

7-2006

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Recommended Citation

Damsteegt, P. Gerard, "The Adventist Theologian, the Three Angels' Messages, and the Unity of the Church" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 72.

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The Adventist Theologian, the Three Angels' Messages, and the Unity of the Church

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Presented at the 2nd International Bible Conference
Izmir, Turkey, July 7-18, 2006

This paper is written in the context of God's mandate to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This mandate calls for Seventh-day Adventists to proclaim the great commission, focusing on the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. Toward the end of her life the prophetess to the remnant summarized this commission in the following words:

In a special sense, Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light-bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the Word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels' messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention.¹

This mandate involves all church members, regardless of their occupations. All members have as their highest calling the responsibility to disseminate the three angels' messages—Christ's last message of mercy.

What does this mean for Adventist theologians? It means that they are privileged to participate in unitedly sharing these messages from their respective theological disciplines. No matter how demanding their disciplines might be, the overarching call for the theologians is to join with church members in sharing Christ's last offer of salvation

¹ E. G. White, *Testimonies*, 9: 19 (1909)

as the only hope of humanity to a dying world. Theologians also would assist in answering challenges and criticisms against our message and mission.

The effectiveness of our church's mission depends on the unity of how united theologians in executing this divine mandate of the three angels' messages, and their ability to serve the church and work together with its membership in implementing this mission.

Now the author will focus on the implications of the three angels' messages for Adventist theologians, the role they play in proclaiming these messages, and how they can contribute to the unity of the church.

Significance of the Three Angels' Messages

To obtain a clear understanding of the task of the Adventist theologian regarding the three angels' messages, we need define what we mean by these messages.²

From the outset, it is important to realize that interpretation of these messages did not happen by chance, guessing, or speculation. Primary sources show that Divine Providence guided our pioneers in the interpretation of these messages, firmly establishing the foundations of our faith. Through “earnest prayer and careful research of the Inspired Word”³ they discovered that these messages reveal the truth that prepares men and women for Jesus' second coming.

After the Great Disappointment of 1844, Adventists, with fasting and praying, frequently met together, often until late at night—sometimes all night—searching the

² For the historical theological development of the three angels' messages among the pioneers, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977). Since 1988 it has been reprinted by Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI 49104.

³ White, “As You Have Received . . . So Walk,” *Review and Herald*, August 19, 1909.

Scriptures to understand the mystery of their experience in the autumn of 1844, the Great Disappointment.⁴

In a series of Bible Conferences from 1846 through 1848, during which the Holy Spirit manifested Himself in a very unique manner through the Spirit of Prophecy, the mandate for the message and mission of the remnant church was clearly formulated. In 1849, as a result of these conferences, Ellen White could say, “We have the truth. We know it.”⁵ Reflecting on this providential guidance, she later remarked, “the Lord would have us walk and work in perfect unity” for it is “in unity of spirit and action will be our strength.”⁶

We will now view how Seventh-day Adventists have interpreted these messages since this guidance.

The First Angel’s Message

The first angel’s message proclaims the everlasting gospel message of the good news of salvation for the time of the end (Rev. 14:6). It reveals the good tidings of the mystery of God, that through the atoning sacrifice at Calvary, Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for our sins, redeemed us from the kingdom of Satan, and has adopted us as sons and daughters of God, giving us precious gift of eternal life which will be fully experienced at Christ’s second coming.

Since 1844 the everlasting gospel has been calling people to repentance with a sense of urgency as never before. The call is made with a loud voice to every human being to fear God and give glory to Him. It is a call for a thorough repentance, demanding a

⁴ Ibid., *Special Testimonies*, Series B, No. 2, 56, 57).

⁵ Letter, E. G. White to the Hastingses, No. 18 (Jan. 11), 1850.

⁶ Ibid., “As You Have Received . . . So Walk,” *Review and Herald*, August 19, 1909.

surrender of all physical, mental, and spiritual powers to the Creator and Redeemer. It leads persons to have such a true fear of sin that they will no longer to continue the sinful lifestyles of the world.

The reason for the urgency of this call is that the hour of His judgment has arrived. This message calls people to repent because the final judgment has already begun. Since 1844 the heavenly records have been opened (Daniel 7:9-11), and the deeds of God's professed people are being investigated in the light of His eternal law, the standard of the judgment. From that time onward, the Scriptures direct our attention to the ark containing the Ten Commandments in the Most Holy Place of His heavenly temple (Rev. 11:19) and the relevance of this law in the final judgment.

The first angel's call concludes with an invitation to worship God as the Creator. This brings out the significance of true worship, which is only accomplished through keeping the Sabbath holy. The second and third messages bring out the tragic consequences about those who reject the first angel's message and to continue to practice false worship forms.

The Second Angel's Message

The second angel's message (Rev. 14:8), explains the result of the rejection of the first angel's message. In the historicist time frame of prophecy, this refers to the rejection of the Great Second Advent movement and the persecution of Advent believers by the Protestant churches, especially in North America.

When during 1843 and 1844 the Adventists observed that the Protestant churches opposed the first angel's message and persecuted and excommunicated them from their churches, their attention was naturally drawn to the second angel's message that announced the fall of Babylon.

Using the historicist prophetic interpretation, many Protestants had interpreted the little horn of Daniel 7, the first beast of Revelation 13, and the harlot and Babylon of Revelation 17 as the apostate Roman Catholic Church and the antichrist of Bible prophecy. When the Protestant churches rejected the Advent message of Daniel 8:14 about the cleansing of the sanctuary, Adventists limited the term “Babylon” no longer only to the Roman Catholic Church, but also the Protestant churches.

The Protestant churches, so highly favored by God during the Reformation, at this time “fell from the favor of God.”⁷ Now they, like the Roman Catholic Church, had become a part of Babylon, and joined the apostate spiritual confusion at the end of time. Adventists who left their churches or were disfellowshipped became a part of a unique movement, which they called the remnant church of prophecy.

The justification for being the prophetic remnant is based on the fact that Babylon had fallen and that the only hope for God’s people was to come out of Babylon and join the remnant of the last days, who keep the commandments of Jesus and the faith of Jesus, and have the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 14:12; 12:17).

The fall of Babylon, therefore, became the biblical justification for the existence of the remnant church. If Babylon had not fallen there would have been hope for its religious organizations to revive and reform. But after their fall became a historical fact, God raised up the remnant church as a place of refuge for His people that they might find shelter from the coming destruction brought about by the seven last plagues when they hear the call, “Come out of her My people,” (Rev. 18:4).

⁷ Ibid., *Early Writings*, 237.

The Third Angel's Message

The third angel's message (Rev. 14:9-12) proclaims with a loud cry the last warning to an apostate world to escape the final wrath that God will pour out upon all the disobedient. It contains the most severe warning ever given to humanity against worshiping the beast and his image. It points to the outpouring of the seven last plagues that follow the close of probation, when there is no more mercy because Christ has completed His intercessory ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. God's judgments upon the human race have always been mixed with mercy; the judgments under the last plagues follow the close of probation after which there is no more mercy.

In the seven last plagues, God's wrath falls upon humanity without any mercy because of His indignation against a rebellious world that was willing to utterly annihilate His remnant. The angel said, "You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." (Rev. 16:5, 6).

In the context of historicist interpretation of Revelation 13, the first beast represents Roman Catholicism; the image of the beast, apostate Protestantism. The first power has enforced false worship on the world through most of the Christian era; apostate Protestantism will participate in this effort in the very near future, which will be seen in an enforcement of Sunday as the day to worship God on a worldwide scale.

When Sunday worship will be forced on people the final scenes of Revelation 13 will transpire. Those who bow to the pressure and worship according to the laws enacted through the influence of both of these powers will receive a mark on their foreheads or on

their hands. Consequently, they will be subject to the seven last plagues and will utterly perish.

Just before Christ's return all non-Christian religions will unite with this apostate Christian coalition against the Remnant Church. At that time Babylon will be a three-fold union, composed of Catholicism, apostate Protestantism, and spiritualism that embraces all other religions, to influence humanity to accept Sunday worship. Under the seventh plague this three-fold apostate union of Babylon will fall apart and perish (Rev. 16:19).

However, before Christ has completed the investigative judgment, the Remnant will give one final invitation to accept God's mercy—the loud cry of the third angel's message (Rev. 18:1). It is this final and greatest outpouring of the Holy Spirit—the latter rain, that brings about this cry. This is the last and greatest revival and reformation in the history of humanity and also the last invitation of mercy to the world. Those who join this remnant movement receive the seal of the living God from the sealing angel (Rev. 7:1-4) and will be saved from the coming full wrath of God manifested in the seven last plagues (Rev. 15, 16).

Unity in Interpreting the Three Angels' Messages

The above explanation of the three angels' messages is based on the historicist hermeneutic of apocalyptic prophecy. For the Seventh-day Adventist church to fulfill its divine mandate, it is absolutely necessary that theologians be united with the rest of the church's membership in the interpretation of the meaning of these messages. If theologians do not fully accept the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, their influence brings confusion and disunity to the mission of the church and will seriously delay the finishing of the work of preparing people for Christ's return.

From the beginning of the movement, Seventh-day Adventists have followed the historicist prophetic hermeneutic, which has its roots in the early church and was widely practiced during the Protestant Reformation. It was formulated by William Miller, adopted by our pioneers, and confirmed by the Spirit of Prophecy. The success of Adventism stands and falls with this hermeneutic.

Ellen White clearly endorsed Miller's hermeneutic. She stated:

Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message⁸ are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted. In the little book entitled 'Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology,' Father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation:

1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible;
2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study;
3. Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering;
4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error;
5. 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."

The above is a portion of these rules; and in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.⁹

Let us examine these hermeneutical guidelines.

The first rule that "every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible" stresses the importance that each word of a particular subject must be in

⁸ When Ellen White mentions the phrase "third angel's message" she does not confine it to Rev. 14:9-12 but she includes all three angel's messages of Rev. 14:6-12. See *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:171 and Damsteeg, *Foundations*, 241, 242.

⁹ White, "Notes of Travel," *Review and Herald*, November 25, 1884.

harmony with the context of the whole Bible. This contextual method of interpreting the Scriptures guards against taking texts out of their proper context.

In this light, Ellen White warned against the practice of some, who, “in order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices,” use certain “passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half of a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite.”¹⁰ Her personal use of texts indicates that she has no objection against using a string of texts to prove a point, provided they are in harmony with the whole Biblical context on the subject as Miller suggested.

The second rule that “all Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study” stresses the importance of the larger context. Before interpreters come to a conclusion, they need to consult the whole Bible to ascertain that the interpretation of a passage or text is in complete harmony with its immediate as well as the larger context of the Bible. It points out that the whole biblical canon should be the context in which the interpreter operates. In this light, Ellen White pointed out that one “should learn to view the Word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts.”¹¹

This rule cautions us against the practice of using a canon within a canon that draws conclusions from a narrow approach by limiting research to a particular passage, chapter, book or section of the Bible which is done often in the name of exegesis.

The third rule that “nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering” has as its purpose to inspire interpreters with confidence that,

¹⁰ Ibid., *Great Controversy*, 521. Cf. White, *Desire of Ages*, 719.

¹¹ Ibid., *Education*, 190.

when they ask God in faith in their study of the Bible, He will make plain to them what He has revealed.

The fourth rule that “to understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error” has been described as the analogy of Scripture method or Scripture principle.

This method teaches that to understand Bible doctrine correctly, it is first necessary to collect all Scripture passages on a certain subject and then to try formulating the doctrine without the slightest contradiction. The method of comparing Scripture with Scripture was also extensively used during the Protestant Reformation.¹²

Commenting on this rule, Ellen White explained that in the study of the Scriptures there is the need of “bringing together all that is said concerning a given subject at different times and under varied circumstances.”¹³ “Compare verse with verse, and you will find that Scripture is the key which unlocks Scripture.”¹⁴ One passage of Scripture will prove “a key to unlock other passages, and in this way light is shed upon the hidden meaning of the word. By comparing different texts treating the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.”¹⁵

She especially recommends the use of this method to understand difficult passages,¹⁶ to discover the hidden or true meaning of the text,¹⁷ to gain new insights,¹⁸ to correct

¹² See e.g. *Ibid.*, *Great Controversy*. 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*, “Search the Scriptures” *Review and Herald*, Oct. 9, 1883.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *Counsels to Teachers*, 437.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *Fundamentals of Education*, 187; cf. White, *Counsels to Teachers*, 437.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *Christian Education*, 59; White, *Steps to Christ*, 90, 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *Fundamentals of Education*, 187; *Ibid.*, “Bible Study” *Signs of the Times*, Sept. 26, 1895.

misinterpretations,¹⁹ and to solve theological disagreements and perplexities among believers.²⁰

The fifth rule that “Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself” means that the Bible itself is the key to understand the Bible. In the interpretation of Scripture, therefore, it is not necessary to depend on extra biblical sources or commentators.

On this very point White explained, “we are not to accept the opinions of commentators as the voice of God” because “they were erring mortals like ourselves. God has given reasoning powers to us as well as to them. We should make the Bible its own expositor.”²¹ She places the use of this method within the broad perspective of Christ’s role in the great controversy between good and evil.²² Methods of interpretation, therefore, must be derived from the Bible.

Theologians to Uphold the *Sola Scriptura* Principle

In light of the general departure from Bible truth Ellen White stresses the “need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty.”²³ In regard to the crucial question, “How Should We Than Live?” the answer is to be found in the Bible only—the *Sola Scriptura* principle. Here the answers to the question challenging humans, “What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?” are plainly revealed.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, *Testimonies*, 4:499.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, MS 4, 1896 in *Manuscript Releases*, 4:56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *Great Controversy*, 354, 423; cf. *Ibid.*, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 476.

²¹ *Ibid.*, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 106.

²² See *ibid.*, *Education*, 190.

²³ *Ibid.*, *Great Controversy*, 204, 205.

No extra biblical literature is necessary. All questions regarding how human beings can be saved and how they can obtain atonement for their sins are spelled out in the Bible. She states, “Searching the Scriptures alone will bring the knowledge of the true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.”²⁴

Adventist theologians need to keep in mind that in the quest for truth, therefore, there is no need to study extra-Biblical sources to arrive at the ultimate truth of how to be saved. The divine revelation in the Scriptures is fully adequate. “All that man needs to know and can know of God,” she says, “has been revealed in His Word and in the life of His Son, the great Teacher.”²⁵

Theologians and the Spirit of Prophecy.

In the light of “the Bible and the Bible only” principle Adventist theologians have wrestled with the role of the writings of Ellen White in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Here the Bible itself provides the answer. The Bible informs its readers that during the time of the end the testimony of Jesus through the Spirit of Prophecy will be present among the prophetic remnant (Rev 12:17; 19:10; 22:9).

The Bible, Ellen White writes, assures true believers of continual guidance by the Holy Spirit. God has promised to give “visions in the ‘last days;’ not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”²⁶ The reason for this special manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the end-time is because “little heed is given to the Bible.” Through the Spirit of Prophecy “the Lord has given a

²⁴ Ibid., *Fundamentals of Education*, 415.

²⁵ Ibid., MS 124, 1903 in *Bible Commentary*, 6:1079.

²⁶ Ibid., *Early Writings*, 78.

lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”²⁷ Ellen White makes the following comparison: “In ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of prophets and apostles. *In these days* He speaks to them by the testimonies of His Spirit.”²⁸

If theologians believe that today God especially speaks to the remnant, it is of paramount importance to listen to the testimonies of His Spirit and find out what are God’s messages and counsel for the end-time generation. To consult this source of revelation is not contrary to the Bible, but in full harmony with its counsels

Theologians and the Testimonies

What is the relation of Ellen White’s messages or testimonies to the Bible? It is important that theologians realize that her writings are not an addition to the Bible, but an aid to its understanding. “God,” she said, “has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of His people to His word, to give them a clearer understanding of it.”²⁹ They are not to give “new light” but “to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed.” She emphasizes that “additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the *Testimonies* simplified the great truths already given and in His own chosen way brought them before the people to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse.”³⁰

Although these testimonies are not new light, they contain light that corrects errors and defines truth: “The Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people.” She adds, “this is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors and to

²⁷ Ibid., “An Open Letter...,” *Review and Herald*, Jan. 20, 1903.

²⁸ Ibid., *Testimonies*, 5:661. Italics mine.

²⁹ Ibid., 663.

³⁰ Ibid., 665.

specify what is truth.”³¹ Theologians, therefore, need to consult these messages and see how they can assist to discover the deeper meaning of the Scriptures and avoid incorrect interpretations.

The establishment of the foundations of the Seventh-day Advent Church shows the intimate relationship between the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. Often Ellen White’s visions would confirm the results of the Bible studies of the Adventist Sabbath keepers during the formative years of the remnant. There were times when the Bible conferences were stalled and her visions broke the deadlock, guiding the believers to the correct Biblical solution.

The truth— “especially concerning the ministration of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, and the message of Heaven for these last days, as given by the angels of the fourteenth chapter of Revelation,” she says, “has been sought out by prayerful study, and testified to by the miracle-working power of the Lord.” It is God Himself, she declares, who “through His Word and the testimony of His Spirit” has revealed the permanence of these “fundamental principles [way marks or land marks] that are based upon unquestionable authority.”³²

The Meaning of the “Bible Only”

An analysis of Ellen White’s use of the phrase “the Bible and the Bible only” reveals that she contrasts it with human “views and ideas,”³³ erroneous traditions on the Sabbath and the Law of God,³⁴ opinions of scholars, scientists, theologians,³⁵ “sayings and doings

³¹ Ibid., Letter 127, 1910 in *Selected Messages*, 3:32. The published source has a typographical error. It refers to Letter 117 instead of 127.

³² Ibid., *Selected Messages*, 1:208.

³³ Ibid., “Missionary Appeal.”

³⁴ Ibid., *Great Controversy*, 448.

of men,”³⁶ “human wisdom,”³⁷ false visions,³⁸ views of the churches steeped in popular theology from which the early Adventists separated themselves,³⁹ the “religions of fable and tradition,” “imaginary religion,” “a religion of words and forms,” and “tradition and human theories and maxims.”⁴⁰ These phrases show that she uses the “Bible only” to contrast Biblical truth with the *unbiblical* positions of religious traditions.

This expression “the Bible only” she never used for contrasting her own writings with the Bible. In Ellen White’s mind there was perfect harmony between the Bible and her writings because “the Holy Ghost is the author of the Scriptures and the author of the spirit of prophecy.”⁴¹ Therefore “it is impossible that the teachings of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the word.”⁴²

This unique relationship between the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy has given the latter a place above all extra-Biblical sources. Consequently in Bible study the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy hold a superior position over other research tools.

Theologians to Preserve Church Unity

Theologians have a serious obligation to see that their influence will preserve the unity of the church by upholding its end-time message and mission. They do well to remember Ellen White’s comment in this regard: “Those who have accepted the truth of the third angel’s message are to hold it fast by faith, and it will hold them from drifting

³⁵ Ibid. 595.

³⁶ Ibid., *Counsels on Sabbath Work*, 84.

³⁷ Ibid., *Fundamentals of Education*, 200.

³⁸ Ibid., *Selected Messages*, 2:85.

³⁹ Ibid., *Writers and Editors*, 145.

⁴⁰ Ibid., *Prophets and Kings*, 624-626.

⁴¹ Ibid., Letter 92, 1900.

⁴² Ibid., *Great Controversy*, vii.

into superstitions and theories that would separate them from one another and from God.”⁴³

When she mentions the “third angel’s message” she does not see it apart from the first and second angel’s messages, but includes it in this phrase all three angels’ messages. To understand and accept the third angel’s message necessitates the acceptance of the first and second angels’ messages. Only then the third angel’s message could be comprehended.⁴⁴

Theologians are to uphold the gospel proclamation for the end-time, which is the key to the moral restoration of humanity. White emphasized, “A great work is to be accomplished in setting before men the saving truths of the gospel.”⁴⁵ In spelling out the far-reaching effect of these gospel truths, she stated, “This is the means ordained by God to stem the tide of moral corruption. This is His means of restoring His moral image in man. It is His remedy for universal disorganization. It is the power that draws men together in unity. To present these truths is the work of the third angel’s message.”⁴⁶ This is not one mission amongst others. No. “The Lord designs that the presentation of this message shall be the highest, greatest work carried on in the world at this time.”⁴⁷

As servants of the church, theologians need to understand the depth, height, and width of the last message of mercy that unites Seventh-day Adventists so that they become aware of significant neglected aspects of this all-embracing message. An important task

⁴³ Ibid., *Heavenly Places*, 349

⁴⁴ Ibid., *Spiritual Gifts*, 1:171. See Damsteegt, *Foundations*, 242.

⁴⁵ White, *Testimonies*, 1:11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

is to impress the church's leadership and laity that in our mission to restore humanity in the image of God is to make sure that

health reform is to stand out more prominently in the proclamation of the third angel's message. The principles of health reform are found in the word of God. The gospel of health is to be firmly linked with the ministry of the word. It is the Lord's design that the restoring influence of health reform shall be a part of the last great effort to proclaim the gospel message.⁴⁸

Theologians ought to be a part of the mission outreach of the church, working together with evangelists and medical missionaries, supporting them in the proclamation of the three angels' messages. Stressing the need for unity in action, White appealed for "the necessity of all our laborers working in unity, with one mind and one judgment."⁴⁹

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The unity among theologians is not something they bring about by themselves in professional societies, committees, conventions, or conferences. Unity is brought about as a result of genuine conversion and the Holy Spirit; division is caused by the absence of conversion and the Spirit. "All who are truly converted unto the proclamation of the third angel's message," White wrote, "must not present to the world, to angels, and to men, division in the place of unity. The truth of God sanctifies the receiver to be a channel and representative of His grace to the world and to angels and to men. All who are called [are] prepared and aided by one Agency."⁵⁰

It is the Holy Spirit who brings theologians into an intimate unity of brotherly love, fellowship, and cooperation, as well as giving their full support to the Church. "From one

⁴⁸ Ibid., *Testimony Studies on Diet and Foods*, 88.

⁴⁹ Ibid., "Our Responsibility as Stewards," *Home Missionary*, December 1, 1894.

⁵⁰ Ibid., "Each Follower of Christ is Called to Work; All are to Copy Christ, the Pattern; Harmony to Prevail," Ms 130, 1901 in 16MR 196

great and powerful Source there would be love and unity; their Christian instrumentality to be proved and to glorify God in love and harmonious action, each strengthening the other and each taking diligent heed to his own course of action in the great and solemn work before them in presenting the sanctifying truth to souls ready to die.”⁵¹

The achievement of unity in the church does not come easily. A clear stand must be taken against falsehood and heresies. White stated, “Evil must be assailed; falsehood and error must be made to appear in their true character; sin must be denounced; and the testimony of every believer in the truth must be as one. All your little differences, which arouse the combative spirit among brethren, are devices of Satan to divert minds from the great and fearful issue before us.”⁵²

True unity that brings genuine peace will not exist when a false peace reigns in the church. White pointed out that we need to make a united effort against falsehoods that presently exist: “The true peace will come among God’s people when through united zeal and earnest prayer the false peace that exists to a large degree is disturbed. Now there is earnest work to do. Now is the time to manifest your soldierly qualities; let the Lord’s people present a united front to the foes of God and truth and righteousness.”⁵³

Referring to how the early Christians experienced unity, White said, “when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the early church, ‘the whole multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.’ The Spirit of Christ made them one. This is the fruit of abiding in Christ.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 16MR 196.

⁵² Ibid., MR311, 48

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Describing the process by which the Holy Spirit tries to bring about this desired unity today, she said,

We have need of divine illumination. Every individual is striving to become a center of influence; and until God works for His people, they will not see that subordination to God is the only safety for any soul. His transforming grace upon human hearts will lead to unity that has not yet been realized; for all who are assimilated to Christ will be in harmony with one another. The Holy Spirit will create unity.⁵⁵

Unity and Diversity Among Theologians

Throughout the years the writings of Seventh-day Adventist theologians have increasingly come under scrutiny by its membership. Internet communications reveal a growing number of controversies in the remnant church. This is unfortunate, for it negatively affects the mission thrust of the remnant church. Several factors are responsible for these controversies that are causing divisions amongst Seventh-day Adventists. From the above, it is clear that theologians need a unity based on Christ's last message of mercy.

One major factor may be a misunderstanding of academic freedom and the often-claimed argument that we have in our church unity in diversity, not uniformity. Again it will be helpful to consider the counsels of the Spirit of Prophecy on how to unitedly publish about our unique message.

Ellen White strongly encouraged writing on this subject but to keep in mind the nature of unity in diversity. She compares this unity to the relationship between the organs of the human body. Said she, "In regard to our brethren writing on the third angel's message. Let them write. Bear in mind that in the branches of the vine there is

⁵⁵ Letter 25b, 1892 (MR311, 48)

diversity in unity. . . . There is an unseen, conscious, indivisible unity, keeping the bodily machinery in action, each part working in harmony with every other. . . .”⁵⁶

She cautions against uniformity, stating, “we are not to feel that we must speak the very same things, giving the same representation in the same words, and yet there is to be unity in the diversity.”⁵⁷ She illustrates a healthy diversity by pointing to the gospels, explaining, “all the different testimonies unite to form one whole, as the books of the Bible are brought together, and bound under one cover. But should Matthew, Mark, Luke and John go off on some tangent, contradicting each other’s testimony, then there would be confusion. In all the presentation of truth by different minds, there is to be unity in diversity.”⁵⁸

She warns against the desire of trying to be different, stating, “one must not labor to have everything that comes from his mind entirely different from that which comes from another man’s mind.”⁵⁹ Instead of attempting to be different, she calls on the need to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit. Said she, “he is to follow in the line where the Spirit of the Lord shall direct, then there will be different figures and different ways of presentation, that will interest and educate different minds.”⁶⁰

Striving for originality is also dangerous. Said White,

Some are always straining to get something original; this places them in great danger. They produce something new, that is not according to the Word of God, and they have not the discernment to see the real harm that results from their ambition to excel some other one in new and strange productions. Thus error comes to appear to them

⁵⁶ Ibid., Letter 53, 1900, pp. 1-7. (To S. N. Haskell, April 5, 1900.) “Diversity in Unity in God’s Work,” MR 550, in 8MR 66.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 67

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

as truth, and they present it as wonderful new light, when it is an innovation that makes of none effect a ‘Thus saith the Lord.’⁶¹

White emphasized the need to leave room for the workings of the Holy Spirit. “Let all be under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit of God. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, one may use the same expressions used by a fellow-worker under the same guidance. He should not make an effort to do this, nor not to do it, but leave the mind to be acted upon by the Holy Spirit. There is one thing all should do, ‘Endeavor to keep the Unity of the Spirit, in the bonds of peace.’”⁶²

She cautions those writing on the truth against selfishness in their evaluation of others who do not express truths in the exactly the same way: “Men may not have precisely the same way of viewing or expressing truths as we have, yet they may be just as precious in the sight of God as we are. There is not to be a thread of selfishness or self-exaltation in our work, for we are drawing our spiritual supplies from the same store-house, and are wholly and entirely dependent upon God, for His grace and His Spirit’s working.”⁶³

Threats to Theological Unity in the Church

Use of extra biblical scholarly sources

In reflecting on present influences that endanger the unity among theologians, the author can see no greater danger for the church than the adoption of non-Adventist theological views in the interpretation and exposition of Scripture and its prophecies.

Light from the heavenly sanctuary revealed that since 1844 Adventists are living in the most solemn era of earth’s history when Christ our High Priest is completing His investigative judgment. The Holy Spirit is also purifying the Remnant Church in

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 68.

preparation for the final sealing of His people that protects them from the coming calamities. Through these new insights Adventists have been motivated to adopt a special end-time lifestyle in preparation for the second advent. This understanding is totally absent among non-Adventists. When Seventh-day Adventist scholars evaluated these end-time lifestyle practices in the light of non-Adventist sources, the result has been heated controversies without end, seriously dividing our churches.

All Seventh-day Adventist scholars are no longer careful in scrutinizing whether the non-Adventist sources and even the Adventist sources they quote are using the same hermeneutics that Seventh-day Adventists have applied since the pioneers. Before using any source into our research and writing the question needs to be asked, “Do these authors approach the Bible with the same high view of Scripture, have the same concepts on revelation and inspiration, the nature and infallibility of Scripture, and the ‘Bible only’ principle?” This is of paramount importance. Differences on these vital concepts affect the correct interpretation of the biblical text.

How many Seventh-day Adventist scholars consider impact of the fall of Babylon on the theological disciplines of these churches since 1844? It is important to remember that following 1844, the churches gradually departed from the historicist method of interpretation of the Bible and a spiritual darkness came upon them that impacted them in areas of prophetic interpretation, theology, and lifestyle. In their departure from historicism, the churches gave up the sound methods used by the Protestant Reformers and early Adventists, leading them into futurism, preterism, idealism and other speculative approaches. These views have significantly influenced the scholarly community in their interpretation of the Bible with its subsequent sad results.

The prophet to the remnant noted the dangers of the so-called “popular theology” in these fallen churches. The nature of this theology is speculative and is characterized by incorrect interpretations of Scripture. It exalts human theories above the Word of God and stands in sharp contrast to the eternal truths taught by the Bible writers.⁶⁴ The presence of this theology is widespread. “To a large degree,” Ellen White warned, “theology, as studied and taught, is but a record of human speculation.”⁶⁵

The problem with an erroneous speculative theology is that it has a detrimental effect on the on mind and judgment which exposes believers to temptations. The study of these speculations darkens the mind.⁶⁶ Ellen White said, it “perverts the judgment and opens the door to temptation, and through its influence Satan seeks to turn hearts from the truth.” Its influence is directed to lowering the standards of Christian living.⁶⁷ It certainly does not prepare believers for the second advent. As an antidote, she recommends “an intelligent love for the truth” which “sanctifies the receiver, and keeps him from the enemy’s deceptive snares.”⁶⁸

Unsound theology, Ellen White pointed out, confuses the intellect and disqualifies a person for teaching. As an example she mentioned Dr. John H. Kellogg. Speaking of him, she says, his “theology is not sound; his mind is confused, and unless he sees his danger, his foundation will be swept away when the test comes. Unless he sees his danger and makes a decided change, he can not be endorsed as a safe, all-round teacher.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Ibid., *Great Controversy*, 126. See also ibid., “Luther at Wittenberg,” *Signs of the Times*, June 7, 1883.

⁶⁵ Ibid., *Counsels to Teachers*, 380.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5MR 380. This view was the result of the theology of Dr. Jackson.

⁶⁸ Ibid., “The Christian Pathway,” *Signs of the Times*, Mar. 6, 1884.

⁶⁹ Ibid., *Battle Creek Letters*, 87.

Regarding this kind of theology, Ellen White perceived two dangers. One danger is a “scientific theology” which had been introduced into the Battle Creek church in 1906. Its impact leads people away from a true faith in God and raised questions about her writings.⁷⁰ As a result even prominent church leaders like the General Conference President A. G. Daniells and theologian W. C Prescott became confused about Ellen White’s work, considering it a mystery.⁷¹

Ellen White wrote of a scene in which both Prescott and Daniells were conversing with Dr. Kellogg, listening to subtle reasoning prompted by the evil angels close by. She described the experience of these men as a life and death struggle because Dr. Kellogg’s influence was so powerful that his subtle reasoning almost overwhelmed them.⁷²

It was through an intervention of Providence that these men saw again the light. “Through the agency of a heavenly messenger, the thought came to the men to ‘review the past experiences of the people of God; review the history of the work from the first,’ and the question was asked, ‘Has this work been what it has been represented to you to be?’” Next, “the heavenly messenger revealed to them ‘scene after scene’ until they saw truth bearing the signature of the heavenly in the past, then present, and still more decidedly in the future.”⁷³

The second danger of this theology is the work of higher criticism, later called biblical or historical criticism. This approach she characterizes as “dissecting,

⁷⁰ Ibid., “Hold Fast the Beginning of Your Confidence,” *Review and Herald*, Aug. 9, 1906. See *The Paulson Collection of Ellen G. White Letters*, 66; Ibid., MS 61, June 3, 1906.

⁷¹ Ibid. 10MR 333.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 333, 334.

conjecturing, reconstructing” the Scriptures.⁷⁴ She considered it to be one of Satan’s tools of deception. Through its “pleasing sentiments,” she says, “the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths.”⁷⁵

The reason for her strong opposition to higher criticism is that it “is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation; it is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.”⁷⁶ She compares its influence to the destructive effect of tradition and Rabbinical teaching in Christ’s days.⁷⁷

In a sermon she ironically contrasts the higher critics, whom she identifies as “poor, finite man on probation,” with the true Higher Critic, “the Lord God of the universe who has spread the canopy of the heavens above us, and has made the stars and called them forth in their order.”⁷⁸

The Place of Extra Biblical Writings

The question theologians have to ponder is this, “How valuable are non-Seventh-day Adventist sources?”

As to the value of extra-biblical sources on Bible teachings, Ellen White says, “the opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority, —not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid., *Education*, 227.

⁷⁵ Ibid., *Acts of the Apostles*, 474. His other tools are “evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism (ibid.).

⁷⁶ Ibid., *Education*, 227.

⁷⁷ Ibid., *Ministry of Healing*, 142.

⁷⁸ Ibid., MS 43a, 1894.

⁷⁹ Ibid., *Great Controversy*, 595.

On the value of commentaries she remarks, “many think that they must consult commentaries on the Scriptures in order to understand the meaning of the word of God.” She does not object to their use, stating, “We would not take the position that commentaries should not be studied,” but cautions that “it will take much discernment to discover the truth of God under the mass of the words of men.”⁸⁰ She says, “many think it essential to acquire an extensive knowledge of historical and theological writings” because “they suppose that this knowledge will be an aid to them in teaching the gospel” but “their laborious study of the opinions of men tends to the enfeebling of their ministry, rather than to its strengthening.”⁸¹

There are, however, some areas of extra biblical sources Ellen White recommends studying. One area pertains to the investigation of the vast amount of truths God has given to His people throughout the past centuries. “The infinite treasures of truth have been accumulating from age to age. No representation could adequately impress us with the extent, the richness, of these vast resources. They are awaiting the demand of those who appreciate them.”⁸²

The purpose of such a study is to communicate God’s truths to others. Said she, “these gems of truth are to be gathered up by God’s remnant people, to be given by them to the world.”⁸³

Here she sees this study as a way to share with others the truths God has already given to past generations, but that have been lost over time. In the context of the second angel’s message, she seemed especially to recommend a study of truths in non-biblical

⁸⁰ Ibid., *Fundamentals of Education*, 187, 188.

⁸¹ Ibid., *Ministry of Healing*, 441.

⁸² Ibid., “An Appeal to Our Churches,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 23, 1890.

⁸³ Ibid.

sources that were produced prior to the fall of Babylon in 1844 when there was not yet a general departure from the historicist hermeneutics.

Instead of studying the latest theological works and papers by scholars who do not employ the historicist hermeneutics in their productions, Seventh-day Adventist theologians should focus on discovering the gems of truth of the past that are still relevant in conveying the present truth today. This has an excellent potential for building bridges with non-Adventists Christians who have departed from the light of the Reformation by calling them back to the great foundational truths of the Scripture and its prophetic interpretation.

Unfortunately many Seventh-day Adventists have not followed this advice. Consequently, they have missed an important opportunity to discover these infinite treasures of truth. Commenting on the reason of our failure, White observed, “self confidence and the obduracy of soul refuse the blessed treasure.”⁸⁴

It is therefore important for Seventh-day Adventist theologians to remember their place and function in the history of salvation. “God’s workers today constitute the connecting link between the former workers, the church of history, and the church that is to be called out from the world and prepared to meet their Lord.... From age to age the light which God has for the world has been imparted to the church militant.”⁸⁵

With this in mind, theologians need to highly respect the light of the past. “All the excellencies that have come through the belief of the truth from past ages to the present time, are to be treated with the utmost respect”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., *Special Testimonies*, Series A, No. 7. 1897, 11.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Another area of extra-biblical sources is that of the study of sacred history which reveals the history of Bible prophecy. Said she, “Sacred history was one of the studies in the schools of the prophets. In the record of His dealings with the nations were traced the footsteps of Jehovah. So today we are to consider the dealings of God with the nations of the earth.”⁸⁷ She challenged Bible interpreters to study prophetic history, stating “We are to see in history the fulfillment of prophecy, to study the workings of Providence in the great reformatory movements, and to understand the progress of events in the marshaling of the nations for the final conflict of the great controversy.”⁸⁸

This approach has great benefits, she explained: “Such study will give broad, comprehensive views of life. It will help us to understand something of its relations and dependencies, how wonderfully we are bound together in the great brotherhood of society and nations, and to how great an extent the oppression and degradation of one member means loss to all.”⁸⁹ White had little appreciation of the study of history as it is commonly studied because it is concerned with man’s achievements while “God’s agency in the affairs of men is lost sight of. Few study the working out of His purpose in the rise and fall of nations.”⁹⁰

From the above, it seems clear that theologians should be very careful with the use of extra biblical sources. If these sources are in harmony with the biblical text they may be used, but if they are contrary to the obvious and clear literal reading of the text, they should be discarded. In no way should they be the key to determine the meaning of a biblical text or passage.

⁸⁷ Ibid., *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, 379.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 379, 380.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Those familiar with primary sources understand the conflicting views these sources frequently present. What are the criteria for theologians? Throughout their history Seventh-day Adventists have accepted views or data that were in harmony with the clear reading of the biblical text, but have discarded interpretations that were in conflict with the natural and obvious reading of the text. Theologians do well to follow this practice, remembering the impact of the events of 1844 and its subsequent light received by the remnant and the resulting darkness and confusion that developed as result of the rejection of truth.

The same is true of the need among theologians to understand the place of the writings of Ellen White in the quest of the truth of the Bible. There is a special blessing connected with understanding the significance of these writings for the unity and protection of the church. She said, “Men may get up scheme after scheme and the enemy will seek to seduce souls from the truth, but all who believe that the Lord has spoken through Sister White and has given her a message will be safe from the many delusions that will come in these last days.”⁹¹

Theologians do well to keep this in mind.

Urgency of Unity in our Message and Mission

More than one hundred years ago, Ellen White informed Seventh-day Adventists that the moment had arrived for the three angels’ messages to swell into a loud cry. She said, “the time has come when the whole earth is to be enlightened with the glory of the angel

⁹¹ Ibid., *Selected Messages*, 3:83, 84.

which came down from heaven”⁹² (Rev. 18:1). What has happened since that time? Have they progressed or regressed?

Towards the end of her life, she sadly explained why this event did not happen at that time, saying, “We may have to remain here in this world because of insubordination many more years, as did the children of Israel; but for Christ’s sake, His people should not add sin to sin by charging God with the consequence of their own wrong course of action.”⁹³

It is clear that Seventh-day Adventists are involved in a tremendous warfare between the armies of Christ and those of Satan. Satan has been successful in muting the cry of the third angel and weakening their understanding of their identity and mission as God’s prophetic remnant to prepare people for Jesus’ coming so they will be able stand in the Day of the Lord. To remedy the situation, Adventists need to experience a great revival and reformation. To bring this about theologians may do well to heed the exhortation of the prophetic voice:

Our success depends upon our unity. Our efficiency and the power of our influence depends upon our wise and unreserved cooperation with one another and with God. We are to advance the work in new territories, sustaining pure principles at every step. We are to cooperate with the angel that is flying in the midst of heaven [Rev. 14:9-11], who also is in harmony with the two former angels [Rev. 14:6-8] in forwarding the solemn event of the second appearing of Christ in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.⁹⁴

To bring this unity in the message and mission among Seventh-day Adventists about, theologians can play a crucial role if they are committed to work together with administrators, evangelists, and ministers, elders and lay persons.

⁹² Ibid., Manuscript 177, 1899 in MR 311, 48.

⁹³ Ibid., Letter 184, 1901 (*Evangelism*, 696).

⁹⁴ Ibid., Manuscript 177, 1899 in MR 311, 47.

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventist theologians have a vital responsibility in the proclamation of the three angels' messages—the last message of mercy to a perishing world. In this task they need to cooperate closely with administrators, ministers, pastors, local elders, and lay persons.

Theologians need to be united on the message and mission as revealed through divine providence and guided by the historicist hermeneutics of the Advent pioneers. This message is based on the Sola Scriptura principle and the affirmation of the Spirit of Prophecy as manifested in the writings of Ellen White.

Theologians need to be fully converted and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, demonstrating an attitude of humility and a teachable spirit. They need to be united on the message and mission, not striving for originality or uniformity, but recognizing the presence of a healthy diversity in full harmony with the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.

Theologians ought to be very careful in the using and incorporating extra biblical sources and views in their writings and need to be fully aware of the threat to theological unity in the church through the use of extra biblical sources and views.

Finally, they need to have a sense of urgency in preparing people for Jesus' return. They must have the desire to be a part of the final call to present Christ's righteousness through a global mission proclamation of the loud cry message to hasten the return of Jesus, carefully paying attention to the light and counsels the Lord has given through His prophet.