

# Adventist and Protestant Fundamentalism

By Reinder Bruinsma

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, and increased interest in fundamentalism of all kinds suggests that now is an appropriate time to reexamine where Seventh-day Adventists stand on the religious spectrum. Are they part of mainstream Protestantism? Could they be considered evangelicals? Are they fundamentalists? Or are they a class in themselves, not fitting into any of these categories? To some extent, Adventists are, indeed, unique; they share many characteristics with mainline Protestant churches, while also possessing evangelical and fundamentalist traits.<sup>1</sup> Adventism was influenced by the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century. Where does it stand today?

## What is Fundamentalism?

Among many definitions of fundamentalism, I have found the following useful:

Fundamentalism—a movement organized in the early twentieth century to defend orthodox Protestant Christianity against the challenges of theological liberalism, higher criticism of the Bible, evolution and other modernisms judged to be harmful to traditional faith.<sup>2</sup>

However, the term “fundamentalism” is increasingly used in a much wider sense. William G. Johnsson has noted in one of his editorials in the *Adventist Review* that, for

some, the term is interchangeable with evangelicalism. It has also been applied to forces outside of Protestant Christianity and has become “a catchall in recent years. It has been applied to figures as diverse as Jim Jones, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Billy Graham, and Jerry Falwell.” It is now often used, claims Johnsson, “in a negative sense to indicate a particular mind-set. A fundamentalist is a strident bigot advocating adherence to outmoded ideas. He is a separatist, suspicious of others.” According to Charles Scriven, the term “fundamentalism” has gradually “acquired the connotation of group-think, fear of knowledge, and hostility to innovation.” Kenneth Wood has depicted fundamentalists as people who demand simple answers to complex questions, who thrive on suspicion and eagerly believe all kinds of conspiracy theories.<sup>3</sup>

I will use the term “fundamentalism” mainly in the first sense, to refer to the religious current that gained momentum early in the twentieth century and has continued to influence or shape the theological convictions of a large segment of conservative Protestant Christianity. In the second part of this article, however, I will also use the word in the wider sense to suggest a mindset that is anti-intellectual, opposed to innovation, and mainly reactionary, and I will briefly address the question of whether present-day Adventism is affected in any large degree by this perspective.

## Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism

The distinction between evangelicalism and fundamentalism is not always clear, so some historical background is in order.<sup>4</sup> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, much of American Protestantism embraced theological liberalism. A majority of theologians and other thinkers in the United States accepted a new scientific worldview, in particular the concept of evolution, and historical-critical theories about the origin of the Bible fit well into this wider philosophical framework.

As with German theologian Julius Wellhausen and other scholars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many in the United States came to believe that Moses did not write the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), but that it arose out of a complicated editorial process that spanned many centuries. They also expressed doubt about traditional views on the dating and authorship of other books in the Bible. These and other developments bolstered liberalism and reinforced an optimistic view of man and his abilities, which characterized the American spirit throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamentalism as a historical movement reacted against this trend. Between 1910 and 1915, opponents of theological liberalism published a series of brochures entitled *The Fundamentals*. Shortly afterward, Baptist editor Curtis Lee first used the expression “fundamentalists” to designate the growing group of Christians whose members were prepared to man the barricades to defend the “fundamentals.” This militant attitude, together with a predilection for revivals, a premillennialist approach to prophecy, a firm conviction that the Bible is totally inerrant, and a Victorian morality, forged diverse groups of evangelical Christians into a broad fundamentalist coalition. It has been justifiably argued that fundamentalism was, more than anything else, a negative reaction: *against* modernism, *against* the theory of evolution, *against* every form of socialism, and—not to be forgotten—*against* Roman Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

For more than a century, Princeton Seminary, a Presbyterian institution established in 1812, was the center of orthodox Calvinism and a bastion of opposition to theological liberalism.<sup>7</sup> Princeton theologians such as Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, took the lead with others like James Orr and Augustus H. Strong in defense of orthodoxy, convinced as they were of every Bible verse’s historical reliability.

Although evangelicalism and fundamentalism overlap, they must not be confused. Evangelicalism is much broader, itself in part a reaction against the narrowness of fundamentalism. All fundamentalists are evangelicals, but not all evangelicals, by far, are fundamentalists.<sup>8</sup>

George Marsden, an expert in the field of American fundamentalism, begins his analysis of the fundamentalist movement with these oft-quoted words: “A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something.”<sup>9</sup> Together with many others, Marsden believes that the militant attitude of many fundamentalists is the most readily noticeable difference between them and evangelicals. Fundamentalists are not just conservative in their convictions, they are also prepared to fight for them.

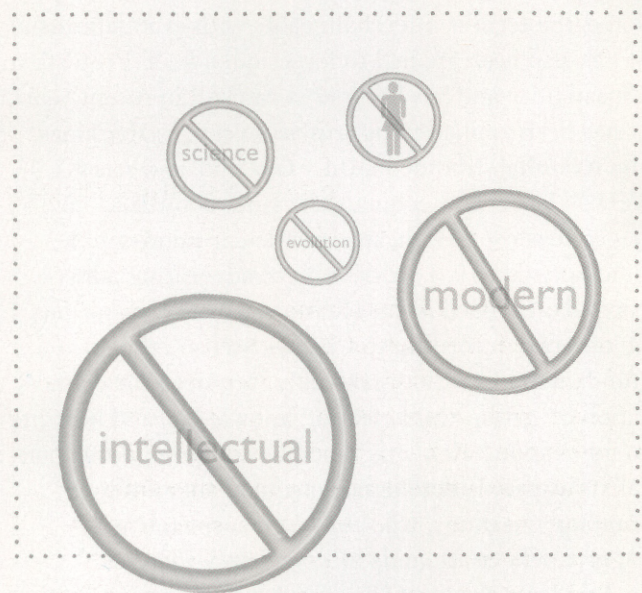
Evangelicals gained identity with the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1943. Through this organization they sought to establish an alternative to the ecumenical Federal Council of Churches and the fundamentalist American Council of Christian Churches. John Stott summarizes the essential differences between fundamentalist and evangelical Christians in eight points:

1. Fundamentalists are suspicious of scholarly

- activities and often display distinct anti-intellectualism. In contrast, evangelicals are much more open to the results of scholarly research.
2. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible was verbally inspired and have little or no appreciation for its human dimensions and cultural context. However, evangelicals recognize those elements and pay more attention to context when interpreting Scripture.
  3. Fundamentalists usually prefer a traditional Bible translation, such as the King James Version. Evangelicals are more likely to use a modern version, for instance, the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, or the Living Bible.
  4. Fundamentalists emphasize the need to interpret the Bible literally, whereas evangelicals devote more attention to context and show more awareness for the Bible's different literary genres.
  5. Generally speaking, fundamentalists have little or no interest in ecumenical activities, whereas evangelicals tend to be open to dialogue with other Christians and usually establish ecumenical contacts.
  6. Fundamentalists often follow current opinions of the majority, rather uncritically, with regard to such social issues as race relations and economic policy. Evangelicals are not immune to the influence of the culture that surrounds them, but are usually more critical and more inclined to construct a biblical world view as the basis for their views and actions.
  7. Fundamentalists tend to be further right than evangelicals on the political spectrum.
  8. Almost all fundamentalists are premillennial in their theology. Evangelicals hold widely divergent views on the Second Coming and other end-time events.<sup>10</sup>

### Adventists and the Issue of Inspiration

Views about inspiration varied among early Adventist leaders, but most of them tended to have a rather narrow conception. The views expressed by George B. Starrs in 1883 while traveling in the company of



Ellen White (who herself held a different view) were probably accepted widely among rank and file Adventists. Not only was he vehemently opposed to “higher criticism,” which he described as “blasphemy,” but he also defended an inerrantist position.<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, questions regarding the inspiration of Ellen White soon became important. Were Ellen White's statements the last word on the many topics she addressed? If she was inspired, was this “verbal” inspiration? Many church leaders knew that Ellen White's writings were heavily edited and at times revised by literary assistants. How could it be maintained, as some leaders argued and many members believed, that she was inerrant in historical, geographic, and scientific details? If not, was she at least inerrant in matters of biblical exegesis and doctrine?

Naturally, these discussions led to questions about the inspiration of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> By the early years of the twentieth century, an often bitter controversy raged in the Church between those who believed in “thought” inspiration and others who strongly defended some form of verbal inspiration, both for the Bible and for the writings of Ellen White.

Ellen White was among those who rejected verbal inspiration and inerrancy. Her views are clearly expressed in the introduction of her book *The Great Controversy*:

The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers, though in human language. . . . The Ten Commandments were and beyond clearly

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spoken by God Himself, and were written by His own hand. They are of divine, and not of human composition. But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. . . . Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony.<sup>13</sup>

Ellen White's best known statement about inspiration, which I shall discuss below, was first written in 1886, but not published in any readily accessible form until some seventy years later. Her balanced position was reflected in the 1883 General Conference resolution on inspiration, which stressed that God imparted thoughts, not the actual words in which the ideas were expressed.

We believe the light given by God to his servants is by enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, many Adventist thought leaders held to the fundamentalist position about inspiration well into the twentieth century. In fact, a tendency "toward verbalism and strict inerrancy dominated Adventist theology in the decades following 1920," writes church historian George Knight, with overemphasis on the role of the writings of Ellen White. "In essence, Adventism, which had started out as a people of the Book, had become more a people of the 'books.' Adventists had forgotten their own history on the topic."<sup>15</sup>

## Adventism and Emerging Fundamentalism

As noted later in this article, modern Seventh-day Adventism is eager to distance itself from fundamentalism. According to one student of this subject, however, this modern attitude "is not reflective of Adventist attitudes in the first half of [the twentieth] century."<sup>16</sup>

At least one Adventist observer, F. M. Wilcox, attended the 1919 conference that established the World Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA). Wilcox reported in the *Review and Herald* that the aim of the conference was to combat "the influences of this evil age," such as higher criticism and evolutionary thinking, and "the subtle species of infidelity . . . taught by many who stand in the sacred desk." He stated his agreement with most of the nine Christian fundamentals identified at the conference, but took exception to a reference to the eternal conscious punishment of "the wicked" and the concept of a premillennial reign of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Wilcox apparently saw nothing wrong with the conference's statement about the Bible: "We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as verbally inspired by God, and inerrant in the original writings, and that they are the supreme and final authority in faith and life." However, he followed with a statement of twenty-two "Fundamental Principles for Which Seventh-day Adventists Stand," which avoided the terms "verbal inspiration" and "inerrant" though it referred to the Bible as our "infallible rule of faith and practice."<sup>18</sup>

Adventist observers regularly attended the annual conferences of the WCFA during the next decade, even though, as H. A. Lukens reported, those meetings seemed to be running out of steam by 1928. Lukens, too, felt that Adventists and the fundamentalist movement had much in common, but he regretted that the fundamentalists did not emphasize the role of the Ten Commandments and that they held an erroneous view regarding life after death. "Seventh-day Adventists,"



he stated, “stand alone on the platform of truth.”<sup>19</sup>

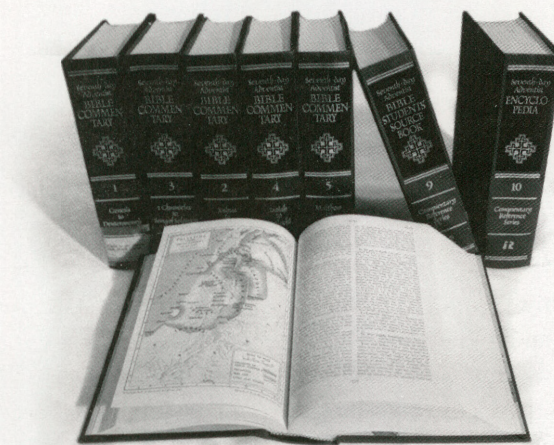
The Seventh-day Adventist Church of the 1920’s and beyond clearly liked the term “fundamentalist.” As the Church began to develop a creedal statement, it began to refer to the various core doctrines as “fundamental” beliefs. When the Church organized a Bible Conference in 1919 for editors of denominational journals, Bible and history teachers of Adventist colleges, and General Conference administrators, General Conference president Arthur G. Daniells exhorted the participants to devote themselves to “earnest, prayerful study of the major questions—the great *fundamentals* of the Word.”<sup>20</sup>

The aim of the 1919 Bible Conference was to bring greater unity on an array of topics among Adventist thought leaders. Many of these subjects (such as the identity of the King of the North in Daniel 11, the meaning of the term “daily” in Daniel 8, and the identity of the fifth trumpet in the book of Revelation) attract little attention in the twenty-first century, but all were related to the more basic question of inspiration.

The 1919 Bible Conference had more divergent opinions on the issue of inspiration than initiators had hoped. On the surface, a more “open” view of inspiration that denied “verbal inspiration” and inerrancy in the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White seemed to prevail. Foremost among the supporters of the more progressive view were General Conference president A. G. Daniells and other prominent church leaders.

In contrast, sharp and vocal criticism arose from those who considered such views dangerous steps toward modernism and the horrors of higher criticism. Prominent among these critics were J. S. Washburn, a well-known preacher, and Claude E. Holmes, a correspondent for the *Southern Watchman*. However, it was quite unfair of them to label Daniells and his group modernists and liberals. From 1909 to 1915, one of them, W. W. Prescott, edited the staunchly anti-Catholic periodical *The Protestant*, which endorsed many of fundamentalism’s central ideas. Later, even the renowned Siegfried H. Horn, though far from being an inerrantist, counted himself among fundamentalist scholars.<sup>21</sup>

Insistence on a strict fundamentalist understanding



of inspiration prevailed and became dominant in the Church for decades to come. Two books that appeared in 1924 indicate that the Church increasingly identified itself with the fundamentalist movement: *Christianity at the Crossroads*, *Modernism/Fundamentalism*, and *The Battle of the Churches: Modernism or Fundamentalism, Which?*<sup>22</sup>

One of the most important and most well-known events in the fundamentalist battle against modernism and evolution was the so-called “Monkey trial” of 1925, which occurred in Dayton, Tennessee. John T. Scopes, a high school biology teacher who taught the theory of evolution, was accused of violating a Tennessee law that forbade teaching the theory in public schools. The trial, which occurred in a circus-like atmosphere, received worldwide attention. Clarence Darrow, one of America’s leading criminal lawyers, appeared for the defense, and former U.S. secretary of state William Jennings Bryan helped the prosecution. Scopes lost, but the trial ended up badly tarnishing the cause of fundamentalism.<sup>23</sup>

The foremost Adventist expert on evolution and creation at that time was George McCready Price. Although Scopes’s prosecutors wanted Price to be present at the trial, he happened to be teaching at Stanborough Missionary College in England and could not attend. In his books, Price had proudly proclaimed himself a fundamentalist. In fact, with the publication of his book, *Q.E.D.; or, The Battle of the Churches: Modernism or New Light on the Doctrine of Creation*, he began to influence the fundamentalist movement strongly. Throughout the 1920s his writings appeared in such publications as *The Sunday School Times*, *Moody Monthly*, and *Bibliotheca Sacra*. Indeed, according to Ronald L. Numbers, the science section of John C. Whitcomb, Jr. and Henry M. Morris *The Genesis Flood* (1961) reads “like an updated version of [Price’s] *The New Geology*.”<sup>24</sup>

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Another example of Adventist involvement in the fundamentalism-modernism conflict was another public debate about creation and evolution, this time between Maynard Shipley, president of the prestigious Science League of America, and two young Adventists editors, Alonzo Baker and Francis D. Nichol. The two-day debate, which took place just weeks before the Scopes trial, on June 13 and 14, 1925, occurred in a large public auditorium in San Francisco and received wide publicity. Observers considered the outcome a draw. They declared Nichol the winner of the first debate, but Shipley the winner of the second.<sup>25</sup>

One other illustration of Adventism's struggle to define itself in the context of the early fundamentalist movement was its attitude toward higher education. In 1918, Frederick Griggs, one of the denomination's most respected education leaders, became a victim of widespread bias against advanced academic degrees for college teachers. He was removed from his office as General Conference education secretary during the 1918 General Conference session and replaced by his far more conservative former assistant, Warren E. Howell.<sup>26</sup>

Like most fundamentalists, conservative Adventist leaders who saw their influence rise in the early 1920s were very suspicious of highly educated people, particularly those who held advanced degrees from non-Adventist institutions of higher learning. They led a determined, and partly successful, effort to purge Adventist colleges and remove dangerous men who were spreading "modernist theology."<sup>27</sup>

Why did Adventism to a considerable extent succumb to the temptations of fundamentalism? Why did it seem unable to build on the more creative and experimental dynamics of earlier decades? Graeme S. Bradford, an Australian church administrator, makes an important point. Fundamentalism emerged as a potent force in Protestantism just as Adventism lost its unique prophetic voice, Ellen White, who died in 1919. Writes Bradford: "The death of the founder of any movement is always of great significance. . . . Other religious movements of the past have shown a tendency to 'pull down the shutters' and strive towards conserving rather than exploring when their founding fathers passed from the scene. This is clearly mirrored in the

experience of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."<sup>28</sup>

Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart agree. When Ellen White died, they maintain, the Adventist Church was "robbed of its chief means of authorizing innovation." That is one reason why the liveliness and flexibility that characterized Adventist theological debate in the nineteenth century evaporated. There was a clear shift toward consolidation and identification with fundamentalism. "Adventist theology has developed in parallel with that of the mainstream. It was at its most distinctive during a time of great diversity; it became fundamentalist in the era of fundamentalism; and softened with the rise of evangelicalism."<sup>29</sup>

### Fundamentalist Attitudes in Recent Adventism

In 1958, a collection of writings by Ellen White never printed before were published under the title *Selected Messages, Volume One*.<sup>30</sup> A chapter at the beginning of the book deals with the topic of inspiration and contains some remarkable statements.

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen.

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine

mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.

Some look to us gravely and say, "Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?" This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God.<sup>31</sup>

To many Adventists, these statements seemed (and still seem) refreshingly new. Yet these quotations express the Church's official position prior to the emergence of fundamentalism and reflected the convictions, not only of Ellen G. White, but also of such prominent church leaders as long-time General Conference president A. G. Daniells, W. W. Prescott, and many others.

When the participants of the 1919 Bible Conference voted a short statement to summarize the consensus at the conference, no reference was made to the inerrancy of the Bible, nor was verbal inspiration mentioned. The participants simply thanked the Lord "for the increased confidence in God, in the integrity of his holy Word, and in the system of doctrine which we denominate present truth."<sup>32</sup> As we have seen, however, the tide soon changed and a more fundamentalist approach to Scripture prevailed.

It is telling that the Ellen G. White Estate, official custodian of her published and unpublished writings, apparently needed a lot of convincing before it released the statements quoted above, which are now found in the first volume of *Selected Messages*.

### Toward a More Balanced View of Scripture

The first major denominational Bible Conference after 1919 convened in Washington, D.C., September 1-13, 1952. A larger number of people gathered this time, 450 teachers and administrators, not only from the United States, but also from overseas.<sup>33</sup>



The agenda of twenty items did not list the topic of inspiration, but organizers clearly seemed to assume a consensus in favor of thought inspiration rather than verbal inspiration. Interestingly, however, Siegfried H. Horn's lecture on recent archaeological discoveries ended with the statement that these findings "can give tremendous strength to our *fundamentalist* position of accepting the whole Bible as God's inspired word [*italics supplied*]."<sup>34</sup>

The 1952 Bible Conference opened the door to a period of some fifteen years in which the Church experienced greater openness and freedom of thought than either before or after. Within that climate, the Review and Herald Publishing Association initiated the Bible Commentary project.

Publication of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* was a remarkable achievement by any standard. Francis D. Nichol, editor-in-chief of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, deserves much of the credit for completing the project within five years and for maintaining a high standard, both in terms of scholarly content and accuracy.<sup>35</sup>

Raymond F. Cottrell, one of Nichol's associates, has given a fascinating account of challenges the editors faced working with thirty-seven different writers.<sup>36</sup> Cottrell considers publication of the commentary a milestone in Adventist approaches to hermeneutics. The commentary always takes note of historic Adventist

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positions, but often mentions alternate interpretations, as well. Writes Cottrell: "The proof-text method of interpretation used for the doctrinal apologetics began to give way to an objective investigation of Scripture using the historical-contextual-linguistic method."<sup>37</sup> The editors faced some tough decisions:

What should an editor do with "proof texts" that inherently do not prove what is traditionally attributed to them—as, for example, Numbers 14:34 and Ezekiel 4:6; Revelation 12:17 and 19:10; Daniel 12:4; Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:1,2; and most of the texts usually cited with respect to "the law"? In most of these and a number of other passages, pastoral concern led us to conclude that the commentary was not the place to make an issue of the Bible versus the traditional interpretation, much as this disappointed us as Bible scholars and would be a disappointment to our scholarly friends who know better.<sup>38</sup>

Cottrell's assessment that the Church continues to feel comfortable with this commentary seems correct. After almost half a century, it remains the foremost Adventist tool in Bible study.

Each volume of the commentary has a number of introductory articles, several of which deal with textual criticism ("lower criticism"). The commentary is outspoken in its rejection of the historical-critical method ("higher criticism"), which it considers a tool of the sceptic. It rejects the notion that the Pentateuch is a composite of various sources from different times, as well as the possibility of a Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah, and other views regarding the origin of the Scriptures that are widely accepted. Yet when it comes to the New Testament, it entertains the possibility that various documents predated the three Synoptic Gospels and that Mark (the earliest writer), Matthew, and Luke used them.<sup>39</sup>

Additional signs of a more balanced approach can be glimpsed in three more recent Bible Conferences, which attracted a total of 2,000 delegates and occurred in separate locations in May and June 1974.<sup>40</sup> This time, the delegates focused specifically on biblical hermeneutics.

The program was built around a collection of papers, written mostly by members of the Biblical Research Institute, sent out to all delegates prior to the meetings. The conferences did not address the topics of "thought" inspiration versus "verbal" inspiration; apparently participants did not consider those topics controversial any longer. The hermeneutical principles discussed at the meetings represented a far cry from a traditional fundamentalistic approach to Scripture.<sup>41</sup>

In regard to this topic, the 1986 Annual Council voted a significant statement, "Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, Methods," which was in fact a report of a special ad hoc committee (Methods of Bible Study Committee). The statement addressed all members of the Church. It rejected the historical-critical method, but stated that "Seventh-day Adventists recognize and appreciate the contributions of those biblical scholars throughout history who have developed useful and reliable methods of Bible study consistent with the claims and teachings of Scripture."<sup>42</sup> The statement rejects verbal inspiration unequivocally:

The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible writers with thoughts, ideas, and objective information; in turn they expressed these in their own words. Therefore the Scriptures are the indivisible union of human and divine elements, neither of which should be emphasized to the neglect of the other.<sup>43</sup>

Students of Adventist history are aware that such discussion among Adventists about the inspiration of the Bible has unavoidably affected the Church's understanding of Ellen White's inspiration. However, the process has also worked in the opposite direction, as Robert M. Johnston has explained:

By applying to the Bible writers what we know about Ellen White, we resolve many problems. We are left with a truly Adventist hermeneutic



that is a via media between the Scylla of fundamentalism and the Charybdis of the radical skepticism of modernism.<sup>44</sup>

Francis D. Nichol expressed similar sentiments. According to him, Adventists have had an advantage compared to other religious communities because they have seen inspiration at work. This has prevented them from maintaining a fundamentalist position on this issue. "If Seventh-day Adventists had not had demonstrated in their midst how inspiration operates," wrote Nichols, they would probably stand with inerrantists.<sup>45</sup>

### Recent Developments

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was clear that Adventism seemed to retain a remarkable degree of global unity, but it also had several "modalities." In 1984, Joan Craven, a former Seventh-day Adventist, wrote an insightful article for *Christianity Today* in which she expressed conviction that many Seventh-day Adventists demonstrate a strongly evangelical orientation. She also found fundamentalists, liberals, and even a few agnostics. Whether or not the inclusion of agnostics was justified, the rest of her observations are well taken.<sup>46</sup>

Ten years later, an article in *Ministry* argued that at least four streams existed in Adventism: Mainstream Adventism, Evangelical Adventism, Progressive Adventism, and Historic Adventism.<sup>47</sup> It may be difficult or impossible to mark an exact demarcation between "mainstream" and "evangelical" Adventism, but it is probably safe to say that the Adventist Church has one wing that is quite conservative and another that regards itself as "progressive." In between, a large group considers itself "middle-of-the-road."

Nobody can deny considerable differences between such independently published journals as *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*, on the one hand, and *Our Firm Foundation* and *Adventists Affirm*, on the other, or that the official church journal, *Adventist Review*, is somewhere in the middle.

Furthermore, Adventist religious scholars have the option of belonging to two Adventist professional organizations, each with a different ethos and goal. Both claim to represent mainline Adventism, but the

Adventist Theological Society (ATS) is considerably to be right of the Adventist Society of Religious Scholars (ASRS), and most Adventist scholars of religion make a conscious choice whether they want to belong to one or the other.

As for Seventh-day Adventist education, some faculties of theology position themselves at the conservative end of the spectrum, as for example those of Southern University and Andrews University, whereas others, especially on the U.S. West Coast, are generally perceived as more "liberal." One example of this latter perception is the theology faculty of Walla Walla College, which has experienced intense scrutiny from its parent bodies in recent years because of its alleged liberal thinking.<sup>48</sup>

However, despite such diversity of opinion—whether real or simply alleged—it would be difficult to find evidence among Adventist religious scholars of any form of fundamentalism that advocates verbal inspiration and inerrancy.<sup>49</sup>

### The Historical-Critical Method

In recent years, controversy has raged among Adventist theologians and Bible scholars over whether legitimate use can be made of the historical-critical method in Bible study. When established in 1987, the ATS determined that one criteria for membership would be rejection of such an approach. Today, a growing number of Adventist scholars disagree with this view, arguing that at least some aspects of the historical-critical method can be accepted as useful tools without necessarily accepting its often antisupernatural presuppositions.<sup>50</sup>

"Methods of Bible Study," a 1986 document voted by the Church's Annual Council, emphasizes that the text of the Bible cannot be properly understood without a study of its original historical context and literary form, thus leaving the door ajar for limited application of the historical-critical method. The document rejected the method only "as classically formulated." Gerhard F. Hasel has followed the same line in his influential publications on the topic of biblical hermeneutics. The recently published *Adventist Handbook for Bible Study* very much reflects the same approach to Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

Australian Adventist and New Testament scholar Robert McIver suggests that ample common ground exists between "progressive" and "conservative" Adventist scholars, and that the controversy is largely over semantics. To him, it would be better to drop the

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term “historical-critical method” from the debate. Robert M. Johnston agrees, writing that “many Adventists know only a caricature of the historical-critical method” and react emotionally to the term without really understanding it. According to Roy Gane, who teaches at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University, labels and litmus tests are not helpful in the discussion.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, Adventist scholars seem to be close to consensus on a legitimate use of at least certain aspects of the historical-critical method, and most, if not all, would not want to be labeled as “fundamentalist.” But a fundamentalist approach to Scripture is not fully in the past. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it still lingers in the theology and religion departments of some educational institutions in the Church, particularly in the third world. In recent international gatherings, when important issues of principle have been at stake, the arguments of some speakers (administrators, laypersons, and some trained theologians) have definitely had a fundamentalist edge.

This tendency was certainly apparent during the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, when the Church discussed women’s ordination. Five years later, it resurfaced at the General Conference Session in Toronto, Canada, when the Church looked at the issues of divorce and remarriage. Furthermore, much of the popular material for personal and public evangelism continues to display an attitude toward Scripture that borders on traditional fundamentalism.<sup>53</sup>

Nor would it be hard to identify fundamentalist trends in a number of critical independent ministries that operate at the Church’s fringe. The report of one minister who pastored a church near headquarters of the right-wing Hartland Institute could be an eye-opener for those in doubt about where this and similar organizations stand on Adventism’s theological spectrum.<sup>54</sup>

A recent debate between two Adventist scholars highlights ongoing tension in the Church about how to approach the Bible. In 1997, Charles Scriven, at that time president of Columbia Union College, expressed serious concern that some were trying “to pull Adventism toward fundamentalism.” He referred

in particular to Samuel Koranteng-Pipim and his widely circulated book, *Receiving the Word*.<sup>55</sup>

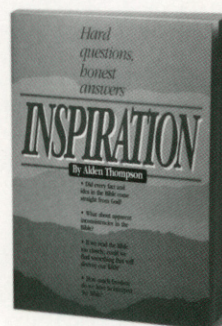
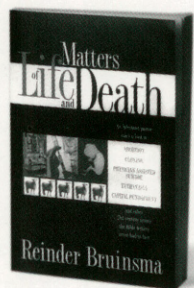
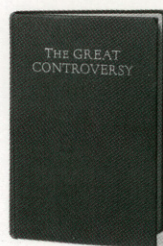
Koranteng-Pipim did not mince words in reply. He vehemently rejected the accusation, which he characterized as “more noteworthy for its breadth than for its depth.” He was confident that Scriven’s statements could “only win the sympathy of those who have already bought into the heterodoxy” challenged in his book. Koranteng-Pipim did not worry much about the accusation of fundamentalism, which, he stated, was “an overused word often invoked against anyone refusing to embrace the spirit of the age.”<sup>56</sup>

The conservative ATS promoted Koranteng-Pipim’s book strongly, and it was distributed around the world. Some praised it as “an amazingly clear and competent presentation” and as “a major contribution in the history of Adventist theology and hermeneutics,” but others viewed it as a concerted attempt “to characterize some of the best-known Adventist efforts to refine and renew the church’s understanding as not simply fallible (which they surely are) but as pure threat.”<sup>57</sup>

Though highly critical of many contemporary Adventist thought leaders, Koranteng-Pipim directed his wrath particularly at Alden Thompson, whose 1991 study on inspiration continues to attract interest. Thompson suggests that we should no longer use the Bible as a “codebook” that provides an unchangeable list of do’s and don’ts, but as a casebook that reveals how God’s unchanging principles were applied in constantly changing conditions.<sup>58</sup>

One year after Thompson’s book appeared, the ATS published a series of papers that rebutted it, the editors viewing the volume as the “fruit of the historical critical method.” One of the contributors expressed fear that Thompson’s book will undermine the faith of the believers and may create further polarization in the Church, and questioned how the Church can allow one of its publishing houses to print a book that goes against the Church’s official position.<sup>59</sup>





## Creationism

If proof of fundamentalism can be found in rejection of evolutionary theory and acceptance of a literal six-day creation in the relatively recent past, then Adventists must plead guilty. In fact, Adventists have often spearheaded the cause of creationism, and, as discussed above, early in the twentieth century clearly identified with fundamentalists on this point.<sup>60</sup>

In more recent times, however, some Adventist scientists have shifted away from traditional views on origins. Adventist scholars who continue to defend the creationist viewpoint are increasingly sophisticated in their arguments. In fact, though their literal reading of the creation account and the flood would seem to place them in the fundamentalist camp, most of them certainly do not deserve to be called “pseudoscientists” or fit into a traditional anti-intellectual fundamentalism.<sup>61</sup>

## Adventists and Politics

As for politics, do Seventh-day Adventists currently have a fundamentalist tendency? The example of Adventists in the United States is instructive. Ten years ago, Adventist sociologists Roger L. Dudley and Edwin I. Hernandez found that, contrary to common assumptions, many Adventists do not vote Republican. In a survey conducted in 1988, Dudley and Hernandez found that Adventists were far from united in their political choice: 24 percent were Democrats; 44 percent identified themselves as Republicans; and 12 percent claimed to be Independents. Twenty percent expressed no interest in politics. In contrast, most fundamentalists in the United States tend to support the Republican party or right-wing independents.<sup>62</sup>

Dudley and Hernandez also found that Adventists are often rather eclectic on various social issues. In many instances they favor “liberal” positions, but at other times they take “conservative” stands. Furthermore, in contrast to most fundamentalists,

who want churches to have a strong political influence, only 14 percent of Seventh-day Adventists want their church involved in political action.<sup>63</sup>

Traditionally, Adventists have strongly advocated total separation between church and state. This may well be the most pronounced difference between Adventism and fundamentalism. Although some individuals in the Adventist Church no doubt hold positions similar to ideas that the Religious Right propagates, such fundamentalist organizations as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have not succeeded at courting favor among many Adventists. On the contrary, the Adventist prophetic perspective leads members to view religious organizations involved in politics with great suspicion.

## Conclusion

Are Adventists fundamentalists? William G. Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, asserts correctly that modern mainstream Adventism is certainly not fundamentalist in the theological sense because it does not subscribe to the ideas of inerrancy and verbal inspiration. Adds Johnsson: “The narrow, negative mind-set often associated with fundamentalism is one that Adventists should not share.” Robert McIver, though recognizing that Adventists and fundamentalists hold certain beliefs in common, emphasizes considerable disagreement, in particular with regard to inerrancy, but also in connection with respective views on dispensationalism and political involvement.<sup>64</sup>

What can we learn from Adventism’s struggle with the fundamentalist approach to Scripture? Norman H. Young, professor of theology at Avondale College, suggests five important lessons. First, Adventists should realize that violent arguments about the Bible can lead people away from Christ. Second, they should be aware of alternatives to defend the Bible that promote a “high” view of inspiration. Third, they should rejoice that, although imperfect, the biblical text

## Much of the popular material for personal and public evangelism continues to display an attitude toward Scripture that borders on traditional fundamentalism.

transmitted to us is not an impediment to faith. Fourth, they should not forget that a combination of inerrancy and a literal reading of the text often provides chemistry for bizarre interpretations. And fifth, they should be satisfied that inspiration safeguards the meaning of Scripture in a reliable way, which adequately conveys God's purpose. "Adventists," Young concludes, "would do well not to repeat within their ranks the nasty and enervating argument of the fundamentalists and evangelicals over the inerrancy of Scripture."<sup>65</sup>

### Notes and References

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