

Andrews University Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

Old Testament

8-2013

Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Part 4

Richard M. Davidson
Andrews University

Paul S. Ratsara
Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, Seventh-day Adventist Church

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/old-testament-pubs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Richard M. and Ratsara, Paul S., "Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Part 4" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 50.
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/old-testament-pubs/50>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Old Testament at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Paul S. Ratsara, PhD, is president of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, Pretoria, South Africa.

Richard M. Davidson, PhD, is J. N. Andrews professor of Old Testament interpretation, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



Dealing with doctrinal issues in the church: Part 4

Controversial issues have the potential of splitting the church. To avoid this danger, church leaders need to exercise much care and, at the same time, show firmness when dealing with these issues.

Lack of spiritual preparation on the part of leaders, members, and scholars contributes to ecclesiastical disunity. When the Holy Spirit does not fill people, they are either empty or, even worse, filled with evil spirits. When people pray, they invoke the presence of God and His power; if not, they become vulnerable to satanic forces and ungodly practices. Lack of spirituality on the part of Bible scholars and church leaders may also lead to wrong hermeneutics. Likewise, when church members are not spiritually connected with the Divine, they can easily become misled theologically. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, every attempt to correctly interpret God's Word becomes futile. In other words, our spirituality influences our presuppositions and approach to biblical interpretation.

The hermeneutical challenge

Presuppositions influence biblical interpretation. Varying biblical presuppositions among leaders and theologians will threaten church unity. Frank Hasel states, "The notion of

presupposition(s) plays an important role in biblical interpretation. We all hold a number of beliefs that we suppose or accept when we come to the task of interpreting Scripture. No one is able to approach the biblical text with a blank mind."¹ The presuppositions of a spiritually fortified person or Bible scholar would lead to the biblical hermeneutics that build the body of Christ, the church. Likewise, a person who is not spiritually fortified tends to develop wrong biblical presuppositions, which will lead to wrong hermeneutics.

Hasel asserts,

Presuppositions delimit the boundaries within which biblical interpretation can and should properly function. They also determine the method and, through the method, also influence, to a considerable degree, the outcome of our interpretation. In other words, they directly affect our theology and the authority that Scripture has for our life and for doctrine. In turn, our theology influences spiritual and theological identity and, finally, also the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church.²

Often times, interpreters of the Bible face what Hasel refers to as "the hermeneutical challenge." This has to do with the fact that the interpreter's

"past, experiences, resident ideas, and preconceived notions and opinions" influence one's methodology of biblical interpretation.³ Hasel suggests that, to an extent, our personal subjectivity tends to interfere with how objectively we can approach the biblical text. The sinful nature and experiences of humankind may also contribute personal and corporate biblical presuppositions and interpretation. Paul said,

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his (Rom. 8:5-9).

John Baldwin calls attention to the influence of the cosmic conflict on hermeneutics, warning that "fallen spiritual powers, Satan and his angels, can influence the exegete. . . . The attempts of Satan and evil angels to redirect interpretations of the Bible cannot be dismissed."⁴ To Timothy, Paul writes,

“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (1 Tim. 4:1). To the church in Corinth, Paul says, “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:3, 4).

When the Holy Spirit departs, the church is left too vulnerable to the control of evil forces. When that happens, church leaders, church members, and Bible scholars will often not agree in

against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the

paradigm of at least seven additional steps for the church when dealing with doctrinal controversy, steps built upon the aforementioned seven principles: (1) assemble representative church leaders to investigate the controversial issue; (2) engage in frank and spirited discussion and give clarifying public presentations of relevant biblical and supplementary data; (3) present reports and personal testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s working through council members and others in relation to the issue under discussion; (4) verify and test these testimonies/reports by the witness of Scripture; (5) allow the Holy Spirit to lead the council to an

Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, every attempt to correctly interpret God’s Word becomes futile.

matters of Christian faith and practice. The Holy Spirit and angels’ departure from the church at the individual or corporate level must be avoided at all cost.

Ellen White writes,

When Satan has undermined faith in the Bible, he directs men to other sources for light and power. Thus he insinuates himself. Those who turn from the plain teaching of Scripture and the convicting power of God’s Holy Spirit are inviting the control of demons.⁵

To the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul says,

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and

Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:11–17, NIV).

Principles and steps

For these reasons, the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to take seriously the approach of the early church toward doctrinal uncertainty or controversy. The experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, in the upper room on Resurrection Sunday, and during the ten days before Pentecost, provides at least seven important principles for a doctrinal crisis: (1) accept the foundational authority of Scripture, (2) employ a solid biblical hermeneutic, (3) maintain a Christ-centered focus, (4) foster a spirit of unity of mind/purpose/impulse, (5) engage in frequent seasons of earnest prayer and fasting, (6) seek for the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to correctly understand scriptural truth, and (7) maintain an evangelistic motivation and passion for lost souls.

The experience of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 provides a

emerging consensus (unity although not necessarily uniformity) from their close investigation of Scripture; (6) if the council is so mandated (as with the Annual Council and General Conference in session), make a formal decision, commit it to writing, and circulate the document among the world church; and (7) implement the council’s decision as binding throughout the world church.

Early examples

The practices of the pioneers during the 1848 and 1855 Bible conferences teach us that a proper relationship with God, the Scriptures, and fellow humans is critical. Spiritual preparedness must characterize the nature of everyone involved in the study of Scriptures. Spiritual preparation includes prayer and fasting. Personal or corporate spiritual preparation would include adoration and praise, confession, supplication, and thanksgiving. During any of our church meetings, it is important to saturate our meetings with prayer.

During the Bible conference of 1848 and 1855, the pioneers' major concern was truth and unity. Inasmuch as doctrinal correctness was also important, they did everything possible to ensure that they did not compromise church unity. The attitude of pioneers was characterized by open-mindedness and a willingness to discern God's will. The same ought to be the practice of leaders and Bible scholars in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

The pioneers studied the Scriptures with thoroughness during the Bible conferences, giving priority to Bible study. The Bible acts as a bulwark against every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief 1 affirms the position of the church regarding the infallible nature of the Bible. Those who wrestle to understand Scripture must accept it as God's Holy Word; otherwise, they will consider the Bible as any other piece of literature subject to scientific methods of interpretation.

Hermeneutics

The choice of a Bible study method is crucial for unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Various methods of approaching the Bible are available, including the higher-critical method. Church unity is achievable if Adventist scholars, church leaders, and church members would approach the Bible using the historical-biblical method, or what is referred to as the "historical-grammatical method." Church leaders and believers should find it necessary to study God's Word with an open mind, ready to understand and do His will. Ellen White points out:

We should exert all the powers of the mind in the study of the Scriptures, and should task the understanding to comprehend, as far as mortals can, the deep things of God; yet we must not forget that the docility and submission of a child is the true spirit of the learner. Scriptural difficulties can never be mastered by the same methods that are employed in grappling with philosophical

problems. We should not engage in the study of the Bible with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God, and a sincere desire to learn his will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth.⁶

In *Messages to Young People*, she writes,

In your study of the word, lay at the door of investigation your preconceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas. You will never reach the truth if you study the Scriptures to vindicate your own ideas. Leave these at the door, and with a contrite heart go in to hear what the Lord has to say to you. As the humble seeker for truth sits at Christ's feet, and learns of Him, the word gives him understanding. To those who are too wise in their own conceit to study the Bible, Christ says, You must become meek and lowly in heart if you desire to become wise unto salvation.⁷

She goes on to say,

Do not read the word in the light of former opinions; but, with a mind free from prejudice, search it carefully and prayerfully. If, as you read, conviction comes, and you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the word, do not try to make the word fit these opinions. Make your opinions fit the word. Do not allow what you have believed or practiced in the past to control your understanding. Open the eyes of your mind to behold wondrous things out of the law. Find out what is written, and then plant your feet on the eternal Rock.⁸

The angels are capable of influencing the understanding of God's Word.

For instance, the angel Gabriel helped Daniel understand the Word of God in Daniel 8:16; 9:22, 23. According to White, "angels are round about those who are willing to be taught in divine things; and in the time of great necessity they will bring to their remembrance the very truths which are needed."⁹

Church unity is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Church executive committees, councils, and boards must always be saturated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Bible scholars must intentionally choose to study the Scriptures under the influence of the Holy Spirit. If all those who search the Scriptures constantly seek to be filled by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church will experience unity of doctrine, faith, and practice.

The church should be united in belief and practice. Church leaders and Bible scholars should shun the temptation of disunity caused by theological and ecclesiastical compromise. Francis Wernick asserts, "Though there will always be peripheral areas of disagreement, in those truths that are crucial to the message of the church the body of Christ must be in agreement. Likewise, there must be harmony in the Biblical practices of the church."¹⁰ However, he observes that "pluralistic views on a number of essential truths and Biblical practices as they are urged upon the church" might negatively affect the unity of the church in the future. He pleads with church leaders and members to utilize this present time to study the Bible with sincerity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Church unity is possible if church leaders teach biblical unity based upon Scripture. In other words, church unity is impossible outside the Word of God. Wernick points out that church leaders should seek peace by teaching biblical unity.¹² He exemplifies the truth of biblical unity by quoting the words of the apostle James: "For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without

partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (James 3:16–18). In the Beatitudes, Jesus also said, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9). Paul adds by saying, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

The pioneers also depended on the Spirit of Prophecy for biblical interpretation and understanding when they experienced a deadlock in their study of the Bible. The writings of Ellen White are a powerful tool for unlocking deadlocks. We should still consider prophetic guidance as a way forward when dealing with controversial issues. Wernick urges church leaders and members to recognize the role of the Spirit of Prophecy as a unifying factor in the study of the Bible.¹³

We believe in the unity of the church. The church comprises people from all walks of life and backgrounds. While the membership of the church is culturally diverse, we must preserve

its unity under God’s leadership. Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity; rather unity means oneness of faith, purpose, and practice in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As church leaders and Bible scholars, we should emulate the zeal of the early church and Adventist pioneers and even surpass them. In other words, more is required of us today than of our early Christian and Adventist pioneers. According to Ellen White,

Greater light shines upon us than shone upon our fathers. We cannot be accepted or honored of God in rendering the same service, or doing the same works, that our fathers did. In order to be accepted and blessed of God as they were, we must imitate their faithfulness and zeal,—improve our light as they improved theirs,—and do as they would have done had they lived in our day. We must walk in the light which shines upon us, otherwise that light will become darkness.¹⁴

May we, by God’s grace, rise up to the challenges that face us as church leaders and scholars when we face controversial issues. ▮

- 1 Frank M. Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, George W. Reid, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 27.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 John Baldwin, “Faith, Reason, and the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, George W. Reid, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 18, 19.
- 5 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 258.
- 6 White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1884), 417.
- 7 White, *Messages to Young People* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1930), 260.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1950), 600.
- 10 Francis W. Wernick, “Leadership Role in Maintaining Unity,” in *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Affirm, 2005), 771.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Wernick, 772.
- 14 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 262.

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or visit www.facebook.com/MinistryMagazine.

Reformation in life, marriage, and ministry

Ellen White defines reformation as a “reorganization, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices.”¹ While we usually apply this to mean the spiritual reformation that must take place in us as individuals before the return of Jesus, we have also seen its fulfillment in the lives of people whose marriages were in trouble.

Rod and Sharon² were very successful in their careers, had been married and divorced previously, and had three children. Rod served two tours of duty during the Vietnam War and, as he told me, had “broken every commandment that is written and some that should be written.” Among

other things, he had left his wife for other women more than a dozen times; but every time he came back home, Sharon took him back. “Now,” he said to me, “I feel totally empty. Can God possibly still love me?”

Several weeks later, after Bible studies, both Rod and Sharon were baptized and immediately immersed themselves in the life and ministry of the church. More than ten years later, they continue to serve the church as leaders of several ministries and conduct Bible studies with prospective members nearly every night of the week—resulting in many baptisms every year. Rod and

Sharon have experienced a personal reformation that changed their marriage and turned them into very effective ministers in their church and community.

—CLAUDIO CONSUEGRA, DMIN, FAMILY MINISTRIES DIRECTOR, NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, UNITED STATES.

- 1 Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1947), 42.
- 2 Pseudonyms.

