



The Priority of The Particular

Adventist theology will increasingly focus on the stories Adventist tell, the concrete experiences of its members.

by Richard Rice

AS IT APPROACHES THE 21ST CENTURY, THE Adventist community may be widely recognized, but we are not widely understood. We need effective ways to express what we are about, especially what Adventists think. Actually, the current theological climate is uniquely receptive to expressions of distinctive religious visions and therefore holds great promise for effectively formulated Adventist theology.

Uncharted Terrain

At the end of the 1960s, a number of influential thinkers argued that the task of theology is to show that the gospel satisfies contemporary criteria of meaning and truth. We have the contents of Christian faith on the one hand, the modern world on the other, and

the rational mind that brings them together.

Over the past 25 years or so, this configuration of the theological task has disintegrated. In fact, each element in this threefold design has been subjected to withering criticism. As many people now see it, the notion of the Christian faith, or the essential claims of the gospel, is an abstraction from the rich blend of ambiguous and provocative narratives, metaphors, and symbols that constitute the Bible as it reads. You can't wrap Christianity in a package of propositions to be intellectually assessed.

Likewise, the modern world—a vision of reality produced by unqualified confidence in scientific inquiry and unqualified optimism for the fruits of technology—is also an abstraction: an abstraction with deadening and deadly consequences. We can embrace it only by ignoring the vast sweep of human experience past and present, which has always been open to ranges of meaning inaccessible to mere rational inquiry, and by overlooking the devastating effects of our ceaseless manipulation of the environment.

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Finally and most emphatically, the rational mind is an abstraction. There is no one way of looking at reality, no integrated program of intellectual operations, no single set of solid assumptions that gives humanity access to truth, or Truth. And we privilege one perspective only by ignoring, if not dehumanizing, others, specifically those who stand outside the stream of thinkers who are Western, white, male, and straight. The very idea of the rational mind seems to ignore that there are other ways of thinking, that there are others who think, indeed, that there are others at all.

As this general vision of the theological task has collapsed, nothing has arisen to replace it. In fact, we cannot speak of *theology* today, we can speak only of *theologies*. In what passes for Christian theology there are no dominating figures, no accepted sequence of tasks, no common methods, and no agreed-upon agenda, only a bewildering barrage of rival claims for our attention. Expelled from the orderly landscape of several decades ago, we find ourselves in uncharted terrain. Only it's not a desert, it's a jungle. New concerns, new perspectives, new movements, new nomenclatures, new voices have sprouted up on every hand.

Let me pick up a single thread that appears here and there within the many activities and disciplines that surround us, and ask where it would take us if we used it as a guide to the future of Adventist theology.

The Ascendancy of Persons

That thread is "the priority of the particular." I'm taking that phrase from Martha Nussbaum's book, *Love's Knowledge*.¹ She gets the idea from Aristotle. In contrast to Plato, who invested intellectual objects with supreme reality and ultimate significance, Aristotle denied that the particular is less real than the universal. Instead of following reason

into the realm of the universal, Aristotle argued, we reach truth by remaining exquisitely sensitive to the complex concrete realities we encounter in the phenomenal world.

Nussbaum applauds Aristotle. Instead of drawing reason away from imagination and emotion, she maintains, we need to bring them together. Morality is concerned with practical choice. It involves a response to the particular, which includes emotion and imagination and never loses touch with our questions about how to live.

I believe the transition Nussbaum calls for in ethical reflection appears in several areas of religious inquiry, including theology. Broadly speaking, it represents a major shift in the things that preoccupy us as sources of value and as objects of attention. It takes us from the abstract to the concrete, from the general to the specific, from the universal to the particular. This turn to the particular emerges across a wide intellectual front in recent years, including ethics, biblical studies, and philosophy.

With the emergence of medical ethics, the preoccupations of moral philosophy moved from tiresome debates about the meaning of ethical utterances (meta-ethics), and the relative merits of utilitarian and deontological ethical schemes (normative ethics), to the real-life challenges confronting people who are trying to relieve human suffering. In the opinion of some people, the move not only revitalized ethics, it saved it. We see the same general development in the rise of virtue ethics. Instead of conjuring up hypothetical conflicts among moral obligations, virtue ethics focuses on the concrete moral agent. Instead of asking, What should one do if . . . ?, it asks, How do virtuous people behave? It moves the question of moral goodness away from exceptional moments of dramatic decision-making, to the attitudes, emotions, and values that affect our lives on a concrete level all the time.

We see a somewhat similar shift in the area

of biblical studies. For a long time, biblical scholars concerned themselves with abstractions. They were preoccupied with what lay behind the biblical documents. They were concerned with such issues as literary and oral sources, layers of tradition, the motives and methods of redactors, as biblical texts moved through various stages in their long development.

In more recent years we have seen a shift to the concrete. Biblical studies now devotes considerable attention, not to the text as it came to be, but to the text as we have it. There are studies of the text as literature, as narrative, and as canon or Scripture. In other words, scholars are considering the biblical documents within the concrete life settings of the communities of faith from which they come and to which they continue to speak.

In related ways, many people are less interested now in what the Bible tells us to believe and more interested in what it means to live in harmony with the biblical story. They see the Bible as a guide for spiritual and moral development rather than a collection of doctrinal propositions.

Faith Expressed in Narratives and Metaphors

We see the move from the universal to the particular in certain aspects of philosophy. Many philosophers have given up on the question of truth, or Truth, but are willing to discuss truths. For Richard Rorty, this takes the form of a rather thoroughgoing relativism. "There is no big picture," he asserts. We have only partial truths and we need to give them careful attention. Similarly, Robert Nozick argues that we should give up trying to build the comprehensive system. Carefully considered, individually established ideas, he maintains, are more likely to stand the test of time than vast overarching schemes.

Similar developments appear in constructive theology. Traditional Christian theologians were concerned with constructing doctrinal systems. They sought to extract from the Bible its essential teachings and arrange the results in attractive logical schemes. The desired result was a body of beliefs, logically coherent, aesthetically integrated, and powerfully convincing.

To many theologians in recent years, this quest for a well-organized body of beliefs pursues an abstraction. It overlooks both the stimulating, imaginative character of biblical literature and the concrete experiences of the community of faith. Accordingly, they turn their attention from universal religious truths to particular religious expressions, from Christian faith as an intellectual construct to Christian faith as it takes concrete form in human life. Though certainly not ignored, questions of truth take a back seat to questions of meaning. Theologians now devote less attention to religious beliefs, and more to the experience of believing.

We see this shift in numerous developments, including two revisionary views of theological method. Postmoderns and postliberals alike reject the Enlightenment view of human rationality as "objective, neutral, and dispassionate." Postmoderns argue that we still need to correlate the claims of Christian faith with standards of contemporary intelligibility. But these postliberals insist that Christian faith has its own "internal logic." It "defines its own language and thought-forms and practices."² Accordingly, theologians need not show that Christian faith meets the "demands of the modern mind." Their task is to express the faith within the terms and concepts that Christianity itself provides.

We also find this growing openness toward "internal" expressions of Christian faith in "narrative theology," whose proponents find a narrative structure in a number of important places.³ One, of course, is the founding litera-

ture of the Christian community. The Bible is filled with stories, or narratives—a fact largely overlooked by historical-critical approaches to the biblical texts.⁴ Another is human experience itself.⁵ Our sense of self has a narrative structure. We become what we are over time, and we express our personal identity by telling our story. The same is true of our social identity. The most cohesive factor in a society is the shared narratives of its members.⁶ Moral and ethical values, too, exhibit a deeply narrative structure. Stories of praiseworthy behavior are often the most important factor in shaping moral experience.⁷

Interest in narrative is part of a larger appreciation for the important role that symbols and metaphors play in our thinking. Everyone knows that figurative language is central to religious life and thought.⁸ But metaphors exert an enormous influence in other areas, too, including philosophy⁹ and ethics.¹⁰ In fact, a growing body of scholarly work indicates that our experience is metaphorical through and through. Metaphors do more than describe experience, they structure it. As the title of one book puts it, we live by metaphors.¹¹

The expanding interest in metaphors generally has stimulated interest in religious metaphors, where it recasts the central object of theological concern. If the most important elements in a religion are not concepts or ideas, but narratives and metaphors, then our attempt to interpret a religious tradition should focus primarily on the metaphors that shape and drive it rather than the beliefs that give it formal expression. Instead of explicating doctrines or constructing systems, therefore, many theologians today are exploring models and metaphors.¹²

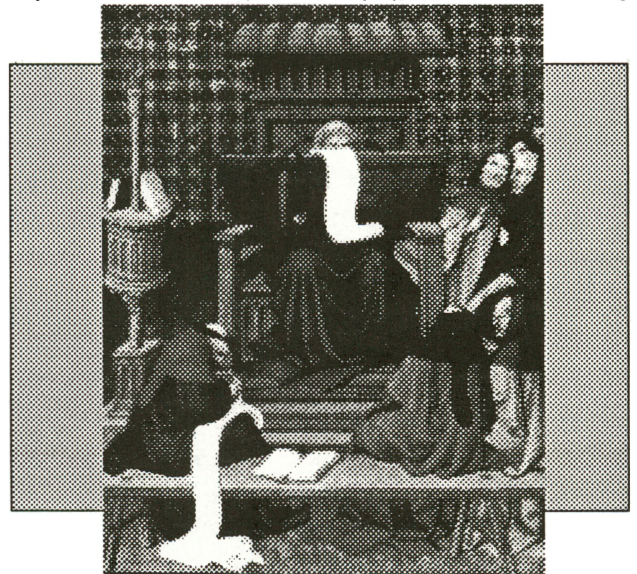
Sensitivity to lived experience is particularly evident in what are sometimes called “contextual” theologies—that is, in the works of liberation, feminist, and African-American theologians. While there are considerable differ-

ences and growing diversity among these movements, they share a common complaint: The dominant voices in the Christian tradition have ignored the concrete experience of specific groups of Christians, in particular the marginalized and the dispossessed. To hear the voices of authentic Christianity today, they argue, we need to attend precisely to those groups who are traditionally overlooked.¹³

Somewhat paradoxically, this turn to the particular also appears in the recent proliferation of systematic theologies¹⁴ and the burgeoning interest in certain distinctly Christian doctrines, like the Trinity, which for many years attracted little theological attention.¹⁵ No longer burdened with having to demonstrate the truth of their claims, theologians feel more free to explore the resources of the classical tradition. They are finding a wealth of meaning in time-honored Christian symbols and concepts.¹⁶

As a corollary development, people today tend to be more open to the distinctive visions that different religious communities provide. Instead of having to demonstrate that their beliefs and practices make sense in light of some generally accepted standard of rationality, religious communities can now find a hearing when they express themselves in

Adapted from “The Belles Heures de Jean, Duc de Berry,” by Jean Pol and Herman de Limbourg



forms that are most natural to their spirit and origins. In other words, it is acceptable today for theology to take the form of religious portraiture, rather than apologetics. Its principal task is to articulate a religious vision, not to establish certain cognitive claims.

These recent developments suggest several ways for us to “re-vision” Adventist theology in order to take advantage of this opening. In order to make our own turn to the particular, there are three interrelated changes we need to make.

One is to shift the primary focus of our concern from the structure of Adventist thought to the texture of Adventist experience. This means attending to the concrete Adventist community, to Adventist life as it is actually lived. It means Adventist theology will listen to all the stories that Adventists have to tell, from every continent and culture and every segment of society.

Shifting to the texture of Adventist experience also means focusing on something deeper than doctrinal formulations. Unless we tap into deeper levels of experience, our account of the community’s faith will be inadequate and unsatisfying. To communicate the essential spirit of a religious community, we must reach beyond its formal statements into the concrete life experience of its members. We must explore the deep-seated hopes and fears, the attractions and apprehensions, the intuited values and commitments that are always felt but seldom articulated. In other words, we must explore the passions that shape and drive the Adventist experience and impart its distinctive contours.

Because these passions lie for the most part

beneath the level of reflective consciousness,¹⁷ the demands of exploring them are great. (The best way, of course, is through imaginative literature, which portrays by intimation rather than direct analysis.) As I envision it, this stage of theological reflection calls for a description of the Adventist experience in the form of essays or personal sketches. What are the most enduring Adventist institutions? Who are the most influential figures in Adventist society? What are the defining moments in Adventist experience? Who belongs to the Pathfinder Club, the Dorcas Society, the church board? What happens in Sabbath school,

church school, summer camp, boarding academy? What is a Bible worker, evangelist, medical evangelist? What is it like to respond to a call during a week of prayer? to ingather during the dead of winter? to read *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* as a child?

If we give our primary attention to the passions of Adventism,

we will obviously have to depart from the traditional sequence of theological inquiry, and this is the second change involved in our turn to the particular. Systematic theologians typically pursue their work in three stages. They start with a discussion of theological method, which reviews the nature and purpose of Christian theology, and identifies the sources and criteria of theological claims. Next, they consider a series of standard doctrinal themes—revelation, God, humanity, salvation, church and last things. Finally, they “apply” their doctrinal reflections to matters of practical significance for the church, or for individual Christians.¹⁸

If we hope to present Adventism today in a

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way that brings to expression its true nature, its inner spirit, I suggest a three-stage project that reverses this traditional order. It would start with an account of the Adventist experience, then reflect on doctrinal issues, and conclude with a quest for overarching themes. So, it starts with the concrete and the specific—it gives priority to the particular—and then moves to more general characteristics, not the other way around.

The third change involved in our turn to the particular is especially hard for a systematic theologian to make, and that is to abandon the ideal of the perfect system, to give up the quest for tight, logical integration. Something always goes wrong when our highest priority is logical precision. Besides losing touch with the intricate textures of religious experience, we often slight the full range of concerns that characterize a religious community. Separated from these concerns, theology easily loses its bearings and takes on a life of its own. It soon becomes a theology for theologians.

Not a Narrow Tower, but A Spacious Temple

We can learn from Robert Nozick's comparison of two ways of doing philosophy:

Philosophers often seek to deduce their total view from a few basic principles, showing how all follows from their intuitively based axioms. The rest of the philosophy then [depends] upon these principles. One brick is piled upon another to produce a tall philosophical tower, one brick wide. When the bottom brick crumbles or is removed, all topples, burying even those insights that were independent of the starting point.

Instead of the tottering tower, I suggest that our model be the Parthenon. First we emplace our separate philosophical insights, column by column; afterward, we unite and unify them under an overarching roof of general principles or themes. When the philosophical structure

crumbles somewhat . . . something of interest and beauty remains . . .¹⁹

The theological "tower" is dominated by a concern for system. Its builders pursue the goals of logical precision and tight-knit integration. They also seek a foundation strong enough to support the entire structure of belief. In contrast, the objective of the theological "temple" is fidelity to the breadth and richness of a religious tradition. Its builders are primarily concerned with comprehensiveness and descriptive adequacy rather than logical precision or conceptual cohesion. Builders of the temple are willing to sacrifice something in the way of precision in order to achieve a richer, fuller account of the community's faith and life. Instead of trying to fit the pieces together in a tidy, logical package, their goal is to give attention to every important idea.

I suggest that we take the temple rather than the tower as our model for Adventist theology in the future. Instead of striving for a tight integration of all our doctrines, let us assemble our insights one by one, and then attempt some overarching unity as a final project. So, the unity comes last, if ever, rather than first.

This conception of theology will help us to avoid the liabilities of the tower model. When we force a single belief or concept to support the entire edifice of Christian faith, it depletes a community's resources. Other important topics will go unattended. Moreover, insisting that everything depends on a single theological idea often provokes theological controversy.

For example, certain Adventist scholars have emphasized a particular concept of biblical inspiration that cannot bear the theological weight they impose on it. Agreement on this one point of doctrine does not guarantee agreement on every other.²⁰ Nor is every doctrinal dispute ultimately traceable to divergent views of biblical inspiration.

Moreover, the insistence that only one, very

specific, concept of inspiration is acceptable to Adventists has had a negative effect on the life of the church. It has divided Adventist scholars, confused many of the laity, and sapped a good deal of the church's theological energy. Too much time has been expended in defending it. Embracing the temple model of theology would help us to avoid the narrowness of vision and the divisiveness and partisanship that the tower model engenders.

On the positive side, the temple model of theology encourages us to enjoy the full sweep of the theological landscape. By freeing us to view our beliefs in their independent grandeur—side by side, as it were—this model

invites us to explore a broad range of religious ideas. We need not be overly concerned about fitting them into a tightly unified system. Cohesiveness and symmetry are worthy theological goals, but the distinctive contours of each belief deserve attention, too.

In conclusion, the present theological scene presents us with a bewildering variety of developments and a number of disturbing trends. But among them are several encouraging signs and more than a few helpful resources. Adventists should take their cue from the growing interest in concrete religious experience and mold their theological reflections to the distinctive shape of Adventist thought and practice.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

2. Richard Lints makes these distinctions in "The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (Winter 1993), p. 659. For a helpful discussion of the postliberal-postmodern debate within current theological circles, see William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1989). The most influential expression of postliberalism is George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

3. George W. Stroup gives a convenient overview of this theological development in "Narrative Theology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1992), pp. 323-327. For a fuller account of the movement, see Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1981).

4. The most influential source for narrative theology is Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in 18th and 19th Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

5. A seminal article for narrative theology is Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971), p. 299-314.

6. Recall, for example, the role of the exodus narratives in Hebrew history and the place Homer's

epics occupied in Greek thought.

7. The works of James W. McClendon, Jr., and Stanley Hauerwas are often mentioned in this connection. William Bennett offers collections of stories for family reading as one way to remedy the widespread moral decay he sees in American culture.

8. No one emphasized the prevalence of symbols in Christianity more than Paul Tillich, who maintained that with a single important exception—that God is being-itself—all our statements about God are symbolic (*Systematic Theology* [3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963] Vol. 1, pp. 238-239).

9. "It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical conviction" (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979], pp. 12, 13). Rorty argues that for the past several centuries the central concerns of Western philosophy have been dominated by the notion that the human mind is essentially a mirror of nature.

10. "Most of the reasoning we do about ethical issues, most of the decisions we make, and most of our judgments about other people are based on metaphors" (Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], p. 61).

11. Among the many intriguing works on this topic are George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Mark Johnson, *The Body*

in the Mind: *The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

12. Sallie McFague is responsible for some of the best known of these endeavors: *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

13. The literature in these areas is rapidly growing, and becoming increasingly diverse. Important liberation theologians include Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Leonardo Boff. For an early overview of liberation thought, see Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978). For an early critique of liberation thinking, see Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979). Some prominent names among feminist theologians are Rosemary Radford Ruether (especially *Sexism and God-talk*), Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (especially *In Memory of Her*), Mary Daly, and Sally McFague. Others are Anne E. Carr and Rebecca S. Chopp. Schussler Fiorenza's recent writings exhibit a preoccupation with questions of theory. Well known black or Afro-American theologians are James H. Cone (*Black Theology and Black Power* and *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?*) and Cornel West (*Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* and *Race Matters*). Womanist theology expresses the concerns of black feminists.

14. Gabriel Fackre speaks rather dramatically of a recent "revival" in systematics as a "rebellion" against the "ad hoc advocates of the secular sixties" and the "latter-day proponents of postmodern ambiguity" (Rebecca S. Chopp and Gabriel Fackre, "Recent Works in Christian Systematic Theology," *Religious Studies*

Review [20 (January 1994), p. 7]).

15. So much has been written about the Trinity in recent years that people are now producing books to describe all the other books on the topic. See, for example, John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

16. Thomas Oden is noteworthy in this regard. He has rejected Protestant liberalism in favor of what he calls "paleo-orthodoxy."

17. In some ways, the emergence of "Christian philosophy" also reflects this turn to the particular. Even though they examine the intelligibility of various religious ideas, these Christian philosophers affirm the intellectual value of the particular vision expressed in classical philosophy of religion. They occupy the level of experience that Wayne A. Meeks identifies as "the moral landscape—the picture of reality that, just beneath the level of conscious reflection, shapes our moral intuitions" (*The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], p. 111).

18. This sequence of method-doctrine-application has several undesirable consequences. One is the tendency to give questions of method disproportionate attention. Another is the way it construes the relation between theology and the Christian life. The doctrine-ethics sequence assumes that thinking about faith is prior to living it and that correct thinking can produce authentic Christian existence. The facts of experience, however, support neither assumption. Attempts to deduce practical applications from theological formulas often conflict with the dynamics of living religion. As we have argued, the life of faith, both personal and communal, draws its strength from sources other than theological prescriptions.

19. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 3.

20. I am indebted to Sakae Kubo for this observation.