Who are the Adventists?

by Douglas Morgan in the September 22, 1999 issue

Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion, by Laura L. Vance

How did a church cofounded by a 19th-century female prophet come to exclude women from leadership roles? Laura Vance explores that and other questions that have perplexed both Adventists and observers of American religion: Has Seventh-day Adventism taken its place among American denominations or does it cling to the sectarianism of its origins? How has Adventism's identity struggle affected its approach to social and moral concerns?

Vance, a sociologist at Georgia Southwestern State University, focuses on gender issues to clarify both the status of women in Adventism and the broader problem of Adventism's status in the sect-denomination schema. Adventism's extensive network of respected health-care institutions, its accredited colleges and universities, its generally cordial relations with government and other churches, and the middle-class comfort of most members suggest the profile of a denomination. Yet Vance demonstrates that a simple sect-to-denomination progression is far from sufficient to explain the complexities of Adventism's development. Indeed, since the '70s there has been a major thrust to reinvigorate the church's sectarian distinctiveness, and gender has been a central issue in the conflicts of recent decades.

But not the only issue. In the first part of her book, Vance gives an overview of Adventist origins, beliefs, organization and contemporary controversies. This concise, scholarly summary alone makes the book worthwhile. Vance explains how Adventism emerged out of the Millerite apocalyptic excitement of the 1840s. It claimed a unique and decisive significance for the Millerite movement in the culmination of the divine plan for history. When Christ did not return at the time William Miller believed had been set by biblical prophecy, a small minority of his followers claimed that the prophecy actually pointed to a final work of judgment and atonement in heaven beginning in 1844. They also came to see themselves as a remnant called by God to proclaim certain truths, such as the seventh-day Sabbath,

the literal, imminent second advent of Christ, and the link between bodily health and spirituality. The restoration of the gift of prophecy in the person of Ellen White confirmed that their movement was divinely led.

In living out and seeking to win others to these beliefs, Adventists constructed a vast array of institutions for education, health care, publishing and health-food production. On the one hand, these institutions have reinforced sectarian separateness, enabling believers to fulfill their temporal needs apart from secular society and dedicating them to advance the Adventist message. On the other hand, they have lessened the distinction between Adventists and the world. They have propelled Adventists into secular graduate study and well-compensated professions; these Adventists in turn tend to be more critical of their faith heritage and more at home in American society.

The conflict inherent in Adventist institutionalism underlies most of the contemporary fissures in the church. For example, scholars employing critical methodologies have called into question traditional understandings of White's divine inspiration and authority. Vance devotes particular attention to dissident scholar Desmond Ford, who in 1979 struck at the heart of Adventism's self-understanding by challenging the biblical basis for the church's teachings.

Ford was motivated not only by fidelity to scripture but by concern about a central Adventist teaching: that believers must give evidence of a sanctified life in order to make it through the judgment begun in the heavenly sanctuary in 1844. This teaching, he argued, undermines the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. According to Vance, the justification/sanctification debate displays the ongoing tension between Adventism's sectarian and denominational orientations. Salvation based on sanctification requires attention to those beliefs and behaviors that distinguish Adventism, while justification emphasizes grace and thus makes maintaining sectarian distinction less important.

Ford's defrocking was part of a general reaction by church leaders in the '70s and '80s against trends deemed threatening to the church's unique identity. The call for a return to traditional, historic Adventism included opposition to the ordination of women. Ironically, Vance argues, the gender norms promoted during this period of sectarian retrenchment were actually the secular norms the church had embraced from the 1920s to 1950s—an era in many respects characterized by Adventist accommodation to the world—and not the norms of 19th-century Adventism. Relying

mainly on an analysis of the church's newspaper, the *Review and Herald* (now *Adventist Review*), Vance argues that 19th-century Adventist women, while expected to fulfill gender-specific domestic responsibilities, were also encouraged to enter the public sphere by engaging in pastoral, educational and evangelistic work to advance the church's mission.

After White's death in 1915 and World War I, the number of Adventist women in public ministry declined precipitously. This trend was accompanied, Vance shows, by a narrowing of the ideal of womanhood to the more strictly domestic and subordinate role prevalent in American culture. The Adventist experience thus appears to bear out Max Weber's theory that in their founding stage sects tend to allot equality to women, but in the subsequent stage of routinization, the public authority of women diminishes and eventually disappears.

Though Vance has done extensive research in both primary and secondary sources and spent time interviewing members of four Adventist congregations, some may question her selection of sources and thus dispute her conclusions. But her book's stimulus to the study of gender in the American Adventist experience can only be welcomed. Well researched and clearly if somewhat laboriously written, Vance's work makes an outstanding contribution to the understanding not only of Adventism but also of the dynamics of sectarian development and interaction with the wider society.