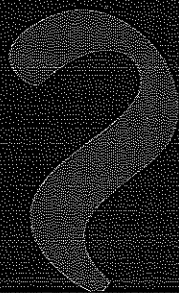


HOW DO

WE

KNOW



BY JOHN MCLARTY

WHAT IS OUR AUTHORITY WHEN IT COMES to matters of theology, faith, spiritual life, and religious law? The classic Adventist answer is the Bible. Ellen White's writings, the ante-Nicene fathers, science, and grandma's stories may be interesting, but they are not ultimately authoritative. Our only real authority is the Bible and the Bible only.

That's what we claim. But is it true? No. Not in practice. Our behavior demonstrates the powerful influence of several authorities. We "know" something in the theological arena from the interplay of the Bible, the church, and human experience. The Bible alone is not sufficient.

The Bible is sufficiently complex that godly, smart people will come to different

conclusions about what it means. The nature of Christ, human nature, the fate of the wicked, Sabbath keeping, soteriology—these are the most religious of subjects. But 2,000 years of Bible study has not brought Christians together. Various churches have decided what the Bible means when it addresses these issues. Members, and especially clergy, of these communities are not free to promulgate their convictions on these topics based on their personal reading of the Bible. Their reading of the Bible is constrained by the authority of the church.

In Adventism, this community restraint is illustrated by our doctrines on the Trinity and eating pork. There is a nearly universal consensus among Christians regarding the plain meaning of Scripture on these two points. Regarding the Trinity, Adventists agree with this consensus. On the matter of eating pork, Adventists disagree with the vast majority of Christian scholars about what the Bible teaches. In each case, of course, we believe our teaching is the plain meaning of the Bible. We regard those who interpret the Bible differently as so benighted or perverse that they must be expelled from preaching and teaching positions in the church.

It does not matter how many texts or how much ancient or contemporary scholarship a theologian adduces to support his views. If he teaches non-Trinitarian views of God or advocates eating pork, the Adventist Church will insist he is not reading the Bible correctly. It is impossible for a scholar using any imaginable method of Bible research to change the mind of the church regarding any of our 28 doctrines. On these points we “already know” what the Bible means. So, in practice, the Bible itself is no longer the sole authority or even the supreme authority when it comes to matters addressed in those doctrines.

A further illustration of the authority of the church: there are Adventist doctrines we can find in the Bible *only if* we are instructed by the church. Out of the billions of people on the planet today, not one single, solitary individual will ever find 1844 in the Bible unless that person is taught by Adventists. In the last 100 years, no Old Testament scholars have seen 1844 in the Bible unless they were influenced by Adventist scholarship. It's not that 1844 is not in the Bible, but the Bible by itself is hopelessly insufficient to teach people this doctrine. They must be taught by the church. No one today attempting the putative William Miller approach to Bible interpretation—reading without reference to commentaries, attempting to use the Bible as its own interpreter—would ever come up with the full suite of Adventist doctrines.

Human Experience

In addition to the Bible text and the interpretive authority of the Church, we are guided toward truth by human experience.

In the early 1900s, Adventists agreed with other Anabaptist groups in disapproving of women dying their hair or wearing makeup. Those items of female vanity were proscribed along with earrings and necklaces. There is no explicit prohibition on wearing jewelry in current Adventist doctrine, and we don't think twice about hair coloring. What changed? There was no new discovery about the meaning of ancient Greek words. Human experience led to the change. Interaction with cultures outside of North America compelled us to rethink our interpretation of the Bible. That, and realizing that the principles undergirding the original proscriptions against jewelry (e.g., inordinate self-indulgence) spoke more loudly against major donors' Mercedes than against \$5 earrings.

Similarly, it was human experience that drove the church in North America to reinterpret the New Testament passages clearly condemning divorce and remarriage. We didn't throw our Bibles away. Neither did we find it appropriate to stick with the plain reading of the text (which is reinforced by early Christian literature). Our pastoral concern for real, live people compelled us to make room in the church, and even among our clergy, for people who violated the ideal clearly articulated by Jesus.

Using experience as a basis for church decision-making is affirmed in the Bible itself. In Acts 15, when Peter urges the church to not impose the Mosaic rules on new members of the church, he bases his argument strictly on the long experience of the people of God. In Peter's argument, experience is given priority over the plain meaning of the Scriptures. Another example of the appeal to experience is the call to test prophets by the fulfillment of their prophecies. Note in this argument that the prophet possesses no authority on the basis of a claimed connection with God. Rather, prophetic authority is determined by the *experience* of the people. The experience of God's people could not create the content of the prophet's message. However, the experience of God's people could correct or invalidate a message brought by a prophet.

Science

Science is a particular type of human experience, or perhaps we could say it is a method for aggregating human experience. Scientific knowledge is not the discovery or possession of an individual. It does not require us to trust the non-reproducible experience of any particular individual. It is communal knowledge.

The notion of science as an authority

is ubiquitous in Adventism. We believe that studying the real world yields real knowledge. Of course, we also believe the Bible gives us special knowledge that is not available through ordinary experience. Controversy arises when the “real knowledge” gathered from science apparently contradicts the “special

The coherence between natural law, moral law, and the character of God has long been a theme in Adventist theology. We believe moral and religious laws promulgated by God are descriptions of how human life works best. So we expect correct interpretation of the Bible to align with the best in human wisdom.

knowledge” gathered from Scripture.

Among Adventists, this controversy is concentrated in the area of geochronology: How old are the fossils? How old is the solar system? According to the plain reading of the Bible, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them over the course of six days, 6,000 years ago. According to science, the solar system formed about 4.6 billion years ago, the first fossils about a billion years later.

What to Do?

Exodus 20:11 (NIV) says, “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them.” The

language is crystal clear. During the week of Genesis 1, God made everything—bugs, beasts, birds, sky, sun, the Milky Way, the universe. Everything.

Curiously, during the three Faith and Science Conferences sponsored by the General Conference, every conservative theologian who addressed the issue contradicted the plain meaning of these words. They all insisted the words “the heavens and the earth” did not really mean “the heavens and the earth.” God did not create the sun and planets on the fourth day. God did not create the fundamental matter that comprises Earth during creation week. The universe and, more particularly, the bodies of our solar system, including Earth itself, are billions of years old. This departure from the plain meaning of the text was not challenged by either General Conference President Ted Wilson or Biblical Research Institute Director Ángel Manuel Rodríguez. There was every appearance of total unanimity.

Adventist scholars and most administrators re-adjust their understanding of the plain meaning of the words “created the heavens and the earth” to accommodate science. They set aside the plain meaning of Scripture regarding the age of the solar system and accept instead the testimony of experience (i.e., science).

Moving from the Old Testament to the New, Paul wrote that death entered the world through the sin of one man, Adam. In light of these words, Adventist theologians argue that any departure from six days/6,000 years will destroy our doctrine of salvation. However, these theologians do not, in fact, take Paul’s words here at face value. Influenced by the experience of feminism, they modernize his words about *a man’s sin* and talk about *human sin* as the originator of biological death. Of course, this is not what Paul says. Paul blames Eve for being first to sin, but he does not reckon her sin to be serious enough or

her status to be exalted enough for her wrongdoing to cause death. It was the male’s sin that caused death. Theological assertions about an absolute link between *human sin* and all biological death require reinterpretation of the plain meaning of Paul’s words.

So How Do We Know?

The past offers guidance for the future. Our current doctrines came into being through an interplay of Scripture, the church, and human experience. Going forward, we can be confident a statement is true when it aligns with the testimony of the Bible, the church, and experience. When any one of these sources of information contradicts our statements, the tired old cliché “needs more study” is probably the truth.

The coherence between natural law, moral law, and the character of God has long been a theme in Adventist theology. We believe moral and religious laws promulgated by God are descriptions of how human life works best. So we expect correct interpretation of the Bible to align with the best in human wisdom. Our experience of Sabbath-keeping affirms the wisdom of the commandment. Faithfulness in marriage, carefulness in diet, and abstinence from tobacco are positively correlated with “the good life.” Experience, the Bible text, and the authoritative interpretations of the church agree.

Unfortunately for the tranquility of the church, the expected convergence has not happened in geochronology. While the vast majority of Adventists believe the church doctrine of six days/6,000 years, the majority of Adventist scientists, at least in North America, see an unbridgeable contradiction between what we know from Scripture and what we know from nature. The steadily accumulating data in the geological sciences point overwhelmingly to ages for fossils that are congruent with the ages Adventist leaders accept for the solar system.

No amount of church pontificating will change the words of the Bible text. Those words have a way of coming back again and again to challenge authoritative interpreters. This is why we are Sabbath keepers. Fifteen hundred years of official church insistence on the sacredness of Sunday broke against the steely words of the Bible text. Official church statements are equally vulnerable to human experience. The apparently impregnable wall of church authority will eventually crumble when it contradicts human experience. Church dogma cannot forever silence the voices of science, history, or the accumulated folk wisdom of the people of God.

Continuing to insist that our doctrines and public theology are shaped by the Bible and Bible only implies that all of our present doctrine and public theology is as infallible as the Bible itself. Thus any change would be a denial of the authority of the Bible. This fixity of doctrine, however, is contradicted by the preamble of our statement of beliefs and the history of our theological development.

It's time to recognize the variety of authorities and influences that shape our doctrine. It's time for a serious exploration of the proper role of church authority in defining truth. How do we properly account for the different roles of formal church structures and the whole people of God? What is the proper role of pastors, scientists, and historians in correcting the work of theologians and exegetes? What should the church do when the Bible and experience contradict?

At the very least, we ought not to anathematize one another on the basis of "truth" that can be supported by appeals to less than all three sources of authority that have historically shaped Christian theology.

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Response From a Nitpicker

By Richard Coffen

Editor's note: This response from Richard Coffen, retired Vice President for Editorial at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, is what I was looking for when writing the article "Is Ellen White Really a Lesser Light?" (Summer 2011). He makes some excellent points, and I will revise my article further as a result of his cogent observations.

At the outset, I must emphasize that I find my understanding of Ellen G. White and her function quite in harmony with the overall thrust of Newman's article. His emphasis agrees with what I understand to be a consensus among Seventh-day Adventist biblical and systematic theologians. Those at the Ellen G. White Estate will have to speak for themselves, but I suspect that their informed insight(s) will also largely conform to the thrust of Newman's thought. Will the majority of Adventist administrators concur? That remains to be seen. I surely hope that they will.

However, I have some comments that may add to the discussion, for dialogue will surely occur now that Newman's article circulates in the public arena. It seems to me that by and large the following observations do not weaken, but rather strengthen his perspective.

To summarize my reaction to the article: I suspect Newman has gone "a bridge too far."

Overstatement

For instance, it seems to me that his overall argument would have been stronger had he not overstated the exactitude of Old Testament predictions. Newman writes: "If what the prophet said did not come true, then he was a false prophet. ... His message was either completely true or else it was false" (p. 15). And Newman uses as an example Micaiah's prediction to King Ahab.

Newman reports: "An Old Testament prophet would have been stoned to death if he had made ... mistakes. ... The Old Testament is full of prophecies in which the smallest details always came to pass exactly as foretold" (p. 17). Once again he provides examples, such as "dogs eating Jezebel" (p. 17).

According to the scriptural evidence, neither fulfilled predictions nor unfulfilled predictions either vouchsafe or destroy the bona fides of a prophet.

Fulfilled Predictions—"If a prophet arises among you ... and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet" (Deut. 13:1-3, NET).

Unfulfilled Predictions—Newman's exaggerated assertions set us up for disappointment when we discover that Old Testament prophets didn't necessarily bat a thousand when it came to predictions.

On one level, this becomes clear when we understand the traditional Adventist view of conditional prophecy, even though some of these conditional predictions were not written with an if-then formula.

On another level, we can point to various unfulfilled predictions proclaimed with great certainty by Old Testament prophets. Contrary to Newman's asseverations, the recipients appear to have allowed a "fudge factor" for God's prophets.

Example 1—Jeremiah 34:5 says of King Zedekiah (see verse 2): "You will die a peaceful death. They will burn incense at your burial just as they did at the burial of your ancestors, the former kings who preceded you. They will mourn for you, saying, 'Poor, poor master!' Indeed, you

have my own word on this. I, the Lord, affirm it!" (NET). How and where did Zedekiah die? He died a blind prisoner of war in Babylon. "The Babylonian army chased after the king. They caught up with him in the plains of Jericho, and his entire army deserted him. They captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where he passed sentence on him" (2 Kings 25:5-6, NET). Nebuchadnezzar "had Zedekiah's eyes put out and had him bound in chains. Then the king of Babylon had him led off to Babylon and he was imprisoned there until the day he died" (Jer. 52:11, NET). Hardly the predicted "peaceful death"!

Example 2—Elijah had predicted of Ahab that "In the spot where dogs licked up Naboth's blood they will also lick up your blood—yes, yours!" (1 Kings 21:19, NET). That's a very specific detail. Naboth's blood was shed in Jezreel, where he had his residence. There, in Jezreel, Elijah predicted that Ahab's blood would be shed and lapped up. However, according to 1 Kings 22:38, Ahab's blood was lapped up in Samaria (not Jezreel).

Example 3—God told Ezekiel that Nebuchadnezzar and his armed forces would succeed in demolishing Tyre. "They will destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers. I will scrape her soil from her and make her a bare rock. She will be a place where fishing nets are spread. ... For I have spoken, declares the sovereign Lord" (Eze. 26:4-5, NET). "He will direct the blows of his battering rams against your walls and tear down your towers. ... He will cover you with the dust kicked up by his many horses. Your walls will shake from the noise of the horsemen, wheels, and chariots when he enters your gates. ... With his horses' hoofs he will trample all your streets. He will kill your people. ... They will tear down your walls and destroy your luxurious homes. Your stones, your trees, and your soil he will throw into the water" (Eze. 26:9-12, NET).

The divinely predicted and detailed

destruction never happened. God later admitted such: "King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made his army labor hard against Tyre. Every head was rubbed bald and every shoulder rubbed bare; yet he and his army received no wages from Tyre for the work he carried out against it" (Eze. 29:18, NET). So, God said he would give Nebuchadnezzar a consolation prize. "I am about to give the land of Egypt to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. . . . It will be his army's wages" (Eze. 29:19, NET). (Some biblical scholars question whether or not this new forecast ever met fulfillment.)

Bad Predictions

Ezekiel probably had the worst batting average for predictions of any Old Testament prophet. Read the detailed account of the restored temple that God described to Ezekiel, which was never constructed, divine blueprint or not!

Example 4—"In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'" (Isa. 19:24-25, RSV). Would anyone have sufficient daring to tell us when that prediction came to pass?

Little wonder that Jerome T. Walsh has written: "Prophecy is not a mechanical process but a living word. Fulfillment need not mesh with prediction like complementary gears: if the central thrust of the prophecy is realized, variations in circumstantial detail are irrelevant."¹

Let's move on. Newman's wording here and there throughout the article sounds as though he espouses a dictation theory of inspiration. "The prophets' role was to speak the very words of God." "Prophets in the Old Testament wrote down the very words of God."

He elaborates, citing Micaiah: "A true prophet never spoke some of God's words mixed with some of his own words. His

message was either completely true or else it was false." Really? What about Micaiah's false prediction given to King Ahab (1 Kings 22:15)? Additionally, what about the lying spirit that YHWH sent to the prophets to deceive Ahab (1 Kings 22:20ff)?

Perhaps Newman has overlooked that the words attributed to YHWH among Old Testament prophets reflects their own personal literary style. Has he also forgotten what EGW said? "The Bible is ... not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. ... God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. ... It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. ... thus the utterances of the man are the word of God"²

Evidence both biblical and extrabiblical points in the direction that in the ancient Near East, spokespersons could and did choose their own words to express the message of their authority figure (their king, for example), even interpolating their own words into the message that had been entrusted to them.

For this understanding, see "The Rab Ša-qa-h between Rhetoric and Redaction," by Jerome T. Walsh, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Summer 2011. Walsh's rhetorical analysis leads him to conclude that 2 Kings 18:22b provides not Sennacherib's words but those of Rab Ša-qa-h (p. 271). Speaking of verse 23a, Walsh claims: "This clause spells out the specifics of a wager that the Rab Ša-qa-h himself—not Sennacherib—has just proposed in v. 23a. ... It should be construed not as part of Sennacherib's original message but as part of the Rab Ša-qa-h's elaboration of that message.

The sentence is best read as an unmarked quotation of an offer authorized by Sennacherib and made in his name, but introduced into the discussion by the Rab Ša-qe-h only as part of his diplomatic negotiations” (ibid.). Walsh calls it “the Rab Ša-qe-h’s elaboration” (pp. 274-275). “In vv. 23-24 the Rab Ša-qe-h makes his own intervention plain” (p. 276).

What Ellen White Never Claimed

On another front, Newman’s case would have been even more cogent had he reminded readers that Ellen White at no time and at no place ever claimed to be an inspired commentator who wrote an inspired commentary on Scripture. Those Adventists who refer to her writings as an “inspired commentary” are just plain wrong, ignoring her repeated statements about the role of her writings serving as a lesser light pointing to the greater light, etc. Newman makes her assertions to this effect quite clear. We need to be told again and again that this perspective (that Ellen White never wrote an inspired commentary) grows out of Ellen White’s own explicit asseverations and is not imposed on her by “doubters.”

There’s one small inconsistency I think I noticed, though perhaps I missed something while reading this excellent analytical piece. At one point in the article, Newman defines the term *prophet*: “The root meaning of prophet is ‘to see, perceive, understand’” (p. 15). He is correct. The prophet’s chief function was to address the people on God’s behalf, having been inspired (commissioned) by his Spirit. Newman words it this way: “Each in some way claimed to be communicating a divine message” (p. 15). However, later in the article he writes that by New Testament times “the meaning of the word *prophet* had changed ... It had lost its meaning of prediction, foretelling the future” (p. 16). If I read Newman correctly, forecasting the future was not the Old Testament meaning of the word

prophet. That being the case, how had that meaning, which the term never had, come to be lost?

Might the discussion about Old Testament Bible writers, New Testament writers, and Ellen G. White be better framed under the rubric of inspiration rather than of titles, such as seer, prophet, apostle, messenger, etc.? Ellen White never claimed the title *prophet*. We attribute that job description to her. However, if her self-image as a *messenger* is correct, how does that differentiate her from the Old Testament prophets, whose chief role was to relay divine messages to the people?

Even then, although Adventists by and large do not accept the concept of “degrees of inspiration” (thanks to Ellen White’s opposition to the term), internal evidence from Scripture makes it quite clear that there are varieties of manifestations of the dynamic of inspiration. Some inspired writers, as George Rice has so clearly pointed out, needed no revelation but relied on eyewitness testimony (such as Luke). Expanding on this perspective, we need to recall biblical evidence which reveals that other inspired individuals felt moved to write letters of instruction with both positive and negative admonition (such as Paul). Yet additional inspired writers received direct communication from God—person-to-person, so to speak (such as Moses). Still other inspired persons experienced ecstatic manifestations (such as pre-king Saul). Some inspired individuals had dreams and visions (such as Daniel). Other inspired writers heard “auditions” (such as Isaiah). Some inspired persons appear to have had nightmares (such as Ezekiel). Yet other inspired writers were moved with emotion to write poetry (such as David). And still other recipients of inspiration played—prophesied on—musical instruments (such as the sons of Asaph and Jeduthun).

Homiletical Ellen White

Another point may be in order. And it

is here where I suspect certain church administrators just might go ballistic, because we have seen that precedent when they dealt with Des Ford. Newman avers that “Ellen White when using Scripture is mostly ‘homiletical’ and ‘evangelistic’”—citing terms used by Robert Olsen. Or as Newman frames it elsewhere in the article: The prophet’s speaking on behalf of God “was for encouragement, exhortation, or reproof, and it was rarely predictive” (p. 15). I am convinced that both Olsen and Newman are correct in their observations, which is in essence precisely what Ford said when he insisted that Ellen White’s role in the church was “pastoral.” Certain church bureaucrats blew a gasket over Ford’s terminology, accusing him of “not believing in Ellen White”—a ludicrous allegation when it comes to Ford, as anyone who personally knows him will acknowledge! But it is precisely this function that other inspired writers fulfilled—be it seer, prophet, apostle, messenger, or ...

Many thanks to Newman for also underscoring Ellen White’s maturation not only intellectually but also spiritually! The logical conclusion from this data is that she (like the Old Testament and New Testament prophets) could make—and did make—factual errors in (1) grammar, (2) spelling, (3) history, (4) science, (5) exegesis, and (6) theology. (Because of space limitations, I refrain from providing examples of such errors among both biblical writers and Ellen White.)

Newman’s article should become required reading within every echelon of the church—from persons in the pew, to local pastors, to seminarians, to overseers at the White Estate, to administrators throughout the hierarchy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. 📖

¹ Walsh, *Berit Olam: 1 Kings* (Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1996), p. 358.

² Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 21.