Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Part 3

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Dealing with doctrinal issues in the church: Part 3

The 1888 Minneapolis Bible conference exemplifies using wrong attitudes to deal with doctrinal controversy. The conference was convened on Wednesday, October 17; the delegation was composed of 90 people representing 27,000 church members. The conference agenda included progress reports concerning new mission fields, the distribution of labor, city evangelism, a new ship for the South Pacific (Pitcairn), and several others.

Among the delegates, the names of Alonzo T. Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner stood out. They were close friends; both were editors for Signs of the Times in California. Jones and Waggoner were at the center of the doctrinal controversy that arose during a ministerial workers’ meeting, October 10–16, prior to the 1888 conference itself.

The battle lines are drawn

The divisive issue had to do with the interpretation of Galatians 3:24. Was the law referred to in the text the moral or ceremonial law? O. A. Johnson, in an article published by the Review and Herald in 1886, had concluded that the law in Galatians is ceremonial. E. J. Waggoner published a series of nine articles in Signs, in which he argued that the law in Galatians is the moral law.

Waggoner became instrumental in the understanding and teaching of righteousness by faith. “Waggoner was asked to present a series of lectures on righteousness by faith. We do not know exactly what Waggoner said, because beginning only in 1891 were all Bible studies at General Conference sessions recorded, but from what he wrote before and after Minneapolis we know approximately what he taught.” Gerhard Pfandl summarizes the main points: “(1) man’s obedience can never satisfy God’s law; (2) Christ’s imputed righteousness alone is the basis of our acceptance by God; and (3) we constantly need the covering of Christ’s righteousness, not just for our past sins.”

Some accepted what he taught, some rejected it, and some were neutral. Among those who accepted the message were Ellen White, W. C. White, and S. N. Haskell. Among those who rejected the message were Uriah Smith, J. H. Morrison, and L. R. Conradi.

Eventually most of those who opposed the message changed their attitude and accepted the message of righteousness by faith, though some left the church. Jerry Moon observes that a mixture of issues and multiple misunderstandings characterized the 1888 session. He says the results that followed the theological conference were devastating because Scripture was put aside and personal issues were the central focus.

The 1888 conference was held 25 years after the church’s formal organization and 44 years after the Great Disappointment. The participants were dedicated, yet divided. In fact, the attitude undergirding the conference was a “search for truth,” which ultimately became a basis for furthering personal ends.
The pioneers also manifested negative attitudes against the Bible. They did not regard the Bible as God’s Word. White mentions “caviling over” God’s Word, “sitting in judgment upon its teachings,” and other irrelevant handling of the Word. Therefore, the purposes of studying the Scriptures had nothing to do with discovering its meaning but had much to do with sustaining one’s personal preferred presuppositions about the Bible.

The process for studying God’s Word included absence of prayer, a focus on nonessentials, use of “ad hominem” arguments, use of “cloture on debate,” a “wresting of Scriptures,” and use of religious political alliances.

There was also much “jesting, joking, and casual talking, but little earnest prayer in the delegates’ private rooms.” Moon observes that the order of study included presentation by Waggoner, debate with searching Scriptures, confusion and rejection of truth, and disregard or rejection of the Spirit of Prophecy.

A threatened divide

Ellen White was instrumental in dealing with the controversy. Moon shows that White called for a “fair hearing” of Waggoner’s presentation, a thorough investigation of Scriptures with “humble prayer and teachable spirit, use of her writings after thorough Bible study, thorough investigation of Scriptures before applying her writings, and a willingness to re-examine the Scriptures.”

first make a thorough examination of Scripture was a major factor at Minneapolis. The 1888 conference showed the most blatant shortcomings in the way the pioneers related to divine authority as expressed in God’s Word and the Spirit of Prophecy.

Richard Schwarz points out that while church leaders spent resources on theological debates, “the spiritual awakening faltered, wavered, and got sidetracked for a quarter of a century.” The 1888 conference exemplifies using the wrong approach to deal with controversial issues in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The 1848 and 1855 conferences

In contrast to the 1888 debacle, the 1848 and the 1855 conferences exemplify right approaches toward dealing with controversial issues in the church.

The 1848 conferences were intended to lay doctrinal foundations for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The first conference was at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, April 20–24. The conference focused on the doctrine of the Sabbath. The second conference was held in Bristol, Connecticut, in June (the exact date unknown). The third conference was in Volney, New York, August 18, 19. David Arnold presented his understanding of the millennium, the 144,000 people, and the Lord’s Supper. Respectively, he held that the millennium was in the past; the 144,000 were comprised of the saints who were resurrected at Jesus’ resurrection; the Lord’s Supper ought to be held once a year, during the feast of Passover. During the same conference, Joseph Bates preached on the Sabbath truth and James White taught about the sanctuary.

Ellen White recounts, “There were about thirty-five present, all that could be collected in that part of the State. There were hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us.” The presence of Ellen White was instrumental to the conclusion of this conference. Moon mentions that the two visions of Ellen White contributed to resolution of the theological differences.

The fourth conference was held in Port Gibson, New York, August 27, 28. During the conference, White received another vision after which she counseled the participants to preserve biblical unity.

The fifth conference was held at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, September 8, 9. The sixth conference was held in Topsham, Maine, October 20–22. Again, Joseph Bates and James White presented the Sabbath and sanctuary truths. The seventh conference was held in Dorchester, Massachusetts, on November 17–19. The conference participants discussed the seal of God referred to in Revelation 7:1–3. Earnest Bible study, prayer, and prophetic guidance characterized the 1848 conferences.
We would come together burdened in soul; praying that we might be one in faith and doctrine; for we knew that Christ is not divided. One point at a time was made the subject of investigation. The Scriptures were opened with a sense of awe. Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth. After earnest prayer, if any point was not understood, it was discussed, and each one expressed his opinion freely; then we would again bow in prayer, and earnest supplications went up to heaven that God would help us to see eye to eye, that we might be one as Christ and the Father are one. Many tears were shed.

We spent many hours in this way. Sometimes, the entire night was spent in solemn investigation of the Scriptures, that we might understand the truth for our time. On some occasions the Spirit of God would come upon me, and difficult portions were made clear through God's appointed way, and then there was perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one spirit.32

The theological process was critical for the successful search for truth and unity among the early pioneers. The subject of discussion during the conferences was the Bible only. White describes the conference participants as people who were keen, noble, and true. These people included Joseph Bates and James White, who served as the main presenters of the biblical truths.

A better approach

The process of biblical investigation included a combination of prayer and study, avoidance of minor points of disagreement, freedom of expression, and individual prayer and study.33 Intensity characterized the process of interpreting the Scriptures. White recalls, “Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word.”34 In addition, she says, “Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth.”35 What this should teach us is that when church leaders and Bible scholars have a personal relationship with God and with each other, they promote unity of faith and mission in the church.

Successful outcomes of the Bible conferences also had to do with an element of persistence—seven conferences in 1848.36 Bible scholars to whom God reveals His will are those who spend adequate amounts of time studying the Scriptures. These will never quit the study of God’s Word or get discouraged before they discover a “thus says the Lord” in the Bible. Instead, they will continue studying the Word until they understand what God’s will is on a given subject.

The theological process that the early church pioneers employed in their search for truth and unity influenced the outcomes of the 1848 Bible conferences. As a result of this process, clear explanation of the passages “under investigation” was arrived at and “difficult portions were made clear through God’s appointed way.”37 This process also helped the pioneers establish the doctrinal system of the church.38

With these examples before us, perhaps the question that one would ask today’s Adventist Bible scholars, theologians, and leaders might be, “Are we following the footsteps of the pioneers as we, ourselves, struggle with important theological issues?”

A Sabbath question

A few years later, in 1855, the pioneers had to deal with a dispute over the beginning of the Sabbath.39 Moon mentions that Joseph Bates, a retired sea captain, held that “even” in Leviticus 23:32, the time for beginning the Sabbath, was 6:00 p.m. equatorial time. In fact, he says that Bates was well respected and followed by the majority since he was “the leading advocate of the Sabbath among Adventists.”40 He also mentions that some Sabbath keepers from Maine, in 1847–1848, “cited the King James Version of Matthew 28:1 in support of beginning Sabbath at sunrise, but a vision of Ellen White in 1848 refuted this.”41 He goes on to say, “A tongues-speaking incident in June 1848 supporting the 6:00 p.m. time was accepted as confirming that the Sabbath begins at 6:00 p.m. As a result, from 1847 to 1855, a few began the Sabbath at sundown, but the majority followed the 6:00 p.m. time.”42

In summer 1855, James White requested J. N. Andrews to study the issue, and Andrews demonstrated from the Scriptures that the Sabbath begins at sundown. Moon mentions that the study was presented to the conference in Battle Creek on November 17, 1855, and published in the December 4, 1855, Review.43 Further, he states that the majority of attendees found Andrews’ arguments convincing. He mentions that the response was unanimous with an exception of two people—Joseph Bates and Ellen White.44

Comparing with the 1848 theological process model that contributed to
the church’s unity of doctrine and faith, the issue of Sabbath keeping would not be considered as over yet. According to Moon, “On Sunday, Nov. 18, Ellen White received a vision endorsing the sundown view. She asked the angel why God allowed this error for nine years. Answer: Because you never thoroughly studied the Scripture evidence. Direct revelation of the Holy Spirit was not given in place of thorough study of Scripture.”

The 1855 dispute was resolved, then, by a thorough study of the Bible and by the believers’ acceptance of prophetic guidance. Moon says, “More comprehensive study disproved the interpretive assumptions.” Today, people of experience and influence may also contribute to wrong theological conclusions and church practices. Thorough study of the Bible, intense prayer, and prophetic guidance contribute to successful theological processes and conclusions, and hence, the unity of the doctrine and faith.

**Study the Word**

One of the lessons we can learn from our pioneers is that they were serious Bible students. Francis Wernick states, “They viewed the Bible as a unified whole, a message from God through human instruments writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

He goes on to say,

To reach their conclusions, our pioneers compared Scripture with Scripture, using one Bible writer to explain what another had written. They saw the Old and New Testaments as complementing one another and the Bible as a unified whole. Thus today we have a system of truth that has kept us unified for several generations.

Wernick mentions that the writings of Ellen White were instrumental “in helping our pioneers to unite in their understanding of the special Biblical truths that make us a distinct people today.” He affirms the role of Ellen White’s writings in unifying the church today.

In addition to the study of the Scriptures, the pioneers spent time seeking God’s guidance through prayer. Moon reports that Ellen White, who was present, highlights the importance of prayer during the 1848 conferences. Their burden in prayer was for unity.

This is a recurring attitude throughout the writings of Ellen White as she reports on her personal experience during these conferences. In times when there were disagreements, there was an emphasis in individual prayer and Bible study. The focus of their study was the Bible. The results were positive and led to a clearer understanding of the truth.

During the 1855 conferences on the time for beginning the Sabbath, Moon observes that there was superficiality in the manner in which they studied the Bible at the beginning stages, and with intensity of Bible study God blessed them with understanding and the matter was settled. Looking at these two conferences, it is very evident that truth and light came at a price. They had to give up their own opinions and focus on allowing God to bring them to unity. In addressing the subject of the ordination of women in our time, the same attitude needs to prevail.

In his conclusion, Moon highlights three elements that are important in dealing with theological controversies. How we relate to God, the Bible, and fellow believers is important in this process. However, the key toward dealing with controversial subjects in the church is a personal relationship with God. Moon states that this relationship with God is “the first issue to settle in resolving doctrinal disagreements within the church or in seeking a response to pluralism and postmodernism.”

(Part 4 will appear in the August 2013 issue.)