



Koranteng-Pipim: "Moderate Liberalism" Threatens Adventism

Reviewed by Norman H. Young

Samuel Koranteng-Pipim. *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle*. Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996. \$10.95 paper. 386 pages.

A number of developments that are occurring in parts of the Adventist Church dismay Samuel Koranteng-Pipim. He discerns a growing tolerance in the church towards theistic evolution, homosexuality, premarital sex, the use of alcohol, jewelry, feminism, contemporary religious music, pluralism, and unhealthy life-style (pp. 105-113; 118; 172-174). He is also concerned at the lack of numerical growth in the western divisions of the Adventist Church (pp. 200, 201). Koranteng-Pipim believes that the cause of this malaise is the loss of the Bible's central place in Adventist faith and practice. He attributes this loss to the increasing acceptance of

the "historical-critical method" of biblical interpretation. He sees the issue, then, as not over how to apply an agreed-upon method of interpretation, but over which of two conflicting methods to apply to Scripture (p. 77).

Koranteng-Pipim urges Adventist leaders and scholars to adhere to the denomination's traditional hermeneutic of taking the Bible in its plain, grammatical, and historical sense (pp. 78, 214-223). He seems not to have noticed that James Barr has made a good case for the view that it is historical criticism and not fundamentalism that takes the text as it reads (see, for example, Barr's *Fundamentalism* [London: SCM, 1977]). Koranteng-Pipim qualifies his plain-literal-sense approach by pointing out that care must be exercised in recognizing the Bible's use of symbolism, poetry, figures of speech, parables, allegory, metaphors, and hyperbole (pp. 264, 265). He rightly emphasizes the necessity of seeing a text in its own historical, literary, and cultural setting (I think he is being informed by critical scholarship in saying this) before applying it to our own culture. That is, one must establish what a text

meant before attempting to say what it means. All this is commendable.

The author makes a good case in defending the plain-sense method of interpretation when rightly employed against the charge of "proof-texting" (pp. 28-30). It is also a fair comment to criticize those who tolerate all sorts of theological aberrations, but who show no tolerance of those deemed to be "fundamentalists" (p. 220). However, his own approach is hardly irenic. Any position that does not coincide with his views is categorized as satanic delusion and part of the predicted "Alpha" apostasy of the last days (2 Timothy 4:3, 4 is treated as prophetic of the Adventist Church today, even though contextually it applied to Paul's day) (pp. 188-191, 326-329).

The book is profusely footnoted and the writer's scholarship is not limited to Adventist authors, though the less-conservative wing of evangelical scholarship is not well represented. His frequent appeals to the Reformers is probably not warranted, since Luther and Calvin's attitude to the text was not one with which Koranteng-Pipim would be comfortable. It is unfortunate that the

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author spends most of his time damning other Adventist writers, and misses the opportunity for constructive dialogue with others. Equally regrettable, given his expressed concern for centralizing Scripture, is the absence of a thorough canvassing of the biblical data. The book does not spend much time with the biblical texts.

He is confident that the sensitive interpreter will not err by over-literalizing the biblical literature. This may not be as straightforward as he seems to think. Take, for example, his own treatment of the biblical view of hell. Koranteng-Pipim opposes any view that sees the fires of hell metaphorically (pp. 160, 161), yet presumably he does not himself take in their plain, literal sense: the outer darkness, the worm that does not die, the eternal ascending smoke of their torment, the worshippers of the beast who have no rest by day or by night, the gnashing of teeth, or the everlasting punishment.

The author assumes that the Bible was without error at the time of its original writing. These now-lost originals were error free in all areas, whether theological, historical, or scientific. He allows that some minor distortions have crept into the Word during its scribal transmission, but these to his mind are few in number and mostly able to be eliminated by comparing the various extant manuscripts (pp. 227, 228). He probably downplays the ambiguity and importance of many of the textual variants in the manuscript tradition. This leads him to offer rational explanations for some celebrated but minor discrepancies in Scripture (pp. 279-304). One would like to have seen a discussion of some of the more profound issues such as the relationship between the Synoptic

Gospels and John.

Koranteng-Pipim accepts that human fallibility is present at each historical point of the biblical data, except the first. It is certainly true that the human propensity to error is involved in interpretation of the text, as it is in the analysis of manuscripts to establish the original Hebrew or Greek text, and likewise in the scribal transmission of the text. But Koranteng-Pipim doesn't recognize that fallible humanity is also involved in the original writing of the text. He believes that here the divine superintendence blocked all human imperfections.

The fact is, if an error-free text were so vital to our salvation, it would be just as important in transmitting the text without error as it was in writing the original text. The inerrant autographs are an entirely hypothetical construction based on no manuscript evidence or biblical text. One wonders—given the author's adherence to the inerrant autographs—how the author manages to maintain his commitment to Ellen White, where we possess the "autographs." The reason for the autographs hypothesis grows out of a misunderstanding of inspiration—as if God were an author in the normal sense of the term, and therefore, as God, incapable of making an error. It also points to a misunderstanding of the purpose of Scripture, as if its authority depended on some *total* divine control of the human writer.

The author is quite able to flex his own interpretation to demonstrate that the Bible does not approve of slavery or patriarchy "as morally legitimate practices for his people" (p. 304, note 12). Yet his commitment to the plain, literal meaning of the Bible prevents him

from seeing how immoral and contrary to the gospel is the tradition of choosing the ordained preachers of that gospel on the basis of gender (pp. 119-142). It does not require an adherence to the historical-critical method of interpretation to be offended by that.

Apparently on the basis of a comparison with Acts, he concludes that the tongues phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 14 is human language (p. 268). This is close to what is meant by the "proof-text method." The plain reading of the text and not the influence of the charismatic movement (as Koranteng-Pipim claims) is what leads most scholars today to see the experience in the Corinthian congregation as different from the phenomenon reported in Acts 2. This is the danger inherent in his interpretative principle number five—"the consistent principle." Differences in the biblical data are forced into a harmonious mold as one practices the admonition of Isaiah 28:10: "line upon line, here a little and there a little" (this text, in fact, has nothing to do with principles of hermeneutics, despite Koranteng-Pipim).

Receiving the Word is an earnest appeal to take the Word of God seriously. Koranteng-Pipim does not hesitate to criticize Adventist publishing for being more interested in profits than the Word, or Sabbath Bible classes for studying the lesson pamphlet rather than the Scriptures. Such an appeal to hear the Word is timely, but this book's approach is more polemical than winsome. It leaves us with a narrow choice: either a form of Adventist fundamentalism or a radical liberalism. In fact, the world of understanding the Bible, like most worlds, is more diverse than that.