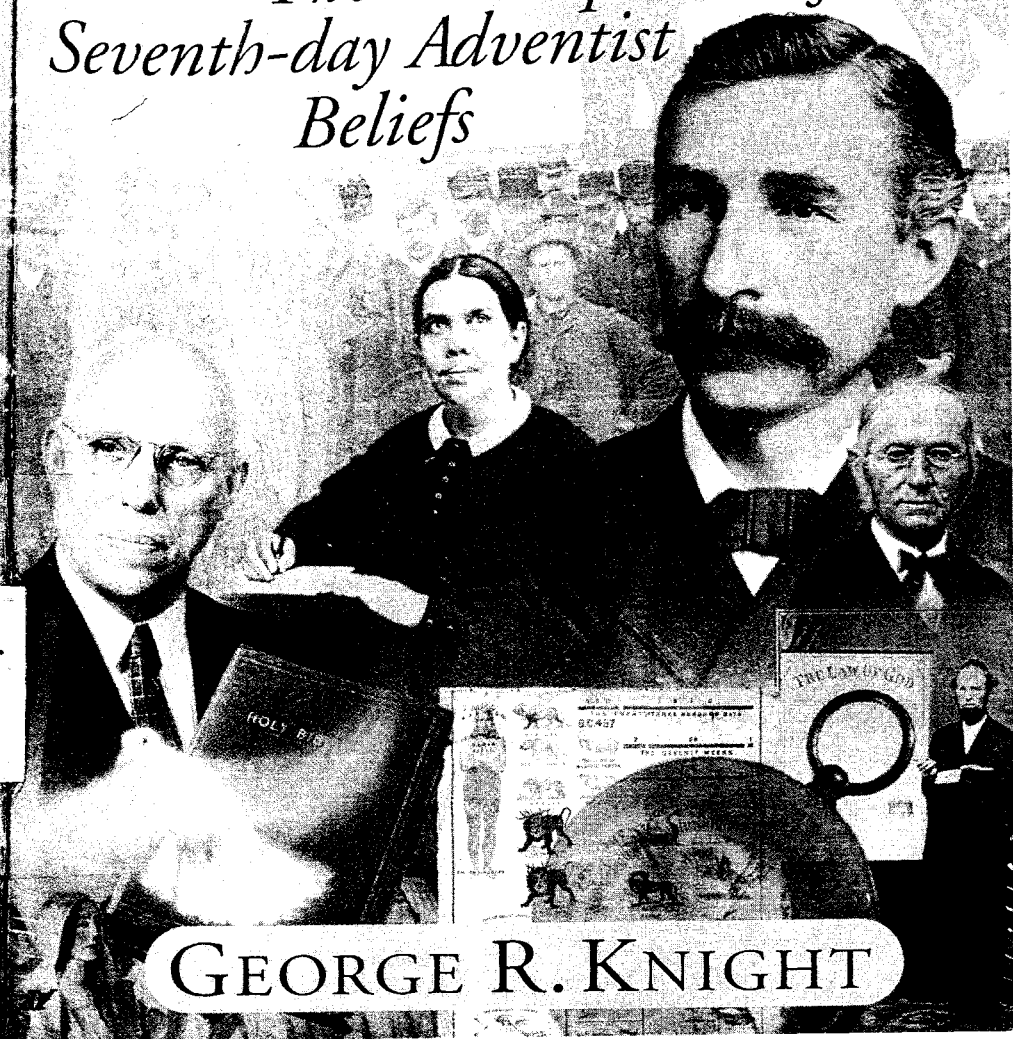


ADVENTIST HERITAGE SERIES

# A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

*The Development of  
Seventh-day Adventist  
Beliefs*



GEORGE R. KNIGHT

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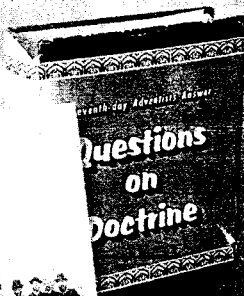
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George Knight is a professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and author of many books, including *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*.



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A  
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*The Development of  
Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*

GEORGE R. KNIGHT



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# A Word to the Reader

**I**t has been my privilege to personally observe and have a part in the Adventist search for theological identity during 55 of the 150 years covered by this book. The scope of this study and Dr. George Knight's carefully researched summary intrigues me. I have thoughtfully read it three times to be sure I could intelligently and honestly write this foreword.

Be sure to read the whole book and not just those sections that attract your attention. If you do, I feel certain you will agree that this book is the product of voluminous research. It is scholarly, informative, provocative, and instructive. The author traces the theological journey the Adventist Church has traveled, which has been fraught with hidden perils, subtle doctrinal sidelines, and dangerous theological snares. His research raises many perplexing but legitimate questions and then proceeds to provide satisfying answers.

At the outset, Dr. Knight poses a hypothetical dilemma. He points out that most of the founders and pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism would have been reluctant to join the church today if they had to agree to Adventism's current 27



## A Search for Identity

Fundamental Beliefs. In the early days of the development of the denomination, "present truth" involved the commandments of God, the Sabbath, the sanctuary message, the non-immortality of the soul, the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

This book clearly reveals that from the beginning Seventh-day Adventists have been prepared to modify, change, or revise their beliefs and practices if they could see a good reason to do so from the Scriptures. This is why a sentence from the introduction to the denomination's Statement of Fundamental Beliefs reads: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."

One of the church's current scholars has noted that "the most striking characteristic about Adventism is the fact that we believe that truth is progressive and not static." As a result, Adventism keeps searching, investigating, listening, reviewing, studying, and praying with the conviction that God may enlighten and enlarge its understanding of the salvation story. This book reinforces the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a prophetic movement with a prophetic message and a prophetic mission.

Although I thought I was reasonably well informed, I must admit that Dr. Knight has sharpened my convictions. I have been deeply impressed by the synthesis of persons and issues and the skillful way he has correlated the journey of 150 years.

In the closing pages, Dr. Knight emphasizes what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. He states that "the genius of Seventh-day Adventism does not lie so much in those doctrines that make it distinctive or in those beliefs that it shares with other Christians. Rather it is a combination of both sets of understandings within the framework of the great

## A Word to the Reader

controversy theme found in the apocalyptic core of the book of Revelation running from Revelation 11:19 through the end of chapter 14. It is that prophetic insight that distinguishes Seventh-day Adventists from other Adventists, other sabbatarians, and all other Christians.”

*NEAL C. WILSON, former president  
General Conference of Seventh-day  
Adventists (1979-1990)*

# A Note From the Author

**T**his book is the second in a series on Adventist heritage. The first, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (1999), traces the general development of the church from its beginning and provides the context for the more specialized volumes in the series. The present volume examines the historical development of Seventh-day Adventist theology. As reflected in the title, this book views that unfolding as an ongoing search for identity.

That search is related to a sequence of crises faced by the church and the questions that each crisis generated in Adventist circles. Thus the crisis of the Great Disappointment of October 1844 raised the question of "What is Adventist in Adventism?"; the crisis of the gospel preaching at the 1888 General Conference session brought the problem of "What is Christian in Adventism?" to the foreground; the crisis of the modernist/fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s placed the issue of "What is fundamentalist in Adventism?" at the center; and the various changes in the church in the 1950s resurrected all three of the previous questions and moved Adventism into

## A Note From the Author

a state of theological tension in the post-1950s decades. The answers to the questions and issues triggered by the various crises faced by the denomination across time have provided the major strands for the ongoing development of Seventh-day Adventist theology since the 1950s.

In harmony with the purpose of the Adventist Heritage Series, I have attempted to keep the treatment of the topics as brief as possible. That means that in many places where I would have preferred to write 30 pages I limited myself to 3. That brevity also forced me to stick to the main lines of theological development while only briefly mentioning significant ideas and movements that were often interesting and even important but not central to Adventism's theological development. Thus I have written this theological history in bold strokes rather than fine ones. The advantage to such an approach is that it makes the main lines of development stand out clearly. The disadvantage is that it tends to gloss over some of the finer points and nuances of the topics treated. While I feel that this little volume has a useful place, I hope in the future (perhaps in retirement) to expand the treatment into four larger volumes that will provide the space that a full-blown treatment of the subject deserves.

Many Seventh-day Adventists probably haven't thought of their church's beliefs as having changed over time. Most likely believe that the founders of the Advent movement held the current doctrinal understandings of Adventism as it enters the twenty-first century. While such a position has much truth, it also harbors a serious misconception. The book's first chapter indicates the belief of the Adventist pioneers that "present truth" was dynamic (rather than static) and could change as the Holy Spirit led the church in its study of the Bible. Modern Adventism holds the same position. On the other hand, certain foundational beliefs held by Adventists are so basic that