

# Reflecting on San Antonio: Or, Hermeneutics or Humility or What's the Bible Really Got to Do With It | BY HEROLD WEISS

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Several observers have said lately that the Adventist Church is in crisis. The diagnosis is related to several factors. Some see the main issue to be the wilting of small congregations in the United States. Others see the exodus of the young who are educated beyond high school, even in Adventist colleges and universities. Still others point to the abandonment of traditional Adventist behaviors like abstention from Coca-Cola, coffee, tea, beer and wine, attendance at movie theatres and Sabbath shopping. I guess that it is in reference to these practices that the General Conference President, Ted Wilson, calls for revival and reformation. Besides, the issue of women's ordination as pastors, something that has been on the front burner for over twenty years, is seen as a possible sufficient cause for a split in the denomination.

In preparation for the recently held General Conference Session, a large committee studied the ordination issue for over a year. It is my suspicion that the members of the committee who were in favor of women's ordination determined that the chances for a favorable vote at the General Conference Session in San Antonio were minimal. On that account, they were instrumental in recommending that the question to be decided was not whether or not women could be ordained, but whether or not to authorize the Divisions of the General Conference to determine whether or not to ordain women in their territories. I was given to understand by some members of the study committee that as such the recommendation of the study committee would pass. Well, to the great disappointment of many, the recommendation of the study committee was

voted down. In this way the delegates to the General Conference Session at San Antonio demonstrated that the church is not only against the ordination of women; it is also against tolerance. Tolerance makes one understand that not all human beings have the same cultural and historical background and, therefore, allows diversity. Tolerance is the virtue that makes it possible for unity not to be dependent on uniformity. Intolerance is the hallmark of an insecure organization on the defensive.

The San Antonio General Conference Session will also go down in history for its revision of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. The promulgation of these clumsy, over-wordy "beliefs" at the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas only revealed the siege mentality dominating the church's hierarchy then. Their further elaboration at San Antonio thirty-five years later demonstrates that the ecclesiastical authorities are still dominated by a reactionary mindset. The announcement that a committee will be formed to study the proper hermeneutical method to be used by Adventists is further proof, if such were still needed, that the leadership of the church suffers from a profound lack of vision. It is ironic that the church that began its life as a movement bringing about liberation from the tyranny of dogmas and creeds, and that formulated its message by an unfettered and original study of the Scriptures, is now trying to find security by controlling how the Bible is to be studied, thus ensuring that its study can only prove what the church has proclaimed to be fundamental beliefs by which church employees will be judged. This development will only serve to promote inquisi-

tors within the membership.

Actually, the crisis of the Adventist church has been percolating for some time and it is related to the study of the Bible. Ever since the educational institutions of the church raised the educational standards of the membership, the reading of the Bible to search for text with which to construct doctrines has been seen as artificial by those members with intellectual curiosity. The academic study of nature, history and literature teaches new ways to approach and evaluate evidence. This phenomenon had been taking place in Protestantism ever since the study of the past developed criteria with which to test its results. At issue has been the question of origins: the origin of the universe in which humans live, the origin of the relationship between Israel and Yahve, the origin of the Bible. For believers, all these revolve around the origin of the Bible. Some insist that its author is God and that, therefore, it reveals God's mind. Others insist that its authors were human beings under inspiration who wrote within the confines of their mental powers and their world of meaning.

Those maintaining God's authorship pick here and there freely because God is consistent and never changes his mind. They still search for texts with which to build doctrinal constructs. For them, taking texts from the Bible as the last word on any subject is the only way to recognize its authority. This way of seeing the question has been taken to the extreme of proposing that believers must envision the universe in which we live as it is described in the Bible. Fernando Canale, as professor of Systematic Theology at the Seminary, insisted on the necessity to adopt the "biblical worldview" as an essential requirement for Adventists. According to him, "a deliberate search for, and adoption of, the biblical worldview is a necessary condition for . . . Christian unity [which] is a unity not only in action but also in mind and thought. . . . The biblical worldview becomes the indispensable tool for grounding the internal unity of the global church."<sup>1</sup>

Such a point of view is difficult to take seriously because it makes a travesty of the Bible.

Which of the various cosmological worldviews presented by different biblical authors is to be adopted? The worldview of Genesis 1 where God is distant, omniscient and omnipotent and man is God's "image" within creation? The worldview of Genesis 2 where God has to fumble looking for what will work, gets dirty working with mud, and man turns out to be disobedient? The worldview of Paul who ascended to the third heaven and saw there things which he cannot reveal? The Stoic worldview of the author of *To the Hebrews* who expects this world to be shaken so that the hypostatic world may be revealed? Or, the worldview of John the theologian who thinks that there is a furnace with a shaft from which smoke escapes when the key to open the abyss is used? Of course, all these descriptions are to be read *literally*.

Those who insist that the Bible was written by inspired human beings read the books of the Bible for what their authors were arguing about and discover that the authors reveal different worldviews and sometimes less than morally commendable views. For them, the authority of the Bible is to be seen in the faith its authors confess, even if at times its expression is limited by the circumstances in which they lived. Those who see God as the author of the Bible, and give to its words absolute eternal authority, describe its authority and inspiration with abstract concepts that are connected only tangentially with the contents of the Bible. Those who see human beings expressing their life of faith in the Bible describe its authority and inspiration on the basis of what they read in the Bible.

Are we expected to believe that God takes pleasure in smashing on the rocks the children of the enemies of Israel? (Ps. 137:9). How can we forget that God commands that homosexuals cannot enter the temple (Deut. 23:17), and that anyone engaging in homosexual activity is to be put to death? (Lev. 20:10). Of course, anyone caught working on the Sabbath should also be put to death (Exod. 31:15). Let us be obedient to the command that the firstborn must be sacrificed to the Lord (Exod. 22:28). Well, not really,

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because the Lord changed his mind about that one (Mic. 6:7). Besides, there is another law proposing that, rather than offering the sacrifice, one was to *redeem* the firstborn paying the stipulated price at the temple (Exod. 34:20). Ezekiel evaluates the original law and decides that it was among God's "bad statutes" (Ezek. 20:25, 26). Jeremiah, on the other hand, insists that God did not command such things at all. In fact, such a thought had never even entered God's mind (Jer. 19:5, 6). Were all these understandings of what to do with the firstborn written by God?

On what basis do we neglect to obey the command that if your eye or your hand causes you to sin you must cut it off? (Mark 9:47; Matt. 5:29). Which commandment are we to obey? The one in the Law of Moses allowing a man to divorce his wife because she no longer "finds favor in his eyes" (Deut. 24:1); the one from Jesus saying that divorce is forbidden, period (Mark 10:2–12); the one in the gospel *According to Matthew*, allowing a man to divorce his wife if she commits adultery (Matt. 5:31; 19:7)? Paul knows Jesus' prohibition of divorce but, as one working among Gentiles, he found it necessary to issue his own exception to the rule; he allows it if an unbelieving spouse initiates it (1 Cor. 7:15). Apparently it has been unofficially decided that only the one issued by Moses is to be followed, with the understanding that the wife can also initiate it if her husband does not find favor in her eyes.

One of the ways by which to understand the Old Testament is to see it as the record of the centuries-long struggle of the Israelites to become a nation of monotheists. Through its pages there are continuous references to the idolatrous tendencies of the people. Several chapters in Isaiah deal with the need to recognize that Yahve is the only true God and that the other gods are just idols. They are pieces of wood which can be used for different purposes. Idolaters shamefully bow themselves before them and worship them. In these chapters the question is repeatedly asked, "To whom then will you liken God?" (Isa. 40:18), "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One" (Isa. 40:45), "To whom will you liken me and make me equal, to compare me, that we may be alike? (Isa. 46:5). The answer to the question is obvious. None other can do the things that are listed as done by God. One of these is brought out repeatedly; God is the only one who can foretell what will happen tomorrow. What God says about the future is proven by future events (Isa. 41:21–24; 42:9; 44:6–8; 46:8–10). God's prophecies

are always fulfilled. An anonymous theologian of ancient Israel disagreed. He told the story of the prophet Jonah to point out that Yahve is not bound by prophecies. The future is in God's hands and those who think they know the future because of a prophecy may find themselves like Jonah completely frustrated. God does carry out his purposes, but those who pretend to know how God will do it forget that God is the only being who is absolutely free. Mercy can only be exercised by those who are free.

Maybe it is possible to construct an argument defending the full authority of God behind all these statements. Maybe someone can harmonize all these statements. There are those who would point out that the Bible must be interpreted with humility. Is it really a question of hermeneutics, or of humility? It is obvious that the authors of the Bible did not take dictation. They were not setting down the view from the top. They were participating in a faith journey with the Lord, and they were expressing the life of faith with the language and the mores of their own cultures. Later Bible writers, on the basis of their life of faith in their own cultures and also under inspiration, judged previous expressions of the faith inadequate.

It is quite evident that the whole of Deuteronomy proclaims the necessity of keeping the commandments as the requirement for living happily and prosperously in the Land. It affirms that righteousness is to be attained through the law: "And it shall be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us" (Deut. 6:25). God and the people are bound by a covenant: "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations and requites to their face those who hate him, by destroying them; he will not be slack with him who hates him, he will requite him to his face. You shall therefore be careful to do the commandments, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which I command you this day" (Deut. 7:9–11). In Leviticus the situation is perfectly clear: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live" (Lev. 18:5). However, when Habakkuk wondered how could it be that in God's world sinful Israel was being sent into exile, and idolatrous and murderous Babylon was rewarded with the spoils of Jerusalem, he was told, "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by

faith" (Hab. 2:4). Paul takes Habakkuk's declaration as his basic text and declares that no one will be justified by living under the law. According to Paul, Israel should have known all along that obedience to the law did not give life. Habakkuk had it right. Paul acknowledges that Moses said that "the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live" (Rom. 10:5), but then denies it by pointing out that Israel failed to obtain righteousness because it "did not pursue it through faith but as if it were based on works" (Rom. 9:32). Can anyone reading the Bible carefully come to the conclusion that God is its author?

Affirming that God is the author of the Bible, which was quite in evidence at the discussions that brought about the revision of the fundamental beliefs at the General Conference Session in San Antonio, has been taken for granted by Christians over the centuries. It is, in this connection, quite revealing that when Paul refers to the declaration that life depends on obedience to the commandments, he does not say "God writes that," but rather says "Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it" (Rom. 10:5). The context is a developed argument to prove Moses wrong.

The god of the Psalmist, who prayed to his god to smash the children of his enemies on the rocks, is not my God. He thought his god would do that for him. I think my God could not possibly do that for anyone. I know that not because I read it in the law; I know that not because I read it in the Bible; I know that because my mind, renewed by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:2), tells me so. The Gospel, as Paul says, is power to live as a new creation in the Risen Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, however, does not make me an irrational being. It enlightens me into the love and the righteousness of God as I critically read the Bible. That the world is full of people who live according to the passions of the world does not deny that the world is also full of people who are empowered by the Spirit to enact God's love and righteousness in this world. It is in the lives of these people that the truth and the

authority of the Bible is revealed.

The positing of God as the author of the Bible in order to give authority to one's own interpretation of it received a shot in the arm by Gerhard Hasel, when he was the Dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. In his *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), he wrote, "Scripture issues from God who therefore is the Author of the Bible" (100). His many students apparently have been promoting his views. One thing is to assume that God is the author of Scripture in the abstract, unaware of any second thoughts about it. In most worship services throughout Christendom, at the conclusion of the Scripture readings the readers proclaim, "This is the Word of the Lord." This declaration conforms to the understanding that the Word of the Lord is an oral word. The Word of God is to be heard. Worshippers understand that the Word of the Lord is to be interpreted by the prophet that will explore it in the following sermon. In this way the worship service has been an encounter with the oral Word of the Lord.

It is something quite different to state in a polemical context that the Bible is "the written word of God," as the first of the Fundamental Beliefs defensively proclaims. In this connection, one cannot but notice the lack of vision of those who formulated the Fundamental Beliefs and decided that one had to affirm belief in an *infallible* Bible before one could believe in God. Can there be a more blatant confusion of priorities? The reactionary idolatry of the Bible is the most lamentable development in the present crisis of the Adventist church.

Those who consider the Bible to be the written word of God impose on its stories an anachronistic literal historicity and scientific accuracy. Such total lack of understanding of what modern science and history are about renders irrelevant whatever else these defenders of God's authority may say. Historians recognize that any telling of the past, or of the present, is conditioned by the subjective agenda of its author. Rather than granting accuracy to ancient

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writers, they reconstruct the historical settings and the symbolic universes of these writers, whether inspired or not, so as to understand them in their own terms. To give historical or scientific credit to those who wrote unaware of historical or scientific canons is anachronistic and, at face value, unbelievable. Besides, those wishing to give historical and scientific value to what supposedly God wrote fail miserably in their efforts because they give such value capriciously to some texts and not to others. The test of any method of interpretation is its ability to function consistently.

Defenders of the notion that God is the author of the Bible and therefore it is the last word on any subject apparently want to have their cake and also eat it. On the one hand they claim that the Bible has historical and scientific authority. On the other they claim that it is beyond any critical evaluation. But that is precisely the hallmark of modern science and history. What any scientist or historian says is immediately considered critically by peers. All their statements are open to critical review by anybody. This is the case when the issue is considered from the point of view of science and history. If we look at it from the point of view of the Bible, to place the Bible beyond any critical judgment is to overlook that biblical authors used their critical judgment on previous biblical authors, as I have been pointing out.

If the Bible is to remain at all relevant in the twenty-first century, its relevance cannot be imposed by authoritarian proclamations of God as its author. The word *authority* derives from the word *author*. An author is not just a writer. An author is one whose writings are recognized by readers who determine that what they are reading says something that makes sense and is significant. Authors cannot impose their authority. They are given authority by readers who gain insights into reality from them. The authority of the Bible cannot be established by declarations that its author is God. Its authority comes from the readers who find in its pages insights that give their lives new significance as they are confronted by the Spirit that inspired the writers of the Bible. As the leaders of the Protestant Reformation well understood, the Bible is the Word of God when the Spirit that inspired its writers inspires its readers. As pages with ink signs on them, Bibles are just books.

Those who claim to know God's mind appeal to their Bibles, and those who know the Holy Spirit that moves human spirits in mysterious ways to lead their journeys of faith also appeal to their Bibles. It is easy to diagnose the crisis in Adventism. It is the standoff between these two

postures toward the Bible. It is more difficult to find a resolution to this confrontation. My suggestion is to take the advice Paul gave to the Christians at Rome who were having heated disputes about proper diet and the observance of the Sabbath. Paul knows that as a result of these disputes some judged the others as sinners, and these responded by despising their judges. Paul reminds everyone that they will have to stand before the judgment seat of God and that, therefore, it is essential to be true to one's faith, that is to one's determination that God is faithful and requires commitment. Sin is what is done without reference to one's faith. Because the classification of clean and unclean meats is real in the realm of knowledge and not in the realm of being, sin is not to be defined in the realm of knowledge. Of course, Paul could bring into the discussion the distinction between the realm of being and the realm of knowledge because he had the benefits of a good Hellenistic education, something that was not available to the ancient Hebrews. On the basis of this cultural development he declared all meats clean. On account of this understanding of sin, he advised the Romans who had "disputes over opinions," "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." In effect, Paul tells the Romans that their judging and despising are uncalled for because these actions deal with definitions of sin that overlook the way things are. His advice is to live by faith knowing that you will be judged by God. Sin, like faith, is in the realm of being.

Would that the crisis in Adventism were solved by the relocation of priorities. That the Bible is "the written word of God" is not the number one Fundamental Belief in the realm of being. The number one Fundamental Belief is that I live by faith in the promise of God and therefore I abound in hope. ■

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## References

1. Fernando Canale, "Importance of Our Worldview," *Ministry* 68/11 (Dec. 1995): 14.