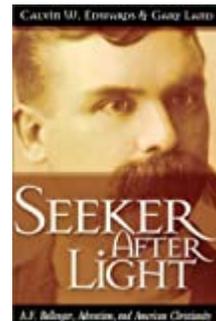




Calvin W. Edwards, Gary Land. *Seeker After Light: A F Ballenger, Adventism, and American Christianity*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2000. 240 pp. \$16.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-883925-30-7.



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Published on H-AmRel (July, 2001)

## Seeking Some Light on Adventism

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In 1905, John Ballenger, a preacher, was excommunicated from the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Ballenger's departure ignited heated controversy within Adventist leadership over the heavenly sanctuary doctrine, and presented a challenge to the very foundations of the Adventist faith. In their book, *Seeker After Light*, Calvin Edwards and Gary Land chronicle Ballenger's life in relation to this crisis in Adventism, sketching the debate itself and Ballenger's life before and after.

In their introductions, the authors make a caveat that this is a book about Ballenger as a public figure. Gary Land writes, "I approached this project as a historian with particular interest in the history of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, but understanding that history as part of the larger story of religion in America." They state that Ballenger may be seen as a "foreshadowing footnote" to the same doctrinal debate in Adventism in the 1980s. However, they never explain how the events are related. Generally eschewing analysis, the book is a straightforward chronological story about Ballenger's life: how he came to Adventism, his early family life, per-

mutations in his theological thinking, and various positions he held as a preacher in the United States, England, Wales and Ireland. There is little conjecture about Ballenger's relationships to other religious events taking place in America during the same period. If, as the authors argue, this is a book about Ballenger as a public figure, there needs to be more information linking Ballenger to a wider public sphere of religion and culture. The lack of context and analysis makes it difficult to assess how the debates over the heavenly sanctuary or Ballenger himself matter outside the realm of Adventism.

Another useful context for the book is the emergence of other holiness sects and later Pentecostalism during the same period. The authors write that more than twenty new holiness denominations emerged between the years 1895 and 1905 which emphasized the experience of sanctification through baptism of the holy spirit. Some more information about how these sects differed from Adventism would have been helpful in terms of understanding the debate over the heavenly sanctuary doctrine. Ballenger traveled widely throughout the United States during his lifetime leading Adventist revivals, al-

though there is little description about what actually took place at these revivals. Did he interact with the other holiness sects? The author briefly mentions that Ballenger developed a deep interest in Pentecostalism at the end of his life and even published pamphlets on speaking in tongues, but these themes are never pursued in depth.

According to Land and Edwards, the basic tenets of Adventism were built on the failure of a prophecy that Christ would return in 1844. The new Seventh Day Adventist Church was organized in the 1860s around the belief that Jesus entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary in 1844. Another central tenet of Adventism was the belief in the seventh day Sabbath, and the book is most engaging when the authors detail Ballenger's fight against Sabbath laws which Adventists viewed as a question of religious liberty. Adventism was also based on the divinely-inspired visions of a woman named Ellen White. Given that the testimony of Ellen White was pivotal to the excommunication of Ballenger, and that she wielded significant power within Adventism, it would have been useful to have more background about her and the origins of Adventism. Her role is especially interesting since women in leadership positions of major denominations were rare during that historical period. It begs the question of what types of roles were available to women in Adventism.

The book makes occasional reference to Ballenger's revivals in the south, and his desire to start an industrial school for "Negroes". Ballenger writes that he had "spent some months in the south, working among the colored people as well as among the whites" (p. 47). In another letter in reference to a revival in Kentucky, Ballenger writes that he "joyfully reported" a victory over race (p. 48). What was the racial composition of Adventism? What did it mean to have revivals for African-Americans and white people in 1898? In a letter to Seventh Day Adventist leaders, Ballenger makes brief reference to a church in Washington where African Americans and Caucasians worked together. The authors never discuss the issue of race in relation to Adventism or tell

us whether Adventist churches were segregated or integrated.

The turning point of Ballenger's life is his trial over the controversy of the Sanctuary Doctrine. According to Ellen White's visions, 1844 was the time when Jesus entered the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. Ballenger eventually came to oppose this central tenet of Adventism, arguing that Jesus entered it upon his crucifixion. It is intriguing to read excerpts from the leader's speeches about Ballenger's views on this doctrine. They reveal the extent to which Adventist leaders feared that by losing the sanctuary doctrine they would relinquish what distinguished their denomination from others. It is this underlying anxiety, rather than Ballenger himself that seemed to propel the trial. At this point, the book cries out for more analysis. Did the Adventists excommunicate Ballenger because of theological rifts or fear over the future of the denomination? Why did they value White's early visions of Adventism over that of biblical sources or a man like Ballenger in 1905? Why was the belief in the heavenly sanctuary so essential to their faith? These are interesting ruminations that the authors might have pursued.

What emerges as the central and most interesting idea in the book is the conflict between the legalism of Adventism and Ballenger's ideas about "the assurance and availability of salvation for everyone" (p. 178). The authors write that the Adventist sanctuary doctrine essentially demolished any hope for salvation for believers in its insistence that the atonement did not begin until 1844 and that sins will not be erased until the final judgement. Ballenger argued for salvation and grace for everyone. Placed in this context, Ballenger's vision for Adventism and salvation was truly democratic for his time. For an audience well-versed in the nuances of Adventism's history and doctrinal debates, this may well prove to be a rewarding read, however, for readers looking for a wider context or more analysis it will leave you "seeking some light".

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**Citation:** Tanya Erzen. Review of Edwards, Calvin W.; Land, Gary, *Seeker After Light: A F Ballenger, Adventism, and American Christianity*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5313>

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