

Do It Yourself: Adventism and the Problem of Race | BY TIMOTHY GOLDEN

"Truth is subjectivity."

—Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*

"I am the way, the truth, and the life."

—John 14:6

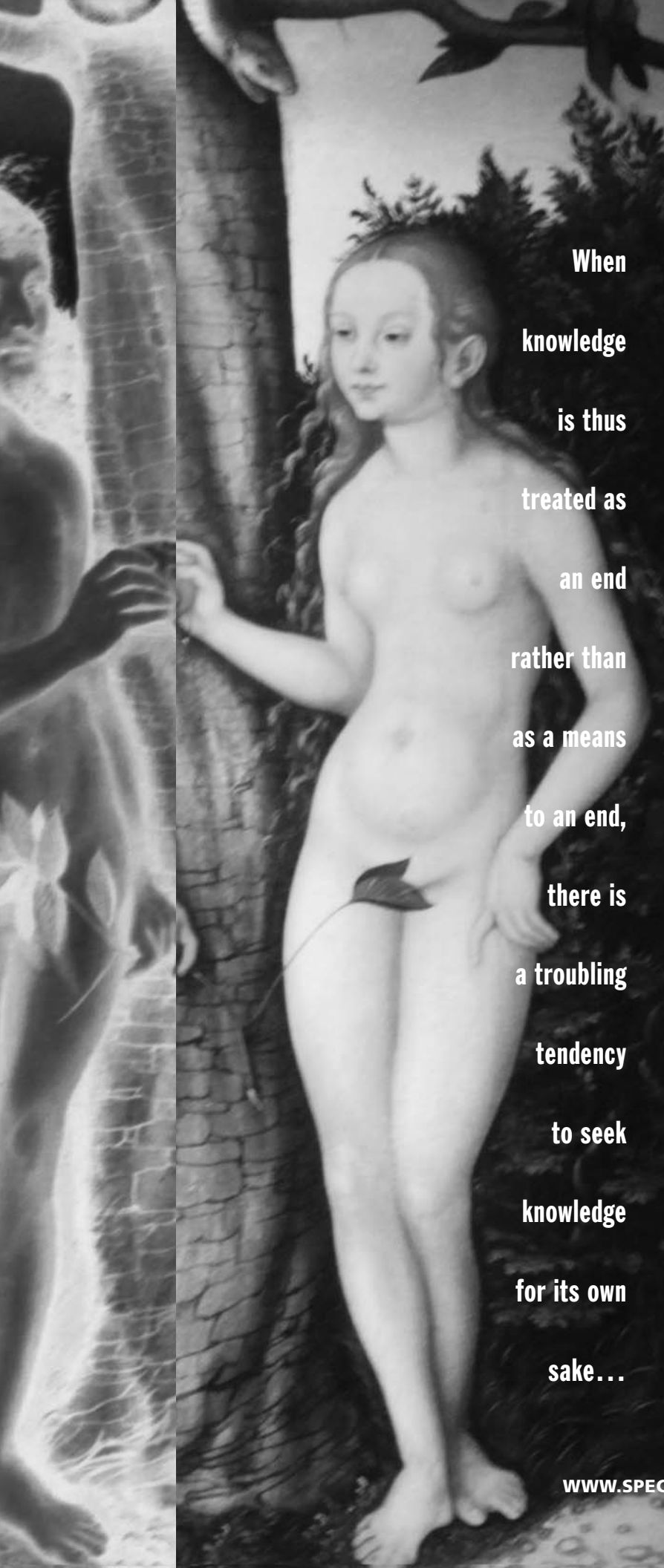
Most tasks, if we are honest with ourselves, we would prefer to delegate to someone else. Whether it be some mundane household chore or errand, we often simply do not have the time to handle it, and it would make our lives much easier if someone else did it for us. But every rule has an exception. And our preference for delegation meets its match when it comes to one task: that of humility.

Scripture recommends that we humble ourselves rather than have someone else—especially God—do it for us. Just ask Nebuchadnezzar. Relegated to the status of a beast for seven years, he is a perfect example of what Jesus means when he says “he who exalteth himself shall be abased, and he who humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). Since he did not perform the task of humbling himself, God had to do it for him. And when God did it, it was done—well done, indeed!

As it is with ancient kings, so it is with contemporary theology. When exegetical and hermeneutical practices presuppose a stable, fixed, unitary subject whose access to an unencumbered “original meaning” is the starting point for our theological reflection, Adventists

run the risk of epistemic addiction and hermeneutical hubris. Epistemic addiction, which I have written of elsewhere,¹ is that condition where one seeks knowledge—either philosophically or theologically—without regard for ethics. Such a search for knowledge is problematic because good and evil are things to be done, not merely things to be “known.” God thus prohibited Adam and Eve from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So it is that Adam and Eve “fell” because they sought an objective knowledge of good and evil, where only a subjective application would do. When knowledge is thus treated as an end rather than as a means to an end, there is a troubling tendency to seek knowledge for its own sake, which is precisely what God forbade Adam and Eve from doing. Treating knowledge as an end rather than a means is problematic for another reason: carried too far, we begin to treat all matters both natural and supernatural as things that we can know, grasp, and understand. And this is a serious problem. Consider the following example. Imagine that you are looking at the earth from the view of outer space. Although you see the earth, you do not see it in its entirety all at once, perfectly comprehending all that is; you only see part of the earth. Moreover, if others are looking at the same view of the earth as you, they will inevitably view the earth from a different vantage point. The point here is that if we cannot even observe the totality of nature, which is finite, all at once, what makes us think that we





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can grasp all that there is to know about God, who is infinite? To think that we can is silly.

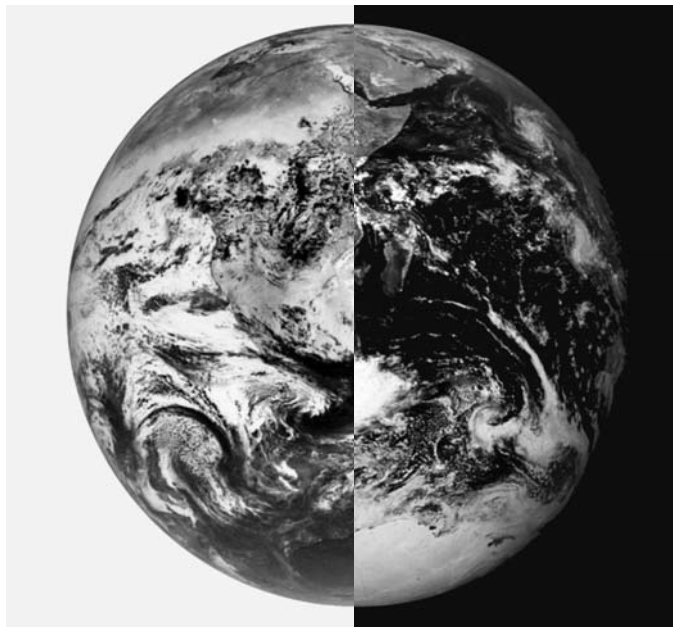
Yet this is exactly what we do in our approach to biblical interpretation: we presume that our finite minds are somehow capable of discerning the meaning of the infinite Word. Adventists have a hermeneutical hubris that is grounded in the troubling notion that Adventists sit upon a perch of epistemic and hermeneutical certainty with immediate access to the original meaning of biblical texts. Upon accessing this undeniable "truth," we then proclaim ourselves correct and everyone else wrong, unaware of the blind spots in our hermeneutical standpoint. Interpreting Scripture in this way has serious ethical and practical implications, which, if not critically evaluated, will result in the kind of humiliation that no one wants: humiliation at the hand of God in Nebuchadnezzar-like fashion. I want to avoid this sort of God-induced humiliation.

This essay is thus an attempt at self-humiliation through the work of Samuel G. London, Jr., an Adventist historian, and the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer. In his book, *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*,² London details two distinct interpretations of Adventist doctrine: one that demands withdrawal from involvement in the twentieth-century African American civil rights movement, and the other that demands participation in it. And what is more interesting, both claimed access to truth based upon the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Not surprisingly, according to London, white Adventists advocated withdrawal, and African American Adventists advocated participation. London thus expresses through his historical analysis of Adventist involvement in the twentieth-century American civil rights movement what Gadamer told us in *Truth and Method*:³ that the truth and method are at odds with one another, and that our prejudices inevitably affect all of our interpretations to such a degree that we are much better off if we recognize this, and seek understanding instead of "truth." The aim of this essay is thus a "do it yourself" project: I want to put London and Gadamer in conversation with one another to

pursue epistemic and hermeneutic humility as it relates to the problem of race within Adventism. When I speak of race, I mean a powerful and abiding social ontology of race beneath the surface of London's historical account of Adventist involvement in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century; the sort of social ontology that completely debunks the false notion that we live in a "post-racial society;" a social ontology that recognizes that "color-blindness" is actually a sinister form of white privilege that actually sustains white social, political, cultural, and theological hegemony rather than eliminating them. It is this notion of race that is at work in London's book, and that I discuss in what follows. I turn first to Gadamer and his critique of the Enlightenment.

Evangelical theologians have a critique of the Enlightenment. This critique, touting itself as anti-modern, typically surfaces in the context of a polarized debate about creationism versus evolution, theism versus atheism, et cetera. Interestingly, the evangelical theologian, although intensely critical of the Enlightenment and what it believes to be its "scientific skepticism" on one hand, is actually quite steeped in Enlightenment principles on the other; for its notion of "truth" is rooted in a one-to-one correspondence between thought and being, which is a conception of truth derived from the modern notion of a subject located within a world who is able to "know" "truth" through a correspondence of one's ideas about the world with the world itself. Although this narrow conception of truth is useful in mathematics and the natural sciences, theology is different. Immanuel Kant argued this point in his landmark text, *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he tried to show that theological matters are practical and ethical, not theoretical and epistemological. But it seems that evangelical theology and Christian fundamentalism—even in, or *especially* in, its SDA incarnation—have adopted the Enlightenment notion of truth, for Christians are caught in an endless (dare I say meaningless) cycle of debate with atheists and evolutionists, trying to "prove" the existence of God, almost like the way that one "proves" that $2+2=4$. Adventist theology has then unfortunately been infected with this Enlightenment notion of truth. Witness its lapse into apologetics that seeks historical "proof" of biblical texts, like we do in our Revelation seminars. By the end of the seminar, we have presented the prospective converts with a neat package that we call "the

truth." But is this advisable? After all, is the truth, in its totality, really just a set of doctrines? I think not. The truth—that is, the complete truth—is not simply objective knowledge, but also is subjective practice. The point here is that for all of our criticisms of the Enlightenment, Christians, perhaps unconsciously, adopt its notion of truth, and



we make the mistake of treating God and spiritual matters like matters of scientific investigation. We become what James K.A. Smith has called "theological positivists,"⁴ thoroughly grounded in a verification theory of meaning, and applying that theory of meaning intended for epistemic certainty about objects to spiritual matters, resulting in a disturbing false sense of epistemic certainty about *subjects and about spiritual matters*, as though we know that we are saved and others are lost! In other words, we think that we have achieved the impossible: finitude comprehending infinity. This is a serious problem, because it turns God (the infinite) into a finite idol of human rationality. Rather than admit that we are created in the image of God and exist to serve him, we create a god in our image to serve us; and our biblical interpretation is thus corrupted because we fail to recognize our own epistemic and hermeneutical limitations. Again, we must attempt to humble ourselves.

Enter Gadamer. For Gadamer, the Enlightenment has a problem. It fails to recognize that in its quest for objective truth and scientific certainty, it has a "prejudice against prejudice."⁵ Gadamer writes that "there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prej-

udice itself, which denies tradition its power.¹⁶ In other words, the Enlightenment way of thinking, rather than acknowledging that in every interpretive endeavor we unconsciously have prejudices that color our interpretation of texts, we instead purport to have unmediated access to the author's original intent, making every endeavor an objective and scientific one. The problem for Gadamer is that the scientific and objective approach of Newtonian physics has spilled over into the interpretation of texts, where we demand objective knowledge and rational consistency without recognizing that these very demands have, at their core, the Enlightenment demand for objectivity, as in Schliermacher and Dilthey. Gadamer points out that the task of classical hermeneutics always aims to render a text consistent, showing the author's true intentions, and then exalting those so-called original intentions as the standard for interpreting that text. We develop, in classical hermeneutics, then, certain principles of interpretation, the adherence to which will afford us access to the author's intent, and then the interpretive enterprise is concluded. But this presents a bigger problem. Namely, what prejudices of his/her own does the interpreter bring in construing the text? And how do those prejudices affect the ultimate interpretation of the text? When we don't ask these questions, we end up with a version of the text that is skewed in favor of the interpreter. And this creates serious problems, especially when the interpreter is a dominant individual or social group. For example, as London points out, there were conservative ideological and theological factors "that infiltrated Adventism upon the passing of its founders, which some white Adventist leaders, in the 1950s and 1960s, used to discourage church members from participating in sociopolitical activity."¹⁷ When white Adventists proceed in this fashion, they have effectively constructed a hermeneutical totality infected with the prejudice of what Gadamer would call their own "historically effected" consciousness:⁸ a consciousness affected by white supremacy and white privilege. Theological and doctrinal proclamations thus situated are

actually proclamations of white supremacy, especially when they prohibit political involvement for the liberation of oppressed people. Thus we get the statement from Nietzsche in *The Anti-Christ* that "Pure spirit is pure falsehood. . . It is upon this theological instinct that I wage war. I find traces of it everywhere. Whoever has the blood of theologians in his veins, stands from the start in a false and dishonest position to all things."¹⁹ Nietzsche indicates here a certain "theological instinct" toward objectifying the truth that is problematic for the reasons just stated.¹⁰ Nietzsche declared the death of God in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the *Will to Power* for a reason: the naïve Socratic optimism that generated an unjustified hope in the power of rationality had infected theology to such a degree (as the Enlightenment notion of truth, grounded in that same naïve optimism has infected Adventist theology) that theology ceased to make the Word flesh, favoring theoretical obfuscation, manifested in theoretical preoccupations with doctrine over creativity and responsibility. The "god" that Nietzsche pronounced dead is not the God of the Bible, but rather a god of rationality; an onto-theological god grounded in reason; the opposite of a human being grounded in God; a god that human beings created to serve them, rather than a God that creates human beings to serve him. In short, it is a god of an oppressive hermeneutical totality that white Adventists used to hypocritically disengage from the quest for civil rights on one hand, and yet benefit from it on the other. For what is the Adventist reliance on Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the area of religious liberty when a Sabbath accommodation is needed on the job—an Act of Congress born of the blood of African Americans and whites of genuine good will—but a reaping of benefits without a sharing of burdens? Indeed, each time an Adventist pastor, religious liberty official, or lawyer argues for a Sabbath accommodation under Title VII, they do so in the shadow of the heroes of the movement that they opposed; heroes like the three African-American girls

Golden ➔ continued on page 74...

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