

The Pandemic, Vaccination, and the Crisis of Adventist Identity

9th Annual Harold Baptiste Lectureship
Delivered to the University of the Southern Caribbean
On February 3, 2022
By Professor Nicholas Miller, JD, PhD
Andrews University

Certain elements of right-wing Adventism and the larger evangelical, Christian world, have reacted urgently and even defiantly to a relatively benign federal government Covid rule that encouraged vaccination, but allowed for masking and testing for those that object. But this same group has had very little to say about the deaths of about 850,000 of our fellow citizens in the United States, and many more millions around the world. Why the disparity of concern? Why has the loss of probably a few hundred jobs of vaccine resistant Adventists (mostly in the health care field, where keeping vulnerable patients safe is an ethical priority), been viewed as such a greater tragedy than the loss of so much life?

Adventists have always valued freedom of conscience. But we have also valued promoting and protecting life and health. In the great pandemic of 1918, we did not view these values as in conflict. What has brought us to the point that a moral monomania for what amounts to economic freedom or job security appears to overshadow, even eclipse, concerns for the basic health and safety of so many of our friends and neighbors? What has happened to Adventist identity in the last hundred years to allow this change to take place?

And what has happened to our epistemological framework that has caused different parts of the church to believe such radically different descriptions of reality? I think these questions of Adventist prophetic views and identity, and Adventist epistemology, are very related, and understanding one will help us understand the other. As a place of scholarship and learning within the church, we need to understand the epistemological crisis we face as a church, and how we can help the church move forward to a place of greater understanding and unity.

Opposition to General Vaccine Mandates

At the outset, I want to be clear that I do not support general vaccine mandates. This is not because I do not believe the vaccines are safe and useful. I do believe, based on studies I have reviewed, as well as the opinions of health experts in positions of trust in the church and in the government, that Covid vaccines are both safe and effective. But I also believe that mandating them upon all workers is counterproductive because of the resistance it provokes, which is harmful to both individuals and society. For this and other reasons, I think such general mandates are unwise and unconstitutional (though I agree with the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that vaccine requirements in the health care industry are a justified protection of vulnerable and at-risk patients.)

Because of my opposition to general forced vaccinations, I was the main author of a model letter that many of the religious liberty departments of the Adventist Church in North America provided for use by members who are conscientiously opposed to the vaccine. Where an employee can be kept safe in the work-place, they should be accommodated in their health convictions. Most employees, at least outside the health-care context, can be safely accommodated.

In most jobs, some sort of testing and masking program should be adequate, as found in the recent OSHA Covid regulation program. (Which has, of course, been declared unconstitutional, as exceeding the powers of a mere executive department. The irony is that many of those that cheer its demise may find it replaced in many states with more severe measures that do not provide any accommodation for those opposed.)

But I and my religious liberty colleagues in the church are resistant to having the church use religious liberty arguments to oppose state or employer programs encouraging or even requiring vaccination. The church has no teaching against vaccines. On the contrary, it has released statements encouraging responsible vaccination among its members. Indeed, it has held neighborhood vaccine clinics at its North American Division headquarters.

Whatever you think of their wisdom, vaccine programs are motivated by health safety reasons, and are not designed to promote a religious view or ideology. While opposition to them is at times couched in rights of conscience or religious freedom, the underlying objection almost always has to do with a mistrust of their safety or efficacy. This is not at its core a religious disagreement, rather, it is a scientific one over the impact of vaccines.

The vast majority of health experts in the state and the church agree that opposition to covid vaccines are not based on good scientific evidence, but on misinformation mixed in with various unreliable conspiracy theories, at times framed in an Adventist prophetic outlook. These often involve suspicion of government and health leaders, and the belief that they are actively ignoring the deaths of citizens, and perhaps even acting to bring such deaths about. From first-hand experience, I know that mixing anti-government conspiracies with Adventist prophecy can be a dangerous and even lethal combination.

Extreme Adventism and Anti-Government Conspiracy Theories

I was a student in England at Newbold College in the mid-1980s, and there I developed friendships with a number of students studying religion. At times we bemoaned what we considered the progressive and even liberal ways of some of our professors. There seemed to us to be an avoidance and even a skepticism towards traditional Adventist teachings, such as the sanctuary message and our historic prophetic outlook. A vacuum developed on these topics, that we filled with our own reading, research and discussions.

The year after I left Newbold, this vacuum came to be filled by less benign influences. Some American visitors came to the neighborhood, and began holding off-campus meetings, promoting anti-government, and eventually anti-church conspiracy theories that were constructed within an Adventist prophetic framework. Some of my friends apparently found the prophetic focus they were looking for.

On a trip back to campus a year or so later, one of my friends urged me to join their movement that was led by a charismatic, smooth-talking leader, adept at mixing history,

prophecy, and current events. There was talk of traveling to Israel, and being prepared to oppose corrupt earthly governments, and usher in the reign of the heavenly kingdom. I pushed back, pointing out that this scenario was not consistent with important aspects of our prophetic outlook, and that opposition to earthly authorities was called for by the church only when they threatened our religious beliefs and worship.

My friend was not to be dissuaded, and I had the sense that he had bought into the fervid ambitions of this charismatic leader, whose vision of reality had overtaken my friends' critical thinking skills, so that he no longer could hear words of warning from within his own community. He and several others followed their leader, not to Israel, but to their new "heavenly kingdom" of Waco, Texas.

Most of us know the tragic story of David Koresh and Waco, and the fiery deaths that occurred in the final government assault on their compound. Perhaps they would argue that their suspicions of government abuse and corruption were right all along; but others of us would see the events there as a self-fulfilling prophecy. They that take up the sword, especially against the state, may well die by the sword as the state responds to an internal threat. The logic of the outcome does not, however, lessen the sorrow for the death of my friends, and of many others at the Davidian compound.

This experience compels me to speak up as I believe that I see history repeating itself, with new smooth-talkers, both within and outside Adventism, leading a campaign of anti-government, and anti-church, conspiracy rhetoric, wrapped in Adventist prophetic rhetoric. These efforts have already contributed to a climate productive of deadly results. Just in my own local Adventist community there have been multiple deaths among vegetarian, health-message reforming Adventists who have not been vaccinated, a number of them members of the church community that has chosen to platform a message critical of the covid vaccines.

Some may balk at comparing the long-haired, fast talking, rock-music playing Koresh with the genteel mannerisms, well-pressed suits and medical and advanced degrees of some of today's anti-covid vaxxers. But charisma takes many forms, and anti-government conspiracy theories will have their baleful results, whether served up with the accompaniment of rock guitars or string quartets. And the most important, and most tragic comparison, is undeniable: the anti-covid vaccine movement has contributed to the needless deaths of more Adventists than David Koresh ever did.

Modern Anti-Government Prophets of Doom

It was thus with great chagrin and concern that I watched recent meetings of Christians, including some Adventists, who oppose both vaccine requirements, as well as the vaccines themselves. Often these groups claim to be promoting health, conscience and religious freedom. But it quickly became apparent that the religious liberty theme is a fig leaf to cover the hard core anti-covid vax and government conspiracy message that lies at the heart of the movement.

Main speakers at the meetings promoted by these anti-vaccine groups repeatedly warn that the vaccine not only is not effective, but that it is downright harmful, causing tens of thousands of deaths. The claim is made that the government and media cover up these deaths, and also suppress the effectiveness of alternate, natural forms of prevention and treatment. In

making these claims, they often rely on the VAERS vaccine reporting system data in a way that is demonstrably misguided and highly misleading, resulting in false conclusions about the impact of vaccines. In short, what they cite as causation, is merely correlation.

Adventist physician and creation advocate Dr. Sean Pitman has pointed out that whenever you vaccinate a hundred million+ people, a certain number of them would have died even if they had not been vaccinated from strokes, heart attacks, cancers, and so on. The question is whether the death rate for the vaccine recipients is higher than the death rate for the background population—and the simple answer is, that it is not. Dr. Pitman's excellent analysis of the VAERS anti-vaccine fallacy here: <http://www.educatetruth.com/featured/dr-mccullough-at-the-village-seventh-day-adventist-church/>, and other expert sources have made similar observations. <https://www.factcheck.org/2021/12/scicheck-increase-in-covid-19-vaers-reports-due-to-reporting-requirements-intense-scrutiny-of-widely-given-vaccines/>

More recently, strong evidence has emerged that not only do vaccinated people NOT die more frequently than unvaccinated, but that in fact the opposite is true: vaccinated people not only die less from Covid, but also from all other causes of death. Thus, claims that the vaccinated are dying from various non-covid causes in higher numbers is simply not true. Adventist physician and researcher Dr. Roger Seheult has examined the massive study demonstrating that here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKVsXOZguLg>.

Studies continue to show that, even with the omicron variant, which even the vaccinated are susceptible to, that cases of Covid that require hospitalization and lead to death, are somewhere from eight to twelve times more likely to occur among the unvaccinated than the vaccinated. See here <https://time.com/6138566/pandemic-of-unvaccinated/>, here <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/briefing/omicron-deaths-vaccinated-vs-unvaccinated.html>, and here <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/01/for-covid-with-covid-hospitals-are-mess-either-way/621229/>.

Now, the problem with my last paragraph is that for about a quarter of those reading this will say, "an article from the New York Times, from Time magazine, and from the Atlantic, I simply do not believe the data they cite." Well, what do you do when "liberal" media sources are actually supported by testimony from your Adventist Christian neighbor physician who runs a hospital system? Consider this report from Dr. Loren Hamel, President of Spectrum Health Lakeland hospital system here in SW Michigan. As of early January, 2022, he reported that: "86% of [Covid] admissions are friends and neighbors that have not been vaccinated. Right now, 100% of our ICU admissions at Lakeland are for individuals that are not vaccinated." The vaccines, he says, "absolutely decreases your risk of hospitalization and dramatically decreases your risk for ICU admission, for ventilation, and for death, if you've been vaccinated."

Why don't some Adventist believe health care professionals associated with their own church, like Drs. Hamel, Seheult, and Pitman? Some have suggested that church leadership is strongly influenced by government money going to Adventist Health Care systems. This claim is simply untrue. I was deeply involved in the PARL Department deliberations and discussions about our position on vaccines, and not once was this issue raised as a factor. Never have I heard it discussed by the Church health care leaders I counseled with. There is no actual evidence that concern for government funds was a factor at all in the Church's approach to vaccines. To claim otherwise, in the absence of evidence, is both gossip and slander, unbecoming of serious church leaders.

In my view, the real reason that some Adventists view the claims of Adventist experts and leaders with suspicion is the same reason that my friends at Newbold would not listen to the warnings and cautions of their Adventist friends and leaders—they had been influenced by unhealthy, sensational conspiracy theories about government and church leadership. A recent well-publicized meeting that included prominent Adventist figures had a main speaker who ended his presentation by arguing that the reason efficacious treatments were suppressed, and dangerous vaccines promoted, was because of an alliance between big pharma, government leaders, including the CDC and the WHO, Bill Gates, the Ford Foundation, and many other organizations, including presumably church leaders who go along with the mandate.

The irony, of course, is that anti-vaccine leaders accuse the media of using fear of covid to manipulate the masses. But they use the fear of almost everything else, all the institutions that help organize and protect our lives, including government, health care institutions, and church organizations and leaders, to convince its listeners that it alone can be trusted to provide guidance on important health questions. Rather than escaping fear, if you buy their arguments, you will be plunged into a world of constant fear and distrust, one that is deeply at odds with Scriptural teaching about both the church and the state. (Rom. 13:1-5; Tit. 3:1; Eph. 4:11-14; Eph. 5:21).

Yes, we are told that the state at times will exceed its God appointed bounds, and must be resisted when it commands us to violate God's commands. But there is no biblical teaching against health and safety measures, and indeed the Bible supports public health measures, including mandatory quarantining, masking, and other measures to suppress infection. (Lev. 13:1-4, 24-26, 45-46.)

Detecting Deadly Conspiracy Theories

How are we to detect and avoid misleading conspiracy theories, at a time when the very elect can be deceived? The Bible provides a formula for avoiding teachings and theories which are derived "by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." (Eph. 4:14.) And what is that formula? Paul describes it as an engagement with the church community, the body of Christ, which working together helps "equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." (Eph. 4:12-13.)

This equipping happens with the support and assistance of those designated to hold office and lead within that body, the "apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." (Eph. 4:11.) The reason the very elect are not deceived is not because they are so smart; rather, they are wise enough to choose carefully the body of faith to which they belong. Of course, one must find a community that is committed to the authority of Scripture and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit within the body of believers. But at this point, does the anti-vax movement offer an alternate community of belief and fellowship to the Adventist church? Or is it, rather, offering membership in a shared sense of grievance, and even defiance, against leadership, both civil and spiritual? How enduring, supportive and stable are communities based almost entirely on opposition and defiance?

The anti-vax movement often proposes actions that fits the description provided by Ellen White of the posture we should *not* take in the face of government authority on a matter

far more central to our prophetic outlook—that of Sunday laws, Ellen White said that we should not defy government mandates forbidding Sunday labor. She noted that: “To defy the Sunday laws will but strengthen in their persecution the religious zealots who are seeking to enforce them. Give them no occasion to call you lawbreakers. . . . Keep right on with your missionary work, with your Bibles in your hands, and the enemy will see that he has worsted his own cause. One does not receive the mark of the beast because he shows that he realizes the wisdom of keeping the peace by refraining from work that gives offense, doing at the same time a work of the highest importance.” (9T 232.3)

The recent OSHA mandate contained nothing that would have crossed anyone’s reasonable religious conscience. It allowed for a testing/masking option for those that did not want the vaccine. But cries of outrage, of discrimination, of even persecution, went up from many Adventists, and some urged us religious liberty leaders to oppose and even defy these rules. It seems that we have still yet to learn the lessons Ellen White was urging in her own day.

One can paraphrase Ellen White, and say “one does not receive the mark of the beast (or preparation for it) because he realizes the wisdom of keeping the peace by testing and masking . . .” Too many Adventists, even some leaders, have shown the need to better understand our own prophetic message, and to be more discerning regarding counterfeit and dangerous conspiracy theories about the government and church leadership.

Ellen White also warned of the dangers of appearing to oppose legitimate state authority. She wrote that “some of our brethren . . . have spoken and written [things] that are interpreted as expressing antagonism to government and law. It is a mistake thus to lay ourselves open to misunderstanding. It is not wise to find fault continually with what is done by the rulers of government. It is not our work to attack individuals or institutions. We should exercise great care lest we be understood as putting ourselves in opposition to the civil authorities. . . . We should weed out from our writings and utterances every expression that, taken by itself, could be so misrepresented as to make it appear antagonistic to law and order. Everything should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as encouraging disloyalty to our country and its laws.

We are not required to defy authorities. There will come a time when, because of our advocacy of Bible truth, we shall be treated as traitors; but let not this time be hastened by unadvised movements that stir up animosity and strife.” (6T 394.)

Church leaders who maintain silence and even tacit support for those that peddle in anti-government conspiracy theories have not grasped these admonitions, as well as the historical lessons provided by the disaster at Waco. They do not realize the ongoing, baleful impact of anti-government conspiracy theories on the Adventist church and Christianity as a whole. This ignorance will, sadly, be paid for in an increasing body count of sincere, but misguided, Adventist members.

Adventists will continue to be susceptible to movements that expose them to danger and even death, unless it can come to terms with the weakness of some of its members, and even leaders, for dangerous, anti-government conspiracy theories. We know that rulers are not to be obeyed who require the violation of the law of God. But short of that, in words more Adventists worried about their conscience need to understand, we are told that: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for

your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." Rom. 13:3-5.

Conscience is not just seen in opposition to authority, it can at times be seen in respect for authority; especially when that authority is seeking to protect the community and save lives, even if we do not always agree with the means used. That is true conscience, and it is what will lead to true liberty and health.

Adventist Identity, Epistemology, and the Importance of the Community of Believers

The question of the true nature of Adventist identity will continue to be debated. There are those that will insist that our primary concern is that of conscience and religious freedom. Thus, all health mandates ought to be opposed and resisted. This is perhaps ironic for a church whose early leaders involved themselves in the movement to pass mandates outlawing the use and sale of alcohol. Others will argue that our true identity is in balancing the realms of conscience and health, recognizing that the health of others and the larger community is also a legitimate matter of conscience.

But perhaps the larger question is how we are to resolve these conflicts of identity? What authority are we to turn to? The Bible, of course, both sides will say, and then they will interpret it differently. Or Ellen White, some will say, and then interpret her differently. It perhaps does not seem very Protestant to say, the community of believers; but that is because we have embraced an individualism that has more to do with modern, secular conceptions of the autonomous self, then it does with Martin Luther's priesthood of all believers.

We take his important construct of the social, believing community interacting and submitting to each other, and replace it with something more akin to a gathering of Popes, capital P, where each of us becomes an authority in his or her own right, not just on matters of theology and doctrine, but the limits and shape of conscience and religious freedom, and the truths of science in the middle of a pandemic. Everyone becomes his her own papal expert, and reliance on appropriate leaders, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is viewed as weakness and naivety, notwithstanding the Bible's admonition that we are to respect and submit to the powers that be, both within the church, as well as the state.

It perhaps takes us back to the notion of college that underlies the community of the university. Here we are at a University lectureship, hoping that we can achieve some kind of unified knowledge in the midst of complexity and diversity. But this is only possible insofar as we take advantage of the college, the collegium, the gathering of thoughtful inquirers, where ideas are exchanged, expertise is recognized and appreciated, and where we submit to one another, as the Spirit works through the system of oversight and consultation we have as a church.

Many of us are surprised and disappointed at the disunity in the church on some of today's important questions of health and conscience. But perhaps we should be even more surprised, and appreciative, of the basic unity that we find in many of these questions among the health, religious liberty, biblical, and administrative leaders of our church. There is a strong consensus approaching unanimity, at the higher levels in our church on questions of the pandemic and the safety, usefulness and importance of the vaccines. The center is holding.

But the experience is revealing a deep divide in the pews, and a widespread misunderstanding, as to how knowledge is reliably obtained, evaluated and applied in our lives and in our community. We need to revisit important ideas that give balance to our Protestant, Adventist individualism; ideas like the *Priesthood of All Believers*, the role of the college and collegiality in arriving at truth, and the importance of engaging the body of Christ and its leaders in assessing truth claims, spiritual, historic, and scientific.

It is not that we turn over our consciences' to others and the community; but we recognize that the truths upon which conscience operates cannot be fully investigated by any single person. Rather, the shared expertise found in the body of Christ serves as a guide to knowing certain truths that we cannot fully know on our own. Perhaps this community is less vital where doctrinal, biblical teachings are at stake; which we can study and know for ourselves. But even here, as we move beyond core biblical teachings into more secondary matters, the community becomes increasingly important. A good example of these are questions of ecclesiastical order, such as church structure and organization. Questions of science, health, and history, which are not directly revealed in the Bible, are more complex to assess, and we need the assistance that our dedicated and expert brothers and sisters can provide.

The crisis of Adventist identity is perhaps to realize that it involves more than merely the identity of Adventist individuals; rather, that there is a larger identity, a body of Adventism, in which we participate. The body of Christ is more than the sum of its individual parts, and the parts of this body mysteriously work together to form a community that is more profound, more wise, than the sum of its individual parts. May we, as Ephesians 4:15 says, "speak the truth in love, and grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ."

That is my prayer for us all.