

Seventh-day Adventism

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Seventh-day Adventism (SDA) is a denomination that developed out of the revival-inspired expectations of Christ's return found among many nineteenth century Americans.

Founder(s):

William Miller (1782–1849); Joseph Bates (1792–1872); James White (1821–1881); Ellen White (1827–1915)

Statistics:

Seventh-day Adventist statistics for 2010 list a worldwide membership of 16,923,239. The Inter-American World Division (including Central America and the Caribbean) has the largest SDA membership with 3,403,718. The East-Central African World Division is second largest in SDA membership with 2,648,520. The North American World Division numbers 1,126,815.¹

History:

With expectations fueled by American religious revivals in the early 1800s, many people hoped that Christ would soon return. Through a study of Scripture, New York farmer William Miller began calculating the date of the Second Advent.² Later ordained by the Baptist church, Miller gave lectures and published his conclusions in 1836 in a book titled *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843*. When Christ did not return between the appointed dates of March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844, Miller and his followers suggested that the Bridegroom was delayed (Matthew 25:5) and calculated a new date of October 22, 1844 (based on Habakkuk 2:3 and Leviticus 25:9).

When Christ did not return on the expected date, some of Miller's followers deserted him in a reaction called "The Great Disappointment." However, many Millerites, including leaders such as Joseph Bates, James White, and his wife Ellen White, came to believe that the October date was correct but that its events had been interpreted incorrectly. Instead of returning to earth, Christ had on that day moved from the "Holy Place" to the "Most Holy Place" in heaven to begin investigating and removing sins from the heavenly records, cleansing the heavenly sanctuary in a process of on-going judgment before His Second Advent.

¹ <http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR2010.pdf#view=fit>

² Using numbers found in Daniel 9:24-27, Miller figured that beginning from 457 B.C. (the events of Nehemiah 2:1, according to the dating of Archbishop Ussher in Miller's King James Bible), the seventy weeks led up to the death of Christ in 33 A.D. (according to Ussher's dating). From that point the 2300 "prophetic" days in Daniel 8:14 led him to the year 1843 as the date of the Second Advent. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 479.

The visions and writings of Ellen White came to be regarded in the Adventist movement as “the Spirit of prophecy.” Born Ellen Harmon in a Methodist family, White accepted the Adventist faith as a teenager and even early in life experienced revelations about her faith. Among her other teachings, White warned against neglecting Sabbath observance. The change from Sabbath to Sunday worship in opposition to God’s command was understood as a fulfillment of Daniel 7:25. The change was supposedly influenced by early Gentile believers in Rome and later promoted by the Roman Catholic Church. In view of the fact that God’s judgment had begun in the heavenly realm, true believers were to live in purity and obedience, observing the Sabbath and awaiting Christ’s return. The name Seventh-day Adventist, adopted in 1860, reflects these key teachings of the denomination—Sabbath observance and Christ’s Second Advent.

The SDA General Conference was organized in 1863 with headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan. SDA headquarters moved to Takoma Park, Maryland in 1904 and to its present location in Silver Springs, Maryland in 1989. An extremist sect of the SDA, the Branch Davidians and their leader David Koresh, became well known after a 1993 standoff with the FBI in Waco, Texas. In the conflict 75 sect members were killed, including Koresh and 25 children.

Such extreme views, however, do not define Adventism. The Seventh-day Adventists are involved in worldwide mission work, education, and disaster relief. They also promote improvements in physical health, as well as defending religious liberty and human rights.

Texts:

The Bible; the writings of Ellen G. White, including *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*; *The Desire of Ages*; *The Ministry of Healing*; and *Steps to Christ*

Beliefs and Practices:

Seventh-day Adventists confess many fundamental Christian teachings, including belief in the Holy Trinity, Christ’s incarnation, His atoning death for the sins of the world, and His resurrection. They accept the books of the Old and New Testament as the inspired Word of God. With regard to the Sacraments, they believe that Baptism must be done by immersion only and depends on the individual’s affirmation of faith. The bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are believed to be symbols of Christ’s body and blood. The observance of the Lord’s Supper also includes the practice of foot washing as a mark of humility.

Seventh-day Adventists also hold a number of distinctive beliefs. The SDA mission statement (adopted in 2009) refers to an important biblical text in Adventist teachings:

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Savior and unite with its remnant Church, disciplining them to serve Him as Lord and preparing them for His soon return.”³

³ <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat1.html>

The first of the three angels in Revelation 14:6–12 calls for repentance and speaks of God’s judgment, which in Adventist thought indicates the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary that began in 1844. The second angel announces the fall of impure Babylon, the apostate church drunk with the “wine” of heresy and the “fornication” of its relationship with the civil authorities. Sabbath-keeping Adventists must separate themselves from the apostate church, which includes the Roman Catholic Church and Protestants who have left the pure “gospel of righteousness” rediscovered during the Reformation.⁴ The third angel pronounces judgment on those who receive the mark of the beast, that is, those who worship on Sundays (Sabbath worship—the day appointed by God—is regarded as the mark and memorial of the Creator’s lordship).⁵

Another distinctive teaching is “the Great Controversy,” the on-going battle between Christ and Satan, with this world serving as the arena of the conflict. This cosmic point of view “unveils Satan’s attempt to remove Christ from His rightful place, both in the universe and in truth.”⁶ The struggle will end at Christ’s final return. Satan will be defeated and become the scapegoat prefigured in the Old Testament as the sins of the righteous and the wicked are transferred to him.⁷ He will be destroyed in the lake of fire and with him, all sins, the evil angels, and all of the resurrected wicked dead.

The SDA believe that the universal church is the community of all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, they regard themselves as a faithful remnant, called out from among other believers to keep the commandments and announce the Second Advent.⁸ They accept the Bible as God’s inspired Word and the standard for all teaching, but they also believe that the prophetic gift of Ellen White was the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of the Spirit’s work within the remnant. While they believe salvation is by grace, the necessary fruit of salvation is obedience to the commands of God.⁹ Of great importance is the commandment that the Sabbath—from Friday evening to Saturday evening—be observed by rest, worship, and ministry. Jesus Christ is believed to have upheld this binding Sabbath observance because He called Himself the Lord of the Sabbath.

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*, Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 1988), 166.

⁵ In Adventist thought the pope is symbolized by the beast and its number of 666. “[Adventists] arrive at this number as follows: The Pope claims the name *Vicarius Filii Dei*. The Latin letters I, V, L, C, D have the numerical values of 1, 5, 50, 100, 500. The letters in the Pontiff’s name (V, I, C, I, V, I, L, I, I, D, I) total 666.” F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 436, note 20.

⁶ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 104. Ellen White wrote: “From time to time I have been permitted to behold the working, in different ages, of the great controversy between Christ, the Prince of life, the Author of our salvation, and Satan, the prince of evil, the author of sin, the first transgressor of God’s holy law.” Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1939), 7.

⁷ The SDA teach that Christ fully atoned for the sins of the world on the cross. Satan bears the sins of the world as a scapegoat in order to receive the just punishment for his demonic responsibility for those sins.

⁸ “The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. This remnant announces the arrival of the judgment hour, proclaims salvation through Christ, and heralds the approach of His second advent.” *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 152.

⁹ “The title to heaven rests on the righteousness of Christ only. In addition to justification, God’s plan of salvation provides through this title a fitness for heaven by the indwelling Christ. This fitness must be revealed in man’s moral character as evidence that salvation ‘has happened.’” *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 128-129, quoting Hans K. LaRondelle, *Christ Our Salvation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980), 77).

Adventists also believe that Christian discipleship involves purity, modesty in dress, and a healthy diet. To promote good health they are to abstain from the unclean foods described in the Bible (a vegetarian diet is preferred) and from alcohol and tobacco. Although the commandment against murder is used by Adventists to support their position against participation in war, they are active in bringing aid to those who suffer during and after conflicts.

As the name of the denomination implies, the events of Christ's Second Advent are of great importance in SDA teachings. It is believed that Christ began His investigative judgment in the heavenly sanctuary in 1844. By this process He reveals all of those among the dead, as well as those among the living, who are worthy in faith to participate in the first resurrection, when the righteous will be raised. This will take place at the completion of His heavenly investigation, as He returns to gather up the resurrected righteous and the glorified living believers to reign with Him in heaven as they await the second resurrection, that of the unbelieving dead. During this period of one thousand years, only Satan and his angels roam the earth. At the end of the thousand years Christ, the saints, and the Holy City will descend from heaven. The wicked dead will be raised to join with Satan and his forces in an assault on the Holy City, but the evil forces will be destroyed by fire in the final conflict of "The Great Controversy." The new earth to follow will be free of sin and death and God will dwell among His people forever.

A Lutheran Response

Seventh-day Adventists believe Sabbath worship marks them as the faithful remnant of Christ's church. Lutherans, however, believe that Christian freedom permits Sunday worship:

For Holy Scripture did away with the Sabbath, and it teaches that after the revelation of the gospel all ceremonies of the old law may be given up. Nevertheless, the Christian church instituted Sunday because it became necessary to set apart a specific day so that the people might know when to assemble; and the church was all the more pleased and inclined to do this so that the people might have an example of Christian freedom and so that everyone would know that neither the keeping of the Sabbath nor any other day is necessary.¹⁰

Scripture indicates that Sunday worship may have been observed by the earliest Christians as they gathered on "the first day of the week" to break bread (Acts 20:7). In the second century, the Christian theologian Justin Martyr (110–165AD) noted that Sunday was the usual day for worship: "But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead."¹¹ The Lord Jesus' reference to Himself as the Lord of the Sabbath does not indicate His insistence on Sabbath worship or His blessing of the practice but instead reveals His Lordship, His fulfillment of prophecy, and the freedom of His followers:

When Jesus brought the kingdom, that to which the weekly Sabbath observation pointed *arrived*, and so the Sabbath was *fulfilled*. After his resurrection from the dead, the weekly observation of the first creation (Gen 1:1-2:3; Ex 20:8) was made

¹⁰ Augsburg Confession, Article 28, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 100.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, "The First Apology," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 186.

obsolete. . . Jesus is the Messiah and therefore Lord of the Sabbath; the freedom of his Lordship extends to his disciples—they are not bound by the OT regulations that only stood to point to the Messiah.¹²

Seventh-day Adventists look forward with joy to Christ's return, encouraging all believers to eagerly watch and wait for the Lord. However, in spite of speculation about the timing of Christ's Second Coming, by SDA founders as well as others, the day of His return has not been revealed to us. Jesus said, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). We need not fear a secret "investigative judgment" because God has already brought us into His kingdom through the saving work of Jesus Christ (John 5:24; Colossians 1:13). Lutherans do not view the thousand years of Revelation 20:3 as a literal period of time as the SDA does, but as a figure representing the entire span of time between Christ's ascension and His return on the Last Day. When Christ returns, all the dead will be raised, believers to live forever in God's presence and the unbelievers to suffer eternal punishment (John 5:28-29).

The Christian Church is not marked by Sabbath worship and obedience to Old Testament laws, but by the faithful preaching and use of the Gospel and the Sacraments: "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel."¹³ Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not merely outward symbols as presented in SDA teaching. The sacraments are means through which God offers, gives, and seals His grace to us.

While recognizing the dedicated work of the Adventists in helping those harmed by war, Lutherans believe that Christians may serve in the military or in government office: "Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married, etc."¹⁴

Although we may outwardly obey the law (for example, refraining from murder or adultery, dealing honestly in business), we cannot obey perfectly as God demands or earn salvation by our obedience. The law always condemns and accuses. It convicts us of sin and our need for a Savior. Redeemed by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we follow God's holy law as a guide for a life of love and service toward others, remembering the words of the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:16-17: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

For Further Reading

Donato, Christopher John, ed. *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*. Nashville: B&H Academic Press, 2011.

"Excursus on Seventh Day Adventism," in *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism* (Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1989).

¹² Arthur A. Just Jr., *Concordia Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:50* (St. Louis: CPH, 1996), 255-256.

¹³ Augsburg Confession, Article 7, *The Book of Concord*, 42.

¹⁴ Augsburg Confession, Article 16, *The Book of Concord*, 48.

- Hudson, Winthrop S. *Religions in America*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981.
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Links and Websites

The Seventh Day Adventist website
www.adventist.org

The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism (1989 CTCR document)
<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=417>