
**The Seventh-day Adventist
Evangelical Conferences of
1955-1956**

Adventist Laymen's Foundation
P.O. Box 789
Lamar, Arkansas 72846

A WORD OF EXPLANATION

In this Brochure, we have brought together all the presently available source documents involved in the Seventh-day Adventist - Evangelical Conferences during 1955-1956. These documents are from the pens of some of the participants - the chief participants for the Evangelicals, Donald Grey Barnhouse and Walter R. Martin; and for the Seventh-day Adventists, the chairman of the Conferences, T. E. Unruh.

It must be noted that the observations and evaluations of these conferences on the part of the Evangelicals were written immediately at the conclusion of the dialogues, while the summation from the Adventist viewpoint did not come till twenty years later in 1977, and are written as an historical post-script. In fact, it must be remembered that the rank and file of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including most of its ministry at that time, did not know who all were involved in these conferences, nor who the primary author of the book resulting from these dialogues - Questions on Doctrine - was, until the article appeared in Adventist Heritage written by T. E. Unruh.*

There remains - still out of reach of research - the original answers given by the Adventist conferees to Barnhouse and Martin. The book - Questions on Doctrine - while purporting to be those answers, is not, but is rather a revision of what was given to these men. Because of this, we must conclude that what Walter Martin and Donald G. Barnhouse have written is an accurate statement of what the Adventist conferees did say to these men, and what the original answers did read as given to them. A careful evaluation of what T. E. Unruh has written reveals that the highest levels of the Adventist hierarchy were involved in the denial of basic, historic Adventist Christology. The list of names reads like a Who's Who of the executive officers of the General Conference at that time.

Although the book - Questions on Doctrine - is not being reprinted, and is no longer available at Adventist Book Centers, the follow-up book - Movement of Destiny - authored by the primary writer of Questions on Doctrine, is still being promoted. Movement of Destiny teaches the same heresies in Christology as did Questions on Doctrine, and bears the nihil obstat of the present president of the General Conference, Neal C. Wilson, and in the first edition, the imprimatur of the then "first minister" of the Church, Robert H. Pierson. In the second edition, a statement by Elder H. M. S. Richards, Sr., was substituted for Pierson's. Further the Statement of Beliefs voted at the 1980 General Conference reflects these same deviations from the historic teachings of the Church in the areas of the Incarnation and the Atonement. This makes it even more important that we understand what did take place during the Seventh-day Adventist-Evangelical Conferences in 1955-1956. The present theological crisis in the Church is not something that happened over night, nor is it the work of one man, but its roots go back to the betrayal of the trust placed in men who were suppose to stand "as guardians of the spiritual interests" of God's professed people. (See Testimonies for the Church, Vol V, p. 211)

Wm. H. Grotheer, Manager
Publications & Research
Adventist Laymen's Fnd.

*Adventist Heritage, Vol. 4, #2, pp. 35-46. (Reproduced with Permission)

2nd Printing

CONTENTS

The Adventist Heritage, Vol 4, No. 2, 1977

The Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955-1956
by. T. E. Unruh

Eternity, September, 1956

Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?
by Donald Grey Barnhouse

Eternity, October, 1956

The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism - Its Historical Development from Christian Roots
by Walter R. Martin

Eternity, November, 1956

What Seventh-day Adventists Really Believe
by Walter R. Martin

Eternity, January, 1957

Adventist Theology vs Historic Orthodoxy
by Walter R. Martin

Eternity, November, 1957

Postscript on Seventh-day Adventism
by Donald Grey Barnhouse

The Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955-1956

T. E. Unruh

A series of conferences between Seventh-day Adventist and Evangelical leaders, begun in the spring in 1955 and running into the summer of 1956, led to the publication of two books: the first, *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*; the second, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*. The first is a definitive statement of contemporary Adventist belief, established on a broad international consensus of church leaders and prepared for publication by a representative committee appointed by the officers of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The second work, by Walter R. Martin, a leading expert on American cults, defines and examines Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, using the first work as source and authority. In his book Martin removed the Seventh-day Adventist church from his list of non-Christian cults and acknowledged that all whose beliefs followed the *Questions on Doctrine* should be counted members of the Body of Christ (the Christian church in the Evangelical definition) and therefore his brethren. While some Adventist and non-Adventist dissidents have been vociferous in their denunciation of the Adventist definitions and the Evangelical evaluation, in retrospect the

Now living in Grand Terrace, California, T. E. Unruh is a retired minister. When the events described here took place, Unruh was president of the East Pennsylvania Conference.

conferences improved the understanding and appreciation of the Seventh-day Adventist church on the part of many Evangelical leaders, and likewise warmed many Adventist leaders toward the Evangelicals. It was a time when the gates between sheepfolds stood open.

There was no thought of precipitating anything of such historic consequence when I wrote a letter on November 28, 1949, commending Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse for his radio sermons on righteousness by faith based on the book of Romans. At the time, Dr. Barnhouse was a popular radio preacher, minister of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, author of a number of Evangelical books, and founder and senior editor of the influential *Eternity* magazine. I was the president of the East Pennsylvania Conference, with headquarters in Reading.

In his reply to my letter Barnhouse expressed astonishment that an Adventist clergyman would commend him for preaching righteousness by faith, since in his opinion it was a well known fact that Seventh-day Adventists believed in righteousness by works. He went on to state that since boyhood he had been familiar with Adventists and their teachings, and that in his opinion their views about the nature and work of Christ were Satanic and dangerous. He concluded by inviting this strange Adventist to have lunch with him.

We did not then get together for lunch, but we did correspond for a time. I returned a soft answer



Donald Grey Barnhouse, radio pastor and editor of *ETERNITY* magazine, put Martin in touch with T. E. Unruh, because of Unruh's earlier exchanges with Barnhouse.



Though his first attempts at improving Barnhouse's understanding of Adventism resulted in further criticism, author T. E. Unruh had established that Adventists want to be understood. This provided an opening for future dialogue.

to the first letter from Barnhouse and sent him a copy of *Steps to Christ*, at the same time affirming the evangelical character of Adventists doctrine. I thought we had an agreement that Barnhouse would publish no further criticism of Adventists before there was further contact and clarification. However, in *Eternity* for June 1950, he sharply criticized *Steps to Christ* and its author. After that, I saw no point in continuing the correspondence.

The Barnhouse article was entitled, "Spiritual Discernment, or How to Read Religious Books." It illustrated the difficulty that conservative Christians sometimes have in understanding one another. Here a man of great spiritual stature, a bold crusader for truth, revealed his prejudice against Adventism and Ellen G. White, whom he erroneously called, "founder of the cult." Concerning the first chapter of *Steps to Christ*, entitled "God's Love for Man," Barnhouse charged that so much emphasis on God's love neutralize His justice and that extending that love to unregenerate man smacked of the universalism

characteristic of the writings of the cult. He quoted a number of statements which he called half truths introducing Satanic error, like a worm on a hook, "the first bite is all worm, the second bite is all hook. That is the way the Devil works." Yet this man came to respect Ellen White as a sincere Christian and a great spiritual leader and to acknowledge that Seventh-day Adventists were his brethren in Christ.

In the spring of 1955, almost six years after my correspondence with Dr. Barnhouse began, I heard from Walter R. Martin, who had seen our correspondence and who asked for face-to-face contact with representative Seventh-day Adventists. Martin had written a chapter critical of Adventism in his *Rise of the Cults* and now wanted to talk with Adventists before doing further writing on the subject of our doctrines.

Walter Martin had come to the attention of Dr. Barnhouse when the former was in his early twenties, a graduate student in the history of



A sincere Christian who intended to expose Adventism as a sect, Walter R. Martin found himself confronted with evidence that Adventists are indeed Christian. Even though he feared it might mean financial ruin, he determined to present the facts as he saw them.



W. E. Read, who was a Field-Secretary for the General Conference in 1955, joined the group of Adventist conferees at Froom's request.

American religion at New York University. By 1955 Martin had to his credit several books about American cults which were recognized as standard works in that field. He was a consulting editor on the *Eternity* staff, a Southern Baptist clergyman, and a member of the Evangelical Foundation, known to the faithful as "How Firm a Foundation," an organization started by Christian businessmen who managed the financial aspects of the Barnhouse enterprises.

It was understood at the outset that Martin, a research polemicist, had been commissioned to write against Seventh-day Adventism. Nevertheless, he declared that he wanted direct access so he could treat Adventists fairly. When I explained this to friends at the Adventist headquarters in Washington, D.C., they agreed that Martin should be treated fairly, and provided with the contacts he sought. Martin expressly asked to meet LeRoy E. Froom, with whose *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* he was already familiar. Froom suggested the inclusion of W. E. Read, then a field secretary of the General Conference. I served

as moderator or chairman throughout the series of conferences.

In March 1955, Martin came to Washington for his first meeting with the Adventists. With him was George E. Cannon, a professor of theology on the faculty of the Nyack, New York, Missionary College. At this first conference the two groups viewed each other with wariness. As the Adventists had anticipated, Martin had read widely from D. M. Canright, E. S. Ballenger, and E. B. Jones, as well as other detractors or defectors. Martin, for his part, seemed to expect a degree of resistance and cover-up, such as he may have met in some of his other investigations. This first meeting can best be described as a confrontation.

Martin began going through a list of questions which reflected his reading. We Adventists, rather than launching into a defense, began with a positive presentation in which we emphasized those doctrines held by our church in common with Evangelical Christians of all faiths in all ages. We stated our conviction that the Bible is the

inspired Word of God and the only rule of Adventist faith and practice. We affirmed our belief in the eternal and complete deity of Christ, in his sinless life in the incarnation, in his atoning death on the cross, once for all and all-sufficient, in his literal resurrection, and in his priestly ministry before the Father, applying the benefits of the atonement completed on the cross. And, finally, while setting no time, we affirmed our belief in the imminent premillennial return of Jesus Christ.

It quickly became clear to the Adventist conferees that both questions and answers would have to be formally stated in writing, that the answers would have to be made crystal clear to the Evangelical conferees and to those they represented, and that a way would have to be found to demonstrate the consensus we were sure we had. Martin was given books and periodicals to substantiate the claims we had made in our opening statement.

Following the first day of discussion both groups were busy into the night. The immediate concern of the Adventists was the list of questions with which Martin had begun his interrogation. Froom, who had a facile pen, took the responsibility of composing the initial answers, in a document running into twenty pages, whipped into shape by his secretary after hours. Until two o'clock in the morning Martin gave his attention to the reading matter we had given him.



The second day will never be forgotten by those who participated in the conferences. As the morning session began Martin announced that, as the result of the first round of discussion and the reading matter he had been given, he was admitting that he had been wrong about Seventh-day Adventism on several important points and had become persuaded that Adventists who believed as did the conferees were truly born-again Christians and his brethren in Christ. In a dramatic gesture he extended his hand in fellowship.

Martin faced serious problems as a result of his turn-about. He had become convinced that Adventists stood with other evangelical Christians on an impressive number of basic doctrines. He was not convinced that Adventists were right on doctrines we describe as "present truth," nor was he ever convinced of these. But how was he to write a book in which he would expose what he considered the errors of Adventism, while at the same time revealing his honest conviction that there existed sufficient common denominators to justify the inclusion of Seventh-day Adventists in the Evangelical Christian community — and still satisfy those who had commissioned him to write a book against Seventh-day Adventism? In his concern, he asked the Adventist conferees to join him in praying for divine guidance.

We Adventists also faced problems. The Evangelical conferees were satisfied that we were presenting contemporary Adventist doctrines, because we were supported by the 1931 statement of fundamental beliefs, which appeared regularly in official yearbooks and manuals of the church, and by the amplified statement in the baptismal covenant. But, they asked, if the Adventist church had reached a firm consensus why did they find contrary or misleading statements in Adventist publications, for sale in Adventist book and Bible houses? We explained that this was the result of efforts by the church to avoid an officially adopted creedal statement, and the denomination's preference for an open-end theology which permitted new light to penetrate in depth. This explanation did not impress them. They asked if we did not think that we ourselves were to some extent to blame if these erroneous statements were used against us. We could only reply that correction had begun.

While church leaders had known of the conferences from the start, a point was reached where we thought it was wise to make a formal

← *From the first formal meeting, to the publishing of the book **QUESTIONS ON DOCTRINE**, LeRoy E. Froom was actively involved in composing the written distillation of the conferences.*

report to the church. In a long letter to Froom and Read, dated July 18, 1955, I reviewed the progress in understanding achieved so far in the conferences, and expressed the hope that the Adventist conferees could be relieved of other responsibilities so as to have more time for what was expanding into a significant encounter, soon to include such a notable Evangelical as Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse. A copy of this letter was sent to R. R. Figuhr, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Thereafter Figuhr gave the support of his office to the conferences and the publication of the definitive statement of Adventist belief which resulted.

Martin's immediate concern was his relationship with his sponsor, Dr. Barnhouse. He reported to his chief his conviction that both had been wrong in their judgment of contemporary Adventists, whom he had become convinced were not cultists but truly members of the Body of Christ. He then asked Barnhouse if he, Martin, was still a member of the team, and if he should go ahead with the book he had been commissioned to write, which now would have to be different from the one they had projected. Barnhouse gave him some reassurance but was not troubled himself. Shortly thereafter he asked to have the conferees meet with him at "Barchdale," his home in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

In anticipation of the extension of Evangelical participation in the conferences Froom early in August urged the enlargement of the Adventist conferee group. He recommended the inclusion of R. Allan Anderson as a regular member because of the latter's background as evangelist, college teacher of religion, author, and especially because of his gift for diplomatic dialogue with leaders of other communions. Anderson was the secretary of the Ministerial Association of the General Conference and editor of *Ministry* magazine. Since April he had been participating in the conferences. Thereafter he was a member of the team, a tireless and valuable participant in the preparation of the text of the developing questions and answers. We four Adventists were authorized by the General Conference to plan with Martin and Cannon for the meeting with Barnhouse at his home in Doylestown. The planning session was held in Anderson's Washington office on August 22.

So it came about that on August 25 and 26, 1955, we four Adventists, with Walter Martin and George Cannon, sat down with Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of the most influential men among American Protestants and internationally famous as a representative Evangelical, to discuss what Seventh-day Adventists really believe.

Having welcomed the conferees, our host expressed his deep desire that love might prevail, and invited the small company to kneel with him while he prayed for the Spirit of the Lord to be present and to guide.

Dr. Barnhouse, always a very articulate man, began the conference by explaining his attitudes towards Seventh-day Adventists. He told about his boyhood in California, near Mountain View, where he imbibed the prevailing view that Adventists were ignorant fanatics who believed the Devil to be the sin-bearer, and that a person had to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in order to be saved. Later, his bad opinions had been confirmed, he said, by reading books by men who had been Adventists but had left the movement, notably E. B. Jones. But since Martin had begun his conversations with the Adventists, and had shared his findings, Barnhouse had come to see that there were sober, truly born-again Christians among Seventh-day Adventists. With them he was glad to fellowship as brethren, while reserving the right strenuously to refute the two or three positions taught by Adventists which Evangelicals hold to be in error. On this candid note the Doylestown conference began.

Chosen for his experience at diplomatic dialogue with leaders of other churches, R. Allan Anderson joined the Adventist conferees before the first meetings with Dr. Barnhouse. courtesy: R. A. Anderson

