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VISION FOR AN ADVENTIST HERMENEUTIC

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Introduction

As Bible-believing Christians, we Seventh-day Adventists hold the Bible as the basis of our beliefs. "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps 119:105).¹ But many Christians no longer believe in the Bible.

For those who still believe in the Bible, the question remains, "How do we interpret it?" Different Bible interpretations make a whole world of difference.

Challenges in Hermeneutics

There are many different methods of interpreting the Bible: historical criticism, historical-biblical analysis, structuralism, rhetorical criticism, canonical criticism, and so forth. There are different ways of interpreting specific biblical texts: exegetical, theological, and homiletical. Then there is the tendency of depending on human reason and experience in the interpretation of the Bible, such as one finds in some academic disciplines. The influences of culture, history, and tradition also play a role. This was already shown in Paul's time, and he advised us to guard against it: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8).

Seventh-day Adventists face the additional challenge of preserving a proper relationship between the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. Are the Bible and Ellen White's writings on the same level of inspiration? Are they also on the

¹All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

same level of authority? What does it exactly mean when we say that the Bible is “the greater light” and Ellen White’s writings are “the lesser light”?

Finally, there may be other challenges. For example, for some time, even after we had accepted the principles of *sola scriptura*, we did not accept the principle of *tota scriptura*. According to Ellen White,

Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgment as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their own authority. Its divine authenticity is destroyed.²

Need for a Sound Adventist Hermeneutic

My vision for an Adventist hermeneutic is that it will achieve the following two goals. First of all it will achieve doctrinal and theological unity. Paul highlights this in 1 Cor 1:10:

I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thoughts

Ellen White comments,

The spirit in which you come to the investigation of the Scriptures will determine the character of the assistant at our side. Angels from the world of light will be with those who in humility of heart seek for divine guidance. But if the Bible is opened with irreverence, with a feeling of self-sufficiency, if the heart is filled with prejudice, Satan is beside you, and he will set the plain statements of God’s word in a perverted light.³

Again she wrote,

We should not engage in the study of the Bible with the self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God, and a sincere desire to learn his will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth.⁴

²Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1994), 39.

³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 108.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1969), 4:417.

Secondly, my vision is that an Adventist hermeneutic will reach a deeper understanding of Bible truth than ever before. Paul admonishes, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). And again, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16).

In this regard, Ellen White's writings make great contributions to the deeper understanding of the Bible. This is achieved in three ways. Her writings direct our attention to the Bible; they aid in understanding the Bible; and they help in applying Bible principles to our lives.

Finally, my vision is that an Adventist hermeneutic will examine difficult questions in the spirit of humility and love. The Bible admonishes us to have an overall spirit of humility and love in dealing with each other. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:2-3).