

Academic Freedom and Accountability at SDA Theological Seminaries

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Abstract

After a review of the legal basis of academic freedom in some western countries, this article briefly explores the historical background of its emergence and the significance regarding theological research. The reasons for respecting certain limitations given by the church and ways to solve tensions between the religious expectations and possibly diverging research outcomes are dealt with, while acknowledging that certain gray areas remain.

Scientific Freedom as Fundamental Right

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines academic freedom concisely as “freedom to teach or to learn without interference (as by government officials).”¹ The Encyclopædia Britannica is more detailed in explaining that academic freedom means

the freedom of teachers and students to teach, study, and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations, or public pressure. Its basic elements include the freedom of teachers to inquire into any subject that evokes their intellectual concern; to present their findings to their students, colleagues, and others; to publish their data and

¹ Merriam-Webster, “Academic Freedom,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/academic%20freedom> (last access on July 26, 2021).

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conclusions without control or censorship; and to teach in the manner they consider professionally appropriate.²

It is further noted that this freedom serves best for the long-term welfare of society, since only freedom of research leads to increased knowledge, because “knowledge is best advanced when inquiry is free from restraints by the state, by the church or other institutions, or by special-interest groups.”³

Today, freedom of research, teaching and science in general is mostly a constitutionally guaranteed fundamental right, as e. g. in the German speaking countries of central Europe—Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, Article 5, states:

- (1) Everyone shall have the right freely to express and disseminate his opinions in speech, writing and pictures and to inform himself without hindrance from generally accessible sources. Freedom of the press and freedom of reporting by radio and film shall be guaranteed. Censorship does not take place.
- (2) These rights shall be limited by the provisions of the general laws, the legal provisions on the protection of minors and the right to personal honor.
- (3) Art and science, research and teaching are free. The freedom of teaching does not release from loyalty to the constitution.

In Austria, this right is granted by the Federal Constitutional Law (art. 81c, para. 1: “Public universities are places of free scientific research, teaching and development of the arts.”) and the Universities Act of 2002. In Switzerland, it is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution (art. 20: “The freedom of scientific teaching and research is guaranteed”). Academic freedom is an important fundamental right that a citizen may enjoy and within which he may not only conduct research but also openly present his results. Like other areas of society, this freedom is subject to certain limitations. In the German Basic Law, this is described by art. 5, par. 2-3, and is bound to the framework of “legal provisions for the protection of youth,” “personal honor,” and “loyalty to

² Encyclopædia Britannica, “Academic Freedom,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/academic-freedom> (last access on July 26, 2021).

³ Ibid.

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the constitution.” In the Austrian equivalent, it is presupposed that “they act within the framework of the laws. . .” (B-VG, art. 81c, par. 1).

These “legal requirements” are very broad in our time and our cultural sphere, as far as questions of worldview are concerned. The practical application of, for example, controversial research methods on humans or animals is much more in the focus of limitations than the results of humanities or theological research. The latter enjoy practically unrestricted freedom regarding elaboration (research) and dissemination (presentation)—at least on the part of the political guidelines, i.e. the state.

In the United States of America academic freedom is not that clearly anchored in the constitution. At least it is not mentioned literally. It is derived from the guarantee of free speech given in the First Amendment, complemented by the equal protection of the laws granted in the Fourteenth Amendment, and espoused by US courts without defining exactly what this right comprises.⁴ In order to ensure a common understanding on tertiary level education and research, in 1915 the “Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure” of the *American Association of University Professors* (AAUP) prepared certain principles of academic freedom and tenure. It became known as “the 1915 Declaration of Principles.” In 1925 and 1926 the *Association of American Colleges* (AAC, now the *Association of American Colleges and Universities*) and the AAUP endorsed a shortened version thereof. Finally, in 1940 AAUP and AAC agreed upon a restatement of the principles drafted in 1925. This restatement is known as “the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.”⁵ This, in turn, was augmented by interpretive footnotes resulting from almost 30 years of experience compiled in the 1969 joint committee of AAUP and AAC, subsequently endorsed by both associations in 1970. To date it is signed by no less than 253 academic associations, starting in 1941 down

⁴ Cf. William H. Daughtrey Jr., “The Legal Nature of Academic Freedom in United States Colleges and Universities,” *University of Richmond Law Review* 25/2 (1991): 235-257; Floyd Greenleaf, “Teaching in the Shadow of Galileo. Academic Freedom on Seventh-day Adventist Campuses,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* (April/May 2010): 12-13. For brief sketches of the history of academic freedom in the USA, with special reference to SDA developments, cf. Greenleaf, “Teaching in the Shadow of Galileo,” 10-17; Keld J. Reynolds, “Some Observations on Academic Freedom,” *The Journal of True Education* (March/April 1965), 16-19; Earle Hilgert, “Academic Freedom,” *The Journal of True Education* (February/March 1967), 16-19.

⁵ Cf. American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, with 1970 Interpretive Comments,” 13-16; online at <https://www.aaup.org/file/1940%20Statement.pdf> (last access on July 27, 2021).

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to 2021, including the *American Academy of Religion*, the *Association for the Sociology of Religion*, the *College Theology Society* (all as early as 1967), the *Society of Christian Ethics* (1968), the *Association of Theological Schools* (1970).⁶

The introduction to the agreement makes clear that “the common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth.”⁷ While “teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, [. . . they] should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.”⁸ Further limitations of academic freedom may be given by the employing institution and must be stated clearly at the time of the appointment; “religious or other aims of the institution” are expressly mentioned as examples for limiting the freedom of research and teaching.⁹ The third comment of 1970, however, clarifies that “most church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 ‘Statement,’ and we do not now endorse such a departure.”¹⁰ Thus, the right to limit academic freedom in religious institutions is practically rejected since then, while another comment on the 1940 document somehow reinstates the right to limit freedom upon institutional policy:

As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.¹¹

If this is not observed by the employed teacher, the fourth 1970 comment explains that if “the extramural utterances of the teacher have been such as to raise grave doubts concerning the teacher’s fitness for his

⁶ Cf. *ibid* and AAUP, “Endorsers of the 1940 Statement,” <https://www.aaup.org/endorsers-1940-statement> (last access on July 27, 2021).

⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Cf. *ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

or her position, it may proceed to file charges under paragraph 4 of the section on Academic Tenure.”¹² The mentioned paragraph, in turn, deals with the process of investigating the incident and finally dismissing the faculty member, who must at first be granted the right of explaining his point of view in front of a faculty committee and the governing board of the institution.¹³

Theological Accountability

Although this agreement on academic freedom is fitted for any research discipline, it might particularly affect theological seminaries, since here, more than in any other field of academic research, the personal attitude, convictions, character, and beliefs are pivotal. Here, the official position as member of the institution’s faculty is much less separable from him/her as a private person than in any other area of learning and teaching.

Furthermore, research in the broad field of theology is by nature much less value-neutral than other fields in the humanities. It inherently has limiting implications in order to work judiciously and responsibly. The more comprehensively and thus profoundly a worldview is constructed, criticized, or claimed as binding, the greater the concrete impact on the personal freedom and individual values of the person influenced by those views. This is a far-reaching responsibility.

Theologians must realize their influence—either direct or indirect—on the faith community to which they belong and/or in which they engage in their work. . . although the majority of the church’s theologians do not hold administrative positions, they must certainly be viewed as leaders. They teach future pastors and other church employees, advise on many issues, and tend to be appointed to study commissions. They have access to the pulpit, give lectures, and hold seminars. And they

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 16. The employing institution’s freedom to decide who is hired as researcher overrules the right of academic freedom, at least in US jurisdiction: “Generally, colleges and universities are free to determine, on academic grounds, who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught, and who may join the student body. It would seem that the courts’ deference to decisions in these important areas recognizes institutional autonomy, but not necessarily academic freedom.” (Cf. Daughtrey, “Legal Nature,” 269.)

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write. All of this means they are important thought leaders. It brings a heavy responsibility.¹⁴

Furthermore, religion is much more personal than an abstract mathematical theory or a new interpretation of, for example, historical events. Believed by the reader, inwardly accepted and transferred into one's own life, theological research and teaching has a much greater, namely life changing weight. As if this were not already "burden" or responsibility enough, a sincere believing, biblical Christian theologian must also be aware that one's own research results can influence the eternal destiny of people. Consequently, this field of research is superior to any other in weight and scope. All other fields are limited (at least basically) to this world. Theology goes far beyond that. In view of this fact it is obvious that here, probably more than in other fields, certain limitations must be accepted in order not to lead other people into theological aberrations, neither wantonly nor accidentally, possibly out of a good-common belief in progress or (perhaps unconsciously) out of sensationalism.

Freedom of research is fundamentally not the same as freedom of responsibility. What an individual person has recognized as correct and true for him- or herself might be far from being "correct" or "true" in an absolute (biblical?) sense, especially in the theological field. In an area which, by definition¹⁵ is largely beyond scientific verifiability, the importance of personal opinion as well as hermeneutical premises must not be underestimated. Moreover, if one considers the widespread ignorance of biblical matters both in society and sometimes in the church and local congregation, the responsibility of the theologian is heightened by the sometimes poor capability of ordinary churchgoers to verify or falsify what is presented.

Freedom of scientific research at universities is usually practiced among experts, and results are discussed and evaluated among appropriately trained personnel. In this respect, too, theology is not entirely comparable with other disciplines. Theologians, especially in free churches, are usually strongly integrated into the everyday life of the congregation and tend not to discuss their new results only among

¹⁴ Reinder Bruinsma, "Theological Diversity: A Threat, an Asset, or What?," *Ministry Magazine* (December 2010), <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/12/theological-diversity-a-threat-an-asset-or-what> (last access on July 28, 2021).

¹⁵ The title of the subject is meant (theology, "the doctrine of God"), in which the intention is presented to investigate a being that is at least not comprehensively tangible.

“experts” who can better deal with controversial or even problematic views and verify or falsify them more easily. They rather carry new findings much more quickly into the basis of congregational life. Of course, every believer should also be able to deal with theological problems and controversies because of his responsibility as “priest of Christ” (1 Pet 2:9), “being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope” (1 Pet 3:15). However, since practice shows that it sometimes comes to a quick acceptance of immature, unbiblical ideas, especially here, in the environment of the church base, a careful handling of “new light” or new “present truth,” to use typical Adventist terms, is all the more important.

Aim and Limitation of Scientific Enlightenment

The revolutionary spirit of optimism of the great Enlightenment thinkers of past centuries, who had to free themselves from the unbiblical yoke of the church in order to be able to fathom and make known the most fundamental scientific knowledge, cannot be transferred without restriction to the theological field of today. When the renowned philosophy professor Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) gave a cutting definition of the spirit of the times in his famous 1784 essay on the question “Was ist Aufklärung?” (“What is Enlightenment?”), he made clear at the same time how different his target group and thus his objective were. He stated:

Enlightenment is the emergence of man from his self-inflicted immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s intellect without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-inflicted if the cause of it lies not in the lack of understanding, but in the resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.¹⁶

In our western cultural areas, it is a long time ago that we lived under such circumstances, in this kind of social structure, mentality, and mindset as implied here. As a result of secularization and

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” In: *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (1784), 481; own translation, in German it reads: “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen. Selbstverschuldet ist diese Unmündigkeit, wenn die Ursache derselben nicht am Mangel des Verstandes, sondern der EntschlieÙung und des Mutes liegt, sich seiner ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen.”

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democratization of western societies, and at the latest since the anti-authoritarian convictions of the 1968 generation and the associated fundamental change in values, which is still having an impact on wide areas of society today, the “guidance of another” is no longer accepted uncritically, especially when it comes to world views and personal lifestyles. From an early age, we learn in our schools that it is not predetermined structures and positions, but rather qualifications and personality that are decisive for the positive exercise of authority. Today, it is no longer a matter of liberation from immaturity due to paternalism by a (political or ecclesiastical) authority, but rather of liberation from deficient half-knowledge or ignorance. The reason for this also lies less in personal courage (the social conditions to be courageous in this are almost ideal), but rather in personal motivation, the own commitment. The problem is not the opportunity for education, but the inadequate use of it.

While for our generation the greatest freedoms in thinking and research are taken for granted, which also includes free access to the Bible and theological writings, it is rather another sentence of Immanuel Kant that should be brought into focus today. At the end of his epoch-making work “*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*” (“*Critique of Practical Reason*”) he declares: “Two things fill the mind with ever newer and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and persistently reflection is occupied with them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.”¹⁷

After his criticism of the proud flight of fancy of the Enlightenment and his plea for more sobriety in the evaluation of the possibilities and limitations of scientific research, he comes to the conclusion that in the end, heaven as well as morality are the highest goods that may cause constant amazement even among the greats of the scientific elite. God, freedom and immortality are demands of practical reason for him. It is precisely his open “capitulation” to the greatness of those “objects of research” that made him a sincere enlightener, facing the individual subjectivity, defectiveness and mental limitations of all human research. While he thus destroyed bold Enlightenment dreams concerning the

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1788), Chap. 34 (“*Beschluss*”); own translation, in German: “Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt: der gestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir.”

solution of all human problems by means of scientific research, he placed science on a solid, honest, and reasonably limited foundation.

Enlightenment in Theology

There are limits to the possibilities of research, and thus also to the freedom of research, which cannot be crossed lightly. Thus, there are areas of theological research that can never be clarified in detail. This begins with specific texts of the Old Testament prophets that are difficult to understand and extends to complex beliefs such as a careful formulation of the doctrine of the trinity. Theology as a field of research that is centrally concerned with God will probably, more than any other field of research, frequently come up against human limitations.

Unfortunately, this has not always been taken into account in theology. Already the Protestant theology professor Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), founder of historical-critical theology in Germany and most important theologian of the Enlightenment, crossed this boundary by elevating the individual, subjective reason above Scripture in the typically manner of the more radical Enlighteners, thus heralding the turn from Old to New Protestantism. Large parts of Scripture were thus deprived of their credibility and authority, labeled as purely human accessories. A separation of religion (practical piety) and theology (academic subject matter) occurred that continues to have a profound effect on the ecclesiastical landscape today. Even in Semler's day, it became clear that this detachment from the biblical foundation and the corresponding turn to human theological opinion or speculation would lead to a blasting of previous religious boundaries. Religion became more and more individual, more and more subjective and thus could give less and less support to the religious target group, the common people. Finally he even agreed to Wöllner's religious edict of 1788, which obliged teachers and pastors to observe the valid confessional writings—in order to at least maintain the religious form and thus order, if the theological foundation was already wavering. So even here, in the birth hour of academic freedom within theology, the door-opener to the new era accepted the necessity of heeding church imposed limits for the sake of unity and humility in academic affairs.

Goal and Limits of Adventist Search for Knowledge

A similar change, though not under the same conditions, was undergone by our church. While all believing Millerites and early Adventists were still closely united by the unifying doctrine of the time prophecies and the resulting hope in the imminent return of Christ, it became clear already in the first years after the great disappointment of 1844 that there were still alarmingly numerous differences in important doctrines of faith. The Sabbath conferences at the end of the 1840s led the way in forming a unified faith and thus a powerful, missionary church.

Even at that time, there were voices that intended to fundamentally refuse any concrete formulation of our teachings and even justified this resistance theologically with the imminent apostasy of the pure Advent church towards the end-time Babylon of Revelation through organization. These were largely convinced of the necessity of a clearly comprehensible, biblically well-founded community doctrine until the name of our church was found (1860) and it was officially founded (1863). On the other hand, the openness to question the given biblical-Adventist doctrines and to possibly optimize any of the previous formulations is maintained until today. Progressing insights should never be rejected. Thus it says in the preface to our present fundamental beliefs:

We humbly confess that there is still much truth to be discovered. . . understanding is ever progressive. . . . We have not written this book to serve as a creed—a statement of beliefs set in theological concrete. Adventists have but one creed: “The bible, and the bible alone.”. . . the beliefs expressed are not the product of a studious afternoon; they represent more than 150 years of prayer, study, prayer, reflection, prayer. . . In other words, they are the product of Adventist growth “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).¹⁸

While criticism is generally possible, it must be kept in mind that these doctrines of faith do not represent an individual opinion of some theology professor or a small committee, but have been formed and affirmed by thousands of delegates of the entire world. Therefore, an

¹⁸ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe. An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2018), vii-viii.

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appropriate critique should not come from an individual alone or a single area of the world field, but must be shared by an equally broad mass of the global church base. The danger of individual influence of strong authority figures is otherwise too great—and ultimately nothing new in the history of our community.

Already the famous physician John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) exerted great personal pressure on his co-workers in the Battle Creek Sanitarium, on the one hand to enforce his pantheistic views and on the other hand to gain more influence over the entire congregation. It was none other than Ellen G. White who made it clear in this context that every new teaching would have to be thoroughly examined and loyalty to a superior must never result in theological corruption. The message addressed to Laodicea in Rev 3 was absolutely necessary to wake up those who did not dare to contradict their boss (Dr. Kellogg) because of their working relationship, although some perceived his teaching as unbiblical and erroneous. They wanted to secure peace. The men were not only oppressed by Kellogg in their beliefs, but were even subject to “restrictions.”¹⁹ Questioning or even openly disagreeing with the directions given was not tolerated. But then they were asked to “unmask these high-minded sophistries.”²⁰ As “free men in Christ” they should dare, and consider it their sacred duty, to resolutely oppose unbiblical teachings.²¹

Ellen White also makes clear that there is definitely more truth to be discovered and that there is no excuse not to explore it:

There is no excuse for any one in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. We are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without examining it thoroughly.²²

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages Book 1* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 198.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 196.

²¹ *Ibid*, 196-197.

²² Ellen G. White, “Christ our Hope,” *Review and Herald* (December 20, 1892): par.1.

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The question has been asked me, “Do you think that the Lord has any more light for us as a people?” I answer that He has light that is new to us, and yet it is precious old light that is to shine forth from the Word of truth. We have only the glimmerings of the rays of the light that is yet to come to us. . . . We shall never reach a period when there is no increased light for us.²³

We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.²⁴

As Ellen White here expresses, it should not be some individual persistently pressing in his own opinion in contrast to the majority of believers. Everyone should strive for “the unity for which Christ prayed” and be ready to give up some personal, long cherished view if it openly contradicts the well-founded convictions of the body of believers—which today is represented at the full session of the General Conference with all its thousands of global delegates.

While on the one hand she opposes unwarranted criticism of our already established, biblical Adventist doctrines, calling them God-appointed “pillars” of our faith,²⁵ on the other hand she calls for further research for deeper truths—but always within the framework already proven true so far. She does not advocate throwing overboard the old “landmarks” in order to find alleged “new light.”²⁶ She even predicted that a much greater crisis than the one around Kellogg (the so-called “Alpha” crisis, ca. 1904-1907) will come: the “Omega” crisis, which will make use of a misunderstood science and attack precisely our old basic teachings:

The truth will be criticized, scorned, and derided; but the closer it is examined and tested, the brighter it will shine. . . . The principles of truth that God has revealed to us are our only true foundation. They have made us what we are. The lapse of time has not lessened their

²³ White, *Selected Messages Book 1*, 401.404.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald* (July 26, 1892): par. 7.

²⁵ White, *Selected Messages Book 1*, 204.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

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value. It is the constant effort of the enemy to remove these truths from their setting, and to put in their place spurious theories. He will bring in everything that he possibly can to carry out his deceptive designs. But the Lord will raise up men of keen perception, who will give these truths their proper place in the plan of God.²⁷

They [i.e., the false reformers/teachers] make of no effect the truth of heavenly origin, and rob the people of God of their past experience, giving them instead a false science. . . . The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error. A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced.²⁸

What influence is it [that] would lead men at this stage of our history to work in an underhand, powerful way to tear down the foundation of our faith—the foundation that was laid at the beginning of our work by prayerful study of the Word and by revelation? Upon this foundation we have been building for the past fifty years. Do you wonder that when I see the beginning of a work that would remove some of the pillars of our faith, I have something to say?²⁹

These pillars of faith are the basic Adventist doctrines, back then only about 50 years old, such as the historical interpretation of the time prophecies pointing to 1844; the sanctuary doctrine; the Sabbath as the sign of God's people; the Seventh-day Adventists as the commandment-keeping people—"the Remnant;" the mortality of the soul; the importance of the spirit of prophecy for the end-time church, etc.

She predicted that even Adventist schools will be affected and should be avoided accordingly. This happened, for example, in Battle Creek at the time of the Kellogg crisis. Teachers were to be tested to see if they agreed with our faith, and if they did not, they were not to be allowed to teach until they realized their error(s) and gave it up.³⁰ Supposed freedom of research was not an impediment to this directive. Theological research had to operate within this framework.

²⁷ Ibid, 201.

²⁸ Ibid, 404.

²⁹ Ibid, 207-208.

³⁰ Cf. Ellen G. White, *Sermons and Talks*, Vol. 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 346; Ellen G. White, Manuscript 20, 1906; Ellen G. White, Manuscript 125, 1907.

The Sola Scriptura Principle in Adventism

The *sola scriptura* (“alone the Scriptures”) argument was not used at that time against this “extra-biblical” authority paving the way from academic freedom to a circumspect theological accountability.

Our Adventist understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle usually differs widely from that of Martin Luther or even of today’s (neo-) Protestantism. Whereas Luther considered the Old Testament and also parts of the New Testament to be inferior especially to the Pauline writings, thus foreshadowing a path that would undermine the *tota scriptura* (“the entire Scripture”) principle, we accept the whole Bible from the first to the last page as the inspired Word of God and equally authoritative in all parts. Since Scripture knows extra-biblical prophets with full divine authority that have not contributed even a single written paragraph to the Bible (e.g., Shemaiah in 1 Kgs 12,22, Huldah in 2 Kgs 22,14, or Uriah in Jer 26,20), and since it even predicts the prophetic ministry of the spirit of prophecy for the end of time in particular, we cannot misuse the motto “Scripture alone” to reject any extra-biblical prophetic ministry and authority, as given in the life and writings of Ellen G. White. Unfortunately, this has not always been heeded within Adventism in recent decades. Reformation slogans have sometimes been misused for corresponding attacks—in misjudgment of the original reformers’ purpose that aimed at the rejection of the Catholic tradition and the arrogated authority of uninspired church fathers and councils.

Also, historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation were unthinkable within our community in the early days of the Advent movement. The Bible was unreservedly regarded as the Word of God and was not weighted hermeneutically in the Lutheran manner according to the principle “was Christum treibet” (“what contains Christ”), thus slighting those New Testament epistles, the Revelation or the Old Testament writings that supposedly were not sufficiently Christ-like. The restricting framework of the overall biblical message, the Adventist doctrine on the basis of the three angels’ messages (Rev 14:6-12), as well as the guiding but also limiting authority of Ellen G. White’s writings, were mostly taken for granted.

In the second half of the twentieth century, historical-critical approaches became more and more evident in Adventism, probably triggered by a more comprehensive university access of our young people and a generally and socially more critical attitude towards old orders and especially institutions, like the church. This was accompanied by an increasingly open criticism of Adventist “traditions,” as both

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Adventist confessional writings and the writings of Ellen G. White were now increasingly titled. Coupled with a discussion of the process of inspiration itself, it was precisely the criticism of the “spirit of prophecy” that, according to our fundamental beliefs manifested itself in the writings of Ellen G. White, became increasingly strident. The human (and thus supposedly erroneous) aspects of the Bible and Ellen G. White were emphasized, while in some circles the divine receded into the background. Selectivity in dealing with these writings and sometimes even a radical denial of supposedly “legalistic” statements were now possible. Polarization and defamation increased.

The idea to smooth the waters by means of a modified (more moderate) historical criticism or the apotelesmatic principle (multiple fulfillments of prophecies) in the particularly disputed area of apocalyptic prophecy failed, since it became more and more apparent that even a bit of critique of the trustworthiness of the Scriptures ultimately results in complete distrust and disorientation. The hermeneutical discussion developed into a fundamental problem that divides the Adventist world into (at least) two camps to this day: 1. fundamental rejection of any biblical criticism, even in moderate form. 2. fundamental acceptance of rational biblical criticism in varying degrees.

In response, the General Conference Executive Committee adopted a clear statement on this issue as early as 1986.³¹ There the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture was completely rejected even in its moderate form. Since this has immediate implications on the high value of academic freedom, a paper had to be prepared also in this direction, which was adopted shortly after (1987) and dealt comprehensively with questions on the subject of “Academic and Theological Freedom and Accountability within Seventh-day Adventist Educational Institutions.”³²

³¹ Cf. General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists, “Methods of Bible Study” (October 12, 1986), <https://www.adventist.org/documents/methods-of-bible-study> (last access on July 22, 2021): “Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists. The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments. In addition, because such a method de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity) and depreciates or misunderstands apocalyptic prophecy and the eschatological portions of the Bible, we urge Adventist Bible students to avoid relying on the use of the presuppositions and the resultant deductions associated with the historical-critical method.”

³² General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Theological and Academic Freedom and Accountability” (October 11, 1987), <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/theological-and-academic-freedom-and-accountability> (last access on July 22,

**The Framework of Academic Freedom
at SDA Theological Seminaries**

Theology is never completely value-neutral or objective. It is, like any other discipline, subject to subjective, human judgment. Because of the object of theology's research, this is probably more the case in this field than in any other. This makes it all the more urgent to find a common ground that can be considered the basic hermeneutical understanding. It is not expedient for the basis of our faith to be criticized anew by each new theologian. There must be a certain "entry level," a common ground on which theology can be fruitfully pursued. This framework is found for Adventist theologians in the fundamental beliefs of our church.

A Catholic, Protestant, Reformed, Methodist or Baptist professor is expected to stand by the fundamental beliefs of his church. The same applies to an Adventist lecturer or pastor. An attack on our fundamentals cannot be justified on the grounds of academic freedom. The 1987 General Conference Executive Committee Policy on "Research Freedom and Accountability at Seventh-day Adventist Educational Institutions" comprehensively addresses this sensitive issue.³³ It is currently undergoing a revision by the IBMTE (International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education) with the objective of expecting an even more emphatic Adventist conviction from faculty at our educational institutions. This already indicates that problems still exist in this realm.

It bases on the "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" of AAUP and AAC, explaining that a faculty member shall "investigate, teach, and publish within the area of his academic competence, without external restraint, but with a due regard for the character and aims of the institution which provides him with

2021); as printed version published e.g. in IBMTE – International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial and Theological Education* (Silver Spring: Department of Education-Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2017), 94-100.

³³ Ibid. The document is a result from the crisis around Desmond Ford in 1979/80 and the questions raised about tolerating deviating views of Adventist theology teachers, fueled by *Spectrum Magazine* demanding more freedom for a greater variety of theological notions. For insightful reports about the development of the document(s) at the 1984 annual council see Ministry Staff, "Ministry Reports: Annual Council—1984," *Ministry Magazine* (December 1984), <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1984/12/annual-council1984> (last access on July 28, 2021).

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credentials.”³⁴ Basic academic freedoms, as well as their limits, are stated to be:³⁵

1. *Freedom of Speech.* With restrictions on the expression of personal opinion. A teacher should always express himself accurately, respectfully, and moderately. He must also make it clear when he is not speaking on behalf of his institution (but merely personally) and should always bear in mind the repercussions for the institution employing him.
2. *Freedom of Research.* Limited by the beliefs of the educational institution and fundamental Christian ethics.
3. *Freedom to Teach.* The teacher may only teach within the framework of the Adventist worldview. Controversial topics that do not directly belong to the investigated subject and thus to the goal of a comprehensive presentation of the given theme are to be avoided. Each teacher is responsible for the consequences of his teaching.

Even these freedoms indicate that research and teaching cannot exist without corresponding responsibilities. These include:

- The goal of seeking and disseminating truth, not personal opinion. This results in the responsibility to consult with others when research leads to outcomes that affect the message and mission of the church. (This must always precede possible dissemination even in the church or in church organs, such as magazines or books.) The goal is to maintain or deepen unity in the church.

³⁴ IBMTE, *Handbook*, 94.

³⁵ See for all of the following points in this paragraph IBMTE, *Handbook*, 94-100. It is not quoted verbatim but summed up in my own words.

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- The educational institution as well as the higher services should be generous so as not to prevent new knowledge by creating an atmosphere of fear.
- It is expected that no faculty member will teach contrary to the fundamental beliefs of our church. In minor areas that do not attack our fundamental truths, controversial opinions are to be presented with due candor in reference to speculative ideas as well as their central or peripheral importance.
- Each educational institution carries a responsibility to follow a procedure for evaluation in the event of academic conflicts that allows all parties to openly present their views and to reach a fair outcome.

While freedom in individual truth-seeking should always be maintained, the world church must be recognized as appropriate and relevant corrective particularly in the field of theology at our colleges and universities. It is a matter of avoiding divisions in our core beliefs. Therefore, in the case of divergent results, there should at first be a communal study, on the basis of a board of experienced and sufficiently competent brothers and sisters, at the end of which the vote of this panel has greater weight than the individual opinion of the dissenting researcher. No polarizing individual view may be promulgated without a prior open-ended examination as described here. Otherwise it “would be an irresponsible use of a worker’s freedom to press a viewpoint that would endanger the unity of the church body,”³⁶ as the GC document further states. This is particularly applied to all those deviating views that have a destructive effect on our Adventist interpretation of the three angels’ message.

It is further pointed out that every employee of our church automatically commits himself not to disseminate views that contradict the beliefs of the church. The teacher is accountable for the preservation of order and unity. If he/she acts contrary to these basic principles of expectable loyalty towards his employer and thus the greater community of faith, disciplining or dismissal is not an interference with the

³⁶ Ibid, 97.

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employee's freedom, "but rather a necessary protection of the Church's integrity and identity."³⁷ No worker has the right to disparage, attack, or hurt the community that pays him his living.

Keeping in mind these necessary and reasonable framework conditions, it should nevertheless be clear for any investigation committee or panel that God might be revealing new light that has hitherto been unknown. So Ellen White warned in context of the 1888 General Conference and the undue handling of the message brought forth by Alonzo T. Jones:

Instructors in our schools should never be bound about by being told that they are to teach only what has been taught hitherto. Away with these restrictions. There is a God to give the message His people shall speak. Let not any minister feel under bonds or [be] gauged by men's measurement. . . . That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God's message for this time.³⁸

This may serve as a complementary, balancing statement on the above mentioned regulations.³⁹ Any scrutiny of new theories, ideas or interpretations must necessarily be open-minded, open-ended, unbiased as to the outcome. Otherwise it will be difficult for God to reveal new insights and to lead us further in our theological development. We must remember that "the Lord has need of men who are spiritually sharp and clear-sighted, men worked by the Holy Spirit, who are certainly receiving manna fresh from heaven. Upon the minds of such, God's Word flashes light, revealing to them more than ever before the safe path."⁴⁰ On the other hand, those men will, of course, never tear down what God has been building up since 1844.

³⁷ Ibid, 98.

³⁸ Ellen G. White, Manuscript 8a, 1888.

³⁹ On the background of the historical incidents that prompted Ellen Whites strict statement see Gilbert Valentine, "A Slice of History: The Difficulties of Imposing Orthodoxy," *Ministry Magazine* (February 2003), <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2003/02/a-slice-of-history.html> (last access on July 28, 2021). He concludes: "This episode [around Alonzo T. Jones in 1888] suggests that some approaches for ensuring orthodoxy are clearly inappropriate if they put authority for orthodoxy in the hands of very small groups, or if they reflect a disposition to control the minds of others, or if they reveal a phobia about things new. The task of balancing openness to the freshness of the Spirit with the need for church unity and the ensuring of orthodoxy is a demanding task for any church leader today, just as it was in Ellen White's day."

⁴⁰ Ellen G. White, Manuscript 8a, 1888.

Recent Developments

In 2010 two articles on the topic of academic freedom appeared in *The Journal of Adventist Education* in its April/May issue. The first, the editorial, argues that especially Adventist education must combine faith and science in an exemplary way, researching with one's God-given "rational capacity to its fullest level," but always keeping in mind that "the ultimate home of the Adventist teacher and student alike is the unshakable castle of faith."⁴¹ Basing on Isaiah 1:18 (KJV: "come. . . and reason"), John Fowler insists that

our acknowledgment of God must not be an irrational one. As creatures of faith, we bow before God and marvel at His wonders. As creatures of the intellect, we must probe the unknown and stretch the frontiers of knowledge. To come and reason recognizes that we are neither dumb slaves to a meaningless faith nor purveyors of intellectual arrogance that relegates faith claims to a mythical world, unworthy of intellectual respect. . . . Adventist educators must recognize that clasping the freedom to reason and explore must not lead to a rejection of the worldview of faith that forms the underlying foundation of Adventist education. Once that is acknowledged, academic freedom no longer regards a faith commitment as stifling inquiry but rather welcomes its guidance in achieving humility and responsibility.⁴²

These thoughts really get to the heart of the issue. He further is certainly right, when he ends with the appeal that "never to abandon or wander away from the rejuvenating embrace of faith is perhaps the most urgent need of Adventist education today."⁴³

The other article in this issue deals with academic freedom on Adventist campuses from a more historic viewpoint.⁴⁴ In it, Floy Greenleaf reviews the history of academic freedom in the USA and especially in Adventist History from 1888 down to the current debates within SDA universities about research in evolution and creation. He ends with a remarkable statement of Galileo Galilei stating that although God himself is infinitely above our understanding, he has given us the

⁴¹ John M. Fowler, "Adventist Education and Academic Freedom," *The Journal of Adventist Education* (April/May 2010): 3.

⁴² Ibid, 3-4.

⁴³ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁴ Floyd Greenleaf, "Teaching in the Shadow of Galileo. Academic Freedom on Seventh-day Adventist Campuses," *The Journal of Adventist Education* (April/May 2010): 10-18.

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task of research in order to more and more discover and admire his greatness.⁴⁵ Both must be combined, research and a profound, deeply rooted, guiding faith in God.

On September 4, 2016 the *Adventist Review* published an article of Larry Blackmer, vice-president of education for the North American Division. He notes:

Our educational system has never been without challenges, however, and those that our colleges and universities face today are more taxing than ever. Administrators and educators are dealing with unprecedented issues brought about by rapid changes in both the wider culture and the expectations Seventh-day Adventists have of their institutions of higher education. . . . The challenges are very real, and some of them prove especially vexing because of the faith commitments that undergird all of the church's educational programs. Not all things are negotiable, nor can Adventist colleges and universities alter their core values to build student enrollments or please those who may not share those core values.⁴⁶

He then continues by listing three major issues that currently catch the most attention, all of which are closely tied together in their core concerns: 1. Academic freedom; 2. Distinctly Adventist education; 3. LGBT legislation. In point one he mentions the current debate about the endorsement process (see below) for SDA faculty and refers to the GC document on academic freedom.

On point two he affirms:

The theology of the church doesn't belong to any one person or group. It really belongs to the larger church, the constituency of the church. Whenever there is a need to adjust the wording of the fundamental beliefs of the church, the church at General Conference session must discuss and vote to make such changes. Professors employed by Adventist institutions, therefore, should be teaching distinctly Adventist theology on our campuses.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid, 17; referring to Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems—Ptolemaic & Copernican*, Stillman Drake, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 464.

⁴⁶ Larry Blackmer, "Higher Ground for Higher Education," *Adventist Review* (September 4, 2016), <https://www.adventistreview.org/1609-19> (last access on July 27, 2021).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

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The way to attain or ensure these results, however, is still being debated as the new IBMTE Handbook is created—a delicate process, he admits.

Point three is another challenge to the autonomy of higher educational institutions and their academic freedom, since state laws might contradict and overrule the institution’s governance if it applies regulations against LGBT lifestyle and/or convictions, even if the institution is run by a church and thus, of course, places a strong emphasis on certain values and religious attitudes, such as the sexual behavior of the students enrolled.

On October 25, 2016 *Spectrum* published the views of Aleksandar S. Santrac, Professor of Ethics and Chair of the Religion Department at Washington Adventist University. As an “insider” experienced in researching and teaching within the framework of academic freedom, he supports the church’s “efforts to generating a statement on academic freedom that will help Adventist campuses and professionals successfully engage their faith and academic standards.”⁴⁸ He desires “some latitude. . . to investigate all aspects of truth in its progressive nature,” reasoning that “progressive and continual pursuit of truth, and so academic freedom, has been part of our tradition and history.”⁴⁹ How far-reaching the necessary latitude should be and what kind of limitations might be legitimate remains unanswered.

Shortly thereafter, in December 2016, another article in the *Spectrum* magazine by Daryl Ward informed the readers that “managers of the General Conference have proposed a process of ‘endorsement’ for higher education religion teachers,” which would be executed by the IBMTE.⁵⁰ It was assumed that “conceived as an endeavor to assure the integrity of the mission and message of the church, the process would actually be a stunning betrayal of Adventist identity.”⁵¹ While basically scrutinizing

⁴⁸ Aleksandar S. Santrac, “Academic Freedom in the Context of Adventist Higher Education,” *Spectrum* (October 25, 2016), <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2016/10/25/academic-freedom-context-adventist-higher-education> (last access on July 28, 2021).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Daryll Ward, “Why the Proposed IBMTE Endorsement Process Would Betray Adventist Identity,” *Spectrum* (December 14, 2016), <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2016/12/14/why-proposed-ibmte-endorsement-process-would-betray-adventist-identity> (last access on July 26, 2021).

⁵¹ Ibid.

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the *modus operandi* of how this would be processed, the main concern is the actual content of *what* is to be signed by the theological faculty.

The author argues that four significant aspects would oppose such an idea of endorsing faculty: 1. The statements are self-contradictory; 2. The ecclesiastical authoritarianism of the statements is utterly alien to the soul of Adventism; 3. Ineradicable vagueness afflicts the statements; 4. The statements are corrupting because they are corrupt.⁵² He explains that “the infinite God they [i.e., faculty members] love cannot be encompassed in any formula” like the 28 fundamental beliefs or their intended enforcement through an endorsement process. “To say at the outset that our denomination has no creed other than the Bible and then produce 4,560 words exercising a magisterial right to determine what constitutes biblical truth (the 28 Fundamental Beliefs) is at best astonishingly inattentive and at worst cynically duplicitous.”⁵³

Unfortunately, he misunderstands or at least misconstrues the Adventist heritage regarding creeds. Those Adventist pioneers that warned of the dangers belonging to any kind of stipulated belief were the same that formulated our first fundamental beliefs (in 1854, 1872, 1889) due to the necessity of defining and delimiting our faith in order to be transparent, prevent misunderstandings, and false teachings. While we are still careful not to limit God-given rights as the freedom of conscience, even our pioneers were aware of the fact that any entity, any institution, any church needs something to agree upon, as a common basis. The Bible itself is interpreted too differently by the existing denominations. So it became clear that it needed further clarification of what actually is understood by Adventists concerning the biblical account, but never “beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4,6). What has hitherto been done in the history of our church is nothing else than a further development keeping pace with present challenges and questions, prompted by the same noble motivation and purpose that inspired the Adventist pioneers.

In April 2017, a subsequent article on basically the same topic was published by the managing editor of *Spectrum*, Alisa Williams.⁵⁴ It reported on the implementation of the above mentioned regulations resp.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Alisa Williams, “Delimitation of Academic Freedom at Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary,” *Spectrum* (April 11, 2017), <https://conversation.spectrummagazine.org/t/delimitation-of-academic-freedom-at-seventh-day-adventist-theological-seminary/13287> (last access on July 27, 2021).

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endorsement process at the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University and summed up the paper's content. It further illuminated the background, citing the Associate Dean of Andrews Seminary explaining that the document "originated with a faculty member in a faculty meeting" and was hoped to "be a model that other institutions could follow if they wished."⁵⁵ In fact, since then it is used by other seminaries.⁵⁶

The document contains six articles, briefly outlined as follows:⁵⁷ 1. The Bible as only creed and rule of faith and practice; 2. Support of the 28 fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, the GC documents "Methods of Bible Study"⁵⁸ and "Academic and Theological Freedom and Accountability"⁵⁹ from which result the following consequences; 3. No methodologies that undermine the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, such as historical-critical methodologies; 4. No evolutionary theories such as macroevolution or theistic evolution; 5. Support of monogamous, heterosexual marriage as divine pattern, abiding by the "Code of Ethics for Seventh-day Adventist Educators"⁶⁰ and the "Pastoral Ethics;"⁶¹ 6. No attacks against a colleague's character and competence. It is stated clearly that these points do not interfere with meeting and discussing with scholars that hold differing views and apply differing methods when approaching the Bible and related topics.

⁵⁵ Williams, "Delimitation of Academic Freedom."

⁵⁶ For instance, Bogenhofen Theological Seminary (Austria), where it was adopted and endorsed by the faculty in 2018. Similar requirements are given in faculty handbooks of several SDA colleges and universities, see, e.g., the *Pacific Union College Faculty Handbook*, 44-46 or the *Oakwood University Faculty Handbook*, 45-51.

⁵⁷ For the full text read the entire document titled "Delimitation of Academic Freedom for the Faculty and Staff of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University" which can be downloaded freely at <https://www.andrews.edu/sem/about/statements/delimitation-of-academic-freedom.pdf> (last access on July 27, 2021).

⁵⁸ General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist, "Methods of Bible Study" (October 12, 1986), <https://www.adventist.org/documents/methods-of-bible-study>.

⁵⁹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, "Theological and Academic Freedom and Accountability" (October 11, 1987), <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/theological-and-academic-freedom-and-accountability>.

⁶⁰ IBMTE—International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial and Theological Education* (Silver Spring: Department of Education—Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2017), 90-93.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 85-89.

Conclusions

I think Reinder Bruinsma is right when he writes that “the discussion about the values of academic freedom and loyalty to one’s faith community will probably never cease. Questions will remain as to how far this loyalty should go.”⁶² Some limits, however, should be clear, even if not every question on loyalty needs a detailed answer but rather belongs to one’s conscience, influenced by the Holy Spirit’s guidance. While science must be fundamentally free, no field of research can do without certain frameworks and limitations. This is especially true in the inherently more subjective field of theology. Every church has certain fundamental beliefs on which membership is grounded. That one moves within this framework as a member of a church should be self-evident—even, or especially as a researcher employed by the church. Equally self-evident, however, must be the freedom to help shape this framework, insofar as the Bible as the highest authority of faith clearly suggests a change or deepening of the given framework/beliefs. Knowledge progresses and cannot be deliberately excluded without seriously impairing God’s blessing in the progress of the work or mission.

However, if previous results have proven to be true, they will not be false in the future. God’s truth does not change any more than he changes himself. The Adventist catchword “present truth” does not mean that we must expect new knowledge in contrast to old “truths,” but that we might add further pearls of truth to the precious, previous ones. Thus, the overall picture becomes clearer and purer.

The most fundamental foundation of our fellowship is the three angels’ message. Another fundamental belief is the significance of the spirit of prophecy for the end-time church, which we believe to be the Seventh-day Adventist church as the remnant of Rev 12:17 as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus,” which is “the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). Attacking these core fundamentals, even if it is done for the most sincere, noble motives (progress, modernization, correction), is not a peccadillo. Singular views in this regard are not a subject for public discussions in the congregation or in congregational publications. The unity and power of our church in the mission of the world would thus be negatively affected, for ““press

⁶² Bruinsma, “Theological Diversity.”

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together; press together,' are the words of our divine Instructor. Unity is strength; disunion is weakness and defeat."⁶³

Theological deviations in fundamental areas must therefore first be discussed internally among those who have sufficient theological competency. For such cases, the apostles' council (Acts 15:1-29) may serve as a model, and Ellen White's precious (and singular) counsel regarding "intellectual freedom" should be applied:

When ministering brethren come together in council, let deference be shown to the expression of intelligent principles, let intellectual freedom be freely accorded to all. There should be unity and love and freedom in communicating one with another. It should be a pleasure to consult one with another, to compare ideas and to review plans. An atmosphere of goodness, confidence, and love should be diffused; for this is the assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit. . . .

Link up with your brethren, if you would have them link up with you, and give you their confidence. Confidence and faith will beget confidence and faith. . . show them that you have confidence, and that you believe that they are taught of God as much as you yourself are taught of God. Open your plans before them. One will be free to speak, and another will be free to speak, and they may call your attention to some things that you had not thought of before.

God does not open everything to one mind, but He teaches one, and another, and still another. Men are to stand in God, and without having the fear of criticism before them, they are to speak as God shall give them utterance, and to write as God shall dictate. After they have written their thoughts, let them be free to read their articles to their brethren, and let them receive any kindly word or caution that the brethren may see fit to offer in the spirit of brotherly kindness and love.⁶⁴

This is how the Christian, brotherly way of evaluation and progress of theological knowledge is meant to look like in our church. We need this kind of a careful review among competent brothers and sisters to avoid individual mistakes that quickly can have a negative impact on entire congregations or generations of students and pastors. And

⁶³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 6 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1901), 293; cf. Ellen G. White, (1871), *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1871), 165.

⁶⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Remnant Church. Its Organization, Authority, Unity, and Triumph* (St. Helena, CA: Elmshaven Office, 1934), 30-31; cf. Lt 53, 1894.

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ultimately, every single one of us researchers needs sufficient humility to accept the possible rejection of new “light” if it turns out to be rather darkness. This is never easy, but all the more necessary in order to avoid struggles, polarization, disunion, and thus weakness.

Our doctrines are tightly woven. If one detaches such important convictions as the three angels’ message, Ellen G. White, the authority and reliability of the Scriptures, the sanctuary doctrine and the investigative judgment etc., other subjects will also be impaired. An honest and accountable use of the academic freedom at an Adventist university does not legitimize the undermining of these fundamentals. In doing so, the Adventist researcher would be denying his theological responsibility and loyalty to his employing entity. There is no persecution of faith on the part of our church. Those who feel constrained within our doctrinal structure and fundamental convictions are free to resign from their post without any negative personal consequence. Noble honesty and respectability, however, mean to let the building stand and not to tear it down by means of a singular notion.

In one of Ellen G. White’s early visions we find an interesting picture on this very subject, there related to the three angels’ message as the core base of Adventist theology:

I was shown three steps—the first, second, and third angels’ messages. Said my accompanying angel, “Woe to him who shall move a block or stir a pin of these messages. The true understanding of these messages is of vital importance. The destiny of souls hangs upon the manner in which they are received.” I was again brought down through these messages, and saw how dearly the people of God had purchased their experience. It had been obtained through much suffering and severe conflict. God had led them along step by step, until He had placed them upon a solid, immovable platform. I saw individuals approach the platform and examine the foundation. Some with rejoicing immediately stepped upon it. Others commenced to find fault with the foundation. They wished improvements made, and then the platform would be more perfect, and the people much happier. Some stepped off the platform to examine it and declared it to be laid wrong. But I saw that nearly all stood firm upon the platform and exhorted those who had stepped off to cease their complaints; for God was the Master Builder, and they were fighting against Him. They recounted the wonderful work of God, which had led them to the firm platform, and in union raised their eyes to heaven and with a loud voice glorified God. This

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affected some of those who had complained and left the platform, and they with humble look again stepped upon it.⁶⁵

It is good to thoroughly examine the foundation of our Adventist faith. Ideally, this is done before baptism and not in the lecture hall in the first place. While a close investigation to firmly root one's faith in the Adventist belief is more than welcome, it is not right to attack the church or its institutions from within, as church member or even as Adventist theologian, once the result is disbelief in what constitutes our church, its message and mission.

Yet, the end of the vision raises hope that all sincere, candid critics will recognize and heartily embrace the thoroughly grounded biblical truths of our church. This will promote our church's unity and thus the purposefulness in fulfilling our mission.

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⁶⁵ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1882), 258-259.