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Man and Knowledge: The Search for Truth in a Pluralistic Age¹

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Introduction

One of my former students at the Theological Seminary, where I was teaching at the time, urged me to watch the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, a popular Hollywood production of a few years ago. Let me briefly recall what I saw:

A renowned college celebrates the beginning of a new school year. Everything is very solemn and breathes the air of veneration and fame. An old gothic style colonnade leads into the assembly hall where students, faculty and parents gather. The senior class members carry banners to the front with the mottos of the school, which later on everyone repeats aloud with one accord: Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence.

As can be expected, all men are wearing suit and tie for the occasion. The proud president announces that 50 percent of all graduates were again accepted into ivy league graduate schools and universities. Then follows a sequence with a stern father who, obviously with total lack of feeling, reprimands his son, demanding blind obedience, and thereby spoiling a special cause of happiness to which his son had been looking forward. A little later the film focuses

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on the students enduring boring classes with totally unimaginative professors.

Then he comes: the new hero in the person of the new English teacher, without suit and tie, whistling in class, in one word, unconventional. We see him easily win the hearts of receptive students who take to his wisdom like dry sponges absorbing water. He hammers his message into them with charming but relentless fervor: *Carpe diem*, "seize the day." Make your life something special, something out of the ordinary. And if it means to rip out certain pages from textbooks which contain nothing but stern rules, do it, because that's fine with the new professor. "From now on," he cheerfully proclaims, "you will learn to think for yourself." He promotes beauty, romantics, and love. His students fly for him and would do anything for him.

While watching I could not help but detect a philosophy which had been masterfully disguised, highlighted with unabashed usage of clichés, and yet loudly proclaimed, a philosophy which has permeated our society on a grand scale. It's message is preached from many political, ecclesiastical, and educational pulpits, amplified by the media, especially magazines, television, and the World Wide Web: "Think what you want, say what you want, do what you want." The limits may be the comfort or discomfort of my neighbor. But otherwise, there is no authority above me, no institution besides me, and no organization before or behind me.

Freedom! It is true we owe much to this current in our world's philosophy: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of having one's own opinion. But there is one catch. Mankind has always been quite thorough when shedding old beliefs and changing paradigms (as it is expressed in modern language). With authority falling into disgrace at large, the highest authority in the universe—God—is falling too.

This is the number one issue we confront today. It has so many ethical, moral, educational, and even political consequences, reaching

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the farthest corners of our everyday lives. How do we view God? How do we view ourselves? How do we view the Bible? How do we view Jesus Christ? How can we know God? And how should we then live?

Is it possible to know the truth? And how does man obtain knowledge? Is there absolute truth, or is everything relative? Is truth biographical, that is, shaped by the personal life history of the individual, “filtered through the prism of our individual experience”?² Is there a way to have a unified theology and corresponding practice, or do we just have to live with fragmentation? Is pluralism the acceptable trend of our time, and we better get used to it? Have we as a Church simply come too far in history to expect the same unified stand that our pioneers had on certain theological issues? Have we come of age in our theological understandings? Have we “lost our innocence”?³ Or do we have to relieve ourselves of a so-called “unity myth” and see our pioneers and our own history with new eyes, as some historians and theologians in our ranks want us to believe?

Generally, it seems in our day and age that members of any given church have a strained relationship to doctrine and theology. There are a number of reasons for this dilemma. Some persons fear to be caught up in theological controversy; others hold that a knowledge of doctrine is not relevant to the needs of everyday living. Jesus and His life and death very easily become the smallest common denominator when the unity of the church is at stake or the trenches between the diverging sides are getting deeper and need to be bridged.

However, “theology matters because it lies at the heart of Christian identity,”⁴ and “if we Christians have anything distinctive to say as Christians, it grows out of the content of our faith.”⁵ If what we believe, then, is just as important as what we live, it is neither right nor intellectually satisfying to live with the status quo of theological pluralism and simply resign ourselves to the philosophy of relative truth. Is the shunning of doctrine on the one hand and the diversity of theological interpretation on the other God’s intention? How can such

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a stance be harmonized with statements like “when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13, NKJV) or, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You” (John 17:21, NKJV)?

As important and pressing as these questions are, it will be impossible to answer all of them within the scope of this study. In order to understand the severity of the problem we are facing, however, it is inevitable first to take a closer look at “truth” as it is perceived today, and also at “theological pluralism” and its philosophical roots. Hopefully, it will become obvious that this is not a mere academic exercise but that it will increase the awareness of the issues with which we are dealing.⁶

The second part of this study will attempt to answer the question what truth really is. I will deal briefly with the issue how knowledge about God can be obtained by man. Along those lines I will also touch on the role of reason and the finite mind to comprehend infinite things.

The third part will “marry” two parties who actually were never separated but are still divorced in many minds. I firmly believe that Jesus and His truth can never be separated without losing both.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the unprecedented flourishing of pluralism among Adventists in some quarters is because the dichotomy between Jesus and doctrine has been with us too long. The result is a fragmented picture of our teachings rather than a united whole. Without the wholistic understanding of truth we tend to lose sight of its purpose and significance for our lives and easily discard any attempt for deeper theological comprehension. Wholistic truth is opposed to theological pluralism. Only Jesus, personally and theologically, can overcome the impasse of entrenching diversity. “The truth as it is in Jesus” (cf. Eph 4:21) is the most profound knowledge any human being can gain.

Truth in Society and Church

One author perceptively observes⁷ that the mere claim to be able

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to come to a knowledge of truth is met by today's intellectual with the same indignation and spitefulness as the Jews met Jesus' statement: "If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free, (John 8:31, NKJV). The central dogma of today's western societies teaches that *human* reason and *human* conscience have the freedom and the ability to search for and to arrive at truth. Everyone who challenges that dogma has to be willing to bear the crunch of the hatred he or she will encounter. This Cartesian program, which builds on the premises of Descartes,⁸ contains an important but unproven presupposition, namely, that the cosmos and human nature are of such a condition that it is possible for human beings to know the truth without ever being dependent on one single word from the Creator.⁹

This humanist philosophy led to a dichotomy in the quest for truth. On the one hand the idea developed that there is a world of objective facts, accessible without any subjective effort; on the other hand the idea emerged that everything outside of the above category is merely individual and subjective opinion. The dichotomy, then, is between universal truths and individual opinion. In the first category one can say: "I know," whereas in the latter it would be: "I believe."

The first category, by its very definition and character, cannot and will not tolerate any kind of pluralism. For example, natural scientists, in their discussion of pertinent scientific matters, do not usually say to each other: "This may be true for you, but not for me." The physical laws of nature exclude pluralistic interpretations. On the other side, in the halls of the arts and human sciences, theology included, pluralism reigns supreme. Here it is inappropriate to speak of "right" and "wrong." Only personal experience can be presented as a kind of testimony. After all, "most of us are not conditioned to ask, 'Is this true?' but rather, 'How do I feel about this?'"¹⁰

This dichotomizing of knowledge ignores the fact that knowledge always consists of an objective and subjective side. It is subjective in the sense that a given subject's depth and scope will be

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dependent on personal factors of the researcher like earnestness, honesty, intellectual and imaginative capabilities, and also cultural traditions. But there is also the objective side, which the searching mind seeks to know, a goal to strive for in order to find that final satisfaction in being able to say: “Now I know.”

The dichotomy just described has resulted in a skepticism which concludes that knowledge outside the world of objective facts is nothing more than personal opinion. Since there are no facts in this area but only “values” (which are a matter of personal preference), they become the expression of what we want. Pluralistic society, therefore, has become the war arena of opposing wills.¹¹ There is no need to convince each other of the truth, because allegedly there is no truth that can be known.

Nature and Knowledge of Truth. While it is not within the scope of this study to elaborate fully on the nature of truth, the subject must be acknowledged to be rather complex, even complicated.¹² To define truth depends on one’s concept of its nature. Several theories have been developed, of which the two major opposing ones—correspondence and coherence—are the most well known.¹³

As Schmitt has shown, the basic issue is the question of realism versus idealism. With rare candor he convincingly argues for the supremacy of realism, which is to say, that there are real objects that really exist, and truth relates to those real objects.¹⁴ Idealism, or anti-realism, or surrealism on the other hand sees truth as something that coheres with other true ideas or statements, but never refers beyond itself.

As philosophical as these descriptions may seem, they are foundational. Accepting the viewpoint of realism, we may say that truth corresponds¹⁵ to an independent reality, which can be also a metaphysical one. Or, in other words, truth is the corresponding statement to something that exists.¹⁶ To establish thus the *nature* of truth is significant for the *knowledge* of truth. Ontology (= the study of being) comes before epistemology (= the study of the method of

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knowing), although the two are also interrelated.¹⁷

It was Augustine who connected ontology and epistemology in that he saw both unified in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ He is the only One that can say of Himself: “I am the truth” (John 14:6), and He is also the One who proclaims truth and helps the human mind to grasp it. “For the knowledge of Christ as the Truth, one is dependent on the Holy Scriptures. This knowledge can be appropriated only if one repents and turns to God, who forgives sins, and if one lives as God wants.”¹⁹ The very fact that the divine Christ is the Truth should make us humble enough to realize that our finite reason is limited, that “spiritual realities elude the reach of human logic alone, that we must be dependent upon the revelation of God’s Word—not our twisted, fallen minds—to discern the truths of an infinite God.”²⁰

When Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 “You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” (NKJV), He chose to add: “with all your mind” (Mark 12:30, NKJV). This would mean that our “whole educational enterprise. . . should be caught up in the desire to love God with all of the mind.”²¹ “In concrete terms it means that because of human sinfulness, which also affects the mind (Eph 4:18), “sinful reason stands in need of conversion just as the rest of man needs to be renewed. Human beings become truly ‘reasonable’ in the biblical sense when ‘we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ’ (2 Cor 10:5, NASB).”²²

Is it justified, however, to use the gap between the fallen human mind and God’s truth as an argument for relativizing that truth, as an excuse for theological pluralism? Is there no absolute truth because man is incapable of grasping it in its fullest divine reality? Or, as most postmodern scholars would put it, Is there only absolute truth in God, and all we can know here on earth is relative? Or, to drive it closer home, Is it justified to use this argument to make biblical and Adventist doctrines appear relative to the respective time and background of the individuals who formulate them?

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Pluralism. The philosophy of pluralism is well illustrated by the famous elephant parable of Buddhism. In it Buddha tells of a king who calls together all the blind men in Sāvattī and has them assembled around an elephant. Each of the men touch and feel different parts of the huge animal and report their discoveries. Those who felt the head of the elephant say to the king, “Your Majesty, the elephant is like a cauldron.” Those who touched its ear say, “Your Majesty, the elephant is like a shovel.” Those who felt its trunk say, “Your Majesty, it is like the shaft of a plough.” Finally, the story goes, they attack each other with their fists, crying, “An elephant is like this, not like that. . .”²³ The powerful message of this parable is that there is no universal and absolute truth, and each individual can only have a partial grasp of it.²⁴

This idea of truth and epistemology, the acquisition of knowledge, is one of the most prominent arguments used for embracing and defending what has come to be known as theological pluralism, defined as “a plurality of doctrinal interpretations *within* a denomination.”²⁵ Consequently, all theologies are of equal truth and value. “Toleration is the supreme virtue in matters of religion, and dogmatism is the most reprehensible attitude.”²⁶

It may be observed that “conscious *theological* pluralism is something relatively new to Protestantism.”²⁷ Before it came on the scene disagreements in theological matters led to divisions among Christians and the establishment of like-minded groups called denominations. Now pluralism means that “we seek to be churches in which . . . major factions or orientations can be present and reasonably happy.”²⁸

The opposite attitude is *particularity*, which had been one of the hallmarks of Christian missions ever since Jesus told His disciples to go into all the world and seek the lost.²⁹ In fact, it should be more than obvious that Christian missions would never have happened had the people involved taken a pluralistic stand. On the other hand, however, it is a sad fact of the history of the Christian church that the church

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made use of political powers to twist people's arms to convert them to the world view it was so particular about.³⁰

The transition from this politically and violently enforced particularity to pluralism was one of the liberating effects of the Reformation, which became apparent only much later when along with democratization came the realization that no group had the right to force its particular point of view on all the others. The very term *Protestantism*, its meaning drawn from the historical events in the 16th century, marks this new approach.

As secularization set in as a result of the new religious liberty, pluralism was part and parcel of the ensuing development.³¹ Considering this background, it becomes understandable why pluralism flourished even more in the religious climate of the New World where tolerance towards different beliefs became one of the core beliefs of the new community.

Relativism. Theological pluralism is identified as a fundamental principle of theological discussion, which in turn is justified on the basis of the nature of doctrine. Here doctrine is treated as "essentially expressive: doctrine is our 'response' or 'reaction' to God's mysterious work."³² This is nothing less than making truth dependent on individual experience. This loss of scriptural authority leaves room for diverging interpretations based on tradition, experience, and reason.³³ Relativism as the backbone of pluralism does not allow for absolute truth. It "insists that tolerance is mandated on the ground that no current in the sea of diversity has the right to take precedence over other currents."³⁴

Schmitt demonstrates convincingly that the so-called *regress objection* to relativism deals the death blow to this philosophy. It describes the unsolvable dilemma for the relativist in that his propositions on relativism can never be relative, but are always absolute. However, if the truth-values the relativist proposes in his theory of truth are absolute, and indeed there is no other way, the whole theory is condemned to collapse.³⁵ Thus "relativism is untenable

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and must be rejected.”³⁶ To quote Newbiggin’s apt critique of relativism; “The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about ‘what is true for me’ is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.”³⁷

Nihilism. One other underlying philosophy of pluralism is nihilism, founded by Friedrich Nietzsche, who came to the conclusion that God indeed “is dead.” He contended that the God *as we perceive him* is dead. He turned against classical western epistemology, which can be called cognitivism, in advocating perspectivism. Because there are many viewpoints, shaped by a multiplicity of differences in culture, time, place, education and temperament, there are accordingly many truths.

The inevitable result is relativism, and the conclusion of relativism is nihilism. “For if there is no truth that is true universally and absolutely, there is likewise no settled meaning and no fixed value.”³⁸ Truth, according to Nietzsche, is an illusion metaphorically camouflaged,³⁹ and this can only lead to nihilism (no ontological reality and no epistemological possibility) and finally even deconstructionism and fascism.⁴⁰

Postmodernism. Another root of pluralism is postmodernism. Rationalism is giving way to *irrationalism*. “Modernists did not believe the Bible is true. Postmodernists have cast out the category of truth altogether.”⁴¹ Religion is not a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not. Rather, religion simply is a choice. We believe in what we like and what we want to believe. This, of course, makes aesthetic criteria more important than rational criteria. For example, people may decide their church affiliation according to what they like about the church. The same criteria are applied to biblical truths and doctrines, which should reflect the whole biblical teaching, but are molded instead to fit one’s preconceived liking.

However, while postmodern individuals experience a loss of moral criteria by which to evaluate what is good and what is bad, they

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tend to condemn everyone who suggests to know the truth. The greatest sin in this philosophical context is to know and proclaim something as the only truth.

Since postmodernism rejects objectivity, it shows more interest in the supernatural, but not on the basis of biblical revelation. There is a different paradigm of spirituality. “The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.”⁴² Peter Wagner, still one of the stalwarts of the philosophy of church growth, recently coined a very similar statement: “Ministry is not dependent on theology but, vice versa, theology on ministry.”⁴³ This pragmatic and success-oriented approach demonstrates how much the Christian church has been influenced by current philosophies.

Historical Criticism. If the central issue in the dispute over doctrine, truth, and pluralism is indeed the validity and authority of the Bible with its claim of universal and absolute truth, it follows that the way we perceive and interpret the Bible is of utmost importance. It would be too simple to claim that the different views and interpretations of our beliefs, which exist among Adventists, are merely culturally determined. It can be a rather frustrating experience to try to discuss Adventist doctrine only to realize that the debating partners do not share the same hermeneutical presuppositions.

The inroads of pluralistic philosophy that I have tried to describe above have also affected the view of the Bible.⁴⁴ When “the concept of revelation as the disclosure of the infallible truth of God [was abandoned and] the corollary that Scripture is this revelation in written form and thus the authoritative norm and controlling canon in theological construction [was given up],” theology inevitably entered the labyrinth of pluralism and instituted the “cafeteria of options.”⁴⁵

Although Ernst Troeltsch laid the groundwork for biblical criticism with his three principles of correlation, analogy, and criticism,⁴⁶ numerous kinds of critical approaches have since

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developed on the basis of these premises.⁴⁷ The fundamental presupposition underlying all these developments is the “priority of human reason over Scripture.”⁴⁸

In marked opposition to this approach is this statement of Ellen White: “The more he [the student of the Bible] searches the Bible, the deeper is his conviction that it is the word of the living God, and *human reason bows before the majesty of divine revelation.*”⁴⁹

Revisionism. The section on historical criticism would not be complete without addressing one of the latest trends of applying this same method to history. The attempt to reanalyze and re-present historical data in light of subsequent knowledge has come to be known as *revisionism*. It has become almost fashionable to cite changes in Adventist theology in order to have an argument for the current pluralistic standpoint.

Some argue for a dynamic concept of *present truth*, assuming that even the Adventist pioneers did not think it was static.⁵⁰ However, when the references given for Ellen White's position is checked it becomes apparent she does not state, as is suggested, that what was present truth a hundred years ago might not be present truth today. Rather, she says: “The present truth, which is a test to the people of this generation, was not a test to the people of generations far back.”⁵¹ And she observes there was a present truth in Noah's day for his generation.⁵²

But the crucial point to be noted is that Ellen White clearly taught that the present truth God gave to the Advent movement was given to be proclaimed to the last generation before Jesus comes, and that this message will stand as truth forever.⁵³ The punch line of Ellen White's argument is this: “We had the truth; we were directed by the angels of God. It was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the presentation of the sanctuary question was given. It is eloquence for every one to keep silent in regard to the features of our faith in which they acted no part. *God never contradicts himself.*”⁵⁴

The decisive issue today pertains to Adventist self-

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understanding. Either it is a movement called by God and led by the Holy Spirit, or it is a movement merely conditioned by social and historical phenomena. Revisionists attempt to show that the latter is the case. They argue that not only Adventist history must be reinterpreted, but also its theology must be adapted to the changes which have taken place in modern society. This is applied to both life-style issues and to doctrinal questions.

There can be no doubt that a crossroads has been reached. It may be expected that some will argue for a balanced mixture of these two viewpoints, not leaving out God's guidance in Adventist history nor being afraid to acknowledge society's influence on the development. However, upon closer investigation, it will become clear that there are indeed two opposing philosophies battling for primacy. What will be the outcome? To stay with the analogy: the crossroads will not become a two lane road going in the same direction just because some people declare it will.

Issue of Identity and Missions. Time and space do not allow me to deal with the issues of *contextualization* and *ecumenism*, other powerful ideas influencing theology and practice, which come under our rubric of pluralism. For example, the problem of the lack of identity comes to mind. A common and fair question to ask is: What gives us as a denomination the right to be a separate entity?

It is impossible to know what role Adventists are supposed to play in this world if we do really do not know why Adventists exist in the first place. It is not satisfactory to cite sociological and historical factors. These arguments do nothing less than call the biblical foundation into question on which Adventists claim to stand. The immediate consequence of a lack of identity is that at its best the missionary and evangelistic thrust of the church becomes less vigorous, and at its worst its voice to the world is muted.

Truth in Biblical Faith

While it is important to take a critical look at the philosophical

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foundations of theology and its current pluralistic perception, it is of even greater significance to reflect on what truth is. The various, interrelated philosophical trends described above contribute to the force and well-being of pluralism in our day. The answer to these trends lies in the concept of wholistic truth to which we now turn.

Wholistic Truth. In recent years doctrines have come into disrepute. We live in an age where doctrine *per se* is viewed as dry, boring, irrelevant, and divisive. People dichotomize Jesus and theology, love and doctrine. “*Love* is understandable—warm and fuzzy. *Doctrine*, on the other hand, sounds cold, difficult, and demanding.”⁵⁵

Theology’s bad reputation has caused widespread illiteracy on many basic beliefs among evangelical Christians and Adventists. This ignorance and demise of doctrine has also led to an impoverished spiritual life, since “a person who does not know what is available to him or her does not know enough to seek it out and receive it.”⁵⁶ “Spirituality needs a sound theological foundation, lest it become a shallow and merely mystical experience.

This deplorable situation has come about because “we have taught it [doctrine] as a cognitive system of facts about God and have separated it from the most vital issues of life.”⁵⁷ An even more significant reason lies in the dichotomy some have made between doctrine and the person of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, is caused by today’s deterioration of the authority of Scripture with the resultant haphazard use of the Bible in Christian circles. It is little wonder if something is ripped apart, which actually is inseparable, that the parts will be deficient if they are looked at just by themselves and not in relation to the other part. But this is exactly what has happened with Jesus and His doctrines, which in fact are nothing less than the expression of what He really is.⁵⁸

Since such a Jesus, who has been reduced by leaving out the importance of doctrine, is a “tame Jesus of love,” an unbiblical notion, the trend to a relativistic and pluralistic theology is encouraged. After all, doctrine does not really matter anymore. Likewise, if doctrine is

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severed from the person of Jesus Christ, it tends to become a legalistic sledgehammer or the mere plaything for the theologians, ultimately killing the genuine search for truth, thereby preparing for the inroads of pluralism. The only solution to this dilemma is a return to the biblical understanding of truth, which does not divide between the person of the Creator and Savior and His teachings. The only solution is a return to *wholistic* theology.

Biblical Terminology. Since Adventists have made the Bible their only standard of faith and practice, and since it has even been recognized by those outside our ranks that the Adventist Church belongs to the so-called “Bible-based denominations,”⁵⁹ we should live up to our claims and our reputation and base our knowledge of truth on the Bible.

In the OT the concept of truth is expressed by using terms related to the root *ʾmn*: *ʾaman*, *ʾemûnah*, *ʾamen*, *ʾemet*. Cognate terms in other semitic languages point to the basic meaning of the root as “permanent” (Aramaic), “security,” “peace,” “reliability,” “faithfulness” (Arabic).⁶⁰

The use of this root in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates a meaning along the same lines. A “guardian,” who takes care of those who have been entrusted to him or her, conveys the idea of “trustworthiness” (Num 11:12; Esth 2:7). Whenever the terms of this root are used in connection with human beings, the idea of “reliability” is stressed. In this sense a person is “true” (Neh 9:8; 1 Sam 2:35). This also applies to God, when he is called the “true and faithful witness” (Jer 42:5). Truth in the Bible, then, has always to do with the content of a personal relationship, pointing to reliability, faithfulness, and permanence.⁶¹

The causative Hiphil form of the same root could be translated “to make someone true” or “to rely on someone,” which actually means “to believe in someone.” Therefore Gerhard von Rad says: “In Hebrew ‘to have faith’ is literally ‘to make oneself secure in Yahweh’.”⁶²

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According to Proverbs 3:3 “truth” belongs to the innermost parts of the human mind, and the immediate context shows that it is seen as parallel to the “law” (*tôrāh*) (v. 1) and to “mercy” or “love” (*hesed*). The same association we find in Hosea 4:1 “There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land,” (NKJV). The term for “knowledge” used here is from the root *yd*^c, which elsewhere is used for conjugal and intimate relationships.⁶³ We may conclude, then, that the terms used for truth in the OT convey notions that belong to the characteristics of a personal relationship.

It may be noted that almost half of the occurrences of the Hebrew term *’emûnah* are translated in the LXX (Greek Septuagint) by the term *pistis* (faith). Here the idea of faithfulness and trustworthiness is being conveyed.⁶⁴ In this light, we are not surprised that Karl Barth translates Romans 1:17, the cardinal text of Luther’s Reformation, “The righteous shall live from faithfulness! (Hab. ii. 4).”⁶⁵ Barth purposefully gives the OT reference in Habakkuk, where indeed the term *’emûnah* has been used. He even sees a kind of ambiguity here in the idea that the righteous person lives both “of the faithfulness of God” and of his own faith. Barth holds that “the form in which the prophet’s words have been handed down already points in both directions,” and he concludes, “where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of men, there is manifested His righteousness.”⁶⁶

The Embodiment of Truth. This biblical understanding of truth provides the background for what we find in the concept of Jesus Christ *being* the truth (John 14:6). He is the One who by His very nature is trustworthy and always remains the same (Heb 13:8). His will for humankind, expressed in the teachings of the Bible, is the outflow of His nature and is just as reliable as He is.

It should not be overlooked that without these true statements *about* Jesus, no human being would be able to know *Him*. Even if we concede that a personal encounter with Jesus Christ is a very important element of Christian faith, we likewise have to remember

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that any such encounter has to be verified in its validity and *truth* by the authoritative Word of Jesus in the Scriptures. Otherwise, our encounter has to be suspected as a mere self-deception. Pfeiffer correctly asserts:

... even clearer is the unity of person and thing which is often overlooked. .. Neither of the two notions must be isolated. Christ as the lifegiving truth is a concrete person, thus not something abstract, but neither something vague, elusive. Certainly encounter with a person does not take place without knowledge, at least not without the knowledge that there is a person there, namely this very person. The appreciation of the personal element and the certainly rightful emphasis of the specific character of an I-Thou relationship over the relation to objects must not lead to the neglect of the objective reference which is inseparably connected with the personal.⁶⁷

Paul could in all confidence say: “I determined *not to know anything* among you *except Jesus Christ* and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2, NKJV, emphasis added). In this respect the “sola Christus” (Christ alone) of the Reformation stands side by side with the “sola scriptura” (Scripture alone), since it concerns the One Person who is responsible for our very life—here and there, now and then—that is, who created and saved us. “Jesus Christ alone, the One crucified” is the “mystery of God” (1 Cor 2:1, 2, 7)⁶⁸ who depicts the whole plan of salvation for mankind.

In John 14:6 Jesus Christ squarely claims to *be* the truth. God Himself *is* the truth. Helmut Thielicke explains:

This exceptional character of Christ, as the New Testament sees it, lies in the fact that he does not only represent a *relation* to the purpose (we could say here: to the *logos*) but that he *is* the *logos*, that the truth has been incarnated in him and is identical with him. Truth is what he is, because in him appears the final purposeful reality, namely the *pistis*-faithfulness of God, which, according to Rom 3:3 is the truth of God, and which is something of permanence, something which one can “rely” on. Christ does not only *proclaim* this truth of God’s faithfulness, which

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carries our life and gives it permanence and purpose, but in him it is there and among us in person.⁶⁹

When we also consider Jesus' statement in John 17:17 that the word of God is truth, which is in complete harmony with the OT equation of truth and *torah*, it follows that everything God has revealed—from and about Himself—is truth. Then it follows that truth is a person as well as the contents of the relationship to that person, which is absolute reliability and faithfulness.

Therefore “person” cannot be separated from “contents.” A person reveals his or her truthfulness and fidelity in the quality of the relationship to other persons. It should be self-understood that a relationship cannot be called such unless it is governed by certain truthful and reliable propositions. Consequently, any dichotomy between Christ and his doctrines is false. John 17:3 summarizes this wholistic view of truth by stating, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent,” (NKJV).

This also helps us to understand why Paul writes about the “love of the truth,” which he sets in parallel to “believe the truth” (2 Thess 2:10, 12, NKJV). The important notion here is that Paul says that the “love of the truth” has to be received in order to be saved. Three things stand out in Paul's statement: (1) Truth is essential to salvation, it is juxtaposed to “unrighteousness” (vss. 10, 12), (2) the expression “love of the truth” suggests more than a mere intellectual acknowledgment of propositions of truth, namely, a personal relationship to the truth,⁷⁰ and (3) this love of the truth has to be *received* as a gift. Here is something that man receives or rejects. If he receives it, he is saved. This need of receiving shows very clearly that it is not something he has within himself. Rather, it has to be given to him from outside. The love for the truth is a gift of God.⁷¹

*The Role of Reason.*⁷² Western philosophy has been heavily influenced by the Greek concept of reason. In Greek thought the mind

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alone is considered capable of grasping the eternal truths, which only exist in the spirit world. A typical example can be found in gnosticism, a religious belief that developed in early Christianity, in which (among other things) people believed that by turning inwardly into themselves, they could attain to a higher knowledge about God. This concept also shaped to a large extent the ideas proposed in the age of the Enlightenment, or the “Age of Reason” as it has been called. Since then, and increasingly so today, the autonomy of the mind has been proclaimed. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804),

defined Enlightenment as the spirit’s determination to exercise its intellectual faculties in unfettered integrity. Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage, that is, his inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Enlightenment is man’s rise from the immaturity which caused him to rely on such external authorities as the Bible, the church, tradition, etc., to tell him what to think and do. The motto of the enlightenment, therefore, was: Have courage to use your own thinking. In its self-sufficient autonomy reason assumed that authority which truly belongs to God and His revelation alone.⁷³

It is interesting, and not without some irony, to note that Kant himself acknowledged “that reason only perceives that which it produces after its own design. . . .”⁷⁴ Indeed, autonomous reason can never grasp the transcendent, it will always be limited to its own immanent devisings. On its own, the human mind cannot come to a true knowledge of God. God must reveal Himself; man can accept or reject that revelation.

It is not surprising that the idea of autonomous reason led to dire consequences for the Christian faith: namely, the rejection of the supernatural, and as a consequence the loss of truth on the whole. The “freedom” that man proclaimed in assumed wisdom came back to haunt him in the form of a nihilistic outlook, something that is practiced today more than it is taught.

In the meantime even secular philosophers have had to

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acknowledge that the rule of reason has led to the slavery of immanence. Post-modern man has come a long way since the Enlightenment ideas were propagated. He now lives between the Scylla and Charybdis of scientific reason and the search for ultimate truth, so often expressed by very unreasonable practices like witchcraft and New Age activities.

The only viable alternative for man would be to turn to His Creator who gave him the gift of reason to attain higher and higher knowledge about the ultimate truth by submitting it to the control of God's reason. Man, created in the image of God, can never act like the "original," like God Himself. If he attempts to do so, he will end up like the father of autonomous reason, who was the first one to ask that fateful question: "Has God indeed said. . . ?" (Gen 3:1).

Even before the fall Adam and Eve were totally dependent in their reasoning on the sure Word of God. Of course, they had the liberty to think for themselves and make their minds independent of God, which they eventually did. But all of us still suffer the terrible consequences. The biblical concept of reason is 'faithful reason,' that is, it is full of faith, because it trusts God and obediently follows His revealed Word.

Moreover, the wholistic view of man in Scripture demands that the mind be never separated from the heart and soul, perceived as the center of decision-making. The biblical mandate for total surrender, then, includes the mind. When man is truly born again by the Holy Spirit and becomes a new creature in Christ, how can one part of him or her not respond in the wake of this revolutionary procedure! "Too often we have emphasized only the spiritual and physical aspects and have cut off the intellectual aspects in our theology. We often emphasize 'mental excellence,' but rarely talk about 'mental obedience' to the Word of God."⁷⁵

The biblical understanding of truth and knowledge, as briefly outlined above, should prevent us from thinking that it is only the human mind that enables man to gain knowledge. "Knowing does not

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consist in observing and analyzing the object; it is the result of experience, a walk with someone (Ps 95:10), and implies a personal commitment to the object or the person to be known.”⁷⁶ Thus, wholistic truth can only be gained by the whole person in the conversion process, and because of the new person’s submission to all of the revelation of God in its entirety, the whole man meets the whole Jesus and discovers what can be termed “absolute truth.”

Absolute Truth. The relativistic philosophy, which is so pervasive in today’s society, either denies the existence of absolute truth (that is, truth that surpasses time and space and is therefore universally valid) or seriously questions man’s capability of grasping it. For many the former is dependent on the latter, that is to say, if the human mind cannot know absolute truth, it is essentially nonexistent. Others would still allow for absolute truth somewhere “out there,” but reject the idea that humans are able to know what it is. Increasingly, the plurality of lifestyles, the overwhelming scope of cultural diversity, and the prevalent skepticism towards all truth claims in today’s world are having a significant impact on the theoretical understanding of what truth is, which in turn influences the choices made in practical life.

The biblical view of truth sees it both as a person, namely Jesus Christ (God) Himself (John 14:6), and as the word of God (John 17:17), and it is not surprising that the term *logos*, “word,” is employed as a designation for both of them (see John 1:1-3, 14). “This exceptional characteristic of Christ as the New Testament views it is to be seen in the fact that he does not only have a *relationship* to . . . the *logos* but that he *is* the *logos*, that the truth is incarnated in him and is identical with him.”⁷⁷

God Himself, then, is the embodiment of the truth which is absolutely true and valid for all times and for the whole universe. To deny the existence of that truth would logically amount to atheism or at best to some sort of deism where God is viewed as a remote being without much significance to any creature in the universe. The biblical

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view of God necessarily includes truth as belonging to the divine being, and if God is seen as absolute His truth is absolute, too.

The greater difficulty comes with the issue of epistemology, that is, the possibility for human beings to know this truth of God. In harmony with the relativistic trend in current thinking the idea of “personalistic truth” has been advanced, which holds that “Christianity [e.g.] . . . is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, insofar as we live it out from day to day. It becomes true as we take it off the shelf and personalize it, in actual existence.”⁷⁸ In this sense truth is not truth in and of itself, but it becomes truth when it is “appropriated” in someone’s personal existence. This proposal, which has gained widespread acceptance even in the church, overlooks the fact that a person will only appropriate a truth if he or she accepts that truth as true in a non-personalistic, or propositional, sense. “The key point in all of this is simply that the coherent articulation and affirmation of any belief or view whatsoever presupposes the notion of propositional truth.”⁷⁹

Although belief is and should be more than mere mental assent to propositions, it will always be based on propositional truth.⁸⁰ If that is so, we cannot follow the relativistic notion of personalistic truth. Propositions can be either true or false which necessitates a standard that functions as the measuring rod for all truth claims. Those who cannot accept the Bible as that standard have to resort to other controls for determining what truth is, such as religious experience, proposed by W. Cantwell Smith and also by John Hick, who has become a prominent voice in favor of religious pluralism.⁸¹

The Christian claim to exclusive and absolute truth rests on the claim of divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ and in the holy Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. The concept of divine inspiration “commits the believer to the view that these texts are the word of God, they are normative for religious belief, and that what the texts tell us is *true*.”⁸² It has to be acknowledged, of course, that in

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order to arrive at some reasonable and consistent knowledge of the truth on the basis of Scripture, sound hermeneutical guidelines for its interpretation have to be adopted. These should be in harmony with the basic self-claim of the Scriptures as being God's Word. Therefore, theories of interpretation that are based on the principle of doubt and other critical assumptions fall short in this endeavor.⁸³

It should be noted that in Jesus Christ and Scripture, which testifies of Him (John 5:39), man has received a divine revelation that enables him to know truth as it is. Since man is trapped in sinful finality, he will never be able on this earth to come to an exhaustive and comprehensive knowledge of truth. Neither is there any room for an arrogant triumphalism that forgets to recognize humbly that sinful beings are saved by grace.

However, these facts should not lead to the presumption that truth cannot be known at all, or that no absolute and universal truth exists. Through the acceptance of Jesus Christ and His Word it is possible to know the truth and embrace the genuine freedom that it brings, in contrast to the idea of the autonomous freedom of the mind. The immediate context of Jesus' words in John 5 describe this epistemological process:

And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life (John 5:37-39, NKJV).

For a knowledge of the truth both the following are essential: (1) a personal acquaintance with Jesus Christ by accepting Him as the incarnated Word of God and as a personal Savior, and (2) a submission to the authority of the inscripturated Word of God in the Bible. Both testify to the absolute truth. Only if, according to Jesus, "His word abides in you" can His truth be known. This wholistic truth

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(Jesus and Scripture) has to be received by wholistic man (body, mind and soul).

However, in humble recognition of his creaturely and sinful limitations man should admit that unless he is willing to be initiated into the truth by the One who is the truth, he cannot grasp it. As Thielicke has aptly put it: “The One who is the truth remains understandably unavailable to those who are not in the truth. I will only be able to understand the One who is the truth if He will first bring me into the truth, or, in epistemological language, if he creates the analogy with Himself. In this respect I am the object of a calling.”⁸⁴ Jesus confirms this when he says to Pilate: “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37, NKJV). Pilate’s famous answer—“What is truth?”—demonstrates Jesus’ point.

The Truth As It Is in Jesus

Ellen G. White has written numerous statements about “Jesus” and about “truth.” In fact, a CD-ROM search reveals that she has used “truth” 53,144 times, and “Jesus” 47,114 times in her writings. In addition, there is her peculiar and highly interesting phrase which constitutes a combination of the two and is employed 793 times: “The truth as it is in Jesus.”⁸⁵ This phrase she especially used to refer to the close ties between faith in Jesus as savior and the process of sanctification. For example, she says: “The truth as it is in Jesus is obedience to every precept of Jehovah. It is heart work. Bible sanctification is not the spurious sanctification which will not search the Scriptures, but will trust to good feeling and impulses rather than to the seeking for truth as for hidden treasure.”⁸⁶

Reconciliation between God and man by the God-man, Jesus Christ, is the key element of our faith. It is crucial, however, that we are aware of the following facts:

1. Atonement takes place outside of us.
2. God is the One who provides it.
3. The salvation process involves:

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86 Ibid.

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a. justification: at conversion, and reaffirmed every time forgiveness through the atoning blood of Christ is granted.

b. sanctification: a new lifestyle, necessarily involving doctrines, for a lifetime.

c. glorification: at the second coming.

4. Jesus Christ is—

a. Savior: He atoned for sin by His sacrifice on Calvary.

b. High priest: He atones by mediating the merits of His own blood.

c. Judge: He brings eternal justice to the restoration of all things.

Only one concept in Scripture contains all these aspects of God's plan of salvation and restoration: the concept of the sanctuary. The sanctuary reveals the "complete" Jesus. Adhering to and proclaiming the truth about the sanctuary, Seventh-day Adventists have a truly "wholistic" theology (apparently they are still the only ones). It is not surprising, then, that Ellen G. White and the pioneers saw the sanctuary parable as presenting the central core of a system of truth.⁸⁷ A brief overview of its main points may suffice.

A Sanctuary in Heaven. The sanctuary was an institution created by God to reveal by means of typical rituals Heaven's steps to solve the sin problem. Moses was instructed to build the earthly sanctuary according to a heavenly reality (Exod 25:9, 40). There are a number of reasons which support an earthly/heavenly sanctuary correspondence. First, there is the term *tabnît* ("pattern"). The semantic range of this word "allows for, or even leans toward, a heavenly original and/or miniature model of a heavenly original."⁸⁸ According to recently discovered Near Eastern thought patterns it is well imaginable that Moses was shown some kind of material structure as a model.⁸⁹

Secondly, there is the causative form of the verbal root *rā'āh*, to see, which suggests that Moses was taken into a state of vision. This is also supported by Numbers 8:4, where the same form, *mar'eh*, is mostly translated by "pattern."⁹⁰ We should also refer to the

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“immediate theophanic, visionary context of this passage,” which “appears to suggest heavenly sanctuary connotations.”⁹¹ Deuteronomy 26:15 confirms this view, where Israel is told to pray: “Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel” (NKJV). When we read Hebrews 8:5, where the writer quotes from Exodus 25:40, we get the clear impression that he saw in the *tabnit* model, the reflection of a heavenly reality (cf. Heb 9:23, 24).

There are a number of insights that the Israelite could have gained from the sanctuary. First, it revealed the loving character of a sovereign, universal God, who condescended to make His dwelling among men. Secondly, it pointed to God’s justice and the nature of sin, which are both defined by the Decalogue that rested in the ark in the Most Holy Place. Thirdly, it showed the terrible nature of sin. It was not possible to have direct access to God, although He was dwelling among man; a priesthood was instituted to mediate between God and man. Finally, the sanctuary rituals demonstrated the divine solution for the restoration of the broken relationship between God and man through sacrifice and mediation.

The Altar and the Cross. In pre-Israelite times (the patriarchal age) we find the “sanctuary principle” in the sacrifices that man brought before God. After the Fall, we see the sacrificial system functioning (Gen 4). The reference to Noah’s flood sacrifice to God subsequent to the Flood contains the first mention of an altar (Gen 8:20). The concept was and is always the same: “Without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb 9:22, NKJV). Both, the propitiatory sacrifice and reconciliation, as it was typically administered in the sanctuary service, is essential for salvation.⁹² The cross of Christ, then, has the same function as the altar in the OT, the latter being the type of the former (John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7).

The “Sympathizing High Priest.” Jesus offers the merits of His own blood in the sanctuary as a means of reconciling repentant sinners to God. According to Hebrews 2:17 the incarnation of Jesus Christ and His being made “like His brethren (NKJV)” was accomplished for

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the purpose of becoming a High Priest and making “propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17, NKJV). He “offered one sacrifice for sins forever” and now sits “at the right hand of God” (Heb 10:12; see also 9:23-28).

Jesus Christ was not only the “lamb” who was slain on Calvary, but He rose and ascended to heaven to become the High Priest, who “sympathize[s] with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15, NKJV). He has entered the heavenly sanctuary to administer His own blood as an expiation for sinners. Again the sanctuary truth encompasses the complete Jesus.

Atonement and Consummation. The sanctuary also demonstrates how Christ’s priestly ministry is not to be a perpetual event (in a cyclical sense) but is directed towards a definite and final goal in history. The rite that reveals this truth most clearly is the Day of Atonement. On this day the high priest went into the Most Holy Place to sprinkle sacrificial blood upon the mercy seat of the ark above the tables of the law. On coming out he symbolically transferred the confessed sins and accountability of the people upon the head of the goat “for Azazel” which was led away into the wilderness. It is clear that this Day of Atonement was understood as a time of judgment. This is supported by biblical data, such as Leviticus 23:26-32 and Daniel 7 and 8, and also by Jewish tradition.⁹³

It is interesting to note that the fasting and soul-searching, prescribed only on *Yom Kippur*, points to a holy lifestyle. There are also indications that the day was pointing back to creation as well.⁹⁴ At the same time *Yom Kippur* stresses the end of the past and introduces a new future.

All of this is just as true for the antitypical, eschatological Day of Atonement, which according to Daniel 8:14 began in 1844 and is still going on. It reveals Jesus Christ in His fullness: He is the bloody sacrifice, offered on the altar of the cross. He is the High Priest, who applies the merits of His own blood for the expiation of our sins and also acts as the judge who officiates in the cleansing of the sanctuary

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from our sins (Dan 7:22—judgment in favor of the saints). He is the sovereign Creator who has the right to judge the world, but who will also recreate it after the executive phase of the judgment. And while the saints await the outcome of the preadvent phase of this same judgment, they seek to bring their lives into harmony with God's will.

Conclusion

The True Jesus of Scripture. As Christians we are concerned to give Jesus Christ His rightful place in the very center of our faith and teaching. But at times we have been so preoccupied with holding on to the “right doctrine,” we have failed to present Jesus Christ, Who is the author and finisher of our faith. We are not always aware that in our feeble attempts to remedy the situation, we actually “empty” the Jesus of the Scriptures and strip Him of vital aspects of His person and ministry. Especially in the area of modern scholarship Jesus has been “emptied” of His historical authenticity and, thereby, also of His full theological significance, a further result of the former reduction of Jesus.

The true Jesus of the biblical revelation can best be seen—in all the aspects of His person and ministry—in the sanctuary concept. Here the statement that He is the truth Himself becomes a tangible reality in that everything pertaining to truth, as the Bible reveals it to us, is included in the sanctuary service. Jesus Christ as sacrifice, High Priest, and Judge, who is concerned about the fact that our relationship is governed by His immutable law, is the one “complete” Christ.

The Christ of the sanctuary can never be separated from His teachings, and if all the teachings of the Bible find their focal point in the sanctuary as the center of the mystery of God, then the doctrines will inevitably be closely bound up with Jesus Christ and would lose their meaning without him. When we preach Jesus Christ, we have to preach the sanctuary; when we preach the sanctuary, we cannot miss Jesus. Facing the cross we face the sanctuary, and looking at the

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sanctuary we are looking at the cross.

The true Jesus of Scripture is never separated from His doctrine. Both are portrayed as forming together a harmonious whole. Neither legalism (doctrine without Jesus) nor cheap grace (Jesus without doctrine) are viable options available to the believer who grounds his faith in Scripture. Moreover, the unity of Jesus and Scripture is the foundation of the knowledge of truth. Being known by Jesus leads the seeker to search the Word of God for more knowledge, and anyone who is open to the Spirit-led illumination of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures—with the inscripturated Word being the normative standard—will be able to love the truth (2 Thess 2:10) and receive it.

Wholistic Truth vs. Theological Pluralism. Having examined the most potent roots of theological pluralism, and having reflected on what the Bible teaches about truth, we may now draw some conclusions about theological pluralism. It cannot be a viable road for the Christian to travel for several reasons:

1. Its relativistic and nihilistic underpinnings set it in diametrical opposition to the biblical understanding of truth, which is presented as absolute and universal in time and space.

2. Theological pluralism neglects to a large extent the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit, Who indeed can lead into all truth, and Who can unite human minds in one understanding of truth.

There will always be differences of opinion on certain matters of faith and practice. It takes the community of faith and a humble spirit to work on these differences, and to be enriched by the process. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to rate these differences as theological pluralism, unless (a) they are of a crucial nature, that is, they question basic doctrines of the Bible and interpretations the church has arrived at after careful and Spirit-led study, and (b) they are held as equally valid views.

3. Theological pluralism does not honor the authority of Scripture as the final arbiter of all doctrine. By adherence to methods that are based on secular philosophies, such as the sociology of

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religion, historical criticism, and revisionism, it discourages the use of the principles of the clarity of Scripture and of *Scriptura Sui Ipsius Interpres* (Scripture interprets itself). Pluralism “argues” that any interpretation, and, consequently, any doctrine, is to a large extent the product of the human mind which is shaped by temporal influences. Neither the incarnational model of inspiration nor the overruling guidance of the Holy Spirit in the discovery of doctrine is accounted for.

4. Theological pluralism deprives any given community of faith the ability or willingness to differentiate between orthodoxy and heresy. A pluralistic philosophy forbids categorization into right and wrong and is flexible concerning any truth claims. This way Schisms may be averted for some time, but only at the higher price of diminished identity and slackened mission efforts.

In a recent article in *Christianity Today* an author aptly summarizes the biblical understanding of truth: “He [Jesus] came saying: ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ The truth is a Person, personal. This truth is not sheer subjectivity, either, for the truth of Jesus is utterly inseparable from Him—His life, death, and resurrection. We Christians really would have no idea what spiritual truth is if it were not for our being met and called by Jesus.”⁹⁵ Sometimes we are so busy trying to explain what truth is, trying to define and defend it, that we miss the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we should heed the following advice:

There is a sense in which we cannot know the truth without first being made truthful. Our problem with the gospel is moral before it is intellectual. We will use anything—even intellectual discussions about the truth—in a last-ditch attempt to keep Christ from us. So knowing the truth is a matter of being transformed, forgiven, born again before we can acknowledge the lies upon which our lives are based, before we can entrust our lives to the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. As Jesus says . . . ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth’ (John 16:13). He will guide us. Truth, Christian truth, is not an achievement of clear thinking. It is a gift. Grace.⁹⁶

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Endnotes

1 This study is an abridged and edited version of an earlier paper entitled "Wholistic Truth vs. Theological Pluralism" which was presented to the Midwest Chapter of the Adventist Theological Society on the campus of Andrews University, January 20, 1996. The full version is forthcoming in a separate publication.

2 William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), p. 95.

3 Jonathan M. Butler, "Introduction: The Historian as Heretic," in *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the origins of Seventh-day Adventist health reform* by Ronald L. Numbers (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), lv.

4 William C. Placher, "Why Bother with Theology?," *Christian Century* 111/4 (1994): 104.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

6 I recommend the assessment of Philip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), p. 112: "When I describe postmodernism or deconstruction or radical feminism to nonuniversity groups, many listeners are tempted to make the mistake of disregarding the whole business as harmless academic claptrap. Ways of thinking that seem very strange at first, however, may have their roots in more fundamental ideas that are widely accepted in the general culture. People often do not understand the full implications of what they have been taught to believe. Claptrap or not, *ideas have consequences*. What is fashionable in the secular academic culture soon becomes fashionable in the media, and even in Christian colleges and seminaries, which tend to follow trends in the mainstream academic world" (emphasis mine).

7 Lesslie Newbigin, "Mission in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft," in *Ökumenische Theologie in den Herausforderungen der Gegenwart: Lukas Vischer zum*, p. 65. *Geburtstag*, ed. Karin Bredull Gerschwiler et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), p. 67. For most of the thoughts in the next few paragraphs I am indebted to Newbigin's excellent assessment of the situation on pp. 67-71, which I try to summarize here, although I do not necessarily agree with all of his conclusions towards the end of his article.

8 The great rationalist French philosopher in the 17th century, whose famous axiom: *Cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am') on the basis of the principle of doubt led him to set up the individual consciousness as the final criterion of truth.

9 Newbigin, p. 68: "Free research without restrictions by any dogma, this is

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the usual way to find truth. If there is any divine revelation at all, it must first introduce the evidence of its own validity and present it before the judgment seat of free scientific research" (translation mine).

10 William H. Willimon, "Jesus' Peculiar Truth: Modern Apologists for Objective Truth Are Making a Tactical Error," *Christianity Today*, March 4, 1996, p. 21.

11 This perfectly explains the otherwise inexplicable fierce reaction of persons with a pluralistic mindset when they are confronted with the notion of absolute truth. What it really boils down to is the old struggle of the human ego for supremacy.

12 See Hendrik M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives*, trans. J. W. Rebel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989; Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), p. 23.

13 For helpful discussions of the various theories see Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* (London: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 15-23; Vroom, pp. 30-42. More comprehensive treatments can be found in Helmut Pfeiffer, *Offenbarung und Offenbarungswahrheit: Eine Untersuchung zur Verhältnisbestimmung von personal-dialogischer Offenbarung Gottes und objektiver Satzwahrheit* (Trier: Paulinus, 1982), pp. 21-84; Frederick F. Schmitt, *Truth: A Primer* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 77-199.

14 See note 12.

15 With Schmitt, Vardy, and others I opt for the correspondence theory as the most viable one.

16 David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 59. See also Carsten Johnsen, *The Mystic "Omega" of End-Time Crisis* (Sisteron, France: Untold Story Publishers, n.d.) for a forceful argument in favor of realism.

17 Partially against Wolfe, p. 59.

18 Vroom, pp. 238-240. It should be kept in mind, however, that Augustine tended to give Platonic philosophy a Christian baptism, which should make one wary of the way he reaches his conclusions. But he was right that in Christ are combined the nature of truth and the way to come to a knowledge of it.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

20 Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Loving God with All Your Mind* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1987), p. 140.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145. He adds: "The whole process of curiosity, questioning, and discovery can be a journey, full of wonder and praise, into the mind of God, who created everything. Whatever can be studied, whether human nature or the physical universe, is what it is because God willed it and made it. To uncover the

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hidden laws that govern matter, to disclose the patterns of subatomic particles, to discover how human beings grow and interact, to discern an underlying pattern in history or in astronomy—all of these amount to nothing less than discovering God's will. Just as God is inexhaustible, knowledge is inexhaustible. Our curiosity and understanding can never be fully satisfied in our earthly lives. As thirst is evidence for water, our yearning for knowledge points to Heaven, in which all desires will be fully satisfied. . . (1 Corinthians 13:12)"(145).

22 Frank M. Hasel, "Theology and the Role of Reason," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (1993):184.

23 Taken from Gustav Mensching, *Tolerance and Truth in Religion*, trans. H.-J. Klimkeit (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1971), p. 19.

24 Mensching, pp. 19-20, has this insightful comment: "Every one of the blind men really does have contact with a part of the true elephant. Transposed into religious terms, the implication is that different religious views are all based on true contact with the sacred. The concrete expressions referring to the object of contact are figurative statements, in the sense of the blind men's claim when they say the elephant is *like* this or that worldly phenomenon. The error and the reason for engaging in strife is the fact that every one of these blind men holds his partial insight to be universally valid. Yet, in fact, none of their perceptions does full justice to the complete nature of the real object. *The same applies to the realm of religion: no one statement can fully encompass and express the whole truth,*"(emphasis of last sentence supplied).

25 Katherine Ching, "The Practice of Theological Pluralism," *Adventist Perspectives* 5/1 (1991): 6.

26 Bernard Ramm, "The Fortunes of Theology from Schleiermacher to Barth and Bultmann," in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), p. 17.

27 Richard G. Hutchinson, Jr., *Mainline Churches and the Evangelicals: A Challenging Crisis?* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981), p. 21.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

29 George W. Forell writes in his book *The Proclamation of the Gospel in a Pluralistic World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), p. 131: "The concept of particularity is fundamental to the self-understanding of the Christian community. From the very beginning Christians saw themselves as significantly different in their faith from those who were not Christians."

30 *Ibid.*, p. 134: "The Christian faith was not only unique, definable, and true but should if at all possible be enforced everywhere."

31 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 134.

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32 Mark Horst, "The Problem with Theological Pluralism." *The Christian Century* 103 (1986): 971. He goes on: "Presumably, there would be no doctrine unless you and I had been strangely warmed by an epiphany of the numinous. Doctrines are like poetry for the lover in the aftermath of passion: pleasant, but essentially derivative. . . . It follows that each individual theological expression should be respected and even affirmed by the church."

33 Ching, p. 8.

34 D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture: essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 33.

35 Schmitt, pp. 68-71.

36 Ibid., p. 71.

37 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI/ Geneva: Eerdmans/WCC Publications, 1989), p. 22.

38 Vernon Grounds, "The Truth about Truth," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38/2 (1995): 223.

39 One of Nietzsche's famous statements was: "There are many eyes. Thus there are many truths. Hence there is no truth." Quoted in Peter C. Moore, *Disarming the Secular Gods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), p. 98.

40 Grounds, pp. 224-227; p. 224: "And one of Nietzsche's aphorisms says it all: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted'." On p. 225 he also quotes Roger Lundin, describing his experience at a summer seminar. It is well worth reproducing: "Metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics were declared dead topics, and philosophy and literature were seen to be nothing more nor less than conversations to be carried on within the rotting corpse of Western belief. Many of my colleagues in the seminar and almost all the books I was reading were urging me to abandon the ideal of truth, to laugh at the dream of hope, and to cease any search for meaning. To paraphrase a few of my summer colleagues: the bad news is that there is no good news, and the good news is, surprisingly, that there never has been any good news. So we are liberated by knowing that we have no right to lament the loss of something we never had. We need not be saved, because we are not lost" (R. Lundin, "Deconstructive Therapy," *Reformed Journal* 36/1 [January 1986], p. 15).

41 Grounds, p. 192.

42 Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), 20, quoted in Veith, p. 211.

43 As heard and noted by the author in a course taught by Peter Wagner at Fuller Theological Seminary in July of 1993.

44 See Frank M. Hasel, p. 195, n. 44, where he rightly warns: ". . . if

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Adventist hermeneutic starts out pluralistic, as some are suggesting it should, the church cannot arrive at a unified understanding of truth.”

45 Bernard Ramm, “The Labyrinth of Contemporary Theology,” *Christianity Today* 16 July 1965:6, 7.

46 See Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), pp. 73-78. For an informative explanation and evaluation of Troeltsch’s principles by a critical scholar see Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 14-19.

47 The scope of this study does not allow for a detailed treatment of these methods. The reader is referred to the relevant literature, e.g. Hasel, *ibid.*; Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

48 Gerhard F. Hasel, p. 77. For an informative study of and convincing argument for the proper role of reason in theology and the priority and authority of Scripture see Frank M. Hasel, pp. 172-198.

49 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 5:700 (emphasis supplied).

50 See, e.g., George R. Knight, “Adventists and Change,” *Ministry* (October 1993), p. 14.

51 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:693.

52 Ellen G. White, “Labors in the Piedmont Valleys,” *Review and Herald*, June 29, 1886, p. 9.

In this article the author is deploring the barriers to new knowledge that the descendants of the Waldenses had built up against the Advent message, and she uses the illustration of Noah’s day to express hope that people who hear the present truth given to the last generation will not suffer the same fate as those who closed their ears and hearts to Noah’s message. By no means is she indicating that there should be openness to another present truth which will succeed the one that was preached in her day.

53 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1986) 1:161: “When the power of God testifies as to what is truth, that truth is to stand forever as the truth. No after suppositions contrary to the light God has given are to be entertained. Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time God has given us as a foundation for our faith. One will arise, and still another, with new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit.” She then affirms so as to leave not even a shadow of a doubt as to what her position is: “We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. . . . And while the Scriptures are God’s word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar from the foundation that God

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has sustained these fifty years, is a great mistake. He who makes such an application knows not the wonderful demonstration of the Holy Spirit that gave power and force to the past messages that have come to the people of God.”

54 Ibid., pp. 161-162 (emphasis supplied); see also idem, *Testimonies*, 4:445: “There is no fault with the theory of the truth; it is perfectly clear and harmonious. But young ministers may speak the truth fluently, and yet have no real sense of the words they utter. They do not appreciate the value of the truth they present, and little realize what it has cost those, who, with prayers and tears, through trial and opposition, have sought for it as for hid treasures. Every new link in the chain of truth was to them as precious as tried gold.”

55 J. Stephen Lang, “Is Ignorance Bliss?” *Moody*, January/February 1996, 13 (emphasis his). Placher, 104, concurs: “Theology has a bad reputation in most Christian churches these days—it’s regarded as obscure, hard to understand, irrelevant, a bit of a joke. Congregations want pastors or priests who are good counselors, good administrators, good preachers. . . .”

56 Kenneth Taylor as quoted in Lang, p. 15.

57 Joseph M. Stowell, “Dealing With the ‘D-Word,’” *Moody*, January/February 1996, p. 6.

58 For persuasive arguments for the crucial importance of doctrine see Alister McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine: What It Is—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), esp. chapter 8: “Is Christianity Possible Without Doctrine?”

59 H.-D. Reimer, a Protestant scholar in Germany, who for many years headed the *Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen* (Protestant center for questions on worldviews), best comparable to what Walter Martin was for Protestantism in North America, stated a number of years ago: “A large number of denominations, especially in the Protestant field, are Bible-based: They emphasize in a trustworthy manner that they have no other foundation for their beliefs, no other additional sacred writings, no official entities with final authority other than scripture alone. In our area the Adventists belong to this category in a classical fashion.” (“Die Frage nach den Glaubensgrundlagen,” *Materialdienst der Evangelischen Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen* 5 (1991): 154-155, translation mine.)

60 See A. Jepsen, “*aman*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, transl. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974) I:292-323.

61 Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, ed. Rudolf Meyer and Herbert Donner, 18th edition, vol. 1 (Berlin: Springer, 1987), p. 78, translates *emet* with “permanence” (*Beständigkeit*), “assurance” and “certainty” (*Sicherheit, Gewißheit*)

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before “truth,” which receives third place. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 68-69, translates the same term with 1. firmness, trustworthiness, 2. constancy, duration, 3. faithfulness, and 4. truth. See also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Truth Will Make You Free*, trans. Rodelinde Albrecht (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 13.

62 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, transl. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962-65) I:171, as quoted in Jepsen, p. 298.

63 See, for example, Gen 4:1: “Now Adam knew [y^d] Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain . . .” See also Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), p. 193.

64 Although Pfeiffer’s *caveat*, on pp. 97-98, against a rash and too simple equation of *’emet* and *’emunah* in all cases needs to be considered, it should not distract from the fact that the two terms are derived from the same root and are obviously strongly interrelated. James Barr’s warning against the oversimplified use of etymological analysis should be heeded but not overrated.

65 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, transl. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 35, 41.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

67 Pfeiffer, p. 110 (translation mine).

68 Some manuscripts have the Greek word “testimony” instead of “mystery.” No consensus has been found among scholars as to which reading should be preferred, although “mystery” finds “acceptance by an increasing number of scholars” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 91, who himself argues for the opposite.) See also Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zurich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), I:226-227.

69 Helmut Thielicke, “Wahrheit und Verstehen,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 62 (1965): 120 (emphasis his; translation mine).

70 See I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 203, 205.

71 See Carsten Johnsen, *The Mystic “Omega” of End-Time Crisis* (Sisteron, France: The Untold Story Publishers, n.d.), pp. 41-44; C. FitzSimmons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1994), p. 164, comments insightfully: “A heart without rectitude will betray orthodoxy by tone and spirit

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even if it is correct teaching. The heart's temptation to escape the ambiguities and problems of life and to establish its own self as center always contributes to any distortion of the gospel. The heart itself must bow in continual worship before God, whose name is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be saved from its escape into death and from its prison of self-centeredness."

72 For this section I am indebted to Frank Hasel's helpful treatment of the subject in his aforementioned article "Theology and the Role of Reason."

73 Frank Hasel, p. 175, summarizing Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" transl. and ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1959).

74 As quoted by Frank Hasel, p. 176.

75 Frank Hasel, p. 190.

76 Doukhan, pp. 193-194.

77 Thielicke, p. 120.

78 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (London: V. Gallancz, 1967), p. 68, as quoted in Harold Netland, "Religious Pluralism and Truth," *Trinity Journal* 6 NS (1985): 77.

79 Netland, p. 81.

80 Ibid, p. 78: "Truth is held to be a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers obtains; otherwise it is false."

81 See, e.g., John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); idem, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); idem, "Religious Faith as Experiencing-As," in *Talk of God*, ed. G. N. A. Vesey (New York: Macmillan, 1969); M. Goulder and J. Hick, *Why Believe in God?* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

82 Terry O'Keeffe, "Religion and Pluralism," in *Philosophy and Pluralism*, ed. David Archard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 65.

83 For a detailed treatment of proper hermeneutical guidelines see Richard M. Davidson's presentation on hermeneutics in this publication.

84 Thielicke, p. 121.

85 See, for example, E. G. White, "The Truth Revealed in Jesus," *Review and Herald*, February 8, 1898, pp. 85-86.

86 Ibid.

87 See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publ. Assoc., 1950), 423; Paul A. Gordon, *The Sanctuary, 1844, and the Pioneers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publ. Assoc., 1983), pp. 20-22; James White, "The Sanctuary and 2300 Days," *Review and Herald*, March 17, 1853, p. 172; R. F. Cottrell, "The Sanctuary," *Review and Herald*, December 15, 1863, p.

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21; J. N. Andrews, "The Sanctuary," *Review and Herald*, June 18, 1867, p. 12; U. Smith, "The Great Central Subject," *Review and Herald*, November 22, 1881, p. 328.

88 Richard M. Davidson, "Typology in the Book of Hebrews," in *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1989), 4: 163.

89 See the statements of A. Goppelt and Frank Cross, Jr., as quoted in Frank B. Holbrook, "The Israelite Sanctuary," in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and Richard W. Leshar (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 5. See also Davidson, "Typology . . .," pp. 164-165.

90 Holbrook, p. 4.

91 Davidson, "Typology . . .," p. 163.

92 For an excellent discussion of the various terms used for the process of atonement in the Bible see John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp. 169-203.

93 See Jacques B. Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), pp. 60-64.

94 Ibid.

95 William H. Willimon, p. 22.

96 Ibid.