Book Review


1919 is one of the significant dates in Seventh-day Adventist history. In this year, an important conference took place of the denomination’s leaders and theology and history teachers. However, the (incomplete) transcripts of the conference disappeared in the archives of the church’s headquarters and were not unearthed until the 1970s. Soon thereafter, the independent Adventist journal Spectrum published major excerpts from the Report of the conference. This caused quite a stir as it showed that several of the divisive issues in contemporary Adventism were also key topics during this conference, in particular with regard to biblical hermeneutics and the inspiration of the Bible and of the Ellen G. White writings.

In his recent book – 1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism – Dr. Campbell (currently teaching theology and history at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas, USA), guides the reader through this conference. He discusses the context in which the conference was held. Protestant Fundamentalism was emerging as a major reaction to liberal trends in various denominations, with a strong emphasis on verbal inspiration as one of its major tenets. In addition, there was a renewed interest in prophetic themes and in the Second Coming of Christ. Some of these themes resonated well with several Adventist leaders and theologians. A few years after the death of Ellen G. White, the Adventist Church had to learn to be without a living prophet and faced questions with regard to the continued authority of her writings.

The first part of the book (pp. 25–59), reports on the three-week conference. Campbell shows how a distinct polarization between progressives and conservatives coloured the discussions of the main topics. These included several issues (which are dealt with in the second part; pp. 63–103), concerning details of traditional Adventist prophetic interpretations (such as the daily, the dating of the 1260 year-period, the identity of the ten toes of the image of Daniel 2
and of the king of the North in Daniel 11). Another important topic at the conference was the church’s attitude towards the doctrine of the Trinity. But the conference’s hottest topic was the doctrine of inspiration and how the Adventist understanding of inspiration related to the abiding role and authority of Ellen White. One of the key questions that dominated the discussions on this issue was to what extent the writing of the prophet should be seen as inerrant and as an absolute authority – also in the sphere of history.

In a mere 116 pages Campbell succeeds in providing a good overview of the setting of the conference (chapter 1–2), of the conference itself (chapter 3–8), of the aftermath (chapter 9) and the contemporary significance of the event (chapter 10). One of the persons who endorsed the book calls it the “definitive account” of the conference. That, however, may be somewhat of an overstatement. In fact, the author’s dissertation (on which this book is based) should perhaps be given that epithet. Readers who want to have more detailed information on some points will (like me) want to check the digital version of Campbell’s dissertation, which is available through Andrews University. Whether or not the subtitle of the book, The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism, is fully warranted, may also be questioned. My “Beach Lectures” at Newbold College (2000), entitled Seventh-day Adventism and Fundamentalism, and an extensive article in Spectrum, based on these lectures, provide ample bibliographical information about Adventist sources that deal with the history of the Adventist attitude towards Fundamentalism.

Of course, one could wish that the author had dealt with some aspects in greater depth. In his dissertation, Campbell gives a full list of the 64 participants to the conference. There he also briefly mentions the reason for the absence of William C. White, the prophet’s oldest son and her right hand in her later years. Why did the wedding of his twin children deter him from attending at least a part of the conference? A notable absentee was also M. L. Andreasen, who at the time was one of the most prominent Adventist theologians. In view of his later controversy with some notable Adventist theologians. In view of his later controversy with some notable colleagues and with the church’s

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leadership, it would have been important to discover what caused his absence? Was he not invited? Did he decline the invitation?

The short section about Margaret M. Rowen (pp. 39–41), who after Ellen White’s death claimed to be her prophetic successor whets the appetite for a much fuller description of who she was, what motivated her prophetic claim and what happened to her afterwards. Perhaps Campbell will, before too long, pursue that story further.

Since the book draws heavily on the transcripts of the conference (the Report), it would have been helpful if the reader would have been provided with the link to the denomination’s archives, where a digital copy may be consulted.

1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism is to be highly recommended to all Adventist professionals in the field of theology and Adventist studies. It should also be read by those Seventh-day Adventist church members who are interested in the history of their church, and who are eager to get a better understanding of the historical background of the current polarization. These contemporary divisions are continuations of the 1919 conference’s debates about different approaches to inspiration and hermeneutics.

Although the paper on which the book is printed does not allow for high quality photographs, the portraits of the main players in and around the 1919 Bible conference and a few pictures of some relevant items, in the back of the book, are an extra bonus that will be appreciated by many readers.

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4 See also Campbell, Michael W. “Rowen, Margaret Mathilda (Wright).” Fortin, Dennis, and Moon, Jerry, eds. The Ellen White Encyclopedia. Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2013, 503–504.