

Ministry

International Journal for Pastors

March 1999



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Ministry

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September 1998

Bright Halwindi's "The Challenge and Reward of Prison Ministry" was very moving. In the Old Testament class I teach, we had been discussing the relationship between faith and faithfulness in the time of the patriarchs. I read the article to my class, and they too were moved.

I've often heard people say that it wasn't fair of Christ to save the thief on the cross, but it was the thief's faithful confession of Christ that brought salvation to him. Likewise the salvation that Christ promises led the Zambian murderer to Christ. In turn, his own faith and hope as he died brought other prisoners to Christ. Who knows what effect the story will have on my students?

In the face of religious persecution, it is tempting to think, "If I compromise my beliefs a little, I'll be free to continue to share my faith, but if I don't, my witness will end." The refusal to compromise and the determination to be faithful unto death may lead to a harvest far beyond what it would be if we held our tongues to save our lives. It is the death of martyrs—not the long lives of those who recanted—that still calls us to Christ.—Ed Christian, Ph.D., Kutztown, Pennsylvania.

● Thank you for Errol Webster's article "The Jesuits and the Reformers." For years, Adventists have confused righteousness by faith with sanctification. The phrase is used only nine times by Paul, two times indirectly and seven times directly for justification. Paul also adds some variation to the phrase: "righteousness by faith" or "the righteousness which is of faith" or "the righteousness which is of God by faith." However it is used, it is used only for justification.

Not once is the phrase used to include sanctification, and for good reason. Righteousness by faith is the righteousness by which we stand justified and accepted of God. Once sanctification is included, it means we are justified and accepted partly by Christ's imputed righteousness for us and partly by imparted righteousness wrought in us by the Holy Spirit—a subtle form of righteousness by works, which is pure Council of Trent and Galatianism, but seldom seen as such.—M. D. Marsh, Palm Springs, California.

November 1998

"Legislating Morality: How Far Do We Go?" by Gary Gibbs is right on target in its analysis and application of the meaning of Ellen White's counsel and example regarding temperance work. Adventists should participate in public life on behalf of biblical moral issues like temperance, pornography, abortion, and the like. The author rightly draws the distinction between the role of government in legislating morality, which is permissible, and in legislating religious observance, which it has no jurisdiction to do.

In our departmental work in public affairs and religious liberty, we do not generally get involved in moral issues. We lack the resources and expertise on a wide range of public policy issues. Thus, our public affairs work is largely limited to protecting and advancing the cause of religious freedom. If the Adventist Church is to make an impact on public moral issues, it will be the result of sound biblical teaching provided by our pastors. Such teaching will guide our members who serve in professional policy roles, either in elective office or legislative staff positions, as well as others who are active as volunteers.

If the church were to take a more active role on a wide range of policy issues, several problems would arise. First, the legislative answers are not always clear. For example, it is clear to many Adventists that abortion is a moral evil. It is far less clear that prohibition is the answer. If prohibition is the answer, then how far do we criminalize the behavior? Do we treat abortion as first-degree murder? Just because we can articulate a clear statement of biblical morality—abortion is evil—doesn't mean that we have answered the public policy question: What should the government do about it?

Second, public policy positions would often reflect the views of only a portion of our members and hence would tend to be divisive—the very thing Ellen White counseled against.

Finally, it cannot be said too strongly that many positions taken by Christians today reflect bad theology and bring disrepute to the gospel. We must be exceedingly careful, therefore, and avoid mixing the sacred and the profane, lest we disgrace the gospel.

Nevertheless, Adventists must build bridges with other Christians who are active in the cause of upholding the moral foundations of our society. In the United States, for example, while many Adventists are afraid the religious right will eventually seek to legislate religion, and rightly so, that fear should lead us to improve our ties, not alienate ourselves. Only by building bridges of friendship, understanding, and true Christian fellowship will they be willing to listen to our prophetic warnings when these warnings become most urgent and timely.—Alan J. Reinach, Esq., director, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Pacific Union Conference, Angwin, California. ■

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If you're receiving Ministry bimonthly and haven't paid for a subscription, it's not a mistake. Since 1928 Ministry has been published for Seventh-day Adventist ministers. We believe, however, that the time has come for clergy everywhere to experience a resurgence of faith in the authority of Scripture and in the great truths that reveal the gospel of our salvation by grace, through faith alone in Jesus Christ. We want to share our aspirations and faith in a way that will provide inspiration and help to you as clergy. We hope you will accept this journal as our outstretched hand to you. Look over our shoulder, take what you want and find helpful, and discard what you can't use. Bimonthly gift subscriptions are available to all licensed and/or ordained clergy. Requests should be on church letterhead and addressed to the editorial office.



Throughout the Christian world

questions about the nature, inspiration, and authorship of the Bible are receiving

serious consideration. A long period of sustained and escalating analytical scrutiny has threatened the soul of scripture. Brilliant minds that are more rationally adept than spiritually discerning have ushered the Christian faith into a watershed moment of truth that tests the heart of its verities. The questions that have been raised are by no means trivial. A lot is at stake, and in the fallout sincere people find themselves on opposite sides of the issues that are being pressed, particularly as those issues are honed down to include aspects of the matter that occupy minds with a more traditional bent.

At the center of the debate, as it is addressed in this edition of *Ministry*, is the question of the inscrutable, supernatural character of the Bible's origins versus the observable, assessable human dynamics behind its

Introducing this issue

W I L L E V A

authorship and how the divine and human relate to one another in the phenomenon of the biblical text. All of this seriously impacts the question of how the Bible is to be interpreted—the question of biblical hermeneutics.

It is important to note that the first three articles appearing in this issue are key to the presentation of the theme. The articles by Roy Gane and Robert Johnston have been purposely chosen to be counterparts representing differing points of view within Seventh-day Adventist scholarly circles. I hasten to say, however, that each purposely represents more moderate or centrist expressions in Adventist thinking, and this makes their differences less consequential.

The third article, by *Adventist Review* editor and New Testament scholar William Johnsson, represents an admirable effort to take the thinking of Gane and Johnston and along with his own reflection synthesize them into a suggested construct

which contributes to a unifying hermeneutic acceptable to a significant swath of Adventist minds and hearts.

In presenting this issue there is an intentional attempt to add something helpful and hopeful to the dialogue over hermeneutics both within the Adventist community and elsewhere. We also hope that this edition of *Ministry* will give broader expression to some of the thinking that goes on among representative Adventist minds. There is a need for us to articulate reputable statements of our thought on this subject more widely than we have.

All of the articles in this issue are related to the same theme and are indeed well worth reading. They have been presented to stimulate our thinking and inspire our hearts to grapple with the fabulous questions at hand. As we wrestle with these matters we must listen for the voice of God and fearlessly trust Him as He leads us forward. ■



Years ago I belonged to a special "club" composed of Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, African Methodist, Episcopalian,

Methodist, and Congregational pastors, along with Roman Catholic priests and Jewish rabbis.

This was the clergy association for the Huntington, New York, area. Twenty-five years later, the group is still fresh in my memory. Why? Certainly not because we always agreed; on the contrary, we had

Can it happen again?

NIK SATELMAJER

enthusiastic disagreements on various issues, such as the Viet Nam war. When we touched theological issues, many opinions were declared. A consensus was not one of our identifying characteristics.

Yet the purpose of our group was

not to challenge each others' theology but to create an environment where we could think more deeply about our positions.

As a reader of *Ministry*, you also are part of a large and diverse group of clergy. Every other month more than 70,000 clergy from a broad spectrum of denominations receive this journal. *Ministry* provides an opportunity to experience and learn from diversity. It is a wonderful way to participate in an exchange of ideas, challenges, and solutions.

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continued on p. 30

AN APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL- CRITICAL METHOD

The historical-critical method is one way of interpreting the Bible, regarding which there is significant division among Adventist scholars.



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Is it possible to develop a framework of understanding within which differences can be profitably addressed?

I believe it is possible if we identify points on which we can agree, define areas of disagreement, and raise specific questions for discussion over which we have humble dialogue.

Areas of agreement

Most Adventist scholars agree on the following:

1. Our hermeneutics is based on faith in what the Bible teaches about itself. This teaching includes deductive assertions that claim inspiration for the whole of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; cf. 2 Pet. 1:21) and inductive evidence that explains and qualifies the nature of inspiration and helps to define the boundaries of canonical scripture.

2. Balance is crucial for hermeneutics. On the one hand, emphasis on "all scripture is inspired" (2 Tim. 3:16, NRSV) without adequate consideration of the nature of the text itself and the

human role in its production leads to unwarranted assumptions regarding the inerrancy of Scripture. On the other hand, fixating on the human dynamics of the authorship of the Bible without giving due weight to its divine source undermines confidence in the authority of Scripture.

3. We need to interpret the Bible. Paul urged Timothy to interpret the word of truth properly (2 Tim. 2:15).

4. Proper interpretation must get its meaning out of the text. This is exegesis, as opposed to eisegesis, which is reading one's own ideas into the text.

5. Interpretation of the biblical text should be contextual in the broadest sense. This involves taking into account and weighing carefully any textual, historical, archaeological, and cultural evidence that may be relevant to a given passage.

6. Culture does not affect the principles resident in a biblical law or divinely inspired message, but it may affect application of the principle.

7. Formation of inspired scripture involved written and oral sources, literary units of various genres that related to various situations in ancient life, and editing. If we refer to these things with historical-critical terminology, we can say that biblical authorship included sources, forms, and redaction. There is plenty of evidence for these. For example, Luke states that he investigated sources telling of Jesus' life in order to write his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). Scholars who believe in the basic Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch acknowledge the probability of anonymous editing/redaction in a number of places, such as the account of Moses' death (Deut. 34).

8. Transmission of the biblical text has resulted in variations among manuscripts. This creates a need for the discipline of textual criticism, which involves study of manuscripts and relationships between them.

9. Scholars who deny the overarching, unifying inspiration of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16) often use historical-critical disciplines such as source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition history in ways that detract from respect for the whole of Scripture as the Word of God. They employ these disciplines as instruments for dissecting the Bible into a noncohesive patchwork of differing and often conflicting human viewpoints, thereby destroying the unity of scripture and undermining faith in its divine authority. They impose human criteria on the Bible, such as restricted views of causality that rule out supernatural intervention in human history. In their quest for information regarding the human factor in the authorship of the text, they often operate without valid methodological controls and go beyond solid, verifiable evidence.

10. Commentaries and other biblical resources by historical-critical scholars who deny the inspiration of the whole Bible can be unsafe for untrained Adventists. True, the historical-critical scholars have greatly expanded our understanding of the Bible and produced many of the best resources available. These works can be mines of valuable information for those trained to

distinguish between solid data and subjective interpretation. But to the unprepared, the same mines may be land mines.

Disagreement

At the heart of the disagreement among Adventist scholars is the question: Can we use the historical-critical method without denying or at least diminishing the inspiration of Scripture?

Some would answer No. They see the method as including and inseparable from the rationalistic worldview that

individuals would presumably have difficulty with at least some of the ninth point of general agreement I have stated above.

It is easy to see why scholars who answer Yes have been alienated from those who answer No. From the perspective of those who say No, scholars who use the historical-critical method are dissecting Scripture in a way that contradicts what the Bible teaches regarding its inspiration, so they are automatically out of line regarding one of the fundamental tenets of Adventism. Their claim to be loyal Adventists who affirm biblical inspiration is viewed with suspicion.

Mutual understanding

In talking with friends on both sides of the question, I have discovered that, to a significant degree, we seem to be talking past each other without an adequate degree of mutual comprehension. This seems so because the historical-critical method means different things to different people. To illustrate: Let me tell you what the historical-critical method has meant to me and why.

I have associated the historical-critical method with speculative dissection of the Bible motivated by an obsession with identifying the human factors involved in its production. When the human production of a portion of scripture can be hypothetically explained, God's seminal role as the Inspirer of that scripture is often left out of the picture. The human being, rather than God, becomes the center of functional authority. This kind of thinking is in accordance with the prevailing philosophy of our age that generally pervades study of the humanities.

Behind my view is my background. As an Old Testament exegete, I have read a large quantity of historical-critical research in my field. An exchange with Moshe Greenberg, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, illustrates why I associate the historical-critical method with dissection of the Bible. In a 1982 graduate exegesis seminar at the

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depends on what you mean by
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results in dissecting the Bible in a way that damages its divine unity and authority.

Some would answer Yes but would define their historical-critical method as limited to a group of exegetical "tools," such as source-, form-, and redaction-criticism, that are ideologically neutral and can be put to positive use without employing an unbiblical ideology.

Yet others would answer Yes without any particular limitation. To varying degrees these scholars would accept the rationalistic worldview that often guides historical criticism, with the qualification that they would generally affirm the possibility of supernatural elements such as miracles. Such

University of California, Berkeley, he mentioned a range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel.¹ The most conservative (Fohrer) accepted two-thirds of the book as the words of the prophet. The most radical (Hölscher) accepted only about ten percent and regarded the rest of the book as unauthentic. I asked Greenberg where his Anchor Bible commentary on Ezekiel would fit in the range. He replied that his commentary would not fit there at all because it would not be regarded as a "critical" commentary, due to the fact that he does not regard it as the task of a commentator to edit the text of scripture.

Greenberg's reply reveals what "critical" in the context of "historical-critical method" means to many contemporary scholars, at least in the area of Old Testament. It is not criticism simply in the sense of appreciation and analysis, as in "art criticism," "rhetorical criticism," or "critical thinking." But it is criticism as it uses analytical tools as extensions of rationalistic ideology to edit the text of scripture in the sense of

separating inspired materials from lesser materials that seemingly reflect human thoughts. In the process, the Bible is treated as a conceptual archaeological site where treasure going back to a prophet who had a direct "pipeline" to God is retained as the Word of God and other material is discarded or at least devalued.

Because the word *critical* means something to me, and to many others, that I cannot ignore or change, I am not comfortable with placing my work under the heading of the historical-critical method. Why should I identify myself with and indirectly lend the support of my influence to an ideology that I reject?

The historical-critical method and inspiration

Now let's return to the question: Can we use the historical-critical method without denying or at least diminishing the overarching inspiration of Scripture? It depends on what you mean by "historical-critical method." I have tended to answer No because I have

thought of the method as including "tools" plus ideology. However, I do not deny that it is possible to investigate the human authorship of Scripture, to the extent that solid evidence allows, for the purpose of understanding the divine message and without devaluing divine inspiration in any way. For example, I believe that Moses was the basic author of the Pentateuch. At the same time, I acknowledge the probability that some kind of editor/redactor reported his death (Deut. 34) and also his incomparable meekness, which at least on one occasion kept him from speaking up for himself (Num. 12:3).

My recognition that the Pentateuch includes some editorial work has arisen from a desire to understand the text. I would not naturally think of it as redaction-criticism unless I were systematically studying editorial insertions to reconstruct the prehistory of the text, working toward isolation of a hypothetical "original" text by identifying a later, less important, editorial "layer." In other words, I would not tend

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to see my work as historical-critical unless I included a "critical" component in the sense of dissecting the Bible in a way that involved finding degrees of inspiration within it.

Two crucial distinctions should be made here. First, recognition of probable editorial work in the Pentateuch can be distinguished from "critical" dissection of scripture in the sense described above. The possibility of such editing was recognized long before development of the historical-critical method. Second, since the language of the Bible is that of its human authors, literary "tools" may detect some distinguishing characteristics of those authors, but such "tools" cannot identify the divine element of inspiration that influenced the minds of the authors (2 Pet. 1:21). The supernatural element in scripture is a matter of faith; it cannot be proven or disproven by analytical application of human reason. Judgments regarding degrees of inspiration result from attaching assumptions to analysis. For example, literary analysis may indicate that a verse was written by an editor rather than a main author, such as a prophet. By itself, this says nothing about whether the verse is inspired. But a scholar who assumes that main authors were inspired and editors were not can conclude that the verse in question is not inspired.

Assumptions are the root problem with the historical-critical method as it is often practiced. The scholar's preconceptions, often shaped by earlier critical scholarship, determine what is regarded as divine and what is not. The use of literary "tools," shaped by assumptions, generally lead to the conviction that the assumptions were right. Subjective human reason judges the Bible in a circular process, with conclusions shaped by presuppositions. This is unscientific by any standard.

One of the basic assumptions of many historical critics is the idea that to be scientific a scholar must employ criticism and approach investigation from a position of doubt. That is, something must be demonstrated through human analysis before it can be believed. True consistency with this

approach would judge as unscientific a scholar who claims inspiration for even a small part of the Bible because inspiration cannot be demonstrated by human analysis.

Narrowing the gap

The basis of disagreement between Adventist scholars who reject the historical-critical method and those who say Yes to a limited form of the method is definition of the method. Those who reject it define it as "tools" plus unbiblical ideology. Those who accept a limited application of the method define it as "tools" alone. While I have favored the first of these definitions, I can see the rationale of the second definition, at least in theoretical terms at this point. However, I cannot understand the thinking of Adventist scholars who seem to accept a full-blown "tools" plus ideology historical-critical method.

If we work together on questions such as the following, some of which overlap, I believe we can narrow the gap between us.

1. What do we have in common on biblical inspiration and hermeneutics?
2. How do we define the "historical-critical method"? Do we view it as necessarily including a philosophy that diminishes divine inspiration and authority or not? What influences have affected our orientations?
3. How do we interpret specific passages of scripture, especially difficult passages, according to our respective hermeneutical approaches? What are the advantages and limitations of our methodologies in actual practice?
4. What potential do historical-critical "tools" have for making a positive contribution to biblical interpretation?
5. Where do we draw the line between proper and improper use of historical-critical "tools"? How can we prevent use of historical-critical disciplines from becoming a "pipeline" for unbiblical influences flowing into our scholarship and thus into the essential faith of our people?

6. Since a number of us have powerful negative associations with the term "critical," could we agree to use

other terminology for an approach that is in harmony with our concept of inspiration? For example, could a "historical-contextual method" include certain kinds of "source-, form-, and redaction-analysis"?

7. How is our role as interpreters of Scripture affected by our responsibility to the teachings and worldwide membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

As we move with care toward dialogue, we should watch for some distracting factors. First, exegesis that is flawed by deficiency of knowledge, unsound reasoning, carelessness, or bias could mistakenly be taken to arise from basic hermeneutical presuppositions. Neither side of the historical-critical issue has a monopoly on bad exegesis, and invalid support for church doctrine can do as much damage as a direct attack.

Second, attaching labels to individuals is natural and convenient, but it can be divisive, misleading, and unfair. Labels and litmus tests are simplistic. Even when they are applied carefully, they cannot do justice to the complexity of real people. This is particularly true in the area of hermeneutics, due to the relatively wide range of thinking on some issues. For example, labeling scholars as those who accept the historical-critical method does not tell us whether their approach is "tools"-only or "tools" plus ideology. Labeling scholars who reject the historical-critical method does not tell us whether they have a balanced view of inerrancy. In either case, the result of labeling can be guilt or innocence by association.

As an Adventist scholar, I desire a safe and friendly environment in which to frankly and profitably discuss loaded questions such as the historical-critical method. We can all afford to learn from each other, and growth through communication does not necessitate compromising our principles. ■

¹ See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, Anchor Bible Commentary Series (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), 20, 21.

THE CASE FOR A BALANCED HERMENEUTIC

In recent years Adventist scholarship has been exercised over issues of inspiration and methods of Bible study. Our struggle closely resembles a similar one currently going on in the evangelical world.



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Few, if any, Adventists have been attracted to the kind of radical liberalism that superciliously dismisses the Scripture or subjects it to destructive criticism. But many have accepted the other extreme of a sort of neofundamentalism that makes untenably exaggerated claims.¹

Writing from within and for the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, Alden Thompson sought to expound a middle way in his groundbreaking work, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*.² Thompson's effort was immediately opposed by Adventist proponents of the inerrantist position.³

Thompson's "codebook vs. casebook" approach is one possible subset of what is referred to as the "incarnational model" of inspiration, while his opponents would not hesitate to designate themselves as inerrantists.⁴

Two views

The two views may be contrasted in various ways. Incarnationalists see the Bible as God's Word given through

human expression. Though assuming divine inspiration, they emphasize the human side of the Bible because that is where the points of contention reveal themselves and because this is the aspect that challenges interpreters. Inerrantists stress the divine nature of the Bible and do not see the human instruments as making much significant impress on the communication. They typically see inspiration extending to the very words of Scripture.

The two approaches start from opposite ends of the problem. The inerrantists reason deductively from general statements that the Bible makes about itself, such as 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21. They assume that such texts imply inerrancy. They labor to resolve specific apparent difficulties and discrepancies found throughout the Scriptures, trusting that those they cannot harmonize will someday be resolved.⁵ By contrast, the incarnationalists' approach is inductive, beginning with the "phenomena of Scripture." To them, whatever inspiration means, it does not eliminate

ROBERT M. JOHNSTON

human slips, so long as they do not impair the main message. When Jesus sent out the Twelve, did He allow them to take a staff (Mark 6:8) or forbid it (Matthew 10:10; Luke 9:3)? Incarnationalists do not regard such details as important; their faith in God's message is unaffected, ascribing such things to the human penmen. Inerrantists, on the other hand, could not concede such a thing without great damage to their faith, for to them everything the penmen wrote is what God said.

Inerrantists base everything on those classic texts in which the Bible writers affirm the divine origin of their messages, such as 2 Timothy 3:16. We must begin, they say, with what the Bible says about itself.

The application of their approach has some problems. First of all, none of these texts is able in fact to bear the weight such an approach forces them to carry. When closely examined, none of them claim inerrancy. Their messages are from God, they are moved by the Holy Spirit, and they are profitable for making us wise unto salvation and instruction in righteousness, and so forth, but nowhere do they claim exactitude in incidental details such as chronology or numbers. They may be right about such things, say incarnationalists, but they do not need to be; that is not necessary to the infallible communication of God's message.

Another problem with the inerrantist approach is its own inconsistency and tendentious selectivity, in that it ignores some things the Bible writers say about themselves. Thus Koranteng-Pipim takes Thompson to task for saying that some Bible writers depended on "Spirit-led research, not revelation in the technical sense."⁶ But Pipim ignores that Thompson had cited specific texts where the writers explicitly acknowledged such dependence (1 Kings 11:41; 1 Chron. 29:29; Luke 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:11). This and similar instances make it appear that inerrantists make their deductions selectively from only those texts that might support their presuppositions.

The most obvious problem is that

inerrantism has no really effective way for dealing honestly with all difficulties. It can rightly solve some problems, it can provide tortured and seriously questionable solutions for others, but it must simply ignore or deny most of them.

A sensible approach

Space allows only a bare outline of what seems to me a sensible approach to these issues, to which large volumes have been devoted.

1. The Bible is God's Word, given through the Holy Spirit, communicating His saving message. This is a given, accepted by faith and confirmed by experience. The Bible is authoritative: It has normative value for people who seek to know and do God's will. It is wrong to try to sort out inspired portions of scripture from uninspired.

2. God's messages were delivered through human instrumentalities and thus bear the impress of human expression. Humanity affected the content, the composition, the textual transmission, and the translation. Human expression includes language, idiom, rhetoric, cultural perspective, illustrations, incidental facts, and some aspects of worldview. When pressed, even inerrantists concede this.⁷ It is necessary to sort out what is human expression and divine message, even though all are inspired.

3. The real issue between the two approaches is not about belief in the Bible but about how the Bible is best understood. Every reader, incarnationalist or inerrantist, can read the Bible only with human eyes and understand it with a human brain. The choice is not between God's Word and human judgment but between one human understanding of God's Word and another human understanding of God's Word. The difference between the two approaches does not lie in the application of human judgment, for all do it,⁸ but in whether or not one acknowledges it. In this connection there are only two kinds of people: those who realize they are applying human judgment to the Bible and those who do not realize they are doing it.

4. Seventh-day Adventists have a special advantage in understanding inspiration, in that we have had in recent memory a modern example of it in the work of Ellen White. In saying this I do not mean to ascribe canonical status to Mrs. White's writings but only to say that in them we have a manifestation of the phenomenon that is recent enough to afford considerable insight into it.⁹ We have her actual autographs, exhibiting such editorial changes as will exclude any idea that inspiration is verbal.

5. Ellen White explicitly supports the incarnational model of inspiration: "The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine with the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.'"¹⁰ To be sure, there is a mystery about it.

6. In the Bible we can discover "a spiritual unity"¹¹ but not a mechanical, superficial unity. Unity in diversity is more profound than mere uniformity, just as singing in parts, with occasional dissonance and counterpoint, is richer than singing in unison.

7. The Scriptures are reliable and trustworthy but not inerrant. By "reliable" we mean that the message God intended to be delivered was delivered and that if the message is believed, obeyed, and followed, the hearer or reader will be guided in the direction God wants him or her to go. By "not inerrant" we mean that attendant details with which the message is infleshed, but which are not an essential part of it, may have their origin in the culture or personality of the human messenger. As even the inerrantist Chicago Statement says, "We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. . . ."¹²

8. Interpretation has two aspects: discovering what the Bible writer *meant* when he wrote for his original audience (exegesis) and discovering what the writing *means* for God's people today. The two aspects are joined by analogy,

for God and human need do not change. The first aspect is the realm of literary and historical study; it is discoverable by close and careful effort, informed by all the information and scholarly tools we can get our hands on. In principle, even an unbeliever, if honest and competent, can make such a study, for one need not be a believer to learn Hebrew or to study archaeology and history or to master literary forms. But the second aspect is a field open only to believers, for proper application of the Word to our own condition is possible only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹³ The two aspects correspond to works and faith. Exegesis is hard work, but it bears no fruit unto salvation without faith.

9. God in His merciful condescension does in fact accommodate His message to popular opinions, even opinions that are in error (*pace* Pipim!).¹⁴ Jesus said that Moses did it (Matt. 19:8), and Ellen White said that Jesus did it.¹⁵ Some laws, such as many of the laws of Moses in Leviticus, are contextual applications of broader, eternal principles.

10. The technology of exegesis welcomes any method that shows promise of being helpful. This includes the historical-critical disciplines, which we do not hesitate to apply to the writings of Ellen White and which we ought not to hesitate to apply in a reverent and respectful way to the Bible. Source criticism, for example, is evident in the endplates of the *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*, as well as in recent studies on the sources Ellen White used for *The Desire of Ages* and *The Great Controversy*. Redaction criticism has been usefully applied also, as for example when our very passages in *1 Selected Messages* dealing with inspiration (taken from MS 24, 1886) are placed alongside the corresponding passages in a book by Calvin Stowe that was apparently one of Ellen White's sources.¹⁶ She did not simply copy but made significant modifications, the study of which affords a valuable clue to her theology.¹⁷ It is indeed possible to utilize these study methods without embracing any tendencies toward antisuper-naturalism.¹⁸

The application of the historical disciplines is simply attending to the "time, place, and circumstances," as careful students of Ellen White's writings have told us to do.¹⁹

The imperfection and inadequacy of human understanding must be acknowledged, but it must not be despised, for it is all we have. We must apply it to the Bible with vigor and then apply the Bible to ourselves with vigor.

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.

Such a hermeneutic makes us distinctive, but there is no virtue in that. The virtue of the Adventist hermeneutic is that our special insights enable us to find our way in our own search for truth and make a contribution to the Christian world in its quest. ■

¹³ Such views were vigorously promoted during the last three decades by certain teachers in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and some members of the Biblical Research Institute. Perhaps the noblest articulation of this position by Evangelicals is the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The latter has been published in several places; e.g., see Ronald Youngblood, ed., *Evangelicals and Inerrancy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 230-239.

¹⁴ Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1991.

¹⁵ Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers, vol. 1 (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventist Theological Society, 1992); see also Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996). An admirably cogent critique of the positions of both Thompson and Pipim has been provided by Tim Crosby, "The Bible: Inspiration and Authority," *Ministry* (May 1998), 18-20. Unfortunately, Crosby's own proposal seems to be rather forced.

¹⁶ Thus Koranteng-Pipim states as an assumption: "All the claims that the Bible makes on any subject— theology, history, science, chronology, numbers, etc.—are absolutely trustworthy and dependable" (*Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, 63, n. 3).

¹⁷ Thus the Chicago Statement says, "Apparent inconsistencies should not be ignored. Solution of them, where this can be convincingly achieved, will encourage our faith, and where for the present no convincing solution is at hand we shall significantly honor God by trusting His assurance that His Word is true, despite these appearances, and by maintaining our confidence that one day they will be seen to have been illusions" (Youngblood, 238).

¹⁸ *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, 36; Pipim is referring to Thompson, 48.

¹⁹ Thus the Chicago Statement says: "We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each

passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of his penmen's milieu, a milieu that God controls in His sovereign providence; it is misinterpretation to imagine otherwise.

"So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: Since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectation in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed" (Youngblood, 337, 338).

⁸ Thus, when Pipim explains why 2 Samuel 24 says that God provoked David to number Israel, but 1 Chronicles 21 says Satan did it, he resorts to the concept of God's permissive will (*Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, 52). This concept does not come out of the text but from systematic theology. It is a useful concept but nonetheless a human explanation.

⁹ The Chicago Statement would deny any such thing. Article V states: "We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings" (Youngblood, 232).

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1950), vi.

¹¹ ———, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 1:20.

¹² Article XIII, Youngblood, 233-234. Similarly Pipim says, "Mark's allegedly wrong citation is actually the result of some twentieth-century scholars' insistence that the first century Jewish writer must follow modern literary standards. . . . Mark, however, does not follow our modern conventions" (*Receiving the Word*, 294, 295).

¹³ Systematic theologians distinguish between inspiration (that which is granted to the Bible writers) and illumination (that which is granted to Bible readers). It is a distinction the Scriptures themselves do not make. Ellen White uses the terms interchangeably, as when she says, "Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages" (*The Great Controversy*, x).

¹⁴ Pipim finds this idea especially distasteful. See *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, 49.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 263.

¹⁶ C. E. Stowe, *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible, Both Canonical and the Apocryphal, Designed to Show What the Bible Is Not, What It Is, and How to Use It* (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Publishing Company, 1867), 13-20.

¹⁷ See David Neff, "Ellen White's Theological and Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe" (1979), an unpublished paper available from the White Estate.

¹⁸ Ernst Troeltsch gave the historical-critical method its classical articulation. He based it on three foundational principles: criticism, correlation, and analogy. We can have no argument with the first principle, we must disagree with part of the second, and we who have experienced miracles in our own lives can accept the third.

Many Adventists know only a caricature of the historical-critical method, reacting emotionally to the term without really understanding what the term stands for, and being unaware of use of the method by conservative scholars such as F. F. Bruce, T. W. Manson, Eldon Ladd, and Robert H. Stein. For a genuinely educational treatment by evangelical scholars, see David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, eds., *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1991).

¹⁹ See Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1998), 372-465.

NINE FOUNDATIONS FOR AN ADVENTIST HERMENEUTIC

The most urgent task facing Adventist biblical scholars today is to reach consensus on principles of interpretation.



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Of all Christian bodies, we are a people who, from our inception, have looked to the Bible as the source and standard for our beliefs. Because of our pioneers' understanding of what the Scriptures taught and did not teach, they stepped out from the existing churches of their day. Because of the same convictions, to this day Seventh-day Adventists retain a unique identity, core teachings, and sense of mission.

But the disturbing fact is that Adventist scholars are now divided over hermeneutics—how we should interpret the Bible. In my judgment they are not radically divided—the gap is not as great as some have stated—but significant differences do exist.

How we came to this point in our history makes an interesting story but cannot concern us here. The most urgent need is that we come to grips with our situation and find a process to reach speedy and genuine consensus.

In this connection the studies in this

issue of *Ministry* by Professors Johnston and Gane provide a helpful beginning. Well-reasoned and thoughtful, they proceed from an embrative rather than a confrontational stance. This is the prerequisite for fruitful dialog. I shall briefly analyze these papers and then, employing perspectives from them, along with my own reflections on the topic, suggest nine foundations for an Adventist hermeneutic.

Observations about Johnston and Gane

The first thing to note about these studies is that they are not parallel. They intersect but do not have the same focus. Johnston is concerned with setting out his view of an Adventist hermeneutic, but Gane zeros in on the role of the historical-critical method in such a hermeneutic. Johnston's paper confines itself to Adventist scholarship; Gane's ranges more widely, taking up the various ways some non-Adventist scholars employ the historical-critical method.

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Despite these different foci, the concerns of the two papers overlap so widely that they easily lend themselves to comparison and contrast. And the result that emerges—this is the second item to note—is the large measure of agreement between the two. If we compare Johnston's ten points with Gane's 11, we find full or partial correspondence in no fewer than nine areas. In fact, the two writers do not disagree on any major matter. The points they do not share—Ellen White's writings as a model (Johnston), the critical approach that dissects Scripture, and the danger of some commentaries (Gane)—are complementary to the areas of agreement, not areas needing heavy negotiation.

Third, I am struck once again with the slipperiness of language. Gane well describes the conundrum posed by the term "higher critical method" because of the several ways in which it may be understood, but another term, "inerrantist," begins to look problematical in view of the qualifications to the Chicago Statement pointed out by Johnston. Any attempt to achieve an Adventist hermeneutic will have to take into account the semantic loading of the agenda and seek to find a way through it.

Foundations for an Adventist hermeneutic

I propose the nine points that follow as foundations for an Adventist hermeneutic. These suggestions are not in the nature of a *via media* or compromise between Johnston's and Gane's views. Rather, with Johnston's and Gane's fine contributions in mind, they are the distillation of convictions that have taken root in my soul from nearly forty years in Adventist ministry, 20 of them devoted to the teaching of Scripture.

1. An Adventist hermeneutic must be one for the whole church, lay people as well as scholars

As one who was given the opportunity for advanced studies, I hope we as a people will view our scholars as an asset, not a threat; as especially gifted servants of the church rather than

distrusted functionaries. On the other hand, I hope our scholars will not view their learning as an end in itself but as a privilege that enables them to share the riches of Scripture with the people of the church. Above all, I hope we will sedulously refrain from setting up scholars as experts.

As Protestant Christians, Adventists have no "experts" in Scripture. Every man or woman may open the Bible and be taught by the one Expert, the Holy

In coming to the
 Bible most of us will first see it as
 a human [rather than a divine]
 writing, just as the people of
 Jesus' day first saw His
 humanity. In both cases faith
 leads beyond humanity to
 divinity. With that
 presupposition our underlying
 perspective changes.

Spirit. Scholars can help us by suggesting insights and aids to understanding the Bible, but they can never—must never—replace the one-on-one dynamic of the individual believer with the God of the Bible.

No elitism in the Adventist Church! No hermeneutic that in itself tends to require a Ph.D. or Th.D. Nothing that makes it a necessity to know Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. The Adventist hermeneutic must be one for the whole church.

2. The divine factor in Scripture

Ellen White, one of the most influential voices for Adventists, provides for me a most succinct and powerful un-

derstanding of Scripture: "The Ten Commandments were 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. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).¹

We must first say of the Bible that it is the Word of God, just as we must first say of Jesus that He is the Son of God. Yet in coming to the Bible, most of us will first see it as a human writing, just as the people of Jesus' day first saw His humanity. In both cases faith leads beyond humanity to divinity. With that presupposition our underlying perspective changes.

For this reason I have a quarrel with any and all attempts to study the Bible merely as one would probe any other writing, ancient or contemporary. Researchers in any discipline agree that the method employed should be congruent with the content. Strangely, however, much of modern critical scholarship attempts to study the Scriptures while bracketing out any possibility of a divine element—which is in fact the constitutive factor. As a child of the Enlightenment and seeking to free study from dogmatic conclusions required by ecclesiastical officials, it has nonetheless set aside that which is at the heart of its subject matter. If we are to rightly interpret Scripture, we must come with an attitude of humble, prayerful listening to God's Word.

3. The humanity of Scripture

Concerning the Bible, we affirm: It is the Word of God, and it is a human word. There is a divine mystery here. Again, it is similar to the union of divinity and humanity in the person of our Savior. We may struggle to understand the conundrum, but ultimately we must accept the mystery. To insist on logical clarity will result in the improper placement of one element or the other.

We must candidly acknowledge the humanity of Scripture, with imperfections of language and concept, mistakes in copying and translation, lack of perfect order and apparent unity. It is true that "it is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired"²—thus we do break with a fundamentalist stance.

These words are scary. It would be simpler to live with a Bible where every word was dictated by God, just as it would be easier to grasp the mystery of Jesus' person if His humanity was only a shell or a form. Just as some Christians have never really viewed Jesus as truly a man, so there is the strong tendency in others to think that the inspiration of Scripture is threatened if we take its humanity seriously.

Here is an example from my own field of specialized study, the New Testament: A significant group of scholarly critics have had a field day dissecting the Gospels, casting doubt on the very person of our Lord until one is left up in the air as to what Jesus actually said and what was put into His mouth by the church that succeeded Him; until His miraculous birth, miracles, and resurrection are relegated to the category of myth. These critics are prepared to concede one thing about Jesus, however: that He died on a cross.

Notice how each of the Gospels records the words Pilate placed over Jesus' head. The fact, surprising at first glance, is that each writer gives a different account of Pilate's words. How could this be? What did Pilate *actually* write? But let's step back and take another look at the cross. Whether we go with Matthew's Gospel ("This is Jesus, the King of the Jews," Matt. 27:37), Mark's ("The King of the Jews," Mark 15:26), Luke's ("This is the King of the Jews," Luke 23:38), or John's ("Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," John 19:19), each writer makes the same point about Jesus—He *was* the King of the Jews. Memory is tricky and selective, but the key idea—the idea God wants us to get—comes through clearly.

4. Let the Bible interpret itself

Because the Bible is the Word of

God, it has but one Author, along with many penmen. That means that the Scriptures have a deep unity, a spiritual unity, that reveals itself to the earnest, careful seeker. Often that unity is obscured by the humanity of the Bible—the frailties of the penmen, the time and place of the revealing of the Word of God—but we must always seek to see the big picture. We need to read and study the whole Bible, neglecting no chapter or book because it seems less appealing to us.

Allowing the Bible to interpret itself also means that we do not impose a priori conclusions on the text. We listen to Scripture; we do not assert, for instance, that *because* inspiration means such and such or our theology demands thus and so, the text *cannot* mean what it appears to us.

The Adventist hermeneutic must be shaped by actual study of the Word. We may with profit be informed by what others have written about the Bible, but our approach must arise out of the deep study of the Bible itself.

5. Interpretation is more an art than a science

God reveals Himself in the Bible—it is the Word of God—and He has not obscured the message He wants to convey. By prayerful, careful study of the entire revelation of Scripture, earnest seekers for truth will know what God is like and how they may come into saving relationship with Him.

But biblical study is an art more than it is a science. We bring to the Scriptures our individual personalities and backgrounds; we filter the Bible through our life experiences. Scripture has a mysterious way of speaking to us directly, one on one. In no sense, therefore, is it true that any one of us can lay claim to the *one*, definitive meaning of Scripture. I have been impressed with the truth of this many times as I have listened to others comment on a passage, such as when I have heard an African-American preacher unlock the richness and depths of texts that speak of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage.

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6. We need each other

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7. Jettison loaded terminology

Reluctantly, I have concluded that Adventist students of the Word would be advised to delete the term “historical-critical method” from their vocabulary. I am loathe to coin another term for our approach—do we even need a new term?—but I am certain that “historical-critical method” has become a bugaboo among us, an expression that raises hackles and engenders heat rather than light. Adventist scholars will not come together until they abandon this terminology.

I am quite clear that the ruling pre-suppositions of the method—the ruling out of the supernatural, history as a closed continuum, the merely “objective” stance—cannot be part of an Adventist hermeneutic. That approach eviscerates the text. It robs it of its heart and soul.

But I am also clear that, because the Bible is a human writing, it may be studied as such. I did my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University, and, like other Adventist scholars before me, took the required course in biblical method from the late great Professor J. Philip Hyatt. The first area we studied under the historical-critical method was textual criticism. Today, I don't know any Adventist biblical scholar who does not see the value of, and employ, this method. Nevertheless, I think it invites endless debate to argue that, because of this common use of textual criticism, Adventist scholars have involved themselves in the historical-critical method.

We may need to jettison other terms that get in the way. For example, is the term “inerrantist” helpful or unhelpful? Are we all agreed on its precise meaning?

8. Concentrate on the plain teachings of Scripture, not the “hard nuts”

I don't say we should neglect the “hard nuts”—they may contain a kernel that the Lord will use to shake up our thinking and our living. But we should not focus on the difficult passages of Scripture, becoming preoccupied with problem texts until we begin to lose our underlying perspective.

The person for whom the Bible no longer contains any difficulties is the

person who has ceased to think. But likewise, the person who continually dwells on the “hard nuts” will become unbalanced in hermeneutic and perhaps in faith.

9. Study, apply, do

The Adventist hermeneutic cannot be content with understanding alone. The apostle John sums up the purpose of Scripture: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31, NIV).

The text may be understood as *coming* to believe in Jesus as the Christ or *continuing* to believe in Jesus as the Christ (the ancient manuscripts vary in the tense of the verb). In either case, the point is cogent: The Bible is meant to lead to faith.

So our study of the Scriptures, whether we are pastors, scholars, or lay members, will not be an end in itself. The study involves intellectual activity, but it is not merely an intellectual pursuit. The Lord intends that our endeavors to interpret His Word will involve our whole being and will result in crucial changes in us. We will feed on His Word and interact with His Spirit and grow thereby. And further, we shall be better equipped to impart His Word to others.

The curse of so much modern biblical scholarship is its intentional stance of detachment from the faith and commitment that the text demands. We are all subject to falling into a similar pit—arguing about the meaning of the text instead of living the text or debating how to study the Bible when we ought to be actually interacting with the Lord Himself through it.

May that Lord make us men and women who rightly divide the word of truth. And who live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. ■

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1888), v, vi.

² See Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 1:21.

What to Do If Your Church Member Is Scheduled to Take a Test on Sabbath

STEPS TO ACTION

1. If a test is scheduled at a time that conflicts with a member's religious beliefs, the member should inform the teacher immediately.
2. The member should offer to take the exam at another time, and under appropriate conditions, which includes offering to pay for a proctor if necessary.
3. If the teacher refuses, the member should contact the school administrator.
4. The member must emphasize that the request is in conformance with his or her religious beliefs. (There may be other students of the same religion who do not request accommodation.)
5. If a member is required to take a test as a condition of employment, at a time that conflicts with his or her religious beliefs, he/she should immediately request an accommodation.
6. Offer alternative times of availability to be tested, either before or after the time scheduled.
7. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Guidelines indicate that unless an employer can demonstrate undue hardship on the conduct of its business, an employer has an obligation to make reasonable accommodation by rescheduling the test at a time other than one that conflicts with the employee's religious beliefs.
8. Most government tests routinely provide alternative test dates.
9. Contact your local PARL director, provide the date and time of the test, and the name and telephone number of the teacher or employer. Do not wait until the last minute. The earlier the intervention, the more likelihood of success.

Ministers

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HOW SCRIPTURE SHOULD FUNCTION IN THEOLOGY

In one way or another, all Christian theology—fundamentalist, conservative, progressive, and liberal—must affirm the authority of Scripture.¹

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In this essay I will identify and briefly explain three important principles for the way Scripture should function in Christian theology—that is, in the interpretation of faith, or in faith's search for understanding.² These principles are (1) Scripture's priority over every subsequent tradition; (2) its wholeness; and (3) its theological Christocentricity.³

Priority over every subsequent tradition

The theological priority of Scripture must be maintained over every subsequent Christian theological tradition. The ground of this priority is the fact that it is in and through the documents of scripture—climaxing with the New Testament and especially the Gospels—that we come closest to the actual revelation of God in Jesus the Messiah. Hence the need for “a constant overhaul of dogmatic development by the standard of Christian origins; and ‘Christian origins’ can only mean in

practice the evidences we have for Christian origins.”⁴

As a resource for theological thinking, a heritage of traditional understanding is exceedingly valuable to a community of faith and to its individual members. It provides a viewpoint, a frame of reference, a place to stand, a foundation. But a traditional theology is always subject to revision in the light of a more adequate understanding of the meaning of Scripture.

Theological traditions, however, tend to solidify and to become fortresses to be defended at all costs rather than foundations on which to build larger and better understandings of eternal truth. Indeed, traditions tend to become absolute and to assume an authority of their own, almost as if they were independent of the scripture of which they were originally expressions and interpretations. When this happens, scripture is used in support and defense of the tradition; scripture thus becomes

the means, and tradition becomes the end. The tradition is then the primary object of theological respect, and Scripture is its agent instead of its norm, its servant instead of its master.

A similar distortion occurs in the theological biblicism that "makes believing a theology about the Bible almost more important, if not foundational, for believing its content; this same biblicism tends to force belief into a pattern of first assenting to a kind of theism read from between the lines before one can go on to use the lines themselves."⁵ Here theology is the prerequisite to understanding the Bible.

The danger of elevating and absolutizing a theological tradition is especially great when a particular interpretation of faith is ecclesiastically inherited rather than personally discovered—when it is regarded as a sacred trust rather than an incentive to theological growth, a sort of heirloom to be treasured, protected, and polished but certainly not to be thoughtfully adapted to suit one's present needs. The danger is greater still when an inherited understanding is vigorously attacked from outside the community of faith or seriously questioned from within; for then the natural impulse is to defend the tradition rather than to acknowledge its fallibility and seek to correct and improve it.

The coincidence of these factors makes the absolutization of a theological tradition entirely understandable and almost inevitable; it does not, however, make it right. Nor does it become right if it happens to be *one's own* tradition that is inherited, solidified, questioned, and absolutized. This is a possibility of which thoughtful Christians should be continually aware, and they should do everything they can to keep it from happening within the community of faith. Christian theological thinking, collective as well as individual, must always remain subordinate to, and in the service of, Scripture. In the words of the Scottish theologian T. F. Torrance a generation ago, our theology "stands or falls with sheer respect for the Majesty and Freedom of God in His Word and

for the transcendence of His Truth over all our statements about it even when we do our utmost to make them aright."⁶

The wholeness of Scripture

It is Scripture as a whole that is the primary source and norm of Christian theological thinking, so "when we appeal to Scripture, we appeal to Scripture as a whole."⁷ As a basis for theology, Scripture functions, like the human body, by means of a dynamic interrelation and interaction of differentiated parts. This characteristic of Scripture has both exegetical and theological significance.

While each part of scripture belongs to the whole and the whole is for Christians unified by the centrality of the figure of Jesus, each part retains its own individuality, which must always be respected.

The basic *fact* that each part, each literary unit, is related to the whole and to the various other parts, it may plausibly be assumed on the basis of its presence within the canon of Scripture that was established over time by the consensus of the Christian community. But the particular *ways* in which a given part is related to the whole and to the other parts cannot simply be assumed. The precise nature of these relationships can be known only through careful exegesis, which examines a passage first of all in relation to its own literary and historical context.

It may, for example, be appropriate to ask whether we can understand the book of Revelation better in the light of, say, the letter to the Romans; but it is surely not appropriate for us to decide in advance that John must be echoing Paul. Similarly, it is highly significant that Jesus was a Jew; but we should not assume that between the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels there is only theological continuity and no tension, as if Jesus were simply the outcome and expression (albeit a uniquely powerful and creative one) of ancient Judaism. Nor can we presuppose that all of the New Testament materials relating to the process of salvation are simply variations on the theme of justification; they may

in fact be saying something quite different, and what they say may require some modification of the theological force of the metaphor of justification.

The wholeness of Scripture, in other words, does not legitimate an imposed consensus that results in a theological homogenization of its various and diverse parts.⁸ "These disparate elements are not to be 'harmonized' into some innocuous consensus. Their function is, rather, to stimulate more thorough reflection and more lively apprehension of the canonical witness and its implications."⁹

If the exegetical implication of the dynamic wholeness of Scripture is a recognition of and respect for the individuality of its different parts, the correlative theological implication is a recognition of the "resultant" and "constructive" character of a total theological understanding of scripture in regard to any given subject.

What I mean here by "resultant" may be clarified by a simple analogy: If an airplane is headed due north at a speed of 600 m.p.h. while a high-altitude wind is blowing due east at 50 m.p.h., the resultant direction of travel is neither due north nor due east but a geometric combination of the two vectors; namely, north-northeast.

Similarly, the biblical materials relating to a given subject may well include differing "theological vectors," so that the "resultant theological direction" is not identical with the theological thrust of any one passage of scripture by itself. A failure to recognize this possibility may lead to theological mischief: "Confusion results when texts that relate events in the flow of redemptive history are isolated from the context of the Bible as a whole and are treated as prescriptions to be imitated by the church in all ages."¹⁰

An especially important example of this theological phenomenon is the role of a person's behavior (or "works") in the process of salvation. It is immediately evident to even a casual reader of the New Testament that Paul and James did not say the same thing¹¹—and determining precisely what each did in fact say, and how the different per-

spectives are related, requires much more than casual attention. Rather than regarding either Paul or James as normative and reinterpreting the other to bring him into harmony with the presumed norm, a truly scriptural view of "faith and works" must take serious account of the views of both Paul and James, and other writers as well. The result will be a formulation that is truly "canonical" in the sense that it reflects the content of the entire scriptural canon but may not be strictly identical with any of the individual scriptural sources.¹²

Another example of the "resultant" character of any "scriptural" or "canonical" interpretation of faith is the doctrine of atonement. Here the New Testament contributes several different metaphors, including ransom (or redemption), healing, cleansing, justification (or, preferably, "putting right"), and dying to sin. Each of these metaphors correlates with a logically prior metaphor for the human predicament: slavery, sickness, defilement, rebellion, and death. While the various metaphors are properly understood as complementary to each other, they are not simply cumulative: In some respects they are mutually reinforcing, but in other respects they are mutually limiting.

In short, it is primarily in the course of the subsequent *theological* task rather than in the course of the prior *exegetical* task that the principle that "scripture is its own interpreter" is most helpfully operative. But if, for example, we want to know what Hosea understood and intended when he quoted Yahweh as saying, "Out of Egypt I called my son," we should consult Hosea's own account in its historical and literary context, not Matthew's much later use of those words in a very different context.¹³

To say that a "scriptural doctrine of" is "constructive" as well as "resultant" recognizes the fact that the various materials of Scripture are often theologically synergistic. Together they may point beyond the explicit content of any or all of them, so that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. Historically, the most prominent example of this phenomenon is the Christian understanding of God as Trinity, which nowhere in Scripture is stated as such, but which in some form is theologically essential even if the traditional formulations are regarded as not entirely satisfactory.¹⁴

While my claim here that theology is "constructive" is much more modest and much less speculative than are some

similar claims in contemporary theology,¹⁵ it does reflect the fact that theology, like science, necessarily goes beyond the evidence whenever it does anything more than merely catalog the relevant data: To relate facts or ideas, as well as to look for their antecedents or explain their implications, is to "construct." Theology is, after all, faith's search for understanding; it is not only an interpretation of *faith* but also an *interpretation* of faith.

Both the "resultant" and the "constructive" characteristics of the theology of Scripture are complicated by the fact that the materials of Scripture are of quite different kinds, including historical narrative, theological polemic, liturgical hymns, imaginative parables, ecclesiastical procedures, and practical advice. If Scripture is to function theologically as a whole, we must consider all of the relevant materials, and in the course of our consideration, we must recognize the qualitative differences among the various kinds of materials and the implications of these differences for determining the respective theological force of particular passages.

To establish, for example, a "scriptural understanding of the role of women in ministry," it is necessary to consider not only the directly relevant materials (including instances of women in various kinds of ministry¹⁶ and instances of restrictions of or limitations on the role of women)¹⁷ but also related themes (such as gender differentiation as a primordial element in created human nature,¹⁸ the equality of all humanity in Christ,¹⁹ and the nature and function of Christian ministry), and even the many casual references to women, which may collectively disclose significant attitudes toward womanhood.

Another example is the "scriptural understanding of the Sabbath," which involves the creation narrative,²⁰ the two formulations of the fourth commandment,²¹ and the Sabbath experiences of Jesus and the apostles. It involves also—and perhaps most significantly—the attention to the experiential and theological meaning of Sabbath time demonstrated in all of the Gospels,²² re-

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flecting a continuing interest in the Sabbath on the part of the Christian communities whose religious life was the context for the writing of the New Testament documents.²³

So it is evident that the task of elucidating a "scriptural doctrine" or "scriptural understanding" requires not only a careful examination of so-called "proof texts" and "problem texts" but also a consideration of all the materials that are directly or indirectly relevant, plus the far more complicated theological integration of the results.

Scripture must function theologically as a whole. "All of scripture should be heard if its canonical sense is to be most fully discerned."²⁴ In its totality lies its theological authority. Like the authority of a board of trustees of a college or university, the theological authority of Scripture is necessarily a collective authority. Individually the voices are often illuminating, but they are authoritative only as part of the whole.

Theological Christocentricity in Scripture

The theological meaning of the whole of Scripture is centered in Jesus the Messiah, the definitive revelation of the character of God; and the meaning of each part of scripture is understood in relation to this center. It is the Incarnate God who is the focus and the ultimate criterion of Christian theology.²⁵

We recognize that Jesus the Messiah was human, and so were those who wrote the Gospel stories through which we know Jesus, as well as the linguistic media (Aramaic, Greek, etc.) through which the stories come to us. And we know that, in principle, nothing human can completely express the reality of God. But notwithstanding this inescapable "qualification" of His revelatory function, Jesus remains the center and norm of all our theological thinking.

Apart from their relation to this theological center, all the other parts of scripture—the history, law, poetry, and prophecy of Hebrew scripture and the narratives and letters of the apostolic writings—are, from a Christian perspec-

tive, inadequately understood. Indeed, according to the British theologian Austin Farrer, apart from this relationship the other parts of scripture would hardly be worth reading at all:

"Christ is the golden heart of scripture. Indeed, if he were not there, the rest would not concern me. Why do I read Paul? Because he sets Christ forth. Why do I read the Old Testament? Because it is the spiritual inheritance Christ received, it is what he filled his mind with, it is the soil in which his thought grew, it is the alphabet in which

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he spelled, it is the body of doctrine which he took over and transformed."²⁶

The other parts of scripture are not, to be sure, utterly meaningless apart from their orientation to Jesus the Messiah. The Ten Commandments and many of the psalms, to take obvious examples, are in themselves broadly relevant to human existence. But for a Christian their meaning is incomplete.

Three things need to be noted regarding this Christocentric understanding of Scripture:

- First, it identifies a *theological* rather than an *exegetical* principle. That is, it does not suppose that every part of scripture was originally intended to refer to the revelation in Jesus the Messiah. Rather, it is the theological significance of each part that is to be understood in

relation to this supreme revelation.

- Second, the principle of Christocentricity is a principle of relationship and interpretation, not of exclusion; the "Light of the world" is the light in which the whole canon is read. Neither the stories of mass destruction nor the imprecatory psalms are to be omitted; but it is in the illumination provided by this Light that they are to be interpreted and understood.

- Third, the relation between the story of Jesus in the Gospels and the other parts of scripture is reciprocal but not symmetrical. Certainly His Messianic mission cannot be adequately understood without both the historical and theological context provided by the Hebrew scriptures and the historical consequences and theological implications provided by the apostolic writings. Yet the supreme revelation disclosed its theological preeminence as Jesus, taking the role of the consummate Moses, radicalized the tradition of *torah* and proclaimed a higher kind of righteousness. Citing what had been "said in ancient times," He declared, by way of contrast, "Now I say to you. . . ." ²⁷ The same combination of continuity and preeminence was indicated again in the letter to the Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets; in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." ²⁸ In Jesus the Messiah the revelatory process reached its zenith; here the character of God became most plainly visible.

There is an obvious sense, then, in which scripture itself is theologically progressive. On the one hand, there are important continuities between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, such as the themes of Creation and renewal, sacrificial atonement, law, covenant, and the kingdom of God in history and beyond. And on the other hand, the New Testament says some things the Hebrew scriptures do not say, such as the truth that atonement is not merely God's provision of sacrifice but God's *self-sacrifice*. Yet this revelatory progression does not make the earlier scriptures irrelevant, superseded, replaced or *passé*; they are not a de-

developmental "stage" or "phase" of revelation that was subsequently outgrown and should therefore be left behind, any more than algebra is left behind when a mathematics student learns calculus. What is prior in revelation never becomes meaningless; it is incorporated into (literally, it becomes part of the body of) that which transcends it.

If the meaning of Scripture, the norm of theological thinking, is centered in Jesus the Messiah, it follows that theology, too, is centered in Him. In fact, if a Christian theology revolves around another center, it is, quite literally, *eccentric*; and every denominational theology must be careful that it avoids this kind of theological eccentricity. The distinctive beliefs and practices of any lived expression of Christian faith are theologically legitimate and spiritually valid only in relation to, and as implications of, the truth of the authentic theological center.

Existential perspective

One final point needs to be made here, not as another methodological principle but as an existential, spiritual perspective.

The goal of theological thinking is not simply an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of Scripture but ultimately a responsive and transforming knowledge of the character, activity, and will of God—what God is, what God does, and what God wants. Similarly, as Charles Wood observed nearly two decades ago, the purpose of Scripture is not simply to ground the formulation of an appropriate and adequate theology but ultimately to foster the present and continuing experience of salvation:

"Our primary aim as Christians in the interpretation of Scripture is to grow in [the] knowledge [of God]: to be reminded, against our inveterate tendency to forget, who God is and who we are, what God's bearing toward us is and what that means for our common life as God's creatures. Scripture serves this reminding function by disclosing God to us and simultaneously giving us the concepts requisite to our hearing and

apprehending of the disclosure."²⁹

In other words, the objective of scriptural study is "to understand through the text, rather than being forever preoccupied with the text itself." Thus we try diligently to avoid both "bibliolatry" and "theologolatry"—the worship of the biblical text and the worship of our own interpretation of faith.

The proper outcome of theological thinking is "to create fervor, to elicit a hymnody, to cause rejoicing."³⁰ Theology, born of a holistic encounter with the Christ of scripture indeed creates "a lyrical calling"; and "even when it is doing its best to think clearly, [and] lay out the Christian doctrines logically, it draws much of its motivation from the beauty that such thinking brings to mind."³¹ It calls for and inspires one to effectively act in consistency with that which is called forth. Both theology and scripture, which is its center and norm, are neither more nor less than instruments of grace, contributing to the ultimate triumph of God's universal love. ■

¹ This claim is admittedly problematic, both because it is seriously disputed and also because there is no consensus about the meaning "scriptural authority." See, for example, David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 1, 2 and 10, 11, n. 2, and the literature cited there.

² The most famous, and probably the most useful, definition of theology was provided in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109), *Proslogion*, preface: "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*).

³ For other Protestant views of the role(s) of Scripture in theology, see also *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996). For recent Roman Catholic views, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1994); and Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for Theological Use of Scripture* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1997). This kind of affirmation is essential because to be Christian means to regard the story of Jesus the Messiah as the clearest revelation of God's character, activity, and relation to created reality; and Scripture is our primary source of information about Jesus.

⁴ Austin Farrer, *Interpretation and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1976), 158.

⁵ Paul L. Holmer, "Contemporary Evangelical Faith: An Assessment and Critique," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing*, ed. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 81.

⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford, 1969), 352.

⁷ John B. Cobb, *Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 178, describing the view of Karl Barth.

⁸ A notable example of unwarranted harmonization is the Song of Solomon, whose sexually explicit language has generated centuries of attempts to understand it as meaning something other than what it most obviously says. Besides its historic spiritualization and Christologization, it has recently been reinterpreted as a political treatise in favor of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in Judah; see Luis Stadelmann, *Love and Politics: A New Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

⁹ Charles M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 110.

¹⁰ Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 173.

¹¹ Compare, for example, Gal. 2:16, "We have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law," and James 2:17, 18, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. . . . Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

¹² Wood describes this process in terms somewhat different from those used here, citing the letter of James as an example and designating its modification in the light of other scriptural (presumably Pauline) materials as its "canonical sense" or "canonical significance" (72–74). For, as he says later, the "canon is not merely an anthology of documents, but, rather, the product of their interaction" (109); therefore, it can be said that "no portion of scripture is above criticism in the light of the canon" (108). I prefer, however, to use the term "canonical sense" to refer to the resultant theological formulation; that is, the sense of the canon as a whole, equivalent to what I call a "scriptural understanding."

¹³ Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:15.

¹⁴ Besides the gender specificity of the terms *Father* and *Son*, the difficulty of the notion of God as "three persons" has been recognized at least since the beginning of the fifth century. Augustine noted in *De Trinitate*, 5.9.10, that if we speak of God as "three persons," we do so "not in order to say that, but in order not to remain silent" (translation supplied). For a standard but less precise translation, see *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 3:109.

For a brief discussion of the problematic character of "person" language in reference to God, see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 275–280.

¹⁵ The idea of "theology as construction" has been developed extensively by Gordon D. Kaufman in *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975; 3rd ed., Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1993).

¹⁶ For example, Matt. 28:7, 8; Mark 16:7; Luke 8:1–3; 24:8–10; John 20:17, 18; Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12; 1 Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:3.

¹⁷ For example, 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12.

¹⁸ Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:18–25.

¹⁹ Gal. 3:28; Eph. 5:21; etc.

²⁰ Gen. 2:1–3.

²¹ Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15.

²² See Herbert E. Saunders, *The Sabbath: Symbol of Creation and Recreation* (Plainfield, N.J.: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1970), 33–53; Niels-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption: A Study of the Biblical Sabbath* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1978), 95–108; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 26–63, 69–73; *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Berrien Springs: Samuele Bacchiocchi, 1980), 147–166; and John C. Brunt, *A Day for Healing: The Meaning of Jesus' Sabbath Miracles* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981).

²³ See Herold Weiss, "The Sabbath in Matthew, Mark, and Luke," *Spectrum* 19/1 (Aug. 1988): 33–39; James J. C. Cox, "Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Sabbath—According to the Gospel of John," *Spectrum* 19/1 (Aug. 1988): 40–46.

²⁴ Wood, 111. For the importance of nonexplicit but relevant biblical materials in ethical reflection and decision making, see John C. Brunt, *Decisions: How to Use Biblical Guidelines When Making Decisions* (Nashville: Southern, 1979), 15–23, 63–73.

²⁵ In the language of the Reformation, Christ was the "unnormed norm" of theology, the norm that is not itself subject to any other norm; the Latin formula was *norma normans non normata*. See Wood, 101, 102.

²⁶ Farrer, 12, 13.

²⁷ Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44. The usual English translation, "But I say to you" suggests a greater discontinuity than is warranted either linguistically or contextually.

²⁸ Heb. 1:1, 2. Here there is no adversative conjunction at all in the Greek text; the word *but* is supplied by the most common English translations, including the Revised Standard Version, New English Bible, Jerusalem Bible, Today's English Version, New International Version, and New Revised Standard Version. A notable exception is the New American Standard Bible.

²⁹ Wood, 38.

³⁰ Wood, 43; on the distinction between the "understanding of language" and "understanding through language" see also Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 318; Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1978), 35.

³¹ Denise L. Carmody, *Christian Feminist Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 252.

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THE WORD AND THE CROSS

In this postmodern world of misplaced values, some within the Christian community admonish the preacher to abandon the Word and the Cross for a more acceptable, more inclusive, human-centered message.



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They argue that the Cross is neither a valuable nor an appropriate message to preach in our time. Those who wish to abandon Christ crucified and other crucial aspects of the faith believe that a massive cultural shift, moving from a worldview shaped by reason and argument to a worldview shaped by image and experience, requires not only a different medium but a different message.

I respectfully disagree. In fact, if ever a generation needs to hear Christ and Him crucified, it is this—the postmodern one. The concern here, however, is just how much postmodern thinking has infiltrated biblical hermeneutics. How can we do our part in saving this generation if the church itself is buying into the very blunders it has been called to challenge?

The challenge of changing worldviews

We have gone from the premodern, through the modern, to the postmodern. Walter Truett Anderson's three umpires analogy explain what this means.

The premodern umpire claimed,

"There are balls and there are strikes. I call them the way they are."

The modern umpire asserted, "There's balls and strikes and I call 'em as I see 'em."

The postmodern ump says, "They aren't anything until I call 'em."

The premodern worldview embraced the supernatural. People believed in God (or gods) and held that "The Divine" ordered the universe. There were objective values, absolute principles, and transcendent reality. Truth could be known through revelation. "There are balls and there are strikes, and I call them the way they are."

That perspective eroded when the modern worldview began to take precedence in the late 1700s. The modern ideology held that reason, rather than revelation, would unfold whatever objective, universal truth existed in this closed, natural universe. Humanism, science, control, technology—all promised a better life. Reality and meaning were still "out there," in objective form, waiting to be discovered by the awesome

TIMOTHY S. WARREN

capabilities of humankind. "There's balls and strikes and I call 'em as I see 'em."

A postmodern shift has supposedly replaced modernity during the last two to three decades. In postmodernity, what is real is what happens to be constructed within the mind and imagination of an individual or individuals within a social community. There are no universals, no metanarratives, no transcendents, no foundations. There is change, diversity, chaos, and relativity. Volition rules over the intellect, emotion rules over reason, image over argument. Experience has replaced truth, skepticism has replaced moral certainty. Meaning is a purely human phenomenon—"in here." I create meaning for myself and so do others. Whatever is is what I see it to be. "They aren't anything until I call 'em."

A hermeneutical relativism

Probably the key factor for our discussion is that in this postmodern worldview, supernatural revelation *and* human reason have been replaced by the

relativism of philosophical hermeneutics as the way of knowing. God does not speak truth. Reason does not provide meaning. We form our own realities, including God, *within* ourselves.

Among the most fundamental postmodern disciplines is that of deconstruction, in which any reality claims, in the form of language (as in Scripture or preaching), are deconstructed in order to be reconstructed from the experiential perspective of some "new" author of meaning, and therefore, reality. Here, truth *is* relative. Communication *is* subjective. Propositions *are* nontransferable. Therefore, meaning *must be* deconstructed. This process has affected and, in some cases, infected biblical hermeneutics and homiletics.

Listen to Ronald J. Allen, associate professor of preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, as he argues that topical preaching is grounded in "the gospel" rather than the biblical text.¹

"You move," he says, "not from text

to sermon but from a topic . . . to a consideration of the topic in the light of the gospel, without centering it in the exposition of a biblical text."²

What is "the gospel" in which we ground the sermon?

Allen answers, "The gospel is the dipolar news that God unconditionally loves each and every created entity and that God unceasingly wills justice for each and every created entity."³

That is a very abstract definition. I prefer Paul's more straightforward one: "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accor-

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dance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

More troubling than his definition of the gospel, however, is Allen's statement that "the gospel itself is a higher authority in the church than the text."⁴

As a result he argues: "When faced with an intractable text [such as Samuel cutting Agag in pieces before the Lord in 1 Samuel 15] the minister might give an exposition of the meaning of the text and then show why the text is harmful and no longer authoritative."⁵

A full interpretation of 1 Samuel 15, or other "intractable" texts, which takes into account both its biblical and canonical theology, would resolve its "intractableness." But that's another issue. What concerns me is how quickly Allen seems to abandon biblical authority.

Bible still authoritative?

Robin Scroggs, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York, takes a step further: "Does the claim that the Bible has authority any longer make sense? If assessments about biblical faith and ethics are made from contemporary sensitivities about what is right or wrong, *then it is our contemporary perspectives that are authoritative.*"⁶

No question about it. If the Bible is interpreted by most postmodern appraisals, then its authority will be abandoned. Scroggs goes on: "What we need is a new understanding of the role of the Bible in the church today that acknowledges the actual reality of our situation—an understanding that takes the Bible as a foundational document but not as authoritative."⁷

And finally, Scroggs asserts, "I propose . . . that we forthrightly give up any claim that the Bible is authoritative . . . This, I would argue, is the inevitable and *appropriate* final step in the long story of the erosion of biblical authority. In public discussions the Bible must be discussed as a human document from the past and our dialogue with it seen as a human process of the present."⁸

Scroggs is right in this: As long as interpretation is controlled by contemporary readings of the text, the Bible will possess no primary authority. I, for one, am not willing to make the necessary concessions. Still, this approach has become standard fare in many circles.

In a 1996 volume in honor of David Buttrick, several contributors posited what I would call a postmodernist view of preaching.⁹

Edward Farley writes about a "New Paradigm for Preaching," and says: "Surely we are summoned to preach the gospel, not the Bible,"¹⁰ so that "when we say that the what-is-preached is gospel, we are unable to restrict that to a single motif such as incarnation, atoning death, or resurrection . . . we refuse to reduce or narrow gospel to a single text, set of texts, or even theme."¹¹

"Preachers . . . do not deliver the world of the gospel to the community of faith. *Finding it already there* [somehow, already in their consciousness], they render it into forms of self-reflection, remembrance, new interpretation, spiritual discipline, and education."¹² Farley concludes that "since the world of the gospel means the mysteries that attend redemptive process, *it is never a fixed content.*"¹³

Why is this gospel ever changing with culture, having no objective anchor and transcending the authority of the

Scriptures? The answer comes back, "Because this gospel is 'in us.'" According to this postmodern hermeneutic, the gospel is "*already there*"—within our "communal consciousness."

The gospel and social consciousness?

David M. Greenhaw, writing on "The Formation of Consciousness," articulates Buttrick's argument that reality is the formation of social, that is, communal, consciousness. "Reality," he states, "cannot be formed in any other way than in consciousness."¹⁴ Whereas Buttrick does not seem to deny the possibility of reality "out there"—an objective reality he seems to own no hope of accessing that reality. The reality of God is merely the consciousness of Him formed by our perceptions of Him. And since we cannot escape our culturally formed consciousness, "God, inasmuch as God is known to us, as God is God as known to us."¹⁵ I needed to read that line several times.

Having abandoned the possibility of a divine Word of revelation from God who is knowable, Buttrick posits that we, as interpreters/preachers, construct reality "to transform a world of profound and pernicious injustice."¹⁶ The goal is a homiletic that creates a social consciousness of the world the way the preacher imagines it should be. Buttrick, as interpreted by Greenhaw, maintains that "to form a communal consciousness, to change a common cultural mind, is what preaching can do. Preaching shapes worlds in social consciousness,"¹⁷ as it seeks "to reform a communal consciousness."¹⁸

Stepping back for a moment, I wonder why a communal consciousness would need reformation if the reality a community perceives and/or experiences is the only reality that community can or should have? And if there is another "reality" (that is, mine as preacher), who can say that *mine* is *the* reality? What right do I have to convert their reality to mine?

"From Buttrick's perspective," says Greenhaw, "Revelation is not the words of the Bible or even the words of preaching but the formation of a faith-

world in consciousness. That is, revelation is something that happens, not something that is reported."¹⁹

All this seems to me to be very much like saying, "This million-dollar Rolls-Royce may look like an automobile to you, but to me, it looks like a treehouse. No, I think a septic tank. That's it. I'm going to drop that Rolls into the ground and run my sewage into it."

Reconstruction of the gospel?

Where does this reconstruction of the gospel lead us? Should we preach Christ crucified? Listen to Ernest T. Campbell. In the same volume, *Preaching As a Theological Task*, in his chapter "The Friend We Have in Yahweh," Campbell concedes, "There can be no disputing the fact that the overwhelming majority of believing Christian people would hold that the gospel has to do primarily with how we stumbling sinners can find forgiveness. If this be the fundamental question that the gospel answers, then the focus will fall on Jesus. Not just his life in general but on the final week of his life. And not just the final week, but the final day. And not just the final day, but the final hours—between twelve and three when he gave up the ghost."

But, Campbell says, "I have trouble with this way of going at it for several reasons. First, it seems a rather cavalier dismissal of the greatest life ever lived to toss out 30 or 33 years just to get to the salvific part."²⁰

That characterization is, of course, a straw-man argument. Neither the Bible nor true Christian preachers ever make light of the gracious, compassionate, challenging, and sinless life that Jesus Christ lived for over thirty years.

"Second," says Campbell, "the church has magnified the gravity of sin out of reasonable proportions."²¹

"Third," he admits, "I have serious problems with the idea that God needed gore to be good; that until God saw blood flow that day, God could not dispense mercy to any."²²

In Campbell's postmodern gospel, "God does not need the 'once offering up of his Son to forgive. God's love does

not require mediation. God forgave long before Jesus came. (What a friend we have in Yahweh!) God forgives in lands and cultures where Christ has not yet come."²³

And finally, he challenges, "If God is one, we may be sure that God is at home in traditions not our own. The term 'God' can be unifying. The name 'Jesus' has proved to be divisive. Unless we are willing to summarily dismiss the faith claims of millions on millions of Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists and consign them to outer darkness, we will have to concede that God conveys grace in many ways and forms."²⁴

Interestingly, this new hermeneutic, emerging from a postmodern philosophy, ends up in an old heresy. Campbell's view of the Cross is the ancient Abelardian view, wherein the fact of the Cross was optional and its only benefit was to offer a fine example of love. There was no sacrifice, no atonement, no redemption. There was, after all, no need.

The apostle Peter defended a different gospel: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24, NRSV). Peter took sin and the Cross seriously.

A response to postmodern hermeneutics

The literature of postmodern theology, hermeneutics, and homiletics spews the sentiments expressed by the writers cited above. From the more cautious speculators to the more radical advocates, we could endlessly recount and discuss their "new" challenge to the preaching task. I ask, "Who are these postmoderns, and how should we respond to their doctrines?" Those who summon you to abandon the Word of the Cross are elite academicians, recreational theologians, even ivory-tower intellectuals. Like avant-garde designers of fashion clothing or shock artists, they put on a provocative show but fail to provide the essential stuff of life. These are the professional philosophers who have stared so long and hard into human wisdom that they have fallen in.

But sin and judgment, sacrifice and forgiveness, are not cultural fiction. They are real. The challenge, therefore, for biblical preachers is not, "Should we preach Christ crucified?" That answer is unequivocal, "Yes, we must." The challenge is, "How can we preach Christ crucified to a postmodern culture that questions Christian exclusivism and absolutism?" We will turn to this in the next article. ■

This article is first of a two-part serial on the challenge of preaching Christ crucified to an increasingly Christless culture. Part II will appear in May.

*All Scripture passages in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

² Ibid., ix.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Robin Scroggs, "The Bible as Foundational Document," *Interpretation* 49 (January 1995) 1:19.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley, eds., *Preaching As a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture; In Honor of David Buttrick* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹¹ Ibid., 168.

¹² Ibid., 170.

¹³ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.


²⁰ Ibid., 104.

²¹ Ibid., 104.

²² Ibid., 106.

²³ Ibid., 108.

²⁴ Ibid., 110.



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Who among us wouldn't jump at the opportunity to expand our staff. We would readily prepare a proposal

for our judicatory committees and eagerly await release of treasury funds to increase our pastoral team.

Since the likelihood of this scenario becoming reality is minimal, let me encourage you with a real way to expand your staff without appealing for extra funding from the conference and yet accomplishing more ministry than you might have imagined possible—more effective use of your lay spiritual leaders (elders, trustees, deacons, etc.).

In fact, most local church elders, by reason of their longer-term residence in the community of believers, have a better grasp on the ministry needs of your congregation than a new incoming staff member might comprehend. Further, the spiritual authority granted to elders by both the Church Manual as well as their election by their fellow members provides unique opportunity and power to effectively minister.

I have never met a pastor who is not busy. In fact, most pastors are too busy with multiplied demands and myriad details awaiting their personal attention. Furthermore, the more you work at pastoring, the longer your "to do" list of expectations grows. Good pastoral work creates more pastoral work. If you make a hospital visit, you will likely meet relatives or friends of your parishioner who would also benefit from your ministry. If you are involved in a community project, you may well expand the circle of

Expand your pastoral team

JAMES A. CRESS

those who look to you for counsel or contribution. Even sharing a Bible study with a prospective member will often grow your list of those who are open to similar studies.

Let's face it. You need real help!

Redefine the role. Too often we have allowed our lay leadership to conclude that ministry is the activity of the professional pastor and their task is to effectively guard the platform during worship services and guard the treasury during board meetings. If your elders believe they are meeting their job description by just platform responsibilities and permission granting/denying at board meetings, then a thorough redefinition of their task is urgently needed. Begin by supplying each of your elders with a copy of *The Elder's Handbook* and a subscription to *Elder's Digest* magazine. Then conduct a class using the curriculum in the handbook with specific applications for your churches.

Extension of pastor. Utilize your elders as an extension of yourself and your ministry activities. Provide them with a supply of your own business cards and then ask them to complete assignments in your name. For example, "Pastor asked me to come to the hospital and pray for you." Or, "Pastor asked me to bring you this pamphlet and to invite you to attend the Bible Class next week."

By "coming in your name" with your business card, the elder clearly identifies the assigned task with the pastoral role and assures the recipient that their needs are noticed and considered vital by the pastoral team. It is also reassuring to the elder that they are ministering by specific assignment of the pastor rather than going on their own agenda.

Expand your base. Perhaps you have a small group of lay leaders who do help with some projects, but you are not receiving all the help you need. Perhaps you have some elders who do not function as you wish they would, whose service is limited to long-established patterns. Recruit new elders to fill specific job descriptions that you develop to show the need for specific ministry functions. By all means, do not attempt to expel or remove an ineffective leader. You might win the vote but lose the much wider issue. Rather, expand your available pool of ministry leaders by recruiting new leaders to add to those already in place.

Function, not form, determines the number of elders. The ministry of elders should be determined by the needs of the church, not the tradition of just one or two elders. Many pastors are amazed that some congregations have thirty or more elected and ordained elders serving with the pastoral staff. For example, a congregation might consider electing one elder for every ten families. Then assign specific families to be nurtured by specific elders in an "under-shepherd" program. Where it is culturally acceptable, include both women as well as men in leadership and do not forget the impact of lowering the average age of your leadership group

by recruiting younger members.

Emphasize evangelism. Help your elders comprehend that their ministry must not be limited to the church membership. The gospel commission compels the church to launch out into the world with the gospel message. Recruit and encourage specific elders for tasks of visiting prospective members, giving Bible studies, teaching community classes, leading in soul-winning seminars, and representing the church to government and society leaders. Then, when elders bring a person to accept Jesus as their Savior, include them in the process of bringing the new believers into the church family. The more your church grows in this way, the more elders you will need to recruit and train to appropriately care for the new believers.

Mentor your elders. Rather than expecting your elders to automatically know how to serve, take them with you and show them how to do the job you want them to accomplish. However, do not overtrain. Many lay leaders have been so overtrained and under-utilized that they are paralyzed by the misconception that ministry is so complex that only professional pastors can accomplish the task. We once taught a short, ten-minute training session with our elders and then immediately went visiting inactive members. The very next Sabbath almost a dozen individuals attended worship services who had been visited that very week.

Release your leaders to serve. Too often pastors think they are amassing power to themselves by keeping close control on various ministry activities. Of course you

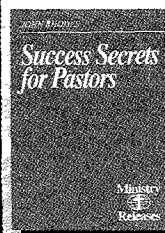
take a risk when you release your elders to minister. You risk that they might not perform the ministry role as well as you would do it. But I believe there is a greater risk. They might perform the ministry role better than you would do it. Remember, your own pastoral authority will expand as you help your elders become effective ministers.

Use elders to solve problems.

One of the greatest blessings the elders in my previous congregation provided me was when they formed a Committee of Concern, which heard issues that might arise between members or even complaints about the pastoral staff. This small group of five elders was the first reference point for members that might be in conflict. Each side was heard with the understanding, both sides would agree to abide by their counsel or face church discipline. This committee released the pastor from adjudicating conflicts between members who all needed pastoral care before and after the issue and who, otherwise, might feel slighted if the pastor's decision favored one side over the other. The elders became both an advocacy for appropriate conflict resolution and a defense for church leadership if complaints arose.

Share your resources. If you discover a book, magazine article, teaching method, or some other effective tool for ministry, share your discovery with your leaders. Rather than hoarding all the "techniques" for yourself, give away everything that you learn. You will discover that you learn even more by sharing and you make your own pastoral task easier by equipping the rest of your pastoral team. ■

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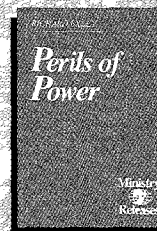
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Newly ordained, I took charge of a small village church in some conflict. The Senior Warden suggested I visit

one of the local matriarchs, who was disaffected. The Warden told me, incidentally, of her devotion to her ancient cat, Toby.

Seeing a chance to ingratiate myself on a first visit, I stopped and picked up a catnip toy with which to gain Toby's affection and, I hoped, that of his mistress. Early in my conversation with the woman, a monster-sized old cat crawled out

The disaffected matriarch

DONALD J. GARDNER

from under the sofa.

"Oh, look, a kitty," I simpered, reaching in my pocket and withdrawing the catnip toy. I tossed it in Toby's direction. Toby stopped for a moment, then leapt upon the toy, threw it high in the air, and finally catapulted himself into a leap

prodigious even for his size. Upon returning to earth, he lay there in an unexpected lifeless heap in front of us, evidently expiring from his unaccustomed exertions.

After that interminable silence which follows major disasters, I asked, "Anything I can do for you?"

"No thank you," the matriarch retorted icily. "You've done quite enough!"

I never did see or hear from her again. But I learned a valuable lesson about focusing on people's needs, not trying to impress or appease them. ■

Donald J. Gardner is pastor of the St. George's Episcopal Church, Clifton Park, New York.

Can it happen again? continued from p. 4

or clergy association meetings ever held. On Tuesday, April 20, 1999, we are sponsoring a seminar, "Preaching That Turns the World Upside Down." The seminar will be broadcast live via satellite. Many of you participated in a similar event we sponsored last year. On the back page of this issue you will find an ad providing details on how you may sponsor such a seminar or how you can find the location of the seminar nearest you.

There are numerous reasons why clergy will benefit from this live, interactive seminar. I will share three of them.

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- Marguerite Shuster, a Presbyterian minister, is a writer, preacher, and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary.
- William Willimon, a United Methodist minister, is dean of the chapel and professor at Duke University.

The last time we held such a seminar, more than five hundred thirty satellite downlink sites participated in North America. These sites included churches, hospitals, colleges, universities, seminaries, and various other locations. Contact us if you need assistance in setting up a site.

Effective continuing education

Continuing education provides an opportunity to add a freshness and newness to our faith and our profession. I recall a group of pastors talking about a professor who taught a course about trends in contemporary

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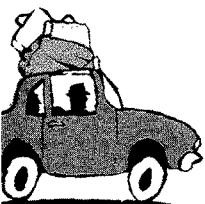
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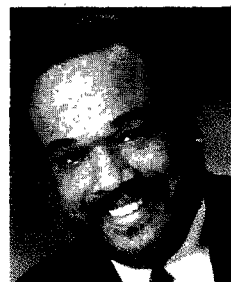
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