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The Associate Editor's

DESK

E. Edward Zinke

Compromising the Authority of Scripture

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have seen ourselves as the people of the Book. The Bible has been our cornerstone. In our beginnings, we relied on it completely, for we were hammering out the doctrines of the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and the judgment—all biblical doctrines based upon the authority of Scripture. But we simply assumed its authority, since its authority was not in question. Our concern was to emphasize the biblical doctrines that had been lost to the Christian Church.

Adventists came out of churches that had already accepted the authority of the Bible and the Reformation call to *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) as well as *sola fide* (by faith alone). We simply assumed that the Bible was the sole foundational authority and that salvation was by faith alone. Having assumed these foundational doctrines, we moved on to the task of restoring the rest of biblical teaching. As a result, we did not come to terms with the issues involved in either doctrine. Therefore, we were vulnerable to salvation by works and to human reason as the

foundation of theology.

Our first crisis came with the doctrine of righteousness by faith. As we all know, in 1888 we confronted it head-on. What had been assumed now had to be spelled out clearly. The doctrine has been renewed from time to time within the church and has been a blessing both to the church as a whole and to each of us individually. We can be grateful for the many voices that have joined in the proclamation of salvation by grace through faith.

Just as we faced a crisis in the doctrine of righteousness by faith, so we also now encounter a similar crisis on the authority of the Bible. And just as we became aware of the issues and principles involved in *sola fide*, so we must also grasp those involved in the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. We can be grateful for the many voices in our church that are beginning to proclaim the message that the Bible is the sole foundation of our faith.

Many similarities exist between the doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Just as salvation is a gift, so too the Bible, God's self-revelation, is also a gift. And just as we must not expect to manipulate salvation through human effort, so we must not seek to control the Bible by human reason. We must receive both salvation and the Bible by faith alone.

The history of theology reminds us that when one of these principles is lost, the other eventually disappears as well. The gift of salvation depends upon the gift of Scripture, for if the authority of Scripture rests upon human works of reason, then the salvation of which the Bible speaks also arises from those same human works.

The result of simply assuming the authority of Scripture has often led to a failure to grasp the meaning of its authority. For example, at times I have sought an absolute, rock-solid foundation to put under the Bible so that I could accept it as the Word of God and therefore as the only authority. I wanted to use

the power of science, archaeology, history, psychology, sociology, and philosophy to build that foundation. I thought that such approaches would confirm that the Bible is the absolute authority.

But by doing so, I did not realize that I had just made myself the absolute authority. I rested my case on the excellence of reason rather than on the power of the Word of God. I compromised the authority of the Bible by attempting to interpret it within my contemporary worldview. I thought that the Bible was to be subjected to contemporary methods of literary interpretation and to concepts of truth, faith, justice, love, etc. Rather than allowing the Bible to be its own interpreter, i.e., to provide its own worldview, its own methods of interpretation; I compromised the authority of the Bible by imposing external worldviews and methods of interpretation upon it. Thus, I was able to make the Bible say what I needed it to say. I could support a "designer god" who fit well in my culture, who could be sold to the thought leaders of my time.

Also, I have misunderstood the authority of the Bible by seeking a "balanced" theology. I attempted to balance law and grace, faith and reason, and natural revelation with special revelation. Somehow, I overlooked the fact that what might appear balanced to me might be altogether unbalanced from God's standpoint, and that it was the biblical message that must provide the balance rather than what seemed appropriate from my human perspective.

Furthermore, some truths are not a question of balance, but a question of relationship. It is foolish for a homeowner to argue with the architect of a new home over the balance between the kitchen and the foundation. That is a question of relationship. The kitchen must rest upon the foundation. So the keeping of the law follows salvation by grace, reason rests upon faith, and natural revelation is understood within the context of special revelation.

I compromised the authority of the Bible when I wanted to

find the truth, wherever it may be found, whether it be in nature, reason, science, philosophy, history, or elsewhere. I sought to find the truth so that I could find my own way to God. I was acting as if truth somehow had an existence independent of God and His Word. Like Pilate, I was asking, "What is truth?" (John 18:38, KJV) when "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6, KJV) was standing directly before me! For me, truth was a thing, or a concept, by which I would measure everything, including God and His Word.

I also failed to grasp the authority of the Bible when I wanted to take the truths discovered in the natural world and harmonize them with the truths from Scripture. Without realizing it, I was using a method that came from the major theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas. For him, theology rested upon the Bible and nature, the Bible and reason, and the Bible and church tradition. In a sense, I was saying, it is wiser to build the house upon the rock *and* the sand.

Thus, I compromised the authority of the Bible when I saw it as just one among many other authorities. I thought in terms of the primacy, or the supremacy, of the Bible rather than in terms of its sole foundational authority. It shocked me when I discovered my position on the primacy of Scripture to be the pre-Reformation view that the Reformation answered with the principle of *sola scriptura*. As a result, I compromised the authority of the Bible by assuming the contemporary humanistic concept of freedom—that we are absolutely free in the universe to make our decision either for or against Christ from a neutral starting point. The biblical teaching I discovered is that we are either slaves of Christ or slaves of Satan, and that we are set free only when we come to Christ. I thought I was free to determine the truth. By contrast, the Bible teaches that the truth will set us free.

Finally, I compromised the authority of the Bible when I

wanted to meet people where they are in order to bring them to Christ. I sought to start with their worldview, with their philosophical framework, in order to convince them of the truth of Scripture. In so doing, I was setting their culture up as the foundational authority.

Though it is true that we must meet people in such a way that they can understand the message of the gospel, the conviction must come from the Holy Spirit, not from the dictates of their own culture. Our task is to confront their culture with God's Word, rather than to base their acceptance of God's Word upon their particular culture. Without verbalizing it, I was trying to tell God where He fits into the organization of knowledge. I was attempting to bring Him into the canon of truth. How lucky God was that I was on the scene to pull together the best arguments to prove His existence and defend the Bible as His Word. I wanted a "designer god" who fits my culture and rationality.

In my treatment of Scripture, I was like a physician who examines a patient, anesthetizes him or her on an operating table, massages the heart, measures the brain waves, excises a portion of the organs for further examination, diagnoses and fixes the problems if possible, and finally pieces the body back together as best as humanly possible. I failed to recognize that the process is just the opposite—that I must be the one placed upon the table. I must submit to the control of the Word of God, be dissected by it, allow its power under the Holy Spirit to be breathed into me, and thus be healed by it.