From its inception, Adventism has owed its existence to the Bible. As the community approaches the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Great Disappointment, it is appropriate to ponder how we have studied the book which gave us birth.

Given current demographic patterns within Adventism, it is not surprising that methods of studying the Bible should become a source of tension in the church. On the one hand, the process of accommodation in a secularized society encourages sophisticated Adventists to recognize the human element in Scripture and treat the Bible simply as literature. On the other hand, the community is growing most rapidly among peoples who lack sophistication, and who know the Bible simply as Scripture, the divine Word. Adventist scholars are caught in the middle. While a certain spectrum exists within the community, with some being attracted more by the human and others more by the divine, Adventist scholars clearly want to have it both ways: the Bible as Scripture and as literature.

My thesis is that the interplay between "Bible as Scripture" and "Bible as Literature" can be a dynamic source of strength to the community. I am assuming, however, that a certain tension between the two is natural and inevitable, reflecting the tension that arises whenever believers assert their conviction that the divine has come in contact with the human.

I will define the primary points of tension between the two approaches, survey key historical developments in Adventism, and conclude with some practical suggestions as to how we can preserve both perspectives, thus enhancing the role of the Bible in the church.

The Primary Tension: Literature vs. Scripture

When believers claim the Bible as Scripture, the Word of God, they expect both mystery and clarity: the mystery of the divine presence -- a mystery which defies explanation -- and the clarity of the divine commands and promises. They see no weakness, no inconsistency, no contradiction, no error. They hear God speaking.

By contrast, when scholars study the Bible as literature, they, too, are looking for mystery and clarity, but of quite a different sort. They seek to explain the mysteries suggested by the text and to establish clarity through careful, even clinical analysis. They dissect and reconstruct. In the end, they judge a writer’s product to be brilliant, mediocre, or poor.

Historically, Adventists have identified with conservative Christians who prefer to view the Bible as Scripture more than literature. But Ellen White’s explicit statements on inspiration, especially in the "Introduction" to The Great Controversy (pp. v - xii) and in Selected Messages, Bk. 1 (pp. 15-23), have kept alive the possibility of an incarnational view of the Bible, one which recognizes both divine and human characteristics:

The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” John 1:14 (GC vi).
Following this statement, Ellen White proceeds to reveal certain "critical" insights into Scripture: 1) The authors "differed widely" both in "mental and spiritual endowments"; 2) the same truth can be presented "more strikingly" by one writer than by another; 3) the appearance of "discrepancy or contradiction" finds resolution in an "underlying harmony."

Selected Messages offers additional "critical" insights: 4) "Perfect order or apparent unity" is not always found in Scripture; 5) The Bible is in some sense imperfect since "everything that is human is imperfect"; 6) Since "God, as a writer, is not represented" in Scripture, certain expressions may not be "like God"; "God has not put Himself on trial in words, in logic, in rhetoric, in the Bible."

Perhaps her most significant claim is represented by the statement: "It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired."

That position allows her the freedom to establish a truly incarnational view of Scripture, one which partakes of both the human and the divine.

By its very nature, the delicate balance between the human and the divine in the incarnational model is precarious. If the creative tension is broken and those drawn by different sides of the equation are not in active dialogue, the model is at risk. To cite a contemporary example in Adventism, if the Andrews Society for Religious Studies is perceived as the advocate for the human dimension in Scripture, while the Adventist Theological Society is perceived as the advocate for the divine, and the two societies go their separate ways, the church could be greatly weakened and impoverished.

Given my own desire to give the appropriate weight to both the human and divine elements in Scripture, I cannot claim to fully understand why certain of my Adventist colleagues resist what I consider to be an appropriate recognition of the human element in Scripture. Perhaps it is the fear that Adventism will be vitiated as mainstream Protestantism was in the nineteenth century when it adopted a whole-hearted critical approach to Scripture.

I would argue, however, that Adventists have a marvelous opportunity to articulate an incarnational model of inspiration, not only for ourselves, but for the larger Christian world. The battles over inerrancy have turned the middle ground into a virtual desert. One notable oasis is Eerdmans' Old Testament Survey (La Sor, Hubbard, Bush). There may be others. But no one could claim that the desert is blossoming like a rose.

Adventists themselves have not yet made peace with the incarnational model. Two recent examples from official publications can serve as illustrations.

The first is found in the Ministerial Department's 1988 exposition of the 27 Adventist Fundamental Doctrines where the key passage from Selected Messages, Book 1 is cited with significant omissions. The quotation is given here exactly as it appears in Seventh-day Adventists Believe ..., with the omitted portions added in brackets and bold type:

The Bible "is not God's mode of thought and expression. [It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented.] Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen." (1) [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. But the words receive the impress
of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will, thus the utterances of the man are the word of God." (2)

The omissions may be innocent oversights or simply a judgment call determined by available space. Authors and editors always struggle with knowing how much of a quotation to include. But for one key sentence to fall by the way without ellipses marks and for another key sentence to be omitted between the quotation marks makes the passage less than helpful.

The other example comes from the first lesson of the current senior Sabbath School quarterly on the book of Zechariah (4th quarter, 1989). Citing Matthew 23:35, the problematic reference to "Zechariah, son of Barachiah," the quarterly poses the question: "According to Jesus, how did Zechariah die?" (Q3, p. 7). Because of the internal logic of the passage, 5SDABC clearly rejects the view that Matthew 23:35 refers to Zechariah the son of Barachiah: "Doubtless Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the high priest, who was stoned to death in the courts of the temple upon orders from King Joash, who reigned from 835 to 796 B.C. (2 Chron. 24:20-22; see Vol. II, p. 83)" (5SDABC 492).

The quarterly does cite the SDABC, but does not mention the possibility that Jesus, Matthew, or a copyist could have made a "mistake." Nor does it refer to the parallel passage in Luke where the problematic qualifier is missing. Instead, the quarterly adopts an inerrancy stance: "However, Matthew specifically identifies the slain prophet as the 'son of Barachias' (compare Zech. 1:1). See also The Desire of Ages, p. 619."

Perhaps even more significant than the reference in the quarterly is the fact that a significant number of thought leaders did not even notice. When I discovered what the quarterly had done, I asked around to see how others had reacted. I found teachers, editors, conference presidents, indeed, a whole Sabbath School class in one of the churches I visited, who had not even noticed because they had given up on the quarterly, using it at best only to give them the assigned passage for the week. The given reasons were remarkably consistent: the Adult Sabbath School Lessons do not lead the student into a serious consideration of the text and tend to omit references to "problems" that crop up in the text. Tailored to meet the desires of those who view the Bible as Scripture, the quarterly avoids addressing the issues that arise when one considers the Bible as literature. Inquisitive Adventists, desiring to consider the Bible as both Scripture and literature are looking elsewhere for help. Others, though still attending Sabbath School in some instances, no longer make the Bible the primary focus in the Sabbath School class.

The position of the quarterly is perhaps understandable given the long-standing nature of the struggle over inspiration within Adventism. At three different times in the last century, the simmering discussion over inspiration has risen to a near boil. As a means of understanding the current debate, I will note highlights of those discussions, placing them against a backdrop of the general claims we have made about the role of Scripture in Adventism.

Divine vs. Human: A Historical Perspective

When Adventists first ventured to publish an unofficial "synopsis of our faith" (1872), the statement affirmed that "we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, aside from the Bible." Similarly, our first "official" statement of beliefs (1931) maintained "that
the Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament were given by inspiration of God, contain an all-sufficient revelation of His will to men, and are the only unerring rule of faith and practice."

Finally, when a full General Conference in session discussed and voted for the first time a statement of "Fundamental Beliefs" (1980), the preamble noted that Adventists "accept the Bible as their only creed."

In spite of straightforward claims about the role of the Bible, however, Adventists have experienced their share of difficulties in understanding the nature of Scripture. And though trends within Adventism often parallel the general post-Enlightenment struggle over inspiration and revelation, a unique counterfoil inevitably colors the Adventist debate, namely, the experience and writings of Ellen White. In each of the three instances when inspiration has become a live issue, her writings have figured prominently.

Scene 1: The 1880's

In the larger Christian world, the practice of "higher criticism" was on the verge of overwhelming orthodox Protestantism. Adventists, meanwhile, voted at the 1883 General Conference to revise the Testimonies before reprinting them, noting that certain "imperfections" should be corrected (see Selected Messages, Bk. 3, p. 96). Shortly thereafter, D. M. Canright, a talented but volatile man who had been in and out of the Adventist ministry at least four times, left for the last time, becoming a Baptist and writing Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced (1889). In his attack against Adventism, he cited the revision of the Testimonies as proof of their non-inspiration.

In the same decade, Ellen White asked W. W. Prescott to assist with the revision of the historical quotations in The Great Controversy. Prescott was shaken by the request, probably because he had become enamored with the writings of Francois Gauszen, a staunch proponent of verbal inspiration. At Battle Creek College, Prescott's forceful presentations of Gauszen's views apparently convinced many, including Elder S. N. Haskell. While Prescott himself seems to have found an acceptable solution to the inspiration issue, the Battle Creek incident continued to haunt the church. W. C. White, writing to LeRoy Froom in 1928, claimed that Prescott's presentations had brought into the work "questions and perplexities without end, and always increasing" (Selected Messages, Bk. 3, p. 454).

Scene 2: The 1920's

In Protestantism in general, the Fundamentalist debate had driven a significant wedge between so-called mainstream Protestantism and those who still held to "fundamental" Christian positions. In popular thinking, the pastors and educators of the mainstream Protestant churches had turned into highly-educated critics who dissected the Bible but who did not believe. Reacting to that threat, conservative believers moved toward Bible Colleges and away from a well-rounded education.

With the death of Ellen White in 1915, Adventists faced the increasingly urgent question of how to relate her writings to Scripture. The Bible Conference of 1919 thoroughly aired the issue, but not to the satisfaction of the church. Two key personalities, A. G. Daniells and W. W. Prescott, propounded what could be described as a moderate (incarnational?) view, a position which stressed contextual interpretation and moved away from inerrability, verbal inspiration, and universal applicability. Both Daniells,
General Conference President since 1901, and Prescott had enjoyed extensive personal contact with Ellen White. They affirmed her authority but not her infallibility.

Daniells' strongest opponents, though not in attendance at the conference, reacted vigorously against him and the position he represented. At the 1922 General Conference, J. S. Washburn circulated a thirty-six page letter against Daniells, part of a larger effort that ultimately prevented Daniells from being reelected as General Conference President.

At the 1919 conference itself, cautious men like M. E. Kern and F. M. Wilcox, while admitting to the reasonableness of the "moderate" position, still expressed concern if that view were allowed to spread to the churches. "I believe there are a great many questions that we should hold back, and not discuss," said Wilcox. "I can not conceive that it is necessary for us to answer every question that is put to us by students or others" (Spectrum 10/1: pp. 45-46).

Caution prevailed. The more outspoken moderates, Daniells and Prescott, were moved to the sidelines. The cautious moderates continued to be influential in the church, playing a significant role in what the church read and heard. Wilcox was editor of the Review and Herald until retirement in 1944. Kern was appointed dean of the Advanced Bible School in 1933, then president when it became the SDA Theological Seminary in 1936. From 1943 until his retirement in 1950, he was a field secretary of the General Conference and served as president of the board of trustees of the Ellen G. White Publications.

Since the mood of the church was with the conservatives and the cautious moderates, the minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference were tucked away in the General Conference archives and forgotten. They resurfaced in 1974, just as the inspiration issue was heating up again.

Scene 3: The 1970's

Decades had passed since the Fundamentalist debate had driven a deep wedge between "liberal" mainstream Protestant churches and the "conservative" ones carrying the label of evangelical or fundamentalist. Increasingly, higher education was "in" for so-called Bible-believing Christians. While retaining a firm faith in the inspiration of Scripture and in a personal God who answers prayer and performs miracles, tenacious young Christian scholars cautiously began using some of the analytical methods pioneered in the nineteenth-century. They argued that they were using these methods simply to describe what they saw in Scripture. They were seeking to build faith, not to destroy it.

But the path was a dangerous one. Concordia Seminary, for example, of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, virtually disintegrated in the struggle as the two extreme positions denied the possibility of middle ground. When the confrontation came in February, 1974, some forty "moderate" and "liberal" professors and four hundred students marched off the Concordia campus and set up their own Seminary in Exile (Seminex). They left behind the "conservatives," just four professors and fifty students.

Publications intensified the controversy. Harold Lindsell, then editor of Christianity Today, wrote a vigorous defense of inerrancy, The Battle for the Bible (1976). He followed with The Bible in the Balance (1979), a book which fingered professors, seminaries, and churches, if Lindsell considered them "weak" on inspiration.
The struggle in Protestant circles was partially mirrored in Adventism. The one major difference, of course, was that Adventist discussions inevitably included consideration of the writings of Ellen White. Regardless of how one viewed the authority of Ellen White relative to the authority of Scripture, virtually all Adventists conceded that the phenomenon of inspiration as experienced by the writers of Scripture was the same phenomenon experienced by Ellen White.

Through the 1970's, it was clear that a number of church leaders preferred a more conservative stance toward Scripture. But the level of interest in Ellen White's literary methods had heightened to the point where it was becoming increasingly difficult to apply the same conservative criteria to Scripture and to the writings of Ellen White.

The General Conference sponsored a Bible Conference in 1974 which argued for a more conservative stance relative to Scripture. The crux of the issue was whether or not Adventist scholars could use the so-called historical-critical method in any form. There was widespread agreement among Adventist scholars that the naturalistic presuppositions which were part of the method in its classical formulation were indeed inappropriate for Adventists. But many of the church's biblical scholars argued that the descriptive aspects of the method (e.g. source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism) could be used productively to serve the church's needs. The conservative response (and the position generally held by the church's administrative leadership) was that use of any part necessitated the use of the whole.

Ironically, in 1974, the same year that the church sponsored the Bible Conference in an attempt to bring all its scholars into a more conservative line, the 1919 Bible Conference minutes were rediscovered in the General Conference archives. Although the minutes were not published until 1979, when Spectrum, a lay journal sponsored by the Association of Adventist Forums, did so (without permission), Adventist scholars quickly became aware of the minutes, recognizing immediately that the key issue of the 1919 Conference was identical with the issue of the 1970's: inspiration. And again, the inspiration question involved both the writings of Ellen White and Scripture.

Spectrum had been instrumental in initiating the move toward more critical analyses of Ellen White's writings. In the Autumn 1970 issue, William Peterson argued that Ellen White had not used the best historians in her chapter in The Great Controversy on the French Revolution, implying thereby that the use of lesser historical authorities diminished or destroyed her prophetic authority. Ron Graybill's rebuttal in the Summer 1972 issue was simple: Ellen White was not working from other historians; she simply quoted Uriah Smith. Interestingly enough, perhaps the whole church had overlooked the statement in the "Introduction" to The Great Controversy (p. xii) where Ellen White describes how she used the "published works" of her contemporaries in the Advent movement. Furthermore, her stated view was that she used quotations from historians, not because they were authoritative, but because they were convenient.

As the decade of the 70's moved to a close, the inspiration issue was complicated significantly by Desmond Ford's 1979 attack on the church's sanctuary and judgment doctrine. Was his stance determined by his method or by his experience or by both? Under General Conference sponsorship, the specific doctrinal issue was addressed at Consultation I (Glacier View, 1980), the methodological issue as it related to inspiration at Consultation II (Washington, D.C., 1981).

Influenced heavily by Ellen White's explicit statements on inspiration, the church's biblical scholars contributed to an important consensus of the working groups at Consultation II, namely, that the descriptive aspects of the so-called historical-critical method could indeed be separated from the naturalistic presuppositions and thus could be used by Adventist scholars. In point of fact, the descriptive methodologies were already being used in defense of Ellen White's literary methods.

In view of the line of reasoning adopted by many of the church's biblical scholars, it was not unexpected to see parallels from Scripture being cited in defense of Ellen White's methods. One of the more remarkable books occasioned by the debate was George Rice's *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (1983). Written for the thoughtful layperson, Rice's book is simply a study of how Luke's literary method is linked to the gospel's theological perspective.

The caveat included at the beginning of Rice's book is an intriguing reminder of the continuing tensions within Adventism over the issue of inspiration:

> The purpose of this book is to investigate a concept of inspiration not generally held by most Seventh-day Adventists. Although the publisher believes that this book will stimulate a constructive study of this subject, this book does not represent an official pronouncement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor does it necessarily reflect the editorial opinion of the Pacific Press Publishing Association. (Rice, p. 4)

It is still too early to tell whether the position represented by Rice's approach can carry the day in the mainstream of the church. For him, the Bible is both Scripture and literature. He affirms that it is possible to believe while also being involved in the critical analysis of the text. If that position is to win through in the church, however, it will need support from a variety of sources.

In the interest of maintaining that creative tension between the Bible as Scripture and the Bible as literature, I would like to offer some suggestions that could help preserve common ground so that the dialogue can continue in a fruitful manner.

**Preserving the Incarnational Model: Some Suggestions**

1. **Recognize that the ethical framework of Scripture, as expressed in the one great command, the two commands, and the ten, constitutes the essential nucleus of Scripture.** By focusing on the primacy of those divine commands that never change, we could more readily analyze the human element in Scripture without risking the demise of the Bible as the Word of God.

2. **Allow for both the casual/devotional reading of Scripture as well as the analytical/critical.** In several instances in Scripture, a casual reading suggests a conclusion not supported by a more analytical approach. One of the more striking examples involves the number of Israelites who left Egypt at the time of the exodus. The figure of 600,000 adult males given in Exodus 12:37 would lead the casual reader to conclude that several million Israelites left Egypt. That figure for the number of adult males finds parallels in Exodus 38:26; Num. 1:45-46; 2:32; 11:21; 26:51. Adding the women and children yields a figure close to two million.
(cf. PP 334) or, stated more generally, "millions" (cf. PP 410).

The analytical reader, however, will be struck by the number of first-born males given in Numbers 3:43 (22,273, one-month old and upward). Comparing the number of first-born males, 22,273, with the figure of 600,000 adult males, yields an average family size close to 80. Numbers 3:27 complicates matters further by stating that Amram and his three brothers (Izhar, Hebron, Uzziel) had 8,600 male descendants (one month old and upward) at the time of the exodus, an average of over 4,300 children (male and female) per family.

Given that state of affairs, the analytical reader will need to be patient with the casual reader who catches the oft-repeated figure of 600,000 adult males, but who is not likely to ponder the implications suggested by the other numbers.

3. Avoid insisting on the two extremes: that the Bible is absolutely accurate in all matters; or, conversely, that it is absolutely wrong in some. This suggestion is extremely difficult to implement. The burden may lie more heavily on the sophisticated and analytical reader. Being too quick to label parts of Scripture as inaccurate is likely to spur a counter-balancing insistence that the Bible is absolutely accurate in all matters. A touch of humility on both sides would be appropriate.

4. Avoid emotive words. Words such as "error" and "contradiction" should be avoided. "Difference" and "paradox" can often be used in their place.

5. Treat each other with respect. Those inclined to see the human side of Scripture are sometimes perceived as being disdainful of those whose thinking is dominated by the divine (cf. James Barr's Fundamentalism). If the incarnational model is to be effective, it must encompass as wide a group as possible, including some on both ends of the spectrum.

6. Confess the presence of the Divine in Scripture even while handling it as literature. Adventists are a community of believers. But in a secular world, the perception of the divine is at risk. Peter Berger's comment about the survival of neo-orthodoxy can be instructive for us, too:

If one is to believe what neo-orthodoxy wants one to believe, in the contemporary situation, then one must be rather careful to huddle together closely and continuously with one's fellow believers (Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy, Anchor Books, 1969, p. 164).

Berger's perspective is not unique. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews sensed the same truth:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

When we meet together to study Scripture, especially if we are considering it as literature, we must publicly and privately remind ourselves that we are a community of believers and that we are handling the sacred Word. Scripture partakes of human and divine characteristics. We endanger the church if we neglect either.