

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Lake Union Herald

Lake Union Herald

---

10-2023

### People Make Mistakes

Denis Kaiser

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs>

---

# People Make Mistakes



▲ DENIS KAISER

A COUPLE YEARS AGO, I STUMBLED OVER A PUZZLING PRIVATE LETTER BY F.M. WILCOX (1865–1951), A FORMER LONG-TIME EDITOR OF THE REVIEW AND HERALD (1911–1944) AND ONE OF THE ORIGINAL TRUSTEES OF THE ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE AFTER HER DEATH IN 1915. SOME STATEMENTS IN THAT LETTER SEEMED CONTRARY TO EVERYTHING ELSE I HAD READ FROM HIS PEN.

On Aug. 5, 1928, he had written, “In my judgment, the historical teaching of the denomination is in favor of verbal inspiration of the Testimonies. This is the position I have always taken myself with reference to the subject. Indeed, I hold to the verbal inspiration of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> These statements led several writers to presume that Wilcox truly believed in verbal inspiration and given his remarkable influence on the church, they concluded that he was responsible for the widespread acceptance of the belief in verbal inspiration among church members from the 1920s to the 1940s.

But when I continued reading the very same letter, I saw the words, “I believe in thought inspiration as applied to both the Bible and the Testimonies.” Did Wilcox just contradict himself in the same document? It seems so. Just four days later, the *Review and Herald* printed an article by Wilcox which contained striking similarities to the letter, yet its ideas were incompatible with verbal inspiration. Already nine years earlier, at the 1919 Bible Conference, the attendees heard Wilcox stress, “I have never believed in the verbal inspiration of the Testimonies.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, any other document from him prior to, and after, 1928 consistently attests to his rejection of the theory of verbal inspiration and his affirmation of thought inspiration, a term it appears he introduced to Adventists.<sup>3</sup>

From a quick reading of the first statement anybody would have to presume that Wilcox believed in verbal inspiration, yet a little bit of digging showed that he may likely have committed a *lapsus linguae*, a slip of the tongue. While it is certainly true that

a belief in verbal inspiration became more widely accepted among church members, we may have to look in a different direction if we want to identify the reasons for its reception. How often have I said the opposite of what I was trying to say simply because I was thinking of my objections against another perspective? Those mistakes happen to all of us. So, let us be gentle with each other and our religious forebears.

In personal relationships we are sometimes puzzled over what the other person says, and we would probably do well to ask for clarification to avoid misunderstanding that person. By asking what they really mean, we exemplify what we want others to do to us too. ■

<sup>1</sup> F.M. Wilcox to L.E. Froom, August 5, 1928, Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference, Silver Spring, MD.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Bible Conference, 1229.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Wilcox’s view, see Denis Kaiser, “Trust and Doubt: Perceptions of Divine Inspiration in Seventh-day Adventist History” (St. Peter am Hart: Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, 2019), 338–364.

**Denis Kaiser** is an associate professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

