

The Case for Renewal In Adventist Theology

by Charles Scriven

“You people have a wonderful message. You must learn to communicate it with greater sophistication so that you will be taken seriously.”

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

On a visit to Loma Linda University not long before his death in 1972, Rabbi Heschel, the great Jewish scholar beloved among Adventists for his book, *The Sabbath*, offered the above salute and admonition in a conversation with Dr. Jack Provonsha. Besides indicating a necessity for evangelism, his words evoke a particular emotion familiar to many thoughtful members of our church, a kind of ambivalence toward the very heritage that means so much to us.

On the one side is gladness and gratitude. The Adventist message of rest, obedience and hope, epitomized in our observance of the Sabbath and belief in the Second Coming, has shaped us to the better through the years of growing up and learning how to think and live. In its rudiments, the message is indeed a wonder, a gift from God as welcome as food and as bracing as a song.

Yet, we know, too, that in the way it is communicated the message may cause, even among church members, bewilderment and sadness,

even hostility and religious doubt. If, in defending the doctrine of creation, we make rude caricatures of modern science; if, in explaining the book of Revelation, we criticize other churches instead of corrupt power wherever it occurs; if, in announcing the Sabbath day, we make an appeal based upon fear and religious arrogance; if, in proclaiming the Second Coming, we turn away from the ethical issues of the here and now; then the message becomes, for many, as much a problem as a help. A vessel conceivably clean seems barnacled with hasty and disturbing thoughts. And this may lead—often it does, in fact—to the personal crisis of being bound emotionally to the Adventist Movement while being nagged by doubt as to its basic validity.

We may safely assume that in urging a more sophisticated communication Rabbi Heschel had no thought of slicker salesmanship. A man for whom ideas were like precious stones, he was urging the necessity of *right thinking* for a strong witness outside the church. In this he was surely correct. But a moment's reflection on spiritual crises in our own midst shows another motivation for thinking carefully about our message. It is a *pastoral* necessity, as well as an evangelistic one, to do this. We must communicate better—more thoughtfully, more persuasively—not just for the sake of nonmembers, but for the sake of our own who, in many cases, suffer

deeply from want of adequate intellectual nourishment for their souls.

Of course, it is by no means self-evident to everyone in our fellowship that this is essential; to call for right thinking—in other words, to endorse theological criticism—is to imply that there has been wrong thinking; it is to suggest the need for change and advance in theology. And while some may applaud the cauterizing effect this would have, others cannot share their enthusiasm. The thought of revision in our understanding of doctrine stirs up understandable anxieties. It is somehow unsettling to think that we have further work to do in thinking out, and giving expression to, the presuppositions and implications of the Adventist message. On the other hand, it is comforting to think that the revered authorities of the past—our prophet, our pioneers, our preachers and teachers, our parents—have bequeathed us insights whole and final in themselves.

A commonplace bears witness to the attractiveness and prevalence of this feeling. It is the assertion that “the major doctrines of the church have been well established,” and that theological differences within the fold are unnecessary.¹ Taken at face value, this assertion means that we are bound down forever to unchanging propositions, whose truth is consummate and whose inner consistency has been established once for all. If this view should harden into dogma, it certainly would rule out modification of thought; it would make every theological criticism seem like a needless disturbance of the peace.

Where, then, is the authority for urging change and advance in theology? And if we permit or even encourage such a thing, what is to prevent wholesale alterations in the Adventist message itself? The answers to these two questions are basic in any effort to communicate our beliefs with greater sophistication. For, if there is no authority for change in theology, the venture has doubtful validity. And if there is no criterion by which to work, constructive change may degenerate into merely destructive innovation.

The authority for making theological advance is, quite simply, the Protestant tradition, going back to the Bible and including our own

prophet, Ellen White. Here we find the basis for both intellectual humility (without which growth in understanding seems unnecessary) and intellectual confidence (without which it seems impossible).

For a proper intellectual humility, we need simply remember Paul’s striking statement of the human condition. This is what we call the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, and it teaches us, among other things, a fitting estimation of our own truth. For one of its meanings is that all things human stand under the divine judgment; we may not boast of what we do or what we think; our only boast is Christ, who accepts us despite our unacceptability. Referring to the Gospel, the apostle told the Christians at Corinth: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels,” adding that “the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.”² It is a classic declaration of human finitude, leaving no doubt that even Paul, himself an inspired prophet, knew that God was in heaven and he was on earth. The same self-knowledge allowed him earlier to confess that in this life we can only see in a mirror dimly. “For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect,” he told the Corinthians in his first letter.³

It is just this imperfection of knowledge and prophecy—even in our inspired mentors—that proves our constant need for better understanding. Within our own movement, we may find authority for this view in the writings of Ellen White herself, who echoed Paul when in 1892 she wrote: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible.” Three years later she applied this insight directly to herself: “In regard to infallibility,” she said, “I never claimed it; God alone is infallible.”⁴

We may conclude that in moments of soul-searching Ellen White, though especially inspired by the Holy Spirit, considered herself liable to be mistaken or inaccurate; this is the meaning of fallibility. The prophet of Adventism understood the difference between divinity and humanity, passing on to us who follow her the insight of Scripture itself.

To scholars, it has become increasingly clear that this humility, this sense of the difference between us and God, is the key principle of Protestantism. In its essence, the Protestant

spirit is the confession that no human work, whether moral, devotional, or intellectual, can reunite us with our Maker. Grace alone can achieve this goal. In relation to the point at hand, this means that there is always distance between human thought, even the thought of prophets, and the divine reality itself. That group or movement which considers itself the invulnerable possessor of truth is larded with demonic traits; in elevating itself to a place of eternal validity, it destroys intellectual honesty and, in Scripture's phrase, "serves the creature rather than the Creator."⁵

We are not, then, making a child's search for excuses to tread the cliff-edge of the forbidden. The New Testament not only justifies, but also demands that we recognize the fallibility of our language about God, and the necessity, in view of this, to subject it to constant testing. But where, it may be asked, lies the hope of theological success? Why should we imagine that fallible human beings can do anything but multiply the signs of their own fallibility?

Such questions do not, of course, have the poignancy for us that they have for the doubt-ridden denizens of modern culture who, thinking God has died, can have no faith in truth or value, either. Our roots run deep into Wesleyan soil, and this soil is rich in the confidence that God's Spirit is still present with His people. In the gospel of John, when Jesus is about to be arrested, he tells the disciples that the coming Spirit "will guide you into all truth."⁶ It is an assurance that we in the Adventist fellowship have had no trouble taking seriously—at least in one way. We look upon the discoveries of the Adventist pioneers with a respect bordering on veneration; to us their insights are "wonderful truths," and we proclaim them in our churches and evangelistic halls with the audacity of prophets.

At the same time, however, there has arisen this wariness of the new in theology, this feeling that our proper business today is merely to perpetuate tradition and combat the errors of those who disagree with us. In this we have disbelieved the One who, through Isaiah, said: "From this time forth I make you hear new things, hidden things which you have not known."⁷ We have interpreted Jesus' promise to the disciples to have a cut-off point, as though the Spirit of truth lies buried in the cemeteries of New

England and Battle Creek. Perhaps we ourselves are endangered by the doctrine that God is dead; for if we say, or seem to say, that God has no new thing to teach us, then we come perilously close to making Him a fallen hero. Fortunately, a fresh reading of Scripture—as well as of Ellen White, who envisioned the unfolding of "new truth" through all eternity⁸—can give us strength against this temptation to skepticism. Indeed, it can provide us resources upon which to base a positive renaissance of theological creativity in the church.

This, then, is the authority for making advance in our knowledge of God; it is the theological basis for learning to communicate the Adventist message with greater sophistication. But what is to save the message from destructive innovation, from changes that give no sign of appreciation for its genius and integrity?

This question, too, is fundamental. Granting the importance of theological criticism, we must grant also the importance of limits, without which a mere debunking process may bring to ruin the very message we wish to preserve and uphold. But what sort of limits? How can we protect our tradition without choking off creative criticism altogether?

In one way, the answer is easy. We must simply grasp the distinction between working *within* a tradition and coming at it from the *outside*, between criticizing a thing out of love and respect and doing so out of hostility and disrespect. To illustrate how this distinction can help, let us invent Mr. Jones. We will say that he has loved and been well nurtured in the faith; that he has given much serious reflection to the study of the creation story; that he has come to believe that the story has a depth we, in our fascination with numbers, have missed. We will say, finally, that Mr. Jones wishes to suggest ways in which the usual interpretation of the story ought to be revised. How should he be regarded?

If it is clear that he loves and respects both the story and the Adventist message of which it is a part, by the criterion being suggested here, Mr. Jones may be encouraged. He is working from *within*, letting the message itself, especially the Bible, but also the teaching of our pioneers, inspire the changes he propounds. He does not

prey upon the truth we hold dear, but wishes to enrich it, so that those who hear it, inside and outside the church, may take it seriously. Whether his suggestions are worthy of acceptance is not the point just now; the point now is that the person who loves the message should be able, without fear or guilt, to challenge old interpretations and offer new ones.

But now consider a hypothetical Mr. Smith. We will say that he is a teacher at one of our colleges; that his once healthy interest in modern culture has become a consuming fascination; that more and more his utterances on church doctrine reveal a debunking mentality. We will say, finally, that he hints darkly in class

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that the creation story is demonstrable nonsense, with no more use or meaning for the person of today. How should Mr. Smith be regarded?

Here, of course, the matter is entirely different. Mr. Smith is coming at the tradition from the *outside*; he has found the authority for his ideas from sources fundamentally hostile to the Adventist world-view. He, therefore, threatens the message instead of enriching it; he is not a friend but a vandal, and should (if he persists) receive appropriate discipline from the church.

In the real life of the Adventist community, we will not always encounter such transparent types as Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith. Deciding who is the friend and who is the vandal may sometimes be difficult. But the illustration does show how the distinction between working within a tradition and coming at it from the outside can help us preserve our beliefs without stifling theological advance. We may, in a different metaphor, put the basic principle like this: In

order to protect the rough beauty of the fundamental Adventist message, we must insist upon organic growth in understanding, and resist rude surgery. We may celebrate the appearance of new leaves and prune away the sickly parts; but we may not cut off the main branches or chop away at the trunk.

All this, however, is rudimentary, like the sums in arithmetic. The hard part comes in trying to apply the principle. If there should be doubt, who decides whether someone is working within the tradition, or coming at it from the outside? Who decides what is organic growth and what is rude surgery? Where lies the ultimate authority in deciding such disputes?

On one level, of course, the ultimate authority is the Christ revealed in Scripture. But it is another level that concerns us here: who, among the human beings in the church, will decide what shall be accepted as true? Who will decide whether an outspoken person should go on speaking out or in some way be disciplined because of what he says or writes?

If here we allow ourselves to be shaped by the Protestant heritage, we will answer that these must be decisions of the people as a whole. The entire community of faith, not just elite groups within it, must bear the responsibility of deciding these hard questions. Roman Catholics assign theological authority to the bishops, but we are Protestants, and Protestants, following the Lutheran dictum of the priesthood of all believers, democratize such authority. Theologians and ministers may have, by virtue of their specialized education, a higher persuasive authority than other members of the church, but *they do not have a higher theoretical authority*. Whether we are lawyers, farmers, sales clerks or General Conference officers, we all have equal rights in the resolving of theological disputes.

This has a complex meaning for the church's practical life, which certainly cannot be elucidated in a few paragraphs. Even so, some elemental points can be made here. One is that trusted leaders must not, simply on their own authority, impede the discussion of ideas, even ideas which, at first glance, seem disturbing. Such persons, in fact, have a duty to encourage the free flow of ideas to all the people. Inhibiting their circulation would smack of the

medieval effort to prevent ordinary people from reading the Bible. It would be an elitism unacceptable in a Protestant community.

A second point concerns the necessity of restraint in treating any outspoken person as dangerous or stamping any new idea as false. It is not enough that a person or idea offend the members of powerful boards, committees, publications or teaching faculties. For if it is the consensus of all the people that counts, this consensus must become clear before an action against a person (such as demotion or firing) or against an idea (such as an official declaration of its falsehood) can be justified. In practical terms, this means letting ideas circulate, letting proponents of these ideas explain how they are connected to the fundamental message, letting others evaluate whether the proponents are right. It means, in short, enough restraint by persons entrusted with power to permit a consensus among the priesthood of believers to develop. Under such circumstances, our advance in the knowledge of God can, if not always, at least often, proceed without acrimony and in a refreshingly natural fashion: in due course, bad ideas will die a natural death and good ones be joyously embraced.

If the Protestant belief in the shared authority of all believers means these things for our leaders, it has a clear meaning for the rest of us,

too. We must all participate in the effort to grow in understanding. Unlike Roman Catholics, we cannot pin the blame for our problems on the bishops. The problems we have are *our* problems: the responsibility to advance in knowledge is *our* responsibility. The theologians among us have a special calling, of course, to serve the church by advancing its knowledge, but we all have a duty to be aware of issues and thoughtful about them. It is the consensus of the *people*, after all, that is finally decisive in matters of theological dispute.

Without a thoughtful membership, we will never grow in understanding, never chip away the hasty and disturbing thoughts, never improve upon our witness. But if we have a thoughtful membership, we may confidently expect, through the grace of God, to achieve all of these things. We may expect, in short, to learn how to communicate more truthfully and more persuasively, just what, as we saw at the beginning, is necessary today for both pastoral and evangelistic reasons. By loving the Lord with our minds, as no less an authority than Jesus himself has commanded, we can all help the church polish its message to a fine, hard luster hitherto unexcelled—so that the persons whose lives we touch, whether inside or outside the church, may see the Light of Eternity reflected in the things we say.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Something very like this view appears in the *Review and Herald*, July 1, 1972, p. 2.

2. II Corinthians 4:7 (RSV).

3. I Corinthians 13:9 (RSV). See also verse 12.

4. These statements, taken in the first instance from the *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892, and in the second from Letter 10, 1895, may be found in *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 37. It has been suggested—for example, by Stanley G. Sturges, in an article, "Ellen White's Authority and the Church," in the Summer 1972 issue of SPECTRUM—that some statements by Ellen White,

such as those found in *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, pp. 66, 67 and pp. 667, 668 and in *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 48, tend to conflict with her denial of infallibility. Whatever interpretation is put on those passages, she nowhere, so far as I know, directly contradicts the statements I have quoted.

5. From Romans 1:25 (RSV).

6. John 16:13 (RSV).

7. From Isaiah 48:6 (RSV).

8. See, for example, *The Great Controversy*, p. 651.