

# B O O K R E V I E W

## THE SHAPING OF ADVENTISM: THE CASE OF W. W. PRESCOTT

**Gilbert M. Valentine**  
**Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1992, 307 pages. Hardback, \$19.95.**

As a small boy I enjoyed listening to my mother tell about her childhood and youth. In particular, I liked her stories about the years she spent at Avondale College in the early 1920s. Frequently those stories included her college president, Professor Prescott, whose name was breathed with deepest respect. To my impressionable mind, the professor became synonymous with the highest and best in culture and learning. It was, therefore, with considerable interest and not a little emotional attachment that I read Gilbert Valentine's biography of William W. Prescott (1855-1944).

Valentine has titled his book *The Shaping of Adventism*. Implicit in this title is the bold assertion that Prescott, more than most men, helped to determine the direction and substance of the Adventist Church. In the present age of specialization such a claim may appear fatuous. No one man could thus shape the church today. In his age, however, Prescott was Adventism's "man for all seasons." At various stages, through an ecclesiastical career spanning 52 years, Prescott played a leading role as college president, educational administrator, church administrator, writer, editor, and theologian. Furthermore, his major contributions encompassed key formative decades (1880s-1920s), years that help us understand the contemporary nature of Adventism.

Although Prescott was the church's first full-time education secretary, Adventist historians have tended to focus on Percy Magan and Edward Sutherland as the foremost innovators and reformers in the formative years of Adventist schooling. Valentine, however, clearly establishes Prescott as a leading and highly significant influence in the development of Adventist educational ideals and practice.

The pivotal Harbor Springs educational convention of 1891 was the product of Prescott's energy and vision. It marked the beginnings of a distinctive Adventist education. In addition, lengthy discussions

between Prescott and Ellen G. White held in Australia in 1895-1896 produced a clearer understanding of how the distinctive philosophy undergirding Adventist education might be implemented in the classroom.

Prescott's contributions to Adventist education extended well beyond educational theory. They encompassed school administration, organizational structure, curriculum concerns, and the in-service development of teachers. Most importantly, he left the impress of his own values, personality, and vibrant spirituality upon generations of students across America and Australia.

Communicating a new educational philosophy and building new structures inevitably resulted in tension between the opposing forces of continuity and change. Prescott's career is a case study of the issues faced by a man who sought change and whose vision for the church and its schools was frequently decades ahead of his contemporaries. As Valentine notes, Prescott often was misunderstood as he searched for solutions to problems his associates had not yet recognized.

Valentine's study also illustrates the impact of personality on a career within an organization (the church) and an individual's capacity to achieve personal and organizational goals. Although he describes Prescott as a charismatic leader and a man of immense intellectual capacity, prodigious memory, and analytical ability, Valentine acknowledges that on occasion dogmatism, assertiveness, aggression, and even obsessiveness diminished Prescott's effectiveness as a leader.

Approximately a third of the book deals with Prescott's direct involvement with colleges and educational matters. The balance describes his contribution to the church as a General Conference administrator, editor of the *Review and Herald*, and theologian. Through the work of Prescott, Valentine explores some of the key issues that faced the organized church: schism (the Kellogg crisis), doctrinal evolution (the Daily), church politics (General Conference sessions), resistance to reform (Washburn and Haskell), and the nature of inspiration and the authority of the prophet (the 1919 Bible conference). Because similar issues remain with the church

today, we can profitably explore the strategies used by Prescott, Daniells, and others to preserve the integrity and cohesiveness of Adventism.

Working within the church is never easy and Prescott, as a somewhat controversial figure, had to contend with criticism at both the personal and professional level. His critics included the incompetent who were threatened by his initiatives, individualists such as John Harvey Kellogg and A. T. Jones who resented the authority he represented, and arch conservatives who continually misrepresented both the substance and style of his work. Criticism is always hard to take—even more so when the recipient is prone to melancholy and periods of intense depression. The manner in which Prescott coped with criticism and yet maintained a strong faith and full commitment to his church is a compelling story within the book and an object lesson to all who similarly suffer. It also highlights the loneliness of the scholar who sometimes finds himself out of step because of his sensitivity to the claims of truth.

Prescott's biography makes fascinating reading. The book should be on the library shelves of all Adventist academies and colleges. Senior high school and college students will find it an excellent reference for classes in Adventist church history and theology. Furthermore, it is a must for teachers and educational administrators at all levels who wish to know more of the human and organizational dynamics that helped to form the church they serve. Andrews University Press is to be commended for the quality of the book's production and presentation.

How did reading the book affect this reviewer's childhood idealization of the good professor? Well, Prescott has become both more and less than those imaginings: more, because he played a part in shaping my church beyond the capacity of a child to understand; less, because he ceased to be an epitome of perfection and became flesh and blood and passion. But I still share the awe and respect communicated by my mother.—Arnold C. Reye.

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