

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK ONCE MORE

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As we gather here this evening in this lovely house of worship, at this sacred gathering, our beloved church is in crisis.

From Sabbath sermons to church publications, from Internet chat rooms to college seminar tables, our faith finds itself under attack.

And whether some of us may choose to hide our faces from it and pretend it will go away—or even worse, assume that God will somehow make it go away without any help from us—no such wishful thinking will alter the reality we confront this night.

Tonight the great Advent movement, particularly in the developed countries of the world, finds its unity sundered by such key issues as:

The nature of inspiration
How human beings are saved
How should a Christian worship?
How should a Christian live?

This week we're going to discuss the doctrine of salvation, in particular how it relates to the final generation of believers.

Let me warn you: we are going to be discussing an incendiary and most controversial subject.

But that should not frighten any thoughtful Seventh-day Adventist.

It frankly disturbs me that so many in contemporary Adventism are terrified of controversy.

Perhaps that shouldn't surprise us, since a good many of us were brought up thinking that if you want to keep your friends, you need to stay away from two subjects:

Religion
Politics

Now political controversy may be one thing, folks, but religious controversy should be no problem for anyone familiar with God's Word.

In fact, we have the assurance from the inspired pen that God has given us the answers to the church's vexing controversies in advance:

2SM 108:

“Not one cloud has fallen upon the church that God has not prepared for; not one opposing force has risen to counterwork the work of God but He has foreseen. All has taken place as He has predicted through His prophets.”

But we can't address the salvation controversy—or any other, so far as I'm concerned—until we ask the question:

Who and what is our authority?

I never give a seminar on current issues in Adventism without first addressing this question.

Because, brothers and sisters, I am increasingly convinced, as I study the inspired documents, that if we would take human opinion, human scholarship, and human experience out of the discussion, and permit Bible truth and its amplification in the Spirit of Prophecy to become our exclusive authority, we could settle most if not all the major controversies in our church TONIGHT!

The reason we have theological divisions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not because the Bible is so complicated, or because the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy are allegedly so complicated.

No, my friends.

What becomes complicated is the attempt to combine the written counsel of God—whether in Scripture, the writings of Ellen White, or both—with human opinion, human scholarship, and/or human experience.

Classic Adventist vs. Mainstream Evangelical Bible Study

Most of us have studied the Bible with other Christians. Why do they see the Bible so differently on certain matters?

The answer is simple. Historically, Adventists have used the Bible comprehensively. Evangelical Christians, despite their vaunted reverence for the Bible, use it selectively, and admit it.

The classic Adventist method of Bible study is the Bible's own method.

Please understand, my friends: No method of Bible study is valid unless it brings all Biblical evidence into harmony. No method of studying the Spirit of Prophecy is valid unless it brings all the evidence into harmony.

A. *The Unity of Scripture*

The Bible declares itself to be both a unified document and an objective standard by which ideas and conduct are to be compared:

II Tim. 3:16:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

Acts 17:11:

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

NIV:

“ . . . examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

Now what were the only Scriptures they had to examine?

The Old Testament.

Seventh-day Adventists are not Old Testament Christians, New Testament Christians, Pauline Christians or Johannine Christians. Seventh-day Adventists are *Biblical* Christians.

Scripture its Own Interpreter

II Peter 1:20-21:

"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scriptures is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

I Cor. 2:12-14:

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

In other words, what the Spirit inspires must be compared with itself in order to be understood.

Isa. 28:9-10:

"Whom shall He [the Lord] teach knowledge? and whom shall He make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, and there a little."

Brothers and sisters, this is the way Seventh-day Adventist theology builds its teachings from the Bible.

On every subject, passages taken from throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are taken into account before a conclusion.

Critics have often scorned this approach as the “proof text method” of Bible study. But what we’re really talking about here is the Bible’s own self-interpretive method.

Now no one is saying we shouldn’t be mindful of context when studying the Bible. But we have to consider what the Bible says about itself, and how the Bible presents a unified, consistent picture of God’s truth.

Remember what God says about Himself:

Mal. 3:6:
“For I am the Lord, I change not.”

Heb. 13:8:
“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.”

Brothers and sisters, according to the Bible, God’s revelation of Himself is changeless and consistent.

This is the genius of classic Adventism.

C. *Evangelical Bible Study*

The popular evangelical Christian approach to Bible study is very different.

Edward J. Carnell, in his book *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, lays down the following rules for Bible study:

- a. The New Testament must interpret the Old.
- b. The New Testament Epistles (really those of Paul only) are to interpret the Gospels.
Edward J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), pp. 53-54.

"Interpret" really means to supersede.

Now what are we talking about here? Dispensationalism—the idea that people at different times in history have been saved by different standards.

II Tim. 3:15-16 leaves no allowance for such a method. The OT, according to this passage, is to make us "wise unto salvation."

II Tim. 3:15-16:

“From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

Harper Study Bible on Eccl. 9:5, p. 979:

"From this verse some have adduced the dogma of soul sleep for the dead until the resurrection. The doctrine of soul sleep is not biblical. The problem is solved when one understands that the Bible is a book of progressive revelation. The Old Testament does not have the full-orbed biblical doctrine of the intermediate state after death."

"Progressive" revelation in this context really means contradictory revelation. (Explain.)

Robert Morey, in his book *Death and the Afterlife*, uses the same argument:

"They (Adventists) do not see any progress from the Old Testament to the New Testament but flatten out the distinction between the testaments. Instead of giving priority to the clarity of the New Testament, they feel safer staying with the blurred vision found in the Old Testament" (p. 23).

(Compare with II Tim. 3:15-16 and Acts 17:11).

E. *Evangelical Bible Study Comes to Adventism*

Prior to 1950, the current controversies over salvation in the Adventist Church did not exist. This is because before this time we used the consensus approach to Bible study, rather than the selective evangelical approach.

Desmond Ford at Palmdale, in 1976:

"1. Paul is the theologian of the New Testament. Only he sets forth an analysis of the plan of salvation, . . .

"2. The only book by Paul which systematically explains Righteousness by Faith is Romans.

"3. The part in Romans which contains this systematic presentation is Romans 3:21-5:21, though obviously the preceding and following chapters are related to this central discussion. *What we wish to emphasize is that it is here we must find the basic nature of Righteousness by Faith. If what we believe is not here, we need to think again*"

Desmond Ford, *Documents from the Palmdale Conference on Righteousness by Faith* (Goodlettsville, TN: Jack D. Walker, Publisher, 1976), p. 4.

Three years later, at a symposium held at PUC, Ford declared:

"Where is the definitive word on the gospel to be found? Certainly not outside Scripture. And where in Scripture? Not even in the Gospels which were written as supplementary to the Epistles. The Cross had to be endured before it could be explained."

Desmond Ford, "Righteousness by Faith," *Study Papers, Series 1: Righteousness by Faith* (Angwin, CA: Pacific Union College Religion Dept, 1979), p. 17

A totally human fabrication, with no Scriptural authority!!

In *The Adventist Crisis of Spiritual Identity*, written several years later, after he was defrocked, Ford wrote:

"Paul was the greatest preacher of the gospel that there has ever been. You say, What about Jesus? My friends, Jesus came to *make* the atonement, not to *explain* it" (p. 253, italics original).

We can't overstate this point.

Ford and others who have lately doubted our fundamental doctrines, claim that such SDA doctrines as the investigative judgment contradict the Bible and the gospel found in the Bible.

Yet these same ones frankly admit just how little of the Bible they have taken into account before reaching their conclusions.

II. *Reliance on Scholarship and Human Opinion*

A. Beware of any book or argument which relies heavily on scholars to explain the Bible.

Jer. 17:5:

"Thus saith the Lord: Cursed by the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord."

"I don't know what I believe, but whatever Morrie Venden believes, that's what I believe."

SC 89:

"The Bible was not written for the scholar alone; on the contrary, it was designed for the common people. The great truths necessary for salvation are made as clear as noonday; and none will mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God.

"We should not take the testimony of any man as to what the Scriptures teach, but should study the words of God for ourselves."

GC 268:

“All who exalt their own opinions above divine revelation, all who would change the plain meaning of Scripture to suit their own convenience, or for the sake of conforming to the world, are taking upon themselves a fearful responsibility.”

UL 125:

“The earnest, sincere searcher for truth will not mistake truth for error. The Word of God is the bread of life, of which all may partake and obtain eternal life. Error is falsehood and deception. Those who partake of it must suffer in consequence, as did Adam and Eve in Eden. It is the privilege of all to search with prayerful, eager interest for the truth. Truth is the tree of life, the leaves of which the human family are to eat and live.

“Those who try to interpret the Word according to their own ideas, who read it in accordance with their own opinions, will never see the truth, and will die in their sins. . . .

“To those who obey, the Word of God is the tree of life. It is the word of salvation, received unto eternal life.”

FH 297:

“When errors arise and are taught as Bible truth, those who have a connection with Christ will not trust to what the minister says, but, like the noble Bereans, they will search the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so.”

FH 309:

“God has made full provision in the Scriptures for our equipment against deception, and we shall be without excuse if, through neglect of God’s Word, we are unable to resist the errors of the evil one. We need to watch unto prayer. We need daily to search the Scriptures diligently, that we may not be ensnared by some delusive error that seems like truth.”

FH 309:

“The winds of doctrine will blow fiercely about us, but we should not be moved by them. God has given us a correct standard of righteousness and truth—the law and the testimony. There are many who profess to love God, but when the Scriptures are opened before them and evidences are presented showing the binding claims of God’s law, they manifest the spirit of the dragon. They hate the light and will not come to it, lest their deeds should be reprov’d. They will not compare their faith and doctrine with the law and the testimony. They turn away their ears from hearing the truth, and impatiently declare that all they want to hear about is faith in Christ.”

VSS 325-326:

“The present truth, the special message given to our world, even the third angel’s message, comprehends a vast field, containing heavenly treasures. No one can be excusable who says, ‘I will no longer have anything to do with these special messages; I will preach Christ.’ No one can preach Christ, and present the truth as it is in Jesus, unless he presents the truths that are to come before the people at the present time, when such important developments are taking place.”

What favorite pastors, professors, and other spiritual mentors may say, cannot determine what we believe or how we live.

Let us ever bear in mind what a friend of mine calls the “one-sentence principle”:

7T 71:

“One sentence of Scripture is of more value than ten thousand of man’s ideas or arguments.”

III. *Reliance on Experience*

This is perhaps the most dangerous approach to truth in contemporary Adventism.

More and more, people are basing their theology, not on a plain "thus saith the Lord," but on whatever their experience finds comfortable.

"Instead of me fitting a religion, I found a religion to fit me."

Quoted by Kenneth L. Woodward, "A Time to Seek," *Newsweek*, Dec. 17, 1991, p. 56

Even Ken Woodward, interestingly enough, had a hard time reconciling this attitude with our Lord’s statement in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Luke 22:42:

“Not My will, but Thine, be done.”

“I suspect that many of those so-called "backsliders" would still be with us, had they been able to make the Christian life work for them.”

Marvin Moore, *Conquering the Dragon Within: God’s Provision for Assurance and Victory in the End Time* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 1995), p. 17.

“Only God knows how many Adventists love the world because they tried to love God and it didn't work.”

Martin Weber, *Who’s Got the Truth? Making sense out of five different Adventist gospels* (Silver Spring, MD: Home Study International Press, 1994), p. 170.

“I would not say that my family and church were overly legalistic; but I certainly grew up with a strong focus on doing the right thing, self-discipline, and a certain insecurity about where I stood with God. These tendencies were compounded in college when I was introduced to the final-generation perfection ideas of M.L. Andreasen, which I embraced with much enthusiasm. Sadly, these powerful convictions didn’t work for me or anybody I knew. In other words, these ideas did not help me become a better person or attain the goals that they set before me.”

Jon Paulien, “A Look at Des Ford’s Latest Book on Revelation,” *Adventist Today*, Winter 2011, p. 24.

“I am baffled, because, unless my whole experience over the past 23 years is wrong, I can’t imagine how anyone who knows the Lord, who has even seen a glimpse of God’s righteousness as revealed in Jesus, could believe that whatever the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives is good enough to give them saving merit before God.”

Clifford Goldstein, “Beyond Logic,” *Adventist Review*, Jan. 23, 2003, p. 28.

“I was taught by well-meaning Bible teachers that justification was not by faith alone in Christ’s imputed righteousness, but that it somehow also included my works as part of the basis of my acceptance with God. I viewed justification as forgiving my past sins, but after conversion, I felt I needed to depend upon my sanctification as the basis of my continued acceptance by God. Since my works of obedience always seemed to fall short of the divine standard, I had no assurance of salvation. . . .

“But finally, through a chain of marvelous providential leadings, the beauty and simplicity of the gospel truth of justification began to dawn before my eyes. . . .

“The marvelous news that I am ‘accepted in the Beloved’ (Ephesians 1:6), that Christ is my righteousness, brought to my soul a joy and peace like that described by the ones who heard the message of justification by faith in the wake of the 1888 General Conference session.”

Richard M. Davidson, “How Shall a Person Stand Before God? What is the Meaning of Justification,” *God’s Character and the Last Generation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 2018), p. 86.

Now folks, this sounds so genuine and heartfelt. And it is true, most assuredly, that Christ is the Christian’s only righteousness.

But as we’re going to learn in the course of this series, the righteousness of Christ includes both justification and sanctification.

Neither of these is inferior or superior to the other. Consider the words of God’s prophet:

DA 300:

“The proud heart strives to earn salvation, but both our title to heaven and our fitness for it are found in the righteousness of Christ.”

And listen to how Ellen White defines title and fitness so far as the requirements for heaven are concerned:

MYP 35:

“The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven; the second is our fitness for heaven.”

The author we just quoted complained about the theology that says justification covers past sins only, and that being accepted by God is based also on sanctified obedience.

But what does the Bible say brings acceptance with God:

Acts 10:35:

“In every nation he that feareth [God], and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him.”

And what do the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy tell us?

ST Dec. 15, 1887:

“There is no way back to innocence and life except through repentance for having transgressed God’s law, and faith in the merits of the divine sacrifice, who has suffered for your

transgressions of the past; and you are accepted in the Beloved on condition of obedience to the commandments of your Creator.”

SD 45:

Many of those who claim to believe the testing truths for these last days, act as though God took no note of their disrespect of, and manifest disobedience to, the principles of His holy law. The law is the expression of His will, and it is through obedience to that law that God proposes to accept the children of men as His sons and daughters.”

ST Dec. 28, 1891:

“Through obedience to all the commandments of God, we are accepted in the Beloved.”

6BC 1092:

“Christ bears the penalty of man’s past transgressions; and by imparting to man His righteousness, makes it possible for man to keep God’s holy law.”

So the question we have to ask is,

Do we believe the testimony of a prominent theologian, however godly and gracious he may be? Or do we believe the written counsel of God?

Here’s another, very recent, experience-driven theological testimony.

After describing how earlier in his life he had accepted Last Generation theology, he writes:

“Thus began my pro-Andreasen/last generation theology years. But they came to an abrupt halt *in March 1969 when I finally realized that last generation theology did not work. After eight years of striving I was still messed up. Beyond that, I hadn’t met even one sinlessly perfect Adventist.* As a result I decided to leave the ministry, give up on Adventism and what I perceived to be Christianity, and eventually return to the hedonism that had shaped my first nineteen years.”

George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assn, 2018), p. 18 (italics original).

And how listen to this one, on the issue of homosexuality:

“A critical question for any theological proposal is which of the two, the Bible or experience, ultimately norms the other. Which is the final court of appeal? By definition, Christian theology assigns priority to the Bible, so the question for any specific proposal is whether in fact it does so. When we ask this question of Guy and Jones’ work here, I find myself suspecting that experience gets pride of place. It is true that they look closely at certain biblical passages, particularly in Jones’ case. But both of them seem to accept as a settled fact that same-sex relationships are appropriate for Christians because people find them personally fulfilling.”

Richard Rice, “Is the Church Ready for Same-sex Sex?” *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives* (Roseville, CA: Adventist Forum, 2008), p. 4-77.

Now folks, Seventh-day Adventists should know better than this.

How did we get to the point where someone's testimony of what they believe to be "personally fulfilling" takes precedence over the Word of God?

Is there something wrong with this picture?

Consider what the servant of the Lord says about experience-driven spirituality:

CH 108-109:

"Eve was beguiled by the serpent and made to believe that God would not do as He had said. She ate, and, thinking she felt the sensation of a new and more exalted life, she bore the fruit to her husband. The serpent had said that she should not die, and she felt no ill effects from eating the fruit, nothing which could be interpreted to mean death, but, instead, a pleasurable sensation, which she imagined was as the angels felt. Her experience stood arrayed against the positive command of Jehovah, yet Adam permitted himself to be seduced by it."

Many of us, I am sure, can relate to the following admonition—from the same page. I've seen it in the personal lives of believers, and even on church committees:

CH 109:

"In the face of the most positive commands of God, men and women will follow their own inclinations, and then dare to pray over the matter, to prevail upon God to allow them to go contrary to His expressed will. Satan comes to the side of such persons, as he did to Eve in Eden, and impresses them. They have an exercise of mind, and this they relate as a most wonderful experience which the Lord has given them. But true experience will be in harmony with natural and divine law; false experience arrays itself against the laws of nature and the precepts of Jehovah."

FH 299:

"When the Savior imparts His peace to the soul, the heart will be in perfect harmony with the Word of God, for the Spirit and the Word agree. The Lord honors His Word in all His dealings with humanity. It is His own will, His own voice, that is revealed to them and He has no new will, no new truth, aside from His Word, to unfold to His children. If you have a wonderful experience that is not in harmony with the expressed directions of God's Word, you may well doubt it, for its origin is not from above. The peace of Christ comes through the knowledge of Jesus whom the Bible reveals."

Now why can't testimonies of personal experience, like those we saw earlier, be trusted?

I Kings 8:39:

"Thou, even Thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men."

Why can't experience-driven theology be trusted?

1. Misconceptions

2. Personal baggage
3. Cherished sins

Another argument for compromising truth these days is the effort to keep one's children in the church.

But whether we like it or not, folks, this verse is still in the Bible. From the lips of our loving Lord Himself:

Matt. 10:17:

“He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.”

Brothers and sisters, the best thing we can do for our prodigals is to keep our standards and our integrity intact, so they have something to come back to when they wander away!

If we lower the standards in order to keep them, we will all end up together all right—but we won't like the outcome!

The Authority of Ellen White

First, we need to understand that Ellen White's writings are to be interpreted the same way as the Bible.

1SM 42:

“The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”

There are those who claim that Ellen White never intended her writings to be used to settle doctrinal, worship, or lifestyle issues.

Not a “theological policewoman”—someone claims.

We will let her own statements speak for themselves:

EW 78:

“God has, in that Word (the Bible), promised to give visions in the last days, not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”

5T 665:

“Additional truth is not brought out, but God has through the Testimonies simplified the great truths already given.”

3SM 32:

“The Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people. It is light that they should have, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. This is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors, and to specify what is truth.”

5T 655-656:

“Serious errors in doctrine and practice were cherished. . . . God revealed these errors to me in vision and sent me to His erring children to declare them.”

GW 302:

“At that time one error after another pressed in upon us; ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. . . . The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth and what is error.”

Very clearly, from these passages, the writings of Ellen White were divinely intended to keep Seventh-day Adventists from straying outside the limits of Bible teachings.

In short, brothers and sisters, it is time we became People of the Book once more.

In closing:

GC 625:

“Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures, and who have received the love of the truth, will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive.”

3SM 83-84:

“Men may get up scheme after scheme, and the enemy will seek to seduce souls from the truth; but all who believe that the Lord has spoken through Sister White, and has given her a message, will be safe from the many delusions that will come in these last days.”

II Chron. 20:20:

“Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.”