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Theology Matters

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Theology Matters

Theology matters, and it is even more true in our post-COVID world. One cannot ignore, when interpreting the biblical teaching, what we have experienced as humanity. Not that the message itself must be changed, but this will affect how one explains and proclaims it. After, for example, the medieval persecution or the Holocaust, one cannot stay any longer with the same theological explanations of reality. Biblical theology needs to give answers properly and relevantly to the needs of our post-modern, post-Christian, and post-truth world.

Many thinkers, scholars, and theologians wrestle with issues regarding hermeneutics, evolution and theistic evolution, health and vaccination, religious freedom, relationship between faith and science, leadership style, relevancy of evangelism, role and ordination of women, homosexuality, interfaith marriages, Church authority and structure, relationship between Christianity and Islam, Christianity and other world religions, salvation of non-Christians, religious secularism, how to effectively work with youth and big cities, environmental studies, non-violent atonement, meaning of justification by faith, contextualization, culture relativism, violence, participation in war and military service, entertainment, and so forth. Biblical-theological thinking should offer appropriate answers, and it should inform us how to live, because proper response to health pandemics and other questions matter.

The principal task of theologians is to present a correct image of God, cast a vision, preach, protect against false doctrines and interpretations of the Bible, and care for those entrusted to one's pastoral care. But how can they do these things if they do not correctly understand the important issues? These include God's character of love, the Great Controversy, the plan of salvation, the centrality of the cross, the relationship between the covenants, the end-time prophecies, hermeneutics, the meaning of Christ's intercessory ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, service in the community, non-combatants in war, relationship to non-Christian religions, the nature and authority of the Church, immigration problems, and questions regarding contraception, abortion, divorce, remarriage, homosexuality, stewardship, near-death experiences, hell, immortality—to name a few. Addressing all these topics depends on an understanding of theology and a constant growth in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). We live in a complex world, and people demand meaningful and relevant answers to their issues.



Need for Theology

Christians need to understand the contemporary world in order for their ministry to be meaningful and relevant. Without recognizing the theological and other pertinent trends, our service in the post-modern world could be in jeopardy and our preaching shallow and unresponsive to society's current intellectual struggles and issues that occupy the modern mind. This isolation would hinder, neutralize, and even silence God's commission to us to be His witnesses in the world and provide answers to humanity's troubling questions.

Teaching and preaching the Gospel to millennials, to Nones, and to Generation Z is the biggest challenge today. We may share the same vocabulary, but new meaning is given to the same words. We employ the same words but use a different dictionary. We live in a post-Christian era where secularism and neo-atheism dominate the intellectual world. The thinking of our people is strongly influenced by evolutionary thinking, Eastern religions, inclusivism, mystical spirituality, formed in part by Hollywood's powerful stories like Avatar, Star Wars, Terminator, Superman, Black Panther, to name a few. Plato correctly stated the famous dictum: "Those who tell the stories [in the most convincing way] rule society/the world." Unfortunately, rock music and subcultures, films, and video games are often aimed against the values of life such as honesty, obedience, respect, and truth, and are vulgar, immoral, suicidal, even Satanic, and full of false spirituality. Violence and naturalism fill the minds and feelings of contemporary young people who listen to and play the various media; consequently, their minds and emotional lives are formed by these entertainments.

The task of Adventist theology is threefold:

1. To explore and present the beauty and relevance of the Adventist message and mission—the genius of biblical truth in the Adventist belief system;
2. To advance in the understanding of the Truth, to discover new things and connections;
3. To refine the Church's current understanding of the Bible and be an *educated voice* in the Church.

It means that theology needs to be a critical but constructive and positive voice in the Church. The Church needs that function, and educators, theologians, and Bible scholars should not betray or eschew this important role. To tell the truth is about courage, not survival. We need to be guardians of biblical truth, but not possessors of truth. If we do not study the Scriptures diligently and seriously, we open ourselves to bringing or cultivating sectarian thinking into the Church; and if we do not stop *anti-education* sentiments, they will produce extremism and fanaticism. Lack of education enslaves.

Christ's followers must follow balanced biblical teaching because they then can grow in Christ and the truth rather than in their own independent thinking or traditions. Adventist theology prepares people to search for the truth, know the truth, love the truth, follow the truth, live the truth, proclaim the truth, and be ready for the Second Coming of Christ. In this way, we can see the coherency of the truth and its perfect

system within the frame of the Great Controversy and the metanarrative of the Holy Scriptures. Biblical truth is a story with the Triune God at the center and all other truth clustered around this unifying and living Center.

Every believer needs theology: (1) to advance in the understanding of truth; (2) to have solid answers to a sophisticated world and new heresies; (3) to experience revival and reformation, because it is always the result of in-depth study of the Holy Scriptures; and (4) to rediscover and restore the forgotten and buried biblical teaching. In addition:

1. Theology helps all to formulate messages centered on Christ in the context of belief in the Triune God. The indicative of the Gospel must always be God-centered and Spirit-filled and must precede the imperative of the Gospel.
2. Theology assists in preserving biblical truth through a competent, responsible, and relevant exposition of God's Word in preaching, avoiding bad scholarship, and the sensational, emotional, and intuitional *fake news* filled with conspiracy theories.
3. Theology equips church members, as well as leaders, to answer questions intelligently. Life is complex, and many in our churches have profound questions related to postmodern, post-Christian, agnostic, and atheistic convictions. Pragmatic religious materialism and religious spirituality create new issues that demand honest answers.
4. Urban settings need trained, thoughtful educators, administrators, evangelists, and pastors. Cities represent a unique challenge for those who want to proclaim God's Word in a meaningful way.
5. Theology edifies the Church and keeps her memory refreshed so that we do not forget key events and past discussions related to the understanding and interpretation of the Bible, and do not commit the same mistakes.
6. Theology helps us to communicate the full Gospel to a wide diversity of cultures and worldviews.
7. Theology gives us a big picture of God's revelation. It points to crucial events in the drama of the biblical metanarrative, demonstrating how all truth is connected, as well as defining the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.
8. Theology equips people to lead meaningful dialogues and contemporary, relevant conversations. It makes us perceptive and competent to

address the Christian, post-Christian, and non-Christian religious and atheistic communities.

9. Theology brings professionalism, expertise, and confidence into our multifaceted ministry. The certainty of the understanding of the biblical truth as a coherent system strengthens the Adventist identity so pastors, educators, and administrators can speak, teach, and preach with conviction and passion for truth. At the same time, a thoughtful acceptance of our limited knowledge leads to humility and tolerance.
10. Theology does not just spell out the importance of what we believe, but also explains why it is relevant and how it should be lived, thus closely connected to ethics.

Ellen White states: “Hard study and hard work are required to make a successful minister or a successful worker in any branch of God’s cause.”¹ She advises: “Ministers should devote time to reading, to study, to meditation and prayer. They should store the mind with useful knowledge, committing to memory portions of Scripture, tracing out the fulfillment of the prophecies, and learning the lessons which Christ gave to His disciples.”² Pastors, she says, should “search the Scriptures diligently and prayerfully that they may become giants in the understanding of Bible doctrines and the practical lessons of Christ.”³

Conclusion

A broad theological understanding is a matter of life and death, because people’s eternal destiny is related to a right presentation and rethinking of the Gospel. Being a leader requires a total dedication of the whole person to this noble task, for it is not a job but, rather, a life vocation.

Our ministry will not be a burden when we experience the genuine love of God. Only persons who value God’s forgiveness and acceptance of being His son or daughter can truly love and serve (Luke 7:47; John 1:12; 1 John 3:1; 5:12–13). Theology really matters and has practical long-term implications. Martin Luther

King Jr. rightly stated: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”⁴ Our Church will be neutralized if we are silent on biblical-theological-missiological issues that always have practical implications.

The Lord’s declaration in Isaiah 66:2b summarizes this need of thorough study of the biblical message from God’s perspective: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (ESV). Daniel powerfully proclaims at the climax of his apocalyptic book: “Those who are wise *will shine* like the brightness of the heavens, and those who *lead many to righteousness*, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3 NIV; *emphasis added*).

Based on this need for theology in our spiritual and practical life, this *Current* issue has been themed “Present and Post-Pandemic Theology: What and How We Will Teach and Preach.” So, in this issue, you will find several reflections that contribute to this *leitmotif*. Important questions posed by them include:

- How do the Gospel and Seventh-day Adventist theology need to respond to situations in the world, including pandemics, spread of fake news, and a post-truth and post-Christian culture?
- What do we learn from the latest phenomena surrounding us?
- How do we envision the future of Adventist theology and practice?

Enjoy these thought-provoking articles and then think about how to put all the pieces together for it to be mirrored in our learning, teaching, preaching, and living experience.

¹ White, Ellen G. (1948). *Gospel Workers*, p. 71. Washington, DC: Review & Herald Publishing

² White, Ellen G. (1948). *Testimonies for the Church* (Vol. 4), p. 412. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.

³ White, Ellen G. (1948). *Testimonies for the Church* (Vol. 4), p. 415. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.

⁴ “This quote, attributed to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., is likely a paraphrase of original language that was slightly different. The closest statement your WorshipWeb Curator could find is this excerpt from Rev. King’s sermon on courage, delivered on March 8, 1965, in Selma, Alabama: ‘A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right’” (Unitarian Universalist Association (n.d.): uua.org/worship/words/quote/silent-about-things-matter)