

# “Gored by Every Sharp Tongue”?

*A Review by Alden Thompson*

George Knight. *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*. Hagerstown, Md: Review and Herald, 2000. 223 pp. Paper, \$9.95.

Rolf Poehler. *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999. 156 pp. Paper, EURO 50 (approx. \$23.00).

Rolf Poehler. *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000. 380 pp. Paper, EURO 50 (approx. \$43.00).

**T**he translators of the King James Bible have words for George Knight and Rolf Poehler: “Whosoever attempteth anything for the public (especially if it appertain to religion . . .), the same . . . casteth himself headlong upon pikes, to be gored by every sharp tongue.” If you meddle with men’s religion, said the translators, even if they don’t like what they have, “yet they cannot abide to hear of altering.”<sup>1</sup>

By casting themselves headlong into the treacherous swamp of Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal development, Knight and Poehler have glimpsed the painful truth of those words from the original preface to the 1611 King James Version. They know what happens to those who advocate change and to those who resist it. They document—some of their quotes are amazing—a remarkable history of change, resistance to change, denial of change. They have done it so well that they just might escape with only minor goring from the sharp tongues.<sup>2</sup>

On both sides of the continuity/change ledger, their stories present good news/bad news scenarios. For the defenders of the “landmarks,” the good news is the remarkable continuity between modern Adventism and the faith of our forebears; the bad news is the record of subtle but striking changes even in key doctrines. For the advocates of “present truth,” the good news is the impressive documentation that Adventism can indeed change and change significantly; the bad news is that change comes slowly and against great resistance, and that “announcing” such change is next to impossible.



In spite of the hazards, however, both men are up front with their intentions. Knight actually uses the word “development” in his subtitle; Poehler’s use of “change” in both his titles is even more daring. Knight’s book is readable, readily available, and thrifty (\$9.95). Poehler’s *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (CD) is more technical, but one doesn’t have to be an expert to read his *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* (AT). In both books, he writes as if English were his mother tongue. Because they are published in Europe, however, they won’t be easy to buy and they aren’t cheap.

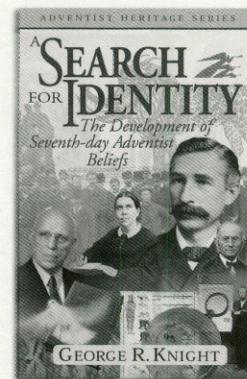
Knight’s focus is slightly more evangelistic than Poehler’s, but both men handle their material with care, and both are quite willing to lay out the facts and state their conclusions even when they run counter to popular perceptions of Adventist history.

In several ways, Poehler’s first book (CD) is not only a helpful prologue to his second book (AT), but also to Knight because Knight focuses more narrowly on Adventism and its immediate historical antecedents.<sup>3</sup>

A slender volume (125 pages of text and notes), CD puts the ideas of continuity and change on the larger stage, exploring their philosophical and historical roots from the time of ancient Greece. In chapter 1, Poehler argues that the Renaissance and the Reformation, then Rationalism and the Enlightenment, opened the door to genuine historical consciousness. Only then could the ideas of “development” and “progress” become meaningful. However, this did not happen until the nineteenth century. Poehler quotes Alan Richardson as saying that “the historical revolution is of greater significance for human self-understanding than the scientific revolution itself.”<sup>4</sup>

After the general historical survey in chapter 1, chapter 2 illustrates and analyzes the three basic models for explaining doctrinal change: static (conservative), dynamic (moderate), and revolutionary (liberal). Appendix 2 (also reproduced as appendix 2 in AT), provides a synoptic comparison of the three models. These same three “types” form the backdrop against which Poehler presents his analysis of Adventist doctrinal development.

Poehler’s second volume (AT) is more substantial



(255 pages of text and notes). He reminds us in the introduction that his work on Adventist teachings is selective, not exhaustive. The closing quote in the Introduction is especially striking because it comes from the Ellen G. White Estate’s response to Ron Numbers’s *Prophets of Health*. It declares that the best way for the Church to “protect” its heritage is to

deal candidly with the controversial and problematic before we are forced to do so by critics.

In the long run, the scholars who have the sources, the courage, and the competence to deal with all the evidence can do most for the cause of truth and the nourishment of faith.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 1 of AT (pages 19-143) analyzes the changes in Adventist doctrine. Chapter 2 (pages 145-223) assesses the ways Adventists have dealt with these changes: heavy on the static model, touches of the dynamic, a rare glimpse of the revolutionary. Chapter 3 is much shorter (pages 225-43), dealing with Ellen White’s role in Adventist doctrinal development. Poehler largely skirts the issue of her own development, focusing more on her role in doctrinal discussions in the Church. I think her own development is at least as interesting.

Poehler brings his arguments together nicely in his summary, which concludes with a quote from a much-admired senior statesman in Adventism, C. E. Bradford, and with Jesus’ promise of the Spirit who “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13). Poehler’s preferred model is a carefully nuanced dynamic one, and





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Bradford's quote points in that direction:

A movement is not a settlement; a movement is not a theological point of view. A movement, in the strictest sense, is not a denomination. A movement is a pilgrimage, a people on a journey, an expedition.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to a substantial bibliography (pages 281-374, which Poehler modestly labels "selected") and a brief index (pages 377-80), AT includes a convenient synoptic chart of Adventism's three major statements of belief: the unofficial statement of 1872; the first official one in 1931; and the 1980 statement, the first one fully discussed and actually voted by a full General Conference in session. A careful analysis of those three documents alone would confirm many of the major conclusions presented by Poehler (and Knight).

In Knight's book, chronology plays a larger role and is linked with the three major "identity" questions he addresses as the book unfolds. After 1844, the dominant question was: "What is Adventist in Adventism?" The second question, "What is Christian in Adventism?" was triggered by the righteousness by faith General Conference of 1888. Finally, by the early 1920s, the fundamentalist debate forced Adventists to ask the third question: "What is Fundamentalist in Adventism?" Knight argues that since 1950 all three questions have impinged on Adventism with greater intensity and are still very much alive today. He is brief on current events, too brief in my view.

Like Poehler, Knight presents a host of fascinating illustrations about how Adventism has changed. But perhaps most significant of all is the question of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, chapter 1.

However, before looking at that question more closely, let's note some of the more subtle aspects of Knight's strategy. Whereas Poehler concludes with a quote from a highly regarded Adventist, C. E. Bradford, Knight opens with "A Word to a Reader" from another significant Adventist, Neal C. Wilson, former General Conference president (1979-90). It is an affirming word. What I find most significant is the

fact that Wilson quotes part of the all-important preamble to the 1980 statement of Fundamental Beliefs: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."<sup>7</sup>

Wilson chaired the General Conference Session that voted to accept the 1980 statement with that preamble. Yet when the General Conference Ministerial Association published its exposition of the 1980 statement, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, the entire preamble was omitted. Not until the third printing was it restored, and then only in an obscure paragraph in the front matter rather than in its rightful place at the head of the entire statement.<sup>8</sup>

That omission illustrates the urgent need for books like Poehler's and Knight's. Knight, perhaps even more than Poehler, vigorously highlights the evidence for change. Here I return to the first page of chapter 1. For starters, here are Knight's opening words, which are almost inflammatory: "Most of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to agree to the denomination's '27 Fundamental Beliefs.'"<sup>9</sup>

The next paragraph cites the evidence, noting that several of the pioneers would not have accepted belief number two on the Trinity. Quoting Knight: "For Joseph Bates the Trinity was an unscriptural doctrine, . . . for James White it was that 'old Trinitarian absurdity,' . . . and for M. E. Cornell it was a fruit of the great apostasy, along with such false doctrines as Sunday keeping and the immortality of the soul."<sup>10</sup>

Standard Adventist sources typically have admitted that certain pioneers rejected the Trinity (for example, Joseph Bates, James White, and Uriah Smith). But they also tended to minimize the significance of this fact. The article on "Christology" in the most recent edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, for example, notes that some non-Trinitarians retained this belief when they became Adventists:

But not all Seventh-day Adventists held this view, and it was not an essential part of the SDA doctrine. For nearly a half century, difference of



opinion on this point persisted, but open controversy was avoided and the anti-Trinitarian view died a natural death.<sup>11</sup>

Both Knight and Poehler would disagree with this assessment. In a footnote, Poehler bluntly states with reference to the Trinity that early Adventists “were fully agreed—in rejecting it.”<sup>12</sup>

Both Knight and Poehler cite the vivid anti-Trinitarian language of J. S. Washburn, a retired Adventist minister. In 1920, for example, Washburn accused W. W. Prescott of introducing the “deadly heresy” of the Trinity into Adventism.<sup>13</sup> As late as 1940, this same Washburn denounced the Trinity as “a cruel heathen monstrosity, . . . an impossible absurd invention, . . . a blasphemous burlesque, . . . a bungling, absurd, irreverent caricature.”<sup>14</sup> Knight quotes Washburn from the same source as calling the Trinity a “monstrous doctrine transplanted from heathenism into the Roman Papal Church.”<sup>15</sup>

What both Knight and Poehler document is the tendency of believers to soften the contrast between the strident anti-Trinitarianism of our forebears and modern Adventism’s acceptance of the Trinity. James White’s comment against that “old Trinitarian absurdity” was actually published in the *Review and Herald* in 1852.<sup>16</sup> However, when the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1976, 1996) quotes him, it closes the quote before “absurdity” and substitutes the word “idea,” yielding the “‘old trinitarian’ idea,” a far kinder, gentler James White than the original source would suggest.

I could multiply examples from both Poehler and Knight and add a host of my own to illustrate the painful truth that change does not come easily for human beings. I am grateful to Poehler and Knight for sharing the fruits of their research with the larger community. And I do hope that they will not be gored too seriously by every sharp tongue as a result of their willingness to share.

### Notes and References:

1. Erroll F. Rhodes and Liana Lupas, eds., *The Translators to the Reader: The Original Preface of the King James Version of 1611 Revisited* (New York: American Bible Society, 1997), 29.
2. Both men have impeccable credentials. Knight, profes-

or of church history in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, is well published and well known in Adventism. Poehler teaches systematic theology at Friedensau University, the Adventist seminary in Germany. His two books are based on his Andrews University Th.D. dissertation, written under the supervision of Raoul Dederen. He also served as the German translator for Dwight Nelson’s *Net 98* TV evangelism series.

3. Copies can be obtained from the author. His e-mail address is Rolf.Poehler@ThH-Friedensau.DE.
4. Ibid., citing Alan Richardson, “History, Problem of,” *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1969 ed., 156.
5. Poehler, *Adventist Teaching*, 18, citing A Discussion and Review of Prophetess of Health (Washington, D. C.: Ellen G. White Estate, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists], 1976), 15.
6. Poehler, AT 255, citing C. E. Bradford, “A Movement Born,” *Adventist Review*, May 10, 1979, 6.
7. Knight, *Search for Identity*, 8.
8. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988).
9. Knight, *Search for Identity*, 17.
10. Ibid.
11. “Christology,” *SDA Encyclopedia*, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 10, part 1, 2d rev. ed. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), 353.
12. Poehler, *Adventist Teaching*, 37. Poehler’s complete footnote (number 1) is revealing: “In 1871, James White stated that the visions of his wife ‘do not agree’ with the creed of ‘the trinitarian’ (‘Mutual Obligation,’ *RH*, 13 June 1871, 204). Neither did she explicitly reject Trinitarianism in her writings. Thus, a century later, SDAs were prone to assume that Ellen White ‘never endorsed the anti-Trinitarian view’ (Don F. Neufeld, ‘125 Years of Advancing Light,’ *RH*, Anniversary Issue, [Nov. 13 1975], 27). However, Neufeld erroneously assumed that the early Adventists ‘differed’ on the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas, in fact, they were fully agreed—in rejecting it.”
13. Poehler, *Adventist Teaching*, 39.
14. Ibid., 40 n. 2.
15. Knight, *Search for Identity*, 154.
16. *Review and Herald*, Aug. 5, 1852, 52.

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