

***Questions on Doctrine* and the Church:
Where Do We Go From Here?**

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In his historical and theological introduction to the new annotated edition of *Questions on Doctrine*, George Knight rightly qualified this book as “the most divisive book in Seventh-day Adventist history. A book published to help bring peace between Adventism and conservative Protestantism, its release brought prolonged alienation and separation to the Adventist factions that grew up around it.”¹

Although the positive comments regarding the publication of this annotated edition have been low-keyed and subdued, the negative comments, however, have been clear and resonating. One reviewer called the publication of the annotated edition “the Dark Day of November 18, 2003” and commented, “In 2003 the book *Questions on Doctrine* was republished—not by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a formal way, but through a non-official press. The republishing of this theological relic, this book which represents a theological watershed unequalled [sic] in Adventist history, is a dark day in our history as a people.” The publication of the original edition had good intentions, yet fifty years later this book still generates a lot of conversation and emotions if not outright antagonism and cries of apostasy.

This week we have taken the time to reflect on fifty years of Adventist theological

¹George Knight, “Historical and Theological Introduction to the Annotated Edition,” *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2003), p. xiii.

debate, controversies and growth since the first publication of *Questions on Doctrine*.

Seventh-day Adventism has changed since 1957—and in my opinion, for the better. Yet, as it seems obvious to all of us our theological reflection on the controversial theological themes presented in this book is not finished and more insights are still to be discovered.

So I wonder where do we go from here? First, is there more for Adventists to learn and if so in which direction should we direct our reflection? And, second, how do we relate to the original intent of this book in making Adventism better understood to Evangelicals, this broad family of Christian brothers and sisters who are closest to us in theology and in ethos—and from whom our pioneers came?

I. Adventist Theological Reflection

What the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* has taught us as a church is that the need for theological reflection, and *good* theological reflection, is important in Adventism. Adventism is not a static denomination and, as in earlier decades, it continues to grow and sharpen its understanding of biblical truths. That's why we have never adopted a creed or a settled confession of faith. We believe in being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our search for truth and in our theological reflection on the meaning of this truth.² Hence, if we truly believe in these premises, our search for truth

²This we express in the preamble to our 28 Fundamental Beliefs: "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the

and theological reflection will lead us to new insights not seen before.

The publication of *Questions on Doctrine* fifty years ago unknowingly forced the church to refine its theology of atonement, its understanding of the divine/human nature of Christ, and of the meaning of the experience of salvation. Indirectly, this book revealed that we needed to do better biblical and theological reflection on these themes. While some have decried the first publication and recent republication of this book, its original publication showed how weak our theology was in some areas and that it needed better work. Today our Adventist theology is much stronger and better articulated as a result of the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*.

Yet the task of doing theology is never completed. Good theological reflection seeks to answer the current questions the church is asking, not questions of past generations. Since the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* all sectors of Adventism have participated in theological reflection to sharpen and nuance our understanding of these doctrines. And now we have insights into these topics and doctrines that our church forebears did not even think of. Even those who have condemned the most the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* have participated in this theological reflection; they also have developed theological knowledge beyond pre-*Questions on Doctrine* reflections. Doctoral dissertations and numerous books have been written. We may not agree with the conclusions reached or advanced in these publications but nonetheless from that perspective alone, the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* has been beneficial

teachings of God's Holy Word."

for the theological reflection of the church.

If we truly believe in our historical position in not having a creed or fixed confession of faith, than we must conclude that theological reflection and search for biblical truth will lead us to new insights. I believe the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* achieved that goal and we are better off today for its having stirred our thinking. But perhaps more theological reflection is still needed and let me indicate a few areas where I think more work could be done.

Some years ago I realized that the debate over the human nature of Christ in Adventism is first and foremost a debate over the exegesis of Ellen White's vocabulary on the human nature of Christ. The Bible certainly talks about Jesus' human nature. But truly our debate is about what Ellen White said and meant by what she said.

Furthermore, I observed also that this debate is about nineteenth-century vocabulary, words and expressions: "propensities of sin," "propensities to sin," "inherent propensities," "taint," "inclinations," "passions," and "susceptibilities." To a large extent the meaning of all these words and expressions is becoming more and more distant from us. I wonder to what extent people in the twenty-first century are able to follow and relate to the intricate nuances of these words, and to what extent this debate about vocabulary has become irrelevant to new generations and cultures. In this sense I concur with Elder Jan Paulsen who also raised this issue in his address at the beginning of Annual Council a few days ago when he said regarding our Conference: "I just cannot imagine a post-modern person in Europe, a business man in Asia or Latin America, any more than a farmer in Africa will care one iota whether Christ had the nature of man before the fall or after. The realities of the world in which we live have other concerns and other priorities

which occupy us.”³

Although I am a historical theologian and I delight in reflecting on the questions raised by *Questions on Doctrines*, I wonder to what extent the issues we discuss regarding this book have become irrelevant questions. The task of theology is to answer the questions people are asking today and I wonder if we are truly doing this when we discuss the theology of *Questions of Doctrine*. A few speakers have shown their copy of *Questions on Doctrine*. Here's mine. I purchased it during the Oshkosh Camporee in 1999. One of the booths was a used bookstore and there I found it. I immediately grabbed it when I saw it. But notice that my book is a discarded copy from a local Adventist church library. Perhaps this is indicative of how important this book has become to many Adventists.

Having said this, let me offer three areas of reflection to those who wish to do further reflection on these questions.

A few years ago Woody Whidden suggested that we should use different terminology in our discussion of Ellen White's thought on the nature of Christ. Instead of debating the virtues of postlapsarianism or prelapsarianism, he offers instead that we should refer to Christ's *unique* human nature and *identity* with our nature. I wholeheartedly agree with his suggestion. Ellen White's thought on Christ's human nature did not use technical words but simple expressions used in her day to either

³Adventist News Network, <http://news.adventist.org/specials/2007/annual-council/paulsen.html> accessed on October 15, 2007.

emphasize Christ's unique nature different from ours or his identity and similarity with our nature. If we were to follow this suggestion I believe we would be able to return to one fundamental thought in Ellen White's writings. In all our debates about the intricacies of Christ's human nature, we have caused the loss of one major concern Ellen White had when she wrote about Christ's human nature. I believe her major concern was to set before us Christ as the example of a real human being with a sincere devotion to doing the will of his Father, who showed humanity the way of victorious living in a world of sin and rebellion by relying fully upon his Father's will, grace, and power. According to Ellen White, Christ is thus our example. Many in Adventism have lost, forgotten and to some extent dismissed her concern. In a world where standards of morality are subjective and relative, Ellen White tells us to look to Christ as the example of what a true and genuine human life is all about. Following Whidden's suggestion would likely help us in our theological discussions and help refocus Ellen White's original intent.

Another area where I think we could benefit from further theological reflection is the doctrine of sin. Although I don't want to be too reductionist, I think the theological debate over the nature of Christ is really about the doctrine of sin. I have said for many years that the Adventist debate about Ellen White's view of Christ's human nature has to do with what we assume or presuppose her definition of sin to be. And that is one area where I think we need to focus future studies. If we were to understand better what the Bible says about sin and then what Ellen White believes and affirms sin to be, than we could likely find more agreement between ourselves. From Scripture we know that sin is a multi-faceted entity that precludes any quick, easy definition. Sin is not simply a wrong action or transgression of the law of God, although it certainly includes this, but it also

includes intentions and attitude, it is a state of being that masters human beings and this from birth. What we assume and presuppose about sin has a deep impact on how we view the human nature of Christ.

Questions of Doctrine launched a major debate among us on the human nature of Christ because it published up to then unknown quotes from Ellen White's writings that obviously brought into question an insufficient definition of sin. Much has been said about the Baker letter and it has become one of the most important Ellen White documents in any discussion of the nature of Christ. I agree with Whidden's conclusion in saying that Ellen White's expressions "propensities of sin," "inherent propensities of disobedience," "a taint of sin," "an evil propensity," and "inclinations to corruption" are all expressions mainly and primarily describing the same phenomenon and whatever they mean we must conclude that Christ was not born with these inclinations. In this letter, Ellen White is contrasting the effects of sin upon the descendants of Adam and its effects upon the human nature of Christ. While the descendants of Adam are "born with inherent propensities of disobedience", Christ, "that holy thing," was not. Ellen White understood that there is an intrinsic difference between Christ's human nature and ours, and this from birth. And to make sure Baker understood she was referring to the birth of Christ, she quoted from the angel Gabriel's words to Mary in the gospel of Luke. "Let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves: for it cannot be", she concluded.⁴

⁴Letter 8, 1895, published in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 13, pp. 13-30.

To some extent I could say the same about what *Questions on Doctrine* taught about the sanctuary and atonement. We know that many early Adventists believed in a strict dichotomy between the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and his ministry in the sanctuary – applying the word atonement only to the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. Yet, Scripture uses the concept of atonement in connection with the work of Christ on the cross. On this subject too, *Questions on Doctrine* published some not well known quotes of Ellen White where she uses the word atonement in connection with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and not only with Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. She did not subscribe to J. H. Waggoner's or Uriah Smith's strict compartmentalization of when the atonement occurs. In that sense she is more Evangelical than some of her most trusted colleagues. So the publication of *Questions on Doctrines* helped us in this area too. Since then we have refined our theological understanding of what Christ's death and heavenly ministry mean and how the two are interrelated and part of his work of atonement.

II. Adventists and Evangelicals

What about the original intent and purpose for the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* which sought to communicate the Adventist message to Evangelicals in a manner they could understand? Is this still something we should be concerned about?

A couple months ago, Andrews University hosted the second session of a conversation between representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the World Evangelical Alliance. While we tend to live by ourselves, some Evangelicals sincerely believe in reaching out to others and establishing healthy relationships with

other denominations. Christians of other denominations are curious and genuine about wanting to know Adventists better. For the most part, they often have a superficial knowledge about our distinctive doctrines, yet they know we are conservative Christians. (In fact, I have a Methodist friend at the Perkins School of Theology of the Southern Methodist University who is currently completing the manuscript of a book to be published by Oxford University Press on how various churches and denominations teach and experience the gospel. In that book he argues Seventh-day Adventists are part of conservative Evangelicals.) So two months ago our small group met together with representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance and we talked about what Adventists believe.⁵

Professors from the Seminary presented four papers for discussion on important Adventist distinctive beliefs: (1) our understanding of prophetic interpretation, 1844 and the heavenly sanctuary (Roy Gane), (2) the role of Ellen White in the development of Adventist doctrines (Denis Fortin), (3) righteousness by faith and the place of works in salvation (Peter van Bemmelen), and (4) human nature and destiny (Miroslav Kiš). All the participants will tell you that the discussions we had over these four days were intense, lively and spirited, yet done in a spirit of kindness and courtesy.

What amazed me in these discussions is that these Evangelical professors and pastors still ask basically the same questions about Adventist doctrines that Donald G.

⁵In my opinion, this was not a dialogue since only Adventists presented papers on agreed subjects. Evangelicals were asking questions to Adventists and sought to better understand Adventist doctrines.

Barnhouse and Walter Martin asked fifty years ago. Evangelicals still ask us to clarify our eschatological interpretation of Bible prophecies, how we get to 1844, and how this date impacts our understanding of Christ's death on the cross and his ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, and what we mean by the scapegoat; they still want us to explain how we view human nature and what happens at death, and what will happen to the wicked after the last judgment; they still have plenty of questions regarding our teaching on salvation, the role of grace and faith in justification and sanctification, the role of the law and works; they still ask us to explain why the Sabbath is so crucial to our faith, why we keep Sabbath the way we do, and what we mean by the mark of the beast; they still raise their concern when we say on the one hand that we believe in the sole authority of Scripture as the basis of our beliefs and Christian life and yet on the other hand we accept Ellen White as an inspired and authoritative prophet of God, they still ask us to clarify our understanding of the role of Ellen White within our movement and how she influenced the development of our distinctive beliefs. Evangelicals today still ask the same questions as others did fifty years ago.

Questions on Doctrine was an attempt fifty years ago to do Adventist apologetics in conversation with Evangelicals. Regardless of its shortcomings, this book was a worthy attempt at apologetics. Regrettably, because its intent and purpose were misunderstood by some in our church, we backed away from further apologetic works. Now we are two generations behind in this work. One thing I learn from the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* is that Adventists need to be more involved in apologetics because we have something to contribute to the broader field of theology. There are many people out there who are willing to listen to what we have to say because they ask

many of the same questions we ask.

Take for example the issue of how to understand the nature of Christ's humanity. Do we know that this discussion on the human nature of Christ is not only an Adventist discussion? Some Evangelical theologians are also discussing the implications of Jesus' humanity and its impact on his sinless life and on the plan of redemption. I first became aware of this many years ago when I read the chapter on the nature of Christ in Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*. Like many Adventists I had the impression that the discussion on prelapsarianism and postlapsarianism was our little secret. I was surprised to learn that Evangelical theologians are also perplexed about this issue and ask very similar questions. I think we could learn something from listening to their discussions, arguments and conclusions on this theological point of common interest. There might be some insights that we would benefit from. But on the other hand, we could share some of the theological insights we have gained after fifty years of discussion.

So where do we go from here? I think we still have work to do in our theological reflection. We will likely continue to have theological differences between us but I think we can work together in a spirit of love and courtesy. And I think we should focus on the issues, problems and questions people are asking.

While some have accused the church of selling out our fundamental beliefs in order to be accepted by Evangelicals, *Questions on Doctrine* provided a needed apologetic work on Adventist beliefs in a language that could be understood by others. We should be very conscious that there is a world out there that is forgotten when we squabble between ourselves and that a lot of people would like to hear what we have to say to them. So my recommendation to the church is that more books like *Questions on*

Doctrine need to be published; it is good for us to learn how to express our beliefs in a way that others will understand and it is good for other Christians to hear what we have to say.