

Christian Commitment and Intellectual Achievement

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I

There are those who regard the expression Christian scholarship a contradiction in terms. If he is truly Christian, they argue, the scholar is more concerned with his religious commitment than with intellectual achievement. They conclude that such a commitment makes free inquiry impossible. Therefore, a dedicated Christian cannot be a scholar, and a scholar cannot be a practicing Christian.

This attitude is found within the church as well as without the church; for even in this age of unprecedented knowledge, some view with alarm any suggestion that the discovery of new truth is a legitimate function of a Seventh-day Adventist college or university. They demand that church-related institutions transmit the known, but they distrust research into the unknown. They insist on affirmation, but they shrink from inquiry. They are devotees of truth, but only to the extent that it requires no adjustment in belief.

The fear that there exists a fundamental disharmony between faith and knowledge, religion and education, piety and intelligence, Christian commitment and scholarly achievement, is not a new one. Atheists and skeptics always have suggested that faith is most compatible with gullibility, religion most at home with ignorance, piety most congenial with stupidity, and Christian commitment most fervid among the intellectually sterile.

Throughout the histories of Catholicism and Protestantism there have been voices and, often, prevailing attitudes in full agreement! Of course, usually they used a more sanctimonious vocabulary to express it. Frequently they made vague references to the need to become like children. Other times they gave out pious re-

minders that God reveals himself best unto babes, connecting this with pompous pronouncements about the foolishness of preaching, and the like. But whatever the language used to express it, the attitude represents the oldest heresy of mankind. It was proclaimed first from the Tree of Knowledge by the father of lies when he insinuated that God prefers to keep his creatures ignorant.

The fear of learning is not aroused as long as the learning is confined to the transmission of the adult culture and values to the young of any particular society or subgroup. When education moves beyond indoctrination, however, and becomes involved in the discovery of new knowledge, the fright whistles start blowing. The reason for this is inherent in the nature of the situation. People fear that new knowledge may undermine the indoctrination.

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The context of a doctrinally oriented organization includes several conditions that encourage such fear. The first condition is the acceptance of a statement, or set of statements, as being synonymous with "truth" or "the truth." The second condition is the extension of church membership to a person upon his affirmation of all these propositions and the withdrawal of it upon his denial of any. The third condition is evident when a church regards its mission and, hence, its reason for existence, the perpetuation and proclamation of this particular set of propositions.

These conditions describe a creedal church or sect. The more detailed the creed, the greater the fear that additional discovery may cast doubt on some portion of it. Such a church is actually declaring, "We do not need the spirit of truth to guide us into all truth. We already have the whole truth." But throughout the history of the church, creeds have proved to be dismally poor substitutes for the Holy Spirit!

The founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church were very conscious of this. Many of them had been disfellowshipped by churches in which the creeds were so rigid that there was no latitude for the discernment of new truths. Thus these founders, fearing creeds as inhibitors of freedom and as obstacles to divine guidance, resolutely refused to adopt a creed for their new church.

John N. Loughborough regarded a creed as the road to apostasy.¹ James White held that a creed is in direct opposition to the gifts of the Spirit.² Ellen White wrote:

The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union.³

As men's minds become narrow, they think they know all, when they have only a glimpse of truth. They close their minds, as if there were no more for them to learn; and should the Lord attempt to lead them on, they would not accept the increased light. They cling to the spot where they see light, when that which they see is only a glimmer of the bright beams they might enjoy. They know very little of what it means to follow in the footsteps of Christ.⁴

Have we perpetuated sufficiently this fear of crystallizing into formal statements what we refer to as "the truth"? Attempts to officialize in increasing detail doctrinal statements and church standards frequently get enthusiastic support. Sometimes in Adventist councils — even in educational councils — the most impassioned speeches are those that call for the codifying of church teachings, principles, and standards so that "people will know what they believe"! We are assured that not only the young people but also the older members need to be told with authority what they can believe, what they ought to wear, where they may go, what they should or should not read or watch, what they may eat, etc. — and that it is high time we tell them straight and stop pussyfooting around with guidelines and basic principles!

The enthusiastic "amen" chorus to which such a speaker usually sits down is alarming evidence that the Judaizers might fare much better at some Adventist councils than they did at the council of Jerusalem. Just how much have we learned from the tragic experiences of the church through the ages with Pharisees and papists? Creedmakers among us are busy, and they are getting a hearing!

II

The New Testament concept of truth bears little resemblance to the way creed artists picture it. Our Lord declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).⁵ He associated truth with "the way," which suggests movement, progression; and with "life," which is the very antithesis of everything static and unchanging. Most startling of all, he identified truth with himself — the God-man. What concept could possibly be more dynamic than that?

When Jesus drew the ultimate contrast, it was in terms of truth and not-truth: "You seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth. . . . You are of your father the devil. . . . He . . . has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him" (John 8:40, 44). When he spoke of being freed from the clutches of sin, he said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). When he prayed that the Father should complete the work of renewal, he petitioned, "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. . . . For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (John 17:17, 19). Then as if to guarantee forever the dynamic, ever-unfolding nature of truth, he promised before leaving, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13).

Both as a moral and as an intellectual quality, truth is the very essence of the Christian's spiritual being. According to the foremost evangelist of all Christendom, it is also the power of the Christian witness. Concerning his evangelism, Paul wrote, "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to

practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but *by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God*" (2 Corinthians 4:2). Truth is not only the *content*, but also the *method*, of living discipleship.

Commitment to any concept of truth short of this is unworthy of a Christian, and it is untenable for a church that is led by the Spirit bestowed to guide us into all truth. On the other hand, a commitment to guidance by the Spirit of truth will result in a mind-subduing awe at the wondrous unfolding of infinite knowledge. It will remove the fear of discovery. Ellen White had such a commitment, and she insisted on, rather than feared, continuing discovery. She wrote:

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The more closely connected man is with the source of all knowledge and wisdom, the more he will feel that he must advance in intellectual and spiritual attainments. . . . Truth is eternal, and conflict with error will only make manifest its strength. . . . If the pillars of our faith will not stand the test of investigation, it is time that we knew it.⁶

Faith in a lie will not have a sanctifying influence upon the life or character. No error is truth, or can be made truth by repetition, or by faith in it. Sincerity will never save a soul from the consequences of believing an error. . . . The Lord does not want us to have a blind credulity, and call that the faith that sanctifies. The truth is the principle that sanctifies, and therefore it becomes us to know what is truth.⁷

Because man is finite and truth is infinite, any particular statement or system of truth must by its very nature be only partial. This assures the obsolescence of any creed that could be devised. Why can we not have a complete dedication to truth as such, to its continuing discovery, and to its practice and propagation as it becomes known? In such a commitment, tenets of faith or doctrinal formulations serve as progress reports in our eternal quest. Was this not precisely the situation at the founding of the church by Jesus? He made no pretense at having revealed a complete creed. Instead, he said:

I have yet many things to say to you,	(Infinitude of truth)
but you cannot bear them now.	(Finitude of man)
When the Spirit of truth comes,	
he will guide you into all the truth.	(Eternal discovery)

In a church so oriented, there need never be fear of discovery, for new truth can threaten nothing. It only adds, builds, enhances, broadens, glorifies, frees, sanctifies, gladdens. In a community fully committed to the discovery of all truth, the only heresies are the perpetuation of ignorance and the teaching of the demonstrably false. Should *anything* else *ever* be branded as heresy? Blessed be the backbone of Athanasius! Said he, "If the world goes against truth, then Athanasius goes against the world."⁸

III

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A legitimate question may be raised at this point. Wherein does the peculiarity of the Seventh-day Adventist church consist in such a creedless commitment? And how does an Adventist scholar differ from others who are also seeking to discover truth? The Adventist role in man's quest for truth must be both cooperative and unique. It is cooperative in its adherence to sound procedures and techniques in research. It is unique in the basic assumptions by which it interprets its findings.

When a man seeks to wrest from the universe its secrets, he has a choice between two basic assumptions regarding its fundamental nature. He may assume that the universe is the result of matter plus chance and time. He will then interpret his discoveries in terms of materialistic evolution. In this system, matter is the basic reality, and personality is merely an incidental result. On the other hand, the researcher may assume that the universe is the result of person plus design and purpose. He will then understand his findings in terms of a theistic creation. In this system, personality is the basic reality and matter the result.⁹

The Seventh-day Adventist scholar accepts the second basic assumption. He holds that God is; that through God's free activity he created the universe; and that through God's continuing activity he supports and guides it in its dynamic state, which we call the natural processes. Therefore, as the scholar studies these natural processes, he understands that he is probing into the activity of God and that he can thereby come to know God. To the scholar the universe in its total dynamic complexity is the self-revelation of the creating God.

The Adventist scholar makes another assumption corollary to the first. Because God is personal, he relates to persons personally. That is, God reveals himself through communication and communion as well as by material activity. Thus, true fulfillment for any particular person may be realized only to the extent that he finds such communion with the personal God, the ultimate reality and existence. The Adventist also holds that the Bible constitutes a record of divine-human communions that were actualized over a period of about a millennium and a half, and that this record has been so uniquely attested that it provides a norm by which all supposed divine-human communication may be validated. The Adventist researcher goes one step further in his belief that more recently the writings of Ellen G. White have supplied another record of a divine-human communion, over a period of about seventy years, which is of particular worth, second only to the Bible itself, in revealing God and his will.

These are basic assumptions made by the Seventh-day Adventist investigator regarding the nature of reality and the canons of evidence. He does not claim that

these can be proved, but he insists that they stand the pragmatic test. He does not question the integrity or the intelligence of fellow seekers after truth who reject these assumptions in favor of others, which also cannot be proved, even though he sincerely believes the weight of evidence to be on his side. In fact, he believes this so firmly that what we have called basic assumptions are actually matters of faith that become self-validating. He is convinced, therefore, that he can make significant and unique contributions to man's endeavor to roll back the frontiers of knowledge.

A church that claims the testimony of Jesus as one of its distinguishing marks has a very special mission in the discovery of truth. It has a great stake in the highest intellectual attainments possible. In the introduction to the Apocalypse, the testimony of Jesus is identified as the revelation of Jesus Christ, given him by God to show his servants. In the nineteenth chapter this testimony is called the Spirit of prophecy. Is this any other than the Spirit of truth that is to guide us into all truth? Then should not the very name *Seventh-day Adventist* be associated in the minds of all with the most vigorous pursuit of knowledge?

Adventist colleges and universities *must* become known for their high scholarly attainments, for their significant contributions to human knowledge, for their leadership in discovering God through his many revelations.

Regardless of how else they may succeed, if they fail in this they will cheat their students, who have a right to expect this. Also they will betray the church that established and supports them. And they will forfeit by default the respect of those in the world before whom they should "witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:2) — which is the Spirit of truth.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1/ "The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such." J. N. Loughborough, Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861, *Review and Herald* (October 8, 1861).

2/ "Now I take the ground that creeds stand in direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point and the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too. But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it

knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement. God put the gifts into the church for a good and great object; but men who have got up their churches have shut up the way or have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed. A creed and the gifts thus stand in direct opposition to each other. Now what is our position as a people? The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time. And in this we take a position against the formation of a creed." James White, Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, *ibid*.

3/ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald* (December 15, 1885).

4/ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald* (July 12, 1898).

5/ Scriptural quotations herein are from the Revised Standard Version.

6/ Ellen G. White, The benefits of Bible study, *Apples of Gold Library*, no. 10 (March 1894).

7/ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2 bks.

(Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1958), bk. 2, p. 56.

8/ Tryon Edwards (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard Book Company 1964), p. 688.

9/ This is a monstrous oversimplification, of course, but perhaps it will suffice for the purpose here.