

Letters from Readers

To the Editors: About a dozen years ago, I left the Adventist denomination because of what I considered to be irreparable deficiencies in its structure and theology. The church was irrelevant — its obsession with a hypothetical future world seemed out of sync with the demands of a substantial present; it was intellectually vacuous — Frank Marsh was obliged to assure us that man was formed from “without doubt, a damp lump of the very finest earth”; and it was inconsistent — the Protestant tradition of the “Priesthood of the Believer” was outwardly affirmed while the General Conference exhibited the contrary manifestation of having a death grip on Truth.

I do not know whether I could ever become an Adventist again, but (in reply to Alvin Kwiram’s “Can Intellectuals Be at Home in the Church?” Vol. 8, No. 1) I believe that the Forum represents the only avenue through which Adventism might attract the intellectual. However, the fact that the majority of Adventists reject intellectual confrontation creates a formidable problem. What I anticipate is that any reform significant enough to have intellectual appeal is likely to alienate the nonintellectual, and it seems likely that the General Conference will want to remain sensitive to the needs of the majority. The question that presses: to what degree can the Forum extend its practice of brinkmanship without precipitating schism?

Co-editor Scriven’s distinction between “working within a tradition and coming at it from the outside” has a nice ring to it, but I doubt that it can work at the practical level, and question whether it is even desirable.

The hypothetical Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith, when translated into their real counterparts are not usually as easy to distinguish as they are in the Scriven scenario, a point which Scriven seems willing to concede. Furthermore, the criticism of Mr. Smith that he is *outside* the church is, fundamentally, an *ad hominem* attack. It suggests that no matter how valid Mr. Smith’s criticism may be, they are somehow tainted or suspect because his psychological locus is not where the church would like it to be. Attention thus becomes focused on where Mr. Smith is coming from rather than on what he is saying. The possibility also exists that the church will subsequently adopt the position advocated by Mr. Smith and reject the arguments of Mr. Jones. Would the church tradition thereby be undermined? Not necessarily. Tradition can be enriched through the absorption of new ideas provided that the period of assimilation is long enough to allow for gradual paradigm shift. Indeed, SPECTRUM writers are currently expressing ideas that would have earned them their “walking papers” ten years ago.

D. Clarence Wilson
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To the Editors: I find the whole controversy over intellectuals and the church puzzling. I am puzzled both by Alvin Kwiram’s position *and* Richard Hammill’s. (See SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 and 3.) I wonder if they are discussing the same subject. Are they both using the term “intellectual” (a dreadful label!) the same way? What

is an intellectual, according to those two scholars? Is it someone whose life is guided by reason as opposed to emotion? But if so, Ellen White is certainly on the side of the intellectual, and every highly educated person is not such a person. Is it someone whose scholarly discipline gives him a superior approach to truth? But if that is so, only the area of his expertise is one in which he has the advantage. Perhaps the church is threatened only by highly disciplined theologians?

I am further puzzled by the assumption on the part of both scholars that the intellectual is certain of his positions, and, perhaps, proud. Surely any intensive study makes the student humble. Surely all serious scholars feel the vastness of the unknown behind the known. Arrogance and self-sufficiency, I would think, are more the product of ignorance than of knowledge.

Perhaps the real distinction in this argument between the "intellectual" and whatever the nonintellectual may be called is not so much a level of education or reputation for scholarship as it is an attitude toward authority. Is it possible that what disturbs the church is not so much the intellectuality of some individuals as it is their protestantism? The sense that one is responsible for what he believes and must choose for himself is not found solely among the educated, but may be more likely to be found there. Perhaps, however, the problems and questions that rise from such a position are more disturbing when they are posed logically, with substantiating evidence. Is the intellectual's threat not so much that he has questions, but that he articulates them clearly?

And does that mean the encouragement of the inarticulate?

To avoid being a destructive force and also to avoid being irresponsible and passive is to maintain a very precarious balance. But if we viewed the church as a community of believers helping one another even though all of us have imperfections, would we not avoid labeling and judging one another and see each one's talents, whatever they may be, as a contribution to the wholeness of the entire church?

Ottillie Stafford

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To the Editors: The question asked in Alvin Kwiram's courageous and perceptive article, "Can Intellectuals Be at Home in the Church?" (SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 1), under present conditions can be answered emphatically, No! An intellectual is an individual with an inquiring mind who through life has asked questions and sought the answers. He is someone for whom a question-and-answer regimen under intellectual freedom has become a way of life.

Such a person would not find his (or her) accustomed intellectual freedom within the Seventh-day Adventist church. He would find a church laden with doctrines and prophetic interpretations that were established more than a century and a quarter ago, not "originally through the Spirit of Prophecy in the remnant church, as some apparently have supposed, but rather by earnest individual and group Bible study." Now, however, many of these cannot be questioned because they were "later confirmed by revelation" (Arthur White, in *Ellen G. White, Messenger to the Remnant*, p. 34).

That is the situation an intellectual would have to accept to become a member. Anyone who asks questions on taboo subjects will soon become known as a "dissident" and will be made to feel very uncomfortable in the church.

Wrote Adventist pioneer Uriah Smith:

The idea has been studiously instilled into the minds of the people that to question the visions in the least is to become at once, a hopeless apostate and rebel; and too many, I am sorry to say, have not strength of character enough to shake off such a conception, hence the moment anything is done to shake them on the visions they lose faith in everything and go to destruction. I believe this state of things never would have occurred, had the position of our people on this manifestation of the gifts been correct. If our people would come together and calmly, candidly, and freely deliberate upon this matter, I believe, as I have said to you and others, that a consistent position could be found, which would free the subject from difficulties, meet and

satisfy the scouting intelligent public, and not rob the gift of a whit of the good it was intended to do. But there are many too doggedly bigoted and stubborn to offer any very flattering outlook in this direction. (From a facsimile copy of an April 6, 1883 letter by Uriah Smith to D. N. Canright.)

Until denominational leaders are willing to act upon Elder Smith's suggestion, there seems to be no prospect of reaching the "scouting intelligent public."

Neil W. Northey
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To the Editors:
Timothy Crosby's review of *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 2) cites LaRondelle's 232 Bible quotations as evidence that the "impossibles" have Bible scholarship on their side. This is something like putting an issue of the Sunday *Los Angeles Times* on a scale and declaring that it is of more "weighty" significance than an issue of SPECTRUM. One Scripture text truly elucidated is more weighty as evidence than thousands cited out of context.

The true context of biblical "perfection" is the doctrine of the cleansing of the sanctuary, just as the true context of Old Testament blood sacrifices is the offering of Christ on the cross. The offering of the Lamb of God on Calvary illuminates 4,000 years of otherwise unintelligible sacrifices and provides the only true perspective for understanding the Hebrew sanctuary ministries.

Likewise, Christ's high priestly ministry in the most holy apartment, as the cleansing of the sanctuary, illuminates an otherwise contradictory and unintelligible biblical doctrine of "perfection." No amount of Scripture citations outside of this perspective can be illuminating.

It seems significant that neither LaRondelle or Heppenstall offer any comment on this all-important aspect of the doctrine of "perfection"—for example, Ellen White's famous statement in her chapter entitled "In the Holy of Holies":

Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless . . . (*The Great Controversy*, p. 425).

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To the Editors:
Timothy Crosby's review of *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* stimulated me to offer a few observations.

In every Seventh-day Adventist church, it seems, there is a faction which insists on "perfection now" and another which dissents. Doubtless, the dispute goes back into the distant Christian past. We know it was going on during the Reformation because while Roman Catholics believed their "saints" achieved "perfection now," the Protestant reformers denied this was possible for anyone in this life.

It must be conceded that some of Mrs. White's writings lend themselves to belief in "perfection now" while others leave a different impression. So far as the Bible is concerned, there is precious little support for the notion that we can attain perfection in this world. If we can, it is only because the term is interpreted differently from that which today's perfectionists insist upon. If the Bible anywhere establishes a double standard for salvation—one for most Christians but a higher one for those at the end of time—I have yet to see the evidence.

True, Jesus said, "Be ye perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect," but this was not directed at persons living in the last days of history. And the overwhelming majority of biblical scholars have always interpreted this as setting a goal for Christians to shoot for rather than representing a requirement for salvation.

I have long suspected that those who believe in "perfection now" have not thought much about what perfection really implies. It means not only keeping God's law flawlessly but also taking advantage of every opportunity to do good unto others—at whatever per-

sonal sacrifice. It means living in austerity and giving all that we can for the poor and for spreading the gospel. It means returning good for evil on every occasion and never harboring a grievance against anyone, not even for a moment. It means never speaking a cross word, whatever the provocation and no matter how tired or irritable or sick we may feel. It means never permitting an improper thought to enter our minds on the Sabbath day (or any other day, for that matter); always putting the most charitable interpretation on others' behavior; never expressing our ego-hunger in any of the myriad subtle ways to which we are prone; always being cheerful and uncomplaining in times of adversity.

Being perfect must also mean that when we reflect upon our life as we pray, we are unable to find a single aspect, whether of commission or omission, in which we fall short of Jesus' example. And doing all this (and more) without ever having a self-congratulatory thought!

When I think of what perfection truly means, in gritty, down-to-earth, realistic terms, I am tempted to say to the "perfection now" folks, "Oh, come off it. Who are you trying to kid?"

Reo M. Christenson
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To the Editors: Your recent issue on "Adventist Eschatology Today" was one of the most thought provoking I have read. Concerning the failure of prophecy, the enigma of Matt. 24:34 has puzzled us for some time. Here Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place." The usual mental gymnastics we use to explain why this has apparently not been fulfilled are of two kinds: 1) there must be someone somewhere in the world who is old enough that he has seen the signs and is still alive, and 2) conditional prophecy. Either or both of these is possibly applicable to this prophecy; however, I would like to propose another point of view.

If, before the phrase "this generation," Christ had been speaking of the people who

saw the signs, we could logically say that he was referring to those people. However, He had been speaking only of the *signs*, not the people. Therefore, I think it is a more logical interpretation to say that "this generation" refers to the audience. I am proposing that it is as though He waved His hand toward the audience and said, "This generation . . .", i.e., the generation before Him in the audience.

Matthew was writing, as a reporter, 30-40 years after Christ's talk with the disciples. The talk referred to two events: the destruction of Jerusalem and Christ's second coming. Probably Matthew confused some predictions concerning these two events. The words, "this generation will not pass away till all these things take place," could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem as the event and the audience as the generation. If so, the sentence is a little out of context but no worse than other verses in the chapter.

The plausibility of this interpretation is enhanced by three factors: 1) Matthew is noted for ignoring chronological order in his writing (*Seventh-day Adventist Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 274); 2) Matthew did not necessarily know which comments referred to which of the two events; 3) the early Christian church expected Christ's second coming in their time and may have expected that the prophecy applied to both of the major events of the chapter.

Milo V. Anderson
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To the Editors: In your extensive discussion of the book, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, (SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 2), both commentators and author miss a point that is vital, namely, the significance of whether or not Mrs. White was inspired.

Ronald Numbers is quoted as stating in his introduction that he has refrained from using the concept of divine inspiration as a historical explanation for Mrs. White's writings. He is also quoted as stating, "I am not saying that Ellen White was not inspired. This is a decision that each person must make on the basis of faith."

But the issue of Mrs. White's inspiration is not like other issues. We can discuss Abraham Lincoln or Voltaire as persons in their societies, subject to the influences and ideas of their times. Not so, Mrs. White.

Ellen White claimed to write under inspiration. She claimed to see visions, including visions of Jesus Christ. She claimed to have been told things by an angel, sometimes so specifically that she placed their statements in quotation marks. She claimed that she was indebted to the Lord for the things she wrote.

These are not statements by a person who was giving what *she* considered true; rather, they are statements that she received information from God and from no place else. These statements are either true or false. The inference from their not being true is that she was either insane or a fraud.

A very similar issue existed with respect to Jesus Christ. He was not an ordinary man in the context of His society in first-century Judea. He claimed the power to forgive sins, to be the son of God. He was either correct in these statements or He, too, had to be an imposter. We cannot logically accept Jesus Christ as simply being a good and wise man. This is one view that is not open to us.

Similarly, we cannot accept Mrs. White as simply being a good and wise woman, who was relying on her own ideas and the ones she picked up from publications and conversations for the source of her statements. This position is not open to us.

It is tempting to try to be objective, or, using Mr. Numbers' phrase, "neither to defend nor to damn but simply to understand." But in this case understanding requires that a decision be made—consciously and openly. Apparently, Mr. Numbers has not done this.

Let me close by stating that, as a man whose time is limited, I am making a conscious decision to confine my reading to professional literature, to news and, most important, to the study of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy with a view to personal and church development. Mr. Numbers' book does not seem to fit into the pattern that would be most productive of good for me, my family, and the congregation of which I am a

member. For this reason, I do not intend to read it, although I am not criticizing someone else who does see fit to read it.

I mention the fact that I have not read Mr. Numbers' book because it is fair to my reader. Ordinarily, this would disqualify me from discussing the book. In this instance, I don't think so. For there is no dispute on an issue vital to a consideration of this book, namely, whether it takes a position on whether or not Mrs. White was inspired in what she wrote.

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To the Editors: Volume 8, Number 1 is my first exposure to a very good journal. Of course, your writers almost go overboard in attacking (whether intentional or not) the unquestioning conservatism of many of our leaders and laymen. This, however, is good, for occasional pruning does make the tree more fruitful.

Of most interest to me, in a Socialist Third World country, was William G. Johnsson's article, "The Mythos of the Mission Story." Having listened to mission stories at Andrews University by even former missionaries to Jamaica, I wholeheartedly support his contentions. He was very amiable, however, and did not go far enough and condemn the plain hard lies that are told about the mission field. Let me hasten to say that these lies may not be intentional; but it is most likely the case that the Western (especially the American missionary) mind does not understand the Socialist or Third World mind. The former, therefore, interprets all he sees and all that is said and done in the "mission field" in terms of his mold. How sad.

I do look forward to a new mythos of the mission story. But I also look forward to our northern brethren's understanding us and accepting us as we are, yet one in Christ.

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