

Bible Studies for Adventists



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February 14–20, 2009

Commentary on “The Authority of the Prophets”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, February 14, 2009

The introduction of this week’s study brings on the stage in a straightforward manner the consequences of rejecting the message of the prophets:

“All through the Bible, a theme recurs: God talks to people through His prophets, and the people either accept or reject what’s being said. Of course, by rejecting the words of the prophets, they’re not rejecting the prophets; they’re rejecting the One who sent them.”

Since the message of the prophet originates in God and it’s actually God’s message, rejecting it is the equivalent of rejecting God whose authority stands beside the message. Authorship establishes the locus of authority.

Problems

This part contains little of anything objectionable, except that its thesis about authority stands in contradiction with what will be affirmed afterwards in the study, especially with the study for Thursday, February 19, which says about Ellen White’s writings:

“Her writings are not another Bible, nor do they carry the kind of authority found in the Bible.”

How does this lesser authority mesh with the thesis that prophetic messages carry God’s authority and rejecting them is tantamount to rejecting God? If Ellen White speaks prophetically, she’s the mouthpiece of God, and her messages bear the same authority as God has, the same authority that stands behind the biblical prophets and their writings collected in the Bible.

Summary

- The thesis that Ellen White’s writings do not carry the kind of authority found in the Bible makes a distinction which cannot be sustained—in fact, it is actually denied by the affirmation of today’s introduction.

Day 2: Sunday, February 15, 2009

This lesson introduces Moses as the mouthpiece of God and draws a parallel between Moses' hesitation to accept God's call and Ellen White's similar hesitation. The relationship between Moses and Aaron in which Moses was going to be God for Aaron and Aaron was going to be the mouthpiece is the human example of the relationship between God and his prophets, his mouthpieces.

Problems

The current lesson is trying to highlight similarities between Moses' call and Ellen White's call to the office of a prophet, found in the initial negative reaction of both of them to the call. Veiled in the argument is that both ministries (Moses' and Ellen's) carry the marks of supernaturalism because neither Moses nor Ellen had the natural abilities or the inclination to become involved in this work. Something else, something unnatural, supernatural, must account for their ministry, the implied logic goes.

Moses was not the type of personality who spoke fluently in public, his natural inclinations leaning toward life in isolation, shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 3:1). He did not seek public affirmation; he didn't love the applause and praise accompanying this work; after all, he was not at all qualified for such public activity since he had problems speaking (Exodus 4:10). His life as the leader of his people's exodus was contrary to his natural inclinations and abilities. Without God's active intervention and continual sustenance, Moses would never have been the biblical prophet and hero the world knows today.

A similar argument is used regarding Ellen White: she had not sought a public career; she was young, timid, in bad health, and not expected to live long. Indirectly it is argued that, because of the similarities between her calling and Moses' calling, her evolution into a powerful personality is attributed to God's powerful and transforming intervention in her life.

What is missing in this picture is the disturbing fact that she was not the first on the list of God's preferences in choosing a prophet. Hazen Foss was previously chosen by God, and he refused the call to become a prophet—and, as Foss related, God had chosen instead of him the “weakest of the weak”, Ellen White, leaving Foss with no hope for eternal life. Contrary to Foss' portrayal of God, the Bible presents a God who knows what he's doing in calling even reluctant prophets to the ministry, who, in spite of their unfitness or opposition to their call, had not failed in their mission. There is simply no case in which God, after being refused by man, had chosen somebody else. For example, Jonah, even if he did everything to run from his duty of delivering the message, had nevertheless ended up shouting God's warnings to the people of Nineva, and even after that he still tried to argue with God to justify his diversion to Tarshish (Jonah 4:2), proving that he had not changed his mind too much regarding his initial refusal to take the call. If God can still accomplish his purposes with such a reluctant and rebellious prophet, if he was not constrained to replace Jonah with somebody else in order to fulfill his plans, Ellen's calling looks like God just failed to do what he successfully accomplished in the past.

Summary

- Ellen White is not like Moses, because Moses was never God's second best choice, selected when God's first choice fails because of people's stubbornness. The dissimilarities between Ellen White's call and Moses bring in question the nature of God's sovereign power, foreknowledge and wisdom in electing people for the prophetic office. It brings into question whether God is truly the God depicted in the Bible or a God of their own imagination.

Day 3: Monday, February 16, 2009

In this lesson, Jesus is described as having the highest authority exercised by a human person on the earth. He is presented as teaching with the highest authority, exorcising people and commanding the forces of nature. His authority is supreme, yet it is nevertheless in dependence and in cooperation with the Father. The study title, “the Authority of the Incarnate Word”, prepares the way for the study of the next day, “The authority of the Written Word”

Problems

There are two affirmations which on one side try to establish Christ's authority as Creator, absolute, independent of anybody else, and on the other side present his authority as dependable on God.

“Ultimate authority belongs to Christ as our Creator (John 1:3) and Redeemer (Rom. 3:24). He is at once the final court of appeal and the absolute norm by which each life is to be judged. Divine authority finds its focus and finality in Him.”

“Yet, the authority that Christ exercised within His earthly commission was granted to Him by the Father (John 17:2). Whatever He did, including all the miracles He performed, always was done in dependence on and in cooperation with His Father (John 5:19).”

The language is biblical as far as it goes; still, it is vague enough to leave open the possibility of Jesus having a delegated authority, derived from the Father’s authority in a way which stands in opposition to his intrinsic authority as Creator.

Unfortunately, stating that all the miracles Jesus performed were done in dependence on His Father is in harmony with the thesis that Jesus renounced his divine attributes when he became incarnate, living on earth as a simple human being in dependence on the Father as any other human being is also dependent on God. His miracles, according to the Adventist understanding, were not miracles performed because He was intrinsically divine, but only through the Father’s divine intervention in his behalf. He remained and functioned basically as a human being, somehow being still the same Person of deity but without its divine attributes.

Jesus was one with his Father, one being. He was distinct from the Father but never separated. The Bible uses the language of cooperation between Christ incarnate and his Father, because by definition the acts of one Person of the Trinity cannot be done without the involvement of the others, since they are one Being. This means that there is harmony and functionality between the three Persons; there is subordination between the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit in which each of them has the role of bringing glory to the others: the Son to the Father, the Holy Spirit to the Son and the Father to the Son. But these different roles do not infringe on their intrinsic equality and do not presuppose dependence as there is between creature and Creator. Jesus remained the only true and eternal God even when he took upon Himself the very nature of man. The incarnation had not impacted Jesus’ divinity and essential unity with the Father.

When he was on earth, Jesus was the Word of God. He was not just a prophet transmitting the Word of God, He was the Word of God incarnate, the same Word that was in the beginning with God and who was God (John 1:1, 14). Consequently, His authority was not derived from Father’s calling in the same way as the authority of other prophets was derived. He was not a man through whom God performed his work; he was God himself with all attributes of divinity working for the salvation of the world.

Summary

- Unfortunately, in Adventist theology, Jesus in his earthly life emptied himself of divine attributes, living as a man in total dependence on his Father in order to be our example, and the present lesson does nothing to bring the needful correction. Jesus as primarily example for believers rather than as Savior is unfortunately the bedrock of legalism. Jesus’ life as example for us to imitate is not the Bible’s emphasis. Rather it is Jesus’ life, death for our sins, and resurrection for our justification, for our benefit, that is the first and foremost truth we need to know and believe about Jesus. Surely, we are called to a life of obedience to our blessed Lord and Savior, but if this life becomes the primary focus, it moves our attention from Jesus to us, to what happens in us. And anything that makes the truth of our salvation less important, replacing it with our obedience as the primary focus is working against the gospel.

Day 4: Tuesday, February 17, 2009

In this lesson there are two examples presented in order to highlight two attitudes toward the written word: King Josiah who received with gladness the discovery of the law in the temple even if it condemned his current practice, and Jehoiakim, his son who burned Jeremiah’s message which was also displeasing for him. Rejecting the message may not bring immediate consequences but nevertheless will result in eternal loss.

Problems

“He [Christ] pointed to the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority, and we should do the same. The Bible is to be presented as the word of the infinite God, as the end of all controversy and the foundation of all faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*

At first sight this is one of the clear statements which establish the Bible as the supreme authority, endorsing the *Sola Scriptura* (Bible Alone) principle of reformation. However the context of the statement is decisive in establishing its true meaning, which is not as plain as it may seem.

There are two other premises or assumptions on the basis of which Adventists read this statement.

- a) God's later revelation doesn't contradict earlier revelation, since God cannot contradict Himself, consequently the messages of later prophets are in perfect harmony with the earlier messages. There are no contradictions between inspired messages, either spoken or written.
- b) Ellen White's messages are no less inspired than the messages of the Bible (see Friday's lesson of this week)

It is true that God cannot contradict Himself, and if Ellen White's writings are no less inspired, then there is no contradiction between her messages and those found in the Bible. Since a great part of her writings interpret and apply the biblical writings, it is assumed that her interpretations of the Bible, as inspired commentaries, are in perfect harmony with the Bible itself. Consequently, any interpretation of the Bible which contradicts the inspired interpretation of Ellen White is assumed to be incorrect, precisely because her interpretation is by default the true one.

This specific context qualifies the alleged affirmation about the Bible as being the "end of all controversy". The underlying assumption presents the Bible as the final court of appeal ONLY when it is correctly interpreted, and since Ellen White's writings are offering the correct interpretation, the inevitable result is that the Bible constitute a final court of appeal ONLY if it is interpreted in harmony with Ellen White's words. If somebody interprets differently the Bible, he cannot appeal to the Bible as the final court because he's obviously twisting the Bible in the Adventist understanding.

The following quotation shows that for all practical reasons, the Bible is not the final court of appeal but Ellen White's visions, which establishes the correct interpretation of the Bible.

"The truths given us after the passing of the time in 1844 are just as certain and unchangeable as when the Lord gave them to us in answer to our urgent prayers. The visions that the Lord has given me are so remarkable that we know that what we have accepted is the truth. This was demonstrated by the Holy Spirit."
Ellen White, MR 760, p. 22, (Letter 50, 1906, to W. W. Simpson, January 30, 1906).

In conclusion, the claim of having the Bible as the final court of appeal is contradicted by the qualified premise of the necessity of interpreting the Bible in harmony with the inspired commentaries of Ellen White. The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses would gladly agree that the Bible needs to be interpreted in harmony with the interpretations given by their own leaders. To their credit, they are not claiming to be believers in *Sola Scriptura*.

Summary

- Adventists claim that the Bible is their final authority, but this claim is based upon their implicit requirement that the Bible is the final authority only when it is interpreted correctly. To the Adventist, correct interpretation requires Ellen White's commentary to explain the Scripture.
- Adventists' claim, therefore, that the Bible is their final authority is disingenuous because ultimately Ellen White is required in order to arrive at the authoritative understanding of Scripture.

Day 5: Wednesday, February 18, 2009

The lesson for today moves to the next way of transmitting God's word, through the preaching of it. Initially the gospel circulated in oral form; only later it was embodied in written form. The Adventist church benefited greatly when they accepted the authority of the spoken word by deciding to reform their organization when Ellen White urged them to make drastic changes in the running of the church.

Problems

"The Word of God, whether spoken or written, has a double function."

This statement is establishing the fact that there is one single Word of God behind both the oral messages of the prophets and their writings. Ellen White is brought as an example of the oral communication of God's Word. These statements do not present a problem for the Wednesday's section of the lesson, but when the next day's statement (Thursday) about Ellen White's writings as not carrying "the kind of authority found in the Bible" is taken seriously, it creates an internal contradiction in the current lesson.

On one hand, the author of the present study, Gerhard Pfandle, presents Ellen White's authority as being of a different kind than the authority of the Bible; but on the other hand he presents her authority in the lesson for today as being the authority of the spoken Word. The immediate question is: how can the authority of the spoken Word can be less than the authority of the

written Word? How one kind of transmission (oral) carries less authority than another kind of transmission (written)? Is it not the same Word of God, whether spoken or written”?

According to Pfandle, there is no difference between the function of the written word and the spoken word. What is true about one is true about the other. If the spoken word is a two-edged sword, so it is the written word. There is no difference between them, beside the form that they take, the essence remains the same, also the effects

“The Word of God, whether spoken or written, has a double function. It is like a two-edged sword, says Paul, “piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, NKJV). In the context of what Paul is saying, the word refers to the messages that were preached both to ancient Israel and to Christians (Heb. 4:2).”

Summary

- In the light of these established premises, how can there be a different kind of authority between the assumed spoken Word gave by God through Ellen White and the written Word of God found in the Bible? This dilemma is at the root of the present crisis and division in the Adventist church, and the current lesson does little to offer a pertinent solution to it.

Day 6: Thursday, February 19, 2009

The present lesson attempts to make a difference between the canonical and non-canonical prophets, prophets whose writings are included in the canon of the Bible, and non-writing prophets like Gad, Nathan, Ahijah, Shemaiah, and Iddo. The lesson states that inspired writings of the apostle Paul such as the letter to Laodicea remained outside the Bible, and if they were to be discovered today, they would be left outside the Bible, having less authority than the Bible. Ellen White’s writings have less authority than the Bible because, they argue, even if they are inspired, they are not canonical.

Problems

There is an underlying assumption that the historic context of Gad, Nathan, Ahijah, Shemaiah, and Iddo has no relevance to the present discussion of Ellen White’s authority. Any parallels between Ellen White and these extra-canonical prophets, however, should acknowledge the different historical-redemptive context in which these people operated. Further, all these prophets are Old Testament prophets, with a mission before the coming of Christ, and there is a difference between that period and the 19th century AD.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,” Ephesians 2:19,20.

The writings of the Old Testaments prophets and the New Testament apostles constitute the foundation of the faith. Since the foundation was established, people can build on it, not modify it. With the coming of Christ, the revelation of God comes to its final Prophet, Jesus Christ, the final revelation of God, the revelation of the last days. There is a distinction made between the past, when God spoke through prophets and revealed himself in that way, and the present reality of the coming of the Son himself who brought the revelation of the past to fullness.

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” Hebrews 1:1,2

With the coming of Christ, and the writings of the apostles which constitute the content of the New Testament, the foundation for the faith was established.

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” Jude 1:3

From this moment on, the faith “once for all delivered” cannot be modified. The foundation is complete; the finality of it is above dispute. All that people can do is to build on this foundation. They have no permission to modify it, to extract or add to it (Revelation 22:18,19). A new epoch in the redemption history starts at this point—a different historical context.

Gad, Nathan, Ahijah, Shemaiah, and Iddo operated before the final revelation brought by the coming of Christ. It was a time when God revealed himself progressively until Christ had come, and these prophets worked in a different time-frame than the post-apostolic era. The claim that Ellen White was no different than the other OT prophets does not take into account that the work of these prophets was recorded in the Bible even if their writings were not, and their work was part of a larger work which culminated in the supreme revelation of Christ. They were part of a period which no longer exists, a time when the work of revelation was incomplete, when the written word went in parallel with the spoken word. This is true also about the formation of the New Testament. The gospel circulated first orally, and afterwards was embodied in the writings of the apostles. Once this work of revelation was finished, anything that comes afterward with claims of inspiration, even extra-biblical, inevitably adds to the already completed revelation, flying in the face of a clear command forbidding any addition to the Word of God.

Another problem is raised by the assumption that inspired books outside the canon carry less authority than books included in the Bible:

“We know, for example, that Paul wrote more inspired letters than we have in the New Testament today (1 Cor. 5:9, Col 4:16). Now, if we found one of these letters today, it would not become part of the Bible. It would remain an authoritative, inspired letter outside of the canon.

Ellen White’s authority can be compared to the authority of the extracanonical prophets. The inspired messages she received for the church are not an addition to the canon. Her writings are not another Bible, nor do they carry the kind of authority found in the Bible. In the end, the Bible and the Bible alone is our ultimate authority.”

This view implicitly affirms that inclusion in the canon raises the authority of the inspired writings. Notably missing in the picture is the fact that inclusion in the canon does not confer any kind of authority to the already inspired writings, it is only an acknowledgment, a recognition of the inspired character of the writing. Inspiration itself confers to these writings the highest authority possible, the authority of the God-breathed word (the true meaning of the word “inspired” is God-breathed, from the greek theopneustos). When the post-apostolic church assembled in order to establish the canon, it only recognized what was obvious, and this act did not enhance the book’s authority. For example, the church recognized that the book of Romans was inspired and consequently put it in the canon. But in this act the Epistle to the Romans had not been given a higher position than it already had. It was as authoritative as the inspired Word of God before inclusion in the canon, as it was afterward. The church had not conferred any authority to the book of Romans which it had not previously had when it was not yet listed in the canon.

Summary

- The distinction Pfandle tries to make between inspired writings outside the canon and inside the canon does not hold water. He’s not at all resolving the problem of the ultimate authority in the SDA Church: is it the Bible or is it the Ellen White’s writings. His attempts to eat the cake and also have it are futile: either Ellen White’s writings are inspired and carry the same authority as any other inspired book of the Bible because they are the Word of God, no matter what form it takes (spoken or written), or her writings are not inspired and fall in the same category as any other uninspired literature. However, it is doubtful that the church will opt in the future for any of these inevitable choices because the consequences are pretty serious. In one case, if Ellen’s writings are acknowledged as carrying the same authority as the Bible, the SDA church will openly place itself in the same category with Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses who have their own extra-biblical writings that prevent them to offer the Bible supreme authority. On the other hand, recognizing that Ellen White’s writings are not inspired as the Bible, will lead to a massive loss of authority with unforeseen consequences. Consequently the inevitable public policy is to allow contradictory statements as the present lessons exhibits.

Day 7: Friday, February 20, 2009

The final part of the current lesson is quoting from a statement made in 1982 by an ad hoc committee of the General Conference on the relationship between the Bible and Ellen G. White. The purpose of this statement, as it is emphasized by Pfandle, is to “avoid two extremes: 1. regarding these writings as functioning on a canonical level identical with Scripture; 2. considering them as ordinary Christian literature”

Problems

There are two denials of the statement that are contradictory:

“Denials:

(1) We do not believe that the quality or degree of inspiration in the writings of Ellen White is different from that of Scripture.

(4) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine.”

Why can inspired writings from the Bible be the basis of doctrine and equally inspired writings from outside the Bible can't? Is not inspiration sufficient, is not “Thus says the Lord” sufficient for establishing a doctrine? How does “thus says the Lord” have less authority in one context than another? When God speaks, is it not entirely trustworthy?

“(2) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White are an addition to the canon of Sacred Scripture.”

Even if theoretically they are not an addition to the canon, how does this distinction function in the practical life? If we are instructed that there is no difference between the inspiration of the Bible and the Ellen White's writings, on what basis are people supposed to consider these fresh revelations as anything other than additions to the previous revelation? The Bible's books contain revelation, and Adventists claim that Ellen White's writings do also; consequently, these later revelations function alongside the previous revelation.

“(3) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White function as the foundation and final authority of Christian faith as does Scripture. “

The Bible remains the final authority only if it is allowed to be interpreted freely even if it contradicts Ellen's writings. However, the assumption that Ellen's writings are as inspired as the Bible does not allow contradictions between inspired writings, and consequently the Bible is not allowed to contradict Ellen's writings. It is assumed from the start that, because Ellen's writings are as inspired as the Bible, they are not in conflict with the message of the Bible, rightly understood. It is assumed that what we read in the Bible does not contradict what Ellen White wrote. It is assumed that the Bible as the final authority will not contradict the lesser authority of Ellen White.

But this assumption will lead inevitably to the conclusion that the Bible cannot be the final authority if its message contradicts Ellen White's writings. Appealing to the Bible for rejecting the Investigative Judgment is not a valid appeal to the Bible as the final authority, according to the Adventists' view. The Bible is indeed the final authority ONLY if it is interpreted in harmony with Ellen's writings. That's simply a denial that the Bible is the final authority if Ellen's writings play such a decisive role. If the Bible cannot be interpreted without qualifications, without any other external points of reference, it is not the final authority.

“(5) We do not believe that the study of the writings of Ellen White may be used to replace the study of Scripture.”

Unstated qualification: As far as the study of the Bible does not replace the study of Ellen White's writings. Taking one without the other is, to the Adventist, tantamount to a rejection of God's revelation.

“(6) We do not believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White.”

Unstated qualification: the Scripture can be rightly understood apart from the writings of Ellen White as far as long as it is assumed that they are not in conflict with her writings.

“(7) We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White exhaust the meaning of Scripture.”

Qualification: Any other meaning of Scripture, if it contradicts the meaning already given to the Scripture by Ellen, is a misunderstanding of the Bible. To the Adventist mind, the entire meaning of Scripture is just a completion of the already conferred meaning Ellen White has given to the Scripture.

Summary

- For the general reader, these statements may look like endorsing Sola Scriptura. But when the dots are connected, it becomes evident that these Adventist statements die the death of a thousand qualifications.
- At the end of the day this week's lesson does not bring any positive contribution toward its stated goal, namely to prevent Ellen's writings from functioning “on a canonical level identical with Scripture”. Preventing Adventist members from treating Ellen White's writings as canonical is an impossible task as long as the label “inspired” is applied to Ellen White's writings, and as long as she holds the prophetic office they say marks the remnant of Revelation 12.