

THE HEALING WORK IS A TRUST, NOT A POSSESSION

A covenant reading of the healing work
God gave Adventists—and of the year it
burned.

By Ricky Curtice

Seventh-day Adventists have a healing work, and did not build it. We received it the way a third generation receives the house it grew up in and never owned: the rooms already furnished, the routines long since set, and the deed in someone else's name. It is an inheritance held in trust on terms we did not set, and what is held in trust is owed rather than owned. The question, then, is not *what have Adventists built*, but the older one: what does it mean for God to entrust a people with a work of healing?

The claim underneath the work was never merely that Adventists had discovered useful things about health, though they had. It was larger and more dangerous: that God had entrusted this people with light for the blessing of others, and had opened doors no committee arranged—a hearing granted that the asking did not earn, workers and means arriving as the need grew. Those openings were real, and they were God's, and that is exactly what would later make them so easy to misread. Nor was the entrusting a single act. Ellen White treated God's company inside the work as practical rather than theological—the physician facing a hard case was to expect the divine Counselor beside him, daily and hourly.¹ God as source is not only a claim about where the work came from. It is a claim about who is in the room.

The character of the work came from Christ, not from a committee. Matthew's summary is almost flat in its plainness: Jesus went through the cities and villages teaching, preaching, and healing every sickness, "moved with compassion on them" because they "were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:35–38). The shortage He named was not of buildings or funding but of laborers willing to be sent out. Ellen White later put the same thing into one line: "The medical missionary work is the gospel in practice."² That is a definition, not a decoration, and it cuts both ways. A work so defined can be corrupted by losing the gospel, becoming skilled, respected, and spiritually hollow; or by losing the practice, becoming doctrinally correct and useless to the suffering.

Two easy readings of Adventist medical history fail. One takes it as a success story: look what was built, look what survived. The other takes it as a lament for lost standing, a branch of medicine we might have had. The first flatters us; the second lets us grieve something cheaper than what was at stake. The third reading is covenant history, harder because it never resolves, and it is how Scripture treats every gift God has ever handed to anybody. It makes a sentence possible that neither of the others can produce: a divine work can be

lost without being formally abandoned. The work keeps its name and its schedule while the thing God gave it to do slowly stops being the thing it does.

None of this is new. Deuteronomy rehearses the law to a generation about to inherit a gift it did not earn, and its characteristic warning is not that Israel will renounce God. It is that Israel will *forget* Him, and that the forgetting will arrive with prosperity rather than hardship. When you have eaten and are full, when the houses are built and the herds multiply, “beware that thou forget not” (Deuteronomy 8). The mechanism is spelled out with uncomfortable precision: the gift succeeds, the success begins to feel self-made, and the heart quietly relocates the credit—“my power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.”

The rest of the Old Testament keeps returning to the same structure. Joshua gathers a generation that inherited everything and demands a decision from it, as though the parents’ choice could not be bequeathed (Joshua 24). Nehemiah’s Levites pray through their entire national history as *confession*, not as heritage celebration (Nehemiah 9). And Paul, reading all of it from the far side of the cross, refuses to let the church file it under someone else’s history: these things “are written for our admonition” (1 Corinthians 10).

The covenant pattern is stable across a thousand years of text: God gives. The people receive. The people forget. God warns. Mercy remains. The next generation must choose for themselves. Notice which step the size of the gift affects. Not the giving, and not the warning. The forgetting. The more a gift produces, the more it looks self-produced. Divine origin was never immunity. It was responsibility, compounding.

Adventists have a year of their own history that tests all of this. Ellen White had been warning for years, by her own later account for twenty, that too much of the work was gathering at Battle Creek—too much machinery, too much dependence, too much identity. “God is not glorified in the centering of so many advantages in one place,” she wrote, “give room; put your plants in many places, where one will not lean for support upon another.”³ The counsel was largely absorbed without being obeyed.

Then, early on the morning of February 18, 1902, the Battle Creek Sanitarium burned. It was the flagship of Adventist medical work, the most visible expression of what the denomination believed God had given it to do for the sick. Nurses, doctors, and attendants got roughly four hundred people out.⁴ Before the year was out, the Review and Herald publishing house, the movement’s other great institution in the same town, burned as well.

Ellen White read that year as neither an insurance matter nor a thunderbolt, though the thunderbolt is the reading religious people reach for too quickly. In the destruction God was appealing to His people to return to Him, and the power that had saved life was exercised “that every worker may have opportunity to repent and be converted.”⁵ The grief was real. The sparing of life was mercy. The calamity carried a warning that counsel alone had not. Repentance was still possible, because the people who needed to repent were still alive.

For a moment the question was genuinely open. Rebuild what was, or reconsider what should be? Ellen White pressed it plainly: “Will they build up in Battle Creek a mammoth institution, or will they carry out the purpose of God by making plants in many places?”⁶ That is not a question about square footage. It is the sending term put as a building decision: does the work go out to the cities and villages, or concentrate where it already stands?

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg had already answered. He got the news from a reporter at Chicago’s Central Station and replied in the same breath: “Of course, we are going to rebuild.”⁷ He was planning the greater building before he reached home. The needs were real—patients, staff, continuity of care. And continuity feels like duty when you

are the one holding the responsibility. The sanitarium was rebuilt in Battle Creek, larger than what burned. Counsel pointing another direction read as impractical against the visible need, and the argument that carried the rebuild was one the counsel had already anticipated and answered.

Sit with that argument, because the reasoning is the failure mode. *The patients keep coming, therefore the work is faithful. The institution is respected, therefore the model is sound. The work is growing, therefore God approves.* Every premise was true, which is what made the argument so serviceable. The conclusions did not follow. Providence means God is working; it has never meant that every human choice made inside the providential opening is endorsed. A clinic can be useful and still be unfaithful. Usefulness is not obedience; it is not even evidence of obedience.

A second failure runs alongside that one, quieter and harder to catch. A work with visible results learns to grade itself by them, and the grades are honest: beds filled, outcomes published, revenue stable. None of those numbers requires the gospel, and none of them can register its absence.

Our institutions live inside the mechanism that operated at Battle Creek, because the mechanism is not Adventist; it is human. Every one of them keeps a number that has to go up.

Enrollment is the honest example, perfectly capable of replacing *are we obeying?* with *are we full?* without anyone in the room noticing the substitution. That is not exactly hypocrisy. It is drift, and drift is rarely visible to the people inside it, which is why the covenant pattern demands rehearsal. The language of the trust survives; the measure changes. A divine work is lost without ever being formally abandoned. Not renounced, merely re-measured.

There is a way to read all of this and be comforted by it. Battle Creek concentrated too much in one place. A man of enormous will answered the building question before the church could ask it. The counsel pointing elsewhere was on the record and went unobeyed. Fix those three things and the failure does not recur. That is the comforting reading, and testing it is the whole reason this series works through a counterfactual: an alternate history in which the medical missionary work was not derailed at Battle Creek but matured into a recognized branch of medicine, Hygienic-Restorative Medicine, practiced by physicians holding its doctorate, the DHRM. The imagined branch is a mirror held up to the real trust, not a prediction, not a proof, and not a lost timeline to grieve. Run the experiment: give the work the structure it should have had, and ask whether the danger goes away.

It does not. A recognized branch would have had *more* providence to misread, not less. Accreditation is the plain case—a genuine opening won by real work, granted by a body that never asked whether the work was obeying, and reading to an unexamined heart as a verdict anyway. A licensed profession would have faced philosophies of its own, the kind that make plain obedience look shallow while leaving every religious word in place. The better structure removes one apostasy, not apostasy itself, because no structure can choose faithfulness for the people who inherit it. Each generation would have had to choose again. That is what the counterfactual is for, and it removes the excuse: if even the better timeline had to keep repenting, our actual history cannot be blamed on bad luck, and our present condition cannot be excused by it.

Warnings are easy to receive after a loss. The test is whether one can be heard while the work is still going well and the patients are still coming.

Nehemiah's generation prayed through that history as their own confession, not as an indictment of their ancestors, and it ended in renewed obligation rather than despair. Psalm 78 lays the same duty on the household, where the failures are told to the children deliberately. What light have we received, and what have we done with it? Where, in our

institutions and in our own households, have we kept the language while changing what we count? And the measure Christ never let drop: which poor, which sick, which neighborhood is the work no longer reaching?

God's gifts do not expire because men mishandled them. But neither do they bless disobedience merely because the original trust was holy. The healing work God gave is still a trust; it was never a possession, however long the deed has sat in our drawer. Joshua's question to a generation that had inherited everything and built almost none of it is still the operative one: "choose you this day" (Joshua 24:15). A trust is not kept by the generation that received it. It is kept, or not, by each of us holding it now.

-
1. Paraphrased from Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 117 and 119, on the physician who would rightly perform his duties needing to live a Christian life daily and hourly, and on the Saviour's presence as an element of strength—the divine Counselor beside the physician to guide and to sustain. Parallel counsel appears in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 190, and *Medical Ministry*, p. 33.
 2. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 77.
 3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 147–150 (counsel dated July 15, 1895). Her retrospective account of roughly twenty years of such counsel appears in Letter 57, 1904.
 4. The fire was discovered at about 3:48 a.m. on February 18, 1902. Chronology from the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, “Battle Creek Sanitarium,” citing the A. S. Bloese Manuscript, Box 1, File 13, 110, and Howard Markel, *The Kelloggs: The Battling Brothers of Battle Creek* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), pp. 152, 157, 174.
 5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 102. On the workers' escape she wrote that God “gave skill and understanding to the workers at the time of the fire, enabling them to get the sick and suffering out of the reach of the quickly spreading flames” (Manuscript 76, 1903, par. 9).
 6. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 76, 1903, par. 13. The same paragraph anticipates the patronage argument for rebuilding at Battle Creek and answers it: “What has been accomplished by this large patronage to win souls to the truth?”
 7. Kellogg learned of the fire from a reporter at Chicago's Central Station around midnight. The rebuilt sanitarium cost more than one million dollars and held its grand reopening on May 31, 1903. See note above on the fire chronology.

Notes

Notes

Why Adventist medical missionary work must be read as covenant history—a trust received, not a possession owned—and what that reading demands now.

Disclosure: *I used at least one LLM AI as drafting and revision aids while preparing this article. I have reviewed and edited the final text and take responsibility for its ideas, purpose, claims, tone, and conclusions.*

Copyright © 2026 Ricky Curtice. All rights reserved.