

Thinking Biblically and the Pastoral Ministry

Fernando Canale
Andrews University

1. *Doctrinal Illiteracy and a Weakened Sense of Identity*

In 1988 Neal C. Wilson recognized that “too many of our people are doctrinally illiterate, and as a result they have no firm convictions or commitment to this prophetic movement.”¹ In 2002 Jan Paulsen called attention to the risk that Adventists might lose their identity. Adventists are becoming more recognizable as “Christians” than as “Seventh-day Adventist Christians.”² We lose our identity “to our own destruction.”³

New generations of young adults are doctrinally and biblically illiterate and as a consequence they do not experience Adventism as a movement, much less as the end time remnant. For many, Adventism has become a place to worship. Yet some feel free to share the more lively “worship experience” of Charismatic and Evangelical meetings on Sunday mornings.

Doctrinal illiteracy leads to lack of identity. Yet, what leads to doctrinal illiteracy? Arguably, doctrinal illiteracy springs from various causes, among them pastors who do not feed the sheep in the deep things God reveals in Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy. As the Word of God does not nurture the mind of the believer, the patterns of the world and other religious communities with which they interact begin to shape their thinking patterns and contents.

2. *Destructive Dichotomy: Professing and Thinking*

The displacement of biblical thinking by secular and evangelical thinking produces a destructive dichotomy in the life of the church. On one hand, the church continues to *profess* to believe in Scripture and to base all its doctrines and practices on it. For instance, the church does not change her clearly biblical fundamental beliefs. On the other hand, as these statements generally remain external to the process of personal thinking, members and leaders in the church continue to *think* according to the patterns of the surrounding culture they had espoused before becoming Adventists. They “download” various philosophies and cultural preferences from what they study, read, or watch on television. As a result, the church is biblical in its external form and doctrines, but secular and charismatic in her way of thinking and lived experience. We are and do what we think (Prov 27:3; 24:3-4), not what we externally profess. Therefore, what the church thinks is what determines its ultimate destiny.

3. *The Changing Thinking in the Church*

In some sectors of the church new generations of Adventists are no longer attracted to Scripture. They do not attend Sabbath School nor are they passionate about knowing the God of Scripture. Sometimes led by pastors and teachers, they are passionate about a mystical Christ they reach through music and generic spirituality disconnected from their every-day choices and life style. Books written by popular evangelical writers replace the study of Scripture and the reading of Ellen White. I know Adventist pastors who are more passionate about the writings of C. S. Lewis than about Scripture. The mind of the church has become simultaneously secularized and charismatized. Increasingly, debated issues are no longer solved with a “thus says the Lord” but with the affirmation of cultural preferences.

Church members are becoming less committed to the doctrines and the mission of the church. They consider the claim that Adventism is the “remnant church” to be arrogant. As I interact with young people I discover that many do not understand what it means to be a Christian or a Seventh-day Adventist. The basic understanding of the Adventist faith was not explained to these individuals, neither before nor after baptism. Some of them want to change progressively the doctrines of the Church to make them fit with what they *think*. For instance, they would like to see the church recognizing the long ages of evolutionary theory. After all, doctrines are supposedly not important, what counts is our spiritual relation with Christ.

Thus, some sectors of Adventism have come to think according to patterns freely borrowed from contemporary culture and evangelical pastors. However, other sectors have continued to develop the Adventist revolution in theological thinking from Scripture. Parallel to the growth of doctrinal and biblical illiteracy, and the loss of identity as denomination, there has been a growth in biblical research.

4. *Changing the Thinking of the Church?*

As the thinking of certain sectors of the church is changing from biblical to secular and ecumenical, can we change it back to biblical patterns? I think we can. How should we do it? Obviously, by going back to the Bible--not only to study it, meditate on it, sing from it, memorize it, but primarily to *understand it*.

We need to bear in mind that *thinking* is not the mere gathering of information but the understanding of real life and human beings as they interrelate with us. Moreover, *thinking* and *understanding* does not end in unproductive theories, but bears fruits in practice. We do what we understand.

What the church must make sure is that all *theological thinking* leading to reforms in worship rituals, life style, missionary work, and in our fundamental beliefs come from a process of *thinking biblically*, from a process of understanding reality based on Scripture only.

5. *Does Thinking Matter?*

To change the thinking of the church one needs first to be convinced that such a change is necessary. Unfortunately, Adventists are convinced that thinking is not important. The need to have a church that thinks biblically may not have been the foremost priority for at least half a century. We have become content with the traditionally received conviction that we have the truth.

If understanding precedes action, to change actions we need to change understandings. Why are we not growing in some sectors of the church? Is it because we do not have the right methods of evangelism, worship, or music? Could it be that what hinders the mission of the church and disrupts its unity is the way in which groups within the Church think?

6. *Thinking in the "Light of Scripture" and the Identity of Adventism*

In the church to think is to do theology. In Adventism, "to do theology" is not to understand tradition and beliefs of the church or our own personal faith, but instead, to understand biblical revelation. This is the real basis for our identity as a people.

Yet, to "think biblically" does not mean just to read, study, or exegete the contents of Scripture, it also involves thinking "from" Scripture. Following the Roman Catholic tradition mainline Protestant and Evangelical churches read Scripture and built their doctrines working "from" the cultural thinking of the times. Adventism, by contrast, originated because our early pioneers interpreted Scripture from scriptural concepts and teachings. The fulfillment of prophecy led them to establish the doctrinal corpus of early Adventism. Ellen White explained that the subject of the sanctuary was the key that "opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious" (GC 423). Adventism springs, then, from a hermeneutical revolution through which the old Protestant principle of "sola scriptura" finally became operative. This unfinished revolution gives identity to Seventh-Day Adventism. However, by neglecting thinking in the light of Scripture today, Adventism finds itself facing widespread biblical and doctrinal illiteracy and experiences a weakened and self-destructive lack of identity.

7. *Renewing the Adventist Ministry by Helping the Church to "Think in the Light of Scripture"*

How should a complex organization like Adventism overcome biblical illiteracy and recover its sense of identity? Local pastors are in the best position to revert these trends. Clearly, all depends on the way in which Seventh Adventist pastors think. In short, there should be a renewal of the Adventist ministry. Adventist ministry should redefine itself by

centering on Scripture. Pastors should help the church to understand our contemporary world by thinking in the light of Scripture. This requires of pastors a deep understanding of Scripture.

Recent emphasis on the so-called “worship renewal” by itself may further intensify biblical and doctrinal illiteracy and the weakening of Adventist identity. Yet, when pastoral ministries renew churches in the light of Scripture, changes in liturgy will flow from a ministry and a community that consider everything in the light of Scripture and not from the patterns of the surrounding culture (Rom 12:2).

8. *Thinking Biblically and Salvation*

The biblical renewal of Adventist ministry is necessary not primarily to lower the rate of biblical and doctrinal illiteracy in the church or to increase the sense of identity in the community of faith. The need for renewing the ministry of the Adventist church by centering it on the process of thinking in the light of Scripture and using it as a guide in our daily lives is the salvation of souls.

Although the ultimate cause of salvation is faith in Christ and his substitutionary death at Calvary, the task of the pastor is to preach the word at all times and in all situations (2 Tim 4:1-5). Through the contents of the words of Scripture the Holy Spirit convicts sinners, God forgives sins, and Christ transforms the minds and actions of sinners after his likeness (1 Cor 2:6). Through a Scripture centered ministry believers should grow in the knowledge of the deep things of God and his kingdom (Heb 5:12-14), and attract the world to the awesome God of Scripture. Biblically speaking, a Christian thinking in the light of the world and its traditions is an oxymoron.

9. *The Power of God Is in the Word*

Finally, Adventist ministry should redefine itself as God’s instrument chosen to help the world and the church to understand God’s thoughts and acts revealed in Scripture, because the power of God is in the content of the words of Scripture. Ellen White put it in these words: “The life of God, which gives life to the world, is in His word. . . The whole Bible is a manifestation of Christ. It is our only source of power (GW 251).

Scripture teaches the same. “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12, NRSV). The contents of the words of God in Scripture have power, for instance, to save (John 6:63; Jas 1:21), to comfort and revive (Ps 119:50), to prevent sin (Ps 119:11), and to guide in the decision making process (Ps 119:105).

God unleashes the power of the Word through the lifelong process of thinking biblically. The pastoral ministry is one of the most important agencies that can stall, destroy, neglect, or intensify biblical thinking.

10. *Conclusion*

Pressure comes to pastors from all sides. Complexities of pastoral life allow the trivial to hide what is essential. Culture is changing. A generic spirituality condones almost all life styles. Few listen to the message of the church. From inside and outside the church, many voices suggest ways pastors may use to navigate the pluralistic world of postmodern society. They concentrate mainly in technology of mass communication, entertainment, and contemporary music in a context of traditional and charismatic Christianity. These trivialities have helped Christians to forget that the power of God is in Scripture.

Adventists may be tempted to go the way of general evangelical Christianity, and some actually do. However, this trend will only increase biblical illiteracy and the lack of identity in contemporary Adventism. It may divide the thinking of the Adventist community beyond repair.

Instead, Adventist pastors may choose to face the complexities of ministry not from the dictates of contemporary culture or evangelical tradition but from the dictates of eternal truth as revealed in Scripture. By realizing that the central responsibility of ministry is to help people to “think in the light of Scripture,” Adventist pastors will become truly ministers of the power of God. This trend will not only increase biblical literacy and develop a healthy sense of identity, but also unify the church in its message and mission.