

## Adventism Fundamentalism and the Bible

Nicholas Miller, JD, PhD

Adventism has certain continuities with nineteenth-century conservative evangelicalism's view of the Bible. But it also has important discontinuities, especially with the fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism. Of course, there is not, and was not, a single conservative evangelical view of the Bible in the nineteenth century. Certainly by the late 1800s, when the challenges of higher criticism to biblical authority were being felt with ever greater force in North America, conservative Protestant Christians found different ways to respond to it. Almost all these groups claimed to support the Protestant standard of *Sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone), but what exactly *Sola Scriptura* meant would differ from church to church.<sup>1</sup>

Often as important as a particular name or category of belief about divine inspiration were the unspoken philosophical assumptions of the interpretive community in which Bible readers operate. Scholars have recognized that Adventism was heir of at least three very distinct religious and theological communities: Methodism (the heirs of the movement started by John and Charles Wesley), the American Restorationist movement (Christian primitivists who desired to return to the purity and order of the New Testament Church), and the Millerite Movement (pre-millennialists led by Baptist preacher William Miller who believed that Christ would return in the 1840s).<sup>2</sup> These three movements were made up largely of believers in the Arminian tradition—the belief that Christ died for all, not just an elect few, and that every person had free will and could choose to partake of the redemptive work of Christ. These Arminian groups also implicitly operated within a Scottish Common Sense philosophical framework, in both its epistemological and ethical dimensions. Such a Scottish Common Sense orientation held that

moral truths were self-evident, discoverable by reason, or through intuition, and that everyone who chose to make the effort could learn and understand these truths.<sup>3</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the approach to Scripture of even this sub-set of evangelicalism. But it is possible to sketch the main outline or pillars of the general, philosophical approach that they shared in their approach to revelation and biblical interpretation. In brief, three main points characterized their approach. First, despite living in an era which is often described as being characterized by a philosophical foundationalism—a demand for an objective certainty in matters of knowledge—most of these groups were willing to live with something less than objective certainty. They embraced an evidentiary approach that did not offer absolute, mathematical proof, but made room for faith and internal judgment.<sup>4</sup> This stood in contrast to other, generally Calvinistic strands of Protestantism that tended to make a certain science of knowledge, both natural and revealed.<sup>5</sup> As the Enlightenment began to make ever more aggressive claims to knowledge and certainty, this other strand culminated in the development of modern conceptions of verbal inerrancy in the halls of Princeton Seminary, which served as the foundations of 20th-century Christian fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup>

The second feature shared in common by Methodists, Restorationists, and Millerites was a willingness to accept the validity of knowledge attainable from God's other book, that of nature. These traditions held a belief in the validity of truths discoverable by human reason, moral sense, and intuition. This view was an expression of the ethical common sense strand of the Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and it supported eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant beliefs in the importance of both natural law and moral philosophy in the construction of laws and for ethical reflection.<sup>7</sup>

The third point was theological and flowed from the first two and became a guiding hermeneutical principle. If God could and did communicate reliable truths, and did so through multiple sources, then one could use these sources to understand and assess claims about God, whether from nature or the Bible itself (or some combination of the two). If the Bible said that God was just, moral, and good, then He could be understood, at least in part, to be just and moral by human reason. In the end, Scottish Common Sense argued that the teachings of the Bible were consistent with moral reason, once moral reason and the Bible were properly understood.

This biblical and moral reasoning supported the adoption of a theological and interpretive system known as the moral government of God. If God was moral, loving, and good, then His written revelation should be interpreted to make those truths about Him clearer. It also provided a framework to think about issues of society and the state. If God Himself was willing to be assessed by the moral framework that He had imbedded into the Universe, and made accessible to the mind of man, then how could human governments escape this standard?<sup>8</sup>

It was no coincidence, then, that there was a strong correlation between those Christians that accepted this moral government of God hermeneutic and those Christians that participated in anti-slavery activism. In such a moral worldview, it was manifestly clear to such Christians that slavery was a practice that had no place in how God had established his morally-based universe.

This correlation can be found at many different times and places. Puritan preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, was a slaveholder. His son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., however, adopted the moral government of God view of the Atonement, and wrote a treatise opposing slavery.<sup>9</sup> William Wilberforce, the famed British anti-slavery activist, was raised a Methodist, and was urged by John Wesley to end the evil institution.<sup>10</sup> Further, “virtually all antislavery Presbyterians and Congregationalists came from the New School,” including biblical scholar

Albert Barnes and the famous evangelist Charles Finney, who helped found Oberlin College of Ohio, a hotbed of anti-slavery activity.<sup>11</sup>

Early Adventist thought came down squarely amidst the Arminian/New School Presbyterian approach to the Bible and social issues. Sea Captain Joseph Bates, health reformer, abolitionist, and bringer of the Sabbath into Adventism, was from the Christian Connection, part of the Restorationist movement; Hiram Edson, who first gave expression to the Adventist doctrine regarding the heavenly sanctuary, had a Methodist background; James White was an ordained minister with the Christian Connection before becoming an Adventist; and Ellen White had been raised in the Methodist church and was known to read New School theologians.<sup>12</sup>

All four of these Adventist founders had grown up in an area of New England so impacted by the fires of revival that it came to be known as the “burned-over” district. It was home to the renewal efforts of Charles Finney and others who created an ecumenical spirit of revival, consisting of new birth conversion, God as a moral governor, and His children as agents of godly spiritual and social reform.<sup>13</sup> So, despite, or perhaps because of, being “biblical conservative,” the Adventists held to quite progressive social positions at the time. They not only opposed slavery and supported abolition, but they called for civil disobedience to fugitive slave laws. They did not ordain women ministers, but their position toward women in teaching, preaching, and evangelizing was progressive by the standards of the day. They wrote strongly against the restrictive teachings, promoted by Christian social conservatives, which defended slavery and that limited women to the teaching of women and children.<sup>14</sup>

Over time, however, Adventists did not consistently keep to their socially progressive positions. Adventist history reveals that a shift in approaches to the biblical text correlates with a shift in the church’s approach to social questions. Adventism’s vision of the Bible at any given

time impacted the vision the church fostered of the role of their members in American life. To understand the impact of Adventism's shifting view of the Bible, it is helpful to see their changing view of the church's social role.

For these purposes, the Adventist approach to the Bible during the century and a half since its founding in the middle of the nineteenth century can be divided into five chronological periods:<sup>15</sup>

- A. Confident Beginnings: Firm Foundations, 1849–1883
- B. Growing Pains: Liberalism & Fundamentalism, 1883–1919
- C. Arrested Development: Against Modernity, 1919–1966
- D. Delayed Adolescence: The Center Hold? 1967–1988
- E. Tentative Maturity: The World & America, 1988–2015

### **A. Confident Beginnings: Firm Foundations, 1849–1883**

In Antebellum America, a quite simple approach to the Bible prevailed among serious Christians. The Bible was treated largely as a pure and uncorrupted text, with the real work of Bible study being to seek to understand what the text actually taught. This stood in contrast to an emergent new German or “higher criticism,” which stressed historicizing Scripture by examining its transmission throughout the centuries, and studying the impact of human thought and culture on its construction and teachings. Higher criticism was slow to come to Britain and America. Its rise in Germany began in the late seventeen and early eighteen hundreds, but it did not get serious and widespread attention in Britain until the *Essays and Reviews* of 1859, the same year that Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published. The distractions of the Civil War slowed a serious engagement with higher biblical criticism for several years in America.<sup>16</sup>

William Miller, the prophetic expositor and key forerunner to the Adventist tradition whose studies led to a series the religious revivals surrounding 1844, was a typical example of this approach to Scripture. In his twenties, Miller had become a Deist and had given up his faith

in Scripture as divine revelation. After a conversion experience in his mid-thirties, Miller came back to the study of Scripture, and he became convinced that “if the Bible was the word of God, every thing contained therein might be understood, and all its parts be made to harmonize.”<sup>17</sup> Early Adventists inherited this high view of Scripture from Miller and his followers, the Millerites. They held the foundational belief that, as expressed by co-founder James White, “the Bible is a perfect, and complete revelation . . . our only rule of faith and practice.”<sup>18</sup> Any Adventist elaboration of Scripture during this period came almost always in defense against attacks by infidels and Deists.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, despite this high view of Scripture, the most formal Adventist statement on Scripture during this time stayed away from strong claims about verbally inerrant inspiration that was becoming common in some evangelical circles. The third article of an 1872 statement of Adventist beliefs said simply that the Scriptures are “given by inspiration of God, contain a full revelation of his will to man, and are the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”<sup>20</sup> The social attitudes of Adventists also differed quite markedly from those Christians in America who were advancing a more absolutist, mechanical version of inspiration. Adventist favorable attitudes toward the role of woman in preaching and teaching, their staunch opposition to slavery, and their desire for government to protect children and families from the use of alcohol contrasted with those holding to a verbal inerrancy outlook, such as those in the Old School Presbyterian tradition.<sup>21</sup>

## **B. Growing Pains: Liberalism & Fundamentalism, 1883–1919**

It was the role of Adventism’s prophet within the Church that precipitated its first significant internal encounter with a more liberal view of Scriptural authority. Such views had begun to

make their way into mainstream evangelical thought after the Civil War had ended.<sup>22</sup> But these new views were not entertained seriously inside the Adventist Church until the early 1880s.

At that time, certain church leaders had grown impatient regarding criticisms leveled at them by Ellen White. It was hard to argue with a prophetic voice that the church at large considered inspired. To strengthen their positions, certain leaders, including the church's president, proposed a theory that while Ellen White's visions were inspired, her "testimony letters to leaders and others" were not inspired to the same degree.<sup>23</sup> This theory of "levels of inspiration" gained some traction in Adventist circles into the late 1880s, and was applied to the Bible as well. But in 1889, Ellen White herself spoke to the question directly. She wrote, with a certain sense of irony, that "the Lord did not inspire the articles on inspiration published in the *Review*." No person, she continued, should "pronounce judgment" on the Bible, "selecting some things as inspired and discrediting others as uninspired."<sup>24</sup> The Church generally embraced her cautionary guidance.

But Ellen White also played in pushing back against the other extreme—that of literal, mechanical, verbal inspiration. It was at the 1883 General Conference Session where it was proposed that there be revision of certain of Ellen White's books to correct grammatical errors.<sup>25</sup> The wording of the motion for revision spoke directly to the process of inspiration. "We believe the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thoughts, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed."<sup>26</sup> Again, this understanding of inspiration as functioning at the level of thought, and not word choice, was also applied to Scripture. For instance, Adventist scholar Uriah Smith wrote that except where a writer quoted God or an angel, that the "mere language" of neither White nor the Scriptures were directly God's words. Rather, he said, though the exact "words may not be

inspired, . . . at the same time, the facts, the truths, which those words convey, may be divinely communicated.”<sup>27</sup>

It was at this time, where both more liberal and fundamentalists views of inspiration were pressing in, that Ellen White made her first extended remarks about the nature of inspiration.<sup>28</sup> Her comments reveal a connection with an existing strand of moderate Protestant thought on the topic. Scholars have since recognized White’s use of New School Presbyterian Calvin Stowe’s book *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible* in setting out her own views of inspiration.<sup>29</sup>

Stowe represented a middle ground between the liberalism of the higher critics, and the verbal inerrancy being developed and promoted by more conservative American Protestants such as the Old School Presbyterians of Princeton Seminary. He drew an analogy between Christ being fully divine and fully human, with the limitations and shortcomings implied by human flesh, and the divine message, but human words and frame, of the written Word.<sup>30</sup> Ellen White used very similar language and imagery to Stowe. “Jesus, in order to reach man where he is,” she wrote, “took humanity.” Similarly, “the Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea.” White also revealed her non-foundationalist, view of truth—that it was given not for absolute, perfect precision, but for use in ordinary life—concluding that in what was almost a direct quote from Stowe, “The Bible was given for practical purposes.”<sup>31</sup>

Ellen White did not, however, merely parrot or crib from Stowe. She differed with him on important points. She refused to follow his claim that “thoughts” were not inspired, but only the men.<sup>32</sup> She distinctly said that God did inspire thoughts. She also allowed a greater role for the Holy Spirit in influencing, though not dictating, the choice of words.<sup>33</sup>

Stowe and White agreed on a non-foundationalist, non-absolutist epistemology (Scripture is for “practical” purposes), as well as a recognition of the human aspects of Scripture. Both interpreted Scripture with a moral government of God hermeneutic that resulted in opposition to slavery. Calvin Stowe is most well known, of course, as being the husband of Harriet Beecher-Stowe, the woman who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—the book that widely influenced abolitionist sentiment leading up to the Civil War. Stowe and his New School colleagues were supportive of these abolitionist views.<sup>34</sup>

Stowe’s and White’s views on biblical language reveals why those holding a moderate, non-inerrant view of inspiration were more open to a Bible reading that criticized establishment institutions like slavery than their inerrantist brethren. There is a simple explanation. Those committed to absolute, inerrant, verbal precision will be more likely to believe they are eschewing interpretation, and reading the “plain meaning” of the text. The problem is, of course, that the “obvious” meaning of a word or passage will often turn out to be the meaning proposed and understood by the social and cultural majority of those in a given interpretative community at a given historical moment.

For instance, the words “slave” or “slavery,” read against an early 19<sup>th</sup> century American backdrop, especially in the South, would make it appear that the Bible supported the racialized, chattel, man-stealing slavery, rather than the economic serfdom of ancient Israel. But an approach to inspiration that recognizes the flexibility, imprecision, and semantic range of language and words will be open to interpreting those words according to larger principles, even if that meant looking for a secondary or less well-known meaning to a word or passage. For those adopting the moral government of God hermeneutic, this view of Scripture meant that difficult texts about human freedom and slavery were interpreted in a manner that, while faithful

to the text and context, would also maximize the fairness, justice, and love of God in dealing with humanity, and of humans with each other.

Based on this approach, Ellen White herself had counseled that Adventists had a duty to disobey fugitive slave laws, as they were an affront to God's laws.<sup>35</sup> Later, after slavery was abolished in the United States, she continued to be a strong advocate for the education and uplifting of the former slaves. Her son, Edson White, risked his life in taking a boat to the South to serve as a floating school in which to educate and empower former slaves.<sup>36</sup>

### **C. Arrested Development: Against Modernity, 1919 - 1966**

There were those within early Adventism that promoted a verbal, mechanical view of inspiration, but they had been kept largely on the margins by the moderating influence of Ellen White and those close to her. But after her death in 1915, that began to change. Her inner circle, including her son, Willie White, and General Conference President A. G. Daniells, worked to keep alive her moderate views on the topic. They found themselves under increasing pressure, however, by a more extreme conservative view, newly energized by an escalation in the fundamentalist/modernist conflict in Christianity and society at large.<sup>37</sup>

It was also in 1915 that the final volume of the series *The Fundamentals* was published. This was the widely circulated (three million volumes distributed) defense of Christian orthodoxy by a consortium of conservative evangelical pastors, scholars, and laymen.<sup>38</sup> There was much that Adventists could accept in *The Fundamentals*. It defended the virgin birth and deity of Christ, Christ's atoning death and resurrection, the Trinity, and the historicity of the Bible.

Three articles criticized even “Christianized” versions Darwinian thought concerning evolution.<sup>39</sup> This stout defense of special creation, a doctrine of particular importance to Adventism—because of its connection with the Seventh-day Sabbath and the character of God—that likely caused the books in *The Fundamentals* series to be of influence in Adventist circles. Whatever the cause, Adventists began to espouse more frequently the views of verbal inspiration defended in *The Fundamentals*.

Matters came to a head in 1919, when Adventists held a Bible Conference for its editors, religion teachers, and church administrators. It was here that the old guard of moderates who had worked closely with Ellen White attempted to head off a growing move in the church to embrace a fundamentalist outlook on inerrant verbal inspiration as to both the Bible and Ellen White.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, the Conference discussions were inconclusive. Records from this Conference, where the facts of Ellen White’s use of sources and editors was freely acknowledged, were not made public until 1974.<sup>41</sup> The overall effect of this conservative turn was that the growing forces of inerrancy and fundamentalism continued to spread throughout Adventism.<sup>42</sup> Official publications for the next two decades often espoused the verbal/inerrancy position.<sup>43</sup>

This shift profoundly influenced not just Adventist biblical exegesis and interpretation, but also larger theological and social outlooks throughout the denomination. Previously, Ellen White and those close to her had been open to the use of new translations of the Bible as they came out. Within Protestant fundamentalism more generally, however, there arose a strong “King James only” movement that soon found its way into the Adventist church.<sup>44</sup>

The Church also moved from a pragmatically progressive outlook on issues of social justice, especially in relation to race and gender, to one that was distinctly socially conservative and even regressive. At the time of Ellen White’s death, while the Adventist church had not

ordained women to the gospel ministry, many women functioned as licensed ministers and evangelists, rising through the ranks to become administrators. At one point, they held as many as a quarter to a third of church administrative offices as treasurers, department secretaries, and educational department leaders.<sup>45</sup> But after the 1920s, women began to disappear from these positions. Very few remained by the 1930s, and all were gone a decade later. They vanished not only from administrative leadership, but also no longer functioned as licensed ministers, being limited to the roles of deaconess or Bible worker.<sup>46</sup>

A similar thing happened on the racial front. Early Adventism had moved forward with pragmatic, yet hopeful, progress in dealing with race questions. While recognizing the dangers of a frontal assault on the southern color line, Ellen White and other leaders sought to elevate the freed slaves through education and evangelism. Their pragmatic and progressive ministry in these regards, however, was turned in a conservative direction as the church entered the 1920s and 30s. Adventist institutions that had not practiced segregation in the early 20th century began to do so in the 1930s. This continued into the 1960s, even as society itself became more open to greater equality.<sup>47</sup>

What happened? Certainly the nation-wide economic depression of the 1930s created a culture-wide pull toward more conservative social values. But given Adventism's socially progressive past, a full explanation must take into account Adventism's growing experimentation with Protestant fundamentalism and the theological rigid and socially conservative outlook that came with it. This fundamentalist status quo was to be challenged, however, by the events of the next period.

## D. Delayed Adolescence: The Center Holds? 1967–1988

The re-marginalization of verbal inerrancy in mainstream Adventism came at a turbulent time in American. In 1966, *Time* magazine ran its famous cover, asking “Is God Dead?” The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were to shortly take place, opposition to Vietnam would coalesce into a popular protest movement, and flower power, Woodstock, and the summer of love would challenge basic Christian moral outlooks.<sup>48</sup>

It was not a time when Americans were attracted to affirmations of moderation, and currents within Adventism reflected this. The denomination’s strongly conservative bent shielded it from truly liberal theology, but it began to move away from some fundamentalist positions. This move was begun in the mid-1950s, when Adventist scholars published the SDA Bible Commentary. In wrestling with the choice of various textual readings, word translations, and interpretations, verbal inerrancy was hard to maintain. But the re-marginalization of verbal inerrancy in popular, mainstream Adventism was signaled by two events in 1966. The first was the publication of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, which stated that the Church did “not believe in verbal inspiration, according to the usual meaning of the term, but in what may be properly called thought inspiration.”<sup>49</sup>

The second was a lecture by Arthur L. White, grandson of Ellen White at Andrews University, the Church’s flagship theological institution. Arthur White stated that “Ellen G. White’s statements concerning the Bible and her work indicate that the concept of verbal inspiration is without support in either the Bible writers’ or her own word.”<sup>50</sup> After this time, it became increasingly difficult to find claims or affirmations of verbal inerrancy in official, institutional Adventist circles.

But some Adventist scholars went further. They were attracted by neo-orthodox theology and encounter views of inspiration—emphasizing revelation as experiential encounter rather than propositional exchange—which were considered liberal in Adventist circles. These new theologies were given a platform by the creation in 1967 by some Adventist academics of the Association of Adventism Forums. Two years later, the Forums began publishing its journal, *Spectrum*, which assumed a “revisionist-critical stand,” and began critiquing traditional Adventist beliefs from the neo-orthodox and encounter theology perspectives.<sup>51</sup> What followed was a series of volleys between left-leaning Adventist academics, and more conservative scholars at the Adventist Seminary and church headquarters. The former wanted to emphasize revelation as encounter, the latter tended to defend a both/and position, arguing that revelation could be both encounter with God, and productive of propositional, doctrinal information.<sup>52</sup>

Those leaning towards neo-orthodoxy also began making greater use of higher-critical biblical analysis than Adventism had previously done. Views of inspiration became bound up with methods of Bible study and how Scripture should be analyzed. The first target of such inspiration deconstruction was Ellen White and her writings. Triggered by a 1970 *Spectrum* article entitled “Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship,” a veritable avalanche of articles appeared in the journal critiquing Ellen White’s use of the Bible, history, health science, her own visions, and other authors. These were responded to in turn by articles and materials from the Church and its denominational scholars.<sup>53</sup>

Thus again it was disputes over Adventism’s experience with inspiration that impacted its discussion about the approach to all revelation, including Scripture. Three distinct groups began to take shape. The first group was made up of those who had embraced an overly rigid view of inspiration, found it untrue, and reacted by viewing all revelation as either operating at the level

of encounter, or as almost entirely historically conditioned, or both. This was a relatively small, but influential group clustered in Adventist academic centers and large urban churches in North American and Western Europe. A positive aspect of this group was that it tended to be socially and racially progressive, supportive of the equal treatment of blacks, women, and other minorities. Many mainstream church members wondered, however, if this was the progressivism of evangelical, biblical thought, or that of socially liberal politics, especially as this group began to espouse elements of the sexual revolution, including the LGBT movement.<sup>54</sup>

The second group included those who reacted against the observations of *Spectrum* and the left-wing revisionists by doubling down on an inerrant view of inspiration, in regard to both the Bible and Ellen White. Given Adventism's extended liaison with Protestant Fundamentalism, especially at the popular levels of the church, this group was somewhat larger than the first, but did not represent the moderate, institutional core. Instead, this second group fed into an existing strand within Adventism of independent institutions, medical and educational, that largely supported the work and beliefs of the church, but operated outside its organizational structure.<sup>55</sup>

In the 1970s, a number of these independent organizations became havens for those Adventists who felt that the growing moderate view of inspiration in the institutional church was a capitulation to the forces of liberalism. This group tended to stay out of social and racial matters, viewing the church's shortcomings as primarily spiritual and theological. They viewed calls for racial or social justice with some suspicion and as being part of the biblically liberal "social gospel."<sup>56</sup>

The third group included those who held to the moderate view of plenary thought inspiration. It was by far the largest group although not necessarily the loudest. It included most of Adventism's official publications and institutional voices, as well as some of the more

moderate independent institutions and ministries. Elements of the more extreme first and second groups could be found in this third group, causing the third group to sometimes feel significant internal tension over how the official publications and institutions within the Church should address various conflicts and viewpoints.

For example, the consortium of Adventist religion and theology professors, the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, founded in 1979 in conjunction with the Society of Biblical Literature, did harbor some left-wing voices.<sup>57</sup> So much so, that in 1988, more conservative members of the group split off and formed a competing, more conservative group called the *Adventist Theological Society*.<sup>58</sup> Certainly both groups had elements from groups one or two within them, but most of the membership of both groups would be more accurately described as moderate in their views of revelation and inspiration.<sup>59</sup> Both these groups and their institutions became more progressive in matters of race and gender equity as they became increasingly aware of the unfortunate impact of fundamentalism on the church over the previous half-century.

With the formation of these two separate theological societies within the church, it might appear that 1988 represented the beginning of a new and higher level of conflict between left-leaning and right-leaning groups within the church. The subsequent years did witness some conflict, but an event two years earlier in Rio de Janeiro—where the world church voted on a document entitled “Methods of Bible Study”—actually presaged a more united future than the theological society split appeared to indicate.

The very location of the Rio event revealed the reality of the growing international nature of the Adventist church. The new international balance of influence represented a boost for the moderate to conservative side of the church. It turned out, however, that Fundamentalist views of inerrant inspiration were primarily a North American phenomenon. Adventist scholars outside

North American were not generally supporters of the verbal inerrantists. The Rio document clearly denied verbal inspiration, acknowledged minor discrepancies in the Bible, and acknowledged multiple sources of revelation.<sup>60</sup>

The Rio document showed the Church moving toward an era of moderate conservatism. The growing clamor of the extremes on both sides of the inspiration issue heralded an increasing loss of influence of either of these extremes on the Adventist mainstream, as a theologically conservative, but socially and culturally diverse, overseas contingent played an increasingly important role in church affairs.

### **E. Tentative Maturity: The World Comes to America, 1988–2015**

In the fifty years since the mid-twentieth century, the average Adventist church member went from being a white male of European descent to an African or Hispanic woman. During this period, the internationalization of Adventist Church membership was its most striking feature. In 1960, total membership stood at about 1.2 million, with 43% of that found in North America and Europe. Forty years later in 2001, the church had grown dramatically by over 1000%, with membership totaling about 12.3 million.<sup>61</sup> In a shift almost as dramatic as this phenomenal growth rate, the population center moved decisively from the Europe and North American to South America and Africa. In 2001, North America and Europe's share of the membership had declined to about 11%. Africa and South America, conversely, came to account for 67% of the Adventist membership, while Asia composed an additional 19%.<sup>62</sup>

At gatherings of Adventist church, theological leaders and Bible scholars from Africa, South America, and Asia began to have a larger influence. The demographic and geographical shift did no favors for the left, progressive wing of the western Adventist church. Somewhat

more surprisingly, the fundamentalist wing of the Church did not find totally sympathetic allies among the Church's new international membership, as many had thought they would.

The more moderate international stance on inspiration can, in part, be attributed to the mission history of the Adventist Church. The vast majority of the overseas *growth* in the Church occurred in the 1950s and after; but the vast majority of Adventist missions were *founded* in the early 20th century, at a time when the theologically moderate view of inspiration had been in its ascendancy. Thus, Adventist missions had proceeded largely on this earlier, more moderate platform. The overseas church had been less influenced than the American by fundamentalist influences of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The result was that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the left/right biblical conflict so prevalent in the North American and European churches began to be overshadowed and tempered by a moderately conservative influence from overseas.

This pattern was vividly illustrated by the discussion and conflict over the question of whether the Church should ordain women ministers. Western leaders and scholars had raised this issue since the 1970s in reaction against the Fundamentalist culture that had marginalized women in Adventism from the 1920s to the 1960s. Conferences were convened, scholars were commissioned, and church councils were held. But whenever a vote was taken, a substantial margin, especially those from overseas, initially resisted the movement to ordain female ministers.<sup>63</sup>

The issue persisted, however, and in 2010 the Church voted to engage in a formal, church-wide discussion on the matter of female ordination. A truly international study body was convened to study and work over a two-year period, and make recommendations to the church at large. What resulted provided a fascinating insight into the engagement of a truly worldwide, multi-cultural church with issues of biblical interpretation and application.<sup>64</sup> Many of the North

American and European delegates assumed a pro-ordination position, but there were a significant number of North American conservatives who held a fundamentalist-inspired outlook and mounted strong opposition to female ordination. This group made a series of presentations that reflected not the moderate, early historic position of the church, but rather a more conservative, fundamentalist view of gender roles. For instance, they not only argued that women should not be ordained to the gospel ministry, but also insisted, contrary to the Adventist pioneers, that women could and should teach only other women or children.

What was most interesting was the reaction of the international delegates to this split. Most of them did not side with the pro-ordination progressives, but many of them did not find the extreme anti-position acceptable either. Over the course of the two years of meetings and discussions, a third group spontaneously emerged that received formal recognition from the Church committee leadership. This third group took a somewhat conservative reading of the Bible and gender roles, but did so in a less dogmatic and inflexible way than the North American conservatives.<sup>65</sup> For example, they were willing to allow the ordination of women in those regions where local leadership deemed it essential to the mission of the church. Ultimately, this third group received the second largest number of votes in the committee, somewhat behind the pro-ordination group, but significantly ahead of the anti-ordination crowd.<sup>66</sup>

In the General Conference session that followed in the summer of 2015 in San Antonio, Texas, where the recommendations were passed on to the full church, the no-ordination vote prevailed. But the margin was significantly smaller than in the past. Earlier General Conference votes had denied ordination by 75% and 70%. But this time, the “no” vote came in at about 59% (and this vote included an Adventist Church that had grown significantly overseas in the more than two decades since the earlier votes).<sup>67</sup> The unmistakable message was that once the overseas

members came into contact with a Fundamentalist approach to Scripture and social issues, they shied away from it, and sought out a more moderate alternative.

### **Conclusion: A Mission to the World Comes Home**

In the 1880s and 1890s, Adventist pioneers started on a mission to the world, which as the time seemed ambitious, audacious, and quixotic. The Church persisted in this global effort when other, larger Protestant churches decided to split up mission territories amongst themselves. The Adventist pioneers endured two World Wars, numerous other regional conflicts and civil wars, and many other trials and hardships, establishing beachheads in most countries of six continents. When the old colonial worlds collapsed after World War II local leaders stepped forward, and the next fifty years turned into a half-century of dramatic missions' growth.<sup>68</sup>

This growth is coming back to the American Adventist Church in two distinct ways. First, the immigration of Adventists from overseas is causing American Adventism to continue to be the fastest growing American Protestant denomination.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, and more importantly to Adventism and the Bible, the international influence is reminding American Adventists of their heritage of a *moderately* conservative approach to biblical inspiration and interpretation and the pragmatically progressive social values that went with it.

Those who the Adventist Church touched with its missionary endeavors have themselves become the missionaries and the teachers. The experience of Adventism illustrates in miniature the larger story of the impact of the Great Awakenings on the Bible in America. The biblically-based social renewal movements of the Second Great Awakening and the missionary impulses found throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in what some have called a Third Great Awakening have combined and coalesced in what could be termed the Fourth Great Awakening—the Christianization of the southern hemisphere in the second half of the twentieth

century. The story of the Christianized global South confronting an increasingly secularized West is not just the story of the future of the Bible in Adventism—but of the Bible and Christianity in America itself. We will do well to pay it close attention.

<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 331-333; also see Ronald F. Satta, *The Sacred Text: Biblical Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007), xiv, 43-73.

<sup>2</sup> Also see Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000), 21-31; George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 28-37.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 220-222. An additional movement which impacted Adventism, but that has received less attention, is the Calvinist-based New School Presbyterian movement that became active and influential in the revivals surrounding the Second Great Awakening in the 1820s and 30s. Nicholas Miller, “Alongside Foundationalism: Adventism’s Alternate Protestant Philosophical Path,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 53, no. 1 (2015): 37-54.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Casson, *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke’s Politics of Probability* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 21-22; Elmer H. Duncan, ed., *Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology* (1780; repr. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), xxxv; See discussion by Miller, “Alongside Foundationalism,” 41-44.

<sup>5</sup> Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623-1687) is said to one of the first formulators of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, and his *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* was used as standard text in “Reformed Christian circles until it was replaced by Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.” “Francis Turretin,” *Theopedia* (viewed on August 31, 2016 at <http://www.theopedia.com/francis-turretin>.)

<sup>6</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> While nearly all biblically conservative 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestants drew from Scottish Common Sense epistemology, traditional reformed thinkers, including those at early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Princeton, became increasingly resistant to the ethical arguments of Common Sense theory. They viewed this method of moral reasoning as an intrusion on the teaching role reserved, in their minds, primarily, if not exclusively for Scripture. Mark Noll ed., *The Princeton Theology: 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1983, 2001), 30-33, 165-166, 218-220.

<sup>8</sup> The moral government of God theory was articulated initially by Hugo Grotius, building on Jacob Arminius’ free-will theology, and developed by John Wesley, Thomas Reid, John Locke, and other Arminian-leaning thinkers, including New England’s Nathaniel Taylor. Miller “Alongside Foundationalism,” 47-50.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Jr., “The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade, and of Slavery,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Tryon Edwards, 2 vols. (Andover, MA: Allen, Morrill & Wardwell, 1842; repr. New York: Garland, 1987), 2: 75-90.

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley to William Wilberforce, February 24, 1791, quoted in Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 144.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Hirrel, *Children of Wrath* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 136; T. H. Olbricht, “Barnes, Albert (1798-1870),” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 281-284; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 501; Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney: 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 271-274; J. Brent Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 81-89.

<sup>12</sup> Sketches of these pioneer Adventists can be found in Gary Land, *Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

- <sup>13</sup> Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 61-76, 150-158.
- <sup>14</sup> On slavery and fugitive slave laws, see Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (1859; repr. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing, 1948), 201-202; Samuel G. London, Jr., *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 44-56; On women, see the entry in Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 329-330.
- <sup>15</sup> The rest of this chapter draws on Alberto R. Timm, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10, nos. 1-2 (1999): 486-542.
- <sup>16</sup> On the slow reception of higher biblical criticism in America, see Holifield, *Theology in America*, 192-195; Noll, *In the Beginning*, 333-339.
- <sup>17</sup> William Miller, *Apology and Defence* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1845), 5-6.
- <sup>18</sup> James White, *A Word to the "Little Flock,"* (Brunswick, ME: printed by author, 1847), 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Moses Hull, *The Bible from Heaven: Or a Dissertation on the Evidences of Christianity* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1863), 79.
- <sup>20</sup> Uriah Smith, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-Day Adventist Publishing Association, 1872), 5.
- <sup>21</sup> Holifield, *Theology in America*, 370-380, 500-502; supra note 19.
- <sup>22</sup> Timm, "History of Seventh-day Adventist Views," 492, n. 38, citing Daniel Wilson, *The Evidences of Christianity*, 5th ed. (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1845), 1:278-89.
- <sup>23</sup> Timm, "A History of Adventist Views," 491-492.
- <sup>24</sup> E. G. White to R. A. Underwood, Jan. 18, 1889, Ellen G. White Research Center, Andrews University (EGWRC-AU).
- <sup>25</sup> Timm, "A History of Adventist Views," 493;
- <sup>26</sup> "General Conference Proceedings," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1883, 741-42.
- <sup>27</sup> Uriah Smith, "Which are Revealed, Words or Ideas?" *RH*, March 13, 1888, 168-169.
- <sup>28</sup> Ellen G. White [1886] MS 24, reprinted in *Selected Messages, Book 1* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 19-21, [http://media4.egwwritings.org/pdf/en\\_1SM.pdf](http://media4.egwwritings.org/pdf/en_1SM.pdf).
- <sup>29</sup> Robert M. Johnston, "The Case for a Balanced Hermeneutic," *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors* 72, no. 3 (March 1999): 11-12; David Neff, "Ellen G. White's Theological and Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe" (unpublished paper, The Ellen G. White Estate [DF 65], 1979), <http://ellenwhite.org/library/Calvin%20Stowe?sqid=1799797490>.
- <sup>30</sup> C. E. Stowe, *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Pub. Co., 1867), 19.
- <sup>31</sup> Ellen White, *Selected Messages, Book 1*, 20, compare with Stowe, *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible*, 15-16, 18.
- <sup>32</sup> Compare Stowe, *Origin and History of the Books of the Bible*, 20, with White, *Selected Messages, Book 1*, 21; Neff, "Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe," 16-19.
- <sup>33</sup> Ellen White, *Selected Messages, Book 1*, 21; Neff, "Literary Indebtedness to Calvin Stowe," 16-18.
- <sup>34</sup> See Daniel R. Vollaro, "Lincoln, Stowe, and the 'Little Woman/Great War' Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 18-34 <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0030.104>.
- <sup>35</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, 201-202.
- <sup>36</sup> London, *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*, 44-56.

- <sup>37</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.)
- <sup>38</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 119.
- <sup>39</sup> Henry H. Beach, “The Decadence of Darwinism,” in *The Fundamentals*, ed. R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, 4 vols. (1910-1915; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 4: 59–71; George Frederick Wright, “The Passing of Evolution,” in *The Fundamentals*, 4: 72–87; and By an Occupant of the Pew, “Evolutionism in the Pulpit,” in *The Fundamentals*, 4: 88–96.
- <sup>40</sup> Allan Lindsay, “Bible Conference of 1919,” in *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014), 657-658.
- <sup>41</sup> Lindsay, “Bible Conference of 1919,” 657-658.
- <sup>42</sup> Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views,” 500-503.
- <sup>43</sup> Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views,” 502-503.
- <sup>44</sup> Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views,” 505.
- <sup>45</sup> Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 329.
- <sup>46</sup> Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 329-330.
- <sup>47</sup> London, *Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*, 69, 76-77, 83-88, 100-106, 109.
- <sup>48</sup> “Is God Dead?” *Time*, April 8, 1966 (viewed on 1/17/2016 at <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660408,00.html>.)
- <sup>49</sup> Don F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1966), 585.
- <sup>50</sup> Arthur L. White, *The Ellen G. White Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1973), 13.
- <sup>51</sup> Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 27, 283-84; Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views,” 513-514.
- <sup>52</sup> Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views,” 515-516.
- <sup>53</sup> Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 33.
- <sup>54</sup> Jared Wright, “Why Adventists Should Consider Supporting Gay Marriage,” *Spectrum*, 16 June 2008 (Viewed on August 31, 2016 at <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/jared-wright/2008/06/16/why-adventists-should-consider-supporting-gay-marriage>.); Jonathan Cook, “Voting for Same-Sex Marriage: An Adventist Perspective,” *Spectrum*, 4 November 2012 (Viewed on August 31, 2016 at <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/jonathan-cook/2012/11/04/voting-same-sex-marriage-adventist-perspective>.)
- <sup>55</sup> Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 333-335.
- <sup>56</sup> Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 341.
- <sup>57</sup> “Adventist Society for Religious Studies,” in Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 14.
- <sup>58</sup> “Adventist Society for Religious Studies,” in Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 326; “Adventist Theological Society,” in Land, *Historical Dictionary*, 15.
- <sup>59</sup> Membership of the two groups overlaps considerably and they have begun fellowshipping together on a yearly basis.
- <sup>60</sup> “Methods of Bible Study Committee (GCC-A)—Report” [2(a)(2)], *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, 18, <http://beta.adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-355695/adventist-review-january-22-1987>.
- <sup>61</sup> Lowell Cooper, “Profile of a Changing Church,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (2003): 5–8, <http://dialogue.adventist.org/en/articles/15-1/cooper/profile-of-a-changing-church>.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, “Profile of a Changing Church.”

<sup>63</sup> General Conference Committee, Tenth Business Session, 55th General Conference Session, Indianapolis, Indiana, July, 11, 1990, 1039-1040, <http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCC/GCC1990-07.pdf>; 56th General Conference, *General Conference Bulletin*, July 11, 1995, 30, <http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCB/GCB1995-08.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Documents regarding the Theology of Ordination Study Committee can be found here: “2013-14 GC Theology of Ordination Study Committee,” *Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research*, (Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2015), <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc>.

<sup>65</sup> David Read, “Surprise ‘Third Way’ Option Emerges At Final TOSC Meeting,” *ADvindicate*, June 7, 2014, <http://advindicate.com/articles/2014/6/6/surprise-third-way-option-emerges-at-final-tosc-meeting>.

<sup>66</sup> The anti-ordination group received a total of 34 votes, the pro-ordination group received 52 votes, and the moderate group received 41 votes. “Importance of TOSC Report,” *EqualOrdination*, (June 1, 2015, <http://equalordination.com/importance-of-tosc>.)

<sup>67</sup> Andrew McChesney and Marcos Paseggi, “Delegates Vote ‘No’ on Issue of Women’s Ordination,” *Adventist Review*, July 8, 2015, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story2988-%E2%80%8Bgc-delegates-vote-‘no’-on-issue-of-women’s-ordination>.

<sup>68</sup> D.J.B. Trim, “Adventist Church Growth and Mission Since 1863: An Historical-Statistical Analysis,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Art. 5 (2012) (viewed on August 30, 2016, at <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1209&context=jams>.)

<sup>69</sup> G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “Adventists’ back-to-basics faith is fastest growing U.S. church,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2011, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-Adventists\\_17\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-Adventists_17_ST_N.htm).

