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**THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE  
INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE**

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## The Role of the Church in the Interpretation of Scripture

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### Introduction

Many studies of biblical hermeneutics are available which deal primarily with individual interpretation of Scripture. However, aside from the Roman Catholic perspective (where the magisterium plays a dominant role), little has been published dealing specifically with the role of the church as a corporate body in biblical interpretation. In this paper, I seek to address the question: how should we *collectively* approach and interpret Scripture? Or to phrase the question differently, What is the relationship between the church and Scripture? A number of inter-related issues are connected with the role of the church and the interpretation of Scripture. These include: the church and the principle of *sola Scriptura*; the church as the repository of the oracles of God; the church and the formation of the biblical canon; the NT church's interpretation of the OT; the authority of church statements of fundamental beliefs in relation to the authority of Scripture; the relationship between the priesthood of all (individual) believers and the authority of the corporate church in the interpretation of Scripture; church authority and procedures for dealing with "new light" and with heresies; the relation of church policies to Scripture; the responsibility of the church to foster a proper interpretation of Scripture; and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church to ever more faithful biblical interpretation and to ever greater unity of the faith built upon the Word. Each of these issues will be taken up in turn in the discussion that follows.

## I. The Church and the Principle of *sola Scriptura* (“By Scripture Alone”)

A fundamental principle set forth by Scripture concerning itself is that the Bible alone is the final norm of truth, the foundational and absolute source of authority, the ultimate court of appeal, in all areas of doctrine and practice. The classical text which expresses this basic premise is Isa 8:20 (NIV): “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.” The two Hebrew words *tōrāh* (“Law”) and *te<sup>o</sup>udah* (“testimony”) point to the two loci of authority in Isaiah’s day which now constitute Holy Scripture: the Pentateuch (the Torah or Law of Moses) and the testimony of the prophets to the previously revealed will of God in the Torah. Jesus summarized the two divisions of OT Scripture similarly when He referred to the “Law and the prophets” (Matt 5:17; 11:13; 22:40). The NT adds the authoritative revelation given by Jesus and His apostolic witnesses (see Eph 2:20; 3:5).

Isaiah warned apostate Israel against turning from the authority of the Law and the Prophets to seek counsel from spiritist mediums (Isa 8:19). In biblical times other sources of authority were threatening to usurp the final authority of the biblical revelation: human philosophy and science/knowledge (Col 2:8; 1 Tim 6:20), nature (Rom 1:20–23; 2:14–16; 3:1–2), reason (Prov 14:12), and experience (Gen 3:1–6). But what concerns us in this paper is the authority of ecclesiastical tradition. Jesus and Paul clearly indicate that Scripture is the norming authority over tradition, including the tradition of the religious authorities (Matt 15:3, 6; Col 2:8). This does not deny the usefulness of Judeo-Christian tradition, as some wrongly interpret

*sola Scriptura*,<sup>1</sup> but rather upholds the authority of Scripture over all tradition as the final norm of truth. Tradition, even ecclesiastical tradition, must be judged by Scripture.

The Bible stands alone as the unerring guide to truth; it is sufficient to make one wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15). It is the standard by which all doctrine and experience must be tested (2 Tim 3:16–17; Ps 119:105; Prov 30:5, 6; Isa 8:20; John 17:17; Acts 17:11; 2 Thess 3:14; Heb 4:12). Scripture thus provides the framework, the divine perspective, the foundational principles, for every branch of knowledge and experience. All additional knowledge and experience, or revelation, must build upon and remain faithful to, the all-sufficient foundation of Scripture.

Seventh-day Adventists maintain the rallying cry of the Reformation—*sola Scriptura*, “By Scripture alone,” the Bible and the Bible only as the final norm for truth. All other sources of knowledge and experience, all other authorities, including ecclesiastical authority, must be tested by this unerring standard. The appropriate human response must be one of total surrender to the ultimate authority of the word of God (Isa 66:2). Ellen White states this principle succinctly:

But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority--not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Reformation rallying cry *sola Scriptura* should be translated as “by Scripture alone” (ablative), not just “Scripture alone” (nominative), in parallel with the two other Reformation slogans, *sola fide* (“by faith alone”) and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”).

<sup>2</sup>*Great Controversy*, 595.

## II. The Church as the Repository of the Oracles of God

In NT times Paul speaks of the Jewish people of his day as those to whom were “committed the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2), i.e., the OT. For the apostolic church the “Scriptures” or “oracles of God” included the OT (see Luke 24:17, 32, 44–45; Rom 1:2; 3:2; 2 Pet 1:21; etc.), and also the writings which became known as the NT. Paul’s use of the word “scripture” (*graphē*, “writing”) in his first epistle to Timothy (5:18) points in this direction. He introduces two quotations with the words “Scripture says,” one from Deut 25:4 in the OT, and one from the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7. The word “scripture” thus is used simultaneously and synonymously to refer to both the OT and the gospel accounts in the technical sense of “inspired, sacred, authoritative writings.”

Numerous passages in the gospels assert their truthfulness and authority on the same level as the OT Scriptures (e.g., John 1:1–3 paralleling Gen 1:1; John 14:26; 16:13; 19:35; 21:24; Luke 1:2–4; Matthew 1 paralleling Genesis 5; Matt 23:34). Peter’s use of the term “scriptures” for Paul’s writings supports this conclusion (2 Pet 3:15, 16): “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” By comparing Paul’s letters to the “*other* Scriptures,” Peter implies that Paul’s correspondence is part of Scripture.

The NT is the apostolic witness to Jesus and to His fulfillment of the OT types and prophecies. Jesus promised the twelve apostles to send the Holy Spirit to bring to their remembrance the things He had said (John 14:26). Paul states that “the mystery of Christ” was “revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph 3:4–5). The twelve apostles held a

unique, unrepeatable position in history (Eph 2:20) as bearing witness of direct contact with the humanity of Christ (Luke 1:2; Gal 1:11–17; 2 Pet 1:16; 1 John 1:1–4). This certainly validates the apostolic writings by the apostles like Peter, John, and Matthew. Paul also was called to be an apostle (see Rom 1:1, 1 Cor 1:1, and the greetings in the other Pauline epistles), and he indicates that his writings are given under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and have full apostolic authority (1 Cor 7:40; 12:13; 14:37; 2 Cor 3:5–6; 4:13; Gal 1:11–12; 1 Thess 5:27; 2 Thess 3:6–15). Thus the NT embodies the witness of the apostles, either directly, or indirectly through their close associates Mark, Luke, James, and Jude (see Luke 1:1–3; Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37; 16:11; Col 4:10, 14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phm 24).

Therefore the OT and NT church served as the repository of the “oracles of God.”

Beyond NT times, the church’s responsibility as the “repository of the oracles of God” continues in its role to preserve the Word of God. As L. Berkhof states it:

By giving His Word to the Church, God constituted the Church the keeper of the precious deposit of the truth. While hostile forces are pitted against it and the power of error is everywhere apparent, the Church must see to it that the truth does not perish from the earth, that the inspired volume in which it is embodied be kept pure and handed on faithfully from generation to generation.<sup>3</sup>

The responsibility to preserve the Word involves not only fostering a sound interpretation of Scripture (an issue taken up below), but also ensuring that the Bible is made available for study by all people of the world in faithful and clear modern translations, and that the copies of Scripture are plentiful and affordable. Hence the valuable work of Bible societies in translating into all languages and disseminating the Bible world-wide.

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<sup>3</sup>L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1939), 595.

But the question naturally arises at this juncture, What constitutes the Bible? What forces/sources “authorized” the various biblical writings to become canonical? How was the church involved in the process?

### III. The Church and the Formation of the Biblical Canon

Adventists join other Protestants in affirming that the canonization of both OT and NT is not a product of the church or other human agencies, but of the Holy Spirit, and that the canonical books contain internal self-authenticating and self-validating qualities that were recognized as such by the community of faith.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the OT, Adventists, along with other Protestants, accept only 39 canonical books and not the so-called deutero-canonical books of the Apocrypha. The latter books, while containing some helpful historical information, were not written by inspired prophets, but came after the close of the OT prophetic period (ca. 400 B.C.).<sup>5</sup> Adventists accept a sixth-century date for the writing of Daniel (in harmony with the internal claims of the book), and place the canonization of the OT in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (ca. 400 B.C.), both of whom as prophets played a role in popularizing and affirming the canonized books among the Jewish

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<sup>4</sup>See, especially, Gerhard F. Hasel, “Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5, no. 1 (1994): 68–105.

<sup>5</sup>For further discussion of additional reasons why Protestants (including Adventists) do not accept the canonicity of the Apocrypha, see, e.g., Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 157–175; Hasel, 74–75.

people (Ezra 7:10; Neh 8:2–8). Jesus Himself recognized the three-part Hebrew canon (Luke 24:44), which was later reaffirmed at the Council of Jamnia (ca. 90 A.D.).<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the NT, we have already noted above the apostolic witness inherent in all of these writings—all written by an inspired apostle or an apostle’s direct disciple who was an inspired eyewitness—and thus the canon of the NT was closed by the end of the first century when the last inspired apostolic document had been written. Such inspired apostolicity/canonicity was eventually recognized by the NT covenant community. The church “came to recognize, accept, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church.”<sup>7</sup> In sum, the church did not *determine* the Canon, but *discovered* it, did not *regulate* the canon, but *recognized* it; the church is not the *mother* of the canon, but the *child* of the Canon, not its *magistrate*, but its *minister*, not its *judge*, but its *witness*, not its *master*, but its *servant*.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. The New Testament Church’s Interpretation of the Old Testament

The NT provides numerous examples where Jesus and the apostles interpreted OT Scripture. Elsewhere I have examined the claim that Jesus and the NT writers often took OT passages out of context, reinterpreted, and reapplied them in light of the Christ-event, and thus

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<sup>6</sup>For discussion of the new scholarly consensus that rejects the older theory that the OT canon was not fixed till the Council of Jamnia, see Hasel, 90–96; and Jack P. Lewis, “Jamnia Revisited,” in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 146–162.

<sup>7</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 287.

<sup>8</sup>Adapted from Geisler and MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, 173.



imposed a NT meaning upon the OT that was foreign to the original meaning. After examining the major examples of NT citations of OT passages where it has been claimed that the NT has not remained faithful to the OT meaning in its original context, I have joined other biblical scholars who have concluded that the NT writers did not take OT Scriptures out of context in their citations, did not read back into the OT what was not originally there, but rather consistently remained faithful to the OT intention, and consistently engaged in solid exegesis of the OT passages using sound hermeneutical principles.<sup>9</sup>

But the focus of this presentation is not upon the individual NT interpreters, but rather upon the church as a whole in its interpretation of Scripture. A crucial case study is found with regard to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. Here is an apostolic model of the exercise of ecclesiastical authority within the church at large: representatives of the various local churches (v. 3) met in a general assembly under the direction of church leaders (“the apostles and elders”; vv. 2, 6) to consider a matter of vital significance for the world church (vv. 5–6). Here is a model that gives biblical justification for Ellen White’s statement regarding the authority of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in general session: “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.”<sup>10</sup> The authority of the General Conference in session will be discussed further below.

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<sup>9</sup>For further discussion and examples of other scholars who have come to a similar conclusion, see, e.g., Richard M. Davidson, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5, no. 1 (1994): 14–39.

<sup>10</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 9, 260.

It has sometimes been claimed that Acts 15 provides a model of ecclesiastical authority in which the church, empowered in the freedom of the Spirit, is able to reach back into the OT witness, and select those portions of the OT that are still relevant to the current situation, and with that same authority of the Spirit also move beyond other portions of the OT that are no longer applicable, and even add new stipulations not contained in the OT.<sup>11</sup> In other words, it is suggested that the NT church, and by implication, the church today, has authority to determine the best path to unity by rejecting some OT instructions and adding new ones as it sees fit under the sanctified guidance of the Spirit.

Such a position, however, does not square with the data of Acts 15. It is true that the Jerusalem Council did allow for vigorous debate (v. 7) on the issues that were faced. The basic issues were: should Gentiles become Jews in order to become Christians, and what Jewish practices beyond the moral law of the Ten Commandments were to be required for these Gentiles who became Christians. There were spirited testimonies given by the parties involved (vv. 7–12). But the basic deciding factor, in the end, was the authoritative testimony of Scripture. James' concluding statement was in essence based upon an exegesis of crucial OT passages. In Amos 9:11–12 he found the answer to the issue of whether Gentiles had to become Jews to become Christians: they did not.

And in Lev 17–18 he found the biblical basis for deciding which laws of the Jewish ceremonial law applied to Gentiles. Acts 15 lists four prohibitions for Gentile Christians given by the Jerusalem Council: “that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things

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<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1991), 147–150.

strangled [i.e., with the blood coagulated and not drained away],<sup>12</sup> and from sexual immorality [*porneia*]” (v. 29). Particularly striking is that this is the same list, *in the same order*, as the four major legal prohibitions explicitly stated to be applicable to the stranger/alien as well as to native Israelites in Lev 17–18. In these OT chapters we find (1) sacrificing to demons/idols (Lev 17:7–9); (2) eating blood (Lev 17:10–12); (3) eating anything that has not been immediately drained of its blood (Lev 17:13–16); and (4) various illicit sexual practices (Lev 18).

In this clear case of intertextuality, the Jerusalem Council undoubtedly concluded that the practices forbidden to the alien in Lev 17–18 were what should be prohibited to Gentile Christians in the church. The parallel of the fourth prohibition in each passage is unambiguous: what Acts 15 labels *porneia* are those illicit sexual activities included in Lev 18. These activities may be summarized in general as illicit sexual intercourse—including incest, adultery, homosexual practices, and bestiality. Various scholars have recognized this intertextual connection.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>The Greek adjective *pniktos*, usually translated “strangled” or “choked,” actually refers precisely to the situation described in Lev 17:13–16. H. Bietenhard, “πνικτός,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975–1985), 1:226, explains: “The command [of Acts 15:20, 29] goes back to Lev. 17:13 f. and Deut. 12:16, 23. An animal should be so slaughtered that its blood, in which is its life, should be allowed to pour out. If the animal is killed in any other way, it has been ‘strangled.’” Even more clearly in his article on πνιγω in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 6:457: “The regulations in Lv. 17:13 f. and Dt. 12:16, 23 lay down that an animal should be slaughtered in such a way that all the blood drains from the carcass. If it is put to death in any other way, it ‘chokes,’ since the life seated in the blood remains in the body.”

<sup>13</sup>For further support for this position on the parallel of Acts 15 and Lev 17–18 and the meaning of *porneia*, see especially H. Reisser, “*porneuō*,” in *NIDNTT* (1975), 1:497–501; and F. Hauck and S. Schulz, “πόρνη, πόρνς, πόρνεία, πόρνεύω, έκπορνεύω,” *TDNT*, 6:579–595. This is in opposition to those who equate the *porneia* of Acts 15 only with the incestuous relationships of Lev 18:6–18. This view fails to recognize that the entire chapter of Lev 18 is a unit describing

The correlation between Acts 15 and Lev 17–18 seems to provide a solid foundation for determining what the early church understood should be required of the Gentiles who became Christians. What was required of the Gentile “strangers” in the OT was still required of them in the NT. Scripture ultimately provided the basis for the church’s decision regarding appropriate practice.

Some claim that this decision on the part of the Jerusalem Council was only advisory, not binding, inasmuch as Paul is seen to consider its ruling as a nonissue in his dealings with food offered to idols (1 Cor 10:19–33).<sup>14</sup> But again, such readings overlook both the wider NT data and the OT basis for the Jerusalem Council’s ruling. According to Acts 16:4, in Paul’s journeys after the Jerusalem Council, he and Silas upheld the rulings of the Council and considered them binding upon the churches: “Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.”

Paul did not change his basic position in his counsel to the Corinthians. Rather, he recognized that the OT basis for not eating food offered to idols was found in Lev 17:7–9, which prohibits the sacrificing of food to demons/idols. Paul understood the intent of this OT passage that formed the basis of the Jerusalem Council prohibition, and thus correctly upheld the prohibition against offering food to idols/demons (1 Cor 10:20–21). At the same time he

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the various illicit sexual activities carried out by the Canaanites (see the inclusio in vv. 3 and 30). Defenders of this latter view include Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 197–226; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Marriage Covenant: A Biblical Study on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1991), 182–189; and others.

<sup>14</sup>See, e.g., Thompson, *Inspiration*, 150.

recognized that if a Gentile Christian was not himself offering food to idols, he would not be going against the OT prohibition and hence, against the Jerusalem Council ruling based upon that OT prohibition, if he ate food that, unknown to him, someone else had offered to an idol (vv. 25–29).

Acts 15 reveals that the church, in its assembly of representative members, may indeed speak not merely in an advisory capacity, but with binding authority upon the whole church, as that authority is based upon the authority of the written Word.

#### **V. Church Statements of Fundamental Beliefs in Relation to the Authority of Scripture**

The basic SDA understanding of the relationship between its Statement of Fundamental Beliefs and Scripture is set forth in the Preamble to the “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists”:

Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.<sup>15</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists recognize that church creeds even among Protestant churches often function in effect like tradition in the Roman Catholic church to place the authority of the church over that of the Bible. Ellen White warned of this:

Though the Reformation gave the Scriptures to all, yet the self-same principle which was maintained by Rome prevents multitudes in Protestant churches from searching the Bible for themselves. They are taught to accept its teachings as interpreted by the church; and

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<sup>15</sup>*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2006), 5.

there are thousands who dare receive nothing, however plainly revealed in Scripture, that is contrary to their creed or the established teaching of their church.<sup>16</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs represents the church's current consensus on biblical truth, the "corporate faith-consciousness" based solely upon Scripture. This statement reflects an on-going relationship of the church with Scripture, in which the Scripture is given final authority in any future expression of the church's fundamental beliefs. As Kwabena Donkor puts it, "Not only does the church see its statement of fundamental beliefs as grounded in the Bible, but it explicitly and purposefully subordinates the statement of beliefs to the Bible by giving the Bible magisterial oversight on its future expressions."<sup>17</sup>

The statement of beliefs expresses the Seventh-day Adventist community's concern for hermeneutics. Donkor points out that "By putting out a statement of beliefs, the community is declaring that 'this is the way we read Scripture'; 'we are not indifferent to any reading of Scripture.' Furthermore," Donkor argues, "the statement of beliefs, as a *system* of beliefs, becomes collectively the principle or framework of interpretation for the community in organizing the disparate data of Scripture. . . . In this way, the statement not only declares the interpretational stance of the community of the past, but provides a guide for present interpretational efforts."<sup>18</sup>

At first glance it may seem contradictory to maintain the Bible as the only creed and at the same time maintain a statement of fundamental beliefs. But as Donkor puts it, "the Seventh-

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<sup>16</sup>*Great Controversy*, 596.

<sup>17</sup>Kwabena Donkor, "The Role of the Statement of Beliefs and Creeds," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16, nos. 1–2 (2005): 99.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

day Adventist Statement of Fundamental Beliefs does not in any way take away from the authority or supremacy of the Bible. Rather, the fact that the church has taken a definite stand on certain *biblical* fundamental beliefs reflects its responsible commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle and its continuing trust in the Bible as the inspired Word of God.”<sup>19</sup>

The statement of fundamental beliefs is authoritative to the extent that the statement accurately presents the message of Scripture. The statement is regarded as authoritative because the community of faith sees it as representing a Spirit-directed consensus, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the Spirit would guide into all truth (John 16:13). At the same time the statement constitutes a derived authority, a *norma normata*, a “rule that is ruled,” and a rule that is open to further modification as the Spirit leads into deeper understanding of truth.

The statement of fundamental beliefs differs from a creed in this last important principle: the possibility (even probability) of change over time. Donkor gives this apt definition of a statement of beliefs: “*a faith community’s Spirit-directed consensus on the truth at any one time, based on its interpretation of inspired Scripture, which then defines the community’s identity and mission.*”<sup>20</sup>

The SDA statement of beliefs, while always provisional, and derivative in authority, under the Word of God, nonetheless is to be accepted as authoritative for God’s people. It was voted by the General Conference in session, which follows the model of Acts 15 in setting forth the interpretation of Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 104.

Following the pattern established in Acts 15, the Seventh-day Adventist church assigns its highest authority, under the Word of God, to the General Conference in session. In 1877 the General Conference session took the following action:

*Resolved*, that the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference when acting within its proper jurisdiction; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience.<sup>21</sup>

Ellen White discusses the authority of the General Conference in session, in the following counsel written in 1909:

I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other one man. Never should the mind of one man or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work and to say what plans shall be followed. But when, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body.

At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God's work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.

When this power, which God has placed in the church, is accredited wholly to one man, and he is invested with the authority to be judgment for other minds, then the true Bible

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<sup>21</sup>*Review and Herald*, vol. 50, no. 14, 106.



order is changed. Satan's efforts upon such a man's mind would be most subtle and sometimes well-nigh overpowering, for the enemy would hope that through his mind he could affect many others. Let us give to the highest organized authority in the church that which we are prone to give to one man or a small group of men.<sup>22</sup>

The *Church Manual* summarizes the nature and extent of the authority of the General

Conference in session:

The General Conference in session, and the Executive Committee between sessions, is the highest organization in the administration of the church's worldwide work, and is authorized by its constitution to create subordinate organizations to promote specific interests in various sections of the world; it is therefore understood that all subordinate organizations and institutions throughout the world will recognize the General Conference as the highest authority, under God, among Seventh-day Adventists. When differences arise in or between organizations and institutions, appeal to the next higher organization is proper until it reaches the General Conference in session, or the Executive Committee at the Annual Council. During the interim between these sessions the Executive Committee shall constitute the body of final authority on all questions where a difference of viewpoint may develop. The committee's decision may be reviewed at a session of the General Conference or at an Annual Council of the Executive Committee.<sup>23</sup>

As we already noted, the authority of the church, exercised by the assembled General Conference in session, in voting a statement of fundamental beliefs, as in other decisions, is a derived authority, always under the authority of Jesus Christ expressed in the truths of Scripture.

We will see in the next section of this paper that the church's statement of beliefs, voted at a General Conference in session, does not nullify the responsibility and privilege of individual interpretation of Scripture to determine one's personal duty to God.

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<sup>22</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 9, 260, 261.

<sup>23</sup>*SDA Church Manual*, 27.

## VI. Individual vs. Corporate Interpretation and Application of Scripture

In contrast to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, in which Christ and the Spirit mystically indwell in the church and therefore the church has the authority to state what is the true meaning of Scripture, the biblical principle is that the Bible is perspicuous and does not require any human ecclesiological magisterium to pronounce its meaning. The biblical testimony encourages the readers to study the Bible for themselves in order to understand God's message to them (e.g., Deut 30:11–14; Luke 1:3,4; John 20:30–31; Acts 17:11; Rom 10:17; Rev 1:3).

Likewise, Ellen White continually encourages personal searching of the Scriptures. For example, she writes: “The one book that is essential for all to study is the Bible. Studied with reverence and godly fear, it is the greatest of all educators. Its pages are filled with truth. Would you gain a knowledge of God and of Christ, whom the Father sent into the world to live and die for sinners? An earnest, diligent study of the Bible is necessary in order to gain this knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Again, White urges:

Let every one who has been blessed with reasoning faculties take up the Bible and search its pages, that he may understand the will of God concerning him. In this Book divine instruction is given to all. The Bible is addressed to every one--to every class of society, to those of every clime and age. Every one should read the Bible for himself. Do not depend on the minister to read it for you. The Bible is God's Word to you. And Christ has made this Word so plain that in reading it, no one need misunderstand.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>*Signs of the Times*, 21 March 1906, par. 1.

<sup>25</sup>*Signs of the Times*, 11 July 1906, par. 6.

White warns individuals not to allow any other source of authority to take precedence over a plain “thus saith the Lord.” We have already noted Ellen White’s counsel regarding the finality of the Bible over all other sources of authority:

But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.<sup>26</sup>

While the Bible and Ellen White’s counsel underscores the importance of individual study of Scripture, there is also the need to recognize the validity of corporate unity and harmony in the interpretation of Scripture. The Bible calls the church to come into “the unity of the faith” (Eph 4:13). Ellen White writes:

God is leading a people out from the world upon the exalted platform of eternal truth, the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. He will discipline and fit up His people. They will not be at variance, one believing one thing and another having faith and views entirely opposite, each moving independently of the body. Through the diversity of the gifts and governments that He has placed in the church, they will all come to the unity of the faith. If one man takes his views of Bible truth without regard to the opinion of his brethren, and justifies his course, alleging that he has a right to his own peculiar views, and then presses them upon others, how can he be fulfilling the prayer of Christ? And if another and still another arises, each asserting his right to believe and talk what he pleases without reference to the faith of the body, where will be that harmony which existed between Christ and His Father, and which Christ prayed might exist among His brethren?

Though we have an individual work and an individual responsibility before God, we are not to follow our own independent judgment, regardless of the opinions and feelings of our brethren; for this course would lead to disorder in the church. It is the duty of ministers to respect the judgment of their brethren; but their relations to one another, as well as the doctrines they teach, should be brought to the test of the law and the testimony; then, if hearts are teachable, there will be no divisions among us. Some are

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<sup>26</sup>*Great Controversy*, 595.

inclined to be disorderly, and are drifting away from the great landmarks of the faith; but God is moving upon His ministers to be one in doctrine and in spirit.<sup>27</sup>

In the interface between the church and Scripture, the biblically-based tension must be maintained between an individual Christian's right and responsibility to stand alone before the Word (if necessary even in the face of established doctrine, as did Martin Luther and William Miller), and his/her loyal and submissive stance with regard to church authority.

There are areas of Christian doctrine which the SDA Church is still vigorously discussing and has not yet taken an official stand (such as the precise makeup of the human nature of Christ, or whether the inorganic "raw materials" of this earth were created by God before or during the six-day creation week), and ongoing study and dialogue in these areas is enriching to the church. In fact, in all areas of doctrine there is ongoing need for deepening our understanding of the Word, ever sinking the shaft deeper in the mine of Truth.

At the same time, there is also need for a "corporate faith-consciousness," as described above in the section on statements of fundamental beliefs, a corporate consensus on the truth that defines the community's identity and mission. The body of Christ must take a definite and unified stand in interpreting the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The Bible and the Bible alone must always be the basis of church unity. The importance of corporate unity in interpreting Scripture is especially evident when faced with those who claim to have discovered "new light," an issue to which we turn next.

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<sup>27</sup>*Testimonies to Ministers*, 29–30.

## VII. Church Authority and Procedure for Dealing with “New Light” and with Heresies

Both the Bible and Ellen White encourage the ongoing searching of the Scriptures, which searching into the mine of truth will ever bring forth fresh and new insights. Ellen White writes: “The earth itself is not so interlaced with golden veins and filled with precious things as is the word of God.”<sup>28</sup> “We have seen only the glimmering of divine glory and of the infinitude of knowledge and wisdom; we have, as it were, been working on the surface of the mine, when rich golden ore is beneath the surface, to reward the one who will dig for it. The shaft must be sunk deeper and yet deeper in the mine, and the result will be glorious treasure. Through a correct faith, divine knowledge will become human knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

Again, White emphasizes that “New light will ever be revealed on the word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed. The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the word of God. Many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God.”<sup>30</sup>

However, at times individuals who study Scripture discover what they consider “new light” that is contrary to the established positions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The *Church Manual*, building upon biblical principles, urges that those who think they have discovered “new light” contrary to established doctrinal or procedural SDA positions, seek counsel from responsible leaders.

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<sup>28</sup>*Christ's Object Lessons*, 104.

<sup>29</sup>*Christ's Object Lessons*, 113.

<sup>30</sup>*Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 34.

Three times in Proverbs the principle is stated: “In the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov 24:6; cf. 11:14; 15:22). Ellen White elaborates: “There are a thousand temptations in disguise prepared for those who have the light of truth; and the only safety for any of us is in receiving no new doctrine, no new interpretation of the Scriptures, without first submitting it to brethren of experience. Lay it before them in a humble, teachable spirit, with earnest prayer; and if they see no light in it, yield to their judgment; for ‘in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.’”<sup>31</sup>

We have already seen above how this plan was followed in the early church: when a difference of opinion arose over an important issue, the believers sent representatives to Jerusalem, and the question was submitted to those assembled, under the leadership of the apostles and elders, for consideration. The decision of this council was accepted by the believers in Antioch, and thus unity was preserved in the church.

This counsel and paradigm from inspired sources must not be seen as deterring one from diligent study of the Scriptures, but instead as a protection against the introduction of false theories and doctrines into the church. God desires that individuals search the Word for gems of truth, but does not wish any to be led astray by erroneous teachings.

That which is truly new light from God’s Word does not make void the old. Instead it harmonizes with the old, causing it to shine brighter with greater luster. As the inspired wise man puts it, “the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day” (Prov 4:18).

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<sup>31</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 5, 293.

While the individual interpreter of Scripture must be ready to accept the progressive understanding of the Word, such understanding will not contradict previous light. This position is supported by the fundamental biblical principle of testing claims to new light Isa 8:20: “To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” Although this principle speaks primarily to testing claims of competing sources of authority, it also implies that later light will not contradict previous light. The special light that God has given the Seventh-day Adventist church in its formative years of hammering out the system of truth with its distinctive foundational doctrines (the “old landmarks”) will not be overthrown by further explorations of the Word.

Ellen White gives the following warning:

We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. They gather together a mass of Scripture, and pile it as proof around their asserted theories. This has been done over and over again during the past fifty years. And while the Scriptures are God's word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar from the foundation that God has sustained these fifty years, is a great mistake. He who makes such an application knows not the wonderful demonstration of the Holy Spirit that gave power and force to the past messages that have come to the people of God.<sup>32</sup>

The church has various appropriate venues where those who have discovered potential “new light” may tentatively test these ideas in a spirit of loyalty and honest inquiry to receive biblically-based feedback. These venues include, among others, private interviews with a pastor or teacher or colleague, informal discussion groups involving academic peers or papers presented to theological societies, correspondence with scholars in such church entities as the Biblical Research Institute or other academic institutions.

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<sup>32</sup>*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 32

The policies of the church allow for a process for those to follow who claim to have “new light,” to have their ideas examined by those of experience, beginning on the local (conference/institution) level, and then allowing for appeal to committees on the union and division levels.<sup>33</sup> During this process of investigation by the “multitude of counselors,” it is urged that the one claiming “new light” refrain from presenting publicly any questions that are not in full harmony with the views of the established body, in order to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). The church pulpit or class lecture room is not the place for a pastor or teacher to work through his/her questions regarding the teachings of the Bible, or promote new ideas that contradict the fundamental beliefs of the church.

Against those who seek to bring false doctrine into the church, and who will not accept the counsel of the “multitude of counselors,” the church has a corporate responsibility to protect the doctrinal purity of the church. In the Bible high priority is given to maintaining sound teaching and avoiding heresy (1 Tim 1:3; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 1 Cor 11:2; Gal 1:8). The church was charged by the apostles to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1) or, in Paul’s terms, to “test everything” and “to hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). The same is true in regard to the exercise of church discipline (Matt. 18:15–17), ranging all the way from private admonition (cf. Matt. 18:16; Gal. 6:1) to removal from church membership (Matt. 18:18; 1 Cor. 5:11, 13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11). The church as a corporate body has established specific biblically-based policies and procedures for dealing with church discipline, although in practice

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<sup>33</sup>See the voted document, “A Statement on Theological and Academic Freedom and Accountability,” and especially the section “Guidelines for Assessing Divergent Views,” accessible on the website of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists ([www.adventist.org](http://www.adventist.org)), under “Adventist Beliefs—Official Statements.”



there is considerable variation in their application since situations dealing with individual church discipline and/or membership status are ultimately handled by local congregations.

The church is given authority to deal with church discipline, based upon Bible principles:

The world's Redeemer has invested great power with His church. He states the rules to be applied in cases of trial with its members. After He has given explicit directions as to the course to be pursued, He says: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever [in church discipline] ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Thus even the heavenly authority ratifies the discipline of the church in regard to its members when the Bible rule has been followed.

The word of God does not give license for one man to set up his judgment in opposition to the judgment of the church, neither is he allowed to urge his opinions against the opinions of the church. If there were no church discipline and government, the church would go to fragments; it could not hold together as a body.<sup>34</sup>

The church is also given authority, under Scripture, to establish various working policies, an issue to which we now turn.

### **VIII. The Relation of Church Policies to Scripture**

The Bible gives basic direction that the church is to formulate plans so that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40). In the formative years of the Advent movement, Ellen White consistently urged the application of this biblical principle. In 1875 she wrote: "The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man's mind, one man's judgment, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 3, 428.

<sup>35</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 3, 445.

As indicated above, the General Conference in session, in its role as the “highest authority” on earth, under the Word of God, following the model of Acts 15, has authority to settle the conditions of membership and the rules governing the church. It has voted well-defined rules requisite to good order, derived from principles set forth in Scripture. The content of the various voted policies set forth in the *Church Manual* is “the expression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's understanding of Christian life and church governance and discipline based on biblical principles. It expresses the authority of a duly assembled General Conference session. ‘God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.’ *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 261.”<sup>36</sup>

These church policies, while representing the best thinking of the church, are not frozen in concrete. The 1946 General Conference Session voted that all “changes or revisions of policy” in the *Church Manual* shall be “authorized by the General Conference session,”<sup>37</sup> and in practice numerous such changes have been made at each succeeding General Conference session.

## **IX. Church Responsibility to Foster Sound Interpretation and Proclamation of Scripture**

In the OT church the institution of the priesthood was given the responsibility of teaching God's Word to the people (Lev 10:11; Deut 24:8; 33:10; Mal 2:7), instructing the people how to distinguish between the holy and the common and the unclean and the clean, and interpreting the law of God for individual case situations (Ezek 44:23–24; Deut 17:8–11). In the days of Samuel, special schools of the prophets were established, which “proved a great blessing

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<sup>36</sup>*SDA Church Manual*, 2.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

to Israel, promoting that righteousness which exalteth a nation, and furnishing it with men qualified to act, in the fear of God, as leaders and counselors. . . . The chief subjects of study were the law of God with the instructions given to Moses, sacred history, sacred music, and poetry. . . . Sanctified intellects brought forth from the treasure house of God things new and old.”<sup>38</sup>

In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Levites “read from the book, the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh 8:8). This involved both translation from Hebrew to the more familiar language of Aramaic and explanation of the meaning to the Jewish people recently returned from Babylonian Exile.

Jesus Himself indicated the need for biblical interpretation, in light of the misapprehension of truth in His day. After He had risen from the dead, Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and “interpreted [*diermēneuō*] to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Later that night He met with the rest of the disciples and “opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Jesus taught the first hermeneutics course to the early church! And the record of the sermons in the book of Acts give evidence of Jesus’ hermeneutical teaching being passed on by the apostles to the wider community of faith in Israel and beyond.

The NT witness is clear that the interpretation and application of Scripture is the task of the entire church, and not restricted to an elite cadre of biblical specialists (see Acts 17:11; Eph 3:18–19; 4:13–14; 5:10, 17). In the NT we find the example of Philip interpreting the meaning of Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30–31). The apostle Paul instructs Timothy to be sure

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<sup>38</sup>*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 96–97.

he is “rightly dividing” (KJV), “rightly handling” (RSV), or “handling accurately” (NASB) [*orthotomeō*, literally, “to cut straight”], the Word of God. In 2 Cor 2:17, Paul affirms that he is not like many who “adulterate” God's word. The Greek word here is *kapēleuō*, literally “to peddle,” alluding to the peddlers of the day who so often used such deceptive tricks that the term “peddle” came to signify “adulterate.” The presence of those who adulterate or corrupt the Word implies the need for careful interpretation and application on the part of church members and leaders alike.

Today, in our denominational schools, which should resemble more and more the ancient schools of the prophets,<sup>39</sup> a central focus must be “deeper investigation which involves the searching of the Scriptures.”<sup>40</sup> In all branches and disciplines of the educational curriculum, the foundational perspective and basic principles, must derive from, and build upon Scripture. I see need for regular symposia dealing with the Bible and Adventist scholarship, and other such venues, involving various academic disciplines to seek to recapture the vision of the biblical model, in a thorough-going and radical return to *sola Scriptura* in our educational endeavor as a denomination.

The church has a responsibility not only in the area of general formal education, to promote the proper interpretation of Scripture and the *sola Scriptura* principle in all of the academic disciplines. The church must take the lead in clarifying sound methods of biblical interpretation, in contrast to unbiblical methodologies. A landmark Bible Conference in 1974,

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<sup>39</sup>Ellen White writes: “All who are connected with the work of education must not follow the same, same, old methods. Our schools should be more after the order of the schools of the prophets” (Pamphlet 158, “Testimonies Relating to Emmanuel Missionary College,” 7).

<sup>40</sup>*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 98.

and publication of a basic book on hermeneutics in the same year,<sup>41</sup> both sponsored by the Biblical Research Institute, began this process in earnest. In 1986 the “Methods of Bible Study” document voted by the Annual Council gave impetus to this project.<sup>42</sup> The Biblical Research Institute is currently taking additional steps in the publication of two volumes on hermeneutics.<sup>43</sup> But much more is needed in providing abundant resources, as well as diverse venues (such as symposia and workshops), for the training of church members in the sound interpretation and application of Scripture.

There is special need for pastors to be thoroughly trained in the Bible-based principles of Scriptural interpretation and application. Ellen White issues numerous clarion calls for pastors to be trained to be powerful students and preachers of the Word. For example, she writes: “Of all men upon the face of the earth, those who are handling solemn truths for these perilous times should understand their Bibles and become acquainted with the evidences of our faith. Unless they possess a knowledge of the word of life they have no right to undertake to instruct others in the way to life. . . . Those who are ambassadors for Christ, who stand in His stead, beseeching souls to be reconciled to God, should be qualified to present our faith intelligently and be able to

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<sup>41</sup>Gordon M. Hyde, ed., *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1974).

<sup>42</sup>Published in the *Adventist Review*, 22 January 1987.

<sup>43</sup>The first volume is already published: George W. Reid, ed., *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Biblical Research Institute Studies 1; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006). The second is nearly completed: Gerhard Pfandl, ed., *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* (Biblical Research Institute Studies 2; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, forthcoming).

give the reasons of their hope with meekness and fear. Said Christ: ‘Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me.’”<sup>44</sup>

In many and varied ways, the organized church must make a more concerted effort to educate its leaders and entire membership in the sound methods of interpreting and applying Scripture.

#### **X. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Guiding the Church into Unity in Biblical Interpretation**

In modern hermeneutical approaches toward the Bible, both among conservative/evangelical and liberal/critical scholars, it is often assumed that the original intent of the Bible writer can be ascertained by the rigorous application of hermeneutical principles and exegetical tools, quite apart from any supernatural spiritual assistance. Thus non-Christians can determine the meaning of Scripture as well as Christians, if they use the tools and apply the principles correctly. This assumption is maintained in the laudable interest of upholding a degree of objectivity in interpreting the biblical text.

However, Scriptural data lead to a different conclusion. We note in particular, 1 Cor 2:11, 14: “For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. . . . The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

“Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.” Since the Bible is ultimately not the product of the human writer’s mind but of the mind of God revealed through the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:12–

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<sup>44</sup>*Testimonies*, vol. 2, 342–343.

13), it is not possible to separate “what it meant” to the human writer—to be studied without the aid of the Holy Spirit, from “what it means”—to be applied by the help of the Spirit. Both the original meaning and its present application involve the thoughts of God, which according to Paul can only be adequately comprehended if we have the aid of the Spirit of God (cf. John 6:45; 16:13; 1 Cor 2:13–14; 2 Cor 3:14–18).

Some have resisted letting the Spirit have a place in the hermeneutical spiral because it seems to them to allow the subjective element to overcome solid exegetical/hermeneutical research. It is true that “spiritual exegesis” *alone*—that is, an attempt to rely totally on the Spirit without conscientiously applying principles of exegesis and hermeneutics arising from Scripture—can lead to subjectivism.

But the proper combination of dependence upon the Spirit with rigorous exegesis based upon sound hermeneutical procedures, far from leading to subjectivity, constitutes the only way of escaping subjectivity. Modern scholars are increasingly more willing to recognize that all come to the Scripture with their own preunderstandings, presuppositions, biases. This cannot be remedied by approaching the text “scientifically” without a “faith bias.” In fact, since the Scriptures call for a response of faith, an attempted “neutral” stance is already at cross-currents with the intent of Scripture (cf. Matt 13:11–17; John 6:69; Acts 2:38).

Believing, Spirit-led interpreters also come with their own biases and preunderstandings and are not impervious to error (cf. Acts 11:15). But for Christians who believe the promises of Scripture, it is possible to ask God to transform their minds so that they increasingly adopt and incorporate the presuppositions of Scripture and not their own (see Rom 12:1). The Spirit of truth was promised to the disciples, and to us: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into

all the truth” (John 16:13). It must be noted that the “you” here is plural; the Spirit directs interpreters together in the fellowship of the church body (Ps 119:63; Acts 2:42; 4:32; Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:3–6), where they may be benefitted by exchange with and correction of other believers. The experience of Acts 15, and of the early Sabbath conferences in the Advent movement, where believers gathered together to wrestle with the weighty truths of Scripture, is needed in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

Interpreters within the church must make a collective decision that their pre-understandings will derive from and be under control of the Bible itself, and constantly be open for modification and enlargement on the basis of Scripture. They must consciously reject any external keys or systems to impose on Scripture from without, whether it be naturalistic (closed system of cause and effect without any room for the supernatural), evolutionary (the developmental axiom), humanistic (man the final norm), or relativistic (rejection of absolutes). They must ask the Spirit who inspired the Word to illuminate, shape, and modify their pre-understandings according to the Word, and to guard their understandings to remain faithful to the Word.

“Spiritual things are spiritually discerned” implies not only the need of the Spirit to aid in understanding, but also the spirituality of the interpreter. The Spirit not only illuminates the mind, but also must have transformed the interpreter’s heart. The approach of the interpreter, individually and corporately, must be that called for by Scripture, an attitude of consent or willingness to follow what Scripture says, if we are to understand Scripture’s meaning: “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (John 7:17).



There must be diligent, earnest prayer for understanding, corporate as well as private, after the example of David: “Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I will keep it to the end” (Ps 119:33; cf. vv. 34–40; Prov 2:3–7). There must be an acceptance by faith of what the prophets say (2 Chr 20:20; cf. John 5:46–47).

In sum, the Bible cannot be studied as any other book, coming merely “from below” with sharpened tools of exegesis and honed principles of interpretation. At every stage of the interpretive process, both by the individual interpreter and the corporate interpretation of the church body, the Book inspired by the Spirit can only be correctly understood “from above” by the illumination and transformation of the Spirit. God’s Word must be approached with reverence. Perhaps the best encapsulation of the interpreter’s appropriate stance, and of the collective attitude of the church, before Scripture, is recorded by Isaiah: “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who *trembles at my word*” (Isa 66:2 NRSV).

## **Conclusion**

This study represents an initial, exploratory, and tentative attempt to set forth the role of the church in the interpretation of Scripture. Further study and reflection is needed to flesh out these foundational concepts, providing concrete illustrations of how the relationship between church and Scripture actually works itself out in practice.