

## **Adventism: Not Restoring, Not Reforming**

**By Rodney Nelson**

### **Heirs of the Reformation**

Seventh Day Adventism has historically believed itself to be the heir of the Protestant Reformation in that it combines the foundational teachings of the historic Reformation confessions into a cohesive whole of truth. Geoffrey Paxton, in his groundbreaking work *The Shaking of Adventism* (1977), devotes his first chapter to this issue. He states the Adventist position succinctly.

Yet the fact is that the Seventh-day Adventist sees himself as standing in a unique relation to the Reformation. He believes that God has called him to carry forward the message of the Reformation *in such a way as no other Christian or Christian body is able to do*. In his opinion the Seventh-day Adventist Church is God's *special* heir of the Reformers. *Only* through the Adventist Church can the work of the Reformation be carried to its God-designed end. (*Shaking*, pg. 18; italicized original)

As shown by Paxton, Ellen White supported such a perspective as well.

The Reformation did not, as many suppose, end with Luther. It is to be continued to the close of this world's history. Luther had a great work to do in reflecting to others the light which God had permitted to shine upon him; yet he did not receive all the light which was to be given to the world. From that time to this, new light has been continually shining upon the Scriptures, and new truths have been constantly unfolding. (*The Great Controversy*, 1950, pgs. 148-149)

The Reformation "is to be carried forward to the close of time by those who also are willing to suffer all things for 'the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.' (Revelation 1:9)" (*The Great Controversy*, 1950, pg. 78). Finally, Seventh Day Adventism "was to receive and carry forward the torch of the everlasting gospel of the Reformation" (*Shaking*, pg. 19).

### **Finisher of the Reformation**

Adventism is to be the completion of the Reformation and finish the mission of spreading the gospel to the world (Revelation 14:6-7). Moreover, Adventism would become "the guardians of the Protestant heritage in a climate of modernism and spiritual declension" (*Shaking*, pg. 19). As historic Protestantism would fall into apostasy, Adventism would arise to preserve and propagate the gospel of Christ. To Adventism would fall the Divine mandate to spread the true gospel throughout the world.

God had commissioned them (Adventism's founders) to continue the Reformation that had brought so much joy and power to the church. With gratitude and humility they accepted their mission. . . . that will bring a full and final restoration of the gospel truth" (*Seventh Day Adventists Believe*, 1988, pg. 163).

As historic Protestantism becomes Babylon in Revelation, Adventism will rise to proclaim the true gospel of the Reformation, thereby restoring the true gospel of the Bible (*SDA's Believe*, pg. 166). The key point is this process is now occurring. However, the gospel proclamation is also more than the gospel of justification by faith that historic Protestantism has and will forsake in the future. The First Angel's Message also includes the call for judgment, true worship of God as Creator exemplified by a return to Sabbath observance, and the implied "restoration of the honor of God's holy law" (*SDA's Believe*, pg. 165).

### **Adventism as Restoration Movement**

As indicated above, Adventism does not merely preserve the true gospel, but it restores the true gospel. Paxton details this restoration vein within Adventism when he investigates statements by other Adventist leaders. He cites LeRoy Edwin Froom as seeking "to show that the Adventist prophetic interpretation is not an *innovation* but a *restoration* of the true historical position of the Reformers themselves" (*Shaking*, pg. 21). Furthermore, Froom states the "commission of the Advent movement is 'fundamentally a restoration, not the formation of a new structure'" (*Shaking*, pg. 21).

Likewise, "The first angel's message proclaims the everlasting gospel and calls for the restoration of the true worship of God as Creator because the judgment hour has arrived" (*SDA's Believe*, pg. 166). Furthermore, the "third angel's message directs the world's attention to the consequence of refusing to accept the everlasting gospel and God's message of the restoration of true worship" (*SDA's Believe*, pg. 167).

Paxton quotes Hans K. LaRondelle, "If the first Reformation is the restoration of the Gospel with the saving doctrine of justification by faith alone, then the second Reformation is the restoration of the holy law of God in the doctrine of sanctification by faith and submission" (*Shaking*, pgs. 22-23).

Finally, Paxton summarizes the matter by stating Adventism has received the task from God "to *continue* and to *consummate* the recovery of the gospel that began in earnest in the sixteenth-century Reformation" (*Shaking*, pg. 23-24). In essence, Adventism continues the gospel of the Reformation due to the apostasy of Protestantism (see *SDA's Believe*, pg. 160).

### **The Restoration Century**

As with all restoration movements, the goal is to reclaim and restore truth from error. On this Adventism is no different than the other restoration movements of nineteenth century America. Three other restoration movements arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to restore biblical truth, if not the church itself. They were the Stone-Campbell Movement, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Adventism also sought to restore lost biblical truth, not merely the gospel (called "Present Truth").

Each one of these movements **had** distinctive beliefs that set them apart from established orthodox churches. The issue is to what degree did these distinctives set them at odds with prevailing orthodox Christian teaching. Adventism did find itself at odds with historic Christian teaching, but in line with it as well. While Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses distinguished themselves as almost separate from historic Christian teaching on almost every point, Adventism found itself claiming to save what was left of orthodox Reformation teaching. While Mormonism claimed that original Christian teaching had virtually been lost through apostasy after the apostolic era, Adventism claimed apostasy had occurred due to Roman Catholic heresy, but was being reclaimed in the Reformation, but the Reformation did not go far enough in the truth reclamation project. Hence, the view that Adventism had been Divinely called to complete the Reformation, especially the proclamation of the true gospel and true worship of God exemplified by the Sabbath.

### **Warnings on Restoration**

Religious movements who have as their goal the restoration of true New Testament Christianity are often guilty of adding more to the faith than they are correcting. Often the focus is restoring what was forgotten or neglected in a particular understanding of apostolic church practice and doctrine. For example, Mormons have "reinstated" proxy baptism for the dead. However, such efforts are really additions to the Christian faith out of proportion to any evidence gleaned from the New Testament regarding the practice itself. Therefore, the reinstated doctrine is totally out of proportion to any New Testament indication of its importance.

Often restored doctrine and practice is best described as taking the minority position. In this approach, a restoration movement may take what is practiced little and expand its importance. For example, in the Christian Church and Church of Christ, the Lord's Supper is practiced each week rather than monthly, quarterly or yearly. While I personally believe with them that New Testament Christians observed the sacrament weekly, I recognize that such a view might be cogent, yet the reinstatement of it while condemning all other occasions of observance is to go too far. However, I once fellowshiped with a denomination that observed the Lord's Supper only once per year according to the Jewish Passover calendar. The focus was not on if I observed it, but when it was observed. Restoration efforts often focus on one aspect of a doctrine and over-emphasize it, thus majoring in minors.

Another thing that often occurs with restoration movements is the addition of new truth to Christian practice and doctrine. In other words, it is not enough to renew and restore old doctrines and practices, but in the process endeavoring to do so invariably embodies a new reality and importance in itself. This is often seen in the movement becoming a special people, a restored church for the last days adhering and showing fidelity to true biblical doctrine. The message becomes identified with the messenger so the messenger (the church) becomes the focus.

This phenomenon is witnessed over and over in all restoration movements. Some in the Church of Christ see their church as the restoration of the apostolic church. All other churches are seen as having error compared to the full restoration of the truth in one body of Christians. Thus, it becomes the Church of Christ versus Baptists and Lutherans and Methodists, etc. The distinctive doctrines are distinctive merely because no one else packages them in the same way. Mormons are another example of a restoration movement that has the total package while everyone else has pieces of the truth. Jehovah's Witnesses likewise see themselves as the restoration of biblical Christianity.

A final aspect of restoration movements is their propensity to become so against the stream of Christian theology and tradition that they diverge from almost every essential teaching of historic Christianity, hence earning the title "pseudo-Christian cult." While it would be irresponsible to label every restoration movement and effort cultic, it remains that such efforts can easily lead to a cultic mentality without the movement actually being a cult. In other words, the perspective of believers in the restoration message of a particular group is essentially cultic in that they divide the world into "us and them." Assuredly, one doesn't have to be in a cult to do this.

### **What About Adventism?**

Is Adventism guilty of majoring in minors and over-emphasizing certain doctrines in the name of restoring neglected or forgotten Christian doctrine? The answer is unequivocally yes.

Throughout its history, Adventism has displayed each characteristic described above. First, Adventism did not merely seek to re-establish lost and neglected doctrines and practices, but established new doctrines unique to themselves ("Present Truth," "Progressive Revelation," to coin a couple of terms). While the Sabbath was not new, Adventism added a prophetic twist to Sabbath observance by making it the final test of obedience in the last days. Likewise, Adventism established the Investigative Judgement as a unique teaching given to Adventism at a divinely established time. The keys to understanding were given to Adventism through the Spirit of Prophecy, thereby giving Adventism the "advantage" no one else had been gifted with. Indeed, Adventism is a "remnant people" prophesied to exist in the latter days of earth's history (Revelation 12:17; 14:12; 19:10).

Second, Adventism over-emphasizes certain doctrines, usually doctrines that are important to Adventism. For one, the focus on the health message is a case in point. While no one will dispute the importance of eating and drinking healthy, one can dispute whether Adventism has gone too far with the health message as a marker of biblical authenticity. While the New Testament does not make diet a focus of obedience or identity marker, Adventism has taken health and made it a key part of their proclamation of truth beyond any scriptural measure. While scripture values good health, it does not require Christians to practice particular dietary habits.

Third, Adventism is never reticent to cite the incompleteness of other denominations in terms of truth. Time and again Adventism teaches how Christians have incomplete revelations of God's truth, particularly the Sabbath/Sunday issue. I remember when I attended and was converted through Adventist "Revelation Seminars." I recall how a couple of sessions picked elements of truth in particular Protestant churches that were biblical and used them to preach the total package of Adventism as the true church, the remnant church. This eclectic shopping approach is convenient for the uninitiated, but it is done to prove Adventist distinctiveness.

In the Adventist version of restorationism, the position of the Reformation gospel that Adventism is supposed to champion is compromised by the Investigative Judgement and by the lack of coherent understanding of justification by faith absent law. The steady onslaught of the Moral Influence Theory, and confusion on whether Christ had a sinful nature, do compromise orthodox Christian teaching on Christ's substitutionary atonement on the cross.

### **From Restoration to Exclusivism**

Perhaps the most telling sign for Adventism moving toward an unhealthy application of restorationism is exclusivism. Exclusivism is not the teaching that salvation is only through Christ, but that the gospel is only fully understood within the identity and message of one church organization. Big claims demand big evidence. Adventism has identified itself as the final church of the end times, either organizationally or as a people. The implication is that all other denominations have varying degrees of truth.

One of the greatest struggles I had as an Adventist prior to leaving was the never ending battle within myself with the idea that I belonged to a church that had the truth in completeness, while others possessed pieces. I had to rationalize the idea that I had to categorize Christians based on my own doctrinal pedigree. I had to battle the belief and feeling that while others were Christians, they were so to the degree of truth they already had, but would ultimately be tested and determined by the truth they rejected. This was

something I ultimately could not accept, and one I struggled with for years after my conversion to Adventism.

Adventism is not exclusive for the doctrines they hold in common with most Christian churches, but for the differences setting them apart from Christian churches. The problems are not the many things they hold in common with other denominations, but in the distinctive doctrines setting them apart. The greatest problem is the prideful division that results from exclusivism. While on the one hand Adventism emphasizes its spiritual brotherhood with other Christian communions, on the other hand it denies complete brotherhood with other Christians due to exclusive teachings and attitudes. All one has to do is challenge the distinctives that separate Adventism from other Christians. The response is often how one would dare question God's unique remnant church. Many of the letters to this magazine exhibit this mentality.

Restorationism had many noble goals, but the doctrines involved in the restoration are often exclusive and divisive. Adventism is no different in this regard than Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Adventism claimed gospel was exclusive to itself, and in the end, the gospel would come under the sole proprietorship of Adventism due to apostate Protestantism. The problem is that the gospel continues on trial within Adventism as it has always been.

The prognosis is that so long as the gospel is encumbered by certain Adventist distinctives that attempt to restore and establish new biblical teaching, Adventism has become a place where the gospel is not welcomed or taught. Perhaps the irony is that the gospel that Adventism sees itself restoring and preserving is itself endangered in Adventism. Furthermore, the very mission Adventism sees itself fulfilling in restoring and preserving the gospel is itself exclusive and cultic. To see itself as the final guarantor of the pristine gospel is based on restorationism gone to extreme.

### **Entrusted With the Gospel**

Jude 3 is a famous apologetic scripture quoted by nearly every apologetic ministry at one time or another. Its significance bears no less importance to our discussion on restoration and the Adventist Church. "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3, New International Version).

Notice the original intent of Jude was to talk about the good news of their shared salvation. However, something interfered with his intention, namely the encroachment of "godless men, who change the grace of God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (Jude 4b; NIV). The true gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ was polluted by false teachers abusing the teaching of God's grace and denied Jesus Christ as Lord. Abuse of the gospel is almost always accompanied by abuse

of Christ's identity and authority. As a result, Jude calls believers to "contend for the faith."

The picture conveyed by the phrase "contend for the faith" is one of fierce competition on the athletic field. The literal application is that believers must compete for the truth of the gospel as athletes compete to defeat their opponent. It "speaks of a vigorous, intense, determined struggle to defeat the opposition" (*Wuest's Word Studies 2*, 1973, pg. 235). The "faith" under contention is more than the truth of the gospel of salvation alone, it embodies "the message or body of saving beliefs accepted as orthodox in the Church" (J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, pg. 247; cf. Galatians 1:23). It was the "body of Christian truth" (Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter; Jude*, pg. 238; cf. 1 Timothy 1:10, 4:6). "It is the truth about God in Christ that has been handed down from believer to believer in an unbroken chain, stretching back to the teaching of Jesus himself as recorded in the NT" (Hillyer, 238).

These notions (of tradition) are by no means alien to the earlier strata of the NT, for it is evident that the idea of tradition, of the gospel as an authoritative message committed to and handed down in the Church, was integral to Christianity from the start. An analysis of Paul's letters, e.g., reveals how packed with traditional material they are; and he too is prepared to use "faith in the objective sense of the content of belief. (Kelly 248).

The finality of the faith is indicated by it being given "once for all." If the faith is understood as objective (a body of beliefs), then the giving of the faith occurred at one time, not to receive subsequent installments in the future. The content of the Christian message is fixed and not to receive revisions in future eras. "No other faith will be given" (Wuest 236; quoting Bengel). The finality of the faith points to completion of the gospel message and fundamental Christian doctrine, not to be repeated again (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Hebrews to Jude*, pg. 388). "Basically the Christian faith cannot be changed; its foundation truths are not negotiable" (Frank Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary 12*, pg. 388). "Christianity is viewed as a system of revealed teaching which is by its very nature unalterable and normative (this is the force of **once for all**)" (Kelly 248). Coffman eloquently summarizes the case.

There is hardly any other message of the NT that has greater relevance for our own times than this. The revelation of Christ through the apostles is complete, inviolate, sufficient, eternal, immutable, and not subject to any change whatever. Jesus made *his sayings* to be the dogmatic foundation of Christianity as evident in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:24-25) and in the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20). (James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, Jude*, pg. 528).

The recipients of the faith are indicated by it being “entrusted to the saints.” “Entrusted” has a significant application. The word translated “entrusted” literally means “having been delivered.” “Delivered” refers “to give over into (one’s) power or use, to deliver to one something to keep, use, take care of, manage” (Wuest 236). The idea is the body of belief (the “faith”) has been delivered for safekeeping, to be preserved in a custodial role for all future generations.

The entity identified as having this duty of preservation of the faith are the “saints” – “*tois hagiois* – the ones set apart by God for himself” (Gaebelein 12, 388). The saints are the recipients of this sacred tradition of faith because they have been set apart as consecrated people who have been given the revelation of the gospel message. “The idea is that God gave the Christian doctrines to the saints as a deposit of truth to be guarded” (Wuest 236). “Each individual Christian has the dual responsibility of maintaining that truth unadulterated and of carefully handing it on to others” (Hillyer 238). What could be a higher calling and responsibility?

Apostasy as a word and concept is prevalent in the New Testament. *Apostasia* means rebellion, backsliding, apostasy, or departure. Whether it is understood as “falling away” or “backsliding” the understanding that apostasy could and would happen in the early church was a given. Warnings are issued in many areas by all New Testament writers to the effect that believers would be subjected and deceived by false teachers. From Jesus to John, believers are warned and prepared for the eventuality of apostasy (Matthew 24:9-12; Luke 8:11-13; 9:57-62; 11:24-26; 13:6-9; John 15:6; Acts 7:39-43; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1-3; 5:15; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 4:3-4; Hebrews 3:12-13; 6:4-8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:17; Jude 4. On the reality of apostasy, the restoration case is strong. However, the restoration case for apostasy as compromising all Christian orthodoxy to the point that it was eclipsed for one thousand to fifteen hundred years is another matter.

### **Entrusted or Restored?**

Restoration churches see themselves as either resurrecting forgotten truths or preserving present truth neglected by other Christians. This special calling places restoration-based churches in a special category of Christians. In a very real sense they see themselves as specially called to preserve, protect, and defend Biblical truth in a special package unique to themselves.

Adventism is no less a denomination that sees itself as being entrusted prophetically with restoring and preserving neglected, renewed, and new truth. The problem is that such a mission is itself problematic. Jude 3 emphatically and uncompromisingly maintains the faith as a whole was delivered to the church to protect and preserve. Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses are guilty of violating this sacred trust especially in that they teach a great apostasy that corrupted and usurped the true gospel. The problem is their restoration introduces teachings so at odds with historic



orthodoxy and evangelical theology that they are guilty of introducing another gospel (Galatians 1:6, 8-9). Adventism is not so simple.

Adventism maintains it stands in the line of truth re-founded by the Protestant Reformation that is to be completed by Adventism. Adventism believes in an apostasy that corrupted biblical truth. The apostasy centered on the rise of the Roman Catholic Church and the corrupting influences of paganism adopted by the Roman Church. This was the fulfillment of Paul's prophetic warning in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 – "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come, until the rebellion (*apostasia*) occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction" (see *The Great Controversy*, 1950, pgs. 49-50).

The nominal conversion of Constantine, . . . caused great rejoicing; and the world, cloaked with a form of righteousness, walked into the church. Now the work of corruption rapidly progressed. Paganism, while appearing to be vanquished, became the conqueror. . . Her doctrines, ceremonies, and superstitions were incorporated into the faith and worship of the professed followers of Christ. . . . (and) To secure worldly gains and honors, the church was led to seek the favor and support of . . . the representative of Satan – the bishop of Rome. (*The Great Controversy*, 50; see pgs. 49-60, 571).

Finally, the ultimate apostasy will occur in the last days.

The Protestants of the United States will be foremost in stretching their hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power; and under the influence of this threefold union, this country will follow in the steps of Rome in trampling on the rights of conscience. (*The Great Controversy*, 588).

At the center of the final apostasy will be the persecuted remnant of commandment-keepers that uphold the Sabbath against Sunday. Therefore, Adventism sees itself as not only the restorer of Biblical truth and obedience who will ultimately suffer for doing so, but are the focus and apex of prophetic history just prior to the Second Advent.

Many pseudo-Christian cults and Adventism began their movements from an aberration – the position that God has called out a special people from the fallen body of Christ to preserve and propagate the true or restored gospel in earth's final generations. Such a belief assumes the larger Body of Christ is somehow perverted or astray, heretical or corrupted. The "remnant theology" of Adventism has always struggled with this

concept. One reason why Adventism's teaching on the mark of the beast is so nuanced is Christians will not receive the mark until the world has been fully cognizant of the Sabbath truth and Sunday counterfeit, thereby accepting "Sundaykeepers" as true Christians now, but blinded due to lack of knowledge.

### **Entrusted, Not Lost**

The history of Christianity is not perfect and full of false teaching and confusion. However, the faith it has always possessed, and often neglected and confused, has always been there whether it was seen or not. The entrustment of the gospel and foundational Christian teaching to the universal church has and does continue to exist. The restoration efforts of certain groups, including Adventism, actually has confused the situation more, and has resulted in further confusion of Bible truth by the introduction of new truth or resurrecting long dead and forgotten heretical or aberrant teaching.

The Worldwide Church of God has accomplished the task of surrendering its own aberrant theology to join the family of orthodox churches – why not Adventism? Will it happen? Only if the denomination can surrender its uniqueness.