

**ELLEN G. WHITE'S WRITINGS:  
AN EXTENSION OF CANON?<sup>1</sup>**

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*Introduction*

When we ask the question about the relationship of Ellen White's writings to canon, specifically, whether or not her writings are (or should be) on a level with canon (either officially and/or in practice), we are asking a question which is really concerned with inspiration and authority, particularly with authority. The Adventist Church today is deeply interested in the extent of Ellen White's authority. Is it less than, equal to, or greater than that of Scripture? We could find advocates in the Church for each of these three options.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is primarily concerned with the relationship between the writings of Ellen White and Scripture in the areas of inspiration and authority. We shall discuss the nature of these two terms for both sets of writings, asking such questions as: What makes a document authoritative? Who determines its authoritative nature and for whom is it authoritative? In what way is a document authoritative? What do we mean by the term "inspired"? Are there degrees of inspiration? What do we mean when we distinguish between "inspirational" and "inspired"? How do the terms inspiration and authority relate? Are the answers we give to these questions vis-a-vis Scripture the same as we would give to Ellen White's writings? What is the relationship between the Church's position that all of our doctrines are based on "Scripture alone," and its position that Ellen White was inspired in the same way the Bible authors were inspired? Does this mean that her works are authoritative for Adventists?

The answers we frequently give to many of these questions have not adequately dealt with some basic issues. Far too often we have offered answers which are based on faulty logic and at best are satisfactory only for the one who already believes! Let me be specific.

A piece of literature cannot automatically be considered spiritually<sup>3</sup> inspired or spiritually authoritative either by an internal claim or by an external claim, i.e., someone's decree. If it could be, we would have absolutely no controls. For example, the Koran would not be inspired or authoritative for a Christian on the basis of a statement in the Koran which might read: "All of the Koran is inspired; it is authoritative." Such an internal testimony would carry no weight at all for a Christian. Likewise, the Koran would not be considered inspired or authoritative for Christians even if every Moslem in the world declared it to be such (even at an Islamic "General Conference"). Moslems, of

<sup>1</sup>This paper was read at the Biblical Research Committee (BRICOM) Meetings in 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Very few, if any, in the church would state that Ellen White's authority exceeds that of Scripture. Adherents of such an option do so *in practice*, not in theory.

<sup>3</sup>Hereinafter, the adjective "spiritually" is assumed.

course, could (and do) make precisely the same objection about the Christian Bible. Yet, the arguments based on internal and external claims are generally used by many Christians. These arguments are, however, inadequate when it comes to dealing with unbelievers. There must be, therefore, some other criterion to which we must look to determine authority. Let us press the point a few steps further.

Seventh-day Adventists believe in *sola scriptura*. Why? Because the Reformers said so? They were, after all, the ones who coined the phrase. We accept the position, but surely it must be for a deeper reason than because the Reformers said so! It is an invalid argument to state that we believe in dogma simply because the Reformers did. The circular nature of such an argument is clearly evident. The same line of reasoning applies to our official statements. The Word of God is not authoritative because the Adventist Church said so in Article One of the 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs voted in Dallas. The Dallas statement is *descriptive*, not *causative*!

I maintain, furthermore, that Ellen White's authority rests on more than the church's declaration. Again, it is not Article Seventeen of the Dallas statement alone that makes Ellen White's writings authoritative. That statement *in itself* cannot make the writings authoritative; rather, it testifies to something that has already occurred, and hence is true prior to the declaration. But in what way is it true *before* the church body stated such, and what made it possible for the Adventist Church to affirm that truth? What is the place or value of the statement?

With regard to the Bible's authority, one might wish to suggest at this juncture that our problem is quickly resolved if we let the giants of the Reformation speak to us. The answer given by the Reformers is that the Bible is self-authenticating. Unfortunately, that answer is only partially helpful; it is clearly an oversimplification. And we must also keep in mind the context of their argument—they made that point in their refutation of the case Roman Catholic scholars were making, namely, that *the Church* has the authority to continue making decisions about its canon beyond the early centuries.

A serious flaw immediately appears in the Reformers' position. If one is able to decide which Bible book belongs to the sacred core on the basis of its inherent value alone (that is, without any decision by the church or by any other criterion), then *the value of the document is determined not so much by its worth as it is by the persuasiveness of the person making the case!* How is it that Luther and the pope differed! Do we say one was under the control of the Spirit more than the other? And if we do, how do we decide which one? We either accept the pope's judgment, let Luther be our pope, or become popes ourselves. The point is, there must be some additional guidelines to take us beyond that highly subjective criterion of the Reformers.

In order to get at the answers to the above questions, I wish to briefly examine what has actually happened in history with regard to Christendom's use of Scripture and Adventism's use of Christian traditions regarding Scripture

as well as Adventism's use of Ellen White's writings. In both cases we shall find some very beneficial information, and we shall find that the frequently asked questions fortunately are not as difficult to answer as one might expect. Furthermore, in my opinion, the answers are faith-strengthening in nature!

In part II we shall consider two criteria for determining authority. Let us first look at some relevant developments in the history of the early church, and in the history surrounding the Reformation, developments which offer us insights for answering the questions we have set for ourselves.

#### *Historical Lessons*

In this section of the paper we want to discuss two historical aspects generally unknown or overlooked by students of church history, but highly instructive in terms of our task. While it is acknowledged today that the early Christians did indeed use a much wider body of literature than the books which became canonical, the explanation given for that usage is incorrect. Early Christians viewed this literature which did *not* get into the canon as both inspired and authoritative. The early church's attitude toward these writings was considerably different from the view traditionally held. This is not to argue for an elevation of any non-canonical literature. It is to point out, however, that there were certain dynamics operating which, when considered, help us better interpret the criteria historically followed in determining canon. This affords additional assistance for us in relating to Ellen White's writings.

Both of the above points inform us that the church's understanding of what constitutes its authoritative literature has not always been as neatly and tightly packaged as most have thought. These two points also reinforce the reservation expressed above about the Reformers' basis for the authority of a document. As we shall note below, our present position is largely derived from the Reformers. But we also must recognize, as noted in the *Introduction*, that the Reformers' criterion for determining canonicity, namely the document's inherent worth, is not entirely adequate. The Reformers' desire to throw out the Roman Catholic's stand on tradition led them to make statements about canonization which cannot be supported. We must not make the same mistakes. There *is* a place for tradition and that has been proven by developments we cannot undo. We shall say more on this.

#### The Early Church's Use of Noncanonical Literature (OT Issue)

We turn now to discuss the first of our two historical developments, namely the incorrect explanation given for early Christianity's use of non-canonical literature.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to a commonly held position on canon, during the first decades of Christianity there was no closed canon within Judaism; in fact,

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Albert Sundberg for much of the following information. For a fuller discussion, see my essay "Albert C. Sundberg on the Biblical Canon and Inspiration," presented to the SDA Religion teachers in San Francisco, Dec. 27-28, 1977, and later published in *Channel*.

evidence of an attempt to limit the scope of Scripture in Judaism does not exist until after the disaster of AD 70, at which time the need to define the “Writings” collection was felt.<sup>5</sup>

The Jewish doctrine/tradition which limited inspiration to the period from Moses to Ezra did not appear in Jewish writings until ca. 90 AD. And even though historians have recognized that the Jewish canon was not closed until Jamnia (ca. 90), it has been assumed that the Jewish canon was closed *in practice* in the time of Jesus and before, a canon with a threefold division of the Law, Prophets, and Writings.<sup>6</sup>

Because Christianity has its roots in Judaism, the Jewish view of Scripture was also the view of early Christianity. And “the religious literature Christianity carried with it from Judaism was the religious literature that circulated freely in Judaism before 70 AD., i.e., a closed collection of Law, a closed collection of Prophets, and an open undefined [body of] literature that included the later defined Writings and the books that have come to be called in Protestant circles the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.”<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to explain the *use* of this wider collection of writings in the New Testament and other early Christian literature—writings not found in the canon established at Jamnia—the theory known as the Alexandrian canon

<sup>5</sup>Sundberg, “The Making of the New Testament Canon,” in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 1216.

<sup>6</sup>There are two Gospel passages often cited to support the view that in Jesus’ day a three-fold division already existed. One passage, Matt 23:35 (Luke 11:51) refers to what may well have been the first and last mentioned martyrs in the canon of that day since Abel (Genesis) and Zechariah (2 Chronicles) are mentioned in books that begin and end a known list. Several problems, however, prevent us from being too certain about the value of such a conclusion. First of all, the list containing 2 Chronicles at the end is a Babylonian (and later) list from a Palestinian (and earlier) list which has Chronicles at the head of the Writings.

A second, and less serious, problem centers around the Matthean text which reads: “Zechariah son of Barachiah.” This Zechariah is the prophet and could not therefore be the Zechariah mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24 where the Zechariah is son of Jehoida the priest. Luke does not mention the additional identification. The original copy of Codex Sinaiticus omits “son of Barachiah.” No doubt the original MS did not include this problematic addition. Nevertheless, the evidence for a closed Writings collection cannot be based on this verse.

The second passage is Luke 24:44 where Jesus said: “These are my words which I spoke to you . . . that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Some believe that Jesus was referring to the entire Writings section by using “psalms.” This, however, is unlikely, for as E. J. Young writes: “What, however, did Christ mean by ‘psalms’? Did He thereby intend to refer to all the books in the third division of the canon, or did He merely have in mind the book of Psalms Itself? The latter alternative, we think, is probably correct. Christ singled out the book of Psalms, it would appear, not so much because it was the best-known and most influential book of the third division, but rather because in the Psalms there were many predictions about Himself. This was the Christological book par excellence of the third division of the Old Testament canon. Most of the books of this third division do not contain direct messianic prophecies. Hence, if Christ had used a technical designation to indicate this third division, He would probably have weakened His argument to a certain extent. But by the reference to the Psalms He directs the minds of His hearers immediately to that particular book in which occur the greater number of references to Himself” [*Ibid.*, p. 32].

<sup>7</sup>Sundberg, “Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon,” in *Studia Evangelica IV*, vol. 102 of *TU*, (1968), p. 453.

hypothesis was proposed. Basically, the Alexandrian canon hypothesis is the view, first proposed by J. E. Grabe in 1720 and again independently in 1771 by J. S. Semler, that as the Gentile church grew it adopted the larger Jewish canon of the Diaspora, the LXX canon. This canon included the Apocrypha. Although the hypothesis was proposed in the post-Reformation era, we must look at the debate on the canon question that occurred *during* the Reformation to really see how and why the theory arose in the first place.

The arguments made by Luther against Eck in the debate over the place of the Apocrypha were to become the major arguments for the Protestant side for centuries, and are with us in many respects today. During a debate between Luther and Eck on the doctrine of purgatory, Eck quoted II Maccabeus in support of his presentation. In response, Luther questioned the validity of the church's right to decide matters of canonicity and argued that the internal worth of a book should be the basis upon which canonicity is to be decided. Although the Catholic Church followed the Augustinian line that the Apocryphal books were to be accepted (Western usage), Jerome had denied canonical status to these books. Jerome held that the Hebrew canon of Jamnia was the correct one; Luther chose to follow Jerome. Just as Jerome had separated the apocryphal books from the Hebrew canon, so Luther segregated them to a separate section of his German translation of the Old Testament, entitling them "Apocrypha: these are not held to be equal to the sacred scriptures and yet are useful and good for reading."<sup>8</sup>

Luther's view became the adopted Protestant view, and only after several centuries passed was it possible for some Protestants to admit that the New Testament did make some use of non-canonical literature, and that the church used a wider collection of "sacred" writings. Once this admission was made, it was inevitable that someone would attempt to explain how the church came to use non-canonical literature. This of course, is where the Alexandrian canon hypothesis came into the picture.<sup>9</sup>

Protestantism did not adopt this theory, however, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. When A. Kuenen showed the inaccuracy of the Talmudic tradition regarding the closing of the canon by Ezra and the great Synagogue, Protestantism had to reevaluate its view that the canonicity of the Apocrypha was a recent innovation of the Catholic Church;<sup>10</sup> it was at this time that the Alexandrian canon hypothesis became the generally accepted account of how the Apocrypha received status within Christianity.

The acceptance of the theory did not mean, however, that the explanation of the wider use of the Jewish religious books was considered a wholesome process. The LXX canon has been treated with disdain by Protestants. Diaspora Judaism had produced an "abortive, sectarian canon which was,

<sup>8</sup>Sundberg, "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration," in *Interpretation* 29 (1975), 354.

<sup>9</sup>An article in support of the Alexandrian canon hypothesis appeared in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 11, 1906.

<sup>10</sup>Sundberg, "The Old Testament of the Early Church," in *HTR* 51 (1958), pp. 206-7.

therefore, without authority. The early church had made a mistake, being largely Gentile, in using this Hellenistic canon.”<sup>11</sup> According to Professor Sundberg, the entire foundation upon which the Alexandrian canon hypothesis was built is unsound. The basic arguments are summarized here.

1. The apocryphal books, with the exceptions of Wisdom, 2 Maccabees, and Additions to Esther, were not originally written in Greek but in Hebrew. We can no longer say in the matter of canon that Palestine was Hebrew and Alexandria was Greek. We know that many Diaspora Jews settled in Palestine bringing with them their Greek copies of the Old Testament. The LXX circulated widely enough to have undergone a Palestinian revision.<sup>12</sup>

2. In the prologue of Sirach, there are statements which indicate that the Law and the Prophets (the “two-fold” division) were recognized collections among Alexandrian Jews (supported by 2 Macc. 15:9) and that the collection of Writings was not yet defined (supported by Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* III 25).<sup>13</sup> This is the same two-fold division, of course, that we find in the Gospels and in Paul.

3. The Qumran community used a very wide range of what we call apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature. And it is not possible to distinguish any difference in the sect’s use of the books that became canonical for Judaism in 90 AD and those that did not. This is true for the New Testament writers as well. We have therefore, evidence “in the mouth of two witnesses” of the use of a wider body of literature in Palestine itself than that canonized at Jamnia.<sup>14</sup>

What does this mean to us? Several things:

1. We must recognize that our position toward canon has largely ignored the historical process.

2. The community of believers (the church) is an important factor in determining canon; it is not enough to say that canon is determined strictly on the basis of *self*-authentication.

3. The early church had a broader definition of authority than hitherto realized. This becomes much clearer in our second point on the historical development.

#### The Early Church’s Understandings in the Process to the Final List (NT Issue)

It is necessary for us to make some important statements of definition regarding the use of the following key terms: Scripture, authority, inspiration, and canon. The first three terms are used interchangeably in early Christianity, whereas “canon” embraced all of the other terms and more. The traditional connections (post-Reformation) between inspiration, Scripture, and canon are therefore

<sup>11</sup>“Bible Canon...” 354.

<sup>12</sup>Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church*, vol. 20 of Harvard Theological Studies, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 86-94.

<sup>13</sup>Sundberg, “The ‘Old Testament’: A Christian Canon,” *CBQ* 30 (1968), p. 145.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

different from those made in the early church. Let us look at these words.

Probably the most common misconception centers around the terms "Scripture" and "canon." They are not, repeat, are *not* synonymous in early Christianity, and can only be considered synonymous for us in light of developments which occurred in and after the final actions of the canonization process itself.

The word "Scripture" was used to designate writings that are authoritative in the sense of Old Testament authority. This is the standard and frequent use of the word by New Testament authors.<sup>15</sup> The second use of "Scripture" was for designating all orthodox writings; they were also regarded as authoritative. This is very common in the early church, for example, in referring to the writings produced by the early church fathers.<sup>16</sup>

"Canon" on the other hand, should be used to designate *a closed collection of Scripture* to which nothing is added or subtracted. This would include the Old Testament (first usage of "Scripture" above) and the New Testament writings which became a part of the Bible. That is, "canon" refers to a *selected portion* of writings known as "Scripture."

Let us look at the word "inspiration." In a few words, inspiration in the early church applied to all orthodox writings, whereas denial of inspiration always referred to pagan or heretical works; inspiration was not synonymous with canonicity.

The early church believed that the inspiration which at one time had existed in Judaism had been transferred to the church. This is clear in both the New Testament and early Christian noncanonical writings. Paul could write that Abraham's true ancestry was a spiritual one, that of faith, which makes Christians the true heirs (Rom. 4:1-17; Gal. 3:1-4, 7; Acts 2:1-21). The fruit of that faith is possession of the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 7:6; 8:1-17, 23). Note that Justin Martyr believed prophetic inspiration had ceased in Judaism (*Dial.* 51), but was now functioning in the church:

The scripture says that these inumerated powers of the Spirit have come upon him [i.e., Christ], not because he stood in need of them, but because they would rest in him, i.e., would find their accomplishment in him, so that there would be no more prophets in your nation after the ancient custom: and this fact you plainly perceive. For after him no prophet has arisen among you . . . it was requisite that such gifts should cease from you; and having received their rest in him, should again, as had been predicted, become gifts which, from the grace of his Spirit's power, he imparts to those who believe in him, according as he deems each man worthy thereof. For, [he says], the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us—*Dial.* 87.

We shall cite a few examples which show how inspiration was operative for authors whose writings did not become canonized.

<sup>15</sup>See any concordance under "scripture."

<sup>16</sup>We cite a few examples below which are drawn from a larger compilation made by Sundberg.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, could write, “I have many thoughts in God” (*Trall.* 4:1); “I write to you not according to the flesh, but according to the mind of God” (*Rom.* 8.3b); “I cried out while I was with you; I spoke with a great voice with God’s own voice . . . the Spirit was preaching and saying this” (*Phil.* 7.1b-2).

Irenaeus writes, “We hear of my brethren in the church who have prophetic gifts and who through the Spirit...” (*Haer.* 5.6.1). Some, he said, “even have knowledge of things to come, visions, and prophetic utterances” (*Haer.* 2.32.4). Regarding the excesses of some of the anti-Montanists he writes, “Others, again, that they may set at nought the gift of the Spirit, which in the latter times has been, by the good pleasure of the Father, poured out upon the human race, do not admit the aspect [of the evangelical dispensation] presented by John’s Gospel, in which the Lord promised that he would send the Paraclete; but set aside at once both the gospel and the prophetic Spirit. Wretched men indeed! who wish to be pseudo-prophets, forsooth, but who set aside the gift of prophecy from the earth” (*Haer.* 3.11.9).

Origen considered himself inspired: “And as Moses heard God, and then gave to the people the things which he heard from God, so we need the Holy Spirit speaking mysteries in us, so that by our prayers we might be able to listen to the scriptures and again to proclaim what we have heard to the people. . . . For if I sell for reward the things that have been spoken to me by the Holy Spirit, what else do I do but sell for reward the Holy Spirit?” (*Hom.* 7.10 in *Ezech.* and *Hom.* 38 in *Lc.*).

Origen identifies the Spirit of truth who revealed the spiritual interpretation of the apostles (*Contra Celsum* 2.2) with the Spirit who reveals the spiritual interpretation to the church (*Hom.* 5.8 in *Lev.*). Origen prays that the Lord will give words to him just as the Lord put words into the mouth of Jeremiah (*Contra Celsum* 4.1). Like Justin, Origen agreed with the belief that the Spirit had forsaken Judaism, but was now active in the church. Origen is the first to introduce the concept of non-inspiration (see below for the meaning of non-inspiration).

Eusebius said in his sermon dedicating a church built by Constantine that not everyone knew the reason for building the church at the site of Christ’s tomb, “but those enlightened about divine matters by the power of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit both know and understand” (*De laud, Const.* 11.3). Eusebius considered the choice of Fabian for bishop of Rome was made by the Spirit’s direction:

For when the brethren were all assembled for the purpose of appointing him who was to succeed to the episcopate, and very many notable and distinguished persons were in the thoughts of many, Fabian, who was there, came into nobody’s mind. But all of a sudden they relate, a dove flew down from above and settled on his head, in clear imitation of the descent of the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove upon the Saviour; whereupon the whole people, as if moved by one divine inspiration, with all eagerness and with one

soul cried out “worthy,” and without more ado took him and placed him on the episcopal throne—*H.E.* 6.29.3.

Sundberg refers to several other statements made by Eusebius, two of which refer to Eusebius’ own inspiration in the writing of his histories.<sup>17</sup>

The view held throughout the early church period was that inspiration was always present in the church, but not as a criterion for determining canonicity. The circumstances in the early church were much different from the commonly accepted view that the books of the Bible are inspired and therefore became a part of the canon, while on the other hand, the books which did not get into the canon were not inspired.

Historians have used the terms “Scripture” and “canon” synonymously primarily because of the doctrine which holds that inspiration is applicable only to the books of the Bible. It should be repeated that for the early church, all Scripture was inspired, but not all Scripture was canonical. In the New Testament itself we have proof that the term “Scripture” was not equated with “canon.”

For years students of the New Testament used 2 Peter 3:15-16 as a cardinal proof for 2 Peter’s late date, for in these verses Paul’s writings are referred to as Scripture. *If one equates Scripture with canon, we do indeed have a problem, for none of the New Testament writings was a part of canon when 2 Peter was written!* On the other hand, given the distinctions we are making, it would be quite natural to refer to Paul’s letters as scriptural, for they were orthodox, inspired and authoritative, but they were *not* canon at that time!

It was “Scripture” that the church received from Judaism, not a canon. Since Jewish influence was strongest in the East, the church in the East followed the Jewish canonical list more closely than the church in the West. In the East this meant that Jewish books for which there was a *tradition of authorship* were included in the Old Testament: 1 Esdras, associated with Ezra-Nehemiah; Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremy, with Jeremiah; Daniel and Esther in their expanded Greek forms; and included sometimes, Ecclesiasticus

<sup>17</sup>As late as 367 AD in Athanasius’ Easter letter, number 39, where we have our first list of NT books as they finally appeared, we have some instructive insights. In this letter, Athanasius refers to “Divine Scriptures,” apocryphal books (which for him are the works of heretics), and other *good* books (*which contain books we now assign to the Apocrypha*). He writes in verses 2-7: “But since we have made mention of heretics as dead, but of ourselves as possessing the *Divine Scriptures* for salvation; and since I fear lest, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, some few of the simple should be beguiled from their simplicity and purity, by the subtly of certain men, and should henceforth read *other books—those called apocryphal—led astray by the similarity of their names with the true books*, I beseech you to bear patiently, if I also write, by way of remembrance, of matters with which you are acquainted, influenced by the need and advantage of the Church. [Emphasis supplied.] After providing us with his canonical list, he writes this concluding paragraph: But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but *appointed by the Fathers to be read* by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. *The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd.* But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; nor is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings. But they are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approbation, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple.

and Wisdom of Solomon. But in the West, not only were these books included, but also those books which we know circulated in Judaism after 90 AD: Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, Judith, and Tobit.

The Eastern Old Testament canon was pretty much settled around the middle of the fourth century and early part of the fifth.<sup>18</sup> The Christian church did not receive a canon of Scripture from Judaism, but rather Scripture on the way to canonization.

In concluding his discussion on the understanding of inspiration in the early church, Sundberg concurs with E. R. Kalin that “the concept of inspiration is not used in the early church as a basis of division between canonical and non-canonical orthodox Christian writings.”<sup>19</sup> The *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, which failed to get into the canon by a narrow margin, was not attacked as non-inspired. “Throughout the entire period of canonization, discussion in the fathers over the question of inspiration, thus, does not function as criterion of canonization; the common view of the church throughout this period is that inspiration is broadly and constantly present in the church.”<sup>20</sup>

In view of these many early church expressions on the wide use of inspiration, how did our present but inaccurate view of inspiration arise? Its origin is in Judaism at the time the question of the Jewish canon was being resolved, AD 90. The doctrine, first found in Josephus (*Contra Apion* 1.8) and also in the Talmud,<sup>21</sup> states that inspiration existed only from Moses to Ezra, and therefore, only canonical books are inspired.<sup>22</sup> Sundberg suggests that the teaching functioned as a means for excluding the books that were not in the canon rather than a criterion for the inclusion of those that were canonical.

The early church, once aware of the Jewish view, found it a very simple matter to agree that inspiration for Judaism ended with Ezra; the next natural step was the belief that God poured out his Spirit on the church, as we noted above. This view was revived in the Reformation period when Christians began to study Jewish literature. The followers of John Calvin used this doctrine against the Catholic position taken at Trent: “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of Scripture.”—Westminster Confession of 1647.

“It is this doctrine, appropriated by the early Calvinists from Judaism, that spread virtually throughout Protestantism, strengthening its dogmatic stance against Catholicism, that we have learned to accept as the Christian doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. This is what Protestants traditionally have meant when affirming that the Bible is inspired.”<sup>23</sup>

We agree with Sundberg when he writes that “the Christian doctrine of

<sup>18</sup>“The Bible Canon...” pp. 355-6.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 369-370.

<sup>21</sup>George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, I:237, 243, 421.

<sup>22</sup>“The Bible Canon...” p. 370.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 371.

inspiration is taught in the New Testament itself and held in the early church throughout the period of canonization of the Christian Bible, that God pours out his Spirit upon Christians and the church. In Christian thought...there is no doctrine restricting inspiration either to a particular period or to particular persons, except that inspiration is denied to heretics."<sup>24</sup> The church, in forming its canon, established the Bible as the measure of inspiration in the church, not the totality of it. "What concurs with canon is of like inspiration; what does not is not of God. Thus the Christian doctrine of inspiration describes the unity of Christians with their canon; the Spirit of God that inspired these books dwells in and enlivens them. Christian inspiration, therefore, is seen not to be a derivative from the New Testament; it comes from God."<sup>25</sup>

The Christian doctrine of inspiration is based on the New Testament and other early Christian literature written in the time prior to the establishment of the canon; this inspiration is "that the Christian embodies the living and enlivening Spirit of God in every age for that age, the Bible canon being the standard, the measure in all things. 'The letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive.'"<sup>26</sup>

#### *The Basis for Authority*

The classical Protestant view, shared by Adventists, is that Scripture is authoritative because of its intrinsic properties. That is, the books of the Old and New Testaments became a part of the canon because of the authority inherent in the books themselves. As stated above, this does not address the central issue; it is very subjective. I wish to expand that statement and add an additional criterion for determining authority.

The authority of a document is derived from two phenomena: (1) The concrete and measurable results the document has on an individual and on a community and (2) the subsequent testimony that the community bears about the document because of *what it has done* for a person or group of persons. The first is clearly primary, particularly at the initial stages. Ordinarily, though, the validity of the second step becomes much more weighty through history, and in practice for many, the only recognizable basis for authority. If you ask why the Bible is authoritative, the most common answer will be something like

<sup>24</sup>Ibid

<sup>25</sup>Ibid

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. If the definitions used by the early church on such key terms as "inspiration," "Scripture," etc. are different from later usage, and are helpful for us today, why don't we adopt their position in its entirety? Two points need to be made in answer to such a question. (1) The current community of believers does not give us this right; our community has to a large degree adopted the Reformation stance, viz., only canonical books can be inspired. (2) We have, on the other hand, adopted the early church's position by elevating some inspired, orthodox writings to a higher level of authority, those in the canon. The early church's position does, nevertheless instruct us about the community's involvement with its writings to the extent that precedents have been established in church history by which we may recognize both the broader definitions on what is considered inspired and authoritative and the role a community has in making judgments about such writings.

“because it’s the Word of God,” which may or may not include the first reason given above (generally it does not). Why is it the “Word of God”? Most Adventists, and no doubt most Christians, would answer that the Bible is the Word of God because the Bible makes the claim (2 Tim. 3:16, for example). We have already observed that this cannot be a valid proof for an unbeliever. This is not to down play the second reason, however, because it is when the community wrestles with the question of canon that decisions are made (by the community) which determine a tremendous amount of future church decisions regarding doctrine and practice.

In the following discussion it will become clear that the testimony of a community of believers, whether it be over what constitutes its authoritative documents, or over individual doctrines and practices, is of utmost importance. The body of believers in themselves *do* carry authority and can therefore make judgments about what literature will be a part of its own authority. This is not to contradict what we said above about authority existing prior to the church’s testimony.

We want to consider the relationship between “prior” authority and the authority of a community which makes judgments about its literature. The “prior” authority, or the basic essence of authority, is determined by its function. This basic criterion for establishing authority is actually an extension of the Protestant view and should be, therefore, quite readily acceptable for us. Nevertheless, we need to say more about it because of its importance for our following discussion.

In his book, David H. Kelsey examined the writings of six twentieth century theologians in order to determine what made Scripture authoritative for them.<sup>27</sup> He makes this pertinent statement in summary: “Part of what it means to call a text ‘Christian Scripture’ is that it *functions* in certain ways or *does* certain things when used in certain ways in the common life of the church.”<sup>28</sup> This provides a means of objective measurement. The six theologians all point to the fact that Scripture is authoritative because it *does* something. It seems to me that the basis of authority resides in all of the following views. Kelsey asked: “In virtue of what is the scripture appealed to ‘authoritative?’” This is his answer:

In every instance the answer was cast in terms of something the scripture was said to do: It refers or “points” the reader to the sequence of God’s mighty acts in history which constitute Heilsgeschichte (Wright); it renders a character (Barth); it expresses the occurrence of a cosmic redemptive event and occasions a transformation of my vision of the world so that I come to live in ways apt to its true character (Thornton); it occasions an event in which my personal and private life is transformed (Bultmann); it expresses the occurrence of a saving and revelatory event for an

<sup>27</sup>The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). One should not judge the book too harshly because of its very poor sentences and lack of clarity. He makes a valuable contribution to the subject we are dealing with.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 90. (Kelsey’s emphasis.)

earlier community and occasions an event of encounter with the holy here and now (Tillich); it proposes or commends concepts men should use to construe their experiences, their word, and themselves (Bartsch).<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, God's Word does all of the above and more. But it is of vital significance that here we have solid basis for recognizing the authority in a document! It is a testimony which states: "By the fruits..." We can observe something actually occurring when a person encounters the Bible. As Kelsey reiterates, "Part of what it means to call a text 'Christian scripture' is that it *decisively shapes* persons' identities when it is used in the context of the common life of the community."<sup>30</sup>

The most fundamental reason for Scripture being authoritative, therefore is in the spiritual results it has on human life. Does this mean, however, that any piece of literature that affects one's spiritual life is authoritative?

Perhaps this would be the place to speak to the difference between "inspirational" and "inspired." Based on what we have said about the importance of the fruitage, the effects in human existence, that a writing might have vis-a-vis authority, one might conclude that Isaac Watts' hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" would have claim to authority. In fact, one might argue rather persuasively that the hymn has a more positive effect on Christian experience than say, I Chronicles. And yet most Christians would consider the hymn inspirational, and not authoritative, whereas I Chronicles would be considered both inspired and authoritative. Why?

There are a number of points we need to make here. First of all, do Christians regard I Chronicles inspired and authoritative because that is the testimony of the church, because it is a part of the canon? Or is I Chronicles a part of the canon on the basis of its inherent authority, as the Reformers argued, and that being the case quite apart from the church's decision? One might wish to argue the point.

Perhaps if a survey were taken most Christians would vote for I Chronicles as having the greatest spiritual impact on their lives. On the other hand, what if the majority voted for Isaac Watts' hymn? What if a mere minority voted for I Chronicles? Whatever the outcome, Christendom would still hold that Watts' hymn is inspirational, I Chronicles is inspired, and that in the end, even our first criterion must be connected to the testimony given by the body of believers. This same body of believers has not given the testimony for Watts' hymn that it has given I Chronicles. That is the decisive difference, and also the reason why our two criteria go hand in hand.

Adventists (and no doubt most Protestants) have more difficulty with the second criterion for determining authority. We have an aversion to giving the community's witness much weight, primarily because of our stand against the

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid. (Kelsey's emphasis.) This, incidentally, is in complete harmony with the Adventist theology of justification/sanctification!

prominence given to tradition by the Roman Catholic Church. Look again, however, at the historical data. *There is no record whatsoever in the history of canonization that any church council or individual wrestled with the question of inherent authority or inspiration as a basis for canonization!*

The struggle that occurred in the church in the centuries prior to the establishment of the final list in itself argues against the Reformers' position. If one should conclude that the church made that final decision through the direction of God's Spirit, well and true; but in so doing we acknowledge that the Spirit worked through the church. The community of believers does then, in the end, play a role!

To a certain extent the authority of the Bible exists in our age because that authority is "built in"; it is now a part of being a Christian. But this is more than saying that the community has passed on the "Authority." Christians are Christians because of what they believe, and that belief is a belief in a particular God who has acted in certain significant and even ultimate ways in history which relate to us in a most intimate way. And our understanding of God's actions with, and attitudes towards, us today includes our involvement with the Bible. And when it comes to making a case for the non-Christian, the *fruitage* in the Christian's life bears the proof for authority.

#### *Application to Ellen White's Writings*

The preceding sections of this paper offer us sound guidelines for this final section on how to determine the place of Ellen White's writings in the Adventist church. What happened in history, and the criteria for determining authority, prove to be very instructive. First let us notice parallels and differences that exist between the early church and early Adventism vis-a-vis the documents.

#### **Orthodox Christian Writings**

1. All orthodox writings were considered inspired, authoritative, and called Scripture.<sup>31</sup>
2. The community singled out certain books from its list of inspired books, and they became "canon" with an elevated sense of authority.

#### **Ellen White's Writings**

1. Writings were considered inspired and authoritative, but not called "Scripture" because of the connotations.
2. The Adventist community gave its testimony to the prophetic nature of the writings, producing an elevated sense of authority. The writings are not called canon for the same reason they are not called Scripture.

After the events had occurred in stage two, (for both the early church and Adventist communities) a certain sense of permanence evolved for the canon and Ellen White's writings, respectively. That is, Christendom had a closed canon, and Adventists had authoritative writings of their own. The body of sacred literature will forever remain sacred in some form or another for the

<sup>31</sup>After the canon was established, the term "Scripture" became synonymous with "canon."

community who so declares.

The reasons given for determining authority for Scripture serve as the basis for determining Ellen White's authority. This author believes that no seeker for truth will remain unaffected by her writings. No Adventist can deny the amazing contributions she has made to the church as a whole and to countless individuals. Do the writings have authority? History gives us the answer! Ellen White herself said, "Let the Testimonies be judged by their fruits" (5T 671).<sup>32</sup> Not only does the Adventist community attest the authority of her writings, the community passes on the heritage of earlier Christian communities echoing, for example, the clarion cry of the Reformation: The Bible and the Bible alone, stated many times by Ellen White herself.<sup>33</sup> But what is the basic link between Scripture and Ellen White?

The centrality of Scripture is Jesus Christ. In Him all Scripture meets (Old Testament points towards, and New Testament points back; both point to a climatic culmination). Ellen White emphasizes and demonstrates over and over again this central theme. The authority which cannot be refuted is that which draws men and women to Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal. This is what it is all about! When Moses, Peter, Paul, or Ellen White speak to Adventists today, that is the bottom line. God so loved the world that whoever believes has eternal life. What better news is there? It has its own authority—we do not have to fight for it. When the writings serve this very practical purpose, their authority will be self-evident and irrefutable.

#### *Summary and Conclusions*

In the Introduction we asked nine questions. We repeat them here with a brief answer for each.

<sup>32</sup>Shortly after Ellen White's death, questions arose over whether or not physical proofs should be used to help determine White's inspiration. A. G. Daniells gave this important testimony: "I have heard some ministers preach, and have seen it in writing, that Sister White once carried a heavy Bible—I believe they said it weighed forty pounds—on her outstretched hand, and looking up toward the heavens quoted texts and turned the leaves over and pointed to the texts, with her eyes toward the heavens. I do not know whether that was ever done or not. I am not sure. . . . Well, just how much of that is genuine, and how much has crawled into the story?—I do not know. But I do not think that is the kind of proof we want to use. What did he consider to be more meaningful? [Continued bottom of p. 18]. I believe that the *strongest proofs* found in the *fruits of this gift* to the church (*Spectrum*, vol. 10, number 1, pp. 28, 19).

When we recall that the term "inspired" had a considerably broader definition in the early church than it has since the Reformation, we have a basis for suggesting that "inspiration" is not as important as is the *fruitage* of an inspired writing. Logically speaking, authority is derived (and even recognized) not so much from the fact that a document is considered inspired as from the fact that a document affects and effects the members of the community of faith. It is true that from the point of view of some, declaring a document inspired elevates the document to a place where it can influence in an authoritative sense. But ultimately, that is not as defensible or as enduring as pushing back to the matter of knowing *why* an inspired document may be considered inspired and authoritative.

<sup>33</sup>Arthur White has shown that the "Bible alone" concept does not mean Ellen White could not be used of God to guide the minds of the pioneers in making difficult positions clear, even in revealing points of truth. "The Position of 'The Bible, and the Bible only' and the Relationship of this to the writings of Ellen G. White," White Estate, Washington, DC, p. 7.

1. What makes a document authoritative? The fruitage it bears in the life of the believing community, whose attestation has a confirming role.
2. Who determines the authoritative nature? Those whose lives have been changed and bear witness to such.
3. In what way, or to what extent, is a document authoritative? The nature of both Scriptures and Ellen White's writings make these writings *normative* for every aspect of life.
4. What do we mean by "inspired"? In the final analysis: a document is authoritative.
5. Are there degrees of inspiration? Either a document is inspired/authoritative or it is not. There is no in-between.
6. What is the difference between "inspirational" and "inspired"? The former is not authoritative on the basis of a community's judgment; the latter is.
7. How do the terms inspiration and authority relate? In practice, they are essentially synonymous.<sup>34</sup>
8. Are the answers we give to these questions the same for both scripture and Ellen White? In all respects except regarding "canon."
9. What is the relationship between the church's position (a) that all of our doctrines are based on "Scripture alone," and the church's position (b) that Ellen White was inspired in the same way Bible authors were inspired, and that her works are authoritative for Adventists? In light of its mission, and as a part of Christendom, Adventism will stand with the church's prophet when it comes to doctrine—the Bible alone. On the other hand, there have always been prophets whose utterances did not and will not become a part of canon. There have always been prophets whose sphere of influence and authority were not universal. Ellen White fits into this category.

In conclusion, we ask our original question: Are Ellen White's writings to be extended into canon? Given the historical distinctions of the terminology, and the understanding of the processes within the community of believers, and given the mission of the church, the answer must be *no*. Are her writings authoritative for the community of Adventist Christians? Definitely, *yes*. Does that authority go beyond the authority we give to other highly respected church leaders? Again the answer is *yes*. Ellen White was a prophet in the truest and fullest sense. That is evident first by the fruitage of her ministry both during her lifetime and also in ours, and second by the overwhelming testimony of the community she served while living, and of the community which is now served

<sup>34</sup>Some may believe that we should make a distinction between inspiration and authority. The early church did not. Reformers used the terms to apply only to canonical books—which had its basis in Jewish circles around 90 AD. That is the difference, and hence, if canon only is inspired, canon only is authoritative. They cannot be separated. In other words, for the Reformers and their progenitors, a document cannot be authoritative unless it is inspired; nor is a document inspired without being authoritative. In this respect, there is a parallel with the early church. The difference lies with whether or not non-canonical literature can be both inspired and authoritative. Early Christians said *yes*. Reformers said *no*. Early Christians, however, held that canonical literature was more authoritative than non-canonical literature!

by her preserved writings.

*Excursus*

The purpose of my paper on Ellen White and the Biblical Canon was to address a few key issues in Adventism today, and hopefully to offer partial solutions to some rather sensitive problems. As I look over the questions that have been raised both by the members of BRICOM and by friends and colleagues who have dialogued with me on the topic, it is rather obvious that while I may have answered a few questions, I have actually created new ones.

Most of the uncertainties are centered around the matter of the absoluteness and objectivity of truth and authority. I have, to be sure, argued that the traditional arguments made in defense of the authoritative nature of Scripture (and therefore in an indirect sense, of the truth contained in Scripture) are often not very sound, and are meaningful at best only for those who already believe. In this brief essay I will make an attempt to clarify my position and show why I feel it is necessary for us to go beyond the arguments usually given.

We shall look at three questions which represent the concerns most often raised. The line of thought that runs through these inquiries suggests that I have taken something away, something that previously offered certainty. Some persons, no doubt, have held a position much like the one I'm going to now cite from, Edward J. Young (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1949) who wrote these words: "Canonical books . . . are those books which are regarded as divinely inspired. The criterion of a book's canonicity, therefore, is its inspiration. If a book has been inspired of God, it is canonical, whether accepted by men as such or not. It is God and not man who determines whether a book is to belong to the canon. Therefore if a certain writing has indeed been the product of divine inspiration, it belongs to the canon from the moment of its composition" (33).

First of all, the statement sounds good, does it not? (We have pointed out, however, that inspiration was not a criterion for canonicity in the early church). Notice the third sentence. How often I have heard this comment: "If a book has been inspired of God, it is canonical, whether accepted by men as such or not." But I must ask, *who* answers the question about whether a book has been inspired of God? I agree, if God inspired the book, it is God's word. But *someone* must decide (either an individual or community), whether or not God inspired the book! Who?

Young goes on to make another commonly heard statement: "It is God and not man who determines . . . canon." Once again, I'll say yes, God determines. But the, it follows that I must also ask: "How do *we determine* what God *has determined*?" How do we know God's thinking on this? Who tells us? Does God? If God, *how* does He tell us?

Dr. Young's final point in the above paragraph reflects a very unscholarly judgment. Magic is not the order of the day. In the following quotations from

the same book, we may again read the typically held position—a product of Reformation heritage. Note the obvious circular nature of the comments: “The Christian recognizes the Scriptures as inspired, because they are such, and bear in themselves the evidences of their divinity. Basic, therefore, to any consideration of how man comes to recognize the Bible as God’s word is the fact that it is indeed divine” (34).

Young is simply saying that Scripture is true because it is. The person who comes to the Bible knows it’s God’s Word because it is divine. This line of reasoning is shallow even for a believer. Let us now turn to some specific questions. The first question suggests that my major criterion for determining authority is as subjective as was the Reformers’: Are the results that a document has on a person or a community a more objective criterion than that of the reformers’ self-authenticating criterion? What is the basic difference between the two?

Both criteria are subjective to the extent that an *individual decides both*; on the one hand, whether there are valid results, or, on the other hand, whether a document has inherent worth. The difference lies in the fact that *results* are phenomena we may look at and experience. *Inherent worth* remains in the realm of judgment, at the decision level. In both cases we may testify: The document speaks to my soul. When we ask the document to prove such, or *demonstrate its worth*, we are asking for fruitage. That level of measurement is more objective than when keeping the basis solely at the decision/mind level.

To argue for “inherent worth” alone is to argue strictly on the subjective judgment of a reader. That is, Luther reads 2 Maccabees and testifies: the text does not authenticate itself. How did he determine this? Obviously his own religious experience, his education, his presuppositions, his understanding of canon history, etc.—none of these can be separated from the judgment he makes. Eck, on the other hand, brings a different background to the same document and concludes the opposite of Luther. For Eck the text of 2 Maccabees belongs to the canon.

Any Christian in any age, however, who argues that a document is authoritative for them because of what that book has done in his/her life, may, and only then, testify that it has inherent worth. That is the relationship between the Reformation criterion and the one I’m proposing. Results come first; the response leads to a statement about self-authentication. *The statement alone, that is without some means of testing it, opens the door for a multitude of different canons. Luther himself would have eliminated some books (such as James) from a canon list which was not in dispute by Catholic or Protestants!*

The second question is, if Scripture is authoritative only after it is declared such (by a person or a community), are we able to say it is still authoritative even if everyone should deny the authority?

If *every* person should deny a document’s authority, it obviously would not have authority. A document only has control over, or offers guidance to, one who agrees to such. That is what *authority* means. “Authority” by definition

requires at least one person to acknowledge the authority, or it does not exist.

Another aspect of the same question may be stated in the form of a commonly expressed position: God's word is true *before* I am called to pass judgment, and that is true in much the same way that a blue colored carpet is blue before I ever see the carpet, or acknowledge its color after I do see it (or even if I never see/acknowledge it). It is blue because it's blue. Scripture is God's word because it is God's word and has been His word from the very beginning. A person's opinion does not alter the facts!

The unfortunate point, however, about this nicely argued position is that *someone still has to agree* to it, for it can never be a position until someone states it. Once someone takes this stance, it is legitimate to ask: Why? Then we are right back where we started. Let's shift the argument to include truth. A Moslem could argue or confess all day that his Koran is true because it's true (whether Christians agree or not).

None of this line of reasoning is intended to argue that a truth becomes truth only by our feeble acknowledgments. Truth is indeed truth prior to our understanding; we do not *make* something true because we say it's true; on the other hand, truth is only truth for any person or body of persons *after they "know" it*. My recognition does not *make* it truth; it only becomes truth for me, though, once I believe! You mean, someone asks, it's only true/authoritative after I (or someone) says it is? No, it may be true/authoritative for someone else apart from my stated belief. But in terms of a person's real world, that truth/authority makes no impact *until* it exercises authority *over* the person. *And it can only exercise authority after the person consents.*

Third, in the end, how can anyone be certain about what is authoritative and whether or not there is such a thing as absolute truth? Where or how are such crucial questions answered?

Let's follow a process. We have a Mr. Brown in our midst. He asks us: How do I know if there is absolute truth and how would I know it if I should confront it? We want to answer for him. What do you tell him? There are several possibilities for a start:

1. You can know, Mr. Brown, because someone will tell you. Of course this requires faith in the person who speaks to Mr. Brown, for someone else may have told Mr. Brown just the opposite. Furthermore, Mr. Brown may want to know how the person found out who passed the information on to him. This is, therefore, not a very satisfactory answer for a serious-minded Mr. Brown.

2. You can know, Mr. Brown, by reading 2 Tim. 3:16 and other similar verses. Again, Mr. Brown must have faith in the document, accompanied with reservations about similar claims in/for other non-Christian religious documents. He may ask us why he should rely upon what could be considered a self-serving testimony. This could also prove to be an unsatisfactory answer for our serious-minded Mr. Brown.

3. My, dear brother, you can believe in absolute truth because there are

millions (those around you and those who have gone before you) who believe—surely they could not all be wrong! That is indeed impressive, Mr. Brown answers. I would, however, like to know in just a small way why these million have believed.

4. Faith, Brother Brown, in the end you must have faith. Oh, but of course. Faith in man? Faith in the Bible? Faith in God? I want to have faith in all three. Help my unbelief!

Why, Brother Brown, if you have faith, that's all it takes. Just have faith that the Bible is God's word. Have faith that what the Bible says about it inspiration is true. Have faith that what the Reformers said, what the church today says is true. Have faith, brother, have faith.

You are saying to me in the last analysis, Brother Brown concludes, that I must myself make the decision and that it is a faith decision? Yes, Brother, yes, that's it. If in the end then, my friends, I and I alone must make the decision, I want to make that decision on more than mere testimonials. There are thousands of conflicting testimonies, all claiming to be true, some of which make rather strong attacks on other testimonies. There must be more than words—written or spoken. I'm going to test the documents. If they are what I'm told they are, the proof will be forthcoming!

*Later:* Mr. Brown speaking, “The Bible is God's word; the Living Word has changed my life—I know from experience; I have tasted and found that the Lord is good; I know Him whom to know is eternal life!”