added, “God’s angels were ministering in that meeting, and when ‘Church of God’ was to be the name of His commandment-keepers, the angels directed the mind of my husband and one or two others in another channel and to fasten upon another name, which was expressive of their faith and which was appropriate for His people” (Ms 8, 1863). ■

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