

The Branch Davidians - Shepherd's Rod — Who Are They?

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Beginnings of the Shepherd's Rod

The experience of the Branch Davidians was part of the saga of a breakaway splinter group that left the Adventist Church in southern California in 1930. Then and now they represent themselves as the true Seventh-day Adventists.

Victor T. Houteff, then an Adventist church member, introduced personal ideas into his Sabbath school classes, ideas he taught at private meetings as well. Following earnest efforts to reason with him, the congregation finally dropped him from membership in November 1930.

Within two years Houteff had produced and circulated two large documents titled "The Shepherd's Rod" promoting beliefs directly contrary to Adventist understandings. These, he claimed, were the genuine message of God. Building on Houteff's assertion that he was the antitypical David, as well as on his claims to possess the prophetic gift, his group adopted the name The Shepherd's Rod.

In 1935 Houteff and 11 followers moved to a newly purchased farm near Waco, Texas, which they named Mount Carmel Center. By 1937 a tentative organization was functioning, calling itself "The General Association of the Shepherd's Rod Seventh-day Adventists." The group continued zealously producing and distributing its literature, infiltrating Adventist churches in search of anyone who could be persuaded to join them.

The U.S. Selective Service draft in 1942 confronted Shepherd's Rods with a quandary. Draftees could be granted Sabbath privileges only if they could be shown to be bona fide members of a recognized religious group advocating that belief.

Being unrecognized as members by Seventh-day Adventists, Shepherd's Rod draftees faced serious difficulties. Therefore the leaders dropped their claim to be regular Seventh-day Adventist members and registered with the United States government under the name Davidian Seventh-day Adventists.

They issued certificates of membership and documented their ministers. The transition to a separated group in 1942 was almost complete; however, they continued to insist that they comprised the true and faithful Adventists.

Shortly before his death in 1955, Houteff announced that following a period of 1260 literal days, Christ would initiate His kingdom. His wife, Florence, succeeding to leadership, identified the 1260 days as extending from November 9, 1955, to April 22, 1959. As the fateful day approached, a call was issued for the faithful to dispose of property and come to Mount Carmel Center. An estimated 800 persons arrived, many bringing the proceeds from the sale of possessions.

When the day came and went, unmarked by the expected event, disillusionment led to fracture of the Shepherd's Rods into smaller groups, the largest remaining at Waco and adding the name "Branch." Some members returned to Seventh-day Adventist churches.

Following an unsuccessful effort by Adventists for reconciliation, late in 1961 Mrs. Houteff renounced the Shepherd's Rod teachings as in error and shortly moved to disband the group.

However, one of the factions gained possession of the Mount Carmel Center. Eventually the center came under the control (in 1984) of Vernon Howell, who had been disfellowshipped in 1981 from the Tyler (Texas) Seventh-day Adventist Church. Howell later changed his name to David Koresh. Under his leadership the group radicalized its program and stockpiled heavy firearms, prompting the February 28 raid by law enforcement authorities—ending in a shootout and standoff that propelled the Branch Davidian group into the media limelight worldwide.

Shepherd's Rod Teachings

The question arises, What are the main teachings that distinguish Shepherd's Rods from Seventh-day Adventists? In brief, the differences center on a series of assertions having to do with last-day events.

Perhaps the most important is the idea that a Davidic kingdom of absolute righteousness is to be established in Palestine prior to the close of probation. This was the event foreseen for April 22, 1959. By divine intervention, Arabs, Jews, and others would be displaced to make room for this kingdom, whose citizens would be the 144,000, including Shepherd's Rods and certain others.

Shepherd's Rod teachings deny that messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. . .") and Micah 5:2 ("But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, . . .out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel") met complete fulfillment with Jesus, arguing that they should apply to the coming Davidic kingdom. Shepherd's Rods see themselves as called to announce the approach of this Davidic kingdom. Afterward, it is said, Jesus will return to establish another kingdom with the Second Advent, which is to follow the close of probation.

Houteff also interpreted the parable of wheat and tares and the harvest of Revelation (Matt. 13:36-43; Rev. 14:14-19). These he applied to the present time period, anticipating the coming of the Davidic kingdom. Instead of describing events to occur at Jesus' return, Houteff believed the harvest of grain began January 1, 1931, with a vision he received appointing him to call out the 144,000. The harvest of tares, he taught, will be a divine slaughter of Adventists who reject his message, fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel 9.

Yet Jesus clearly assigns the harvest and the separation of grain from tares to His return at the end of the world, which follows the close of probation (Matt. 13:39-43).

A major theme of Shepherd's Rod teaching has been an interpretation of the prophecy of

Ezekiel 9. At a point prior to probation's close, we are told, divine agencies will destroy those Adventists who reject the appeals of the Shepherd's Rod. This represents an invisible coming of Christ to establish the Davidic kingdom prior to probation's close. Later, Jesus is to come in visible glory to establish His kingdom following the seven last plagues.

Adventists, in contrast, see the prophecy's primary meaning in the Babylonian conquest of Judah, although parallels with the visions of Revelation 7:15,16 indicate analogies with certain final events. But those events will follow the close of probation.

The fracturing of the Shepherd's Rod movement that began in 1961 has led to a wide variety of additional beliefs promoted by different subgroups. Vernon Howell's special interpretation of the seven seals of Revelation (6:1-8:1) offers an example.

His declaration that he alone holds a satisfactory understanding of the seals is used to bolster his claim to be the Lamb who alone can open the seals (Revelation 5). His interpretation stands in marked contrast to the Adventist understanding, which sees Jesus as the Lamb and the seals as reaching across 2,000 years from the time of Jesus to His return.

Sifting Truth From Error—Questions to Ask

The experience of the Shepherd's Rods and similar groups illustrates the hazards, not in holding strong religious faith, but in distorting it. As Ellen White reminds us, "the track of truth lies close beside the track of error" (*Review and Herald*; Oct. 22, 1903). Several simple but important tests should be applied by every believer who wants to build solid faith while hedging against error.

1. Is there a heavy concentration on one or two main points?
2. Am I hearing a careful pursuit of understanding, or an urging toward quick conclusions?
3. Does the person or group distance themselves from the larger body of believers? Such separation robs us of the balance provided by hearing the whole church.
4. Does the promoter or group emphasize impending danger to the point of creating a feeling of desperation? A true walk with Christ builds hope and confidence, not terror.
5. Is undue attention given to the ideas of one person?
6. Am I urged to accept uncritically whatever is promoted, buttressed by the use of selected Bible texts and Spirit of Prophecy quotations as proofs?

Ours is a perilous age for Christians, not only from unbelief, but a willingness to believe too much. The false lies beside the true. The drives of human needs and the hype of marketing, both in products and ideas, push us to make the most crucial of decisions on shallow evidence. Christ has a better way: careful searching of His Word and placing utter trust in Him alone.