

**The Persistence of Urgent Apocalypticism
Within a Denominationalizing Sect:
The Case of Seventh-day Adventism**

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ABSTRACT¹

On October 22 this year (2018) was the 174th anniversary of what Adventists know as “The Great Disappointment.” It also means that Adventists have been proclaiming urgently that Jesus is returning “soon” for 174 years. After that many years, what does “soon” mean? How soon is “soon”? If the delay is the result of the need to complete the “pre-advent judgment” (previously known as “the Investigative Judgment”) this should surely make us wonder about the slow speed of God’s computer equipment compared to what we now have here on earth. If it is the result of the failure of all Christians to take the Gospel effectively to the “10-40 North Quadrant”, the huge sweep of population stretching from north Africa through the Middle East, Southern Asia, many of the former Soviet Republics, to China, Japan and much of Southeast Asia, then this suggests that, given our limited progress there, “soon” will be long indeed.

This paper is named “The Persistence of Urgent Apocalypticism Within a Denominationalizing Sect: The Case of Seventh-day Adventism.” In it, I argue that the doctrine that the second coming of Christ is near continues to be affirmed in Adventist credal statements primarily because church leaders fear that any attempt to update the prophetic teachings of Ellen White would result in unmanageable fallout, and it continues to find expression in evangelistic preaching and writing because it still attracts potential converts. It also reappears as the theme of a quarter’s Sabbath School lessons fairly regularly, as a means of hopefully keeping the expectation alive among church members. However, as American Adventism has put down roots in society and prospered, and has thus moved from near the sect pole towards the denomination pole of the sect-denomination continuum, the doctrine has lost a great deal of its urgency among many of the members. However, as one might predict from sociological theory, considerable urgency continues on the fringes of Adventism, among the much more sectarian “independent ministries.” These continue to attract a following because of the frustration of first generation members, who were initially attracted to Adventism by its apocalyptic message, because they find when they attend many Adventist churches, especially in the Developed World, that the doctrine has been de-emphasised in the preaching of many of them.

¹ The Abstract was added to the paper in 2018.

The Persistence of Urgent Apocalypticism Within a Denominationalizing Sect: The Case of Seventh-day Adventism

INTRODUCTION

The origins of Seventh-day Adventism were urgently apocalyptic. Its founders had all been disciples of William Miller, whose proclamation throughout the American Northeast that the Second Coming of Christ would occur on October 22, 1844 had spawned the "Millerite Movement." Although grief-stricken and humiliated by the "Great Disappointment," this segment of the movement continued to anticipate the imminent return of Jesus. Its leaders regarded this belief as so central to their faith that they enshrined it in the name they adopted: Seventh-day Adventist.

October 1994 marked the 150th anniversary of the failure of Miller's prophecy--and a further century and a half of preaching that Jesus would soon return. However, during this period American Adventism has been transformed: Adventists have grown in number, put down roots in the society, and experienced prosperity. This paper investigates the extent to which an urgent apocalyptic continues to be taught and believed within Adventism today.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

This question is explored with the help of church-sect theory. Developed first in Europe (Troeltsch 1931 [1911]), this theory proved especially stimulating once Niebuhr applied it to the religious situation in the U.S. (1957 [1929]). The religious pluralism and absence of an established church here caused researchers to alter the theory's nomenclature, as they now compared sects with denominations rather than churches, and tested Niebuhr's claim that all sects would inevitably be transformed into denominations (Yinger 1957, 54). Eventually Stark and Bainbridge, responding to confusion caused by differences among researchers in the lists of characteristics used to define sect and denomination, put forward a single dimension, "the degree to which a religious group is in a state of tension with its surrounding socio cultural environment" (1985, 23). According to this definition, sects are in high tension with their environments while denominations have low tension (49-51).

Although research has shown that not all sects become denominations,² as generations pass most of those that survive and grow compromise with the world, thus reducing tension and moving towards denominational status (Wilson 1969 [1963], 371, 372). This usually occurs as they increase their participation in the wider society and as influential members experience upward mobility and then find that the tension between their religious group and society is

²Yinger, for example, introduced the concept of established sect (1946, 22-23).

inconsistent with their interests (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 134, 99, 103). Since an urgent apocalyptic anticipates "the end of the world"--the sudden destruction of society--a group holding such a position is, by definition, in high tension with its environment. However, intense apocalypticism is difficult to maintain: "The expectation that the world is to overturn through supernatural action is necessarily subject to repeated postponement" (Wilson 1973, 36).

As a religious group begins to move from sect towards denomination, its membership is likely to become more diverse. For example, Niebuhr realized that some members would become uneasy with change and compromise, and would hold fast to the traditional teachings, thus creating theological diversity within the ranks and risking, ultimately, a new sectarian schism (1957[1929], 19-20, 54).

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is a product of a large study of international Seventh-day Adventism, whose data include over 3,000 in-depth interviews from 54 countries and questionnaires from interviewees (who are mostly church employees) and samples of college students and laity. It focuses on the North American Division of the Adventist Church (the U.S. and Canada), drawing on data from interviews, questionnaires, and books, periodicals and tapes published by the official Adventist publishing houses, independent organizations of conservative and liberal Adventists, and "independent ministries" on the fringes of Adventism. It also utilizes data from four other relevant surveys of North American Adventists.

APOCALYPTIC URGENCY AMONG EARLY ADVENTISTS

William Miller had concluded from his study of the apocalyptic visions of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation that "the time of the end" had begun in 1798 and that the Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1844 (Numbers and Butler, 1987). Although he withdrew after the failure of his prediction and most of his followers dispersed, a small group reinterpreted the key prophecy: October 22, 1844 became the beginning of the pre-advent judgment in heaven and was the final date singled out by time prophecy; the return of Jesus would follow quickly. A young visionary, Ellen White, played an important role in confirming this interpretation. Since they initially held that with the beginning of judgment the "door of mercy" had been shut, they made no efforts to evangelize. Even after they came to believe that they were called to share their message with others, they avoided formal organization and foreign evangelism, believing that insufficient time remained.

Miller's prophecies had portrayed governments as wild beasts which hurt God's people. Adventists elaborated on these as they developed their eschatology further. They adopted a unique interpretation when some members were arrested for violating state "blue laws" following their adoption of the Saturday-Sabbath: beginning in 1851, they denounced the American Republic, identifying it with the second beast of Revelation 13, which "had two horns like a lamb" and spoke "like a dragon." They saw the early days of the U.S., when it had adopted its Constitution and Bill of Rights, positively--as symbolized by the beast's lamb-like appearance,

with the two horns representing the principles of political and religious freedom. But, pointing to slavery and to the religious intolerance they had experienced, they held that it had betrayed both principles--it was a dragon in lamb's clothing, and was destined to play a persecuting role in the world's final events (Morgan, 1994:238). That is, Adventist eschatology invoked tension with the state: it was highly sectarian at this point.

EXTENDING THE TIME

The new sect finally created a formal organization and chose a name for itself in the early 1860s. Having organized, Adventists then began to build institutions and, in 1874, they sent their first foreign missionary to Europe. Many more missionaries followed--and more institutions were built abroad. The building spree between 1860 and 1901 included 16 colleges and high schools, a medical school, 75 "sanitariums" or hospitals, 13 publishing houses, and 31 miscellaneous institutions (such as health food factories). Although these institutions were created in order to facilitate Adventists in their goals of spreading their "last warning message" and thereby ushering in Christ's Kingdom, the result was gradual goal displacement: there was an inevitable tension between longer-term building and organizing and the urgency of their message.

Meanwhile, Ellen White had elaborated on Adventist eschatology, with special attention to the final events just before the Second Coming. The main players would be Satan³ and his henchmen the Roman Catholic Church,⁴ "Apostate Protestantism,"⁵ "Spiritualism,"⁶ and the U.S. government. These would persecute God's "remnant"--the loyal Adventists--beginning in the U.S.:

"When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of the threefold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government...then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near" (White 1885, 451).

White's eschatology was published in final form in 1888 in *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. The details of the eschatology reflected the times in which White wrote--spiritualism was in vogue, and a Protestant establishment was trying to shore up its position by, among other things, introducing a "national Sunday law" that would protect and codify the state blue laws. Although White declared that "the final events" would be "rapid," her detailed list of future events created an impression that the end was somewhat more distant--especially

³The dragon of Revelation.

⁴ This interpretation was first made by European Protestant reformers.

⁵By this White meant all the Protestant church organizations together with those members who failed to accept the Adventist message.

⁶Since Adventists believed in "soul sleep"--that is, that the dead were dead until resurrected--any attempt to contact the dead was, by definition, of the Devil.

when the national Sunday law failed to pass in both 1888 and 1889. Adventists had a part in this outcome--they had chosen to work against the fulfillment of their own sign of the eschaton.

The elaboration of Adventist eschatology had involved some reshaping, especially of their view of the U.S. While they continued to identify America with the two-horned beast, it was no longer portrayed as already in the dragon phase, but as still lamb-like, and its demise was thus seen as less imminent. That is, the time believed to be remaining before the Second Coming of Christ was lengthening, and tension with the state was beginning to relax. Moreover, Ellen White now counseled rapprochement with civil authorities in order to facilitate missionary work, urging Adventists to help prolong the future of America "so the Adventist message could go forth and flourish" (Butler 1974, 193). Adventists thus found themselves in an anomalous situation where they wished to delay the end of the world in order to have greater opportunity to preach that it was at hand. Consequently, although their re-honed eschatology saw the passage of a national Sunday law as the culmination of the prophecy concerning the two-horned beast, and thus a sure signal that the end was at hand, they felt obliged by Ellen White's counsel to "extend the time" to respond boldly to this threat (Butler 1974, 196-98; Morgan 1994, 241-42). A flurry of political activity culminated in the creation of what became the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department within the General Conference,⁷ which institutionalized the Adventist Church's role as a watchdog of the First Amendment.

During the following decades, Adventism continued to accommodate to the state. It altered its stance on military service, pursued accreditation for its colleges, and accepted government aid for its schools and hospitals (Lawson 1996 a, b). In order to gain accreditation, it exposed its academics to graduate study at major universities, which inevitably made the content of their courses less sectarian, and thus also impacted their students. Meanwhile, accreditation prepared the way for widespread upward mobility among graduates of Adventist colleges (Lawson 1995).

Adventism also began to adjust to the religious economy. In the 1950s church leaders participated in a series of meetings with two well-known Evangelical scholars, Walter R. Martin and Donald Grey Barnhouse who, in the process of writing a series of studies on Christian "cults," had begun researching Seventh-day Adventism. When Adventists published their answers to the Evangelicals' questions, it was revealed that they had denied three doctrines which had been widely held among them but were offensive to Evangelicals (QOD 1957). All were relevant to the specialness of Adventism and its end-time message.⁸ Although some members expressed a sense of betrayal over the new formulation of belief, there was widespread relief when Martin's book declared that Adventists were not a cult but were "brethren" of the Christian Evangelicals (1960).

⁷Adventist Church headquarters.

⁸ These doctrines were that the writings of Ellen White were free of error and equal to the Scriptures, that Adventists alone comprised the biblical Remnant, and that Christ was born with a sinful nature (this change disowned the bulwark of last-generation perfectionism).

Adventists were putting down roots in society and, in the process, becoming world-affirming. The apocalypse was less imminent. Adventist spokespersons sometimes recognized this explicitly. For example, when, during World War II, Supreme Court decisions strengthened religious liberty and Roosevelt included freedom of religion as one of his four basic freedoms, the editor of the official church paper commented that what Adventists had prophesied clearly lay further in the future (Editorial,1943). Seventh-day Adventism had become a denominationalizing sect.

EXPECTANCY AND DELAY

This does not mean that Adventists had abandoned their eschatology. They continued to believe that Jesus was returning soon and to look expectantly for signs of the fulfillment of Ellen White's whole eschatological scenario. Consequently, they remained prone to excitement whenever they found evidence that the return of the Lord might be near. Although the Adventist Church, as a corporate religious body, learned the lesson of 1844 and has never set or endorsed a date for the Second Coming, groups of Adventists have focused on particular dates for that event more than 20 times in the past 150 years (Paulien 1994, 24). Their attention was often drawn to these "signs of the times" by Adventist evangelists, for eschatology remained at the center of Adventist evangelism--it attracted crowds and gained conversions, especially during times of crisis. Adventist evangelists made much of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, both world wars, the great depression, the election of J. F. Kennedy, the first Catholic, as president, the Cuban missile crisis, the first expedition to the moon,⁸ the sexual revolution of the 1960s and rise of the gay movement, the Cold War, and the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York.⁹ The Adventist Church also used the expectation of the return of Jesus--and fear of not being ready--to maintain the commitment of its members and to control their behavior.

However, there was considerable burnout on the issue over time as the extended delay made its impact: it proved increasingly difficult to maintain a high level of expectation. Most Adventists settled into a state of chronic fretfulness about the Second Coming. While they have "held onto the Sabbath," members of the baby-boomer generation, in particular, "are frankly embarrassed by those wild, apocalyptic books on which this church was founded" (Fagal 1992, 3; Branson 1991, 2).

As Adventists have buried generations of forebears who believed that they would live to see Jesus return, they have tried to find reasons for the delay. Two main explanations have been put forward, each of which is associated with a response:

1) The delay has been caused because members' characters are not yet ready for translation. The response is to somehow attain fully sanctified lives (Douglass 1975).

⁹ While Evangelicals generally saw the creation of the state of Israel as of cosmic significance, this was not part of Adventist eschatology.

Interviewees who hold this position admitted that they experience a lot of stress, for most feel that they have not "arrived", and are therefore responsible for the delay--or in danger of being lost.

2) Since Jesus had stated that the gospel would be preached in all the world and then the end would come, the problem must be that Adventists have failed to complete this task. This is the explanation espoused most strongly by the administrators who address the issue. Their response has been to pour more energy and resources into evangelism and other forms of spreading the "Advent message."

THE FRAGMENTING OF THE ADVENTIST APOCALYPTIC

The data suggest that the doctrine of the Second Advent, as taught and believed within American Adventism today, is fragmenting:

Church administrators deliver mixed messages. On the one hand, they make strong affirmations of the traditional doctrine. Adventism's creed, the list of 27 "fundamental beliefs," passed at the 1980 General Conference Session with strong administrative backing, continues the expectation that the return of Jesus will be soon. A book by the president of the General Conference at the time, published to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Great Disappointment, notes that the unexpected delay is causing some to question, but affirms that "WE STILL BELIEVE!" (Folkenberg 1994, 9).

On the other hand, when an Adventist publishing house was sued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission because of its discrimination against women in salaries and promotions, the defense brief, which must have been written with the input and approval of Church leaders, distanced present day Adventism from its "earlier" anti-Catholicism as "nothing more" than a manifestation of an attitude common among conservative Protestant denominations in earlier decades" which has now been consigned to the historical trash heap so far as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned" (Pacific Press case 1975: 4). Was this mere opportunism, or a straw in the wind?

Adventist leaders preside over a strongly centralized, hierarchical organizational structure. Its institutions root it strongly in this world: for example, the finances of its massive U.S. hospital system dwarf the budget of the General Conference, and its hospitals are currently eagerly engaged in mergers with non-Adventist hospitals--sometimes with Catholic hospitals--in order to strengthen their positions.

EVANGELISM

Adventist evangelism--whether it adopts the form of blockbuster public meetings making full use of multimedia, "Revelation Seminars," or magazines, such as the *Signs of the Times*, "soul-winning" books, or television and radio programs--still focuses strongly on "end-time events." Adventist evangelists used, typically, to invoke the timeline prophecies to show that the "time of the end" began in 1798 and that 1844 was the last pinpointed date, which left the Second

Coming as the next major event--and would then point to whatever current events seemed appropriate to suggest that the denouement was very near. However, many evangelists and writers have eagerly updated their eschatological content since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, for they now claim to see a convergence of trends preparing the way for the fulfillment of Ellen White's predictions. These "trends" include: 1) Papal influence has grown dramatically, coming to the fore in the role played by Pope John Paul II in the collapse of Communism; 2) The U.S., having emerged as the sole superpower, is finally in a position where it could, in alliance with the Papacy, press the whole world into conformity with an attack on God's elect; 3) The New Christian Right has emerged as a political force in the U.S., has built an alliance with the Catholic Church over abortion and other social issues, and both are attacking church-state separation and receiving some cooperation in this from the Supreme Court; 4) A resurgence of spiritualism is occurring in several guises--in the New Age movement and the widespread interest in "near death experiences" and appearances of the Virgin Mary (Finley 1992a,b; Moore 1992, 1995; Goldstein 1993, 1996).

Although the grim Adventist eschatological scenario is portrayed as close to culmination, it is still future for Adventist evangelists. With their unhindered access to meeting spaces, advertising, publishing, and the airwaves, their utilization of modern conveniences in their lives, and their satisfaction with the image Adventism and its institutions project to society, they are clearly personally comfortable in America today.

PASTORS

Since Adventist evangelism emphasizes eschatology, converts are usually those attracted by this topic. However, when they join Adventist congregations, they find that their pastors typically give far less emphasis to eschatological subjects than the evangelists. When I asked 115 North American pastors what themes they stressed in their sermons, only 7% mentioned eschatological subjects as their prime theme.

These data should not be interpreted as suggesting that Adventist pastors in North America are ignoring the topic of the apocalypse. When 296 pastors responding to another survey were asked how many sermons they had preached over the preceding twelve months "where the Second Coming had been the sole subject," the median response was three (Rosado 1991).¹⁰ More than half (50.3%) of 1,988 North American members included within a survey of the world membership of the Adventist Church sponsored by the General Conference reported hearing a sermon on "the Second Coming or last day events" "more than once" during the preceding year. On the other hand, only 23.8% had heard a sermon dealing with "the 2,300 years or other prophetic events"--topics which were likely to have been more urgent in tone (World Survey). That is, most of the pastors who choose to address the topic of the Second Coming in their sermons approach it as a doctrine, without a great deal of urgency.

¹⁰This survey was introduced in a manner that was likely to encourage exaggerated reporting of attention to that topic

When the responses of interviewees to a block of questions asking to what extent they agreed with statements rooted in Adventist eschatology were cross-tabulated with age, a sharp age-break emerged. Those who had entered the ministry before the mid-1960s--when a seminary degree was not the norm and very few of the college religion teachers had doctorates--were much more likely to answer that they "strongly agree" or "agree" with these statements; on the other hand, those who had entered the ministry later were more prone to "disagree" or "strongly disagree." Since a seminary degree was the norm for the latter, they had been exposed to scholars with advanced degrees from the finest universities there and also, increasingly, in the Adventist colleges during their baccalaureate programs. This interpretation is confirmed by cross-tabulations between "years of education" and the same block of eschatologically-rooted statements: those with only 16 years education tended to agree with the statements, while those with higher degrees tended to disagree. That is, the key to understanding the relatively low priority accorded to apocalyptic preaching by pastors lies in what is taught in the seminary and by the religion departments of Adventist colleges.

TEACHING APOCALYPTICS

The Seminary and departments of religion in general avoid the traditional Adventist approach to eschatology. Several of the 49 such teachers interviewed mentioned that they would not teach a course on Daniel and Revelation or that no one was willing to do so. Interview excerpts illustrate the tone of these comments:

"The Second Advent is not now an important part of Adventist faith and life.... Daniel and Revelation has not been really important in Adventist scholarship during my career. There have always been courses on them, but the area has not been terribly important to the intellectual life of the church. We've had a collective subliminal awareness that traditional interpretations don't make a lot of sense. We have over-interpreted these pictures, which really say that there is a struggle between good and evil which God will win. We've tried to interpret each detail, to do left-brain analysis to what is really a right-brain piece of art."

"I preach the Second Coming, but differently--my emphasis is not on time, but on its influence on ethics... I am having difficulty preaching the signs of the coming in the old way--they are ordinary historical events, so that every generation could see them in their time--so many periods expected His return..."

"My course, 'Apocalyptic Studies,' presents apocalypics as a literary genre, as just another way of writing theology."

These attitudes were confirmed in seven recent books where theologians addressed apocalyptic themes. The following quote is representative of them all:

"My purpose...is to highlight the text of the Bible rather than comment on the continuing swirl of current events. ... The safest course is to understand the Bible's view

of the end on its own terms, rather than expecting direct answers to the kinds of questions that only people in our day could have asked. Our Bible is the product of God speaking to people in another time and place. ... The purpose of the Bible's teaching about the end is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to teach us how to live as we await the end... When will the Son of man come? There is nothing in the current scene that gives us the absolute certainty that the end is immediately before us--or a long time in the future" (Paulien 1994:13, 34, 89, 159).

LAITY

In surveys of 785 church members and 1305 students at Adventist colleges, I asked to what extent they agreed with the statement "Christ will return in your lifetime." One-seventh (14.7%) of the members and one-fifth (21.1%) of the students agreed strongly. More than three-fifths of the members and half the students answered "uncertain," which is theologically technically correct since Jesus said "no man knows the day...." As expected, cross-tabulations showed converts to be significantly more urgently apocalyptic than members raised by Adventist parents.

A survey of over 13,000 students in Adventist high schools found that 31.3% worried "very much" "about not being ready for Christ's return," and 21.3% "about not being faithful during the Time of Trouble." (Another 28.4% and 22.5% respectively worry "quite a bit.") Urgency engenders fear among this age group (Valuegenesis Study). When these same questions were asked in a survey targeted at 3,300 Hispanic students, the proportion admitting to being fearful proved to be higher still: 59.5% worried "very much" about not being ready for Christ's return and 45.1% about possibly proving unfaithful during the Time of Trouble (AVANCE Study). (Another 17.9% and 20.1% respectively worried "quite a bit.")

That is, while large majorities of laypersons show a belief in the doctrine of the Second Coming, urgent apocalypticism seems to be much less widespread, being concentrated among converts and, often fearfully, among younger students exposed to indoctrination in Adventist schools.

ON THE FRINGES OF ADVENTISM

Urgently apocalyptic "independent ministries" on the fringes of Adventism have multiplied in recent years. Their growth is associated with the frustration of many converts who, having been attracted by the eschatological preaching of the Adventist evangelists, are disappointed to find far less of this in the churches they join after their baptisms. These ministries have so disturbed church leaders as a result of the flow of their outspoken literature around the globe and the perception that they are diverting considerable amounts of income from the denominational conduit that the Annual Council of the church in 1991 voted to condemn them as "producing distrust and division that hinder the work of God" (Perth Declaration 1991, 7). In 1992 the North American Division of the church published a large book, *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries*, laying out its grievances with some of the ministries as a warning to members. Like the early Christians, who continued to think of

themselves as Jewish and therefore focused their evangelism on Jews--initially in Jerusalem, and then in the cities to which they were scattered--the leaders of these groups continue to identify with Adventism, even if they have been disfellowshipped, and to focus their efforts on reaching Adventists. (The best known of these ministries to the media was David Koresh's Branch Davidians.)

The fringe apocalyptic ministries are much more urgent in their apocalypticism than most mainstream Adventists. They generally differ from the latter (who have themselves been shown to be very diverse on this issue) in at least one of two main ways. First, many of them are so impatient with the long delay in the Second Coming since 1844 that merely pointing to recent world events as new evidence that the general Adventist eschatological scenario is on track (as the leading evangelists have) is unsatisfactory to them: they want more direct proof that these are the very last days and Jesus is about to come. To accomplish this they often develop some kind of time-line prophecy which focuses on the current period. Second, they often see the Adventist church leadership as so compromised with the "world" and the members so "lukewarm" in their spirituality that the church is unready to receive Christ and as such is responsible for his delay. Some of them portray the official church as having shifted positions on beliefs and behavioral standards, so that it has obscured the "last warning message" bequeathed to it through Ellen White, and present their own group as the true "historic Adventists." When criticisms of church leadership are met, in turn, with charges of heresy and attempts to subject them to church discipline, the rancor escalates.

My analysis divides these urgently apocalyptic groups into five categories.¹¹ The attempts to apply time prophecies to the present differ considerably from one category to another:

- 1) The 6,000-year umbrella time prophecy. The argument here is that, according to Bishop Usher's biblical chronology, the creation took place about 4004 B.C., so that the sixth millennium is closing. If each millennium is symbolized by one day, the seventh, or Sabbath, millennium--what the book of Revelation calls THE millennium--is about to open. Premillennialists believe that Christ returns before then.

One of the authors who falls into this category, G. Edward Reid, is an unusual case, for he is a lone writer rather than the head of a ministry, and he holds a departmental position at the headquarters of the Adventist North American Division. He submitted his book manuscript, which suggests that Christ will return by the year 2000, to the Review and Herald (R&H), an Adventist publishing house, but it was rejected because the editors saw it as too apocalyptic and irresponsible in its biblical interpretation. However, he was able to gain the support of the marketing staff, which is made up of old hands from the Adventist Book Centers (ABCs), one of the havens of Adventist fundamentalists. When he was able to raise money to self-publish the book, he arranged for the R&H job printing division to print the book—which leaves the erroneous impression with many readers that it has the "imprimatur" of the publisher,

¹¹Not all fringe groups are urgently apocalyptic. Some focus on health issues, others on the nature of God, etc. However, such groups are not within the scope of this paper.

especially since its marketing division signed up to distribute it through the ABCs, and it carries, on the back cover, an endorsement from the chair of the Religion Department at Southern College, the most conservative of the Adventist colleges in the U.S. (Reid 1994).

Jan Marcussen is best known as the author of *National Sunday Law* (1983), a simplified rehash of the position put forward by Ellen White in *The Great Controversy*, with no attempt to link it to current events. He has struck a chord among a segment of Adventists, for they have provided him with the funds to print and distribute 7.8 million copies of the book in 19 languages since 1983. His newsletters attempt, with poor documentation, to show that the law is about to be enacted. He also puts forward other evidence that the end is upon us, and in his newsletter of mid-November 1995, he used the 6,000 year theory to cement his case, claiming that this period would culminate in 1996.

2) The Jubilee Cycle approach takes the Levitical Jubilee year, based on seven "sabbatical years" for a total of 49 years, through 70 cycles--a symbolic number--and thus to our day.

However, although the dates of some sabbatical years are known, there is disagreement about the dating of jubilee years in biblical times.¹² Consequently, various proponents disagree about the ending of the 70th cycle. An earlier group in the Pacific Northwest settled on the year 1987, and expected the Second Coming that year. The person best known for this timeline, Larry Wilson of Wake Up America Seminars, initially announced that the cycle ended in 1992 before settling on 1994. For him this is the beginning of the final period, during which the usual timeline prophecies, such as the 1,335 days of the book of Daniel, are applied as literal rather than symbolic (a day for a year) days. He expected the events accompanying the Great Tribulation to begin in 1994 or 1995, and that this would include a large asteroid hitting the earth. These events would culminate in the second coming of Jesus "around 1998" (1994:1). In a defensive "addendum" inserted in the fifth edition of his most widely circulated book after the close of 1995, he states that he does not regard the delay of what he expects as a failure of his interpretation. He continues to preach and to publish--the number of copies of this book in circulation has passed 500,000 (1994).

3) Applications of the time-line prophecies of Daniel and Revelation to the present.

This has been done by several ministries, usually as literal days. Some of them see this as a second (dual) fulfillment, others as the prime application. They look for clues in current events, and link them to the prophecies--a method which gives them a great deal of scope, and therefore also room for disagreement with one another. The best known of these is Charles Wheeling of Countdown Ministries in Alabama--perhaps because he has been active over a long period. He saw the Iran-Iraq War (beginning in 1980) as the harbinger of the Battle of Armageddon; more recently, he found the Persian Gulf War in prophecy. He looks for an international crisis in the banking system, and is currently very interested in the actions and

¹²Indeed, there is no direct evidence that the jubilees were observed at all after their initial explanation.

sayings of the Pope. Because he rejects the earlier applications of the timeline prophecies, the year 1844 has no special significance for him. Even though this would seem to put him at odds with the writings of Ellen White, he has been extraordinarily active in publishing and distributing millions of copies of *The Great Controversy*--both in whole and in part--in many countries (Wheeling 1995).

4) The status of Jerusalem.

William Grothier of the Adventist Laymen's Foundation and Bible Prophecy Seminars, and editor of the monthly paper "Watchman, What of the Night?," stands apart from the other ministries in his focus on the status of Jerusalem as a sign of the end of time.¹³ He also stands apart from the Evangelicals, who are concerned with the nation of Israel rather than Jerusalem. He sees the unification of Jerusalem in 1967 as the "beginning of the end of time," and its appointment as capital of Israel in 1980 as the close of probation for nations--and also, because of its illegitimate changes in its doctrine, of that of the corporate Adventist Church; individuals have a little extra time, but that too is now petering out (1995; 1994). In a switch, he focused his paper during 1995 on the aims of the Papacy as given in recent encyclicals.

5) Those who "sigh and cry" over the apostasy of the Adventist Church.

Several prominent ministries--Hope International (publisher of *Our Firm Foundation*), the Hartland Institute (a college without accreditation and publisher of *The Last Generation*), Cherrystone Press (the personal vehicle of Dr Ralph Larson), and Prophecy Countdown (a television and shortwave radio ministry) fall into this category. Their key complaint is about changes in Adventist doctrine, such as in the nature of Christ (from sinful--like our nature--to sinless--like pre-fall Adam's) as a result of the Bible conferences with Evangelicals Martin and Barnhouse during the 1950s. Because these changes impact on Adventist eschatology (such as the belief that the final generation must overcome as Jesus overcame and stand perfect at the close of probation) and an apostasy within the church was predicted by Ellen White, the latter is therefore seen as a clear sign that the end is imminent (Larson 1993, 180).

Although most of the ministries in this category may be counted as doctrinally orthodox, they have drawn much more fire from Adventist leadership than the other categories: the condemning book *Issues* was aimed directly at them--by name--by church leadership, and most of their leaders have been disfellowshipped since its publication in 1992. They have come under attack because their orthodoxy makes them more attractive to unsettled Adventists, they appear to attract considerable sums from their supporters which might otherwise have gone into denominational coffers, their criticism of the official church and its leadership is constant and uncompromising, and their influence is being felt among Adventists in the Developing World because of the widespread distribution of their publications there. (Because it comes without cost to recipients there, the circulation there of *Our Firm Foundation* is said to exceed that of the official church paper.)

¹³He also stands apart from Evangelicals, whose focus is on the nation of Israel, not Jerusalem.

TWO CONTROVERSIES HIGHLIGHTED THE ADVENTIST DILEMMA

The media attention to the Branch Davidian crisis showed church leaders how dangerous such fringe groups could be to the reputation of Adventists, for in the first hours after the ATF raid on the Davidian compound there were many news reports that revealed that Koresh's followers had been drawn from among Adventists¹⁴ and identified the Branch Davidians as Adventists. Since Adventist leaders place high priority on projecting a positive image of their church, they regarded this as a crisis of major proportions. They were successful in having the Branch Davidians' connection to Adventism removed from later media reports through the help of costly media consultants (Lawson 1995).

The Branch Davidians were not the only case of a ministry causing public embarrassment for Adventists at that time--and the other example was much more perplexing. In November 1992, 42 billboards appeared in Orlando, Florida. Half of these stated "When Church & State Unite, What Do You Lose?", the others "Just How Secure is Our Constitution?" These "teasers" were followed by 12 huge billboards featuring a facial photograph of the Pope and posing the question, "Why is the Vatican Trying to Change Our Constitution?" They also offered the opportunity, via an "800" number, to buy copies of Ellen White's Great Controversy. The advertisers spent \$80,000 on billboard space, \$25,000 on newspaper advertisements, \$35,000 on radio spots, and \$100,000 on television time--a total of \$240,000. Similar billboards were also erected in several west-coast cities. David Mould, an active Adventist originally from the Caribbean and head of Laymen for Religious Liberty, claimed responsibility. He explained that he had been angered because of what he saw as the silence of the Adventist Church on these issues at a time when he felt that it was clear that the prophecies of Ellen White were being fulfilled. (That is, his ministry is another example of category 5, above.) He announced that his organization would also sponsor a massive protest demonstration when the Pope visited Denver in the Fall of 1993, which would hopefully draw international attention (Knittel 1993, 53; Coffin 1993a, 4; 1993b, 8).

The initial billboard campaign presented a problem for the Adventist Church. Adventists are extremely well known in Orlando, which is the location of the church's largest hospital. Both talk shows and the press there covered the campaign extensively. Florida Adventist Hospital was deluged with calls, and Adventist staff there were reported to be angry and embarrassed. Because of the decentralized nature of the campaign, the international headquarters of the church in Maryland chose to leave the local church administrators with responsibility for responding to the media. Yet how to respond posed a perplexing problem. While Laymen for Religious Liberty was a conservative independent ministry, it was not doctrinally at variance with the church. It was promoting a book that Adventists regard as divinely inspired and which is the benchmark of historic Adventist eschatology, and had apparently stimulated thousands of orders for it; the billboards highlighted positions often taught by Adventist evangelists and Revelation Seminars. Nevertheless, these were positions that mainstream Adventists had

¹⁴ Indeed, most of them were still on church rolls, for, following Davidian policy, they had not withdrawn their membership.

abandoned to such an extent that many of them became highly ill at ease when they were publicly identified with them. They have become so comfortable with society that they found the conflict implied in the billboards threatening and intensely embarrassing.

The leaders of the Florida Conference were no exception. However, "they could not denounce [the billboards] in terms of the message, for doing so would have taken a position relative to Ellen White that would induce tremendous negative fallout from many devout Adventists." Eventually they wrote a letter to the local newspaper dissociating the Conference from Mould's actions but not from the *Great Controversy*; and they published a special edition of the conference newsletter which praised God for the sales of the book, but which then quoted a number of statements by Ellen White "cautioning church members not to present Adventist beliefs in denunciatory and injudicious manners" (Knittel, 1993: 54).

Because of its potential national and international impact, church leaders chose to become involved directly in trying to deflect the negative media impact of the promised campaign during the Pope's planned visit to Denver (Patterson 1994). This was ultimately not arranged by Mould, who had fallen into financial and legal difficulties, but by another independent group based in Montana, which contracted to rent billboards from the Gannett Corporation. Church leaders responded by working with the Adventist hospital in Denver to organize an advance media blitz and a religious liberty rally to present the Adventist Church positively. They also developed contacts with the media: "We told them what might happen, and explained that we were not responsible for it, and that we could not stop those who were responsible from doing it. We explained the same thing to religious leaders, including Catholics" (Patterson 1994).

Gary Patterson, the administrator who had been the media contact during the Branch Davidian crisis, was again placed on call, ready to go with a presentation once the billboards started to appear and the media focused on a press conference. When, shortly before the Pope's visit, it became known that the billboards were imminent, a press conference was called. Patterson explained that the boards did not represent Adventism, and that doing something like this was against the advice of the author of the very book they were trying to distribute. While Adventists were Protestant, and therefore had their disagreements with Roman Catholics, they did not want to fight, and this was not the right time and place to address the differences. When reporters raised potentially embarrassing questions, Patterson found that he was able to fob them off with limited replies because of their lack of knowledge (Patterson 1994).

To the surprise and relief of the church leaders, the press conference had the unintended consequence of persuading the Gannett Corporation to abandon the billboard contract. That is, the church's media campaign aborted the crisis. However, the issue highlighted the dilemma of Adventism: "[The billboards issued raised] an urgent question: Did Ellen White's nineteenth century knowledge and experience significantly influence her end-time scenario? Fundamentalists say no. Progressives say yes" (Walters 1993, 13). To many progressive Adventists, the crisis was rooted in the contradiction that the church had continued to pay lip-service to the present relevance of all the writings of their prophet three-quarters of a century after her death, but were in fact acting differently. However, to conservatives, the reason why

the *Great Controversy* now seems dated, bigoted, and likely to cause embarrassment to some Adventists is that it is coming true (Goldstein 1993, 5-7).

These experiences led Church leaders to worry whether some of the other independent ministries could prove equally embarrassing with time. In an issue of the official church paper headlined "Are we sitting Ducks for Cults?," published soon after the Davidian compound burned, an Adventist sociologist discussed "Why are some Adventists vulnerable to fatal fanaticism?" (Rosado 1993:16). There is ample evidence of the relevance of this question in the conspiracy theories that burgeon among some segments of the Adventist membership where there is an urgent yearning for the fulfillment of their apocalyptic expectations. Some theories that have received wide currency in recent years are that a Sunday law has been secretly drafted and will be sprung upon the nation; that there is a scheme afoot to use computers, social security numbers, and credit card numbers to prevent Sabbath-keepers from being able "to buy or sell" and thus impose "the mark of the beast"; and that Jesuits have infiltrated the General Conference, which has subsequently become part of a conspiracy to keep Adventists in the dark about these threats (interviews).

CONCLUSION

The doctrine that the second coming of Christ is near continues to be affirmed in Adventist credal statements primarily because church leaders fear that any attempt to update the prophetic teachings of Ellen White would result in unmanageable fallout, and it continues to find expression in evangelistic preaching and writing because it still attracts potential converts. However, as American Adventism has put down roots in society and prospered, and has thus moved from near the sect pole towards the denomination pole of the sect-denomination continuum, the doctrine has lost a great deal of its urgency. However, as one might predict from the theory, considerable urgency continues on the fringes of Adventism, among the much more sectarian "independent ministries." These continue to attract a following because of the frustration of first generation members, who were initially attracted to Adventism by its apocalyptic message, with the de-emphasis of the doctrine in Adventist churches.

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