

The Bible and the Church: Revisiting the Obvious

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Since its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist church has been committed to the Bible and the Bible only to establish its system of beliefs and form its mission. The Bible has also played a major role in Ellen White's prophetic ministry and in guiding the Adventist movement through some challenging times of theological turmoil. The current cultural, intellectual, and social circumstances indicate that as the church moves toward the future, its stance on Biblical authority will face increasing challenges from every corner. Theological controversies, ethical dilemmas, and cultural demands will increasingly force the church—amidst turmoils of criticism, doubt, and social pressures—to take a clear stand on crucial issues. Given the realism of this scenario, one might ask: How can the church survive? How can the church preserve its identity through the social changes and the challenges posed by the unstable moral foundation of contemporary society?

Sources of Theological Authority

In dealing with the challenges mentioned above, some people may appeal to tradition; others, to reason and experience. Well-intentioned believers may appeal to the community as the locus of ultimate authority. Unfortunately all of these supra-mentioned authorities, as helpful and convenient as they may be, are not solid enough to function as the bedrock foundation the church needs to face the challenges that lie ahead. Tradition as the ultimate source of theological authority was examined by the Reformers and found wanting on the basis of biblical revelation. As good as it may be, and of course there is good tradition (see 1 Cor 11:2), tradition in itself can never work as the ultimate foundation for the church's beliefs and procedures. Because of its very nature, tradition is ever changing and easily degenerates into traditionalism. As J. Pelikan, puts it: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."¹ Although not wrong in itself, tradition is deficient as a superior source of authority to judge its claims and correct its course. But what about reason?

Reason might be a viable option, but that it is not reliable has been sufficiently demonstrated by the two world wars that engulfed humanity in killing without precedent in our short human history, the culmination of which was the Holocaust. Such atrocities, perpetrated by enlightened nations, reveals that the enlightened intellect does not stand the test of absolute reliability in matters related to the ultimate good. In regard to human values and the search for the supreme good, the Cartesian ideal followed by the Enlightenment's obsession with making reason the ultimate locus of authority has proved beyond any shadow of doubt to be a total failure. Reason, as part and parcel of God's image in humanity, has an obvious and indispensable role in the apprehension of information and in the processing of knowledge. Reason, however, is also deeply affected by sin and therefore needs a source of authority above itself to judge and correct its ways.

More recently, the community has been advanced as a viable option to hold the seat of ultimate authority. According to this view the community of believers is to determine truth and decide what is right and what is wrong. However, the community is not reliable as a foundation for ultimate authority. Although the community lies at the core of what it means to be a church, and as much as one may value the authority of the community, it has also been affected by sin and as such is obviously not exempt from failure. Communities—religious and otherwise—have perpetrated horrible things against fellow human beings. In the late twentieth century, entire communities came close to the brink of being annihilated by other communities for either religious, racial, or other reasons. So, as much as one may respect the authority of the community, it becomes evident that the community is not a reliable locus for ultimate authority. The community must be subordinated to a higher authority in order to decide what is wrong and what is right.

In the attempt to circumvent the problems attached to reason, tradition, and community, one might point out that the Holy Spirit, by bringing enlightenment to the believers, stands as the supreme foundation of authority. Although such a suggestion appears to be absolutely right at first glance, it should be kept in mind that seldom do appeals to the Spirit become a subtle way of legitimizing one's own subjective experience. Even in appealing to the Lord Jesus Christ as the supreme seat of authority in theological matters, the believer risks arguing on the basis of a Jesus reconstructed according to his or her own personal or cultural preferences.

The power of the Spirit and the lordship of Jesus certainly play a foundational role in solving theological disagreements. Nevertheless, the question may be asked as to how one can be sure that a given course of action is being moved by the Spirit and, therefore, represents the lordship of Jesus. Again, in indiscriminate appeals to the Holy Spirit or to Jesus the risk persists of replacing Jesus and/or the Spirit with reason/experience, tradition, or community, and therefore of identifying one's own desires and preferences with the will of Jesus and/or guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Among such important, though limited and restricted sources of theological authority, the Bible emerges as the unique and absolute standard to judge all other authorities. Such postulate emerges naturally from the example of Jesus and the self authenticating claims of the Scriptures themselves.

It does not require too much effort to notice that according to the gospels, Jesus regarded the Scriptures as the ultimate court of appeal and repeatedly pointed to them to clarify an issue or settle a debate. In his appeal to a biblical passage, He asserted with absolute conviction: "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:34, 35).

The Scriptures claim over and over again that what is being said comes from God. Writing to Timothy, Paul stated "that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for 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, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:15–17). This classical text affirms the divine origin of the Bible with its consequent implications for its inspiration and authority. It evaluates the Scripture as being profitable and clarifies its purpose: "to make wise for salvation."

On the basis of the Scriptures' own claim in regard to their origin and purpose, we are justified to take the Bible as the ultimate seat of authority. The Epistle to the Hebrews declares: "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Heb 1:1–2). This short passage illustrates and encapsulates the canon in its entirety. In the Old Testament God speaks to us "in various ways through the prophets." In the New Testament God speaks to us "through the Son."

Therefore, only the Scriptures are capable of leading us out of the maze of so many ethical options and theological points of view vying for acceptance in a culture of relativism and consumerism. Only by accepting the self-authenticating claims of the Bible and by taking into consideration its absolute authority will the church be able to solve her theological and practical quandaries and still remain united under the lordship of Jesus Christ.² In order to know what path we have to tread as a corporate church and as individual church members, there is no option but to turn to the Scriptures. After all, the Bible clearly voices its self-authenticating claims of being the ultimate court of appeal in all matters of theology and practice for the church. As the well-known passage from Isaiah posits: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa 8:20; cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17).

Relevance of the Scriptures

The revelation of God in the Scriptures is the most objective and foundational means God employs to communicate his will to the church. Although modern developments in the social sciences, semiotics, and

linguistic theory have stressed the importance of various means and processes of communication—including nonverbal communication—the word remains the primary and foundational instrument for interpersonal interaction and relationships.³ Endowed with the image of God, humans received from the Creator the ability for objective and verbal communication like none of the other created beings that populate this planet. As if this were not enough, God revealed His will to human beings by means of words. And through the Bible He establishes relationships and gives guidance to His people. The effective power of God’s Word in creation and regeneration, ubiquitous from Genesis to Revelation, is concisely expressed in Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

The Word of God claims authority over all areas and dimensions of individual and church life. The seven points elaborated below just exemplify some areas in need of attention if we want to be faithful to the comprehensive and gracious demands of the Scriptures.

1. Theologians and Bible teachers have the solemn responsibility of putting scholarship into the service of God and His Word. More than thirty years ago, James D. Smart wrote a book titled: *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics*.⁴ This work argues that although the Bible has been mass produced and its academic knowledge has increased, this knowledge has not reached the people. Nonetheless, the crucial challenge that the church faces today is not ignorance of the Bible’s message but the silencing of its authoritative voice. A perusal of some recent biblical and theological works produced by so-called conservative scholars seems to indicate the muting of some central claims of the Bible. To exemplify, one could mention the growing skepticism of some evangelical scholars about the literality and historicity of the Genesis’ creation account coupled with an increasing disposition to accept evolution.⁵

This situation places a major responsibility on the shoulders of Adventist scholars. With the bewildering variety of theoretical frameworks and methodological options available in the academic community, Adventist scholars must use critical skills to adopt right presuppositions and methods in the interpretation of the Bible. Besides, the combination of academic integrity with humility remains the standard before every Bible scholar and theologian. The authority of the biblical interpreter must be subordinated to that of the Bible, and particular opinions should be humbly submitted to the evaluation of peers and, ultimately, of the church at large. By integrating competent work with prayerful trust in the Spirit, theologians and Bible teachers will continue to be a blessing to the church, inasmuch as they help her to better understand and apply the Word of God. The words of Malachi voiced to Israelite priests, fittingly apply to Adventist theologians and Bible teachers: “For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Mal 2:7).

2. Church leaders must allow the Bible to determine their leadership style. It has been acknowledged that the Bible is “the greatest collection of leadership case studies ever written, with tremendously useful insights for today’s leaders and managers.”⁶ But in matters of church leadership and administration the Bible is essential not only because of its “case studies” but because of the leadership principles contained therein. Business management techniques and marketing initiatives may have a place in the overall running of the church, but without the Bible these otherwise useful tools may become nothing more than secular models of efficiency and professionalism. Church leaders are called not only to promote the preaching of Jesus, but also to follow Jesus’ style of leadership and administration. Church leaders are not called to act or behave like CEOs, but to be leaders like Jesus: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Pet 5:2–4).

3. Prayer, an obvious spiritual discipline usually taken for granted, must have a biblical orientation. According to the Bible, prayer should be offered with a recognition of God's holiness and human sinfulness. Biblical prayer does not function as a mantra to manipulate God, but as a means of communication and communion between penitent sinners and a merciful Creator and Redeemer. The following passage, captures an important dimension of Biblical prayer: "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the Lord" (Isa 55:6-8).

4. Evangelism must remain biblically oriented. Although there are many legitimate ways of motivating people to come to Jesus, the preaching of the Word must remain central in the missional undertakings of the church. Along and above the different methods employed to attract people to Jesus, strong efforts should be made to lead people to trust God's Word and follow the Jesus revealed therein. Thus evangelism in its manifold expressions should not only proclaim the person of Jesus, but should also invite people to obey Jesus and be faithful to his message as revealed in the Scriptures. True evangelism honors the Scriptures. When summoned before King Agrippa, Paul clarified that his preaching intended to say "no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come." (Acts 26:22) And, in continuation, the apostle asked the monarch the decisive question: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?" (Acts 26:27).

5. Christian education must also be conditioned by the Scriptural revelation of God. That education in its ultimate sense must take into consideration the word of God is clearly expressed by the admonitions of God's wisdom in the many biblical passages that emphasize the instructions/law/testimonies of the Lord as the source of wisdom. The largest chapter of the Bible, Psalm 119, is entirely devoted to extolling the benefits of the Torah, the revelation of God, for the spiritual and intellectual growth of God's children. In the same vein, the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible does not spare words to advise and admonish those in search of wisdom to cherish God's word. With a keen perception of what the Bible means by education, Martin Luther penned this much quoted statement: "I am much afraid that schools will prove to be the great gates of Hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not increasingly occupied with the Word of God must become corrupt."⁷ Hence the relevance of God's appeal to His children: "Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth" (Prov 5:5).

6. The ministry of music is an important area of church life that needs to be founded on the Bible. Music may excel in many communication forms as a means of conveying the truth. There may be many Christians who do not know the Bible well, but there is hardly a person who do not know several hymns or gospel songs. Conflicts involving music styles and music instruments have engulfed some congregations, but as important as music style and music instruments may be in conveying the right atmosphere for adoration, one should not be oblivious to the importance of song and hymn lyrics. The message of hymns and songs should be in harmony with the teaching of Scripture. Church composers and musicians have the sacred duty to make and perform church music in such a way as to communicate a message consistent with God's character revealed in the Scriptures: "Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; Sing praises with understanding" (Psa 47:6-7).

7. Church worship must give an important place to the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. The worship service should not become a venue for so many announcements and advertisements of church

activities and programs that hardly any time is left for the exposition of God’s Word. When God’s people gather together to worship, they need to receive the Word of God to help them face the trials, discouragement and challenges of daily living. Nothing should impair or replace the proclamation of the Word. Preachers who use the pulpit to tell personal stories without responsible biblical exposition or who use the pulpit for the mere entertainment of their audiences are betraying their calling and profaning the pulpit. What Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:2 should become the orientation point of every preacher: “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

Our preaching and exposition must be informed by appropriate study and investigation of the Scriptures. The Bible does not function merely as a recipe book or a reference book. The Bible does not always yield easy and ready answers for some of life’s challenging circumstances. One may not find a specific passage or verse for each spiritual malady or personal problem.⁸ But the Bible, if rightly interpreted, certainly provides the ultimate answers for life’s most crucial questions—and even for matters related to church procedures—because the relevance of the Bible transcends the sum of its individual parts. As the written record of the overarching plan of God to redeem the world from sin, the Bible provides God’s people with a worldview, a meta-narrative that spans from creation to the new creation. Although individual passages and texts may bring comfort in situations of sorrow and suffering, and even provide guidance for specific circumstances, one should never lose sight of the organic interconnections among the various passages and themes of the Bible in the grand panorama of the plan of salvation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon every preacher to make the unity, truth, and authority of the Bible clear and accessible to the audience. Preachers should pay attention to Paul’s advice to Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

Conclusion

As argued above, the Bible stands as the absolute foundation upon which the church should base her theology and practices. As Paul emphasized in Ephesians 5:25–27: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the **washing of water by the word**, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (emphasis supplied). Therefore, in order to remain faithful to the Lord, the church must continue to uphold the Word of God as the supreme authority to prescribe her beliefs and adjudicate her experience and practice.

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

²See the study by Kwabena Donkor, “Contemporary Responses to *Sola Scriptura*: Implications for Adventist Theology” in this issue of *Reflections*.

³See Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning was the Word: Language: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 11–38.

⁴James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 142.

⁵See, e.g., Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012); John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Waltke, Bruce K. and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 153.

⁶Lorin Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership: From Moses to Matthew: Management Lessons for Contemporary Leaders* (New York: MJF Books, 2003), ix.

⁷Quoted in Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers, 2000), 129. Also in Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, Pacific Press, 1911), 140.

⁸See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Hermeneutical Guidelines for Dealing with Theological Questions,” *Reflections* 40, October 2012. *Reflections* seeks to share information concerning doctrinal and theological developments among Adventists and to foster doctrinal and theological unity in the world church. Its intended audience is church administrators, church leaders, pastors and teachers.

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