USES OF THE BIBLE IN ADVENTISM

by

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Introduction

The present paper demonstrates the danger of assigning a rather general title (with little clarification) to someone who still has preaching in his blood, for the end result may appear to be more a sermon than a scholarly paper. My thesis is that the Bible has traditionally been used in Adventism to support doctrine and to provide lessons for Christian living, that this usage is no longer adequate to meet the present situation, and that Biblical specialists from within this group must lead the way in reviving the use of the Bible in Adventism if Scripture is to play a meaningful role in the life of the church.

Traditional Usage of the Bible

A survey of early issues of the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald reveals that most articles were on doctrinal subjects, usually the two most distinctive doctrines--Sabbath and Second Coming. These articles were showered freely with texts of Scripture to back them up with authoritative proof. Titles included "The Seven Last Plagues," "The Beast with Seven Heads,"
1 and "The Seventh Day is the Sabbath."2 This early method entrenched itself in the very bones of Adventism and came to predominate. Specific Biblical passages became proof texts to support doctrinal beliefs.

1Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald, II:1 (8-5-1851).
2Ibid., II:3 (9-2-1851).
Probably no work epitomizes this tradition better than Bible Readings for the Home. Over two hundred doctrinal subjects, as well as topics on Christian living, are presented in question and answer format with proof texts supplying most of the answers. Context is never given for the texts and passages of dubious textual status are used without comment. Hundreds and hundreds of proof texts speak to subjects from salvation to Sabbath to Second Coming, and even to missionary work, our duty to the poor, and the evils of city life. Of course, many decades of Sabbath School lessons have followed the same format.

Doctrinal support, however, was by no means the only use for Scripture. It has also provided generations of Adventists with moral and spiritual lessons for living. If adult Sabbath School lessons presented proof texts in question and answer form to support doctrine, children’s Sabbath School lessons told us Bible stories, and then drew lessons of admonition and warning. Typical of this tradition is Uncle Arthur. For example, he concludes his story of Saul’s death by saying:

So it was really disobedience that caused his death. Time and again he had disobeyed God, and finally his wrongdoing caught up with him. In going to the witch of Endor he went just one step too far. Disobeying God is always dangerous. Of course, it we repent and tell Him we are sorry, He will forgive

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"Bible Readings for the Home" (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958). (Originally published in 1914 with the word "circle" added at the end of the title.)

"For example, see the use of Mark 16:15-16 on p. 97.

"For the latter Abraham and Lot are the prime example, pp. 717-719."
us. But if we go on and on doing things He has told us not to do, the day will come when we may suffer a fate as sad as Saul’s.⁶

As we look back over the history of Adventism these two usages, support for correct doctrine and moral admonition, prevail.

**Evaluation of the Tradition**

The problems and limitations of both of these primary usages are evident today. Prooftexting often led to misuse of Scripture by ignoring both historical and literary context and by making the Bible answer questions that were not part of the author’s intention or agenda.

The dangers of drawing moral admonitions from the stories of the Bible are equally real. Again, the admonitions often bore little resemblance to the agenda of the biblical writer. Leander Keck’s treatment of the dangers of moralizing in preaching certainly apply to most of the Sabbath School lessons I heard as a child and read to my children. He says:

> Moralizing has the effect of transforming the Bible into an assortment of moral precepts and examples. The Bible’s own agenda is replaced. Where moralizing prevails, the congregation is cheated out of the Bible’s own overarching concerns, such as the election of Israel, God’s commitment to establishing justice on earth (most moralizing sermons are oriented to individuals), the meaning of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the kingdom of God and the call to repentance, or the eschatological horizon of human existence. Moralizing frustrates the Bible as the coherent disclosure of the ways of God to which human life is called to respond. Frequently,

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moralizing either treats the Bible as the basis of advice as if it were reducible to the book of Proverbs or to a collection of exemplary hero stories, or it treats the Bible as the warrant for a rather narrow and often parochial morality. The Bible’s own way of thinking is sidetracked. Inevitably, the Bible becomes an uninteresting book, and incoherent jumble of materials that, in a highly inefficient way, contain general moral truths.7

Yet in spite of these shortcomings in traditional usage of the Bible, it would be a serious mistake to evaluate the past in a primarily negative way. Both of these usages of Scripture gave testimony to the Adventist community’s commitment to the Bible and to faithfulness to the God of the Bible. This commitment produced a community that was willing to stand up for basic convictions. And after all, it was this community that produced us, and other people like us, and I should add a lot of truly wonderful people who are quite different from us.

There is an inevitable cultural relativity to Biblical interpretation. We cannot blame our mothers and fathers for not seeing everything that we see. In fact, we have probably lost sight of some important things they saw, and certainly a future generation will see much further than we do. We must applaud our forbearers for taking the Bible seriously and attempting to live their lives in harmony with God’s will. Were it not for that blood in our veins we would not be here discussing these matters.

The Present Situation

Raymond F. Cottrell begins an article on the story of the

publication of the SDA Bible Commentary by saying:

Seventh-day Adventist study of the Bible came to age with the publication of the seven-volume Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary in 1953-1957. The proof-text method of interpretation used for doctrinal apologetics began to give way to an objective investigation of Scripture using the historical-contextual-linguistic method.°

There can be no doubt that the fifties brought significant change in Adventist usage of the Bible. Not only did the Bible Commentary attempt to interpret the Bible within its historical and literary context, but Questions on Doctrine tried to put Adventist doctrine on a biblical foundation stronger than that of apologetic prooftexting.° Adventist Bible teachers began earning doctorates biblical studies. The result has certainly been a greater sophistication in use of the Bible.

I am convinced, however, that the basic approach to the Bible within the mainstream of the life of the Adventist church has not changed. For one thing, the work of Adventist biblical scholars, while influential in the classroom, has not been that accessible to the general populace of the church. The fact is that Sabbath School lessons (certainly the place more than any other where Adventists encounter Bible study) still focus primarily on doctrine, even when the format is supposedly exegetical. Witness the fact that last quarter we spent almost five weeks on Revelation 14 and only one week on Revelation 21


°Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957.)
and 22 together. And by far the majority of the "thought" questions in Sabbath School lessons reflect a moralizing approach.

But there is also more of the traditional approach in the way Bible scholars use the Bible than we might realize. We still seem to be focused primarily on doctrine, although attention has shifted from doctrines taught by the Bible to the doctrine of the Bible itself. Much of the energy of Bible teachers has been spent on questions of inspiration, hermeneutics, and methodology for studying the Bible--more, it would appear, than has been spent on actually attempting to communicate the content of the Bible. Numerous conferences and consultations have been devoted to these questions, beginning with the Bible Conferences of 1974. Debates continue to appear in print.¹⁰ The irony is that more attention is often given to how to interpret than to

¹⁰Much of this debate has centered on the question of the use of historical-critical methodologies in Adventism. While many of the differences involve different definitions of terms, there certainly are substantive differences as well. For one side of the debate articles such as the cluster on biblical interpretation in Spectrum 13:2 (December 1982), including: John C. Brunt, "A Parable of Jesus as a Clue to Biblical Interpretation," pp. 35-43; Lawrence T. Geraty, "Beyond Fundamentalism: A Short History of Adventist Old Testament Scholarship," pp. 44-50; and Larry G. Herr, "Genesis One in Historical-Critical Perspective," pp. 51-62 (This last article differs from the general trend by attempting to communicate the content of a portion of Scripture.); and Jerry Gladson, "Taming Historical Criticism: Adventist Biblical Scholarship in the Land of Giants," Spectrum 18:4 (April 1988):19-24.

For the other side of the debate see articles in Adventist Perspectives such as: Leon I. Mashchak, "Canonical Criticism: Olive Branch or Trojan Horse?" II:2 (Summer 1988):61-67) and "The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Study," I (November 1987):32-35; and Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Rise and Wane of Biblical Authority," I (November 1987):8-16.
interpreting.

That irony seems especially tragic when viewed against the backdrop of the life of the church today. For while Sabbath School lessons continue to answer doctrinal questions and moralize, the fact is that fewer and fewer people are listening. If our past has included misuse of the Bible, the present is characterized by disuse.

The following observations are not scientific but anecdotal. I believe, however, that they do represent a trend. My wife is going to school in Portland right now. I visit her on weekends. For the first time in years we have been church hopping (six churches in nine weeks) with no responsibilities. We have been able to sit and observe. We have been amazed at how consistent the Sabbath School pattern is. Traditional classes serve the elderly. The quarterly is read with great reverence, and genuine discussion would be considered irreverence. The young and the professional members are served by larger classes that do not use the quarterly, and often the Bible is entirely absent. These classes discuss relevant issues such as ethical decisions, family life, and coping with the world. But the impression is that one has to make a choice—the Bible or relevance.

Many modern Adventists have a hard time seeing how the Bible speaks to the pressing issues of real life. One of my students represents many of them. She recently told me, "It's not that I don't believe. I believe the doctrines and I believe that my religion should be important. But it really isn't. I just don't
find it very interesting."

The Current Challenge

We are the group that shoulders the greatest responsibility for making the Bible and its message interesting, meaningful and relevant to Adventists today. This means that we will have to see our interpretive task in a broader and more holistic way than we often have. If it is Scripture that we are interpreting, and not merely an historical text, we have not really interpreted until we have opened the message of the Bible to people in ways that allows its message to come alive for them.

The historical, linguistic and literary work we do is all necessary prerequisite to the real interpretive task, that of helping people encounter a living Word of God through the Bible.

If we are not careful, our scholarly work can intimidate non-specialists into silence. This is why we cannot content ourselves to do the scholarly background work and leave the task of communicating to others. We must show how the Bible can actually be the book of all Christians. This work will include several specific tasks.

We must offer exposition of Scripture that is faithful to the author's own agenda and also speaks to the practical issues of life. There are successful examples. I think of a couple of Bill Johnsson's books\(^1\) and of the weekly radio program on the

Sabbath School lesson hosted by my colleague Doug Clark.\footnote{The program is called "Probe" and is broadcast on the Walla Walla College station, which now reaches our entire conference, as well as on Adventist World Radio in Guam.} The real value of this kind of work is educating non-specialists in how to read the Bible so that they can be more confident in reading it for themselves. As my colleague Ernie Bursey often points out, jokes lose their power when they have to be explained, and so does the Bible. We are successful when we help others develop the tools to read with such immediacy that they experience the power.

We must also use our creative talents to help the church make Scripture come alive in the experience worship as Charles Teel has tried to teach us.\footnote{Charles Teel, "The Apocalypse as Liturgy" \textit{Spectrum} 14:3 (December 1983):33-43.} If there is anything to the right-brain left-brain research the Bible will make much more impact on life when experienced holistically, not just in an analytical, doctrinal, left-brain way. We need more liturgies, worship services, and group devotional guides.

The Bible must also be brought to bear in an intelligent and thoughtful way on moral and spiritual issues that confront Christians today. In a recent study of the way the Bible has been used to address the abortion issue in Adventism I have concluded that we do not generally do well at this task, but there are some excellent and hopeful exceptions.\footnote{John C. Brunt, "Adventists, Abortion, and the Bible," \textit{Spectrum} 19:4 (May 1989):14-20.}
we will have to admit that we cannot find instant, simplistic answers to all our dilemmas in the Bible, but we can find much material that is useful in aiding our reflection.

Finally, we must be able to utilize the Bible in creating a holistic vision of Adventism that is faithful to the agenda and message of Scripture. Only when we can help the whole community grasp this kind of vision will be able to go against the grain of the prevailing culture. To a large extent the Bible has lost its ability to challenge us to stand up against the current of the prevailing culture. We need to help people hear the Bible’s call to a different Kingdom.

It is disturbing to hear of surveys where Adventist young people list their main two goals in life as being good Christians and making lots of money\(^1\) or to see how willing the majority of my Christian Ethics students would be to take up arms if America went to war. No matter what methods of interpretation or hermeneutic we use, there are basic themes and demands in the Bible that are painfully clear, such as compassion and justice. Perhaps if we spent more time making these central principles come alive, and less time debating about the Bible, Scripture would have more transforming power in the church.

In our recent church hopping my wife and I have most often attended a church that is known for its informal, spontaneous service, contemporary music, and fellowship. On the way out of a

\(^1\)This was reported to me by Dr. Rob Sheppard, Religion Department Chairman at Southwestern Adventist College.
recent church service a layman in the church came to me and expressed surprise that I should be there. He said, "I wouldn't expect to see an intellectual like you here. We don't feed the head here, we feed the soul." I don't like this kind of dichotomy, for I believe that the Bible will only regain its central, transforming role in our community if we who have devoted our lives to study and teaching can lead members into an encounter with God through the Bible that feeds both head and soul.