

# Seventh-Day Adventism a Cult?

by Phil Johnson

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*Seventh-day Adventism is a cult that has extra-biblical revelation, elitism, enslavement, and error, and its followers are deceived by its teachings.*

**Duration:** 1:00:11

**Scripture:** John 5:24, Galatians 1:8-9, Colossians 2:16-23

**Topics:** "Cult"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker describes a woman who experiences a spiritual encounter where she falls backward and then regains her strength. She speaks with a musical voice, expressing joy and sadness as she sees wonderful and dark things in the world. The speaker then discusses the characteristics of cults, highlighting the importance of being cautious when encountering teachings that deviate from the Bible. One key characteristic is the reliance on extra biblical revelation as a lens for interpreting Scripture. The sermon also mentions the Millerite predictions and the debate surrounding the Adventist doctrine of investigative judgment.

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## Transcript

What I want to do is go back and add part two to a study we did last year because I was requested to do it by the pastoral staff on Seventh-day Adventism, and I want to do part two of that. And I'm just going to read, to begin with, a short passage from Colossians 2. I like to start with Scripture. Normally, we like to just do exposition of Scripture.

Today, it's going to be more of a historical survey, but I'm going to start with this passage from Colossians 2, and I'll read it without comment. And what I want to do is revisit this subject of Seventh-day Adventism, and I'm going to start with this passage, Colossians 2, verses 16 through 23, which is a key biblical text. It warns us, you'll listen as I read it, it warns us against any cult or ism or philosophy of religion that stresses human works.

It puts a lot of emphasis on what we do, things like legal obedience and ceremonies and dietary rules and asceticism or other works that you can perform supposedly in order to achieve holiness through some kind of ritualized self-denial. That's actually what most religions teach. And in the realm of evangelical Christianity, Seventh-day Adventism is the embodiment of that.

You'll see that as I read this passage, I think I'm reading from Colossians 2, verses 16 through 23. Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

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

It's the embodiment of everything the Apostle Paul opposed. And one of the classic works on quasi-Christian cults is a book titled *The Four Major Cults* by Anthony Hokema. It was written in the middle of the 20th century.

It's a little bit dated, but he deals with four cults, calls them major cults. And the four cults he deals with are Christian science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventists. And it intrigues me that if you think about all four of those groups, they all started in America.

All of them began in the 19th century in the wake of religious fervor and perfectionist teaching and millennial expectation that, for the most part, was stirred up and followed Charles Finney from New England across Pennsylvania to Oberlin, Ohio, which is where Finney finished his career. This was an era of significant religious confusion and homebrew doctrines, lay theologians, unchecked error. It was much like the evangelical movement today.

In the words of Scripture, everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And so you had both men and women, lots of them, starting their own religions. And most of them, most of these new religions, had deep roots in the superstitions of Freemasonry and Spiritism and other occult beliefs.

And they blended these superstitions with biblical language and biblical imagery. And they claimed, every one of them, that they had received some new light directly from heaven, and people in that era followed them in droves. And so the four major cults, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventism, all of them were born within a 250-mile radius of each other.

The seeds of Seventh-day Adventism were sown first with a document that was published in 1822 by William Miller in upstate New York. It would be 40 years before Seventh-day Adventism would organize formally, but that document in 1822 was the beginning. Mormonism came along within a decade in 1830, also in upstate New York.

The first official Seventh-day Adventist church was formally established in 1863. Then seven years after that, in 1870, the Jehovah's Witnesses got their start in Pittsburgh. The Christian Scientists began in

Boston in 1879, and all four of these groups grew quickly.

All of them started within a few years of each other, and the genesis of these religions spanned less than 50 years. And for most of the 20th century, evangelicals universally referred to those four groups as cults. All of them claimed they had recovered lost truth that had been obscured to the church for centuries.

All of them regarded every other denomination as utterly false. And over the years, all of them have made proselytes by feeding on evangelical churches, mainly through stealth and deception. They will claim to believe the same things we do, or they try to hide who they really are.

I have a stack of Seventh-day Adventist literature in my office that you have to look in the fine print on the copyright page to even discern that this has anything to do with Seventh-day Adventism. They try to obscure that fact, and they hate to be called cults. And they insist that they're really benign and biblical, and lately some of them have lobbied hard for acceptance in the mainstream evangelical movement.

Seventh-day Adventists were the first to, and they have also been the most successful with that strategy. But now Mormons are doing it as well. They insist they don't deserve to be written off as a cult.

They're just another denomination like the Methodists or the Lutherans, and they're all trying to sell themselves as mainstream now. But all four of those groups are quasi-Christian, sub-Orthodox. They all claim to be the one true church, and so it's proper to label them cults.

And I believe Seventh-day Adventism deserves that label as well. When they assigned me the subject last year, they wanted me to answer the question, is Seventh-day Adventism a cult? And I listened recently to the tape I did last year, and while it was good and a good survey of the history of Seventh-day Adventism, I want to make sure I have thoroughly answered that question for you. I believe they are a cult.

Now let's talk about the distinguishing characteristics of a cult. What do we mean when we say they are a cult? That word, cult, itself simply means a religious sect or community. You could argue that, you know, we're a cult as well, but in common usage, in normal evangelical usage, in evangelical circles anyway, that that expression is normally reserved for groups that encourage a kind of obsessive commitment to a very narrow set of doctrines.

They all have authoritarian leadership, and they all have their own unique body of extra-biblical revelation. They're basically closed communities, fully committed to some novel system of doctrine that is shared by no one else. That's what we mean when we say they're a cult.

We don't generally categorize Roman Catholicism as a cult, even though it fits nearly all of those categories, because the errors of Roman Catholicism didn't spring up suddenly or recently. Catholicism's errors evolved and compounded over the centuries, and so the word cult, in the sense that we've come to use that term, doesn't quite fit Roman Catholicism, which is not to diminish the seriousness of Roman Catholic errors. They are perhaps worse even than Seventh-day Adventism's errors, but owing to the antiquity of the Catholic system, we don't generally classify them as a cult.

We reserve that term for these authoritarian groups that spring up suddenly with new revelation and new doctrines, and it's sort of come out of nowhere. And prior to 1960 or so, these four major groups were what came to mind whenever evangelicals talked about cults. But then starting in the late 1960s, we had the proliferation of a number of new, smaller, but often even more deadly cults that arose.

They started making secular news headlines with everything from, you know, criminal activities to mass suicides. You had the Children of God, the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones and the Jonestown People's Temple, the Worldwide Church of God, the Way International, and lots of lesser-known cults, including one really small cult that was started by a small group of people who were excommunicated from Grace Church in the 1990s. They called themselves a true church.

They still exist somewhere in Oklahoma, and I think their group is melting down. You have another cult up the road in Santa Clarita, the Tony Alamo Christian Foundation. These are all dangerous, authoritarian groups that teach novel doctrines.

And several of the new cults were offshoots of Seventh-day Adventism, including the Branch Davidians. They started out as Seventh-day Adventists. The Worldwide Church of God, which basically absorbed the Seventh-day Adventist system and a whole bunch of other heresies and melted them together.

There was a group called the Shepherd's Rod. There was a group called the Church of Bible Understanding. And then you had the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, all of these new cults that came out of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement.

And as a point of historical interest, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell, started out as an early Seventh-day Adventist. So Seventh-day Adventism has always been a breeding ground for new and more dangerous cults. And there's been this recent proliferation of religious cults also that have nothing to do with Christianity.

You have groups like Scientology and Urantia and the Heaven's Gate cult, that group that committed mass suicide on the Internet in the 1990s. You had the...remember the Rajneesh cult that took over a town in Oregon in the 1990s? And they've moved, by the way, to Pune, India, where their office is pretty close to the Grace to You office in India. And you had the Hare Krishnas and a whole bunch, dozens, literally dozens more.

In fact, Wikipedia has a list of 270 religious movements that are new in the past century or so. And most of them could be classified as cults. And I think that's only a partial list.

There are many, many smaller cults. And last year, when I spoke on the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement, I gave this definition of a cult. Don't try to write it down because I'm only going to say it once, and you can get it from the recording later if you want.

But listen carefully because you get the idea easily, I think. A cult is an authoritarian, elitist, religious sect who teach that salvation hinges on membership in their group, and yet they depart from one or more essential points in the ancient ecumenical creeds, the classic creeds of early Christianity. Most of the cults peddle their movement as a recovery of true Christianity, which they say was lost to the world until they came on the scene.

And they say they are now privy to truth that had lain hidden in darkness until the light finally dawned on them. They generally claim that their emergence, their recent emergence, signals the next major phase in God's plan for the world. That's what they believe.

And they're often clever and very subtle and deceitful enough to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. They confuse Christians, they deceive unbelievers, and they hurt the testimony of the true church, and they muddy the gospel message. And there are four key characteristics.

I want to sort of flesh out my definition of a cult. There are four key characteristics that most of these quasi-Christian cults have in common. These are the things to be wary of when someone comes along teaching doctrines you're not familiar with.

And if you see all four of these characteristics together, you know you are dealing with a cult. And the first is extra-biblical revelation. All the major cults have some source of authority outside the Bible, and this becomes the lens through which they interpret Scripture.

And therefore, whether they want to admit it or not, and usually they won't admit it, the truth is the stuff they append to the Bible governs what they can see in the Bible. For Mormons, it's the Book of Mormon. For Jehovah's Witnesses, it's the Watchtower magazine.

For Christian scientists, it's a book called--this is the title--Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. And that title, I think, is a dead giveaway. It acknowledges what all of these groups believe, and they are convinced that their distinctive writings, these new revelations that they think they are privy to, those things hold the only key that can unlock the true meaning of Scripture.

And that, of course, is the central tenet of the most ancient of all the heresies, Gnosticism. Every Gnostic claims you can't understand the Bible on its own terms. You need a guru or an enlightened leader of some kind to open for you the true meaning of Scripture.

That's the underlying Gnostic principle, and it drives every cult. And for the Seventh-day Adventists, the key that unlocks the Bible's true meaning is the voice of their founding prophetess, Ellen G. White. We talked about her influence last year.

I introduced her to you in that message. If you haven't heard it, it's okay. I'll have more to say about her this morning.

But that is the first characteristic of a cult, extra-biblical revelation. Here's a second feature all cults share in common. They believe their sect is the one true church.

Each one of them claims to be the true or the truest expression of genuine Christianity. Of course, the Mormons and the Seventh-day Adventists will try to fudge on that claim or downplay it, because they so badly these days want acceptance in evangelical circles. But the truth is, it is built into the DNA of every true cult, this belief that their group alone represents true Christianity and all other denominations since the apostolic era are apostate.

A third characteristic of the cults is that they all have a superstitious attachment to some self-styled prophet or leader or a novel system of doctrine. People who belong to cults are spiritually actually in a state of demonic bondage. And that's obvious, because even...and you notice this pattern in all the cults, even when they recognize that their leaders are untrustworthy or guilty of prophesying falsely or whatever, they often stay with the cult, because they are constrained by a superstitious fear that if they leave, they might forfeit the possibility of salvation forever.

And so they're fiercely loyal to the group, even after their eyes have been opened to the lies that are being taught. And then fourth, the fourth characteristic is that all these cults preach a different gospel. They preach a message that is incompatible with the core gospel truths we find in Scripture.

These aren't cults because they're merely in error on some minor point of doctrine or practice, but their teaching, their distinctive teachings, fatally corrupt the gospel. Most of them do this by mingling works with grace. Some of them also portray Christ as someone other than he truly is.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, deny the deity of Christ. But those are the four key characteristics of quasi-Christian cults. If you want them in a shortened kind of alliterated form, here they are.

Extrabiblical revelation, elitism, enslavement, and error. Those all start with an E, so I'll give them to you that way. And what I want to do this morning is consider those four characteristics with regard to Seventh-day Adventism and evaluate whether they truly apply to this group or not.

Is it a cult or is it not? So let's look at these characteristics one at a time. The first is extrabiblical revelation. Do they claim some Gnostic-style secret that they have been made privy to? And to answer that question, I want to start with a brief review of Seventh-day Adventist history.

I won't go over everything I said last year. If you want a more complete summary of Seventh-day Adventist history, you can listen to that first message I did on the subject. But both the name Adventism and the roots of this movement come from a widespread belief that flourished in the first half of the 1800s that the second coming of Christ was drawing near.

That word Adventist refers to the advent, the coming, the second coming of Christ. An Adventist is someone who has an obsessive interest in the timing of Christ's return. Jehovah's Witnesses are their own kind of Adventists, but they're Adventists as well.

Seventh-day Adventists are a unique cult of Adventists, but they're obsessed with the timing of the second coming. That has never been a healthy fixation. Don't fall into that trap either.

It's not a good thing. Jesus Himself said, concerning that day and that hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only. That's Matthew 24, 36.

And then in Matthew 24, 42, He says, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. You don't know. And He's saying, stay awake, you don't know the time.

Be ready in case He delays His coming, and be ready in case He comes sooner than you think He might. Because no one knows when it will be. Scripture is very clear on that.

And if someone starts giving you a time frame, steer clear. William Miller was a totally self-trained Baptist lay preacher in the early 1800s. He had been converted out of gross heresy.

He was a deist who actually didn't even believe the Bible, and was converted out of that into a Baptist church, but without any firm theological grounding. His background was in deism. He became obsessed pretty quickly with the second coming, and he believed that he had figured out an exact window of time during which Christ would return to the earth.

And in fact, let me read to you from his own words. Here is how he summarized his teaching, quote, he said, my principles in brief are that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same with all the saints sometime between March 21st, 1843 and March 21st, 1844. That was his whole doctrine.

That's the way he summarized his teaching. And he published a document explaining this rationale. That was the document I mentioned in 1822 that sort of began this movement.

And by the early 1840s, his movement, they called the Millerites, because they were followers of William Miller. The Millerite movement had expanded by the 1840s into a huge international phenomenon. Pretty much everybody was aware of this.

It was all in the news. And in fact, in one five-month span in 1843, 600,000 copies of Millerite literature were distributed in New York State alone. People sold their homes.

They gave away their possessions. They gave up their livelihoods in order to demonstrate their faith in William Miller's predictions. They were going to divest themselves of everything and go on the hill and just wait for Christ to return.

And of course, Christ did not return, not in Miller's lifetime or even in that century. And Miller tried a couple of times to adjust his calculations and fix the dates a time or two, but he himself quickly gave up hope of finding a way to adjust his calculations to keep the expectation alive. And he died baffled and disillusioned.

He never joined the Seventh-day Adventist movement himself. And to this day, Adventists refer to Miller's failed prediction of the Second Coming as the Great Disappointment. They put it in capital letters even, the Great Disappointment.

Now, that would seem a pretty shaky foundation on which to build a cult, right? A false prophecy that culminated in a disappointment and worldwide embarrassment. But the truth is, as I said, this is a bondage and the gullibility of spiritually blinded minds knows no bounds. The Seventh-day Adventists simply rebuilt the movement and turned it into a classic cult by justifying William Miller's mistake with a series of false prophecies that were issued by a prophetess whose qualifications and character are deeply suspect.

Ellen Harmon was 12 years old and an impressionable child when her parents became followers of William Miller in 1840, four years before the expected time of Christ's return. She married at age 19, two years after the Great Disappointment, and we know her today by her married name, Ellen G. White. In 1844, when Adventist expectation was still at its peak before the disappointment, Ellen was a 17-year-old.

She was subject to fainting spells and she was already beginning to exhibit an overbearing disposition. I think she must have been a detestable 17-year-old. And when the Great Disappointment made it clear that William Miller's predictions were wrong, Ellen suddenly began to experience visions.

Her experiences like this always took place in crowded meeting halls and other public places, and her biography says she had almost 200 of these seizures. In fact, let me read to you about it. This is from her son, William White, who described it this way.

She would fall helpless to the floor, stop breathing, and yet her heart beat and she would speak. How could she speak when she stopped breathing? I'm not sure, but there's quite a lot of testimony about the fact that she stopped breathing when this happened. And it was all very melodramatic.

William White, her son, also wrote this about his mom's visions. The first one I witnessed as a little boy in a meeting house in Roosevelt, New York. Father had given a short talk.

Mother had given a short talk. Father prayed. Mother prayed.

Notice she's always trumping her husband, but whatever. Mother prayed, and as she was praying, he says, I heard that shout, glory. There's nothing like it.

That musical, deep shout of glory. She fell backward. My father put his arm under her.

In a little while, her strength came to her. She stood up in an attitude of one seeing wonderful things in the distance. Her face illuminated, sometimes bright and joyous.

She would speak with that musical voice, making short comments upon what she was seeing, and then as she saw the darkness in the world, there were sad expressions as she spoke of what she saw. This continued 10 or 15 minutes. Then she caught her breath, breathed deeply several times, and then after a little season of rest, probably 5 or 10 minutes, during which time Father spoke to the people, she arose and related to the congregation some of the things that had been presented to her.

Ellen White herself claimed that a supernatural being who appeared to her in the form of a young man guided her through these visions. Adventists today refer to this as the spirit of prophecy. Ellen White referred to the spirit as her accompanying angel, which sounds suspiciously to me like what Scripture refers to as a familiar spirit, a demon.

And given the complexity of her visions and the influence that they have had, you do have to wonder if these were demonic visitations, either Satan or one of his messengers disguised as an angel of light, the way Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11, 14 and 15. And in fact, if these visions were not demonic, it was all simply play-acting on her part because her visions are muddled, ambiguous, religious-sounding gibberish that completely lacks the clarity and authority you find in Scripture, divine revelation. These are not divine revelation.

It's a woman's gibberish. But her visions became the means of regrouping the Adventists after the Great Disappointment. She said the Lord had revealed to her that those who remained faithful and expected would soon see the Lord in glory and be taken immediately to heaven.

But, she said, now the door of salvation is permanently closed to everyone who didn't follow William Miller's teaching or those who also lost faith after Miller's predictions failed. And her prophecies in those early days regularly indicated that the Lord's coming was still very near. She said the angel promised her that she would be one of those living who would witness the second coming of Christ.

But her visions over the next few years kept revising the timing. She blamed the delays and the missed predictions on the unbelief of people who doubted her prophecies, which is an interesting argument. But ultimately, she more or less dropped the subject of when the Lord would return.

And, of course, it goes without saying she was dead wrong. She died almost exactly a hundred years ago on July 16th of 1915, and the Lord still hasn't returned. So it should be clear those were false prophecies all around.

But by 1847, the Whites, Mrs. White and her husband, had also fully embraced Saturday Sabbatarianism. And so, naturally, as her predictions about the timing of the Lord's return receded from their prominence in her predictions, the issue she began to deal with all the time was Sabbatarianism. In her mind, this issue, Saturday Sabbatarianism, rather than belief in William Miller's timetables, this issue, the Sabbath issue, became the definitive mark of the true believer.

And a few short years after she had declared the door of salvation closed to everyone outside the cult, she evidently began to realize that if she held firmly to the claim she made in that prophecy, that the door of salvation is closed, if you weren't in during the William Miller hysteria, you can't go to heaven. If that was true, there would be no way to recruit new members to the group. And also, as time passed, and more than a decade passed, and babies were born to church members and began to reach adolescence, there was the dilemma of how to get these children past that closed door and into heaven.

And so Ellen's prophecies took on a very elastic property. Her visions were subject to frequent revisions and reinterpretations, and she soon disowned the idea that the door of salvation was permanently closed. I mentioned in passing earlier that her character seems questionable.

It wasn't just the changeable prophecies that cast doubt on her integrity. Last year when we covered the history of the movement, I also read a few firsthand accounts to you of people close to her who said she was a rank hypocrite. She wasn't completely honest about how much and how often she cheated on her own rules about dress and diet.

She'd hide the fact that she didn't follow the same rules she imposed on her followers. One of her personal assistants, I read this last year, left an unintentionally humorous account of how she repeatedly caught Mrs. White sneaking around and eating oysters and other forbidden foods and indulging in lots of petty acts of unsanctified behavior during a journey to California by train. And it's clear from what Ellen White wrote about herself that she was a hopeless narcissist with overblown delusions of grandeur.

But here's the thing, the writings of Ellen G. White are nevertheless revered by Seventh-day Adventists today as equal to Scripture in their authority and accuracy and reliability. And although most Seventh-day Adventists will try to downplay the stress they put on Ellen White's writings, they do in fact believe that Ellen White was divinely inspired and her books are revelations that are superior to every resource and every other truth claim outside the Bible. And since they read and interpret the Bible through the lens of Mrs. White's supposedly inspired books, her writings in practice have a higher authority than Scripture.

Scripture simply cannot be used to correct Mrs. White's errors. It's always the other way around. Her writings are used to change or alter the clear interpretation of biblical passages because Scripture is interpreted according to what she wrote.

It's exactly the same situation you have in the Catholic Church with papal infallibility or the Book of Mormon among the Latter-day Saints or the writings of Mary Baker Eddy in the Christian Science Cult or the Watchtower magazine for the Witnesses. Those extra-biblical writings become the rule by which Scripture even is subject to. And if you think I'm exaggerating, let me read from an article published in a Seventh-day Adventist magazine.

This is Ministry Magazine, October of 1981. It's an old magazine, Ministry. It has been published since 1928 and it is the key periodical that's written specifically for Seventh-day Adventist pastors and church leaders.

And this particular article was written to confront a trend that began to peak about 35 years ago when some ministers in the denomination were beginning to raise legitimate questions about the reliability of what Ellen White wrote. The article, this article that I'm about to read from, is written by Ron Graybill. He is a leading Seventh-day Adventist historian and apologist.

And this article reflects the denomination's official position with regard to Mrs. White's written works. In fact, the article is titled, *Ellen White's Role in Doctrine Formation*. And it says this, quote, we believe the revelation and inspiration of both the Bible and Ellen White's writings to be of equal quality.

The superintendence of the Holy Spirit was just as careful and thorough in one case as in the other. And then he adds this, there is, however, a definite distinction to be made between the normative authority of scripture and the formative authority of Mrs. White's writings in our church. Why should a distinction be made? In the first place, Ellen White clearly placed the Bible alone in a category of standard and rule for doctrine.

That's not true, by the way, but we'll pass over it. Then he says there are other practical reasons for making the distinction between Mrs. White's writings and scripture. Only if we refrain from using Ellen White as a normative authority for doctrine can we hope to meet other Christians on a common ground and expect them to see the validity of our doctrines, unquote.

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

Now, I realize it may sound like I'm putting a cynical slant on this guy's argument, but that is clearly what he's implying. If both the Bible and the revelation and inspiration of Mrs. White's writings, that's the expression he uses, if they are indeed of equal quality, and if you're willing to be honest and upfront about what you believe, what would common ground have to do with it? Think about this. Faithful evangelicals, I'm not talking now about the Christianity Today crowd, but faithful evangelicals who truly believe scripture is authoritative, they don't downplay our conviction that the Bible is the Word of God in order to find common ground with unbelievers.

But Seventh-day Adventists distribute copies of Ellen White's books and especially her most famous book, *The Great Controversy*. They distribute those books the way the Gideons distribute the Bible. Over the years I've worked at Grace to You, I have received countless copies of that book.

They come in every month, and other books by Ellen White. They come regularly in the mail sent to us by Seventh-day Adventists who promise that simply reading this work will awaken John MacArthur to a whole new understanding of the truth. And that, by the way, is a level of veneration Seventh-day Adventists rarely show for the scriptures.

So that's the first characteristic, extra-biblical revelation. They do base their belief system on a Gnostic-style secret that they have been made privy to through the visions of Ellen White. All right, so what about characteristic number two, elitism? Do they believe their sect is the one true church? And here's another principle that is built into the very DNA of Seventh-day Adventism.

Bear in mind that Mrs. White's very first vision and her most influential prophecy was that early declaration she made that the door of salvation was closed to everyone but the Millerites who remained faithful and who still believed the prediction even after the Great Disappointment. They were the only ones going to heaven, she said. She claimed she had this vision in December 1844, just weeks after the Great

Disappointment.

In fact, let me read it to you. Here, in her own words, is how she recorded that prophecy. She said, quote, while praying at the family altar, the Holy Ghost fell on me and I seemed to be rising higher and higher, far above the dark world.

I turned to look for the Advent people in the world, but I could not find them. When a voice said to me, look again and look a little higher. And at this, she says, I raised my eyes and I saw a straight and narrow path cast up high above the world.

On this path, the Advent people were traveling to the city, which was at the farther end of the path. They had a bright light set up behind them at the first end of the path. This light shone all the way along the path and it gave light for their feet so that they might not stumble.

And if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the city, they were safe. But soon, some grew weary and they said the city was a great way off and they expected to have entered it before. Others rashly denied the light behind them and said it was not God who had led them out this far.

She's describing people who had given up their belief in the Millerite predictions. And she says, the light behind them went out, leaving their feet in perfect darkness, and they stumbled and got their eyes off the mark and lost sight of Jesus and fell off the path down in the dark and wicked world below. It was just as impossible for them to get on the path again and go to the city as for all the wicked world which God had rejected.

They fell all along the way, one after another. That's her description. She's describing the case as hopeless, not only for people who never believed Miller's predictions, but also for those who once believed it and after the disappointment realized it was false.

Then, almost 40 years later, in 1883, when after she'd been forced by pragmatic reasons to revise that doctrine and say, no, no, no, the door isn't permanently closed, she admitted this, quote, for a time after the disappointment in 1844, I did hold in common with the advent body that the door of mercy was then closed forever to the world. I'm still a believer in the shut door theory, but not in the sense in which we at first employed the term or in which it is employed by my opponents. And she went on to explain that the door is closed only to those who had seen the light and rejected it prior to 1944.

The door is still open for others, she said, as long as they embrace her prophecies when that new light was given to them. And especially, she says, the Sabbatarian principle. It's not anymore about the timing of the Lord's return.

Now it's about the Sabbath. That issue moves to the head of the list. Now, obviously, the revised version still retains that same element of elitism.

According to the new dogma, all those who knowingly refused the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbatarianism, they're going to be sealed in their unbelief by the mark of the beast, and they will be permanently excluded from any possibility of salvation. Modern Seventh-day Adventists these days don't like to emphasize that idea, but it is the official teaching of their church. In the exact words of Mrs. White, quote, the worshipers of God will be especially distinguished by their regard for the fourth commandment, but the worshipers of the beast will be distinguished by their efforts to tear down the Creator's memorial.

She means the Sabbath. She's talking about the Sabbath. She was convinced against all the evidence of the New Testament that the practice of gathering on the first day of the week was a kind of late revision to the law of God made, she said, by the Pope.

Sunday worship, she insisted, had been imposed on the church in later centuries by a corrupt papacy. Like most Protestants in that era, she considered the Pope Antichrist, and so she reasoned that Sunday worship corresponds to the mark of the beast. And for her, and for millions of other Seventh-day Adventists, Saturday Sabbatarianism is considered the single most important mark of true faith in Christ, and Sunday worship is the mark of the beast.

Now, so look at our list. You have extra-biblical revelation, check. Elitism, check.

How about this third characteristic of the cults? Enslavement. Is there a superstitious attachment to a self-styled prophet or leader or to the group itself or to the driving principle? Is this a kind of bondage for people who get into it? And the answer to that should be obvious by now. It is virtually impossible to find a credible Seventh-day Adventist leader who does not give evidence of a slavish devotion to Ellen White, her doctrines, the mythology that surrounds her, and her quirky beliefs about food and stuff.

And Seventh-day Adventism in recent years, just in the past handful of decades, has been in flux with internal controversies at least for four decades. And a lot of the discussions within the movement have focused on two issues, Sabbatarianism, which is impossible to justify biblically, and the doctrine of justification by faith, which is impossible to reconcile with the legalism that is at the core of virtually every Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal distinctive. And several well-known Adventist leaders over the past 40 years or so have questioned the received doctrines on those two matters, Sabbatarianism and justification.

The best known and most influential voice that has raised those questions about Adventist doctrine is an Australian theologian and a former Adventist pastor named Desmond Ford. And his original concerns had to do with the issues that lie at the heart of the gospel, the issues of justification by faith, the role of good works, the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Is it implanted, imparted, imputed? That was the debate.

And Desmond Ford became a critic of this vital Adventist doctrine known as investigative judgment. This is a teaching that claims Christ is currently examining and judging his people's works to determine whether this individual or that individual will be justified or not. This is one of the novelties of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine that defines the Adventist confession of faith.

This is one of the things that sets him apart from every other denomination. And it comes straight from Ellen White herself. She claimed that although Christ did not return in 1844, what happened then was that he moved from the holy place in the heavenly tabernacle to the holy of holies in heaven.

And at that point, she says, he began this process known as investigative judgment, where he is reviewing the works of believers with an eye to their final judgment. Now, remember, in those days, Ellen White was teaching that the door of salvation was totally closed to everyone who wasn't already in, and the Millerites who had actually kept the faith. But she said, even they are to be judged according to their works.

So she says, Christ is in heaven, you know, reviewing the instant replays or whatever. And as soon as he finishes this work, she said, he will return to earth. And she said, that'll be very soon.

That's what they believed. And so this doctrine of investigative judgment has, at its heart, a heavy emphasis on human works and human righteousness. And frankly, it is impossible to reconcile this doctrine with the biblical teaching about justification by faith.

But ever since Ellen White first promoted this doctrine, it has been considered one of the pillars of Seventh-day Adventist belief. Desmond Ford, the Adventist pastor, questioned it. And in 1980, he was excommunicated from the cult for doubting that doctrine.

He's not formally been a member of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination for more than 35 years. And yet, he refuses to let go or even acknowledge some of the group's most egregious errors. He's still a Saturday Sabbatarian.

He still follows a vegetarian lifestyle and believes Ellen White's notions about diet and health. Most of all, he still reveres Ellen White as a prophetess and insists that her writings are at least valuable, if not inspired. So he thinks what this manifestly false prophetess wrote is superior to all other works on the Christian religion.

It is very hard to cut that tie once you're ensnared in a group like this. You know, we have a few. We have actually several former Adventists here in Grace Church, and all of them will tell you that getting out of the cult is a very frightening and difficult proposition.

The elitism that is so prominent in all cults instills a kind of superstitious fear that if you leave this group, it might forever lock you out of heaven. And in fact, many who leave Seventh-day Adventism end up either indifferent or overtly hostile to all forms of Christianity. In the 1970s, a wealthy Australian Seventh-day Adventist named Robert Brinsmead was influenced by Desmond Ford, and Brinsmead began questioning the Seventh-day Adventist doctrines.

For a while, he dabbled in Reformed theology and began to publish a journal that got worldwide circulation for a few years, and it was quite good. It was called Present Truth, and it featured some hard-to-find writings that had been excerpted from the Puritans and other Reformed writers. This was before lots of Puritan reprints were available.

And that magazine was free. It was well edited, and I subscribed to it during my college career. That magazine gave me my first exposure to Puritan works.

And Brinsmead also wrote one of the finest critiques of Sabbatarianism you'll ever read. But after being out of Adventism for several years, he began to derail spiritually. He dabbled...after he left Reformed theology, he dabbled in Neo-Orthodoxy and then moved to Socinianism.

And today, he is an elderly recluse who professes no religious faith at all. And Desmond Ford's son, Luke, followed an even more sinister path. At one point, he professed conversion to Judaism.

And then he also seemed to abandon faith altogether, and he became a blogger, a famous blogger, who reports on trends in the adult industry. And an article in Salon magazine called him the Matt Drudge of Porn. That kind of gross apostasy is the fruit of cultish elitism.

A person who is totally sold out to a religious group, thinking, I have found the one true church. And when he discovers that what he's being taught is actually based on lies and false prophecies and unbiblical doctrines, it's hard to shake off the disillusionment and then believe anything with real conviction after that.

When you finally manage to cut that strong tie that binds you to the cult, if you don't embrace the true Christ with genuine faith and a renewed heart, you'll have no anchor whatsoever.

On the other hand, even if you get excommunicated like Desmond Ford, assuming you can stave off complete disenchantment with all religion, it's hard to let go of the belief system you were so sold out to. That's a major problem with any cult. But it's especially difficult to leave a legalistic group like the Seventh-day Adventists.

Legalism is a powerful bondage that is very, very difficult to break. Any of the former Seventh-day Adventists here will affirm that. So let's review.

These are the features of practically every cult. Extrabiblical revelation, elitism, enslavement to the group and its rules. Seventh-day Adventism gets bad marks in every one of those categories.

So what about the fourth and perhaps most important category of a cult? Error. Do they offer a different gospel? Do they present a different Jesus? Or do they have some other kind of heterodoxy on a similarly grand scale? And here again, you cannot avoid the conclusion that Seventh-day Adventism qualifies as a cult. They're not as blatantly heretical as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses.

And certainly they aren't as far off track as Christian science. But the subtlety of the Seventh-day Adventist error actually makes this cult a more immediate threat in our circles of fellowship. Seventh-day Adventism is a close, close parallel to the heresy Paul was confronting in his epistle to the Galatians.

In that seminar I taught last year on Seventh-day Adventism, I remarked that the Sabbatarianism is to Seventh-day Adventists what circumcision was to the Galatian heretics. The error of the Judaizers in Paul's time would probably seem trivial to the average evangelical today, really, if we encountered it without any reference to the epistle to the Galatians. Most evangelicals would look at that and say it's a trivial error.

These are churchmen who had some kind of affiliation with the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem. They didn't deny the deity or the humanity of Christ. They freely confessed that Christ was Israel's Messiah.

They believed in the resurrection. They affirmed the necessity of faith. And they no doubt spoke with great passion about grace and the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.

They were advocates of holiness. And they appealed to the scriptures as authoritative. So what was the big deal? Why did Paul actually curse these people as heretics? There was one significant difference between Paul and these heretics.

Paul taught that good works were the fruit of justifying faith. The Judaizers insisted that good works were instrumental in justification. Or to say it another way, they revised the order of salvation.

They said faith begets works and faith plus good works beget justification. But Scripture says faith alone begets justification and good works are the fruit of God's regenerating work. They're the fruit, not the cause of our justification.

Romans 4 verses 4 and 5, to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. In other words, if you think you can earn sufficient righteousness through your own good works, you're going to get exactly the wage you deserve. But to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies

the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

That's clearly the principle of sola fide, faith alone. In fact, that word alone in the expression justification by faith alone is the hinge on which orthodoxy swings. It's not just that we believe in justification by faith, it's that we believe that faith is the only instrument of justification.

You don't get justification by baptism or Sabbath observance or any ritual or work. Virtually every cult and every sub-orthodox religion goes astray doctrinally for precisely this reason. They deny the principle of sola fide.

They deny that faith is the only instrument of justification. Romans 4 verse 5 again, to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. Seventh-day Adventism teaches a grab bag full of errors.

And it's not just Saturday Sabbatarianism. They also deny the doctrine of eternal punishment. They don't believe in hell, which means they write off pretty much everything Jesus ever said about hell.

They believe in soul sleep and conditional immortality. In other words, they teach that the human soul has no conscious existence apart from the body. And they claim that the dead, the wicked dead simply cease to exist.

They also deny the security of salvation. I mentioned in that earlier seminar last year that Mrs. White claimed that Satan, not Christ, bears the sins of redeemed people. She also taught a unique kind of perfectionism that in effect saddled all Christians with the baggage of the law and made assurance of salvation impossible.

In fact, listen to her. She wrote, quote, those who accept the Savior, however sincere their conversion should never be taught to say or feel that they are saved. This is misleading, she says.

Everyone should be taught to cherish hope and faith, but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that he accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation. So she says, don't teach people to believe that they are saved. In fact, one of the standard texts on Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is a book by Francis Nickel entitled Answers to Objections.

It's a common book. You'll find it everywhere in Seventh-day Adventist libraries. He says this, quote, it is not an accurate statement of our position to say that we hold that a person cannot be saved unless he keeps the Seventh-day Sabbath.

Here is our position. Only those will be saved who, having been redeemed by the grace of Christ, walk in obedience to all the light that God has given them. That's perfectionist teaching distilled in a statement that would make salvation impossible.

The clear implication of what he's saying there is that our merits, our personal merits, will be weighed in order to determine whether we are saved or not. It's the same error built into the doctrine of investigative judgment, and it flatly contradicts what Scripture teaches. Listen to the words of Jesus, John 5 24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death unto life." Seventh-day Adventism's strange mixture of false doctrines and rank legalism and smug perfectionist statements fatally muddies the gospel.

This patently false claim that salvation ultimately hinges on a believer's own merit is a deliberate denial of the gospel of grace taught in Scripture. This is precisely what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Galatians 1 when he wrote this, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we have preached to you, let him be accursed." If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you receive, let him be accursed.

That's Galatians 1 verses 8 and 9. And remember that the passage we began with, Colossians 2, warns about the dangers of people who rely on their own visions, whose teaching is full of rules and regulations saying, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, people who would pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink with regards to the Sabbath. Those are Paul's very words. It should be obvious that Seventh-day Adventism is precisely the kind of cultish religion Scripture warns us about.

And we cannot afford to let down our guard against a false religion like this. In fact, we need to recover our own commitment to the truth, our devotion to the truth of Scripture. We need to rededicate ourselves to the work of discernment, and we need to return to our first love, making a distinction, a clear distinction between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

That's the command Scripture gives to us. By the way, keeping watch between truth and error is the true work of the Holy Spirit, not the nonsense you see Benny Hinn doing. But the work of the Holy Spirit is to keep watch between truth and error.

The spirit of truth opposes the spirit of error. The spirit of truth is the Holy Spirit, and there is no honor in trying to minimize the errors of a false religious system that deceives multitudes. So let's stand for the truth in the true power of the Holy Spirit, even though, frankly, it's more stylish today to compromise and to downplay errors like this.

The time will come when our spiritual heirs will be thankful that we tried to be clear and careful in our defense of the gospel. Let's pray. Father, we do need Your Spirit to empower us and enable us with wisdom to understand Your Word, with the ability to discern between truth and error, with the boldness to speak up, and with the courage to stand firm.

Give us also the meekness and mercy we learn from Christ, and make us faithful witnesses for the gospel. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

You have been listening to Pastor and Teacher Phil Johnson. For more information about the Grace Life Pulpit and its ministry, visit [www.thegracelifepulpit.com](http://www.thegracelifepulpit.com).

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