



## Alden Thompson's *Inspiration: Why Is It A Cause Célèbre?*

Reviewed by Clark H. Pinnock

Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*. Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991. \$19.95 hardcover. 332 pages.

Though I have not met Professor Thompson, certain facts about him are apparent from reading the book. Vivid allusions to incidents tell me that he is a well-known Adventist speaker, an energetic college Bible teacher, and an involved Old Testament scholar. Most importantly, I detect Thompson as a man of vision with an urgent message. He longs for God's people, especially his Adventist community, to derive full value from the Bible without being distracted unnecessarily. As a pastor, he wants to prevent believers giving up their faith because of certain mistaken expectations they have picked up about the Bible. The dialogical and autobiographical character of the book make it absorbing to read, even for a Baptist.

Thompson has a perspective on biblical inspiration that he believes will make it possible for people to study the Bible without fear. His first sentence captures the paradigm: "The discovery that the Bible is more like a family letter and less like a theoretical treatise has made a profound impact on my life." He points out that we would not quibble if in a family letter we came across a misspelling, an unusual chronol-

ogy, or an unorthodox turn of phrase. As readers, we would be able to handle such features without difficulty and get the message loud and clear. Such difficulties in a letter would not disturb us because we would take them in stride. The same can be true of Bible difficulties, if we break free of the bondage of the theoretical paradigm and adopt a practical standpoint that listens to the Father and lets the text transform us. The Bible does not need to be perfect in a logical and scientific sense for us to hear its message of salvation. It was given to meet the needs of ordinary people, not to satisfy the demands of experts. Thompson wants us to think of the Bible as God's love letter to his family. Referring to 1 John 3:11, he writes: "This is not the language of science or philosophy, but the language of relationship and experience, the language of the family" (p. 140).

Thompson thus calls us to focus on the practical emphasis of a text like 2 Timothy 3:15-17 which, saying nothing about inerrancy, highlights instead the plenary profitability of the Scriptures in conveying a saving and equipping knowledge of God. It does not take a theoretical posture, and we should not. If we would look at the Bible this way, we would be liberated from all sorts of anxieties that we so unwisely and unnecessarily suffer from.

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Thompson's proposal is really about hermeneutics more than inspiration. One does not find him spending time proving that the Bible is divinely inspired. Why should he do so? Theology from the beginning has implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the inspiration and authority of the Bible. This is true not only of Adventists but also of practically every other tradition as well. The real question is seldom *whether* the Bible has authority but what *kind* of authority it has. Thompson knows that the urgent issue is hermeneutics, not inerrancy.

The key question to be asking is this: Does the Bible convey a message of liberating good news or is it a burden full of difficulty? Is the Bible a source of renewal or a worry to us? Alden Thompson wants to free the Bible for Adventists and others, so it can transform lives as it was meant to. He is critical of the kind of theology which, in "defending" the Bible, makes it a burden and something unbelievable. In contending that the real issue is hermeneutics, not inerrancy, Thompson is speaking not only to Adventists but to the larger evangelical world in North America, of which (I believe) Adventism is a part. I welcome his voice in this broader evangelicalism. He has the role played earlier by such as James Orr, Dewey Beegle, and Jack Rogers, who also urged us to read the Bible without fear.

The central feature of Thompson's doctrine of Scripture is the divine and human character of the Bible. As Paul says in a favorite verse of mine: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV). Chapter six of the book is crucial: "Heavenly Message, Earthen Vessel." Thompson views the Bible in an incarnational manner, as a blending of human and divine. He believes that God adapts his word to

us in a human form so that it might be understood. Because of this, we must give as much attention to the human form of the texts as we do to its divine inspiration, because only by attending to God's word in human language can we hope to discover the divine teaching. The miracle of Scripture is that, despite all human fragility and all limitations of human authors, God's word is effectively heard and realized. As an Adventist, Thompson is able to appeal effectively to Ellen White on this point. I almost envy him the prophet because it is harder for me to appeal to any comparable figure to secure the point with the likes of Harold Lindsell about!

Thompson holds that inspiration does not entail a perfectly inerrant Bible, but does not do much to answer those who think otherwise. This is an omission for the non-Adventist evangelical because in his or her world there are many illegitimate arguments along these lines that need to be exposed. I was forced to expose them for example in *The Scriptural Principle* (1985). The fact is that the Bible does not claim to be inerrant in the autographs, that texts are regularly cited to prove what they do not actually say, and that a lot of circular argument is practiced defending a perfect Bible. Biblical inspiration, according to the Bible, is different from biblical inspiration according

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to Warfield, as James Dunn and Paul Achtemeier among others have shown. I judge that a fair reading of those biblical claims for inspiration are in close agreement with the general perspective of Alden Thompson.

Being Adventist, he applies the incarnational principle especially to biblical law. Like Charles Kraft, he calls the Bible a casebook, not a codebook. Just as the gospel writers adapt the sayings of Jesus to different situations, so God's laws are situationally directed and need to be thought out when applied today.

As a biblical scholar, Thompson naturally concentrates on areas of the Bible's humanity. He knows about many difficulties in the text and their possible effects on people who do not understand the point about incarnational revelation. He is concerned that people may lose their faith, not recognizing this principle. Part three is chock full of illustrations from the Bible that can cause believers (who are not alert to the divine/human nature of Scripture) to panic. He tries to help readers cope with these passages.

There will surely be objections to his strategy. Some will say that if we allow details like the numbers leaving Egypt to be discounted, we may undermine confidence in the Bible as a whole. Unscrupulous people will list his alleged concessions to unbelief and make him appear a dangerous fellow. (This happened to me.) Not everyone wants to know what the text actually contains, if it contradicts their ideal picture of the Scriptures. More reasonably, others will urge him not to give up so easily on the Bible difficulties but put greater effort into solving them. My sense is that Thompson will agree that any difficulties that can be solved should be solved, but he will not endure dishonesty in the defense of orthodoxy. To that I say, Amen.

# Bradford on Thompson's *Inspiration*

Reviewed by Charles Bradford

Much serious writing turns out to be autobiographical—at least in a sense. In his recent volume, *Inspiration*, Alden Thompson admits to the “autobiographical element in the body of this book.” The book is not only autobiographical for Thompson but also for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To Adventists the Bible is the book, *sine qua non*. Scripture is taken very seriously, and any assumption that appears to threaten biblical authority is looked on askance. Professor Thompson's book raises questions that are not usually discussed in denominational publications and will no doubt raise a few eyebrows. This is why he has gone to great lengths to lower the theological threshold and to expunge all threatening, flag-raising words and expressions. He has even run his manuscript through the computer in order to expunge jargon that could come across as inflammatory. Thompson wants to be read dispassionately, but I am not sure that this is possible.

Thompson (a fourth generation Adventist) writes out of an Adventist background and tradition to an Adventist audience. The book is about inspiration, but is largely an examination of Ellen White's view of inspiration/revelation, which Thompson enlarges upon and seems to support quite fully. Some would

probably say that he uses Ellen White to buttress his own theory of inspiration, but we must grant our brother good faith and hear him out. After all (through the publishing house reading committee), he has submitted his findings to “brethren of experience.”

Thompson uses two basic documents to set forth the Adventist position on inspiration: “The Inspiration of the Prophetic Writers,” *Selected Messages*, Book 1, chap. 1, pp. 15-23, and Introduction to *The Great Controversy*, pp. v-xii. He believes that Ellen White's view of inspiration is the most advanced and enlightened to be found anywhere. All that follows is Thompson's interpretation and application of these chapters in the development of a model of interpretation that “is capable of encompassing all Scripture” (p. 316). In Part II, Thompson develops a theory of inspiration that he hopes will add to the ongoing discussion of the subject in Adventism. He talks about a “Practical Approach to Inspiration,” then proceeds to take up some of the perennial problems, e.g. the formation of the canon, the relative merits of the various manuscripts, and how to judge and use modern translations. Then he introduces what is the core of his argument: “Casebook or Codebook,” an organizing principle that he has been working out in the classroom and in the pulpit for years. Thompson warms to his task.

In Thompson's view, there are two ways to approach Scripture: as codebook or casebook. “In our culture today a codebook is an instrument of precision. When a contractor builds to code, he goes

by the book. The minimums are clear; the specifications exact. . . . he may install more insulation or provide more access than the code prescribes, but not less” (p. 99). On the other hand, a “casebook” requires more interpretation, more thoughtful reflection, and “describes a series of examples that reflect a variety of responses under varied circumstances. None of the cases may be fully definitive or prescriptive in other settings, but each is described in a manner that could be helpful in someone facing similar circumstances” (p. 100).

Even before Thompson, our understanding of how inspiration and revelation works—how Scripture functions—has been constantly expanding. If, for no other reason, this growth process means that we will always be confronted with “problems.” Further, coming out of a 19th-century conservative religious tradition, we have tended, willy-nilly, toward the inerrancy position. I do not view this as the kind of fatal flaw that some have felt it to be, nor am I critical of the founders of Adventism, the majority of whom, as Thompson points out, leaned toward this position. The men and women who founded a church in 19th-century America had to fight hard to establish their position in their world. They had little time for discussion of the various views on inspiration. “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it,” was their approach—and it worked. They convinced men and women that they had a message from God by reading it from their Bibles. It does, however, make for a painful experience when church members are suddenly exposed to arguments that they never heard discussed among us. The pain is intensified because the Bible is of such great importance to Seventh-day Adventists.

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Whether “liberal” or “conservative,” there is no disagreement on the importance of scripture among Adventists. What divides us is not the authority of Scripture, but the nature of Scripture (as in the nature of Christ), and how Scripture functions in the community of faith and in the experience of the individual believer. The burning issue before Adventism is, How shall we do Scripture? Is it ever right to tell the people about the “problems”? What is the right setting in which to do it? Could it be that we are independent Bible students? Shall we develop Adventist answers rather than depending on worn-out conservative Protestant positions that are incompatible with the Adventist (Ellen White) view of inspiration? On the other hand, shall we move closer to liberal views? But everyone knows that liberalism is bankrupt.

Thompson believes the time has come to seize the initiative by formulating a thoroughly Adventist approach to Scripture. “The traditional view of inspiration with its inclination toward inerrancy has meant that the evidence against inerrancy *from within Scripture* is cited primarily by the ‘liberals.’ In this book I have sought to show how Ellen White carefully occupies that dangerously middle ground. She saw the human in Scripture, but still believed and still experienced its power the Word of God. Because of my trust in Ellen White and because of the role she plays in Adventism, my argument has been: If she can see the evidence and still believe, so can I. And so can you” (p. 312).

My assignment is to resonate to Thompson’s book. What shall we do with it? Is it a threat to faith? Are there dangers here that “must be exposed”? What are its strengths and weaknesses? One thing is cer-

tain: Thompson makes us think, and that’s good. He may even scare us a bit. That is not necessarily bad. Thompson may even be tempted to think for a moment that his is the last word, the model that we all should rush to adopt. But he knows that is not going to happen. He could be making too much of his forays into the “real world” of the churches with these bright new insights. How much can be accomplished in a weekend seminar by a team of visiting college professors? But in spite of any chinks in the armor, *Inspiration* does add to the discussion in helpful ways.

Adventists have no index of forbidden reading. One pilgrim cannot dictate to another. Ellen White’s counsel is still good: “Give them strengthening Bible diet and Bible duty to strengthen and brace the soul for the coming conflict” (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 478). It is the business of the servants of God to give the people food in due season. We are sorry for those who will be completely twisted out of joint by the book, but they just may have superior insights denied us common folk. Making Thompson’s work a political issue and making him a whipping boy will not enrich the discussion. In fact, we must not make too much of the product of any human mind when we are responsible for our own soul’s salvation.

Thompson’s treatment of law is helpful and he is “tempted to argue that one of the unique Adventist contributions to the Christian world may be our understanding of law” (p. 112). We need all the help we can get in making the case for the enduring nature of God’s law in an age of relativism. His statement that “A commitment to the one great law of love brings a wholistic perspective to life that makes religion all-encompassing” (p. 111) will go down well in the Adventist com-

munity and appeal to all thinking Christians. When he says that biblical law is an enduring casebook, he is really speaking to its codebook aspect. If there is any criticism of Thompson it could be that he leaves himself open to the charge of pitting “casebook” against “codebook” to the denigration of “codebook.” But this is not a fatal flaw either. Appendix A, “The Inspiration Issue in Adventist History,” helps to put the issue in historical perspective.

As responsible human beings and members of the household of faith, we should not read anyone uncritically. Thompson deserves to be read in this manner, with charity. He should not be rejected out of hand nor swallowed hook, line, and sinker. He will be threatening to some. There are others who will welcome this book as a new opportunity to do a little “brethren bashing”—for not bringing these matters to our attention before. Whatever we bring to the reading of this book, it should be with the question in mind, Does this help me to get a better handle on the Word? Does it enhance my Bible study time and maximize the benefit that I receive from the Word?

Thompson realizes that all of this will be disquieting to many Seventh-day Adventists. *Inspiration* may not be *must* reading for every church member. This is in no way to be taken as condescending, but each of us needs different emphases at various times and stages of our growth in Christ. Some very deeply spiritual Christians don’t need a course in apologetics. Long years of reading, study, listening to the Word and feeding on it have done the job quite adequately. But *Inspiration* will not harm any intelligent, committed Christian, whether or not this is his or her time of greatest need for this kind of reading.