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George R. Knight  
*Andrews University*

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George R. Knight, EdD, is professor emeritus of church history at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



# Ecclesiastical deadlock: *James White solves a problem that had no answer*

Church organization was one of the hardest fought battles in Adventism’s early decades. Extending nearly 20 years, the struggle not only eventuated in aspects of church order not suggested in Scripture but provided a key hermeneutical principle for deciding other topics not made explicit in the Bible. In the process, James White, and many others, experienced a hermeneutical metamorphosis, a necessary transformation that allowed Seventh-day Adventism to develop into a worldwide force. Without the change, Adventism probably still would be a backwater religious group largely confined to the northeastern and midwestern United States.

What was the issue, and how can we learn from it today?

## Deadlock

In 1844, George Storrs set forth the basic position for the Adventist struggle over organization when he proclaimed “no church can be organized by man’s invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized.*”<sup>1</sup> That proclamation rang true to a generation of Adventists who had been persecuted by their denominations as Millerism reached its crest in 1843 and 1844.

Of course, some of the founders of what became Seventh-day Adventism did not need much help on the anti-organizational front. For James White and Joseph Bates, the stance came naturally, because they had come from the Christian Connexion, which had no effective church structure above the congregational level.<sup>2</sup> Even Ellen White, who came from the highly structured Methodist Episcopal Church, had seen the Babylonianish characteristics of her denomination as ministers were defrocked for advocating Millerism. They sought to silence members who would not be quiet on the topic and disellowshipped those who disobeyed that hierarchical order—including her own family, which faced a church trial and lost their church membership in 1843.<sup>3</sup>

It was no accident that the earliest Sabbatarian Adventists were suspicious of the persecuting power of Babylon. They had felt the power of church structures in a way that was not pleasurable or, they believed, even Christian.

But as the Sabbatarians began to develop their own congregations in the early 1850s, they soon realized that symbolic Babylon had more than one meaning in the Bible. Symbolic Babylon could represent not only a persecuting entity but also confusion.

James and Ellen White began to emphasize that latter definition by late 1853 as they faced the problems of a disorganized movement with little direction and no structure above the congregational level. “It is a lamentable fact,” James thundered through the pages of the *Review and Herald* in December 1853, “that many of our Advent brethren who made a timely escape from the bondage of the different churches [Babylon] . . . have since been in a more perfect Babylon than ever before. Gospel order has been too much overlooked by them. . . .

“ . . . Many in their zeal to come out of Babylon, partook of a rash, disorderly spirit, and were soon found in a perfect Babel of confusion. . . . To suppose that the church of Christ is free from restraint and discipline, is the wildest fanaticism.”<sup>4</sup>

James’s wife agreed. Basing her sentiments on a vision received during her and James’s eastern tour in the fall of 1852, Ellen wrote that “the Lord has shown that gospel order has been too much feared and neglected. Formality should be shunned; but, in so doing, order should not be neglected. There is order in heaven. There was order in the church when Christ was upon the earth, and after His departure order was

strictly observed among His apostles. And now in these last days, while God is bringing His children into the unity of the faith, there is more real need of order than ever before.”<sup>5</sup>

Even Bates was on board regarding the need for church order. In harmony with his Connexionist background, Bates claimed that biblical church order must be restored before the Second Advent. He argued that during the Middle Ages, the “law-breakers” “*deranged*” such essential elements of Christianity as the Sabbath and biblical church order. God had used the Sabbatarian Adventists to restore the seventh-day Sabbath, and it was “perfectly clear” to his mind “that God will employ law-keepers as instruments

order we mean that order in church association and discipline taught in the gospel of Jesus Christ by the writers of the New Testament.”<sup>7</sup> A few months later he spoke of the “perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament by inspiration of God. . . . The Scriptures present a perfect system, which, if carried out, will save the Church from imposters” and provide the ministers with an adequate platform for carrying out the work of the church.<sup>8</sup>

J. B. Frisbie, the most active writer in the *Review* in the mid-1850s on church order, agreed with Bates and White that every aspect of church order needed to be *explicitly spelled out in the Bible*. Thus he argued against any church name except the one given

ordination of deacons, local elders, and pastors. By the mid-1850s, they were ordaining all three classes.<sup>10</sup>

Gradually, they were strengthening gospel order at the level of the local church. In fact, the individual congregation was the only level of organization of which most Sabbatarians gave much thought. Thus such leaders as Bates could preface an extended article on “Church Order” with the following definition: “Church, signifies a particular congregation of believers in Christ, united together in the order of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup>

But in the second half of the 1850s, the church-order debate among Sabbatarians would focus on what was meant for congregations to be “united

*That shift was essential to the creative steps in church organization that he [James White] would advocate in the 1860s.*

to restore . . . a ‘glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle.’ . . .

“This unity of the faith, and perfect church order, never has existed since the days of the apostles.”<sup>6</sup>

By 1853, the problem was not seeing the need for church structure but biblical justification for such a move. And that need takes us to early Adventist hermeneutics.

### Hermeneutical transformation and the way forward

While Bates was clear that the apostolic order of the church needed to be restored, he made no room for any element of organization not found explicitly in the New Testament. James White, at this early period, shared a similar opinion. Thus, he could write in 1854 that “by gospel, or church

by God in the Bible. As he put it, “THE CHURCH OF GOD . . . is the only name that God has seen fit to give his church.” He then referred his readers to such texts as 2 Corinthians 1:1 (“the church of God which is at Corinth”), noting that “it is very evident that God never designed that his church should be called by any other name than the one he has given.” All other names, such as Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Methodist, were human inventions and “savors more of Babylon, confusion, mixture, than it does” of God’s church. By the same logic, Frisbie implied, along with other Adventists, that they should not keep church membership lists since the names of God’s children are recorded in the books of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

With their literalistic biblical approach to church order, Frisbie and others soon began to discuss the

together.” At least five issues would force leaders, such as James White, to look at church organization more globally. The first had to do with the legal ownership of property—especially the publishing office and church buildings. Other issues included the problems of paying preachers, the assignment of preachers to work locations, the transfer of membership between congregations, and the question of how independent congregations should relate to each other. The problems related to the paying and assigning of preachers were especially difficult because the Sabbatarians had no settled pastors. The issues the young movement faced led logically to thinking beyond the congregational level.

By 1859, those concerns were joined by others, including the need to extend missionary labor to new fields.

Those issues and others drove James White to progressively urge the need for a more complex and adequate form of church structure.

“We lack system,” he cried out in the *Review* on July 21, 1859. “Many of our brethren are in a scattered state. They observe the Sabbath, read with some interest the *REVIEW*; but beyond this they are doing but little or nothing for want of some method of united action among them.” To meet the situation, he called for regular meetings in each state (yearly in some and four or five times a year in others) to give guidance to the work of the Sabbatharians in that region.<sup>12</sup>

“We are aware,” he wrote, “that these suggestions, will not meet the minds of all. Bro. Over-cautious will be frightened, and will be ready to warn his brethren to be careful and not venture out too far; while Bro. Confusion will cry out, ‘O, this looks just like Babylon! Following the fallen church!’ Bro. Do-little will say, ‘The cause is the

Lord’s, and we had better leave it in his hands, he will take care of it.’ ‘Amen,’ says Love-this-world, Slothful, Selfish, and Stingy, ‘if God calls men to preach, let them go out and preach, he will take care of them, and those who believe their message;’ while Korah, Dathan and Abiram are ready to rebel against those who feel the weight of the cause [e.g., James White], and who watch for souls as those who must give account, and raise the cry, ‘You take too much upon you.’”<sup>13</sup>

White let it be known in the most descriptive language that he was sick and tired of the cry of Babylon every time that anyone mentioned organization. “Bro. Confusion,” he penned, “makes a most egregious blunder in calling system, which is in harmony with the Bible and good sense, Babylon. As Babylon signifies confusion, our erring brother has the very word stamped upon his own forehead. And we venture to say that there is not another people under heaven more worthy of the brand

of Babylon than those professing the Advent faith who reject Bible order. Is it not high time that we as a people heartily embrace everything that is good and right in the churches? Is it not blind folly to start back at the idea of system, found everywhere in the Bible, simply because it is observed in the fallen churches?”<sup>14</sup>

As one who had the “weight of the cause” upon him, James White felt impelled to take his stand for better organization among Sabbatharians. Castigating those who thought that “all that was necessary to run a train of cars was to use the brake well,”<sup>15</sup> he firmly believed that in order to get the Advent movement moving, it had to organize. That task he would pursue with full vigor between 1860 and 1863.

Meanwhile, James’s strategic place in the Sabbatarian movement had given him perspective that not only separated him from the reasoning processes of many of his fellow believers but had transformed his own thinking.

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Three points White raised in 1859 are of special importance.

### Three hermeneutical principles

First, he had moved beyond the biblical literalism of his earlier days, when he believed that the Bible must explicitly spell out each aspect of church organization. In 1859, he argued that “we should not be afraid of that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.”<sup>16</sup> Thus he had come to a new hermeneutic. He had moved from a principle of Bible interpretation that held that the only things Scripture allowed were those things it explicitly approved to a hermeneutic that approved of anything that did not contradict the Bible and good sense. That shift was essential to the creative steps in church organization that he would advocate in the 1860s.

That revised hermeneutic, however, put White in opposition to Frisbie, R. F. Cottrell, and others who continued to maintain a literalistic approach that demanded the Bible should explicitly spell out something before the church could accept it. In response, White noted that nowhere in the Bible did it say that Christians should have a weekly paper, a steam printing press, build places of worship, or publish books. He went on to argue that the “living church of God” needed to move forward with prayer and common sense.<sup>17</sup>

White’s second point involves a redefinition of “Babylon.” The earliest Adventists had approached the concept in relation to oppression and applied it to the existing denominations. As we saw above, White reinterpreted it in terms of confusion and applied it to his fellow Sabbatarians. By 1859, his goal had advanced to steering the Advent cause between the twin pitfalls of Babylon as oppressor and Babylon as confusion.

White’s third point concerned mission. Sabbatarians must organize if they were to fulfill their responsibility to preach the three angels’ messages.

Thus, between 1856 and 1859, White shifted from a literalistic perspective to

one much more pragmatic. Why, we might ask, did he make such a move while others among the Sabbatarian ministers remained rooted in their biblical (or, more accurately, unbiblical) literalism? The difference probably had to do with the fact that he felt the bulk of the responsibility for the Sabbatarian movement and, thus, had to make sure that it prospered in its mission in the real world.

### A legal issue

A second round in the hermeneutical struggle took place when, in February 1860, James White raised the question of incorporating church property so that it could be legally held and insured. He refused to sign notes of responsibility for individuals who desired to lend their money to the publishing house. Thus, the movement needed to hold church property in a “proper manner.”<sup>18</sup>

White’s suggestion called forth a vigorous reaction from R. F. Cottrell—a corresponding editor of the *Review* and the leader of those opposed to church organization. Recognizing that a church could not incorporate unless it had a name, Cottrell wrote that he believed “it would be wrong to ‘make us a name,’ since that lies at the foundation of Babylon.” His suggestion was that Adventists needed to trust in the Lord, who would repay them for any unjust losses at the end of time. “If any man proves a Judas, we can still bear the loss and trust the Lord.”<sup>19</sup>

The next issue of the *Review* saw a spirited response from White, who expressed himself “not a little surprised” at Cottrell’s remarks. He pointed out that the publishing office alone had thousands of dollars invested “without one legal owner.” “The Devil is not dead,” he asserted, and under such circumstances he knew how to shut down the publishing house.

White went on to claim that he regarded “it dangerous to leave with the Lord what he has left with us, and thus sit down upon the stool of do little, or nothing.

“Now it is perfectly right to leave the sun, moon and stars with the Lord; also the earth with its revolutions, the ebbing and flowing of the tides. . . . But if God in his everlasting word calls on us to act the part of faithful stewards of his goods, we had better attend to these matters in a legal manner—the only way we can handle real estate in this world.”<sup>20</sup>

On April 26, James White made a much more extensive reply to Cottrell, arguing that as long as “we are stewards of our Lord’s goods here in the land of the enemy, it is our duty to conform to the laws of the land necessary to the faithful performance of our stewardship, as long as human laws do not oppose the divine law.” White, significantly, also raised again the hermeneutical argument that he had used against the biblical literalists in 1859. Acknowledging that he could find no plain text of Scripture for holding property legally, he pointed out that the church did many things for which it could find no Bible text. He then moved on to Jesus’ command to let “your light so shine before men,” pointing out that He did “not give all the particulars how this shall be done.” At that point, he wrote that “we believe it safe to be governed by the following RULE.

“All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed.”<sup>21</sup> With that declaration White placed himself fully on the platform of a pragmatic, common sense approach to all issues not definitely settled in the Bible. Ellen White supported her husband in his struggle with Cottrell.<sup>22</sup>

The hermeneutical struggle, renewed in October 1860 as the property difficulty, came to a head at a conference James White called in Battle Creek in order to discuss the problem along with the related issues of legal incorporation and a formal name, a requirement for incorporation. Between September 29 and October 2, 1860, delegates from at least five states discussed the situation in detail. All




agreed that whatever they did should be according to the Bible but disagreed over the hermeneutical issue of whether something needed to be explicitly mentioned in the Bible. James White, as usual, argued that “every Christian duty is not given in the Scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> That essential point had to be recognized before they could make any progress toward legal organization. Gradually, as the various problems and options surfaced, the majority of the candidates accepted White’s hermeneutical rule.

The October 1860 conference accomplished several main goals. The first involved the adoption of a constitution for the legal incorporation of the publishing association. The second was that “individual churches so . . . organize as to hold their church property or church buildings legally.” James White, still fighting the hermeneutical battle with the proof-texters, twice called the objectors to produce “one text of scripture to show that this is wrong.” Not being able to find such a passage or to match his logic, the objectors surrendered and the motion carried.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Though these issues concerned church organization, something much more basic and important was at stake: hermeneutics.

The early 1850s found all of the Sabbatarians in a literalistic, proof-texting frame of mind. Without an explicit text on a topic, they would not and could not move forward.

By revising his hermeneutics, James White found his way out of this trap. He had come to realize that “we should not be afraid of that system which is not opposed to the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.”<sup>25</sup> With that hermeneutical breakthrough, he provided the means by which he and his wife could guide the young movement into a mission to the entire world. 

- 1 George Storrs, “Come Out of Her My People,” *Midnight Cry*, Feb. 15, 1844, 238.
- 2 See George R. Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2001), 15–18.
- 3 Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827–1862* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1985), 43, 44.
- 4 James White, “Gospel Order,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, 173.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald

- Pub. Assn., 1945), 97.
- 6 Joseph Bates, “Church Order,” *Review and Herald*, Aug. 29, 1854, 22, 23.
- 7 James White, “Gospel Order,” *Review and Herald*, Mar. 28, 1854, 76.
- 8 James White, “Church Order,” *Review and Herald*, Jan. 23, 1855, 164.
- 9 J. B. Frisbie, “Church Order,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1854, 147.
- 10 See George R. Knight, “Early Seventh-day Adventists and Ordination, 1844–1863,” in Nancy Vyhmeister, *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 101–14.
- 11 Bates, “Church Order,” 22.
- 12 James White, “Yearly Meetings,” *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 James White, “Borrowed Money,” *Review and Herald*, Feb. 23, 1860, 108.
- 19 R. F. Cottrell, “Making Us a Name,” *Review and Herald*, Mar. 22, 1860, 140, 141.
- 20 James White, “Making Us a Name,” *Review and Herald*, Mar. 29, 1860, 152.
- 21 James White, “Making Us a Name,” *Review and Herald*, Apr. 26, 1860, 180–82.
- 22 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 211.
- 23 James White, “Business Proceedings of B. C. Conference,” *Review and Herald*, Oct. 16, 1860, 169.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 170, 171.
- 25 James White, “Yearly Meetings,” 68.

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## Finishing what was started

Almost 500 years have elapsed since the 33-year-old German monk nailed his humble, but exhaustive, 95 Theses to the door of the castle’s church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had no inkling on that Saturday, October 31, 1517, that his list of grievances would launch a movement unprecedented in history, with billions following his lead in protesting an unbiblical system and advancing in a clearer understanding of God’s will. All of us still trying to extricate ourselves from the bondage of tradition and practices that do not align with the Bible and to help others do so are spiritual heirs of Martin Luther.

Our world today is not much different from that of 1517. As in Luther’s day, clergy corruption still exists today. As in Luther’s day, beliefs contrary to God’s Word spiritually enslave the masses, and the vast majority are slow to make any move to extricate themselves from false systems and teachings. As in Luther’s day, today some who know better and should be leading the deceived into the light of truth do not take so bold a stand as to arrest people’s attention and cause them to act.

But just as Luther began the Reformation, so we are to finish it. The scope of our task is daunting, but if each of us nails our lists to the

bulletin boards of our communities, a reformation even greater than Luther’s will sweep the earth, culminating in the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

— BENJAMIN BAKER, PHD, IS ASSISTANT ARCHIVIST FOR THE ARCHIVES, STATISTICS, AND RESEARCH OFFICE OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS, SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, UNITED STATES.

