



# Are Adventists Still People of the Book?

Only 300 delegates gather to discuss authority and use of Scripture in Adventism.

*by Douglas Clark*

ONLY 250 TO 300 PEOPLE OUT OF MANY thousands took advantage of the opportunity to explore together an understanding of what the Adventist Church claims as a basic doctrine: the centrality of the Bible to belief and practice. Among the six breakout discussion papers prepared and distributed in advance of the 1995 General Conference Session, two dealt specifically with the Bible: "The Authority of Scripture" and "The Use of Scripture in the Life of the SDA Church." The authority of Scripture document drew no more than a couple hundred individuals to the main meeting hall of the session. The music hall across the street was virtually empty, with audience members ready to discuss the use of Scripture outnumbering the six panel members by no more than five or six to one.

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## The Authority of Scripture

George Reid, director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, chaired the session on the authority of Scripture. He was assisted by a panel consisting of Artur Stele, president of the Zaokski Theological Seminary in Russia; Jairyong Lee, dean of the theological seminary in the Philippines; Loron Wade, dean of theological studies at Montemorelos University in Mexico; Gerard Fandel, an administrator from the South Pacific; and Richard Lehmann, president of Saleve Adventist Institute, Collonges, France.

Following Reid's introduction to the session topic, Raoul Dederen, former dean of the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University, read the document in its entirety. The document itself addressed the issue of biblical authority directly and forcefully, focusing in the first section on an unquestioned and essential authority inherent in the Bible. This

authority, according to the document, must undergird the correct approach to Scripture and should be clearly apparent in “objective” divine revelation of “objectively communicated” statements and events. Threats to the authority of the Bible arise from relativistic, tentative, and self-serving perspectives and motivations that ultimately undermine biblical theology.

The question of the normative value of Scripture and the sources of normative revelation occupied the second section of the document. Again, fears regarding threats to the Bible as the “infallible revelation” of God’s will characterized the tone. All too often, the document asserted, human reason, tradition, or experience have replaced Scripture as *the* norm for Adventist belief and practice.

The “pernicious claims of science” to supersede biblical truth came under strong critique in the document’s third section. Historicity and factuality in the Genesis accounts of Creation take center stage and stand in judgment of errant scientific theories and of those church members anxious “to placate the scientists.” While not dismissing science entirely, the document clearly and categorically subsumed science beneath the factual claims of the Bible.



Threats springing from an overemphasis on the cultural conditioning of biblical texts have further undermined biblical authority, according to the next section of the document. Decrying the devastating effects resulting from this relativising trend, the paper laid claim to “a continuous history and an unbroken connection” that binds the biblical past to the modern reader in such a way as to supersede all cultures. It is the more independent among us who tend toward cultural relativism, the document asserted.

The subsequent section called, in the face of destructive methods of biblical investigation, for “better” research—research which, among other things, takes account of biblical languages and background material. Claiming that “we regard no difficulty as insuperable,” the document’s author cited reversals in archaeological interpretations that once conflicted with the Bible as proof that the Scriptures are trustworthy and will be vindicated in the end.

The two sources of revelation—special revelation and general revelation (nature and reason)—came under discussion in the next section. Protection against any improper relationship between these can only be found in “an unequivocal” emphasis on the inspiration of the Bible. Inspiration was not defined, only appealed to.

The final and longest section of the document pulled together two threads woven throughout the entire piece. In its discussion of the need for church discipline in the face of failure to submit to biblical authority and norms, the document came to its major foci. The document took a defensive stance against threats to doctrinal fidelity. The underlying message of the document was concerned more with church authority than with biblical authority. For example, the document emphasized the integrity of the church, outlining how to deal with those apparently drinking too deeply of modernism or “those unwilling to listen to the advice of the believers.”

The recommendations that concluded the document pressed forcefully for corrective measures—some educational, some disciplinary, some administrative—to bring church members back into conformity with biblical authority as defined by the church.

By and large, the panelists supported the document in its contents and its concern to protect the Bible against threats to its authority. Stele felt a loss of biblical authority would unravel church unity. Lee saw the 18th century as the turning point away from a belief in *sola scriptura* toward questions and doubts about biblical authority. Fandel affirmed the document's assessment of today's situation, worrying that for many, personal experience was replacing Scripture as the source of belief. Both Wade and Lehmann, while supportive of concerns raised in the document, did express reservations about the section on discipline, fearing a return to the Middle Ages of intolerance.

In contrast to the basic show of support for the document among panelists, speakers from the floor, while polite, almost consistently raised questions about its tone and/or its contents. Only one of the 12 or 13 spokespersons came out enthusiastically in support of the direct approach the document took to the problems the church faces today.

John Brunt, of Walla Walla College, recognizing the deep hungering of church members for practical help from the Bible, decried the stone-throwing tone of the paper. He called rather for a positive, clear, nurturing approach to the problem, with the goal of encouraging responsible and relevant Bible study and application.

Others raised questions about the disciplinary parameters of the document (who, exactly, would be subject to church discipline?); about the reference to a "creed" in the document (wondering if we were again toying with a creedal formation of doctrines); about the tone—which would only exacerbate the rift

between educators (especially scientists) and church administrators; about problems surrounding the term *sola scriptura*; and about the quality of writing in the document itself. One seasoned pastor hoped we would never use a document like this for disciplining church members. Following this discussion, members of the audience who wished to do so submitted further recommendations in written form.

According to Reid, the document had served its purpose of generating discussion and would not be published officially anywhere outside the General Conference Session. The fate of the recommendations—those already formulated as part of the document and those submitted in written form by the audience—was not entirely clear.

## The Use of Scripture in the Life of the SDA Church

Angel Rodriguez of the Biblical Research Institute chaired a panel that included Bertil Wiklander, new president of the Trans-European Division; Violeto F. Bocala, secretary of the Asia Pacific Division; Heikki Silvet, secretary of the Euro-Asia Division Ministerial Association; Jaime Castrejon, secretary of the Inter-American Division Ministerial Association; Johann Heinz, of Friedensau Theological Graduate School in Germany; and Miroslav Kis, chair of the department of theology and Christian philosophy in the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

Before reading the document, the chair indicated that it grew out of a request by the Administrative Council of the General Conference. The council had asked an unidentified individual to write an initial draft, which took on numerous changes as it snaked its way through a series of committees and readers. Whether or not any form of the document's contents or recommendations might appear in

published form was not clear. At minimum, the General Conference Administrative Council will see the results.

The document clearly issued from a deep concern about the use of Scripture within the church by administrators, publications, educators (especially those in higher education), personnel in medical institutions, pastors, and church members at large. The document relied on feelings, perceptions, and “anecdotal reports” within Adventism that expressed uncertainties about the Bible. “A recent study” apparently also indicated little attention and a dangerous lack of commitment to the Bible, certainly less than our forebears had.

A list of six recommendations concluded the document. These suggested assessments and evaluations of current trends, programs to foster appropriate study methods, and steps to ensure adherence to doctrinal truth.

Panelists spoke initially to specific aspects of the document’s content. Wiklander, while recognizing the diminished role of Scripture among Seventh-day Adventists today, nevertheless recommended changes to the paper (suggesting a future life for the document). Wiklander noted, among other concerns, an overemphasis on standards at the expense of salvation. Castrejon called for a greater balance between cognitive and practical/experiential approaches to Scripture. There should be, he noted, greater emphasis on the impact of the Bible on one’s affective life.

Opening what turned out to be but the first volley in a fusillade of disparaging comments on Sabbath school lessons, Silvet pled for an overhaul that might enhance the value, depth,

and appeal of the Sabbath school *Quarterly*. He also questioned the either-or dichotomy the document posed between devotional reading and deep Bible study. Heinz celebrated the centrality of the Bible in our Protestant heritage, and decried members’ confusing their own ideas with scriptural truth.

Ruing the fact that postmodern thought diminishes biblical authority, Kis advocated rethinking the nature and purpose of the Bible in culture. Disagreeing with the document’s concern that our publishing houses should pull in the reins on pluralistic and potentially divisive books and articles, Kis argued for increased publication outlets for new ideas intended to stimulate discussion.

Give and take between speakers from the floor and panelists raised other significant issues. Along with continued bombardment of the Sabbath school *Quarterly* and suggestions to make it inductive and more useful and relevant, participants celebrated personal discovery in Bible

study. This cannot happen through spoon-feeding, many suggested, but through use of appropriate tools and methods. Couldn’t we provide scholarly as well as more popular versions of an introduction to methods of interpreting Scripture, one participant asked, with an eye toward greater appreciation, understanding, and application of the Bible? Another participant wondered if its judgmental tone, based on perceptions and anecdotes, could be edited into a more positive and affirming expression, built on more adequate data?

The final hour dedicated to this document was set aside for consideration of recommen-

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dations. In addition to the six printed in the document, a number of others surfaced in the discussion. These included a call to open and maintain lines of communication, especially between teachers and administrators. Further attention to the study of interpretation of Scripture received wide support (in particular for use with the Sabbath school lessons). Some felt that heavier theological/biblical content in sermons would be preferable to socially oriented topics. Perhaps, suggested some, a series of booklets following a "What Does the Bible Teach About . . .?" motif would prove useful.

## A Personal Analysis

First, it is clear that the serious tone and protective stance adopted by the authors of the documents reveal deep concerns about Bible study in the life of the church. Honestly laying claim to the appellation "People of the Book" is much more difficult today for Seventh-day Adventists than in the past. Unfortunately, it is the very tone of the papers (especially the one on the authority of Scripture) that runs counter to meaningful attempts to create for Bible study an inviting atmosphere, an open door to discovery, a celebration of biblical curiosity.

Secondly, the contents of the documents argue almost exclusively from cerebral, academic, intellectual perspectives and have not taken into account the holistic creatures church members (and the worshipping community) are. Culture and experience cannot be surgically removed from the Bible. While inspired, the Bible was nonetheless written in and is read today within the context of life experiences and human stories. To assume a clean separation between "objective" truth and experiential truth is to deny the holism of human nature Adventists have affirmed for more than a century.

Finally, it is also clear, from the extremely low attendance levels at these sessions, that either the church and its members already believe they know what they need to about the Bible (its authority, inspiration, interpretation, and application), or they don't much care anymore. Neither option is very encouraging.

However, the future is not necessarily bleak. By putting our best and most dedicated minds and hearts together as a church, we may be able to work toward a dynamic approach to the Bible, an approach that studies the understanding of people who first heard prophets, poets, and apostles, but also explores the invigorating relevance of Scripture to life today. Such a twofold task is worth our continued and most profound efforts.