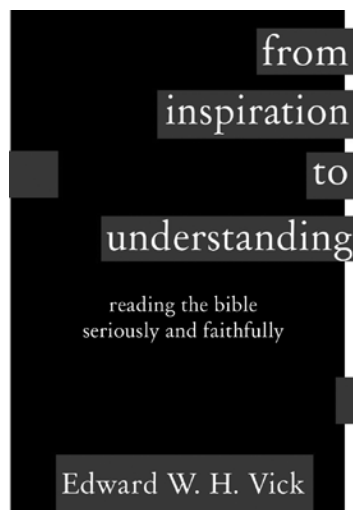


Integrity in Scriptural Interpretation:

An Interview with Edward W. H. Vick | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN



Within Adventism, no topic matters more than the one Edward W. H. Vick addressed in his 2011 book, From Inspiration to Understanding: Reading the Bible Seriously and Faithfully. Vick, who taught many years at Canadian Union College and now resides in Nottingham, England, earned degrees in philosophy and theology

from three British universities, including Oxford, and took his doctorate in systematic theology at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. During the 1960s, he taught at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He has written a dozen or so books on a wide range of theological topics. The following interview, conducted by Charles Scriven, chair of the Adventist Forum Board, addresses themes from the aforementioned reflection on the Christian doctrine of Scripture.

Scriven: The title of your book on Scripture reflects one of its main themes, namely, that the metaphor of “inspiration” is a misleading way to discuss the status and importance of the Bible. Why is that so?

Vick: Let me say, to begin, that I work from two guiding principles. I first ask what happens with the Bible in the Christian community. What does the church do with Scripture? What is its practice? This requires faithfully *reporting* on how, in worship, devotion, interpretation, and evaluation, the church actually approaches and treats Scripture. The second principle is that of *explaining* the church’s practice, or of putting the practice, so to speak, into theory. This means asking how the church itself has explained the status of Scripture, and seeing whether that

explanation is consistent with what it actually does.

We notice at once that a certain process of interpretation determines how the Bible is read. Certain principles of interpretation become standardized and form a tradition for understanding the Bible. That hermeneutic tradition declares that the Bible is to be taken as the guide for doctrine and for practice. One result is a manifest concern for the *authority* of Scripture.

Scriven: So now the question comes to mind: How did the Bible come to have the authority it has in the church?

Vick: Well, we must talk about the story of its composition, of its sources and how they were put together. How did what were at first oral traditions come to be put into writing, when, and why? How did some written documents, but not all that were available, become part of the sixty-six-book collection we think of as the biblical canon? Finally, why does the contemporary Christian accept the decision made long ago about which books should be left in or left out?

The traditional defense of the Bible’s authority brings me to the title of the book, *From Inspiration to Understanding*. Many have said, and still say, “The Bible has authority because it is inspired.” That is the basic issue the book examines.

Scriven: And this brings us back to my question: Why do you think the metaphor of “inspiration” is a misleading way to get at the status and importance of the Bible?

Vick: I said that we must first consider the practice of the church, then form a conclusion as to what it means. If the text of Scripture were lost or unread, it would have no authority. “Inspiration” is a relational term. Human agents are inspired. And if people say that a piece of writing is inspired, they mean that what someone wrote affects them in a certain way, and perhaps also that it had its origin in a

certain way. But that judgment is subjective. We cannot say that the document itself, apart from reader reaction to it, is “inspired.” The Bible has authority because it has influence, not just because someone pronounces it “inspired.”

Scriven: Again, how does the Bible come to have its authority, its influence in the life of the church?

Vick: To speak of *testimony* is to speak of evidence. The question then becomes, “What is it *evidence* for?” The testimony of the Scripture constitutes evidence for a series of events that happened in the past, long ago. Christian testimony bears witness to past events. Such may be established as historical. Scripture bears witness to *claims* to God’s revelation in the past, in the story of the Hebrews, in the story of Jesus and his *acceptance* as the Christ in the Christian experience of individual and community. These are religious claims. That such claims were made depends on the historical evidence.

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The Bible provides testimony to what God has done. Scripture bears witness to *claims* that God is revealed in the story of the Hebrews and of Jesus. Scripture documents the *acceptance*, by the first Christians, of Jesus as the Christ. Such testimony constitutes historical claims.

But Christians make another kind of claim beside the one that Scripture bears witness to the beliefs of ancient people. It is based on later and contemporary Christian experience. They recognize claims about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as authentic because, in reading Scripture, they experience God’s revelation and find it a genuine reality just as the earliest Christians did. They *testify* to that present reality, knowing it is not amenable to proof.

Scriven: Yes! The revelation to which Scripture testifies cannot be demonstrated. So the Bible, the written text, in providing historical evidence for the claim, is *not identical*

with the divine revelation to which it bears witness.

Vick: But now there is a serious question to answer. This is about the *ancient context* and the framework of their thought and speaking. Scripture came into being within this framework, one that is very different from ours. We now move on the recognition that the *context* of all Scripture writing was an ancient understanding of the universe. The scriptural believers testified to their faith in a context very different from ours.

A theologian who was a chaplain in the army remarked that he constantly met soldiers who told him they could not have faith as they read Scripture. The reason they gave was that they could not identify with the ancient understanding of the universe that provided the context for the writings. His answer was that they did not have to. He proposed that they distinguish between the *framework*, or *worldview*, in which the message was placed, and the *essence* of the message itself. You can hold on to that essence without assuming the worldview, as the ancient writers did, that the earth is flat, is built on pillars, that Hades is beneath the flat earth, and that the sun moves across the arch of heaven.

Think of Joshua, who demanded that the sun stand still so he could continue battle. Astronomers today would have a lot to teach him. But again, what is the text of Scripture actually supposed to *do*? The point, Christians say, is that when the Bible is read it becomes the medium of a very particular event, or experience: the revelation of God through the influence of the risen Christ. And that is what matters. The words are inert and lifeless apart from the experience; they come alive when they mediate knowledge of a living reality.

Scriven: To exert influence, the Bible must be read. It must be interpreted. But the church and its members are human and prone to error, so what really assures the authenticity of the Christian message?

Vick: What are Christians doing when they read and interpret the text? We shall distinguish two approaches.

Readers can approach the Bible *devotionally*,

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reading it for comfort, spiritual uplift, assurance, a relationship with Christ. They can also approach it with the purpose of *establishing doctrine* within a particular context, or church community. As the community develops, new questions arise, new concepts emerge, and new decisions have to be made. The text itself is established by means of skillful scholarship. Once established it is “there,” the primary source. From such a text the church derives its doctrines. Then these doctrines come to be defined as orthodox, or what the church’s administration requires that you believe. And when questions arise, church leaders must defend their method of interpretation. They must explain how the doctrine was derived from the text.

To sum up:

1. The devotional approach to Scripture was made possible only when the text of Scripture was available for reading by ordinary believers. This was the heritage of the Reformation, the heritage of Luther and Tyndale, whose labors and sufferings, Tyndale’s to the death, produced readable translations in European languages and thus made possible the reading of Scripture by all, including the lowliest of people.
2. The study of the text with the purpose of establishing doctrine takes place within a particular context, a church community. As the history of the community develops, new questions arise, new concepts emerge, and new decisions have to be made. The doctrine that emerges defines the community to the extent that it continues to be affirmed and confessed. Here is an important point.

However, it came to be the text, as we now know it and interpret it, is a “fixed” text. We should continue to ask whether it is the best text. By saying this I mean that we have in front of us the translation of a much earlier text that has first been established, then given recognition, and later translated and is then “there” to be read, the

result of a very long and costly process.

Let us go back for a moment and make some historical comment. The prophetic hermeneutic was retained after the Disappointment. Some of the disappointed believers continued their firm belief in divine guidance, even if the result turned out to be unexpected and the crucial prediction in error. This raises a serious question. Does divine guidance lead into error? It is a question that may be raised about later developments. Does God guide you, when in his knowing, he leads you to a false conclusion? What sort question is this?

Even if questions were raised about the validity of the hermeneutic that produced conclusions and actions based on those conclusions, what became the “Advent Movement” decided that it must continue to employ the same method of interpretation that had produced the Great Disappointment. It had no desire and hence no incentive seriously to question the way they had been interpreting and using Scripture. Their belief was that God had been and was still guiding them in that use. Hence, it continued in its enthusiastic application. What was to be done with the 1844 date and with the notion associated with an immediate Advent?

Please note that I am describing church *practice*. From what the church does we can make firm propositions about the position and status of Scripture. And we don’t have to speak of “inspiration” in order to achieve this result.

Scriven: Yes, but there is the question of authenticity? How can we assure, or at least endorse, the integrity of effort toward the establishment of doctrine?

Vick: Doctrine is derived from particular passages of Scripture. First there is selection of texts considered relevant. Then, when one or more passages have been interpreted doctrinally, the astonishing claim is made that this is “what the Bible teaches.” Such claims are sometimes made even when different passages from other parts of Scripture present contrary positions.

Closed definitions of acceptable doctrine can restrict understanding by unduly confining the

message of Scripture. An example is when the primary interest confines attention to certain selected texts that Adventists have focused on in a few favorite apocalyptic passages.

Scriven: Say more about the Adventist tradition of prophetic interpretation.

Vick: Early Adventist hermeneutic retained certain key features of prophetic interpretation it inherited from the Millerite movement. Miller saw all Scripture as on a level. He drew “proof texts” from any part of it and placed them in his system. He saw himself as a man of the concordance. He even used the term “promiscuous” of his method.

Following the Great Disappointment, believers who had expected the end of the world and their translation into “heaven” had to come to terms with their situation. Could anything remain of their beliefs? One group seized upon a new speculation from Hiram Edson. According to him, the expected cleansing of the sanctuary was happening in heaven, not on earth as Miller had thought. That would take time. The destruction of the earth would come later, in its turn. The idea that Jesus was now a priest in a heavenly sanctuary meant that they had time to reassess and rebuild. Their hope in the Advent could be renewed. They were reassured.

These early Adventists had to admit either their dating error, or their hermeneutic error, or both. They admitted neither, but instead re-interpreted the reference of the key terms in their key text, Daniel 8:14. They thus decided to continue employing the same method of interpretation that had produced the Great Disappointment.

Scriven: Over time, how has all this affected the way Adventists deal with the Bible?

Vick: Here are some rules of interpretation that became accepted:

1. In developing doctrine from the text of Scripture, do not ask questions like the following: date of composition of the books, how the

final text was compiled into “books,” what the relation is between passages which are duplicated within the books, how different versions of events are found in the individual books, etc.

2. Treat all passages of Scripture as of equal value as sources of doctrine.
3. Accept the text as it stands, treating passages from any biblical book as equivalent in value to any other. Any chosen passage has an equal status with any other chosen passage, and all can be used as “proof texts.” There was no serious interest in the context.
4. Attempt, where appropriate, to co-ordinate the text of Scripture with future events and so make predictions about that future, even specifying dates or periods of time in relation to those future events. This became a dominating concern. Adventists have, uniquely, the God-given mission to foretell the future of the world and to characterize God’s coming judgment.

Questions are to be raised regarding each of these positions.

Interpretation That Produced This Result?

Here is a list of the dominating constituents that were elaborated in detail and at great length as Adventism developed, many of them accompanied with ingenious charts.

- Acceptance and retention of the primary significance of the date 1844.
- Year-for-a-day principle.
- The concept of sanctuary and replacement of its original designation. Sanctuary was the earth ripe for destruction. Now it is a literal place in the heavens, i.e. somewhere in space.
- Post-1844 “cleansing” (Daniel 8:14) = a process of mediation between Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father; judgment as “investigation.”
- The primary and preferential reference for understanding Christian salvation is made to feature detailed activities of the Hebrew tabernacle, and Temple rituals.

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- Jesus, is both sacrifice and priest/mediator.
- God is Judge.
- Final destructive judgment, punishment of the wicked ending in their non-existence.
- Final salvation of the righteous to a heavenly existence.

The sanctuary idea occupied a great deal of interest and it became the central theme for extended development, becoming an elaborate as well as an essential doctrine. Inherited from William Miller, it was duly modified at the suggestion of Hiram Edson and has been modified again as time has passed. The context has changed quite radically and so has its meaning. For Miller it signified Advent, final judgment, and world destruction at a particular year, month, and day.

For the early Adventists, with the modified adjustment their situation demanded, the revised but retained idea of the sanctuary enabled them to make claims about atonement, mediation, judgment as inquiry, and judgment as execution. In the process of their interpretation Adventists insisted on:

1. Retaining the primary importance of the basic idea of sanctuary, while radically changing its significance.
2. Retaining the hermeneutic of prophetic interpretation.
3. Retaining the doctrine produced by that hermeneutic, even if the doctrine has been altered beyond the initial teaching. So now a quite different story is being told as the meaning of the text. It is obvious that they went to great lengths to maintain the rightness of the course their history was taking.

Scriven: In the course of all this, some themes, like that of the sanctuary, have taken on a shape quite different from what the original text suggests. What constructive suggestions would you make for us.

Vick:

1. Let's learn to show some humility in asserting our claims. That shows up in being willing to

discuss, and if need be, revise them.

2. Let's recognize the importance of considering talks and writing, by competent people, that develop ideas and methods that are new to us, or have even been overlooked or rejected. This will lead to honest and sincere discussion.
3. Let's realize that we cannot retain all the results of the conversations that took place during the immediate post-Disappointment period.
4. Let's allow that Scripture consists of very diverse contents. Each of these requires its appropriate understanding. The apocalyptic elements are important, but cannot be the single, or even the primary, model for understanding the divine revelation.
5. Where discernment is required (and when is it not?) let's be sure to appoint committee members who have some competence in their knowledge of Greek, in the history of the text, and, in the story of its acceptance as Scripture, some awareness of Hebrew and relevant historical contexts.
6. Give ample opportunity for sympathetic consideration of the suggestions forthcoming from dedicated, qualified, and competent writers and scholars, treating them not as subordinates to be dominated, but welcoming them as valued contributors to ongoing discussion. ■

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