

**COMBATING SYNCRETISM IN CONTEMPORARY SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH THROUGH ENLIGHTENED MINISTRY**

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Abstract

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This research paper revealed that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is faced with the challenge of syncretism especially in Africa. A combined narrative and case study approach were used in the study. In order to establish a conceptual framework of the study a review of relevant literature was done. The research delved into establishing a conceptual framework of syncretism within the church in an African context. It proceeded to explore the biblical perspective of combating syncretism. The African traditional worldview was found to be the guiding compass of many professed church members. On the other hand the biblical perspective of combating syncretism was explored, and suggestions made to church leadership on Bible based methods of combating syncretism.

The research revealed that the visible manifestation of syncretism is multifaceted and largely motivated by the presence of unfulfilled felt needs of the church members. The need to maintain community solidarity and inability to withstand life's challenges were highlighted as the main contributors to syncretic practices. A paradigm shift of doing evangelism where the focus is on winning families and strengthening nurturing strategies were also brought into perspective. It was discovered that new church members as well as old ones need to be grounded in biblical truth through a comprehensive teaching ministry that focuses on areas that address the traditional African worldview. It was also discovered that a comprehensive understanding of the African traditional worldview and practices are indispensable prerequisites for combating syncretism. The obligation to decisively address syncretism was highlighted as a key leadership function in the church.

COMBATING SYNCRETISM IN CONTEMPORARY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH THROUGH ENLIGHTENED MINISTRY

Introduction

The contemporary Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a church with members who are all pure, perfect and live holy lives during the day and also during the night. This church which is commonly known as the remnant church of the Bible prophecy is not a church composed of followers who are all hot spiritually or very cold, but according to Revelation 3:14-22 the church has membership that is lukewarm. In terms of analysis they are neither cold nor hot but they are just in-between.

This contemporary church is not already in heaven where there are holy beings that do not sin but it is in the world where the great controversy between Christ and Satan is still raging. In referring to the church, Ellen White observes that, “The truth is a sanctifying power; but the church militant is not the church triumphant. There are tares among the wheat.”¹ It is true that the church is not yet triumphant and it has wheat and tare in the same congregation.

The Bible is also reminding us that, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). This is a war that is affecting most of the church members and making them to have dual allegiance to Christ and also to the evil one.

Definition of Syncretism

¹ Ellen Gould White, *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1991), 240.

Syncretism according to Watson Mill is “the fusion or adoption of beliefs and rituals by one religious tradition from another.”¹ Furthermore, the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines syncretism as “the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief.” The word syncretism comes from the Greek word *Synkretismos* whose verb *synkretizein* means to combine. It is therefore viewed as a process through which elements or practices of one or more religions are combined with another practice resulting in a change from the original nature of the basic religion or practice concerned. From the definitions above we have discovered that different forms of beliefs or practices are combined to come up with something different from the originals. This is because of the experience of synergy or fusion that takes place during the process of combining the two teachings and practices. The outcome of the combination becomes a new thing altogether which is referred to as syncretism in this research paper.

Religious Background of Syncretism

Religious syncretism takes place when foreign beliefs are introduced to an indigenous belief system and the teachings are blended. The new heterogeneous religion will now take a new shape of its own. This is seen clearly in most African Christian churches where they mix Christianity and African traditional religious beliefs and practices to come up with something else. For instance, a Christian Church's proselytizing of animistic South America has a lesson for all. The fear of death, as presented by the church led natives to be baptized into the church by the tens of thousands without any preaching of the Gospel whatsoever. Former idolatrous temples were razed, with church's shrines and chapels built on the same spot. Natives

¹ Watson E. Mills (ed.). *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991) p. 868.

were allowed to substitute praying to saints instead of gods of water, earth, air, and replaced their former idols with new images of this Christian organization. Yet, the animistic religion of the natives and its former practices were never fully replaced. It was adapted into Christian teachings, and this new belief system was allowed to flourish.

More recently, religious syncretism can be seen in such religious systems as the New Age, Hinduism, Unitarianism and Christian Science. These religions are a blending of multiple different belief systems, and are continually evolving as the philosophies of mankind rise and fall in popularity. Many people in Africa today as well as humans in other parts of the world belong to various religious organizations where their social, emotional, economic and their spiritual needs are met from time to time.¹ Religious syncretism is simply not compatible with Christianity. The contemporary Seventh-day Adventist church is not free from syncretism. The church has members with one leg in the church and another leg in the world or African religion.

David Lindenfeld of Louisiana State University asserts the implications of syncretism that these combinations may superficially resemble one another but still be quite different in terms of their meanings for the people who engage in them.² It is very unusual and very rare to have two separate practices or religions that are combined to reproduce themselves in something that is similar to the origin, it is normal to have the outcome which is usually different.

¹ Hilde Arntsen, Religious Syncretism. <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/zimbabwe/religion/arntsen4.html> & <http://www.gotquestions.org/syncretism-religious.html>, accessed on 18th April 2015.

² <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/4.1/lindenfeld.html>, accessed on 18 April, 2015.

When church members get involved in secret practices with activities that border on spiritualism and yet when they participate in normal church programs they pretend to be faithful stewards of the creator God, such kind of behavior is viewed as syncretic and there is the need to combat this religious concubinage. In order for us to understand what combating syncretism in contemporary Seventh-day Adventist church is all about, we shall begin by looking at the biblical perspective of combating syncretism.

The Biblical Perspective of Combating Syncretism

Syncretism in the Old Testament

The Bible reveals syncretism as a long-standing weapon of Satan to separate God from his people. The history of Israel as described in the Old Testament, is a gigantic fight for the validity of the first commandment. When Israel settled in the Promised Land, the Phoenician Canaanite fertility cult became a big temptation to Israel (Jer 19:15). Kaiser observes that Baal and Ashera cultic practices were gradually absorbed by Israel until their religion became syncretized with the Canaanite religion.¹

After the split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, Jeroboam made deliberate decisions to manipulate religion in order to consolidate his new kingdom. I Kings 12:27 states that he was afraid his subjects would go back to Rehoboam, king of Judah because the temple was in Jerusalem. The setting up of two golden calves by Jeroboam proved to be a snare for his people. According to Devries, the people of God found themselves in the midst of confusion between the worship of God and the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god.² Jeroboam sought to offer a more comfortable

¹ Walter Kaiser, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 324.

² Simon Devries, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, 2002), 162.

religion, which eventually led to a theologically syncretized religion. Jeroboam's experience illustrates how unconverted leaders can lead the church into religious syncretism.

Hesselgrave observes that syncretic practices like worshipping idols within Israel were dealt with decisively.¹ After the great sin of the golden calf in the wilderness, Moses commanded for the complete annihilation of idolaters (Ex 33:28). Levitical law prescribed death to those who embraced the Canaanite gods (Lev 20:1-6). Warnings of turning into idolatry are recorded in Deuteronomy 4-6. The strict laws against idolatry show how leadership should respond to any appearance of religious concubinage within the church.

Despite the warnings against mingling with the people of the land, Israel continued to face challenges of forming syncretic associations with the Canaanite religious practices (2 Kings 17:7-8). The Israelites borrowed heavily, in practice, from the idolatry (Judg. 1:19), the shrine prostitution (1 Kings 14:24) and the child sacrifice and witchcraft (2 Kings 17:16-17) of the Canaanites. Prophets of God sought to enforce the obligatory nature of God's plan for Israel to remain separate and devoted to the worship of God. The prophet Hosea warns Israel of syncretic practices by referring to them as "Ephraim's harlotry" (Hos 6:10).

In Hosea 4:11,13 the Lord asserts that "Ephraim mixes himself with the nations; Ephraim has become a cake not turned ... so Ephraim has become like a silly dove without sense." According to Stewart, this description of Ephraim's compromising disposition refers to the gullibility of Israel, which led to her spiritual

¹ David Hesselgrave, "Syncretism- Mission and Missionary Induced?" *IFMA Triennial Conference*, St Louis, MI, Sept 23, 2004.

prostitution with Assyria.¹ As a result of spiritual prostitution, God's hand of protection was removed from his people leading to Assyrian captivity for Israel and the Babylonian captivity for Judah.

Syncretism in the New Testament

Furthermore, the Greco-Roman world, which provides the socio-political context of the New Testament, harbored all manner of cults and mystic religions. Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth were headquarters of syncretic religions whose worshippers sought to absorb and swallow the early Christian church. As a result, Apostle Paul experienced several confrontations with false teachers who propagated syncretic teachings in the church. Carson posits that these false teachers did not openly reject Christ but relegated him to a lesser place as one of the intermediaries between God and man.² The Colossian heresy exemplifies a situation where false teachers brought about an amalgamation of doctrines that did not reject Christ openly, but displaced his preeminence and distorted salvation. The gradual hybridization of Christianity, Judaism, Mystic cults and Greek philosophy brought about perverted teachings, which the apostle Paul addresses in his letters to the Colossians and Galatians.³ False philosophers (Col 2:18) claimed to have knowledge not yet discovered by the average Christian. Paul's fearless confrontation and relentless exposure of the errors propagated by false teachers demonstrates again, how church leadership should deal with the challenge of syncretism in our day.

¹ Douglas Stewart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, 2008), 79.

² Henry Carson, *Colossians and Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 15.

³ Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism, The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief* (London: Eerdmans, 1995), 90.

Again, one of the earliest encounters between syncretism and the church is recorded in Acts 15. Jewish Christians were coming from a religious culture that placed emphasis on heritage, tradition and religious forms. These Judaizers taught that, “Unless you are circumcised, according to custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1). This brought a lot of controversy in the early church with regards to the issue of salvation. Because of past background and worldview, the early Jewish Christians did not easily throw away their Judaist practices and beliefs. They insisted on some external norms and practices that were derived from ceremonial laws.

As a result of this controversy, the Jerusalem Council was summoned to deliberate on the matter. The Council concluded by writing an official letter stating the conditions for a person to become a Christian. This statement of faith brought back focus and harmony in the Christian church. The Jerusalem Council provides the basis for a decisive approach to dealing with syncretism. The church has to come up with position statements on controversial issues in order to preserve doctrinal purity among the believers.

However, Poilhill observes that Judaizers who invaded the churches continued to secretly propagate their perverted doctrines.¹ Paul’s epistles to the Colossians and the Galatians made it clear that the Christian belief is based on the risen Lord and not on the synthesis of religious beliefs or practices from one religion to another. The temple of Aphrodite in Corinth lured many people including Christians. Paul likens such practices as synonymous with joining the body of Christ to the body of a prostitute (1Cor 6:15-16). Christians who went up to the temple of Aphrodite were syncretistic, because they were joining their Christian faith with idol worship. It can be observed that the apostle Paul continued to teach and expose the heresies of false

¹ John Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2010), 92.

teachers. Ellen White exhorts ministers to “take time to teach, to hold Bible readings”¹ and get the truth fastened in the minds of the believers.

The experience of the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:14-16) who were overpowered by demons made the people of Ephesus and Corinth to understand the superiority of the name of Jesus. At the same time, Simon Magus, a sorcerer offered the apostles money to acquire the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9-20). Again his immediate and swift judgment reminded people of the danger of syncretic practices and blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The incompatibility of the Holy Spirit and magical arts was made apparent. It can be observed that the presence of the Holy Spirit exposes the folly of syncretism and directs people to the knowledge of God.

Therefore, the early church was aware of its distinct identity and labored to maintain its doctrinal purity amidst the prevailing religious perversions of the time. Corwin points out that it was on the basis of maintaining doctrinal purity that the early Christian church dealt with Judaism from which it emerged and prevailed against a multiplicity of mystic religions, which abounded at that time.²

The Manifestation of Syncretism

This section focuses on the manifestation of syncretism within the Seventh-day Adventist church. Some Christians with experiences in magic and other occultic phenomena struggle to leave completely behind their connection with evil powers. The baptized membership of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa has been

¹ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 441.

² Gary Corwin, Connecting the Post-Modern Dots, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 2009, 42.

growing fast and by the end of the last quarter of 2014 it was 7,031,189¹. It is interesting to note that a significant number of conversions to Adventist church come from the pool of Pentecostal Christians, and African Traditional Religion.

Generally won over by the convicting unique Biblical truths taught by the Adventists church, some of these converts tend to preserve the worship styles and practices of the previous church connections.² Consequently Charles H. Kraft calls the practice as “dual allegiance” meaning that since they find within Christianity little or none of the spiritual powers they crave for, to meet their needs of healing, blessing, guidance and even relief from demons they continue their pre-Christian practice of going to diviners.³ This could be the reason why syncretic practices are common in the church today.

Philippe Denis indicates that African Christians recognize the African traditional religious worldview because they are part of it. During the day many people separate themselves from African religion, but at night they consult traditional healers and attend the healing sessions of the indigenous churches.⁴ To this, Donkor asserts that:

African worldview is inculcated in the Africa child so well that it takes strong ideological shift to stem its influence in adulthood. This worldview, somehow, has a lingering influence on a Christian who is not well instructed in Christian doctrine. Among Seventh-day Adventists in Africa, fear of magic, witchcraft, and other spiritualistic arts remains a temptation.⁵

¹ Office of Statistics, Archives, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2015 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015). www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?Fields=U_GMEU 7th April 2016.

² Kwabena, Donkor, (editor). *The church, Culture and Spirits and Adventist in Africa.*,(Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, MD, 2011), 4.

³ Charles H. Kraft, *Appropriate Christianity*, (Published by William Carey Library, CA. 2005), 361.

⁴ Philippe Denis, “African Traditional Religion,” *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*, Jonathan Bonk, ed. (Berkshire Publishing Group, NY 2007), 12.

⁵ Donkor., 227.

From this assertion it can be observed that ministry should endeavor to change people's worldview in order for them to be true disciples of Jesus Christ. The question that arises is, what makes some Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) members to maintain both Christian and non-Christian beliefs? Jefferson G Nogueira observes that, "people seek in mysticism and the supernatural something to provide them with peace of mind and security."¹

However, in the contemporary ATR setting, healing, eradication of suffering and other adversities that affect people, are frequently associated with mystical powers. The following are some sensitive areas where SDA members fail to resist while defending their faith. Africans have very strong sense of community, the so-called Community Solidarity. It is a system where to be a human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, rituals and festivals of the community.

The central point in the understanding of the African view is; "I am because we are, therefore I am" This theory becomes hard to those who have accepted the Gospel to live a truly Christian life. The expectations of the family and community members put enormous pressure on those individuals who have accepted to live differently.²

Many professing Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, rely on the mystic powers of witchcraft and sorcery in times of great temptations and problems. In times of need, reliance on the ancestors seems irresistible to most Africans. This religious-concubinage makes people embrace what is good and helpful to them from both Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

¹ <http://www.historiaehistoria.com.br/materia.cfm?tb=alunos&id=205>, accessed on 19th April 2015.

² Donkor., 42.

Again needs like wealth, struggle for power, visible progress in career, success in business, finding a spouse, marriage, childlessness and fear of untimely deaths in the family, fear of the future and inordinate ambitions to rise to higher positions cause many to consult mystical powers. Sometimes when sickness comes and orthodox medication fails to heal the sick person, there is again the tendency of appealing to mystical power to handle the issue.

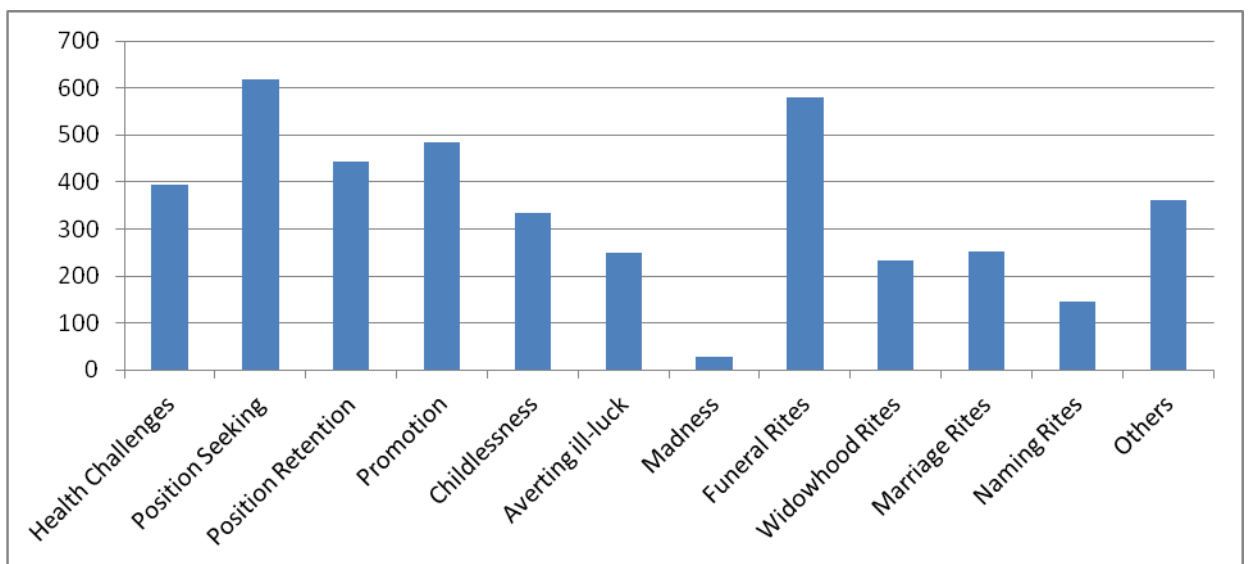
A typical example that happened to a church leader in Angola concerns position seeking. Before the session, he felt he would not step down. He challenged everyone that he would be re-elected. One day, early in the morning he went to a witch doctor that lived in a horrible place whose specialty was to give full bath to the clients seeking for power. Having performed her job she asked him to let in the next client. Soon after he opened the door, he saw his church member waiting for the same procedure. As a result of what happened, he eventually lost his membership and credentials. Furthermore he ended up becoming a polygamist. It can be observed that the issue of syncretism affects not only church members but the pastorate as well.

In addition to this the witch finder fished out a well-respected church elder in one of the churches in Zambia. People in the village were being tormented in so many ways through the practicing of witchcraft. Some were claiming to work in the fields of witches at night, others dying from mysterious sicknesses. Some married men were finding themselves sleeping on the floor while witches were having sexual intercourse with their wives. As a result of community solidarity, a witch finder was hired and many witches caught including the elder. They all confessed that he was their boss and that they were using the SDA church for night meetings and special services¹.

¹ Njiri, Hamoonga and Paulo who are Research Fellows in the Doctor of Ministry class at Solusi University, Zimbabwe shared and collaborated this story during the AFTR/MSSN 721: Seminar in African Traditional Religions taught by Prof. Philemon O. Amanze, April 8 to 22, 2015.

Causes of syncretism: In a survey carried out among Seventh-day Adventists in Nigeria during the summer of 2008, it was discovered that some members get involved in syncretic activities as a result of sickness, inordinate desires, funeral rites, childlessness, marriage rites and position seeking among others. The revelations that emerged from that survey have been shared below:

BAR CHART SHOWING SITUATIONS THAT LEAD SOME SDAs INTO SYNCRETISM



The survey reveals that there are many situations in life that lead Seventh-day Adventists into syncretic -spiritualistic activities¹.

These sad stories showed that syncretism is real in the church. On the other hand, the gospel must be assimilated into each culture and context without compromising the heart of the message or diluting the authority of the scriptures.² Furthermore Philemon Amanze asserts that, “As spiritualism more closely imitates the nominal Christianity of the day, it has greater power to deceive and ensnare.³ In view of this the leadership

¹ Philemon Amanze, *Seventh-day Adventist Response to Spiritualism: The Nigerian Experience* (Babcock University Press: Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria, 2011), p.153

² Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theory* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 21.

³ Philemon Amanze, *Seventh-day Adventist Response to Spiritualism: The Nigerian Experience* (Babcock University Press: Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria, 2011), p.153.

of the contemporary Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa should do something urgently in order to help many members and their pastors to avoid syncretic activities and make it to heaven.

Recommendations.

Taking into account that syncretism is one of the major challenges that is confronting the Seventh-day Adventist church members and their pastors in Africa, we recommend that:

1. There should be intentionality in the process of making disciples in a way that deals effectively with the African worldview.
2. The church leadership must take seriously the responsibility of teaching the members all the doctrines, particularly key themes like the state of the dead, spiritualism, cosmic conflict, assurance of salvation, and Christ's victory over demonic powers.
3. The leadership must intentionally develop a continuous nurturing program, including ongoing review of Biblical doctrines for newly baptized members
4. Members should be encouraged to participate in church programs and activities in order to enhance spiritual growth.
5. The Church should intentionally seek to cultivate an atmosphere of unity and togetherness in order to enhance a culture of caring in the church members.
6. Fasting, constant prayer and consecration: These activities should become integral parts of the daily activities of church members and especially ministers (Matthew 17:19-21). Whatever the Master had said we must go home and do likewise.
7. Acquire sound knowledge of the theological and philosophical worldviews of African Traditional Religion: Knowledge is power. The tenet and practices of this religion must be acquired by ministers and communicated to members of the body of Christ. Ministers of the gospel in training should have courses on African Traditional Religion every academic session while those who are

already serving should be equally equipped through Seminars. This knowledge will help the ministers to contextualize and also apply the tenets of the Christian religion as espoused by the Bible.

8. Understand that mystic powers as demonstrated in magic, witchcraft and spiritism are from the enemies of righteousness (Satan-devil-demon or the fallen angels). These facts must be made clear at all times. Demons are rendered as unclean spirits in (Matt 8:16, Luke 9:42); angels that sinned (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, Matt. 25:41). Other names that are associated with him are the great dragon, old serpent, deceiver (Revelation 12:9); god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4); prince of this world John 14:30; prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2)

9. These powers are real as seen in many biblical passages such as Exodus 7, 8; Daniel 1, 2, 4, 5; 1 Samuel 28; 1 Timothy 3:8; 11 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Revelation 9:1-20; 13:13-18 etc. These are clear indications of the spiritual battles which every child of God must fight and overcome by the power of the Lamb. This knowledge should empower us to call upon the Lord whenever we are tempted. This power will come only as we feed daily on the Word of God, through Bible study sessions, meditation, and with a determination to stand for the right no matter the consequences. When we do our part Jesus Christ will grant us victory.

10. The Christian's life is a battle and we must submit to the divine will of God in all matters. The Lord in His Omniscience may decide to inform us that His grace is sufficient to us as He communicated Paul (2 Cor.12:9), even when we are afflicted by the evil one. But one fact is important: after all harassments here, at the expiration of the temporal sufferings we experience here on this sinful planet, we will partake of an eternal glory which cannot be compared with any suffering we had encountered on this earth. (Rom. 8:18).

11. Stop magnifying Satan: Many a times, the children of God focus their attention on Satan. This should not continue. We should rather focus our attention on Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith. On this issue Ellen G. White has counseled as follows¹:

There are Christians who think and speak altogether too much about the power of Satan. They think of their adversary, they pray about him, they talk about him, and he looms up greater and greater in their imagination. It is true that Satan is a powerful being; but, thank God, we have a mighty Saviour, who cast out the evil one from heaven. Satan is pleased when we magnify his power. Why not talk of Jesus? Why not magnify His power and His love?

¹ Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 493

12. Avoid every form of contact with the demonic including astrology, new age paraphernalia, demonic movies and music, charms, séances, games, Ouija, night visits to traditional healers, (*do not delegate anyone to go on your behalf*) etc. Since there is a lot of power in these symbols, having them simply means you want to have some kind of demonic influence over you. In the same way, the popular harsh, loud, enchanting music with violent rhythms have been inspired by demons. These must be avoided completely and if you have them, they should be destroyed without further delay. (Lev. 19:26, 31; 20:6; Deut. 18:9-13; Acts 19:18-20)
13. Put a Guard at the Gate of Your Soul: How did Satan get into heaven, the abode of God? He just walked in through the gate into the very throne room of God in heaven. After all, there was not even a guard at the door in this case. You sent your guard home because you were taught that you could not be attacked as a child of God. This is a dangerous orthodoxy.

Conclusion

The need to combat syncretism is an urgent one in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Effective ways of addressing syncretism are derived from biblical principles and the general understanding of how syncretism manifests itself. All evangelistic and nurturing strategies should be deliberately structured to assist the church members to experience a radical change from the African traditional worldview to the Bible worldview. In order to uphold purity of doctrine and lifestyle, leadership should take a leading role in combating syncretism

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