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ADVENTIST VIEWS ON INSPIRATION

Conflicting views of inspiration among Seventh-day Adventist scholars indicate that they are still divided in their personal understanding of this important topic.

During the period of 1991-2000, Alden Thompson's *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (1991) brought the debate on inspiration down from the scholarly realm into the church level. The author, a professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla College, regarded revelation in this book as "some kind of special input from God, a message from Him to His creatures on earth" and as "a visible or audible intervention by God." He defined inspiration as "the Spirit's special urging of a messenger to speak or write" and "a means to indicate that the Holy Spirit has been active in a special way." While acknowledging that "all Scripture is given by inspiration" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), Thompson

suggested that "the most crucial point" of his book was perhaps the idea that "*the Bible does not say that all Scripture was given by revelation.*"¹

Thompson evidently intended to come up with a model of inspiration that could provide enough room for both difficulties and cultural accommodations. Room for errors, mistakes, and "fatal contradictions" in the Bible (although Thompson tried to avoid such words) was provided by the human side of his "incarnational model." Cultural accommo-

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dations found special space in his “casebook” (as opposed to “code-book”) approach to Scripture.

For Thompson, “the one great law of love,” the two commandments to love God and to love humanity, and the Ten Commandments “form a pyramid of law that embodies the eternal principles of God’s kingdom,” which are normative “to all mankind at all times everywhere.” “All other biblical laws are applications of those principles in time and place.”²

His casebook approach to Scripture also provided for a high position for human reason. According to him, “*the casebook approach allows us—in deed, forces us—to recognize that revelation and reason must work together. Revelation always deals with specific cases. Reason, in dialogue with the Spirit, determines which of those cases are most helpful in informing the decisions we make day by day.*”³

Thompson’s book was controversial from the very beginning. While some endorsed the book, others strongly opposed it. The most significant response to it was the Adventist Theological Society’s *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (1992),⁴ with articles by Raoul Dederen (two), Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, Norman Gulley, Richard Davidson, Gerhard Hasel, Randall Younker, Frank Hasel, and Miroslav Kis.

The basic consensus of those authors was that Alden Thompson’s model of inspiration was based on a

partial reading of the Bible and of the writings of Ellen White. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson even alleged in the preface that Thompson’s study illustrated “the fruits of the historical-critical method,” which had been regarded by the 1986 Annual Council as “unacceptable” for Adventists.⁵

While the previous developments of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of inspiration have been largely confined to the phenomena of Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, Fernando Canale, professor of systematic theology at Andrews University, in the summer of 1993 began a five-part series in the *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, proposing a “new approach” to the doctrine of revelation and inspiration. Canale suggested that “a new theological model about the origin of Scripture” could be developed on the basis of an understanding of God and of human nature derived from Scripture rather than from Greek philosophical concepts.

Canale criticized conventional Roman Catholic and Protestant models of revelation-inspiration for their indebtedness to a timeless view of God and to an immortalist concept of the human soul. He explained, in regard to the concept of God, that “when God is conceived to act within a timeless realm, the theological content of Scripture (which is brought into being by God) will also pertain

to the timeless realm. In this case, the historical side of Scripture is considered to belong, not to its divine cause, but rather to the human condition necessary for the expression of its divinely (timelessly) originated content. Thus, the Scriptures are said to be 'historically conditioned.' On the contrary, the concept that God is capable of acting genuinely in history (that is, 'historically') leads to a conception of the biblical writings as being 'historically constituted.' According to the former view, the historical side of Scripture is external and incidental to its religious and theological contents; according to the latter view, the historical side of Scripture belongs to the very essence of its divinely revealed and inspired contents."⁶

The development of a new model of revelation-inspiration based on the *sola Scriptura* principle would require, according to Canale, the paradigmatic shift to a "temporal-historical conception of God's being and actions" that allows Him to act "historically in history." The multiform "divine revelatory activity" in history was viewed as comprising "theophanic, direct writing, prophetic, historical, and existential" patterns,⁷ supporting the notion that "the whole Bible is revealed and the whole Bible is inspired."⁸ For Canale, this change of paradigm would require also "a new exegetical methodology" (different from both the classic historical-

grammatical method and the liberal historical-critical method). Canale dealt with this new methodology in some later publications.

The spring 1994 issue of the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* came out with several papers on inspiration presented at the 1993 Scholars' Convention of the Adventist Theological Society, which convened in Washington, D.C., on November 18, and Silver Spring, Maryland, on November 19-20, 1993. The overall tenor of those papers was the emphasis on the infallibility of Scripture, with specific responses to some charges raised against the trustworthiness of the Bible.

In 1995, Robert S. Folkenberg, then president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, stated in the *Adventist Review* that "our unequivocal, historic emphasis upon the divine inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture has strengthened our church. It has helped us resist the error of treating some parts of Scripture as God's Word, while ignoring or rejecting other parts. If we accept it as God's Word, we must accept it all, whether or not we like what it says. To us the Scriptures should be the ultimate revelation of God's will for our lives."⁹

Several other publications helped to keep alive the ongoing debate on inspiration during the second half of the 1990s. One of the most influential

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landmarks in that debate was Samuel Koranteng-Pipim’s provocative book *Receiving the Word*. Pipim, who was at that time a Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at Andrews University, called the attention of his readers to a significant variety of historical-critical attempts to undermine the authority of the Scriptures within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He also tried to uplift the trustworthiness of the Bible by demonstrating that many of its alleged “errors” are either distortions added in the transmission process of its original text, or short-cuts in our present understanding of its true meaning.¹⁰

That not everybody fully agreed with Pipim’s approach is evident from George R. Knight’s response to it. Knight, a professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, criticized Pipim (1) for still believing in “inerrancy and verbalism”¹¹ and (2) for using the “well-known debater’s

technique” in which “at one extreme it sets up the ‘right’ position, which is very, very right, while at the other extreme is the ‘wrong’ position, which is very, very wrong.”¹² Knight’s own view of inspiration was more clearly expressed in his book *Reading Ellen White*, in which he argued (1) that “inspiration is not infallible, inerrant, or verbal”¹³; (2) that several factual “mistakes” can be found in the inspired writings¹⁴; and (3) that those writings are infallible only “as a guide to salvation.”¹⁵ The views of Pipim, on one side, and of Knight, on the other, are representative of the two main conflicting poles around which gravitate the contemporary discussions on inspiration.

Meanwhile, the concept of models of inspiration was much further developed in 1996 by Juan Carlos Viera, director of the Ellen G. White Estate, in his *Adventist Review* article entitled “The Dynamics of Inspiration.” While George Rice had spoken only of two

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models, Viera suggested the following six: (1) the *visionary* model, in which God speaks “through prophetic visions and dreams”; (2) the *witness* model, in which God inspires “the prophet to give his or her own account of things seen and heard”; (3) the *historian* model, in which the message “did not come through visions and dreams, but through research”; (4) the *counselor* model, in which “the prophet acts as an adviser to God’s people”; (5) the *epistolary* model, in which “the prophet writes greetings, names, circumstances or even common things that do not require a special revelation”; and (6) the *literary* model, in which “the Holy Spirit inspires the prophet to express his or her intimate feelings and emotions through the means of poetry and prose, as in the psalms.” According to Viera, “the prophet can make orthographical or grammatical mistakes, as well as other kinds of language imperfections such as *lapsus linguae* (a slip of the tongue) or *lapsus memoriae* (a slip of the memory),”

but the Holy Spirit “is in control of the inspired message” and “always corrected His messengers in matters important to the church.”¹⁶ Viera’s models reflect more the sources of the inspired content than its actual transmission process.

Two years later, Viera’s book on inspiration, *The Voice of the Spirit*, attempted to explain the “relationship between a divine message, perfect and infallible, and a human messenger, imperfect and fallible,” in the process of prophetic inspiration. Commenting on Ellen White’s classic statement, “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired . . . ,”¹⁷ Viera suggested that, “taken with all the seriousness that this declaration deserves, it means that expressions such as ‘the pen of inspiration,’ and ‘the inspired writings’ are only symbolic expressions that refer to the message the writings communicate and not to the text itself of the prophetic declarations. Expressions such as these will continue to be used—and there is nothing

wrong with that—because we all understand what they mean: that what we may be reading at the moment comes from a mind inspired by the Spirit of God. Therefore, we speak of ‘inspired paragraphs’ or ‘inspired books’ or ‘inspired letters.’ Nevertheless, those expressions, taken literally, would contradict the prophetic thought that tells us that it is not the text, the words, or the language of a declaration that is inspired, but the message these communicate—and that message comes from heaven.”¹⁸

Support for the notion of a non-inspired prophetic text was found in the fact that Ellen White herself allowed C. C. Crisler and H. H. Hall’s chapter on “The Awakening of Spain” to be added to the Spanish version of her book *The Great Controversy*.¹⁹ Under the assumption that this chapter shares the same nature of the book itself, Viera was not afraid of stating that the chapter “ended up being part of the text (not inspired) of a book that contains the message (inspired) of God.”²⁰ This might be easily seen as a significant move toward the liberal position that the Bible is not the Word of God but only contains that Word.

Also in 1998 came Herbert Douglass’s textbook titled *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White*. Rejecting “verbal, inerrant inspiration” for implying that the prophet would have to function simply as a “recording machine” or as

a “court stenographer,” Douglass argued for “thought inspiration” because “God inspires the prophet, not his or her words.” But the “divinely revealed message, or content,” can still be regarded as “infallible and authoritative.”²¹

Of special significance in the late 1990s were Leo R. van Dolson’s adult Sabbath school lessons for the first quarter of 1999, dealing specifically with the subjects of “revelation and inspiration,” and its companion book titled *Show and Tell*. Van Dolson, who had been one of the editors of the book *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (1992), defined inspiration in his lessons as “the means by which God safeguarded the production and preservation of the Bible in order for it to become an infallible and sufficient guide to salvation.”²² But these widespread Bible lessons, as balanced in their content as they could be, were unable to affect Adventist academic tensions about inspiration.

Noteworthy also are some articles on inspiration published in *Ministry* magazine between 1999 and 2000. The September 1999 issue of that magazine came out with a slightly edited version of Alberto Timm’s paper presented at a plenary session of the First Jerusalem International Bible Conference, in June 1998. Timm, director of the Brazilian Ellen G. White Research Center and professor of church history and historical theology at Brazil Adventist University’s

Campus 2, suggested that further Adventist studies on “the nature and authority of the Bible” should take into consideration (1) “the symphonic nature of inspiration,” avoiding the “classical polarization under the labels of verbal inspiration on one side and thought inspiration on the other”; (2) “the wholistic scope of inspiration,” recognizing that the “overall thematic interrelationship” of the Scriptures “makes it almost impossible for someone to speak of the Bible in dichotomous terms as being reliable in some topics and not in others”; and (3) “a respectful approach to the inspired writings,” that allows us to emphasize “more the content of the divine messages than their human containers” and “more the core of these messages than their side issues.”²³

A new appeal for a cultural-conditioned understanding of inspiration was made by Richard W. Coffen in his two-part series “A Fresh Look at the Dynamics of Inspiration,” published in *Ministry* magazine of December 1999 and February 2000. Coffen, vice-president of editorial services at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, was the editor of Alden Thompson’s *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (1991), and showed himself very close to Thompson’s theory of inspiration. Besides pointing out several factual errors in the Scriptures, Coffen also argued for a divine-human dichotomous read-

ing of the Scriptures. He says, “Contrary to what some suggest, it is not heretical to deal with merely the human aspect of the Bible in isolation from its divine side, or vice versa. That’s not heresy but simple necessity. The heresy occurs when we deny the unity, wholeness, and complementarity principle in relation to inspiration.”²⁴

At the end of the second part of Coffen’s article appeared an editor’s note saying that “a response to Richard Coffen’s two-part series,” by Ekkehardt Mueller, associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, would appear in the April 2000 issue of *Ministry*. In that response, Mueller explained that “an inductive approach” to Scripture, as used by some scholars, “looks for discrepancies and takes notice of these phenomena. Oftentimes, it does not allow for harmonization even where it seems to be possible and advisable. It is preoccupied with finding differences rather than agreement and unity. And it always has only parts of the entire puzzle.”²⁵

Thus, instead of an inductive-versus-deductive approach, one should proceed inductively and deductively, taking into consideration not only “the phenomena of the biblical texts” but also “the self-testimony of Scripture.”²⁶

Mueller argued also that “the human and the divine in Scripture

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are not complementary. They are integrated. Consequently, different sets of tools in order to study the human side and the divine side of the Bible cannot do justice to the unified nature, the truly incarnational character of Scripture.²⁷

Another major appeal for a historically conditioned understanding of inspiration can be found in Raymond Cottrell’s paper, “Inspiration and Authority of the Bible in Relation to Phenomena of the Natural World.” Presented originally at the revisionist 1985 Conference on Geology and the Biblical Record sponsored by the Association of Adventist Forums (publisher of *Spectrum* magazine), in West Yellowstone, Montana, this paper appeared in print only in 2000, as a chapter of that conference’s symposium, titled “Creation Reconsidered.” Cottrell, a former editor of the *Review and Herald* Publishing Association and more recently an editor of *Adventist Today*, tried to solve some of the basic tensions between faith and

reason, and between the Bible and natural sciences and secular history, by suggesting a clear distinction between the “inspired message” of the Bible and the “uninspired form in which it comes to us.” Yet “the inspired message on record in the Bible” is viewed by Cottrell as “culturally conditioned” and “historically conditioned.” For him, “historical conditioning permeates the entire Bible. It is not incidental, nor is it exceptional and unusual; it is the invariable rule.”²⁸

Under the assumption that “in matters of science, the Bible writers were on a level with their contemporaries,” Cottrell could suggest that on these matters our understanding should be informed by the more reliable data provided by modern science. His attempt to harmonize the Bible account of Creation with modern science led him to the conclusion that “at an unspecified time in the remote past, the Creator transmuted a finite portion of his infinite

From the early 1800s up to the time of Ellen White's death (1915), traditional views of inspiration were challenged by individuals who either had been personally reproved by Ellen White or had been shocked by the idea that inspired writing could be improved by its author.

power into the primordial substance of the universe—perhaps in an event such as the Big Bang.”²⁹

The notion that “the words and forms of expression in the Bible were historically conditioned to their time and perspective” led the same author, elsewhere, to the conclusion that the Genesis flood did not extend beyond the known “lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.” He even stated that “only by reading our modern world-view of ‘all the earth’ [Gen 7:3] back into the Hebrew text can the idea of a world-wide flood be established.”³⁰ This represents, indeed, a major departure from the traditional Adventist understanding of a universal flood, as described in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, of which Cottrell himself was an associate editor.

But also published in the year 2000 was the most comprehensive official exposition of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of inspiration. That exposition, titled “Revelation and Inspiration,” was prepared by Peter M. van Bemmelen, professor of

theology at Andrews University, and submitted to the analysis of the Biblical Research Institute Committee, sponsored by the General Conference, prior to its publication as a chapter of the major *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (2000). The subject of inspiration is addressed in that chapter from the perspective of (1) its biblical interpretation, (2) its main historical expositions throughout the Christian era, and (3) Ellen G. White’s comments on the topic.

Van Bemmelen defined “inspiration” as the supernatural process by which the prophets were “moved and directed by the Spirit of God, in putting the words of the Lord in written form.” While recognizing that “the locus of inspiration is in the inspired author,” he argued that “there is little doubt that thoughts as well as words are involved in this process,” in such a way that those words are “words from God,” “fully human and fully divine.”³¹ Furthermore, “because all of Scripture is God’s word and every word that

comes from God is true, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that all of Scripture is truth.”³²

In regard to the so-called “factual errors” of the Bible, van Bemmelen recognizes that “no serious student of the Bible will deny that there are difficulties in Scripture,” but he adds that “these difficulties do not affect the clarity of Scripture.” He warns his readers that the claims and allegations “that there are numerous errors, contradictions, historical inaccuracies, anachronisms, and other flaws in the Scriptures” constitute “a serious indictment against the truthfulness of Holy Scripture.” He also alerted his readers that “through exalting the authority of human reason, tradition, and science, many have come to deny or to limit the authority of Scripture.” But the Bible itself “warns repeatedly against anything or anybody that would undermine or usurp the authority of the Word of God.”³³

In the first few years of the 21st century, the developing tensions from the previous three decades crystallized into either a more theological approach or a more pragmatic view. Building up on his former articles on “Revelation and Inspiration” (1993-1995), Fernando L. Canale’s major theological and scholarly contributions for the study of the inspiration-revelation process culminated in the publication of his works *Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive*

Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern Word (2001)³⁴ and *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (2005).³⁵ Committed to the high view of Scripture as the reliable Word of God, Canale argued that Christian knowledge can be regarded as of divine origin only by allowing the Bible to say what it actually says about itself; otherwise, Christian theology is left groundless, without any cognitive foundation.

A more pragmatic and popular view was held by the Australian Graeme Bradford in his books *Prophets Are Human* (2004),³⁶ *People Are Human (Look What They Did to Ellen White)* (2006),³⁷ and *More Than a Prophet: How We Lost and Found Again the Real Ellen White* (2006).³⁸ By accepting the validity of most of the criticisms raised against Ellen White, Bradford’s low view of inspiration provides room for a huge variety of supposed factual errors and inaccuracies within the inspired writings.

Alden Thompson expanded the basic concepts of his series “From Sinai to Golgotha” (1981)³⁹ into the book *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew From Fear to Joy—And Helped Me Do It Too* (2005).⁴⁰ Thompson suggests that the concepts exposed within the prophetic writings develop and improve over time to such extent that the early

writings of a prophet can be considered as less mature (and less reliable) than his or her later ones, regarded as more mature (and more reliable).

Bradford's and Thompson's emphases on the humanity of the prophets raise the questions, If prophetic writings are quite as permeated by factual errors as non-inspired Christian writings, what is then the advantage of the former writings over the later ones? Are we, as non-prophets, entitled to correct the teachings of the prophetic writings? By doing so, would we not end up regarding our own ideas as more reliable than those exposed by God's prophets?

The conflicting views of inspiration mentioned above demonstrate that at least some Seventh-day Adventist scholars are still divided in their personal understanding of inspiration.

Summary and Conclusion

Different views on the nature of inspiration have been advocated within the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the 150 years of its history.

Sabbatarian Adventists inherited William Miller's high view of Scripture as the infallible and unerring Word of God. That Seventh-day Adventists kept that view of Scripture during the first four decades of their history (1844-1883) is evident from both their responses to infidel chal-

lenges against the Bible and their uncritical reprint in the *Review* of several articles by non-Seventh-day Adventist authors who fostered an inerrant view of Scripture.

From the early 1800s up to the time of Ellen White's death (1915), traditional views of inspiration were challenged by individuals who either had been personally reproved by Ellen White or had been shocked by the idea that inspired writing could be improved by its author. During that same period, Ellen White wrote some of her most significant statements on inspiration. Responses to higher criticism show that Seventh-day Adventists continued to regard the Scriptures as the infallible and trustworthy Word of God.

The first five years after the death of Ellen White saw the development of an identity crisis about the nature of her inspiration. That crisis reached its climax at the 1919 Bible and History Teachers' Council. The years following that council viewed Seventh-day Adventists on the side of Fundamentalism in uplifting the trustworthiness of the Bible in the context of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy. Responses to Modernism demonstrate that Seventh-day Adventists still kept their view of Scripture as the infallible and unerring Word of God.

In the early 1950s, new trends began to develop within Seventh-day Adventism that assumed an in-

creasingly radical tone in the early 1970s. Such issues as encounter revelation and the use of the historical-critical method influenced the Seventh-day Adventist discussions about inspiration. The main forum to foster discussions of those issues was *Spectrum* magazine.

Despite the emergence of new trends, no significant changes were made in Seventh-day Adventist official statements on inspiration. One has to avoid, therefore, the generalizing tendency of superimposing individual views or segment trends from the scholarly world upon the whole church.

Noticeably, the last few decades have seen the development of a factual and apologetic doctrine of inspiration largely shaped by revisionist studies of Ellen White. As insightful as such developments can be, the time has come for Seventh-day Adventists to move beyond apologetic concerns into the task of developing a more constructive theology of inspiration.

Holding to the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, Seventh-day Adventists should seriously take more into consideration what the Bible and the writings of Ellen White have to say about themselves. As the end-time remnant, Seventh-day Adventists should not give up their identity as a people who live “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, RSV). □

This article concludes a three-part series.

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