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# Spirituality: Biblical and nonbiblical—Part 2 of 2

## Prelude

In 2008, Review and Herald Publishing Association published my book *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul*. In the volume I tried to do two things. First, I wanted to testify to the journey God had taken me on to find closeness to Him and true, biblical heart religion. Second, I wanted to help others who also long to grow closer to God. At the time I first wrote, there was little or no controversy about what came to be called *spiritual formation*. Soon after the book was published, however, some in the Christian world (eventually including some Seventh-day Adventists) began to use the term *spiritual formation* to describe dangerous, counterfeit spiritual practices.

Given the current climate, I would like to clarify several things. I am a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist who cares deeply about my church. I am opposed to all forms of spirituality that are contrary to the principles of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. I would also be the first to admit that my book is far from perfect. If I could turn back the clock, I can think of a number of changes that I would make in the original manuscript. For example, I would quote passages from Ellen White that speak to the subject, even though Review and Herald suggested that I not do this because of their plans to market the book to the non-Adventist public. I would correct a chart

that, at first glance, makes it appear as if I believe in Karma. Obviously, I do not. I would attempt to clarify that the term *spiritual formation*, as I understand it, is a term very similar to *sanctification* or *spiritual growth*. I would also not include a bibliography of books for additional reading, since some critics apparently understood this to be my blanket endorsement of all that the various authors wrote or believed. This is certainly not my position. Furthermore, I would be more careful to clarify, define, or omit terms that have become the center of so much misunderstanding and suspicion. Finally, I would explain that while I support biblical repetition within the appropriate context (see Ps. 136), I oppose, as the Bible does (Matt. 6:7), meaningless, mind-emptying repeating and/or mantra-like meditation and prayer. I hope that such changes would have allowed all my readers to more easily understand my position.

In a certain sense, this two-part article (part 1 published in the October 2015 issue and part 2 published in this issue) is meant in part to answer two larger questions that have arisen in connection with the book. In part 1, I explored how biblical Christian spirituality contrasts with that of the so-called Eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the New Age. Part 2 is a response to the question of whether Adventist spirituality is unique. I hope

this two-part article can be a blessing and further promote a closer walk with Jesus.

## Adventist spirituality

Is there anything unique about Seventh-day Adventist spiritual life? Do Adventists have anything special to contribute to Christian spirituality? I propose that Adventists have four key convictions that, taken together, form a distinctive package heavily shaping Adventist devotional/spiritual life. While each individual conviction is not necessarily unique, the complete package is one that is unparalleled. This kind of spiritual/devotional life should be not only practiced by Adventists but also shared with all who seek God.

## A valid question

The many varieties and practices of spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian, make the question of uniqueness pertinent. Not only the proliferation of spiritualities makes the question important, but a biblical precedent exists for asking this type of question about uniqueness. In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples ask Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (RSV). The Jews of Jesus' time evidently believed that followers of important rabbis could receive from their teacher specific prayers that illustrated their distinctive beliefs. John the Baptist and Jesus were both part of

a larger circle called Judaism. Within that larger circle, John had given a specific “prayer” (spirituality) to his disciples that embodied his unique teaching. Jesus’ disciples are realizing the importance of their Rabbi. They want Jesus to do for them what John did for his disciples. The time had come for them to receive from Him a prayer illustrating and reinforcing His unique teaching.

Within the larger circle of Christianity, Adventists see themselves as a people with a special mission. It is only right, then, that a believer ask, “What kind of spiritual life (prayer) should we practice that illustrates our teaching and key beliefs?”

### Four key convictions

I believe that the following four convictions powerfully influence and epitomize Adventist spirituality.

1. *Adventists believe and practice a symbolic and literal Sabbath.* Many other Christians now talk of the Sabbath as a key part of their spiritual life; however, most use the Sabbath only symbolically. For them it symbolizes spiritual rest and salvation and may provide time for spiritual reflection. As to the necessity of actually observing the literal seventh day, they are often silent or negative.<sup>1</sup> Adventist spirituality believes in a symbolic *and* literal Sabbath. Keeping a literal weekly Sabbath gives structure to life and time. This makes us regularly set aside a time for God to be present.

Adventists not only believe in the literal Sabbath day but also believe it needs to be observed in the way the fourth commandment states. No work should be done. Thus, the day itself and how it is observed combine to create space for worship, rest, and communion with God. Instead of confining us, the Sabbath frees us. It releases us from work and our regular activities and encourages us to seek God. This seven-day cycle and structure of actual rest symbolizes not only God’s creative and saving power but also a foretaste of the heavenly rest. The symbolic meaning of the Sabbath as a memorial for creation

and salvation rests on and works with the literal to create real spiritual impact.

To a certain extent the same is true of the second coming of Jesus. Although many Christians now accept a literal second coming of Jesus, a significant number still hold to a belief often called *realized eschatology*. This view sees the second coming of Jesus taking place or being accomplished (“realized”) already in the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Second Coming is spiritualized, and hope for a literal Second Coming is lost. Adventists, of course, believe in a literal, imminent return of Jesus. Early

in relationship to God. This leads to major differences in both doctrinal and experiential issues.

For Adventists, the body is part of our person, or soul. Nourishing and caring for the body is caring for the soul. Properly cared for, the body is an ally supporting the spiritual life, not an enemy. Care for the body is part of spiritual life. Adventists cannot support ascetic practices that cause pain or torture to the body in an effort to benefit the soul. Punishing the body to benefit the soul does not make sense, for punishing the body means harming our soul.

*As believers engage in both mission and compassion for human need, spiritual life is nourished and enlivened and others are helped and healed.*

Adventists saw their devotional time as a meeting with Jesus through His Spirit, which was a foretaste of their experience of actually seeing Jesus soon. This literal expectation gave reality and urgency to their everyday spiritual life and can do the same for us today.

2. *Seventh-day Adventists hold a wholistic view of human beings.* Adventists believe that people are souls—not that they have some separate entity called a soul. Other Christians use the word *soul* in a different way that divides a person into separate components. When those who believe in the soul as a separate, spiritual part of a person think of spiritual life, they picture in their mind only that part. For them this piece of a human being, called soul, is what relates to God. When Adventists hear the word *soul*, we think of the whole person

Not only is the body part of the soul but so are the mind and emotions. Properly understood, mind and emotions are not only part of the soul but are assets to communion with God, not barriers. When we worship, we should worship with all of these various facets joining together in complete harmony. Mind, heart, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30) are all components of who we are, not separate, self-existent entities. All can work together in synergistic unity in our spiritual life.

Another implication of this wholistic view for our spiritual life has to do with care for social justice and the poor. Evangelism and social justice are not separate issues. Both have to do with the life of the soul (person) and are the work of God. As believers engage in both mission and compassion for human need, spiritual life is nourished

and enlivened and others are helped and healed.

3. *Seventh-day Adventists believe that the spiritual life takes place in the context of the cosmic conflict, also known as the great controversy.*

At the 2005 General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists, the church voted a new fundamental belief entitled “Growing in Christ.” I quote it here:

“By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus’ victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seem to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. . . . In this new freedom in Jesus we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience.”<sup>22</sup>

Several points in this statement should be noted. First, this is one of our fundamental beliefs. Many statements of belief, confessions, and creeds of other Christians do not have such an affirmation of the devotional life. This shows how important the spiritual practices should be in the life of an Adventist Christian. Second, the statement calls for a *daily* practice. This shows again how regularity of communion with God is crucial. Third, the belief emphasizes the triumph of Jesus and the positive, victorious context of the spiritual life. Because of this, the spiritual life should be one of joy and peace that experiences the presence of Jesus. This spirituality should not be one that focuses on potential danger, problems, and fear of deception but rather emphasizes the accomplishments of

Jesus. Believers can, with confidence, pray for continuing victory over evil and evil powers because of the ongoing triumph of Jesus in this cosmic conflict.

4. *Adventists believe that Ellen G. White makes a significant contribution to the spiritual life.* Ellen G. White is preeminently a spiritual writer in whom Adventists believe is a manifestation of the spiritual gift of prophecy (see Ephesians 4). However, Adventists, including Ellen White herself, see her writings as subject to the Bible, which is the “greater light.”

The most serious scholarly studies of Ellen White have emphasized her teaching on doctrine, ethics, and theology. While she does deal with these areas, I feel her biggest contribution is her writing and teaching on spiritual life. Her writings breathe an atmosphere of deep personal communion with God and open the path to an intimate experiential relationship with Jesus.

I give two examples, which, if followed, profoundly affect Adventist spirituality. First, a familiar statement from *The Desire of Ages*:

“It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, . . . our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. If we would be saved at last, we must learn the lesson of penitence and humiliation at the foot of the cross.”<sup>23</sup>

Several points should be noticed. First, this contemplation of Jesus’ life is highly recommended as a daily exercise. Second, the call is for “contemplation” and use of the imagination. Third, this practice results in powerful positive spiritual results.

Some Protestant Christians, including some Adventists, have questioned the use of contemplative prayer. While some types of contemplative prayer are not appropriate, Adventists should be clear that there does exist a type of contemplation that is not only acceptable

but recommended. This is not the only place Ellen White calls for this kind of practice in her writings.<sup>4</sup> Words spoken against contemplative prayer must carefully define terms so this valid and beneficial devotional practice does not become misunderstood or lost.

Much the same thing can be said for the use of visualization of biblical passages or scenes. While the practice of visualization and imagination can be wrongly done, manipulative, or even demonic, these passages show a dynamic, positive way to do it as a means to benefit the spiritual life in a practical way.<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of the devotional life that Ellen White teaches is found in her book *The Ministry of Healing* as the climax and conclusion of the chapter “With Nature and With God” that describes Jesus’ devotional life. Here are her words:

“All who are under the training of God need the quiet hour for communion with their own hearts, with nature, and with God. In them is to be revealed a life that is not in harmony with the world, its customs, or its practices; and they need to have a personal experience in obtaining a knowledge of the will of God. We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart. When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God. He bids us, ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10). This is the effectual preparation for all labor for God.”<sup>26</sup>

This quote deserves a careful reading. Note the key points. All who want to be trained by God need a quiet hour for communion with Him. That communion is threefold—with our own hearts, with nature, and with God. In this practice we experience the personal reality of discovering God’s will. We must do this by individually hearing Him speak to our hearts. The quietness makes His voice more clear. All effective labor for God is based on this, and it will give us a changed life.

Those who may have worried about the practice of quietness before God and the validity of listening to God’s still

small voice should rest at ease. While what we claim to hear must be tested by the Bible, listening for God in this way is a proper practice that bears wonderful fruit in the life. The possibility of error must not rob us of the joy of listening for God.

At the root of both of these examples lies two core convictions that Ellen White operates with. First, the Bible is a living word through which God still speaks to us as we absorb it and contemplate it deeply. Second, real interchange takes place between God and humans. Jesus is a resurrected Lord and is present and active among us by His Spirit, and we can and should daily commune with Him.

### Conclusion

Two main conclusions may be drawn from this discussion. First, not only is it a valid search to look for a

possible unique, Adventist spiritual life, but also we do have a special perspective that can be joyfully shared with others. Do we know this, and even more importantly, are we living it in our daily devotional practice?

Second, Adventists have been known for their emphasis on true doctrine. We have not always been known for our communion with Jesus. We have not always connected the two in a meaningful way. We must not abandon our study and proclamation of true doctrine, but we must not forget that all true doctrine must have an experiential impact as well. My prayer is that the day will come when the truth and clarity of our doctrine will be vitally connected to the depth and fervor of our religious experience. Our mission will never be completed by the single-sided teaching of cognitive truth. People will only be permanently and positively changed

when the intellectual truth is closely tied to the truth of close personal communion with God in an experiential relationship. This is the heart and soul of Adventist spirituality. ✨

- 1 See Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 141–49.
- 2 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010), 159, 160.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 83. Another measure of the influence and popularity of this quote is that the popular adaptation of this book *The Desire of Ages* called *Messiah* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2003) uses that statement as preface and introduction to the book (p. 3).
- 4 See Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1956), 10, 47, 60, and 71; *Our High Calling* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1961), 96.
- 5 See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 661; *Steps to Christ*, 58; *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), 1.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1942), 58.

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