

COMING TO GRIPS WITH SCRIPTURE:
THE BIBLE AS BOTH A PROBLEM AND A SOLUTION
IN OUR POLARIZED CLIMATE

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Almost 25 years ago, *Adventist Today* published an issue with the optimistic theme “A Gathering of Adventisms.” Four major camps were identified—mainstream, historic, evangelical, and progressive—and an adherent of each was given space to present his/her perspective. The editors signaled a desire to showcase a diversity of viewpoints and move past “the old liberal/conservative dichotomy.”¹ In our current church climate, however, it seems that a discussion of polarization is difficult to avoid. Although the broad spectrum of views identified by *Adventist Today* a quarter century ago may still be a valid categorization, recent events have tended to obscure this spectrum by forcing splits along polarized lines. One point on which most can agree is that this trajectory is an unfortunate one. Yet what can be done to address it? There are undoubtedly many complex factors involved. This paper offers a suggestion regarding just one of them, namely, the function of the Bible.

In this hermeneutical reflection paper, I argue that the Bible is currently a problem contributing to polarization in contemporary Adventism but that it can become a solution. The issue, I suggest, is that high regard for the Bible is coupled with unrecognized superficial engagement. And as a result of this combination, a mistaken sense of authority is attached to certain viewpoints, leaving very little room for discussion. Yet there is hope that the Bible can lead us beyond polarization because it is a shared starting point. If we begin to appreciate biblical texts for what they are in themselves, we can find a place for meaningful conversations to begin.

¹ Jim Walters, “Inside *Adventist Today*,” *Adventist Today*, January–February 1994, 2.

The Bible as a Problem

As Adventists, we set the stakes high when it comes to biblical engagement, sometimes even styling ourselves “people of the Book.”² But could there be a disconnect between the way the Bible is perceived and actual engagement with it? The primary problem, I suggest, is not a lack of engagement,³ but the tendency toward superficial engagement because of certain perennial issues. I wish to highlight three issues in particular: (1) equating theology derived from the biblical interpreter’s inference with the teaching of the Bible itself, (2) ignoring contextual meaning because it does not align with our interests, and (3) neglecting the diversity of the biblical witness. Let us consider each of these in turn.

First, equating theology derived from the biblical interpreter’s inference with the teaching of the Bible itself. In seeking to establish Scripture’s voice, we often make inferences as we relate passages to one another, particularly on biblical topics that are less clearly presented. A classic example is traditional Adventist teaching regarding the millennium. The core passage for this doctrine is Rev 20, yet not everything we teach about the millennium is found in that text. We also find it necessary to appeal to Jer 4:23–25 for the notion of a desolate earth, to 1 Thess 4:17 for the saints being taken to heaven, and to 1 Cor 6:2–3 for the nature of the judgment.⁴ To say that these other texts are relevant, however, requires inferring the relationship of events they describe.

² The *Church Manual* asserts, “If we cease to be the people of the Book, we are lost, and our mission has failed.” *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat / Review and Herald, 2016), 143.

³ According to data presented in October 2018, there is an upward trend in terms of Adventists engaging in daily Bible study. See Andrew McChesney, “Adventist Church Presents New ‘I Will Go’ Strategic Plan,” *Adventist Review*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story13043-adventist-church-presents-new-i-will-go-strategic-plan>.

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association / Review and Herald, 2018), 407–19.

We ought to recognize an assumption that is operative in such reasoning. We are assuming that there is another reality—a set of factual truths—behind the Bible, and that we can access it by reaching through the Bible.⁵ We reach through several texts and seem to find a harmonious view of the millennium. Yet this view is *our* view; none of the biblical authors would have been able to articulate this doctrine in this way. David Aune cogently articulates the issue: “The New Testament witnesses are as clay in the hands of the theologian, who fashions it in his own likeness and breathes into it his own life. He then stands back amazed at the close resemblance between his own theological stance and that of the earliest Christian witnesses.”⁶

The assumption that we can make use of the Bible to access truths not expressly articulated in the Bible is not necessarily wrong. It is, in fact, a time-honored assumption, undergirding in part the dictum from the Reformation, “Scripture interprets Scripture.”⁷ My purpose is neither to call it into question nor to call for an end to the use of the Bible in systematic theology. What I am saying is that we ought to take ownership of our systematic constructions. In other words, we would do well to be aware of how the interpreter shapes the interpretation. To be sure, this is the case not just for systematic constructions but also for exegesis of texts. Yet if it is true at the level of individual texts, it must be at least as true at the level of relating these texts to one another. In short, if we equate our own teaching with that of the Bible itself, we are setting ourselves up for problems.

⁵ I am indebted to Susan Hylen for this image.

⁶ David E. Aune, “The New Testament: Source of Modern Theological Diversity,” *Direction* 2, no. 1 (January 1973): 10.

⁷ The idea behind this dictum goes as far back as Martin Luther. See Raymond F. Surburg, “The Significance of Luther’s Hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 4 (April 1953): 241–54. Surburg translates a statement in which Luther asserts that Scripture “is in itself the most certain, the most accessible, the most readily understandable (book), which interprets itself.”

The second issue out of the three is ignoring contextual meaning because it does not align with our interests. We are sometimes reticent to follow the logic of a passage in its historical and literary contexts. One example is Paul's discussion of the law. In an effort to defend the Decalogue and the Sabbath in particular, Adventists have found it necessary to account for Pauline statements about the law as a temporary provision which is no longer binding now that Christ has come (cf. Gal 3:19–26). A major approach has been to posit a distinction between moral and ceremonial laws,⁸ but Paul himself makes no hint of such a distinction. To be sure, Adventists are not unique in reading Paul through lenses that sometimes distort his meaning. The moral/ceremonial distinction is one that Calvin was familiar with in the 16th century, and he attributed it to “ancient writers.”⁹

But while Adventists are not unique in this regard, perhaps we have been slow to catch up with scholarly correctives. Krister Stendahl argues that the dominant reading of Paul in the wake of Augustine and Luther is a misreading which translates the law into legalism and Gentile inclusion into assurance of salvation.¹⁰ Stendahl observes, “It has always been a puzzling fact that Paul meant so relatively little for the thinking of the Church during the first 350 years of years of its history. ... A decisive reason for this state of affairs may well have been that up to the time of Augustine the Church was by and large under the impression that Paul dealt with those issues with which he actually deals.”¹¹ Indeed, the issue of Jew/Gentile relations was a dominant one in Paul's ministry and correspondence, and he addressed the law as a subset of this

⁸ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 279–81.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.14.

¹⁰ Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 205–6.

¹¹ Stendahl, 203–4.

issue. As Stendahl notes, this ceased to be a point of contention and the church recognized that its concerns were not identical with Paul's concerns. We might benefit from similarly acknowledging the differences between our interests and Paul's.¹²

The third and final issue is neglecting the diversity of the biblical witness. Adventists tend to emphasize the unity of Scripture's message,¹³ but this often results in missing the richness conveyed by the diversity of voices within the canon. Consider the various New Testament perspectives on eschatology. In 1 Corinthians, Paul seeks to correct the imbalance of a community enamored with wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual manifestations which they are presently experiencing. He thus characterizes the present time as transitory and partial: "As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (1 Cor 13:8–10).¹⁴ Then, in ch. 15, he offers a lengthy exposition on the future hope of the resurrection. Paul wants his Corinthian congregation to prioritize the future hope.

In contrast to the decidedly future eschatology of 1 Corinthians, the Gospel of John stresses a present eschatological fulfillment, a "realized eschatology" as some call it.¹⁵ As Adventists, we are prone to miss this fact as we invoke Jesus's words in John 14:3 in our passionate proclamation of his second advent: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will

¹² I suggest that by acknowledging such differences and reading Paul more contextually, we could better appreciate his argument and be more attuned to its spiritual implications. For Paul, "law" does not mean Decalogue but Torah. And he argues that the age of Torah is past, not because he thinks God's moral requirements no longer matter, but because he is convinced that what sets the pace for God's people is no longer Torah but Spirit (cf. Gal 5:18).

¹³ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 20–21.

¹⁴ Biblical citations are from the ESV.

¹⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments: Three Lectures with an Appendix on Eschatology and History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 65–66. Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 2:426–437.

come again and will take you to myself.” Yet even this promise, from the Johannine perspective, has already been largely fulfilled. In ch. 20, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and declares that he is in the process of ascending (v. 17). When he appears to the group of disciples (v. 19), he makes himself known as one who has ascended and then returned and whose presence will remain with the community through the Spirit.¹⁶

The difference between the eschatological outlooks of 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of John is just one example of the diversity of the biblical witness. One reason for this reality is that the biblical documents are thoroughly situational. Paul and John and others write as pastors with timely messages for their communities.¹⁷ This is something positive; it gives us rich resources for responding to the diverse situations we face. Also, Scripture’s diversity results in a more complete picture of the great truths to which it bears witness. As George Eldon Ladd puts it, “There is great richness in the variety of New Testament theology which must not be sacrificed.”¹⁸ Ladd goes on to describe how various parts of the New Testament focus on different dimensions of the single act of redemption. Diversity within the canon, then, is not something to downplay but something to celebrate.

I am arguing that the three tendencies I have highlighted are problematic, first, because they represent superficial engagement with the Bible, and second, because they are carried out

¹⁶ The idea that John intends this scene to be read as fulfilling Jesus’s promise to return is reinforced by a plethora of connections between 20:19–23 and the promises of chs. 14–17. I am not arguing that John denies a future eschatology; rather, the Fourth Gospel contains a nuanced perspective that affirms the community’s future hope and then supplements it with the insistence that much of what is hoped for can already be experienced in the present. Craig Keener, in his commentary on John, notes this pattern: “The author seems to begin with the community’s futurist expectation and establishes the present reality from it.” *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:323.

¹⁷ John Drane contends that there is significant variety even within the letters of Paul. This diversity, he suggests, stems not so much from development in Paul’s thought as it does from pastoral responses to diverse situations. “Theological Diversity in the Letters of St. Paul,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976): 3–26.

¹⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 33.

with the supposition that deep engagement is actually taking place. Someone strings together a series of texts and reaches a theological conclusion that is present in none of them explicitly. Someone asserts that a passage is speaking of one thing while ignoring contextual clues that point to something else. Someone fails to see the differing stances of two texts and thereby misunderstands one or both of them. In each case, the interpreter sets the agenda but thinks he/she is being driven by the text. I recognize that exegesis always involves an interplay between text and interpreter, but the problem in the trends I have identified is that the role of the interpreter looms extremely large but goes essentially unacknowledged.

The combination of high regard for the Bible and superficial engagement with it is, I suggest, one factor contributing to polarization within Adventism. The reason for this is fairly simple: a mistaken sense of authority is attached to conclusions that would otherwise be open to question, or at least thoughtful discussion. Many are convinced that certain points of view are buttressed by Scripture's authority and therefore are infallibly established. Any attempt to discuss such an issue is considered an attack on the Bible itself. Questioning certain assertions is seen as tantamount to denying biblical authority. The result is often an impasse in discussion.

The Bible as a Solution

Having spent considerable time dealing with the problem, let us briefly consider how the Bible might become a solution. There is hope that the Bible can help break our polarized deadlock because the Bible is a shared starting point. Adventists on both ends of the spectrum at least agree that the Bible is important. This might seem a small point of agreement, but it is a significant one. And in cases of polarization, points of commonality are very precious things. For comparison, consider the US political sphere. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center leads to a striking conclusion: partisan disagreements are not just over how to address the

issues but extend to the more fundamental question of what the issues are.¹⁹ As Adventists, we might fiercely debate how to interpret the Bible, but at least we have a text we agree is worth interpreting.

Because of our immense hermeneutical disagreements, the Bible cannot offer a direct route to moving beyond polarization.²⁰ We cannot expect simply to reason our way to conclusions on the basis of Scripture and magically reach a point of unity. We could benefit from taking a step back and encouraging conversations about fundamental questions, such as what sort of book the Bible is and what it means to be contemporary readers of this ancient text. Perhaps we could even benefit from putting certain questions on hold for the moment—questions about the Bible’s direct relevance to our issues and concerns—and take some time to appreciate individual biblical texts for what they are in themselves. Rather than being so quick to appropriate the Bible for our own apologetic or doctrinal or ethical purposes, we might benefit from reading the Bible for its own sake.

The role of the Adventist scholar in this trajectory is, I suggest, twofold. First, scholars can take on a deconstructive role. We can work as iconoclasts, attempting to dismantle certain assumptions about the texts of Scripture and draw attention to relevant biblical data that will implicitly challenge people’s hermeneutical presuppositions. We can strive to help people see that certain readings do not square with what is actually in the texts themselves. This basically

¹⁹ “Little Partisan Agreement on the Pressing Problems Facing the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, October 15, 2018, <http://www.people-press.org/2018/10/15/little-partisan-agreement-on-the-pressing-problems-facing-the-u-s/>.

²⁰ Our current hermeneutical impasse and its impact on polarization were brought to attention at the 2015 General Conference session when, on the day immediately following the ordination vote, a delegate made the request that the church engage in a study of hermeneutics. See General Conference Business Session Transcript, (July 9, 2015), 20, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/general-conference-business-session-transcript,-thursday-am,-july-2,-2015.pdf>.

means working toward what psychologists call cognitive dissonance, but that doesn't have to be a negative thing. Some educators see such moments—when old prejudices are challenged by new understandings—as prime opportunities for growth and transformation.²¹

Second, scholars can take on a constructive role. We can model and encourage mature engagement with Scripture. We can equip people to become more attuned to the diversity of voices within Scripture and to see that as something positive. Scripture's diversity indicates that the Bible is not a precise set of instructions for life, but a rich resource that guides us in responding with sanctified wisdom to varied situations. Seen in this way, the Bible can spark imagination for Adventist members to creatively contribute to the church and the world. Also, the rich diversity of the Bible offers a hopeful model for how we as a church can be a diverse but united community.

In sum, I have argued that in our polarized context the Bible is a problem but can become a solution. If we are truly to be “people of the Book,” we must take our Book seriously and seek to remedy cases where superficial engagement goes unrecognized. We still have work to do in coming to grips with Scripture.

²¹ Paul Gorski writes, “I have come to learn that these moments form the critical crossroads of learning, the educational moments of truth, in my social justice teaching.” “Cognitive Dissonance as a Strategy in Social Justice Teaching,” *Multicultural Education* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 54.