

DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN G. WHITE

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The Topic

Since the beginning of Seventh-day Adventism there has been real or perceived tension between two contrasting perspectives of church-state relationships: (1) the “eschatological view” that a union of church and state will lead to persecution in the times preceding the Second Coming of Christ, and (2) the “temporal view” that in order to accomplish its mission in the present, the church needs to work in an independent but nonconflictual relationship with the state as far as it can do so without violating its primary allegiance to God.

The Purpose

In order to discover Ellen G. White’s position on the two perspectives, the study analyzed all of White’s writings on the topic of church-state relationships, searching for her principles of church-state relationships. Her principles were compared with the views of others during the Colonial and early Federal periods of American history, and with the historical records of the church-state debate among Adventists until the end of her life.

The Sources

The search for principles used all relevant published and unpublished writings of Ellen G. White. The studies of the American historical background and the progression of the debate among Adventists used both primary and secondary sources.

Conclusion

Ellen White’s principles of church-state relationships grew out of her worldview of a Great Controversy between good and evil. She believed that church and state had been established by God as separate institutions with distinct purposes for the benefit of humankind. However, in the conflict between good and evil, both church and state are objects of Satan’s attack. According to White, the state has divinely given authority to enforce the last six of the Ten Commandments, which define human responsibilities to other humans, and to safeguard the freedom of humans to obey the first four commandments, which describe their responsibilities to God. Thus the proper role of government is to protect both the religious and civil liberties of its citizens.

White expected the church to pursue its mission in compliance with the laws of the land, but with nonnegotiable loyalty to God, and that Adventist participation in social and political activism should always be subordinate to the requirements of the church’s mission.