

Vision and Mission–Part 1: Historical and Methodological Background

Fernando Canale
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

1. The State of the Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church originated as a missionary global movement to prepare the way for Christ's second coming in glory and majesty. This mission has led Adventists to reach the ends of the world thus becoming universal (catholic) in scope and spiritual experience. According to Ted Wilson's report in his first State of the Church address, the Adventist mission remains vibrant and expanding rapidly, entering new frontiers, engaging postmoderns and reaching the megacities of the world.¹ Unfortunately, he also sees the church facing "some enormous challenges" that damage the spiritual life and derail the mission of the worldwide Adventist community. These challenges are: "(1) A loss of Seventh-day Adventist identity among some of our pastors and church members; (2) The growing tide of worldliness in many of our churches; (3) The danger of disunity; (4) A spiritual complacency and apathy that leads to a lack of involvement in the mission of the church."²

If we reflect on these issues we discover that they represent a sequential order guided by an inner causal relation. In other words, each point is the cause of the next one. This order becomes clear when we learn Wilson believes the main malady affecting the church today is our lack of identity which, in turn, is caused by the "neutralization of Scripture" among "too

¹ Ted Wilson, "An Urgent Prophetic Calling: A Message from the General Conference President," *Adventist Review* online, <http://www.adventistreview.org/an-urgent-prophetic-calling>.

² *Ibid.*

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many of our pastors and members.”³ Not surprisingly, he suggests that to deal with these challenges successfully we should de-neutralize and re-empower Scripture by studying it through the “historical, biblical method.”⁴

a. Destination and Itinerary

If this scenario indeed reflects reality, the question arises: How should we facilitate a global return to Scripture in Adventism at all levels of church life? Simply put, how do we become anew the “people of the Bible”? And furthermore, is this even feasible in an institutionalized and secularized global community involving large-scale educational and medical institutions? I believe it is not only possible but incumbent upon us to diligently work towards this return to Scripture if we would fulfill Christ’s mission to the remnant in these last days.

Because I believe that, as the Remnant Church, we all want to become involved in the final mission to prepare ourselves and the world for the glorious coming of Christ and the establishment of His eternal kingdom, my purpose in this journey is to explore the way in which we can all participate in bringing Christ and His Word back as the sole ground and living center of the life of the church.

Many contemporary Adventists incorrectly assume that the formative experience of Adventism was the Great Disappointment.⁵ *In reality, the engine propelling Seventh-day Adventists to organize and become the universal church was their theological vision and system. In this essay I propose that remembering, retrieving, embracing, expanding, using and disseminating that vision and system is the key in our hands to foster unity and finish the global mission of the church, preparing the way for the*

³ “Now, here is precisely my concern. Too many of our pastors and members either have failed to recognize, or have forgotten, the divine prophetic calling God has given us as a church. There’s a growing tendency to minimize our differences with other denominations. In some Seventh-day Adventist churches, the messages from the pulpit are little different than the typical Protestant church. Much of this comes from the neutralization of the Bible as God’s Word. It is so important that we base our beliefs on the Word of God, using the historical, biblical method of studying the Scriptures, and approaching prophetic understanding from the historicist perspective. God’s Word must be foundational to our belief, faith, and practical living. The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth if we will study, pray, and listen to God’s voice. This will help us strongly establish our Seventh-day Adventist identity.” Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ As an example of an incorrect understanding of what drove formative Adventist pioneers to organize our Church see, for instance, Alex Bryan, *The Green Cord Dream* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, Kindle Edition, 2012). Kindle Locations 138-144.

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second coming of Christ. What is that vision? How does it work? What does it do? How should we use it? These are the questions we will now ponder for the sake of Christ, His church and His mission.

To achieve this purpose and answer these questions I invite you to journey with me visiting some unique places that will provide us with new vistas, helping us discover the beautiful horizon before us. We will explore the best way to end the neutralization of Scripture and facilitate the worldwide denominational return to a biblical spirituality that can power the final mission of the church.

In this article (part 1 of a two-article series) we will start our journey by (1) assessing our present situation. Then we will go back in history to (2) learn where the pioneers got the vision and answer questions about it such as, what is it? What does it do? How does it work? What difference does it make? Moving on, we will (3) consider how Adventists lost their vision and the consequences that followed. Immediately after, we will (4) contemplate how the vision connects with the mission of the church throughout our denomination's history. At that point in our journey we will be ready to explore, in the next article (part 2 of this two-article series), the direct connection that exists between vision and everyday life by (5) considering what it means to live out the vision spiritually and the difference its various interpretations have on the spiritual and missionary life of the church. After (6) exploring the oft-forgotten vision-spirituality-church-mission connection operating within the church, we will (7) survey the way in which it relates to the neutralization of Scripture. Finally, we will (8) seek ways to maximize the church's rich human resources to overcome the neutralization of Scripture and empower God's Word on a personal, institutional and global level.

A few tips may help our travelers make their journey more enjoyable and profitable. We are embarking on an "exploratory" expedition similar to the 40-day stake-out trip Joshua, Caleb and their ten companions made when Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:1-14:9). After a tumultuous process the Lord led them to possess the land they had surveyed. Somewhat like this group of men, I have been a "lone ranger" surveying the land for over 40 years. This experience has allowed me to select a few chosen destinations as samples of the vast territory yet to conquer.

When planning to visit a foreign country for the first time, among our many preparations we make sure to read travel guides or watch videos that describe the land and its culture. If you find our destination in this journey

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is taking you to a “foreign land” I highly recommend you pick up my colleague and friend George Knight’s incisive “tour guide”: *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism*.⁶ In it he surveys the same territory we will visit and presents his own assessment of the land, sharing clear and penetrating insights on our present situation from the historical perspective of a seasoned Adventist thinker.

Also, please note that we are seeking to cover a broad terrain, which means the visits to each destination will be somewhat short and sketchy. After our journey, many questions will linger and a few destinations inspire us to further exploration. Yet, our basic overview, cursory though it may be, is the essential starting point for the massive goal we seek to reach. To profit from our visit to each destination you will need to keep in mind that I arranged our itinerary in a logical and narrative order. In other words, we need to visit some spots first in order to better understand and appreciate the next. This may require revisiting earlier destinations to understand present locations. To facilitate the reviewing of earlier sections I have included cross-references and figures along the way. With the roadmap and travel tips in hand, we’re now ready to get started on our journey!

b. How Did We Get Here?

To move ahead we need to assess, though briefly, how we have arrived at the point of nullifying Scripture in our lives and ministry. Bluntly put, how did we morph from being known as “the people of the Bible” to a people that “neutralize” Scripture? No doubt this mutation stems from a long and complex history. Here we need only trace some of the waymarks of its evolution: Identity loss, doctrinal illiteracy, forgetfulness of prophecies, and neglect of spiritual disciplines.

Thirteen years ago in an address to Adventist leaders, Jan Paulsen, former president of the General Conference, likewise perceived a loss of Adventist identity in their ranks. According to Paulsen, by design or simple assimilation, Adventists were becoming more recognizable as mere “Christians” than as “Seventh-day Adventist Christians.” He stated that as Adventists we “...have a very specific identity, which we lose to our own destruction.” Paulsen appropriately reminded us that our identity is directly

⁶ George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008).

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linked to—even equivalent to—our theological thinking.⁷ Thus, the decline in our sense of identity as Seventh-day Adventists revealed a malfunction in the theological thought structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Very likely this is one of the factors that have paved the way to our present “neutralization” of Scripture noted by pastor Ted Wilson. Since our identity is grounded in Scripture, a loss of identity may flow from an undetected disconnect between our theological thinking and Scripture.

Going back fourteen years, we find pastor Neal C. Wilson, then president of the General Conference, recognizing that “too many of our people are doctrinally illiterate, and as a result they have no firm convictions or commitment to this prophetic movement.”⁸ It is not difficult to see how doctrinal illiteracy—producing a lack of conviction and commitment to the church—may lead to a loss of identity and the neutralization of Scripture.

To make a long story short, let’s go back even further in time to more than a hundred years ago and consider Ellen White’s reflections on the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference, particularly the spiritual debacle among the leadership. Mrs. White was not so much concerned with the theological issues on the table as with the lack of spirituality (conversion) exhibited by the leaders. According to her, the lack of unity and power among the leaders revealed a lack of Christian spirituality stemming from the “most wonderful laziness” in personal “close, critical study of Scriptures.” Their spiritual life depended too much on the research and preaching of others whose views they embraced uncritically as “positive fact” while they should have been able to discern these views “to be Bible truth [or error], through their own individual research, and by the deep convictions of the Spirit of God upon

⁷ Jan Paulsen, “The Theological Landscape,” *Supplement to the Adventist Review*, June 13 2002, 3-8. Adventist identity came to existence when they discovered that their experience was anticipated in the prophetic description of the eschatological remnant Church that will “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17 KJV). For an introduction about its deterioration in contemporary Adventism see, for instance, Frank Hasel, “The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology,” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Studies in Adventist Ecclesiology* (Silver Spring, MI: Biblical Research Institute, 2009). And also, Carmelo Luis Martines, *El Remanente Fiel: Un Debate Contemporáneo*, vol. 3, Serie Tesis De La Facultad De Teología De La Universidad Adventista Del Plata (Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2013).

⁸ Neal C. Wilson, “The President Calls for Renewal,” *Adventist Review*, April 7, 1988, 12.

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their hearts and minds.”⁹ Using current terms, we may say the leadership had “head” knowledge based on tradition and not the necessary “spiritual” knowledge that transforms the heart. In these brief observations from the inspired pen, we can detect a dynamic that has continued throughout the ensuing one hundred and twenty-seven years, a dynamic which is silently but surely neutralizing Scripture and Christ from the life of the church.

To recap, we have traced some historical waymarks leading to our present state of apathy toward the Bible. We have noted that scriptural neutralization springs from a lack of ecclesiological identity, stemming from doctrinal illiteracy caused by a “wonderful laziness” in personal Bible study. Already in 1888, according to Ellen White, our church leadership was fast losing its spiritual ground in Scripture. Because Adventist spirituality had become dependent on listening to sermons (to the neglect of personal Bible study), the *sola Scriptura* principle became replaced by the “tradition of the elders.” This simple fact reduced the experience of church leaders to a mere “head knowledge” which did not spring from hearts intentionally disciplined by close Bible study. At the same time, in an imperceptible but real way, Adventists began to move away from the rock of Scripture to build on the sand of human traditions. This deadly combination of head knowledge and human traditions continues to affect Adventism. Instead of being the spiritual body of Christ eagerly heralding His soon return, we are more and more becoming a human institution whose self-preservation requires traditions that frequently interpret Scripture to gratify a people ignorant of Scripture (Hosea 4:6).

The English dictionary defines neutralization as “the process that makes something or someone ineffective by applying an opposite force or effect,” as such we should look for the opposing force behind the current

⁹ The full quotation may help the reader to gain a deeper understanding of Ellen White’s train of thought on this point. “It has been shown me that there are many of our people who take things for granted, and know not for themselves, by close, critical study of the Scriptures, whether they are believing truth or error. If our people depended much less upon preaching, and spent far more time on their knees before God, pleading for him to open their understanding to the truth of his word, that they might have a knowledge for themselves that their feet were standing on solid rock, angels of God would be around about them, to help them in their endeavors. . . . There is a most wonderful laziness indulged in by a large class of our people, who are willing others should search the Scriptures for them; and they take the truth from the lips of these as a positive fact, but they do not know it to be Bible truth, through their own individual research, and by the deep convictions of the Spirit of God upon their hearts and minds,” Ellen White, “To Brethren Who Assemble in the [Battle Creek] Week of Prayer,” Reading for Sabbath, December 15, 1888, in *The Ellen G White 1888 Materials*, 196.

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neutralization of Scripture. According to the Great Controversy that force is Satan and his angels. We know Satan also operates through the visible Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:4) who early in the history of the church neutralized Scripture with human traditions and philosophy. We should therefore not be surprised if he attempts the same winning strategy with the eschatological remnant in our days. After all, he is fully aware that Scripture is the living source of power given to the Church to minister to humanity.¹⁰ This brief historical review and the spiritual situation it unveils are familiar to us. We are well aware of our need for spiritual renewal: We need revival and reformation. Yet how can we, as a worldwide community, accomplish this task? The success of revival and reformation in the Seventh-day Adventist church hinges on which foundation we choose to build: Will we choose the sand of human traditions or the rock of Scripture?

c. How Do We Move Forward?

Because we know that revival and reformation is the work of the Holy Spirit we have, for decades, prayed for the latter rain to be poured out on our people. We hold that only this event will produce the needed revival and reformation to finish the work. Thus, we exhort the church to read the Bible (Revived by your Word)¹¹ and pray for the latter rain (777 Prayer Initiative). Considering we have been doing these things, on and off, for the last 50 years or so, it would be wise to consider the possibility that there may be something else we are overlooking, something besides Bible reading, prayer, and missionary work that the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church must embrace in order to experience the biblical spirituality of Christ and finish His final mission outlined by the Three Angels' Message. Perhaps, we need to move from simply seeking "head" knowledge to obtaining a "heart" of understanding. To access such an experience we need to engage in personal critical Bible study, which is the necessary condition for the Holy Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ and give us the much-needed "heart knowledge."

Although our personal experience and the institutions of the church are different in nature and purpose, they exist in intimate relation to each other.

¹⁰ "The life of God, which gives life to the world, is in His word. It was by His word that Jesus healed disease and cast out demons, by His word He stilled the sea and raised the dead, and the people bore witness that His word was with power. He spoke the word of God as he had spoken it to all the Old Testament writers. The whole Bible is a manifestation of Christ. It is our only source of power," (Ellen White, *Gospel Workers* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1948], 251, emphasis mine).

¹¹ <http://revivedbyhisword.org>.

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While the institutions influence our experiences, we individually impact what the institutions do. This implies that changes must occur simultaneously, both in the individual and the institutions of the church. To gain speedy worldwide reach, the leadership of the church should embrace and facilitate serious Bible study and the application of biblical teachings and principles to the everyday operations and policies at all levels of our church's administration and institutions. This work is a necessary condition for the sustained work of revival and reformation until our Lord's return. In other words, we need to obtain a deep understanding and experience of God's revelation in Scripture at all sectors of the church. We must move away from a culture of tradition and institution building to a culture of revelation and obedience. We need to think, feel, and act in the light of Scripture through the leadership of Christ our Lord who is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 5:23). We need to experience this now. The question is *how?*

d. Identifying our Resources

1. Institutional Resources

At the present time our church is enjoying the rich blessings of God manifested in many ways. Besides the basic organization of our church—General Conference, Divisions, Unions and Conferences—educational and medical institutions have played a leading role in the development and growth of Adventism since its formative years. These institutions were created under Christ's direct guidance through His servant, Ellen G. White, with clear and explicit spiritual and missionary goals. Arguably, the present and future of Adventism is forged in the silent but faithful work of dedicated Adventist educators throughout the world. Since leaders are oriented and formed by their educational experience we can easily see the importance of our educational institutions. The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow.

Consequently, changes in education will directly and rapidly affect what happens in other fields and determine the present and future direction of the church. In the last thirty years there has been an explosion in the creation and growth of Adventist universities. Presently the Adventist church operates more than one hundred universities and colleges around the world.¹² They are a solid resource indispensable to creating spiritual unity, advancing the vision and fulfilling the mission of the church. *However,*

¹² For a list of Seventh-day Adventist Universities and Colleges see, <http://education.gc.adventist.org/colleges.html>.

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when disconnected from each other and working from the basis and dynamic of human tradition they become a major hindrance to the work of God and, if left unchecked, will change the foundations of the church.

In short, educational institutions—elementary, academy and higher education—are resources that shape the mind and heart of human beings when they are young, thereby determining their usefulness for the church. Educational institutions are the only means to pass on the experience of one generation to the next thus crafting the shape of the future. As in worship, the decisive resources in educational institutions are not material but human. In the church, the decisive qualifications for human resources are the theological and spiritual convictions and commitments of our personnel, faculty, and administration. At all the educational and administrative levels within the Seventh-day Adventist church, first and undivided allegiance must be given to Christ and Scripture (*sola Scriptura*).

2. Human Resources

With the passing of time, Adventists have lost not only their “first love” (Revelation 2:4) but also, and more importantly, the formative Adventist pioneers’ “experience” that moved them to create and organize what we now know as the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹³

The human resources of the church are its members, leaders and laity. All are needed for ministry and mission. However, we know that our usefulness for ministry and mission depends on our actions, which are determined by our spiritual union with Christ. Our spiritual oneness with Christ, in turn, hinges on the theology (doctrinal understanding) we adopt, and the fountainhead from which all theology flows can be only one of two: tradition or Scripture. The success of the church, then, depends on the spiritual quality of their human resources, not on the material excellence and number of its institutions. As such, we must foment each believer’s spiritual union with Christ. When Adventist institutions foster and facilitate this spiritual dimension in all their members they will naturally achieve their mission and maximize their resources

Because spirituality can flow from one of two sources, tradition or Scripture (1.b), two different types of spirituality result. To distinguish between them we need a vision from which to evaluate them. Let us, then, turn our attention to the Adventist Vision.

¹³ For an introduction to this phenomenon see Fernando Canale, “From Vision to System: Finishing the Task of Adventist Theology Part 1: Historical Review,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 2 (2004).

2. Getting the Vision

The title of this section deserves some clarification. The word *vision* has a variety of meanings. Throughout our journey I will use the word *vision* not in its prophetic sense of anticipating the future and receiving information supernaturally, but as (1) the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom, and (2) a mode of seeing or conceiving. When we go to the optometrist we seek to improve our ability to see. Without the ability to see clearly, our seeing activities can be distorted. Thus, when using the word *vision* in reference to Adventism I will be referring not the actions we perform in seeing things but to *the ability to think with wisdom the deep things of God* around whom the Church gathers and exists.

This ability is grounded in *a mode of seeing or conceiving the things of God*. This mode of seeing is the vision whose main role is to allow us to see (understand) the Truth of Christ in Scripture. In this way, vision has a *hermeneutical function*, that is to say, *it works as a set of principles or ideas guiding the process of interpretation and understanding*. From now on, then, the word *vision* will have the added meaning of “hermeneutical principles or ideas necessary to interpret and understand Scripture and reality as a whole.” In short, the word *vision* (and the contents associated with it) will always have a hermeneutical function.

Adding the adjective *Adventist* to *vision* simply signals our intent to discover what the vision (as described above) means in Adventism and the role it plays in the life and mission of the church. This will help us then move forward to the questions on function, retrieval, and method.

a. From Where?

If Adventists have had a vision propelling them forward, it did not arise out of nothing. From where did it come? As we will see in the next destination, our Adventist vision arose from the sanctuary. Moreover, we know the sanctuary message did not come to Adventism by divine revelation but through Bible study because all believers were united in an impassioned commitment to the *Sola Scriptura* principle. They had received this principle as a treasured inheritance from the Protestant Reformation but were the first to understand and apply it fully.

While the reformers correctly placed the authority of Scripture over tradition, they implicitly continued using tradition as a hermeneutical guide to interpret Scripture. However, this was not so among the leaders of the Advent Movement. We find them intentionally drawing their hermeneutical

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(interpretive)¹⁴ principles from Scripture, thereby departing further from the authority of tradition. According to William Miller’s rules of interpretation, they had come to believe that the hermeneutical principles we need to interpret Scripture must come from within Scripture itself. Briefly put, Scripture interprets itself.¹⁵ Also, for them *Scriptura* meant “the whole of Scripture,” including both Testaments, not only the New.¹⁶

Since they were intentionally seeking to build their whole understanding of Christianity on Scripture alone, interpreted by itself, sooner or later their vision was bound to spring exclusively from Scripture. They were moving in the right direction.

b. *What Is It?*

Based on the *sola Scriptura* principle thus understood we ask, what is the Adventist vision? To avoid unnecessary disagreements I suggest we consider the “formative” vision that compelled Adventists to become the global eschatological Remnant of Christ’s Church, motivating them to global mission. Let us direct our attention, then, to the contents and role of the Seventh-day Adventist formative vision.

Historians tell us that on the day after the October 22 frustration, Hiram Edson discovered the cause of their “Great Disappointment” experience. The Daniel 8:14 cleansing of the sanctuary prophecy did not point to Christ’s second coming but to the new phase of His redemptive work in the

¹⁴ The words “hermeneutics” and “hermeneutical” in this essay are used as synonyms for “interpretation” and “interpretive.” The words “to understand” and “understanding” are used as close synonyms of “hermeneutics” and “interpretation.” However, these words are by no means identical in meaning. Hermeneutical emphasizes the principles of interpretation and understanding. Interpretation, in turn, underlines the process through which we know, and finally, understanding underscores the goal of this process. Vision as used in the writing properly belong to the special emphasis of hermeneutics, that is, it provides the general principles that guides us as we process information and ultimately attain understanding of Scripture and realities.

¹⁵ “Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom, is my rule, and not the Bible.” Joshua Himes, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life* (Boston, 14 Devonshire Street: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 20, 21, rule 5.

¹⁶ ———, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life* (Boston, 14 Devonshire Street: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 20, rules 2 and 4.

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most holy place in the heavenly sanctuary.¹⁷ This scenario had never once crossed their minds. The idea was both novel and attractive because it explained their questions and spiritual disillusionment; it also opened to their minds new ideas and vistas to consider. Soon, they were back to studying the Scriptures, systematically attempting to see how the newfound truth fit in with other Christian doctrines. Adventist historian Arthur White, describes the following six years as the “time of the development of a doctrinal structure, a time when the body of truth was being firmly fitted together, piece by piece. It was a time when those involved would have been ill-prepared to herald a message not yet understood in its fullness and its interrelationships.”¹⁸

In our days, with our practical, mission-minded denominational culture, we may feel they were wasting their time. They had the truth and should have engaged in mission without delay.¹⁹ We think in this way because we have lost the passion and understanding of the vision that was moving them from the depths of their very beings. What was that vision? The vision was the groundbreaking yet simple truth that Christ was in heaven working out the last arrangements necessary for finishing His work of salvation. We now know this plain biblical truth as the sanctuary doctrine, one of the fundamental pillars of Adventism. While this is true, it also presents a problem. The unfortunate reality is that we now, at best, consider the sanctuary doctrine just another *head knowledge doctrine*. As such, we automatically file away under “irrelevant miscellaneous information” what the pioneers saw as their central *theological and spiritual vision*. At this point, you might be confused, perhaps even disturbed wondering, “What difference does it make if we call the sanctuary a *doctrine* or a *vision*?”

Adventist historian C. Mervyn Maxwell may help us to understand the colossal difference that exists between considering biblical teachings on the sanctuary to be mere *doctrine* versus working *vision*. He correctly perceived that for Adventist pioneers in this formative period (1844-1850) the fulfillment of prophecy was not simply another doctrine but a “hermeneutical tool.”²⁰

¹⁷ See, for instance, C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1976), 49.

¹⁸ Arthur L. White, *The Early Years : 1827-1862* (Review and Herald, 1985), 190.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 192.

²⁰ “Luther and some other reformers honored the historicist interpretation of prophecy, including the year-day principle; but Seventh-day Adventists pioneers, having arrived by the same route at the conviction that the second advent movement was a fulfillment of prophecy, used that fulfillment as a hermeneutical principle in the further development of their

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Ellen White also understood the hermeneutical (interpretive) role of the sanctuary in Christian theology and spirituality. As a historical witness she identified and expanded the sanctuary doctrine's hermeneutical role. In a summary statement she explains, "*The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God's hand had directed the great Advent movement, and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of his people.*"²¹ The "system of truth" that Ellen White and the pioneers discerned is contained within the pages of Scripture²² and consists of "a simple and complete system of theology and philosophy."²³ Evidently, the hermeneutical function of the sanctuary guided and determined the *message* (position) and the *mission* (work) of both our Adventist pioneers and Ellen White. It was the hermeneutical role of the sanctuary that led the church to discover and formulate "the invulnerable *structure* of truth to present to the world."²⁴

c. What Does It Do?

To understand what the vision will accomplish, we must first understand the doctrine of the sanctuary as "hermeneutical vision." As explained above (2.0) "vision" means "a mode of seeing or conceiving," that allows us to envision what we are looking for or trying to understand. According to Ellen White, as they studied the Bible after the Great Disappointment, the sanctuary "opened to view" a complete system of truth to the understanding of the pioneers. This system of truth (the message) gave them the motivation to organize and propelled them to global mission. Maxwell expressed the vision role of the sanctuary using the technical term of "hermeneutical tool." Basically, the sanctuary doctrine became the "hermeneutical vision" because it allowed Adventists to understand the

message. Once established as scriptural, the fulfillment of prophecy in the second advent movement *became a hermeneutical tool* for helping establish the Sabbath, sanctuary, spiritual gift, true church, second advent doctrines, etc" C. Mervyn Maxwell, "A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 214, 15, emphasis mine.

²¹ Ellen White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation* (Oakland: Pacific Press Publishing Co., 1888), 423, emphasis mine.

²² ———, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 136.4, Letter 17, 1902.

²³ Ellen White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 105.

²⁴ Arthur L. White, *The Early Years*, 190, emphasis mine.

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interconnected truths of the Bible and conceive them as a simple yet complex *system of truth*.

Neither the “hermeneutical vision” they used, nor the “system of theological and philosophical truth” they saw came from outside the Bible. On the contrary, both were already present and operative in the whole of Scripture. They were simply applying the *sola scriptura principle* inherited from Protestantism to its full potential. In so doing they became radical revolutionaries, charting a new course, and breaking new theological and philosophical ground. According to Arthur White, “All this was in ‘the scattering time,’ 1844 to 1850. Now they were prepared to enter the openings of ‘the gathering time.’ The message was clear. Doctrinal beliefs were for the most part well established. Wrote Ellen White on December 13, 1850, ‘We know that we have the truth.’”²⁵ Although they could not fully grasp the seismic shift their discovery entailed, the beauty, inner consistency, and spiritual power of their message was felt. This new systematic understanding of the truth about Jesus Christ was already propelling them to become the emerging Remnant Church eager to engage in global mission.²⁶

d. How Does It Work?

Today we realize that the formative vision of Adventism is what we now label “the doctrine of the sanctuary,” when used not merely as doctrine but as the guiding hermeneutical tool. How does a hermeneutical tool work? Before addressing this point, let us take a brief detour to address an even

²⁵ Arthur L. White, *The Early Years*, 193. Arthur L. White quotes from the following passage. “Dear Brother Rhodes was with us in our last conference. It was good to see his face once more and cheering to hear him talk the plain cutting truth of God from the Bible. How plain our position is: We know that we have the truth. Brother Rhodes has now gone in company with Brother John Andrews to the eastern part of the State to hunt up the scattered sheep. We have received two letters from them. God is at work and is bringing souls from the rubbish to the clear light of truth. We have received cheering letters from different places. God is with Israel.” Ellen White, “Letter to Reuben and Belinda Loveland,” (Paris, Maine December 13, 1850), Lt 30.

²⁶ “Those who received the light concerning the sanctuary and the immutability of the law of God, were filled with joy and wonder, as they saw the beauty and harmony of the system of truth that opened to their understanding. They desired that the light which appeared to them so precious might be imparted to all Christians; and they could not but believe that it would be joyfully accepted. But truths that would place them at variance with the world were not welcome to many who claimed to be followers of Christ. Obedience to the fourth commandment required a sacrifice from which the majority drew back.” White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, 454.

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more general issue: Why do we even need hermeneutical tools to read the Bible?

To answer this question, consider for a moment the process of reading. When we first learn how to read we assume the process is straightforward. We assume that when reading a book we all understand more or less the same thing. Consequently, if after comparing reading reports on the same passage we discover variances, we logically assume some readings are wrong and need correction to fully reflect the text. If we apply this naïve view of reading to the Bible and find variances between various reading reports we will have the same compulsion. For some reason, we tend to see our reading as right and others' as wrong.

However, if we were to take time to explore the reasons different readers had for their divergent reports we may begin to understand that reading is not as simple and straightforward as we first thought. We will realize that “reading” is only one aspect of the larger human experience we know as “knowing.” If we were to study the process of knowledge long enough we would discover that *all knowledge is interpretation*. To read is to know and to know is to interpret. In other words, we cannot read without at the same time interpreting (usually unconsciously) what we read.

But the goal of reading is to understand what we read. Understanding always requires a context, without a context we cannot know or read. Like knowledge, contexts are always present and changing. Exegetes, who specialize in reading texts, know this well. They know that if we change or ignore the context our understanding of the text changes as well. Biblical exegetes have discussed and classified the contexts necessary to understand the biblical text in various ways. Among them they mention the philological, textual, literary, historical, and theological contexts.²⁷ However, there are other broader contexts always present and guiding us when we read, think, and communicate. These are the ontological and metaphysical contexts usually studied by philosophers. The ontological (reality)²⁸ and metaphysical (totality)²⁹ contexts are closely related to the

²⁷ See, for instance, Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 68-85.

²⁸ I use the technical word “ontological” to refer to the study of the nature of reality. In biblical interpretation and theology “reality” is always assumed. Simply put, when we say “God is” we either assume the “is” means “real” or “fictional.” As Adventists we usually do not think about this level because we assume God is real. Automatically, we interpret Scripture and theology within the context of reality. Yet, not all readers and thinkers do likewise. Non-Christians and an overwhelming number of Christians believe that the “is”

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theological context exegetes, theologians, and pastors use to read Scripture, develop doctrines, and preach sermons.

Our brief detour comes here to an end allowing us to answer the previous question: why do we need “hermeneutical tools” to read the Bible and do theology? We need hermeneutical tools because reading and thinking are not simple but rather complex experiences that involve many components, among them a variety of interlocking contexts. The contexts we assume are hermeneutical or interpretive tools because they are the necessary presuppositions (or principles) required for a proper understanding of texts and doctrines. Usually we are unaware of the presuppositions we assume. So, to make sure we are heading in the right direction in our knowledge and understanding we must become aware of them through study and reflection.

With this in mind we can now turn our attention to the main question opening this section: how does the sanctuary doctrine work as “hermeneutical tool.” The answer is simple. In Scripture (and Adventist theology) the sanctuary plays the role of metaphysical context or presupposition. We usually refer to the metaphysical context as “the big picture” and identify it with the Great Controversy theme. For this reason the Adventist Vision plays the *macro*-hermeneutical role in the Church, that is to say, it provides the first most general principle of interpretation Christian denominations have always drawn from tradition. From now on in our study I will use the word *vision* with the added meaning of *macro* hermeneutical principles.³⁰ That will facilitate the narrative and guide us through our journey. But how does the sanctuary “big picture” work as hermeneutical vision?

in Scripture is fictional.

²⁹ I use the technical word “metaphysical” to refer to the study of reality as a whole. Thus, in seeking to understand the whole, metaphysics assumes and integrates ontology. In common parlance, we speak of “the big picture.” In short, metaphysics is the study of the big picture we assume as context to understand everything.

³⁰ We may classify our presuppositions according to their inclusiveness in three levels, macro (philosophical), meso (theological), and micro (exegetical). The Sanctuary and the Great Controversy work, then, as macro presuppositions, doctrines as meso, and words and literary contexts as micro. The difference between these levels the extension to which they apply. Philosophical presuppositions apply to everything, theological (meso) to the places where that particular doctrine is assumed, and, literary context only the individual texts in which they appear. With this in mind we can see the *macro* presuppositions apply to the entire Bible, *meso* to the portions of Scripture where a doctrine is assumed, and *micro* only to particular texts.

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Ellen White helps us to answer this question when she explains that the subject of the sanctuary was the key opening “. . . to view a complete system of truth, *connected and harmonious*. . . .”³¹ In other words, the pioneers’ understanding of the sanctuary allowed them to see how the other truths of Scripture (doctrines) fit together in perfect rational harmony and spiritual beauty. They did not find that harmony and beauty in the understanding of doctrines advanced by the churches they had left behind. That systematic vision of the whole of Christ’s teachings in the Old and New Testaments was new to them, united them in spirit and propelled them to global mission.

In summary, the sanctuary as (macro-hermeneutical) vision provides the context necessary to connect all doctrines, teachings, biblical texts, spiritual experiences, practices, etc. The sanctuary plays this role simply because in His love God has chosen to live, abide and dwell with His people in a house (Exodus 25:8). Because in the universe all things “hold together” in Christ “who is the head of the body, the church,” (Colossians 1:17, 18 ESV) the sanctuary becomes the immediate context of all divine actions by which the Trinity relates with our universe and the church, from the time of its creation to today.

With the pioneers we could also see why the sanctuary should be the vision guiding our understanding of Christ’s works and, through it, the entirety of doctrines and reality. However, the sanctuary is not the ultimate, all-decisive hermeneutical presupposition (context), God is.³² This brings us to consider God’s being (ontological context) and its relation to the sanctuary (metaphysical context).

e. What Difference Does It Make?

At this point in our journey you may be tempted to think that I am writing from a theological ivory tower, utterly disconnected from everyday practical life (reality). I assure you that I am not. If you bear with me, I promise to show you how Scripture and the Adventist pioneers connected the sanctuary with reality (ontology).

³¹ White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, 423, emphasis mine.

³² Besides, the Adventist Vision as described in this essay includes more components also anticipated and used by the Pioneers and Ellen White that we are not including in this work in order to keep it as simple as possible. A full study of the Adventist Vision still lies in the future.

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Ellen White herself experienced the practical role of the sanctuary as it works together with other “truths that are the foundation of our faith.”³³ Adventists referred to these foundational truths, which included the sanctuary and the nonimmortality of the soul, as “pillars,” “landmarks” or “waymarks.”³⁴ Looking back sixty years to their early experience she could not but acknowledge that these truths “have made us as a people what we are, leading us on step by step.”³⁵ Earlier she highlighted their role as hermeneutical vision in the experience of “[t]hose who received the light concerning the sanctuary and the immutability of the law of God, [and] were filled with joy and wonder, as they saw the beauty and harmony of the system of truth that opened to their understanding.”³⁶ Clearly, for them the sanctuary doctrine and other “pillar truths” were essential to their understanding of Scripture, as well as the entire range of Christian doctrines and their identity as Eschatological Remnant Church. However, unbeknown to them, the hermeneutical vision of the sanctuary involved a much deeper and broader theological revolution. To properly appreciate the magnitude of the difference the sanctuary as hermeneutical vision makes in Adventist theology let us consider its revolutionary role in some detail.

f. The Unintended Revolution

Admittedly, Seventh-day Adventism is not the first denomination to have studied and accepted the sanctuary doctrine. Among others, the English Puritans accepted and wrote about a literal heavenly sanctuary well

³³ Ellen White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), 29.1. *The Review and Herald*, May 25, 1905.

³⁴ “The passing of the time in 1844 was a period of great events, opening to our astonished eyes the cleansing of the sanctuary transpiring in heaven, and having decided relation to God’s people upon the earth, [also] the first and second angels’ messages and the third, unfurling the banner on which was inscribed, ‘The commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.’ One of the landmarks under this message was the temple of God, seen by His truth-loving people in heaven, and the ark containing the law of God. The light of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment flashed its strong rays in the pathway of the transgressors of God’s law. The nonimmortality of the wicked is an old landmark. I can call to mind nothing more that can come under the head of the old landmarks. All this cry about changing the old landmarks is all imaginary. ———, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1946), 30.

³⁵ ———, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 29.1. *The Review and Herald*, May 25, 1905.

³⁶ White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, 454.

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before Seventh-day Adventism ever entered the stage.³⁷ Because other faiths have made references to the sanctuary and other Adventist doctrines before the advent of our denomination, some among us feel uncomfortable embracing the Remnant Church claim.³⁸ In their minds such a sweeping claim requires more than a few “distinctive” doctrines. They are absolutely right. We need more, much more. For starters, we need to understand, along with the pioneers, that the doctrines we now call “distinctive” are, in reality, a biblical “hermeneutical vision”; but we will return to this distinction later. First we need to consider something the pioneers did which implicitly required a paradigm shift in Christian theology. Let me explain.

When on October 23, 1844 Hiram Edson realized that Daniel 8:14 pointed to the beginning of a new phase in Christ’s salvific work as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, the ontological assumption on which the entire scope of Christian theology had been built was not only rejected but also implicitly replaced by its opposite. This long sentence requires unpacking, so bear with me. As we saw earlier, Hiram Edson was the first to unravel the cause of their disappointment by pointing to Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. This awareness permitted them to discover the hermeneutical function of the biblical sanctuary and allowed them to use it as the hermeneutical vision to understand Scripture and the entire range of Christian doctrines. As we noted (2.b), they did not think of the sanctuary and pillar doctrines as merely “distinctive” but also, and more importantly, as their guiding “hermeneutical vision.”

Earlier (2.d), we identified the sanctuary and its function as the *metaphysical* or *articulating* principle in biblical thinking. Now we should keep in mind that to *articulate* we need *something*. The *something* the sanctuary articulates is *reality*, which in technical jargon we refer to as *ontology*. Simply put, the sanctuary interprets (explains) the totality (metaphysics) of reality (ontology). This shows that the sanctuary as “articulating vision,” which opened to view a complete system of truth connected and harmonious, must assume realities to be articulated. At this point, we need to identify the realities the sanctuary *articulates*.

Because the sanctuary is the house where God dwells (Exodus 25:8), it is easy to see that this dwelling/sanctuary articulates the loving historical

³⁷ Bryan W. Ball, *The English Connection: The Puritan Roots of Seventh-Day Adventist Belief* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1981).

³⁸ On a current assessment of the Adventist claim to be the Remnant Church see, for instance, Fernando Canale, “On Being the Remnant,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24, no. 1 (2013).

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relationships between Christ the Creator and His creatures. That was easy, wasn't it? Yet, there is more you need to know. God, humanity and the sanctuary are realities that, in some way, must interact. The sanctuary as building facilitates the articulation or relationship between Christ and His creatures possible and provides broad guidelines for it. However, for this interaction to occur in the sanctuary, God (ultimate reality) must be historical in nature. This runs in the face of the entire Christian tradition that views God (ultimate reality) as non historical. In other words, while Scripture and Adventist theology (following the pioneers) assume God interacts with humans, creation and the sanctuary within space and time, Christians assume that He does it outside of the historical space-time continuum.³⁹ Here we arrive at a major crossroads where the road diverges in opposite directions. Choosing the way of divine atemporality and spacelessness will lead to a vastly different destination than choosing the road that views God as engaging with humans in time and space. You can see this is not a minor difference, but a massive, all-embracing assumption determining the meaning of everything in theology and practice. Our understanding of creation, marriage, the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and certainly the sanctuary are intensely affected by the road chosen.

Have you ever asked yourself why Adventists are the only Christian denomination holding the doctrine of the sanctuary? After all, the sanctuary as the dwelling place of God plays a large role in Scripture both in the Old and New Testaments. We can trace the cause of this nullification back to the non-historical understanding of the ontological assumption working within Christian tradition. Church history shows that soon after New Testament times Christians began to incorporate practices taken from contemporary culture and the religions of their day. With the passing of time, a tradition developed that progressively departed from biblical teachings replacing them with pagan religious practices following a fateful pattern initiated in earlier times by Solomon and Jeroboam.

³⁹ For an introductory scholarly analysis of this little known fact see, for instance, Fernando Luis Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason : Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions*, ed. University Andrews and Seminary Seventh-day Adventist Theological, Doctoral Dissertation Series ; v. 10. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987). For a more detail analysis of the historical evidence see, Raúl Kerbs, *El Problema De La Identidad Bíblica Del Cristianismo: Las Presuposiciones Filosóficas De La Teología Crisiana Desde Los Presocráticos Al Protestantismo* (Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata and Adventus: Editorial Universitaria Iberoamericana, 2014).

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As Adventists, we are familiar with this unfortunate trend in Church history and feel called to complete the Reformation movement initiated by the Protestant embrace of the *sola Scriptura* principle. However, as a denomination we have not yet realized that the inner engine working and directing the development of Christian tradition is the non-historical understanding of ultimate reality (ontological context). In the years after Christ's earthly ministry the acceptance of a non-historical interpretation of reality began to take root as the mindset of the early church leaders was increasingly derived from Greek philosophy, particularly from the teachings of Plato.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have held that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle spell out the wisdom of God's natural revelation while Scripture expresses God's special revelation. As such, they believe that to get an accurate picture of God we need to draw from both sources. Following this strategy, Christians have applied Plato's and Aristotle's non-historical view of reality (Greek ontology) to God, using it as a *hermeneutical tool* to interpret Scripture and thereby construct their Christian doctrines. So while philosophers speak about the "timelessness" of God, theologians prefer to talk about His "eternity" and "Spirit," *yet these terms refer to the same timeless reality, which is incompatible with time and history*. Succinctly, because God is eternal and unchanging, Christianity has assumed that in nature and life God cannot experience the past-present-future sequence that time and history require.⁴⁰ Furthermore, since space presupposes time, to conceive of God's reality as non historical also demands His spacelessness. In other words, according to Christian tradition God's reality is void of and incompatible with both time and space. While some readers might label these philosophical developments within Christianity as insignificant or worthless theological speculation, we must keep in mind that these teachings are the intellectual catalyst that led early Christianity to progressively depart from Scripture and follow human traditions. When Christians uncritically embrace the non-historical, spaceless view of God, they cannot but interpret Scripture's language about God and His redemptive acts in history as mere metaphors and symbols. They do that because logic demands that if God is outside of time and space, He cannot act in a temporal sequence. In this simple but sweeping way, these macro-hermeneutical ontological presuppositions prevent them

⁴⁰ At the end of this section you will find an example of the way in which different view of reality—either temporal or timeless—produce opposite understanding of the Biblical sanctuary.

from understanding the reality of God's biblical acts of salvation as a sequence that actually took place in created temporal history.

Let us consider how we might apply this macro-hermeneutical ontological presupposition to the Adventist view of the sanctuary that began in October 22, 1844. As Adventists, we assume that the sanctuary doctrine describes a real sequence of events taking place in space and time. Moreover, we have no doubt God Himself (the whole Trinity) engages and experiences a sequential series of real divine actions including the cross and Christ's "heavenly High Priestly ministry." However, most scholarly and educated Christians find this view risible, childish and an outgrowth of sheer ignorance. Without further thought they quickly dismiss it. For them the thought that God should act historically in time and space is as ludicrous as proposing the possibility of living without breathing. In other words, it contradicts their view of reality and natural law. So while all Christians agree that the sanctuary speaks about reality, they assume it is a spiritual—not historical—reality. In summary, we are safe to state that, by and large, Christian leaders view the Adventist sanctuary doctrine as sheer nonsense.

Can you see the macro paradigmatic shift the sanctuary as hermeneutical tool entails for Christian theology and practice? This difference springs from the ontological, macro-hermeneutical presupposition stealthily operating from within the sanctuary. Because of this "reality difference," the Adventist vision entails a *macro paradigmatic revolution* involving the entire reinterpretation of Scripture, now read through the light coming from the sanctuary. This *hermeneutical light* promises to shed greater understanding on Christian doctrines, life and mission.

3. Losing the Vision

No doubt the sanctuary hermeneutical vision nested in the inner spiritual being of each early Adventist. This vision clarified their doubts, illuminated current issues, and promised a brighter future. It made them sit with God in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). "Now in the holy of holies they beheld Him, their compassionate High Priest, soon to appear as their King and Deliverer. Light from the sanctuary illuminated the past, the present, and the future. . . and as they should by faith follow their High Priest in His ministration there, new duties would be revealed."⁴¹ Perhaps because it was such a delight to them to think and experience life from this blessed

⁴¹ *Great Controversy*, 424.

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hermeneutical perspective, they assumed their treasured view of the sanctuary would naturally be passed along to future generations who would continue the revolution initiated by this vision. Sadly, that was not the case. As noted earlier (1.b), already by the 1888 conference the move from Scripture to tradition was subtly taking place. As full appreciation and commitment to the origin of the sanctuary vision weakened, so did its understanding, embracing and use among Adventists. If left unchecked, this process would lead to the fading and eventual vanishing of the biblical sanctuary as the hermeneutical vision of Adventism.

a. Growing Pains: Averting the Demise of the Adventist Vision

By the inception of the twentieth century, Adventism was facing an unprecedented theological crisis of seismic proportions threatening to replace its foundational hermeneutical vision. Adventism had faced attacks on the sanctuary doctrine before. In 1904 Ellen White reported that in the past fifty years the sanctuary doctrine was being attacked from inside Adventism. A year later, she ominously warned this trend would continue in the future.⁴² According to her, the pillars and sanctuary doctrine would be challenged from various sources including scientific theories,⁴³ theories on the Word and on God,⁴⁴ wrong interpretations of Scripture,⁴⁵ special light “from God,”⁴⁶ and of course, Christ’s archenemy, Satan.⁴⁷ She was writing in the wake of the Kellogg Pantheistic Crisis.

⁴² “In the future, deception of every kind is to arise, and we want solid ground for our feet. We want solid pillars for the building. Not one pin is to be removed from that which the Lord has established. The enemy will bring in false theories, such as the doctrine that there is no sanctuary. This is one of the points on which there will be a departing from the faith. Where shall we find safety unless it be in the truths that the Lord has been giving for the last fifty years?” Ellen White, “Review and Herald,” May 25, 1905; White, *Evangelism*, 224.

⁴³ Ellen White, *Medical Ministry* (eBook Copyright @ 2010: Ellen G White Estate, 1932), 87.

⁴⁴ ———, *The General Conference Bulletin: 1894-1913, Periodical Articles* (eBook @ 2010 Ellen G White Estate, 1895), April, 6, 1903 par 27.

⁴⁵ ———, “Manuscript Release No. 760.” (eBook Copyright @ 2010: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981). 16.4.

⁴⁶ ———, “The Ellen G White 1888 Materials.” (eBook Copyright @ 2010: Ellen G White Estate, 1987). 804.1.

⁴⁷ ———, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958, 1980), 1:201.

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Although John Harvey Kellogg had been harboring pantheistic ideas for some time, the crisis took General Conference leaders by surprise.⁴⁸ They felt blind-sided and apparently unaware of the incipient storm brewing within the medical and educational institutions in Battle Creek, Michigan. Kellogg and other leaders were seeking to accomplish a “great reformation” among Seventh-day Adventists by “giving up. . . the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization.”⁴⁹

The engine of this “reformation” was the pantheistic view of God as present everywhere. Pantheism radically reinterprets the ontological principle of the Adventist vision. When followed to its logical conclusions this philosophical conception of God sweeps away the Great Controversy (Atonement as History of Salvation), and disfigures the real biblical “Christ” beyond recognition.⁵⁰ During a Sabbath afternoon visit to Kellogg’s home in the summer of 1902, W. A. Spicer (later to become president of the General Conference) learned, to his astonishment, of the doctor’s entrenched position. He correctly understood that pantheism and the Adventist sanctuary vision are incompatible and therefore mutually exclusive.

Ellen White also understood this incompatibility, though with much greater theological precision. She comprehended that the incompatibility between these two visions lay at the level of their ontological presuppositions.⁵¹ This is so because, as we noted earlier (2.f), the sanctuary assumes God is a historical being, while pantheism assumes God’s personal

⁴⁸William Ambrose Spicer, *How the Spirit of Prophecy Met a Crisis: Memories and Notes of the “Living Temple” Controversy* (eBook Copyright @ 2010: Ellen G. White Estate, 1934), 19-21.

⁴⁹White, *Selected Messages*, 1:204.

⁵⁰———, *Selected Messages*, 1:203.

⁵¹In a divinely revealed and providentially timed message addressed to the first General Conference Autumn council meeting in Washington, DC (October 1903) entitled, “Decided Action to be Taken Now,” Ellen White spells out the macro hermeneutical danger involved in the Pantheistic spiritualization of biblical truth and spirituality facing the Church. “It is something that can not be treated as a small matter that men who have had so much light, and such clear evidence as to the genuineness of the truth we hold, should become unsettled, and led to accept *spiritualistic* theories regarding the *personality of God*. Those doctrines, followed to their logical conclusion, sweep away the whole Christian economy. They estimate as nothing the light that Christ came from heaven to give John to give to His people. They teach that the scenes just before us are not of sufficient importance to be given special attention. They make of no effect the truth of heavenly origin, and rob the people of God of their past experiences, giving them instead a false science.” Ellen Gould Harmon White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association), 7:37.

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reality is spiritual; that is, it exists in a timeless and spaceless dimension (5.c.1). Ellen White realized this view implied exactly the same “spiritualizing” of Christ many Advent movement believers used to explain the great disappointment fifty years earlier, many of them stating that Christ’s coming had been spiritual.⁵² The spiritualization of Christ is an expression of the classical timeless-spaceless Greek ontology assumed in Christian theology since early times (5.b.2-3).

The effects of accepting pantheism would have had enormous vision repercussions. Far more than mere “reform,” this change of vision would have required a complete “redoing” of Adventism from scratch. Such a redoing would have replaced the principles of truth on which Adventism stood with a new philosophical foundation built on human traditions. Essentially, the acceptance of Kellogg’s views would have transformed Adventism into another modernist Protestant denomination, with an appearance of virtue but devoid of the truth.⁵³ The biblical theological and spiritual revolution unleashed by early formative Adventist thinkers would have been aborted before having had the chance to fulfill its God-given mission of establishing “Christianity upon an eternal basis.”⁵⁴

⁵² When Ellen White read portions of Kellogg’s *Living Temple* for the first time, she “recognized the very sentiments against which I had been bidden to speak in warning during the early days of my public labors. When I first left the State of Maine, it was to go through Vermont and Massachusetts, to bear a testimony against these sentiments. *Living Temple* contains the alpha of these theories.” ———, *Selected Messages*, Christian Home Library. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 1: 203.

⁵³ “The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error. A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced. The founders of this system would go into the cities, and do a wonderful work. The Sabbath of course, would be lightly regarded, as also the God who created it. Nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the new movement. The leaders would teach that virtue is better than vice, but God being removed, they would place their dependence on human power, which, without God, is worthless. Their foundation would be built on the sand, and storm and tempest would sweep away the structure” White, *Selected Messages*, 1:204-05.

⁵⁴ “As the end approaches, the testimonies of God’s servants will become more decided and more powerful, flashing the light of truth upon the systems of error and oppression that have so long held the supremacy. The Lord has sent us messages for this time to *establish Christianity upon an eternal basis*, and all who believe present truth must stand, not in their

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b. Ground Zero: Adventist Institutions.

In an earlier stop we saw how educational and medical institutions are great resources that play a decisive grounding formative role in the life and mission of the Church (1.2.1-2). However, leaders and laypersons have come to think about them as mere tools designed to provide skills to future leaders. While this is true, we need to recognize they play a much deeper and pivotal role in the life and mission of the Church. Whether we realize it or not, something much more profound is taking place in Seventh-day Adventist educational and medical institutions: the shaping of the Adventist mind and spirit. For that reason we should see them as “ground zero” in God’s work. Let me explain.

Adventist institutions are “ground zero” in God’s work, not in its military sense of “place where an explosion occurs,” but in its derivative sense as “the center or origin of rapid, intense, or violent activity or change.” Since the spiritual center of the Christian church is Christ’s work of redemption, and “the work of education and the work of redemption are one,”⁵⁵ we can easily understand why Seventh-day Adventist institutions are the source of its theological, spiritual and missionary development. They are the place where the biblical remnant church equips her leaders spiritually as disciples, theologians and missionaries. The church of the future flows from the educational system of the present. We should neither forget nor ignore this basic law of life (Galatians 6:7).

This fact and the Battle Creek/Kellogg Pantheistic Crisis described earlier (3.a) underline the decisive role our institutions play as “ground zero” in God’s remnant church. For these reasons we now turn our attention to consider the way in which they relate to the sanctuary hermeneutical vision that originated Seventh-day Adventism.

Though Adventism averted the mega hermeneutical crisis implicit in the pantheistic reinterpretation of God’s personality (Postmodern Vision, 5.c.1) the sanctuary doctrine as the hermeneutical vision of early Adventism continued to fade away, slowly but surely, throughout the first half of the twentieth century. While Seventh-day Adventism grew in members and institutions, successive generations of leaders no longer used the sanctuary as a hermeneutical vision. In fact, by the nineteen fifties Seventh-day

own wisdom, but in God; and raise up the foundation of many generations. These will be registered in the books of heaven as repairers of the breach, the restorers of paths to dwell in. We are to maintain the truth because it is truth, in the face of the bitterest opposition. . .” ———, *Selected Messages*, 3: 407.

⁵⁵ ———, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), 30.

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Adventists used the sanctuary mostly as a doctrinal “badge” to distinguish themselves from other Protestant churches.

From grounding vision the sanctuary had become a “distinctive” doctrine.⁵⁶ Imperceptibly, the vision of Adventism was fading away. Seventh-day Adventist leaders were progressively losing this vision not because they were rejecting or reinterpreting biblical teachings on the sanctuary but rather because they were no longer using it as such. The saying “use it or lose it” was proving to be true.

Thus, the problem now threatening unsuspecting Seventh-day Adventist leaders was no longer heresy but the even more dangerous fact that Seventh-day Adventism was rapidly losing its biblical vision, necessary tool to discern the difference between heresy and truth. This problem was aggravated in the sixties when our leading educational institutions (ground zero, 3.b), now coming of age, became full-fledged research universities. Since then, we have been playing with the big boys in the major theological and ecclesiological leagues without a clearly outlined strategy (vision) from which to organize our global spiritual and missionary game plan. A systemic disconnect between administrative, ministry, missionary, educational, and medical branches of the church followed and progressively has become the *modus operandi* among Seventh-day Adventist leadership. This systemic disconnect, demanded by the high specialization and diversification of knowledge taking place during the twentieth century, has intensified and accelerated the unavoidable consequences of earlier generations’ neglect and forgetfulness of the Adventist vision.

c. Why Should We Care?

You may be thinking, *Okay, so we lost our vision, so what? We will use a new one. After all, to live is to change.* Or perhaps you are thinking, *you have your vision and I have mine.* Certainly those are valid opinions. However, we must be aware that different visions tend to create divisions. If strength is found in unity, it is far wiser to find a common unifying vision. But do we then use your vision or mine? What would be our criterion to decide? Would it be practicality, reason, science, Scripture? Do you see my point? There is only one foundation that will stand the test of time and accomplish God’s mission: the Rock of God’s Word. To avoid

⁵⁶ For an introductory study on this point see, for instance, Fernando Canale, “The Eclipse of Scripture and the Protestantization of the Adventist Mind: Part 1: The Assumed Compatibility of Adventism with Evangelical Theology and Ministerial Practices,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 21, no. 1-2 (2010).

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further divisions, even splintering into various organizations, we must recover the biblical vision and make it operative in all our churches and institutions.

At this point, you may be wondering how losing the Adventist Vision affects the life of the Church, most notably its universities and medical institutions. The answer is simple. If the vision that originated, united and organized Adventism into a worldwide movement exists only in the books of history but not in daily operation, another vision—or visions—must be operating among us. This is because no one, neither believers nor the Christian church at large, can function without a vision. Every person interprets knowledge based on some vision, most often an unconsciously adopted one. If we are not using the biblical sanctuary vision, then the vision or visions we are using have been drawn, consciously or not, from our human culture. As such, we face the implicit problem of disintegration from within. In other words, division is evident not only in the various fields of specialization, but also, and more importantly, in the way we think, interpret the Bible, worship, and understand spirituality.

By way of example let us briefly consider the present controversy over women's ordination taking place within Seventh-day Adventism. Committees were appointed, papers were written, and leaders met requesting the direction of the Holy Spirit over their deliberations. And yet, at the end of the day we still understand the Scriptural teachings on women's ordination in diverse ways. Is the Spirit not present and guiding? I believe the Spirit is present and guiding. So why are we still not of one mind and spirit on this issue? Perhaps the Spirit wants us to realize we have a methodological/hermeneutical problem that affects not only this punctual disagreement but everything we are and do. I think God wants us to learn something far greater and important than the relatively small issue of women's ordination. I think some involved in the discussions are individually arriving at this obvious conclusion. Might our present disagreement on women's ordination be related to the systemic forgetfulness of the Adventist vision? What if engaging our churches, administration and institutions in the process of retrieving the Adventist vision would help us solve this potentially divisive issue and prevent many more that will no doubt press the Church in the future, diverting time, energy and funds from our real task of preaching the message to the world?

I believe wholeheartedly that recovering and implementing our lost vision is the key to overcoming many of our current difficulties. However, as a leader you may still be in doubt, believing that involving our church

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administration, institutions and local churches in some “unpractical, brain knowledge” theological enterprise will reap little spiritual or missionary growth. Additionally, you might feel that diverting funds to such an enterprise would be an irresponsible waste of means that should instead be used in advancing the missionary work of the church around the world. If you find yourself thinking along these lines you have not fully understood yet the practical and logical repercussions for the unity and growth of the church should the entire force of dedicated Seventh-day Adventists around the world retrieve, enlarge and apply the Adventist vision in their current work assignments. In order to make this more evident, we will now explore the impact of the vision, whatever it be, on the practical life and mission of the church.

4. Thinking the Vision and the Mission

In this section we need to survey the causal correlation that exists between the vision and the life and mission of the church. We will accomplish this goal through an overview of the way in which we have related to the Adventist vision throughout history. A chart at the end of this section (Table 1: Periods and Vision Correlation) will help us visualize the causal relationship between the Adventist vision and church life in the hope that it, along with reason and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, will motivate you to apply it in your sphere of influence as lay person or General Conference leader.

a. Methodology

My reflections on the causal relationship that exists between vision and mission (as seen in the table below) follow two main coordinates, one diachronic (through time) and the other synchronic (simultaneously occurring in all historical periods). I have chosen to order the diachronic sequence according to the statements by global leaders discussed above in the “State of the Church” section (1.b). I selected them because their privileged roles in the church allowed them the best vantage point to witness the global mindset in a way not available to most of their contemporaries.⁵⁷ To round out the table and make it more useful, I have

⁵⁷ I have chosen to follow a ministerial categorization of the historical periods because in this study we are attempting to discover the causal relation that exists between theology, life and mission. Since the goal of theology is to ground and foster the life and mission of the church the best way to assess its worth is to consider its outcomes in the life and mission of the church.

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added two more time periods, one at the beginning and the other at the end. At the top of the left column, then, the chart starts with (1) the “formative years.” It then moves to Ellen White’s reflections on the (2) “most wonderful laziness” in personal Bible study among leaders and laity as the real cause behind the theological controversies at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session. After that, it continues with pastor Neal Wilson’s 1988 report about the existence of widespread (3) “doctrinal illiteracy” and lack of prophetic conviction among Seventh-day Adventists. The next period below is (4) the “lost of identity” observed by pastor Jan Paulsen in 2009. In following is (5) the “neutralization” of Scripture, taken from Pastor Ted Wilson’s (2013) concern about forces neutralizing Scripture among Seventh-day Adventists.

Before I explain this chart, a further word on methodology is imperative to avoid misunderstandings. In describing different periods I will follow a systematic or “model” methodology rather than a historical one. In other words, this methodology does not seek historical precision but common traits shared by a significant number within a historical period. The goal of this method then is not to describe historical facts with scientific accuracy but to trace important theological and ecclesiological trends in order to better understand our present experience and be in a stronger position to minister to the worldwide church. Additionally, it is granted that within the complexity of history not all leaders, nor all church members, embraced these leading mindsets. However, to underscore the effect of each period on the church, it is beneficial to imagine the consequences should all church leaders and lay members embrace them.⁵⁸

The top row in table 1 includes three fundamental aspects of Church Theology (*sola Scriptura*, Adventist Vision, and biblical system), and three important aspects of Church Life (church unity, church mission, and church relations with other churches). I organized them from left to right according to the causal links that exist between them. This means that the first is the cause or ground of the second and so on, successively.

b. Most Wonderful Laziness

We are now ready to begin exploring the relationship between theological knowledge and church life as we follow the chart from top to bottom. As we proceed, I will attempt to show the causal relationships existing between the Adventist Vision (Scripture, Vision, System) and the

⁵⁸ History presents an inexhaustibly source for reflection that can be approached with many methods all of them reaching partial results.

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three fundamental aspects of Church Life (Unity, Mission, Relations). Ellen White's strong conviction that at Minneapolis⁵⁹ the doctrinal problems stemmed directly from the absence of biblical spirituality and the presence of formalism among the leaders suggests that up to that point in time most leaders embraced and applied the Adventist Vision. Embracing the Adventist Vision led them to the discovery of the complete and harmonious system of biblical theology, which in turn produced strong personal spiritual experiences of union with Christ, which generated an undivided engagement in the mission of the church by all leaders and church members. Ellen White's comments on the Minneapolis Conference also suggest that something new, detrimental to the life of the church, was sneaking in the church, reaching even the leadership. A new period had already begun. Something had changed from earlier years. Looking at the chart you will notice that the only explicit difference between the "formative years" and the period of "most wonderful laziness" appears under the "Church Unity" as a change from spiritual to doctrinal unity. However, as Adventists began to rely on the teaching of their leaders rather than on personal Bible study, an imperceptible change in the "Adventist Vision" from an *explicit* embracing and application to an *implicit* awareness may have been taking place. The major visible difference, then, was not theological (Scripture, Vision, System) but spiritual. To use a now-familiar term among Seventh-day Adventists, head knowledge/experience was replacing spiritual knowledge/experience.

Ellen White saw it clearly, to move forward they had to overcome the spiritual situation of the church. That is the reason for her almost solitary advocacy for the message of Justification by Faith proclaimed by Waggoner and Jones. Only when biblical spirituality had been restored could the church agree doctrinally and methodologically. But how could the church get the experience of justification by faith? What was the divine prescription to experience such spirituality among the leadership? Ellen White's answer to this question was clear and simple: *personal Bible study received with prayer and applied to daily life*. Only through the *personal discovery* of divine truth as presented in Scripture can the Holy Spirit produce the righteousness/justification experience in us. This requires an individual, time intensive work. But Adventists had stopped receiving their spiritual food from Scripture. They were replacing the more painstaking

⁵⁹ To gain a first hand knowledge of Ellen White's highly negative evaluation of the 1888 Minneapolis conference see his extensive reflections in, White Ellen, *The Ellen G White 1888 Materials* (eBook Copyright @ 2010: Ellen G White Estate, 1987).

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“made from scratch” personal Bible study with the far easier “fast food” teaching of the leaders/General Conference (Butler). In so doing, something new and dangerous was sneaking into the church: tradition. We should note that this situation (that of depending on the teaching of men instead of individual study) has continued to operate in the church ever since, providing the basis for other (more visible) negative changes in the mindset and practice of Seventh-day Adventists.

c. Doctrinal Illiteracy

Resulting from this seemingly innocuous spiritual change, a very different church emerged a century later. By then the church and its institutions had grown in number and quality. Looking at the third row labeled “Doctrinal Illiteracy” we note the introduction of subtle changes. Apparently the unity of the early formative years no longer permeated the whole church. Pastor Neal Wilson’s pointed observation regarding “doctrinal illiteracy” indicates that church unity did not stand either on spiritual or doctrinal ground, but merely by force of the institutional organization. Moreover, if Adventists were ignorant of their doctrinal beliefs, they were likewise ignorant of the biblical system of truth, the Adventist vision and the *sola Scriptura* principle. Yet, the absence of these essential guiding principles in the minds of leaders and church members indicates that they had started to use their own sources, vision and system of thinking. In the vacuum of a solid biblical ground a new “Adventist” mindframe was quickly emerging from non-biblical sources. From within the everyday life of the church and its institutions (ground zero, 3.b), tradition was replacing Scripture.

Since what happens in the mind directs the actions (Proverbs 23:7) we see the results of this mind change directly affecting the life of the church. Church fragmentation was happening from within. The unity that was perceived was not spiritual or doctrinal, but institutionally grounded. Church mission and church growth were slow and uneven. Evangelization began to be directed only to the “unchurched,” implying that we need not evangelize and convert Christians of other denominations. This is a serious modification in the previous understanding of the global mission of Adventism (Three Angels’ Messages). Emerging from a mindset of tradition, another vision was silently replacing the original biblical vision in the mind of Seventh-day Adventist leaders (ground zero: administration and universities, 3.2). Keep in mind that the vision dictates how we interpret reality and therefore affects everything we think and do (2.c-d). If this trend

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continues we will be seeing gigantic changes of “biblical” proportions being advanced from within Seventh-day Adventism in the near future.

d. Loss of Identity

Let’s move on to the next period whose main characteristic, according to pastor Jan Paulsen, is the loss of Adventist identity. By the turn of the twenty-first century, many who had grown up during the eclipse of Scripture⁶⁰ became leaders in church administration and educational institutions (ground zero). This new generation developed a new conception of Adventism. Their relation to the church was not grounded in the transformation of mind and spirit (Romans 12:1-2) motivated by heart-searching Bible study (Matthew 7:24-28), but in a *cultural attachment to community*. Naturally, this group conceives of Adventism as a culturally evolving institution. Accordingly, they can no longer accept the early pioneers’ avowed identity of being the remnant church.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, an increasing number of Adventist administrative and educational leaders are no longer convinced that Seventh-day Adventism is the only true visible church of God.⁶² Articulated and empowered through the global Adventist educational system (ground zero) and disseminated by the global media ministries, these ideas are quickly permeating all levels of the administrative and educational systems in the global church.

In challenging the identity of Adventism as the remnant church this new trend is likewise rejecting the Adventist vision and the *sola Scriptura* principle⁶³ from whence it comes. As anticipated by Ellen White this challenge comes from science and takes the form of theistic evolution. Because the understanding of the universe plays a vision role in human thinking, theistic evolution is not confined to the halls of academia but

⁶⁰ For an introductory analysis of the Eclipse of Scripture in Adventism see, for instance, Canale, “The Eclipse of Scripture and the Protestantization of the Adventist Mind: Part 1: The Assumed Compatibility of Adventism with Evangelical Theology and Ministerial Practices,” ———, “The Eclipse of Scripture and the Protestantization of the Adventist Mind Part 2: From the Evangelical Gospel to Culture,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22, no. 1 (2011).

⁶¹ ———, “On Being the Remnant.”

⁶² Hasel, “The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology.”

⁶³ On the *sola Scriptura* principle see, for instance, Fernando Canale, “Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics: Toward a Critical Assessment of the Methodological Ground of the Protestant Reformation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 50, no. 2 (2012).

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permeates the whole system of church teachings and practice.⁶⁴ Challenges to the vision lead to challenging the harmonious theological system the sanctuary opens to view.

These challenges, embraced by a sector of Adventist scholars and teachers, have belittled the *sola Scriptura* principle, vision, and system of Adventism resulting in negative outcomes for the life of the church. When educators read them, they lose confidence in the biblical teachings of the church and feel motivated to change the contents of their teaching and preaching. Consequently, these new teachings change the mind of the students who, in time, become the leaders of the Adventist community. Out of these processes emerges a church doctrinally divided⁶⁵ and spiritually dead.

When the unity of the church is damaged her mission is severely weakened, possibly even mutated, through extreme cultural contextualization, both abroad and in our own American culture. Church outreach slowly but certainly morphs from outreach to ecumenical dialogue as we sit at the same table and pews with other Christian denominations (and non-Christian religions) to learn from and worship with them. If universally embraced and followed to its ultimate conclusions this trend will put a complete stop to church growth. Our church will die or be absorbed into the ongoing Roman-Catholic-led ecumenical movement.

e. The Neutralization of Scripture

As we move forward in time to consider the next period, we arrive at our present situation. In his 2013 Status of the Church address mentioned earlier (1.0), Pastor Ted Wilson directed the attention of Seventh-day Adventists to serious issues facing the global church: Loss of identity, worldliness (secularization), disunity, and, spiritual complacency. With surgical precision and theological savvy, he identified the logistical origin of these maladies: the neutralization of Scripture. Though this is a serious, even potentially terminal, diagnosis, the good news is that God has the power to reverse it and we have the key to His power through Bible study and prayer.

⁶⁴ For an introduction to the way in which evolution as a macro hermeneutical presuppositions impacts Adventism see, for instance, Fernando Luis Canale, *Evolution, Theology, and Method : Part 3 : Evolution and Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2004).

⁶⁵ For an introduction to the theological divisions in our Church see, for instance, Canale, "From Vision to System: Finishing the Task of Adventist Theology Part 1: Historical Review."

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	Sola Scriptura	Adventist Vision	Biblical System	Church Unity	Church Mission	Church Relations
Formative Years (1844)	Embraced	Explicit	Embraced	Spiritual	High	Message to the world
Most Wonderful Laziness (1888)	Embraced	Implicit	Embraced	Doctrinal	High	Message to the world
Doctrinal Illiteracy (1988)	Ignored	Ignored	Ignored	Institutional	Low	Message to the unchurched
Loss of Identity (2009)	Challenged	Challenged	Challenged	Divided	Weak	Ecumenical Dialogue
Neutralization of Scripture (2014)	Replaced	Replaced	Replaced	Traditional	Non Existent	Ecumenical Embrace

Table 1: Periods and Vision Correlations

Let us turn our attention back to “Table 1: Periods and Vision Correlation” above, noting the “Neutralization of Scripture” entry. Here we are facing the future that lies directly before us, and which, as the church, we are building day by day. All the main characteristics of each precedent period are present and working within us. At the same time, we witness all around us a clear and continuing departing from the Adventist vision and even from Scripture whence the vision comes. Let us, for a moment, imagine the consequences of “doing business as usual.”

The logical consequences of allowing the neutralization of Scripture to continue unchallenged are not difficult to see. A process of “replacement” will follow the previous periods of “neglecting” and “challenging.” Scripture will be replaced by Christian tradition. The Adventist vision will be replaced by the Panentheistic Evolutionary vision—the updated and improved version of pantheism (5.c). The “complete and harmonious system” of biblical philosophy and theology will be replaced by the

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complete and harmonious system of deep ecumenical theology.⁶⁶ The life of the church will be impacted in like manner. The bond uniting Adventists will no longer be that of the historical Christ ascended to heaven and soon returning, but the uncertain ground of an ever-changing regional traditions. Adventism will repudiate the three Angels Mission, and, embracing the ecumenical mission, church growth will be sparse at best and institutionally driven. In the long run, Seventh-day Adventism as a denomination would cease to exist, most likely merging into the deep ecumenical embrace structured, organized, and led by the Roman-Catholic church.

f. Back to Scripture All Over Again?

The good news is that the future is open. We can choose to do something different to redirect the destiny of the Church. If, as we noted above (1.b), to neutralize means “to make ineffective” then to de-neutralize would mean, “to make effective.” If Pastor Wilson’s diagnosis is correct, and I think it is, we can expect that once the global church removes the obstacles hindering Bible effectiveness, its power for salvation (by means of the Holy Spirit) will be unleashed throughout the world. We must eradicate what hinders the full power of the words of God in Seventh-day Adventism. We need to recover what we began to lose at Minneapolis: the spiritual appropriation and application of Scripture to our personal lives first, and then to all levels and activities of the worldwide church. To put it simply, we must intentionally organize to upgrade Bible study from head knowledge to a spiritual heart understanding that transforms our lives personally, communally, and institutionally. Returning to Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) then is the only option open to the church to help her achieve spiritual unity and accomplish the final mission. Why? Because going back to Scripture will produce the revival and reformation that we have long sought.

Now the question arises, *haven’t we already been diligently seeking revival and reformation?* True, we have sought revival and reformation, but the results have been mixed, at best. Our church has still not experienced the revival and reformation sought. God has not answered our prayer. Why? Because we wrongly assume God will send the latter rain only by our asking. In so assuming we forget God’s oft-repeated prediction,

⁶⁶ Erroneous theories and doctrines are also rational, consistent and harmonious, but not biblical, and therefore at the end reality will prove them to be wrong and deceptive. Only the biblical harmonious system of doctrines will prove to be true at the end. At the present time each human being must choose which system he or she wants to embrace and practice.

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“Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me” (Proverbs 1: 28 ESV). Why would a loving God not answer the requests of His children? God explains, “Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices” (Proverbs 1:29–31, ESV). Later, we find the same pattern taking place in Hosea’s time as God explained to them, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me” 4:6 (ESV). Does this somber message apply to us? Could this pattern be recurring at the present time? I think this is precisely what is happening today, particularly when we consider where we once stood and the spiritual downward spiral we have already reviewed from our past history.

I think we would all agree, then, that to finish the mission we must engage God personally and heed to all His counsels and reproofs. We must listen attentively to the voice of God, a voice we find only in the sacred pages of Scripture. Therefore, the only way to change the direction of the church and finish God’s mission is through a personal and corporate return to Scripture, characterized by humbleness of mind and heart. We must heed God’s words and then, personally and corporately, live out the Adventist vision in everyday life. The question then is *how*? How can we live the Adventist vision personally and corporately in a way that would empower the global mission of the Church? We will consider these questions in a forthcoming article.

5. Conclusion

A divided Church cannot fulfill her mission. In our attempt to overcome theological and spiritual divisions within Adventism to strengthen its mission we considered the biblical content of the Adventist vision and its determinative role in creating theological unity and passion for mission. To better understand the way in which the vision operates within the community we examined its methodological function with special focus on its nature, mode of operation, and expected outcomes. To better appreciate our present situation we surveyed loss of vision and its consequences in Adventist history. We ended this first article with a clear sense that the way to unity and total mission engagement requires that Adventist leadership (corporation) and laity should go back to Scripture to retrieve anew its vision and embrace its mission. But how could we reverse the inertia of

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many years of forgetfulness? We will explore this challenge in the next and final article of this series.

Fernando Canale is Emeritus Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the Sevensent-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, where he taught from 1985 until his retirement. Before coming to Andrews University, he was a pastor in Argentina and Uruguay and taught Philosophy and Theology at River Plate Adventist College in Argentina. canale@andrews.edu