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# Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Part 1

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# Dealing with doctrinal issues in the church: Part 1

Doctrinal controversies are not unique to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The history of Christianity itself shows that doctrinal and theological controversies characterize the growth and experience of the church. Francis Wernick observes, “Division and disunity have marked the history of the Christian Church from at least the end of the first century. . . . While not immune from this danger of dissent, Seventh-day Adventists have been relatively free of serious discord, having a remarkable unity on Bible truth. But danger is always present as the enemy of the church seeks in every way possible to bring in variance and disagreement.”<sup>1</sup>

Our pioneers had to deal with controversial issues in the early days of our church; thus, today, with a membership of about 17 million from various backgrounds, we will as well. If the pioneers needed to be careful with the process of dealing with controversial issues, then we need to be more careful now. The ecclesiology of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still in its infancy theologically.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of issues directly relating to ecclesiology that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not yet settled biblically, theologically, and doctrinally.<sup>3</sup>

This series of articles suggests some ground rules for dealing with a potentially divisive theological issue.

We begin by looking at the history of doctrinal controversy, both at the beginning of the Christian church and the inception of the Adventist movement, and by learning from the first Christian disciples and from our Adventist pioneers.

## A case study from the early Christian church

*The Way to Emmaus and the Upper Room* (Luke 24; Acts 1; 2)

The greatest doctrinal challenge to the early church came on Resurrection Sunday. The hopes of the disciples had been dashed when Jesus, the One they had believed to be the Messiah and Deliverer of Israel, had been crucified, apparently failing in His Messianic mission. How did the resurrected Jesus lead His disciples through this crisis of uncertainty to a solid understanding and experience of truth regarding Himself, His mission, and the future mission of the disciples? At least seven crucial points in the narrative of Luke 24 and Acts 1 and 2 are instructive for dealing with doctrinal issues.

1. *The foundational authority of Scripture.* As Jesus walked with the two disciples on the seven-mile-long road from Jerusalem to Emmaus that Resurrection Sunday afternoon, He could have simply revealed His wounds in His hands and side and feet and, upon recognizing Him, the

disciples would have eagerly bowed and worshiped. But Jesus determined that their faith not be based primarily upon physical phenomena but rather on the testimony of the Scriptures. Only after they were convinced, by the Written Word, concerning the truth of the Messiah and His mission, did Jesus disclose His identity by showing them the nail prints in His hands. At least six times in the narrative of Luke 24, Luke refers to the Scriptures as the foundational authority for the disciples’ faith and understanding of Truth (Luke 24:25, 27, 32, 44, 45, 46). Any study of doctrinal issues today must likewise recognize the same foundational authority of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

2. *A solid biblical hermeneutic.* Speaking to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus “interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27, NRSV). The word for “interpret” here is *diermeneuō* (*dia* + *hermeneuō*), which is related to the English term *hermeneutics*. During that seven-mile walk in the countryside, Jesus instructed His disciples in the basic principles of biblical hermeneutics. Later that evening, as He appeared to the larger group of disciples in the upper room, “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (v. 45, NKJV).

Any study of unclear or controversial doctrinal issues must be built

upon a faithful exposition of Scripture carried out according to solid hermeneutical principles arising from the biblical presuppositions of *sola* and *tota Scriptura*—the Bible alone, and in its entirety, as the ultimate foundation of truth.<sup>5</sup>

3. *A Christocentric focus.* Jesus' only recorded words in His ambulatory teaching session with the two disciples focused upon His death and resurrection: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:25, 26, NKJV). Luke records that Jesus "expounded to them in all the Scriptures *the things concerning Himself*" (v. 27, NKJV; italics supplied). Later that evening, in the upper room, He reiterated "that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms *concerning Me*". . . 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to *suffer and to rise from the dead the third day*'" (vv. 44, 46, NKJV; italics supplied).

On the Day of Pentecost, 50 days later, the Holy Spirit was poured out, not as end in Himself but as an earthly sign that Christ had been anointed as Priest-King in the heavenly inauguration ceremony (Acts 2:31–33). The recognition that they had a Mediator in the heavenly sanctuary gave the disciples boldness to fearlessly proclaim God's Word.<sup>6</sup>

A Christocentric focus is vital to understanding truth. Ellen White affirms: "Jesus is the living center of everything."<sup>7</sup> "In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary."<sup>8</sup> "The correct understanding of the ministration [of Christ] in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith."<sup>9</sup>

4. *Unity of mind/purpose/impulse.* Scripture states that when the 120 disciples met in the upper room after

Jesus' ascension, "These all continued with one accord [*homothymodon*] in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14, NKJV). The Greek adverb *homothymodon*, often translated "with one accord," refers to a condition of being "with one mind/purpose/impulse."<sup>10</sup> Ellen White elaborates on the heart preparation of the disciples in relation to one another before Pentecost: "Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship."<sup>11</sup> "They emptied from their hearts all bitterness, all estrangement, all differences; for this would have prevented their prayers being as one. And when they were emptied of self, Christ filled the vacancy."<sup>12</sup> Such a spirit is needed as much today as we come together to wrestle for an understanding of God's Word in regard to unsettled theological issues.

5. *Earnest prayer and fasting.* As cited above, the disciples in the upper room before Pentecost "all continued with one accord *in prayer and supplication*" (Acts 1:14, NKJV; italics supplied). These seasons of prayer were accompanied with fasting,<sup>13</sup> and involved humility of heart, true repentance, and confession;<sup>14</sup> deep "heart-searching and self-examination" and consecration of their soul-temples;<sup>15</sup> and earnest pleading to the Lord for the unction of the Spirit to be poured out upon them in fulfillment of Jesus' promise.<sup>16</sup> Such seasons of prayer and fasting are just as necessary today on the part of those who are dealing with unsettled or controversial theological issues.

6. *The illumination of the Spirit to understand the truths of Scripture.* Before His death, Christ promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to guide them into truth: "when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13, NKJV). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost

brought about the fulfillment of that promise. "Pentecost brought them [the disciples] the heavenly illumination. The truths which they could not understand while Christ was with them were now unfolded. With a faith and assurance that they had never before known, they accepted the teachings of the Sacred Word."<sup>17</sup> That same illumination of truth by the Holy Spirit is available even more now in the time for the pouring out of the latter rain: "The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the former rain, but the latter rain will be more abundant. . . . Christ is again to be revealed in His fullness by the Holy Spirit's power."<sup>18</sup>

7. *An evangelistic motivation—a passion for lost souls.* On Resurrection Sunday, Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, not only to lead the disciples into all truth, but to give them power for witnessing for the gospel in His name, "to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47–49, NKJV). At the time of His ascension, He repeated His promise of the Holy Spirit for this same purpose: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The disciples in the upper room at the time of Pentecost "did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with a burden for the salvation of souls." As the disciples "grasped the imparted gift" of the Spirit, "[t]he sword of the Spirit, newly edged with power and bathed in the lightnings of heaven, cut its way through unbelief."<sup>19</sup>

In our day, as we seek for the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to deal with unsettled or controversial issues, such seeking needs to be carried out with an evangelistic purpose, to proclaim wonderful truth clearly and dynamically to a dying world. And this gift of power awaits our demand and reception: "Only to those who wait humbly upon God, who watch for

His guidance and grace, is the Spirit given. The power of God awaits their demand and reception. This promised blessing, claimed by faith, brings all other blessings in its train. It is given according to the riches of the grace of Christ, and He is ready to supply every soul according to the capacity to receive.<sup>20</sup> God is ready to pour out such a gift to help us wrestle with weighty truths, if we are willing and ready to receive this precious gift!

(Part 2 will appear in the April 2013 issue.)



- 1 Francis W. Wernick, "Leadership Role in Maintaining Unity," in *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, ed. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Affirm, 2005), 769.
- 2 Very few Seventh-day Adventist theologians have written on ecclesiology. The Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference (BRI) has felt this need, and a study on ecclesiology is underway.
- 3 On May 12, 1982, the Biblical Research Committee (a committee overseen by BRI) took an action to embark on a series of studies on ecclesiology. Under this topic there is currently little written by Seventh-day Adventist scholars on ordination. It is only recently (at the 2010 General Conference Session) that the BRI was mandated to give a careful study of the question of the theology of ordination.
- 4 For an overview of Scripture's own testimony as to its full authority as the ultimate norm for doctrinal discussion, see, e.g., Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology: Commentary Reference Series*, vol. 12, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 22–57; and idem., "The Authority of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver

Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 75–89.

- 5 These basic hermeneutical presuppositions are apparent in the narrative of Luke 24. Jesus' grounding of truth was "by Scripture alone" (*sola Scriptura*), and He interpreted the things about Himself "in all the Scriptures" (*totā Scriptura*). For a summary of these and other hermeneutical principles arising from Scripture itself, see, e.g., Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology: Commentary Reference Series*, vol. 12, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 58–104; and Ekkehardt Müller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 111–134.
- 6 See Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 39: "The Pentecostal outpouring was Heaven's communication that the Redeemer's inauguration was accomplished. According to His promise He had sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to His followers as a token that He had, as priest and king, received all authority in heaven and on earth, and was the Anointed One over His people."
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 186.
- 8 White, *Gospel Workers* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1901), 315.
- 9 White, *Evangelism*, 221. For discussion of the Christocentric focus of all Scripture, and the importance of interpreting Scripture Christocentrically, see, e.g., Hans LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 4–9 and passim; and Richard M. Davidson, "Back to the Beginning: Genesis 1–3 and the Theological Center of Scripture," in *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle*, eds. Daniel Heinz, Jifri Moskala, and Peter M. van Bemmelen (Berrien Springs, MI: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2009), 5–29.
- 10 Walter Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2000 [hereafter abbreviated as BDAG]), s.v. "ὁμοθυμαδόν."
- 11 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 37.
- 12 Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1898. Cf. idem., *Story of Redemption*, 246, 247: "This testimony in regard to the establishment of the Christian church is given us not only as an important portion of sacred history but also as a lesson. All who profess the name of Christ should be waiting, watching, and praying with one heart. All differences should be put away, and unity and tender love one for another pervade the whole. Then our prayers may go up together to our heavenly Father with strong, earnest faith. Then we may wait with patience and hope the fulfillment of the promise. . . . The great and important matter with us is to be of one heart and mind, putting aside all envy and malice, and, as humble supplicants, to watch and wait. Jesus, our Representative and Head, is ready to do for us what He did for the praying, watching ones on the day of Pentecost."
- 13 White, *Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1898: "They were bidden not to leave Jerusalem till they had been endued with power from on high. They therefore remained in Jerusalem, fasting and praying."
- 14 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 36: "As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief!"
- 15 White, *Evangelism*, 698: "After Christ's ascension, the disciples were gathered together in one place to make humble supplication to God. And after ten days of heart searching and self-examination, the way was prepared for the Holy Spirit to enter the cleansed, consecrated soul temples."
- 16 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 37: "Now, in obedience to the word of the Saviour, the disciples offered their supplications for this gift [of the Holy Spirit], and in heaven Christ added His intercession. He claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit, that He might pour it out upon His people" (italics supplied). Ellen White summarizes this preparatory process in *Testimonies for Ministers*, 507: "It was by the confession and forsaking of sin, by earnest prayer and consecration of themselves to God, that the early disciples prepared for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The same work, only in greater degree, must be done now."
- 17 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 45, 46. Cf. Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, 3:1152: "No man can have insight into the Word of God without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. If we will but come into the right position before God, His light will shine upon us in rich, clear rays. This was the experience of the early disciples. . . . [Acts 2:1–4 quoted.] God is willing to give us a similar blessing, when we seek for it earnestly."
- 18 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), 121. For discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture, see John Baldwin, "Faith, Reason, and the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 20–24.
- 19 White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 37–38.
- 20 White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 672.

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## Through the eyes of Jesus

We need a revival! How true that is in both our church's life and our own individual lives. Many of us long for a strong and significant manifestation of God's power in our midst.

So, we look at ourselves (hopefully not so much as at others) and realize that there is room for change and growth in many areas. And we are determined that now is the time to make those changes and really seek God's kingdom first. Such a decision establishes the foundation for a true revival to take place.

At times I have experienced that my self-evaluation, self-examination, and self-development have become a bit too self-centered. The focus on my own faith process (or lack thereof) has sometimes forced me into a self-centered worldview that has been unhealthy in the long run.

I need to look at myself through the eyes of Jesus. He loves me! Always! No matter what! He wants the best for me, and He has promised to be with me to the end of the ages (cf. Matt. 28:20). He sees all the problem areas in my life, and He truly

knows the best way to transform me. He is the Potter that can shape the clay much better than I, the clay, can do myself (cf. Jer. 18; Isa. 29).

Look to Jesus. Open your heart fully to Him who sees it all and knows what and how things need to be revived in your life.

—BOBBY SJOLANDER SERVES AS THE PRESIDENT OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN SWEDEN, HEADQUARTERED IN STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

