**The Haunting of Adventism: The Ghosts of the 1919 Bible Conference**

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The 1919 Bible Conference provides a crucial window into the minds of Adventist thought leaders at a pivotal moment in our Adventist past. Not only was it the first major discussion about the authority and interpretation of Ellen White’s writings after her death, it reveals a changing of the guard as an older generation who worked closely with Ellen White were passing from the scene of action, and finally, how a tsunami of Fundamentalism flooded Adventism. The historical Fundamentalist movement, for reasons I have pointed out elsewhere, would become extremely problematic for how Adventists understood and used Ellen White’s writings. The twin issues of both the authority and interpretation of her writings would be a central feature throughout the 1919 Bible Conference. Yet the prescient “round table” conversations between the Bible and history teachers during the post-meeting were what would make this event, after the transcripts were discovered, so very famous.

While many aspects of the 1919 Bible Conference are notable and have been reflected upon this past centennial year including here as part of ASRS, what I want to focus my reflections upon is how these discussions have shaped Adventist discourse and behavior in the wake of this meeting. These “round table” discussions are significant for both their candor and transparency. The repeated calls of participants for church leaders to take a stand—most notably about how to properly interpret Ellen White’s writings—would ever afterward haunt Adventism after this meeting. Listen to their pleas:

* On Aug. 30th H. C. Lacey urged church leaders to publish a tract setting forth the facts about Ellen White and the problematic aspects of teaching inerrancy and infallibility. An anonymous respondent replied that they could not lest their “enemies . . . publish it everywhere.”[[1]](#endnote-1)
* That same day W. G. Wirth reiterated that they needed to “get something out for us” [teachers] and should they not do so, the teachers are the ones who “suffer.” He would add later on: “We really need some published statement.”[[2]](#endnote-2)
* W. W. Prescott noted the problematic aspect of placing the Spirit of Prophecy above the Bible.[[3]](#endnote-3)
* W. E. Howell attributed the problems they faced to those who took “extreme” and “radical” positions with regard to Ellen White’s writings.[[4]](#endnote-4)
* C. L. Benson was worried lest this “subject” be dropped at the 1919 Bible Conference. He was concerned that there becomes a variance between teachers and church members. Instead he urged that there be some kind of “campaign” among educators for those in the field. They needed to teach the proper relationship of the Bible and Ellen White’s writings, and he even noticed that some people preached entire sermons just from her writings. Should a break occur between educators and the field “we are in a serious place.”[[5]](#endnote-5)
* T. M. French urged that “some general statement” be issued. This would demonstrate that they were not “shifting our position” but re-affirming the position of our pioneers about the nature and authority of Ellen White’s writings. This would be a “great help” and “do much good.”[[6]](#endnote-6)
* F. M. Wilcox on Aug. 1st affirmed that he stood in full agreement with A. G. Daniells about these issues related to Ellen White. “I have never believed in the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies.” Yet it was a “very delicate question.” He was concerned about the “influence” that would “go out from this meeting.” “And unless these questions can be dealt with most diplomatically, I think we are going to have serious trouble.”[[7]](#endnote-7)
* Finally, also on Aug. 1st, J. N. Anderson boiled it down to “the main question” about how those present at this meeting would teach their students. While they had “a unanimous opinion” as “we stand pretty well together.” He poignantly asked if it was “safe to tell . . . our students” about mistakes about historical facts in her writings. If we don’t respond to students who press such interpretative questions, could they still “be true to ourselves?” The pressing point: “Is it well to let our people in general go on holding to the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies? When we do that, aren’t we preparing for a crisis that will be very serious some day?”[[8]](#endnote-8)

This last line appears foreboding as Adventist historians well-know that Adventism in fact did reach a crisis during the twentieth-century. This Fundamentalist vision for an inerrant Ellen White, one that placed her writings above the Bible, would become extremely problematic for Adventism. Such a crisis was reached, as George R. Knight has recently argued in his *Ellen White’s Afterlife* during the 1970s and 1980s when a number of individuals challenged this new approach to Ellen White’s writings that was inaugurated and popularized with the onslaught of Adventism Fundamentalism during the 1920s.

This radical transformation has haunted Adventism in the form of four specific ghosts[[9]](#endnote-9): race, gender, lifestyle, and Last Generation Theology.

**Race**

Seventh-day Adventists began as a rather socially progressive movement. At the time the burning issue was slavery, and the denomination was formed in the crucible of the American Civil War. Most early adherents, most notably Ellen White, were ardent abolitionists. Thus, it is shocking that the same denomination would become so racist that by 1944 portions of North America were segregated into separate (Regional) conferences largely based upon skin color. How did Adventism go from abolitionist to effectively racist? I propose the answer is found in the historical Fundamentalist movement.

It is no accident that some of the most vociferous advocates for the inerrancy of Ellen White’s writings were also leading proponents of race bifurcation during the time surrounding the 1919 Bible Conference. As a case in point, J. S. Washburn, who along with his ally, Claude Holmes, were disappointed not only that they were not invited to the 1919 Bible Conference but described it as nothing short of a “diet of doubts.” (One must keep in mind that Holmes was the person who got himself fired for getting into the General Conference vault and copying unpublished testimonies, particularly those written to A. G. Daniells and then refusing to return them). Washburn was especially bitter toward the highly successful Lewis Sheafe. Historian Douglas Morgan has carefully documented the racist vitriol from his pen in his detailed biography of Sheafe.

The most extensive description by an Adventist of the work of the Ku Klux Klan appears in A. W. Spalding’s unpublished manuscript, *Lights and Shades*.[[10]](#endnote-10) The manuscript was never published due to his very graphic, and at times racist, descriptions of life in the American South during the early twentieth-century. While noting the excesses at times of the Klan, Spalding argues that things could have been much worse. Thus “God was overruling” noting some positive aspects of the Klan to maintain racial segregation. Spalding notes that due to sin racial segregation was necessary, and that mixed marriages caused confusion and a lessening of the races. As several recent narratives of the Klan have observed, strong theological underpinnings behind the Klan.[[11]](#endnote-11) While not all Fundamentalists supported the Klan, it was certainly prominently supported by some such as the outspoken Fundamentalist J. Frank Norris who advertised and supported Klan activities. Similarly, among some Adventist Fundamentalists, the Klan thrived. For example, some Adventist communities had Klan chapters including cross burnings. Adventists were especially enchanted with the anti-Catholic composition of the organization,[[12]](#endnote-12) and, ironically, at least one Adventist minister gave a presentation at a Klan meeting to promote *Liberty Magazine*.[[13]](#endnote-13) Similarly, Adventists noted with admiration support by the Klan for private parochial school systems.[[14]](#endnote-14) At one point, Klansmen showed up to an Adventist evangelistic meeting and donated $25 inviting Adventist members to join the Klan. Adventist minister W. E. Barr noted with appreciation the work of the Klan to uphold the American constitution and a clean community.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Perhaps another way of assessing the increasingly racist attitudes of Adventism as it became Fundamentalist during the 1920s is the view of Adventists toward lynchings. While Adventists did not actively condone such behavior, neither did they condemn it either. As Adventism became increasingly Fundamentalist, it effectively became neutered as Adventism moved away from its much earlier socially progressive stance in terms of race.

**Gender**

Scholars have made this connection between Fundamentalism and gender for some time. While scholars have long acknowledged the complexity of culture and change in the rise of the historical Fundamentalist movement, this matter of change included changing gender roles at the turn of the century. Betty A. DeBerg argues in *Ungodly Women* that such anxiety drove early Fundamentalists to reinforce what they perceived as traditional family values. Similarly, Margaret Lamberts Bendroth makes a similar connection, noting a more theological rational, since the family for many Fundamentalists was the microcosm of the universe with an inherent universal moral order. Thus, a divine plan for the family combined with a literal reading of Scripture mandated paternal care, maternal submission, and the obedience of children.

What is not as well-known is how Adventism moved from a movement in which women were active in church leadership and pastoral ministry to become extremely marginalized during the twentieth-century. A huge part of this reversal once again takes place in the time surrounding the 1919 Bible Conference (which incidentally included only 3 female editors among the 65 participants). The lowest number of female ministers in Adventist history occurs during the 1920s and 1930s. Kevin M. Burton argues that this marginalization of women can be seen in the creation of church policies that largely excluded women, once again that began during the 1920s and would peak in the 1940s.[[16]](#endnote-16) He furthermore has noted how the narrative of Hazen Foss and William Foy as precursors to Ellen White became popularized within the Adventist historical narrative during this time. While certainly there were historical references to both individuals, this narrative now focused on how Ellen White (as a woman) was God’s “last choice.” Clearly God preferred either a white or black man, over a woman. Adventist historiography was being re-written during this time to exclude, or at best marginalize the role of women in our Adventist past. Adventist publications furthermore frequently reprinted literature during the 1920s emphasizing the sphere of women as being in the home. One of the most prolific authors advocating for this was once again A. W. Spalding. This should not be surprising because views of race and gender often went together.

**Lifestyle**

As Fundamentalism was in large part a reaction to widespread intellectual, social, and cultural changes within American culture, it similarly began to proscribe certain behaviors as unbecoming of a Christian. While Fundamentalist pulses can be seen in most conservative denominations at this time, who similarly upheld high strictures of what a Christian lifestyle entailed, it should come as no surprise that as society changed, new strictures would be implemented to protect and regulate the behavior of adherents.

Adventists who had historically advocated for Temperance saw a natural affinity for the rise of the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting Alcohol consumption. In fact, the marked support for this Amendment stands in stark contrast to the comparatively sparse support for the Nineteenth Amendment passed only a year later. Society was changing including new forms of entertainment. Most disconcerting of all was the advent of the motion picture film. Judge Philips in 1920 described “The moving picture show is doing more to ruin the youth of to-day than the liquor traffic ever thought of doing.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Seventh-day Adventist publications often quoted Fundamentalist sources expressing general concern about the increasingly secular content of movies. F. M. Wilcox, editor of the *Review and Herald*, wrote a series of articles in 1926 titled “A Warning Against Moving-Picture and Other Theaters.” In one of these editorials he reported the action of the 1925 Annual Council meeting:

Sad it is that there needs to be sounded in the columns of our church paper a warning against these great evils. And yet we must believe, from the letters which come to us from different parts of the field, that there are a number of our dear brethren and sisters who are succumbing to these unholy influences. Unfortunately, those thus affected do not belong alone to the younger class of our church membership. Some of our older brethren and sisters have so lost out of their hearts the true spirit of this message, have so lost out of their lives the consciousness of Christ’s presence, that they have become frequenters of these questionable places of amusement. And still more sad is it to learn that occasionally there is found a Seventh-day Adventist preacher who belongs to the class who frequent the movies.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The position of Wilcox would similarly become the official position of the denomination. The church in Annual Council voted (which has never been rescinded): “*Resolved*, That this Council declares its emphatic disapproval of attending moving-picture theaters and other questionable places of amusement, and calls upon our workers, church officers, and lay members, young and old, to refrain from this evil practice.”[[19]](#endnote-19) The action noted that church members who persisted in this pernicious activity may be subject to disfellowship.

In this brief overview it is not possible to make all of the connections that exist between Fundamentalism and the regulation of behavior that was mirrored within Adventism. Suffice to say that broad similarities can be observed as the Fundamentalist movement became increasingly militant both in theology and in the regulation of Christian behavior. In a similar way Adventists, as society changed in terms of media and entertainment consumption, with a similarly strong reaction regulated Adventist lifestyle. At least in terms of motion picture films, Adventists should avoid them at all costs, and if necessary, threatened with losing their church membership.

**Last Generation Theology**

Perhaps the most difficult “ghost” of the 1919 Bible Conference wasn’t a ghost so much as it was the fact that as Seventh-day Adventism became increasingly Fundamentalist during the 1920s, it created the perfect crucible for the birth of Last Generation Theology (the idea that one must be perfect in order for Christ to return popularized by M. L. Andreasen). While some Adventist thought leaders, such as W. W. Whidden have pointed to A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, I argue instead that the Fundamentalist 1920s and 1930s created the fertile environment for the birth of Last Generation Theology. Certainly, participants of the 1919 Bible Conference recognized the dangers of a rigid hermeneutic of Ellen White—an idea they attributed to A. T. Jones who would “hang a man on a single word” as they remembered. Yet after Jones left the denomination, his more rigid view of inspiration lived on in the much more conservative S. N. Haskell as Denis Kaiser has so ably traced. Yet on a popular level, participants at the 1919 Bible Conference recognized that the growing popularity of inerrancy and a rigid view of inspiration appear to coincide more with the rise of Fundamentalism. As a new generation became infatuated with Fundamentalism, as I have traced in my recent *1919* book, they popularized new ideas that older church leaders recognized were problematic for the traditional (and more flexible) stance of the authority and interpretation of Ellen White’s writings.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to exhaustively analyze the development of M. L. Andreasen’s views, something that has already been done somewhat by Paul M. Evans in his dissertation, yet it is significant that by 1937 Andreasen developed a full-blown understanding of this final-generation theology in his book, *The Sanctuary Service*. While there is not a direct connection between Andreasen, a subtle influence can still be seen. If Nancy Murphy is correct in her assessment that both Modernism and Fundamentalism were responses to foundationalist epistemologies, such a binary mindset set the stage for explaining the thought of Andreasen. In turn, Andreasen, in a very binary way, when he went back through the sanctuary service separated the final eschatological events when God’s people stand without a mediator from the work of Christ who sustains His people during this very difficult period. In doing so, Andreasen shifts the locus from Jesus to human beings as responsible for vindicating God’s character. If Foundationalism requires an interpretative key through which to explain truth, then for Andreasen this becomes his reason for God’s people to exist at the end-of-time. Andreasen created an Adventist philosophical framework working back from Adventist eschatology into other areas of Adventist theology and lifestyle. While much more work needs to be done on the formation of Andreasen’s ideas in relation to the development of Fundamentalism, for me it appears clear that the clearest explanation for the formation of Andreasen’s theology is this foundationalist framework. This shift of focus moves away from Christ in the heavenly sanctuary to the work of God’s people who must become perfect in order for Christ to return. This theology would over time morph into a much more militant and new form of Adventist Fundamentalism. In other words, a Fundamentalist mindset created the perfect environment for Last Generation Theology to be birthed within Adventism.

**Perspective**

During this centennial year of the 1919 Bible Conference it is imperative to recognize how the Seventh-day Adventist Church was radically altered as a result of the rise of Fundamentalism. At the actual 1919 Bible Conference, both the progressives and the traditionalists, haled the rising Fundamentalist movement as a model for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They were downright envious even if they recognized that there were problems with Fundamentalism. That did not stop church leaders on both sides from haling the Fundamentalist movement as one of the most significant movements in Christian history and role models for Seventh-day Adventists.

The pleas of those at the 1919 Bible Conference at these “round table” discussions appear to have been ignored. Church leaders never published any of the material, nor did they prepare anything that would have taken the pressure (and criticism) off these teachers. This earlier generation of church leaders, many of whom had worked with Ellen White and held to a much more flexible understanding of inspiration (and who understood Ellen White’s writings as a lesser light as compared to the Bible) would either retire, get fired, or pass away. Some of the most dramatic departures were those of C. L. Benson and E. F. Albertsworth who fell under suspicion and lost their jobs. This more progressive generation would pass from the scene of action and with them their more flexible understanding of revelation and inspiration. The 1919 Bible Conference would become a forgotten episode in Adventist history until the transcripts were rediscovered in the 1970s.

Yet the rising Fundamentalist movement, for all of its good, also came at a great cost because it radically changed Adventism in ways beyond which any of them could have recognized. Church leaders at the 1919 Bible Conference recognized that if they did not do something, at least in terms of how they understood and interpreted Ellen White that there potentially could be significant challenges in the future. This turned out to be far truer than any of them could then have realized. In addition to promulgating an inerrant and infallible Ellen White, it radically changed Adventism in terms of race, gender, lifestyle, and created the crucible for the formation of Last Generation Theology that continues to haunt the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

1. “Report of Bible Conference,” [hereafter RBC], July 30, 1919, 1213, 1214. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. RBC, July 30, 1919, 1214, 1216. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. RBC, July 30, 1919, 1216. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. RBC, July 30, 1919, 1224. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. RBC, July 30, 1919, 1225. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. RBC, July 30, 1919, 1226. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. RBC, Aug. 1, 1919, 1229-1230. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. RBC, Aug. 1, 1919, 1231. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I am using this term “ghost” as a literary device to make a point, but also want to personally reaffirm my commitment to the belief in the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the non-immortality of the soul. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See “Lights and Shades,” unpublished manuscript, 62-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “The Modern Ku Klux Klan,” *The Educational Messenger,* July 1922,27. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See note in *Field Tidings*, Jan. 6, 1926, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. S. B. Horton, “The Parochial School Issue,” *Lake Union Herald*, Sept. 27, 1922, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. W. E. Barr, “Ku Klux Gives Donation,” *Southwestern Union Record*, May 16, 1922, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kevin M. Burton, “God’s Last Choice,” <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2017/06/14/god%25E2%2580%2599s-last-choice-overcoming-ellen-white%25E2%2580%2599s-gender-and-women-ministry-during-funda> [accessed 11/14/19] [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. H. K. Halladay, “Pulling the Movies’ Fangs: Converting the Villain into a Harmless Pedagogue,” *Signs of the Times* 47(16), 1920, 1, cited by Lynelle R. Ellis, “Seventh-day Adventists and the Movies: An Historical and Contemporary Exploration of Conflict Between Christianity and Visual Media,” (Ph.D. diss., Regent University, 2019), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Cited by Ellis, 58-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Cited by Ellis, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)