

Questions on Doctrine Conference
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Questions on Doctrine and the Church: Present and Future

Jon Paulien

The Basic Issue

The basic issue of the *Questions on Doctrine* controversy, it seems to me, revolved and still revolves around an unspoken subtext. I summarize that subtext in the following sentence: *Is there more than one right way to think?*

I have little doubt that our earliest Adventist pioneers would have instinctively answered *No* to this question. In their minds truth was basically clear and unchanging. There was only one right way to think. It seems to me, however, that the answer of Adventist history as a whole to this question has increasingly been *Yes*. Very early on a considerable diversity of expression can be seen in the pages of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. And it has become increasingly evident that Adventist understanding of truth was both developing and fragmenting throughout our history. Our pioneers expressed an awareness of both development and fragmentation at the 1919 Bible Conference, but these thoughts were largely held in private. What brought an awareness of development and fragmentation into public knowledge was the controversies that developed around the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*. So whether we like it or not, Adventist history bears witness to both doctrinal development (which means that the “one way to think” of the past is not adequate for the present) and increasing fragmentation. Is this good or bad, healthy or unhealthy? What would the Scriptures teach us?

Is there more than one right way to think? Scripture answers this question with a qualified *Yes*. The answer of Scripture is grounded in the principle that *God meets people where they are*. The thoughts and ideas of inspiration come from God. But the form those thoughts take are grounded in the time, place and circumstances of specific human beings. Time constraints require me to limit myself to just two biblical examples.

The first and most obvious example is the presence of four gospels in the New Testament. In the highest sense there is only one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ. But that one gospel finds itself expressed in four different ways by four different people. While there is an essential unity and harmony in their presentation of the gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are each a unique and creative expression of that gospel. None of the four gospels has the whole picture. Each comes at the story with a unique purpose in mind. Each story is a true outline of the same events, yet they are all distinctly different. To put it another way, *the four gospels testify that there is more than one right way to think*. In the four gospels, the differences are due to different human standpoints in telling the story of God’s greatest revelation in Jesus Christ.

In Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 God Himself is the one who articulates this diversity. The two visions cover essentially the same ground: a series of four empires followed by a time of political

division followed by the kingdom of God. The purpose of the two visions is the same: to show God's overarching control of history (see Dan 2:21 and 7:26). To the pagan king He develops this outline of history in the form of an idol. To the Hebrew prophet He develops the outline as a *midrash* on creation. The story is the same, but the form is different. In other words, *there is more than one right way to think*.

Now in saying this I do not mean to imply that all viewpoints are right simply because they have been expressed. I am not promoting uncontrolled relativism. There were at least a dozen or so written gospels in the early Christian centuries that did not make it into the biblical canon. These contained, at times, fanciful and even bizarre features. All ways of thinking are not right. But my basic point remains valid. We must not, in our fear of relativism, be too quick to marginalize any viewpoint we disagree with. Just because someone else doesn't see through my eyes does not mean that what they see is false. Differing perspectives can be windows into the larger truths that we all seek.

It is helpful in theological discussion, therefore, to keep in mind that if someone expresses a truth in a form different from mine, it should not automatically be assumed that if I am right the other must be wrong. To accept that *there is more than one right way to think* keeps us open to learning fresh dimensions of truth, and it inoculates us against the pride that can come from attainment of truth. As we have seen this week, there is much to be learned from the *Questions on Doctrine* controversy, even when we disagree. To still voices that differ from us may be to still the voice of the Spirit.

If we cannot, in a room full of fellow believers like this, conceive of the possibility that there is more than one right way to think among us, what will we do should we discover that God has acted mightily to create Islamic or Buddhist forms of Adventism? Will we automatically assume that "God would never do such a thing?" Has God given us the right to judge everyone else by our own comfortable standards of right thinking and practice?

My Own Experience

Reflecting on my own experience with the *Questions on Doctrine* controversy has been helpful to me. I grew up in a traditional Adventist home. Our beliefs and practices were consistent with what Adventists believed and taught in the 1950s. Growing up I was strongly influenced by the end-time perfection theories of M. L. Andreasen, even though I never heard the name until the 1970s.

But there was a fundamental problem. This "old theology" did not work for me or for anyone that I knew, including my parents. Our striving for character perfection did not lead to character improvement. I do not remember ever hearing a clear expression of the gospel until I was nearly 25 years old. I believe that one of the things driving the fresh perspectives of *Questions on Doctrine* and later on those of Desmond Ford and Robert Brinsmead was the sense that traditional Adventism was doomed to failure unless grounded on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Traditional Adventism may have been ever so right, but in the form that it came to me it was devoid of the gospel's power to change lives. There had to be a better "right way to think."

In light of that, I was thrilled beyond measure to hear a clear and unequivocal statement of the gospel from Colin Standish yesterday. If Andreasen and his disciples had been clearer on the gospel back in the 50s and 60s things might have turned out much different than they did. It

is not too late to undo the damage that occurred because of unhealthy polarization. The best way to do that is to speak truthfully yet kindly and to listen carefully to each other, as we have been doing here.

One thing struck me yesterday when Russell Standish was speaking. If God meets people where they are, then whatever we make of His sinlessness, the human nature of Christ must have been truly and completely human in terms relevant to our condition. As the second Adam, Jesus also represented me. He took on the nature of those He redeemed, yet without sin. That's a little too heavy for me to figure out, but let it suffice for me to say that there is much to be gained from contemplating both sides of the nature of Christ controversy. I know that I will be rethinking my own position on the basis of what I heard at this conference. There is more than one right way to think.

The Present Situation

Whether we like it or not, the publication of *Questions on Doctrine* brought the diversity and fragmentation of Adventism into public view. And the pace of fragmentation has not diminished over the last fifty years. I find at least four major brands of Adventism current among us. Let me summarize these four briefly.

1) *Creative Traditionalism*. This is the form of Adventism most clearly expressed by our evangelists and our frontier missionaries. Its traditionalism is grounded in the evangelistic approaches of the past. But its creativity is driven by a certain pragmatism. Evangelists and frontier missionaries mold and shape their presentations of the message in terms of what actually works on the ground, whether in western contexts or in overseas missions. The key motivation is is whatever works. As our church president has said more than once, *Adventist theology is increasingly driven by mission*. But such creativity can lead to fragmentation.

2) *Respectful Biblicism*. Meanwhile, Seventh-day Adventist scholars seek to ground Adventist teachings more firmly in the Scriptures. The key motivation here is not what works, but whether beliefs can be confirmed by solid exegesis and sound hermeneutics. These activities function best at scholarly conferences like this one and venues such as the Seminary and the Biblical Research Institute Committee of the General Conference. Adventist scholars are frustrated, however, by differences among themselves and the lack of traction that their work has attained within the Adventist mainstream.

You will note that I have not highlighted distinctions of “conservative” and “liberal” among the scholars. This is because I believe that in many ways conservative and liberal Adventist scholars have more in common with each other than they do with the other three “brands” of Adventism I have listed here. Representatives of the other three groups would largely feel lost in the detail of our discussions this week, important as they are.

3) *Indifferent Minimalism*. Here I refer to the beliefs of Adventists in the pew in North America. There is an increasing gap between what the evangelists and theologians teach and what the people in the pew believe. The people in the pew are motivated more by what works on Monday than by some objective standard of exegesis or missionary necessity. Adventist distinctives are often trumped by needs in the area of family life, finances, recovery and stress management. Even the most conservative in this group would have a hard time articulating doctrines like the sanctuary and the state of the dead. This kind of functional Adventism focuses

on those few doctrines that seem to make the most difference on Monday morning. In broad terms, most of the younger, post-modern Adventist generation also fits into this group.

4) *Passionate Creativity*. Here I refer to what Philip Jenkins calls the Southern Majority. An increasing majority of Adventists live in the “two-thirds world” that centers in the southern hemisphere. In these areas there is relatively little familiarity with Ellen White and little pastoral control. Beliefs are driven by tradition and by devotional readings of Scripture. As with the typical lay Adventist in the northern hemisphere, there is a tendency toward minimalism. Southern Adventists are generally more passionate about their faith than northern Adventists, but they are becoming more and more creative as they face the challenges of non-Western cultures and non-Christian religions head on. This is resulting in significant fragmentation of belief and practice in places like China and Africa.

Unifying Influences

In the face of increasing diversity and fragmentation, what are the unifying forces that keep the church together? I have identified at least three.

Perhaps the strongest unifying influence in the Adventist Church is Andrews University. I can say that now that I am employed at Loma Linda instead. A larger and larger percentage of the top Adventist leaders around the world have doctorates from Andrews University. This common educational thread has proven to be a powerful unifying force. This influence is increasingly diluted, however, by the proliferation of seminaries and higher education programs in nearly every division of the church. Ellen White’s concerns about concentration of power, however, suggest to me that a little diversity in Adventist education may be a good thing.

A second major unifying influence is the Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly. More than ten million copies are published four times a year in more than a dozen languages. Through the lesson, the vast majority of Adventists are exposed to the same theological ideas every week. But this influence is also not as strong as it was. Sabbath School attendance is dropping in many places and more and more classes, at least in North America, are electing to use other resources than the once ubiquitous Quarterly.

The third major unifying influence in the Adventist Church is the church system of governance. A tightly-linked hierarchy of financial and governmental authority brings a common look to Adventist institutions around the world. The use of the English language as a common medium of negotiation and discussion enables church leaders at all levels to stay in touch with each other, share information, and collaborate on decisions. For all of its shortcomings, the church system has been remarkably successful at fostering theological as well as structural unity.

But this unifying influence is also under threat. There is an increasing amount of independent action at local church and conference levels. The rise of Global Mission was an admission that the system as it was couldn’t do it all. Fresh opportunities and challenges in the 10/40 window are driving change. Indigenous forms of Adventism in places like China and the Muslim world are extremely difficult to fit within the system. Self-supporting ministries are multiplying exponentially and may one day siphon off the lion’s share of the church’s financial base. All of these things raise questions about the church system’s ability to maintain unity in a fragmented theological landscape.

Some Options for the Future

Several options present themselves at a glance. First of all, we can encourage or develop some new unifying force, something that will be as effective as Andrews, the Quarterly and the church institution have been up until now. I am not sure what that would be at the moment, but I am hopeful that the collective wisdom of this august gathering may help us all find the way.

A second option would be a unity of like minds. We could conceive of a smaller, more focused Adventism that rejects all other options and invites dissenters to either conform or leave. Such an Adventism would seek the comfort of past certainties and the stability that can come from selective use of the evidence. A part of me finds this option very appealing. It feels good to *know* that you are right, that there is only one right way to think, *my way*. But I cannot pursue this route for three reasons. First, it seems to run contrary to the biblical principle that God meets people where they are and that, therefore, there is more than one right way to think. Second, for me personally, such a position would be spiritually dangerous, fostering pride and self-promotion. And third, such an Adventism would be more like the Amish than the faith of our pioneers, we could easily become more concerned about our own personal faithfulness than we are about the lost.

The third option seems obvious to me, yet is very troubling as well. It would be a return to the concept that we are a spiritual movement more than an institution or a corporate system. It would be a return to the simplicity of the earliest pioneers. There would be a strong common focus, yet a respect for diversity of thought and cultural expression. Such an Adventism would have more open definitions of some things, there would be fewer mandatories, less complexity and a more minimal level of organization. What troubles me is that is not the Adventism of my childhood, the days before *Questions on Doctrine*. We should only go there in the confidence that comes from passionate commitment to the central verities of Scripture and a great love for each other that manifests itself especially when we disagree. Perhaps we have tasted a little of this possibility in our discussions this week.

The Big Picture of Adventist History

Where does *Questions on Doctrine* stand in the big picture of Adventist history and doctrinal development? It seems to me that it has become representative of one of the six great paradigm shifts that have occurred since the beginning of our history as a people. While you might come up with a different list of six, here is mine for what it is worth.

- 1) The Great Disappointment (1844).
- 2) Organization (1860-1863).
- 3) The Minneapolis Conference and its aftermath (1888).
- 4) The Death of Ellen White and its aftermath (1915-1919).
- 5) *Questions on Doctrine* and its implications (1956-1957).
- 6) Glacier View (1980).

I wrestled long and hard with whether or not to include the re-organizations of 1901-1903 and the Kellogg controversies later in the decade as a major paradigm shift on the same level as the others. One could argue the case for that. I have chosen to see that decade as part of the aftermath and implications of what took place in 1888 and the years that followed, since Jones

and Waggoner were very much involved in the Kellogg controversies and left the church along with Kellogg.

The six paradigm shifts I have identified cover 136 years, with five periods in between. The time between paradigm shifts in Adventism has been an average of 27 years. It is ironic, and perhaps coincidental, that our gathering here comes exactly 27 years after Glacier View. The church seems due for the next major crisis and paradigm shift. Perhaps something that has occurred at this conference will be a harbinger of that shift. We live in interesting times.

Forecasting the Future

I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but you would probably be disappointed in me if I did not offer some suggestion as to what the next critical event might be. Such things tend to be a surprise. Of the previous six paradigm shifts, only the need for organization and Ellen White's death were fairly predictable in advance. So the following is sheer guesswork.

I considered the possibility that we are long overdue for a major schism. There have been many minor breakaway movements in the past. But no breakaway has siphoned off a substantial percentage membership and retained a life of its own. But then I talked with David Larson and a person at the top levels of the General Conference. Both assured me that the Adventist Church is schism-proof, due to the way that finances are handled and property is owned. So I have largely dropped that concern.

In its place I would like to suggest that this conference may be the harbinger of a more positive paradigm shift. The openness and respect we have shown to each other here suggests to me that Adventism as a faith and as an institution may be maturing in a significant way. Perhaps we have come to the place where humility and a teachable spirit can guide our theological endeavors instead of defensiveness and ideological politics. If it is true that "we know in part," that we "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:9, 12, ESV), then the strength of our convictions needs to be balanced with a deep awareness that our best efforts are flawed and that God uses those we disagree with to take the rough edges off our own opinions.

I dream of an Adventism whose central conviction is fidelity to Scripture, no matter what the cost. I dream of an Adventism where we can all sit down together, search the Scriptures, and learn from the Holy Spirit and each other, the way our first pioneers did. I tasted some of that this week and I long for more. I will live in hope that this conference has been the beginning of good things to come.

A Lesson From the Early Church

Let me close with an analogy that I was first pointed to by Robert Johnston. As we approach the hundredth anniversary of Ellen White's death (2015) we find ourselves in a position similar to that of the early church around 190 AD, some ninety years after the death of the last apostle. As many early church scholars (like Jaroslav Pelikan) have pointed out, the death of the apostles led to a fragmentation of direction in the early church. Some five different groups came into existence in the second century, each with a different solution to the problem of church unity.

1) There were the *Gnostics*, who believed that having the right ideas was the key to keeping the church on the right track. They might be somewhat analogous in principle to the

education wing of the church today. Adventist Bible teachers feel that through careful study of Scripture, we can come closer to the mind of the Lord for today.

2) There were the *Monastics* who felt that the only safe place in a corrupt church was to form “self-supporting outposts in the wilderness.” These sort-of checked out of the church mainstream and sought to maintain purity of doctrine and practice without the challenges of facing the real world.

3) There were the *Montanists*, early charismatics who believed that every Christian was as inspired as the apostles or the Scriptures. Their focus on the Spirit as the key to church life is now mirrored in some Adventist circles as well.

4) There were the *Marcionites* who sought to reform the church by a radical emphasis on the gospel and the gospel only. This kind of emphasis was seen in the Ford/Brinsmead call for the gospel to become central to Adventist thought and mission.

5) In the early church there were also the *institutionalists*, who believed that the only way to maintain unity of faith and practice was to let the bishops decide whenever there was a disagreement. While this approach was practical and maintained unity, it also planted the seeds of what would eventually become the papacy.

There is nothing new under the sun. Adventists today stand in a similar relation to the death of inspiration as did the early church. When the prophets are dead the church shifts from the living voice to the written word. Believers struggle to apply words for another time and place to their own time and place. Back then and again today there are different approaches to the challenges of doing theology without the guidance of a living voice. Some seek to make their way by exegesis and careful reasoning. Others check out and try to find God in isolation. Still others seek a direct spiritual experience from God. A revival of the gospel seems the only way out for some. And many prefer to let others do their thinking for them.

Which of these five ways will help us the most today, as we approach the end of this special conference? The early church chose the fifth, let the bishops decide and keep us all together. That choice didn't turn out so well. Will we do any better?