

Martin/Barnhouse Authentication of Adventists as Evangelicals

By Ralph Weitz

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In 1955, two evangelicals met with representatives of Seventh-day Adventist Church for dialog. They were Walter R. Martin, director of cult apologetics for Zondervan Publishing, and Donald Grey Barnhouse, editor of *Eternity* magazine and pastor of the great evangelical church, Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA. The meetings were done with the approval of R. R. Figuhr, General Conference President. Those representing the SDAs were Leroy E. Froom, Adventism's leading historian and apologist, W. E. Read, Field-Secretary for the General Conference, Roy Allan Anderson, Secretary of the Ministerial Association of the General Conference, and T. E. Unruh, who acted as chairman.¹

The results of the meetings were a series of magazine articles published in *Eternity* magazine. Walter Martin published a book, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*. The Adventists published a comprehensive book on their theology, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (hereafter *QOD*). This dialog and publication were significant events in the communication between Adventism and the evangelical world. (It should be noted that neither Martin nor Barnhouse are mentioned in *QOD*. Martin is referenced as "An author of several works dealing with the history and beliefs of certain religious groups..."²) However, there are some serious issues that must be examined in order to evaluate these historic events.

1. Could the small, selective group of Adventist leaders represent the over 1,000,000 Adventists³ in the 1950s? Seventh-day Adventism had developed into a complex system with over 100 years of history when this meeting took place. The men representing the Adventists were very capable, but did they represent Adventism as a whole? They certainly did not represent the hard-core traditionalists like Francis Nichols, well known SDA apologist, whom Martin claimed was a worshipper of Ellen G. White.⁴

¹ Kenneth Samples, "From Controversy to Crisis: An Updated Assessment of Seventh-day Adventism", *Christian Research Journal*, Summer, 1988, pp. 9-10

² *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, (Washington, D.C. Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1957) p. 7

³ *These Times*, May 1981, p. 16

⁴ *Advent Currents*, An Interview: Walter Martin, July, 1983, pp. 17-18

2. Did the *QOD* truly represent Adventism or the view of the selected men and the General Conference Committee that approved it? A General Conference committee approved the *QOD*⁵ but the General Conference as a whole did not approve it.⁶

3. Martin was separated from a traditionalist leader, Francis D. Nichols (author of *Ellen White and Her Critics*, 1952 and *Why I Believe in Mrs. E. G. White*, 1964), during the dialog time. The General Conference deliberately separated them. Martin said, “He was prohibited from making contact with me.”⁷ Although Martin and Barnhouse⁸ had contact with Traditionalists, did they realize how much control the Traditionalists had? Martin was greatly disappointed when the Adventists renege on the publishing agreement made at the end of the dialog (see point # 4).

4. To the dismay of Martin, the *QOD* was withdrawn from publication. Martin’s book (*The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*) was never distributed in SDA bookstores. The General Conference, in spite of the fact that Martin had Christian bookstores carrying his book and the *QOD*, made this decision. A book, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, was written to respond to Martin’s book.⁹ All of this was contrary to the agreement, which had been worked out between them.

5. There are Adventists who disagree with *QOD* and they have worked to prevent its use. Samples states it this way:

Following its [QOD] publication, M. L. Andreasen, a respected Adventist scholar, severely criticized QOD, stating that in his opinion it had sold Adventism down the river to the evangelicals. Several years later, under Robert Pierson’s administration, two prominent scholars, Kenneth Wood and Herbert Douglass, declared that the publishing of QOD had been a major mistake.¹⁰

SDA books like *The Protestant Dilemma* by Richard Lewis praise Martin for his understanding of SDAs and then take him to task on his view of the Sabbath:

This absurd eisegesis [of Exodus 20:8-11] is inevitable if Mr. Martin’s conclusions are to be accepted.¹¹

⁵ Samples, p. 12

⁶ Gordon L. Lewis, *Confronting the Cults*, (Nutley, N.J.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966) p. 102; *Questions on Doctrine*, p. 9

⁷ *Adventist Currents*, p. 18

⁸ *Adventist Currents*, “Questions on Doctrine: a Theological ‘Sting?’” July, 1983, pp. 22-23 This is an interesting exchange that was transcribed from a phone call between Barnhouse and Al Hudson.

⁹ *Adventist Currents*, p. 19 Martin’s interview is confusing at this point, for this is the identical title as *QOD*.

¹⁰ Samples, p. 12

¹¹ Richard Lewis, *The Protestant Dilemma*, (Mountain View, California, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1961), p. 30

6. Many of the evangelical critics of SDA who have written since 1956 have used the *QOD* to prove their point that Adventism is a cult.¹² They have also taken Martin to task in using *QOD* for his interpretation of Adventism's theology.¹³

7. The question and answer format of *QOD* creates a situation where the best of SDA apologetics can be brought to bear. The difficulty with this is that the answers are not brought into cross-examination. Obviously they were to the reasonable satisfaction of Martin and Barnhouse. An example of the lack of cross-examination: *QOD* states that SDAs do not use Ellen White as "the source of our expositions" [of Scripture].¹⁴ When the question of Sunday observance being enforced by law as the mark of the beast is supported by a quote from Ellen White, there is no questioning of this tactic.

When Sunday observance shall be enforced by law, and the world shall be enlightened concerning the obligation of the true Sabbath, then whoever shall transgress the command of God, to obey a precept which has no higher authority than that of Rome, will thereby honor popery above God. - The Great Controversy, p.449¹⁵

This section has four quotes from White and several Roman Catholics but the Scriptures used do not come to bear on this issue and there is no opportunity for Martin to point this out in the publication.

8. Martin clung to the *QOD* as the definitive view of Adventist theology. In nearly every defense of SDA doctrine he uses *QOD* as his authoritative source. He uses expressions such as "The Adventists make this very clear,"¹⁶ and "Let the Adventists speak for themselves," to introduce *QOD*'s response.¹⁷ This limits him as a responsible commentator and observer. The revised 1985 edition of his *Kingdom of the Cults*, he continues to support his view in light of a letter from W. Richard Leshner, vice-president of the General Conference, who states continued support for *QOD*. Martin's continued view of SDA (although note the tentativeness):

*On the basis of the above letter [Leshner's], dialog with several Adventist leaders, and the continuing flux within Adventism itself; I must, for the time being, stand behind my original evaluation of Seventh-day Adventism...*¹⁸

¹² Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 90-143; Ruth A. Tucker, *Another Gospel, Alternative Religions and the New Age Movement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 112-114; Gordon Lewis, *Confronting the Cults*, pp. 103-124

¹³ Gordon Lewis, pp. 103, 122-124

¹⁴ *Questions on Doctrine*, p. 93

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.178

¹⁶ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., Publishers, 1977 revised), p. 421

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 410

¹⁸ Martin, p. 410 (Revised edition, 1985)

It appears that Martin is less assured of the Adventists 30 years later than he and Barnhouse were back in 1955.

9. Much of the literature since publication of *QOD* from the Seventh-day Adventists is supportive of the Traditional Adventist view. A few examples:

The Protestant Dilemma (1961) - this book gives a vigorous defense of sabbatarianism and strongly challenges a Sunday-keeping view to the point of loss of salvation if you decide to worship on Sunday.

*Seventh-day Adventists have urged the acceptance of the seventh-day Sabbath because they sincerely believe that to deliberately reject it is to reject the Lord of the Sabbath.*¹⁹

Why I Believe in E. G. White (1964) - This book defends the traditional view of Ellen White including visions, health reform, Spirit of Prophecy, etc.

*There is another question that is sometimes asked: Should a person be taken into the church who does not accept Mrs. White as God's special messenger to the remnant church? We believe that the Adventist ministry in general would quickly answer, No. How could we answer otherwise? In view of the fact that such a belief in Mrs. White is one of the articles of faith, why would anyone wish to belong to our church if he did not accept Mrs. White?*²⁰

A Gift From God (1974) - This is the standard Sabbath school quarterly for Seventh-day Adventists. It is a continuation of the traditional view of Ellen G. White.

*The gift from Jesus referred to by the title of these lessons is the gift of a person, Ellen G. White, whom God gave to the remnant church to serve in a prophetic role.*²¹

*Throughout Ellen White's long ministry of seventy years (1845-1915), revelations came to her in visions of the day and visions of the night. The light thus communicated to her by God she embodied in her addresses, numerous periodical articles, hundreds of personal, written testimonies, and in her many published books - at the present time about sixty in English.*²²

Salvation by Faith and Your Will (1978) - this book gives the traditional view of SDA salvation by faith and works. One support for Morris Vender's salvation view is to claim that Jesus' nature in the incarnation was just like that of Adam's, and that we can draw

¹⁹ Richard Lewis, *The Protestant Dilemma* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1961) p. 105 Note the subtitle - *How to Achieve Unity in a Completed Reformation.*

²⁰ Francis D. Nichol, *Why I Believe in Mrs. E. G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1964) p. 106 Note the subtitle - *Some Reasons Why Seventh-day Adventists Believe That Ellen G. White Possessed the Gift of "the Spirit of Prophecy"*

²¹ *A Gift From Jesus* (Mountain View, California, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1974) p. 3

²² *Ibid.*, p. 31

upon the same power from the Father that Jesus did. He uses Ellen G. White and Scripture to present his case.

*Apparently Jesus did not use His inherent divinity until the morning of the resurrection.*²³

*Jesus did not have the physical stamina of Adam.*²⁴

[Christ was] *able to be tempted, able to fall.*²⁵

Barnhouse vigorously refuted this position in his phone call with Al Hudson.²⁶ This is a heretical teaching that falls far short of sound biblical Christology.²⁷

These Times (1981) - this magazine was designed for non-Adventists to show that Adventists are “God’s true church.”²⁸

*[O]nly the Seventh-day Adventist Church has within its ranks the true gift of prophecy - in the person and writings of Ellen G. White. Her writings, life and activities over more than seventy years of ministry match all the tests given in Scripture. Thus, only the Seventh-day Adventist Church can properly be called the remnant church...*²⁹

The SDA church continues to publish and believe doctrines that are not acceptable to Evangelicals.

10. Martin was so discouraged by the lack of progress with the Seventh-day Adventists almost thirty years later that he threatened to rewrite his sympathetic chapter on Seventh-day Adventists in his book, *The Kingdom of the Cults*.³⁰ It would be interesting to see his reaction today after all the continuing revelations about Mrs. White’s writings (Martin had made some positive statements concerning her material - “I thought some of Mrs. White’s material was prophetic.”³¹), and other entrenched responses by Traditional Adventists.

11. While Barnhouse and Martin were meeting with the Adventist leaders, the church as a whole was requiring new members to believe and sign *The Everlasting Gospel*.³² Certainly Barnhouse and Martin would not find this document in agreement with their

²³ Morris Venden, *Salvation by Faith and Your Will* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association, 1978) p. 91

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94

²⁶ *Advent Currents*, pp. 22-23

²⁷ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989) pp. 224-229

²⁸ *These Times*, p. 5

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

³⁰ *Adventist Currents*, p. 23

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19

³² *The Everlasting Gospel*, (Takoma Park, MD: Washington College Press, 1956 revised) p. 1. This is an important booklet because it was in use by the SDA churches for new members when Donald Gray Barnhouse and Walter R. Martin were in dialog with Adventist leaders to determine if they were evangelicals, inside back cover

dialog. The practice of the church makes a much stronger statement than the few leaders meeting with them.

12. A mistake was made when Barnhouse and Martin choose not to interact with former Seventh-day Adventists.³³ When they narrowed their interaction to the select leadership of the organization, they missed seeing a balanced perspective. Many past (Cainwright, Jones) and present (Slattery, Ford, Rea, Ratzlaff) critics have significant experiences and insights to the teachings, beliefs and practices of the Adventists. Martin and Barnhouse focused their window of understanding (although they were familiar with the critics³⁴) of Adventism to the point of having a misperception of Adventism.

13. Did Adventism want to be a part of the Evangelical community or just remove the stigma of “cult” or strange religious group? As noted above, the publishing agreements were not followed through with. In addition, one of the hallmarks of the Evangelical community is cooperation in spite of our differences. This is well represented through the National Association of Evangelicals. A second hallmark is the willingness to recognize one another in ministry. Joan Craven, a sympathetic former SDA, in 1994 noted that Adventists have up a wall that prevents building relationships and their involvement or cooperation with Evangelicals in ministry. In fact she notes that they see Evangelicals as a mission field.³⁵ Her conclusion is this:

*However, the wall of Adventism is formidable. And we will not know if it is impregnable until SDA leaders and laity are willing to address critically the barriers of legalism in the context of a truly evangelical faith.*³⁶

³³ *Adventist Currents*, p. 17

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17

³⁵ Joan Craven, “The Wall of Adventism,” *Christianity Today*, October 19, 1994, pp. 20 - 25

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25