
Reaching for a Higher Ground

by Karla K. Walters

Reading the Bible has become particularly meaningful to me since my professional training has introduced me to the reader-response theory of literary criticism. This approach suggests that there is no “truth” in the printed words on the page; the “truth” is created when the reader understands what the author wrote. What the reader can understand is determined by his or her wealth of experience. This means that each time an individual reads a particular work, his experience will change his understanding of that text.¹ Thus, every time I read the Bible, I see a new meaning—not the meaning dictated by church doctrine, not the meaning dictated by Bible teachers, not the meaning I saw yesterday—but a new meaning based on the experience I have had up to this moment of my life.

This theory supports a progressive reading of the Bible. It also harmonizes with the well-established precept of daily Bible study, which assumes that one gains new understandings by repeated reading of the Bible over time. The Apostle Paul also suggested that progressive understanding occurs when he wrote, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11). Further, no one would claim that once one reaches adulthood, one no longer grows or changes. I am not the same adult I was 20 years ago; the years of experience have had a cumula-

tive effect on my thinking and perceptions. My understanding of the Bible, as well as my faith, is constantly growing.

An example is my recent reading of those familiar Bible passages in which Paul exhorts Christian women not to adorn themselves with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly apparel, but rather to practice good works and foster a “hidden man of the heart,” ornamenting themselves with a “meek and quiet spirit” (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 3:3). Like many Adventists, I had in the past understood these texts to be, primarily, exhortations against wearing jewelry. Now that I have teenage daughters, I feel that the most important meaning of these passages is to teach young women to strive for moral substance and active achievement, rather than becoming frivolous, primping “airheads.”

My faith has developed in other ways as well. I believe my expectations of life and of God’s methods and power must be constantly open to revision. Our Adventist forebears experienced the need to revise their expectations when they encountered the Great Disappointment of 1844. They scurried back to their Bibles to search for a new view of the 2,300 days, the Second Coming, and the sanctuary doctrine. As I see it, this is the cycle of expectation and revision: We form expectations, usually founded on a sense of the ideal; when we encounter actual experience, we revise these expectations. These revised expectations are themselves subject to further actual experience, leading us to further revisions of our expectations. The process can be viewed as a circle, something like Diagram A, on the following page.

Karla K. Walters, an assistant professor of English at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, received her Ph.D from the University of Oregon. This essay is adapted from her remarks at the 1989 National AAF Conference in Seattle.

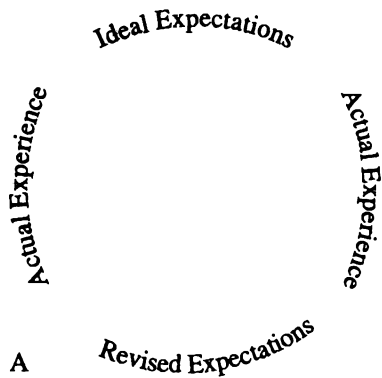


Diagram A

I find that I must keep my definition of God open-ended, and that I constantly revise my views, both of doctrines and of people. As a child, I expected my parents to be perfect and infallible. When I became a teenager, I realized that my parents often made mistakes and that their words and actions were sometimes self-serving and manipulative. I had to change my expectations of my parents; I've learned to love them despite their imperfections.

For me, now, “present truth” is far more than merely waiting for the Second Coming. For me, the pursuit of excellence is present truth, as is fighting the evils of a vicious secular environment.

The same thing is true of my expectations of church leaders. At one time I admired them and expected them to be perfect and infallible. When I reached young adulthood, I could see that they made mistakes and that they could be self-serving and manipulative. I'm still working on revising my expectations of church leaders, yet I am convinced that in my relations with them I ought to show the same spirit of love and tolerance I show toward my parents.

My view of the Second Coming has changed since I was a teenager in academy. At that time the Second Coming seemed imminent. I was certain I would soon see the Lord coming in clouds of glory. In moments of furtive honesty, the young women in the dorm would talk about how they hoped Christ wouldn't come until they'd had a chance to get married and have

children, and/or get started on their careers. This was often stated as a hope that the Second Coming would not arrive for five years.

Now, more than 20 years later, having married, raised my children, and launched my career, I view life from the vantage point of middle age, looking toward old age, and I see the Second Coming differently. It has finally and forcefully dawned on me that every Adventist who has died since 1844 will experience the Second Coming at the resurrection. This is now what I, too, expect—my own death seems much more imminent than it did when I was a teenager. No one knows at what time death will come, just as no one can tell the hour or the day of the coming of the Lord. My new view of the Second Coming makes it seem much more imminent, much more probable, and much more comforting than my former belief that in my lifetime I would see Christ coming in the clouds.

In a sense, I am willing to accept a “slow” God, and have become more patient in practical, human affairs. Having left the days of impetuous youth behind, I no longer expect instant action. For example, I teach on a campus with 15,000 students in a state university system with 19 campuses. I know better than to expect immediate results within this bureaucracy. Two years ago, funding for a new business administration building was approved for my campus, but the ground breaking has yet to take place. So much of life requires this kind of patience that I believe it is rare to find instant results anywhere except at a computer terminal.

I was fortunate to attend Wisconsin Academy when it was under the guidance of Mildred Summerton, one of the outstanding women educators in the denomination. In her chapel talks Miss Summerton repeatedly spoke of “the quality of excellence”; she urged us to strive to do more, to be better, to make the world a better place, to do the best with whatever it was that God gave us. I still believe that unless we have this striving for excellence, we have nothing.

I believe this means concentrating on the big picture and leaving details, such as choice of clothing, to the individual. As long as one doesn't

go naked in public, whether one wears a saffron robe or black leather pants is a matter of choice.

For me, now, “present truth” is far more than merely waiting for the Second Coming. For me, the pursuit of excellence is present truth, as is fighting the evils of a vicious secular environment: greed, duplicity, dishonesty, power-grabbing, money-grabbing, injustice, bigotry, sexism, and racism. The message of the Bible has changed for me since I was an Adventist academy student, but it has not become less demanding. Pursuing

excellence and combating evil takes tremendous creativity and energy. Only faith in God provides the energy and the power to persist.

For me, the Adventist church is no longer an infallible parent demanding conformity to myriad rules of behavior. For me, the church is a community of caring believers nurturing and revitalizing one another for the challenging pursuit of excellence and the battle against the forces of evil. Finally, I firmly believe that our reach should exceed our group, or what’s a heaven for?²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Louise M. Rosenblatt is the primary author of reader response theory in her *Literature as Exploration*, third edition (New York: Modern Language Association, 1984) and *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional*

Theory of the Literary Work (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

2. A paraphrase of Robert Browning, “Andrea Del Sarto,” *Men and Women* (1855).