

RETHINKING THE MILLENNIUM

Why the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Millennium is untenable

by Winston McHarg (August 2016)

A sympathetic observer appeals to the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be true to their Protestant heritage and ground their understanding of the Millennium in the Bible alone.

It is often said that the only unique teaching of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that of the Investigative Judgment. Few realise that another unique teaching is the church's understanding of the Millennium. Although counting themselves as premillennialists (those who believe that the Second Coming takes place *before* the Millennium, hence the prefix *pre*) they hold to a truly unique understanding not shared by any other premillennialists.

Varied views on the Millennium have existed from the early days of the Christian church. However it has generally been regarded as a less crucial area of doctrine. Most churches tolerate varying views on this subject. Not so the Adventists, who regard this doctrine as so clear and important as to include it in their list of Fundamental Beliefs. These are the actual words of fundamental belief number 27.

‘The Millennium is the thousand-year reign of Christ with his saints in heaven between the first and second resurrections. During this time the wicked dead will be judged; the earth will be utterly desolate, without living human inhabitants, but occupied by Satan and his angels. At its close Christ with his saints and the Holy City will descend from heaven to earth. The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected, and with Satan and his angels will surround the city but fire from God will consume and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners forever. (Rev 20; 1 Cor. 6:2,3; Jer. 4:23-26; Rev. 21:1-5; Mal. 4:1; Eze. 28:18,19) (1)

My contention in this paper is that this understanding of Revelation 20 is at significant odds with the clear teaching of the rest of the New Testament. All forms of premillennialism are based on just one much-debated passage in the highly symbolic book of Revelation. Put aside this one debated passage and we discover that there is not a single verse in the Old or New Testaments that clearly teaches this. Apart from this passage the Bible knows nothing of a thousand-year reign following the return of Christ. What then *does* the Bible teach about the events that will transpire at the return of our Lord?

The New Testament is clear that the Second Coming of Christ brings a final end to sin and sinners and ushers in an eternity of righteousness. That great climactic event (second only to His

death and resurrection) will see at that time the resurrection of all men, the final judgment of all people, the punishment of the wicked, the rewarding of the saints, the destruction of Satan and his angels and the ushering in of a new heavens and earth wherein dwell eternal peace, happiness and righteousness. This is the clear teaching of Jesus, His apostles and the creeds of historic Christianity for which I will give evidence in what is to follow.

WHY THE TEACHING OF A ONE THOUSAND-YEAR REIGN FOLLOWING THE SECOND COMING IS UNBIBLICAL

It contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus.

Jesus had much to say about His return and the events that would attend it. The synoptic gospels in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 19 record His Olivet discourse about last day events. One searches these chapters in vain for even a hint that His return will be followed by a thousand-year reign. For Jesus the culmination of salvation history is the day of His own return. Consider just some of His sayings.

Matt. 16:27 “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and *then he will repay each person* according to what he has done.” (All scriptural passages in this paper are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated)

John 5:28,29 “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when *all who are in the tombs* will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment”. According to Jesus the dead are raised together at that final hour. “ALL” hear his voice. They come forth to different destinies but they come forth *together*. Jesus taught the same truth in several of his parables.

Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43. The parable of the wheat and the tares. The parable of the wheat and the tares teaches clearly that His coming will bring the final separation of the righteous and the wicked. Notice Jesus’s interpretation of His own parable.

“The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one ...the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matt.13:38-43)”

Matt. 25:31-46. The separation of the sheep and the goats. In this parable Jesus tells us plainly *when* the final judgment takes place and *who* will be involved. “***When the Son of Man comes in his glory...before him will be gathered all the nations,*** and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Matt. 25:31-33

These parables seem to be telling us that the judgment of all men takes place at the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus knows nothing of a 1000 year period separating the judgment of the righteous from the judgment of the wicked.

The Last Day In John 6:39,40,44 Jesus calls the day of the coming resurrection “the last day” and in John 12:48 He calls the day of judgment “the last day” thus linking the two. It seems clear that for Jesus “The last day” is both the day of resurrection and judgment. The words have more than a ring of finality about them. The “last day” is the ***last*** day. Seventh-day Adventist theology catapults the last day a thousand years beyond the return of Christ!

It contradicts the teaching of the Apostle Paul.

To Paul, much more than any other apostle, were given insights into the meaning of God’s dealings with the world. To Paul were given an abundance of revelations (2 Cor.12:7). To him were given, as to no other apostle, detailed knowledge of the final events to take place: the rise of the antichrist, the sequence of events to transpire on the last day and the nature of the resurrection body among other things. It is significant that one can read his writings and not once does he mention a 1000 year reign of Christ following His return. Paul’s understanding of the events of the day of Christ’s coming reinforce the teachings of Jesus regarding the final day. Let us look briefly at just three of Paul’s statements that reveal his understanding that day.

2 Thess. 1:7-10 “... when the Lord Jesus is revealed on that day with his mighty angels in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the the punishment of *eternal destruction*, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, *when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints*, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed ...” It is obvious that Paul knew nothing of a 1000 year reign before the final judgment. For him eternal destruction would fall on the wicked on the day of Christ’s return and not 1000 years later.

Romans 8:18-25 Here Paul personifies creation and depicts it as yearning alongside believers for the day of redemption. Why? Because on that day not only will believers receive “the redemption of our bodies” but “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption.” *The creation is renewed at the same time that believers receive their resurrection bodies!* Both fell

together, both will be renewed together. This point is particularly devastating to the Adventist scenario which pictures the creation as a chaotic planet lying desolate for 1000 years!

1 Cor. 15:50-56 Here, when Paul says the dead are raised at “the *last* trump,” he obviously sees the day of Christ’s return as the grand finale. Victory! It’s all over at last! He goes on to say, “*Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory* (verse 54).” It is unlikely he would say this if he knew that 1000 years still had to transpire after which billions would be slaughtered at the time of the attack on the heavenly city.

So clear in his own mind is Paul’s understanding of the day of Christ’s return as the day of the universal resurrection and judgment of all men, that it is taken as a given and appears almost unconsciously on his lips and throughout his letters. To the the skeptical philosophers of the Areopagus he warned that *God “has fixed a day [not several] on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.”* (Acts 17:31).

“To Felix, the Roman governor, Paul said, “There will be **a resurrection** [not two] of both the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15).” To the wayward Corinthian believers he warned, “Do not pronounce judgment before the time, **before the Lord comes** who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. **Then each one will receive his commendation from God** (1 Cor. 4:5).”

It contradicts the clear teaching of the Book of Revelation.

The evidence for a “grand finale” Second Coming as outlined above I find to be compelling if not conclusive, but there is even more. Just as compelling is the evidence from the book of Revelation itself. All premillennialists agree that the book of Revelation is composed of a series of visions which climax in the end times. If this is correct it would be surprising if these visions did not include some mention of a post Second Coming reign if that were indeed the meaning of the twentieth chapter. However a search of these visions fails to provide such supporting evidence and instead supports the position of a grand climax at the Second Coming.

Consider the following.

Rev 11:15-18 Under the seventh trumpet two audible messages are heard. The first is described as Loud voices in heaven. “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign [not for 1000 years, but] forever and ever.*’” ***The second coming brings the eternal kingdom!*** Immediately following this declaration John hears singing. It is the song of

the twenty four elders. Notice carefully some of the words of this song because they summarise the great events of the final days.

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
Who is and who was,
For you have taken your great power
And begun to reign.
The nations raged
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

Consider the following points

- The first verse confirms the commencement of the eternal reign
- Those who are judged are referred to simply as “the dead”.
- No mention is made of separate judgments or resurrections. The reference is obviously to one universal judgment of all men.
- The judgment takes place after the anger of the nations against God’s people and God’s resultant wrath (the seven last plagues?).
- The judgment involves both the righteous and the wicked (prophets and saints / raging nations and the destroyers of the earth).
- No mention is made of a still future 1000 year period followed by a resurrection and a judgment of only the wicked followed by the slaughter of billions as in the Seventh-day Adventist scheme of things.

Rev.15:1 “Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, *which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.*” Notice that these plagues are described as “*the last*” (Rev15:1). This finality is further emphasised when the final bowl is poured out. “... a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne saying, “*it is done*” (Rev.16:17) The ESV Study Bible comments, “This declaration, repeated in 21:6, affirms that God’s plan has reached completion(10:7), His wrath against evil is finished (15:1,8), and His

kingdom is fully come (11:15).” (2) These words would be a strange thing to say if billions were still to be slain at the third coming of Christ as per the Adventist understanding.

Rev. 19:6-9 Rev. 21:2,9. Is the marriage of the Lamb at the Second Coming or 1000 years later? In the early part of chapter 19, just before the description of the annihilation of the wicked, at what all agree to be the Second Coming, the announcement of the marriage of the Lamb sounds forth from the great multitude: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, *for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready* (Rev.19:7).” This announcement is followed by the description of the conquering Christ going forth in battle to rescue His bride and destroy those who are about to destroy her. The marriage of the Lamb takes place on the day of His victory, the day of His coming when He is united with His people. *Yet in the 21st chapter it is said to take place 1000 years later at the end of the Millennium!* For the Adventist this is an absolute conundrum and contradiction. How could it be both, unless the day of His coming *is* the end of the Millennium? This will become clearer later.

Rev. 21:3 After the holy city descends to the earth at the end of the Millennium we hear the words, “Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be His people...” This is inexplicable if the saints have already been dwelling with Him for the past 1000 years!

Rev. 1:7 Still another problem for the Adventist position are the words, “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, *even those who pierced Him.*” For those who believe the wicked remain in their graves at the second coming these words present a difficult problem. To accommodate this passage Adventists create a special mini pre resurrection of the wicked for those directly responsible for the crucifixion (GC 627).

Rev. 22:13 The last chapter of Revelation contains words of Christ which indicate the finality of His coming and deliver a final broadside to the premillennialist position. “Behold I am coming soon, *“bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one* for what he has done.”

What about progressive revelation?

The argument is sometimes made that Revelation chapter 20 is a case of progressive revelation, i.e., a further revelation unknown to Jesus or the apostles but revealed at the end of the apostolic age to only the apostle John. The problem with this response is that many of the passages we have looked at don't just omit mentioning a millennium following the return of Christ they actually *preclude* it. For instance how can Jesus be said to recompense *every* person at His return (Rev. 22:13, Matt.16:27) if the wicked are left in their graves until the end of the 1000 years? Why

would creation long for redemption at “the revealing of the sons of God” if 1000 years are still to follow? Further evidence against progressive revelation is (as we have seen) the fact that the rest of the book of Revelation itself says nothing about or militates against the likelihood of the Seventh-day Adventist position.

A SUMMARY THUS FAR

The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Millennium undermines the magnificence of the Second Coming by diluting its content and denying its finality

The greatest event in the history of the universe was the crucifixion of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. By that event He was proclaimed king of the universe and we are saved. The second most important event is His coming in glory to renew the planet and to be forever with His people. **For a church that claims to be foremost in proclaiming the Second Coming of Christ it is sadly ironic that the Adventist teaching of the Millennium undermines the magnificence of the Second Coming by diluting its content and denying its finality.**

It does this by:

- Teaching only a half resurrection, i.e., a resurrection of the righteous only at the Second Coming
- Removing the great general judgment *entirely* from the Second Coming and dividing it into three: a pre-advent judgment of the righteous beginning in 1844, a judgment of wicked angels and men to determine punishments during the Millennium, and finally a judgment of the wicked at the end of the Millennium.
- Creating a third coming 1000 years after the Second Coming
- Prolonging the existence of sin, death and the Devil for yet another 1000 years
- Deferring the new heavens and earth for 1000 years

Is all of this likely or believable?

This is some of the bizarre confusion that results when sound exegetical principles are abandoned, clear passages ignored or twisted, and what is regarded as a fundamental belief built upon one obscure passage in a highly symbolic book.

One scholar who abandoned the premillennialist scheme has said,

No single passage in an admittedly symbolic and comparatively difficult context should be allowed to overturn (or trump) the witness of a multiplicity of passages in admittedly didactic and comparatively straightforward contexts... To make the rest of the New Testament (not to mention the Old Testament) bend to the standard of one text in the most controversial, symbolic and, by

scholarly consensus, most difficult book in the Bible is hardly a commendable hermeneutic method. We simply must not allow a single apocalyptic tail to wag the entire epistolary dog! We must not force the whole of scripture to dance to the tune of Revelation 20. (3)

Where do we go from here? Is there an explanation of Revelation 20 which actually makes sense and dovetails with the rest of scripture? I believe there is and will now attempt to explain it to you.

AMILLENNIALISM: A RETURN TO SOUND EXEGESIS

In this the last half of my paper I am suggesting that the best answer to the meaning of Revelation 20 is not some new and exotic explanation but rather a *return* in essence to the position endorsed by our Protestant forebears, a position known as amillennialism. In his recent book, [A Case for Amillennialism](#), Kim Riddlebarger reminds us,

In point of fact it is the *amillennial* position that has been the predominant eschatological view of Christianity since the days of Augustine. It is the position held by the vast majority of Reformed and Lutheran theologians, set forth in all the Reformed and Lutheran confessions. (4)

Of course this does not mean it is true, but it is an impressive point that has been largely forgotten and should at least prompt all who are truly interested in the truth to give it fair consideration.

What exactly is amillennialism? Before launching into an explanation let me tell you what it is *not*. In spite of its name it is not “*no-* millennialism” as the name would first seem to indicate. Contrary to what some of its critics would have us believe amillennialism *does* teach a real millennium. As we shall see the binding of Satan is real, the reign of the saints is real, as is the coming to life of all who have ever lived. All these things are real but being couched in the language of apocalyptic are not necessarily literal.

The issue of the time of the Millennium is the basic point of difference separating premillennialists and amillennialists. Premillennialists believe the 1000 years *follow* the Second Coming while amillennialists see the 1000 years as a symbol for the period between the first and second advents of Christ. For amillennialists the Millennium is a symbol for the current church age. In other words, it is *now*.

The great impasse

Seventh-day Adventists along with all other Premillennialists see Revelation 20 following on in chronological order from chapter 19 and thus describing events following the Second Coming. Amillennialism sees Revelation 20 as a recapitulation beginning with the commencement of the

Christian Era and, thus, a completely new vision. This is a crucial point. It is here that the great impasse between premillennialists and amillennialists occurs. Is chapter 20 recapitulation or continuation?

Because chapter 20 follows on immediately after the Second Coming of chapter 19 is seen as convincing evidence for a millennium which *follows* the Second Coming. The fact that most modern versions of the Bible begin chapter 20 with the words “*Then I saw*” appears to reinforce this idea. But is it really so clear cut?

The words “then I saw” occur numerous times in Revelation and they do not always indicate temporal or chronological sequence. For instance Rev 14 ends with the return of Christ and the slaughter of the wicked this is followed immediately by the account of the seven last plagues which are introduced by the words “*then I saw another sign in heaven great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last...*” (Rev. 15:1). John is not saying that the seven plagues follow the Second Coming. All agree that the plagues precede the Second Coming. This is clearly the beginning of a new theme.

Adventists themselves are capable of ignoring what clearly appears to be the temporal sequence of events described in Revelation as is evident from their own repositioning of the judgment scene to support their understanding. Revelation 20:7-15 positions the final judgment *after* the destruction of the wicked armies that surround the camp of the saints, but Adventists take the liberty to reposition the great white throne judgment just *before* the destruction of the wicked who surround the city. (5)

In summary, events don't always follow in chronological sequence in Revelation and the words “Then I saw” do not always infer a chronological application. Often these words mean simply that this is the next event that John saw in vision. Whether or not chronological sequence is intended has to be determined by other factors such as contextual and thematic considerations.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT REVELATION 20 IS A RECAPITULATION?

Chapter 20 is a logical place to begin a fresh vision.

Chapter 19 ends with what all agree is the climactic Second Coming. This is a logical place to begin a new vision especially in view of what we have already seen in regard to the “grand finale” nature of the day of our Lord's return. Chapter 19 brings the Second Coming and with it the destruction of the beast and the false prophet. It is reasonable that attention should now be turned towards the power who instigated and inspired them, the dragon (Satan) himself.

Recapitulation is a common apocalyptic device.

I need hardly tell my Adventist friends that the visions of the Old Testament apocalyptic book of Daniel recapitulate again and again. Chapter 2 is recapitulated in chapter 7. Chapter 8 recapitulates much of chapter 7 and is itself recapitulated in the final vision of chapters 10-12.

Recapitulation also occurs frequently in the New Testament book of Revelation. Most commentators see recapitulation in the seals, the trumpets and the bowls of wrath, but this is not all.

Nations exist on the earth during the Millennium.

Seventh-day Adventists teach that the wicked are totally destroyed in the battle that marks the end of the nineteenth chapter. In the final verses of chapter 19 we are told that all those living on the earth will be destroyed. Simultaneous with this destruction the righteous of all ages are raptured away to spend the next 1000 years in heaven. Thus the earth is left totally desolate but, in saying this, they have to explain the existence of “the nations” of verses 3 and 7. Why is Satan locked up? **“So he might not deceive the nations!”** The clear implication is that there *are* nations to deceive. Adventists tell us that the binding of Satan is because all men have been slain and therefore Satan has no one to tempt! The text is not saying that the nations are slain to lock up Satan. The text is saying that Satan is locked up *“so that he might not deceive the nations”* (Rev. 20:3)! Satan is removed from the nations; the nations are not removed from Satan. Surely the natural reading of the text is that there *are* existing nations at the beginning of the Millennium. The Adventist understanding fails to accommodate the plain, straight forward sense of the passage. Nor does it accommodate the fact that nations are still in existence at the *end* of the Millennium.

“And when the thousand years are finished Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive *the nations that are at the four corners of the earth* (Rev. 20:7, 8).” The Adventists say that these nations spring into existence because God raises them (although this is not mentioned in the text) and in this way Satan suddenly has someone to deceive! That is not really what the passage says. It says *Satan is released* from his prison ...” (Verse 7). Seventh-day Adventists say that the dead are raised to free Satan. The Bible says Satan is freed to deceive the nations, nations **“that are at the four corners of the earth”**, nations which are plainly already existing! Of course if the amillennialist understanding of the Millennium is correct the existence of nations on earth during the inter-advent period presents no problem and we avoid all this unnecessary straining of Scripture!!

The battles of chapters 19 and 20 are almost certainly the same.

Another convincing evidence against continuation is the fact that the battle of Rev 19:11-21 would appear to be the very *same* battle recapitulated in Rev 20:7-9. Seventh-day Adventists

believe these are two totally different battles separated by 1000 years. If it can be shown that these battles are the same then this would be convincing evidence of recapitulation. What evidence is there for this?

Both battles are referred to as “*the*” battle. In Rev 20:8 the word “battle” is preceded by the definite article in the original Greek. The same is true of the battle described in the 19th chapter (Rev 19:19). This is not just another battle this is *the* battle, i.e., the greatest battle, the mother of all battles. A battle so great that it is already known to the readers of Revelation because it has already been described in the sixteenth chapter where it is called Armageddon, “*The battle of the great day of God Almighty*” (Rev.16:14).

That the battles of chapters 19 and 20 are the same is further supported by the fact that John uses imagery from *one* particular Old Testament battle to describe *both* battles in Revelation 19 and 20. (See particularly Ezekiel 39:4,17-20). If John expected us to understand the battles of chapters 19 and 20 to be totally different battles it is unlikely he would have used imagery from one particular Old Testament conflict.

The timing of the marriage of the Lamb allows no room for a 1000 year interruption. Compare Rev.19:6-9 with Rev. 21:2, 9.

I have already referred in the earlier half of my paper to the timing of the marriage of the Lamb as demonstrating that the book of Revelation itself contains significant evidence that challenges the idea of a 1000 year period *following* the Second Coming. This same argument supports the truth that chapter 20 could not be continuation of chapter 19. If the marriage of the Lamb takes place at the Second Coming (Rev. 19:6-9) why is it described elsewhere (Rev. 21:2,9) as taking place *after* the Millennium at the descent of the Holy City? It seems obvious that both events must take place at the same time which is in complete harmony with the amillennialist position but leaves Adventists and all other premillennialists attempting to explain a 1000 year interruption.

What is the bottomless pit?

Adventists teach that the earth itself is the bottomless pit of Revelation 20:1, 3 into which Satan is hurled for the 1000 years. They say that the return of Christ brings the destruction of the wicked and simultaneously the righteous dead are raised and the living righteous are caught up with them to meet the Lord in the air. The righteous then accompany Christ to live with Him in heaven. Thus the earth is left uninhabited, desolate and chaotic. This is to be Satan’s abode for 1000 years where he is to mull over the fruits of his rebellion. What are we to say to this?

There seems little reason to equate the earth itself with the bottomless pit. If John had wanted to tell us that the place of Satan's incarceration will be the earth why didn't he say so? He has already described Satan's defeat by Jesus as a casting to the earth (see Rev. 12:4,9) so why should he hesitate to use the same word here? Instead he uses a word that is mainly understood in the New Testament as the source of evil, the prison of evil spirits.

The Greek word is *abussos* which means literally "bottomless" or "deep". It is used nine times in the New Testament mainly to describe the place of incarceration of demons (see Luke 8:31 where the demons begged Jesus "not to command them to depart into the *abyss*"). Most occurrences are found in the book of Revelation where it is used to describe the place from which evil emanates and the haunt of demons. For example under the fifth trumpet (Rev. 9:1-3) demonic invaders are released *from* the abyss *onto* the earth. In describing the place of Satan's imprisonment John could have used the word "earth" if that was what he wanted to convey, but he didn't. Instead he used the very word we would expect him to use: *abussos*, the haunt and prison of all things evil.

Seventh-day Adventists say that Jeremiah 4:23-26 is a description of the earth in a desolate, chaotic state during the Millennium. However a cursory reading of the passage reveals that Jeremiah is not predicting a desolate earth during the Millennium. In the hyperbolic language used often by the prophets Jeremiah describes the coming desolation soon to fall upon Israel in Jeremiah's time by the Babylonian invasion.

WHEN DOES THE BINDING OF THE DEVIL TAKE PLACE AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

According to Seventh-day Adventists the binding of Satan will take place immediately after the Second Coming of Christ. As we have seen this position is untenable for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the fact that the New Testament clearly teaches that the Second Coming is the grand finale of human history. It results in an abrupt end to sin and sinners and the annihilation of Satan and his angels. According to the Adventist understanding the Second Coming is reduced to a mere prelude to a heavenly millennial reign followed by the real grand finale at the third coming 1000 years later!

According to the amillennialist position the binding of Satan has been already achieved by Christ in His victory over the Devil during His life on earth. The binding of Satan should be thought of as a figurative description of the way the activities of Satan were curbed by the victory of Christ at His first coming. Is there any evidence that the binding of Satan took place at the first advent?

Jesus specifically claimed to have bound the Devil. In response to the ludicrous charge that He cast out devils by the power of the Devil He told a brief but powerful story that rebuts His opponents and provides us with a valuable key to understanding the meaning of Rev. 20:1-3. “If Satan casts out Satan he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ...but if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless he first ***binds*** (Greek: *deō*, *the same word used in Rev. 20:2) the strong man?* Then indeed he may plunder his house (Matt. 12:26-29)”. Jesus here, in the early part of His ministry, is claiming to have overcome and bound the Devil. He is undoubtedly referring to His victory over Satan in the desert at the event known traditionally as “the temptation.”

Jesus defeated the devil and bound him when He overcame him at the temptation. At the beginning of His public ministry, immediately after His baptism, He was led by the Spirit into the desert to be involved in a titanic struggle with the prince of this world. We don’t make as much of this battle as we should. It is a watershed event second only to His crucifixion and resurrection. It was a time when the fate of the world hung in the balance. From that terrible struggle He emerged the victor! He had bound the strong man! Now He would plunder his goods.

The evidence of that binding is seen most markedly in His complete mastery of demonic spirits. From now on the casting out of demons became a frequent and spectacular stamp of His authority. The gospels tell us that His control of Satan and his angels was absolute. With supreme ease He casts out a huge number of demons. His control extends even to multiple expulsions: from Mary Magdalene He casts out *seven* demons and from a wild Gadarene He casts out a *legion* of evil spirits – spirits that are so cowed in His presence that they are said to *beg* him not to send them into the abyss (Greek: *abussos*).

In the casting out of demons by His disciples Jesus sees evidence of the fall of Satan. When the disciples return from their first missionary tour they seem *most* amazed by the power Jesus has given them over evil spirits. “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, ***even the demons*** are subject unto us, in your name.’” Jesus sees this as confirmation of His victory and joyfully exclaims, “I saw Satan like lightning fall from heaven.”

The defeat and binding of Satan commenced with the victory of Christ in the desert and was completed and sealed by His victory on the cross. Approaching the final days of His ministry Jesus said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be *cast out*” (Greek:

ekballō a similar word to that used in Rev. 20:3 where Satan is described as being “cast” (Greek: *ballō*) into the bottomless pit). By His death and resurrection Jesus sealed Satan’s doom.

Seen in this light Rev. 20:1-3 is not dealing with some interesting but relatively unimportant event that follows the Second Coming but with the central message of the New Testament – the victory of Christ – the Gospel itself!

Consider the following passages.

1 John 3:8 — “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil”

Heb. 2:14,15 — “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, *that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*”

Col. 2:15 — “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (NIV)

One of the great strengths of the amillennialist position is the fact that it centers on Christ and His victory over Satan at His first advent. We ought never to forget that the book of Revelation is in its opening words said to be “the revelation of Jesus” and is said to deal with things which apply to believers in the first century (Rev. 1:1). These are important exegetical keys in our striving to understand this most difficult of books. The Seventh-day Adventist position has nothing to say about the victory of Christ at His first advent and centres on events after the Second Coming, events which would have had no relevance for first century believers.

AN OBJECTION: IF SATAN IS BOUND, WHY IS HE SO ACTIVE?

If the binding of Satan was accomplished at Christ’s first advent it means we are now living in the time when the Devil is bound. Already I hear the loud objections from my friends that it is clearly evident that the Devil is far from bound! Just look at the havoc he is wreaking in the world! Think of the Middle East and Islamic terrorism, the massive problems today in Africa, Europe, Asia and South America. In so many places Satan is spreading violence and human misery. How can amillennialism explain the continuation of evil?

First. In the New Testament, chains and incarceration of demonic spirits are seen to be figures of speech used to describe not total but limited restriction. “And the angels who did not stay within their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in *eternal chains* under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day (Jude 6).“

The apostle Peter uses very similar language. “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but *cast* them into hell and committed them to *chains* of gloomy darkness to be kept unto judgment... (2 Peter 2:4)” No one familiar with either the Bible or their own experience would conclude from these passages that evil angels, though chained and incarcerated, are totally incapacitated from working evil in the world! If evil angels, said to be incarcerated and bound in chains, are allowed to be active to a limited degree then why should it be so difficult to believe that the same applies during the Millennium?

Second. Notice that the text doesn’t specifically say that Satan’s binding is total. In the Adventist understanding Satan is quarantined to a desolate world totally devoid of inhabitants. He is totally incapacitated in his work of temptation simply because he has no one to tempt! So incapacitated is he that he may as well not exist! Such a time *will* come of course when he is cast into the lake of fire, but that time is not yet.

A close reading of Revelation 20:3 reveals that Satan is bound only in one particular capacity, “SO THAT HE MIGHT NOT DECEIVE THE NATIONS ANY LONGER”! (Rev. 20:3) A vicious dog can be chained but that doesn’t mean that he is rendered totally powerless. It is still as vicious as ever, but only in that part of the yard where he is allowed to roam! John is telling us that Christ’s victory means Satan is incapacitated from preventing the Gospel going to the Gentiles. The death and resurrection of Christ were followed by Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The age of worldwide evangelism had begun. Empowered by the Spirit Christian missionaries ventured forth quickly and victoriously into all the world making disciples of all nations. The Christian church, in spite of its recent decline in most Western countries, is still the world’s largest religious organization numbering well over 2 billion adherents world wide and, even now, experiencing phenomenal growth in developing countries such as China, Africa and South America. Robert Strimple summarizes the amillennialist position with great clarity.

At the Cross Satan is bound, but not absolutely. Revelation 20:2-3 does not say that Satan is bound, period. He is bound in one respect only, namely, “to keep him from deceiving the nations (Gentiles) anymore”. The age of salvation for the Gentiles has arrived. Prior to Christ’s ministry Israel was the one nation called out from all the nations of the world to know God’s blessings and to serve him...essentially all the nations of this earth were in darkness, under Satan’s deception. But then, praise God! Christ came and accomplished his redemptive work. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on “all the people” (Acts 2:17), signifying the fact that the gospel of Christ is a gospel for all the nations, not just the Jewish people. The age of world missions had

begun, and Satan's deceptive work on that grand scale over so many centuries had come to an end.
(6)

Although Satan is prevented from stopping the worldwide spread of the gospel in all other areas of deceit and evil he is relatively free. If anything he is more active than ever. "Woe to you earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short (Rev.12:12)". Like a snake dealt a broken back he flays around furiously for a time but his death is sure. In the wisdom and purpose of God he is given time to display the worldwide workings of evil and play his begrudging part in refining those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. A significant detail regarding the word rendered "nations" reinforces still further this understanding of the binding of Satan.

WHO ARE THE "NATIONS"?

The word for "nations" in Revelation 20 is the Greek word *ethnos*, a word which is frequently rendered "gentiles" throughout the New Testament. When Paul is commissioned for his great missionary task Christ tells him that it is to the *ethnos* (Gentiles) that He is sent, "...to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Acts 26:17,18. This understanding is further confirmed by the fact that in Revelation 20 the "nations" who come under Satan's sway at the end of the Millennium are also described as "Gog and Magog", eschatological *gentile* enemies of Israel mentioned in the book of Ezekiel.

Rev 20:3 tells us that Satan is restrained from deceiving the nations only for a set period "*until the thousand years are ended. After that he must be released for a little while.*" Revelation 20:7-10 takes up the account of his release and the events that ensue.

And when the thousand years are ended. Satan will be released out of his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the Devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Rev. 20:7-10)

This final assault on the Church is described in symbolic language as a satanic army attacking the camp of the saints only to be destroyed just as they mount their final assault. (7) To

the careful reader of the Bible it is the familiar story of the church of God experiencing a great and final tribulation before the Lord returns to punish her persecutors.

We now turn away from the Devil and his destiny to the glorious reward granted to those who remain true in the heat of persecution, even to the point of death.

THE HEAVENLY REIGN OF THE MARTYRS

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. (Rev. 20:4-6)

Many theories have been advanced as to the meaning of this passage. The present writer has no hesitation in confessing that he has wrestled long with this particularly difficult portion of Scripture. One thing he is certain of though is that the traditional Adventist understanding of this passage as outlined in Fundamental Belief number 27 just does not make for sound exegesis. First, a few comments on this understanding.

The Adventist idea of all the righteous of all ages reigning in heaven (8) with fully glorified resurrected bodies scrutinising the books of record for a thousand years to find out why certain individuals didn't make it fails to inspire or do justice to the details of the passage. In the first place those reigning are NOT identified as the righteous of all ages, only as a very limited group – martyrs who are said to have “come to life.” In the second place these individuals are clearly said to be “*the souls*” of them that had been martyred. A strange thing to call them if they are embodied and fully glorified individuals. I will say more on this shortly but let me now comment briefly on the Adventist understanding of the *purpose* of the 1000 years.

Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief number 27 says only that the 1000 years will be spent “judging the wicked”. Others have extrapolated this into all sorts of strange theories. According to one of these theories our first thousand years in heaven are to be spent checking on God's justice! Scrutinising records to settle the minds of the saved that God has done the right thing in excluding certain of our loved ones and friends!!

For example, in a recent article in the September 2015 issue of the Australasian issue of “Signs of the Times,” the author claims that God “is providing the Millennium for that very purpose, *to give us the opportunity to satisfy ourselves that He has chosen the right companions for us for eternity...Each of us will have 1000 years to leaf through the heavenly records and confirm God’s justice for ourselves.*” He goes on to describe the new earth and says, “The Millennium will have served its purpose ... because every inhabitant will have had 1000 years to review the record of God’s dealing with sin and sinners, *confirming God’s mercy and justice.*” [Emphasis mine] (9)

Has this author thought about the implications of what he has written? Has he thought about just how long one thousand years are? It is the equivalent of thirteen or so lifetimes! For 1000 years we, the saved, will be “satisfying ourselves that he has chosen for us the right companions for us for eternity”! This is yet another example of the strange conclusions that result from poor exegesis.

It is hard to warm to the idea of spending first 1000 years in heaven scrutinising the inner secrets of family and friends! Is it likely that after finding ourselves among the redeemed on that wonderful day we will have the audacity to even think to question God’s justice?! Hasn’t the Cross demonstrated as nothing else can the incredible depth of His wonderful wisdom and love?

In spite of the unlikely possibility of our wanting to pursue such questions the Bible *does* assure us that there *will be* an opportunity for any, albeit unlikely, questions to be settled. That opportunity will be at the great universal judgment of the final day. In the final judgment Jesus said, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops (Luke 12:2,3). According to Christ, “...on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak (Matt.12:36)” The general judgment of the final day will reveal everything and doubtless with glorified bodies we will be able to quickly process every necessary detail. There will be no need to scrutinise records for 1000 years.

Adventists claim that their pre-advent investigative judgment and their post Second Coming “scrutiny of the neighbours” judgment serve the heroic function of vindicating the character of God! Unfortunately these two strange teachings succeed only in exposing a poor grasp of the meaning of the gospel. Those who believe these ideas underestimate the sufficiency of the cross to vindicate the character of God and the power of the universal judgment to put to rest any possible doubts.

What I have said earlier about the believer appearing in person at the judgment may strike fear into the hearts of some, particularly those reared on a christless diet of legalistic perfectionism. It is at this desperate point that the Gospel comes to our rescue and comfort. True, in ourselves we have nothing to commend us. Even our repentances need repenting of and our tears of contrition need washing in the blood of Christ. But it is precisely for this purpose that Jesus overcame and defeated the Devil. He won that victory as our *representative*. His victory is *our* victory. Although sinful and inadequate we can come boldly to His judgment seat because we come in the perfect victory robe of His flawless righteousness which becomes ours the moment we believe in Him and His victory. Not in ourselves but *In Christ* we are *more*, much more, than conquerors – we are actually accounted righteous. *In Christ* we can have confidence and boldness on the day of judgment. See Romans 8:37 and 1 John 4:17.

WHO ARE THOSE WHO LIVE AND REIGN WITH CHRIST FOR THE 1000 YEARS?

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE FIRST RESURRECTION?

Who, then, are the ones who live and reign with Christ for 1000 years? Only the martyrs are clearly identified. (10) Strangely, in spite of the fact that only a very limited group are specifically mentioned Seventh-day Adventists and almost all other premillennialists teach that this first resurrection is the *totality* of the righteous of all ages. The passage says only that these are martyrs, ones particularly dear to the heart of Christ. To extrapolate further is supposition. The first coming to life appears to be a *special* occurrence for a very limited group of people. Certainly this is what an *a priori* reading of the text seems to say. Leading conservative scholar N.T. Wright supports this position.

The crucial thing for our purposes is the question: what is the first resurrection, spoken of in 20:5,6? *It seems to be an initial coming-to-life of some, but not all the righteous.* Not only are martyrs specified rather than ordinary Christians who died in their beds but one type of martyr is singled out: those who were beheaded. This group appears, then, to be as it were *an advance party of the righteous, sharing already in the rule of the Messiah.* (Emphasis mine) (11)

What kind of resurrection is the first resurrection?

This coming-to-life and reigning with Christ is called “the first resurrection”, but a close reading of the text seems to indicate that it is only a kind of resurrection. Wright comments again.

“...it seems likely that we are faced here with **a radical innovation**: a use of the word ‘resurrection’ to mean a coming-to-life in a sense other than, and prior to, that of the final bodily raising.” (Emphasis mine) (12)

Resurrections generally involve bodies. That is what the word means, but John seems at pains to assure us that this is *not* a bodily resurrection. He tells us that this is a coming to life of only “*the souls*” of those who have been martyred. (13) Apparently their bodies are in the grave but their souls are in heaven enjoying life with Christ. Sam Storms, in his recent book Kingdom Come, suggests,

I am sure John knew that *anastasis* might well evoke the notion of bodily resurrection in the minds of his readers. That is why, I believe, he explicitly identifies those whom he predicates this resurrection as the “*souls of those beheaded*.” He knew that such a phrase, even more so because of the parallel in Rev. 6:9-11, would have alerted his readers (prospective martyrs) that the kind of resurrection in view was spiritual life after physical death. (14)

If only the souls of the martyrs are involved, why does John describe the coming-to-life of the martyrs as a *resurrection*? Could it be because the essence of resurrection is union with Christ? The disembodied coming to life of the martyrs, while not conforming to the understanding of a regular resurrection, nonetheless includes the most precious element of resurrection – being present with Jesus! I suggest that in order to communicate this new wondrous thought John calls it a resurrection because resurrection above all things means being present with the Lord. The martyrs “live and reign *with Christ*”!

For the martyrs this is “the first resurrection” but for them it is not the full and final resurrection of the last day when they will receive glorified bodies. Calling this immediate translation into the presence of Jesus a “first resurrection” was John’s shorthand way of saying that death for the martyrs is *in essence* similar to a resurrection. What better or simpler way to convey the truth of the immediate glory of being present with the Lord? Storms suggests,

“Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that John might wish to describe life in the intermediate state in Rev.20:4-6. How else could he have done so, other than the way he has, and still secure the needed emphasis...what terminology could he possibly have used, other than he does use, and still maintain the desired emphasis? There is simply no other Greek noun besides *anastasis* that would adequately make the point.” (13)

Consider also that the coming to life of the martyrs before the resurrection of the great day was a completely new idea to the believers. All believers were fully familiar with the concept of

resurrection on the last day. See Martha's words in John 11:24 and Paul's detailed descriptions of this great event in 1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15. Note also that resurrection was a familiar concept widely believed in the Judaism of Jesus' day. However, the concept of instantaneous translation into the presence of the Lord upon martyrdom, if this is what is intended, would be a completely new thought unfamiliar to believers who thought only of their loved ones as asleep in their graves.

What does verse 6 mean when it says "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power"? Doesn't this say that *all* the righteous will be involved in the first resurrection? No. It really doesn't say that. No mention is made of *all* the righteous and we have already seen that the only ones specifically mentioned to have a place in the first resurrection are the martyrs. All verse 6 is saying is that *whoever are involved in the first resurrection* are blessed and holy, which, of course, is certainly true of the martyrs.

What, then, of the second resurrection? To whom does it apply?

Firstly it should be said that surprisingly the words, "the second resurrection," never occur, never in the book of Revelation and never in the Bible. Here it is only implied. If there is a first, there must be a second. Who it applies to is debatable. Seventh-day Adventists and all premillennialists say it applies to the wicked of all ages. But could it apply only to the souls reigning with Christ? Robert Strimple supports this understanding, although it is not crucial to my position.

In verses 5-6 John speaks of "the first resurrection". Clearly this phrase implies a second resurrection. But does this mean that premillennialism is correct after all, that there will be two resurrections, the resurrection of believers at Christ's coming and a resurrection of unbelievers a millennium later? Not at all. The reference to the first resurrection implies a second, true – a second resurrection *for the same people!*" (Emphasis mine) (16)

The first resurrection applies only to the martyrs, the second resurrection likewise applies only to them. If they had a first then it is implied that *these same ones* will have a second. These blessed individuals have experienced a "first resurrection" of only their souls. When the Lord returns however they will experience their second resurrection when they are united with their glorified bodies.

My Adventist friends might be alarmed to learn that I concede that even the martyrs might be enjoying a disembodied intermediate conscious state before the day of our Lord. To me, this is simply the natural reading of the text. Think of it: John is readying believers to face possible horrible death. Under inspiration he is assuring them that if they are slain they will immediately live

and reign with Christ! This is an incredibly strengthening message! To my Adventist friends I would suggest that it is hard to see how a mere “sleeping in the ground until Jesus comes” would as greatly encourage fearful hearts and strengthen resolve to be faithful unto death as would the wonderful thought that immediately upon death they will be with their Lord in glory.

If the first resurrection involves only the martyrs then “the rest of the dead” mentioned in verse 7 must indeed be the *rest* of the dead, i.e., the bulk of humanity, both righteous and wicked. For them the coming of Christ will be their first and only resurrection which brings us to the next scene in Revelation 20.

The Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15)

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The Adventist understanding of the great white throne judgment is that this is a judgment of only the wicked at the end of the Millennium. Interestingly the Adventist understanding eliminates completely any judicial judgment at all from the Second Coming in spite of the many clear New Testament passages that locate it there. In Adventist thinking the judicial judgment is a complex, three-phase saga.

- the righteous are judged in their absence at the Investigative Judgment (which it is claimed began in heaven in 1844)
- after the return of Christ the righteous scrutinize the records and decide penalties for the wicked and evil angels during the 1000 years in heaven and finally
- the wicked alone appear before the judgment bar of God at the end of the Millennium to receive their just deserts!

In comparison the amillennialist understanding of the judgment is refreshingly uncomplicated.

Amillennialists understand the white throne judgment as the final universal assize of all men which takes place on the day of our Lord’s return. On this great day all of humanity will be called to

give account. Not once are the participants of the great white throne judgment referred to as only “the wicked.” Four times they are referred to as simply “the dead” and no explanation or hint is given that only wicked people are involved. This is the bodily resurrection and judgment of *all* men. “And I saw *the dead*, great and small, standing before the throne... And *the dead* were judged by what was written in the books according to what they had done. And the sea gave up *the dead* who were in it, Death and Hades gave up *the dead* who were in them.” Rev 20:12,13

Further evidence for the presence of *all* people at this judgment is the presence of the Book of Life in which is recorded a list of all the saved. Why the need for the Book of Life if the judgment concerns only the wicked? The text goes on to say, “And *if* anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:15)”. Clearly, there must be those whose names *are* found written in the Book of Life!

CONCLUSION

In view of what I have outlined in this paper it is hard to understand why the Seventh-day Adventist Church regards its understanding of the Millennium as so clear and important as to include it as one of their *fundamental* beliefs? Surely a fundamental belief should display considerable credibility? It is hard to say that about this belief. If it is truth it is not clearly so. Consider just some of what we have discovered about this teaching.

*It is based upon a single disputed passage in the highly symbolic book of Revelation.

*The church allows its unique understanding of this passage to trump a multitude of clear and unambiguous passages found throughout the New Testament.

*It undermines and dilutes the magnificence and finality of the Second Coming.

*It undermines the teaching of the New Testament about one final judgment of all people at the Second Coming.

*The purposes suggested by Adventists for the Millennium appear to be trivial and unnecessary.

*Acceptance of the Adventist position involves us in a bizarre tangle of resurrections, judgments and destructions, and even a third coming of Christ!

*An alternative position suggested by our Protestant forebears (while not without some uncertainties) makes better sense and is based upon a more convincing exegesis.

As a sympathetic Christian observer who regularly enjoys fellowship with Adventists I submit this paper in the interests of truth. It is a request to carefully and honestly consider the positions I have outlined. I humbly suggest that the Seventh-day Adventist Church be true to its Protestant heritage and ground its understanding of the Millennium only in the Bible.

AFTERWORD

THE CONTINUING SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

There are some who will be uncomfortable with my paper because it calls into question their long held understanding of the Millennium. They will be tempted to brush aside my observations with the protest that “this is a minor subject not worth making an issue over.” I agree that this *is* a relatively minor subject, but this underlines the point I wish now to make.

If this is a relatively minor subject, and if it is highly debatable, as I think my paper demonstrates, *whence then the certitude that enabled it to become one of the church’s fundamental beliefs?* As stated in my introduction most churches recognise the debatable nature of the Millennium and relegate it to the position of something optional. Why are the Adventists so sure that their understanding is the correct one? Could it be that the certitude comes from factors outside of Scripture? Is it possible that this teaching is grounded in a source other than the Bible?

A study of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia reveals that the unique Adventist position evolved in the years following the Great Disappointment of 1844. (17) The early pioneers of the SDA movement inherited their initial understanding of the Millennium from William Miller and his followers but, after separating from the Millerites, came soon to differ in one significant area: the Millerites believed in a populated earth and an *earthly* millennial reign while the Adventists came to believe in a desolate earth and a *heavenly* reign of the saints.

The article in the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia implies that both Ellen and James White played a significant role in the formulation of the doctrine. Ellen later incorporated the new understanding into some of her major writings. Her support of this teaching would have placed it beyond question in the minds of those who were prepared to give her final authority (probably the bulk of those early believers). Later it would be enshrined as one of the fundamental beliefs of the church.

If what I am saying is true, then it has significant implications regarding the understanding of Ellen White’s prophetic gift. Could the church have overused or misused an otherwise valid but nonetheless limited gift? Is it possible that an unwarranted overuse of this gift has been used to

stifle the continuing search for truth in the Adventist church? The church has prided itself as “standing on the shoulders of the Reformers” and continuing the noble search for truth. The reality is that any attempt to venture into new areas is almost invariably greeted with the suffocating question, “What does Sister White say?”

Questioning of debatable doctrines such as the investigative judgment, the age of the earth, the church’s traditional understanding of last day events and the role of Ellen White herself in doctrinal matters has led to censure and sometimes the removal of ministerial credentials. Desmond Ford’s desire to be true to Scripture and his resulting disagreement with Ellen White’s position on the obscure and highly doubtful investigative judgment doctrine was almost certainly the main reason for his sacking at Glacier View in 1980. One can only wonder how a devout Christian, brilliant scholar and tireless defender of the church could be defrocked because he questioned, on biblical grounds, such an obscure and debatable teaching? Could the answer to Adventism’s dilemma lie in the reevaluation of Ellen White’s authority in the light of the New Testament gift of prophecy?

Space, and my own limited knowledge in this area, prevent me from venturing more deeply into this crucial question but let me point briefly to just one relevant area of New Testament advice.

In talk of the gift of prophecy the less mentioned gift of discernment, found in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12:10, often appears to be forgotten. To the church in Corinth Paul advised, “Let two or three prophets speak, and *let the others weigh what is said* (1 Cor. 14:29).” In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul encourages the gift of prophecy but in the same breath encourages believers to maintain a healthy skepticism. “Do not despise prophecies, but *test everything, hold fast what is good* (1 Thess. 5:20, 21).” Clearly the New Testament gift had limitations and did not guarantee infallibility. Clearly believers were placed under obligation to not naively accept all claimed prophetic messages. All such utterances were to be rigorously put to the test (weighed) and only that which was deemed to be authentic was to be accepted. One could well ask, “Was the understanding of the Millennium brought under the scrutiny of the rest of the Bible and the gift of discernment before being adopted as a fundamental belief?”

In my early teens I studied the Bible with a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. My heart was inspired as he spoke to me of the Reformers and the recovery of truth. He told me of the noble task bequeathed to the Seventh-day Adventist church to continue the task so courageously begun. Do Adventists really stand on the shoulders of the Reformers? Seventh-day Adventists seem to have

forgotten the Reformation and the noble task. They seem to have retreated into their castle to defend the 28 fundamentals against any who suggest the church may have got it wrong. Why?

In my opinion the main factor which hinders the ongoing search for truth in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the inordinate authority given to the writings of Ellen White.

Resolving this question of Ellen White's authority is the main challenge that confronts the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The reality is that there is little real searching for truth in the church. Rather there is an assumption that Ellen White is of a similar authority (or near similar authority) to that of the Bible. Therefore, any "search" usually degenerates into an attempt to ***harmonize*** the Bible with her writings. The results of this are seen in the convoluted twisting and turnings in the doctrine of the Millennium and that of the Investigative Judgment.

Assuming Ellen White had a genuine gift, what are the limits of that gift? What of her doctrinal authority? We know that Ellen White changed her mind on a number of important doctrinal issues. Sometimes when pressed for a definitive word on disputed areas of doctrine, even ones on which she had already given an opinion, she refused to be the final word. Instead she directed her followers to the Bible as the final source of truth. (18)

Many church leaders are aware of the inordinate amount of authority given to her writings but, having inflated her authority over many years, are now reluctant to reeducate the membership towards a more realistic position for fear of splitting the church. It is a difficult bind the leaders have allowed to develop by initial exaggeration and then inertia in the face of the resulting complications. In the meantime, caught in the spotlight of a pitiless internet, these problems and inconsistencies are displayed to a shocked membership and honest enquirers. No wonder many thinking members lose faith in the church's message and mission and potential converts turn away from the church.

Isn't it time that the leaders enlightened the membership and removed Ellen White from the pedestal where *they* have placed her? Maybe the position she would have chosen for herself would *not* have been a pedestal? Maybe a chair at the conference table as an important, but not infallible, voice in the ongoing search for truth?

Some time ago I attended a lecture by a medical professor whose subject was a little-known disease then affecting a member of my family. What struck me most about the lecturer was not so much the content of his address but his tone: his total openness, his willingness to acknowledge the problems and his preparedness to give consideration to other conflicting theories and approaches to the disease. The man was not out to protect his own ideas or ego. His main concern was for people

and truth. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we Christians could have the same attitude? In spite of their theological limitations and errors this was the spirit that permeated the hearts and minds of many of the early Adventists – the determination to follow the truth no matter where it led. Shouldn't this be our first fundamental belief?

About the author

Winston McHarg graduated in 1969 from Avondale College with a Bachelor's Degree in Theology. He served the church in the capacity of pastor until his resignation from the ministry in 1978 due to his disagreement with Adventism's founding doctrine of the Investigative Judgment. The author continues to enjoy church attendance and fellowship with his many Seventh-day Adventist friends and relatives.

He says, "I regard myself as a sympathetic onlooker and see this paper as something positive, hopefully helpful to the church in the long run. These views represent my current position but I am definitely open to alternative suggestions. Adventism claims to be an extension of the Reformation and the search for truth. I have tried to be true to that position. I humbly throw these thoughts into the arena for discussion and ask that people give them honest and serious consideration. As someone once said, "The truth has nothing to fear from investigation'."

ENDNOTES

(1) [Fundamental Beliefs, no. 27. \(General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2015\).](#)

(2) [English Standard Version Study Bible](#), (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 2729

(3) Sam Storms, [Kingdom Come](#), (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2015), 557, 558

(4) Kim Riddlebarger, [A Case for Amillennialism](#), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 31

(5) E. G. White, [The Great Controversy](#), (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 666

(6) Robert B. Strimple, [The Millennium and Beyond](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 123, 124

(7) Notice that the city is NOT said to be the New Jerusalem (which is *later* described as descending *after* the Millennium) rather "the beloved city" is a fitting symbol for the threatened but beloved people of God who are further described as "the camp of the saints" i.e., a temporary and vulnerable situation for the still unglorified saints who are about to face their final tribulation.

(8) Adventists teach that, at the Second Coming believers return with Christ to spend the Millennium in Heaven. None of the passages which are used to support this idea are clear or unambiguous. John 14:1-3 and 1 Thess.4:16-18 are two favourite and oft quoted passages. A close reading of the highly metaphorical passage in John says nothing definite about going to heaven. Jesus does say that He will "...take you to Myself, that where I am there you may be also." But notice He says nothing about going to Heaven, His emphasis is upon being together with His followers. He does say that He is going to "prepare" a place for His disciples but Revelation tells us that this place will descend *from* Heaven to the earth, "And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down *out of Heaven* from God, *prepared* as a bride adorned for her husband". Rev.21:2 Similar things can be said of 1Thess. 4:16-18. As in John the emphasis is upon being together with Jesus. Believers are said to be caught up to meet their Lord in the air but where they then go is not specifically stated. That believers then return with their Lord to the earth may be implied in Paul's use of the word "*apantesis*" in 1 Thess.4:17 where believers are said to be caught up "...to *meet* the Lord in the air." According to scholars like F.F. Bruce and N.T. Wright this word was frequently used in New Testament times to describe a happy welcoming custom extended to important dignitaries. An advance party would be sent forth to greet the esteemed person *before* he reached the city. After this initial welcome he would then be escorted back to the city with much fanfare (F.F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 102-03, N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, 145).

(9) Dean Edgar, "What the Bible Says About the Millennium" in Signs of the Times (Warburton, Vic., Australia, September 2015).

(10) "...those to whom the authority to judge was committed" are probably not to be confused with the martyrs. The scene seems to be the same one described in Daniel 7:9-10, 26. These are most likely heavenly beings who are here pictured as passing judgment on the persecutors of those who have slain the martyrs here described.

(11) N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 473, 474

(12) idem. 474, 475

(13) It is true that the Greek word for souls *psuchē* is sometimes used to designate simply "people," e.g., Acts 2:41, where it is used for the 3000 converts on the day of Pentecost. This usage, however, is limited. Scholar George Murray points out that of a total of 105 usages of *psuchē* in the New Testament only five could possibly mean "people." He then points out that such an application in Rev.20:4 would not make sense. "If we concede that the passage means people rather than

disembodied souls, the passage would then read, ‘I saw the people of them that had been beheaded,’ and such a reading would hardly do justice to its construction.” George Murray, Millennial Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1948), 183.

(14) Sam Storms, 454

(15) idem. 453

(16) Robert B. Strimple, 127

(17) Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966 and the 1976 Revised Edition), article ‘Millennium’

(18) Ellen White changed her mind from time to time on various doctrinal issues. She usually seemed to do this without embarrassment or attempt to cover up. Acknowledged instances of her changing positions include her understanding of the law in Galatians and the meaning of the “daily” in the Old Testament book of Daniel. See Graeme S. Bradford, More Than a Prophet (4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 2006), 121, 122

AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE TWO RESURRECTIONS OF REV. 20:4-6

This alternative position is relatively new in my thinking and I here tentatively append it to my document for the consideration and feedback of all who are interested. My new suggestion is that in Revelation 20:4 John is simply referring back to his earlier view of “the souls of those who had been slain” Rev.6:9-11. All agree that the earlier scene is highly metaphorical (the souls of the martyrs are pictured as under the altar of burnt sacrifice- the place where the blood of sacrificial victims was poured!) In the more literal Rev.20:4 passage John is merely harking back to this earlier scene. *He is saying that he now sees the group he had seen earlier who were THEN seen as “souls” but this time “they came to life” (bodily resurrection) and reigned with Christ for 1000 years.* Rev. 20:4. That the two groups are the same (or similar) is reinforced by the almost identical words John uses to describe them (compare Rev. 6:9 with Rev. 20:4).

If there is any light in this suggestion it means that both resurrections of Revelation 20 are *bodily* resurrections (significantly *both* resurrections are described as a “coming to life” compare Rev.20:4 with 20: 5) and the often criticised amillennialist position of two different understandings of *anastasis* in the same passage is resolved. To summarise - the first resurrection is then a bodily

resurrection of a relatively small and select group (the martyrs). The second resurrection is a bodily resurrection of “the rest of the dead” (v 4) i.e., the great bulk of humanity *both* righteous and wicked. This detail accords perfectly with the description of those arraigned before the Great White Throne judgment of Rev. 20:11-15 who are described five times as simply “the dead”, never “the wicked dead” as in the Adventist and premillennialist schemes.

I leave my readers to consider if there is any value in this new understanding of the nature of the two resurrections of Revelation 20.