

Are Adventists Evangelical?

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The case of Ellen White in the 1890s



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Who is an Evangelical? Are Seventh-day Adventists Evangelical?

Evangelicalism is often traced back to the eighteenth-century movement in the Church of England that created the Evangelical Party inside Anglicanism and found expression in the ministry of John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770).¹ Without doubt, the Evangelicals “released into the Church of England a fresh outburst of religion which resembled that of the primitive church more closely than anything else,”² and Wesley determinedly sought to recover the genius of early Christianity. Whitefield’s emphasis upon the “irremediable sinfulness” of the human condition and the effectiveness of Christ’s salvation is also characteristic of much Evangelicalism. Eighteenth-century Evangelicals frequently restated such Protestant Reformation emphases as conversion, the supremacy of Scripture, and gospel preaching.

David Bebbington gives a more limited yet useful definition: “There are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”³

If such are the marks of Evangelicalism, are Seventh-day Adventists

Evangelical? Adventism arose in mid-nineteenth-century America with a decidedly Evangelical self-understanding that its mission was to preach the gospel in all the world and “then shall the end come” (Matt. 24:14; cf. Rev. 14:6, 7). But such an observation only begins to answer the question. Even this article does not debate whether or not Adventists as a Christian denomination are Evangelical; it simply presents evidence that Ellen Gould White (1827-1915), the movement’s most prominent author, was Evangelical.

Primitive Christianity

Ellen White gave lifelong emphasis to the idea that Christians should recover or restore the essence of New Testament Christianity. Her writings present the teachings of Jesus and the apostles as the ideal toward which the church should now strive to return. No doubt she was deeply influenced in this regard by John Wesley, having been raised in a devout Methodist Episcopal family in Portland, Maine. Also, the “restorationism” of Thomas and Alexander Campbell was a potent influence in North America during her early life, and confronted her directly through the thinking of James White (1821-1881), the Millerite preacher whom she married in 1846. When James White became a sabbatarian Adventist, he retained the determination to restore New Testament belief and life that characterized his former denomination, the Christian

Connexion, during its early decades.⁴

The 1888 edition of Ellen White's *Great Controversy* was widely sold and avidly read by Adventists during the 1890s. In it she interpreted Christianity in terms of its ideal state during the early centuries, its perceived apostasy during the Dark Ages, and its restoration by the Protestant Reformation. Her constant appeal was for her generation to so yield to Christ and His truth that they would experience "such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times."⁵

The Protestant Reformation

White's publication of *The Great Controversy* also brought three decades of her literary endeavor to a high point. Beginning in 1858 with a volume containing 219 pages,⁶ the organizing principle of her major writings was the concept of a conflict between good and evil. On one side was Satan and his forces; on the other side Christ and His forces.⁷ The war, which had begun in heaven, was transferred to this earth with the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. Thereafter, biblical and Christian history could be best understood, White contended, in terms of that cosmic controversy. Although the conflict was recounted in summary form during 1858, almost immediately White began to retell the story in greater detail. Whereas the account filled four volumes totalling 1,700 pages between 1870 and 1884,⁸ its final telling would require at least eight volumes filling 4,300 pages.⁹ The 1888 book, treating the Christian Era from the end of the apostolic age to the setting up of the kingdom of God, was revised in 1907 and 1911. However, since its essential interpretation of Christian history remained constant, any one of the various editions of this particular volume adequately conveys White's formulation.

That interpretation was made more graphic by White's travels in Europe from 1885 to 1887, which helped her to describe the major people and events of the Protestant Reformation with

greater force. Martin Luther was presented as a towering figure who fearlessly attacked the doctrine of salvation by works and courageously proclaimed justification by faith. This, with his fidelity to Scripture, made Luther a shining light in his time, a person through whom God spoke.¹⁰ Other reformers shared in the struggle on the side of truth and righteousness. In his day John Wesley continued the unrelenting war against evil.¹¹

Thus Ellen White created for Adventists a theology of history that invested the leaders of the Reformation and their spiritual descendants with archetypal significance.

The Scriptures

White's doctrine of Scripture was shaped by her concept of the Protestant Reformation and honed by the ideas of John Wesley in particular. She declared the sufficiency, clarity, and authority of the Bible, and emphasized the responsibility of every per-

soned significance in relation to her concept of eschatology. Thus she warned that only "those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict."¹³ But some Adventists acted as though White's definitions of faith and duty were easier to follow than those of the Scriptures. Such individuals were on occasion rebuked by their prophet. Speaking to a conference of church leaders in the United States, White enjoined them bluntly:

"I do not ask you to take my words. Lay Sister White to one side. Do not quote my works again as long as you live until you can obey the Bible. When you make the Bible your food, your meat, and your drink, when you make its principles the elements of your character, you will know better how to receive counsel from God. I exalt the precious Word before you today. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, 'Sister White said this,' and, 'Sister White said that.' Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands."¹⁴

**"These are our themes—
Christ crucified for our
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dead, Christ our interces-
sor before God."**

The cross of Christ

White challenged her contemporaries to focus upon God's love expressed in Jesus Christ, and to present a wide range of Bible teachings, such as conversion and the Second Advent. But a major refrain throughout the 1890s reiterated the centrality of the cross.

"The sinner must ever look toward Calvary; and with the simple faith of a little child, he must rest in the merits of Christ, accepting His righteousness and believing in His mercy."¹⁵

"These are our themes—Christ crucified for our sins, Christ risen from the dead, Christ our intercessor before God; and closely connected with these is the office work of the Holy Spirit, the representative of Christ, sent forth with divine power and gifts for men."¹⁶

Thus, to White the cross was the foundation of the Christian faith, a manifestation of the love of God, and a measure of the value of a human soul. All the blessings of the present and future life, she declared, come to

son to go directly to the Scriptures for truth.

"It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth, and then to walk in the light and encourage others to follow his example. We should day by day study the Bible diligently, weighing every thought and comparing scripture with scripture. With divine help we are to form our opinions for ourselves as we are to answer for ourselves before God."¹²

This responsibility linked the doctrine of Scripture with another crucial Reformation concept: the priesthood of all believers. In addition, White gave to the study of Scripture a height-

us stamped with the cross. Not only is the cross the center of all religious institutions on earth; it will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout eternity.¹⁷

Righteousness by faith

Adventists' respect for both Luther and Wesley has often become volatile when placed within the framework of Adventist eschatology, a fact illustrated by a debate that has flourished for more than a century. The questions have been more easily asked than answered. What is the actual condition of the sinner? What is the relation between justification and sanctification? What, after all, is Christian perfection, and how is it achieved? Such issues have proved to be hardy perennials because Adventists believed they must find answers that fitted the situation of Christians who expected to be alive on earth at the cataclysmic return of Jesus Christ.

A painstaking doctoral study recently concluded that the nineteenth-century Adventist notion of original sin "developed along Arminian and conditionalist line and emphasized actual sin more than ontological sin."¹⁸ Thus, it seemed natural for some Adventists to emphasize sanctification as embodying the Christian's primary duty: to overcome particular sins. On the other hand, White enunciated a doctrine of human depravity that necessitated justification by faith in Luther's terms. During its early decades Adventism too often assumed that it had no problem in its soteriology. After all, its mission seemed to pivot on the need to warn Christians about the nature and implications of last-day truths. But by the 1880s the church became embroiled in a conflict between rival views of salvation.

That context, particularly apparent at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session, helped make the 1890s "the decade of Christ" for Ellen White. She refocused the content of her first four decades of literary endeavors, producing major books: *Steps to Christ*, 1892; *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 1896; *The Desire*

of Ages, 1898; and *Christ's Object Lessons*, 1900.¹⁹ She also included the essential message of these volumes in other books written during this period and in her constant stream of periodical articles.

Activism

White's personal life exemplified the idea that Christian doctrine both motivated and restrained Christian action. Christianity should, she believed, shape the life of the individual and that of the company of believers, as well as reach out to society as a whole. Mention of three dimensions of her activism must suffice here.

Temperance was a major Protestant issue during the 1890s. That White shared this pervasive concern is abundantly clear from her speeches and published writings. However, her

between the mind and body. While her 1905 volume *The Ministry of Healing*²² was the crowning expression of her ideas on health, it merely put between two covers the concepts that she often enunciated during the 1890s.

Another strand of White's writings has been compiled in a 340-page volume, *Welfare Ministry: Instruction in Christian Neighborhood Service*. White spent the 1890s in Australia. These were years of great challenge for Christians, because of labor disputes, depression, and droughts. White's time in Melbourne, Sydney, and Cooranbong gave her opportunity to meet firsthand some of "the poor," "the unfortunate," and "the outcasts" of society.²³ She also took a lead in assisting those Adventists whose employment was terminated as they began to keep Saturday as their Sabbath.

In White's mind there was an intimate relation between the mission of the church and its duty to the poor. "It is not possible," she argued, "for the heart in which Christ abides to be destitute of love."²⁴

Conclusion

Was Ellen White Evangelical? If to be Evangelical is to be motivated and restrained by a sense of faith and duty similar to Luther,

Wesley, and the Evangelical Party in Anglicanism, the answer must be yes. Her doctrine of Scripture, her analysis of the sinful nature of humankind, her idea of righteousness by faith, her methodical attempts to express the implications of the gospel in word and deed—all bear stronger testimony than do any countervailing factors.

On July 30, 1901, White confided in her diary:

"The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light which streams from the cross of Calvary, and in connection with the wondrous, central truth of the Saviour's atonement. Those who study the Redeemer's wonderful sac-

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definition of temperance was broader than that of most others. "True temperance teaches us to abstain entirely from that which is injurious, and to use judiciously only healthful and nutritious articles of food,"²⁰ she declared in 1866. That definition remained important and unchanged, and is made even clearer in the 191-page compilation of her lifetime comments on the topic of temperance.²¹

A closely related subject, health, did more than influence the Adventists to found hospitals and manufacture health foods. Such institutions created a visible face whereby the public came to recognize the movement in many parts of the world. White's broad-ranging assertions motivated her associates to seek to understand the principles of healthful living, the use of natural remedies, and the relationship

rifice grow in grace and knowledge.

"I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption,—the Son of God uplifted on the cross of Calvary. This is to be the theme of every discourse."²⁵

Probably such cross-centeredness is the most essential feature of Evangelicalism. While contending that Ellen White belongs among the Evangelicals, I wish to also state unequivocally that not all Adventists should be so classified. To ask if Adventists are Evangelical is akin to asking if Anglicans are Evangelical; the answer must be yes and no. Despite Seventh-day Adventist protestations about a unity that to some observers has seemed like uniformity, both Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals have flourished within the movement. Yet it is instructive to ponder the significance of the fact that Ellen White, Adventism's most notable author and one of its key founders, was clearly an Evangelical. ■

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¹ B. L. Shelley, "Evangelicalism," in Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 413-416.

² Alexander C. Zabriskie, *Anglican Evangelicalism* (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1943), p. 21.

³ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-17.

⁴ I. Daniel Rupp, *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), pp. 166-170; David Edwin Harrell, Jr., "Restorationism and the Stone-Campbell Tradition," in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), vol. 2, pp. 845-858. The Christian Connexion metamorphosed into the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

⁵ Note the initial statement of these ideas during the 1850s, and their subsequent development up to Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1888), especially p. 464. Cf. also the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy*.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels* (Battle Creek: James White, 1858).

⁷ Joseph Battistone, *The Great Controversy Theme in E. G. White Writings* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1978), is a useful study of this emphasis.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Publishing, 1870); *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. Life, Teaching and Miracles of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Publishing, 1877); *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. The Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Publishing, 1878); *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan From the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1884).

⁹ ———, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1888); *Patriarchs and Prophets or the Great Conflict Between Good and Evil as Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old* (Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1890); *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Melbourne, Australia: Echo Publishing, [1896]); *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1898); *Christ's Object Lessons* (Melbourne: Echo Publishing, [1900]); *The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911); *The Captivity and Restoration of Israel; The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Lives of Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1916).

¹⁰ ———, *The Great Controversy* (1888 ed.), p. 292; cf. pp. 120-170, 185-210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-264.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 598.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 593, 594.

¹⁴ Manuscript 43, 1901, in *Ellen G. White Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1990), vol. 5, p. 141. White's authority in relation to Scripture was discussed with vigor in the Adventist/Evangelical dialogues during the 1950s. See *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), pp. 26-28, 89-98. For a more recent scholarly perspective, see Roy E. Graham, *Ellen G. White: Cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (New York: Peter Lange, 1985), pp. 140-184.

¹⁵ *Review and Herald*, Mar. 20, 1894, p. 177; cf. *Review and Herald*, Mar. 19, 1895, pp. 177, 178.

¹⁶ Ellen White to Edson White (Sept. 25, 1895), p. 2. See also White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 186.

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), p. 22; cf. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., a segment written in 1895), pp. 91-98.

¹⁸ Edwin Harry Zachrisson, "Seventh-day Adventists and Original Sin: A Study of the Early Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of the Effect of Adam's Sin on His Posterity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1984), p. 3; cf. pp. 7-

13, 396-401, 406-409.

¹⁹ White, *Steps to Christ* was first published by Fleming H. Revell in New York, 1892. Publication details of the other volumes are given in note 9.

²⁰ *The Health Reformer*, April 1877, p. 107.

²¹ *Temperance as Set Forth in the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1949).

²² White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn.).

²³ *Welfare Ministry: Instruction in Neighborhood Service* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), pp. 167-260. For a glimpse of the historical context, see Alwyn Fraser, "The Australian 1890s," in Gary Land, ed., *The World of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1987), pp. 226-243.

²⁴ White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), p. 384.

²⁵ Manuscript 70, 1901, p. 4. See also Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1955), p. 221.

Why the church fails to reach the world

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the everlasting gospel." This gospel, which is the good news that Jesus died for our sins and gives us eternal life when we believe in Him, is simple and complete. This gospel is the answer to secular people's search for meaning. But secular people want more than pious platitudes. They want to see this gospel believed and practiced in loving, kind, and considerate people.

God wants numbers. He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Those numbers will come only as we each one, individually, fall on the Rock Christ Jesus, live by grace each day, and allow Him to develop His character within us. When secular people see something different in our attitudes, not just our profession, many will inquire as to why the difference. Then we can unfold to them the joy and privilege of living for Jesus. ■