

Dumb it Down or Let it Speak? The Future of Seventh-day Adventist Bible Education

Olive J. Hemmings

Introduction

Biblical Studies is part of the wider enterprise of knowledge and thus is an ongoing process of understanding. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has engaged that process more rigorously than most other Christian denomination precisely because of its heritage as “a people of the book” and its all consuming attention to the educational enterprise.¹ Yet the church is perpetually at risk of maintaining a death grip upon the Bible and consequently stifling the process of Bible education. This is naturally so because it has, through years of biblical studies developed a doctrinal structure that declares it the true remnant with a special message for these last days. It is understandable then that the task of engaging the Bible in the ongoing process of knowledge is not easy. Yet the obsessive fear that particular approaches² may undermine fundamental doctrines may be as destructive as denying that God still speaks through the Bible. In so doing the Bible may be misrepresented or otherwise dumbed down³ as it becomes marginalized in the intellectual arena. This paper observes the problem of Bible education in the wider culture and in Seventh-day Adventism in particular. It suggests basic ecclesiastical attitudes and proposes a systematic approach in Seventh-day Adventist higher education, to mitigate the problem.

¹ For some insight into the rigor of Bible study in which the church engages see *Our Firm Foundation*, 2 vols., A Report of the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Conference Held September 1-13, 1952, in the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Takoma Park, Maryland (Washington D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953).

² Between 1974 and the present, there has been an ongoing conflict among Seventh-day Adventist theologians and administrators regarding interpretative methodologies. Much of the conversations is concerned about the fundamental doctrines, and how they may hold up in light of the application of higher critical tools of interpretation. Close observation of the debate reveals a lack of credible evidence that the use of higher critical tools necessarily undermines the fundamental doctrines. It also reveals that a strict use of the methodology accepted by the church does not guarantee a preservation of its doctrines. For example, the conflict over the Sanctuary doctrine does not involve higher critical methodology. It is also interesting to note that the Church used the tools of higher criticism to defend the Spirit of Prophecy literature against plagiarism.

³ The term generally refers to “a variety of different things but the concept always involves a claim about the simplification of culture, education, and thought, a decline in creativity and innovation, a degradation of artistic, cultural, and intellectual standards, or the undermining of the very idea of a standard, and the trivialization of cultural, artistic, and academic creations.” (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumbing_down). Its use here involves not only the foregoing but also takes a literal twist as in silencing the Bible by turning people away from it or disabling its true meanings due to oversimplification, misrepresentation and trivialization.

Dumbed Down

The Bible is the most important body of literature in Western culture. It is the sacred text of Judeo-Christianity, the mother of Western civilization. Yet though more widespread and accessible than any other body of literature, it has been dumbed down for the most significant part. Very often a simple answer dealing with a most basic content area of the Bible stumps some of the brightest of Jeopardy contestants. Over the 26 years that I have taught Biblical Theology in SDA higher education the results of the Bible content pre-tests for General Education RELB classes have become more and more disturbing. Over the past five years I have consistently encountered church going students who do not know what the Gospels are.

Indeed the Bible has been trivialized or otherwise swept aside by many intellectuals (Christians not excluded) as a relic of the past, an old mile post marking a curious stage of human ignorance. Such problems are exacerbated by the absence of credible and responsible resolutions to the “inconsistencies” and “inaccuracies” in the Bible by those who designate themselves as the watchdogs of the faith. On the other end are those who equate the Bible with God by using the statement, “God does not change” while not being sure themselves which of the practices in the Bible they need to follow and which they do not need to follow. Thus in the absence of adequate Bible education the mutability or immutability of God becomes a human sport tailored to particular social, political and ecclesiological agendas. In so doing the Bible carries no more authority than particular interest groups are willing to lend it, and the God of the Bible is replaced by an idol (also called “God”) created in human image.

Thus at the end of the day both the Bible despisers and the Bible thumpers muzzle the Bible by saying things it does not say, make claims, and accuse it of claims it does not make. As a result, this misunderstood and misrepresented text is often cast aside as an entire generation writes its own thwarted text. David Koresh types find following among people who lack adequate Bible education. Several SDA college educated people went down in the Waco flames. Too many pastors stand at the pulpit with a Bible in hand while doing little if anything with it. As a college student, I visited a Seventh-day Adventist church where the women who go up to sing were

warned not to speak at all, just sing.⁴ And the only appropriate question here is: in which of our schools was the pastor of this church educated? Several years ago a prayer group on an SDA college campus broke out in violence. One of those acts of violence was the burning of all non-KJV Bibles they could find. As a Bible educator my only thought was that we had failed these students.

Arguably, the chief perpetrators of this assault upon the Bible may not so much be the supercilious intellectuals, but the church itself. For if the Bible is given its due respect as the complex body of literature that it is, if the church is able to accurately estimate the nature of the task of Bible education and then approach that task responsibly, carefully and systematically the Bible may find a more exalted place in the minds of the general population.⁵ Most importantly, the dogmatic compulsions that serve only to create fragmentation, contempt, distrust and paranoia within the faith community may begin to disappear. This is particularly true for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Indeed its *raison d'être*, the quality of its existence, the integrity of its mission and purpose rest entirely upon the successful accomplishment of this task.

Let It Speak

The Bible has come a long way from the Latin text which only the educated clergy could read,⁶ through the conflicts of the Reformation in search of less papal and more biblical Christianity, to the present proliferation of denominations each imposing its own meaning upon the text. As “a people of the book” the Seventh-day Adventist church has come a long way from the aftermath

⁴ This is based on 1Corinthians14:34.

⁵ Careful observation of the ridicule to which several websites and you-tube videos subject the Bible reveals a woeful lack of education about the true nature and purpose of the Bible. (See for example, <http://www.boreme.com/funny2007/penn-teller-bible-p1.php>; <http://nitwitnastik.wordpress.com/.../errors-inconsistencies-and-contradictions-in-the-bible/>; www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD33c01mCnY; www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD33c01mCnY). Very often the explanations to the obvious difficulties in the Bible are made by people who themselves lack adequate Bible education.

⁶ Between the fifth and fifteenth centuries C.E the Bible was restricted to the Latin language in the form of the Latin Vulgate. Because only the priests were educated to understand Latin, the church had ultimate power to rule without question. To possess a Bible in a language other than Latin was a crime punishable by death.

of the Great disappointment through Arianism, Trinitarianism, the 1888 General Conference on “Righteousness by Faith”, the 1919 Bible Conference,⁷ the 1974 Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics,⁸ the Glacier View Sanctuary Review Committee, the 1986 Rio Conference⁹ to the present fomenting conflicts over faith and science¹⁰ and Women’s ordination. It would seem that amidst all this clamor the Bible has something to say for itself, which as a faith community we are yet to hear. If the Bible is to truly have a voice the church must find ways to responsibly and accurately represent it. This is the first step in Biblical faithfulness which does not necessitate the sort of blind belief and pseudological explanations that disables the mind or otherwise transforms curious minds into unbelievers.

1. The Bible is not God.¹¹

The approach that attempts to equate the Bible with God¹² inevitably breeds atheists. In the 19th century among mounting skepticism from what people perceived in the Bible to be inconsistent with the character of a just God, Ellen White wrote: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented.”¹³ Too many Seventh-day Adventist leaders and

⁷ See note # 3 above.

⁸ This was the church’s initial response to concerns regarding higher criticism.

⁹ The continuing tension in the 80s regarding hermeneutics culminated at a conference among the denomination’s leaders in Rio de Janeiro in 1986. The report of the meeting took the form of the document “Methods of Bible Study”.

¹⁰ The most recent discussion of the issue among Seventh-day Adventist theologians, scientists and administrators took place at the Glacier View Ranch in Denver, Colorado August 13-20, 2003. Larry Evans reports that the stated objectives of the conference were: (1) to increase clarity regarding the church’s understanding and witness about the biblical account of origins; (2) to identify a strategic plan for the church to communicate science and faith issues; (3) to foster a positive atmosphere for open communications among theologians, scholars, and church administrators; and (4) to heighten the awareness of the importance of the tensions between science and religion issues and to promote an attitude of caring and humanity during this time of process. (See Larry R. Evans, “Theologians, Scientists Discuss Vital Issues,” *Adventist Review*, 2 October 2003, 40.)

¹¹ While the Reformation fought the death grip of Papal authority in exchange for *sola scriptura*, it fell into the ditch of a pernicious bibliolatry which persists today and is a leading cause of widespread rejection of the Bible.

¹²The use of John 1: 1, ff. to justify this approach is an example of inadequate bible education. The use of the term *logos* (translated “word”) in John 1 is different from the use of the English term “word”. As such it does not refer to the Bible. A clear understanding of its use requires knowledge of Greek philosophy and Greek language..

¹³ 1 SM:21.1

teachers have ignored this council. If the Bible must speak today the church must be willing to appropriately separate tradition in Scripture, from the just principles of a loving Creator. The church must responsibly seek to make believers aware that the Bible is not ahistorical. It must be accurately represented as the great paradigm of divine grace couched in human history and arising out of genuine human struggles. Out of those struggles the voice of God itself struggles to be heard. That is why we see in Scripture Divine love and grace mingled with hatred, cruelty and injustice. Adequate Bible education equips one to hear that still small voice that struggles to be heard above the noise of human traditions.¹⁴ Arbitrary literal readings¹⁵ or socio-cultural impositions upon the text renders it totally human, and places it at risk of losing its credibility as divinely inspired literature.

2. The greatest literary masterpiece of human history

That it is a literary work without equal is a claim that the church needs to boldly make about the Bible and then treat it as such. The Bible is first and foremost literature albeit sacred literature. Thus any study of the Bible that gives it the respect it is due must recognize the nature of its rich, diverse literary genres and forms if it is hear it profound messages. For example, any teaching of the Gospels must take into consideration the literary genre of the gospels themselves and then the various literary forms¹⁶ contained in the Gospels. This is vital to answering the nagging question regarding the so called “contradictions” of the accounts in the gospels.

3. The Bible is not a science book

The Bible does not claim authority for any other academic discipline beyond its own discipline as a diverse body of sacred literature. For example, any attempt to internally reconcile the seemingly conflicting accounts in the gospels misrepresents and confounds the text. Ancient story telling is not concerned about accurate details. Rather it is concerned

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 11: 11, 12 for example.

¹⁵ It needs to be clearly stated that literal renderings is not consistently possible. Thus there must be honest discussion about why some readings may be literal, and some not.

¹⁶ Recognition of the literary form of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is the only credible means of contradicting its use as proof of life after death.

about the lesson to be learnt from the story. Hence the story though true at the core is shaped by the narrator to bring out a particular lesson.¹⁷ Further, it is an exercise in futility for scientists to measure the accuracy of the Bible with scientific data,¹⁸ or for theologians to use the Bible to measure the accuracy of science.¹⁹ The Church will not soon win that battle if history is to teach us anything.²⁰ As such the doctrine of the Sabbath should not be subject to scientific proof of six literal days of creation. Sabbath observance is a timeless lesson of the miracle of human existence, of human liberation and God's justice – a lesson that the church must seriously engage. It is the profound lesson of grace, salvation, and human responsibility that needs to be heard in the story of creation, not scientific facts.²¹ Only then will the creation story speak in ways that bring about renewal and restoration within the body of Christ.

Higher Education Intervention

A careful systematic approach to Bible education must begin at higher education because it is there that the church trains teachers and pastors and other denominational leaders. As such the college curriculum and its approach to faith and learning must reflect a calculated effort to keep the Bible away from the margins of the academy.

1. The Bible Curriculum.

¹⁷ The stories in the Gospels differ because each Gospel writer comes to the Christ event with a different emphasis.

¹⁸ Joshua commanded, "O sun, stand still at Gibeon, And O moon in the valley of Aijalon" (Josh 10:12). If Joshua did not know that the sun was stationary relative to the earth, it is not because he was not inspired; rather it is because he was not involved in a scientific debate. The text rather speaks to a miracle for more daylight hours in a manner that was familiar to Joshua. "It is not the words... that are inspired, but the men..." (1 SM 1:21.2)

¹⁹ When the churchman Galileo in the 16th century embraced the heliocentric view of Copernicus based on his own astronomical observations, the church subjected him to torture and banishment before forcing him to recant. This was because the church believed that heliocentrism was contrary to the teaching of the Bible (See 1 Chronicles 16:30, Psalms 93:1, Psalm 96:10, Psalm 104:5, Ecclesiastes 1:5; cf. note 13 above). Now heliocentrism is a foregone conclusion, and Galileo is named the father of modern science. Yet many have rejected the Bible because of this very controversy. The church therefore has to take up the responsibility to explain carefully the process of Biblical inspiration.

²⁰ See note # 18 above.

²¹ History has demonstrated that the attempt to transform the Bible into a science book will only create unbelievers, or otherwise mute conformists. This was indeed the case in the controversy over Galileo's findings. See note 14 above.

The study of the Bible in higher education must be carefully guarded as an intellectual discipline and not taken for granted as a necessary pre-requisite for graduation from a Seventh-day Adventist college. Neither should those preparing for gospel ministry be allowed to assume they already know what they need to know and simply go through the necessary motions. The culture of anti-intellectualism that surrounds the study of the Bible must be rejected as antithetical to the very nature of the Bible, as contrary to the history of Adventism, and as counterproductive in the effort to advance the mission of the Church. Bible educators whether they be full time or adjunct must therefore be carefully chosen, not so much for their politics, but for demonstrated knowledge of the wide range of disciplines that bear upon the Bible, and a balanced and responsible approach to its study.

It must also be clearly understood that courses labeled RELB are just that, RELB, the B representing Bible. They should not be treated as RELT courses, T representing Theology. Theology courses relate to already formed religious/theological views whether those views are biblical, historical or philosophical. Bible courses allow the Bible to say what it meant and what it means to say by the application of all the necessary literary tools which allow for a faithful and balanced rendering of the text. Thus the teaching of these courses demands the discipline necessary to relinquish already formed assumptions. It requires the sense of responsibility to carefully guide growing minds into a deeper understanding of the Bible in a manner that strengthens their faith in God and their commitment to the Church.

If academia is to be serious about Bible education it must treat the study of Bible with the respect it treats other disciplines. Therefore, when students enter college without the prerequisite knowledge of the Bible necessary to register for a General Education RELB class they must be made to register first for a pre-college Bible course (dealing with content study). Math and English General Education courses require this. It is difficult for the student who does not even know what the Gospels are, or who has never opened a Bible to get the maximum benefit from a grade level approach to the course RELB 160 Jesus and the Gospels. Neither is it fair to those who have attended church schools and are ready to move on.

2. Approach to faith and learning.

Any wholesome and meaningful approach to faith and learning must recognize that God's revelation fills up all of human history. It is not confined to any one time and any one book and any one discipline. However the Bible as paradigm of that revelation is the measuring stick. It witnesses to the surety of the fulfillment of history as a process of salvation. As such it speaks to Divine omniscience, justice, love, providence and grace out of which a perpetually developing and learning humanity emerges. Thus the Bible educator must be the enabler of an encounter with the God of the text who transcends the text and engages us into greater and greater understanding of who we are and what we ought to be. Such encounter is the fruit of patience, humility, and surrender to the God who in spite of frail and sin ridden human instruments, continues to speak. It is then that the student can fully engage the sciences, the humanities and the arts, and all the other academic disciplines and therein experience that very encounter.

Inclusive Conversation

Finally, the Church must engage all voices in the study of the Bible. As such directors and associates of the Biblical Research Institute²² must include theologians from all sides of the biblical conversation. No one interest group should claim ownership of the church, and no one should claim ownership over the Bible. Whatever the labels used to identify its Biblical scholars, these all belong to one body; thus all these voices must be heard conversing with each other, rather than speaking against each other. This is urgently necessary if Seventh-day Adventism is to be a united, balanced, and qualitatively growing world church.

Summary and Conclusion

An anti-intellectual approach to the Bible results in its trivialization by the wider society, and creates confusion and division in the church. Consistent with its heritage, the Seventh-day Adventist church must engage the Bible as part of the ongoing process of knowledge. Careful attention to the true nature and purpose of the Bible, knowledge responsible review of the higher education Bible curriculum, and a wholesome approach to faith and learning may foster a culture of keen biblical interest. This enables a full grasp of the immense scope of Divine revelation in a

²² This is the section of the world Church responsible for providing the biblical perspective from which the denomination may approach the major issues that arise.

world of rapidly increasing knowledge. Thus the voice of God may echo through the centuries as we hear it now crisply and clearly in the birth of every new understanding.