Contributions to Creation Theory

Sometimes what we consider as biblical has no basis in Scripture.

L. James Gibson

Why Theology Matters

Doing theology in the right way demands duties and responsibilities.

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How to interpret Scripture—God’s Holy Word—is one of the most crucial issues in the life of a Christian.

Roy E. Gane
The study of nature and the study of special revelation have a long history of interaction. Many scholars consider that Christianity has had a beneficial impact on efforts to study nature systematically. Conversely, the study of nature has also made contributions to our understanding of special revelation.

First, it may be useful to note that the approach to the study of nature has changed, and with it, its relationship to special revelation. Humans have studied nature from the dawn of history, but not always with the same approach taken by modern scientists. Modern science can be considered as beginning with the development of mathematical physics in the 17th century by such scientific luminaries as Galileo, Descartes, and Newton.

Although the founders of modern science generally saw nature as an expression of God’s wisdom, modern science has tended to separate God from the study of nature. By excluding any consideration of divine activity and focusing exclusively on the relationship between matter and energy, science has become increasingly secular. It is now considered inappropriate to mention God in explaining events in the cosmos. This is a change in the philosophy of science since the days when Ellen White stated that science and the Bible should be in harmony. The present refusal of scientists to acknowledge God means that modern science is no longer friendly toward the biblical record of divine activity in nature.

What Did We Expect?

Many Seventh-day Adventists, myself included, have been educated to expect harmony between science and Scripture. This expectation is based upon certain statements from the Bible, and especially from Ellen White.

To illustrate: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. . . . Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Ps. 19:1, 4, NIV).

“God is the author of science. . . . Rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other.”¹

Presumption of harmony led me, and others, to suppose that conflict between science and Scripture was only superficial, that scientific research by dedicated Christians would uncover the truth hidden by the anti-religious bias of godless scientists. And it is true that anti-religious bias has a significant impact on the attitudes of many scientists.
An example: "It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our \textit{a priori} adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen."\textsuperscript{2}

Many scientists truly have an anti-religious bias. The situation is much more complex, however, than mere bias. Even dedicated Christian scholars have been unable to develop satisfactory explanations for some of the challenges that science presents to faith in Scripture. The conflict is much more than superficial.

\textbf{Why Did Our Expectations Fail?}

How can we account for this situation? How can there be conflict when we have been told by special revelation that there should be harmony? What is a proper response to the conflict?

Many of us draw on our scholarly training to address this problem. We may say something like, “The Bible is not a textbook of science.” The implication of this statement often seems to be something like this: The Bible talks about spiritual things, while science studies the real world. Therefore, we can ignore the Bible when considering Earth history.

Many Christians find this approach unsatisfactory. One problem with this approach is that the Bible talks about the real world, too. Much of what the Bible discusses deals with God’s interaction with the world, both animate and inanimate. If God has been intimately involved in Earth history, what confidence can we have that science can find the truth by excluding any reference to the supernatural? If God has not been involved, what motivation do we have for making any effort to find harmony between science and Scripture?

Before going further, perhaps we should reconsider what inspiration has to say on the topic. Could we have misunderstood? Perhaps we have focused on the quotations that affirm our ability to discover truth, failing to balance them with quotations that point out the inadequacy of our efforts to understand the world and our tendency to place our own opinions above the information God has revealed to us.

Romans 1, for example, points out that we are disinclined to accept the evidence that God has plainly shown us in nature: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse" (vs. 20, NRSV).

The accuracy of this statement is reflected in the quotation cited above from Richard Lewontin. But this is not the only problem. Consider the following quotations from Ellen White (who has a great deal to say about God and nature):
"The most difficult and humiliating lesson that man has to learn is his own inefficiency in depending upon human wisdom, and the sure failure of his efforts to read nature correctly. . . . of himself he cannot interpret nature without placing it above God."³

This does not sound as though we should expect harmony between science and Scripture. Maybe we need to revisit her writings to see if we have correctly understood what she is trying to tell us. When Ellen White wrote about science agreeing with Scripture, she was using science with a meaning different from the way it is commonly used today. Today, the word science is understood as referring strictly to material causes. Spiritual or non-material causes are specifically and explicitly excluded. Ellen White had a term for such an approach to the study of nature: "False science is something independent of God."⁴

Since modern science, by majority definition, excludes any explanation involving God, it does not represent the approach that Ellen White meant when she said science and Scripture should agree. Thus, we cannot legitimately apply Ellen White’s statements of expected harmony to the current, completely secular, nature of science. We need to look further into her statements to find a more realistic expectation.

What Should We Expect?

Many of us have expected science and Scripture to be in harmony, and we have quoted Ellen White in support, but this is based on a highly selective reading of her messages. Due to the totally secular nature of modern science itself, conflict seems inevitable.

"I have been warned that henceforth we shall have a constant contest. Science, so-called, and religion will be placed in opposition to each other, because finite men do not comprehend the power and greatness of God."⁵

Such quotations have forced me to re-evaluate my expectation that “science” and Scripture will agree. I now recognize that conflict is to be expected, especially when science attempts to explain an event in which God acted in direct ways with which we are unfamiliar. Since Scripture emphasizes such divine activity, we can expect frequent conflict between the modern, secular practice of science and the record of divine activity in Scripture. This conflict is especially acute with regard to the biblical record of past events that cannot be scientifically tested and confirmed. This problem greatly complicates the potential of science to contribute to creation theory.

Three Classic Cases

Despite the difficulties noted above, the study of nature has revealed much that has contributed to our understanding of Scripture. One way this has been accomplished is by clarifying certain terms in Scripture by narrowing the range of possibilities that seem consistent with observation. There are famous examples in which biblical interpretation has been clarified through the study of nature.

1. The Flat Earth Myth. Some scholars have claimed that the Bible teaches the Earth is flat, although this claim has been refuted.⁶ The Bible does use language that permits the interpretation
that the Earth is flat. Isaiah 11:12 and Revelation 7:1 refer to the Earth as though it has four corners. On the other hand, Isaiah 40:22 refers to the circle of the Earth. It seems the biblical text is ambiguous on the question of the shape of the Earth. (No circle has four corners, though neither is a circle necessarily spherical.)

According to Jeffrey Russell, the notion that the Bible teaches the Earth is flat was popularized by the overtly anti-biblical writing of Washington Irving and Andrew Dickson White in the 19th century. According to these authors, Columbus had to fight against this biblical error in order to gain approval for his voyage to the New World. This legend is false.

Very few scholars of the Middle Ages actually believed the Earth was flat, and neither Columbus nor his contemporaries were among them. A few early Christians held a view of a flat Earth, but leading Christian and Greek thinkers from the fourth century A.D. onward have favored a spherical Earth.

In the case of the shape of the Earth, science has contributed to our understanding of creation by clarifying a point that the Bible left ambiguous.

2. The Geocentric Universe Error. A second example is the famous story of Galileo and the geocentric universe. In this case, Bible believers actually did claim that the Bible teaches the centrivity of the Earth. This belief was apparently supported by texts describing the sun as “going down” (e.g., Gen. 15:12, NASB). These texts, and others, seemed to suggest the interpretation that the Earth is the center of the universe.

Science has shown otherwise. The Earth is not even the center of our Solar System, much less the center of the universe. The popular interpretation of the text was shown to be incorrect. (The Earth does function as the center of existence for observers living on its surface. Technically, one can choose any point of reference one wishes for the center of the universe, but the Earth makes a very awkward and inconvenient choice from the standpoint of studying the cosmos.)

The solution to this problem is to recognize that the Bible writers recorded events as they were perceived at the time, without the broader perspective available to people living today. In this case, science has contributed to our understanding that the language of the Bible may be phenomenological rather than analytical.

3. The Extra-biblical Error of Fixity of Species. A third example concerns the notion of fixity of species. Some creationists have taught that species do not change appreciably, but are relatively fixed in their structure and characteristics. Although this concept is not taught in Scripture, the phrase “according to their kinds” (e.g., Gen. 1:24) has been used in its support.

Charles Darwin, who was trained in theology at Cambridge, was apparently taught fixity of species. In an 1844 letter to Joseph Hooker, he commented that asserting that species might change was like “confessing a murder.” The inference that species were fixed was justified theologically by arguing that to admit that species have changed would be to imply that God’s creation was so imperfect that He had to make adjustments from time to time.

However, the idea of fixity of species is not derived from the Bible. There is nothing in Scripture
that teaches either that the creation is now in the same condition as when it was created, or that species cannot change. What really happened in this case was that an idea from secular Greek philosophy, Plato’s typological thinking, was incorporated into Christian theology, and the Bible was then interpreted as teaching it. Thus, it could be claimed that science supports the Bible.

Later changes in scientific thinking resulted in what appeared to be conflict between science and Scripture, but was actually conflict between the old and new ways of practicing science.

In this case, science has contributed to our understanding of creation by showing that species are not immutable, but can change. This example provides a strong warning against incorporating non-biblical ideas into Christian theology and then claiming they are taught by the Bible. Although we welcome harmony between the two approaches to knowledge, the Bible does not depend on scientific support.

In each of these three examples, science has corrected or clarified ideas that were claimed to be biblical. In the first case, the problem was largely invented by anti-biblical writers and has been debunked. In the second case, the problem was real, but a satisfactory solution has been found in the realization that Bible writers may have used ordinary language, not technical language, to describe what they saw or to illustrate their point. In the third case, the problem was caused by incorporation of extra-biblical ideas into Christian doctrine. We would be wise to remember these examples as we study the relationship of science and Scripture today. Some problems may be spurious, some resolvable, and some legitimate.

Contributions to Creation Theory From Scientific Discoveries

The idea that nature shows signs of a purposeful creation is an old one. Many Bible writers saw God’s hand in nature. Today, this concept may be expressed in the term “Intelligent Design.” Several discoveries in science have been interpreted as examples of intelligent design.

*Fine-tuning of the Universe.* The continued existence of a habitable universe depends on the specific properties of matter and energy. For example, the fundamental forces are balanced against one another in such a way that complex molecules can form and persist, yet they can also react and undergo chemical changes. The chemical bonds are strong enough to preserve molecules, yet weak enough to permit them to change. If the strength of chemical bonding forces were not balanced properly, life as we know it would be impossible.

Numerous other examples could be given to illustrate the precise balance of the fundamental forces and physical constants. A number of authors have discussed this topic.9 The point is that nature is so finely tuned that Intelligent Design seems a much more plausible explanation than chance. This finding of science supports the literal interpretation of biblical texts that state that the heavens were created by God for a purpose.

*The Temporality of the Universe.* Science has discovered evidence that seems to indicate that the universe is not eternal, but that it had a beginning.10 This raises the question: How did the universe begin? Experimental evidence does not produce any answer to this question. Especially
when one takes into account the fine-tuning mentioned above, the possibility of Intelligent Design is a reasonable hypothesis to account for the origin of the universe. This discovery supports the literal interpretation of biblical texts that claim God created the starry heavens.

**Irreducible Complexity of Life.** Living organisms are exceedingly complex. This complexity extends to the smallest unit of life, the cell. The simplest living cell contains hundreds of complex molecules of specific composition, none of which has been observed to form in abiotic systems. Living cells are irreducibly complex, in that there exists some minimum complement of molecules required for life. This complement is irreducible because it cannot be reduced without killing the cell.

The origin of life is universally recognized as an unsolved problem for a materialistic worldview. Many books and papers have been written about this problem. The irreducible complexity and specified information found in living cells are characteristics of intelligent activity. The discovery that cells are extremely complex, information-rich systems has contributed to creation theory by supporting the inference drawn from the Bible that all life owes its origin to God's creative activity.

**Polyphyly.** Polyphyly means having separate ancestries. The claim of polyphyly is that living organisms have descended from numerous ancestors of independent origins. The opposite view is monophyly, which is the claim that all organisms have descended from the same original ancestor.

There are two lines of evidence for polyphyly. First and foremost is the evidence from selection experiments. Scientists have raised, manipulated, and tested thousands of generations of bacteria, and hundreds of generations of fruit flies, mice, and other species. Results show that existing anatomical structures may vary considerably, but new structures do not form. Claims by evolutionary scientists that long periods of time are sufficient to generate new body types are merely claims and cannot serve as evidence. The actual evidence in hand indicates limits to change and implies numerous lineages with separate ancestries.

A second line of evidence comes from the pattern of morphological gaps in the fossil record. The morphological gap between two similar species, such as a horse and a zebra or donkey, is quite small, and the number of intermediate evolutionary steps is quite small. But the morphological gap between a horse and a grasshopper is enormous, and the number of intermediate evolutionary steps should be extremely large. The probability of finding an intermediate between species in the horse family should be quite low, since there are only a small number of intermediate steps. Yet many species of fossil horses are known, and evolutionists feel they have a fairly good record of the evolution of the horse. In contrast, the probability of finding some evolutionary intermediates between a horse and a grasshopper seems quite large, since so many intermediate steps are required. Yet there are no intermediates linking the two phyla chordata and arthropoda. If chordates and arthropods have separate ancestries, as appears to be the case, there cannot be any evolutionary intermediates between the horse and the grasshopper.

Fossil intermediates are most notably absent among the groups with the largest morphological differences—the phyla—and most notably present among groups with small morphological differences—within families. 11
As others have noted, scientific evidence can also be used to argue for monophyly. Patterns of similarities in DNA sequences, the near universality of the basic chemical processes in all living cells, and the sequence of fossils are all used to argue for monophyly. All this evidence, however, is circumstantial rather than direct, and is consistent with polyphyly as well. The most compelling evidence is directly observable in the resistance to major morphological change observed in selection experiments.

Although the evidence is mixed, science has provided substantial evidence of the existence of numerous lineages with separate ancestries. This evidence has contributed to creation theory by supporting the interpretation of Genesis 1 as indicating the discrete creation of numerous different groups of organisms.

**Human Uniqueness.** Humans stand apart as qualitatively distinct from the rest of creation in certain ways, principally in the development of their minds. Humans seem to be the only species with the capacity for intelligent speech, abstract thought, religious worship, a sense of right and wrong, and artistic creativity.

Physiological and morphological similarities of humans to other creatures have been used as an argument for human descent from more primitive primates. Some circumstantial evidence is consistent with this claim, but empirical evidence does not support the notion that organisms develop capacities beyond what they need for survival. For example, natural selection does not seem capable of driving the evolution of the human mind to develop capacities that are of no immediate use, yet human intelligence seems far greater than is necessary for survival.

Scientific confirmation of the uniqueness of the human mind contributes to creation theory by supporting the interpretation of human creation with mental capacities implied by what the Bible refers to as “the image of God” (Gen. 1:27, NIV).

**Catastrophism.** Scientists have discovered evidence of many impacts by extraterrestrial objects that caused devastation on the Earth. In some cases, the devastation appears to have been global and is associated with the disappearance of large numbers of now-extinct species from the fossil record. Before acceptance of extraterrestrial impacts in the scientific community, the idea of global catastrophe was emphatically rejected. Now global catastrophism is recognized as part of the history of our Earth.

Creationists generally regard the fossil record as resulting largely from the effects of a global flood. Discovery of large numbers of impact craters has brought the realization that the Flood must have been much more violent and much more complex than what would be envisioned merely from the effects of ordinary storm activity. A series of extraterrestrial impacts may have provided a major mechanism for the destruction of the Earth. The intermittent nature of extraterrestrial impacts might provide a mechanism for the stepwise pattern of deposition seen in the geological record. Thus, science has contributed to creation theory by showing that the Earth has been subjected to global catastrophic activity, although the supernatural causes of these events places them into conflict with the secular philosophy of modern science.
Science has produced discoveries in several areas that have contributed to creation theory, in many cases supporting the biblical teaching of supernatural Intelligent Design. These examples make it seem more reasonable to accept other claims in Scripture of divine activity in Earth history.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This has been only a brief sampling of this topic, but perhaps enough has been said to permit some lessons to be identified.

● Seventh-day Adventists have frequently overemphasized the expectation of harmony between science and Scripture. We have often failed to recognize properly the contrast between the secular nature of science and the supernatural nature of Earth history as described in the Bible. This has left many of us unprepared when we are faced with conflict where we expected none. We would benefit from a greater realization that the secular presuppositions of science, as presently practiced, will always stand in tension with the supernatural viewpoint of Scripture. Somehow, our church members, especially those exposed to scientific training, need a greater appreciation of this reality.

● Study of Scripture and the study of nature can shed light on each other. Science has discovered evidence that has clarified some ambiguities in Scripture, such as the shape of the Earth and its relationship to the Sun. Other scientific evidence indicates that nature is not a closed system. There are gaps in the economy of nature, most famously in the origin of the universe, the origin of life, and the origin of the phyla. The nature of these gaps and their relationship to known regularities in nature suggest intelligent activity. If so, then a complete view of Earth history must include an awareness of supernatural activity and a willingness to go beyond materialism in developing theories of Earth history.

● We must be careful how we allow science and theology to influence each other. The relationship of science and faith is complex rather than simple.

We must be cautious when encountering simplistic scientific claims, either for or against the Bible. On the one hand, we should resist the temptation to use scientific discoveries as justification for rejecting Scripture. We must not permit our faith to be the hostage of science. We will always have to make some choices based on faith rather than empirical evidence.

On the other hand, we should resist the temptation to use scientific discoveries as justification for believing Scripture. Science does not provide simple answers to our questions about Earth history. Too often, we have rushed to adopt some preliminary scientific report as proof that the Bible is true. The Bible does not depend on science to justify its statements.

As mentioned earlier, conflict arose over the geocentric universe because the major group of Christians adopted a specific view of cosmology based on extra-biblical ideas that were culturally dominant at the time. Later, when different extra-biblical ideas achieved cultural dominance, the view previously adopted by Christians came into conflict with the newer view. Similarly, fixity of species was a concept derived from extra-biblical sources and incorporated into Christian theology. When new extra-biblical sources gained cultural dominance, the older ideas were discarded. Since
Christians had attached their theology to these old ideas, Christian theology suffered significant loss.

We must not incorporate extra-biblical sources in our system of faith. For example, we should beware of incorporating into our faith any particular model of the Flood. Another example is the trend among many Christians to accept evolution as God’s method of creating. The evolutionary tenets of common ancestry and death before sin do not have any biblical support and have implications that undermine the basic biblical message of salvation by faith. Hopefully, we can profit from the lessons of history and resist any potential pressure to incorporate theistic evolution or similar theories into our theology.

Science has at times contributed to creation theory by clarifying certain ambiguous biblical texts and by supporting the inference that God is active in nature. Yet science does not affirm everything the Bible says about nature, nor does it have the tools to do so. Our faith in Scripture must rest on our confidence that it is God’s special revelation. We must not permit science to determine whether we shall or shall not accept the teachings of Scripture.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

Because Seventh-day Adventists have long considered themselves the “people of the Book,” the Adventist student of Scripture would include scholars, administrators, educators of all levels and disciplines, writers and editors, church board members, youth directors, Sabbath school teachers—any, in fact, who would be included among the priesthood of believers.

As such, our duties and responsibilities in relation to the message, mission, and unity of the church are both definable and elusive. On the one hand, we intuit what they are. On the other hand, we sometimes differ on the meaning of those duties and responsibilities. Even if consensus existed, there would always be difficulty communicating them.

Sometimes we don’t consider—let alone articulate—the deeper level of these duties and responsibilities. We could easily spend time listing the obvious and more measurable tasks and duties of interpreting Scripture: instruction and classroom pedagogy, scholarly research and publishing, speaking in behalf of, consulting, or critiquing the church, penetration of influential social spheres, even constructing a systematic interpretation of the vision and conviction of biblical faith.

However, a more intangible perspective is often forgotten or overlooked regarding matters of stewardship, biblical focus, character, and worldview.

The greatest challenge of Seventh-day Adventist theology today lies precisely in these issues. Our great need is more a matter of character and spirit, biblical focus and measure, attitude and frame of reference, than in creative thinking, solid scholarship, and academic freedom.

God has blessed His church with able thought leaders who are profoundly skilled to deal with both Scripture and the issues His people face. There is creative thinking and solid scholarship, as well as great freedom in which to work with new ideas and press new frontiers consonant with our Seventh-day Adventist faith. Yet, the power and effective influence of their theological work is diminished in proportion to how these deeper, more intangible issues are realized in their personal (and shared) experience and seen as a fundamental baseline of their duties and responsibilities.

In the midst of outlining some very tangible duties and responsibilities of the church’s first-century thought leaders, the Apostle Paul reminds Timothy of the deeper intangibles of his role as a young leader of the church. In the fourth chapter of 2 Timothy, he tells of a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3). “They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (vs. 4, NIV). They will tune out what they don’t wish to hear and follow teachers who say what they want to hear.
In every period of Christian history there have been times when there has been refusal to listen to sound doctrine. We know that apostasy, which Paul envisioned, happened very early in Christian history and was even at work in his day (2 Thess. 2:3-7; Acts 20:28-31). But this implies that as history proceeds toward its consummation, the situation will grow worse.

*Who will have a passion for the biblical truth when I am gone? What will happen to the gospel?* These were questions that dominated and vexed Paul’s mind as he lay in chains, and to which he addressed himself in his second letter to Timothy. Already in his first letter, Paul had pleaded that Timothy keep safe “what has been entrusted to [his] care” in terms of biblical truth and understandings (1 Tim. 6:20, NIV). But after his first letter, the situation had worsened and the apostle’s appeal thus became more urgent. So he reminds Timothy that the precious gospel was now committed to him (2 Tim. 1:13, 14), and that it was now his turn to assume responsibility for it, to defend it against attack and falsification, and to ensure its accurate transmission to future generations.

In this second letter to Timothy we find a seasoned leader mentoring a younger leader for the theological realities ahead. In the process we catch a glimpse of how such theological realities impact the nature, message, and mission of the Church. Looking over Paul’s shoulder as he engages Timothy, we see some of what both the tangible and intangible duties and responsibilities of the Seventh-day Adventist leader entail.

It should be noted that Paul’s thoughts to Timothy (as with other New Testament writers) reflects somewhat of an apologetic tone. He is assertive and defining, unequivocating and direct. We should not be embarrassed or ashamed of a similar posture, or retreat from it. Yet, like Paul, we must avoid being negatively critical.

Rather, we must be proactive, articulating positive things. When Paul writes apologetically, he is not attacking anyone, per se. He was not putting anyone down, though he did drop some names, identify theological trends, and describe the kind of teachers whose motives and integrity must be questioned (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-13).

He simply understood human nature. He knew how average church members living in a real world with real bodies and with real pressure from their contemporary culture, think, struggle, react. Paul had a realistic grasp of how things can and will go morally and spiritually in individual lives and in the life of the church. He knew that specific moral and spiritual matters must be addressed with candor and clarity. In effect, Paul modeled how the leader must be assertive, positive, defining. He recognized how human nature and weakness, and the power of contemporary culture, can encapsulate human beings into a distinctive worldview.

The leader must critique and warn as well as build up. But theological critique or warning must never undermine biblical faith or put others down—even theological enemies. People are not to be driven from error but drawn to the truth in all its beauty. The leader’s responsibility is that of building up even when he or she is compelled to be critical. It is to be constructive. Creative. Positive. Defining. Yet, as with Paul in the early church, these will always take place in an uneasy context.
“God still wishes in these days,” wrote John Calvin, “to build his spiritual temple amidst the anxieties of the times; the faithful have still to hold the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other, . . . because the building of the Church must still be united with many contests.”

It is not difficult to sense that the day of itching ears, of which Paul informed Timothy, is upon us even now. No other passage of Scripture describes more accurately the day in which we live. If this is so, like Paul and Timothy, the Seventh-day Adventist leader works within the context of the anxieties of our eschatological times and the struggle for minds and hearts in the Great Controversy. It is from this perspective that our duties and responsibilities are set and ultimately defined. It is a perspective that reminds us that we work within an uneasy context. There is need for the theological enterprise and faith-affirming theology.

**Stewardship**

When Paul exhorts the young Timothy, in regard to his duties and responsibilities, they are envisioned as “stewardship.” Timothy is to “guard” (keep safe, protect, defend) what has been entrusted to his care (1 Tim. 6:20, NIV). There is a “pattern” (model, example, outline) of sound words and teaching that Timothy had received from his mentor (Paul)—a pattern from God’s Word and the things He has revealed in His Word about Himself, our human condition, salvation, how we are to live, last things, etc. (2 Tim. 1:13, 14).

Elsewhere, Paul asserted that the church’s thought leaders are servants of Christ and “stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1, 2, NKJV). Overseers are “steward[s] of God” (Titus 1:7, NKJV). Paul envisions such stewardship to be practically expressed in activities like preaching the Word, being ready in season and out of season, reproving, rebuking, exhorting with great patience and instruction, enduring hardship, doing the work of an evangelist, fulfilling the ministry we have been called to perform (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). All this is in the context of the challenges to individual and corporate life and faith.

More specifically, in Paul’s thinking, the church is steward of the Word of God—steward of the truth: “If I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15, NKJV). The church is the repository of the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2; Heb. 5:12). Ultimately, stewardship includes that of biblical truth!

This does not mean that either the church or its theologians “have” the truth. Truth does not belong to the church. Truth is revealed by the One who is the Truth. Thus, the church is a receiver and conduit. But it is also constituted by truth, changed by it, and holds it in sacred trust to the extent that truth flows from it to the world. The church is granted the privilege of seeing truth (or parts of it, at least), understanding it, being transformed by it, proclaiming it, teaching it, being possessed by it. Truth is based on Scripture as Paul asserts (2 Tim. 3:16, 17; cf. 4:2-4; John 17:17). The church is the pillar and ground of truth when it stewards the truth God has entrusted to it. This is the nature and mission of the church.
Timothy was to hold fast the pattern of right teaching and to guard carefully what had been entrusted to him (2 Tim. 1:13, 14). Evidently, something has been entrusted to the church, to us. We have been given a pattern of truth. A pattern of sound teaching. A gospel DNA, so to speak. The idea of truth or a pattern of doctrine means dealing with ideas—ideas and words that are concrete, objective, propositional. As ideas or words, truth can be spoken, heard, written down, read, and kept. It is everywhere assumed in Scripture that these words and ideas of truth carry understandable form, content, and—most important—meaning. True words can be relied on because they are in accord with reality. These true words encompass right action (ethically correct behavior) as well as correct knowledge.

These Epistles to Timothy (as well as that to Titus) are important because of the wealth of information they contain concerning theology and how it relates to the practical matters of church life and organization—its nature, mission, and unity. Timothy was to know and articulate “how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). The conduct Paul envisioned includes public worship, the selection and qualifications of church leaders, the pastor’s personal life and public ministry, how one confronts sin in the church, the role of women, the care of widows, and how to handle money. There are also important doctrinal truths about Scripture, salvation, and Christ. In 1 Timothy, Paul gives instruction concerning false doctrine (1:3-20), life within the church (2:1–3:16), false teachers (4:1-16), pastoral responsibilities (5:1–6:2), and the man of God (6:3-21). These all fall under the umbrella of stewardship.

Corresponding to these earlier themes, 2 Timothy outlines elements of a strong spiritual life, the dangers of false teaching, standing against apostasy, the centrality and work of Scripture, faithful preaching, and faithful evangelistic ministry. The core message of 2 Timothy is “guarding the gospel”—which, in the context of Paul’s thinking, had to do with “truth.” Again, these very practical perspectives would be included in stewardship.

Theology then, is the fundamental framework and impulse for such practical application. There is no competition between the two. Theology anticipates application, and application demands theological grounding and direction. As such, application is often the occasion in which theology is consciously expressed and clarified in terms of implications for life’s necessities and culture’s context.

Such theology presupposes the teaching church. Teaching is always going on within the church. It defines “true” doctrine, life, and practice. It bases and examines the doctrinal content of what is being taught within the church.

“Theology is a function of the Church.” Theology is the task of criticizing (in a constructive way) and revising the church’s language about God. This does not mean, however, that the theological enterprise changes the church’s teaching about God or the Word of God. But it does mean that there can be no theology without the church. Theology is done in the framework of the church.

More specifically, the theologian “is always the theologian of a particular church. He receives the truth in her communion, shares her convictions, and promises to teach and propagate her values as long as they do not prove to be contrary to the Word of God.” These teachings constitute a bias,
and this is perfectly acceptable. No one ever does theology without any presuppositions. Every Bible student entering upon this theological task has certain convictions that he or she cannot set aside at will. One cannot eliminate oneself.

This is assumed of any Seventh-day Adventist reader of Scripture as well: that he or she is possessed by the DNA of biblical Adventism and works within its organizing reality. Theology must be conducted within Seventh-day Adventist distinctives and their corresponding confessional context.

Furthermore, this stewardship means that mission and theology go together. True theology should move the church to mission. It is with this in mind that Paul exhorts the young theologian Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Theology must give birth to (as well as arise out of) and serve the goal of the church’s mission and work in the world. Furthermore, it must facilitate that mission. Students of Scripture must envision themselves as evangelists with persuasive purposes if they are to feed the church’s mission.

As Miroslav Kiš notes, as a “pillar and bulwark of truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15) the church has the right to expect all those who hold leading positions or who teach in her name to do everything in their power to defend her teachings (2 Tim. 4:1-5). As a body of Christ (Col. 1:18), the church has the right to expect that every member, especially its thought leaders, will remain united and loyal to her call, her message, and her mission.”

As a steward of God’s truth, the church has the right to decide who can be her spokesperson, who she can teach in her name (Titus 1:10, 11). “If a brother is teaching error, those who are in responsible positions ought to know it; and if he is teaching truth, they ought to take their stand at his side. We should all know what is being taught among us; for if it is truth, we need it. We are all under obligation to God to know what He sends us.”

The church reserves the right to watch with diligence over interpretation, teaching, and preaching of that Word, lest strange worldviews and private agendas influence the minds of its ministry and, through it, its membership (Titus 2:7, 8).

For the church to steward the truth with which it has been entrusted, it needs leaders who faithfully steward that very trust. As the essence of life is not ownership but stewardship—the faithful management of all that God entrusts to us—so the theologian’s duties and responsibilities are one of stewardship. He or she is faithfully to manage (interpret, teach, guard, proclaim, etc.) the biblical truths God entrusts to His church. Stewardship has to do with the theologian’s vision and influence, his or her commitment and mind. There is more here than mere articles of faith. Stewardship has to do with shared vision, with heart, attitude, and spirit.

Fundamentally, the duties and responsibilities of Seventh-day Adventist leaders are faith-affirming, constructive, and current. The Adventist leader—as a theologian—is a steward of truth and a resource for the church. He or she probes the deep things of God to assure there is only one theology in the church. The theology of the leaders, pastors, and parishioners should be the same as that of the seminary scholars and theologians.

**Biblical Focus**
Ultimately, the theologian’s use of the Word of God is integral to his or her stewarding truth on behalf of the church. Paul’s assertions regarding the inspiration and practical nature of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-18) serve as an interpretive hinge between his two assertions regarding the moral/spiritual dysfunction and theological needs that the church will face (vss. 1-13; 4:1-8). The passage 2 Timothy 3:14-18 about the inspiration and authority of Scripture is sandwiched between 2 Timothy 3:1-13 and 4:1-8 about moral/spiritual dysfunction and theological needs. Each passage places the others in context. Here Paul’s language is both fluid and informative. Scripture (3:16), what is taught (3:16; 4:2), the Word (4:2), sound teaching (4:3), and truth (4:4) are nearly synonymous. Scripture, Word, and truth are linked (cf. 2:15). What is taught (doctrine, theology) flows from this matrix if it is to be sound.

For Paul, theology is biblical teaching, and biblical teaching includes applying Scripture to life. Scripture is the Word that is to be preached, and the truth that is to be articulated flows from the inspired writings. This biblical focus is what causes itching ears and the desire for accommodating theology, which Paul asserted is inevitable. There will be individuals unable to tolerate sound biblical teaching, who yearn for an easier theology. They will be inclined to turn aside to mere human constructions reflecting their own values (4:3, 4).

Whenever the Word is applied, it demands response and decision, and this calls for radical change. People of Paul’s day as well as contemporary humanity want to be freed from the doctrinal and ethical absolutes of Scripture. Theological trends in our age are attributable to the increasing infection with the same quest for freedom, with the arrogance of human self-sufficiency.

In Paul’s understanding, doctrine (theology, what was taught and preached) was drawn from the Word of truth (Scripture). In outlining concrete doctrine, he was simply integrating and assuming the basic elements or principles of Scripture. Theology thus integrates Scripture. It brings together the kaleidoscope of scriptural statements on any subject to show their common pattern. It identifies the great unifying themes underlying biblical passages, and shows how any particular passage illustrates such a theme. To study theologically is not to dispense with Scripture, but to become so immersed in it that its common themes and patterns begin to emerge.

This is what Paul envisions for the young Timothy when he speaks of “correctly [handling] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, NIV). A clear path of truth from the “word of truth” (Scripture) is to be articulated in correctly teaching and following God’s message. Like a laser focusing on some specified purpose (rather than mere dispersion of a floodlight), the theologian focuses Scripture’s meaning so that it penetrates or pinpoints or illumines or guides or cuts.

Without compromise, Adventism takes the principles of sola scriptura and prima scriptura to their logical conclusion. No tradition, no creed, no belief is recognized unless supported by a clear “thus saith the Lord.” However, another method continually challenges our posture. Rather than sola scriptura, there is the press to bring together Scripture, science, reason, and experience so that these four entities have equal validity—in effect, four equal votes. Sola scriptura, of course, does not discount reason, experience, or science. They each have an important and authoritative voice.
However, *sola scriptura* demands that the Bible becomes the hermeneutic—the lens—for evaluating data from every other source.

As Fernando Canale asserts, the Seventh-day Adventist theologian’s “commitment to the *sola-tota scriptura* principle requires a departure from the traditional multiple sources of theological matrix and the hermeneutical guide drawn from philosophical and scientific ontologies.”\(^6\) This is a critique that evangelical scholars themselves are beginning to sound.

Ben Witherington suggests that what passes as theology in the church’s proclamation shows not merely glaring weaknesses but real problems of exegesis. He suggests that Evangelicalism has lost touch with its Reformation principles of *sola scriptura* and *prima scriptura* and in particular with its rigorous attention to details of the Bible and the need to stick to the text. “The problem with Evangelical theology at this juncture,” Witherington asserts, “is that it is not nearly biblical enough.”\(^7\) Here we find the major reformers still dependent on the philosophical foundations of earlier theologians.

Is it possible that today’s Adventist theology is not biblical enough? That we have lost our biblical focus? That we are busy reading so much theology, even doing exegesis, that we no longer really read Scripture anymore? Every Seventh-day Adventist student of Scripture must ask these questions: “Am I truly biblically focused in my work? Do my projects lead to the Word, and are they built solidly on the Word? Am I biblical enough?”

Only Scripture has the necessary information to produce Christian theology. More pointedly, only Scripture has the necessary information to produce Seventh-day Adventist theology. “The basic elements of Christian theology [and, it could be added, Seventh-day Adventist theology],” Canale asserts, “are biblical elements, not philosophical teachings introduced later via church tradition.”\(^8\)

All theologians work their reflections using a methodology and presuppositions. The source of theological knowledge is the base on which theological methodology stands. There is need not only of the sola scriptura principle but the prima scriptura principle whereby the Adventist student of Scripture gives hermeneutical and interpretive priority to the truth of Scripture over the truths we derive through philosophical and scientific methodologies. Moreover, we criticize and understand the latter in light of the former. This is a fundamental part of the Adventist theologian’s “rightly handling the Word of truth” (ESV).

The ongoing exegesis/theology debate naturally comes into view here. Increasingly more Seventh-day Adventist thinking is being questioned and stifled today in the name of exegesis. On the other hand, so much of Adventist thought is assumed as biblical and no longer in need of closer biblical examination or further development, corrective balance, or change. In some arenas, careful biblical exegesis no longer takes place. Some of us are like the fly crawling on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel while others are the tourists looking up from 70 feet below. We are either too narrow in our perspective (exegesis) or dizzied by our trying to take in the whole (theology). From either perspective, Scripture becomes distorted or fragmented, unwittingly robbed of its voice, depth, and breadth. What we need is exegesis that informs theology and theology that guides exegesis.
Seventh-day Adventist student of Scripture will recognize the strengths and limitations of exegetical methodology, biblical theological method, and systematic theological method, and work to coordinate these respective resources in their proper priority and balance.

Ultimately, theology is biblically measured and so must be the student of Scripture. Every one of us has the capacity to distort Scripture. We are all capable of clinging to our distorted views when challenged by colleagues, or even by the plain teachings of Scripture itself.

In doing theology, anything new and creative, or deeper and richer, will we become more excited about our own ideas than about God’s Word? No matter how great the idea, if it is not biblical, it is not great at all. If readers are immersed in Scripture, any ideas they draw from it are truly never their own as if they can claim credit for them. If they ever consider theological ideas or projects as their own, apart from Scripture or the mission and message of the church, they are unwittingly detaching themselves from the humble role of a steward of Scripture and positioning themselves as authoritative.

Paul’s thoughts on theological understanding and the theologian’s ability to articulate theology adequately is instructive: “We speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words” (1 Cor. 2:13, NIV). Paul would remind us that understanding spiritual things (what’s in God’s mind and why He does what He does) is dependent on the Holy Spirit’s work on the mind of the student of Scripture. Likewise, the ability to put those spiritual things into proper words (theology) is dependent on the same Spirit. Scripture belongs to the Holy Spirit, not to the theologian. The phenomenon of Holy Scripture is a mystery.

On our own we are unable to connect with the deep spiritual things of God. We are unable to put the deep spiritual things that we may discover in our study into words that not only inform, correct, or exhort, but also to inspire spiritual response. Paul assures us that the mind of Christ can be known, plumbed, and mirrored (1 Cor. 2:16). The Adventist student of Scripture needs the Spirit to grasp spiritual themes and to find the right words to articulate those spiritual truths. This calls for humility before God and His Word. It means understanding our biases, our limitations, our spiritual journey, and our capacity to twist Scripture to our own taste. It calls for the workings of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts.

When this happens, our words (theology) will be received not as the words of human beings, but for what they truly are: the word of God, which will work powerfully in those who chose to believe (1 Thess. 2:13). Such is demanded by a generation not so sure anymore whether they are following mere Seventh-day Adventist culture and traditions and who yearn for foundations and certainty beyond just another institutionalized religion.

Seventh-day Adventist leaders are thus biblically focused, biblically measured. They give hermeneutical and interpretive priority to the truth of Scripture over the truths arrived at through philosophical and scientific methodologies. They understand that their authority and power—as well as that of the church in the world—lies in the Word of God. The church has no authority or transforming power of her own. When her theologians both understand and model this reality, she
will remain biblically focused and biblically measured, both as a corporate community and individual Christians.

**Character**

The making of theology is closely related to the making of a theologian. The theologian makes the theology, which is the outflow of a life. Theology deepens and grows spiritually and biblically because the theologian grows and deepens spiritually and biblically. The theology is full of divine anointing because the theologian is full of divine anointing.

Paul made this moral/spiritual link between the person of the theologian and the heart of theology when he wrote to the young Timothy: “You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness” (2 Tim. 3:10, NRSV). In other words, “You . . . certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is” (NLT). And again, “You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (3:14, NKJV).

You can trust the theology (what you have learned) because you know the source. Paul asserted that he and those working with him were on a higher moral and spiritual level—godly—than the evil impostors who not only deceive, but have themselves become deceived (2 Tim. 3:12, 13). The implication is that because of that, their theology (teaching) is likewise on a higher moral and spiritual level. This moral/spiritual link between theologian and theology, which Paul envisions, includes Paul himself, those working with him, many witnesses, and “trustworthy people” (NLT) who will be able to teach others adequately as Timothy extends the stewardship of the gospel to them (2:2). Even more directly, Paul exhorts the young theologian: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV).

Life and theology go hand in hand. The character of the heart determines the character of the theologian’s theology. Living theology resonates with the soul and the spiritual realities of God. Hurting theologians create a comforting theology. Offended theologians engender defensive theology. Sidelined theologians articulate independent theology. These, of course, are generalizations, yet there is more truth to these assertions than not. This is the being and doing that must be kept in balance. Not only is there the being of the church in relation to its going (doing of mission), but a being of the theologian in relation to theological work. Devotion qualifies the theologian’s duty in immeasurable ways.

Furthermore, theologians are not mere theology-makers but people-makers, theologian-makers, pastor-makers, and saint-makers. The soul of the theologian leaves its fingerprints on the soul of the church, the soul of individuals within the church (2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10, 14). Who the theologian is in personal character and spiritual life influences who the church sees herself to be in her character and spiritual life. This is how the theologian’s character and spiritual life effectively touch the church’s nature, mission, and unity.
Just as there is a moral frame of reference on the part of those with “itching ears” who are no longer able to endure sound doctrine because their values and passions draw them in another direction, there is a corresponding moral frame of reference on the part of the theologian who would preach the Word and be ready in every season to reprove and rebuke and exhort with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:2-4).

The church members’ moral/spiritual lives determine the spiritual/moral quality of theology they can either tolerate or desire. The unconverted heart prefers senseless myths rather than solid truth. “The prophets prophesy lies, . . . and my people love it this way” (Jer. 5:31, NIV). How can today’s students of Scripture rebuke or reprove or correct or exhort or lift to a higher standard if their own hearts are polluted?

There is a link between ethics and doctrine. The true nature, mission, and unity of the church call for moral/spiritual excellence on the part of its theologians because such moral/spiritual excellence is at the very heart of her nature, mission, and unity. Her leaders must both work and speak from that heart. As the church is holy, so must her theologians be; otherwise, their work and influence will unintentionally undermine (1 Thess. 2:10-13).

In speaking of the challenge of leadership formation, Ron E. M. Clouzet suggests that theological training has “overlooked the inner person of the would-be parson.” He outlines the ascetic, scholastic, encyclopedic, mentoring, and professional paradigms for ministerial training and posits how each has fallen short in nurturing moral and spiritual formation of seminary students. Studies Clouzet cites show that the preponderance of what is considered valuable for the pastor’s effectiveness in ministry is not, in fact, ministry skills or leadership skills, but character values.

This diminishing of character values accounts for the lack of power in spiritual leadership and the inability to influence a world careening to self-destruction. The challenge of leadership formation has to do with whether church members can see God in their leaders—together with spiritual passion, integrity, and power of the Holy Spirit. The challenge of theological leadership is likewise moral and spiritual formation of the inner person such that there is not only facility with divine truth, but also close communion with God and the living presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In his book Power Through Prayer, E. M. Bounds writes that “Men are God’s method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men. . . . What the church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations or more and novel methods. She needs men whom the Holy Spirit can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come upon machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.”

The same is true for theology. The church is looking for better students of Scripture. God is looking for better men and women. What the church needs today is not better theology, nor a new theology, or a theology to meet the times or culture, or more and novel theological methods. She needs men and women whom the Holy Spirit can use. Men and women of character and spiritual depth. The Holy Spirit does not flow through theology or theological systems, but through men and
women. The Holy Spirit does not anoint theology, He anoints men and women so that the theology is biblical, spiritual, empowered. God needs theologians who will live holy lives.

Peter Forsyth notes that the theologian “should first not be a philosopher but a saved man, with eternal life working in him.” Philip Hughes asserts that “The creative task of theology is, first of all, the task of the redeemed who, through the prior grace of God, have returned to the Father by the Son, and through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit have been put in tune with the mind of Christ.”

Theology that kills is often orthodox. Nothing is so dead as a dead orthodoxy. Theology can engross, harden, and estrange the heart from God by the neglect of personal moral and spiritual discipline. Students of Scripture may lose God in their theology. Thus theologians must keep their spirit in harmony with the divine nature of their high calling. Only the heart can learn to do theology, so we must do the work of the heart. The theologian is to be a praying man, a praying woman. God commits the keys of His kingdom to the leaders who understand that their own spiritual moral growth is their main business. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

Why is this so important and fundamental? Because of the deep spirituality of the theologian’s work and because the nature and mission and unity of the church demand it. And if we would move our generation for God, we must rise to a new level of “theology making” by a new level of “theologian making.” Prayer makes the man or the woman. Prayer makes the theology (as Paul exhorts Timothy and models prayer in his own life, cf., 1 Tim. 2:1, 2, 8; 2 Tim. 1:3). Every leader who does not make prayer a mighty factor in his or her own life and teaching and writing is weak as a factor in God’s work. He or she is powerless to advance God’s cause in this world.

True theology is God-touched, God-enabled, and God-made. Even divine truth has no life-giving energy alone. It must be empowered by the Holy Spirit. If the inner person has never broken down and surrendered to God and His Word, the inner life will not be a great highway for the transmission of God’s message, God’s power. It will be a spiritual nonconductor. This brings us again to the reality that the leader’s ability to articulate theology adequately is Holy Spirit dependent and thus a spiritual phenomenon: “We speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Cor. 2:13, NIV).

The Adventist leader understands how personal spirituality impacts one’s theological enterprise and the power of one’s theological influence to truly transform lives spiritually. Again, the leader makes the theology. Living theology is God-touched, God-enabled, and God-made. It is spiritually tuned to the mind of Christ. It is self-surrendered to the Word of God. The theologian’s personal life must in harmony with the moral vision of Scripture, constantly nourished on the words of faith and the sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). The theologian must be growing intellectually, spiritually, and on the issues that matter to the church. These are the duties and responsibilities of the Adventist theologian in light of the nature and message and mission of the church.

**Worldview**
In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell speaks of how some individuals are able to intuit things long before others even have a clue. How a little bit of the right knowledge can go a long way. How decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as those made cautiously and deliberately. How some snap perceptions and resulting decisions may even be the best.

Gladwell writes how our snap judgments and first impressions can be educated and controlled, and how we should take our instincts seriously and learn how to use them correctly. There is as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis. Gladwell calls this intuitive skill “thin-slicing.” Thin-slicing is the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on narrow slices of experience. It is rapid cognition that allows a person to zero in on what really matters. There is power in the glance, where one intuits the essence of something. Something one hears or sees, a tone of voice, something said or left unsaid, something done or not done.

Paul had the theologian’s intuitive skills—thin-slicing—in mind when he told Timothy to “be prepared in season and out of season” in order to reprove, rebuke, exhort (2 Tim. 4:2, NIV). The leader must read between the lines—at all times, everywhere. The leader’s preparedness—“be ready”—is not merely in the sense of a preparedness to respond (i.e., that one is up-to-date on current theological issues or knows where to find things in the Bible or in one’s library), but preparedness in the sense of being able actually to recognize what’s happening, where people are headed, what the issues are, where matters lead to their logical, theological, and experiential conclusion and what needs to be done—quickly before it’s too late.

Our biggest challenge for thin-slicing as Seventh-day Adventist leaders is all the exposure we ourselves have to evangelical thinking and theology, non-Adventist seminaries, mega-church practical application, contemporary culture, and a host of Christian literature, some that is biblical and much that is socio-psychological in perspective. We are in danger of losing our theological edge to intuit the impact on Seventh-day Adventist distinctives because some of those very distinctives have already become blurred in our thinking against the encapsulating power of these powerful realities.

The church needs for its leaders to see where things are headed. They need to know what the church is actually doing. They must intuit the implications for the nature, message, and mission of the church if lifestyle, application, music, entertainment, worship, preaching, and theology continue in certain directions. God forbid that the itching ears in our midst find in us (Seventh-day Adventist leaders) the very teachers in accordance to their own desires—however unwittingly on our part. Or that the myths they turn to are unwittingly facilitated by us—Adventist leaders. Nothing has greater potential for calling into question the nature, message, and mission of the church than the church’s own leadership.

Before we react too strongly to these assertions, we should be reminded that this theological intuition of which Paul writes, this “theological thin-slicing,” takes place against the backdrop of history and the moral/spiritual trends in history within both the Christian and secular worlds. There is
a worldview that frames Paul’s theology and his theologian-making of Timothy. Paul tells Timothy that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3, 4, NKJV). He isn’t speaking here of a general falling away—something every age experiences.

Rather, this “time” on the horizon is the apostasy within the church itself of which Paul writes about more clearly in his letters to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:3, 4). There he speaks of the “mystery of iniquity” (KJV) in the context of the church in history (vs. 7). He refers to some sinister entity working behind the scenes that can be identified (intuited, thin-sliced) but that cannot be entirely described or explained or even believed by some as really there at all. It’s a secret entity acting secretly, but which at some point in history will become visible, and when it does become visible it will still act disingenuously. It will be a known entity existing on two levels, one relatively open and benign, but serving to mask the true, hidden function. According to Paul, that evil force was already operating in a hidden way behind human activity and was determined to gain supremacy over the church. Theologians and theology would alike be involved.

More specifically, Paul’s reference to “the apostasy” in 2 Thessalonians 2 was no general apostasy. It was a direct link to the prophetic “little horn” power of apostasy we read about in Daniel 7. The flow of Paul’s ideas in 2 Thessalonians 2 follows those of Daniel 2 and 7 and also Christ’s outline of last things in Matthew 24 (where Jesus, too, refers to the Book of Daniel [see Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14]). It is evident that Paul had been explaining biblical prophecy to the Thessalonians, patterning his thinking after both Daniel and Jesus in Matthew 24 (2 Thess. 2:6).

This was no new prophecy, no new development in the scheme of things. The knowledge of the sequence of events in Daniel 2 and 7 was essential to understanding Paul’s thinking about a prolonged delay of the emergence of the antichrist because of the existence of a restraining power: “Now you know what is holding him back” (2 Thess. 2:6, NIV). The apostolic church apparently had no question about the identity of this “restraining” power (vs. 6). Given Daniel 2 and 7 and the words of Jesus in Matthew 24, believers knew that Rome would be the last major empire before the apostasy would break out in its fullness.

Young Timothy undoubtedly heard Paul speak of these things many times. Like every Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic enterprise, these were the “traditions” that new believers were to hold onto (2 Thess. 2:15). When Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions” (vs. 15, NASB), he seemed to picture a gale, in which there is danger both of being swept off one’s feet and of being wrenched from one’s handhold. In the face of this moral/spiritual hurricane force wind of apostasy, he urged them to stand their ground, planting their feet on terra firma, and clinging to something solid and secure, as if clutching for dear life. In the context of his thought, those traditions were the historical-prophetic understandings of the Book of Daniel. So, knowing what lay ahead and thin-slicing his way through the coming moral/spiritual confusion would be integral to Timothy’s theological leadership.
Paul was writing within a historical-prophetic context and understanding of reality. We refer to it as the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which has been waging through the great epochs of salvation history. Paul identified all the moral spiritual issues (ethics and theology and spiritual life) that come into play within that historical-prophetic vision. Patrick Granfield writes: "There is need for the prophet-theologian who is a prophet in the biblical sense of the word—individuals who are perceptive to both the needs of the word and the voice of God, in order to proclaim and interpret present history."13

In the Book of Revelation, we read how the dragon is angry with an end-time people who exhibit both a rhythm of obedience and a prophetic impulse (Rev. 12:17; cf., 19:10). Revelation’s vision of the saint’s clash between the dragon and a fallen world is a “prophetic conflict.” It is prophetic truth against prophetic delusion or the denial of the prophetic. Worldview is at the center of the controversy.

The dragon is angry not merely because there is a prophet in the church (how we often narrowly interpret this Seventh-day Adventist identifying passage). He is angry because of what the prophet encourages the church to accept from Revelation (and from Daniel) about Jesus and the Great Controversy between Himself and Satan—and the moral spiritual issues at stake. He is angry because there will be theologians in the church who choose to believe this apocalyptic prophecy and its defining worldview. He is angry that there will be theologians in the church who understand how the everlasting gospel is set in an apocalyptic historical-prophetic context, and how that unique setting of the gospel brings understanding and urgency to a host of biblical truths and compels decision for Christ. He is angry because these theologians understand what such a worldview says about the nature and mission and message of the church. He is angry because the church follows the lead of her theologians and gives this testimony of Jesus to a confused and bewitched world. He is angry because his cover is blown, his game plan revealed, his real motives exposed. The dragon knows the power of apocalyptic prophecy where Jesus is fully unveiled and the gospel unfolds against a Great Controversy backdrop taking place in real history and real time.

God’s remnant people find their roots and message and mission in apocalyptic prophecy—Daniel and Revelation. And so will her theologians. Revelation points toward a penetrating prophetic consciousness on the part of those on whom the dragon vents his anger. There is a driving prophetic worldview and impulse. The crisis of Seventh-day Adventist identity in contemporary times is closely linked to the loss of this prophetically defining theological vision. In this context, our duties and responsibilities take on profound and urgent significance. We are impelled by a prophetic psyche that enables defining theological vision and nurtures a clear Adventist identity. That defining vision encompasses the DNA of Adventist identity, message, and mission: a vision drawn from the books of Daniel and Revelation, the everlasting gospel, judgment, Sabbath, sanctuary, nature of humankind, creation ex nihilo, obedience to God’s covenant commandments, the prophetic gift, remnant identity, the historical-prophetic understanding of the great epochs of salvation history within the great controversy between Christ and Satan as well as the emergence of religious/moral/political apostasy.
within the church itself. This is the defining worldview that enables the Seventh-day Adventists to thin-slice a host of practical matters, including theology, fundamental beliefs, lifestyle, ethics, entertainment, music, worship, sexuality, and mission—and in doing so stay true to the church’s nature, message, and mission.

Young minds under formation need to hear a clear and certain message from their leaders. No questions without answers. No doubts that leave individuals hanging. They need to see a modeling of their mentors’ own journey and humility before the Word of God. In a time when it is easier to criticize than affirm because affirming means commitment and action, Adventist leaders must ask penetrating questions and give defining answers. Defining answers to critical questions of faith and life demand taking a position on such matters. As stewards of the heavenly vision, their influence and commitments, Seventh-day Adventist leaders—at whatever level of the church—will have purposefully taken such a personal position. They will identify with the truth articulated in those defining answers.

For the sake of the nature and mission and message of the church, the church’s leadership must be willing to take a position, take a stand, sound a certain trumpet. The Seventh-day Adventist leader must be assertive, positive, defining. He or she must thin-slice for the sake of the church. Such theological instruction, nurture, and guidance, however, must be done (as per Paul) with patience, compassion, and love (2 Tim. 4:2; Eph. 4:15).

The reality of theological thin-slicing is that leaders intuit matters that their colleagues may not be able to see, at least at first. Leaders who do this correctly on a matter may themselves be in need of being thin-sliced by their colleagues on a matter they may not be aware of in their own positions and assertions. Theologians, then, must come alongside one another and listen to what their colleagues see or hear or intuit as theological reality—from both a critical and a constructive perspective.

There are moments when every theologian needs corrective thin-slicing from his or her colleagues or the church. There are moments, too, when others intuit the far-reaching contribution or perceptive direction of a theologian’s ideas or projects better than the one articulating it at the time and need to come alongside with words of encouragement. It’s about holding one another accountable and encouraging one another in stewardship of theological responsibility to the church.

Being open to the thin-slicing of one’s peers demands a stewardship of submission not only to the nature, mission, and message of the church, but also to one another as thought leaders within the church. In this way, the Holy Spirit enables organic corrective empowerment, synthesis of thought, passion, and defining vision. This calls for a humility and mutual submission of purpose and thought in behalf of one another and the church. The combining of our thinking and coming into line with one another as well as pushing the edge with one another will enable a vibrancy for the church that is needed for the church to fulfill its mission in the world—especially as the church becomes increasingly younger and conservative. This closing of ranks and faith-affirming theology on the cutting edge, together with a prophetic-impulsed thin-slicing, enables the church to remain properly
oriented toward the open future it faces.

It is in this way that the Seventh-day Adventist leaders serve as sentinels as well as stewards. They are watching from the walls: looking both within (into the church) and without (into the world), cutting a straight line (2 Tim. 2:15). They are thin-slicing: understanding the times and the issues. This will enable them to clear thinking theologically, emotionally, psychologically, morally, spiritually—in terms of the pattern of truth and prophetic vision of things—in all situations (4:5). They must not bend under the pressures of the times. Nor should they be influenced by the murmuring of frightened or demanding leaders or lay people.

Worldview is a fundamental perspective and tool in leaders’ theological duties and responsibilities. It enables them to stay on their feet and steady the church in the anxiety of confusing and challenging times. It enables them to steady others with calm assurance in the Word of truth and where God is leading His people through the sure word of prophecy (2 Peter 1:19).

Seventh-day Adventist leaders will be able to affirm that the pattern of truth entrusted to us will still be the truth—today, tomorrow, the day after, during earth’s final moments, and when Jesus comes, because truth never dies. They will be able to affirm a heavenly sanctuary and that it isn’t going anywhere just because some say it doesn’t really exist. They will be able to affirm a pre-advent judgment that is still going on. God still hates pride. Humanity continues to be born in sin. We must still be born again. Dead folk are still dead. Christ is still our only Savior. Lifestyle matters. None but the righteous shall see God. Our prophetic message is still valid and very much relevant. The Creation account is more than theological or metaphorical.

Anyone who stands around waiting for the truth to change is exactly like the rest of Christianity who want the Sabbath to change and Creation to change and lifestyle matters to change. But the Word of God with its sure word of prophecy (2 Peter 1:19) clarifies and prioritizes the issues: Sabbath/Sunday, spiritualism, sensuality, Scripture, soul (nature of humankind, state of the dead), Creation, sanctuary, Second Coming, Spirit of Prophecy, Christian values and lifestyle, salvation by faith alone.

Thought leaders for the Seventh-day Adventist church are not their own. Everything that they are and do is consecrated to Him.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

5. Gospel Workers, pp. 300, 301.
Mission of God's People in the Old Testament

God’s great commission truly began in the Garden of Eden.

Jirí Moskala

When God calls His people into existence, He gives them a mission. There were no Old Testament people of God without a mission; there is no election without a commission. God’s call presupposes a call for action. Biblical theology is a mission-oriented theology.

The Hebrew Scripture knows nothing about an election for salvation but knows an election for mission (Ex. 3:7-10; 7:1, 2; 19:5, 6; Jer. 1:5). The mission and the message of the Old Testament people, even though both issues can be separated, belong firmly together. The mission includes the proclamation of the message.¹

Some scholars, however, argue that in the Old Testament there is no specific call to evangelize the world. Eckhard J. Schnabel, for example, challenges Old Testament scholars, theologians, and missiologists by claiming that there is no commission in the Old Testament (in contrast to the New Testament) to go and evangelize the world. Abraham, Israel, and others, Schnabel says, were only passive witnesses for God, a light to the world, but not actually engaged in mission per se. He argues that there was nothing like an active programmatic plan to proclaim God’s message to the whole world during the times of Israel’s monarchy or intertestamental Judaism; thus, they did not engage in mission.²

In response to this claim, one must first acknowledge that the modern reader of the Hebrew Scripture might have different questions and expectations than one can readily find answered in the biblical text because the basic characteristic of the Old Testament is that of a storybook with a metanarrative on salvation. It is neither a handbook on mission with a philosophy, nor a blueprint for a programmatic missiological behavior. Also, the biblical language and imagery employed in regard to the mission are different from what we use today.

One should not be surprised to find a lack of direct commands to mission, but instead there are stories in which are expressed hints and observations as well as some explicit statements that uncover the mission of God’s people in Hebrew Scripture. These incidental expressions witness about the mission strategy in a different form, and they are not as straightforward as one could wish.

In addition, the metanarrative of the Old Testament unfolds only progressively God’s universal plan for the whole world. It helps to realize that God had a global plan, a blueprint for the people of God to fulfill, but it has not always been plainly perceived. Christopher Wright fittingly states that "the mission of God is to bless all nations on earth. . . . Israel in the Old Testament was not chosen over against the rest of the nations, but for the sake of the rest of the nations."³ God’s plan for humanity...
can be expressed by the statement found in Isaiah: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22).4

David J. Bosch wittily states: “If there is a missionary in the Old Testament, it is God Himself who will, as his eschatological deed *par excellence*, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant.”5 If this is so, then one can deduce that God will not do it Himself, but His working method will utilize humans to accomplish His objective (Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:4-6). John A. McIntosh defines God’s mission as doing everything possible to communicate salvation to the world.6 Thus, God’s universal purpose is actually the “basis for the missionary message of the Old Testament.”7 God has a mission, and the believers in Him are to participate in it.

**A Twofold Mission**

The mission of the Old Testament people was twofold:

- For Israel’s children and the following generations, there was to be an inward focus (centripetal). Parents were expected to repeat the stories of deliverance to their children (Ex. 12:24-27; Deut. 6:4-9; Isa. 38:19): “One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works” (Ps. 145:4, 5). The account of God’s goodness was to be passed on from each generation to the next. “Tell your children and grandchildren” (Ex. 10:2) is God’s crucial instruction.

- For the other nations, the Gentile world (even to the distant islands [Isa. 66:19])—there was an outward focus (centrifugal). The mission of the people of the Old Testament was directed toward others who did not belong to the community of faith. There is a growing number of scholars who take the Old Testament as a basis of biblical mission. Harold Henry, for example, speaks about Moses as "the first missionary of whom we have any knowledge."8 Bosch mentions that “stories of pagans like Ruth and Naaman who accepted the faith of Israel”9 indicate the missionary nature of the Old Testament. Others recognize individuals such as Abraham, Melchizedek, Jethro, Balaam, and Jonah as agents of God’s mission.

Prophets of God were not only speaking to their own people, but they also prophesied about many nations as well; God will judge all (e.g., Jeremiah 46–51; Eze. 25–32; Amos 1–2; Jonah; Obadiah). God was concerned with all nations, and the message of the Old Testament people transcended Israel’s borders. God did not provide warnings to people without a purpose; He always wanted to steer them to repentance (see Genesis 6:3; Jonah 3).

**Universal Mission**

The mission of the people of the Old Testament began only after the appearance of sin, when two different ways of life were chosen (see two lines of genealogies—Cain and Seth—in Genesis 4; 5). The followers of God were to carry the message of salvation to others (Isa. 66:19; Ps. 67:2; 96:3). This mission was universal in scope. Unfortunately, God’s people did not always succeed in their mission.
Because of his fall into sin, Adam failed in his mission to lead all his family to God. Allusion to this function can be seen in Genesis 1:28. This implicit role for Adam and Eve derives also from the fact that they were directly created by God Himself and created first. It follows that they should keep the creation order and lead humanity in respect, admiration, and obedience to God in order to maintain a right relationship with Him.

Arthur F. Glasser aptly states: “God called Adam and Eve to accept responsibility for this world as his viceregents, to serve and control it under his direction and for his glory.” The power of evil was such a destructive force that it broke down good while letting evil triumph and degrading people to such an extent that God had to intervene with the Flood (Gen. 6:5, 6, 11-13).

The first hint about intentional mission activities in the Bible can be detected in Genesis 4:26 when Seth began to proclaim/preach the name of the Lord. This possible translation can be found in Martin Luther’s and Robert Young’s versions. It seems that this mission was first family oriented and gradually enlarged as humanity grew more numerous. Seth’s descendants continued the proclamation, as is suggested by the phrase that “Enoch walked with God” (Gen. 5:24). But as they mixed with the descendants of Cain’s line, they failed, and faithful people almost disappeared (Gen. 6:1–8).

Genesis 1 to 11 is universal in scope. Before the Flood, when the iniquity was rapidly growing, the Spirit of God was striving with people to call them to repentance, unfortunately in vain (Gen. 6:3, 5). In addition, God called Noah to be His messenger, to be a preacher of righteousness to the antediluvian world (2 Peter 2:5), and to call all people to make the right decision for God and enter the ark. The biblical flood was worldwide; therefore, his mission had to be worldwide, too. He was like a savior for his generation, but the Tower of Babel soon finished the good beginning after the Flood (Gen. 11:1-9). God, for the third time, had to start from scratch, but this time with Abraham (Gen. 12:1; 15:7).

The universality of the mission was explicitly mentioned for the first time in regard to Abraham. The Great Commission of the Old Testament declares: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). The Lord stresses it three times to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). He is to be a light to the whole world. God’s seven-fold blessing contained the key imperative phrase (in the center position): “I will bless you. . . . Be a blessing. . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2, 3).

Note the imperative in the divine statement, which is usually overlooked. God commands Abraham to be a blessing to others because He blessed him. The Lord’s blessing cannot and should not be taken selfishly. Abraham needed to live for others. Genesis 12:2, 3 was therefore God’s programmatic statement for Abraham and those who would follow the same faith. Walter Kaiser accurately articulates that this text provides “the formative theology” for “a divine program to glorify himself by bringing salvation to all on planet earth.” Abraham thus became the special messenger, missionary, to the entire world, with a mission that would only later be carried by Israel and fully fulfilled by Ebed Yahweh (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9) on an even larger scale because He would be
the Salvation (not only that he would declare, bring, or proclaim it) for the whole world (49:6).

In many places where Abraham traveled and lived, he built altars and called on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18). In this way, he witnessed about his unique God. Abraham’s first “missionary” journey to Egypt failed, however, because of his disbelief, and he had to be escorted out (12:10-20). Later, he fulfilled his prophetic role in regard to the king of Sodom (14:17-24). He grew through his defeats (described in Genesis 16; 20), struggles, and victories (18:16–33; 22:1–19) in such a way that at the end God stated that “Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commandments, my decrees and my instructions” (26:5). The knowledge about the God of Abraham was to grow in the world in such a way that even “the nobles of the nations [will] assemble as the people of the God of Abraham” (Ps. 47:9). Abraham’s God would meet them, and they were to follow Him. “All nations on earth will be blessed through him” (Gen. 18:18) because God’s ultimate wish is always to bless all humanity. Abraham is a model of God’s mission.

Genesis 10, a previous chapter containing a table of 70 nations (a symbolic number standing for the totality of nations), introduces the narrative about Abraham, which means that Abraham was to be a blessing to the whole world. Abraham also needed, however, to be a teacher to his children. He was to teach them about the true God, instruct them about God’s ways, and direct them to keep His law in order that they might live according to “the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19) and do everything according to the will of God.

Abraham’s universal mission was repeated to Isaac (26:4), and reaffirmed to Jacob (28:13-15; 35:11, 12; 46:3) and Moses (Ex. 3:6-8; 6:2-8). Moses together with Israel needed to continue this universal mission to the whole world, starting as being light to the Egyptians, spreading out by the Exodus (Josh. 2:8-12), and continuing on throughout the many centuries (Isa. 42:6, 7). The purpose of the ten plagues in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea was not only to show that the Egyptians’ gods were nothing (Ex. 12:12), but also to demonstrate to the Egyptians that God was the Lord (Ex. 7:5, 17).

God called Israel to an ethical distinctiveness (Lev. 11:44, 45; 18:3; Micah 6:6-8). They were to be committed to a holy life, because only in this way could they live to the glory of God and His name, attract people to Him, be a light to the nations, and the nations could see their wisdom (Deut. 4:6; Isa. 58:8; Eze. 36:23). Moses’ speech to Israel, when he stressed the importance of obedience to God and His law (Deut. 4:5-8), implies the visibility and some kind of missionary activities of Israel.

The mission of the Old Testament people can be summarized by God’s ideal for Israel: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests [thus, a mediatorial role of Israel for other nations is anticipated; they should be the means of bringing people to God] and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5, 6).

Specific Examples of Missionary Activities
The question remains: Was Israel’s witnessing passive or active? Did they actually go to foreign countries to speak about their living, loving, and holy God? As mentioned above, opinions differ. There are only a few examples of active witnessing. One may consider the following cases of how God called specific individuals or people and sent them to accomplish particular tasks:

- Joseph was brought to Egypt by jealousy and the intrigues of his brothers, but God changed it in such a way that he became a savior for Egypt and his family and a witness for a true God (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:19-21).
- God called Moses and sent him to Egypt to encounter Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods (Exod. 12:12). It is explicitly stated that God sent him there, which means that Moses was commissioned by God to present to Egypt a living Lord (Ex. 3:10-15; Deut. 34:11).
- For Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, it was through the initiative and witness of a young slave Israelite girl in Syria that he became acquainted with the true God of heaven (2 Kings 5:15).
- The prophet Elisha went to Damascus. When he was there, Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, sent his messenger to him to inquire if he would recover from his illness (2 Kings 8:7-15).
- The most obvious missionary activity is recorded in the Book of Jonah. This prophet was not willing to go and fulfill God’s commission. At the end, he wondered what was wrong with God when He saved the cruel Ninevites. Jonah saw the salvation of Ninevites as evil, and he refused to agree with God’s compassion (Jonah 3:10; 4:1). In a dramatic way, God taught His prophet about the universality of God’s salvation (4:6-11). The Lord demonstrated His unselfish love for all, even for the enemies of His people.
- The Prophet Isaiah, at the conclusion of his book, declared that God will send missionaries to the whole world (Isa. 66:19). The result will be that “from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the Lord” (vs. 23, NKJV).
- A number of Old Testament prophets (Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) dedicate large portions of their books (Obadiah’s whole book) to pronounce judgments against other nations, which suggests that God was purposely working for these nations. They were responsible for their behavior and accountable to the Lord.

Jeremiah sent Seraiah to Babylon with a scroll, which first had to be read aloud, and then a symbolic act of sinking the scroll had to be performed (Jer. 51:59-64). Seraiah’s case offers a unique example of a prophetic message that could be heard in a foreign land and provides the evidence that the oracles against foreign nations could be actually delivered in the foreign countries. Daniel and his three friends witnessed to Babylon’s top officials and the king about the true God (Daniel 1–3). They helped Nebuchadnezzar to know the Most High God.

After his conversion, described in Daniel 4, he wrote a letter to all nations about the mighty Most High God who had humbled him and about the King of heaven who would reign forever (Dan. 4:1-3, 37). Daniel also witnessed to the last Babylonian king, Belshazzar (Daniel 5), to Darius the Mede and the high Medo-Persian officials (Daniel 6), and possibly even to Cyrus (Dan. 1:21; 6:28;
10:1), who issued the decree to allow the Jews to return home from Babylonian captivity (2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-4). Glover rightly describes Daniel as a missionary.

- Witnessing to Gentiles is presented in the Psalms, the missionary book *par excellence*: “I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples” (Ps. 57:9); “Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples” (117:1, 2).

It is also true that the geographical location of Israel (placed at the main crossroads of Middle East international routes, between Egypt and Assyria or Babylon) was a very significant factor in the Israelites’ being witnesses for their God and an object lesson for the nations. Different cultures, merchants, religions, nations, and people were meeting there, and people were confronted with a different system of beliefs.

The importance of the worldwide mission of Israel is underlined in the fact that the temple in Jerusalem would be the mega-world center for a true worship (Isa. 2:2) and that everyone would come there and learn how to worship the true God (Isa. 2:3, 4; 56:2-8; 62:9-11). The Israelites would become teachers of righteousness: “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, “Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you”’” (Zech. 8:23).

During the time of the Exile, Daniel pronounced a blessing on those who would lead others to righteousness (Dan. 12:3). It is noteworthy to stress that his message has an international connotation and perspective (2:31-47; 7:1-14). It is God who “changes times and seasons; . . . deposes kings and raises up others” (2:21).

**Additional Biblical Support**

The righteous acts of God during the Exodus were heard about by many other nations (e.g., Joshua 2:8-11). Hiram, the king of Tyre, spoke very highly about the Lord, God of Solomon: “Because the Lord loves his people, he has made you their king. . . . Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who made heaven and earth!” (2 Chron. 2:11, 12). The queen of Sheba visited Solomon because his fame had reached her far country (1 Kings 10:1-9; 2 Chron. 9:1-8). These narratives suggest that other nations also heard about the God of Israel and Solomon’s wisdom. Paradoxically, sometimes God’s people needed to go through troubles or even be sent into exile so that they might accomplish their primary mission—to be a light to the world.

Two missionary Psalms (67; 96) express very eloquently a universal mission and focus on God’s promise to Abraham that he and his posterity would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Psalm 67 is built on the Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6:24-26 in which the name of the Lord, *Yahweh* (which expresses the idea of a personal God of His covenant people), is changed for God (*elohim*) to stress the universal call of God to all nations to praise Him: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the...
earth. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you. The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us. May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him” (Ps. 67:1-7).

In Psalm 96:2-9, the psalmist calls believers to proclaim God’s salvation among the nations: “Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.”

There are also other texts in Psalms that call for missionary activities among the nations: “Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts” (Ps. 105:1, 2). “I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame” (119:46). “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy” (126:2, 3). “They [the Lord’s faithful people, according to verse 10] tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (145:11, 12). “My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever” (vs. 21). The psalmists thus declare that they will praise God among the nations (57:9; 108:3), and the kingdoms of the earth should “sing to God” (68:32). Thus, the whole earth will “be filled with his glory” (72:19).

As a result of these witnessing exercises, Egyptians and Ethiopians will submit to the Lord (Ps. 68:31) all kings will bow down to him and all nations serve the Davidic King, the Messiah (72:11), God will be “feared by the kings of the earth” (76:12), and will judge all the nations as His inheritance (82:8), and “all the nations . . . will come and worship” before the Lord (86:9). Foreigners then will be like the natives enjoying the benefits of citizenship (87:4–6), and “all people” will know of God’s “mighty acts” (145:12).

The Prophet Isaiah explained that the descendants of Israel would be a spectacle to all nations of God’s goodness to them: “Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed. I delight greatly in the Lord; . . . he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (Isa. 61:9-11).

God foretells the bright future of Zion and Jerusalem in these terms: “The nations will see your
vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow” (Isa. 62:2). Isaiah speaks about missionaries who “will proclaim [the Lord’s] glory among the nations” (66:19). Isaiah continues by stressing what the Lord will do: “I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites” (vs. 21). The Book of Isaiah ends with the international and worldwide dimension of worship: “From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me” (vs. 23, NKJV). In this context it is interesting to notice Isaiah’s rebuke to King Hezekiah for not fulfilling his God-given mission by not sharing God’s salvation message with the Babylonian emissaries but instead showing off his royal treasures (2 Kings 20:12-19; 2 Chron. 32:31).

The Prophet Zephaniah strikingly notes that “the nations on every shore will worship [the Lord],” not only in Jerusalem, but “every one in its own land” (Zeph. 2:11), and remarkably states that God will “purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder” (3:9). God projected that even from beyond Cush (Ethiopia) will come His worshipers who are called His people to serve Him: “From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings” (vs. 10). The NIV Study Bible comments: “Israel’s God will be acknowledged by the nations, and God’s people will be honored by them (cf. verses 19, 20).”

Greg King underlines that God’s true worshipers “will be the recipients of international fame and honor” and that “peoples from the most distant places . . . will experience salvation and will worship Yahweh on His day. He is the redemptive King not only of the Judahites, but also of people from many nations.” Thus, “on two occasions (2:11; 3:9, 10), Zephaniah depicted worship of Yahweh taking place on a worldwide basis by those who are delivered from the judgment. . . . There will be so many that they will stand shoulder to shoulder, serving Yahweh unitedly (3:9).” Because of that, God is depicted in a unique activity (never again mentioned in the entire Old Testament). He is singing over His people with joy: “The Lord your God is with you, the mighty warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you, in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (3:17).

The prophetic word of God was to be promulgated to others, but this word needed to be accompanied by godly behavior. In this way, the God of Israel would be attractive to all nations, and they would come and worship Him (Isa. 56:6, 7; 61:9-11; 62:2). As a result of such activities, kings would issue edicts in favor of Jerusalem’s temple (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes). Otherwise, the people of God would be a byword and object of scorn (Joel 2:17; Eze. 36:20, 21). God is either dead or alive in people’s minds. Consequently, it depends to a great degree on the behavior of His followers; their deeds are a stronger witness and speak louder than words as to whether their God is in their lives or not (Eze. 20:41; 36:23; Hosea 1:9; 2:21-23).

If God’s remnant people truly accomplish His task, then people will come to the Lord and become His faithful followers. Isaiah and Micah prophetically envisioned a time when “Many peoples [nations] will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to . . . the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths’” (Isa. 2:3). Zechariah underscored it very
emphatically: “‘Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people’” (Zech. 2:11).

The people of God in the Old Testament were to be an object lesson for other people and nations. When nations saw what God had done for them, they should have recognized the God of Israel as a living God and followed Him because He was the true King. Thus, God was showing Himself holy through His people in the sight of many nations (Joshua 2:9-14; Isa. 61:9-11; Eze. 7, 27-29). This is a different type of evangelism than what Christians usually have in mind: not so much by proclamation, but by being a living example of God’s intervening grace. Witnessing without practical lifestyle support is empty, harmful, and destructive. It can never be overemphasized that the exemplary conduct of God’s people was and is the best witness for the Lord. “‘I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘when I am proved holy through you before their eyes’” (Eze. 36:23).

God’s Working With Gentiles (Outside of Israel)

God called His people to a certain mission, and His people needed to fulfill that mission, but God also worked outside of Israel. The Old Testament remnant was not an elect elite group who would be uniquely saved, but they were elected for a mission. This does not mean, however, that God did not also use other individuals or did not work for other people outside of the main community of faith. How this was done is not always revealed to us; it is simply stated.

Examples of God’s working with different people outside of Israel include:

- Melchizedek, king of Salem and the priest of the God Most High (Gen. 14:18-20). Melchizedek appears suddenly on the scene as an unknown character, blesses Abraham, and expresses his strong belief in the Creator God who gave victory to Abraham over their enemies. Abraham, as an expression of his love and gratitude to God for all he received from God, gave his tithe to Melchizedek. Because Melchizedek faithfully served the Lord, he became a type for Christ (Heb. 7:1-3, 11-17).

- Jethro, the priest of Midian and Moses’s father-in-law (Ex. 18:1). After hearing from Moses what the Lord had done for Israel in Egypt, Jethro praises Yahweh: “‘Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly’” (Ex. 18:10, 11).

- Balaam, a prophet of God. Balaam pronounces messianic prophecies (Num. 24:17-19) in the midst of his apostasy (Numbers 22–24), which cost him his life (31:8).

- Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho. Rahab heard about the God of Israel, believed, helped two Israelite spies, saved her family from destruction, and joined the people of God (Joshua 2:1-21; 6:17, 25). Rahab later married Salmon, son of Nahshon, one of the prominent princes of Judah (Num. 7:12), and became an ancestor of the Messiah.
God worked with other nations, e.g., the Cushites, Philistines, and Arameans. The prophet Amos boldly proclaims God’s intervention for these nations: “‘Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?’ “declares the Lord. ‘Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?’” (Amos 9:7). There are no historical records about these activities of God, and there is no other biblical passage that witnesses about them except this text in Amos.

• God gave the Canaanite people 400 years of grace to repent and return to Him (Gen. 15:13-16). Similarly, before the Flood, God offered 120 years of grace (6:3). In both cases, however, rebellion against God continued.

• The nations were judged by God. As already mentioned, many prophets uttered oracles against foreign nations (Isaiah 13–23; Jeremiah 46–51; Amos 1–2). This suggests that God has revealed to them the truth and that they were accountable for their actions to God (see especially the books of Jonah and Obadiah).

• Nebuchadnezzar, the famous Babylonian king, wrote a letter to the pagan world about his dramatic conversion story and powerfully witnessed about God’s eternal kingdom and the Most High God who humiliated him and revealed His sovereignty to him (Daniel 4).

God ultimately puts together these two different groups. (God’s faithful remnant—people from the mainstream of His church, and people who work outside of this pattern). “Insiders” and “outsiders” belong together. Melchizedek came in contact with Abraham (Gen. 14:18–20); Rahab with Israel (Joshua 2); Jethro with Moses (Exodus 3; 18); Naaman with Elisha (2 Kings 5); Nebuchadnezzar with Daniel (Daniel 1; 2; 4); Ahasuerus [Xerxes] with Esther (Esther 1–9). Moabite Ruth expressed this so eloquently to Israelite Naomi: “‘Your people will be my people and your God my God’ ” (Ruth 1:16).

Isaiah describes this multiethnic relationship with amazing words and provides a vivid picture: “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance’ ” (Isa. 19:23–25). This is a stunning statement. Not only Israel, but also Egypt and Assyria are called the people of God, and they are to worship together.

**God, the Missionary**

God has a breathtaking mega-plan to bless and save the whole world. For that purpose, however, He uses human instruments, and through them He leads people to Himself (Isa. 45:22). From the very beginning, the horizon of mission for the Old Testament people was to be worldwide. Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others had their mission to fulfill.

The ultimate, intentional purpose of God in electing Abraham, or Israel, was to become a blessing, light, and witness to the entire world about the true God so that everyone could come to a
saving knowledge of the living and loving Lord. The goal of God’s plan was always to invite all human beings to salvation. From the very beginning, the plan of redemption was never concealed nor reserved only for one family, group, or nation. Through Abraham and his posterity, all the families of the earth were to be blessed. The Old Testament vision of mission was all-inclusive.

Mission is about more than merely going somewhere, sending someone, or doing something. Mission is primarily about being—being a special people with a special message that needs to be modeled in real life. This has implications for Christian ecclesiology, and particularly for Adventist ecclesiology, which can be summarized in several points:

- Mission means identification with God’s ultimate goal for saving humanity and working out this plan.
- Being is more important than sending. The call to an ethical lifestyle and living tangibly the message of God was a crucial focus that is to be emphasized in our modern times.
- The worldwide scope of the mission of God’s people did not change. As God had a deliberate plan to save the world during the time of the Old Testament dispensation, so He has it today.
- The mission and message are inseparable. The essentials of the message did not change. It has had new and different emphases during the passing of time, but basic principles of salvation were valid all the time. Paul, for example, built the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ on key texts derived from the Hebrew Scripture according to the structure of the Hebrew canon: Genesis 15:6 (Torah); Habakkuk 2:4 (prophets), and Psalm 32:1, 2 (writings). God’s people of today ought to proclaim the “eternal gospel.”
- The Old Testament community of faith and its message was eschatological and future oriented. The biblical-eschatological paradigm should provide a pattern for our thinking today. God is coming to establish His eternal kingdom. This eschatological focus provides powerful fuel for mission. The hope of the second coming of Jesus Christ is the hope of all hopes.
- Prophets constantly spoke against false religious systems and warned against the infiltration of paganism into true worship. So the task of God’s people today is to present first of all the true picture about God, reveal His true character, who He is, and point the attention of all to Jesus Christ while also unmasking firmly, but lovingly and wisely, the Antichrist with its apostate religious system.
- God uses two different groups: insiders, the faithful remnant (principal stream of the community of believers); and outsiders, those who serve God faithfully according to their light but work outside of His eschatological movement. The faithful remnant has a special God-given mission, but outside the mainstream, God has His messengers, individuals, or communities who also proclaim the truth. The Lord desires to put these two different streams together by drawing them closer to each other because His ultimate goal is to have only one flock (Isa. 14:1; 56:3-8). As a part of our commitment to mission, we need to recognize God’s work outside our own community of faith.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations in this article are from The New International Version of the Bible.


15. Ibid., p. 30.

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How to interpret Scripture—God’s Holy Word—is one of the most crucial issues in the life of a Christian.

Roy E. Gane

PART 2

Part 1 of this article outlined strategies for attempts to change Scripture in order to avoid allowing its system of divine principles to guide belief and lifestyle (against 2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Those strategies include:

1. Cutting out what you don’t like.
2. Supplementing Scripture.
3. Treating Scripture as obsolete.
4. Treating at least some of Scripture as merely human through historical criticism.

Randall Younker addresses another approach that has received quite a bit of attention lately:

5. Adjust its interpretation to make it harmonize with science. “Generally,” Younker says, “this school of thought has denied that the author of Genesis intended the narratives to be understood literally or historically. Rather, these narratives were intended to be read in a non-literal way. Some argue that the text is mythological; some say it is poetic—a literary artwork not meant to be understood literally; some say it is theological; some say it is symbolic. Some have proposed interpretations that the days of Genesis were not 24-hour days, and that the Flood was local instead of global—or not real at all. A number of Adventist scholars have been attracted to the interpretations of this school.”

This is a vastly broader issue than that of the Genesis Creation. For example, another locus of such harmonization would be the tendency of some behavioral scientists (or those influenced by them), who regard homosexual orientation as innate and unalterable, to try to explain away biblical passages that condemn homosexual practice (e.g., Leviticus 18; 20; Romans 1).

Creation is difficult to deal with because CNN was not there to report on the event.

The Bible claims to present information that humans received from the Creator God Himself as His “eyewitness” account. If we believe that He inspired the whole Bible, as 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 says (cf. 2 Peter 1:20, 21), we can accept that He created Planet Earth in six days (Genesis 1). The narrative genre of Genesis indicates that these days (plural) consisted of periods of alternating darkness and light determined by the relative movements of the Sun and the Earth, as in later narratives of the book. So these days were basically like our days, although we cannot be sure that...
their length was exactly the same as our present 24 hours because we do not know the precise speed of the Earth’s rotation on its axis at that time.

Biblical scholars who accept the six-day Creation can have differences regarding other factors. For example:

- Granted that God originally made everything out of nothing (Ps. 33:6, 9; Heb. 11:3), did He begin the Creation week with a lifeless planet that had existed in an unformed state for a long time?
- Did God make all the stars of the universe on the fourth day of Creation (Gen. 1:16), or do the words “and the stars” (NRSV) mean that He made them, but not necessarily on the fourth day, and perhaps a long time previously?

Rather than receiving information from a personal superhuman being whose witness is accepted by faith, modern science receives information by empirical human observation and experimentation. Sophisticated technologies and bodies of accumulated data make such science a truly impressive source of knowledge. All of us rely on science in countless aspects of our lives. In fact, we entrust our lives to science every time we ride in a car or airplane.

But scientists admit that the question of ultimate origin is elusive. Even if there was a “Big Bang,” a theory extrapolated from the fact that the universe is expanding, this does not answer the question: What was before the bang? Why did it go off? How was the “DNA” of the universe encapsulated so densely in what exploded?

Some have recognized that a Big Bang is not necessarily incompatible with an Intelligent Designer, or perhaps even God as we know Him from the Bible: He could have used such a bang as an instrument to make the universe, perhaps long before the creative activity recorded in Genesis 1, provided that this chapter does not describe the creation of the entire universe.

Neither does Darwinian macro-evolution explain ultimate origins. This theory has to do with the progressive origin of new species over a long period of time through chance mutations. But what conditions made the process begin and allowed it to continue, given the delicate balance of elements necessary for life as we know it? Unlike the Big Bang theory, Darwin’s hypothesis directly collides with Genesis 1, which recounts the origin of the basic species during one week through the instrumentality of God.

Obviously there has been a form of evolution since then, so that the German shepherd and Chihuahua could develop from the same pair of canines preserved on Noah’s ark (Genesis 7). This variety is significant, but it is manifested within the boundaries of a basic type created by God.

There are many forms of evolutionary theory and many areas of investigation that scientists use to support it, such as the geologic column, which appears to show stratified development of species over long periods of time. Impressed by all this accumulated data, some Christians have accepted macro-evolution to varying degrees. Then they are faced with the problem of what to do with Genesis 1 and other biblical references to Creation by God in six days (e.g., Ex. 20:11). To harmonize science and the Bible, they compromise the latter. To make Genesis 1 compatible with science, they feel compelled to try to make this chapter something other than a literal account of the origin of life on
Planet Earth in one literal week. None of these attempts have really worked, as recognized by proponents of historical criticism who acknowledge that Genesis means what it says but simply do not believe its message because they do not accept miracles or divine inspiration of this book.

Must we choose either science or the Bible and compromise or ignore the one that we do not choose? Christians are all over the map on this question. Variety of opinion would not be such a problem if it were not for the fact that conflict between science and the Bible is damaging faith. For example, when a young person educated to respect science, but who has not yet developed solid personal faith, is confronted with choosing science or faith in the Bible and its Creator God, he or she will naturally be strongly tempted to give up the latter, become agnostic (or atheist), and leave the church at least in spirit. Tragically, this trajectory is not theoretical, as we see young people close to us who have been raised in Christian homes and educated in Christian schools exiting from faith.

An attractive solution is to invest resources in apologetic science, that is, science that confirms the Bible. This quest is somewhat like exploration of archaeological material remains to confirm the historicity of the biblical account. There have been excellent contributions in these areas of science and archaeology. But sometimes we don’t find what we are looking for, or what we find appears to contradict the Bible, pending further investigation.

Research in a single discipline is a messy process, with new data and breakthroughs answering some questions but raising many more. Comparative study between two disciplines compounds the messiness of both disciplines and complex relationships between them. This is especially challenging if the two disciplines belong to different domains of epistemology, such as texts and material remains. Texts can state or imply ideas, including stories of events. But material evidence analyzed by science, including the science of archaeology, cannot directly tell a story; it presents effects of events preserved in a medium that is affected by various forces over time. So it is often difficult to know exactly how things got to be a certain way and how long the process took: Was it gradual or sudden/catastrophic—or a combination of both?

There are plenty of valid questions regarding the relationship between Genesis and science. But here are a few preliminary observations and suggestions regarding potential for positive, faith-building engagement in our Christian community:

*Let the Bible be the Bible, and let science be science.* Let investigation in these areas be the best quality, taking as much evidence into account as possible, rather than picking and choosing what supports our preconceived convictions. We must learn to live with differences in perspective between science and the Bible, recognizing that our human knowledge is limited to small pieces of a huge puzzle. We can recognize harmony between God’s written Word and nature, His “second book,” but let’s not force artificial harmonization where differences appear. We should not put a burden on biblical scholars and theologians to come up with interpretations of the Bible that fit science; nor should we put a burden on scientists to come up with scientific data that is apologetically correct from a biblical perspective.

*Theologians and scientists should seriously and patiently listen to each other to understand*
problems and concerns faced by those working in the other area of inquiry, which is largely unknown to them. Because theologians are in the “driver’s seat” in the church, they should make an effort to reach out to scientists and learn how to communicate with them where they are, rather than marginalizing them and driving them underground.

Work to build mutual trust and not jump to conclusions regarding each other’s Christian commitment. Just because a person is grappling with big questions does not mean that he or she cannot be a person of faith (see, e.g., the Book of Job). Of course, a sincere, open-minded, thinking person of faith (who may quite naturally have questions), will speak of God and His written Word with respect and will not use his or her questions to undermine the faith of others.

The Creation issue is not simply a science versus religion debate, with all scientists on one side of the question and all theologians on the other. Representatives of both sides are in both disciplines. In fact, some theologians have been at the forefront of those trying to bend the Bible to fit science.

Definition of terminology is important for communication within any given discipline, and it is even more crucial for cross-disciplinary communication when two parties have limited understanding of each other’s disciplines. Upping the ante even more is the fact that some terminology has become loaded. For example, the word evolution means “development.” We all agree that there has been some kind of evolution/development to bring about the phenomena that we know today. But to many, evolution instantly evokes Darwinian macro-evolution as an atheistic explanation for the origin of the species.

Problems should not be manufactured or exacerbated. Science and true religion are not intrinsically in conflict. If the same God who created the natural universe has revealed Himself and His activities in words, we would expect harmony between nature and His words. Of course, science is not synonymous with nature: It is human observation and interpretation of nature. Religion also involves varying degrees of human interpretation, especially of sacred texts. Regarding the origin of Planet Earth, the clarity of Genesis 1 (and other passages on Creation, which should not be overlooked) leaves no real interpretive wiggle room to escape the idea that God made it from nothing and brought about life and its environment here in six days. Science can fill in many details regarding development since Creation, but it is simply beyond its scope to explain ultimate origins. So we should not pit science and the Bible against each other in such areas where their scope does not even overlap. Biblical revelation is intended to teach us about things that we cannot gain from our own investigation through science. The two branches of revelation should be complementary rather than contradictory.

Don’t view apparent contradictions as threats. Instead, take up these challenges as opportunities for stimulating collaborative research. As in many lines of investigation, areas of conflict give birth to exciting new breakthroughs.

6. Rely on political correctness. “Widespread use of the term politically correct and its derivatives began when it was adopted as a pejorative term by the political right in the 1990s, in the context of the Culture Wars. Writing in the New York Times in 1990, Richard Bernstein noted ‘The
term ‘politically correct,’ with its suggestion of Stalinist orthodoxy, is spoken more with irony and disapproval than with reverence. But across the country the term p.c., as it is commonly abbreviated, is being heard more and more in debates over what should be taught at the universities.” . . .

“Within a few years, this previously obscure term featured regularly in the lexicon of the conservative social and political challenges against curriculum expansion and progressive teaching methods in U.S. high schools and universities. In 1991, addressing a graduating class of the University of Michigan, U.S. President George H. W. Bush spoke against ‘a movement [that would] declare certain topics “off-limits,” certain expressions “off-limits,”’ even certain gestures “off-limits”’ in allusion to liberal Political Correctness. The most common usage here is as a pejorative term to refer to excessive deference to particular sensibilities at the expense of other considerations. . . .

“The central uses of the term relate to particular issues of race, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and worldviews, and encompass both the language in which issues are discussed and the viewpoints that are expressed.”

I have become aware of this approach when some individuals have taken offense to written or oral presentations in which I was simply presenting what the Bible unambiguously says. While they were ostensibly objecting to what I said, it was obvious that their real quarrel was with the Bible.

The first such occasion that I recall came after publication in 1996 of my Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide: Judges: Deterioration and Deliverance. A few months later, I received a letter from a woman who blasted me because I had insulted her by referring to the obesity of Eglon, the repulsive ancient king of Moab who oppressed Israel and was assassinated by Ehud, the Israelite deliverer (Judges 3). It was clear that to her, mention of obesity was “off-limits” because it placed a pejorative value judgment on a person.

Of course, I heartily agree that we should be sensitive to the feelings of others, including when we refer to bodily characteristics and challenges. But for several reasons, it is not possible to get the point of Ehud’s assassination of Eglon in practical or theological terms without negative reference to the extreme royal corpulence:

● “The obesity of Eglon (see verse 17) was a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of a sword short enough to be concealed (see verse 16), but the facts that the king stood up and Ehud struck so hard that he used the maximum potential of the sword’s length (including the handle!) aided Ehud in killing the king.”

● The name Eglon likely means “calf.” So scholars have recognized that an Israelite who heard the story would receive the distinct impression that the Moabite oppressor was like a fatted calf ready to be slaughtered.

● The Bible describes Eglon’s demise in physically repulsive terms (my description was very mild
by comparison!), which fitted his character. "However, we must keep in mind that grotesqueness, satire, and comical twists in the story not only rivet the reader’s attention and elevate the Israelites at the expense of their enemies, they also contribute to a profound theological and historical point: . . . Opposing God is foolishness!"7 In other words, it is fatuous nonsense.

In my study guide and its companion book (God’s Faulty Heroes), I dealt with and tried to reflect accurately the story of Eglon (without overemphasizing its offensive aspects) because it was there—in the Bible. The problem is that the Bible is not politically correct: It offends people through expressions that are not currently deemed polite.

Individuals such as the woman who wrote to me are OK with leaving such a story in the Bible, just as long as everyone ignores it. That is, we are supposed to treat the Bible as if the story is not there because it is not nice. This state of denial avoids a disturbing question: If God is responsible for what is in the Bible, is He not nice?

Is our loving Creator-God, who cares about sparrows and numbers the hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:29-31) really less sensitive to human feelings than we are? Or does He sometimes have reasons for risking offense that outweigh the imperatives of politeness?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus was very sensitive to feelings (e.g., Luke 7:36-50; John 4). But when a Canaanite woman from Phoenicia kept entreating him to cast a demon from her daughter, Jesus replied: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt 15:26, NRSV). Talk about a politically incorrect insult! But Jesus was simultaneously testing her faith and teaching His disciples to revise their attitudes toward Gentiles, for the ultimate benefit of millions of people. On that occasion, those priorities were more important than being nice on a superficial level.

God also shows great sensitivity in the Old Testament. For example, the Lord says in Isaiah 66: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (vs. 13, NRSV). But two chapters earlier, the prophet says: “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth” (64:6, NRSV). The real meaning of the Hebrew expression rendered “filthy cloth” is so jarring that modern English translators don’t have the courage to render it literally: “cloth of a menstrual period.” For an ancient Hebrew reader/hearer, this language would have been even more extreme and disturbing because menstruation was a form of physical ritual impurity that had to be kept away from the sacred domain (e.g., Leviticus 15).

So why would a prophet of God employ such disgusting language, which we would never think of using in polite speech among ourselves, let alone in a sermon? Apparently, it was more important for Isaiah to emphasize the extreme inadequacy of human works for salvation and utter dependency on divine grace than it was for him to be “nice.”

There are, of course, much more serious clashes between the Bible and political correctness than the issue of giving offense regarding matters such as obesity. A few years ago I made a public presentation regarding the Israelites’ divine mandate to exterminate all the corrupt inhabitants of Canaan in holy war (e.g., Deut. 20:16, 17). I reluctantly had to write on this topic in my commentary on Numbers because such a policy toward non-Israelites, which modern people would term “genocide,” is recorded in that book.8 After my presentation, there was an outcry against the idea
that God would ever actually authorize such atrocities. The idea came through that Moses and the Israelites must have mistakenly supposed that God commanded holy war!

According to the Bible, Moses was the great prophet who uniquely enjoyed face-to-face access to God (Num. 12:6-8; Deut. 34:10) and was barred from the Promised Land for failing to represent God properly in one particular incident (Num. 20:10-12). If direct biblical assertions that Moses received his cues from God regarding holy war (e.g., Numbers 31; Deuteronomy 7 [cf. 6:1]; cf. Joshua 6; 1 Samuel 15) are false, how can we trust anything else in the Pentateuch? Or in the later biblical books recorded by lesser individuals, including the New Testament writers? Do you want to believe in Jesus? He treated the laws of Moses as divinely authoritative (Matt. 8:4; Mark 12:26; Luke 24:27). If He was mistaken about Moses, how could He be the Son of God?

Once we start bracketing out parts of the Bible that we deem inaccurate because they do not conform to our notions of what a good God can or cannot do, everything logically unravels, and none of the Bible has any credibility whatsoever. By virtually editing Scripture, we put our own authority in place of God’s like other higher-critical thinkers, such as those who physically cut out what they don’t like (Thomas Jefferson), obscure its meaning with an overlay of human tradition, or separate divine from human elements through historical-critical methodologies. The logical outcome of such approaches is agnosticism.

Why not let God be God and admit that He is not bound by constraints of political correctness? He loves the world (John 3:16) and does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). But when He has exhausted His options in reaching people with salvation and they still reject Him, He abandons them to destruction (Isa. 5:4-7). In fact, He takes responsibility for destruction of the finally impenitent as an unpleasant task that is alien to His nature (Isa. 28:21). His retributive justice directly and miraculously annihilated the entire pre-Flood world (Genesis 7), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), and Israelite rebels (Numbers 16, 25), and He will ultimately destroy all evil, including rebels against His government, with fire (Revelation 20). In this way, He will end all suffering and death caused by sin and oppressors (Revelation 21).

According to the Bible, the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan, who had enjoyed four centuries of grace (Gen. 15:13, 16), richly deserved direct destruction by God (Lev. 18:3, 24, 25). In fact, He was planning personally to drive them out of the Promised Land before His people (Ex. 23:23, 27-31) so that they would not lead the Israelites to worship other gods (vs. 33). But when the Israelites initially refused to take the land by faith (Numbers 14), God subsequently required more active cooperation in warfare to develop their trust in Him (Deuteronomy 7; 20; Judges 3). In this way, God accomplished two things at once: He executed the wicked and taught the Israelites, who served as His agent of destruction for a limited time in a very limited geographical area.

This by no means legitimates any form of holy war during the Christian era. Already three millennia ago, God meted out punishment resulting from the misguided zeal of King Saul, who initiated genocide on the Gibeonites without direct authorization from Him (2 Samuel 21).

This doesn’t mean that we feel comfortable about what happened to the Canaanites or that we
fully understand the ways of God. But the fate of those ancient people can be a warning to us and a motivation for us to reach out to all the modern "Canaanites" around us so that they can be saved as Rahab was (Joshua 2:6).

Concerning the Canaanites, Leviticus 18:3 says: "You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you" (NRSV). Following this command is a list of laws against incest, sex during menstruation, adultery, Molech worship, homosexual practice, and sex with animals (vss. 6-23). Verse 24 begins the conclusion to the chapter: "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (vss. 24, 25, NRSV).

Here in Leviticus 18:22 we find the hottest current battleground between the Bible and political correctness: homosexual practice. Leviticus 20 raises the stakes: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (vs. 13, NRSV). Needless to say, in today’s culture, this is radically politically incorrect. However, notice two crucial points:

- That which is condemned is not homosexual tendencies, but acting on them.
- The death sentence was to be administered under the ancient Israelite theocratic judicial system, which no longer exists. In modern secular states, we should respect the human rights of all citizens, including those who commit adultery and homosexual acts.

Even so, the New Testament raises the stakes even higher: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11, NRSV).

The good news is: There is redemption for sinners when they accept the transforming, free grace of God provided through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This miraculous change is available for those whose sins are humanly impossible to overcome. The apostle Paul knew actual people in Corinth like that: "And this is what some of you used to be" (vs.11, NRSV). But those who choose to keep their sins, rather than giving them up to God’s cleansing, sanctifying, justifying process will not go to heaven. This applies to any sinners, and would also be true of more "respectable" categories of the "morally challenged," such as the self-righteous.

But the fact that "sodomites," i.e., practicing homosexuals (vs. 9, NASB, NIV), cannot be saved as such without giving up their lifestyle is offensive to some Christians. After a public presentation in which I discussed the biblical view of homosexual practice, a few individuals were clearly angry with me because I presented what the Bible said. Shame on anyone who permits the sacred book to contradict the higher cultural norm and authority (and therefore god) that they have adopted: political correctness!
Insofar as “political correctness” seeks to be inclusive and to protect people from being hurt or marginalized, it has positive intentions that coincide with strong social concerns in the Bible (Exodus 21; Leviticus 19; 25; Isaiah 58). But any social consensus or contract, including political correctness, goes too far when it attempts to stifle discussion, revise sacred history, or replace God as the ultimate arbiter of morality. If someone doesn’t want to accept the Bible, he or she should just admit it, rather than attempting virtually to rewrite part of it or to attack someone else who presents it without rewriting it.

I began Part 1 of this two-part article with another passage by Paul: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, NKJV, italics supplied). Some of Scripture may be hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), but all of it is our friend from God to enhance the quality of our existence in this life and the life to come.

Like a friendly physician, the Bible sometimes wounds us so that we can be healed. As the wise man said: “Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6, NRSV). As sinners, our only safe course is to submit to the accurate surgery of Scripture, rather than seizing the scalpel ourselves to discard it or to make light scratches of our own choosing rather than deep incisions. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, NRSV).

Our only compassionate approach to other sinners is not to treat their condition lightly by saying, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14, NRSV), as if their problems are inconsequential. Rather, it is to introduce them to Jesus, the Friend of sinners, who came to “save his people from [not in] their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NRSV, italics supplied) in order to give them true and enduring peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

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REFERENCES
3. Ibid., p. 34.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 42.
Tradition has it that a Christian chaplain in the U.S. Army back in World War II originated the expression: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” The meaning of this aphorism is that when all human beings—at least in Western culture—face life-and-death situations, even those who’d renounced God earlier in their lives recognize a latent faith in His existence. No matter how seemingly hardboiled or hardhearted, in times of utter desperation, people will turn to God as the ultimate hope. And this aphorism has enjoyed a form of durability for half a century.

But the Western mind has been undergoing a considerable change since World War II. Maybe you’ve noticed!

In the military—and, indeed, in many other subgroups in our culture—atheism itself has turned quite militant. Those who refuse to believe in God have become assertive in their disavowal of His existence.

Of course, atheism has been around for quite a while—especially among the segment of the population that considers itself the intelligentsia. Way back in the third century B.C., the Cyrenaic philosopher Theodorus the Atheist taught that the goal of life was pretty much just to pursue happiness and avoid grief. Closer to our own time, philosophers like Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Bertrand Russell leveled their best thinking at religion itself—especially Christianity. Unquestionably, all have had their impact on today’s worldview, but generally, Everyman has been too absorbed in mere survival to take the time to read much philosophy.

Today, however, popular culture has become an increasingly open market for ideas—including those that deny God. And Everyman is definitely “reading” popular culture. So now atheism is taking the offensive on many fronts. The entertainment world has become increasingly influential to the general public. Self-professed atheists are expressing unhesitant disbelief in God—people like Woody
Allen, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Ian McKellen, Keanu Reeves, Bruce Willis. If none of these names rings a bell, you may be assured that they ring big bells in the public consciousness of our time. These are among the Hollywood idols—pun fully intended—that draw countless millions to the places of worship that theaters are today.

But this is no diatribe against theaters—or even the broader subject of movies. Film is only one of the texts in which atheism is asserting an increasing voice in the public discourse. It appears among countless other beliefs in music, literature, the visual arts—all the media in popular culture.

So in what way does Scripture address the denial of God’s existence? Generally, it seems that the people of God in Scripture, in both Old and New Testament times, were confronted on every side by others who were at least theistic, whether they believed in another god or many other gods: Baal, Adrammelech, Moloch, Jupiter, Mercury, Diana. Were there no atheists in Scripture?

Interestingly, Ellen G. White suggests that atheism was among the theories that led to the building of the Tower of Babel: “The dwellers on the plain of Shinar . . . denied the existence of God and attributed the Flood to the operation of natural causes. . . . One object before them in the erection of the tower was to secure their own safety in case of another deluge. By carrying the structure to a much greater height than was reached by the waters of the Flood, they thought to place themselves beyond all possibility of danger. And as they would be able to ascend to the region of the clouds, they hoped to ascertain the cause of the Flood. The whole undertaking was designed to exalt still further the pride of its projectors and to turn the minds of future generations away from God and lead them into idolatry.”¹

In point of fact, atheism itself is a form of idolatry: the worship of oneself. If I were to decide that God does not exist, I am essentially placing my own personal will in the place of God. In the cosmic reckoning, as they say, there just isn’t any middle ground on this—no third or fourth or fifth choices, despite the claims of pluralism. Everyone worships something or someone—even if it’s oneself.

The inception of sin in heaven, Lucifer’s very first exercise of it, demonstrates just how elemental this issue is. There were no other gods for Lucifer to transfer allegiance to. It wasn’t as if he found a place of faith down the street that suited his worship style better. It was God or himself—just that simple, just that profound: “‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High’” (Isa. 14:14, NKJV). He had no interest in worshiping anyone or anything except himself. He exercised his God-given power of choice in favor of self.

And this power of choice is granted to all throughout human history. “God forces no one to be obedient; if He didn’t force [Lucifer] to be obedient in heaven or Adam and Eve to be obedient in Eden, why do it now, long after the consequences of disobedience have wreaked havoc on humanity?”² This allows for the freedom to choose a contrarian worldview and express it as one wishes.

English-American author/journalist Christopher Hitchens, one of the more publically active, in-your-face contrarians of our day, has made a career of debating believers—both in person and in
writing—over the issue of God’s existence. Among other well-known unbelievers such as Richard Dawkins and A. C. Grayling, for more than four decades Hitchens has aggressively attacked the position for God from a purely intellectual worldview.

Now in stage-four esophageal cancer, however, Hitchens is in his very own foxhole. And the media have descended upon the author of the bestseller God Is Not Great to see if his terminal illness has shaken his faith in atheism, to see if his condition has possibly brought about another expression common to Christian thought: the “deathbed confession.” At the time of this writing, it has not, and Hitchens considers his position courageous, even heroic.

“We don’t want to be annihilated,” he says. “We just think that the overall likelihood is that we join the molecular cycle when we die. We don’t wish it to be true, but we face it.”

But Christians embrace another, much more positive, “overall likelihood.” To the very last breath we draw, God’s grace is open to us all. As long as there is life, there is hope—for Christopher Hitchens and for you and me.

REFERENCES
1. Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 119.
2. Garments of Grace, Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, Clifford R. Goldstein, ed., Second Quarter 2011, p. 120.
The appearance of Jephthah in Hebrews 11 presents an interesting conundrum for the Bible student. Why did the author of Hebrews (whom I accept as Paul) highlight a man as a heroic example of faith to be emulated when he seems to have offered his daughter as a human sacrifice? In short, what did the author see in Jephthah’s story that merited his inclusion in the all-star list of faith heroes found in Hebrews 11?

For those less familiar with Jephthah, his story is found in Judges 10–11. In short, Israel had been unfaithful yet again and, thus, had fallen under the abusive dominion of the Philistines and Ammonites for 18 arduous years (10:6-9). During an Ammonite attack, the people of Israel decide to repent to regain God’s blessing. God seems to question how genuine the repentance is, but the people make significant reforms anyway. Battle lines are formed, and war appears about to erupt (vss. 10-18). It is in this setting that Jephthah appears in the story.

Judges 11 describes Jephthah as a prostitute’s illegitimate son and mighty warrior. Furthermore, Jephthah was disowned from any portion of the family inheritance by the “legitimate” sons of their common father. Jephthah fled from his brothers and became a gang leader, making his living by raiding, hence developing the warrior skills (11:1-3). Like most gangs, however, it seems likely his raids were against fellow Israelites and not against foreign enemies, perhaps in revenge for his disenfranchisement from legitimate society. Jephthah clearly charges the elders of Gilead with driving him out (vs. 7). Perhaps these elders were his brothers, who earlier were credited with forcing him to flee (vss. 2, 3), but it seems likely that a good portion of the elders were not so closely related. Hence, Jephthah was disenfranchised from the entire tribal unit, not just from his blood family.

A prostitute’s son leading a gang in criminal behavior would not seem to be a likely candidate for God to use in His service. Certainly, some better candidates must have been available!
Furthermore, Jephthah appears to vow to offer a human sacrifice and to follow through with it.

In light of these facts, one might be tempted to wonder if the author of Hebrews was in his right mind to list Jephthah as a hero of faith.

I shall not here survey the divided scholarship on the topic, for I believe most scholars have missed the point of Hebrews 11. I propose, rather, that this chapter uses the story of Jephthah in a similar manner to Paul’s use of Abraham’s faith in God’s promise of a son/descendants in Romans 4. (This similarity of usage would not be surprising to anyone who accepts Paul as the author of Hebrews.) In Romans 4, Paul takes a single aspect of Abraham’s life—his belief in God’s promise of an heir and descendants (Gen. 15:6)—and uses it as an analogy to how we believe on Christ for justification. Paul waxes quite idyllic when he argues that Abraham never wavered in faith because of his old age and that he was fully convinced God would do what He promised (Rom. 4:18-21).

The alert reader may wonder how Paul can use such lofty language about Abraham’s never doubting the divine promise when also considering Abraham’s union with Hagar. I suggest that for Paul, the central concern was that Abraham never wavered over if God would give him the son and descendants. It appears to have been inconsequential to Paul’s point that Abraham faltered over how the promise would be fulfilled. Paul thus builds his doctrine of righteousness by faith on Abraham’s unwavering faith relative to the “if” dimension of the promise, using this one element of Abraham’s life and experience as an archetypal example as the basis for the doctrine of righteousness by faith. In like manner, the author of Hebrews seems to have in mind one portion of Jephthah’s life that best exemplifies the life of faith he is trying to illustrate. I propose that the passage about Jephthah’s battle preparations, as well as the ensuing battle, is what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he cited Jephthah in chapter 11.

In this story, Jephthah first sent messengers to the Ammonite king, inquiring why they were attacking the Israelites (Judges 11:12). The Ammonite king answered to the effect that Israel stole land from Ammon during their exodus from Egypt and asks Jephthah to restore that land peaceably (vs.13). Jephthah gives a lengthy response, rehearsing that exodus history and an unprovoked attack by the Amorites. This sets up Jephthah’s core rebuttal to the Ammonite king, namely that Yahweh had dispossessed the Amorites of the land now being disputed by Ammon (vss. 14-23) and gave it to Israel. Israel thus has this land by divine grant and thus has a legal right to possess it.

Jephthah closes his message by asking if Ammon really intends to take what was assigned to Israel by Yahweh. In a seeming chide, he wonders if the king of Ammon should only possess land that his god, Chemesh, gives him, while asserting that Israel will possess what Yahweh gave to them (vs. 24). He finally asserts that Israel had possessed the land under dispute for 300 years (vs. 26) and wonders why the complaint was not made sooner.

Jephthah thus framed the issue as a conflict between Yahweh and Chemesh, citing examples from Israel’s history in which Yahweh defeated the other gods and their associated nations (vss. 25-28). More critically to the theology of Hebrews, based on a 300-year-old grant from Yahweh, Jephthah went into battle expecting victory, even though the Ammonites had dominated Israel for 18
years. Jephthah attempted the impossible because he believed Yahweh would enforce the grant, and God gave the victory. As in Romans 4, this single act of faith seems to be what underlies the citation of Jephthah in Hebrews 11.

In Hebrews 11, the author is concluding an appeal to first-century believing Jews, trying to convince them to persevere in their faith and not give up on Jesus. As part of this appeal, the author applies Habakkuk 2:3 to the Second Coming in order to set up the argument that Jesus is coming and has not tarried, implying that these harried Jewish believers can hang on till He gets here. The author continues by using Habakkuk 2:4 to outline two responses to this unseen promise: “The just shall live by faith”; or “shrink[ing] back” (Heb. 10:38, NIV). Here, as in Habakkuk, “the just shall live by faith” is not primarily about how we are justified but, rather, focuses on choosing to live a lifestyle in which behavior is governed by faith in God’s promises, even if the promises are unseen. The Hebrews could not see Jesus coming in glory but needed to persevere anyway as if they could see Him coming.

Hebrews 11 is a catalog of examples of persons acting on an unseen promise that God eventually fulfills. Noah had never seen a flood (vs. 7) but built an ark anyway because God made a promise. And so it is with each character. Thus, Jephthah’s going into battle against Ammon, with 18 years of visible oppression at their hands, yet trusting an ancient, unseen promise that God fulfills, fits the theological purpose of the chapter. Events afterward are not important to the theological development of the archetypal point, just as with Paul’s use of Abraham, who believed God yet later lied to Abimelech. In contrast to Abraham, however, Jephthah seems to have been a fairly unsavory character.

Jephthah’s moral anomalies fit well, however, into the larger trajectory of the Book of Judges. The book depicts a strong moral decline after Gideon’s central confession that God, not Gideon, is to rule over Israel as king (Judges 8:22, 23). Starting with Gideon’s ephod becoming an idolatrous snare, almost every judge thereafter has something wrong revealed about him.

Abimelech tries to be a king and gets killed. Several judges live like kings with harems, hence the large number of sons (two with 30, one with 40). And then there is Samson.

Jephthah’s rash vow and fulfillment is simply another evidence of the moral decline that occurs when God is not functionally king in Israel. Yet in that darkness, not unlike the story of Esther, Jephthah the outlaw invoked the promise of God, put it on the point of his spear, and went into battle trusting God to keep His promise. And God did.

Jephthah, then, teaches us about not only how faith works but also about God’s grace. When this ancient outlaw turned to God in faith, God did not hesitate to respond favorably. His unsavory past was not held against him. Though cast off by his half-brothers, Jephthah was graciously received by God. Whenever sinners trust God’s word more than their perceptions and feelings, grace erupts and they become empowered in the ways of God. Jephthah thus exemplifies another truth expressed by the author of Hebrews: “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Judges 7:25, ESV).
Compromising the Authority of Scripture

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have seen ourselves as the people of the Book. The Bible has been our cornerstone. In our beginnings, we relied on it completely, for we were hammering out the doctrines of the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and the judgment—all biblical doctrines based upon the authority of Scripture. But we simply assumed its authority, since its authority was not in question. Our concern was to emphasize the biblical doctrines that had been lost to the Christian Church.

Adventists came out of churches that had already accepted the authority of the Bible and the Reformation call to *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) as well as *sola fide* (by faith alone). We simply assumed that the Bible was the sole foundational authority and that salvation was by faith alone. Having assumed these foundational doctrines, we moved on to the task of restoring the rest of biblical teaching. As a result, we did not come to terms with the issues involved in either doctrine. Therefore, we were vulnerable to salvation by works and to human reason as the foundation of theology.

Our first crisis came with the doctrine of righteousness by faith. As we all know, in 1888 we confronted it head-on. What had been assumed now had to be spelled out clearly. The doctrine has been renewed from time to time within the church and has been a blessing both to the church as a whole and to each of us individually. We can be grateful for the many voices that have joined in the proclamation of salvation by grace through faith.

Just as we faced a crisis in the doctrine of righteousness by faith, so we also now encounter a similar crisis on the authority of the Bible. And just as we became aware of the issues and principles involved in *sola fide*, so we must also grasp those involved in the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. We can be grateful for the many voices in our church that are beginning to proclaim the message that the
Bible is the sole foundation of our faith.

Many similarities exist between the doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Just as salvation is a gift, so too the Bible, God's self-revelation, is also a gift. And just as we must not expect to manipulate salvation through human effort, so we must not seek to control the Bible by human reason. We must receive both salvation and the Bible by faith alone.

The history of theology reminds us that when one of these principles is lost, the other eventually disappears as well. The gift of salvation depends upon the gift of Scripture, for if the authority of Scripture rests upon human works of reason, then the salvation of which the Bible speaks also arises from those same human works.

The result of simply assuming the authority of Scripture has often led to a failure to grasp the meaning of its authority. For example, at times I have sought an absolute, rock-solid foundation to put under the Bible so that I could accept it as the Word of God and therefore as the only authority. I wanted to use the power of science, archaeology, history, psychology, sociology, and philosophy to build that foundation. I thought that such approaches would confirm that the Bible is the absolute authority.

But by doing so, I did not realize that I had just made myself the absolute authority. I rested my case on the excellence of reason rather than on the power of the Word of God. I compromised the authority of the Bible by attempting to interpret it within my contemporary worldview. I thought that the Bible was to be subjected to contemporary methods of literary interpretation and to concepts of truth, faith, justice, love, etc. Rather than allowing the Bible to be its own interpreter, i.e., to provide its own worldview, its own methods of interpretation; I compromised the authority of the Bible by imposing external worldviews and methods of interpretation upon it. Thus, I was able to make the Bible say what I needed it to say. I could support a "designer god" who fit well in my culture, who could be sold to the thought leaders of my time.

Also, I have misunderstood the authority of the Bible by seeking a "balanced" theology. I attempted to balance law and grace, faith and reason, and natural revelation with special revelation. Somehow, I overlooked the fact that what might appear balanced to me might be altogether unbalanced from God's standpoint, and that it was the biblical message that must provide the balance rather than what seemed appropriate from my human perspective.

Furthermore, some truths are not a question of balance, but a question of relationship. It is foolish for a homeowner to argue with the architect of a new home over the balance between the kitchen and the foundation. That is a question of relationship. The kitchen must rest upon the foundation. So the keeping of the law follows salvation by grace, reason rests upon faith, and natural revelation is understood within the context of special revelation.

I compromised the authority of the Bible when I wanted to find the truth, wherever it may be found, whether it be in nature, reason, science, philosophy, history, or elsewhere. I sought to find the truth so that I could find my own way to God. I was acting as if truth somehow had an existence independent of God and His Word. Like Pilate, I was asking, "What is truth?" (John 18:38, KJV) when
"the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6, KJV) was standing directly before me! For me, truth was a thing, or a concept, by which I would measure everything, including God and His Word.

I also failed to grasp the authority of the Bible when I wanted to take the truths discovered in the natural world and harmonize them with the truths from Scripture. Without realizing it, I was using a method that came from the major theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas. For him, theology rested upon the Bible and nature, the Bible and reason, and the Bible and church tradition. In a sense, I was saying, it is wiser to build the house upon the rock and the sand.

Thus, I compromised the authority of the Bible when I saw it as just one among many other authorities. I thought in terms of the primacy, or the supremacy, of the Bible rather than in terms of its sole foundational authority. It shocked me when I discovered my position on the primacy of Scripture to be the pre-Reformation view that the Reformation answered with the principle of sola scriptura. As a result, I compromised the authority of the Bible by assuming the contemporary humanistic concept of freedom—that we are absolutely free in the universe to make our decision either for or against Christ from a neutral starting point. The biblical teaching I discovered is that we are either slaves of Christ or slaves of Satan, and that we are set free only when we come to Christ. I thought I was free to determine the truth. By contrast, the Bible teaches that the truth will set us free.

Finally, I compromised the authority of the Bible when I wanted to meet people where they are in order to bring them to Christ. I sought to start with their worldview, with their philosophical framework, in order to convince them of the truth of Scripture. In so doing, I was setting their culture up as the foundational authority.

Though it is true that we must meet people in such a way that they can understand the message of the gospel, the conviction must come from the Holy Spirit, not from the dictates of their own culture. Our task is to confront their culture with God’s Word, rather than to base their acceptance of God’s Word upon their particular culture. Without verbalizing it, I was trying to tell God where He fits into the organization of knowledge. I was attempting to bring Him into the canon of truth. How lucky God was that I was on the scene to pull together the best arguments to prove His existence and defend the Bible as His Word. I wanted a "designer god" who fits my culture and rationality.

In my treatment of Scripture, I was like a physician who examines a patient, anesthetizes him or her on an operating table, massages the heart, measures the brain waves, excises a portion of the organs for further examination, diagnoses and fixes the problems if possible, and finally pieces the body back together as best as humanly possible. I failed to recognize that the process is just the opposite—that I must be the one placed upon the table. I must submit to the control of the Word of God, be dissected by it, allow its power under the Holy Spirit to be breathed into me, and thus be healed by it.