

Four Great Ideas In Adventism— An Evangelical's Testimony

by Timothy L. Smith

Sometimes I think youthful or scholarly Adventists, like youthful or scholarly members of other communions, may be too quick to yield to the temptation to dismiss one or another aspect of their denomination's teachings as vestiges of folk-dogmas inherited from simple-minded forebears. This is particularly true of doctrines that have become denominational distinctives, serving to separate an oncoming generation from other Christians. I listened recently to a group of young Mennonite graduate students in the congregation gathered around Boston by those who have moved there to study or teach at Harvard and MIT. Their impatience with the ancient Mennonite insistence upon radical Christian pacifism saddened me, for at this moment in history people outside their tradition are turning to the peace-churches to help save humanity, and perhaps all life on earth, from destruction in a firestorm of nuclear violence that is falsely called war.

I imagine it to be possible that Adventists have sometimes not seen as clearly as a

deeply interested outsider might what your most priceless gifts really are, or always known how to share them as generally as you wished. I am sure that we have rarely been wise enough to receive them thankfully.

The dynamic character of biblical revelation, evident across the centuries of its composition, and Christ's promise that the same Holy Spirit who inspired "all Scripture" would attend the believing and obeying church "to the ends of the earth" prompt us to listen closely to every historic Christian community that has taken the Bible seriously as the word of the Lord. The light shed upon its entire message by the particular doctrines that each one of the great evangelical traditions has found crucial is, I think, indispensable to a full illumination of its meanings. Wesleyans like me, therefore, need you to be the very best and most thoughtful Adventists you can be, utterly open to the Holy Spirit's guidance as you seek to understand the truth of Scripture.

You may not yet realize it, but you also need me this morning to be the very best Wesleyan that my Nazarene background calls me to be. Indeed, whenever I speak in the pulpits of other ministers, or in the more neutral pulpits of college and university chapels, I have found it best always to speak clearly as a Wesleyan; in that tradition lies the particular treasure I have to share. You

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Adventists have something likewise to share with me and every other evangelical.

None of us intends to be sectarian. I sometimes think of my fellow Nazarenes as a Jewish friend did of the Jewish community in New York. "We Jews are not really sectarian," he said "we just find our own inner life so interesting." Indeed, the inner life of each evangelical community should also be interesting to other evangelicals. Though our distinguishing doctrines may not be the wheel on which all Christian truth must turn, they do mark the boundaries of our own fellowship, and they identify the special gift we have to offer to the others. Let me, then, speak this morning of four great ideas which I hear singing out of Adventist history, forming a chorus that the whole evangelical community might join.

The End of History is at Hand

I begin (to surprise you) with your conviction that the end of history is at hand. The hope for the long-deferred fulfillment of the promise of Christ's Second Coming first drew together the Seventh-day Adventist community in the early 1860's. Ellen White helped to shape and thereafter expounded the doctrine of the cleansing of the sanctuary to deal with, though not in her view to explain fully, what had been happening in the years since the great disappointment of 1844. Thereafter, she and her associates and successors used this doctrine to deal with what has happened both within and beyond history since the 1860's, though none of them foresaw many of the particular events that have taken place in human affairs. In the long perspective of what Bible scholars call "salvation history," and in light of the belief of many of them that the early church likewise expected the immediate return of Christ and reacted to its delay by rethinking their understanding of the prophecies of His return, the century and a quarter since the

gathering of your denomination seems a relatively short time.

I want to affirm the continuing relevance of this Adventist expectation of the end of time to any proper understanding of what Scripture has to say to us today. It seems odd to quote Jonathan Schell's book, *The Fate of the Earth*, in support of Ellen White and of you who remain persuaded of the truth about the end of history that she set forth. Schell foreswears any religious commitment and denies any faith in divine help to spare us from what the political leaders of our world and nation seem bent on making inevitable. Schell describes, in terms that sound new only to secular readers, events so horrible as to ignite, he barely hopes, a worldwide peoples' crusade to stave off the fiery suicide of our race, and the murder of all other living creatures. You have inherited a stark doctrine of divine judgment; in it one can hear the heartbeat of grace. In the "last days," as the growth of your own communion demonstrates to be true, the Lord has promised to pour out his Spirit upon all flesh. What may be proceeding behind the veil of eternity in the cleansing of the sanctuary certainly does not preclude the renewal of the vitality of Christian faith that is taking place on earth now, in these closing decades of what was supposed to be the post-Christian century.

The trans-national character of the doctrine that we are living in the end-time is also important to contemporary Christianity, as it has been, historically, to Adventists. It underlays the amazing interracial and international perspective on Christian evangelism which has been so much a part of Adventist perceptions since Mrs. White went to Australia and endorsed her son Edson's determination to preach to black people in northern Alabama. Your community presently is the most international of all religious ones, including the Buddhist and Islamic. Its loyalties cut across all allegiance

to nations, races, and places, all identification with classes, customs, and cultures. On no college or university campus in this country can one experience intercultural and inter-racial friendships better than at Andrews University. Moreover, the movement of black people converted to Adventism out of Alabama and Mississippi during the early years of this century, especially

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during the two World Wars, laid foundations for an indigenous black Adventist movement that was a rebuke to the racism that still gripped American Protestantism decades after the end of the Civil War. Your church's history demonstrates, then, the coming end of the old world of ethnic, national, and religious discrimination, and the dawn of a new one in which neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female may claim precedence in world Christendom.

The foreign missions that you have carried on with such astonishing success are likewise the seedbed of internationalism, as they are in every other evangelical community, including the fundamentalist one for which the Reverend Jerry Falwell often presumes to speak. I feel very close to Haiti today, partly because one of my former students helped found a mission there in which the Nazarenes have been prompted for the first time to respond to immense poverty with a broad range of social ministries for persons to whom we are preaching the Gospel. Likewise, when the King of Swaziland passed away a few weeks ago, Nazarenes everywhere felt differently about it, I suppose, than other evangelical

Christians, because the largest Protestant community in Swaziland is Nazarene, and many of the king's family are members of our churches there. Through such overseas missions, done at the simple bidding of Christ that we preach the Gospel to every creature, an international view of things has been imprinted in the minds of young people in Bible-believing churches.

These young people belie the public illusion and rhetoric of some of their leaders that evangelicals are super-patriots with little sense of responsibility for the world.

Adventists have renounced with a special urgency the notion that the Christian religion is to be identified with American culture, with any country's nationalist policies, or with upper-class social ideals. The particular shape of your beliefs about the end of history has foreclosed for you the dispensationalist option of embracing in Christ's name the militarist national socialism that has recently engulfed the modern state of Israel. The God of the sacred Scriptures does not stand on the side of racial oppression or legitimize a foreign policy that routs villagers by the thousands out of their ancestral homes to make room for those who believe they are still God's favorites.

The language of extermination that cropped up during the recent attacks on Beirut by the Israeli army (as one colonel put it, "The PLO are like termites; if you leave one they'll all be back next year") echoed, in all our memories, the neurotic oratory of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. Some wise man said, "Choose your enemies carefully, for you are apt to end up being much like them." Jewish psychoanalysts, carrying out their studies of the psychology of concentration camps, first demonstrated the tendency of the oppressed to take upon themselves the traits of their oppressors. It is not an anti-semitic statement at all, but a sober warning to friends and to members of my family who are Jews, to say that the greatest corruption of biblical idealism and of Jewish morality in the past

1500 years now threatens to prevail in modern Israel.

If we Americans are obliged to warn our Jewish allies of their danger, we should also press our own leaders to draw back from the parallel corruption of this nation's idealism and morality. The world we have known is in sober fact coming to an end, either by violence of fire or by the radical submission of humankind to the "righteousness that is by faith in Christ." You Adventists have never compromised for a moment this biblical conviction.

The Law of the Lord is Life

Second, I want to lift up the Adventist affirmation that the law of the Lord is life for humankind. No single biblical notion is more pervasive in Scripture than this, and because of your distinctive emphasis upon Sabbath law, it stands at the very heart of Adventist faith and life. Like most Protestant evangelicals, I was reared to think that your opposition to laws forbidding many activities on Sundays was helping to destroy the "Christian Sabbath." As time went on, however, it became evident that large numbers of evangelical Protestants were not going to be careful about keeping Sunday in the old way, and were on that account losing interest in such legislation.

It was refreshing last night to hear Mrs. Hartman explain that her family became Seventh-day Adventists under the guidance of a new landlord who refused to accept their rent check on Sabbath morning. From this flowed friendship and an opportunity for this man to bear witness to his faith. Her family soon chose the Adventist way, convinced in large measure by one Christian's loyalty to the Ten Commandments; her father was eventually ordained an elder in the church.

I think this Adventist "gift" is more important for its potential than for any success you have had recently in sharing it. No

greater compromise has undermined Protestant and Catholic Christianity during the last 80 years than the growth of antinomianism—the notion that the moral law of Moses is out of date and has been ever since Jesus preached the law of love. Under the new covenant, we hear on every hand, in phrases

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wrenched out of their actual biblical sense, grace supplants law and forgiveness makes obedience unnecessary. The result is to obscure the biblical point: God's priceless gift of love, through faith, was intended precisely to enable us to fulfill the righteousness of the law.

The fulfillment, which Jesus proclaimed in his "Sermon on the Mount" as the essence of the Good News, was not a new doctrine at all, but the central promise of the old covenant. Only recently has the determination of Old Testament scholars to confront us with Torah on its own terms forced us to realize that the Bible does not contain two ethical systems, one for the Old and the other for the New Testament. What Jesus and St. Paul preached was the same ethical system that Moses set forth, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit. When Jesus answered the question, "What is the greatest commandment of all?" with the word, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength," he was quoting Moses' commentary on the meaning of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 8. (Moses' words have stood at the heart of every Jewish

service of worship until this day.) On Moses' terms, the law is life for Israel: it is holy, just, and good. St. Paul reiterated the point, in that section of Romans 7 that many 20th century evangelicals pass over in their eagerness to expound its last section, misconstruing it to teach that believers must expect to continue in their old and sinful ways. When Jesus went on to say, in response to his questioners, that the second "great" commandment was like the first, "You must love your neighbor as yourself," he was again quoting Moses from another key summary of the meaning of the law in Leviticus 19. St. Paul, going back to Moses but echoing also the words of Jesus, affirmed in Romans 13 that the last five of the Ten Commandments, having to do with our relationships to other human beings, can only be fulfilled in love.

Mrs. White's generation of Adventist leaders had fully absorbed this deep sense of the moral unity of the Old and New Testaments, having inherited it from their varied Methodist and Puritan backgrounds. You have not forgotten it. In the nuances of speech that I hear in your celebrative worship, such as the gathering last night, it is clear that keeping the Sabbath, as you view it, means far more than simply observing a series of restraints on behavior. I hear instead an immense affirmation of the continuity of law and love in the Old and New Testament scriptures, in the lives of faith you now endeavor to live and in your hopes for the future. In Adventist understanding, grounded, I think, on a profound grasp of Biblical teachings, God hallows ordinary time in the Sabbath, linking it to eternal time—called, in the Greek New Testament, *kairos*. In that eternal *kairos* we live now, by faith, and one day shall in it be gathered to the presence of the Lord. As we began our worship this morning, I sang the hymn "The Church Has One Foundation" like an Adventist, having sung it as a Nazarene all my life. Ellen White herself could not have improved upon the conception of the consummation of history in Sabbath rest

that appears in the line reading, "When the church victorious shall be the church at rest."

The Promise of Righteousness by Faith

Closely linked to all this is your historic understanding that the gospel consists in the promise of righteousness, by grace, through faith. I am aware that arguments over this question have recently been substantial among Adventist theologians. I think I know, however, though I am not sure I know as fully as I should, where Ellen White stood on this question. Her perceptions and sensibility, like those of other Adventists and Millerites, were shaped under Methodist influences. No theme was more crucial to Wesleyan religion, either in England under the leadership of the founder or in 19th century America. In my book, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, now reprinted in paperback by my own university, I stressed the Wesleyan roots and character of the moral perfectionism of the mid-nineteenth century. I am now persuaded that New School Presbyterians Charles G. Finney and Asa Mahan read Wesleyan writings more deeply during the years between 1832 and 1839 than I had originally thought. The new book of Finney's lectures, *Promise of the Spirit*, that I have edited reflects Finney's embrace in 1839 of an essentially Wesleyan view.

But my understanding of the biblical authenticity of the experience of righteousness through faith has been greatly enriched by recent reading in the history of Calvinist and Puritan thought. Indeed, from the earliest years of the Puritan movement in England and the earliest days of its transplanting in America, the only firm ground of one's assurance of being among the elect was the discovery of inward grace and power to live above ordinary sinfulness. Scholars have known this for many years. Nevertheless, I was scarcely prepared for

my discovery last year in the sermons of George Whitefield (which I began reading in order to see more clearly what John Wesley taught) an obsession with precisely this good news. The Holy Spirit who brings repentant sinners to new life in Christ, Whitefield preached often and nearly always, breaks the power as well as cancels the guilt of sin; He enables each believer to live a life of consistent victory over temptation. In 1737, a year before John Wesley experienced “salvation by faith,” as he called it, at a prayer meeting in Aldergate Street, London, Whitefield published in England his sermon *On the Nature and Necessity of Our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus*. It is a “fatal mistake,” Whitefield warned in that sermon, to “put asunder what God has inseparably joined together” and to “expect to be justified by Christ without also being sanctified, that is, having one’s nature ‘changed’ and made holy.” That sermon, republished in Boston with the blessing of leading clergymen, prompted the invitation that brought Whitefield to that Puritan city in September 1740 for the revival that has ever since been called a “Great Awakening.”

George Whitefield did not learn this doctrine from Jonathan Edwards at all. He was still a very young man and had been taught in Oxford’s “Holy Club” to make Scripture the source and test of all Christian doctrine. He had read, on the recommendation of Charles and John Wesley, the great devotional works of the Puritans of the previous century, as well as Scottish Henry Scougal’s *Life of God in the Soul of Man* and Anglican William Law’s *Plain and Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Like the Wesleys and all evangelicals of that century, he had also read Bishop Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. But he tested all his reading by the Scriptures.

The doctrine of righteousness by faith was the moral heartbeat of 19th century evangelicalism. Few then would have considered for a moment reinterpreting the New Testament as a rejection rather than a

fulfillment of the law of the Old. You may look high and low in the religious literature of the evangelicals of that century—Lutherans, Calvinists, Wesleyans, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, or Adventists—and you will find nowhere the antinomian understanding of grace that has become such a pernicious infection in the 20th century evangelical revival. Precisely to the degree that the revival of our age is continuing and deepening, just so are leaders in all these traditions (illustrated notably by Richard Lovelace’s book, *The Dynamic of the Spirit*) rediscovering the centrality of the biblical promise of sanctification, of a transformation of moral life through the work of the Holy Spirit.

If she were alive, I believe Ellen White would be embarrassed if you Adventists were to resolve your current discussions of this question simply by attributing the

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doctrine of righteousness through faith to her. (She would have instantly rejected the notion that a vision or a series of moving thoughts was revelation from God if in substance they contradicted what she thought were the plain teachings of Scripture. She would have called such a vision simply a bad dream, for she stood as firmly as any of her contemporaries upon the authority of the Bible.) Rather, you Adventists owe your longstanding commitment to moral restoration, as Wesleyans and other Christians do, to that same loving God who in the power and grace of his Spirit made the world, revealed himself to fallen humanity in Scripture, and in his blessed Son, our Savior, created the faith, through

love, that reopened our lives to the Spirit's transforming presence.

The promise of righteousness by faith is the central theme of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. If you share my dismay at the fragmentation of biblical studies that has taken place in the 20th century, and the resultant uncertainty as to how something called "biblical theology" might grow out of such a patchwork of varied writings, I urge you to consider the wholeness of Scripture. Today, we tend to think that concept was an affirmation of faith that the same Holy Spirit had been present from age to age, in every situation, inspiring alike prophets, lawgivers, and the writers of the four gospels and the New Testament epistles. Our earlier teachers, however, whether John Wesley, John Cotton, Alexander Campbell, or Ellen White, saw the wholeness of Scripture as an observable fact. Study it in this light for yourself. I urge you to see whether you do not find that, on common sense examination, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, its central theme is God's call to righteousness and his promise to restore in us by grace the divine image and so enable us to fulfill that call. His love (in the biblical text the word means "loyalty"), his faithfulness (which is the very ground of all Revelation and the reason for His giving to us the law), are the fountain from which springs the grace that saves us from unrighteousness.

Such convictions have been one of your gifts to your fellow evangelicals. Now, in the 20th century, when they need that gift most grievously, I urge you to continue making it, discharging that only debt that Christians should really know, "the debt of mutual love."

The Presence of the Hallowing Spirit

One final contribution, to which I have been pointing throughout this talk, is the conviction that the Holy Spirit is present in

the church, empowering it for righteousness by constantly renewing the community's understanding of Scripture. Here, again, I point to a strong current of Christian doctrine whose source is far deeper and wider than the inspiration of Ellen White. It springs from the teachings of the apostles and the early church fathers, from the rediscovery of the unity of Spirit and Word in Puritan and Wesleyan thought, and from the common evangelical understanding of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. A good place to begin reading about this question is in Geoffrey Nuttall's book, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Practice*, notably his great chapter on "The Spirit and the Word." Nuttall shows how the 17th century Puritans and the Quakers who followed in their train laid out very carefully and clearly the link between the revelation of the Spirit in the Word, and the illumination of the Spirit which guides Christians as they search for the meaning of the Word. He stresses the firm bond that has existed in the minds of evangelical leaders between the authority of Scripture and the Spirit's leadership.

The 19th century understood that the Scriptures comprised, as virtually all the creeds in evangelical Christendom put it, "the only guide to Christian faith and practice." They assumed that the guiding Spirit was with believers as they studied the Bible. The authority of Scripture lay, then, not in each particular word but in the meanings of the sentences and paragraphs, in what they taught about salvation and holiness. The recent struggle over theories of biblical inspiration, conducted sometimes, I think, by persons who care more about the battle than about the Bible, seems almost to ignore this point.

Here stands the watershed that separates the Hebrew and Christian faiths from virtually all the other religions of the world. The Bible declares that our Heavenly Father wants his children to understand. To Ezekiel he said, "Son of Man, stand upon your feet and I will speak with you." Don't grovel in the dust before God; he is not an idol,

but your Father. He wants you to reason, to think with him. As Richard Baxter said in the 17th century, the way in which the Holy Spirit teaches us is by commending God's truth to our reasons so that we can understand how true and right it is that we should do what he tells us. I don't read letters from my mother to memorize the words; I read them to get the message. Just so, the messages of Scripture comprise God's inspired Word. I am dismayed when friends who say they stand for a "high view" of Scripture tease me with the charge that I believe in an errant Bible. What I do believe in is the unerring power of Scripture to make plain, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, all the truth that is necessary for my salvation and moral rectitude. Salvation comes through the word of the Lord because the same Spirit who breathed into those words is at work in my mind and heart.

In many different ways and times He spoke to us—"in sundry places and in diverse manners," as the writer to the Hebrews put it—but always the essential theme is our lostness, our utter dependence on his grace, and his promise not only to forgive us of our sins but in the power of his Spirit bring us into a new life of deliverance from them.

Two complex developments took place in the last part of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century that distorted our memories of this great tradition of scriptural authority. One was the emergence of fundamentalism, with its sincere conviction that the literal and verbal inspiration of each word in the Bible is the ground of our faith in it. Alas, this allowed, though of course it did not require, the use of proof-texts. Not only was context disregarded, but the long tradition of understanding the meanings of biblical passages that runs from Moses to Paul. Moses illuminated Israel's understanding of God's covenant with Abraham while

serving as an agent in the forging of another and more particular covenant. Half a millennium later, Samuel, Micah, Amos, and Isaiah of Jerusalem taught the people of the two kingdoms the meaning of Torah. The later prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi—revitalized the teachings of the earlier ones by applying them to the crises that brought on Judah's downfall.

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(Jeremiah escaped with his life from the charge of sedition because someone remembered that Micah had said the same things two hundred years before, prompting a repentance that saved the nation for divine judgment.) Likewise, in the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus gave new life and newly relevant meanings to the teachings of the prophets; Paul, Peter, and John, nearing the end of their own apostolic ministries, revitalized the meanings of all Scripture—the Torah, the prophets, and the Gospels—with an inspired new exposition of the way in which "the truth as it is in Jesus" confronted an increasingly Gentile church. Literalist fundamentalism dulls the historic Christian conviction that although in the Scriptures God has spoken in different places, times, and circumstances, the moral, spiritual, and saving truth remains consistent throughout.

The other and quite opposite event was the emergence of modernism, whose teachers made culture and the developing consciousness of their own historical situation the ultimate sources of religious and ethical authority. Most modernists, however, in the early part of this century as well

as now, continued to preach sermons from biblical texts. Many of them were quite deeply absorbed in understanding the original settings and meanings of those texts, yet they remained convinced that the interpretation and application of whatever truth there may be in Scripture must rest upon what history and modern culture have taught us. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit became, in this view, a general notion of the "inspiration" of the human intellect; modern ideas may not only supercede those of Scripture, but if necessary entirely displace them.

Both fundamentalists and modernists have wanted to force the great body of evangelical Christians, whose true inheritance was the doctrine of scriptural authority outlined above, to a choice between these stark alternatives. Modernists would love nothing more than for evangelicals to have no choice but to embrace the fundamentalist understanding of scriptural authority, for they believe that most bright young people would soon find that dogma would not stand up, even against the testimony of Scripture itself. Meanwhile, fundamentalists seem still to take pleasure in pushing their evangelical brothers and sisters toward the modernist camp, on the grounds that not to believe in the literal and verbal inspiration of Scripture is to betray the old time religion.

Someone wrote recently in an article in *Spectrum* that Adventists have remained largely untouched by this controversy because, as the writer put it, "we have Ellen White." Yes, you do, but I am not quite sure that you understand just how and why that is important. Certainly she would scorn any who suggested that her prophetic words revised the teachings of Scripture at any point. She inherited the 19th century

understanding of where the authority of Scripture lay: not in the words but in the meanings of the passages that conveyed "present truth." If I have understood at least some aspects of the recent debates in Adventist circles, I think that, ironically, divergent parties are subjecting the inspiration and authority of Ellen White to the same stark alternatives that the battlers about biblical inspiration have insisted on. True to my historian's role of defending the dead from libel, I say that's unfair to the memory of Mrs. White. What she said, I think, viewed in the perspective of her own times, was that God had spoken with the gift of prophecy to illuminate the meaning of Scripture. The final authority of the Bible over all Christian faith and practice must be, she thought, the unquestioned conviction of any prophet who came from the Lord. Her encyclopedic comments on the meanings of Scripture (the index to them fills a substantial volume) displayed her reverence both for the Bible and for the sovereign Spirit who in all times and places must guide believers into truth.

Evangelical faith rests, in the broadest sense, on the whole biblical record of God's faithfulness to humankind. That faithfulness, dimly comprehended, becomes the garden of love in which his Spirit plants saving faith. This, I think, you Adventists ought now to reclaim from your tradition and shout from the housetops.

Indeed, in all four of the ways I have talked about this morning, I pray God will give you grace both to grasp these rich treasures and to give them away—to your evangelical brothers and sisters, and to those who dwell at the far corners of the earth.