

Is Seventh-Day Adventism a Cult?

Colossians 2:16-23

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I'm just going to read a short passage from Colossians 2 without comment to start with. I want to revisit the subject of Seventh-Day Adventism this morning, and I'm going to start with Colossians 2:16-23. This is a key biblical text, warning us against any cult or -ism or philosophy of religion that stresses human works—things like legal obedience, ceremonies, dietary rules, asceticism, or other works you can perform and supposedly achieve holiness through ritualized self-denial. I'm reading from Colossians 2:16-23:

let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—

21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"

22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

I chose that passage because in the plainest possible language it debunks every one of the principles that are distinctive to Seventh-Day Adventism. Adventism is a self-made religion laden with rules about Sabbath observance, diet, and other lifestyle issues. It is based largely on the visions of a silly woman. It's the embodiment of everything the apostle Paul opposed.

One of the classic works on quasi-Christian cult studies is a book titled *The Four Major Cults*, by Anthony Hoekema. The four cults he deals with are Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Seventh-day Adventism. It intrigues me that all four groups started in America. All of them began in the nineteenth century, in the wake of the religious fervor and perfectionist teaching that followed Charles Finney from New England across Pennsylvania to Oberlin Ohio. It was an era of significant religious

confusion, homebrew doctrines, unchecked error. (Much like the evangelical movement today.) In the words of Scripture, **"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"**—so you had both men and women starting their own religions.

Most of them had deep roots in the superstitions of freemasonry, spiritism, and other occult beliefs. They blended their superstitions with biblical language. They claimed they had some new light received directly from heaven—and people followed them in droves.

The four major cults—Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Seventh-day Adventism—all were born within a 250 mile radius of each other. The seeds of Seventh-Day Adventism were sown first, with a document published in 1822 by William Miller in upstate New York. (It would be forty years before Seventh-Day Adventism would organize formally, but that document in 1822 was the beginning.) Mormonism came along within a decade, in 1830—also in upstate New York. The first official Seventh-Day Adventist Church was formally established in 1863. Then seven years after that, in 1870, the Jehovah's Witnesses got their start in Pittsburgh. The Christian Scientists began in Boston around 1879. All four groups grew quickly.

For most of the twentieth century, evangelicals universally referred to those four groups as cults. All of them claim to have recovered vital truth lost to the church for

centuries. All of them regarded every other denomination as utterly false. And over the years, all of them have made proselytes by feeding on evangelical churches through stealth and deception. They'll claim they believe the same things we do, or they try to hide who they really are. They hate to be called *cults*, and they insist they are really benign and biblical. Lately some of them have lobbied for acceptance among the evangelical mainstream.

The Seventh-Day Adventists were the first and have been the most successful with that strategy. But now Mormons are doing it to. They insist they don't deserve to be written off as a cult; they say they are just another denomination like the Methodists or Lutherans.

But all of these groups are quasi-Christian, sub-orthodox, and they themselves all claim to be the one true church. So they are properly labeled cults. And I believe Seventh-Day Adventism deserves that label as well.

Let's talk about the distinguishing characteristics of a cult. The word *cult* itself simply means "a religious sect or community." But in common usage, especially in evangelical circles, the expression is normally reserved for groups that encourage a kind of obsessive commitment to a very narrow set of doctrines, authoritarian leadership, and their own body of extrabiblical revelation. They are basically closed communities, fully committed to some novel system of doctrine shared by no one else.

We don't generally categorize Roman Catholicism as a cult (even though it fits nearly all those categories), because the errors of Roman Catholicism did not spring up suddenly or recently; they evolved and compounded over centuries. So the word *cult* (in the sense we have come to use the term) doesn't quite fit Roman Catholicism. That doesn't diminish the significance of Roman Catholic errors (which are perhaps even worse than Seventh-Day Adventism's errors). But owing to the antiquity of the Catholic system, we don't generally classify them as a cult.

Anyway, prior to the late 1960s, four major groups came to mind when evangelicals talked about "cults." But starting in the late 1960s, a number of new, smaller (but even more deadly) cults arose. They started making secular news headlines with everything from criminal activities to mass suicides. You had The Children of God, The Branch Davidians, Jim Jones and the Jonestown "People's Temple" sect, The Worldwide Church of God, The Way International, and lots of lesser-known cults (including one that was started by a group who were excommunicated from Grace Church in the 1990s, calling themselves "A true church")—and another one up the road in Santa Clarita: The Tony Alamo Christian Foundation.

Several of the new cults were offshoots of Seventh-Day Adventism—including the Branch Davidians, the Worldwide Church of God, a group called "The Shepherd's Rod," A

group called "The Church of Bible Understanding," and the Seventh-Day Adventist Reform movement. And, as a point of historical interest, Jehovah's Witness founder, Charles Taze Russell, started out as an early Adventist. So Seventh-Day Adventism has always been a breeding ground for new and more dangerous cults.

There has also been a recent proliferation of religious cults that have nothing to do with Christianity—groups like Scientology, Urantia, the Heaven's Gate cult (a group that committed mass suicide in the 1990s), the Rajneesh cult who took over a town in Oregon in the 1990s, the Hare Krishnas, the church of Satan, and literally dozens more. Wikipedia has a list of 270 new religious movements, and most of them could be classified as cults. There are many more, I'm sure.

Last year, when I spoke on the history of Seventh-Day Adventism, I gave this definition of a cult: ***"A cult is an authoritarian, elitist religious sect who teach that salvation hinges on membership in their group, and yet they depart from one or more essential points in the ancient ecumenical creeds."*** Most cults peddle their movement as a recovery of true Christianity, which was lost to the world until they came on the scene. They are now privy to truth that lay hidden in darkness until the light dawned on them. They generally claim that their emergence signals the next phase major in God's plan for the world.

They are often clever and very subtle, deceitful enough **"to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."** They confuse Christians, deceive unbelievers, hurt the testimony of the true church, and muddy the gospel message.

There are four key characteristics that most of the quasi-Christian cults have in common. These are the things to be wary of when someone comes along, teaching doctrines you are not familiar with. And if you see all four of these characteristics together, you know you are dealing with a cult.

First is *extrabiblical revelation*. All the major cults have some source of authority outside the Bible, and this becomes the lens through which they read and interpret Scripture. Therefore, whether they want to admit it or not, the stuff they append to the Bible governs what they can see in the Bible. For Mormons, it's *The Book of Mormon*. For Jehovah's Witnesses, it's the *Watchtower* magazine. For Christian Scientists, it's a book called *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. (That title, by the way, is a dead giveaway. It acknowledges what all these groups believe: They are convinced that their distinctive religious writings hold the only key that can unlock a true understanding of Scripture. That, of course, is the central tenet of the most ancient of all heresies, gnosticism. Every gnostic claims you cannot understand the Bible on its own terms. You need a key, or a guru, or an enlightened leader of some kind to open the true

meaning of Scripture for you. That's the underlying gnostic principle that drives every cult.)

For the Seventh-Day Adventists, the key that unlocks the Bible's true meaning is the voice of their founding prophetess, Ellen G. White. We talked about her influence when we covered the history of the movement. I'll have more to say about her this morning.

But that's the first characteristic of a cult: *extrabiblical revelation*. Here's a second feature all cults share in common: *They believe their sect is the one true church*. Each one claims to be the one true expression of genuine Christianity. Of course, the Mormons and Seventh-Day Adventists will fudge on this claim, because they so badly want acceptance in evangelical circles. But built into the DNA of every true cult is a belief that their group alone represents true Christianity, and all other denominations are apostate.

A third characteristic of the cults is their *superstitious attachment to a self-styled prophet, leader, or novel system of doctrine*. People who belong to cults are spiritually in a state of demonic bondage, and that's obvious because (even when they recognize their leaders are untrustworthy or even guilty of prophesying falsely) they often stay in the cult, constrained by the superstitious fear that if they leave, they might forfeit salvation.

And fourth, all these cults preach *a different gospel*, incompatible with the core gospel truths we find in Scripture.

These cults are not merely in error on some minor point of doctrine or practice: their teaching fatally corrupts the gospel. Most of them mingle grace and works. Others portray Christ as someone other than He truly is.

So those are the four key characteristics of all quasi-Christian cults. If you want them in shortened, alliterated form, here they are: *extrabiblical revelation, elitism, enslavement, and error*. And what I want to do this morning is consider those four characteristics and evaluate whether they truly apply to Seventh-Day Adventism or not. First is:

1. EXTRABIBLICAL REVELATION. DO THEY CLAIM SOME Gnostic-STYLE SECRET THAT THEY HAVE BEEN MADE PRIVY TO?

To answer that question, let's start with a brief review of Seventh-Day Adventist history. (And if you want a more complete summary, you can listen to that first message I did on Seventh-Day Adventism.)

Both the name "adventism" and the roots of the movement come from a widespread belief that flourished in the first half of the 1800s that the second coming of Christ was rapidly drawing near. The word "Adventist" refers to the Second Advent, the return of Christ. An "adventist" is someone who has an obsessive interest in the *timing* of Christ's return. That's never been a healthy fixation. Jesus

Himself said, **"Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only"** (Matthew 24:36). And one chapter later, in Matthew 24:42, He says, **"Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."** Be ready if He delays His coming, and be ready for Him to come sooner than you anticipate. Because no one knows when it will be, and if someone starts giving you a time frame, steer clear.

William Miller was a totally self-trained Baptist lay preacher, converted out of gross heresy, *deism*, without any firm theological grounding. He was obsessed with the second coming and believed he had figured out an exact window of time during which he said Christ would return to earth. Here, in his own words, is how he summarized his teaching: *"My principles in brief, are, that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all the saints, sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844."* He published a document explaining his rationale in 1822, and by the early 1840s, the Millerite movement had expanded into a huge international phenomenon. In one five-month span in 1843, 600,000 copies of Millerite literature were distributed in New York alone. People sold their homes, gave away their possessions, and gave up their livelihoods in order to demonstrate their faith in William Miller's predictions.

Of course, Christ did not return—not in Miller's lifetime; not even in that century. Miller tried adjusting his dates a time or two, but he himself gave up hope of finding a way to adjust his calculations to keep the expectation alive. He died baffled and disillusioned. He never joined the Seventh-Day Adventists himself. To this day, Adventists refer to Miller's failed prediction of the second coming as "The Great Disappointment."

That would seem a pretty shaky foundation on which to found a cult—a false prophecy that culminated in an disappointment and worldwide embarrassment. But the gullibility of spiritually-blinded minds knows no bounds.

The Seventh-Day Adventists simply rebuilt the movement and turned it into a classic cult by justifying William Miller's mistake with a series of false prophecies issued by a prophetess whose qualifications and character were deeply suspect.

Ellen Harmon was twelve years old and an impressionable child when her parents became followers of William Miller in 1840. (She married at age 19, and we know her today by her married name, Ellen G. White.) In 1844, when Adventist expectation was still at its peak, Ellen was a seventeen-year-old. She was subject to fainting spells and already beginning to exhibit an overbearing disposition. When the Great Disappointment made it clear that William Miller's predictions were wrong, Ellen began to experience

visions. These experiences always took place in crowded meeting halls and other public places. She had almost 200 of these seizures. Her son, William C. White, described it this way: "*She would fall helpless to the floor, stop breathing, and yet her heart beat, and she would speak.*"

It was all very melodramatic. William White also wrote this about his mother's visions:

The first one I witnessed as a little boy in the meetinghouse at Roosevelt, New York. Father had given a short talk. Mother had given a short talk. Father prayed; Mother prayed; and as she was praying, I heard that shout, *Glory*. There is nothing like it—that musical, deep shout of *Glory*. She fell backward. My father put his arm under her. In a little while her strength came to her. She stood up in an attitude of one seeing wonderful things in the distance, her face illuminated, sometimes bright and joyous. She would speak with that musical voice, making short comments upon what she was seeing. Then as she saw the darkness in the world, there were sad expressions as she spoke of what she saw. This continued ten or fifteen minutes. Then she caught her breath, breathed deeply several times, and then, after a little season of rest, probably five or ten minutes, during which time Father spoke to the people, she arose and related to the congregation some of the things that had been presented to her.

Ellen White claimed that a supernatural being in the form of a young man guided her through these visions. Adventists today refer to this as "the spirit of Prophecy." Ellen White refers to the spirit as her "accompanying angel." That sounds suspiciously like what Scripture refers to as a "familiar spirit." And given the complexity of her visions and the influence they have had, you do have to wonder if these were demonic visitations—either Satan or one of his messengers, disguised "**as an angel of light**," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:14-15.

If these visions were not demonic, it was all simply play-acting on her part, because her visions are muddled, ambiguous religious-sounding gibberish completely lacking in the clarity and authority of divine revelation.

Anyway, Ellen's visions became the means of regrouping Adventists after the Great Disappointment. She said the Lord had revealed to her that those who *remained* faithful and expectant would soon see the Lord in glory and be taken immediately to heaven, but the door of salvation was now permanently closed to those who rejected William Miller's teaching or lost faith after Miller's predictions failed.

Her prophecies regularly indicated that the Lord's coming was very near. She said the angel promised her that she would be one of those living who would witness the coming of Christ. But her visions over the next few years kept revising the timing. (She blamed the delays and missed

predictions on the unbelief of people who doubted her prophecies.) Ultimately she more or less dropped the subject of *when* the Lord would return. Of course, it goes without saying that she was dead wrong. She died almost exactly a hundred years ago (July 16, 1915), and the Lord still hasn't returned, so these were false prophecies all around.

By 1847, the Whites had fully embraced Saturday Sabbatarianism. So naturally, as her predictions about the timing of Christ's return receded from prominence in her predictions, Sabbatarianism became the issue she stressed as most importance. In her mind, this issue, rather than belief in William Miller's timetables, became the definitive mark of a true believer.

A few short years after she declared the door of salvation closed to everyone outside the cult, Mrs. White evidently began to realize that if she held firmly to the claims she made in that prophecy, there would no way to recruit new members. Also, as time passed and babies were born to church members, there was the dilemma of how to get those children past the closed door and into heaven.

So Ellen's prophecies took on a very elastic property. Her visions were subject to frequent *revisions* and re-interpretations. Ellen herself soon disowned the idea that the door of salvation was *permanently* closed.

I mentioned that her character seems questionable. It wasn't just the changeable prophecies that cast doubt on her

integrity. When we covered the history of the movement, I read a few firsthand accounts of people close to her said who she was a rank hypocrite. She wasn't completely honest about how much she cheated on her own rules about dress and diet. She'd hide the fact that she didn't follow the same rules she imposed on her followers. One of her personal assistants left an unintentionally humorous account of how she repeatedly caught Mrs. White sneaking around, eating oysters and other forbidden foods and indulging in several petty acts of unsanctified behavior during a journey to California by train. And it's clear from what Ellen White wrote about herself that she was a hopeless narcissist with overblown delusions of grandeur.

But here's the thing: The writings of Ellen G. White are nevertheless revered by Seventh-Day Adventists as equal to Scripture in their authority, accuracy, and reliability. Although most Seventh-Day Adventists will try to downplay the stress they place on Ellen White's writings, they do in fact believe Mrs. White was divinely inspired and her books are revelations superior to every other resource and every other truth claim outside the Bible.

And since they read and interpret the Bible through the lens of Mrs. White's supposedly inspired works, her writings in practice have a *higher* authority than Scripture. Scripture simply cannot be used to correct Mrs. White's errors, because Scripture is interpreted by what she wrote. (It's exactly the

same situation you have with Papal infallibility in the Roman Catholic church, the book of Mormon among the Latter-Day Saints, the writings of Mary Baker Eddy in the Christian Science cult, and *The Watch Tower* magazine for Jehovah's Witnesses.)

If you think I am exaggerating, let me read from an article published in *Ministry* magazine, October 1981. Since its first issue in 1928, *Ministry* has been the key periodical written specifically for Seventh-Day Adventist pastors and church leaders. This article was written to confront a trend that peaked some 35 years ago, when some ministers in the denomination were beginning to raise legitimate questions about the reliability of Mrs. White's writings. The article, written by Ron Graybill, a leading Seventh-Day Adventist historian and apologist, reflects the denomination's official position with regard to Mrs. White and her works. The article is titled, "Ellen White's role in doctrine formation," and it says this:

We believe the revelation and inspiration of both the Bible and Ellen White's writings to be of equal quality. The superintendence of the Holy Spirit was just as careful and thorough in one case as in the other. [Then he adds this:] There is, however, a definite distinction to be made between the normative authority of Scripture and the formative authority of Mrs. White's writings in our church. Why should a distinction be made? In the first

place, Ellen White clearly placed the Bible alone in the category of standard and rule for doctrine. Then there are practical reasons for making the distinction. Only if we refrain from using Ellen White as a normative authority for doctrine can we hope to meet other Christians on a common ground and expect them to see the validity of our doctrines.

If you follow his argument, he is saying, quite clearly, that Mrs. White's writings are equal to Scripture in every sense that would matter. But her writings must nevertheless be kept distinct from Scripture, because that's the only way "to meet other Christians on a common ground." In other words, for polemical and apologetical reasons, they can't afford to let on that they believe Mrs. White to be as authoritative as the Bible, because that would undermine Seventh-Day Adventist attempts to solicit agreement and endorsements from evangelicals.

Now I realize it may sound like I'm putting a cynical slant on his argument, but that is clearly what he is implying. If both the Bible and "the revelation and inspiration" of Mrs. White's writings are indeed "of equal quality"—and if you're willing to be honest and up front about what you believe—what would "common ground" have to do with anything? Faithful evangelicals who truly believe in the authority of Scripture don't downplay our conviction that the

Bible is the Word of God in order to find "common ground" with unbelievers.

But Seventh-Day Adventists distribute copies of Ellen White's most famous book, *The Great Controversy*, the way the Gideons distribute the Bible. Over the years I've worked at Grace to You, I've received countless copies of that book (and others by Ellen White). They come regularly in the mail from Seventh-Day Adventists who promise that reading it would awaken John MacArthur to a whole new understanding of the truth. It's a level of veneration Seventh-Day Adventists rarely show for Scripture.

So that's the first characteristic of a cult: *extrabiblical revelation*. They do base their belief system on a gnostic-style secret that they have been made privy to through the visions of Ellen White.

What about characteristic number 2?

2. ELITISM. DO THEY BELIEVE THEIR SECT IS THE ONE TRUE CHURCH?

Here's another principle that is built into the very DNA of Seventh-Day Adventism. Bear in mind that Mrs. White's very first vision, and her first influential prophecy, was that early declaration that the door of salvation was closed to everyone but the Millerites who remained faithful and still believed the prediction even after the Great Disappointment. They were the only ones going to heaven. She claimed she had this vision in December of 1844, just weeks after the Great Disappointment. Here, in her own words, is how she recorded that prophecy. She said:

While praying at the family altar, the Holy Ghost fell on me, and I seemed to be rising higher and higher, far above the dark world. I turned to look for the Advent people in the world, but could not find them—when a voice said to me, "Look again, and look a little higher." At this I raised my eyes and saw a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world. On this path the Advent people were travelling to the City, which was at the farther end of the path. They had a bright light set up behind them at the first end of the path This light shone all along the path, and gave light for their feet so they might not stumble. And if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the City, they were safe. But soon some grew weary, and they said the City

was a great way off, and they expected to have entered it before. . . . Others rashly denied the light behind them, and said that it was not God [who] had led them out so far. The light behind them went out leaving their feet in perfect darkness, and they stumbled and got their eyes off the mark and lost sight of Jesus, and fell off the path down in the dark and wicked world below. It was just as impossible for them to get on the path again and go to the City, as all the wicked world which God had rejected.

They fell all the way along the path one after another . . . Almost forty years later, in 1883, when she was forced for pragmatic reasons to revise that doctrine, she admitted, *"For a time after the disappointment in 1844, I did hold, in common with the advent body, that the door of mercy was then forever closed to the world. . . . I am still a believer in the shut door theory, but not in the sense in which we at first employed the term or in which it is employed by my opponents."* She explained that the door was closed only to those who had seen the light and rejected it prior to 1944. The door was still open for others, as long as they embraced Mrs. White's prophecies when that *new* light was given to them—and the Sabbatarian principle (rather than the timing of the Lord's return) moved to the head of the list.

Obviously, the revised version still retains the same element of elitism. According to the new dogma, all those who knowingly refuse the group's seventh-day

sabbatarianism will be sealed in their unbelief by the mark of the beast, and they will be excluded permanently from any possibility of salvation.

Modern Seventh-Day Adventists don't like to emphasize this idea, but it *is* their official teaching. In the exact words of Mrs. White, "*The worshipers of God will be especially distinguished by their regard for the fourth commandment,*" but "*the worshipers of the beast will be distinguished by their efforts to tear down the Creator's memorial.*" She's talking about the Sabbath. She was convinced, against all the evidence of the New Testament, that the practice of gathering on the first day of the week was a late revision to the law of God. Sunday worship, she insisted, was imposed on the church by a corrupt papacy. Like most Protestants in that era, she considered the Pope antichrist, so she reasoned that Sunday worship corresponds to the mark of the beast. And for her (and millions of Seventh-Day Adventists) Saturday Sabbatarianism is considered the single most important mark of true faith in Christ.

So look at our list: Extrabiblical revelation. *Check.* Elitism. *Check.* How about the third characteristic of cults?

3. ENSLAVEMENT. IS THERE A SUPERSTITIOUS ATTACHMENT TO A SELF-STYLED PROPHET, LEADER, THE GROUP, OR THE DRIVING PRINCIPLE?

The answer to that should be obvious by now. It is virtually impossible to find a credible Seventh-Day Adventist leader who does not give evidence of a slavish devotion to Ellen White, her doctrines, the mythology surrounding her, and even her quirky beliefs.

Seventh-Day Adventism has been in flux with internal doctrinal controversies for at least four decades, and a lot of the discussions within the movement have focused on two issues: Sabbatarianism (which is impossible to justify biblically) and the doctrine of justification by faith, which is impossible to reconcile with the legalism that is at the core of virtually every Seventh-Day Adventist doctrinal distinctive.

Several well-known Adventist leaders over the past four decades have questioned the received doctrines on these matters. The best-known and most influential voice raising questions about Adventist doctrine is an Australian theologian and former Adventist pastor named Desmond Ford. His concerns have to do with issues that lie at the heart of gospel truth—justification by faith, the role of good works, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

He has especially been a critic of a vital Adventist doctrine known as "*investigative judgment.*" This teaching claims that Christ is currently examining and judging His

people's works to determine whether they will be justified or not. It's one of the novelties of Seventh-Day Adventist doctrine that defines the Adventist confession of faith and sets them apart from all other denominations.

Mrs. White claimed that although Christ did not return to earth in 1844, what happened was that He moved from the holy place in the heavenly tabernacle into the holy of holies in heaven. And at that point, He began this process known as *investigative judgment*, reviewing the works of believers with an eye to final judgment.

Remember, in those days Ellen White was teaching that the door of salvation was closed to everyone but the Millerites who kept the faith. But they were to be judged according to their works. So Christ was in heaven reviewing the instant replays or whatever, and as soon as He finished this work, He would return to earth. That would be very soon, the Adventists still insisted.

Anyway, the doctrine of investigative judgment has at its heart this very heavy emphasis on human works, and it's impossible to reconcile with the *biblical* teaching about justification by faith.

But ever since Ellen White first introduced this doctrine, it has been considered one of the pillars of Seventh-Day Adventist belief. Desmond Ford questioned it, and in 1980, he was excommunicated from the cult for doubting that doctrine. He has not been formally a member of the

Seventh-Day Adventist denomination for more than 35 years. And yet he refuses to let go or even acknowledge some of the group's most egregious errors. He is still a Saturday Sabbatarian. He still follows a vegetarian lifestyle and many of Ellen White's odd notions about diet and health. Most of all, he still reveres Ellen White and insists her writings are valuable—if not inspired. He still thinks what this manifestly false prophetess wrote is superior to all other works on the Christian religion.

It is very hard to cut that tie, once you are ensnared in a group like this.

We have a few former Adventists in our church, and all of them will tell you that getting out of the cult is a very frightening and difficult proposition. The elitism that is so prominent in all cults instills a superstitious fear that leaving the group might forever lock a person out of heaven. And in fact, many who leave end up either indifferent or overtly hostile to Christianity in general.

In the 1970s, a wealthy Australian Seventh-Day Adventist named Robert Brinsmead was influenced by Desmond Ford and began questioning Seventh-Day Adventist doctrines. For a while, Brinsmead dabbled in Reformed Theology. He published a journal that got worldwide circulation for a few years was quite good. It was called *Present Truth*, and it featured some hard-to-find writings excerpted from the Puritans and older Reformed authors. The magazine was

free. It was well-edited. And I subscribed to it during my college career. (That magazine gave me my first exposure to Puritan works.) Brinsmead also wrote a very fine critiques of Sabbatarianism.

But after being out of Adventism for a few years Brinsmead began to derail spiritually. He dabbled in neo-orthodoxy and then moved on to Socinianism, and today, he is an elderly recluse who professes no religion at all.

Desmond Ford's son Luke followed an even more sinister path. At one point, he professed conversion to Judaism. Then he too seemed to abandon faith altogether and became a blogger who reported on trends in the adult industry. An article in *Salon* magazine called him "The Matt Drudge of porn." That kind of gross apostasy is the fruit of cultish elitism. A person is totally sold out to a religious group, thinking *I have found The One True Church!* And when the person discovers what he has been taught is actually based on lies, false prophecies, and unbiblical doctrines, it's hard to shake off the disillusionment and believe anything with real conviction. When you finally manage to cut that strong tie that binds you to the cult, if you don't embrace the true Christ with genuine faith and a renewed heart, you will have no anchor whatsoever.

On the other hand, even if you get excommunicated like Desmond Ford, assuming you can stave off complete

disenchantment with all religion, it's still hard to let go of the belief system you were so sold out to. That's a major problem with *any* cult.

But it's especially difficult to leave a legalistic group like the Seventh-Day Adventists. Legalism is a powerful bondage that is very, very difficult to break. Any of the former Seventh-Day Adventists here will affirm that.

So let's review: these are the features of practically every cult: *extrabiblical revelation, elitism, enslavement* to the group and its rules. Seventh-Day Adventism gets bad marks in every one of those categories. What about that fourth characteristic of a cult?

4. ERROR. DO THEY OFFER A DIFFERENT GOSPEL, A DIFFERENT JESUS, OR SOME OTHER KIND OF HETERODOXY ON A SIMILARLY GRAND SCALE?

Here again, we cannot avoid the conclusion that Seventh-Day Adventism qualifies as a cult. They are not as blatantly heretical as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, perhaps—and certainly they aren't as far off track as Christian Science. But the subtlety of the Seventh-Day Adventist error actually makes this cult a more immediate threat in our circle of fellowship.

Seventh-Day Adventism is a close parallel to the heresy Paul confronted in his epistle to the Galatians. In the seminar

I taught last year on Seventh-Day Adventism last year, I remarked that *the Sabbath is to Adventists what circumcision was to the Galatian heretics.*

The error of the Judaizers in Paul's time would probably seem trivial to the average evangelical today. They were apparently churchmen who had some kind of affiliation with the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem. They didn't deny the deity or humanity of Christ. They freely confessed that He was Israel's Messiah. They believed in the resurrection. They affirmed the necessity of faith, and they no doubt spoke with great passion about divine grace, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life. They were advocates of holiness, and they appealed to the Scriptures as authoritative.

There was only one significant difference between Paul and these heretics: Paul taught that good works were the fruit of justifying faith; the Judaizers insisted that good works were instrumental in justification. To say it another way, they reversed the order of salvation. They said faith begets works, and faith plus good works beget justification.

Scripture says faith *alone* begets justification, and good works are the fruit of God's regenerating work. Romans 4:4-5: **"to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.** [In other words, if you think you can earn sufficient righteousness through your own good works, you will get precisely the wage your works deserve. But—] **to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the**

ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." The word *alone* in the expression "justification by faith alone" is the hinge on which orthodoxy swings. Virtually every cult and every sub-orthodox religion goes astray doctrinally for precisely this reason: they deny the principle of *sola fide*—the truth that faith is the *only* instrument of justification. Romans 4:5 again: "**To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."**

Seventh-Day Adventism teaches a grab-bag full of errors—not just Saturday Sabbatarianism. They also deny the doctrine of eternal punishment, which means they write off pretty much everything Jesus ever said about hell. They believe in soul sleep and conditional immortality. (In other words, they teach that the human soul can have no conscious existence apart from the body, and they claim the wicked dead simply cease to exist.) They also deny the security of salvation. I mentioned in that earlier seminar that Mrs. White claimed Satan, not Christ, bears the sins of redeemed people. She also taught a unique kind of perfectionism that in effect saddled Christians with all the baggage of the law and made assurance of heaven impossible. She wrote:

Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give

ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.

One of the standard texts on Seventh-Day Adventist doctrine is a book by Francis D. Nichol, titled *Answers to Objections*. He writes,

it is not an accurate statement of our position to say that we hold that a person cannot be saved unless he keeps the seventh-day Sabbath. Here is our position: Only those will be saved who, having been redeemed by the grace of Christ, walk in obedience to all the light that God sheds on their way.

The clear implication is that our own merits will be weighed to determine whether we are saved or not. It is the same error built into the doctrine of investigative judgment. It flatly contradicts what Scripture teaches. John 5:24: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."**

Seventh-Day Adventism's strange mixture of false doctrines, rank legalism, and smug perfectionist statements fatally muddles the gospel. This patently false claim that salvation ultimately hinges on the believer's own merit is a deliberate denial of the gospel of grace as taught in Scripture.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul was speaking about in Galatians 1 when he wrote, **"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we**

preached to you, let him be accursed. . . . **If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.**" That's Galatians 1:8-9. Now remember that the passage we began with, in Colossians 2, warns about the dangers of people who rely on their own visions, whose teaching is full of regulations saying, "**Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch,**" who would "**pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to [the] Sabbath.**" It should be obvious that Seventh-Day Adventism is precisely the kind of cultish religion Scripture warns about, and we cannot afford to let down our guard against a false religion like this.

Instead, we need to recover our own devotion to the truth, rededicate ourselves to the work of discernment, and, return to our first love, making a clear distinction between "**the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**"

By the way, keeping watch between truth and error is a true work of the Holy Spirit. There's no honor in trying to minimize the errors of a false religious system that deceives multitudes. Let's stand for the truth, in the true power of the Holy Spirit—even though it's currently more stylish to compromise. The time will come when our spiritual heirs will be thankful that we tried to be clear and careful in defense of the gospel.