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## THE CHURCH'S USE OF THE TEXT<sup>1</sup>

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### *Introduction*

Throughout the Christian era there have been at least two basic and often opposing approaches to the text made by the church: (1) A *defense* of the faith once delivered to the saints; and (2) A *proclamation* of the faith. The roots for this phenomenon can be found in the New Testament itself, and one does not have to look diligently to recognize the many instances from the first century to our day in which one or the other of these two approaches was dominant. Although there are positive elements in both emphases, the second emphasis is the superior one.

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church not only reflects at different periods in its history these two approaches to the text, it is currently positioned, as I see it, in the less desirable *defense* mode.

### Purpose

In this brief paper I wish to: (1) demonstrate that the emphasis on proclamation is indeed superior to the defense emphasis, but more than this (since this audience no doubt does not need to be persuaded on the point), (2) show that the defense emphasis is *not as necessary* for the preservation of the church<sup>2</sup> or an institution as many have held, and (3) argue that although our predecessors frequently made proclamations that were based on an incorrect methodology or exegesis (from our obviously advanced “vantage point” and according to our standards!), their proclamation *is not* automatically invalidated by our “recognition” of those shortcomings!

Pursuing the implications of this third point for the Adventist Church's present use of the text lies outside the scope of this paper, but the suggestions are definitely intended to elicit discussion.

In the following comments on the evaluation of the church's use of the text it will be important to keep four categories in mind: (a) *the writer's methodology*, (b) *his concept of reality*, (c) *the validity of his proclamation*, and (d) *the relevancy of his message for later generations*. An evaluation, either for understanding past usage, or for guidelines for our present usage, must include these four categories.

### Presuppositions

Because this essay may be read by persons outside the religion teachers' circle, I wish first of all to state two presuppositions, with some comments, that govern my thinking on the subject.

<sup>1</sup>This paper was read at the West Coast Religion Conference (Pacific Union College, Walla Walla College, La Sierra University and Loma Linda University), 1988.

<sup>2</sup>*Church* is used in the paper to refer both to the Christian church in general and to the Adventist church specifically. It will be evident, however, that what I write is intended to provide a basis for re-examining the use of the text by the Adventist church.

Presupposition 1: The Scriptures, as God's word, are the result of a unique union of the human and the divine.

Comments: So far as the *human* element is concerned, there is no disagreement over the fact that each author wrote his message in the context of his own world view. But we must also acknowledge that some of those views may have been formulated by using methods and concepts which in later centuries have been discarded or at least considered obsolete or unacceptable for modern use. Examples are given below.

So far as the *divine* element is concerned, God, in his attempt to reach humanity, is not on trial for the failures of humanity to adequately represent him or his message—which representations at times prove to be woefully inadequate and in some instances, to some, just plain distorted. Nevertheless, the enduring beauty and quality and truth of the text transcends human frailties and speaks effectively with amazing power to human hearts and needs in every age.

The above observations are made with respect to the *writing of the text*. What about the *use of the text*? Obvious as it may be, it needs to be restated: those who interpret, as humans, are also bound by their own surrounding history. We state this fact so often, and then proceed to speak and write as though it applies only to those who have gone before us! (This is more true for those who are fundamentally opposed to the process of modifying earlier theological statements, the defenders, than it is for the proclaimers.) Thus, even though the status of the written text is fixed, our understanding and therefore our use of Scripture cannot be static. This leads me to my second presupposition.

Presupposition 2: One generation of believers does not have the right to question the validity of an earlier generation's *proclamation* solely on the grounds that, by our standards, the earlier generation's interpretation might not be the interpretation we would give today.

Comments: Our claim to have a superior exegesis (again, because we have more information available about the time in which the text was written, or our twentieth century methodology is scientifically constructed) does not mean that our exegesis affords us a basis for either passing negative judgments about the validity of the earlier exegesis, or for calling into question the integrity of our predecessors' experience. What may appear to us to be the results of a naive or limited understanding by those who went before us, may in actuality be the result of *our* limited understanding of their age. It is impossible to capture fully their setting.

Any judgment we make about those who have gone before us (whether a Bible writer, a reformer, or an Adventist pioneer) must be made in light of three crucial factors. As far as possible, we need to have: (1) an understanding of their perceptions of reality, (2) a sensitivity to their heartfelt needs and aspirations, and (3) a measurement of the fruitage or outcome of their position. (This last point is the real test, not whether or not they used methods we do not use or held views of reality we do not hold—more below.)

#### *Defense versus Proclamation*

It is not my position that every aspect of a defense is unnecessary, but rather,

that the defense as primarily practiced by most church organizations is not required, at least to the extent many contend. That is, while careful analysis about the past in the pursuit of scholarship has its place, the moment such activity has as its major purpose the *defense* of a present position, it becomes less valuable. In fact, when scholars are involved in the work for defense purposes (as opposed to pure scholarly activity), often the diligent efforts to *prove* the exegetical accuracy and relevancy of the past interpretations tend to be unproductive.

This is the case not only because of the difficulty involved in attempting to recapture the earlier context of those who went before us who formulated the "faith," but also because the earlier relevancy is not necessarily required for our time. Furthermore, that sort of concern with the past often causes the community to turn inward, to dialog only with its own members, and thus to lose its awareness of those outside the community. (Permit me to make it clear that my comments about *defending past interpretations* should not be confused with the highly beneficial act of *recounting the past blessings and leading of God*.)

It surely must be axiomatic that the very life of a religious community is preserved most effectively when it is actively ministering to the conscious needs of the present! When a church devotes its best intellectual energies to proving it is right about all it has done or said in the past, apart of the absence of outreach, you may also expect to see evidences of paranoia, charges and counter-charges, and ultimately minor, if not major, breaks within the community. We now look at some examples from the New Testament and from Christian history.

1. New Testament. One does not have to a New Testament scholar to recognize that Jesus' message was good news for his day - an extremely relevant *proclamation* for widespread needs; he met the needs of all those who had been excluded by mainstream Judaism: Samaritans and Gentiles, anyone who was a sinner, harlot, tax collector, etc. On the other hand, the entire body of Jewish religious leaders was concerned primarily with the *preservation* of Judaism. Judaism was in dialog with Judaism, not with the world around it.

Paul also addressed the excluded masses, proclaiming the good news that salvation was available to everyone (without first becoming a Jew). He met the same sort of opposition from the defenders of Judaism that Jesus had met - the same sort of exclusion theology, a salvation with conditions as set forth by the defenders of the faith.

2. Christian history. We cite two examples from the centuries between the New Testament era and our own. First, during most of the centuries leading up to the Reformation, the church was unequivocally concerned with the *status quo*. The reformers are the ones who are recognized as the proclaimers.

Second, the pioneers of the Adventist Church were proclaimers. The official Adventist Church today is defense oriented, as is best demonstrated by the papers prepared for the Daniel and Revelation Committee (DARCOM). I was a member of that committee for several years, and I believe no one would dispute the statement that the bulk of the careful scholarly work done for that committee would be beneficial *only* for the members of the Adventist Church, and that it had very little, if any, kerygmatic value.

When a community of believers is geared up for proclamation they will be compelled to understand their audience, and I find it hard to believe that most of the papers prepared for DARCOM in the 1980s will ever be received by non-members as helpful (or even understandable). I do not believe this would have been the case 125 years ago, but 125 years are 125 years!

*Wrong Method, Right Message*

This is the section of the paper that contains my most important point on the church's use of the text (referred to in point number three under *purpose* of the introduction and again in *presupposition 2*).

I hold that a proclamation does not necessarily lose its validity simply because someone later on in history is able to show that there are all sorts of problems connected with either the earlier methodology, the world view, or the issue of relevancy. It is of considerable importance that we keep in mind that *while the validity of a message may remain intact, relevancy may not*. *Validity* and *relevancy* are determined by those who make the proclamation, whether agreed upon or not by contemporaries. *Relevancy*, however, must be addressed in every age, and therefore later generations may, by definition of the word, no longer hold that the earlier relevancy applies. Judgments about relevancy and validity must be made independently. To repeat, it does not follow that a negative conclusion about relevancy means that we can draw the same negative conclusion *vis-a-vis* validity.

The generation who is using the text is naturally expected to use the methods of its day, and would be responsible for judging both the validity and the relevancy. Later generations will obviously enter into the question of determining whether or not an earlier proclamation is relevant for themselves. Methods also differ from age to age, and a change in method (or in world view) is not in itself sufficient to invalidate a proclamation. I wish to cite several New Testament examples and one from the Reformation period.

New Testament Examples

1. Matthew is known for his use of the Old Testament as a source for proving that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah (*Out of Egypt I have called my son. . . ; A voice was heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children. . .*, etc.). This use of the Old Testament is entirely unacceptable as a method for persons living in our day. It was, however, a widely accepted method of interpretation among the Jews in Matthew's day and was considered to be a thoroughly legitimate approach even by his rabbinical contemporaries who did not accept his conclusions.

2. Paul cites Hab. 2:4 many times in his writings to support his proclamation about Gentile acceptance: "The just shall live by faith." However, neither the Hebrew text nor the Greek text of Habbakuk supports the rendering we find in Paul's usage.

3. When Paul wrote in Philippians that there would be a time when at the name of Jesus everyone would bow, those *in* heaven, *on* the earth, and *under* the earth, he was reflecting an obviously inaccurate cosmology. This is the case in

a number of Bible books, particularly the book of Revelation.

4. In 1 John, one extremely important test that had to be applied to determine orthodoxy was the confession that Jesus had come in the flesh; to deny that fact was tantamount to being a liar and antichrist. The test in 1 John at the present time is practically meaningless (except perhaps for those who may wish to argue that a modern day application of John's warning could be directed at the Bultmannian view of the historical Jesus!).

#### Reformation Example

Martin Luther used the writings of Paul to deal with his terrible sense of guilt by quoting the passages on justification by faith. Paul, however, did not have the problems Luther addressed in mind at all. As Krister Stendahl has pointed out, Paul was concerned with the Jewish-Gentile issue, not a plagued conscience.

#### What is the point?

In all five examples above the writers were involved in a ministry that fulfilled critical needs, and even though we might not use the text the way they used it, or even though our needs may be different, the proclamation they made endures. That is due, I believe, not only because the method they used and the message they gave was *right for them*, but because the truth, or validity, of their proclamation transcends any temporal methodological or conceptual deficiency.

In Matthew's case, his method is no longer employed, but the Messiahship of Jesus was firmly established. For Paul, in Romans, his objective of providing a theological basis for bringing the Gentiles into Christianity was gloriously achieved, and his message continues to speak of God's marvelous gifts to persons in all ages. In Philipians, Paul's inaccurate cosmology is no way detracts from Paul's point, *viz.*, that the entire universe will acknowledge Jesus' exalted position.

As for John's warnings, we have a different historical context in which the threat of Gnosticism no longer exists. But in John's day when Gnosticism was a threat to the young Christian movement, the test he voiced dealt with a life and death matter in the minds of the church leaders. We automatically make the necessary adjustments (just as we do on a multitude of issues, such as women having their heads veiled in public worship). In Luther's case, the great burdens of his heart and the deep sense of guilt all rolled away, and impetus was given for a much needed reformation.

In each of the five examples, twentieth century Christians can point to a problem of one kind or another. On the other hand, in all five cases, we concur that the *results* or fruitage of the proclamation was of great benefit.

#### Conclusion

We have noted that when it comes to the church's use of the text, we must keep four categories in mind, and that the evaluation we make of previous uses of the text, and guidelines we find for the present, center around our understanding of these categories: (a) methodology; (b) concept of reality; (c)

validity of the proclamation; and (d) relevancy of the message.

I conclude that we need to be very cautious about making negative statements about our predecessors in all of these categories, and also, that by far the most serious task for us today in our use of the text is a sharper consciousness of category (d), relevancy -- even if it means a bold acknowledgment that a cherished view of earlier times is no longer relevant for us.

In the last analysis, the text *must* speak to each new generation of believers at the very point where it has meaning. *How* the text does this is not, fortunately, governed by whether or not we use a method that somehow miraculously reaches us from heaven! Likewise, the text's success in speaking to us is not determined by our (mis)conceptions of reality. At this date, to my knowledge, heaven's methods and heaven's reality are still veiled (our problem, not God's) and all we can do is our best.

It is the Scriptures' ability to speak anew to each generation *where that generation is* that makes it the Living Word of God. *The church needs to be alert to the possibility that undue concern about past interpretations might actually cause the very consequences such concern is designed to prevent, for paradoxically, the past is best preserved by successfully dealing with the present.*