

Church History (67): Religious Cults (Part 1)

In this lesson, and the following two, we want to consider three prominent nineteenth-century religious cults. This morning we will consider Seventh-day Adventism, leaving Mormonism and Jehovah Witness for subsequent weeks.

I. Seventh-day Adventists

1. *Their origin.* "Central to North American Adventist beginnings was a Baptist layman by the name of William Miller (1782-1849). From 1816-1818, Miller studied his Bible intensively and came to the solemn conclusion, 'that in about twenty-five years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up' and Christ would come. Miller had reached his conclusion through a study of the prophecies of the book of Daniel, especially Daniel 8:14: 'Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.' Operating on the commonly accepted understanding that a day in prophecy equals a year, Miller calculated that the 2300-day prophecy would conclude in 1843. And, interpreting the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 as the earth and its cleansing as the last-day purging of the earth by fire, Miller reasoned that Christ would return to the earth at the end of the 2300 days—about 1843" (Knight).¹ Miller's first influential convert was Joshua Himes (1805-1895), who started the first two Adventist magazines: *Signs of the Times* (1840) and *Midnight Cry* (1842). In addition to these, Himes started various local magazines: *Trumpet of Alarm* (Philadelphia), *Second Advent of Christ* (Cleveland), and *Western Midnight Cry* (Cincinnati). "Miller gained many followers who took his theories as literal predications and eventually October 22, 1844, was set. Obviously, however the literal Second Coming of Christ did not happen by October 22, 1844. Miller's followers, then called 'Millerites,' were devastated. That day become known as 'The Great Disappointment.'"²

On October 22 tens of thousands of believers lingered in expectation of the appearance of Jesus in the clouds, while countless others waited in doubt, fearing that the Millerites might be correct. But the day came and went, thus encouraging the scoffers and fearful, but leaving the Millerites in total disarray and discouragement. Their specific claims about the time and their unbounded confidence in the October 22 date served to heighten their disappointment. Despite those reassuring words, the bulk of the Millerites probably gave up their Second Advent faith. Meanwhile, those who continued to hope for the soon coming of Christ saw their once harmonious movement dissolve into chaos as different leaders and self-appointed 'leaders' put forth conflicting claims and counterclaims regarding the meaning of their experience and the "truth" about the Second Advent. Out of that seething cauldron and shapeless mass of discouragement and confusion would come the Seventh-day Adventist Church.³

In the aftermath of "The Great Disappointment," three leaders emerged who sought to summarize a body of truth promoted through conferences. "The first of the Sabbatarian Conferences convened in the spring of 1848 in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. At least five more met that year, another six in 1849, and 10 in 1850" (Knight).⁴ Through these conferences, Joseph Bates (1792-1872), James White (1821-1881), and Ellen G. White (1827-1915), took prominent positions. Eventually Ellen G. White took a dominant posi-

¹ George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 1

² <https://www.adventist.org>

³ George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 1

⁴ George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 3

tion among the leaders through her visions and writings. "While various biblical concepts were still being studied, those leading this movement were guided by a young woman, Ellen G. White. Her profound insight from God on these rediscovered truths astounded Bible scholars and clergy alike. White was recognized as a modern-day recipient of the spiritual gift of prophecy."⁵ "Although the name 'Seventh-day Adventist' for the denomination was not officially assumed until 1860 at a conference held in Battle Creek, Michigan, nevertheless, Seventh-day Adventism had been launched. In 1855, Adventist headquarters were established in Battle Creek and remained there until 1905, when they were transferred to Takoma Park, a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C." (Martin).⁶ "By the end of the 1870s, Adventist membership had tripled, passing 16,000 members. By 1901 there were 75,000 members worldwide, and the Church had also established two colleges, a medical school, 12 secondary schools, 27 hospitals, and 13 publishing houses."⁷

2. *Their basic beliefs.* "By early 1848 the Sabbatarian Adventist leaders, through extensive and intensive Bible study, had come to basic agreement on at least five points of doctrine: (1) the personal, visible, premillennial return of Jesus; (2) the cleansing of the sanctuary, with Christ's ministry in the second apartment having begun on October 22, 1844—the beginning of the antitypical day of atonement; (3) the validity of the gift of prophecy, with progressively more of the believers seeing Ellen White's ministry as a modern manifestation of that gift; (4) the obligation to observe the seventh-day Sabbath and the role of the Sabbath in the great end-time conflict prophesied in Revelation 11-14; and (5) that immortality is not an inherent human quality but something people receive only through faith in Christ" (Knight).⁸ These doctrinal positions were eventually summarized in 1872 as *A Declaration of Fundamental Principles*. "As the first comprehensive Seventh-day Adventist statement of faith, it codified what may be called the Adventist *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) of the period. Theology always implies the art of summarizing and carving out formulations; thus the 1872 statement is a prime example of early Adventist theology" (Hoschele).⁹ The *Declaration* contains 25 articles with over half addressing eschatology. In 1957, the Adventists published *Questions on Doctrine*, wherein all the major doctrines of the *Declaration* are confirmed, and yet a more evangelical position on the Trinity and deity of Christ are maintained. Prior to this, early Adventists were either unclear on these truths or expressly denied them.

(1) The writings of Ellen G. White. As White claimed to receive direct revelation from God, her teachings were viewed as "divinely given" "inspired" and "authoritative." "When early Adventist leaders came to the point in their study where they said, 'we can do nothing more,' the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me. I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me, with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God, was made plain to me, and I gave to others the instruction that the Lord had given me" (EGW).¹⁰ Elsewhere she said: "The brethren knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given."¹¹ Again, in her *Early Writings* she confessed:

⁵ <https://www.adventist.org>

⁶ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 601

⁷ <https://www.adventist.org>

⁸ George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 3

⁹ Stefan Hoschele, *The 1872 Declaration of Fundamental Principles on the Contextual-Theological Significance of Adventism's First Statement of Faith*, 33-34

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, xxii, 4

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, xxiii, 1

"Thus the doctrinal foundation of the Seventh-day Church was laid in the faithful study of the Word of God, and when the pioneers could not make headway, I was given light that helped to explain their difficulty and opened the way for the study to continue. The visions also placed the stamp of God's approval upon correct conclusions. Thus the prophetic gift acted as a corrector of error and confirmer of truth."¹² As late as 2015, the Adventists reaffirmed their confidence in the writings of Ellen G. White. "We reaffirm our conviction that her writings are divinely inspired, truly Christ-centered, and Bible-based. Rather than replacing the Bible, they uplift the normative character of Scripture and correct inaccurate interpretations of it derived from tradition, human reason, personal experience, and modern culture."¹³

Adventists believe that the closing of the Scripture canon did not terminate Heaven's communication with men through the gifts of the Spirit, but rather that Christ by the ministry of His Spirit guides His people, edifying and strengthening them, and especially so in these last challenging days of human history. And it is the Holy Spirit who divides "to every man severally as he will" (1 Cor. 12:11). He calls one to be an apostle, one an evangelist, another a pastor or a teacher, and to another He gives the gift of prophecy. Seventh-day Adventists believe that this gift was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White.¹⁴

(2) The Great Controversy. Ellen G. White, and most early Adventists, believed in various forms of Arianism (the view that denies the Father and Son share the same nature and are thus eternally one in power and glory). In her book, *The Great Controversy*, she described the Father as supreme, the Son beneath Him, and Lucifer beneath the Son. "Satan in Heaven, before his rebellion, was a high and exalted angel, next in honor to God's dear Son. A special light beamed in his countenance and shone around him brighter and more beautiful than around the other angels; yet Jesus, God's dear Son, had the preeminence over all the angelic host" (EGW).¹⁵ According to White, the Father chose to exalt the Son to a place of equality with Himself. "The Father then made known that it was ordained by Himself that Christ, His Son, should be equal with Himself; so that wherever was the presence of His Son, it was as His own presence. His Son would carry out His will and His purposes but would do nothing of Himself alone. The Father's will would be fulfilled in Him" (EGW).¹⁶ "The exaltation of the Son of God as equal with the Father was represented as an injustice to Lucifer, who, it was claimed was also entitled to reverence and honor" (EGW).¹⁷ It was this elevation of the Son to equality with the Father, that resulted in Lucifer's rebellion.

The angels joyfully acknowledged the supremacy of Christ, and prostrating themselves before him, poured out their love and adoration. Lucifer bowed with them, but in his heart, there was a strange, fierce conflict. Truth, justice, and loyalty were struggling against envy and jealousy. His desire for supremacy grew strong, and envy of Christ was indulged. The high honors conferred upon Lucifer were not appreciated as God's special gift, and therefore, called forth no gratitude to his Creator. He gloried in his brightness and exalted and aspired to be equal with God. He was beloved and revered by the heavenly host, angels delighted to execute his commands, and he was clothed with wis-

¹² Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, xxiii, 2

¹³ <https://www.adventist.org>

¹⁴ *Questions on Doctrine*, Question 9

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Prophecy*, 1:17.1

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Prophecy*, 1:17.2

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 37

dom and glory above them all. Yet the Son of God was exalted above him, as one in power and authority with the Father. He shared the Father's counsels, while Lucifer did not thus enter into the purposes of God. "Why," questioned this mighty angel, "should Christ have the supremacy? Why is He honored above me?"¹⁸

(3) The Seventh-day Sabbath. Adventists believe Saturday remains the Christian Sabbath. They further believe that those who refuse to keep it will receive the mark of the beast, and those who persevere in their refusal will be destroyed. "The pope has changed the day of rest from the seventh to the first day. He has thought to change the very commandment that was given to cause man to remember his Creator. He has thought to change the greatest commandment in the decalogue and thus make himself equal with God, or even exalt himself above God" (EGW).¹⁹ "On the first Sabbath in April 1847, seven months after we began to keep and teach the Seventh-day Sabbath, the Lord gave me a vision, in which the importance of the Sabbath was stressed. I saw the tables of the law in the ark in the heavenly sanctuary, and a halo of light about the fourth commandment. In this revelation, I was carried down to the close of time and saw the Sabbath as the great testing truth on which men decide whether to serve God or to serve an apostate power" (EGW).²⁰ According to Adventists, prior to Christ's return the world will be divided between those who keep the Seventh-day Sabbath and those who do not. "While the worshipers of God will be especially distinguished by their regard for the fourth commandment, the worshipers of the beast will be distinguished by their efforts to tear down the Creator's memorial, to exalt the institution of Rome. It was on behalf of Sunday that popery first asserted its arrogant claims; and its first resort to the power of the state was to compel the observance of Sunday as 'the Lord's Day'" (EGW).²¹

There are now true Christians in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion, who honestly believe that Sunday is the Sabbath of divine appointment. God accepts their sincerity of purpose and their integrity before Him. But when Sunday observance shall be enforced by law, and the world shall be enlightened concerning the obligation of the true Sabbath, then whoever shall transgress the command of God, to obey a precept which has no higher authority than that of Rome, will thereby honor popery above God. He is paying homage to Rome, and to the power which enforces the institution ordained by Rome. He worships the beast and his image. As men then reject the institution which God has declared to be the sign of His authority, and honor in its stead that which Rome has chosen as the token of her supremacy, they will thereby accept the sign of allegiance to Rome—"the mark of the beast." And it is not until the issue is thus plainly set before the people, and they are brought to choose between the commandments of God and the commandments of men, that those who continue in transgression will receive "the mark of the beast."²²

(4) The heavenly sanctuary. "They had expected Christ to come to earth to cleanse the sanctuary, but the sanctuary was not the earth. It was in heaven! Instead of coming to earth, therefore, Christ had passed from one 'apartment' of the sanctuary into the other 'apartment' to perform a closing work now known as the 'investigative judgment'" (Martin).²³ Thus, on October 22, 1844, Christ entered the heavenly sanctu-

¹⁸ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 36

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, xxiii, 2

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, xxi, 1

²¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 522

²² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 525

²³ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 598

ary where He began to make atonement for man's sin. "The ark of God's testament is in the holy of holies, the second apartment of the sanctuary. In the ministration of the earthly tabernacle, which served 'unto the example and shadow of heavenly things,' this apartment was opened only upon the great day of atonement, for the cleansing of the sanctuary. Therefore the announcement that the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His testament was seen, points to the opening of the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary, in 1844, as Christ entered there to perform the closing work of the atonement" (EGW).²⁴

I was shown what did take place in heaven at the close of the prophetic periods in 1844. As Jesus ended His ministration in the holy place and closed the door of that apartment, a great darkness settled upon those who had heard and rejected the message of His coming, and they lost sight of Him. As Jesus died on Calvary, He cried, "It is finished," and the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom. This was to show that the services of the earthly sanctuary were forever finished, and that God would no more meet with the priests in their earthly temple, to accept their sacrifices. The blood of Jesus was then shed, which was to be offered by Himself in the heavenly sanctuary. As the priest entered the most holy once a year to cleanse the earthly sanctuary, so Jesus entered the most holy of the heavenly, at the end of the 2300 days of Daniel 8, in 1844, to make a final atonement for all who could be benefited by His mediation, and thus to cleanse the sanctuary.²⁵

In connection to entering the Holy of Holies, October 22, 1844, began what Ellen G. White referred to as the "investigative judgment" wherein Christ investigates every professing Christian to determine their destiny. "In the day of final atonement and investigative judgment the only cases considered are those of the professed people of God. Every man's work passes in review before God and is registered for faithfulness or unfaithfulness. Opposite each name in the books of heaven is entered with terrible exactness every wrong word, every selfish act, every unfulfilled duty, and every secret sin, with every artful dissembling. Heaven-sent warnings or reproofs neglected, wasted moments, unimproved opportunities, the influence exerted for good or for evil, with its far-reaching results, all are chronicled by the recording angel" (EGW).²⁶ As Seventh-day Adventists are radically Arminian, they believe you can be truly saved and eternally lost. "It seems to us abundantly clear that the acceptance of Christ at conversion does not seal a person's destiny. His life record after conversion is also important. A man may go back on his repentance, or by careless inattention let slip the very life he has espoused."²⁷ "There must be an examination of the books of record to determine who, through repentance of sin and faith in Christ, are entitled to the benefits of His atonement. The cleansing of the sanctuary therefore involves a work of investigation—a work of judgment" (EGW).²⁸

As the books of record are opened in the judgment, the lives of all who have believed on Jesus come in review before God. Beginning with those who first lived upon the earth, our Advocate presents the cases of each successive generation, and closes with the living. Every name is mentioned, every case closely investigated. Names are accepted, names rejected. When any have sins remaining upon the books of record, unrepented of and unfor-

²⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 507-508

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Early Writings*, 60

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Christ in His Sanctuary*, 175

²⁷ *Questions on Doctrine*, Question 36

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 422

given, their names will be blotted out of the book of life, and the record of their good deeds will be erased from the book of God's remembrance. All who have truly repented of sin, and by faith claimed the blood of Christ as their atoning sacrifice, have had pardon entered against their names in the books of heaven; as they have become partakers of the righteousness of Christ, and their characters are found to be in harmony with the law of God, their sins will be blotted out, and they themselves will be accounted worthy of eternal life.²⁹

(5) The second coming of Christ. Adventists believe in a secret rapture which results in a thousand-years of desolation on earth. After this, there's the second coming of Christ (the Great Advent), the general resurrection and judgment, and the new heavens and earth. According to White, while the redeemed will be in heaven with Christ during the thousand years, only Satan and the demons will be on earth. The wicked will be dead awaiting the second resurrection after the millennium. "Here is to be the home of Satan with his evil angels for a thousand years. Here he will be confined, to wander up and down over the broken surface of the earth and see the effects of his rebellion against God's law" (EGW).³⁰ "Then at the close of the one thousand years, Jesus, with the angels and all the saints, leaves the Holy City, and while He is descending to the earth with them, the wicked dead are raised and consumed with fire from God. The same fire that consumed the wicked will then purify the whole earth" (EGW).³¹ From the start, Adventists believe in "soul-sleep." "We, as Adventists, have reached the definite conclusion that man rests in the tomb until the resurrection morning. Then, at the first resurrection (Revelation 20:4-5), the resurrection of the just (Acts 24:15), the righteous come forth immortalized at the call of Christ, the Life-giver. And they then enter into life everlasting in their eternal home in the kingdom of glory."³²

The wicked receive their recompense in the earth. They "shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts." Some are destroyed as in a moment, while others suffer many days. All are punished "according to their deeds." The sins of the righteous having been transferred to Satan, he is made to suffer not only for his own rebellion, but for all the sins which he has caused God's people to commit. His punishment is to be far greater than that of those whom he has deceived. After all have perished who fell by his deceptions, he is still to live and suffer on. In the cleansing flames the wicked are at last destroyed, root and branch—Satan the root, his followers the branches. The full penalty of the law has been visited; the demands of justice have been met; and heaven and earth, beholding, declare the righteousness of Jehovah. Satan's work of ruin is forever ended. Now God's creatures are forever delivered from his presence and temptations.³³

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *Christ in His Sanctuary*, 177

³⁰ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 290

³¹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 53-54

³² *Questions on Doctrine*, Question 41

³³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 785-786