

and *Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 242-251.

98 This term is coined by William Lane Craig, "Pannenberg's Beweis für die Auferstehung Jesu," *Kerygma und Dogma* 34 (1988): 92-93.

99 For a presentation of some Biblical Guidelines and Principles in interpretation see Richard Davidson, "A Hermeneutical Decalogue," *JATS* 4/2 (1993): 95-114.

100 It appears that a large segment of contemporary theology is reviving a new mystical knowledge of God. But as one person once so poignantly remarked: "Mysticism starts in mist—ends in schism—and is centered on the I."

101 Miroslav Volf, "The Challenge of Protestant Fundamentalism," *Concilium* (#3, 1992), pp. 101-102.

102 Mark Corner, "Fundamentalism," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 244.

103 Packer, "Fundamentalism," p. 144.

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## THE WORD OF GOD IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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In the beginning there was the Word of God (John 1:1). This Word, infinitely more powerful and more effective than any human word ever uttered in its echo, created worlds, beings and things (Ps 33:6-9). No sooner were Adam and Eve created than God blessed them and spoke to them (Gen 1:28). Since then, through the ages, in many and various ways, God has kept open the lines of communication. Through visions, dreams, the audible voice, conscience, events in human history, and ultimately through the presence of His Son among humans, He has maintained His Word, present and active (Heb 1:1-2).

Many of these revelatory events are found, gathered under the direction of the Holy Spirit through the process called inspiration, in the document called the Bible. The Bible is, therefore, the creative and revealing Word in the form of a document. Because of the involvement of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is not just a collection of ancient, pious sayings about God, but actually is the Word of God.

My thesis is that Seventh-day Adventist ethics must have the Word of God as foundation. Any other approach, any other basis of authority is insufficient. There can be no genuine Adventist ethics where the basis is not Scripture.

### Alternative Approaches

For long centuries the official Christian church made great efforts to keep Scripture away from Christians. Reading the Scriptures was considered dangerous for spiritual health, and history

records the persecutions and executions of those who kept the Bible at home or who read it.

Under the strong influences of the Reformation, Protestantism returned to Scripture as the only authority for faith and conduct, only to be challenged in turn by liberalism. Starting with the Renaissance (16th century) and the Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries), the emphasis turned to human reason for definition of truth, to individual conscience as the final arbiter of right and wrong, to preestablished natural law where the cosmos is a self-contained system, and finally to historical, critical verification of truth. The supernatural is sometimes tacitly excluded (Lamarck), and sometimes modified to mean that revelation adds nothing to reason (Lessing).

Scripture became the object of critical, literary, and historical study, setting aside its divine origin and inspiration. The question was, What can we find if we treat, study, and analyze the Bible as any other book? If we eliminate miracles because they are supernatural and unscientific, reject prophecies because humans cannot know the future, dismiss anything that hurts our ego, our autonomy, our freedom—such as sin, law, judgment—center only on the historical Jesus rather than Jesus Christ the Son of God, what could we discover then in the Bible? Can Scripture be relevant when it is partially or completely secularized? Some felt that the biblical message needed demythologization (Bultmann); others preferred interpretation from a Marxist perspective (Bloch); yet others urged an existential and subjective approach to its interpretation (Barth).

We must ask: Does it really matter whether we accept the Bible as the Word of God, or can Christianity maintain its identity, its unity, and its mission without hearing God's Word? After several centuries of experimentation without God's Word, we witness several developments:

First, the question now arises: If the Bible is not the Word of God, who then speaks for Him? Who is the emissary of divine authority on earth? Robert McAfee Brown points out that while in Roman Catholicism the church has the pope who has ultimate authority, in Protestantism this issue remains "the Achilles' heel."<sup>1</sup> The Reformers subordinated both the individual's conscience and

ecclesial authority to Scripture. But since the Bible is divested of its authority, by liberalism, does this mean that humanity is left without a word from the Word of God?

Second, we witness a proliferation of divergent views on the basic Christian doctrines, and even more importantly, the total rejection of some pillars of Christianity. Thus, the literal seven-day creation is dismissed as unscientific, the virgin birth and resurrection are myths, and the second coming and the final judgment are mere symbols.

Third, we observe the appearance of a bewildering spectrum of perspectives on the nature and the role of the Bible.

Finally, as a result of the previous three developments, substitutes for biblical authority come to prominence. But does it really matter how we view Scripture? I believe it does.

For the sake of brevity and clarity we will group the multiplicity of opinions into four categories: (1) the Bible, an ordinary book, (2) the Bible, a Counselor, (3) the Bible, the Word About God, (4) the Bible, the Word of God. We will describe these views of the Bible and note the impact each approach leaves on Christian life and behavior.

*Bible, an Ordinary Book.* If the Bible is just another book, we cannot expect anything more from it than what we count on receiving from any other book. Then, God does not speak through its pages, and there is no moral nor religious authority in its message. Authority may be conferred on the individual (emotivism or subjectivism) or on society and its structures (Marxism). Such a way of being, and the behavior it yields, harbors several dangerous defects.

The most important defect may be personal or social irresponsibility. When no account is to be rendered to God, even when human controls are very effective and completely benevolent (which is an impossible ideal), each does what is good in his/her own eyes (Judg 21:25). Experience shows, however, that without a clear indication of what is good and what is evil, many do not care if their actions are good in anybody's eyes. Emotivism and social democracy tend to relativism in morals and dictatorships in social life (communism). This option is not compatible with Christianity.

*Bible, a Counselor.* When the Bible serves as a counselor and a



teacher, the emphasis is placed on the education and nurture of the Christian community. The divine involvement in the process of inspiration may be acknowledged, however, biblical authority functions only in the role or authority of an advisor. The Bible is merely a resource book, containing a wealth of God-inspired wisdom. The role and mission of the church is to make this information vividly present, instructing its members and interpreting the message of Scripture.

There is much in this approach that commends itself to a Christian. Scripture is definitely "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16, RSV). The examples and case studies have informed innumerable lives in all ages and in all professions. The Bible is a "case book."

But the disturbing fact in this approach is that the Bible does not have the authority of the Word of God. For that reason the ultimate prerogative for faith and order is relegated to the community of faith, or its leadership. The pronouncements of the church in each age, the interpretation of the Bible by its theologians, forms a corpus of traditions which slowly take precedence over Scripture.

This was the situation in the time of Jesus (Mark 7:7-9), and it is the case with several prominent Christian churches today. Human traditions are bound to conflict, human insight is prone to biases, and the human fascination with power (especially the prospect of speaking for God) leads to compromise and corruption. This understanding of Scripture involves definite risks for the Christian life.

*Bible, a Witness.* Many Christians recognize that Scripture warrants greater and fuller trust. They realize that the main theme of the Bible is God and His salvific activity towards humans. He longs to enter into an encounter with His creatures, and this is seen as the supreme task of the Bible. Reading the Bible brings us into His presence where our life and our conduct are confronted with His holiness. There we can measure our hopelessness and cling to Him for grace and forgiveness.

Biblical authority is compared to that of a witness who presents to us the evidences of who God is and what He has done

in the lives of those whom He saves. The testimony is compelling and direct. It touches the innermost recesses of the soul. Such an encounter cannot pass without impacting the character and life of the human being. The Word of God comes in the privacy and subjectivity of individual existence. The Bible is only an instrument to facilitate such an experience.

But the Bible is still short of being the Word of God. In the moment of private encounter, Scripture's witness may become His word for a person, but there is no Word of God to humans in the Bible outside of this subjective "eternal moment." The message in the Bible is not God's Word per se. It is only a statement about Him. There is in fact, in this view, no objective Word of God today. God can speak only to our subjectivity. If He does not speak to us in that direct manner, our life is left without the Word.

This is a serious conclusion, indeed. If the Word of God is limited to what happens in my private experience, what happens if our private experiences contradict? Also, how do we know we have had an encounter with God and not with the tempter? Our character and our behavior have no authoritative, external, guiding system. History provides ample illustrations of tragic consequences when this is the case.

*Bible, the Word of God.* In distinction from these and other such views many Christians still hold the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God. It is not our task here to present the doctrines of revelation and inspiration. Rather, we focus on two main questions relevant to our subject of Christian lifestyle and behavior. First, What do we mean by the statement: the Bible is the Word of God? Second, What difference does it make in the Christian life?

When we confess that the Bible is the Word of God we mean that:

1. The biblical writers do not expound their private views, opinions, or wishes (2 Pet 1:19-21).
2. The authors do not rely on their own poetic inspiration, theological insight or literary genius as the source of biblical content.
3. The content of the biblical message reflects the divine will because it originates in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Timothy 3:16).

4. It is relevant, compelling, and authoritative independently of human acceptance or personal experience, and that implies objective and not exclusively subjective discernment of its divine nature.

For an appraisal of the importance of the Word of God in human life, and more particularly the role and influence of the written Word, we first turn to the Bible itself. We ask, What does the Word mean to such people as David, Paul, and Jesus Himself? What part did it play in their lives? What we discover is that their esteem for Scripture and their dependence on its authority exceed the esteem and dependence described above in the first three approaches. They do not regard Scripture as any other book. Here are some evidences:

1. To Joshua God recommends "this book of the law" above anything else, and above any other authority (Josh 1:8).

2. Psalm 119 is a creative ode written to magnify the law, that is, Torah, the Bible of David's time. He exalts God's word as a lamp which guides (vs 105), and a teacher who gives understanding (vs 97-100).

3. The prophets of the Scriptures testify that their message was *the Word of God* and not just a *word about* God. Evidences of this are on nearly every page of the prophetic books, and Paul and Peter unite their voices with them (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21).

4. The use of the word "scripture" in such passages as Galatians 3:22 and Acts 17:2 indicates an appeal to authority, not just a simple reference to a book.

5. Jesus also appeals to Scripture.

a. He relies on its authority in questions of teaching and doctrines (Mark 12:10-11; John 10:34-36).

b. He recognizes and affirms the prophetic nature of Scripture, setting it above ordinary writings (Luke 4:21; John 13:18).

c. He affirms the unique role Scripture must play in leading human beings to eternal life and to Him (John 5:39).

d. When a rich, young ruler inquired about guidance in daily decisions, dilemmas and actions, Jesus did not suggest expediency (utilitarianism), personal feelings (emotivism), the voice of tradition, the impact of the situation (situationism), nor did He tell him "Do whatever seems to be loving, and you are safe!!" No! He

referred him to the written Word, thus setting all the other norms under the authority of God as expressed in the Scriptures (Matt 19:17-19).

e. Jesus stands firmly on the biblical Word when confronted with temptation. Reason, human insight, situation, even personal encounters did not overshadow the Word of Scripture. "It is written," He said, and that was the conclusion no matter what the consequences (Matt 4:1-11).

It is enough for the servant to be and to behave like his or her master. Christians follow the example of Jesus when they search the Scriptures for guidance in the moral decisions of daily life. But what do we find in Scripture that is so useful in our lives? How is Scripture a basis for Christian ethics?

### Bible and Standards of Behavior

While there is a general consensus that the Bible contains guidelines for human lives, there is a significant divergence of opinion as to their nature and function. In the remaining portion of this essay we focus briefly on the role of the Bible in providing standards of behavior. Inevitably, the measure of authority ascribed to Scripture and the extent to which it is identified with the Word of God will determine its relevance and importance for moral life.

*Principles.* Often it is admitted that the Scriptures give general, absolute and objective statements of right and wrong, frequently called principles. These are the broad outlines of God's will from which humans, more or less autonomously, can derive more concrete norms. In teleological and autonomian circles these principles tend to be very general and abstract. Thus neo-Lutheran theologians like William Lazareth speak of paradigms of love which alone should guide us in our ethical decision.

Joseph Fletcher, on the other hand, argues that the Ten Commandments are general maxims, not laws or precepts meant for obedience. They are objective generalizations which must be set aside whenever the absolute principle of love demands it. But love is also, and even more an obstruction. No one knows completely what love is except the moral agent in the given situation. It is only the context which concretizes love. Therefore, such a remote and abstract concept can lend itself to innumerable interpretations.



Whether stealing and adultery are good or bad will depend on love's decision in the concrete situation.

It must be admitted that the Bible does furnish general, objective and absolute standards of behavior. "He has showed you, O man, what is good," exclaims the prophet Micah. However, if those principles are so abstract and made to be so general that they cannot give concrete guidance, then we do not find them helpful at all. Fortunately, a more careful look at biblical principles of right and wrong reveals that all of them, without exception, are given in a concrete, real life context, to real people, for guidance in real situations. God's will does not come to us as a consensus statement of some legislative body in an effort to satisfy some remote constitution. No, the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount are given to people focusing on their immediate life and actual needs.

God's Word affirms this saying: "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it." (Deut 30:11-14, RSV).

Thus, we can affirm with the Word of God that God has shown us what is good in the form of principles. These commandments are general, they are absolute and objective, but they are not for that reason abstract. Rather they are near to human life, mouth and heart. This is indeed the unique beauty of God's Word in Christian Ethics, and we would do well to study it carefully as we are enlightened by this spiritual lamp in a dark place (cf. 2 Pet 1:19).

*Life Stories.* But Scripture does not leave Christians with principles alone. God is too concerned for our happiness and safety, too distressed when sin and evil ruin our body, mind and soul, not to provide further help and more direct guidance. This is why we can find in the Bible life stories which contain the examples of value-systems falling within the broader principles. Principles serve as codes of human behavior, while life stories provide examples of conduct. There is no contradictions between the two, as

it has been suggested sometimes. On the contrary, the strength of the principle is enhanced whether the example is that of obedience or disobedience.

One example may be sufficient. The principle states clearly "Thou shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14). The life story of Joseph sets the norm by saying: "Do not disobey the principle, not even if you are a slave under the orders of your masters, not even if you are single, not even if you will face a prison sentence or death." But Scripture often gives negative examples as well. Within the purview of this principle the case of David and Bathsheba comes to mind. David's sin only strengthens the principle against adultery, rather than weakening it.

It seems evident that the life stories in the Bible serve several functions in reference to the basic principles of behavior:

1. They set a norm, indicating how far we may be asked to go in our obedience (Heb 12:3-4).
2. They may serve as warnings, displaying consequences of our decisions and actions.
3. They illustrate the value-systems used by the biblical characters. The priorities of both Joseph and David are clearly displayed in the above-mentioned experiences, and this is very useful for our instruction today (1 Cor 10:11).

Yet Scripture cannot provide us with an example for every possible temptation and dilemma. We are, however, surrounded by a cloud of people who have shown us the norms, the limits to which they obeyed the will of God (Hebrews 11 and 12). A Christian will not be molded by life stories which reflect the norms of this world (Rom 12:1-2), but rather will be conformed to the will of God and stories of the Bible. Thus, there is no contradiction between codes and cases.

*Rules.* In His love for us God is willing to provide an additional step. He does not remain detached from our actual struggles with decisions and temptations of life. God has put in His Word not only principles and norms of behavior, but also rules. The Bible presents an important number of rules. These are direct statements of duty requiring obedience. The main reason for these is that we do not always know which way to turn and what is loving, good and just, because of our limitations and sinful learnings. The purpose for the

rules is to prevent us from harming ourselves and our neighbor with dangerous actions, or damaging consequences.

Thus, when the principle says, "Thou shall not commit adultery," and the norm (or life experience) defines the values to be safeguarded and priorities chosen ("don't do it, not even if you're forced into sin like Joseph"), then the rule will apply the principle and norm by saying what is actually forbidden: "If a man lies with . . . wife of his neighbor" . . . or with "his daughter in law" . . . they have committed an abomination (Lev 20:10-21). The rule will always seek to express the principle and honor the priorities in view of what is good and just for human life.

Christians are called to think, to pray, to sometimes agonize their decisions through, but not totally on their own. We are safe only if we base our decisions on principles found in Scripture, focusing them through norms or priorities exemplified in Scripture, and reaching our decisions through formulation of rules in harmony with those biblical principles and norms. It makes all the difference in the world if we accept Scripture as the Word of God. If we do not accept the Bible as His Word we will miss His creative Word which sustains us (Matt 4:3).

If we ignore the Bible as His Word, we will miss His statement about what is right and wrong, good and evil, given at Sinai.

If we disregard the Bible as His Word we will fail to hear His words on Calvary "It is finished," sin is defeated, you are up against a foe that has been conquered, and we may not enjoy the victorious life offered to us.

Finally, if we scorn the Bible as the Word of God we will most certainly not recognize the resurrection call as His Word, and then "we are of all man most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19).

To be a human being means to be able to hear the Word of God. In hearing His Word and conforming our lives with the life stories of the Bible, and trusting in God who always knows best, we set our behavior on firm ground (Psalms 112).

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 171-172.

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ADVENTIST HERMENEUTICS

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When surveying the history of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics, it is helpful to distinguish the hermeneutics underlying essential characteristic doctrines from those nonessential secondary views. It is helpful also to distinguish early hermeneutics from later ones.

### Protestant Heritage

In arriving at the doctrines that Seventh-day Adventists consider essential and characteristic of their theology, it can fairly be said that the precursors and pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism "followed basically the hermeneutical principles established during the Reformation that were also held by non-liberal Protestants of their time."<sup>1</sup> The essential characteristic doctrines include the imminence and literalness of the premillennial second coming, the holiness of the seventh-day as the Sabbath, the unconscious sleep of the dead, the presence of spiritual gifts in the end-time (specifically as seen in the ministry of Ellen G. White), and the datability of the pre-advent judgment to 1844.

*Influence of William Miller.* William Miller, of Low Hampton, New York, helped set the stage for later Adventists by carefully elaborating a list of 14 "Rules for Interpretation."<sup>2</sup>

Miller's first rule for interpreting the Bible was that "every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible." Miller was determined not to be satisfied with a superficial