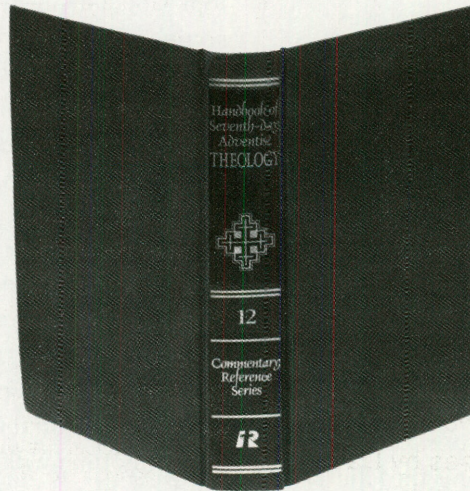


Theology as Topical Bible Study



Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology,
Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12. Hagerstown, Md.:
Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000; 1,009 pages.

Reviewed by Richard Rice

Volume 12 of the “Commentary Reference Series” is now ready to take its place on Adventist bookshelves, alongside the *Adventist Bible Commentary*, *Bible Dictionary*, *Sourcebook*, and *Encyclopedia*. The *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* appeared just in time for the 2000 General Conference in Toronto. Over a thousand pages long, it contains twenty-eight entries—an overall sketch of the movement entitled, “Who Are Seventh-day Adventists?” followed by twenty-seven extensive essays on various doctrinal topics, from biblical inspiration to eschatology.

The *Handbook* has a long history. In fact, it has a long “prehistory,” as someone involved in the project put it. At one time during Robert Pierson’s presidential administration, both the Review and Herald and Southern Publishing Associations were authorized to prepare a theology book, unbeknown to each other. Nothing came of either effort, however, and it wasn’t until the 1980s, well after the two publishing houses had merged, that the projects began to move. By the end of 1986, members of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) and editors at the Review and Herald had a slate of writers and deadlines in place and the next year a steering committee was set up

to oversee the operation. The Review and Herald took charge of paying the writers and editing their material. But the quality of the contributions varied widely and writers kept missing deadlines, so the project was terminated in 1987.

Still convinced the Church needed a theological handbook, the General Conference revived the project the next year. At Annual Council in 1988, the Executive Committee authorized George Reid, of the Biblical Research Institute, to direct its preparation. Raoul Dederen, longtime professor at the Adventist Theological Seminary, was appointed project director and editor, and under his determined leadership things began to roll. The idea was to have the *Handbook* ready by the 1995 General Conference. It finally appeared in 2000.¹ Sad to say, two of the contributors, Gerhard Hasel and Kenneth Strand, both among the Church's most productive scholars and most influential teachers, did not live to see their contributions reach publication.

The Review and Herald Publishing Association has printed and published the book, but its production has been entirely the responsibility of the Biblical Research Institute.² The articles were written by individual authors whom Dederen and the BRI selected. The contributors were instructed to write with the nonspecialist, general reader in mind, to devote the bulk of their articles to a consideration of biblical material ("abstaining as much as possible from non-scriptural sources" [xi]), and to develop positions "broadly representative of mainstream Adventist theology and biblical scholarship." The Biblical Research Institute Committee (BRICOM) read the initial drafts and often requested revisions. Consequently, as the preface announces, "no part of it is the work of a single author." The overall goal was to produce a "handy and valued reference tool" for "Adventist non-Adventist homes, classrooms, and libraries, as well as... pastoral offices" (xi).

Moreover, the writers were to meet these needs on a global scale. The list of authors is international. Though all but a few of the twenty-seven writers now live and work in the United States, many of them came from other parts of the world and the whole working team—BRICOM members included—repre-

sents more than twenty countries. By other standards, however, there is notably little diversity. More than twenty of the twenty-seven contributors have been associated with the General Conference or with Andrews University at one time or another. The only woman in the group is Nancy Vyhmeister, who wrote the introductory essay.

Each article follows the same general format: first, an introduction that contains a brief overview of the topic and a detailed outline of the presentation; second, an extensive treatment of biblical material relating to the topic (almost always the longest section); third, a "historical overview" that summarizes different treatments of the topic throughout the Christian centuries, along with the development of Adventist thought on the issue; fourth, a compilation of quotations from Ellen G. White's writings, arranged under topical headings—the sort of compilation found at the end of each of the *Commentary* volumes; and fifth, a "literature" section that contains "a short list of works used by the author and regarded as helpful for further investigation of the topic."³

Only time will tell whether the appearance of this *Handbook* represents an important event in Adventist history, but it certainly deserves careful attention. I don't know of anything else the Church has produced that rivals it in the way of sustained theological reflection. Because it is a "handbook" of "theology," it is appropriate for us to ask just how each expression applies to it.

It is quite a reach to call this volume a "handbook." At least, it is unlike most other theological handbooks or dictionaries I have seen. I have three such works in my library.⁴ Each is roughly half the size of the Adventist *Handbook*; their articles, arranged in alphabetical order, vary in length from half a column to many pages; and the number of contributors ranges from 138 to 175. In comparison, the Adventist *Handbook* is quite large, the number of contributors is remarkably small, and the individual entries are exceptionally long. The essays average more than thirty-seven double-column, print-filled pages.⁵

Theological vs. Alphabetical Order

Perhaps most significantly, the articles in the Adventist *Handbook* are arranged in "theological" rather than alphabetical order. They follow the general sequence of topics familiar to every student of systematic theology. The book starts with the doctrine of

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revelation, proceeds through the doctrines of God, humanity, salvation, and church, and concludes with eschatology. The Adventist *Handbook* contains two articles on revelation, one on God, four on humanity, four on topics of special concern to Adventists (the sanctuary, creation, the law, and the Sabbath), three on the church, four on different aspects of Christian living, and seven that deal with eschatological themes.

What we have here is less a handbook of theology than a systematic theology. The book doesn't just itemize the bits and pieces of theology, as handbooks typically do, it integrates and arranges them in a sequence of substantial essays. However, most systematic theologies are the work of one author, who brings to bear on the range of Christian concerns the unifying vision of a single mind. The handbook, of course, is a group project, perhaps more accurately, a committee project, and for that reason it was probably a good idea not to describe it as systematic. Still, a title along the lines of “an introduction to Adventist theology,” or “essays in Adventist theology,” would more accurately convey its intentions.⁶

Given the fact that the book was thoroughly edited by a committee, it is surprising to find considerable overlap among certain articles. For example, Aecio E. Cairus's article, “The Doctrine of Man,” discusses sin, death, resurrection, and the future life, in spite of the existence of separate articles devoted to each of these three topics. Raoul Dederen's article, “Christ: His Person and Work,” and Ivan Blazen's article on “Salvation” touch on a number of the same themes. Miroslav Kis's article on “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior” includes a section on “Christian Stewardship,” even though Charles E. Bradford devotes an entire article to the topic. Consideration of humanity's final destiny shows up in a number of different articles, too. Perhaps the reading committee found it difficult to excise shared material without violating the integrity of the different articles.

The historical surveys are generally succinct and quite informative, although the same characters—largely related to developments in Western Christianity—show up time and again. Eastern Christianity is generally ignored. The Ellen G. White quotations are

treated unevenly. Some authors simply list them under various headings; some include introductory or interpretive remarks; and others provide summaries of her statements with supporting references.

I have two additional quibbles with the preparation of the volume. The articles lack footnotes and endnotes, and that is regrettable. The idea, of course, was to make the book's appearance more inviting to the general reader, the sort of person likely to dislike such scholarly apparatus. However, given the length and density of the articles, I doubt that the absence of footnotes is likely to increase readership. The sort of people inclined to make their way through dozens of information-packed pages with skimpy margins will want to know where the authors got their material and just how they use their sources.

In general, the “Literature” sections that appear at the end of each article are only minimally helpful. They combine a list of the author's sources with suggestions for further reading without any distinction between the categories. The list of items is probably too long for the general reader, too short for the scholar, and too diverse to be of much help to either. In a given bibliography one might find references to items in nineteenth-century denominational publications, popular books and articles of recent vintage, and weighty scholarly tomes like Kittel's massive *Theological Dictionary of the Greek New Testament* and Karl Barth's multivolume *Church Dogmatics*.

Because the book really isn't a handbook, I have my doubts that this volume will serve as the “handy and valued reference tool” it is supposed to be. It is a little difficult to imagine a student snatching it from the shelf, paging quickly to an item of interest and finding her question succinctly answered. The selection of Ellen G. White quotations, as well as the historical summaries, at the end of each article may serve such a purpose, but the articles themselves



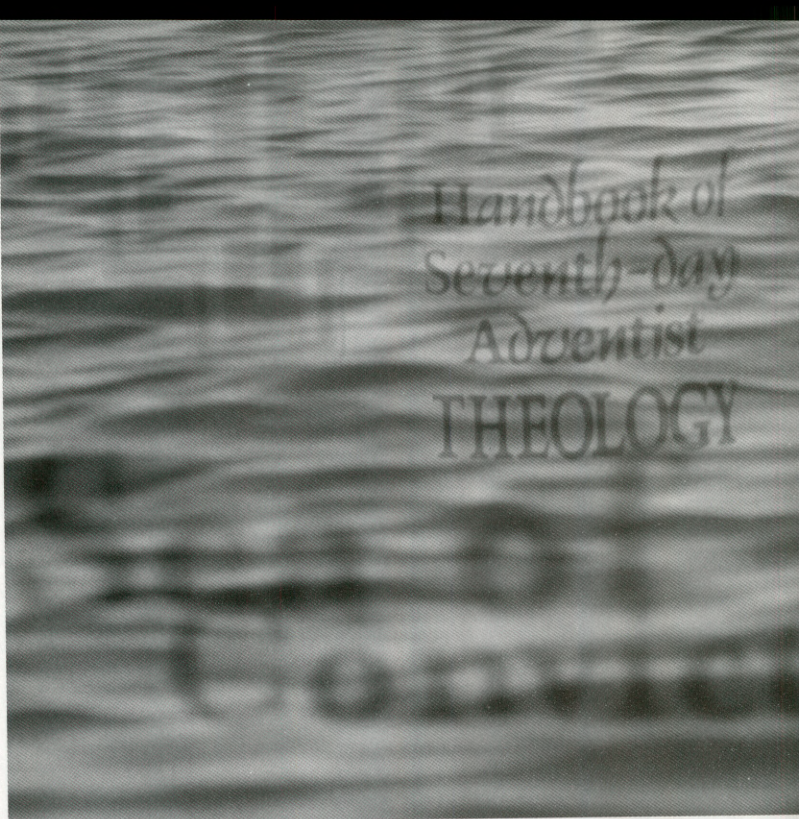
probably won't. There is no easy reading here, only solid, serious material calling for diligence and determination. However, the book has three features to help readers looking for specific items. Each article contains a detailed outline at the beginning, the headings and subheadings throughout the text are very clear, and the *Handbook* has both a general index and a selective scriptural index.

So much for the "handbook" part of the title. What does it represent as a work of "theology"?

To begin, the mere appearance of this volume is encouraging. It is reassuring to think that an interest in serious theological reflection exists in the Church today. I grew up in the 1950s, when the *Bible Commentary* was published. The members of the little church to which I belonged bought the volumes, read them, discussed them, and eagerly awaited the arrival of the next addition. These books made a major contribution to the thinking of the Church and testified to the seriousness with which Adventists studied their Bibles.⁷

The commitment to serious Bible study I saw years ago has given way to something rather different in recent years. For the most part, Adventists today are not interested in reading serious books—or even articles—of any length. They now appear to be more interested in items of an inspirational, devotional nature. They want help in solving problems and building relationships. Consequently, our denominational publications don't contain the sort of material for which they were known years ago. They now include much more in the way of news items, personal sketches, chatty columns, and inspirational thoughts, and much less in the way of sustained biblical or doctrinal discussion. If the arrival of this *Handbook* generates an appetite for some solid theological food, we can all be grateful and the Church will be the better for it.

As far as the Adventist Church and the larger religious world are concerned, this volume will serve both, perhaps in different ways. On the one hand, along with the *Bible Commentary*, the *Handbook* demonstrates that Seventh-day Adventists are capable of and committed to sustained theological reflection. The articles all evince a great deal of work. They are



obviously the fruit of extensive research and careful exposition. The labor is a little more "labored" in some places than others, but anyone who reads this book carefully will learn a lot.⁸ Non-Adventists can learn from the serious discussion of characteristic Adventist concerns, like creation, the Sabbath, the sanctuary, judgment, and death. Adventists can learn from the careful treatment of themes not unique to our own community, such as the doctrines of God, Christ, and the church.

The Great Themes of Christian Faith

As a whole, the book clearly demonstrates that Adventists do not hold their distinctive beliefs in isolation from the great themes of Christian faith. They are interested in the entire range of Christian beliefs, and they want to situate their specific doctrinal concerns within a comprehensive framework of Christian faith.⁹ Adventism represents a particular expression of Christianity, but it is not a departure from it.

Although there is a good deal to praise about this endeavor, there are some things about it that concern me. I wish this *Handbook* managed to convey the vigor and intensity that often characterizes Adventist theological discussion. I also wish it provided a sense of the growing range of Adventist theological concerns.

The sections of each article that deal with Adventist history don't pursue matters beyond the

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nineteenth century, so readers unfamiliar with recent discussions in Adventism will not be brought up to date. For example, “The Sabbath in Seventh-day Adventist History and Practice” concentrates on developments in the mid-1800s. Yet over the past few decades, Seventh-day Adventists have done some of their most creative theological work on the Sabbath, indeed, some of the most creative theological work anyone has done on the Sabbath. Unfortunately, the article conveys no sense of that work.

Nor does the *Handbook* signal some of the liveliest theological discussion in the past few decades. I couldn't find anything on women in ministry, certainly a matter of great concern to Adventists in North America, and one that the world church has addressed. In fact, the words *ministry* and *ordination* do not even appear in the index. Ellen G. White's literary dependence is touched on only lightly, and the books by Ronald Numbers and Walter Rae that ignited controversy on the topic twenty-five years ago do not appear in the bibliography.

On the other hand, the book contains some oblique references to variations of thinking within the Church. Fernando Canale indirectly refers to the open view of God as one to which certain Seventh-day Adventists are attracted.¹⁰ In his article on the person and work of Christ, Raoul Dederen mentions that some Seventh-day Adventists believe Christ assumed a fallen human nature in the incarnation. He also refers to the beliefs of some contemporary Seventh-day Adventists who prefer a “view reminiscent of Abelard's moral influence interpretation” to the traditional view that Christ's atoning death represents “a penal substitutionary sacrifice.”¹¹ However, these comments hardly communicate the intensity with which many Adventists advocate the fallen humanity of Christ, or the significant influence that Graham Maxwell's “larger view” of God has had on the thinking of many in the Church.

The book includes some discussion of moral and ethical issues—see “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior” and “Marriage and Family”—but the authors of these articles approach these issues primarily as matters of individual concern. Adventists have had a long-standing interest in the relation between the church

and the world, and in the role that its members should play in addressing social problems. Adventists were deeply involved in various reform movements in the nineteenth century, particularly the temperance movement, and over the past forty years many Adventists have called on the Church to respond to social evils in critical and constructive ways. One learns next to nothing about this aspect of Adventist life in this volume, however, and that is unfortunate.¹²

Something else that's missing is an extensive discussion of the Adventist concern with spiritual formation and the devotional life. Adventists have a tremendous investment in religious education. We see it in our private educational system—the largest unified private school system in the world, one General Conference official has told me—in programs for Bible study on a group and personal level through Sabbath quarterlies and devotional aids like morning watch books. But the *Handbook* does not develop such concerns. It contains a brief section on “piety” in the article “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior,” but a single page does not begin to convey our interest in this area.¹³ (The index contains no entry titled “prayer.”) At the same time, the volume does address a number of important issues, such as homosexuality, abortion, and the environment, and it has a nice essay devoted to health and healing, an area of characteristic Adventist concern.

We may quibble over whether our favorite topics receive adequate treatment in the *Handbook*; but it makes one omission particularly hard to understand. The “Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology” oddly contains no article titled “theology,” or any explanation of theological method. This is not to say that the project has no concept of the theological task behind it. There is indeed. It is very specific, it emerges in several ways, and it raises important questions.

Consider the general layout of the articles. As noted, each article contains an extensive review of biblical material on the topic, a much briefer review of historical material, and a compilation of pertinent Ellen G. White quotations. These are the basic sources an Adventist theologian would consult in developing a position, of course. But one would expect an author who has reviewed these sources to take another step—to synthesize the insights this study provides and

formulate a constructive statement on the topic. However, in these articles there is no such constructive statement. There are short sections on "practical implications" after each biblical section, and the words "theology" and "theological" occasionally appear in subsection titles within the biblical discussion. However, the bulk of each article consists of a review of biblical material. As the preface notes, the writers were instructed to "abstain as much as possible from referring to nonscriptural sources" and "let the *Scriptures* speak" (emphasis original) (x).

The implication is clear. As envisioned by the editors of this book, the task of theology is to survey various biblical passages that relate to doctrinal topics. With that, the work of theology is essentially done. We don't need constructive, interpretive statements, because the Bible speaks for itself.¹⁴ In other words, once we have determined what the biblical material meant, there is no need to ask what it means. We already know it.

This approach to theology rests on the assumption that the biblical message needs only to be stated to be understood. It seems to presuppose that the Bible speaks with timeless immediacy to every generation, more or less independent of historical circumstances. This brings us to the perennial challenge theology faces as to what, exactly, is involved in hearing the message of the Bible *for us*.

Interpreting vs. Preserving Biblical Messages

In very broad terms, there are two contrasting approaches, each with a cluster of variations around it. One emphasizes the importance of preserving the biblical message and respecting its integrity. The other emphasizes the importance of interpreting the biblical message. The first is preoccupied with the spoken word; the second, with the word that is heard. So although they share a commitment to communicate the message, they disagree as to what effective communication involves.

Proponents of the first approach fear that the attempt to interpret, mediate, or translate the message to contemporary minds will compromise and obscure

it. Instead of hearing the message, they are convinced, interpreters inevitably impose their own ideas on the Bible and, not surprisingly, find in its words nothing but the echo of their own presuppositions. Proponents of the second approach fear that the message will never speak to us effectively unless it takes seriously the thought forms that shape our view of reality.

The Bible reflects the thought forms of antiquity, a world far removed from our own. To understand what the biblical writers say to us we must take into account the vast distance between their time and ours. This requires us to analyze two perspectives—ours as well as theirs. Unless we bridge the distance between them, the message will remain inaccessible to men and women today.

It is essential, then, that we take into account the perspective that we ourselves bring to the Bible as we seek to understand it. Because no one occupies a neutral vantage point and because we all stand in a specific place within human history and society, we must approach the biblical text in a way that is "methodologically self-conscious." So we have not heard the Bible unless we have heard its message for us, and we have not heard its message for us unless we take into account the conceptions we bring with us when we approach the text.

The reply to this alternative conception of theology is that anything in the way of constructive interpretation amounts to human speculation. Interpretation involves imposing ideas on the Bible, rather than drawing them from the Bible; placing human reason above the Bible, rather than submitting human reason to the Bible. Our task, instead, is simply to hear the message of the Bible, in essentially its own words, and accept it straightforwardly as the Word of God. We must let the Scriptures speak for themselves and avoid allowing our own ideas to interfere in the process.

This is an ideal, to be sure, comes the rejoinder from the other side, and one that nearly all theologians—liberal as well as conservative—would warmly endorse. Nothing should obscure or predetermine the meaning of the biblical text. However, this goal does not obviate the need for interpretation. Like it or not, admit it or not, it is a simple fact that nobody, not even the most ardent biblicist, comes to the Bible devoid of theological presuppositions.

Although there is nothing like this sort of exchange in the *Handbook*, concerns like these lie behind the *Handbook*, and there are places where they surface. The authors of two articles in particular insist that we should avoid human speculation and let the Bible speak

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on its own terms. In both, the authors’ own agendas are evident, even as they insist that they are only attending to the clear teaching of the Word.

In “Doctrine of God,” Fernando Canale insists that “our understanding of God must stand free from human speculations,” and human philosophy must be “subject to the Bible, since divine philosophy is already available in the Scriptures” (105). However, Canale’s approach to the doctrine is very much in the manner of classical theological reflection, dominated as it is by philosophical concerns. He discusses the divine attributes of “eternity” and “immutability,” heavy philosophical concepts, before he takes up divine love, certainly God’s preeminent biblical attribute. In addition, Canale appeals to divine mystery rather than addressing some significant problems in his formulation, such as the difficulties of reconciling divine foreknowledge with future free decisions (114), and the difficulties of affirming that God is both three and one.¹⁵

I like a great many things about Canale’s discussion. He affirms an interactive view of God’s relation to the world. And by marshaling the biblical support for the divinity of the Son and the Spirit as well as the Father, Canale provides a strong affirmation of the divine Trinity. My point is that Canale brings certain presuppositions to his study of the Bible, despite his determination not to do so. The fact is, we all do, and Adventist theology would be better off if we all acknowledged it.

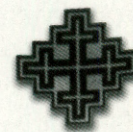
Language of Philosophy vs. Language of the Bible

Nonbiblical presuppositions are also evident in another essay whose author is determined to avoid them. In the article on biblical interpretation, Richard Davidson explicitly rejects the “historical-critical” in favor of the “historical-biblical” method of interpretation. The distinguishing characteristic of the former is that it uses “methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone,” whereas the latter makes human reason the ultimate criterion for truth.¹⁶ Appropriate biblical study “analyzes but refuses to critique” the Bible.¹⁷

The interesting thing about this methodological commitment is the fact that it does not come from a straightforward reading of the Bible. Instead, it derives from a certain concept of the Bible through rather elaborate reasoning. Davidson draws many implications from *sola scriptura*, the principle that the Bible alone is the final norm of truth. The principle implies two corollaries, he says: the primacy and the sufficiency of Scripture. Another general principle of interpretation, the totality of Scripture, implies two more corollaries, and so it goes.¹⁸ It is obvious that a great deal of close reasoning goes into Davidson’s positions. It is not so clear that each point in his chain of corollaries—and the implications he derives from them—are directly based on biblical evidence itself. In fact, the language of the discussion—principles, implications, corollaries—is the language of philosophy, far removed from the language of the Bible.

Davidson is convinced that those who take other approaches to the biblical material are allowing human reason to determine what they find there. However, one could say the same thing about his approach. He advocates conclusions that seem to go well beyond what the biblical data support. For example, he lists among the hermeneutical procedures we should reject “literary (source) criticism,” “the attempt to hypothetically reconstruct and understand the process of literary development leading to the present form of the text.” Instead, he advocates “literary analysis,” which examines the “literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form” (95).

Rejecting this quest for sources seems unwarranted, especially when certain biblical writers frankly describe using sources (Luke 1:1-3) and some even seem to tell readers to go look at them (1 Chron. 19:29-30). Davidson’s approach also conflicts with the *Adventist Bible Commentary*, which acknowledges that both Matthew and Luke relied on common written sources, including Mark and another document.¹⁹ So,



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the *Bible Commentary* says we can know something about the literary sources of the biblical documents, but Davidson says we should not inquire behind their canonical form. Does this mean that the process of canonization is off limits, too? Davidson does not say. However, the logic of his position tends toward that conclusion. God directly superintended the entire production of the Bible as we now have it. For theological purposes, that's all we need to know about it. Studies that lead to a more complicated picture of the Bible's history represent challenges to divine authority and should be resisted.

Some time ago I worked through a couple thousand pages of *God, Revelation, and Authority*, the magnum opus of Carl F. H. Henry, one of the twentieth century's leading Evangelical thinkers and a strong supporter of biblical inerrancy.²⁰ Davidson's discussion is strongly reminiscent of what I read there. His article doesn't invoke the word *inerrancy*, but in other respects it employs both the language and the logic of that position.²¹

I don't know how many in the Adventist Church share Davidson's position, but I am a bit surprised to find it advocated so strongly in a volume described as “broadly representative of mainstream Adventist theology and biblical scholarship as they are practiced throughout the worldwide Adventist Church” (xi). In certain respects, it departs dramatically from mainstream Adventist biblical scholarship.

From Doctrine to Scripture

To summarize, the *Handbook* is a good example of the way Adventists have characteristically gone about describing their beliefs. We see it in church publications, evangelistic series, and Bible studies, as well as in academy classes in religion and seminary courses in theology. The approach is basically to develop a list of doctrinal concerns and then mine the Bible for evidence to support them. This is theology as topical Bible study. Although the extensive review of biblical material in each article is supposed “to let the *Scriptures* speak,” each pursues a specific theological agenda. As John Brunt says in his article, “the entire biblical

section is an explication of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the resurrection” (370). There is nothing wrong with going from doctrine to Scripture, of course—after all, John Calvin suggests doing so in the introduction his great *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—but that is not quite the same as studying the Bible on its own terms, as every trained biblical scholar knows, and it is worth noting and preserving the important difference between these activities.

As I see it, then, this volume provides an outstanding example of traditional Adventist theology. It identifies a large number of our characteristic doctrinal concerns, and it contains extensive, sometimes massive, surveys of relevant biblical material.²² But however valuable this approach to theology is, there are other approaches worth noting, too, and I believe that the Adventist community should consider them as well.

One is the sort of activity that the contributors to this volume were specifically asked not to do, and that is to develop their own constructive statements. Nothing substitutes for careful exegetical work. The Bible remains for all time the authoritative source and guide of Christian faith. However, to hear the biblical message to us, to appreciate its application to our situation, we must take into account the dynamics of our own situation. In other words, to hear the message clearly, we must carefully consider what it means to listen. Every generation confronts new challenges. Every generation asks new questions. We do not live in a cultural or intellectual vacuum, so we cannot avoid the challenge of interpretation. The Church has a responsibility to address these questions and respond to these challenges. Theology must be constructive as well as descriptive, or we risk missing its message for us today. Fritz Guy's recent book on theological method contains an eloquent brief for this theological vision.²³ It calls for a constructive interpretation of Christian faith from an Adventist perspective, and this is something rather different from what we find in this *Handbook*. Such a project would speak to academy, church, and world—the three “publics” of theology—in helpful ways.

I believe that the Church would benefit from yet another approach to theology, as well. Valuable as the interpretative and constructive task of theology is, it

shares the preoccupation with doctrines, or beliefs, that we find in the Adventist *Handbook*. By personal inclination and professional training, I am drawn to this general vision of theology. I like nothing more than applying reason to the contents of faith in a logically rigorous way, developing well-constructed arguments to support Christian truth-claims. However, I have come to the conclusion that the value of such endeavors, whether pursued in traditional or revisionary ways, is limited. They are relatively ineffective in communicating the lived experience of the community of faith.

Doctrines are not simply beliefs, they are beliefs that the Church holds dear. They are convictions by which people live and die. Beliefs and believers are bound together, and we need a way of doing theology that explores and explicates that inseparable union. Our "fundamental beliefs" rest on the surface of a profound sea of convictions, some of which we are clearly conscious, many of which move us in profound and imperceptible ways.

On a definitional level, for example, an Adventist is one who believes in Christ's personal return to Earth. On an experiential level, however, an Adventist is someone whose whole life is oriented by the fervent expectation of Christ's return. On a definitional level, a sabbathkeeper regards the seventh day of the week as the appropriate day for Christian rest and worship. On another level, however, the Sabbath represents an experience that infuses all of life and all reality with meaning. Theology needs to find ways to get at the experiential connection between belief and life. And this takes something more than a section on practical application in our doctrinal discussion. It involves the recognition that our doctrines are practical through and through. And it requires ways of rendering or portraying the way that beliefs bring to expression deeply held convictions.

This "third way" is not easy to define. Its object is elusive, not because it is too abstract for clear analysis, but because it is too concrete. It is not easy to "get at," and it is not easy to encompass. The concrete life of the community characterized by faith-hope-and-love embraces beliefs, but much more as well, and we need ways to capture the full range of its life. So, we need all the resources of traditional biblical study. We need to bring the conclusions of our biblical study into conversation with other sources of truth, with the conclusions of science and philosophy, for example. However, we also need to get to the heart of the community's corporate experience.

How shall we do this? Finding a way is our first task. Or so it would seem. But we can't define the task and then follow it. This sort of theology doesn't consist of method then application, theory then practice. So, we'll have to develop our method as we go. Like the life of faith itself, theology is a journey, an exploration. It will no doubt contain false starts and disappointments. However, it will also lead to achievements and surprises. Only one thing is sure: the beginning will not determine the outcome. We want the richness of what we are exploring to determine our inquiry, rather than force our conclusions to fit a preestablished mold.²⁴

I am glad the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* is available. It will serve a useful purpose. I hope it also serves as a springboard for further discussion. In addition to a review of the biblical support for our doctrines, we need something that tells the Adventist story and conveys something of the Adventist adventure. We need a "theological portrait" that will plumb the depths of Adventist experience and situate our beliefs within the dynamic context of our community's rich and varied life.

Notes and References

1. Compared to the *Bible Commentary*, the *Handbook* emerged at glacial speed. It took twice as long to produce the one-volume, one-thousand-page handbook as it took to produce the seven-volume, eight-thousand-page commentary. Eighteen months after the Review and Herald board approved its preparation, the first of the *Commentary's* seven volumes appeared. The last one followed some four years later.
2. In fact, they were supposed to provide the Review and Herald with "camera ready copy."
3. *Handbook*, x.
4. Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1960); Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1992); and Alan Richardson and John Bosden, eds., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).
5. None is shorter than twenty pages, and the longest is Fernando Canale's book-length discussion of God, which runs to fifty-five pages.
6. In some ways the *Handbook* resembles a book of readings on theology, because it incorporates the work of various individual authors. But this description would not fit the project either. Ordinarily, books of readings draw on varied, often disparate, sources, and this project was



conceived as a single work from the beginning.

7. During the same time, I might add, *The Bible Story*, the ten-volume series by Arthur S. Maxwell, also emerged one book at a time, so we of the younger set had our own resource for Bible study. As I entered my teens, I turned to the *Bible Commentary* as a source of devotional reading.

8. Some articles are noteworthy for their smooth flow of thought. Raoul Dederen's clear account of Christ's person and work reminds me of his popular lectures that I heard at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary in the late 1960s. I am also impressed with the cohesive exposition of biblical and theological material in the articles by Niels-Erik Andreasen, Ivan Blazen, John Brunt, and William Johnsson. Given the *Handbook's* emphasis on biblical material, scholars specifically trained in biblical studies, as these were, are well equipped for their assignments.

9. To quote the preface once again, the book seeks to provide the general reader "a comprehensible exposition of the pertinent facts concerning the main tenets of Adventist theology, supplying the information such a reader might reasonably expect in comprehensive compass" (*Handbook*, xi).

10. "Some discussion has been initiated supporting the open view of God." *Ibid.*, 151.

11. *Ibid.*, 199.

12. Adventists have been particularly active in supporting religious liberty, at least in the United States, but I couldn't find anything about it in the *Handbook*.

13. *Handbook*, 687-88.

14. According to one author I spoke with, contributors to the volume were specifically instructed not to include original ideas in their work.

15. Canale comes perilously close to tritheism when he describes the persons of the Trinity as "three individual centers of intelligence and action," or "centers of consciousness and action," a formulation he identifies as "persons in the biblical sense." If this is indeed what the divine persons are, then they are essentially three independent beings, who happen to work in concert. In other words, there are three gods. Canale recognizes the thrust of his

formulations, but all he does to avoid tritheism is to assert that the idea that God is "one single reality," "transcends the limits of our human reason," and must be accepted by faith.

Handbook, 150.

16. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

17. *Ibid.*, 96.

18. *Ibid.*, 60-63.

19. "Thus it seems clear that the Spirit of God led the authors of the first and third Gospels to use previously written accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, and probably oral reports as well." Francis D. Nichol et al., eds., *Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1953-57), 5:178.

20. *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1976-83).

21. One could draw the inference that Adventists are inerrantists from other portions of the *Handbook*, too. In her introductory essay, Nancy Vyhmeister describes Adventists as "a conservative body of evangelical Christians" (1), and the glossary includes this sentence in its definition of "Evangelicalism": "The authority of the Scriptures, the word of God written and therefore inerrant in its original autographs, is the foundational tenet of the movement" (xix).

22. The articles on the judgment, the Sabbath, and creation are particularly noteworthy for their painstaking attention to textual concerns.

23. *Thinking Theological: An Adventist Interpretation of the Christian Faith* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1999).

24. Perhaps we will find clues in recent studies of religious narrative and metaphor, or in theological proposals with words like "imagination," "confession," "postmodernism," and "radical orthodoxy" in their titles. We may also find clues in the stories Adventists read and in the stories they tell.

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