

Is the Bible Our Final Authority?

George W. Reid

The eighteenth century English philosopher John Locke's contention that in every person resides a self-directed autonomy not to be abridged except by permission of the possessor appears to have won the day. First visible politically in revolutions in North America and France, it has become foundational to every segment of western thought. Contemporary extremists now challenge all kinds of authority, making leadership increasingly difficult if not on occasion perilous.

An interesting sidelight is such a philosophy's impact on religious authority and morality. To a striking degree the idea that no one has a right to place limits on my personal desires and that my permission must be sought before any sort of limit can be set on my activities continues to bleed across into areas of life once thought to be the domain of God's direction. As a result moral, behavioral, and even doctrinal beliefs now find themselves set by a polling of the community in search of majority opinion. Understandably, molding that opinion has become big business as smooth public relations programs ply the group in an effort to sway opinions, or at an even-less-commendable level, to generate the mood, possibly even an irrational one, that may sway people toward a desired end.

In such a climate it is hardly surprising that in the minds of many the idea of objective norms governing right and wrong seems an antiquated left-over from a less enlightened era. The basic source to be consulted becomes one's inward opinion or feeling.

With these conditions prevailing, it is not surprising to discover that the Bible's claim to be the expressed will of God is under heavy fire, even on occasion among Adventists. We must recognize the fact that the strongest force shaping Adventist opinion today comes from

the surrounding social environment, something particularly true in industrialized countries. We can deny it, but the pastors in the field know full well its truth.

To observe this is by no means to dismiss the gravity of serious talk about authority, rather to underline the necessity of saying clear-headed things. General reassertions of a position, no matter how fervent, will not do. Adventists must undertake a reassessment of where we are and explore once more what authority the Bible will exercise. This includes the question of whether the message presented in the Scriptures will recapture the deepest wellsprings of the Adventist spirit and, if so, just how it can come to pass. Given the historic Adventist insistence on grounding all things in God's Word, this question is of high importance. The erosion of biblical authority is so significant that it overshadows many of the issues being tossed about and, in fact, contributes to the discussions of some of those issues.

What kinds of sources are used to base religious authority? Varied proposals are set forth, ranging from an inner mystical force (typical of several Eastern faiths), human perceptions (often preceded by rational analysis), a religious organization (typical of certain cults centered on a single leader), a combination of Scripture and church tradition (characterizing movements such as Catholicism's several branches) human experience as claimed to be under control of the Holy Spirit (as in charismatic groups), the Bible as authoritative Word of God (as claimed by conservative Protestants), and various blends of the above. Some, such as Mormons, subordinate the authority of canonical Scripture to later revelation. Of all these, Adventists have heretofore placed the Bible-the full 66 books-in commanding position. As Ellen White put it,

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 creed 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.-*The Great Controversy*, 595

It would appear that this statement comes close to being definitive. But all is not this simple. Mrs. White is not here denying value to other channels of learning; instead she is identifying the Scriptures as the sole final voice in matters of religious faith. That she does not intend to limit the biblical voice to religious matters alone, however, is evidenced by her repeated commendation of the Bible as a source of historical information and bearer of the one authentic record of origins, surely of importance to science.

The Problem of Biblical Discrepancies

But when we extend Scriptural authority beyond purely religious lines, we render it vulnerable to historical and scientific research, and therein lies the collision point that pits honest people against one another over the nature of the Word.

It is clear to all observers that the Bible contains discrepancies. In an effort to coordinate the Gospel reports about the cock crowing in connection with Peter's denial, Harold Lindsell in his best-selling *Battle for the Bible*, requires him to crow six times. The steady process of critical studies has turned up substantial numbers of difficulties in the biblical text with which any acceptable understanding of inspiration must cope. How Bible students will deal with these so-called "phenomena" has become the turning point and presents a challenge to Adventists as well.

A dozen books produced on revelation/inspiration since 1975 demonstrate that a half-dozen theories of inspiration are available in the marketplace of ideas. They run the entire gauntlet, but three principal ones deserve brief review. Despite their ambiguity, we shall use terms such as "liberal" and "conservative" because they are useful, in a manner intended to be

descriptive rather than pejorative. These words, so commonly used in all the world around us, have survived simply because they say something that we seem not to be able to say otherwise without clumsiness in language.

The three approaches are the (1) liberal, (2) neo-orthodox, and (3) evangelical. We must be committed to fairness in looking at them, and once the short review is complete, we turn to where we Adventists fit in. Numerous variations exist among writers, even within the same camp, but we note what is essential.

Liberal. Generally liberal Protestantism is traced to the German philosopher Schleiermacher's idea that the sense of God is inwardly perceived and variable in form. It can be described as a sense of dependence upon a higher power. Such a concept soon was wedded to the critical examination of the biblical books.

In essence, the liberal view begins with the "phenomena" of the Scriptures, the millions of fragmentary pieces of information, and proceeds toward formulation of an overall view of inspiration that can account for all the elements under examination. It claims a thorough faithfulness to the text itself, letting conclusions arise from the text rather than imposing them from predetermined norms.

As the work proceeds, three repeated motifs emerge: first, that divine truth is not to be located in an ancient book but is represented in the ongoing work of the Spirit in the community. This is discerned by critical rational judgment. Its goal is not to seek formulation of objective truth, but instead an authentic awareness of God. Second, Jesus appears as the archetype of religious insight and excellence. Salvation becomes a matter of Jesus' teaching and pioneering a better way to understand God, but Jesus' humanness is stressed above other qualities. Third, the essence of Christ is to be found in His human greatness.

From this perspective discrepancies within the biblical text pose no special problem, for the accent falls on Christ's humanity. It is not important that Matthew cites a quotation as coming from Jeremiah when no such passage occurs in our present text of Jeremiah (Matt

27:9-10). All such reports are of human origin, but what counts is that they bring the reader toward Jesus. It is in this continuous conveying to faith in Jesus where liberal theologians find inspiration. As Paul Achtemeier puts it, inspiration occurs as an activity of the Holy Spirit where tradition, the right situation, and a respondent come together. For him the respondent is not simply the person who wrote, but includes every person who had been active in gathering, shepherding, preserving, modifying, and reinterpreting the tradition over the years, including the final writer. For this reason inspiration is a continuing dynamic, present in all ages whenever the Scriptures are read. A great deal more could be said, but obviously this perspective is not compatible with Adventist thinking.

Neo-Orthodox. Even defenders of a liberal view of inspiration concede that its end product is amorphous, in fact heavily subjective. In the absence of absolutes, to what does the believer key his life? The answer generally is to that which reason decrees to be good, drawn from the total life experience.

This very uncertainty led to a twentieth century reaction commonly called neo-orthodoxy or encounter theology, which sought return to an increased authority in Scripture. Here we find Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann. The task: how to reconcile an error-prone text with the idea of true authority. The means: to conceive of the Bible at two levels. On the lower level is the text as we find it, error-prone, in human language, steeped in the context of culture. This we explore by critical studies, where we find it to be the record of human encounter with God.

But on a higher level God functions above the limitations of human language. There He moves in an experiential range, dynamically at work in relationship with the biblical text but paradoxically floating free from it. The encounter with God is an event of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer, although under the stimulus of the testimony of the biblical witnesses.

The end product: because its value lies in the floating upper level of encounter, we may ply the lower level record with critical analysis without disturbing its function. So revelation

becomes not transmission of objective, propositional truth, but a subjective encounter with God, inwardly received. It is not difficult to see the influence of Schleiermacher in this system and how its ambiguity has left it unsatisfying to many.

Evangelical. The evangelical begins with the concept that Scripture is the Word of God written. In this the stress falls heavily on its Godward side, often to a minimizing of the human element. Although the Bible itself scarcely lays out a systematic order of inspiration, it has considerable to say about how God committed His word to speech and writing. This has been nicely demonstrated by Bernard Ramm in his *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (1961).

We have the familiar statements of 2 Timothy 3:15-17, "All scripture is inspired by God," literally God-breathed, and 2 Peter 1:20, 21, which tells us prophecy comes by impulse of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' comment that "scripture cannot be broken" is cited on occasion (John 10:35), but in myriad places we read of how the Spirit of the Lord came upon the prophet to provide a message to God's people or even foreign nations.

Evangelicals accept the prophetic model of the Scriptures. In so doing their heavy emphasis on the Bible's God-given qualities has brought with it the assertion that ultimately the original manuscripts must have been error-free. The present perplexity lies in working with copies whose original perfection has been lost due to copyists' errors, misinterpretations, and a series of other problems introduced by the transmission process.

Among informed Evangelicals the effort has been to reconcile differences in the best ways possible. Some proposals exhibit considerable ingenuity, if lacking in credibility. The key word is infallible. Again, among the better informed this does not require a mechanical dictation theory, but it has proved difficult for Evangelicals to agree exactly on what they mean by "infallible."

Most Evangelicals appeal to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* but it appears the reformers meant by this expression that as the court of final appeal they would accept the

Bible alone. This differs from Evangelical teachings of an error-free text in the original autographs, an idea actually developed in the post-Reformation era.

In distinguishing themselves from neo-orthodox views, Evangelicals insist that although the Bible indeed mediates encounter with God, it does far more: It transmits rich content in the meaning of the words themselves. The Bible presents factual, propositional, objective truths that provide norms for faith and practice as God's revealed will, norms valid whether accepted or not, norms that bear the character of lasting truth because they reveal His character in written form as well as in their reports of the ministry of His Son. As the Holy Spirit was at work in transmitting to the writer, so He is active in leading the reader to respond to God's call.

From this perspective inspiration is also an objective phenomenon, not simply one of the Spirit at work within the believing community, although in a sense this is so. But while expressed within the language, culture, and times of humanity, the text carries transcendent values above and beyond, values designed to present God's Son as the unifying center of a collection of documents written at varied times and places. And alongside revelation of the Son there is expression of the will of God and the way of salvation.

An Adventist Response

How do Seventh-day Adventists fit into this pattern? Being far from the liberal doctrine of inspiration and almost as far from the neo-orthodox perspective, Adventists find themselves uncomfortable with Evangelical inerrancy. The idea of defending the error-free status of lost autographs rings hollow. It seems a form of shadowboxing. But the challenge is as serious to Adventists as the Evangelicals; how can we maintain a high view of scriptural authority while at the same time recognizing the limitations of Scripture? Can the "Bible and the Bible only" position of Ellen White be defended?

Already Adventists have begun to work on these problems. Several carefully reasoned

articles and a number of book-length essays and collections of essays have appeared. We have the BRI volume, Gerhard Hasel's *Biblical Interpretation Today*, which particularly addresses methods; George Rice's *Was Luke a Plagiarist?* and the BRI publications on prophetic interpretation. We should note as well Alden Thompson's *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* which has implications for hermeneutics. The publication of several of Ellen White's writings on the nature of the Bible and workings of inspiration has proved invaluable. Indeed they set us on a path that offers at least partial resolution of the tensions.

A continuing concern is the temptation to resolve the matter by some sort of compromise that will soften the firm Adventist commitment to a high view of Scripture. Aside from simply looking the other way, which is unworthy of serious Christians, at least three mediating (compromising) options have presented themselves.

The Adventist pioneers were well aware of the struggle over the Bible's credibility raging around them in the last century. Both Ellen White and others were alarmed by rapid growth of skepticism and what then was called higher criticism, today better known as historical criticism.

The trend manifest itself even in the fledgling Battle Creek College and in George I. Butler's series in the *Review and Herald* of 1884, where he proposed degrees of inspiration, incidentally one of the mainstays of the liberal view. Under this rubric liberal scholars were enabled to sort biblical elements according to their own value judgments. Mrs. White's response was quick:

I was shown that the Lord did not inspire the articles on inspiration published in the *Review*, neither did He approve their endorsement before our youth in the college. Where men venture to criticize the Word of God, they venture on sacred, holy ground, and had better fear and tremble and hide their wisdom as foolishness. God sets no man to pronounce judgment on

His Word, selecting some things as inspired and discrediting others as uninspired.-*Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, 23

Although Butler's effort was abandoned, the threat continued to the believers, prompting Mrs. White to continue placing articles in print dealing with the Bible's authority.

A second proposed solution was the idea of confining the Bible's authority to religious matters only. This would relieve historical and scientific statements from the limitations of inspiration. In one of her most impressive earlier articles, appearing in 1876 and benignly titled "Bible Biographies" Ellen White reinforced in resounding language her defense of the historicity of biblical reports, at that time being challenged by Wellhausen and others. She wrote,

The lives recorded in the Bible are authentic histories of actual individuals. From Adam down through successive generations to the times of the apostles we have a plain, unvarnished account of what actually occurred and the genuine experience of real characters. . . . The scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves.-*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, 9

Her final sentence makes a remarkable assertion troubling to some readers. Elsewhere she defended the Genesis reports of the seven-day Creation and the Flood as literally true.

More recently certain Adventists have maintained that by discarding some rationalistic elements of historical criticism the remainder of the system becomes usable for valid study of the Bible. Historical criticism is thus treated as a pool of elements from which one can select, rather than an integrated method. Although the historical grammatical method long used by Adventists functions in areas also examined by historical criticism, a close examination shows the objectives of the two systems to be at cross purposes. In recognition of the problem involved, the Annual Council of 1986, meeting in Rio de Janeiro, approved a statement

designating the historical-critical method, as classically defined, as unsuitable for use by Adventists.

While certain highly technical procedures can yield data useful for both systems, historical criticism's view of the Scriptures is radically at variance from the prophet-oriented view of Adventists, with obvious implications for an understanding of inspiration and the authority of God's Word.

Ellen White on Inspiration and Authority

To this point Ellen White's guidance has received only passing notice. We have noted her ringing endorsement of the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. A more careful study makes clear that for her the Scriptures remain the final authority, not only where they touch religious matters, but in their report of events as well.

However Mrs. White is not where Evangelicals are. While affirming the Bible's authority, she recognizes in far higher profile the human element in Scriptures. We review in brief excerpts what she has to say about the language and thought patterns in the Bible:

"Don't you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?" This is all probable. . . . All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble.-*Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, 16.

The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language.-Ibid. 19.

There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures.-Ibid. 20.

The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect.-Ibid.20.

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented.-Ibid. 21.

The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen.-Ibid.

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts.-Ibid.

How can we reconcile all this with the previously-cited dictation statement from "Bible Biographies"? By reference to the context. There Mrs. White is addressing the idea that Bible writers were impelled to tell the whole truth about Bible characters rather than yield to the normal temptation to lionize, omitting unpleasant facts. It is in this matter that the writers were strictly guided by the Holy Spirit, not in their selection of specific words.

And what of Mrs. White's confidence in a finite Scripture? It remained untouched by skepticism. While attending the General Conference in Minneapolis in 1888, she wrote:

The Lord has preserved this Holy Book by His own miraculous power in its present shape-a chart or guidebook to the human family to show them the way to heaven.-*Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, 15

She was ready to accept the humanness of the language and the means of expression, yet retain her clear, resounding, unshakable confidence in the authority of that same Scripture. A few lines later she continued:

I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible-Ibid, 17

Brethren, let not a mind or hand be engaged in criticizing the Bible.-Ibid.

Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost.-Ibid. 18.

Amid the tensions of Minneapolis we see she could turn her mind to something that was more fundamental than the squabbling of the saints in conflict.

Reconciling the Tensions

Given her stress on the human side of the inspired Scriptures, how could she reconcile such solid expressions of confidence in their authority? With two basic principles.

First, accommodation. We should not expect to find God's style or majesty in a way that would require an error-free Bible. She writes:

The truths revealed are all "given by inspiration of God;" yet they are expressed in the words of men and are adapted to human needs. . . . "the Word was made Flesh"-*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 747

And again, "The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words. . . . He meets fallen human beings where they are."-*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 22.

Second, suspension of judgment.

The entrance of sin into the world, the incarnation of Christ, regeneration, the resurrection, . . . are mysteries too deep for the human mind. . . . But God has given us in the Scriptures sufficient evidence of their divine character, and we are not to doubt His word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.-*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 699

Given the limits of human access to data and comprehension, in this statement and others Ellen White is encouraging us to hold our judgment until we have sufficient information; to operate from a premise of faith, trust, and confidence, and allow God in His own good time, by His own good means, to open the doors of understanding. In the kingdom we are likely to find ourselves asking ourselves, Why was I so troubled over this? Under the explanation of the Creator Himself it will be seen to fit the pattern of His divine order, His divine plan, His divine Word, and part of all that He has communicated with us.

With the immense advantage of the gift of prophecy in modern times, Adventists are prepared for a genuinely integrated understanding of revelation, inspiration, and preservation of authority in the Word while others explore box canyons in search of understanding. But we will fall short of God's plan unless we allow the Holy Spirit to both interpret the Word and move it into proclamation.

The word was not given for a debating ground among scholars. For centuries God's people were told that they were incapable of understanding the meaning of the Word. The Bible was chained in the church. It was locked away in a language that common people did not know. God's people were told that if they wished to understand it, they must consult with the church and its designated authority.

With the coming of the Reformation there was liberation. The Word became available to everyone. There began a spreading access to those words God has given to us, even if in frail human language. It comes in vessels but it is the gift of God, treasure in earthen vessels.

The word is far more than understanding and sharing. It is for practical purposes, for the salvation of the lost and nurturing of the saints. The churches are in desperate need of a revival of genuine biblical preaching. Its delivery will rebuild a spirit of relevance and firm confidence. Such confidence not only represents human understanding of how God speaks but it opens doors for the Holy Spirit.

All great and lasting revivals are built around the Word of God. There remains a power

in the Word that will attract sincere people from a superficial world to embrace the Christ who is the center of the Word, and is indeed the Word come among us. The world deserves to hear about Him, and that message comes only from the Word.