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Taking the Bible Seriously in Edward W. H. Vick's Theology

| BY JAMES J. LONDIS

As early as 1978, an important article appeared in *Spectrum* which featured the theological efforts of (now former) Seventh-day Adventist seminary professor Edward W. H. Vick. It opens this way: "Edward W. H. Vick is an unusual figure among Seventh-day Adventist theologians because he has worked out his theological interests in a more exacting and consistent fashion than his teachers or contemporaries within the denomination."[1] Dr. Ron Walden next identifies what it is to be a theologian who, while using all the disciplines, wants to understand what the text of the Bible means in contemporary culture. Vick's efforts to be helpful to the Adventist church were then appreciated by few, even though his purpose was to produce…"greater coherence and power in Adventist preaching, provide a reasonable, integrated, satisfying set of motives for Adventist life, and generally result in better ministers, better Christians and better people."[2]

Walden concludes his piece with a poignant hope:

> *If Edward Vick, who is not now teaching at an Adventist college, had received more sustained encouragement, he might have developed more fully some of the intriguing hints dropped in his published work and the Advent movement would undoubtedly have benefited. As it is, perhaps, we may hope for more from his pen, and especially for works in which his extraordinary methodological suggestions are worked out to their substantive conclusions. If Adventist ministers, leaders and scholars were to confront such a body of theological literature, agreeing where appropriate and disagreeing where necessary, but never relaxing the effort to understand these matters, the church could only be better for it.*[3]

Over the years, Walden's wish for "more from his pen" has been granted, even into Vick's eighth decade. In a prodigious effort, Vick has applied his theological acumen and interests across a range of issues essential to the future of Adventism, not the least of which is revelation, inspiration and biblical authority. Published by Energion publications in 2011, Vick's book *From Inspiration to Understanding: Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully* burrows into the deep caves of what most threatens the future of our church: "What is the basis of Scriptural authority and what methods will enable us to interpret it as responsibly as we can?" Without mentioning it by name, Vick's research challenges the adequacy of certain statements in the "Methods of Bible Study" document approved by the General Conference. It is my purpose in this article to summarize this volume, thereby encouraging more Adventists to thoughtfully engage it as we anticipate the report on hermeneutics for the 2020 General Conference Session (voted at the 2015 Session in San Antonio, Texas).

To begin with, Vick, in granular fashion, details the various ways contemporary believers approach the Bible, what it means for the Bible to acquire the status of "Canon" in the Christian Church, how the question of "inspiration" relates to the Canon, and the reasons the Church takes the Bible to be authoritative. His analysis of the "series of mistakes" often made by believers about "authority" is worth the price of the book. *All this resides in the first 100 pages.* The reader is challenged to think carefully (which few do) about the meaning of the term "authority" and its relation to Christian tradition and doctrine. *Most Adventists, unfamiliar with this history, need to know it if they are to have a view of the Bible's authority that is consistent with the history of how it came into existence.*

All this is prolegomenon to how we should understand the *basis* of Biblical authority. In the past, the church has linked that authority to its understanding of a doctrine of "inspiration" which itself, over the millennia, has acquired meanings which contribute to our present confusion. Vick asks: Why and how, for the first time in Christian history, have large portions of the Christian community embraced

the concept of "verbal inspiration?" Currently defended (along with its cousin "thought" or "plenary inspiration") largely by the fundamentalist wing of Protestantism, he asks whether their infallibility and inerrancy view is even faithful to the Scriptures it seeks to secure. "No," is his response, and lays out the confusion, inadequacy and error of this approach.[4] It follows what is known as a "presuppositional methodology," which imposes on the Bible a pre-determined understanding of the basis of its authority.

If, on the other hand, we allow it to speak for itself and study the history of how the Bible came to be, a doctrine of inspiration will emerge that is more faithful to it. This will lead to a greater illumination of the meanings we should derive from it. Logic, then, requires concluding that if our concept of "inspiration" shapes our understanding of the Bible's authority, it also impacts what we conclude the Bible *can reveal*. Put differently, it helps us perceive what we "do not know, and *why* we do not know" the meaning of every issue we think Scripture addresses.

> *That God is living and active is a primary assumption of the Old Testament. It is not concerned with rational arguments or proofs, nor are the prophets religious 'geniuses' with highly developed powers. Revelation is an act of God's grace. He need not have continued to reveal his purpose to Israel. He did so.*[5]

Revelatory events were many, varied and complex in Israel. Casual experiences, encounters, deep personal experiences; all became occasions for Yahweh to reveal Himself. "God came to men in many ways and at different times. . . . He reveals himself to the one who is ready to obey and to 'perform' the word he hears."[6]

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament does not understand the "knowledge" of God as an intellectual achievement, but something personal and deeply relational. This in no way suggests that "facts" are unimportant since before the heart, so to speak, can respond appropriately to the Jesus of the New Testament, its words concerning Jesus must be understood. "The purpose of revelation is not simply to impart information, but to communicate the life of God. Hence the condition of reception is not intellectual acumen but trustful and obedient acceptance. This, the New Testament calls *faith* "… 'By this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments.'"[7]

What Vick means for our understanding of "revelation" is clear: God is the "subject" (the infinite subject) of revelation, who takes the initiative to make himself known. In our sinful, broken state, we can neither find nor attain knowledge of God. Philosophy and science cannot find God, even though they are magnificent rational achievements. Most especially, we humans cannot understand or know ourselves through these disciplines. "Information may be discovered. Love may not. God is not 'discovered.' There is no revelation without the presence of God . . . To insist on this preserves the important conviction that only what is beyond man's situation can reveal the nature of that situation."[8] Since one cannot communicate love or pass on "presence," the Christian teaching of the Holy Spirit is essential if one would adequately understand revelation. Words spoken about God "may be empty, formal and dead" if God is not present through the Spirit. There is little dissension among believers about this portion of Vick's discussion.

However, the book then moves into perhaps the most contentious of all the issues:

> *A doctrine of inspiration, if it is to be at all satisfactory, must take into account the facts about how the books of Scripture came into being and how they were recognized as special books. Different writers have understood the idea of inspiration in different ways. We examine some views and consider carefully possible meanings for the term,* inspiration. *Does inspiration have to do with the process i.e. the composition of the book or the product of the writing, or with both? The great diversity in the writings, and the practice within the churches in using and valuing some portions of Scripture over others, means that a 'flat' doctrine of inspiration is unsatisfactory, i.e. one which claims that all parts of Scripture are equally inspired.*[9]

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In short, if the authority of the Bible is based primarily on the doctrine of "inspiration," any defensible theory must "take into account how the scriptural books came into being and how they became part of the canon."[10] Beliefs that ignore this process or give it insufficient importance must be rejected.

> *It is a common mistake to veil the variety of viewpoints, teachings, aims, styles, approaches, theologies, by simply speaking of the 'the Bible.' But the Bible is too diverse for that. [An adequate theology of inspiration cannot]...* assume *such unity. It is a fatal weakness of traditional inspiration theories that they either chose to overlook, or just did not see, the diversified character of the Bible itself.*[11]

In Vick's analysis, no currently supported doctrine of inspiration in very conservative church groups will stand up under careful investigation; not verbal, not inerrancy, not infallibility, not even—strictly speaking—"plenary" or "thought" inspiration. One cannot base Biblical authority on one's theory of inspiration, even if one assumes that those rare biblical texts that refer to "inspiration" (I Tim. 3;16, e.g.) are clear and self-evidently true. The Greek *theopnuestos* (literally "God-breathed"), translated "inspiration," will not support the English meaning given to it, nor is the Greek meaning of the term transparent.

Vick further notes that if one moves away from the fundamentalist or even reformed evangelical theory of revelation/inspiration (the latter supported by many, but not all, Adventist scholars), one cannot simply appeal to the "plain reading of the text" as a sufficient basis for interpretation. That approach makes two questionable assumptions: First, that any passage in any given biblical book may be illuminated by comparing it with other passages in other books. Second, that each book in the canon was the result of a process in which the Spirit dominated the writers to ensure that their teachings were consistent with each other.

Letting the sixty-six books of the canon book "speak for themselves," therefore, does not and cannot result in theological consistency. Even when a New Testament writer quotes an Old Testament passage as a Messianic prophecy, we must be cautious. "Out of Egypt have I called my son" cannot be used with impunity to refer to Jesus' escape into Egypt to avoid Herod's effort to kill him. Early church usage of the Old Testament cannot exercise the same authority for us that it did for them because we understand the function of those texts very differently. Nor will it do to argue that when an "inspired" New Testament writer quotes an Old Testament passage and applies it to Jesus differently than the passage indicates, that this makes his interpretation "inspired" and therefore correct. Having said that, it is important, says Vick, to note that the New Testament writers did urge believers to see in the events surrounding Jesus the fulfillment of the *promises given to Israel throughout its history*.

Vick makes the case that we must locate the canonical status of Scripture elsewhere. This is not to suggest that the Bible is not the result of God's activity, only that no body of sacred writings can have authority over a given faith-community if that community does not accept its authority. Reasoning which assumes that a few obscure allusions to Biblical texts can ground the *authority* of the Bible is both circular and weak. In short, it is imperative that believers keep the authority of the Bible independent of theories of inspiration. "No account of how the book came to be what it is can explain why it has authority now."[12]

What does the preceding analysis imply for *interpreting* the Bible, the so-called "hermeneutical" issue? Vick's comments do not amount to a "theory" of interpretation similar to those developed by prominent philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer or Paul Ricouer. Instead, he pulls out of his considerations several pragmatic proposals to help the modern believer relate more thoughtfully to Scripture, including its most troubling portions.

Reading the Bible, even for devotional purposes, is "interpreting" it. The believer is looking for meaning and guidance in how to live

one's daily life. Most Christians do not read Scripture "to inform themselves about ancient history, nor to 'prove' some dogmatic position, nor to enjoy it as literature."[13] It is read to better understand God's ways and will and to hear God "speak," as it were, to each person and to the church. Reading for that purpose requires that you must understand the text and what it means; it is to "interpret" the text. While it may, at times, be a relatively simple matter, very often interpreting the text is complex. Name any discipline in science or the humanities, including theology, and you will find that one has to master its vocabulary. "It takes time, expenditure of effort and a degree of intelligent and sustained interest to grasp such meanings. The professional is often not able to interpret adequately to the layman the meanings which he, the professional, understands."[14]

"Interpretation" has a variety of meanings which should not be conflated or confused. It may refer to "translation" from one language to another, to rendering meaning for an obscure passage from the ancient past, or helping someone catch the meaning of an artistic creation. Most of us recognize that to interpret a non-verbal Beethoven symphony, musicians with high performance skills are required. "But something similar must be said when the subject matter is verbal. . . . In the case of the New Testament for example, knowledge of Greek and of the contemporary culture and history; secondly, a sympathy with the author, and a desire to understand him; thirdly, a disciplined imagination to render the meaning . . . in an appropriate way."[15]

This process often leads to rival theories that require us to "interpret the interpretations." How does one do that? Every discipline must confront this challenge, including theology. Vick poses a series of questions to highlight the difficulties in this many-layered interpretive process. "What was the written text interpreting, and how can we (the contemporary interpreters) understand that? We have to find our way through the many divergent interpretations of Christian teaching." Since most interpretations claim to be based on the text of Scripture, we are forced to interpret the interpretations. This brings us to a third question: "How shall we, modern interpreters, understand our contemporary situations in the light of our Christian faith?"[16]

We live in a culture very alien to the Biblical writers, making it difficult for us to believe, think and feel as they did. Vick is concerned that many dismiss "the Christian message of God's love in Jesus Christ because they feel that they are being asked to believe, in connection with the essential message, things they cannot believe." In Scripture's religiously saturated culture, nothing happened unless God somehow willed it, from sickness to good fortune. Miracles were far more prevalent, as were human contacts with supernatural beings. "Today's is a context in which thought is secular, scientific, historical, post-Enlightenment and analytical. . . . In short, we are modern readers dealing with an ancient book."[17]

While we can strive to be faithful to the meaning of the writer as we study his text within his culture, what do we do to be faithful to what his meaning would become in our culture? Do we handle snakes to prove we trust God? Do we refuse to allow women to speak to teach men as counseled in I Tim. 2:11–15? When a loved one is dying, shall we avoid medical science and rely solely on prayer? Are we really to think that we live in a three-storied universe with the stars in a dome? When millennia separate us from the biblical writer, we cannot presume to understand his meaning simply because it has meaning for us. What does it mean to be "faithful" to *his* meaning? He interpreted the meaning of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ for his time; we must interpret it as it occurs in ours.

How are theologians to be faithful to the Bible in constructing theology, Vick asks? Do we merely repeat what the Scriptures say? That is not interpreting and betrays the ethical obligation of the theologian to admit that he stands within a tradition of interpretation that cannot be sidelined, even if he disagrees with portions of it. Notice Vick's quotation from theologian Langdon Gilkey:

There is no revelation without the presence of God.

'In the Christian tradition these symbols find their normative expression, and for theology their source, in the Scriptures, since their primary reference is to the events of revelation to which the Scriptures witness. It is these symbols that are reinterpreted in various ways in tradition; and it is they that the theologian must reinterpret, re-present, in a manner intelligible to us and yet 'appropriate' or faithful to their sense in their original locus.'[18]

"Symbols" like the following: "God as Lord, as judge, as electing, choosing, covenanting, God as giver of the Law, God as redeemer, God as faithful, covenant, the elected people, the Messiah, the New Age to come." Again:

The awesome and risky task of 'constructive' or 'systematic' theology is to propose a unified contemporary *understanding of that same complex of symbols, and understanding that is (a) faithful to their original sense in Scripture and tradition, (b) adequate to our own general experience, and (c) intelligible in our time.*[19]

In interpreting the Bible, the Christian interpreter is dealing with the revelation of God.

Vick points to "offensive biblical passages" that should trouble those who reject a historical approach to Scripture. One may "then be in the irrational and untenable position of having to acknowledge that all the directives of Scripture [are] binding, having their source in the divine."[20] Elisha the prophet, for instance, instigates Jehu's revolution, sending one of the sons of the prophets to appoint him King of Israel. Jehu, accepting this honor, shoots Joham and Ahaziah, orders the murder of Jezebel, demands that Ahab's seventy sons be beheaded, and then obliterates all associates of Ahab. Following the slaughter of the Baal prophets and a number worshipping at their temple, the Bible states "For this butchery and slaughter, the Lord commends Jehu" (II Kings 9,10).

When we couple the Jehu passage with Paul's comments about the shamefulness of women speaking in church (I Cor. 14:33–45) and the Old Testament's putting to death of homosexuals (Lev. 20:13), we must admit that the traditional understandings of the inspiration of Scripture require modification. The historical distance between then and now requires our thinking differently about "then." It is here that the various "criticisms" or methods of interpretation become necessary, even if not always definitive. A case in point: a number of biblical manuscripts do not always agree on the wording of specific passages. Which rendering is most likely the original (or closest to it) is an important question to answer, and scholars use sound principles in that task, a "critical" approach to the Bible known as textual criticism. Other so-called critical tools may also be helpful when used judiciously and within the theologian's commitment to the Bible as God's revelation.

Finally, we do not (and cannot) unthinkingly accept the pre-scientific explanations of biblical events, including those in the New Testament. No one today would argue that disease and disabilities are punishment for sin in one's family history or personal life. Nor can we assume that all New Testament "demoniacs" were possessed of demons. Medical science now accounts for their behaviors (bipolar, psychotic) quite convincingly. Still, in spite of our historical and cultural distance, with all of its attendant challenges, Vick ends his volume with these encouraging words:

In interpreting the Bible, the Christian interpreter is dealing with the revelation of God. The believer confesses that here one encounters the living God. Through these words God encounters him. He finds that God comes to him, speaks to him, becomes a reality in his experience. Hence the Bible is not simply a book to be studied as literature. What the Christian interpreter reckons with is that the reality of God has become known and is becoming known through Scripture. It is the same God known through Jesus Christ to those who in the New Testament witnessed to their faith. So the interpreter presupposes that the reality revealed to him is the same reality revealed to them.[21]

In today's world, skeptical of all things concerning "faith" in the God of the Bible, Edward W. H. Vick's trenchant theology of inspiration, revelation, and Biblical authority, coupled with the importance of careful princi-

ples of interpretation, contribute significantly to making the reality of the God of Jesus Christ more rationally compelling and eminently worthy of worship. For this, all believers, including Seventh-day Adventists, owe him their profoundest gratitude. ■

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References

1 Ron Walden, "Edward Vick's Passion for Theology," *Spectrum* 8, no. 3: 48.

2. Ibid., 51.

3. Ibid., 55.

4. For complementary treatments of the issues addressed by Vick, see James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 52–64; Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973); Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Publishing, 1999), 91–156.

5. Edward W. H. Vick, *From Inspiration to Understanding: Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully*. (Gonzalez, Florida, 2011), 177, passim.

6. Ibid., 183.

7. Ibid., 184–186, passim.

8. Ibid., 187.

9. Ibid., 114.

10. Ibid., 116.

11. Ibid., 121.

12. Ibid., 159.

13. Ibid., 311.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 313–314.

16. Ibid., 314–315, passim.

17. Ibid., 317.

18. Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 56; quoted in Vick, 324.

19. Ibid., 57; quoted in Vick, 325.

20. Ibid., 330.

21. Ibid., 342.