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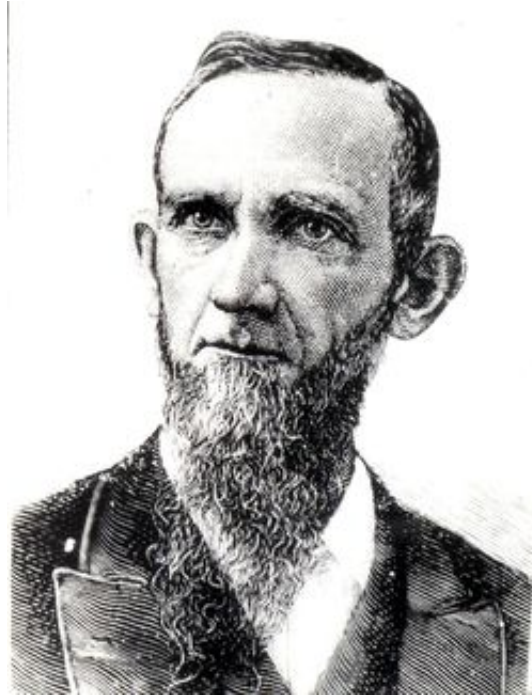
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March 27, 2012

2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "D. M. Canright and Inspiration: The Origin of a Crisis"



Presentation

Jud Lake* presented his research on the topic "D. M. Canright and Inspiration: The Origin of a Crisis". The following exposition summarizes his presentation, rendering the main points of his findings.

Introduction

Dudley M. Canright (1840–1919), formerly a well-known Seventh-day Adventist minister, became the most significant detractor of Seventh-day Adventism and Ellen White during the late 19th century and early 20th century. One year after Canright left the Church he published the first edition of *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced* (1888). In this book he laid down six reasons for his rejection of Ellen White's prophetic gift and divine inspiration: (1) she rewrote statements she had originally written; (2) her husband made suggestions which she incorporated in her writings; (3) she employed editorial help; (4) she used the writings of others in her books; (5) she suppressed some passages from her earlier works; and (6) when the *Testimonies* were revised in 1885, approximately 24 "changes" of words were made on each page. Lake concluded that these points show that Canright obviously had a mechanical view of inspiration. In the course of his presentation the speaker looked at the pertinent models of inspiration, the broader 19th-century background, the role of the French theologian Louis Gaussen and his reception in Adventist publications, the Adventist crisis in the mid-1880s, Ellen White's own views of

inspiration in comparison to Gausson's view, and the origin of Canright's conceptions.

Models of Inspiration

Lake gave three definitions of divine inspiration that are relevant to his study: (1) the verbal-plenary model of inspiration—while it distances itself from the mechanical view of inspiration, it nevertheless declares that it is the entire biblical text with its verbal relationships that is inspired; (2) the dictation model of inspiration—while there was some overlap with the first view of inspiration, it declares primarily that the Bible was dictated word for word by God, a view that was obviously used by Canright to critique Ellen White; and (3) the whole-person model of inspiration—this view focuses on the inspiration of the whole person rather than only the words or the thoughts of the prophet, a view that was espoused by Ellen White.

Nineteenth-Century Protestantism and Inspiration

In the 19th century such developments as deism, higher criticism, etc. challenged traditional views of inspiration and caused Christians to reformulate these, rejecting notions of verbal or plenary inspiration and proposing various alternatives. During the Second Great Awakening evangelicals gave a renewed emphasis to the Bible as the Word of God and the final authority for Christian life and doctrine, which in turn led them to clash with their liberal counterparts. Lake mentioned the early 19th-century revivalist Robert Haldane, the first writer in the English-speaking world who used the term “verbal inspiration.” Haldane, in various ways, promoted the idea that God “dictated” the words to the biblical writers.

Louis Gausson

The same view was also found in the works of the Swiss theologian Louis Gausson (1790-1863), a colleague of D'Aubigné. Both influenced Adventists—D'Aubigné for his *History of the Reformation* and Gausson for his belief in the Second Advent and his use of the historicist approach in the interpretation of prophecy. Gausson's book *Theopneustia* was translated into English and had such an impact on English-speaking Christianity that it remained uninterruptedly in print until 1971. Lake pointed out that Gausson regarded inspiration as a process in which the divine agency entirely dominates any human agency. Further, inspiration has to do with the writings and not with the writers. Gausson frequently made use of the term “dictated” in regard to the words that God directly “dictated” to the biblical writers. Hence it is no wonder why, in 1886, Augustus H. Strong referred to Gausson as an advocate of mechanical inspiration, the Bible writers being the “pens, not the penmen, of God.” Lake referred to another famous 19th-century writer, Benjamin B. Warfield, who promoted the idea of inerrancy and, although speaking favorably of Gausson, he carefully avoided the language of dictation. Lake pointed out that Gausson's book was popular only at the grassroots level rather than in scholarly circles; the writers and readers of the *Review and Herald* may well be put in the first category.

Gausson and the *Review and Herald*

Early Adventists maintained a high view of Scripture. Yet until the early 1880s there is no extended treatment of the nature of inspiration in Adventist publications. Since Gausson was noted among the Millerites and early Seventh-day Adventists for his belief in the Second Advent and his prophetic expositions, Lake surmised that Gausson won the confidence of early Adventists causing them to embrace his views on inspiration and to uncritically reprint passages from his book in the *Review* between the late 1850s and the early 1880s. The speaker concluded that while Gausson himself denied a belief in the dictation theory, readers of the English version of his *Theopneustia* could easily derive a rigid view of inspiration from his dictation language, which is what some Adventists did.

The *Review and Herald* and the Language of Dictation

Lake pointed out that the writers in the *Review* frequently utilized a language akin to Gausson's phraseology in *Theopneustia*.

Then the speaker went on to quote several statements from articles in the *Review* during the years 1855 to 1883, representing the use of the word “dictated.” While it is often used in a general sense of “control” or “direct,” there were also some references to the Bible that evoked a strong sense of divine control and direction in the production of the Bible, suggesting a strong focus on the words. Then he referred to the use of the dictation terminology (in the late 1860s and early 1880s) in regard to Ellen White and her writings where people considered her writings as being “dictated” by the Holy Spirit.

The Crisis in Battle Creek on Inspiration: 1883-1885

With such statements found in the *Review* it is no surprising why church members had developed a rigid view of the inspiration of the Bible writers and Ellen White. In the early 1880s a crisis exploded in the church on this topic. Since 1881 Ellen White and her staff were working on a revision of the *Testimonies*. When news of this revision got out to church members, a storm of opposition erupted, particularly in the Battle Creek church. This was specifically due to a rigid, mechanical, dictatorial view of inspiration that could not tolerate any changes of the wording in the inspired writings. The 1883 General Conference session proposed a resolution that called for “verbal changes” in the *Testimonies* as “to remove” any “imperfections.” It further affirmed a more holistic understanding of inspiration: “We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the words in which the ideas should be expressed.”

Ellen White’s View of Inspiration and Louis Gausson

Lake declared that Ellen White’s view was much more whole-person oriented than the word-oriented view of Gausson and those in the church who had adopted his view. Between the 1880s and the turn of the century a second wave of Gausson’s influence became manifest in the church, particularly through the influence of W. W. Prescott. People who were impacted were S. N. Haskell and D. M. Canright. That Ellen White never accepted, yes even rejected, this view is evident from her statements to David Paulson in 1906. She stated, for example, that it “is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired,” and that “the writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.” Yet the second wave of Gausson’s influence continued and still persists today.

Origin of Canright’s View of Inspiration

With keeping these points in mind it is easier to see the context of Canright’s experience. Canright carefully studied Moses Hull’s 1863 book *The Bible from Heaven: A Dissertation on the Evidences of Christianity* and published a revised version in 1878. While Hull argued that the Bible does not conflict with the sciences, it was not given to teach these. It was nevertheless reliable, authentic, integer, credible, and able to answer all objections. Canright mainly followed Hull, at times word for word, but he also rewrote portions and added new material. Thus far, Lake, could not find positive evidence that Canright had ever read Gausson’s book. Canright was, however, an avid reader who regularly bought the newest books he could find on certain topics. Hence it is possible that Canright was also acquainted with the popular and well-known book *Theopneustia* by Gausson. His use of the dictation phraseology and word-oriented perspective on inspiration suggests that he was directly or indirectly influenced by Gausson’s view. In reaction to one Ellen White critic he revealed a strict black-and-white view of a test of prophets (either her writings are the word of God or not inspired at all). He used the phrase “the word of God” in reference to her writings, a claim that she never made.

A further piece of evidence is that Canright had left the ministry three times and the third time was between 1882 and 1884. Thus he was not present at the 1883 General Conference session when the resolution regarding the revision of Ellen White’s writings and the declaration regarding her inspiration was passed. Apparently he was not even reading church publications, including the *Review*, during that time. Lake suggests that Canright belonged to the group of Adventists that held a rigid view of inspiration. Canright had been influenced by similar views within Adventism and he reflected the views of Gausson’s *Theopneustia*. His mechanical dictation model of inspiration is clearly seen in his first edition (1888) and all future editions

(until 1914) of *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*. It can also be found in his last book against Ellen White, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White, Seventh-day Adventist Prophet, Her False Claims Refuted* (1919). Because of his rigid view of inspiration he tended to misunderstand and misinterpret Ellen White during his pastoral ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist church (28 years) and in the Baptist church (32 years). Canright never repudiated his rigid view that he had espoused in discrediting Ellen White whereas the Baptist denomination repudiated that “dictation theory” and espoused a “dynamic theory.”

Conclusion

Lake came to the following conclusions: (1) Many critics of the 20th and early 21st century have employed a word-oriented view of inspiration similar to Canright’s view to discredit Ellen White’s ministry. An emphasis of the words and sentences while disregarding the literary context ended always in misinterpretation. (2) The debates at the 1919 Bible Conference and the plagiarism charges of Walter Rea in the early 1980s are examples of a word-oriented view of inspiration that continued beyond the 19th century. While in the early 21st century many conservative Adventist misinterpret Ellen White’s writings from an unbiblical word-oriented perspective of inspiration, other Adventists lose their confidence in her writings because they recognize that a defense from such a perspective is untenable. (3) The history of the Adventist church shows the need of educating the church on the subject of biblical inspiration and how it operated with the Bible writers and the experience of Ellen White. In order to avoid the same mistakes in which Canright and others fell we should continue learning from the lessons of the 1883 General Conference session action against verbal inspiration and Ellen White’s whole-person view of inspiration during the late 1880s.




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