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AIIAS Theological Forum 2002: Hermeneutics: "How Readest Thou?"

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ARE YOU LISTENING?

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Christians around the world respect the Bible. They may not always listen to it carefully, but they respect it.

One of my ministerial student families in Pakistan had the sad experience of losing their little son. While we were attending the funeral, sitting on grass mats on the ground near their home, I carefully placed my Bible next to me on the mat. As you might know, that was not a culturally correct way to handle the Bible. My colleague in the Religion department quietly informed me that I should put the Bible on my lap or the people would infer that I did not respect the Bible. The village folk in Pakistan would even kiss the Bible when they received one at an evangelistic meeting.

I am sure that most of us were taught while we were young not to put other things on the Bible. The first of our fundamental beliefs as Seventh-day Adventists is that the Bible is a very important and special book. It is not the product of human beings, but the very word of God. People wrote it, but only as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:20). As Paul claims, the entire Bible was inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16).

Nevertheless, you will surely agree with me that, to be of any value, the Bible must be more than a carefully handled book that we treat with respect. If it really *is* the word of God, and it is, then we ought to be finding out what it has to say. When God speaks everybody should listen. Today I am going to take it for granted that we all believe that the Bible is God's word. After all, this is a fundamental belief of Adventists. What I want us to consider today is what we are going to do with this word from God.

We have God's word, but people have not always listened very well. We have God's word, but we let others tell us what it says. This *is* God's word, but we fail to really dig to find what it really says. Maybe we do not really want to understand it or apply it to ourselves. Wasn't it Mark Twain who said, "It's not the parts of

the Bible that I don't understand that bothers me; it's the parts I do understand"?

But if we do not really listen to what God has said in His word, how is it ever going to do its work of teaching, rebuking, correcting, and instructing us in righteousness? We need this so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

God has spoken. Are you listening? Let us check out in our own experience whether we are listening to God's word or not. Let us consider three crucial questions.

1. How Much Time Are You Taking to Find Out What the Bible Says?

If we are not reading it, we are not listening very well. It does not take a doctoral degree to figure that one out, does it?

I was re-reading a story in the Bible this week that really amazes me. It is the one in 2 Kgs 22: the story of Josiah, an eight-year old king. According to v. 2, "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left."¹ Obviously, this king wanted to do what God wanted him to do. That was a definite change from the way things had been done in Judah.

And how did he know what was God's will? He listened. Here are the main story lines from 2 Kgs 22:

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. (v. 8)

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Acbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us." (vv. 11-13)

[Huldah said to them,] "Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD. 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'" So they took her answer back to the king. (vv. 18-20)

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the NIV.

What amazes me most about this story is the fact that God's word had gone unread for so long. Josiah had a good heart, but he was king for eighteen years before the Scripture was found and read to him. In Deut 31:24-27 Moses had told Israel to keep a copy of the law of God beside the ark in the sanctuary. But I am sure that he never intended that it was to be hidden there and never read. In fact, in Deut 6:1-9 Moses told them that they must keep God's words in their heart and mind, and teach them to their children when they walked, when they sat, when they went in, and when they went out (vv. 1-9). Yet, for years and for king after king, no one bothered to find out what God had to say. What a tragedy!

2 Kgs 23:22 says that they had not even had Passover on a regular basis. Isn't that at least four hundred years? That ceremony was to remind them of God's saving power and grace, and they did not even seem to know they were to celebrate it. Amazing!

I am glad that Josiah, at least, was willing to read the Word and to really listen to it. Notice 2 Kgs 23:1-3:

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

If only Israel had done this more often, they would have been rebuked, corrected, and instructed in righteousness by God, the One who loved them, knew them intimately, and wanted the best for them. They would have been thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:17).

God wants to do the same for us. He has spoken to you, too. How much time are you spending with His word? Are you listening?

2. Are You Listening to God's Word Right out of His Book?

Or are you mainly listening to what other people tell you He said?

Now, I do not want you to quit attending these forum presentations. Nor should you stop reading your Sabbath School lesson, or books about the Bible and Bible subjects. They all have their place. But their only proper place is to guide us back to the actual word of God.

You cannot really listen to God if you are mainly listening to what others say He said. That didn't take a doctoral degree, either! But let me tell you something: those of us with theological degrees have had a lot of experience reading what

other people say God says; and it is absolutely amazing what some people can tell you that God supposedly says.

We must listen to God. When you listen to someone speaking for God then you must listen to God to see if He agrees. Go back to the Bible. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa 8:20 KJV). That is a good text for Adventists. I suggest we apply it to ourselves more often.

There is a story connected with the one about Josiah that is quite interesting in this regard. About three hundred years before Josiah was born, God told King Jeroboam that Josiah would come and restore true worship. (And some people claim that prophets cannot really tell the future.) In this story, a prophet was sent to tell Jeroboam that he was wrong in starting his own forms of worship in Israel. The prophet gave the prophecy about Josiah; he destroyed the false altar just by cursing it; and he healed Jeroboam's hand, which had shriveled up when he tried to save the altar. You remember the story.

This was a true prophet sent by God. Jeroboam invited him over for dinner but the prophet refused:

Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the word of the Lord: "You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came." So he took another road and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel. (1 Kgs 13:8-10)

The prophet was not supposed to tarry there in Bethel. God did not want it to appear that He in any way accepted their false worship. So the prophet headed toward home only to encounter an old prophet. At least that was his claim. Maybe he was a prophet that had lost his way in this new religion of Jeroboam. The rest of the story is found in vv. 15-18:

The prophet said to him, "Come home with me and eat." The man of God said, "I cannot turn back and go with you, nor can I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. I have been told by the word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water there or return by the way you came.'" The old prophet answered, "I too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the Lord: 'Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.'" (But he was lying to him.) So the man of God returned with him and ate and drank in his house.

Should God's man have listened to what someone said God said? At least, he should have checked it out with God. Because he did not, he lost his life.

Look at that whole interesting story sometime, especially if you like stories of prophet-eating lions. But we must move on. The point is well illustrated, though: we must go to God's word to check out any person's idea of what God's word says.

Do you think James White was one of God's men? Sure he was. But for much of his ministry he taught that Jesus was not God. Do you think Martin Luther was one of God's men? I would say so. But, up until just before he died, he taught that people went to heaven or hell when they die. How about A.T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner? Ellen White had to reprove them for some of their faulty theology. How about your favorite Adventist author or preacher or, dare I say, professor? They are human, too.

If we believe that the Bible is God's word to us, we will want to listen to what it says. We will be like the Bereans: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

If we want to be "thoroughly furnished unto every good work," we need to find out what God says in His word. He has the words of life for you. Are you listening?

3. Are You Listening to God's Word Very Carefully?

If we believe that the Bible is God's word, we will want to really hear what God has to say, not to look for what we want to hear. What we feel God *should* say might not at all be what He *really* says.

May I be open with you? It bothers me how easy it is for us to come to Scripture with our own agenda. Some of our own scholars, some whom we admit are God's people, have become so convinced concerning historical, archaeological, or scientific data and theories that they are inclined to come to the Bible already knowing what the Bible ought to say. That, my friends, is not what Adventists believe, according to our Fundamental Beliefs. We cannot tell the Bible what to say. We must go to the Bible to find out what God says.

Now, you may think that you never go to the Scriptures with your minds made up from science or secular philosophy, as you perceive the "liberals" do. Let me remind you, however, that "conservatives" can just as easily go to the Scripture with their own preconceived ideas and philosophies, tightly holding to what they have been taught.

Jesus said to the Jewish leaders, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). They studied, but they missed seeing Jesus, because they had other ideas of how it should be. We all know of non-Adventists who just cannot seem to see the truth of the Sabbath in the Bible or figure out that the dead are asleep until the resurrection. We understand that it is because of their past conceptions. It is hard for them to see what God is really saying. Let us not forget that we are humans too. We all have learned ideas that can influence how we hear God's word.

We can safely go to God's word only with the desire to hear what He says, even if it is different from what we expect. We can safely go to God's word only with our hearts open to the Holy Spirit, with a prayer on our lips asking for God's guidance. We cannot just presume that we already know what He will tell us. We cannot trust how we feel about it. As John said, "Dear friends, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1).

What might God want to tell us that we are missing because we think we already know what He will say?

The Bible is God's word. He has spoken to you. He wants to show you that you are going in a wrong way; He wants to correct your errors; He wants to teach and instruct you concerning righteousness; He wants to fully equip you for every good work. He is speaking these things to you. *Are you listening?*