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Why Theology Matters

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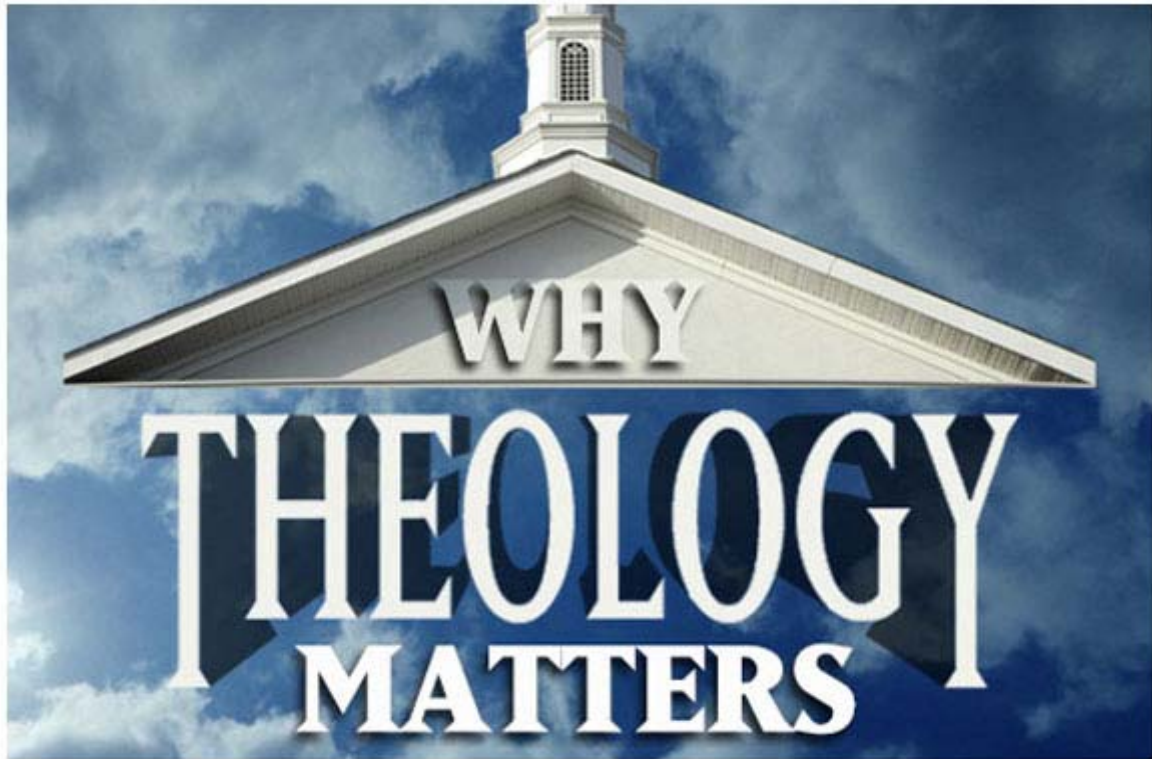
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Doing theology in the right way demands both duties and responsibilities.

By Larry L. Lichtenwalter

Because Seventh-day Adventists have long considered themselves the “people of the Book,” the Adventist student of Scripture would include scholars, administrators, educators of all levels and disciplines, writers and editors, church board members, youth directors, Sabbath school teachers—any, in fact, who would be included among the priesthood of believers.

As such, our duties and responsibilities in relation to the message, mission, and unity of the church are both definable and elusive. On the one hand, we intuit what they are. On the other hand, we sometimes differ on the meaning of those duties and responsibilities. Even if consensus existed, there would always be difficulty communicating them.

Sometimes we don't consider—let alone articulate—the deeper level of these duties and responsibilities. We could easily spend time listing the obvious and more measurable tasks and duties of interpreting Scripture: instruction and classroom pedagogy, scholarly research and publishing, speaking in behalf of, consulting, or critiquing the church, penetration of influential social spheres, even constructing a systematic interpretation of the vision and conviction of biblical faith.

However, a more intangible perspective is often forgotten or overlooked regarding matters of stewardship, biblical focus, character, and worldview.

The greatest challenge of Seventh-day Adventist theology today lies precisely in these issues. Our great need is more a matter of character and spirit, biblical focus and measure, attitude and frame of reference, than in creative thinking, solid scholarship, and academic freedom.

God has blessed His church with able thought leaders who are profoundly skilled to deal with both Scripture and the issues His people face. There is creative thinking and solid scholarship, as well as great freedom in which to work with new ideas and press new frontiers consonant with our Seventh-day Adventist faith. Yet, the power and effective influence of their theological work is diminished in proportion to how these deeper, more intangible issues are realized in their personal (and shared) experience and seen as a fundamental baseline of their duties and responsibilities.

In the midst of outlining some very tangible duties and responsibilities of the church's first-century thought leaders, the Apostle Paul reminds Timothy of the deeper intangibles of his role as a young leader of the church. In the fourth chapter of 2 Timothy, he tells of a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3). "They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (vs. 4, NIV). They will tune out

what they don't wish to hear and follow teachers who say what they want to hear.

In every period of Christian history there have been times when there has been refusal to listen to sound doctrine. We know that apostasy, which Paul envisioned, happened very early in Christian history and was even at work in his day (2 Thess. 2:3-7; Acts 20:28-31). But this implies that as history proceeds toward its consummation, the situation will grow worse.

Who will have a passion for the biblical truth when I am gone? What will happen to the gospel? These were questions that dominated and vexed Paul's mind as he lay in chains, and to which he addressed himself in his second letter to Timothy. Already in his first letter, Paul had pleaded that Timothy keep safe "what has been entrusted to [his] care" in terms of biblical truth and understandings (1 Tim. 6:20, NIV). But after his first letter, the situation had worsened and the apostle's appeal thus became more urgent. So he reminds Timothy that the precious gospel was now committed to him (2 Tim. 1:13, 14), and that it was now his turn to assume responsibility for it, to defend it against attack and falsification, and to ensure its accurate transmission to future generations.

In this second letter to Timothy we find a seasoned leader mentoring a younger leader for the theological realities ahead. In the process we catch a glimpse of how such theological realities impact the nature, message, and mission of the Church. Looking over Paul's shoulder as he engages Timothy, we see some of what both the tangible and intangible duties and responsibilities of the Seventh-day Adventist leader entail.

It should be noted that Paul's thoughts to Timothy (as with other New Testament writers) reflects somewhat of an apologetic tone. He is assertive and defining, unequivocating and direct. We should not be embarrassed or ashamed of a similar posture, or retreat from it. Yet, like Paul, we must avoid being negatively

critical.

Rather, we must be proactive, articulating positive things. When Paul writes apologetically, he is not attacking anyone, *per se*. He was not putting anyone down, though he did drop some names, identify theological trends, and describe the kind of teachers whose motives and integrity must be questioned (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-13).

He simply understood human nature. He knew how average church members living in a real world with real bodies and with real pressure from their contemporary culture, think, struggle, react. Paul had a realistic grasp of how things can and will go morally and spiritually in individual lives and in the life of the church. He knew that specific moral and spiritual matters must be addressed with candor and clarity. In effect, Paul modeled how the leader must be assertive, positive, defining. He recognized how human nature and weakness, and the power of contemporary culture, can encapsulate human beings into a distinctive worldview.

The leader must critique and warn as well as build up. But theological critique or warning must never undermine biblical faith or put others down—even theological enemies. People are not to be driven from error but drawn to the truth in all its beauty. The leader's responsibility is that of building up even when he or she is compelled to be critical. It is to be constructive. Creative. Positive. Defining. Yet, as with Paul in the early church, these will always take place in an uneasy context.

"God still wishes in these days," wrote John Calvin, "to build his spiritual temple amidst the anxieties of the times; the faithful have still to hold the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other, . . . because the building of the Church must still be united with many contests."¹

It is not difficult to sense that the day of itching ears, of which Paul informed Timothy, is upon us even now. No other

passage of Scripture describes more accurately the day in which we live. If this is so, like Paul and Timothy, the Seventh-day Adventist leader works within the context of the anxieties of our eschatological times and the struggle for minds and hearts in the Great Controversy. It is from this perspective that our duties and responsibilities are set and ultimately defined. It is a perspective that reminds us that we work within an uneasy context. There is need for the theological enterprise and faith-affirming theology.

Stewardship

When Paul exhorts the young Timothy, in regard to his duties and responsibilities, they are envisioned as “stewardship.” Timothy is to “guard” (keep safe, protect, defend) what has been entrusted to his care (1 Tim. 6:20, NIV). There is a “pattern” (model, example, outline) of sound words and teaching that Timothy had received from his mentor (Paul)—a pattern from God’s Word and the things He has revealed in His Word about Himself, our human condition, salvation, how we are to live, last things, etc. (2 Tim. 1:13, 14).

Elsewhere, Paul asserted that the church’s thought leaders are servants of Christ and “stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1, 2, NKJV). Overseers are “steward[s] of God” (Titus 1:7, NKJV). Paul envisions such stewardship to be practically expressed in activities like preaching the Word, being ready in season and out of season, reproofing, rebuking, exhorting with great patience and instruction, enduring hardship, doing the work of an evangelist, fulfilling the ministry we have been called to perform (2 Tim. 4:2, 5). All this is in the context of the challenges to individual and corporate life and faith.

More specifically, in Paul’s thinking, the church is steward of the Word of God—steward of the truth: “If I am delayed, I write

so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15, NKJV). The church is the repository of the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2; Heb. 5:12).

Ultimately, stewardship includes that of biblical truth!

This does not mean that either the church or its theologians "have" the truth. Truth does not belong to the church. Truth is revealed by the One who is the Truth. Thus, the church is a receiver and conduit. But it is also constituted by truth, changed by it, and holds it in sacred trust to the extent that truth flows from it to the world. The church is granted the privilege of seeing truth (or parts of it, at least), understanding it, being transformed by it, proclaiming it, teaching it, being possessed by it. Truth is based on Scripture as Paul asserts (2 Tim. 3:16, 17; cf. 4:2-4; John 17:17). The church is the pillar and ground of truth when it stewards the truth God has entrusted to it. This is the nature and mission of the church.

Timothy was to hold fast the pattern of right teaching and to guard carefully what had been entrusted to him (2 Tim. 1:13, 14). Evidently, something has been entrusted to the church, to us. We have been given a pattern of truth. A pattern of sound teaching. A gospel DNA, so to speak. The idea of truth or a pattern of doctrine means dealing with ideas—ideas and words that are concrete, objective, propositional. As ideas or words, truth can be spoken, heard, written down, read, and kept. It is everywhere assumed in Scripture that these words and ideas of truth carry understandable form, content, and—most important—meaning. True words can be relied on because they are in accord with reality. These true words encompass right action (ethically correct behavior) as well as correct knowledge.

These Epistles to Timothy (as well as that to Titus) are important because of the wealth of information they contain concerning theology and how it relates to the practical matters of

church life and organization—its nature, mission, and unity. Timothy was to know and articulate “how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God” (1 Tim. 3: 15). The conduct Paul envisioned includes public worship, the selection and qualifications of church leaders, the pastor’s personal life and public ministry, how one confronts sin in the church, the role of women, the care of widows, and how to handle money. There are also important doctrinal truths about Scripture, salvation, and Christ. In 1 Timothy, Paul gives instruction concerning false doctrine (1: 3-20), life within the church (2: 1–3: 16), false teachers (4: 1-16), pastoral responsibilities (5: 1–6: 2), and the man of God (6: 3-21). These all fall under the umbrella of stewardship.

Corresponding to these earlier themes, 2 Timothy outlines elements of a strong spiritual life, the dangers of false teaching, standing against apostasy, the centrality and work of Scripture, faithful preaching, and faithful evangelistic ministry. The core message of 2 Timothy is “guarding the gospel”—which, in the context of Paul’s thinking, had to do with “truth.” Again, these very practical perspectives would be included in stewardship.

Theology then, is the fundamental framework and impulse for such practical application. There is no competition between the two. Theology anticipates application, and application demands theological grounding and direction. As such, application is often the occasion in which theology is consciously expressed and clarified in terms of implications for life’s necessities and culture’s context.

Such theology presupposes the teaching church. Teaching is always going on within the church. It defines “true” doctrine, life, and practice. It bases and examines the doctrinal content of what is being taught within the church.

“Theology is a function of the Church.”² Theology is the task of criticizing (in a constructive way) and revising the church’s

language about God. This does not mean, however, that the theological enterprise changes the church's teaching about God or the Word of God. But it does mean that there can be no theology without the church. Theology is done in the framework of the church.

More specifically, the theologian "is always the theologian of a particular church. He receives the truth in her communion, shares her convictions, and promises to teach and propagate her values as long as they do not prove to be contrary to the Word of God."³ These teachings constitute a bias, and this is perfectly acceptable. No one ever does theology without any presuppositions. Every Bible student entering upon this theological task has certain convictions that he or she cannot set aside at will. One cannot eliminate oneself.

This is assumed of any Seventh-day Adventist reader of Scripture as well: that he or she is possessed by the DNA of biblical Adventism and works within its organizing reality. Theology must be conducted within Seventh-day Adventist distinctives and their corresponding confessional context.

Furthermore, this stewardship means that mission and theology go together. True theology should move the church to mission. It is with this in mind that Paul exhorts the young theologian Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Theology must give birth to (as well as arise out of) and serve the goal of the church's mission and work in the world. Furthermore, it must facilitate that mission. Students of Scripture must envision themselves as evangelists with persuasive purposes if they are to feed the church's mission.

As Miroslav Kiš notes, as a "'pillar and bulwark of truth' (1 Tim. 3:15) the church has the right to expect all those who hold leading positions or who teach in her name to do everything in their power to defend her teachings (2 Tim. 4:1-5). As a body of Christ (Col. 1:18), the church has the right to expect that every

member, especially its thought leaders, will remain united and loyal to her call, her message, and her mission."⁴

As a steward of God's truth, the church has the right to decide who can be her spokesperson, who can teach in her name (Titus 1:10, 11). "If a brother is teaching error, those who are in responsible positions ought to know it; and if he is teaching truth, they ought to take their stand at his side. We should all know what is being taught among us; for if it is truth, we need it. We are all under obligation to God to know what He sends us."⁵ The church reserves the right to watch with diligence over interpretation, teaching, and preaching of that Word, lest strange worldviews and private agendas influence the minds of its ministry and, through it, its membership (Titus 2:7, 8).

For the church to steward the truth with which it has been entrusted, it needs leaders who faithfully steward that very trust. As the essence of life is not ownership but stewardship—the faithful management of all that God entrusts to us—so the theologian's duties and responsibilities are one of stewardship. He or she is faithfully to manage (interpret, teach, guard, proclaim, etc.) the biblical truths God entrusts to His church. Stewardship has to do with the theologian's vision and influence, his or her commitment and mind. There is more here than mere articles of faith. Stewardship has to do with shared vision, with heart, attitude, and spirit.

Fundamentally, the duties and responsibilities of Seventh-day Adventist leaders are faith-affirming, constructive, and current. The Adventist leader—as a theologian—is a steward of truth and a resource for the church. He or she probes the deep things of God to assure there is only one theology in the church. The theology of the leaders, pastors, and parishioners should be the same as that of the seminary scholars and theologians.

Biblical Focus

Ultimately, the theologian's use of the Word of God is integral to his or her stewarding truth on behalf of the church. Paul's assertions regarding the inspiration and practical nature of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-18) serve as an interpretive hinge between his two assertions regarding the moral/spiritual dysfunction and theological needs that the church will face (vss. 1-13; 4:1-8). The passage 2 Timothy 3:14-18 about the inspiration and authority of Scripture is sandwiched between 2 Timothy 3:1-13 and 4:1-8 about moral/spiritual dysfunction and theological needs. Each passage places the others in context. Here Paul's language is both fluid and informative. Scripture (3:16), what is taught (3:16; 4:2), the Word (4:2), sound teaching (4:3), and truth (4:4) are nearly synonymous. Scripture, Word, and truth are linked (cf. 2:15). What is taught (doctrine, theology) flows from this matrix if it is to be sound.

For Paul, theology is biblical teaching, and biblical teaching includes applying Scripture to life. Scripture is the Word that is to be preached, and the truth that is to be articulated flows from the inspired writings. This biblical focus is what causes itching ears and the desire for accommodating theology, which Paul asserted is inevitable. There will be individuals unable to tolerate sound biblical teaching, who yearn for an easier theology. They will be inclined to turn aside to mere human constructions reflecting their own values (4:3, 4).

Whenever the Word is applied, it demands response and decision, and this calls for radical change. People of Paul's day as well as contemporary humanity want to be freed from the doctrinal and ethical absolutes of Scripture. Theological trends in our age are attributable to the increasing infection with the same quest for freedom, with the arrogance of human self-sufficiency.

In Paul's understanding, doctrine (theology, what was taught and preached) was drawn from the Word of truth

(Scripture). In outlining concrete doctrine, he was simply integrating and assuming the basic elements or principles of Scripture. Theology thus integrates Scripture. It brings together the kaleidoscope of scriptural statements on any subject to show their common pattern. It identifies the great unifying themes underlying biblical passages, and shows how any particular passage illustrates such a theme. To study theologically is not to dispense with Scripture, but to become so immersed in it that its common themes and patterns begin to emerge.

This is what Paul envisions for the young Timothy when he speaks of “correctly [handling] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2: 15, NIV). A clear path of truth from the “word of truth” (Scripture) is to be articulated in correctly teaching and following God’s message. Like a laser focusing on some specified purpose (rather than mere dispersion of a floodlight), the theologian focuses Scripture’s meaning so that it penetrates or pinpoints or illumines or guides or cuts.

Without compromise, Adventism takes the principles of *sola scriptura* and *prima scriptura* to their logical conclusion. No tradition, no creed, no belief is recognized unless supported by a clear “thus saith the Lord.” However, another method continually challenges our posture. Rather than *sola scriptura*, there is the press to bring together Scripture, science, reason, and experience so that these four entities have equal validity—in effect, four equal votes. *Sola scriptura*, of course, does not discount reason, experience, or science. They each have an important and authoritative voice. However, *sola scriptura* demands that the Bible becomes the hermeneutic—the lens—for evaluating data from every other source.

As Fernando Canale asserts, the Seventh-day Adventist theologian’s “commitment to the *sola-tota scriptura* principle requires a departure from the traditional multiple sources of theological matrix and the hermeneutical guide drawn from

philosophical and scientific ontologies."⁶ This is a critique that evangelical scholars themselves are beginning to sound.

Ben Witherington suggests that what passes as theology in the church's proclamation shows not merely glaring weaknesses but real problems of exegesis. He suggests that Evangelicalism has lost touch with its Reformation principles of *sola scriptura* and *prima scriptura* and in particular with its rigorous attention to details of the Bible and the need to stick to the text. "The problem with Evangelical theology at this juncture," Witherington asserts, "is that it is not nearly biblical enough."⁷ Here we find the major reformers still dependent on the philosophical foundations of earlier theologians.

Is it possible that today's Adventist theology is not biblical enough? That we have lost our biblical focus? That we are busy reading so much theology, even doing exegesis, that we no longer really read Scripture anymore? Every Seventh-day Adventist student of Scripture must ask these questions: "Am I truly biblically focused in my work? Do my projects lead to the Word, and are they built solidly on the Word? Am I biblical enough?"

Only Scripture has the necessary information to produce Christian theology. More pointedly, only Scripture has the necessary information to produce Seventh-day Adventist theology. "The basic elements of Christian theology [and, it could be added, Seventh-day Adventist theology]," Canale asserts, "are biblical elements, not philosophical teachings introduced later via church tradition."⁸

All theologians work their reflections using a methodology and presuppositions. The source of theological knowledge is the base on which theological methodology stands. There is need not only of the *sola scriptura* principle but the *prima scriptura* principle whereby the Adventist student of Scripture gives hermeneutical and interpretive priority to the truth of Scripture

over the truths we derive through philosophical and scientific methodologies. Moreover, we criticize and understand the latter in light of the former. This is a fundamental part of the Adventist theologian's "rightly handling the Word of truth" (ESV).

The ongoing exegesis/theology debate naturally comes into view here. Increasingly more Seventh-day Adventist thinking is being questioned and stifled today in the name of exegesis. On the other hand, so much of Adventist thought is assumed as biblical and no longer in need of closer biblical examination or further development, corrective balance, or change. In some arenas, careful biblical exegesis no longer takes place. Some of us are like the fly crawling on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel while others are the tourists looking up from 70 feet below. We are either too narrow in our perspective (exegesis) or dizzied by our trying to take in the whole (theology). From either perspective, Scripture becomes distorted or fragmented, unwittingly robbed of its voice, depth, and breadth. What we need is exegesis that informs theology and theology that guides exegesis. The Seventh-day Adventist student of Scripture will recognize the strengths and limitations of exegetical methodology, biblical theological method, and systematic theological method, and work to coordinate these respective resources in their proper priority and balance.

Ultimately, theology is biblically measured and so must be the student of Scripture. Every one of us has the capacity to distort Scripture. We are all capable of clinging to our distorted views when challenged by colleagues, or even by the plain teachings of Scripture itself.

In doing theology, anything new and creative, or deeper and richer, will we become more excited about our own ideas than about God's Word? No matter how great the idea, if it is not biblical, it is not great at all. If readers are immersed in Scripture, any ideas they draw from it are truly never their own as if they

can claim credit for them. If they ever consider theological ideas or projects as their own, apart from Scripture or the mission and message of the church, they are unwittingly detaching themselves from the humble role of a steward of Scripture and positioning themselves as authoritative.

Paul's thoughts on theological understanding and the theologian's ability to articulate theology adequately is instructive: "We speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words" (1 Cor. 2: 13, NIV). Paul would remind us that understanding spiritual things (what's in God's mind and why He does what He does) is dependent on the Holy Spirit's work on the mind of the student of Scripture. Likewise, the ability to put those spiritual things into proper words (theology) is dependent on the same Spirit. Scripture belongs to the Holy Spirit, not to the theologian. The phenomenon of Holy Scripture is a mystery.

On our own we are unable to connect with the deep spiritual things of God. We are unable to put the deep spiritual things that we may discover in our study into words that not only inform, correct, or exhort, but also to inspire spiritual response. Paul assures us that the mind of Christ can be known, plumbed, and mirrored (1 Cor. 2:16). The Adventist student of Scripture needs the Spirit to grasp spiritual themes and to find the right words to articulate those spiritual truths. This calls for humility before God and His Word. It means understanding our biases, our limitations, our spiritual journey, and our capacity to twist Scripture to our own taste. It calls for the workings of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts.

When this happens, our words (theology) will be received not as the words of human beings, but for what they truly are: the word of God, which will work powerfully in those who chose to believe (1 Thess. 2:13). Such is demanded by a generation not

so sure anymore whether they are following mere Seventh-day Adventist culture and traditions and who yearn for foundations and certainty beyond just another institutionalized religion.

Seventh-day Adventist leaders are thus biblically focused, biblically measured. They give hermeneutical and interpretive priority to the truth of Scripture over the truths arrived at through philosophical and scientific methodologies. They understand that their authority and power—as well as that of the church in the world—lies in the Word of God. The church has no authority or transforming power of her own. When her theologians both understand and model this reality, she will remain biblically focused and biblically measured, both as a corporate community and individual Christians.

Character

The making of theology is closely related to the making of a theologian. The theologian makes the theology, which is the outflow of a life. Theology deepens and grows spiritually and biblically because the theologian grows and deepens spiritually and biblically. The theology is full of divine anointing because the theologian is full of divine anointing.

Paul made this moral/spiritual link between the person of the theologian and the heart of theology when he wrote to the young Timothy: “You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness” (2 Tim. 3: 10, NRSV). In other words, “You . . . certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is” (NLT). And again, “You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (3: 14, NKJV).

You can trust the theology (what you have learned) because you know the source. Paul asserted that he and those working

with him were on a higher moral and spiritual level—godly—than the evil impostors who not only deceive, but have themselves become deceived (2 Tim. 3: 12, 13). The implication is that because of that, their theology (teaching) is likewise on a higher moral and spiritual level. This moral/spiritual link between theologian and theology, which Paul envisions, includes Paul himself, those working with him, many witnesses, and “trustworthy people” (NLT) who will be able to teach others adequately as Timothy extends the stewardship of the gospel to them (2:2). Even more directly, Paul exhorts the young theologian: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV).

Life and theology go hand in hand. The character of the heart determines the character of the theologian’s theology. Living theology resonates with the soul and the spiritual realities of God. Hurting theologians create a comforting theology. Offended theologians engender defensive theology. Sidelined theologians articulate independent theology. These, of course, are generalizations, yet there is more truth to these assertions than not. This is the being and doing that must be kept in balance. Not only is there the being of the church in relation to its going (doing of mission), but a being of the theologian in relation to theological work. Devotion qualifies the theologian’s duty in immeasurable ways.

Furthermore, theologians are not mere theology-makers but people-makers, theologian-makers, pastor-makers, and saint-makers. The soul of the theologian leaves its fingerprints on the soul of the church, the soul of individuals within the church (2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10, 14). Who the theologian is in personal character and spiritual life influences who the church sees herself to be in her character and spiritual life. This is how the theologian’s character and spiritual life effectively touch the church’s nature,

mission, and unity.

Just as there is a moral frame of reference on the part of those with “itching ears” who are no longer able to endure sound doctrine because their values and passions draw them in another direction, there is a corresponding moral frame of reference on the part of the theologian who would preach the Word and be ready in every season to reprove and rebuke and exhort with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:2-4).

The church members’ moral/spiritual lives determine the spiritual/moral quality of theology they can either tolerate or desire. The unconverted heart prefers senseless myths rather than solid truth. “The prophets prophesy lies, . . . and my people love it this way” (Jer. 5:31, NIV). How can today’s students of Scripture rebuke or reprove or correct or exhort or lift to a higher standard if their own hearts are polluted?

There is a link between ethics and doctrine. The true nature, mission, and unity of the church call for moral/spiritual excellence on the part of its theologians because such moral/spiritual excellence is at the very heart of her nature, mission, and unity. Her leaders must both work and speak from that heart. As the church is holy, so must her theologians be; otherwise, their work and influence will unintentionally undermine (1 Thess. 2:10-13).

In speaking of the challenge of leadership formation, Ron E. M. Clouzet suggests that theological training has “overlooked the inner person of the would-be parson.”⁹ He outlines the ascetic, scholastic, encyclopedic, mentoring, and professional paradigms for ministerial training and posits how each has fallen short in nurturing moral and spiritual formation of seminary students. Studies Clouzet cites show that the preponderance of what is considered valuable for the pastor’s effectiveness in ministry is not, in fact, ministry skills or leadership skills, but character values.

This diminishing of character values accounts for the lack of

power in spiritual leadership and the inability to influence a world careening to self-destruction. The challenge of leadership formation has to do with whether church members can see God in their leaders—together with spiritual passion, integrity, and power of the Holy Spirit. The challenge of theological leadership is likewise moral and spiritual formation of the inner person such that there is not only facility with divine truth, but also close communion with God and the living presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In his book *Power Through Prayer*, E. M. Bounds writes that “Men are God’s method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men. . . . What the church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations or more and novel methods. She needs men whom the Holy Spirit can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come upon machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.”¹⁰

The same is true for theology. The church is looking for better students of Scripture. God is looking for better men and women. What the church needs today is not better theology, nor a new theology, or a theology to meet the times or culture, or more and novel theological methods. She needs men and women whom the Holy Spirit can use. Men and women of character and spiritual depth. The Holy Spirit does not flow through theology or theological systems, but through men and women. The Holy Spirit does not anoint theology, He anoints men and women so that the theology is biblical, spiritual, empowered. God needs theologians who will live holy lives.

Peter Forsyth notes that the theologian “should first not be a philosopher but a saved man, with eternal life working in him.”¹¹ Philip Hughes asserts that “The creative task of theology is, first of all, the task of the redeemed who, through the prior

grace of God, have returned to the Father by the Son, and through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit *have been put in tune with the mind of Christ.*"¹²

Theology that kills is often orthodox. Nothing is so dead as a dead orthodoxy. Theology can engross, harden, and estrange the heart from God by the neglect of personal moral and spiritual discipline. Students of Scripture may lose God in their theology. Thus theologians must keep their spirit in harmony with the divine nature of their high calling. Only the heart can learn to do theology, so we must do the work of the heart. The theologian is to be a praying man, a praying woman. God commits the keys of His kingdom to the leaders who understand that their own spiritual moral growth is their main business. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

Why is this so important and fundamental? Because of the deep spirituality of the theologian's work and because the nature and mission and unity of the church demand it. And if we would move our generation for God, we must rise to a new level of "theology making" by a new level of "theologian making." Prayer makes the man or the woman. Prayer makes the theology (as Paul exhorts Timothy and models prayer in his own life, cf., 1 Tim. 2:1, 2, 8; 2 Tim. 1:3). Every leader who does not make prayer a mighty factor in his or her own life and teaching and writing is weak as a factor in God's work. He or she is powerless to advance God's cause in this world.

True theology is God-touched, God-enabled, and God-made. Even divine truth has no life-giving energy alone. It must be empowered by the Holy Spirit. If the inner person has never broken down and surrendered to God and His Word, the inner life will not be a great highway for the transmission of God's message, God's power. It will be a spiritual nonconductor. This brings us again to the reality that the leader's ability to articulate theology adequately is Holy Spirit dependent and thus a spiritual

phenomenon: "We speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:13, NIV).

The Adventist leader understands how personal spirituality impacts one's theological enterprise and the power of one's theological influence to truly transform lives spiritually. Again, the leader makes the theology. Living theology is God-touched, God-enabled, and God-made. It is spiritually tuned to the mind of Christ. It is self-surrendered to the Word of God. The theologian's personal life must in harmony with the moral vision of Scripture, constantly nourished on the words of faith and the sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). The theologian must be growing intellectually, spiritually, and on the issues that matter to the church. These are the duties and responsibilities of the Adventist theologian in light of the nature and message and mission of the church.

Worldview

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell speaks of how some individuals are able to intuit things long before others even have a clue. How a little bit of the right knowledge can go a long way. How decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as those made cautiously and deliberately. How some snap perceptions and resulting decisions may even be the best.

Gladwell writes how our snap judgments and first impressions can be educated and controlled, and how we should take our instincts seriously and learn how to use them correctly. There is as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis. Gladwell calls this intuitive skill "thin-slicing." Thin-slicing is the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on narrow slices of experience. It is rapid cognition that allows a person to zero in on what really

matters. There is power in the glance, where one intuits the essence of something. Something one hears or sees, a tone of voice, something said or left unsaid, something done or not done.

Paul had the theologian's intuitive skills—thin-slicing—in mind when he told Timothy to “be prepared in season and out of season” in order to reprove, rebuke, exhort (2 Tim. 4:2, NIV). The leader must read between the lines—at all times, everywhere. The leader's preparedness—“be ready”—is not merely in the sense of a preparedness to respond (i.e., that one is up-to-date on current theological issues or knows where to find things in the Bible or in one's library), but preparedness in the sense of being able actually to recognize what's happening, where people are headed, what the issues are, where matters lead to their logical, theological, and experiential conclusion and what needs to be done—quickly before it's too late.

Our biggest challenge for thin-slicing as Seventh-day Adventist leaders is all the exposure we ourselves have to evangelical thinking and theology, non-Adventist seminaries, mega-church practical application, contemporary culture, and a host of Christian literature, some that is biblical and much that is socio-psychological in perspective. We are in danger of losing our theological edge to intuit the impact on Seventh-day Adventist distinctives because some of those very distinctives have already become blurred in our thinking against the encapsulating power of these powerful realities.

The church needs for its leaders to see where things are headed. They need to know what the church is actually doing. They must intuit the implications for the nature, message, and mission of the church if lifestyle, application, music, entertainment, worship, preaching, and theology continue in certain directions. God forbid that the itching ears in our midst find in us (Seventh-day Adventist leaders) the very teachers in accordance to their own desires—however unwittingly on our

part. Or that the myths they turn to are unwittingly facilitated by us—Adventist leaders. Nothing has greater potential for calling into question the nature, message, and mission of the church than the church's own leadership.

Before we react too strongly to these assertions, we should be reminded that this theological intuition of which Paul writes, this "theological thin-slicing," takes place against the backdrop of history and the moral/spiritual trends in history within both the Christian and secular worlds. There is a worldview that frames Paul's theology and his theologian-making of Timothy. Paul tells Timothy that "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3, 4, NKJV). He isn't speaking here of a general falling away—something every age experiences.

Rather, this "time" on the horizon is the apostasy within the church itself of which Paul writes about more clearly in his letters to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:3, 4). There he speaks of the "mystery of iniquity" (KJV) in the context of the church in history (vs. 7). He refers to some sinister entity working behind the scenes that can be identified (intuited, thin-sliced) but that cannot be entirely described or explained or even believed by some as really there at all. It's a secret entity acting secretly, but which at some point in history will become visible, and when it does become visible it will still act disingenuously. It will be a known entity existing on two levels, one relatively open and benign, but serving to mask the true, hidden function. According to Paul, that evil force was already operating in a hidden way behind human activity and was determined to gain supremacy over the church. Theologians and theology would alike be involved.

More specifically, Paul's reference to "the apostasy" in 2

Thessalonians 2 was no general apostasy. It was a direct link to the prophetic “little horn” power of apostasy we read about in Daniel 7. The flow of Paul’s ideas in 2 Thessalonians 2 follows those of Daniel 2 and 7 and also Christ’s outline of last things in Matthew 24 (where Jesus, too, refers to the Book of Daniel [see Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14]). It is evident that Paul had been explaining biblical prophecy to the Thessalonians, patterning his thinking after both Daniel and Jesus in Matthew 24 (2 Thess. 2:6).

This was no new prophecy, no new development in the scheme of things. The knowledge of the sequence of events in Daniel 2 and 7 was essential to understanding Paul’s thinking about a prolonged delay of the emergence of the antichrist because of the existence of a restraining power: “Now you know what is holding him back” (2 Thess. 2:6, NIV). The apostolic church apparently had no question about the identity of this “restraining” power (vs. 6). Given Daniel 2 and 7 and the words of Jesus in Matthew 24, believers knew that Rome would be the last major empire before the apostasy would break out in its fullness.

Young Timothy undoubtedly heard Paul speak of these things many times. Like every Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic enterprise, these were the “traditions” that new believers were to hold onto (2 Thess. 2:15). When Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions” (vs. 15, NASB), he seemed to picture a gale, in which there is danger both of being swept off one’s feet and of being wrenched from one’s handhold. In the face of this moral/spiritual hurricane force wind of apostasy, he urged them to stand their ground, planting their feet on *terra firma*, and clinging to something solid and secure, as if clutching for dear life. In the context of his thought, those traditions were the historical-prophetic understandings of the Book of Daniel. So, knowing what lay ahead and thin-slicing his

way through the coming moral/spiritual confusion would be integral to Timothy's theological leadership.

Paul was writing within a historical-prophetic context and understanding of reality. We refer to it as the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which has been waging through the great epochs of salvation history. Paul identified all the moral spiritual issues (ethics and theology and spiritual life) that come into play within that historical-prophetic vision. Patrick Granfield writes: "There is need for the prophet-theologian who is a prophet in the biblical sense of the word—individuals who are perceptive to both the needs of the word and the voice of God, in order to proclaim and interpret present history."¹³

In the Book of Revelation, we read how the dragon is angry with an end-time people who exhibit both a rhythm of obedience and a prophetic impulse (Rev. 12:17; cf., 19:10). Revelation's vision of the saint's clash between the dragon and a fallen world is a "prophetic conflict." It is prophetic truth against prophetic delusion or the denial of the prophetic. Worldview is at the center of the controversy.

The dragon is angry not merely because there is a prophet in the church (how we often narrowly interpret this Seventh-day Adventist identifying passage). He is angry because of what the prophet encourages the church to accept from Revelation (and from Daniel) about Jesus and the Great Controversy between Himself and Satan—and the moral spiritual issues at stake. He is angry because there will be theologians in the church who choose to believe this apocalyptic prophecy and its defining worldview. He is angry that there will be theologians in the church who understand how the everlasting gospel is set in an apocalyptic historical-prophetic context, and how that unique setting of the gospel brings understanding and urgency to a host of biblical truths and compels decision for Christ. He is angry because these theologians understand what such a worldview says about the

nature and mission and message of the church. He is angry because the church follows the lead of her theologians and gives this testimony of Jesus to a confused and bewitched world. He is angry because his cover is blown, his game plan revealed, his real motives exposed. The dragon knows the power of apocalyptic prophecy where Jesus is fully unveiled and the gospel unfolds against a Great Controversy backdrop taking place in real history and real time.

God's remnant people find their roots and message and mission in apocalyptic prophecy—Daniel and Revelation. And so will her theologians. Revelation points toward a penetrating prophetic consciousness on the part of those on whom the dragon vents his anger. There is a driving prophetic worldview and impulse. The crisis of Seventh-day Adventist identity in contemporary times is closely linked to the loss of this prophetically defining theological vision. In this context, our duties and responsibilities take on profound and urgent significance. We are impelled by a prophetic psyche that enables defining theological vision and nurtures a clear Adventist identity. That defining vision encompasses the DNA of Adventist identity, message, and mission: a vision drawn from the books of Daniel and Revelation, the everlasting gospel, judgment, Sabbath, sanctuary, nature of humankind, creation *ex nihilo*, obedience to God's covenant commandments, the prophetic gift, remnant identity, the historical-prophetic understanding of the great epochs of salvation history within the great controversy between Christ and Satan as well as the emergence of religious/moral/political apostasy within the church itself. This is the defining worldview that enables the Seventh-day Adventists to thin-slice a host of practical matters, including theology, fundamental beliefs, lifestyle, ethics, entertainment, music, worship, sexuality, and mission—and in doing so stay true to the church's nature, message, and mission.

Young minds under formation need to hear a clear and certain message from their leaders. No questions without answers. No doubts that leave individuals hanging. They need to see a modeling of their mentors' own journey and humility before the Word of God. In a time when it is easier to criticize than affirm because affirming means commitment and action, Adventist leaders must ask penetrating questions and give defining answers. Defining answers to critical questions of faith and life demand taking a position on such matters. As stewards of the heavenly vision, their influence and commitments, Seventh-day Adventist leaders—at whatever level of the church—will have purposefully taken such a personal position. They will identify with the truth articulated in those defining answers.

For the sake of the nature and mission and message of the church, the church's leadership must be willing to take a position, take a stand, sound a certain trumpet. The Seventh-day Adventist leader must be assertive, positive, defining. He or she must thin-slice for the sake of the church. Such theological instruction, nurture, and guidance, however, must be done (as per Paul) with patience, compassion, and love (2 Tim. 4:2; Eph. 4:15).

The reality of theological thin-slicing is that leaders intuit matters that their colleagues may not be able to see, at least at first. Leaders who do this correctly on a matter may themselves be in need of being thin-sliced by their colleagues on a matter they may not be aware of in their own positions and assertions. Theologians, then, must come alongside one another and listen to what their colleagues see or hear or intuit as theological reality—from both a critical and a constructive perspective.

There are moments when every theologian needs corrective thin-slicing from his or her colleagues or the church. There are moments, too, when others intuit the far-reaching contribution or perceptive direction of a theologian's ideas or projects better than

the one articulating it at the time and need to come alongside with words of encouragement. It's about holding one another accountable and encouraging one another in stewardship of theological responsibility to the church.

Being open to the thin-slicing of one's peers demands a stewardship of submission not only to the nature, mission, and message of the church, but also to one another as thought leaders within the church. In this way, the Holy Spirit enables organic corrective empowerment, synthesis of thought, passion, and defining vision. This calls for a humility and mutual submission of purpose and thought in behalf of one another and the church. The combining of our thinking and coming into line with one another as well as pushing the edge with one another will enable a vibrancy for the church that is needed for the church to fulfill its mission in the world—especially as the church becomes increasingly younger and conservative. This closing of ranks and faith-affirming theology on the cutting edge, together with a prophetic-impulsed thin-slicing, enables the church to remain properly oriented toward the open future it faces.

It is in this way that the Seventh-day Adventist leaders serve as sentinels as well as stewards. They are watching from the walls: looking both within (into the church) and without (into the world), cutting a straight line (2 Tim. 2:15). They are thin-slicing: understanding the times and the issues. This will enable them to clear thinking theologically, emotionally, psychologically, morally, spiritually—in terms of the pattern of truth and prophetic vision of things—in all situations (4:5). They must not bend under the pressures of the times. Nor should they be influenced by the murmuring of frightened or demanding leaders or lay people.

Worldview is a fundamental perspective and tool in leaders' theological duties and responsibilities. It enables them to stay on their feet and steady the church in the anxiety of confusing and challenging times. It enables them to steady others with calm

assurance in the Word of truth and where God is leading His people through the sure word of prophecy (2 Peter 1:19).

Seventh-day Adventist leaders will be able to affirm that the pattern of truth entrusted to us will still be the truth—today, tomorrow, the day after, during earth’s final moments, and when Jesus comes, because truth never dies. They will be able to affirm a heavenly sanctuary and that it isn’t going anywhere just because some say it doesn’t really exist. They will be able to affirm a pre-advent judgment that is still going on. God still hates pride. Humanity continues to be born in sin. We must still be born again. Dead folk are still dead. Christ is still our only Savior. Lifestyle matters. None but the righteous shall see God. Our prophetic message is still valid and very much relevant. The Creation account is more than theological or metaphorical.

Anyone who stands around waiting for the truth to change is exactly like the rest of Christianity who want the Sabbath to change and Creation to change and lifestyle matters to change. But the Word of God with its sure word of prophecy (2 Peter 1:19) clarifies and prioritizes the issues: Sabbath/Sunday, spiritualism, sensuality, Scripture, soul (nature of humankind, state of the dead), Creation, sanctuary, Second Coming, Spirit of Prophecy, Christian values and lifestyle, salvation by faith alone.

Thought leaders for the Seventh-day Adventist church are not their own. Everything that they are and do is consecrated to Him.

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