

Adventism's Choices: Monolith or Pluralism?

Angry Saints, George Knight (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publ. Assoc., 1989). 158 pp. \$13.95.

Reviewed by H. Ward Hill

Not many students of Adventist history are crying out for more coverage of the Minneapolis General Conference. George Knight himself senses a surfeit of commentary on this event. "... I have heard too much, seen too much, and perhaps said too much on the topic of the 1888 General Conference session" (p. 152). Why then another book?

Knight may or may not agree that the lesson of history is that we do not learn anything from history. He nevertheless thinks that we *can* learn something. He is persuaded that, imbedded in the factious wrangling among Adventists of a century ago, is the raw material for framing a viable global strategy for finishing the Lord's work on the earth. *Understanding* history is the key.

Knight elaborates a multi-dimensional crisis in the Adventist church of the late 1880s. He sees an uncongenial mix of variant understandings and personality conflicts, characterized by harshness of spirit and misuse of authoritative sources. He is sparing in his praise of those he endorses and charitable toward those whom he demeans. He clarifies the context of the quibbling over such things as the identity of Daniel's ten kingdoms. But he sees smallness in the spirit of the debate even though the subject is no longer seen as trivial. Hence, the incongruous coupling in his title, *Angry Saints*.

The most obvious lesson is one that most of us already know. Doctrinal accuracy can reside in the hearts of crusty Christians; embracing the pillars of truth does not insure that loving deeds will follow.

Like an encouraging number among the new breed of Adventist leadership today, Knight seems ready to speak in front of the children. He courts the scholarly wing of the church by touting the virtues of *glasnost*. He italicizes A. T. Jones's reminder that "our views will have to be examined by men who are acquainted with the avenues of history..." (p. 20). He includes W. C. White's assessment that sentiment during the famous righteousness by faith controversy was willing to forgo unity in favor of being "correct" (p. 21). He wants us to remember that E. J. Waggoner had stressed that "every point of our argument will have to be subjected to the test of the most rigid criticism" (p. 24).

While Knight notes these calls for careful examination of each point of faith, he does not follow through with suggestions that there be an agenda for specific points of discussion (à la Ford) but makes a call for loving relationships. This may indeed be the first step. And in one sense the problem at Minneapolis was more attitudinal than substantive (p. 94).

But the appeal to love one's neighbor, without an accompanying call to other eternal truths, can prove to be largely visceral. It can self-destruct if it proves to be little more than the waving of arms in pentecostal delight, having one's brokenness healed by the touch of flesh on flesh, and one's whispered concerns made more memorable by a prolonged hug.

Knight sees the current tensions within Adventism, which have grown out of the Barnhouse/Martin dialogue of the 1950s, as paralleling the controversy at Minneapolis. In the eyes of some, the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* raised the issue of the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since, in their view, some time-

honored positions seemed to be altered. "That," argues Knight, "was the essence of the struggle, and the emotional foundation for that struggle, at Minneapolis" (p. 132).

There are indeed many voices in the Adventist church today who believe that those points of faith which can be defended only by tortuous routes through obscure religious symbolism must be left to individual conviction. To try to force an orthodoxy on these points will drive away many who love the Lord, want to keep His commandments, and look forward to the return of Jesus.

As he enumerates the foibles of the faithful involved in the 1888 encampment, and draws lessons implicit in this event and those which followed, Knight focuses sharply on what he calls "the forgotten issue of Minneapolis" (p. 100): religious authority. In his view this was "the most crucial thing Adventists can learn from the Minneapolis experience" (Ibid.). In the words of Mrs. White, the lesson of 1888 was to "Investigate the Scriptures for yourselves. . . . No man is to be authority for us" (p. 102). Twice he quotes a passage from Mrs. White, stressing the discovery of truth as an on-going process:

As a people we are certainly in great danger, if we are not constantly guarded, of considering our ideas, long cherished, to be Bible doctrines and in every point infallible, and measuring everyone by the rule of our interpretation of Bible truth. This is our danger, and this would be the greatest evil that could ever come to us as a people (pp. 103, 136).

Knight doubtless understands that the corrective path to which he points can be very painful. For, when one point of doctrine is called in question, the shadow of fallibility falls over the unchallenged portions of the faith as well. These are calls to surrender the safety of certainty. To challenge an entrenched and treasured doctrinal truth angers the saints who hold it. Here, righteous indignation over perceived erroneous teaching combines with elements of a bruised ego, tending to make an unholy mix.

While one can read Knight's analysis with a great deal of profit, there remains a critical point which is left undeveloped. We can all agree that, where disunity occurs, we should appeal to a prayerful study of the Scriptures. But at some

point we must realize that those who earnestly study the Scriptures do not necessarily reach the same conclusions. When Scripturally based but divergent views are held, what is the path to unified action?

In the same congregation can be found members labeled as fundamentalists and traditionalists, or evangelicals and liberals. Those who align themselves with particular groups or streams of thought within the church face dilemmas. Those bent on preserving the traditional distinctives find it extremely difficult to accept those who differ with their interpretation of these distinctives. They cannot be at home with "evangelicals" since they are persuaded that the latter misunderstand the nature of Christ, and what victory in him means. Such a view, traditionalists feel, will simply anesthetize believers to the true gospel, and confirm them in their sins. With such an understanding, the latter rain will never get beyond a few drops.

On the other hand, the evangelicals or liberals feel that the traditionalists are actually embracing the Babylonish doctrine of salvation by works. Hence mutual intolerance prevails. The liberals can be tolerant of almost anything. What they cannot abide is intolerance.

Must Adventists seek an identity characterized by a monolithic doctrinal structure, or must we be content with a pluralistic order where tolerance triumphs over regulated orthodoxy?

Knight cries out for "Christ-like forbearance" as the critical need of times past as well as present. In Mrs. White's words, it was "the manner in which the truth has been handled, because Jesus was not in it" which was the root of the controversy (p. 51).

Nevertheless, Knight holds that Adventists "attained a full-orbed message" and began the loud cry in 1888 (p. 128). All that is required now is the "vitalizing latter rain power of the Holy Spirit" (Ibid.). He admits, however, that many Adventists "still find themselves trapped in a pre-

1888 theology that emphasized 'our righteousness' and the law of God, rather than the all-importance of Christ's merits" (p. 134).

While Knight keeps his feet planted on relatively safe ground, reading his book cannot but keep alive a searching question which is haunting the Adventist church today: Must Adventists seek an identity characterized by a monolithic doctrinal structure, or have we reached the place

where we must be content with a pluralistic order where tolerance triumphs over regulated orthodoxy? Whether we like it or not, the pluralistic order is here.

Perhaps Knight's next book will show us how to be fervently united in our mission even if we find it impossible to agree on a number of other things besides the ten kingdoms and the meaning of law in the book of Galatians.