



In the Spirit of Truth: Pipim Responds

An author and Andrews University doctoral student asks if Scriven is advocating a drift away from Adventism.

by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim

SOME SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS IN CERTAIN parts of the world are facing an identity crisis. The church's most distinctive theological doctrines are being challenged—from within. Uncertainty prevails over the church's unique identity and mission, and its worldwide organizational unity is being defied.

As a result of this identity crisis, many students in our institutions are confused. There exists a generation of church members, preachers, Bible teachers, leaders, writers, and publishers who are unsure of some of our historic beliefs. And in the areas where the situation prevails, vibrant church growth and church life have been adversely affected.

This startling development is well-known.¹

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Yet not everyone sees this sophisticated internal challenge to our Adventist belief and practice as a threat. The advocates of theological change see themselves as offering "bold" and "visionary" guidance to the Seventh-day Adventist Church by "refining" or "renewing" our beliefs and practices. In their estimation, their "adventure of truth" is veering the church off the course of "fundamentalism," an overused theological word often invoked against anyone refusing to embrace the spirit of the age.

The document "Embracing the Spirit" is a classic example of such a use of the "fundamentalist" epithet. Since this document has been circulated as an "Open Letter to Leaders of Adventism," we shall take a brief look at it in the next section.

"Embracing the Spirit": A Summary

Although the document "Embracing the Spirit: An Open Letter to Leaders of Adventism," reads like the private opinion of its

author, it was written and signed in its author's capacity as college president, and mailed out with the approval stamp of the college's development office.² Inasmuch as this "Open Letter" seeks to be treated as the official position of the college and the constituency represented by its development office, the document deserves a brief analysis and evaluation.

"Embracing the Spirit" expresses concern over what its author describes as Adventism's "drift toward hostility to truth," "antagonism to the adventure of truth," "stifling [of] the church's quest for deeper understanding,"³ and fearful accusation against "every prospect of substantive critique and revision of Adventism's speech about God."⁴

While Scriven applauds the efforts of North American thought leaders who are "offering energetic and visionary guidance to Seventh-day Adventist conferences and congregations" by "refining and renewing [Seventh-day Adventist] belief,"⁵ he denounces those persons who are standing in the way of this "renewal of understanding," arguing that their alleged "drift toward hostility to the adventure of truth . . . moves the church ever closer to religious fundamentalism."⁶

In so many words, he repeats his opinion that "the church's current drift . . . toward anathematizing the adventure of truth and nullifying the work of the Spirit"⁷ is evidence that "the church is drifting in the fundamentalist direction." By fundamentalism, he indicates three tendencies: (1) a tendency toward a flat, mechanical reading of the Bible; (2) a tendency toward rigidity and arrogance with regard to customary understanding; and (3) a tendency toward reactive, inward-looking separatism.⁸

"Embracing the Spirit" intimates that Adventism's alleged drift toward fundamentalism is a grave situation that "admits of one protection only: the embrace of the Holy Spirit."⁹ For our author, "embracing the Spirit" means that while the church has "the right and obligation

to require them [those charged with intellectual leadership] in our colleges and universities to be faithful and effective in that leadership," we must also expect them "to nudge us toward the insights, sometimes hard to bear, that Jesus said would come."¹⁰

When our scholar writes about "insights, sometimes hard to bear," he explains that through the Spirit's guiding presence, Christians would be led "in ways unforeseen by the disciples [of Christ]." He asserts: "The unmistakable implication is that new insight, insight yet to enter Christian minds, would sometimes entail a difficult departure from the customary. It would be insight the disciples themselves were not ready, at that moment, to bear."¹¹ According to our Adventist scholar, such an openness to the Spirit will rule out "the narrow, unimaginative thinking that develops from the three tendencies of fundamentalism."¹²

Interestingly, our author suggests that *Receiving the Word*, my most recent work challenging liberal reinterpretations of traditional Adventist beliefs and practices, is partly responsible for generating "the energy" or a "rallying point for those who (effectively, if not deliberately) are stifling the adventure of truth within Adventism."¹³ One can understand our scholar's exasperation over the book's "larger-than-expected readership,"¹⁴ given the fact that *Receiving the Word* has been warmly embraced by very large numbers of Bible-believing Adventists around the world—church members, pastors, students, scholars, and leaders.¹⁵

Though the author of "Embracing the Spirit" is careful to state that those he disagrees with—styled, "persons with the outlook and attitude expressed in Koranteng-Pipim's writings"¹⁶—are not "pure fundamentalists," he asserts: "Still, to the degree that the church is drifting in the fundamentalist direction, he [the author of *Receiving the Word*] is abetting the drift, and so are those who endorse his

writing.”¹⁷

Perceptive readers of the above comment will readily observe that our scholar is opposed, primarily, to the theological direction of the Adventist Church, which he characterizes as “fundamentalist.” His criticism of *Receiving the Word*, and hence of those persons who share the outlook expressed in this work, stems from the fact that the book is encouraging readers to keep moving in the direction of the church’s beliefs, not in the adventurous paths being suggested by the self-styled “energetic visionaries.”

Those who fail to recognize this overriding concern of the writer of “Embracing the Spirit” may be missing the primary thrust of his “Open Letter to the Leaders of Adventism.” Our author has a complaint against the theological direction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is why he purposes with all his “heart and mind” to “oppose the effort of a few in our circle to align the rudder of the church with the direction of the drift.”¹⁸ He is distressed by the writings of the author of *Receiving the Word* mainly because the latter “illustrates and reinforces the church’s current drift.”¹⁹

A Brief Evaluation

Our scholar must be commended for his stated commitment to a “full-hearted openness to the adventure of truth”²⁰—even if he is silent on what that truth is or on whether each of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventism is to be bracketed within that truth.

He is also to be lauded for emphasizing an “embrace of the Spirit”—though he fails to clearly specify whether the “Spirit” he speaks about is the Spirit of him who inspired the written Word to be the norm of all beliefs and practices (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21), or whether it is another “Spirit” which is none other than the spirit of our age. Such a clarification would also have been in order, espe-

cially since there are presently some within our ranks who are jumping on the wings of the “Third Wave of the Holy Spirit” (i.e., the contemporary charismatic movement), in their flight from the biblical truths and practices upheld by Seventh-day Adventists.

He must also be complimented for recognizing that “the Bible story ascends toward Jesus, who is the final ‘Word’ of God, and the final authority for thought and life”²¹—despite the fact that he fails to note that we cannot recognize the true Jesus Christ apart from the written Word (John 5:39). Such an emphasis would have been in order to distance our scholar’s views from Barthianism or neo-orthodoxy, a mistaken theological view that jettisons the authority of the Bible for some undefined or nebulous concept called “the final authority of Jesus Christ.”

The author of “Embracing the Spirit” also deserves our admiration for asserting the right of the church to “hire teachers and researchers who, in their various ways, assist in promoting and refining that [the church’s distinctive] vision”—even if he fails to state what recourse is available to the church when our institutional thought leaders teach, preach, or publish works that deny or fail to be “partisan to the mission implicit in the church’s calling as the Remnant.”²²

Again, our scholar must be applauded for accurately describing the “listlessness,” “stunted faith,” and the “alarming tedium (and non-participation) associated with many Sabbath schools of North America and other strongholds of Adventism”²³—even though he misdiagnoses the cause as “fundamentalism,” and follows it up with a wrong prescription, namely, an “embrace of the Spirit,” including a “substantive critique and revision of Adventism’s speech about God.”²⁴ He also fails to give evidence that his prescription will produce genuine church growth, faithfulness to God’s written words, and vitality in “the church’s older strongholds [which are] suffering from

flat or declining enthusiasm and faithfulness.”²⁵

Finally, the author of “Embracing the Spirit” deserves our appreciation for calling attention to the “destructive tendencies of fundamentalism”—though he fails to justify his claims to have discovered fundamentalism in *Receiving the Word*.

But with all due respect, I beg to differ with Scriven’s assessment of developments within contemporary Adventism, with his debatable analysis and evaluation of a work that defends the church’s beliefs and practices, and with his puzzling silence on crucial issues on biblical authority and biblical truth.

There may be a place for denouncing a book for abetting the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s alleged “fundamentalist” drift. But negative criticisms that fail to demonstrate objectively that the position upheld in *Receiving the Word* is unbiblical or out of harmony with traditional Adventist belief does not deserve serious attention nor serve the cause of truth—however loudly one invokes the emotional catch phrase of “fundamentalism.”

Therefore, instead of focusing on the “straw man” erected by the author of “Embracing the Spirit,” I will simply state the facts and proceed to identify some unanswered questions in our scholar’s work. In this way, I hope to correct our scholar’s diagnosis of, and prescription for, the church’s theological condition.

The book *Receiving the Word* argues that some within our ranks have been infected by the virus of contemporary higher criticism (the historical-critical method). The symptoms of this infection can be seen by all who care

about the health of the body of Christ: It has created theological uncertainty among our people, and paralyzed the growth and vitality of the church in the areas where the product of higher criticism has been embraced. Since this new approach to Scripture denies the full inspiration, trustworthiness, internal harmony, and sole authority of the Bible, *Receiving the Word* challenges the method as unbiblical and incompatible with Seventh-day Adventist beliefs.²⁶

But while opposed to contemporary higher criticism, *Receiving the Word* does not seek to promote the three tendencies of our scholar’s dreaded “fundamentalism.” Contrary to the subtle insinuations in “Embracing the Spirit,”

we do not shy away from intellectual pursuits nor seek to create “congregations of poorly educated members who win converts, it is true, but have great difficulty passing their vision to succeeding generations and make little if any transformative difference in their surrounding cultures.”²⁷

Besides, chapters 9 and 10 of *Receiving the Word* dismiss any intimation that we argue for a mechanical or literalistic reading of the Bible. Moreover, our call for upholding the ideals of God’s endtime “Remnant” does not encourage the kind of “inward-looking separatism” alluded to by our scholar.²⁸

The Bible-believing Adventism that is advocated in *Receiving the Word*, and embraced by an overwhelming majority of Seventh-day Adventists around the world, is not afraid to investigate, advance in, or clarify biblical truth. But its quest for biblical truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, compels it to challenge the kind of unbiblical thinking that for some has become the hallmark of scholarly

The author of “Embracing the Spirit” encourages a “substantial critique and revision of Adventist theology.” Is this actually a clamor for the abandonment of some of our biblically established doctrines and practices?

enlightenment and spiritual insight.

The Adventism encouraged in *Receiving the Word* is a vibrant Christian movement that rejoices that Jesus Christ died for our sins in fulfillment of Bible prophecy, and has called us to walk in his steps through a faithful, obedient commitment to him. This kind of Adventism does not pander to the spirit of our age while believing or congratulating itself that it is transforming its ambient culture or renewing the beliefs of the church.

Our college administrator is a scholar who claims to write “neither lightly nor recklessly.”²⁹ Hence his “Embracing the Spirit” should not be dismissed for being more noteworthy for its breadth than for its depth. He indicates that he has “considered the subject matter” and written his thoughts “with all the care” that he can muster.³⁰ Thus, he should not be faulted for invoking the “fundamentalist” epithet as a decoy for diverting attention from the key issues raised in my recent book.³¹ Still, in all fairness, it must be stated that his “Embracing the Spirit” can only win the sympathy of those who have already bought into the critical heterodoxy challenged in *Receiving the Word*.

Some Unanswered Questions

One cannot help but notice that, in “Embracing the Spirit,” there is a deafening silence regarding major questions of biblical truth. A few examples will illustrate our observation.

Our college administrator’s “Open Letter to Leaders of Adventism” speaks of “adventure to truth.” But he is vague on whether that “adventure” has a destination—i.e., a body of beliefs that may be accepted as “the truth.” One is left wondering if the emphasis on “adventure of truth” is not an euphemism for parrying with the truth.

He encourages the “refining,” “renewing,” and “substantive critique and revision” of

Adventist theology. However, he does not specify which of our Fundamental Beliefs needs this kind of modification. Is it possible that the call for a change in Adventist theology is actually a clamor for the abandonment of some of our biblically established doctrines and practices?

The author of “Embracing the Spirit” sees the Adventist Church “drifting” in the direction of fundamentalism. Yet he fails to notice that his observation of the church comes from the vantage point of one who is riding a fast train of change called the “adventure of truth.” Could it be that those riding this speeding train are rather the ones who are “drifting” away from Adventism toward an unknown destination?

He speaks about “embracing the Spirit.” Yet he is mute over whether that Spirit will ever contradict the Spirit who inspired the written Word to be the test of all spirits. One is left in a quandary over whether the call to “embrace the Spirit” is not a proposal for a paradigm shift so that the “People of the Book” will now see themselves as “the People of the Spirit”—as if the Holy Spirit ever quarrels with his inspired book.

Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventists have always insisted: “The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested” (*The Great Controversy*, p. vii). “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20, KJV; cf. Galatians 1:8, 9).

Finally, our scholar and college administrator acknowledges the church’s “right and obligation” to require our thought leaders to be totally committed to the message and mission of the church.³² Yet when the advocates of theological change are called upon to give account of their stewardship, he characterizes it as an eagerness to “track down and

penalize every effort at constructive innovation."³³ Should we not expect those who take upon themselves the responsibility of a "substantive critique and revision of Adventism's speech about God"³⁴ to (a) show why the church's beliefs and practices are unscriptural, and (b) offer solid biblical basis for their new "insights" or "adventure of truth"?

The author of "Embracing the Spirit" is silent on the above questions. More significantly, he avoids dealing with the hermeneutical issues addressed in my *Receiving the Word*—issues that lie at the heart of Adventism's theological

debates. Space constraints will not allow me to present in this edited essay the controverted issues on biblical inspiration and interpretation.

However, in my 50-page booklet response to Dr. Scriven's "Open Letter"—a response from which this current article is excerpted—I have identified some key questions for him to address (see footnote 1 for details). I trust that our scholar, who speaks so eloquently and admirably of the "adventure of truth," and all others who share his attempt at "refining and renewing" Adventist belief will now, in the spirit of truth, offer candid answers.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For example, the president of the General Conference stated this concern in 1995: "In many of the more developed and sophisticated areas of the world, I sense that an increasingly secular value system is negatively impacting many of our members. I sense a growing uncertainty about why we exist as a church and what our mission is" (Robert S. Folkenberg, "When Culture Doesn't Count," *Ministry* [December 1995], p. 7). A brief documentation, detailing the underlying causes, of this identity crisis may be found in chapters 4 to 6 of my *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996), pp. 75-206. To read reviews of and excerpts from *Receiving the Word*, see the World Wide Web page at <http://ourworld.compu-serve.com/homepages/pipim>. In the U.S.A., this 368-page book is available at the various Adventist Book Centers. You may also send prepaid orders (\$10.95, plus \$3.00 shipping and handling in the U.S.A.) to: Berean Books, P. O. Box 195, Berrien Springs, MI 49103, U.S.A.; Fax: 616/471-4305; e-mail 105323.612@compuserve.com; CompuServe 105323,612. Because of space constraints, this essay has been heavily edited from *In the Spirit of Truth*, a 50-page booklet responding to Dr. Scriven's "Embracing the Spirit." You may order your copy of *In the Spirit of Truth* by sending \$3.50 to the author at the above address.

2. Charles Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit: An Open Letter to the Leaders of Adventism" (Takoma Park, Md.: Columbia Union College, 1997). Dr. Charles Scriven is the president of Columbia Union College, a Seventh-day Adventist institution in Takoma Park, Maryland.

3. Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit" (3:3, 4). Note that figures in parentheses show the page numbers and the full paragraphs in which the quotations are found. Thus, (3:3, 4) refers to page 3, paragraphs 3 and 4.

4. Ibid. (12:2).

5. Ibid. (3:4; 4:3).

6. Ibid. (5:1).

7. Ibid. (4:1).

8. Ibid. (6:3).

9. Ibid. (5:2-8:2).

10. Ibid. (5:1); cf. (6:1); (8:3-10:2).

11. Ibid. (12:3-13:3).

12. Ibid. (10:1). As examples of the new insights that entail a "difficult departure from the customary," our author continues: "Down the centuries, minds indeed would change in ways unforeseen by the disciples: Christians would come to favor complete abolition of slavery; they would defend liberty over despotism; they would further weigh, and further support equal rights and opportunity for women" (ibid., 10:1). In making this assertion, our Adventist scholar seems to be unaware of the fact that the Bible has never supported the practices of slavery, despotism, and denial of women's equal rights, and that many of the people who championed the cause of the abolition of slavery, defense of liberty over despotism, and the support of equal rights and opportunity for women, did so on the basis of *truth already revealed in Scripture*. Readers will benefit from the following works: John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, Hants.: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984), pp. 2-28, 45-61; Theodore D. Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery: Or, An Inquiry Into the Genius of the Mosaic System, and the Teachings of the Old Testament on the Subject of Human Rights* (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1864); cf. Dale B. Martin, *Slavery As Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Guenther Haas, "Patriarchy as An Evil That God Tolerated: Analysis and Implications for the Authority of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangeli-*

cal Theological Society (September 1995), pp. 321-326; George W. Knight III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women. New Testament Teaching* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 7-15.

13. Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit" (14:2).
14. Ibid. (4:1-2); cf. 8:2
15. Ibid. (4:1).
16. Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word*.
17. Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit" (4:2).
18. Ibid. (6:3).
19. Ibid. (3:3).
20. Ibid. (4:1)
21. Ibid. (16:2)
22. Ibid. (7:0).
23. Ibid. (12:3-13:1).
24. Ibid. (11:3).
25. Ibid. (12:2).
26. Ibid. (5:2).
27. An excellent exposition of the Seventh-day Adventist position on the inspiration, trustworthiness, unity, and authority of Scripture is found in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministe-

rial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), pp. 5-15. This work, produced by 194 thought leaders around the world, is to be received "as representative of . . . [what] Seventh-day Adventists around the globe cherish and proclaim," and as furnishing "reliable information on the beliefs of our [Seventh-day Adventist] church" (ibid., pp. iv, v). For the general Seventh-day Adventist understanding of biblical interpretation, see "Methods of Bible Study," *Adventist Review* (January 22, 1987), pp. 18-20, reproduced as Appendix C in *Receiving the Word*, pp. 355-362. "Methods of Bible Study" rejects as "unacceptable to Adventists" "even a modified use" of the historical-critical method.

28. Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit" (5:3).
29. Ibid. (6:4-8:2).
30. Ibid. (3:3).
31. Ibid. (2:1).
32. These key issues have been summarized in section 4 of *In the Spirit of Truth* as a set of 10 questions on inspiration and interpretation.
33. Scriven, "Embracing the Spirit" (12:3-13:1).
34. Ibid. (7:1).