

Are Adventists Protestants?

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From its very inception, the Adventist church has claimed to be carrying the torch of Protestantism, fully sharing the Protestant Christian tradition. We trace our ancestry through Wesley, Luther, and the Waldenses, to the earliest Christian Church and to Jesus himself. Therefore Adventists dislike very much being classified among the cults on the fringes of Christianity. In the 1950s the church put forth a serious effort to refute once and for all the charge of "cultism" that had bothered us for some time. The dialogue with "evangelicals" at that time may not have convinced them of the Adventist claim to be the unique inheritors of the Reformation; but it succeeded, at least to some degree, in defending the authenticity of our Christian heritage. The legitimacy of the church's mission was recognized and the possibility of genuine dialogue with other Christians was established on a more solid foundation.

We Adventists see ourselves as reformers who, not quite satisfied with what the Reformation of the sixteenth century accomplished, wish to extend the spirit of the Reformation to its logical limits in order to prepare a people for the Second Coming of Christ. But reformers must keep in mind that they must remain inside the tradition while they wish to reform. Those who attack from outside are not reformers but invaders. In the zeal for reform, it can happen that a person or a group goes beyond the limits established by the foundations for reform. It is indeed legitimate to carry out a reformation to its logical conclusions, but that must be done standing on the foundations originally set forth. If we wish to see ourselves as carrying out the Protestant Reformation, we Adventists must remain true to the axioms of that reformation. Otherwise, no claim can be made to be working from within.

It is no idle pastime, therefore, to review the axioms of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Protestantism stands squarely on four affirmations: "Faith alone," "Grace alone," "Christ alone," "Scripture alone." These are the criteria by which Protestantism has historically been measured. Any of the four has veto power over any claim to belong to Protestant Christianity. In this essay I would like to concentrate on one of these criteria, because I believe that, while no Adventists would openly challenge any of these axioms today, in practice some are denying their Protestant heritage. There was a time when, in practice and even in theory, some Adventists stood in judgment under the axiom "Faith alone." But the battles over "righteousness by faith" and "grace and law" are over; the ghost of the "Galatian heresy" has been laid to rest.

Today the church must face up to the challenge of "Scripture alone." This confrontation has become unavoidable because of the way in which some Adventists misuse the writings of Ellen G. White. I am convinced that Mrs. White herself would rise to the challenge if she knew of the role her writings are being forced to play in the church.

I

In order to put this challenge in perspective, we must first establish what "Scripture alone" meant as a basic axiom in the Reformation. And this includes understanding what "tradition" meant as that to which "Scripture alone" was opposed. It is easy on a superficial basis to dismiss the word "tradition" as non-Protestant, and to react negatively at the very mention of the term. But it has different meanings in different contexts. Some historical considerations, therefore, are in order.

First of all it must be said that until the time of the Renaissance no clear distinction had been made between *Scripture* and *tradition*;¹ the possibility that the two could be in tension had not been conceived. The early Christian fathers were aware of the existence of apostolic tradition in Holy Scripture and in oral form, but the matter was not a serious concern. From the fathers, the medieval Church inherited a theological understanding in which "sacred page" and "sacred doctrine" were seen as one indivisible whole. Either could serve equally well to establish truth, for the Scriptures meant what the Church believed. It was the Reformation that made it necessary to formulate with some precision the relationship between Scripture and tradition. This was done by the Roman Catholic church when it formally defined the canon of Scripture for the first time at the Council of Trent.²

But tradition did not become a Catholic monopoly. The Reformers also

used tradition and in turn created several variants. Some of these took a rather definite configuration when they were embedded in the Protestant Confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Melancthon showed great concern for tradition and allowed it to play an important role in the formation of what he viewed as Protestant orthodoxy.³ When controversies arose between Reformers, the legitimacy of a particular view was defended by appeals to the early Church. This clearly indicates that it is a misunderstanding to think that those who affirm the priority of Scripture thereby deny the value of tradition. "Scripture alone" is not in itself hostile to tradition. It cannot be. But it must be understood that in this context "tradition" means the form taken by the faith when it is expressed in terms of the ongoing cultural development of Western man. History conditions the expression of the Christian faith. And these various expressions are not only valid for their own time but may also play a legitimate role in informing future expressions of the faith.

In a different context, one could ask the question, "What is Scripture itself, if not a form of tradition?" By their appeals to Scripture, Protestants have correctly emphasized the exclusive authority of the original tradition: the body of information and teaching contained in the Old and the New Testaments. It is original and irreplaceable. The gospel reaches man today in the form of a history at the center of which is Jesus the Christ; and if that history is to serve as a guide to the lives of men today, not only the shaping of the original tradition but also the transmission of that tradition till this day must be given serious consideration.

At times it has been claimed that concentrating on "Scripture alone" gives undue weight to the letter of Scripture, without regard for the fact that before the written word there was the oral word. Biblical scholarship today is very much aware indeed of the historical priority of oral transmission carried on by living witnesses. Even the Reformers, when they spoke of "Scripture alone," knew of the oral as well as the written transmission of the word.⁴ It is impossible to think that Christianity began with the New Testament. It cannot be repeated enough that the fundamental fact of revelation is not a book. The New Testament is the deposit of previous preaching; it is the result of revelation. The whole pattern of the New Testament makes clear that its origin was in oral tradition. In the middle of the second century, Papias spoke of the written gospels as second best to the oral reports of the disciples of those who had been disciples of the Lord.⁵ The "word of the Lord" was originally the word of preaching and only secondarily the written word.

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At the time of the Reformation a controversy arose as to the nature and the function of the living word. At issue was the question of whether the word could transmit to believers more than mere conceptual information. There was no question that the word could give instruction, orders, exhortations, understanding. But could it transmit the Holy Spirit? Could it transmit grace? The Catholic hierarchy claimed that for the transmission of grace the sacraments were the only means. The Reformers challenged this, especially because the Church claimed a monopoly over the sacraments on the basis of apostolic succession. To the Reformers "Scripture alone" meant to oppose the claim that the living activity of grace, operative in the sacraments of the Church, was what gave the Roman hierarchy its authority. They were not denying the historical priority of oral tradition or setting up the written over the oral tradition. They were denying that the activity of grace operating through the sacraments gave the Church its authority. They found authority for themselves in the gospel, in the power of the word, so that even Scripture was to be submitted to the exclusive authority of the gospel. It was on this basis, for example, that Luther could judge the Epistle of James to be "a rather strawy epistle"⁶ in comparison to the more substantial letters of Paul; Christ is not in it with as resplendent a force as he is in Romans. This means that the authority of Holy Scripture rests, paradoxically, on the gospel — that is, essentially on the living, the spoken, word.⁷

It was only later (in the seventeenth century, when Protestantism experienced a hardening of the arteries) that, in order to buttress itself against the advances of historical research on the biblical traditions, Protestant orthodoxy carved out the doctrine of verbal inspiration. But this timid attempt to safeguard the word of God by freezing it in the words of a book, seen from today's perspective, only serves as a further indication of the loss of vitality suffered with the passage of time. To be sure, verbal inspiration was a doctrine developed in order to defend the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. But defend this principle, it could not. In fact, it quite soon became a threat to it. Thus before historical science could affect the word of God, it finished with the doctrine of verbal inspiration.⁸ Protestantism thus returned to its historical position of not identifying the word of God with letters on a page, be these even the letters written by the hand of Paul himself on the original parchment that had his signature.

After these preliminary considerations it may now be understood clearly what the Reformers were denying when they affirmed "Scripture alone." They were not denying the fact of tradition, nor were they denying the im-

portance of tradition in either of the two contexts discussed above. Implicitly they recognized the origin of Scripture in tradition, and explicitly they took recourse to the historical tradition of the faith. What they were denying was the right of tradition to set forth the meaning of Scripture. They were denying to tradition hermeneutical mastery over Scripture. They were defending the right of Scripture to be its own interpreter.

For Scripture to be the only source of revelation it must also be the only source for its own interpretation. When in his debates with representatives of the Roman hierarchy Luther insisted that he be proved wrong from Scripture, his opponents insisted that the fathers they were quoting were rightly interpreting the Scriptures. And *there* is where Luther planted his flag and refused to recant: he denied the authority of any tradition that sets itself up as the interpreter of Scripture. Historically speaking, it cannot be said that Luther's appeal to Scripture was his desperate attempt to save face after all other foundations had crumbled under his feet.⁹ It was not the case that between 1517 and 1520 Luther suffered a collapse of authority and then as a last resort made his appeal to Scripture. Luther had been constrained by the Scriptures under the influence of his Augustinian teacher, Trutvetter, who had already used the "Scripture alone" principle, even if not in the same way Luther later employed it. It was because Luther was apprehended by Scripture and its power that he found himself free from all other authorities and was able to consider them as subordinate to Scripture.

Luther was the first one to make it clear that the question of the authority of Scripture in relation to other theological authorities is dependent on the question of the interpretation of Scripture. Although he was indeed defending the uniqueness of the word of God in Scripture, his appeal to "Scripture alone" was not primarily a battle cry to defend inspiration or revelation. Luther was denying that anybody or anything outside Scripture could exercise hermeneutical control over Scripture. He was determined to test the prevalent ecclesiastical attitude toward Scripture, which in effect was driving people's attention away from Scripture and toward the authorized interpretation of it. If the people are told that the meaning of Scripture can be gotten immediately from an authorized interpreter of Scripture, the inevitable result is the neglect of Scripture. It does not take long before the Scriptures are no longer able to speak with their own voice.

The Church buttressed its position by claiming that Scripture cannot be privately interpreted. It was generally agreed that the willful interpretation of Scripture by one individual was the root of heresy. One man's interpretation was the affirmation of one's own will, and Luther as a monk had

renounced his own will when he took monastic orders. Luther knew all this, of course; and the possibility that his theological battles were only a battle for the affirmation of his own self never ceased to torture him. But soon he became aware that the danger of individual interpretation was not avoided by acceptance of a traditional interpretation.

If one were to accept the interpretation of Saint Augustine, who guaranteed that Saint Augustine had not been guilty of individual interpretation? Besides, even if one were to accept Saint Augustine's interpretation as authoritative, how could one be sure that he was not interpreting Saint Augustine in his own individual way? Luther insisted that the tradition could not guarantee the meaning of Scripture. Rather, Scripture was to exercise authority over the meaning of the tradition. The only way to safeguard oneself against Saint Augustine's individual interpretation was to interpret Saint Augustine according to Scripture, and not Scripture according to Saint Augustine.

So if there is danger in individual interpretation of Scripture, the thing to do is to turn to the text of Scripture itself and not to other writings. It is *only* in Scripture that one may draw upon the Holy Spirit in order to judge all other commentaries, pagan or Christian.

What is at issue is the nature of Scripture itself. If Scripture is considered a difficult, strange, ancient, opaque book that lets itself be understood only stingily, then it might be argued that other lights are needed in order to throw light upon it for its treasures to become more easily accessible. In the process, however, these other lights will attract attention to themselves, since the nature of their light becomes important. But if Scripture is a true light itself, if it is lucid and transparent, then its light is what illumines every other source of light. Then the study of the text of Scripture itself becomes imperative because all others are to be judged on the basis of it.

"Scripture alone" means that Scripture is its own only interpreter. It speaks for itself. It does not need to seek elsewhere for sources of understanding. The word of God is in Scripture. The Holy Spirit and grace are not an ecclesiastical monopoly. The word of God is the subject of Scripture and is illumined by it.

In the search for God's word, all other sources are subordinate, and under the judgment of Scripture. For the study of Scripture all the tools of research are to be used conscientiously and with the rigor the discipline demands. But no preconceived ideas may be brought to Scripture in order to validate it, or to be validated by it. Methods of research may be brought to it, but Scripture must be allowed full control over its own meaning. It must

have full sway in its own interpretation. The interpreter must surrender all his own notions to the mind of Scripture so that the Holy Spirit may work.

III

There is no question that Ellen G. White stands squarely in agreement with this classic Protestant understanding of "Scripture alone." Her appreciation of the Scriptures as the only source of Christian access to the word of God is well documented throughout her writings. Her understanding that the Scriptures are their own best interpreter is amply demonstrated.¹⁰ It would be preposterous to suggest that she considered herself the one called upon to exercise hermeneutical control over Scripture. Never did she wish to become the one who stands over the word of God and judges it as to what it means. Her words in these matters are quite explicit. In no way did she envision becoming a distraction from the study of the word of God. She never claimed that her writings were a shortcut to the meaning of Scripture.

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Thoughtful investigation and earnest, taxing study are required in order for this word to be understood. . . . The evidence of the truth of God's word is in the word itself. Scripture is the key that unlocks scripture. The deep meaning of the truths of God's word is unfolded to our minds by His Spirit.¹¹

Mrs. White did not see herself as a guarantor of the meaning of Scripture, in this way drawing people away from Scripture to her own writings, where the meaning of Scripture, supposedly, could be obtained more easily. On the contrary, she insisted on the necessity to study the Bible, because only there are the treasures of God available. She said: "There are truths in the word which, like veins of precious ore, are hidden beneath the surface."¹² "These Scriptures are a treasure-house of precious pearls, and all need them."¹³ "Precious treasure will be secured by those who study God's Word with earnestness, for heavenly angels will direct the search."¹⁴

Anyone familiar with her writings knows Mrs. White's position on the principle of "Scripture alone." It is ironic, therefore, that her writings have come to be used by some as a means of drawing students away from the Scriptures and of establishing the meaning of a certain passage. "Scripture alone" demands, rather, that the meaning of the writings of Mrs. White be determined by the biblical word.

There is no shortage of people who feel that if Mrs. White has interpreted a text of Scripture in a particular way, that is the *only* meaning of the text, and that anyone who interprets the text differently is thereby challenging the authority of Mrs. White. Nothing could be more contrary to her

own spirit and practice, and nothing could paralyze Seventh-day Adventism more effectively. At no time did Mrs. White think that when she commented on a passage of Scripture she was declaring its meaning once and for all. This is clear from the fact that she gave different interpretations to the same passage on different occasions. An example of this practice is her interpretation of the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13): in *Christ's Object Lessons* she interprets it in terms of the Second Coming of Christ;¹⁵ but in *The Great Controversy* she applies it to the period before the 1844 disappointment, saying that it "illustrates the experience of the Adventist people."¹⁶ This indicates that as far as she was concerned the application of a passage of Scripture she had made at one time in no way was to be considered the *only* meaning of the passage.¹⁷

Mrs. White repeatedly encouraged students of the Scriptures to dig deeper in order to find further meaning. She promised that earnest students would be further illumined by the Holy Spirit and given a deeper view into the mysteries of God.

Those who dig beneath the surface discover the hidden gems of truth. The Holy Spirit is present with the earnest searcher. Its illumination shines upon the Word, stamping the truth upon the mind with a new, fresh importance. . . . The preciousness of truth is realized as never before. A new, heavenly light shines upon the Word, illuminating it as though every letter were tinged in gold. God Himself has spoken to the mind and heart, making the Word spirit and life.¹⁸

The worship of the living God is to be continually assisted by an ear that is open to the words "Holy, Holy, Holy," when these are spoken in a new voice. The Scriptures themselves already said it well: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52). This means that there can be no conflict between what Mrs. White may have brought out of a passage of Scripture in her time and what an earnest student of the Scriptures may bring out today. And if with the tools of scholarly research a biblical student establishes the meaning of a passage of Scripture in its original setting, he is in no way contradicting or challenging the meaning that Mrs. White may have given to the same passage. Nor was Mrs. White contradicting herself when she gave a second meaning to a passage of Scripture by considering it from a different perspective.

IV

It is imperative for the church that wishes to carry the Protestant Reformation to its logical limits to strictly enforce in its practice the principle of

"Scripture alone." The Adventist church must therefore insist that Mrs. White is to play the legitimate role for which she was called of God. She was not called to draw people away from an earnest study of the Scriptures, or to offer herself as a shortcut to its meaning. Rather she was a witness to the necessity of earnest and prayerful Bible study so that new meaning, new veins of precious ore, may be tapped to the glory of God. She is in no way to be considered the guarantor of the meaning of Scripture that makes all further searching unnecessary, and that exercises hermeneutical control over the Bible. No book, in either black covers or red covers, can control the word of God.

The Holy Spirit is still active to energize the mind and the heart of one who diligently searches the mysteries of God's word. The Spirit alone can guide a man to the presence of the Eternal. As Mrs. White herself said it: "Only by the aid of the divine Teacher can we understand the truths of God's Word."¹⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 From a historical point of view, it was humanism that made the distinction necessary. See W. Maurer, *Luther's Verständnis des neutestamentlichen Kanons, Fuldaer Hefte*, XII (1960), p. 53.
- 2 See Josef R. Geiselman, *Das Konzil von Trient über das Verhältnis der Heiligen Schrift und der nichtgeschriebenen Traditionen in Die mündliche Überlieferung; Beiträge zum Begriff der Tradition*. Edited by Michael Schmaus. (Munich: M. Hueber 1957), pp. 123-206.
- 3 See P. Fränkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Geneva: E. Droz 1961).
- 4 See Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition*. Translated by S. H. Hooke. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1968), p. 110.
- 5 Papias *Exposition of the Lord's Oracles*. Quoted by Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 39, 3-4.
- 6 Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar edition 1883), *Die deutsche Bibel*, volume six, p. 10.
- 7 Luther, volume ten, part 1-1, p. 17.
- 8 A good example is provided by Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1965).
In a review of this book in *Christianity Today*, April 15, 1966, pp. 34-36, Gleason L. Archer, rather than recognizing "a demonstrable error in the original autograph of Holy Scripture," prefers to suppose a "textual emendation" for which, however, there is no textual support whatever. Thus the proper designation for what he suggests is "textual conjecture."
- 9 This rather common Roman Catholic argument, although inadequate in view of the evidence, is still presented at face value. See, for example, James T. Burta-chaeall, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810* (London: Cambridge

University Press 1969), p. 285: "The first Reformers, once they had thrown off the authority of Rome, had to cast about for some new authority of last resort; they located such in the Scriptures."

- 10 Among the numerous references that could be given here, see Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Teachers, Parents, and Students* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1913), p. 462; and *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1923), pp. 105-106.
- 11 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, nine volumes (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1948), volume eight, p. 157.
- 12 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume eight, p. 157.
- 13 White, *Counsels to Teachers, Parents, and Students*, p. 456.
- 14 White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1946), pp. 214-215.
- 15 White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1941), pp. 406-407, 414.
- 16 White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1911), p. 393.
- 17 The fact that the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, seven volumes (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1953-1957), volume five, pp. 508-509, follows the interpretation given in *Christ's Object Lessons* and makes no mention whatsoever of the interpretation in *The Great Controversy* can in no way be construed as an attempt to challenge Mrs. White's role in the church. For reasons of his own, and taking into account the purpose for which he was writing, the commentator preferred one interpretation over the other — perhaps because he felt that it had better support in the context of Matthew's Gospel.
- 18 White, *Selected Messages*, two books (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1958), book two, p. 39.
- 19 White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1955), p. 68.