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# Book Review of Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development, by Rolf J. Pöhler

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if it were priced lower, it would have been an ideal glossary or "concise" dictionary for beginning students of Phoenician. In spite of the above criticisms, Krahmalkov must be thanked for giving us the most comprehensive dictionary of Phoenician and Punic to date. That is no small task! Philologists, historians, and students of religion are all indebted to him for this contribution.

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Pöhler, Rolf J. *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000. 380 pp. Paper, \$52.95.

Young denominations, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, are reluctant to admit to doctrinal change over time, preferring instead to speak of doctrinal continuity. Rolf Pöhler, professor of systematic theology at Friedensau University, Germany, argues in *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* that "doctrinal readjustments were not only a historical fact but constituted a theological challenge which the Seventh-day Adventist Church could not ignore" (7). His recent book is adapted from the second part of his doctoral dissertation, "Change in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development," which he defended at Andrews University in 1995, and follows publication of the first part in a companion book, *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development* (Peter Lang, 1999).

In this book, Pöhler investigates the extent, nature, and direction of doctrinal developments that have occurred in the history of the denomination from its inception to about 1985. The first chapter presents a historical survey and analysis of some theological developments within Adventism, as well as of certain sociological factors that seem to have been involved in them. The second chapter assesses what Adventists have written regarding doctrinal continuity and change. The last chapter takes a brief look at Ellen G. White's involvement in and views on doctrinal development. The book ends with appendices of official Adventist doctrinal statements and an extensive bibliography.

*Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* displays a rich collection of historical and theological information on Adventism in which Pöhler demonstrates a good knowledge of Adventist literature and its religious roots. The footnotes are sometimes just as important and informative as the text. However, one obvious weakness is the unfortunate layout: Pöhler's book is the publication of a doctoral dissertation with confusing headings and subheadings and extremely long chapters (2 and 3). It is a scholarly work of historical theology and is not user-friendly for lay people.

In his attempt to demonstrate and assess doctrinal continuity and change within Adventism, Pöhler begins with a survey of various examples taken from Adventist beliefs. A basic methodological approach he uses is to study not only officially recognized teachings of the church (such as statements of beliefs) but also general expressions of fundamental beliefs as expressed in books and leading Adventist journals (33-34). Overall, Pöhler's examples are persuasive and prove his thesis that there has been both continuity and change in the development of Adventist teaching. However, a few of his examples are weak. Regarding the

meaning of the Sabbath, a core doctrine of Adventism, he prefers to highlight trends toward reorientation of thought among some theologians rather than the continuity with past teaching to be found in leading journals (68-70). The same can be said regarding the delay of Jesus' second coming. While the church still clearly teaches the imminence of the Parousia, Pöhler again emphasizes those who wish to reinterpret this teaching in a manner relevant to today's world (83-87). For both of these examples, footnote references tend to emphasize literature that supports the idea of change rather than giving adequate weight to an overwhelming amount of literature that would support the idea of continuity. With Jaroslav Pelikan, one could say that Pöhler is "like most other historians, [who tend] to be more interested in change than in continuity" (20, n. 1).

Pöhler also discusses the sealing of the saints (a teaching taken from Rev 7 and 14) as an example of doctrinal change between 1844 and 1856 (72-74). However, in my opinion, this doctrine was a secondary teaching within the overall Adventist eschatological framework, and was being studied and discussed by early pioneers for a number of years. No firm teaching had been arrived at in the period Pöhler refers to. Can we then speak of doctrinal change? I would raise the same question in reference to his treatment of teaching on the time of trouble (75-77). Finally, I also question the validity of Pöhler's dabbling in the sociology of religion and concluding that the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary, among others, may be the result of some cognitive dissonance among early pioneers of the church (136). This section of the book (134-143) is too brief, in my opinion, to be convincing.

Toward the end of his first chapter, Pöhler suggests some conclusions regarding the general direction of doctrinal development within Adventism (123-133). He identifies these trends as progressing from flexible and simple to fixed and compound statements of faith, from heterodox to orthodox doctrines, from distinctive to fundamental truths, and from legalistic to evangelical tendencies. I found this section to be very helpful and to reflect a fair analysis of the information he has presented in the chapter.

The second chapter is an assessment of the various responses Adventists have given to theological developments in the past. After analyzing significant events and statements related to doctrinal continuity and change in seven periods of twenty years from 1846 to 1985 (146-179), he goes on to discuss catchwords in Adventist phraseology (180-196) that have reflected the denomination's intent "to uphold the fundamental doctrines of the church as well as the readiness to constantly advance in the understanding of revealed truth" (180). His third section deals with models of conceptual doctrinal development. Of the models he discusses, Pöhler appears to prefer some form of a "dynamic approach which reckons with the factuality and possibility of doctrinal development and change and, at the same time, respects the necessity of, and demand for, substantial doctrinal continuity" (219). In his discussion of these various models, Pöhler is tentative and indecisive as to which one best exemplifies the model the church should favor. He seems to tend toward some form of moderately situationist or revisionist models, but does not spell out his personal views. This is a weakness in his argument and conclusions.

The last chapter is a short excursus on Ellen White's thoughts about continuity and change in doctrinal teaching. Here also, Pöhler is ambivalent and

guarded. On the one hand, he affirms that her ministry had a lasting impact upon the church in providing both doctrinal influence and an ideological framework for the church's mission, while, on the other hand, he seems to hold that such an influence was historically conditioned by her nineteenth-century heritage. I believe he is right in saying that Ellen White upheld a dialectical approach to continuity and change in Adventist teaching: changes to the fundamental doctrines tended to jeopardize the church's self-understanding while revisions to secondary teachings would not constitute a threat (239-240). Furthermore, I agree that she supported the idea that "doctrinal development was first and foremost a process in which old truths were rediscovered and restored to the church" and that such truths may need to be reinterpreted or recontextualized for a new generation (241-242). However, I feel uncomfortable with the general thrust of Pöhler's conclusion in this chapter. I somehow doubt that Ellen White would be open to such an unrestrained revisionist model of doctrinal change as he seems to imply.

In his conclusion, Pöhler argues that the best approach to doctrinal development in Adventism appears to be a dynamic restorationist model of faithfulness to the Bible (249). This approach, he thinks, will help the church accept and deal positively with its growing theological/doctrinal pluralism without further endangering its unity. Seventh-day Adventists who wish to reinterpret fundamental beliefs will be pleased with this proposed model; others will find the book's conclusions indecisive and tentative. The discussion regarding continuity and change in Adventist teaching is certainly not over.

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Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001. 301 pp. Paper, \$24.99.

This book is about developing church policy in relationship to the biblical text. Webb first introduces the basic questions of the Christian and culture. The second section examines biblical authority in terms of the prominence and trajectory of themes through the Scriptures. Over half of the book details his criteria for the authority of scriptural themes. Webb finds some themes "persuasive" and others "inconclusive" based on such criteria as whether there is a purpose statement in the text or whether it is grounded in Creation or the Fall. In general, the NT has greater authority than the OT. In fact, "Appeal to the OT" is the title of one section in the chapter "Inconclusive Criteria." The emphasis of this section is on the inconsistent manner in which NT texts appropriate OT statements, but there also is a generalized preference for NT authority.

The third section examines the use of "Extrascriptural Criteria." These criteria are cultural values and scientific and social-scientific evidence. This section is a scant thirty-five pages, followed by a ten-page conclusion. There are four appendices, three of them examining Paul's statements on women in the church. There is also a bibliography and indices.

Slaves, women, and homosexuals are the case studies which Webb uses to explore his methodology. The superficial similarity to *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* by Willard Swartley is not accidental, but Webb is prescriptive where