

⁶⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, p. 1689.

⁶⁸ Ellen G. White, "Christ's manner of Teaching," *The Signs of the Times*, Feb. 29, 1892, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Ellen G. White, "The Example and Teaching of Our Redeemer," *The Watchman*, April 23, 1907, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 127.

⁷¹ Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 313.

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THE ROLE OF THE CENTRIST THEOLOGIAN IN THE CHURCH

By E. Edward Zinke

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Throughout history, some individuals have changed very largely the way their contemporaries thought about God, mankind, and the world. For example, Plato, Aristotle and Kant, whether right or wrong, were catalysts for such radical key changes in world views.

Major movements have also vitally altered prior ways of viewing the world. The Reformation was such a movement. It was a religious and theological movement. Our thinking, it declared, ought not to be founded on tradition, whether of the church or otherwise, or on church councils, the pope, nature, or reason, no matter how useful these might be for other purposes. Rather, the foundation for our world view and faith must come solely from the Bible, the Word of God; hence the Reformation concept, *sola Scriptura*, by Scripture alone.

A few occasions stand out in our personal lives as particularly memorable. My visit to Constance, Germany, is one such key event in my life. I stopped to meditate at the place where John Hus and Jerome of Prague were burned at the stake approximately a hundred years before Martin Luther started the Reformation. I contemplated the significance of their lives and their willingness to die for the Word of God.

A large boulder has been located at the place where Hus was killed, commemorating his martyrdom. After meditating for a few moments, I walked around the boulder and noticed

on the other side an elderly lady sitting on a park bench. She seemed to have lived nearby all of her life and probably had sat on that bench numerous times. As a good American tourist, I lifted my camera to take a picture of the rock. This startled the woman. She looked at the camera, then at the rock, then back at me. She walked around the rock looking at it the entire way, then back at my camera. Then she walked down the street, apparently wondering why this tourist wanted a picture of that boulder. Did she understand its significance?

Do we?

I wonder if we do understand the significance of the rock—the Word of God. It is part of our heritage. It was accepted as foundational to the existence of our Seventh-day Adventist church; but how many of us understand its full significance?

For the Reformers, accepting the Bible alone (*sola Scriptura*) meant that no other source of authority could function as the foundation of their theology, their thinking, or their lives. True believers during the Reformation did not turn to the church or church councils, nor did they turn to reason, empirical data, or existential experience. Rather, they turned to the Bible as the foundation for their faith and life. This did not mean that they felt that God had never spoken through the church, church councils, the pope, the natural world, or reason. It simply meant that for them the Bible was the authority by which they would determine how God had spoken, what He had said, and how what He had said should fashion their teachings and their lives.

They rejected the idea of building their system of thought and life on both the Bible *and* the church. They also refused to build on the Bible *and* tradition, the Bible *and* the pope, the Bible *and* reason, the Bible *and* nature, and—to extend the principle to our day—the Bible *and* history, science, psychology, sociology and existential analysis. Instead they said, “The Bible *alone* is our foundation.”

The Seventh-day Adventist church inherited and adopted

the concept of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone. Time and again the pen of inspiration reminds us of this. For example,

But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines, and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority,—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.¹

The Seventh-day Adventist church arose within the context of the idea that the Bible is the touchstone of truth. As a church we assumed and adopted the concept that the Bible was the authority for our doctrine, for our lives, and for our manner of thinking. Our church depended on the Bible to provide the lens through which the world was to be viewed. We were the people of the Book. In practice, the Bible was our authority; in principle, however, not everyone seems to have understood the issues involved in the acceptance of that authority.

The authority of the Bible was assumed by our pioneers without grappling with the issue of Biblical authority. Later in our history we had to come back to the issue of Biblical authority. Our concerns to begin with were largely with doctrinal issues, which we approached from the adopted base of the authority of the Bible. To be a Seventh-day Adventist was, for some, to attend church, observe the Sabbath, pay tithe, believe in the conditional immortality of the soul, and have some understanding of 1844 and the Judgment.

Along with *sola Scriptura*, our church inherited from the Reformers the concept of righteousness by faith. The issue of salvation was not much discussed by our pioneers to begin with; it was taken for granted. But later our church found it essential to explore the issues relative to salvation. In the process, we came to a fuller recognition that a Seventh-day

Adventist is a person who has assented to specific doctrines and adopted a unique lifestyle, and who has also received by faith the righteousness of Christ and thereby entered into a personal relationship with Him as the Lord of life.

As an aside, it is important to note that there is a relationship between *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone). When the latter principle is lost, the former is also eventually lost. When the Bible is no longer accepted as a divinely given supreme authority, then one must produce a human "work" such as philosophy, science, or history, in order to come to a faith in the existence of God and to prove that the Bible is His Word from sources external to the Bible. A human work is considered necessary in order to achieve the faith by which we are saved! But contrary to all such notions, salvation remains a gift. "It is not of works lest any man should boast."

Faith is not based on human philosophy, history, or science. (See 1 Cor 1-2). Faith is itself the substance. (See Heb 11:1). Faith is not produced by human effort; it is the gift of God (see Eph 1:8) that comes by hearing "the word of God" (Rom 11:17). Instead of being founded on man's knowledge, faith in the Word of God is the foundation of man's knowledge. (See Heb 11:3). Faith comes from the power of God rather than from the wisdom of man. (See 1 Cor 2:5).

Accommodating to Humanistic Reasoning

Since the essence of the Seventh-day Adventist church is centered on doctrine and lifestyle, some believers have come to think that doctrine and lifestyle may be separated from the Bible. In the view of these persons, the Bible was useful as a source book but not necessarily as an all-encompassing foundations. Pointing to other foundations for truth and faith their thought processes have begun to think in categories parallel to humanistic ones of the world around us. Some of them have begun to feel that reason and sense experience are the ul-

timate criteria for truth—and in doing so have gone a long way toward becoming humanists themselves.

A humanist is not necessarily an atheist or an agnostic. A humanist may not even be a secularist. A humanist may believe in God and desire to center his life in God. But the humanist, broadly defined, grounds his thinking in something other than Scripture. The humanist's preferred sources of knowledge are the natural world, human reason, sense data, experience, moral impulses, the will, and so on, each or all of which in some way become the foundation for his thought processes and thus the foundation for his qualified acceptance of God and the Bible.

Looking back over and assessing my life from the convictions that I hold now, I have to admit that I was raised and educated in our church as a kind of a humanist. I even earned two seminary degrees, without becoming fully aware of what was driving me in my intellectual and spiritual life. Although I knew some people who spoke about the absolute authority of Scripture, the Bible seldom functioned for me in the role of an absolute authority. The history classes I attended were not taught (to my recollection) from a Biblical philosophy of history as I understand it now. History and its interpretation were simply a matter of looking at historical "data" as if they were neutral and could be analyzed without guidance from the Divine hand. The task of the historian, I was taught, was to discover the "truth" wherever it might lie. The impression was left that the Bible was not the standard of truth, of all truth. Similarly, the psychology course I took found no foundation in the Biblical concept of the nature of man. Rather, the observed "data" were presented as the substance from which models of psychology were to be constructed. My psychology professor occasionally introduced something from the Bible and Ellen White but his doing so did not change the overall impact. In other classes I was taught to believe in the worldwide flood because it could be proven scientifically, not because the Bible recorded it to be factual. The existence of

God was supported by various philosophical arguments rather than by Scripture.

I want to be clear that my teachers were devoted, spiritual men and women. A number of them accepted and practiced the authority of Scripture in their lives; and I am grateful for their example. Furthermore, there were other voices, voices that acknowledged the full authority of Scripture for all thought and life.

I will have to admit, judging from my current perspective, that I was a well-educated "Adventist humanist." When such a person attends a secular university, as many of our young people are doing all over the world, there is little reason to remain an Adventist except as a "cultural Adventist," i.e. as an Adventist who likes the culture and the lifestyle of the religious community in which he grew up. There are also professors who are no more than "cultural Adventists." But heritage alone will not maintain a person as a vital link in the church and its mission, because other sources of authority are accepted to be either equal to or higher than the Bible function in decisive ways. In my view, the kind of "cultural Adventism" with the humanistic foundation that I have just described, and that many students have been exposed to and have consciously or unconsciously accepted in North America, is the seed bed of liberalism in our church. By the time students so molded leave our schools and go to a university they are preconditioned to follow the norms of the professors in the universities. In turn new secular ideas from outside educational institutions are brought into our church. But the beliefs of real Adventism are not founded in reason, sense data, or existential experience. They are grounded in the Bible. Anyone who does not accept the full Bible as highest authority cannot remain a Seventh-day Adventist in the fullest sense of the term.

When a Seventh-day Adventist theologian, scientist, or scholar questions the literal six-day creation of Genesis 1, the miracles recorded in Scripture, the giving of the Decalogue by

God on Mount Sinai, the unity of the book of Isaiah, the presence of bodily resurrection in the Old Testament, the historicity of Genesis 1-11, the authenticity of the words of Jesus in the Gospels, Christ's miracles, or the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, church leaders, administrators, constituents and parents understandably take alarm. It should be recognized that when a person reaches such conclusions it is usually the result of stepping onto a humanistic path years earlier.

Common Foundation Eroding

It seems fair to say that current theological discussions within the Seventh-day Adventist church are taking place at quite a different level from those of previous Adventist generations. The Adventist pioneers dealing with the identity of the kings of the north and south in Daniel 11, the interpretation of the "daily" in Daniel 8, the time for beginning the Sabbath, clean and unclean food in Leviticus 11, health reform, and the like, were in principle united in their acceptance of the Bible as their authoritative foundation for the binding answer. Today it appears that this common foundation has been eroding. Today it is the Bible itself, its role and authority, that is under question.

A basic uneasiness is felt by many Adventist lay people and church leaders that something in the church is wrong. They find it difficult to pinpoint the true causes of the problem. May I submit that the crisis in the life and theology of our church today—particularly in the North American Division and in other first world countries—is due in large part to an insufficient understanding of the issues surrounding the authority of the Bible for faith and practice?

Who wants to be the bearer of bad news? We like positive information and "good news." Too often I wonder why it is all right for an Adventist theologian to discuss the theology of such a figure as Karl Barth and how he differs from, say, Emil Brunner or Thomas Aquinas, and how his influence extends

into the present, but consider it awkward to discuss our own theological issues. Are we perhaps too close to home, too afraid of being attacked by brothers?

But should we shrink back from the challenges which confront us? Would we be faithful disciples of our Master if we hid our heads in the sand, or refused to look the issues in the face? Are we trying to hide something from someone? Is it not important for us to understand where theological trends within our church come from and where they may take us? Surely it is important for us to understand where we are with reference to the authority of Scripture in all of our thinking and doing. If we are unwilling to face the issues head on, will we be able to solve our problems constructively? Our entrusted stewardship of faith gives us little choice. There are times when even silence creates guilt.

More and more concerned Seventh-day Adventist parents are asking, "Where should we send our children to attend academy (secondary school) and college? Where will they get a Christian education based on Biblical rather than humanistic philosophy? Where will they be taught to think Biblically?" The parents who are asking these questions do not wish to spark a witch hunt. God forbid! But they do want us all to refocus on what counts most in genuine Christian, Adventist education. Meanwhile, students in various schools are being exposed to teachings that are radically divergent from the Bible and our historic positions. More and more pastors, parents and church members are asking questions regarding these matters, and rightfully so.

Liberal Versus Centrist

While labels can be misleading, it is necessary to find categories under which to discuss issues. Therefore, without attaching a pejorative meaning to terms, we will speak of the "liberal" and the "centrist" theologians in our church. (There are also some "right wing" persons in our church, but it is not the task of this paper to address their theology). There are

variations within both groups of theologians, of course, and some are to the left and to the right of the centrist theologians. Furthermore, the centrist is not in the right simply because he is in the center. The term "centrist" is appropriately applied only when Scripture is at the center of all theology. Some liberal theologians and scholars in our ranks prefer to designate themselves "progressives," a term used widely outside the Adventist framework for liberal theologians.²

Progressive theologians construct their theology on foundations other than those of Scripture. They do not wish to invoke the Bible's divine authorship and resultant unity as normative. The Bible is not accepted as the Word of God, nor is it considered self-authenticating. They reject or radically modify the Reformation principle that the Bible is its own interpreter. "Progressive" theologians use Scripture, but verify or interpret it from without. Truth to them is truth "wherever it may be found," and the Bible is not the final norm for testing all truth. They utilize external criteria to test the truth of the Bible. They apply methods of interpretation used for any other document, past or present, to the Bible as if the Bible were but a human book. Therefore, they employ the historical-critical methodology.

In sharp contrast to progressive theologians, centrist theologians base their methods of interpretation on the internal witness of the Bible, its own internal self-testimony. They acknowledge the divine authorship and resultant unity of Scripture. They allow the Bible to be its own authenticator and interpreter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Both centrist and progressive theologians desire to address the world. Progressive theologians feel that to reach the public, they must reinterpret Scripture according to the philosophies and norms of contemporary society. Centrist theologians argue, on the other hand, that, while communication must certainly be intelligible, the Bible is a heaven-given deposit of truth that confronts the world and must not be compromised by the world. They attempt to address the world

with the message of Scripture—no matter how radical it may seem to contemporary minds—in such a way that the world is challenged to renewal and conformity to Scripture. Their goal is conversion.

Liberal (or progressive) theologians make reason, or some other human norm, equal to the Bible and, in the end, superior to it, stating that nature and the Bible must be harmonized on some basis outside the Bible. Centrist theologians see Scripture as providing the foundation from which such harmony is to be experienced. They regard scientific deductions as valid only when they harmonize with the divine revelation of Scripture.

Progressive theologians hold that one cannot start simply with the Bible but should instead begin with reason or some other accepted norm. Centrist theologians accept reason as a tool and gift of God but reject the idea that reason or some other aspect of man can be made the foundation and structure of a believer's world view and theology.

A house must be built on a foundation with walls, windows, and a roof. Each component is essential and has its own proper function. But a house could scarcely remain a house if the roof became the foundation. Likewise, reason, culture, or any other norm must not be placed where the Word of God belongs. The Bible must remain the blueprint and foundation of one's theology, life, and thinking.

Distinctive Teachings Essential to Mission

The Seventh-day Adventists need to reaffirm the authority, internal unity, and full inspiration of Scripture. They need to reaffirm the Bible's authority in matters of science and history, including its accounts of a literal creation in six days, a single worldwide flood, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the truth of miracles, the final phase of the ministry of Christ that began in the real heavenly sanctuary in 1844, and an imminent, literal, and visible second coming. Is the mission of our church at all related to our message? Will

our church lose its identity, if it loses its distinctive teachings? Will our church remain itself, or will we become something else?

When the distinctive message of a church is lost, its mission centers in social concerns, even in liberation theology with its use of arms, rather than in the urgent need of men and women to become God's special people and to spread the distinctive Biblical messages of Christ's soon return.

Are "Progressives" on the Cutting Edge?

Surprisingly liberal (or progressive) theologians use the same language as centrist theologians—but they infuse it with new meaning. Thus, a new message, a new mission, a new theology are garbed in centrist language, making Adventists a different but not a renewed people. There are liberals (or progressives) in other churches, such as Catholics, Southern Baptists, and Lutherans (Missouri Synod) and so on, and we can learn from what they have done in their communities of faith. We are seeing the results of progressives in our community of faith.

Does this mean that self-proclaimed progressives are at the creative edge of Adventist theology? Are not progressives rather bearers of an amalgamation of thoughts and traditions stemming from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and various other forms of humanism? They are promoters of traditions incompatible with the foundational concept of *sola Scriptura*.

Progressives, we must be aware, ordinarily seek to change the church gently so that the church will not realize that it is being changed. They dare not move too quickly lest they sever the support of administration and funding provided, ultimately, by an unsuspecting conservative membership without which they cannot exist. They pull back if they sense that they have pushed their views too quickly and wait a while to test the waters. One successful approach used by progressives in attempting to alter the church is to take

control of its educational institutions, the intellectual power base of the church. In this way, young and formative minds can be carefully and subtly educated in “progressive” ways of thinking with only minimal disturbance to the laity at large.

Progressives seldom operate by discussing issues clearly and openly. They state theological positions cautiously and with implications glossed over or hidden. They prefer to minimize or discredit other points of view. While they insist on pluralism, tolerance, equity, and fairness, it has been seen time and again that whenever they gain control they deal out the opposite of what they demand. Why is there a constant push to replace centrist theologians, to discredit them, or to maneuver politically to block them from filling available positions?

One beneficial result of all this is that in recent years the mainline position of the church has had to be restated and finely tuned in contrast to the liberal position of progressives. Thus, the theology of mainline Adventism has been deepened and more thoroughly articulated.

Some church members have wondered what justification there is for the church to permit control of leadership in many of our educational institutions and publishing ventures to be vested in the hands of progressives. Is it that boards do not know who is who; or are there more complicated reasons? The real threat to the message and mission of the remnant church is from within, and it is even more subtle than any from without.

Progressives play a role in the church. But it is one that is as competitors against their own team, for their “progressive” philosophy and goals conflict with the Biblically based mission and message of our church.

Ethics! Our solid and conservative lay people have sacrificed to make the church what it is, to build its institutions and to support its administration, ministry, and teachers. The laity have sent their young people to be strengthened and renewed in their faith in our institutions.

Do progressives have a right to accept the funds and use the institutions developed by a laity that is overwhelmingly centrist? Would it not be more forthright, although perhaps suicidal on the part of the progressives, for them to declare their motives openly, make clear the origin and implications of their theological methods and Biblical interpretations and proclaim forthrightly their final goals?

These questions are not intended in any way to control the freedom to think or to explore new regions of knowledge. These questions are presented instead as a searching plea in order that the entire church may discuss them fully and exhaustively and accept whatever may be in harmony with the norms of the authority Scripture.

We are now presented with a golden opportunity in the history of the Advent movement—to unite our church on the principles of the Word of God. It is tempting to be complacent, to minimize the problems, and to take a “head-in-the-sand” approach when it comes to problems associated with the liberal, progressive wing of the church.

Church Must Reaffirm Its Theology

Administration plays a key role in supporting centrist theology. This centrist theology is Bible-based and Ellen White-affirming, and it represents the belief system of the vast majority of Adventist ministry and laity. It holds a bright future for the church and its renewal. If the church is to continue to be itself, it must reaffirm its theology.

Evangelists and pastors have an interest in the discussion. Their task is certainly at stake because their role depends upon “the message” and “the truth,” upon a clear “thus saith the Lord.” Treasurers have a stake in the issue. If we are no longer sure what God has said, we have little reason to sacrifice our tithes and offerings to support the proclamation of our message. The secretariat will want to consider its role. Why should an Adventist accept a mission assignment if there is no clear purpose, mission, and message associated

with that assignment? Missionaries, after all, are not social workers or anthropologists. They are God's messengers, sent out to bring a final warning message of salvation to a world doomed to die.

The space shuttle program of the United States was hampered for awhile by an O-ring problem that slowed the program nearly to a standstill. Are we not ourselves now faced with an O-ring problem? Is there not a justifiable feeling that something is wrong; and some have suggested possible solutions? So far, there have been few major catastrophes, but we continue to face the possibility of a Challenger disaster.

With concern many have read the *Washington Post* transcription of the dialogue between the pilots of the Air Florida flight that crashed in the Potomac after brushing a bridge because of iced wings. Before takeoff, the pilots chatted over coffee about the ice problem, even complaining that the wings were required to be de-iced. Their complacency cost the lives of many people including their own.

Do you know how to boil a live frog? I am told that a frog will immediately attempt an escape if thrown into boiling water. But a frog placed in cold water will not panic if the water is heated slowly. As the water reaches higher temperatures, the frog will never realize what is happening to him.

For the last twenty years or more, centrist theologians in the Seventh-day Adventist church have been a source of a renewal compared to that of Reformation times. They have been working at the cutting edge of theology in the church and beyond the church. By the grace of God and with the guidance of the Bible and the pen of Ellen G. White, they have initiated and fostered a deepening understanding, renewal, and affirmation of the beliefs of God's remnant church. They have strengthened the Biblical concept that the Bible is the basis of our understanding of God, man, and the world. The centrist has been at the heart of what the church is through teaching, preaching, researching, and writing. Rather than reformulating the theology of the church into a modernistic

structure, the centrist has rethought it from the standpoint of the authority of Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. Tremendous strides have been made in the understanding of Daniel and Revelation, the judgment message, the authority and centrality of the Bible and its attending method of interpretation, flood geology and creationism, to mention but a few areas. The work is by no means finished or complete, but the results have been substantial.

May I suggest that centrist theologians continue to consider additional areas of exploration as long as time lasts. The initial work on the nature of the Ellen White writings from the perspective of revelation needs to continue. There are extensive studies to be undertaken on the nature of the church, the nature of Christ, the nature of man, and the area of ethics. Deep explorations need to continue into the relation of Scripture to science and the humanities. These studies will make significant contributions to the church, provided they are conducted with respect for the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

The ongoing revival or strengthening of the authoritative role of the Bible within the church gives us a tremendous opportunity. Let us keep the Bible as the basis of our unity. Let us press together as administrators, pastors, evangelists, educators, health professionals, and lay workers to proclaim the three angels' messages from within the context of the entire Biblical message to a world living at the very end of time. May we glorify our soon coming Saviour in these endeavors.

Based on the right foundations and the humble efforts needed to protect these pillars of our faith, the future of the remnant church is a bright and glorious one—soon to culminate in the most splendid revelation of Christ to the world ever seen since He left this earth.

Endnotes

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 595.

² Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern*

Theology from an Evangelical Perspective (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 15-33, designates the modern liberal theologian as "progressive" with the following definition: "Progressive theologians are those who are very impressed by the new insights and burning issues of their day and insist that Christian theology address them, even if to do so means major revisions in the beliefs Christian theology has formerly affirmed" (p. 15).

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ANOTHER LOOK AT ADVENTIST HERMENEUTICS

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Hardly a more sensitive topic for discussion exists among Seventh-day Adventists than the question of how to treat the Bible. Although this issue lies near the heart of what matters to us most deeply, there is nonetheless a clear difference of opinion among us concerning it.

Two fundamental questions are worth examining, both essential to the lifeblood of the Advent movement. First, does a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exist? Second, assuming the first question is answered affirmatively, can we confirm it? Free from commitment to status quo, we remain ready to examine on a recurring basis any previously accepted premise, recognizing that our understanding is always partial if human reason is a component. While we accept that which God has revealed, when it comes to the question of our understanding of it, we must examine the merits of each case.

Does a Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutic Exist?

In dealing with our first question, can we say a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exists? Prior to 1950 there seems to have been substantial unity on the essentials, although not always yielding the same results. We could cite such exceptions as the king of the north, Armageddon, and sometimes rambling discussions on Daniel 11. There was agreement, however, on foundations, agreement that the Scriptures are