

The Bible and the Church

By John C. Brunt

Preface for Publication

The following paper was presented as the presidential address at the November 1997 meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies. I have chosen to resist the temptation to edit this paper either to bring it up to date or to transform it from an oral presentation to a written essay. Because it was presented at a time when we at Walla Walla College were in the middle of a tense situation, I prefer to leave it as an accurate transcript of what I said on that occasion.

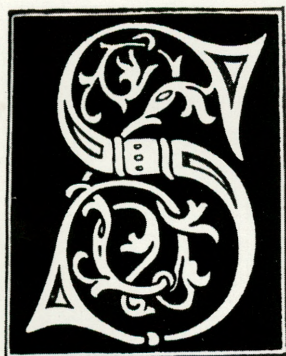
Fortunately, by God's grace, the heat of battle has given way to a wonderful process of healing. In December 1997 the commission set up by the Walla Walla College board presented its report to the full board. This balanced report examined at least a half dozen specific rumors that had circulated about the school of theology and exonerated the school in each case. It also spoke in a broad way to the theological situation within Adventism and offered constructive criticism both to the college and to its critics.

The board submitted the report to the college for its response. In March 1998, the college presented a response prepared by a committee that included faculty from both theology and other disciplines, a staff member, a student, and was chaired by Stephen Payne, then vice-president for admissions and marketing. The board was visibly moved by the tone of the report. Several members said they believed it showed the character of Walla Walla College as a place of spiritual and denominational commitment. The board accepted it without modification, and the college is currently implementing its 37 recommendations for making its commitment more intentional and visible.

In light of the process of healing, this paper would be somewhat different if it had been written today. In places the tone would be more gentle, although I stand by the basic content and concepts. I hope that its publication now will neither renew the heat of battle nor interfere with the process of healing. Rather, I hope these ideas may help us avoid future battlefields.

The Bible and the Church

The Adventist Society for Religious Studies, November 1997



ome papers are born, nurtured, and grow in the library, others on the battlefield. I personally prefer those that come from the library. They fit my left-brained approach to life. In the past year, however, I must admit I have spent more time on the battlefield than in libraries.

In case you live in another universe, those of us who teach theology at Walla Walla College have been under attack. My colleagues and I have spent two days with denominational administrators listening to

charges, many based on rumor, others on outright falsehoods, and a few that probably represent legitimately different perspectives on the task of religion teaching. I have spent two and a half hours with a special board subcommittee (a wonderfully friendly and dedicated group for the most part) set up to investigate the school of theology, answering questions going back to what a pastor supposedly overheard me say to a colleague in the hall when he was a student in the seventies. I fear this paper reveals its battlefield provenance.

I would like tonight to introduce the weekend by offering a prolegomena to our topic for this conference, biblical passages and resources for the renewing of Adventism. This topic implies several things. First it implies that the church needs renewing. That is hard to debate. That the Anglo church in America is not growing is a cause of concern to everyone. I recently visited a large Western city where I used to pastor. I attended a church that had been formed by the merging of three former congregations, yet it was smaller than any of the former three had been when I was there. But size is hardly the major concern. Adventists from all ends of the spectrum recognize an identity crisis.

The topic also implies, however, that the church is renewable. Optimism is implicit in it. And finally, the topic suggests that Scripture is a source from which we must legitimately expect renewal to come. I agree with all the implications.

It seems to me, however, that the Bible has not fared well in the church in recent times. Several years ago at one of these sessions in Anaheim, I pled that Adventist Bible teachers not only address their scholarly concerns, but also work to make the Bible interesting, accessible, and relevant to the church. I could hardly have dreamed how beautifully this wish would be realized. George Knight envisioned and initiated the most significant event for the Bible in the Adventist church in four decades since the publication of the *SDA Bible Commentary*. In the *Bible Amplifier* series Adventists make Scripture come alive in an interesting, readable way that leads the reader into the actual study of the Bible. Jon Dybdahl's *Exodus*, George's *Matthew*, and John Pauliens' *John* have all been a blessing to me. Yet, by and large, these books sit on inventory shelves and the whole project has been canceled because

Adventists don't seem to be buying serious Bible study, even when wrapped in such an interesting, readable, attractive package.

On the other hand, church members seem to have flocked to buy a book that doesn't help them understand the content of the Bible, but rather talks about the Bible and the methodology the author thinks should be used in its study. With an almost tabloid-like sense of conspiratorial distrust (and an often tabloid-like sense of accuracy and fairness as well) the author misrepresents most of the Adventists who have attempted to write about what the Bible says for our day. And this sells. In fact, it sells well.

Given the popularity of *Receiving the Word*¹ and the demise of the *Bible Amplifier* series, is there much hope that the Bible can be a source of renewal for the church?

I wish to propose three prerequisites to the Bible being a source of renewal for the church. I believe that if the Bible is to renew our community, we must first value the reason that God has given us to understand the Word, we must also value the diversity of both the Bible and the members of the body of Christ, and we must see the ethical and moral dimensions of Scripture as an integral part of its message. Let me speak to each of these three convictions.

Reason and the Life of the Mind

Then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

—Luke 24:45

Before the ascension, Jesus opened the disciples' minds so they could understand Scripture. Actually, Jesus had been opening their minds the whole time He had been with them. He did it by telling them parables and challenging them with new metaphors. He did it by asking them questions and waiting for answers.

The mind, with its ability to reason, is the gift God has given to humans to enable them to live in God's image and understand God's Word and will. Coyotes, cucumbers and caterpillars don't study Scripture. Only humans with the ability to reason can do that.

The Bible can only fare well in a church where reason is valued and the life of the mind is appreciated. Yes, reason is fallible and minds, without the aid of God's Spirit, can plot demonic actions. But without reason, there can be no understanding of Scripture. It is through reason, aided by God's Spirit, that we understand the meaning of Scripture that God has for us. As Ellen White has said:

It is God's purpose that the kingly power of sanctified reason, controlled by divine grace, shall bear sway in the lives of human beings.²

Yet reason is under attack from both the right and the left today and from both inside and outside the church. On the left there are those who question the very concept of meaning in texts or in human discourse. They argue that there are only social constructions of reality and of meaning. No text has meaning in itself. There are merely different readings of texts by different communities with no basis for placing any one above another. As one paper I heard a few years ago at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings (the primary biblical studies of Bible teachers from all denominations and religions), all texts are like the stars. There are infinite ways we might organize them into constellations, and various societies have organized them differently. In the same way, various communities read texts and impose meaning on them, but there is no meaning apart from those social constructions, just as there are no constellations in the stars until we impose them on the heavens.

Certainly there is more than an element of truth in all this. We all know how much of our own prejudice we impose on any text or event. Our family lived in Atlanta for three years when our children were in elementary school. On Sabbath afternoons we would often go to one of two mountains (although to call them such is laughable by Western standards), Stone Mountain on the east of the city and Kennesaw Mountain on the west. The former is a memorial sponsored by the State of Georgia. The latter is operated by the U.S. government. They both memorialize the same war, but even after almost a century and a half, a visitor can hardly tell that they have to do with the same events. Even the name of the primary event is different. The U.S. memorial is about the Civil War, but you will never find those words at Stone Moun-

tain. There it is the War Between the States. On the west of town one hears about General Sherman, the brilliant military strategist, while on the east the emphasis is on how General Sherman needlessly raped, pillaged, and burned his way across Georgia. Humans always bring something to every event and text that they study.

To conclude from this, however, that we must give up the attempt to find a consistent message in a text is a needless depreciation of the gift of reason that God has given us. We can never leave all our prejudices behind, but with the aid of the Spirit we can hear the gospel in God's Word, *if* the reason that God has given us to help us overcome our prejudices is valued. This same reason enables us to carry on the work of exegesis, which is nothing more than asking questions of the text in a disciplined way to help us find a message in Scripture that transcends what we bring to the text, by seeing it within the light of its historical and literary context. Too much postmodern thought, with all its important insights, depreciates the role of reason and thus our ability to understand Scripture, hear God's message in it, and find renewal.

On the other hand, reason is also attacked from the right. Instead of being understood as a tool to help us understand God's revelation in Scripture and other sources, reason is contrasted with revelation. All thinking is suspect. As one person told me recently, "I'm so glad that when I went to college, my teachers didn't raise any questions or try to make me think. They simply indoctrinated me into the Adventist message so that I know what I believe." Does he really, or does he only know what his teachers believed? When I heard this I couldn't help but think of a statement from the *Testimonies*:

Teachers should lead students to think, and clearly to understand the truth for themselves. It is not enough for the teacher to explain or for the student to believe; inquiry must be awakened, and the student must be drawn out to state the truth in his own language, thus making it evident that he sees its force and makes the application.³

This is a process of studying Scripture that necessitates reason. It can only take place where there is a positive regard for the mind as God's gift. A church that is afraid to awaken inquiry cannot be renewed by Scripture. Only a healthy appreciation for the mind can liberate us to feel comfortable with

the spirit of inquiry. If we are to be renewed by Scripture, we must rekindle the kind of positive regard for reason that made Ellen White call for thinkers, not reflectors of the thoughts of others.

One final caveat about reason: We should think of it holistically, not as intellectualization alone. Bible study includes reason, but involves the whole person. Notice what Ellen White says as she fleshes out what "sanctified reason" means for the study of Scripture:

With your Bibles open before you, consult sanctified reason and a good conscience. Your heart must be moved, your soul touched, your reason and intellect awakened by the Spirit of God; the holy principles revealed in His word will give light to the soul.⁴

Unity in Diversity

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

—Romans 14:5, NRSV.

With these words, Paul tells the Romans that they don't have to agree on every detail of practice, but he does go on to tell them they do have to welcome one another and refrain from judging or scorning those who hold a different perspective.

Diversity in the church and in the Bible has been a problem from the beginning of Christianity. In fact, diversity was such an embarrassment that many in the early church had problems with the existence of more than one Gospel to tell the story of Jesus.

Now clearly the early church didn't accept every story of Jesus. There were gospels that the church did not believe gave authentic voice to the words and deeds of Jesus. Christian identity will always demand that there are limits to diversity. It is possible to preach a different gospel that is not truly Christian, as Paul warned the Galatians in the first chapter of his letter to them. But God did allow even such a vital body of information as the story of Jesus to come to us in four different versions which, if we are honest, we must acknowledge have not only different details at times, but also different perspectives.

What are we to make of this? As I said a moment ago, this was a problem for some church members. Marcion, who was declared a heretic by the church at Rome around the middle of the

second century accepted only Luke. Tatian tried to weave all four Gospels into one in his *Diatessaron*. The problem of four Gospels became such an issue that Irenaeus felt compelled to argue that there should be precisely four Gospels. With logic that will hardly be convincing to any of us, he argued:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the 'pillar and ground' of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.⁵

Far more convincing is Ellen White's reasoning, which gives a very different reason for the existence of four Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament. She says:

"Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Saviour? Why could not one of the disciples have written a complete record, and thus have given us a connected account of Christ's early life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all the writers mention them? It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain Scripture truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others."⁶

The notion that the minds of human beings can legitimately differ is not popular today in some circles. "Pluralism" has become the four-letter word of Adventism. But the church will never again be the monolithic, homogenized group of people who all look and act alike as I perceived it when growing up in the 50s. Of course, it wasn't really that monolithic then; we simply didn't have the global view that let us see beyond our own fairly circumscribed world. Diversity wasn't an issue because most of us could live our lives with people like us. In such an environment it was easy to ignore the diversity of Scripture.

What Ellen White does is transform the *problem* of diversity in Scripture into the *advantage* of diversity in Scripture. The diversity of Scripture makes God's message available to a diverse

world with diverse minds. In a church that is as diverse as ours, this is good news, if we will accept it and appropriate it.

For example, in the rich diversity of Scripture there are multiple perspectives on the meaning of the atonement. Each of these adds something important to our understanding of this mystery that will engage our minds for eternity. Yet the tendency today is to make allegiance to one of these biblical models over the others a litmus test for orthodoxy. In fact, legitimate biblical perspectives are virtually demonized in order to uphold the one, supposedly orthodox perspective. We have not learned Ellen White's lesson. The minds of humans differ. The perspectives of biblical writers on the atonement also differ in order to appeal to different minds. This is an *advantage*, something we should appreciate. How can a diverse church be renewed by Scripture if we don't appreciate this profound truth?

Scripture can only renew us today if we are willing to accept its diversity and ours. Yes, this diversity will always be a diversity within limits, and no, it will never be neat and easy to determine the precise lines of those limits. But if we try to homogenize the Bible into one mold and squeeze all of us into that same mold, we will cut off many opportunities for the Bible to challenge even our most cherished traditions and call us to new plateaus of theological understanding and ethical responsibility.

Even in Scripture, truth often emerges from tensions, and recognizing those tensions creates balance. Such recognition allows the Bible to challenge us from opposite directions at different times when we have strayed too far in either direction.

Ethics and Mutual Responsibility

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

—Galatians 5:14, NRSV

I am grateful for the statement of 27 fundamental beliefs voted at the 1980 General Conference at Dallas. I believe they set forward the basics of Adventism with some beauty of language that actually made it through the process

of committee editing and amendments from the floor. They certainly offer many improvements over the previous statements of belief in Adventism. I am also grateful for the preface to the statement, which puts the whole set of beliefs into a context that avoids creedalism.

Although I believe and appreciate this statement, I am grateful that my only creed is the Bible, for it contains much more than statements of beliefs. As important as they are, there is more to Christian life than statements of belief. Christian life involves building up a community of believers, caring about one another, and treating each other with respect.

I worry that the Bible cannot renew us as it should because we focus so much on its theoretical formulations, or more precisely on the doctrinal formulations drawn from it, that we forget the weightier matters of the law, and in the name of doctrinal purity ignore the very foundations of the gospel. Perhaps we need at least a dose of Karl Barth's famous dictum that dogmatics is ethics.⁷

I hesitate to tell this story for I know that the very telling may contribute to the polarization I abhor, but I want to illustrate what I'm talking about. When the Walla Walla religion teachers met with the conference and union leaders to hear charges against us, we were told (without any details) that there were elements in our dissertations that proved we were not truly Adventists. A few days later we heard that several Adventist scholars and teachers from other parts of the country had had a tele-conference with our Northwest administrators. These scholars and teachers had presumably been asked to review our dissertations and other writings in order to find items that might incriminate us and then share them with the administrators. From things that some of the administrators said it became obvious that statements had been taken out of context and misrepresented.

Rumors do get out, and when I heard about this I decided to call one of those who, according to rumor, was involved in this teleconference, and see if it was true. I had known this teacher since elementary school and felt comfortable talking with him. When I called and asked him about it, there was a very long silence on the other end of the telephone and then I heard, "There has been a breach of ethics here, because we were promised that no one would ever know."

Indeed there was a breach of ethics, but it was not that the secret got out of the bag. It was that colleagues, in defiance of Matthew 18, were willing to speak in damaging ways about other colleagues behind their backs without ever speaking to them directly. The quest for doctrinal purity does not negate the Bible's message of ethical responsibility to one another.

As I said, Scripture is neither a series of doctrinal statements nor merely a source for finding doctrinal statements. Its holistic message addresses our life together as fellow believers. The rich blend of histories, stories, poems, proverbs, letters, visions, and Gospels addresses and challenges every aspect of our lives. The opportunities for renewal will increase as we open ourselves to all of this rich diversity. And as we do, it will become apparent that God is not only concerned with what we believe, but also with how we live together in mutual care and respect for each other. It is here that we are most in need of renewal.

Conclusion

I have spoken boldly about some prerequisites that I believe are necessary if we are to open ourselves for biblical renewal. But we must never get the idea that we own the Bible and will decide how and whom it should renew. The Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS) does not own the Bible, and neither does the Adventist Theological Society (ATS.) Church administrators do not own the Bible, but neither do church religion teachers. The Bible is God's word in which God addresses us and challenges us all. We must ask the Spirit to open us to be renewed by God's message.

After all, what is the church? It is not a corporate headquarters building on Old Columbia Pike in Silver Spring. It is not a building at all. It is not a college or university. It is people who are committed to Jesus Christ and become part of his body. We cannot renew the church out there, we can only renew ourselves as part of the body and pray that we will then be God's channels for further renewal.

In trying times we are tempted not only to lose heart, but also to point the finger at those who oppose us, forgetting that we have responsibilities, too. Once when David Ben-Gurion was prime minister of Israel, he was reviewing a group of

new soldiers. He stopped and asked one of them, "When will there be peace?" The recruit replied, "I don't know, it depends on the Arabs." Ben-Gurion added, "And on us."

I am grateful that long before this current battlefield experience, God sent a witness and mentor who has given me courage and perspective. I refer to Sakae Kubo, who taught me at the seminary in the 60s and with whom I had the privilege of working at Walla Walla in the late 70s and early 80s.

Once I asked him how he had kept his courage and loyalty through the years of exile when he was not allowed to teach. He told me that he had endured because he loved the church. I hope we are all here because we love the church. I think of Philip Yancey's words about his own experience: "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else."⁸

This conference focuses on biblical resources for renewing the church that we love. It is my prayer that this conference will allow us opportunity to open God's Word, and with sanctified reason and good conscience, find our hearts moved and our souls touched, so that *we* may be renewed, and through our renewal, new life may flow to the church that we love.

Notes and References

1. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, MI: Berean Books, 1996).
2. Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, 70.
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 6:154.
4. Ellen G. White, "Seek First the Kingdom of God," *Review and Herald* vol. 70, no. 6, (2-7-1893), 81-82.
5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (AH) 3:preface, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1:414.
6. Ellen G. White *Counsels to Teachers*, 432.
7. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (*Church Dogmatics* 1:2), Trans. by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956), 782-796.
8. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 16.

John Brunt serves as vice president for academic administration and professor of Biblical studies at Walla Walla College. He has taught at the college since 1971. He holds a Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Emory University.