

A DIME A DOZEN

Reflections on Matthew Quartey, “Moribund: The State of Contemporary Conservative Adventist Hermeneutics,” *Spectrum*, May 21, 2020 [1]

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The current Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, titled, “How to Interpret Scripture” [2], has brought the issue of Biblical interpretation—often called hermeneutics—to the fore in Seventh-day Adventist thinking and conversation. And it has already provoked a decidedly negative review from an author and website long dedicated to the weakening of Biblical authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

False Claims

Unfortunately, the review begins, in its first two paragraphs, with some false assertions which appear designed to accuse the General Conference leadership of dishonesty. In the author’s words:

Nearly five years ago, at the conclusion of the San Antonio General Conference (GC) session, the GC Biblical Research Institute was authorized to team up with unnamed GC officials in revamping our Hermeneutics document. Their charge was to produce a new report to be voted on at the Indianapolis GC gathering. Since then, against normal protocol and in spite of a church constituency clamoring for transparency, this committee’s work has been shrouded in secrecy.

I do not doubt that there is a resultant hermeneutics document somewhere. What I doubt is whether it is inclusive and represents the broadest voices of trained Adventist thinkers. My suspicion is that this unrevealed product constitutes another seized opportunity by the church’s Conservative leader base to tug us further toward the ideological Right. In any event we find ourselves, during this last quarter before what would have been the Indianapolis GC session, studying the Conservative Right’s version of the new Hermeneutics, as presented in the current Adult Sabbath School Guide [3].

The fact is that no such authorization was ever voted by the General Conference session of 2015. Here is the statement to which the above author is likely referring, which wasn’t even in the form of a motion, only a stated recommendation:

We have a world church looking at the same Scriptures and coming up with very different interpretations. I think that points out that this church has very divided hermeneutics or rules of interpretation. The world church should take time to study and to

bring together what our hermeneutic really is, because we're using two very different ones [4].

The session responded as follows:

VOTED: To refer to Steering Committee the idea of developing a specific hermeneutic for the world church [5].

On the following day in San Antonio, the following report was given to the session by a General Conference Undersecretary:

Yesterday we voted an action with a request to the Steering Committee that the world church take time to study our hermeneutic, or our system of biblical interpretation.

The Steering Committee sees value in that request, and they have agreed to work with the Biblical Research Institute to address the issue. In fact, the Biblical Research Institute is already studying the issue and has plans to publish their findings in the form of a revised second edition of the book currently available on biblical interpretation [6].

Nothing was stated, either in the original recommendation or the Steering Committee action, regarding a document to be approved at the pending General Conference session in Indianapolis (originally scheduled for 2020 but now postponed to May 2021, due to the coronavirus pandemic). A recent edition of the *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter* has reported that, far from being “shrouded in secrecy” as the *Spectrum* author claims [7], the revised second edition of the book on Biblical hermeneutics has in fact involved collaboration from a significant number of denominational scholars:

Building on previous publications on hermeneutics, the BRI has initiated a process of studying some hermeneutical issues in greater depth. The BRI has gone beyond the immediate BRI members by selecting a variety of scholars to write articles on a number of relevant hermeneutical topics that are faced by the church today, and to bring these to the Biblical Research Committee (BRICOM) for feedback and input. BRICOM consists of more than 40 representative scholars and administrators specializing in a variety of theologically related disciplines. The project was introduced and approved by BRICOM in 2017. The volume consists of some 14 chapters and we plan to have it published before mid-summer of 2020 [8].

The *Spectrum* author in question not only makes false claims regarding the relevant GC session action and the BRI's preparation of the forthcoming book on Biblical interpretation; his assertions that the work attending this book has flouted normal church protocol and been “shrouded in secrecy” are leveled without any proof whatsoever. My question to him is, Has he in fact sought information regarding the preparation of this book, and been denied? On what basis does he allege a lack of transparency on the part of the church relative to this forthcoming book?

“Inclusive”?

As noted above, the *Spectrum* author doubts whether the work on hermeneutics now nearing completion “is inclusive and represents the broadest voices of trained Adventist thinkers” [9]. Here is where he gets into trouble. The standard by which he is prepared to judge the forthcoming book is whether or not it is “inclusive” so far as the variety of theological tendencies in contemporary Adventism is concerned. He is obviously bothered that the material being produced will reflect “the Conservative Right” so far as Adventist theology is concerned [10]. He desires, in his words, a “big tent” church in which wide varieties of doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and behavioral options are allowed to its employees and members [11].

But “inclusion” should never be the goal of the faithful Bible student. Strict adherence to the inspired Word, irrespective of cultural or social consequences, has ever been the path of the consecrated in the course of sacred history. The patriarch Noah could hardly be described as “inclusive” in the message he preached to the antediluvians, a message which the Bible says “condemned the world” (Heb. 11:7) and resulted in only eight souls being saved from the Flood (I Peter 3:20). Elijah wasn’t exactly “inclusive” in his dealings with Ahab, Jezebel, and their pagan prophets, nor was John the Baptist in his rebuke to Herod and Herodias on account of their adultery.

In His prayer for His disciples, Jesus was clear that the unity He sought in their ranks was to be based on sanctification through His Father’s Word of truth (John 17:17-21), not some open-ended, unconditional togetherness. In contrast with the fictive Christ fabricated by the “leave religion to follow Jesus” crowd of our day, the Jesus of Scripture was far removed in His teachings from what the vast majority of self-styled theological “progressives” would call inclusive. It was He who declared, speaking of the way to heaven: “Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:14). Elsewhere He stated: “I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matt. 10:34-35).

The apostle Paul was likewise a firm advocate of doctrinal and moral consistency in the faith and life of professed Christians. He declared that “though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). Regarding those refusing to obey the inspired Word found in his epistles, he instructed the church to “note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (II Thess. 3:14-15). The same author instructed Timothy to “charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (I Tim. 1:3), and admonished the Corinthian church to separate from their ranks those engaged in sexual immorality (I Cor. 5:9-13).

Absolutes, Not Ambiguity

None of the above Bible instructions envision the sort of pluralistic accommodation and doctrinal chaos recommended by the *Spectrum* author and his fellow travelers in the church. The Biblical worldview is one inhabited by absolutes, not ambiguity, with these absolutes recognized in the Sacred Word as both understandable by the believer and the measure by which both God and the faith community are to hold believers accountable. In Ellen White's words:

That which in the councils of heaven the Father and the Son deemed essential for the salvation of man, was defined from eternity by infinite truths which finite beings cannot fail to comprehend [12].

Contrary to the popular stereotype, the inspired pen informs us that the rabbis in Jesus' day were very ambiguous in the way they handled the Scriptures. Jesus, Ellen White tells us, took a very different approach:

But while His teaching was simple, He spoke as one having authority. This characteristic set His teaching in contrast with that of all others. The rabbis spoke with doubt and hesitancy, as if the Scriptures might be interpreted to mean one thing or exactly the opposite. The hearers were daily involved in greater uncertainty. But Jesus taught the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority. Whatever His subject, it was presented with power, as if His words could not be controverted [13].

In stark contrast with the above statement, the *Spectrum* author faults the current Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly with the following criticism:

Basically the lessons teach a proscribed, static, right way of thinking and understanding scripture. They lay down markers for a settled Adventist orthodoxy, one that eschews questioning. We are to hold firm and not deviate from established beliefs because deviation leads to ungodly philosophies. And worse – bad behaviors. I suspect a key reason contemporary Conservative Adventist hermeneutics posits settled fundamental positions and understandings is to keep faith with our 19th century founding vision, even if those ideas have lost relevance. But this view is reactionary. And because we hold on to an immutable understanding, our church continues to deny women full participation in gospel ministry. We contend the world is 6,000 years old. We continue to teach that Sunday Laws are on the horizon. And we should be ready to flee to the mountains when the whole world comes after us. Therefore we maintain a hermeneutic posture dedicated to preserving the status quo. Which then absolves us of any responsibility to reinvestigate our founding positions, though the world we inhabit is different from the worldview that Scripture and EGW evoke [14].

First of all, the above statement takes a premise typical of theological liberalism by equating honest questions with persistent doubts and even disbelief. Honest questions are consistently welcome in the Biblical worldview, as the stories of such Biblical luminaries as Job

and the apostle Thomas bear witness. But when “questioning” becomes code for denying the existence of a transcendent standard of right and wrong so far as faith and practice are concerned, the Biblical message is set aside.

It would be tempting to address each of the issues noted in the above statement by the *Spectrum* author, but in the present context we need not do this—except perhaps to note that the author in question offers no compelling reason for Seventh-day Adventists to reject the continuing relevance of any of the points of faith or practice he mentions. The end-time scenario of classic Adventism dismissed by the above author (e.g. Sunday laws, fleeing to the mountains) may seem remote to some in our present societal context, but in view of the current coronavirus pandemic and its near-overnight upending of life as we know it, one wonders how anyone could be so certain that classic Adventist eschatological expectations merit discarding or at least a major overhaul.

What is more, the paradigm of eternal truth presented in the Bible stands decidedly at odds with the ambiguous, relevance- and culture-driven paradigm apparently held by the above author. The God of Scripture declares, “For I am the Lord; I change not” (Mal. 3:6); “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8). God through Jeremiah urged His people as the Babylonian captivity loomed:

Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls (Jer. 6:16).

The biggest problem theological liberalism faces with the Bible is the former’s reflexive disdain for old truth and unfettered allurements for spiritual “newness,” the latter unrestrained by any transcendent, timeless standard of right and wrong. Using the logic of the *Spectrum* author in the statement cited above, one could easily see how apostates in almost every age could have made a case for their rejection of God’s truth. When he denounces “markers for a settled orthodoxy” which in his view “eschew questioning,” this rationale could easily have been used to challenge the “rigidity” of the Ten Commandments and to justify such aberrations as the golden calf worship at Sinai (Ex. 32), the similar worship forms later adopted by Israel’s King Jeroboam (I Kings 12:28-33), and the licentious feast at Baal-peor prior to Israel’s crossing of Jordan (Num. 25:1-9). Such contemporary terms as “seeker-sensitive” and “culturally relevant” would certainly, in those times, have fit such “innovations,” as would the quest of some in our day for ecumenical “open-mindedness.”

Many forget that heathen worship in the ancient world tended to be eclectic and not at all exclusive. One Jewish historian, writing of the persecution of the Jews under the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, states that “in antiquity religious persecutions were something of a rarity” [15]. That’s because the faith of Israel was itself something of a rarity, with its belief in one true God and the falsity of all other faith systems. This is why, in the midst of Israel’s idolatry under Ahab and Jezebel, the prophet Elijah challenged God’s people: “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow Him, but if Baal, then follow him” (I Kings 18:21).

We see the same principle at work in the persecution of the early Christians under the Roman Empire. British historian Stephen Williams, in his in-depth biography of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, explains how pagan and Christian thinking clashed on this very point of inclusion versus exclusion. Speaking of the Christians, Williams writes:

Rome could accept their version of the Supreme God, whom others called Jupiter or Sol; it could accept Christ together with other heroes and divinities (the eclectic Emperor Alexander Severus honoured Christ alongside Orpheus, Abraham and others). But what was preposterous was the Christians' arrogant insistence that *no* gods had ever walked the earth until an obscure Jewish teacher who was executed in the reign of Tiberius [16].

Here we see one of the most basic dividing lines between the religion of the Bible and the vast majority of alternatives throughout the human story. Paganism has long taught the notion of "many paths up the mountain" so far as the quest for truth and ultimate reality is concerned. Jesus addressed this notion when He declared that "wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Describing the path to destruction, Ellen White states:

In the road to death the whole race may go, with all their worldliness, all their selfishness, all their pride, dishonesty, and moral debasement. There is room for every man's opinions and doctrines, space to follow his inclinations, to do whatever his self-love may dictate [17].

In giving the Great Commission to His followers, Jesus again echoed the absolutist nature of the spiritual kingdom He was inaugurating, when He declared, "He that believeth and its baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16).

Again we are constrained to recognize that an absolutist spiritual worldview pervades both the teachings and the narrative of Scripture. The consistent message of the prophets and apostles in both Testaments is one of adherence to an objective, unerring standard of divine truth and moral rectitude. Even the termination of the Old Testament ceremonial law by the death of Jesus acknowledged the reality of absolute truth as the divinely-appointed "shadow of things to come" reached its prophesied substance. Once the supreme Sacrifice was consummated, the rites and ceremonies prefiguring that Sacrifice could safely be set aside (Acts 15:4-29; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14-16; Heb. 10:1).

In stark contrast to the inspired evidence noted thus far in our study, the *Spectrum* author writes: "I submit that the resolute adherence to past theological positions or scriptural interpretation promoted by the Adventist Right is inconsistent with the Bible and EG White" [18]. We will demonstrate otherwise as the present article proceeds.

Jesus and “Progressive” Truth

First, let’s be clear that such labels as “Adventist Right,” “Conservative Right,” “ideological Right,” and “progressive” as used by the *Spectrum* author [19], are relevant to the present discussion only in a religious/theological sense. Neither cultural nor political connotations should be read into these terms so far as the current Adventist dilemma is concerned. In light of the intense, often knee-jerk polarization in the American body politic just now, clarity on this point is essential as we consider the topics before us.

Speaking of our Lord’s “ye have heard . . . but I say” instructions, along with other issues, the *Spectrum* author seeks to establish the notion that the teachings of Jesus ran counter to certain Old Testament moral standards:

His new exegetical approach turned the interpretations of the familiar Jewish code on its head, exposing concerns and giving richer meanings to such subjects as capital punishment, adultery, divorce, oath-swearing, retributive justice and neighborly love [20].

But a closer look at the sayings of Jesus on the above points makes it clear that no contradiction exists between our Lord’s admonitions and those of the Old Testament. For starters, Jesus’ insistence that both sin and righteousness were primarily issues of the heart rather than of outward conduct, was clearly based on the Old Testament. Citing evidence from the Mosaic law, Ellen White observes as follows on this point:

Through Moses the Lord had said, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart. . . . Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Leviticus 19:17,18. The truths that Christ presented were the same that had been taught by the prophets, but they had become obscured through hardness of heart and love of sin [21].

Elsewhere the Old Testament likewise established the foundation of the New Testament equation of hatred with murder (Matt. 5:21-22; I John 3:15) in such passages as Proverbs 23:7, in which the wise man stated, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

Similarly, Jesus statement that lust was synonymous with adultery was in fact rooted in the Ten Commandments themselves—in the command: “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife” (Ex. 20:17), making it clear that the inner desire for a wrongful relationship was as much a violation of God’s law as the actual consummation of such a relationship. Jesus’ more restrictive admonitions relative to divorce were likewise not a case of God contradicting Himself, but rather, of God conceding to the hardness of men’s hearts with the earlier, more lenient divorce policy in Moses’ time (Matt. 19:7-8). God’s original design for marriage—that a man shall “leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:25)—preceded the concession made by Moses on account of hardened hearts.

Far from being the result of a “new exegetical approach,” as the *Spectrum* author claims [22], Jesus’ instruction on the above points was in fact a return to God’s original ideal as made plain in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Israelites in Moses’ day would certainly have been familiar with God’s original marriage ideal as explained in Moses’ own writings (Gen. 2:24). Like Israel’s desire for a king (I Sam. 8:4-7), what was temporarily permitted regarding divorce was identified by the prophetic voice as something other than the divine ideal.

On the issue of oath-swearing, Ellen White is also clear that Jesus’ command to “swear not at all” (Matt. 5:34) was not a contradiction to the counsel of Moses, but rather, a clarification as to what was and was not permitted on this point so far as the Mosaic law was concerned:

The Jews understood the third commandment as prohibiting the profane use of the name of God, but they thought themselves at liberty to employ other oaths. Oath taking was common among them. Through Moses they had been forbidden to swear falsely, but they had many devices for freeing themselves from the obligations imposed by an oath. They did not fear to indulge in what was really profanity, nor did they shrink from perjury so long as it was veiled by some technical evasion of the law.

Jesus condemned their practices, declaring that their custom in oath taking was a transgression of the commandment of God [23].

This helps us understand that when Jesus speaks of what was said “by men of old time” (Matt. 5:21,27,33), in contrast with His own teachings, that the former refers as much to the veiling of God’s law through human tradition as it was a reference to the divine law itself. This is especially clear when Jesus says, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy” (Matt. 5:43). This is not a reference to any Old Testament passage whatsoever, but rather, to what apparently was a man-made tradition that had developed over time. The Mosaic prohibition of hatred, even in the heart (Lev. 19:17), clearly militates against any endorsement by God of any hatred between human beings.

Turning to the issue of Jesus and capital punishment, the *Spectrum* author writes:

He “disobeyed” some codified laws to demonstrate their true intent. He famously refused to sanction killing the woman caught in adultery, going so far as telling her “I don’t condemn you,” (John 8:11) a position that contradicts the capital punishment prescription for adultery. (Lev 20:10) Similarly, the established law dating back to Moses sanctioned killing Sabbath breakers by stoning. (Ex 31:14) Yet we find Jesus and his disciples going through a cornfield, plucking and eating ears of corn, actions understood in the Jewish world of Jesus’ day as unlawful Sabbath work [24].

The *Spectrum* author seems to believe that Old Testament capital punishment laws relative to sins like adultery made no allowance for mercy to, or repentance by, the offender. But the Old Testament is quite clear that “he that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13). No evidence exists in the Old Testament that persons sorry for the sins of which they were found guilty by the Mosaic judicial

system were condemned to die regardless. The mercy shown by Jesus to the woman caught in adultery (John 8:11)—who, the inspired pen tells us, had been deliberately led into sin by her accusers for the purpose of laying a snare for Jesus [25]—was thus in full harmony with Old Testament teachings, as the inspired account by Ellen White offers clear evidence that the woman was sorry for her sin [26].

Regarding the incident of alleged Sabbath-breaking by Jesus and His disciples, to which the *Spectrum* author makes reference, the author’s own statement is sufficient to undermine his argument for Jesus contradicting the Mosaic law, as he describes the plucking of grain by Jesus and His disciples as “actions *understood in the Jewish world of Jesus’ day* as unlawful Sabbath work” [27]. Like the statement, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy” (Matt. 5:43), the pharisaic prohibition against what Jesus and His disciples did that Sabbath was based on uninspired tradition, not the teachings of the Old Testament.

The *Spectrum* author cites Jesus’ statement to His disciples, “I have much more to say to you. [But] it is more than you can handle right now” (John 16:12, NRV), then speculates as follows:

We can make multiple inferences from this statement. First we can generalize this to mean that God’s self-revelation or his “truth,” in the words of EGW, is progressive [28].

The statement that “truth is progressive” is a favorite mantra of theological liberals. Sadly, the word “progressive” is too often assumed to mean “contradictory.” Nothing in the teachings of Jesus or the apostles, or Ellen White, gives credence to this understanding. The Biblical concept of progressive truth means development, but never contradiction—as in the case of the Trinity doctrine, whose roots can be found in the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 1:26; Micah 5:2) but whose fuller clarity is established in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19; John 1:1,14; Acts 5:4). Development, yes. Contradiction, no. We have already noted how the theology of Scripture, including that of Jesus, is rooted in a concept of truth that is eternal and unerring, not one that is ambiguous or subject to reversal based on culture, circumstance, personal experience, or scholarly speculation.

Slavery

A favorite argument by theological liberals against the plain reading of Scripture is the notion that such a reading has buttressed the defense of human slavery. This argument has been especially ubiquitous in the case certain ones have sought to make in favor of women’s ordination to roles identical with those of men in church ministry.

An article by a leading advocate of women’s ordination addressing the “hermeneutics” of slavery was published several years ago, which attempts to connect the literal reading of the Bible relative to the slavery issue to a similar approach to the Bible relative to women’s roles in ministry [29]. The present writer wrote a reply to this article which is available online [30].

After describing the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833, followed more than three decades later by the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution abolishing slavery in the United States [31], the *Spectrum* author writes, speaking of slavery:

When the odious practice re-emerged in another form, dressed in the legal finery of a Jim Crow South, it took another Christian visionary who saw, in the same Bible that Southern Christian preachers used to justify and preserve this perversity, a way to point us to a higher human ethic. An ethic that envisions former slaves and their owners, their children and their children's children, breaking bread together [32].

Though the *Spectrum* author doesn't claim, here or elsewhere, that the Biblical cases for and against slavery are equally credible, it is important to recognize the Biblical evidence that they are *not* equally credible. Equally passionate convictions on both sides of a Biblical issue do not imply equal credibility for both sides, as any Adventist understands who has demonstrated to other Christians the superior Biblical evidence for the Sabbath, the mortality of the soul, the true relation of law and grace, the true manner of Jesus' second coming, and any number of doctrines on which classic Adventism differs from most of the rest of Christendom. The same holds true for the slavery issue.

To begin with, those Old Testament passages which speak favorably (or at least without condemnation) of slavery (Gen. 17:13; Lev. 22:11; 25:39-46; Num. 31:25-26) describe a very different system from any other model of slavery in the human experience, including the one defended by American Christians in the antebellum or Jim Crow South. Bond-service in the Israelite system was in fact a type of social security for the poor or for those in debt, a means of survival for those unable to subsist on their own (see Lev. 25:39). Such servants, if they escaped from their masters, were not to be returned (Deut. 23:15-16), and were eventually to be set free (Ex. 21:2; Lev. 25:10,13,47-51; Deut. 15:1-3). No such provisions existed for slaves in the pre-Civil War American South. Indeed, the infamous Fugitive Slave Act during that era, requiring citizens to return escaped slaves to their masters, ran directly counter to the Mosaic law in this regard (Deut. 23:15-16).

The argument of pro-slavery advocates that Jesus and the New Testament apostles offered no explicit condemnation of slavery—even, as in the case of Paul, urging obedience by slaves to their masters (I Cor. 7:21; Eph. 6:5-9; I Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10)—hardly proves a divine endorsement of the practice. It helps to remember that while slaves are urged to be subject to their masters in the above statements, nowhere is the institution of slavery praised as an orderly and admirable feature of society—as in the case of Aristotle, who declared slavery to be part of “natural law” [33]. Nor are Christians encouraged or lauded in the New Testament for buying or owning slaves. Though pro-slavery Christians often noted that the apostle Paul sent the escaped slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon, they neglected to consider the all-but-decisive evidence from Paul's epistle to Philemon that the latter was to set Onesimus free upon his return:

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever: Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord (Philemon 15-16).

But what is imperative to keep in mind is that neither Jesus nor His first-century followers were political or social revolutionaries. Rather, their agenda was one of establishing in human hearts those principles which, in time, would demolish the rationale for slavery and a host of other unjust political and social customs. Indeed, the article in question quotes an Ellen White statement which explains this priority on the part of the gospel's advocates:

It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system [34].

It helps also to remember that unlike America, the Roman world of the apostles' day was not ruled by a representative government. The mechanisms available for peaceful, within-the-system social change, of the kind pursued by the modern American civil rights movement, were not available to the Christians of the first century A.D. The sort of arbitrary, sudden overturning of the social order which would have prevented the success of the gospel in the apostles' day, is not the pattern whereby change usually occurs in a setting like the United States. Christians living in countries governed by popular rule can therefore follow Biblical principles in the pursuit of social reform while remaining focused on the gospel agenda and eschewing social disruption and needless divisiveness.

The Role of Women

The *Spectrum* author writes as follows regarding gender roles in the Jewish community of Christ's day, and how the Lord allegedly transcended these strictures:

Like slavery, discrimination against women was endemic in the scriptural Judaism of Jesus' time. Arbitrary limitations were placed on women simply for being born women. They were barred from touching the Torah or studying from its pages, making the priesthood the purview of only men. Their consolation: motherhood and the kitchen. This domestication of women had its [roots] in the Covenant and Israel's founding. By designating male circumcision as the sole rite of passage to the Abrahamic God, men became privileged oracular custodians at the expense of women's unhindered access to God.

Until Jesus. Much is made by Conservatives, particularly Headship proponents, that Jesus' disciples were all men and that if he had wanted women in ministry, he would have included some among the inner twelve. This might seem plausible until we also consider that these twelve were all Middle Eastern, Jewish, and largely illiterate fishermen – delimiting factors that have not barred men from Christian ministry.

In significant ways, Jesus broke down some artificial barriers imposed on women. We forget that the first genuinely great Christian evangelist was a woman who, having tasted from Jesus' jug of living waters, could not constrain the impulse to share it with her whole village. "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:30) They went to see Jesus and "because of his words many more became believers." This, before the twelve or the sixty were even sent out. And why do we keep forgetting that the resurrection message – "He is not here, but is risen" – was first given to a group of lowly women, whose retelling was dismissed by the male disciples as "idle tales," so that "they believed them not?" (John 24:11) Both "Biblical orthodoxy" and scriptural interpretation has consistently shifted over time [35].

First of all, the Judaism of Jesus' time was not primarily "scriptural," but traditional. Nowhere in the Old Testament are women forbidden to touch or study the Torah, or any other of the Sacred Writings of which the Old Testament canon consisted. Such restrictions as these had nothing to do with a plain reading of the Old Testament Scriptures. By contrast, the fact that the Hebrew priests and New Testament apostles were exclusively male reflects a principle tracing back to sinless Eden and the Godhead itself, as articulated in the apostle Paul's writings (I Cor. 11:3; I Tim. 2:12-13).

After all, the only distinction between human beings originating—like the Sabbath—in a sinless world, is the distinction between male and female (Gen. 1:27). The Bible doesn't say, "slave and free created He them," "black and white created He them," or "patrician, plutocrat, plebeian, and peasant created He them." All of these latter distinctions are products of the age of sin. All of these represent human constructs. Male and female, by contrast, are divine constructs.

Spiritual male headship is embedded in the plan of salvation itself. When Adam and Eve tried to hide from God, it was Adam to whom the Lord first called (Gen. 3:9), despite the fact that Eve was the first to sin (verse 6). This is why it is Adam, not Eve, who is designated in the New Testament as the one through whom sin and death entered the world, thus necessitating the coming of a Savior (Rom. 5:12-19; I Cor. 15:22). The Second Person of the Godhead didn't come to earth as the Second Eve, but rather, as the Second Adam.

It is sheer fantasy to speak of how "Biblical orthodoxy' and scriptural interpretation [have] consistently shifted over time" [36], and to cite as proof the witness for Jesus by the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:30) as well as the witness for Jesus' resurrection by the women who brought the news to the initially-unbelieving disciples (Luke 24:11) [37]. (Unfortunately, the reference by the *Spectrum* author to Luke 24:11 is mistakenly listed as coming from the Gospel of John.) The fact is that neither the Samaritan woman nor the women who attested to Jesus' resurrection received ordination to spiritual headship roles by either our Lord or His church. And they didn't need it, any more than women today need ordination to ministry roles identical to those of men as a prerequisite for the conduct of evangelism or witnessing in general.

The *Spectrum* author appears to believe (1) that the witness of these women for the gospel required a shift in Biblical understanding; and (2) that one must apparently be ordained to a headship role in order to engage in such witnessing. Neither of these notions is supported from Scripture by the author in question. Witnessing for Jesus has never required formal ordination to ministry, nor did the legitimacy of any testimony on the part of the women here cited require a shift in Biblical interpretation or Biblical orthodoxy. A shift away from popular tradition, yes. A shift away from Old Testament orthodoxy, no.

Early Adventist Theological Errors—Alleged and Otherwise

The *Spectrum* author then turns to the experience of early Adventism as evidence that truth is contradictory and that the church today should be open to forsaking any number of currently-held doctrinal positions in the name of “progress”:

And what about early Adventism? Did our founders always hold unswervingly to all earlier positions? Were they "conservatives?" The record disputes that our pioneers held rigidly to all earlier theological views. In fact, in several areas they proved to be pragmatic, if not malleable. For example, on Christology, our earliest position was closer to Arianism, the doctrine that Jesus was “begotten” of the Father at a point in time and therefore subordinate to the Father in all things. We later switched to our current Trinitarian position [38].

But as with his thoughts on Judaism and the role of women, the above author seems not to understand that the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, not commonly held beliefs or practices at any time in Adventist history, form the measure by which truth and error are determined. Ellen White never taught an anti-Trinitarian view of the Godhead, even though her husband and other of our pioneers did. Opinions and behaviors without an inspired basis can always change. Those grounded in the inspired consensus cannot.

The *Spectrum* author continues:

We also once believed that the Ten Commandments are salvific. But gradually, after the 1888 Minneapolis GC session, where presentations on Righteousness by Faith predominated, we moved away from this doctrine and now see the “schoolmaster” reference in Galatians (3:24-27) as inclusive of the moral law. This was not a small shift, but EG White (EGW) was instrumental in helping with the pivot [39].

Once again, let’s be clear that it’s the inspired writings, not views purportedly held by church members or even leaders, that must function as the guide to faith and practice. Regarding the scope of the law as described in the book of Galatians, Ellen White was consistent throughout her ministry—despite the claims of critics and so-called “progressives”—that both the moral and the ceremonial law are included in the law as described by Paul in this epistle [40].

What is more, how are the Ten Commandments not “salvific” if they—along with the ceremonial law—function as the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24)? If the Ten Commandments convict us of sin and thus convince us of our need of a Savior (Rom. 3:20), that is certainly a key part of the saving process. The psalmist spoke of this truth centuries before Paul did, when he declared that “the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul” (Psalm 19:7). Whether in drawing us to Jesus by convicting us of our guilt (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24), or in its inscription on the human heart in the new covenant experience of conversion (Deut. 30:14; Psalm 119:11; Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 10:6-8; II Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:8-10), the law is intimately involved in the believer’s salvation. This doctrine can hardly be blamed on early Adventism; it is the teaching of Holy Scripture.

What is more, Jesus and the apostle Paul are as clear as possible that Spirit-empowered obedience to the divine law—as distinct from the superficial, surface piety represented by the works-righteousness condemned in Scripture (Rom. 3:20,28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9)—is in fact the condition of receiving eternal life (Matt. 7:21; 19:16-26; Luke 10:25-28; Rom. 2:6-10; 8:13; Heb. 5:9). Ellen White, far from pivoting the church away from this Bible truth, affirmed it repeatedly in her writings, both before and after the events of 1888. Examples of her statements on this point include the following:

In reply to this question [by the rich young ruler] Jesus told him that obedience to the commandments of God was necessary if he would obtain eternal life; and He quoted several of the commandments which show man’s duty to his fellow men. . . .

Christ’s dealing with the young man is presented as an object lesson. God has given us the rule of conduct which every one of His servants must follow. It is obedience to His law, not merely a legal obedience, but an obedience which enters into the life and is exemplified in the character. God has set His own standard of character for all who would become subjects of His kingdom [41].

When the lawyer came to Christ, saying, 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?', the Saviour did not say, Believe, only believe, and you will be saved. 'What is written in the law?' He said, 'how readest thou?' . . . Here the false doctrine that man has nothing to do but believe is swept away. Eternal life is given to us on the condition that we obey the commandments of God [42].

The keeping of these (ten) commandments comprises the whole duty of man, and presents the conditions of eternal life. Now the question is, Will man comply with the requirements? Will he love God supremely and his neighbor as himself? There is no possible way for man to do this in his own strength. The divine power of Christ must be added to the effort of humanity [43].

His (the Christian’s) perfect obedience to all God’s commandments, opens to him the gates of the Holy City [44].

The terms of salvation for every son and daughter of Adam are here outlined. It is plainly stated that the condition of gaining eternal life is obedience to the commandments of God [45].

Those Seventh-day Adventists who adhere to Scripture and the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy as the lodestar of their faith and practice still believe God's law to be salvific, provided its conviction of guilt is accepted and its requirements obeyed through the converting, sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

The *Spectrum* author continues by dredging up another favorite liberal Adventist topic—the shut door doctrine held by many early Adventists following the Great Disappointment:

In other areas such as the short lived “shut door” doctrine, our pioneers initially linked the events of 1844 to “the final call for salvation,” insisting “the door of salvation was shut” to those who rejected this message. The closest EGW came to repudiating this teaching was her concession that this was a personal belief (*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 74) and not one she received in a vision. Though we never disavowed this view outright, after 1844 we found a new application in the Investigative Judgement doctrine, and allowed the “shut-door” teaching to die of neglect [46].

Once again, beliefs held by early Adventists and the inspired instruction of Ellen White are two very different things. A careful review of Ellen White's statements both during and after the shut door episode demonstrate the complete harmony of her inspired witness on this point, that the phrase “shut door” actually had several different meanings for the early Advent believers, and that Ellen White never taught in her role as God's messenger that the door of mercy had closed for the entire world on October 22, 1844 [47].

“Future Possibilities Outside a Closed Canon”

Returning to the slavery issue, as well as introducing other topics, the *Spectrum* author insists that only by going outside the Biblical canon could Ellen White have opposed slavery as she did, and only thus—in his view—could the church have embraced any number of tenets upheld by our classical faith:

The static hermeneutic projected in the current Sabbath School lessons cannot adequately explain God's evolution on slavery as advanced by EGW. The prophetic role we have carved out for EGW, and for that matter the emergence of post-1844 Remnant Adventism, is possible only as we allow for future possibilities outside a closed canon. Until 1844, nothing in scripture appeared to signal to earlier Christian communities that such staple Adventist conceits: Investigative Judgment, Three Angel's Messages, Sunday laws, Time of Trouble, could be deduced from Scripture as foreshadowing the Adventist Church. We read ourselves into these positions. But having made room for our existence

this way, we cannot now close the door to other future possibilities by insisting that biblical interpretation is settled [48].

Let us again clarify that growth and contradiction are not one and the same thing. Nothing in the Bible endorses slavery as it was conducted in antebellum or Jim Crow America. In no way, as we have already demonstrated, can the Bible and Ellen White be justly seen in conflict over this issue.

The various doctrinal and eschatological tenets listed by the *Spectrum* author—the investigative judgment, the three angels’ messages, the future Sabbath/Sunday crisis, and the final time of trouble can foreshadow none other than the Seventh-day Adventist movement for the simple reason that no other Christian community on earth is proclaiming these messages. The fact that Ellen White elaborates on these events and concepts beyond what is found in Scripture is in full accord with the Biblical model of expanding but consistent truth which our study has affirmed, as in the case of the Trinity doctrine. Absolutely nothing cited by the *Spectrum* author sustains the notion of “progressive” truth which in reality makes truth contradict itself.

Interestingly, one contemporary Adventist historian has found that a Seventh-day Baptist in the seventeenth century by the name of Thomas Tillam apparently articulated much of what would become the classic Adventist position regarding the Sabbath being the end-time seal of God in opposition to papal authority, a full two hundred years before the rise of the Advent movement [49]. What is more, this historian states that he “know[s] of no evidence that either Joseph Bates or Ellen White (or, presumably, any of the other SDA pioneers) had access to Tillam’s works. Rather, it seems they merely made similar observations at differing times and places based on shared convictions about the Sabbath” [50].

Conclusion: A Dime a Dozen

In sum, the timeless, transcendent approach to the inspired writings found in the current Adult Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly [51] represents the consensus of both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, both in teaching and narrative. The *Spectrum* author’s assumption that “the resolute adherence to past theological positions or scriptural interpretation promoted by the Adventist Right is inconsistent with the Bible and EG White” [52], is simply not supported by the testimony of either Scripture or the writings of Ellen White.

One marvels at the persistent conviction of theological liberals in the church that openness to doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and moral diversity will make the faith community more “relevant” and presumably attract more people to its fellowship. The *Spectrum* author closes his article with the claim that “while the uninformed may, for example, find solace in the notion that our world is just 6,000 years old, scientists among us whose training tells them otherwise, are deprived of a home” [53].

Aside from the fact that such reasoning as the above would classify Noah as among the “uninformed” because of his disagreement with the scientific consensus of his day, the above author—like so many of his fellow travelers in contemporary Adventism—seems quite unaware of the fact that the doctrinal and moral flexibility he recommends to his church has succeeded in emptying the pews of mainline denominations for more than a half-century, and is still emptying them today [54]. These so-called “progressive” Christian bodies, their wreckage strewn on the rocks of elusive “relevance,” are a dime a dozen. By contrast, those religious communities who adhere steadfastly to their orthodox, theologically conservative heritage continue to flourish, even in the present postmodern climate [55].

Numbers, to be sure, don’t prove theological correctness. We noted earlier in our study the declaration of our Lord that “narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:14). But what these decades-long trends perhaps help us understand is that overt skepticism and secularism will not be the dominant forces in Christian thought as the final events draw near. After all, with miracles and supernatural signs as ubiquitous as prophecy foretells during that time (Matt. 24:24; Rev. 16:14)—on both sides of the controversy, no less [56]—intellectual doubt regarding such occurrences will garner few takers. All evidence from the inspired pen indicates that the conflict of the last days will divide the world between two contrasting forms of religious conservatism. One camp will seek to unite the world under the banner of global conversion to popular Christianity through state-enforced morality capped off by Sunday laws. The other will adhere strictly to the written counsel of God, in steadfast defiance of global pressure and lying wonders to the contrary.

Where, in that ultimate moment, will we stand?

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