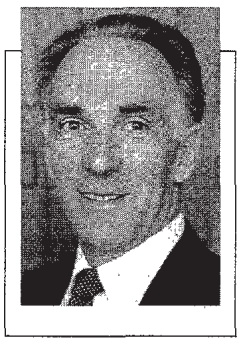
Does our past embarrass us?

Arthur N. Patrick

Is our theological history an embarrassment to present faith and proclamation? How do we bridge the chasm between faith and history of faith?



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Seventh-day Adventists are a pilgrim people upon whom the past and the future impinge constantly. Part of our pastoral commission is to help our people remember the journeys of faith that lie behind us, and to explore with them the terrain of the future in the combined light of history and Bible prophecy.

Early Christians were certain that the past experiences of God's people had continuing significance. Paul was convinced that the history of Israel was not simply an example for believers, but that it was recorded as a warning to those "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11, NIV).

Early Adventists grasped this idea and applied it to their theological and ecclesiological development as they sought to learn from both Jewish and Christian history. Our most important periodical, the *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald,* was designed in 1850 with a sense of the past as well as the present: it proposed to review the rise of the Second Advent movement and to herald the seventh day of the week as the Bible Sabbath. In 1858, with the publication of *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels,* Ellen White began a new phase of her lifetime focus on history. Major revisions of this work, produced in 1884, 1888, and 1911, helped Adventists better understand the Lord's leading throughout Christian history in general, and within their own heritage in particular. In 1903 Ellen White declared: "We must study to find out the best way in which to take up the review of our experiences from the beginning of our work." [1] Such injunctions have led Adventist publications to make frequent reference to our heritage.

But during recent decades, recourse to the past has been fraught with peril as well as promise. This problem is not unique to Seventh-day Adventists. Indeed, during the second half of the twentieth century many areas of Christian history have undergone fresh scrutiny, often with traumatic results for believers. For instance, a recent article analyzed the ramifications resulting from "the maturation of evangelical historiography and the phenomenon of observer-participant history." [2] Another article, after listing the important changes that occurred in the short period between 1960 and 1980, concluded that it is no longer adequate to see history as "an act of piety," laudatory in tone and compilatory in nature. Nostalgic antiquarians writing triumphalist or polemical accounts aid the burial of the past, but this is unacceptable to a generation that demands perceptive analysis. No longer do "the traditional themes of heroic survival and unity in the face of many foes" speak to an age that is suspicious of hagiography.[3]

How should we relate to the history of our faith? Does our church have closet doors better left closed?

In 1970 A. Graham Maxwell pointed out that at great expense the Adventist Church has developed a body of people willing and able to examine critically the movement of which they are a part. Dr. Maxwell also observed that in the past "no religious movement has been able to

survive beyond this point without serious loss of unity and sense of mission." [4] Since 1972 our church has planned and opened archival facilities at its headquarters and in major centers around the world. This has made it possible for trained historians to use primary source materials in the writing of observer-participant accounts of the past, thus helping the maturing process of Adventist historiography.

Adventist history is the story of Adventist belief and direction. The story traces the impact of theological ideas on believers and their world. It demarcates passionate struggles and great victories at various levels—personal, theological, organizational, missiological. It shows how the Lord led us, taught us, transformed us, chastised us, and moved us forward. Too often we tend to forget the ups and downs of the past, and imagine that our doctrines have been static. This failure to perceive the nature and extent of historical development of faith, doctrine, and practice in the Adventist Church has caused a chasm of misunderstanding between the faith of many Adventists and the realities of their heritage.

The problem has evoked a number of responses. Some earnest believers deny the existence of the chasm and seek to silence or discipline those who discover or describe it. Others are so troubled by the chasm that they refuse to deal with the past intelligently, and at times abandon the church. Yet others seek to bridge the chasm between the present and the past.

We may applaud the motives of those who state that Adventist faith has not experienced developmental growth and change. Good motives, however, do not necessarily make a position valid. History testifies that we have had the courage to change when it was necessary to do so, and that change or growth in itself need not be equated with collapse. A few examples from the past will illustrate the point.

Evidences of a chasm

The need to understand the development of Adventist doctrine is aptly illustrated by the "shut door" interpretation of 1844. This idea has a unique importance for Adventism because of its bearing on issues that are central to our movement's identity—the doctrine of the sanctuary, the role of Ellen White, and missiology. The earliest report of Ellen White's first vision had references to the shut door theory. James White's letters from 1845 onward stressed the significance of the doctrine for Adventism. Uriah Smith's apologetic writings during the 1860s gave a more durable and systematic form to the doctrine. As a result, the shut door doctrine has provided critics of Seventh-day Adventism, from Millerite times to the present, with one of their most convenient offensive weapons.

Yet today few of us would talk about the shut door theory with any theological enthusiasm. In fact, we have an anomalous situation: official Adventist literature until recently has been loath to admit the existence of a chasm between the faith of believers and the facts of history in this area. However, since the International Prophetic Guidance Workshop in 1982 there has been a serious attempt to understand the problem. Instead of denying its existence or underrating its reality, we can now admit that God led our pioneers step by step, and that the shut door concept helped them maintain a sense of identity during a time of difficult transition.[5] This approach helps us to face our history honestly and creatively, and to interpret the approach of our pioneers toward theology. To relate to history thus is to equip ourselves better in the fulfillment of our pastoral commission.

A second example of the chasm that developed between the past and the present may be cited from a different area—the precious doctrine of righteousness by faith. Beginning around 1950, there has been a continual emphasis on Christ our righteousness and on justification by faith. Efforts have been made to recapture the actual teachings of A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner on justification and sanctification, and no effort has been spared in the reproduction of their writings. But a careful reading of their presentations, so needed when they wrote, has been disappointing for many Adventists. Their writings do not fit the need of the church in the way they once did. Only in the light of history do those writings become cogent. The Lord has continued to lead His people, and that guidance is more fully brought home to us, for instance, in "The Dynamics of Salvation" statement first published in the *Adventist Review,* July 31, 1980.[6]

Let us draw a third illustration, this time from the area of science. Most of the 25 books written by George McCready Price affirm the doctrine of creation over against the theories of evolution. This emphasis is a continuing necessity. But some of the issues now in focus and the arguments we offer are quite different from those current in the Price era. From 1902 Price's "theme song" declared: "The arrangement of the fossils in the rocks is merely a taxonomic, or classification, series, a cross section, if you will, of the life of the antediluvian world." [7] But informed Adventists who currently continue Price's crusade for creationism generally agree that there is some sort of order in the geologic column. Instead of devoting their energies to denying geologic structure, they try to explain why it is present.[8] So we do well to avoid being dogmatic about matters that may be merely our interpretation rather than the explicit teaching of Scripture. Effective pastors nurture their flocks; they do not divide them by dogmatic assertions of controversial ideas.

A fourth example, also relating to science, is even more graphic. In the 1860s Uriah Smith sought to defend Ellen White from 52 objections raised by her critics. James White applauded Smith's articles in the *Review and Herald* and sold them widely when they were reprinted in book form. In one of those articles, Smith defended Ellen White's statement on the amalgamation of man and beast. He not only contended that amalgamation was a fact but also declared that its "effect is still visible in certain races of men," and identified examples from peoples living on two continents. Smith further claimed support for his theory from naturalists who found it impossible "to tell just where the human ends and the animal begins." [9]

That was history. Now look at a recent analysis. With remarkable courage and clarity, Gordon Shigley has recounted the history of Smith's apologetic on this point, and noted the various stances that Adventists have taken since Smith's book was published.[10] Probably no one would contend today that amalgamation is a fact. To do so would suggest that one has failed to profit by the wealth of information that God has made available on creation science. Even so, a proper understanding of the history and development of doctrine would lead us to consider Uriah Smith's dilemma sympathetically, and perhaps even to appreciate whatever may have led him to his position. Such a stance would make it possible to disagree with Smith on amal-

gamation, without necessarily calling into question his historic contribution to the church or our confidence in our past.

Fifth, during the 1970s Adventists were confronted with fresh data relating to health reform, again indicative of the chasm that lay between the church's faith and its history. In *Prophetess of Health* Ronald Numbers focused on some of the problematic issues.[11] Some members and ministers were troubled deeply by some of Numbers' findings. Scholars faced tough issues on sources and interpretations. Slowly the church was made aware that health reform, like our other doctrines, experienced gradual development over many decades before reaching its present status, and that this development took place in response to varying stimuli.

Relating to prophetic ministry

To a large extent the chasm of misunderstanding between present Adventist faith and early Adventist history relates to the prophetic ministry of Ellen White. A wealth of new data concerning her life and writings has surfaced in the past 20 years, leading to interpretations and conclusions that may seem at variance with previous positions. For example, prior to 1970 most believers accepted the following statements with little or no hesitation:

1. Ellen White's writings make a striking appeal to timeless truth.
2. They contain certain unique elements.
3. Her writings on health placed Seventh-day Adventists on vantage ground by relating bodily health to basic spiritual well-being and by pointing out numerous paths to right living.
4. She made effective use of the Bible in her writings.
5. She often helped the church develop and express its theology.
6. She retained control over her literary output.
7. Her writings reveal a remarkable literary beauty.

Are these statements totally adequate for today? Recent studies[12] seem to indicate that they are not. In fact, conclusions from some of these studies argue for some change or modification to the above statements, somewhat along the following lines:

1. Ellen White's writings make a striking appeal to timeless truth even though they are historically conditioned to a significant degree.
2. They contain certain unique elements even though they are related in an evident way to both Adventist and non-Adventist literature of her time.
3. Her writings on health placed Seventh-day Adventists on vantage ground by relating bodily health to basic spiritual well-being and by pointing out numerous paths to right living, even though she reflected some of the ideas of her Adventist and non-Adventist contemporaries.
4. She made effective use of the Bible in her writings even though she employed Scripture in a variety of ways, not all of which express the meaning and intent of the Bible.[13]
5. While she often helped the church develop and express its theology, her doctrinal understandings underwent both growth and change during her lifetime of ministry.[14]
6. She retained a position of control over her literary output, but her literary assistants and advisors did have more than a minor mechanical role in the preparation of her writings for publication.
7. Her writings reveal a remarkable literary beauty, but her use of sources and the role she assigned her assistants/advisors indicate that this literary excellence should not be used as a proof of her divine inspiration.

Although the examples given in this article are few in number and are enunciated only in brief form, they illustrate the kind of bridge-building that is essential to care for the chasm that exists between the present faith of the Adventist believer and a historical understanding of Adventist thought. To effectively bring about this building is the pastor's responsibility. This is why pastoral training should include an understanding of "the origin and subsequent modification of characteristic Seventh-day Adventist teachings."[15] But this endeavor should not cease with seminary training; it is a valid part of a pastor's lifetime commmission.

Some earnest believers, unable to live with the reality of doctrinal change and growth, conclude that our heritage is unworthy and needs to be disregarded. They seldom refer to Adventist history or the writings of Ellen White, and they feel a sense of disquiet when others do so. This struggle between faith and history has been a crucial factor in the loss of scores of ministers and members within the past decade. And the struggle can be met effectively only by recognizing the reality of the chasm, on the one hand, and by accepting the need for change and growth, on the other. To deny the reality of the chasm is to perpetuate the problem. To alienate from our heritage is to experience the loss of spiritual identity. Responsible shepherding requires that we bridge the chasm.

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Objectives in bridge-building

If the chasm between faith and history is to be bridged effectively, we need to keep in focus a clear set of objectives. Our study of faith and history should ever remain an exciting quest for:

- *Truth*—that is, historical accuracy.
- *Insight*—that is, an understanding of how the past illumines the present and the future.
- *Stability*—that is, a sufficient grasp of the relevant data so that new items of information do not threaten our belief system.
- *Identification*—that is, a pervading sense that Adventist history is our personal heritage, and hence precious.
- *Commitment*—that is, a conviction that the Adventist Church has a mission worthy of our best talents and energies.
- *Awe*—that is, faith that the God of Scripture and Jesus Christ have led and continue to lead the Second Advent movement.
- *Celebration*—that is, a desire to commemorate the integrity, achievements, and faith of the past—and thus to inform and inspire the present.

The task of the pastor as interpreter of the past and spy of the future is a demanding one. It calls for the skills of a bridge-builder; it involves the patience of the

saints; it requires an exercise of living faith.

And it can be done, especially if we make one of Adventism's famous affirmations our very own: "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history." [16]■

[1] Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 145.

[2] Leonard I. Sweet, "Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: The New Evangelical Historiography," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. LVI, No. 3 (Fall 1988), pp. 397-416.

[3] J. D. Bollen, A. E. Cahill, Bruce Mansfield, and Patrick O'Farrell, "Australian Religious History, 1960-1980," *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (June 1980), pp. 8-44.

[4] A. Graham Maxwell, "The Distinctive Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," in Vern Carner and Gary Stanhiser, pubs. *The Statue of Christ: Essays in Honor of Edward Heppenstall* (Loma Linda: privately printed and published, 1970), pp. 89-96.

[5] Adventist writers including F. D. Nichol, Arthur L. White, Rolf J. Poehler, Ingemar Linden, and Douglas Hackleman have dealt with this subject. See especially Robert W. Olson, "The 'Shut Door' Documents" (Washington, D.C.: E. G. White Estate, 1982).

[6] The statement resulted from the work of a consultation group on righteousness by faith, and has since been republished in various parts of the world in periodicals and pamphlets.

[7] Harold W. Clark, *Crusader for Creation: The Life and Writings of George McCready Price* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1966), pp. 17, 18.

[8] This approach became important not long after Price's death, as shown in Harold G. Coffin, *Creation: Accident or Design?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1969), p. 108. See also pages 174-183 for Clark's explanation.

[9] Uriah Smith, *The Visions of Mrs. E. G. White: A Manifestation of Spiritual Gifts According to the Scriptures* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1868), pp. 102-105.

[10] Gordon Shigley, "Speciation by Amalgamation: A History of the Controversy Surrounding Ellen G. White's Amalgamation Statements" (Hong Kong: South China Union College, 1979). A shortened version of Shigley's research appeared as "Amalgamation of Man and Beast," *Spectrum*, vol. 12, No. 4 (June 1982), pp. 10-19.

[11] Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

[12] Some of the best studies are available in Roger W. Coon, ed., *Anthology of Recently Published Articles on Selected Issues in Prophetic Guidance 1980-1988*, 6th ed. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University, 1989).

[13] Raymond F. Cottrell, "Ellen G. White's Evaluation and Use of the Bible," in Gordon M. Hyde, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Committee, 1974), pp. 142-161.

[14] Alden Thompson, "From Sinai to Golgotha," *Adventist Review*, December 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, 1981.

[15] The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, has moved wisely to include the course "Development of SDA Theology" as part of its Master of Divinity curriculum. See *SDA Theological Seminary Bulletin*, 1988-1989, p. 89.

[16] Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943), p. 196.

Christ our righteousness

Ellen G. White

Ellen G. White comments on righteousness—and particularly justification—by faith.

This article is a reprint of Ellen G. White's Manuscript 21, 1891 *(Manuscript Release 747).*

I have attended the closing meeting of the ministerial Bible school—a school composed of conference delegates and those who have been attending the ministerial institute. At this meeting several were called upon to say something. Remarks appropriate for the occasion were made by Elders Olsen, Waggoner, Prescott, and Smith; also by Elder Haskell, who has been mercifully preserved during his tour around the world.

I spoke in regard to matters that were deeply impressing my mind. I referred to the fear that had been expressed by some who were not members of the ministerial institute, and who had not been present at all the Bible classes of the school—a fear that there was danger of carrying the subject of justification by faith altogether too far, and of not dwelling enough on the law.

Judging from the meetings that I had been privileged to attend, I could see no cause for alarm; and so I felt called upon to say that this fear was cherished by those who had not heard all the precious lessons given, and that therefore they were not warranted in coming to such a conclusion. None of the members of the class who had been studying the Word to learn "What saith the Scriptures?" entertained any such fear. The Bible, and the Bible alone, has been the subject of investigation in this school. Every lesson has been based, not on the ideas and the opinions of men, but on a plain "Thus saith the Lord."

Many remarks have been made to the