

Needed—Constructive Adventist Theology

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This paper argues two theses: (*a*) that the Seventh-day Adventist church has a pressing need for constructive theology; and (*b*) that such constructive theology will be most helpful to the church when it emerges as the product of *cooperative* (in the sense of interdisciplinary) and *integrated* endeavor. Let us take up each matter in turn.

I

To many in the church, the first thesis will be self-evident. Yet, clearly, to a number (perhaps the majority) it will be a cause for misgivings. This is because the term *constructive theology* may evoke thoughts of speculative ideas that would inevitably lead to a diluting of distinctive doctrines and perhaps eventually to removal of “landmarks.”

But if that is so, the need such persons might feel would be for *doctrines* rather than for theology. Since the doctrines of the church were established in a previous generation, to these persons the need would be not for theologians but for preservers of the tradition. That is, the Adventist preserver of religious tradition may be a memorizer of Scripture and Ellen G. White writings — one who can pull an “appropriate” saying out of the acknowledged bag to meet any question — rather than a constructive thinker.

Therefore, it seems necessary to set forth at least a brief justification of my first thesis — that the Seventh-day Adventist church has a pressing need for constructive theology. Three principal arguments that may be advanced arise from the nature of theology, the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and the course of contemporary Adventist practice.

Anselm's definition of theology is "faith seeking understanding."¹ That is, theology involves the Christian believer in the endeavor to explicate the meaning of his faith. He is a *believer* (let us say he is an Adventist) — there is the "given." But he is also a *rational* creature — and there arises the need for theology. Theology is thus the effort to explain and defend his religious posture — first for himself, then for the edification of his fellow Adventists, and finally for the persuasion of non-Adventists.

The task of theology as such can never be completed. Every believer is a man of his age, and each age brings fresh questions and challenges to the faith. The "answers" for an earlier generation are important, but they cannot be carried over in toto to meet today's intellectual environment. A church that "dishes out answers" to questions that are no longer being asked, but is silent when faced with the problems of the hour, cannot claim to be true to its prophetic vocation.

Does this mean that the culture will now be allowed to dictate the direction of theology? Not at all. Theology is to be done in the confluence of three streams: *Scripture*, the *tradition*, and the *culture*. The Bible retains, and must retain, a normative place — it is Scripture.² By tradition we understand the accumulated wisdom of the church at large, arising out of Christian experience and reflection on Scripture, a particular place being given to the peculiarly Seventh-day Adventist aspect. In this tradition, then, the Ellen G. White writings and the landmark doctrines that the pioneers hammered out must be at the fore. Thus, while the Adventist cannot divest himself of his contemporaneity as he comes to the task of theology, the impingement of Scripture and the Adventist tradition temper the impact of the culture on his work.

It may be helpful to point the way in which the Adventist thinker is to be a man of his time, yet not bound by his time. The past century and a quarter have seen vast changes in the world, not only in terms of technological achievements, but more importantly in terms of man's view of God, the cosmos, and self. I mention only three figures whose writings have profoundly influenced our generation: Darwin, Feuerbach, and Freud.

Faced with the changed *Weltanschauung* that has come about as a result of the hypotheses of these men, the Adventist has only two courses from which to choose. On the one hand, he may attempt to reconstitute nineteenth-century Adventist theology, pretending to himself (and to others) that Darwin and company never existed. On the other hand, he may face squarely the challenge to his faith which their hypotheses have brought.

The former position is the easier, but it is the way of obsolescence. It is one thing to be able to prove to your neighbor that Saturday is the Sabbath — but

what if that neighbor no longer cares about *any* day of worship? What if his response to a biblical approach is a shrug of the shoulders and a so-what attitude? Again, suppose that the seemingly inexorable drift of the culture is toward the wholly secular, the denial of the supernatural. Poised midway between the twin poles of Scripture and tradition, the Adventist may find himself, at least at this point, a man apart from his age — even as did the first Christians.³

2/ THE HISTORY OF ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

Adventist theology to this point has been primarily concerned with apologetics and polemics.⁴ It was probably a necessary phase as we sought to establish our identity, our distinctive place in Christendom. But that is not our greatest need today. Now we need constructive theology rather than debate.

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Consider the two preeminent doctrines that gave rise to the official name of the church: Seventh-day Adventist.

For more than a century the church has been concerned about arguing for the Sabbath vis-a-vis Sunday: the issue has been *which* day is the day for Christian worship. But where, in all our concentration on the Sabbath, has there been produced a work on the *theology* of the Sabbath — on its beauty in itself, on its *Christian* significance? The sad truth is that one has to go to a Jewish thinker to find a work in depth on this topic.⁵ Surely, of all people, Adventists should be able to write a theology of the Sabbath! And, as more and more people “outside” seem less concerned about *which* day and more inclined to pose the question of why *any* day, the need for such theology is daily more urgent.

The same line of reasoning can apply to the Second Advent. Adventists have been more concerned with a historical focus than with a distinctively *theological* endeavor. Yet there has been a tremendous upsurge in apocalyptic thought, not only in a secularized context (e.g., the ecology crisis), but in scholarly interest in the New Testament apocalyptic. Whereas a number of biblical scholars have broken the image of apocalypticists as wild-eyed eccentrics concerned with arcane numerics, some Adventists seem half-ashamed of their apocalyptic roots.

What I mean is this: Not only in the secularized context but in the field of biblical scholarship, Adventists have much to contribute. Surely no one can grasp biblical apocalypticism like the Adventist! So he *can* and *should* be heard from. But again, his contribution should be more than mere restatement of Scripture or tradition if he is to command a hearing by his contemporaries.

3/ CONTEMPORARY ADVENTIST PRACTICE

The point here is simply that, whether or not one considers theology to be a bane or a blessing, in fact every Adventist is to some extent involved in doing the-

ology. Whether or not we care to admit it, constructive theology is being done. So the issue really is not *whether*, but *what sort*. Will it be good or bad theology?

A visit to an Amish community is an interesting experience — and a sobering one. When one observes the quaint dress styles, the horse-drawn black buggies, the lanterns, and the horse-drawn plows, one has an eerie feeling of stepping back into the past. Here is a community that has chosen deliberately to freeze a tradition at a point in time.

That was not the route followed by the early Christians. Constructive theology began with the Resurrection and continued apace as the young church went first to the Jews and then broke out into the Gentile world. The New Testament is witness to the theological development that accompanied the growth of the church.

Nor has the Seventh-day Adventist church chosen to follow the example of the Amish. There was *development* of theology throughout the nineteenth century; the Ellen G. White writings themselves show clear evidence of such growth. And the process did not end with the death of the “messenger.” The church today faces new questions — and old questions in new settings. Matters such as euthanasia, abortion, birth control, and military service come to mind. We can all recall Adventist preachers and writers who predicted that God would never allow man to set foot on the moon. Why have those assertions fallen silent? Why have the erstwhile proponents not claimed that the Apollo landings were part of a gigantic hoax? Obviously because, acknowledged or unacknowledged, Adventists have been engaged in the task of constructive theology.

My suggestion, therefore, is that the need for constructive Adventist theology — a need, as we have seen, springing from the nature of theology itself, from considerations of early Adventist history, and from the practice of the church — be openly acknowledged. Perhaps then we can go about the task more intelligently. And perhaps then we may produce good rather than bad theology.

But whose is such a task to be? Is it to be limited to those alone who have been “licensed” or educated to follow theological pursuits? This question leads us to the second thesis of the paper.

II

Manifestly every Adventist is in some sense a theologian. When life tumbles in — at the hour of tragedy, in suffering, in facing the loss of everything — faith is severely tested. *Then*, no matter what its roots, only a theology individually constructed for that moment will be adequate. As *each* believes, so *each* constructs theology.

But it is obvious that much more remains to be said. I have in mind *written*

works of constructive theology. Clearly, comparatively few Adventists are prepared to engage in such a task. (This is not at all to discourage individual contributions by lay persons. It will be a sorry pass if we move toward a stratification of the church into a “hierarchical” or “intellectual” caste system. Many a minister or teacher has found a penetrating theological insight from the lips of a lay believer.)

It seems necessary to consider three groupings in the church which might contribute to such a task — ministers, teachers of religion, and informed lay persons qualified for all kinds of professions (other than theology).

The task of constructive theology is forced on the pastor in two respects: in his visiting with his congregation and in his preaching. He has occasion to reflect on the issues of life and death — and of the oft-sad riddle of human existence — and he betrays his calling if he does not engage in such reflection — with prayer and searching study. He must struggle for answers that are meaningful to his flock as he meets them in their homes or as he stands before them on Sabbath morning.

It is no accident that the notable theologians of the modern period have had their roots in the pastorate.⁶ Theology that is significant emerges out of *concern* and *struggle*. Contrariwise, theology that is attempted by one isolated from the hard knocks of life may be sterile, clever, and trivial. Clearly, Adventist pastors should have a leading place in constructive Adventist theology.

What, then, of the teachers of religion? Here are persons who have even more occasion (of a different kind) for the contemplation that is essential for the theological task. This is a group that increasingly is improving in terms of academic qualifications. Rightly we should look to these academic theologians of the church. Yet, over the years, the contribution of the group has been extremely slender.

It seems undeniable that the self-image of the religion teacher has been largely responsible for this lack of theological enterprise. As long as he conceives himself to be no more than a preserver of the tradition, the criterion of excellence will be his ability to repeat ad hoc selections from Scripture and Ellen G. White. Constructive thought is more taxing. Also it implies a requisite image of the teacher on the part of educational administrators: that is, the *expectation* of creative theological work from teachers of religion and the *provision of intellectual freedom* to pursue it.

Perhaps a crisis in the teaching of religion in Adventist schools will spark a development of constructive theological endeavor. Why should religion classes be any less exciting than others? Exciting classes will come only as the religion teacher is a true academic, working at his profession: studying, thinking, and writing.

Granted, then, that the “technical” theologians of the church should take the lead in the theological endeavor. What place in constructive theology is there for the lay persons? Because doing theology becomes hair-splitting and futile if theological professionals divorce themselves from the pastorate (or the classroom), I suggest that effort toward constructive theology in our day calls for a *cooperative* interdisciplinary venture between theologians and lay persons (“lay” in the sense of “not ordained”) in other professions. Let me elaborate both the grounds and the functioning of such a venture.

The grounds of the endeavor are these. Every religious datum is at once a historical datum. As such, it is amenable to investigation by the psychologist, the sociologist, the historian, the linguist, the anthropologist, and so on (though the religious datum is *not exhausted* by such investigation, as Eliade has emphasized⁷). That is to say, the word of God comes as the word of man. Although we cannot allow theology to be collapsed into anthropology, this in no wise implies that theology will not stand to benefit by contributions from the human sciences.⁸ The very acceptance of these sciences in our culture demands that theology give them a hearing.

Let us take a simple illustration, devil possession. A recent issue of *Insight* gave three “interpretations” of a miraculous healing from the demons — from the perspectives of a church administrator, a psychiatrist, and an anthropologist.⁹ Unfortunately, there was no attempt to *integrate* these views! It is in the *theological area* where the tension was most strongly felt by the *Insight* reader — but no constructive theological effort was set forth. As I see it, such an endeavor could not fail to take account of the “explanations” from psychiatry and anthropology. It is thus that the “answers” from the past century cannot meet the needs of the “problems” of our age.

I hold that the most fruitful theological work will go forward as the professional (technical) theologians of the church sit down and dialogue with dedicated lay professionals — physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and so on. Out of such cooperative concern will come a theology truly meaningful to Adventists themselves and to those “outside”!

There are precedents for such a venture. We have long maintained the idea of the *unity* of man. Our health and medical concerns have not been excrescences on the true stem of Adventism. And in the scholarly world at large, the need is increasingly felt for interdisciplinary contacts, for a studied effort to turn the tide against the compartmentalization of man.

In the history of the people of God through the ages, it has been constructive theology that has pointed the way out of darkness and preserved the group by di-

recting it forward. When Jerusalem was ransacked and the temple was burned, when the Master was executed on a Roman cross, when the day of expectation turned into the bitter night of October 22, 1844 — in each case it was a *theological* “answer” that gave comfort, hope, and new direction.

Even so must the Seventh-day Adventist church, as it approaches the third millennium of Christian history, find hope within and defense without by the work of its constructive theologians.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1/ *Fides quaerens intellectum. Prosligion I.*

2/ Cf. Herold D. Weiss, Are Adventists Protestants?, *SPECTRUM* 4(2):69-78 (Spring 1972).

3/ Cf. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books 1970), passim.

4/ A work such as *Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1957) plainly is designed to place Adventist thought squarely in the Protestant fold — that is, it is essentially defensive in character. Again, our leading writer, Francis D. Nichol, was indubitably an apologist, not a constructive theologian.

5/ E.g., Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath:*

Its Meaning for Modern Man (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young 1951).

6/ We need only mention Schleiermacher out of the past century and Karl Barth in our own.

7/ E.g., Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books for Bollingen Foundation 1964), p. xiv.

8/ The current concern with “structuralist” approaches to biblical exegesis involves the attempt to supplement traditional historically oriented exegesis (“diachronic”) with *synchronic exegesis* as made available by insights from the human sciences.

9/ Diane Crane, Demon possession: Magda's masters, *Insight* (July 11, 1972).