

Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Proposal for Ground Rules

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Introduction

Doctrinal controversies are not unique to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Even when the denomination was in its infancy, church leaders had to deal with controversial issues.¹ The church continues to experience issues that threaten its unity. As a matter of fact, the history of Christianity shows that doctrinal and theological controversies characterize the growth and the experience of the Christian church.

Francis Wernick observes:

Division and disunity have marked the history of the Christian Church from at least the end of the first century While not immune from this danger of dissent, Seventh-day Adventists have been relatively free of serious discord, having a remarkable unity on Bible truth. But danger is always present as the enemy of the church seeks in every way possible to bring in variance and disagreement.²

¹Jerry Moon, "Lessons from the Adventist Pioneers in Dealing with Doctrinal Controversy," unpublished presentation to a symposium of the Adventist Theological Society, Andrews University, May 16, 1997. For a more recent treatment, see *idem*, Jerry Moon, "Sabbatarian Bible Conferences," in *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, forthcoming).

²Francis W. Wernick, "Leadership Role in Maintaining Unity," in *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, ed. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Affirm, 2005), 769.

Controversial issues have the potential of dividing the church. If the pioneers had to deal with controversial issues at that time, what more with the same church that now has a membership of about 17 million with various backgrounds. If the pioneers needed to be careful with the process of dealing with controversial issues then, we need to be more careful now. The ecclesiology of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still in its infancy theologically.³ There are a number of issues that directly relate to ecclesiology that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not yet settled biblically, theologically and doctrinally.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some ground rules for dealing with a potentially divisive theological issue, such as the theology of ordination. To achieve this it would be well to look at the history of doctrinal controversy, both at the beginning of the Christian Church and at the inception of the Adventist movement, and learn from the first Christian disciples and from our Adventist pioneers. We need to agree on the approach and attitude that ought to prevail in handling delicate subjects that have a potential of dividing the church. The church today can learn from the way that the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit guided the early church in dealing with doctrinal uncertainty (especially Luke 24 and Acts 1-2) and controversy (especially Acts 15), and we can be instructed from wrong and right approaches that the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church employed when, on more than one occasion, they dealt with controversial issues.

I. The Early Christian Church: Two Case Studies

A. The Way to Emmaus and the Upper Room (Luke 24, Acts 1–2)

³Very few Seventh-day Adventist theologians have written on ecclesiology. The Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference has felt this need, and a study on Ecclesiology is underway.

⁴On May 12, 1982 the Biblical Research Committee (a committee overseen by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists) took an action to embark on a series of studies on ecclesiology. Under this topic there is nothing on ordination. It is only recently (at the 2010 General Conference Session) that the BRI was mandated to give a careful study of the question of the theology of ordination.

The greatest doctrinal challenge to the early church came on resurrection Sunday. The hopes of the disciples had been dashed as Jesus, the One they had believed to be the Messiah and deliverer of Israel, had been crucified, apparently failing in His messianic mission. How did the resurrected Jesus lead His disciples through this crisis of uncertainty to a solid understanding and experience of truth regarding Himself, His mission, and the future mission of the disciples? At least seven crucial points in the narrative of Luke 24 and Acts 1–2 are instructive for us today in dealing with doctrinal issues.

1. The foundational authority of Scripture. As Jesus walked with the two disciples on the seven-mile-long road from Jerusalem to Emmaus that Resurrection Sunday afternoon, He could have simply revealed His wounds in His hands and side and feet; and upon recognizing Him, the disciples would have eagerly bowed and worshiped. But Jesus determined that their faith not be based primarily upon physical phenomena, but rather on the testimony of Scriptures. Only after they were convinced concerning the truth of the Messiah and His mission by the written Word, did Jesus disclose His identity by showing them the nail prints in His hands. At least six times in the narrative of Luke 24, Luke refers to the Scriptures as the foundational authority for the disciples' faith and understanding of Truth (Luke 24:25, 27, 32, 44, 45, 46). Any study of doctrinal issues today must likewise recognize the same foundation authority of Scripture.⁵

2. A solid biblical hermeneutic. Speaking to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus *interpreted* to them the things about Himself in all the scriptures” (Luke

⁵For an overview of Scripture's own testimony as to its full authority as the ultimate norm for doctrinal discussion, see, e.g., Peter M. van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12; ed. Raoul Dederen; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), 22–57; and idem, “The Authority of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (ed. George W. Reid; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 75–89.

24:27, NRSV). The word for “interpret” here is *dihermeneuo* (*dia* + *hermeneuo*), which is related to the English term “hermeneutics.” Jesus instructed His disciples in the basic principles of biblical hermeneutics during that seven-mile walk in the countryside. Later that evening as He appeared to the larger group of disciples in the upper room, again “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

Any study of unclear or controversial doctrinal issues, such as the question of ordination, must be built upon a faithful exposition of Scripture carried out according to solid hermeneutical principles arising from the biblical presuppositions of *sola* and *tota Scriptura*—the Bible alone, and in its entirety, as the ultimate foundation of truth.⁶

3. A Christocentric focus. Jesus’ only recorded words in His ambulatory teaching session with the two disciples focused upon His death and resurrection: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:25, 26). Luke records that Jesus “expounded to them in all the Scriptures *the things concerning Himself*” (vs. 27). Later that evening in the upper room He reiterated “that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms *concerning Me*. . . . Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ *to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day*” (vs. 44).

⁶These basic hermeneutical presuppositions are apparent in the narrative of Luke 24. Jesus’ grounding of truth was “by Scripture alone” (*sola Scriptura*), and He interpreted the things about Himself “in all the Scriptures” (*tota Scriptura*). For a summary of these and other hermeneutical principles arising from Scripture itself, see, e.g., Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12; ed. Raoul Dederen; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), 58–104; and Ekkehardt Müller, “Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (ed. George W. Reid; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 111–134.

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days later, the Holy Spirit was poured out, not as end in Himself, but as an earthly sign that Christ had been anointed as Priest-King in the heavenly inauguration ceremony (Acts 2:31–33). It was the recognition that they had a mediator in the heavenly sanctuary that gave the disciples boldness to fearlessly proclaim God’s Word.⁷

A Christocentric focus is vital to understanding truth. Ellen White affirms: “Jesus is the living center of everything.”⁸ “In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary.”⁹ “The correct understanding of the ministration [of Christ] in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”¹⁰

4. Unity of mind/purpose/impulse. Scripture states that when the 120 disciples met in the “upper room” after Jesus’ ascension, “These all continued with one accord [*homothymodon*] in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1:14). The Greek adverb *homothymodon*, often translated “with

⁷See Ellen White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 39: “The Pentecostal outpouring was Heaven’s communication that the Redeemer’s inauguration was accomplished. According to His promise He had sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to His followers as a token that He had, as priest and king, received all authority in heaven and on earth, and was the Anointed One over His people.”

⁸Ellen White, *Evangelism*, 186.

⁹Ellen White, *Gospel Workers*, 315.

¹⁰Ellen White, *Evangelism*, 221. For discussion of the Christocentric focus of all Scripture, and the importance of interpreting Scripture Christocentrically, see, e.g., Hans LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983), 4–9 and passim; and Richard M. Davidson, “Back to the Beginning: Genesis 1–3 and the Theological Center of Scripture,” in *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle* (ed. Daniel Heinz, Jiří Moskala, and Peter M. van Bemmelen; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2009), 5–29.

one accord,” refers to a condition of being “with one mind/purpose/impulse.”¹¹ Ellen White elaborates on the heart preparation of the disciples in relation to one another before Pentecost: “Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship.”¹² “They emptied from their hearts all bitterness, all estrangement, all differences; for this would have prevented their prayers being as one. And when they were emptied of self, Christ filled the vacancy.”¹³ Such a spirit is needed as much today as we come together to wrestle for an understanding of God’s Word in regard to unsettled theological issues with regard to ordination.

5. Earnest prayer and fasting. As cited above, the disciples in the upper room before Pentecost “all continued with one accord *in prayer and supplication*” (Acts 1:14). These seasons of prayer were accompanied with fasting,¹⁴ and involved humility of heart, true repentance and confession,¹⁵ deep “heart-searching and self-examination” and

¹¹Walter Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000, hereafter abbreviated as BDAG), s.v. ὁμοθυμαδόν.

¹²White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 37.

¹³Ellen White, *Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1898. Cf. idem, *Story of Redemption*, 246–7: “This testimony in regard to the establishment of the Christian church is given us not only as an important portion of sacred history but also as a lesson. All who profess the name of Christ should be waiting, watching, and praying with one heart. All differences should be put away, and unity and tender love one for another pervade the whole. Then our prayers may go up together to our heavenly Father with strong, earnest faith. Then we may wait with patience and hope the fulfillment of the promise. . . . The great and important matter with us is to be of one heart and mind, putting aside all envy and malice, and, as humble supplicants, to watch and wait. Jesus, our Representative and Head, is ready to do for us what He did for the praying, watching ones on the day of Pentecost.”

¹⁴White, *Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1898: “They were bidden not to leave Jerusalem till they had been endued with power from on high. They therefore remained in Jerusalem, fasting and praying.”

¹⁵White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 36: “As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief.”

consecration of their soul-temples,¹⁶ and earnest pleading to the Lord for the unction of the Spirit to be poured out upon them in fulfillment of Jesus' promise.¹⁷ Such seasons of prayer and fasting are just as necessary today on the part of those who are dealing with unsettled and controversial theological issues related to ordination.

6. The illumination of the Spirit to understand the truths of Scripture.

Before His death Christ had promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to guide them into truth: "when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost brought about the fulfillment of that promise. "Pentecost brought them [the disciples] the heavenly illumination. The truths which they could not understand while Christ was with them were now unfolded. With a faith and assurance that they had never before known, they accepted the teachings of the Sacred Word."¹⁸ That same illumination of truth by the Holy Spirit is available even more now in the time for the pouring out of the latter rain: "The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on

¹⁶White, *Evangelism*, 698: "After Christ's ascension, the disciples were gathered together in one place to make humble supplication to God. And after ten days of heart searching and self-examination, the way was prepared for the Holy Spirit to enter the cleansed, consecrated soul temples."

¹⁷White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 37: "Now, in obedience to the word of the Saviour, the disciples offered their supplications for this gift [of the Holy Spirit], and in heaven Christ added His intercession. He claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit, that He might pour it out upon *His people*." Ellen White summarizes this preparatory process in *Testimonies for Ministers*, 507: "It was by the confession and forsaking of sin, by earnest prayer and consecration of themselves to God, that the early disciples prepared for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The same work, only in greater degree, must be done now."

¹⁸White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 45–6. Cf. Ellen White, *SDA Bible Commentary*, 3:1152: "No man can have insight into the Word of God without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. If we will but come into the right position before God, His light will shine upon us in rich, clear rays. This was the experience of the early disciples. . . . [Acts 2:1–4 quoted.] God is willing to give us a similar blessing, when we seek for it as earnestly."

the day of Pentecost was the former rain, but the latter rain will be more abundant. . . . Christ is again to be revealed in His fullness by the Holy Spirit's power.”¹⁹

7. An evangelistic motivation—a passion for lost souls. On Resurrection Sunday, Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, not only to lead the disciples into all truth, but to give them power for witnessing for the Gospel in His name, “to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47–9). At the time of His ascension, He repeated His promise of the Holy Spirit for this same purpose: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The disciples in the upper room at the time of Pentecost “did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with a burden for the salvation of souls.” As the disciples “grasped the imparted gift” of the Spirit, “The sword of the Spirit, newly edged with power and bathed in the lightnings of heaven, cut its way through unbelief.”²⁰ In our day, as we seek for the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to deal with unsettled/controversial issues, such as the theology of ordination, this seeking needs to be carried out with an evangelistic purpose, to proclaim wonderful truth clearly and dynamically to a dying world. And this gift of power awaits our demand and reception: “Only to those who wait humbly upon God, who watch for His guidance and grace, is the Spirit given. The power of God awaits their demand and reception. This promised blessing, claimed by faith, brings all other blessings in its train. It is given according to the riches of the grace of Christ, and He is ready to supply every soul according to the capacity to

¹⁹Ellen White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 121. For discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture, see John Baldwin, “Faith, Reason, and the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (ed. George W. Reid; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 20–24.

²⁰White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 37–38.

receive.”²¹ God is ready to pour out such a gift to help us wrestle with weighty truths, if we are willing and ready to receive this precious gift!

B. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

The first Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15 has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies, with many different issues under discussion.²² Our focus in this paper is to look at this chapter as a crucial case study of the way the early church dealt with controversial doctrinal issues. Here is an apostolic model of appropriate steps for the church to take as it wrestles with doctrinal controversy and seeks divine guidance in understanding what is truth. The narrative in Acts 15 assumes the necessity of applying the various lessons set forth in connection with the disciples’ experience in the upper room as described in the previous section of this paper (Luke 24; Acts 1–2),²³ but depicts several additional practical steps taken by the early church in dealing with specific controversial doctrinal issues.

Acts 15:1–5 sets the stage for the Jerusalem Council, by describing the situation that had arisen in the early church with regard to the requirements for Gentiles when becoming Christians. Some Jewish Christians had come from Judea to Antioch, teaching that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

²¹Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, 672.

²²See, e.g., the bibliography in Joseph Fitzmeyer, *Acts of the Apostles* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 549–550, 559–560.

²³Throughout the book of Acts up to the time of the Jerusalem Council, there is continued mention of most of the elements discussed in the previous section of this paper: dependence upon the authority of Scripture, and illustrating the use of a Christocentric hermeneutic in the various sermons given by the apostles (see e.g., Acts 2:14–39; 3:11–26; 4:8–12; 7:1–53; 13:16–41) references to the unity of spirit among the disciples (Acts 2:1, 46; 4:24); earnest prayer and fasting (e.g., 2:42; 3:1; 4:24–31; 6:4, 6; 8:15; 9:40; 10:9; 12:5; 13:2–3; 14:23); dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit (the whole book of Acts of the Apostles may be better called “Acts of the Spirit”; the Spirit is mentioned some 45 times in the first 15 chapters of Acts); and a sustained evangelistic focus (see, e.g., Acts 2:38–39, 47; 3:19–20; 4:31; 5:14, 28–32; 8:4, 26–40; 9:31; 13:46–49; 14:1–28).

Luke reports that as a result of this teaching, “when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question” (v. 2). Coming to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas brought a report to the church and its leaders in Jerusalem of what God had done with them in the conversion of the Gentiles (v. 3–4), but “some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses’” (v. 5). In light of this background, we may summarize the basic issues facing the early church at the time of the Jerusalem Council as two-fold: (1) should Gentiles become Jews in order to become Christians? And (2) what Jewish practices beyond the moral law of the Ten Commandments were to be required for these Gentiles who became Christians? Ellen White puts her finger on the nub of the problem when she writes: “The Jewish converts generally were not inclined to move as rapidly as the providence of God opened the way. . . . They were slow to discern that all the sacrificial offerings had but prefigured the death of the Son of God, in which type met antitype, and after which the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic dispensation were no longer binding.”²⁴

The multi-faceted process of the Jerusalem Council in dealing with these issues may shed light on the way the Seventh-day Adventist church today should work through crucial theological issues.

1. An assembly of representative church leaders. In response to the disputed theological issue regarding the Gentiles’ relationship to the Jewish ceremonial law, “the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:7). This verse specifically mentions the “apostles and elders” who met together with Paul and Barnabas and responsible leaders sent from the church at Antioch, but v. 12 speaks of “all the multitude/assembly

²⁴White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 189.

[*plēthos*]” and v. 22 refers to “the apostles and elders, with the whole church.” Ellen White clarifies that this assembly involved “delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals.”²⁵ “At Jerusalem the delegates from Antioch met the brethren of the various churches, who had gathered for a general meeting. . . .”²⁶

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.”²⁷ At the same time, the basic principle of gathering representative leaders for a general assembly to deal with a theological issue also applies to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee and the regional Biblical Research Committees that are appointed to study the issue of ordination.

2. Frank and spirited discussion of the issues and clarifying presentations.

At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, there was much “dispute” (KJV, NKJV), “debate” (ESV, NASB), “discussion (NIV, NLT)” (v. 7). The Greek noun *zētēsis*, in the context of this verse, probably refers to “engagement in a controversial discussion, debate, argument,” but the term can also mean “a search for information, investigation” (as, e.g., in Acts 25:20).²⁸ Ellen White states that the basic question at issue “was warmly discussed in the assembly.”²⁹

²⁵Ibid., 190. The reference to “elders” in v. 6 has been interpreted by many to refer only to the local elders of the Jerusalem church, but it may also include local elders of the various Christian churches (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim 5:17; Tit 1:5).

²⁶Ibid., 191. Cf. *ibid.*, 196: “The council which decided this case was composed of apostles and teachers who had been prominent in raising up the Jewish and gentile Christian churches, with chosen delegates from various places. Elders from Jerusalem and deputies from Antioch were present, and the most influential churches were represented.”

²⁷Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9:260.

²⁸BDAG, s.v. ζήτησις.

²⁹White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 191.

Along with the spirited discussion/debate/argument/investigation, Peter gave a presentation of pertinent evidence from his own experience and theological perspective to the general assembly. He alluded to his own encounter with Cornelius (described in Acts 10) when God Himself had directed that Gentiles hear and accept the gospel from his preaching. Peter “argued that since God had established such a precedent within the Jewish Christian mission some ten years earlier—though it had not been recognized by the church as such—God has already indicated his approval of a direct Gentile outreach. Thus Paul’s approach to the Gentiles could not be branded as a deviation from the divine will.”³⁰ Peter asked the council members, “Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (v. 10).³¹ And he stated his theological conclusion: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [the Gentiles].” (v. 11)

A spirited discussion, earnest investigation and public presentations of evidence—wrestling together with issues of theological controversy—is altogether appropriate today in our appointed council sessions (TOSC and BRC’s), as it was in the Jerusalem Council.

3. Personal reports/testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s working. According to Acts 15:12, after Peter had given his presentation, “all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (ESV). An important part of the Jerusalem Council proceedings was to listen to reports detailing the miraculous workings of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles

³⁰Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 9 (John–Acts)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 445.

³¹Ellen White clarifies that this “yoke” “was not the law of Ten Commandments” but rather “the law of ceremonies, which was made null and void by the crucifixion of Christ” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 194).

through the labors of Barnabas and Paul.³² So in our dealing with doctrinal controversy today, in our TOSC and BRC sessions, it is appropriate to present reports and personal testimonies of the Holy Spirit's working through council members and others in relation to the issue under discussion.

However, the report of the Holy Spirit's work did not end the proceedings of the Jerusalem Council. The next step, often overlooked in most modern discussion of Acts 15, is perhaps the most crucial part of the process.

4. **Testing and verification by the witness of Scripture.** 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 Old Testament witness, and select those portions of the Old Testament that are still relevant to the current situation, and with that same authority of the Spirit also move beyond other portions of the Old Testament that are no longer applicable, and even add new stipulations not contained in the Old Testament. In other words, it is suggested that the New Testament church, and by implication, the church today, has authority to determine the best path to unity by rejecting some Old Testament 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. As we have seen, the Jerusalem Council did allow for vigorous debate on the issues that were faced; there was spirited discussion, in which various viewpoints were expressed. There were also personal testimonies given, sharing individual experiences in the way God had worked and led (vv. 7b–12). But the ultimate deciding factor, in the end, was the authoritative testimony of Scripture. James' concluding statement was in essence based upon an exegesis of crucial Old

³²For elaboration on the reports/testimonies of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, see White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 192–194.

Testament 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.³³

And in Lev 17–18 was found the biblical basis for deciding which laws of the Jewish ceremonial law applied to Gentiles. The intertextual linkage between Acts 15 and Lev 17–18 is not apparent on the surface, if one engages in a superficial reading of the Scripture. But as one looks more closely, the connection between the relevant Old Testament passages and the situation at hand in the Jerusalem Council becomes evident. 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 strangled [i.e., with the blood coagulated and not drained away],³⁴ and from sexual immorality [*porneia*]” (v. 29). One cannot fail to notice, upon close inspection, 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 Old Testament 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).

³³For discussion of how James’ interpretation is in harmony with the meaning of Amos 9:11–12 in its Old Testament context, see especially R. Reed Lessing, *Amos* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia, 2009), 575–578, 586–590.

³⁴The Greek adjective *pniktos*, usually translated “strangled” or “choked,” actually refers precisely to the situation described in Lev 17:13–16. See H. Bietenhard, “πνικτός,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (1975, hereafter *NIDNTT*), 1:226: “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.’” Cf. idem, “πνίγω, ἀποπνίγω, συμπνίγω, πνικτός,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968, hereafter *TDNT*), 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.”

Numerous scholars have recognized this intertextual connection.³⁵ In this clear case of intertextuality, the Jerusalem Council undoubtedly concluded that the practices forbidden to the uncircumcised stranger/alien in Lev 17–18 were what should be prohibited to uncircumcised Gentile Christians in the church. What was required of the Gentile “strangers” in the OT was still required of them in the NT.

Thus Scripture ultimately provided the basis for the church’s decision regarding appropriate practice. The various views and experiences expressed at the Council were tested by Scripture. Such an ultimate test by the Word of God is crucial for any contemporary proceedings dealing with controversial doctrinal issues, and certainly applies to the sessions of the TOSC and BRC’s as they study the theology of ordination.

5. **Emergence of a Spirit-led consensus.** As the study and application of Scripture proceeded, a consensus began to emerge under the guidance of the Spirit and the leadership of the apostles. This Spirit-led consensus is apparent from the wording of the Jerusalem Decree: “The apostles, the elders, and the brethren” (v. 23); “it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord” (v. 25); “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” (v. 29). Ellen White elaborates on the process at this stage of the Council’s proceedings, highlighting “the careful investigation of the subject” by those present: “James bore his testimony with decision—that God designed to bring in the Gentiles to enjoy all the privileges of the Jews. The Holy Ghost saw good not to impose the ceremonial law on the Gentile converts; and the apostles and elders, after careful investigation of the subject, saw

³⁵For scholarly concurrence and further discussion, see Richard M. Davidson, “Which Torah Laws Should Gentile Christians Obey? The Relationship Between Leviticus 17–18 and Acts 15” (A paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society 59th Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, 15 November 2007). Cf. H. Reisser, “πορνεύω,” *NIDNTT* (1975), 1:497–501; and F. Hauck and S. Schulz, “πόρνη, πόρνος, πορνεία, πορνεύω, ἐκπορνεύω,” *TDNT* (1968), 6:579–595.

the matter in the same light, and their mind was as the mind of the Spirit of God.”³⁶ White further describes the emerging of a consensus: “The council moved in accordance with the dictates of enlightened judgment, and with the dignity of a church established by the divine will. As a result of their deliberations they all saw that God Himself had answered the question at issue by bestowing upon the Gentiles the Holy Ghost; and they realized that it was their part to follow the guidance of the Spirit.”³⁷ The consensus was articulated by James, the brother of Jesus, who presided over the council (v. 19). Into such a consensus is what the Spirit longs to guide His church today as they deal with doctrinal controversy, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise (John 16:13). It must be recognized that at the first Jerusalem Council unity (consensus) did not mean uniformity (of practice). It appears that the consensus reached by the early church was not the conclusion that was expected as the process began, but came as a surprise to those involved as the Spirit led them to a deeper understanding of Scripture. The Spirit may well surprise us again!

6. **Formal decision and circulation of the council’s action.** The consensus reached by the council was formalized in writing (vv. 23–29), and circulated among the churches by delegated representatives (vv. 22, 30; 16:4). Ellen White makes clear that the decision on the issues discussed, once made by the council, “was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country.”³⁸ There was no need for a vote by the church membership at large: “The entire body of Christians was not called upon to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches.”³⁹ Though the decision of the council met with some resistance among Jewish Christians, “The

³⁶White, *Story of Redemption*, 307.

³⁷White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 196.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 190.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 196.

broad and far-reaching decisions of the general council brought confidence into the ranks of the Gentile believers, and the cause of God prospered.”⁴⁰ Such formal decision and public pronouncement of church action is applicable today in such venues as Annual Council and the General Conference in session.

7. **Universal authoritative status of the council’s decision.** Some claim that the decision on the part of the Jerusalem Council was only advisory, not binding, since, it is suggested, Paul considered its ruling as a nonissue in his dealings with food offered to idols (1 Cor 10:19–33). But again, such readings overlook both the wider NT data and the Old Testament 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 [Paul and Silas] 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 apparently recognized that the Old Testament 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 seems to have 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 recognized that a Gentile Christian not personally offering food to idols 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. 25–27). Within the overall parameters of the Jerusalem Council ruling, moreover, Paul allowed for a difference of practice based upon one’s individual conscience and the conscience of others (vv. 27–29).

⁴⁰Ibid., 197.

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.⁴¹ This chapter of Scripture also provides a paradigm for dealing with doctrinal controversy in the church, a paradigm that the Seventh-day Adventist church may well follow in facing contemporary controversial issues regarding doctrine and practice. The last two of these principles apply particularly to the Annual Council or the General Conference in session, but the rest also have relevance for the special division-wide conferences and other councils in their wrestling with and bringing to resolution current controversial doctrinal issues.

⁴¹Acts 15 is an illustration of the principle set forth by Jesus regarding the authority of the church, in Matt 16:19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” As the NASB correctly translates the perfect passive participle of the verbs for “bind” and “loose,” what the church decides is not independent and arbitrary, but its “binding” and “loosing” is dependent upon recognizing what already “has been bound” and “has been loosed” in heaven, as revealed in Scripture through the Spirit.

II. The Adventist Movement: Two Case Studies

A. Wrong Approach: The 1888 Bible Conference

The 1888 Bible conference exemplifies wrong attitudes toward dealing with doctrinal controversy in the church. The conference was convened on Wednesday, October 17. The delegation to the conference was composed of 90 people representing a church membership of 27,000. The conference agenda included progress reports concerning new mission fields, the distribution of labor, city evangelism, a new ship for the South Pacific (Pitcairn), and several others.⁴² About the 1888 Bible Conference Ellen G. White wrote:

We are impressed that this will be an important time among us as a people. It should be a period of earnestly seeking the Lord and humbling your hearts before him. I hope you will regard this as a most precious opportunity to pray and counsel together; and if the injunction of the apostle to esteem others better than ourselves is carefully heeded, you can in humility of mind, with the spirit of Christ, search the Scriptures carefully to see what is truth. The truth can lose nothing by close investigation. Let the word of God speak for itself; let it be its own interpreter, and the truth will shine like precious gems amid the rubbish.⁴³

Although many delegates came to attend the conference the names of Alonzo T. Jones and Elliot J. Waggoner stood out. They were close friends and both were editors for *Signs of the Times* in California.⁴⁴ Jones and Waggoner were at the center of the doctrinal controversy that arose during a ministerial workers' meeting, October 10-16 prior to the Minneapolis conference of October 17, 1888.

The issue that divided the ministerial group had to do with the interpretation of Galatians 3:24. The group of ministers sought to understand whether the law referred to in

⁴²Gerhard Pfandl, "Minneapolis, 1888: An Adventist Watershed," *Adventist World* [data base on-line]; available from <http://www.adventistworld.org/issue.php?issue=2010-1001&page=24>; accessed may 29, 2012.

⁴³Ellen G. White, *1888*, 196.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

the text meant the moral or ceremonial law.⁴⁵ On one hand, O.A. Johnson in an article published by the Review and Herald in 1886 had concluded that the law in Galatians is the ceremonial law. On the other hand he E.J. Waggoner published a series of nine articles in the *Signs*, in which he argued that the law in Galatians is the moral law.”⁴⁶

Waggoner became instrumental in the understanding and teaching of righteousness by faith. “Waggoner was asked to present a series of lectures on righteousness by faith. We do not know exactly what Waggoner said, because beginning only in 1891 were all Bible studies at General Conference sessions recorded, but from what he wrote before and after Minneapolis we know approximately what he taught.”⁴⁷ Gerhard Pfandl summarizes the main points: “(1) man’s obedience can never satisfy God’s law; (2) Christ’s imputed righteousness alone is the basis of our acceptance by God; and (3) we constantly need the covering of Christ’s righteousness, not just for our past sins.”⁴⁸

The hearers of Waggoner received his teaching differently. Some accepted, some rejected, and some were neutral. Among those who accepted the message were Ellen White, W.C. White, and S.N. Haskell. Among those who rejected the message were Uriah Smith, J.H. Morrison, and L.R. Conradi.⁴⁹ “Eventually most of those who opposed the message changed their attitude and accepted the message of righteousness by faith, though some left the church.”⁵⁰ After the Minneapolis session Ellen White collaborated with Jones and Waggoner in the proclamation of the message of righteousness by faith to the Adventist community of faith. Forums for presenting the messages included camp meetings, workers’

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Pfandl, *Adventist World*, January 2010, p. 25.

meetings, and Bible schools.⁵¹ Pfandl states, “Minneapolis 1888 was a turning point in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Through Waggoner and Jones, supported by Ellen White, the church was saved from an incomplete understanding of the gospel.”⁵²

The 1888 conference was characterized by a battle for supremacy instead of a humble and prayerful spirit. Ellen White called it “the hardest and most incomprehensible tug of war we have ever had among our people.”⁵³ Too many had a self-confident approach that was divorced from a rigorous study of the Bible and prayer. Prejudice prevailed and a spirit of debate permeated the discussions on Righteousness by Faith. Ellen White attempted to intervene in order to bring the members to a prayerful spirit and intense study of the Word. Her call for a change of approach seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.⁵⁴

The personal attitudes manifested during the 1888 conference in Minneapolis contributed to the church’s polarization at that time. It is well known that a mixture of issues and multiple misunderstandings characterized the 1888 General Conference session.⁵⁵ As a result, some of the believers left the church. Several aspects of the discussions contributed to the devastating results. Some of the participants manifested negative attitudes toward the Bible. Instead of approaching the Bible with reverence and awe, delegates were “caviling over” God’s Word and “sitting in judgment upon its teachings.”⁵⁶ Ellen White noted that “Some felt no need of prayer.”⁵⁷

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³White, *1888 Materials*, 182.

⁵⁴White, Ms 15, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 163-175.

⁵⁵George R. Knight lists four major points of controversy: the law in Galatians, a threatened national Sunday law, the debate over the ten kingdoms of Daniel 7:24, and an alleged “California conspiracy” among the delegates. *From 1888 to Apostasy: the Case of A. T. Jones* (Washington, DC; Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1987), 23-34.

⁵⁶White, MS 15, 1888, *1888 Materials*, 148-149).

⁵⁷White, MS 24, 1888, *1888 Materials*, 216.

At the root of these wrong attitudes was spiritual pride and self-confidence. General Conference President G. I. Butler expressed the collective self-confidence of the church when he declared, a few months before the conference, that “Seventh-day Adventists have never taken a stand upon Bible exegesis which they have been compelled to surrender.”⁵⁸ The participants of the conference were dedicated and yet divided. Consequently, the group Bible study that should have been a genuine search for truth became a partisan debate. The study had little to do with discovering the meaning of the Scriptures, but had much to do with sustaining personal presuppositions about them. The process for studying God’s Word was crippled by lack of prayer, focus on nonessentials, personal attacks, and a spirit of debate in which there was “constant danger of handling the Word of God deceitfully.”⁵⁹

Many of the delegates lacked spiritual intensity. There was much “jesting, joking, and casual talking, but little earnest prayer in the delegates’ private rooms.”⁶⁰ There was a tendency to avoid praying with those who held different opinions. Ellen White recalled that at Minneapolis she had “tried most earnestly to have all our ministering brethren who were rooming in the house meet in an unoccupied room and unite our prayers together, but did not succeed in this but two or three times. They chose to go to their rooms and have their conversation and prayers by themselves.”⁶¹

Waggoner’s presentations in Minneapolis were not followed by careful Bible study in a spirit of mutual respect and humble openness to new insights. Instead there was contentious debate, with misuse and distortion of Scripture to support personal preconceived positions.

⁵⁸ George I. Butler, circular letter to all state conference committees and our brethren in the ministry, [January 1888], quoted in Knight, *1888 to Apostasy*, 23.

⁵⁹ White, *1888 Materials*, 167, 216.

⁶⁰ White, *1888 Materials*, 45, 137, 142.

⁶¹ Manuscript 24, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 218.

This perversion of Bible study led to confusion, rejection of truth, and disregard or rejection of the Spirit of Prophecy.⁶²

In seeking to resolve the controversy in Minneapolis, Ellen White called for a change in their approach to Bible study. She insisted on a “fair hearing” for each presenter and a willingness, on the part of all, to carefully re-examine with humble prayer and teachable spirit, even old familiar Scriptures to see whether new insights might be found there. She maintained that the use of her own writings must not take the place of diligent, exhaustive Scripture study. After thorough Bible study had been done, there would be additional profit in the use of her writings. Ellen White insisted that her writings should not take the place of the Bible. Instead, they must be used to magnify God’s revealed will through the Bible. In other instances, her writings may be used to clarify biblical truth in the event that the church or individuals have thoroughly studied the Bible but cannot fully understand God’s will.⁶³

The attitudes that the pioneers manifested in the 1888 conference threatened the unity of the believers. The neglect to make a thorough, open-minded examination of Scripture was a major factor at Minneapolis. There was a widespread disregard of divine authority as expressed in God’s Word and the Spirit of Prophecy.⁶⁴ Richard Schwarz points out that while church leaders spent time and resources on theological debates, “the spiritual awakening faltered, wavered—and got sidetracked for a quarter of a century.”⁶⁵ When wrong attitudes and methods accompany the study of God’s Word spiritual revival and the mission of the church are threatened. The 1888 conference exemplifies wrong approaches in dealing with controversial issues in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The earlier conferences of

⁶² See, e.g., *1888 Materials*, 96, 334, 381, 414.

⁶³ White, *1888 Materials*, 145-146, 163-175.

⁶⁴ White, Ms 15, 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 161-167.

⁶⁵ Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 187. [In the first edition (1979), the same quotation appears on p. 195.]

the late 1840s and 1855 exemplify better approaches toward dealing with controversial issues in the church.

B. Better Approach: The Conferences of 1846-1848 and 1855

A significant element in the process of spreading early Sabbatarian Adventist doctrines was a series of Sabbatarian Bible conferences in the late 1840s.⁶⁶ Even before the first of these “Sabbatarian Bible Conferences,” small study groups had already laid the main doctrinal foundations. By January 1847 there was agreement among a small circle on the Second Coming, the Sabbath, the sanctuary, conditional immortality, the three angels’ messages of Rev 14, and the perpetuity of the gift of prophecy.⁶⁷ These doctrines were published in two small books, *Seventh-day Sabbath Vindicated*, by Joseph Bates (Jan. 1847);

⁶⁶Alberto Timm points out that while some older studies knew of only five Sabbatarian Bible conferences in 1848, there is now documentation of six “major” conferences and a smaller one (Bristol Conference) for a total of seven in 1848. Reference is made also to six conferences in 1849, and ten in 1850, for a total of 23 known Sabbatarian conferences. Timm, *Sanctuary and the Three Angels’ Messages*, 63. “Departing from the traditional idea that the 1848 conferences laid the foundations of the early sabbatarian doctrines, Gordon O. Martinborough suggested in 1976 that since those doctrines were already basically defined by 1847, the main purpose of the [1848-1850] conferences was the spreading of such doctrines.” Alberto R. Timm, *The Sanctuary and the Three Angels’ Messages, 1844-1863: Integrating Factors in the Development of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrines*, Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1995), 63. See also G. O. Martinborough, “Beginnings of the Theology of the Sabbath,” 122-251; G. R. Knight, *Anticipating the Advent*, 41-43; idem, *Millennial Fever*, 319-321.

⁶⁷ Jerry Moon, “Sabbatarian Bible Conferences,” in *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Review and Herald, forthcoming).

and *A Word to the "Little Flock,"* by James White, with portions by Ellen White and Joseph Bates (May 1847).⁶⁸

Following these publications, the founders determined to hold a series of conferences inviting other former Millerites to unite on this doctrinal platform.⁶⁹ This series of evangelistic conferences became known as the Sabbatarian Bible conferences. The first of these was held at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, United States of America, April 20-24, 1848, with about 50 in attendance.⁷⁰ James White called it "the first general meeting of the Seventh-day Adventists."⁷¹ A second, smaller meeting convened at Bristol, Connecticut, the weekend of June 24, 1848.⁷²

A third conference was held in Volney, New York, August 18-19. David Arnold, the host of the meeting, held that the millennium was in the past; that the 144,000 were those

⁶⁸Joseph Bates, *Seventh-day Sabbath: A Perpetual Sign*, 2nd ed. rev. and enl. (New Bedford, Mass.: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847); James White, *A Word to the "Little Flock,"* (James White: 1847).

⁶⁹Alberto Timm shows that the outreach program fostered by publications and Bible conferences was vitally important for the formation of the community that could participate in the process of further refining and sharing the new doctrinal system. That system was formed around the studies of the cleansing of the sanctuary mentioned in Daniel 8:14 and the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12. Timm, *Sanctuary and the Three Angels' Messages*, 63; L. E. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4:1153; Knight, *Anticipating the Advent*, 34, 41-43; idem, *Millennial Fever*, 319-321. See also, Merlin Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002), 352-364; G. R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (RHPA, 2004), 92-134; idem, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (RHPA, 2000), 55-89.

⁷⁰ Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:93.

⁷¹ James White, *Life Incidents: In Connection with the Great Advent Movement as Illustrated by the Three Angels of Revelation XIV* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), 271.

⁷² James White to Dear Brother [Stockbridge Howland], July 2, 1848, pp. 1, 2; Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University.

resurrected at Jesus' resurrection; and the Lord's Supper ought to be held only once a year, during the feast of Passover. Thus the conference participants were deeply divided. Ellen White recalled, "There were about 35 present, all [the Adventists] that could be collected in that part of the State. There were hardly two agreed. Each was strenuous for his views, declaring that they were according to the Bible. All were anxious for an opportunity to advance their sentiments, or to preach to us."⁷³ After group Bible study and prayer, Ellen received a vision in which her "accompanying angel" explained "some of the errors of those present, and also the truth in contrast with their errors."⁷⁴

The fourth conference was held in Port Gibson, New York, August 27, 28. During this conference, White again received a vision after which she counseled the participants to preserve biblical unity.⁷⁵ The fifth conference was held at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, September 8, 9. The sixth conference was held in Topsham, Maine, October 20-22. Again, Joseph Bates and James White presented the Sabbath and Sanctuary truths. The seventh conference of 1848 was held in Dorchester, Massachusetts, on November 17-19. The conference participants studied the seal of God referred to in Revelation 7:1-3.⁷⁶ Earnest Bible study, prayer, and prophetic guidance characterized the 1848 conferences. Ellen White recounts,

Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word. Again and again these brethren came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power. When they came to the point in their study where

⁷³Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:97-98.

⁷⁴Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:99; see also J. N. Loughborough, *Review and Herald*, Mar. 3, 1885, quoted in A. L. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1981-1986), 1:140-142.

⁷⁵White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:99.

⁷⁶ Jerry Moon, "Sabbatarian Bible Conferences," in *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Review and Herald, forthcoming 2013). See additional sources in note 71.

they said, ‘we can do nothing more,’ the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me; with instruction as to how we were to labor and teach effectively. Thus light was given that helped us to understand the scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to time when we shall enter the city of God, was made plain to me, and I gave to others the instruction that the Lord had given me.⁷⁷

She goes on to say,

We would come together burdened in soul; praying that we might be one in faith and doctrine; for we knew that Christ is not divided. One point at a time was made the subject of investigation. The Scriptures were opened with a sense of awe. Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth. After earnest prayer, if any point was not understood, it was discussed, and each one expressed his opinion freely; then we would again bow in prayer, and earnest supplications went up to heaven that God would help us to see eye to eye, that we might be one as Christ and the Father are one. Many tears were shed We spent many hours in this way. Sometimes, the entire night was spent in solemn investigation of Scriptures, that we might understand the truth for our time. On some occasions the Spirit of God would come upon me, and difficult portions were made clear through God’s appointed way, and then there was perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one spirit.⁷⁸

The correct theological process was critical to the successful search for truth and unity among the early pioneers. The subject of discussion during the conferences was the Bible only. White describes the conference participants as people who were keen, noble, and true, who “searched for truth as for hidden treasure.”⁷⁹ Joseph Bates and James White were the main presenters. She also testifies that the conference participants opened the Scriptures “with a sense of awe.” They were intent on finding unity of doctrine, for they “knew that

⁷⁷Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206-207.

⁷⁸Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 24-25.

⁷⁹Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206.

Christ is not divided.”⁸⁰ Their motivation was to know the meaning of the Bible and “be prepared to teach it with power.”⁸¹

The successful process of biblical investigation included a combination of prayer and Bible study, investigating one point at a time, freedom of expression, but no dwelling on minor points of disagreement, and being careful not to impose individual opinions upon the Scriptures. Ellen White recalled the intensity of their search for truth: “Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the entire night, praying for light and studying the Word.”⁸² In addition, she says, “Often we fasted, that we might be better fitted to understand the truth.”⁸³ When church leaders and Bible scholars have a personal relationship with God and with each other, they promote unity of faith and mission in the church, and the opposite is also true.

The pioneers learned how to overcome contention and hard feelings through prayer.

“Sometimes one or two of the brethren would stubbornly set themselves against the view presented, and would act out the natural feelings of the heart; but when this disposition appeared, we suspended our investigations . . . that each one might have an opportunity to go to God in prayer and, without conversation with others, study the point of difference, asking light from heaven. With expressions of friendliness we parted, to meet again as soon as possible for further investigation.”⁸⁴

The successful outcome of the Bible conferences also had to do with an element of persistence—seven conferences in 1848. Further, it had to do with the order of study. Ellen White mentioned that whenever the pioneers had reached the limits of their ability to understand the biblical evidence, they would join in united prayer. Often such united prayer

⁸⁰ Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 24.

⁸¹ Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206.

⁸² White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206.

⁸³ White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 24.

⁸⁴ Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 25.

was followed by a vision resolving the difficulty and enabling the study to continue.⁸⁵ But direct revelation from the Holy Spirit through visions was not usually given until after they had thoroughly examined the biblical evidence. The apostle Paul says that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16, 17). Bible scholars to whom God’s will is revealed are those who spend adequate amounts of time studying the Scriptures. These will never quit the study of God’s Word or get discouraged before they discover a “thus says the Lord” in the Bible. Instead, they will continue studying the Word until they understand what God’s will is on a given subject with an open mind and heart.

Ellen White states,

We are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without examining it thoroughly; neither can we afford to reject anything that bears the fruits of the Spirit of God; but we should be teachable, meek and lowly of heart. There are those who oppose everything that is not in accordance with their own ideas, and by so doing they endanger their eternal interest as verily as did the Jewish nation in their rejection of Christ.⁸⁶

The theological process that the early church pioneers employed in their search for truth and unity influenced the outcomes of the 1848 Bible conferences. As a result of this process, a “clear explanation of the passages under investigation” was arrived at and “difficult portions were made clear through God’s appointed way.”⁸⁷ White states, “Light was given that helped us to understand the Scriptures in regard to Christ, His mission, and

⁸⁵Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206-207. For examples of multiple occasions on which united prayer was followed by a vision, see idem, *Life Sketches* (1880), 202, 210, 216, 224, 225, 231, 232; idem, *Early Writings*, 32, 36. (Search <prayer vision> in CD-ROM).

⁸⁶*Counsels to Writers*, 35.

⁸⁷White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 25.

His priesthood. A line of truth extending from that time to the time when we shall enter the city of God, was made plain.”⁸⁸

A clear understanding of the Scripture contributed to the unity of the early pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church. “Unity of understanding provided a basis for unity of action.”⁸⁹ White testifies, “Then there was perfect harmony. We were all of one mind and one spirit.”⁹⁰ Perhaps, the question that one would ask today’s Adventist Bible scholars, theologians, and leaders might be, “Are we following the footsteps of the pioneers?” Ellen White states, “Truth is stronger than error, and right will prevail over wrong.”⁹¹ She goes on to say, “Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.”⁹²

Furthermore, she points out:

The Lord designs that our opinions shall be put to the test, that we may see the necessity of closely examining the living oracles to see whether or not we are in the faith. Many who claim to believe the truth have settled down at their ease, saying, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing."⁹³

A few years later, in 1855, the church pioneers had to deal with an issue of Adventist lifestyle: the proper time for beginning the weekly Sabbath.⁹⁴ The pioneers considered the time for the beginning Sabbath as critical in order to preserve church unity. However, there

⁸⁸White, *Selected Messages*, 1:207.

⁸⁹Moon, “Lessons from the Adventist Pioneers,” 3.

⁹⁰Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 25.

⁹¹Ellen White, *Prophets and Kings*, 659.

⁹²Ellen White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 35.

⁹³Ibid., 36.

⁹⁴The main sources are: [James White], “The Conference,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 4, 1855, p. 75; J. N. Andrews, “Time for Commencing the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 4, 1855, 76-78; James White, “Time of the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 4, 1855, 78; James White, “Time to Commence the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, February 25, 1868; Ellen White, *Testimonies*, 1:

were various views regarding the time for the beginning of the Sabbath among the early Adventist believers.

Joseph Bates held that the word “even” or evening in Leviticus 23:32 (KJV), occurred at 6:00 p.m. Because he was the leading advocate of the Sabbath among Adventists, his opinion was respected and most followed his interpretation.⁹⁵ Some Sabbathkeepers from Maine, in 1847-48, “cited the King James Version of Matthew 28:1 in support of beginning Sabbath at sunrise, but a vision of Ellen White in 1848 refuted this.”⁹⁶ A tongues-speaking incident in June 1848 supporting the 6:00 p.m. time was accepted as confirming that the Sabbath begins at 6:00 p.m. As a result, from 1847 to 1855, a few began the Sabbath at sundown, but the majority followed the 6:00 p.m. time.”⁹⁷

Perplexed about this problem, James White, in June 1854 asked D. P. Hall of Wisconsin to study into the matter, but nothing came of it. Preoccupied with the age-to-come theory, Hall joined the *Messenger* party and left the Sabbatarian Adventists.⁹⁸ In the summer of 1855, James White requested J.N. Andrews to study the issue, and Andrews demonstrated from the Scriptures that the Sabbath begins at sundown. His study was presented to the conference in Battle Creek on November 17, 1855, and published in the *Review* of December 4, 1855.⁹⁹ The majority of attendees found Andrews’ arguments convincing. In fact, the response was unanimous with the exception of two people—Joseph Bates and Ellen White.¹⁰⁰ Thus the threat of disunity still hung over the group. But on November 20, 1855, Ellen White

⁹⁵A. L. White, *Ellen G. White*, 1:322-326.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹J. N. Andrews, “Time for Commencing the Sabbath,” *Review and Herald*, Dec. 4, 1855, 76-78.

¹⁰⁰A. L. White, *Ellen G. White*, 1:323.

received a vision endorsing the sundown view. Direct revelation of the Holy Spirit was not given in place of thorough study of Scripture.”¹⁰¹

The conclusions drawn about Sabbath keeping were by and large based on the interpretive assumptions of a few influential people (especially Joseph Bates). Ellen White herself reasoned that God had not corrected the practice of the past nine years, so it must have been alright. After comprehensive Bible study, the Spirit of God intervened, confirming by vision the findings of the Bible study.¹⁰²

Several reasons affected the investigative process of the Scriptures regarding the time for beginning the Sabbath. Moon suggests that these had to do with superficial Bible study, interpretive assumptions by both Joseph Bates and Ellen White, and a nine-year tradition of beginning the Sabbath at six o’clock. However, “more comprehensive study disproved the interpretive assumptions.” By thorough Bible study and believers’ acceptance of prophetic guidance, the disagreement was resolved.¹⁰³

Today, people of experience and influence may also contribute to wrong theological conclusions and church practices. Thorough study of the Bible, intense prayer, and prophetic guidance contribute to successful theological processes and conclusions, and hence, the unity of the doctrine and faith.

One of the lessons we can learn from the pioneers is that they were serious Bible students. Wernick states, “They viewed the Bible as a unified whole, a message from God through human instruments writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁴

He goes on to say,

To reach their conclusions, our pioneers compared Scripture with Scripture, using one Bible write to explain what another had written. They saw the Old and New Testaments

¹⁰¹Ellen White, *Testimonies*, 1:113, 116.

¹⁰²A. L. White, Ellen G. White, 1:323-325.

¹⁰³Moon, “Lessons,” 4.

¹⁰⁴Wernick, 769

as complementing one another and the Bible as a unified whole. Thus today we have a system of truth that has kept us unified for several generations.”¹⁰⁵

Wernick mentions that the writings of Ellen White were instrumental “in helping our pioneers to unite in their understanding of the special Biblical truths that make us a distinct people today.”¹⁰⁶ He affirms the role of Ellen White’s writings in unifying the church today.¹⁰⁷

In addition to the study of the Scriptures, the pioneers spent time seeking God’s guidance through prayer. Moon reports that Ellen White who was present highlights the importance of prayer during the 1848 Conferences. Their burden in prayer was for unity.¹⁰⁸ This is a recurring attitude throughout the writings of Ellen White as she reports on her personal experience during these conferences.¹⁰⁹ In times when there were disagreements there was emphasis in individual prayer and Bible study.¹¹⁰ The focus of their study was the Bible.¹¹¹ The results were very positive and led to a clearer understanding of the truth.¹¹²

During the 1855 conferences on the time for beginning the Sabbath, Moon observes that there was superficiality in the manner in which they studied the Bible at the beginning stages, and with intensity of Bible Study God blessed them with understanding and the matter was settled.¹¹³ Looking at these two conferences it is very evident that truth and light came at a price. They had to give up their own opinions and focus on allowing God to bring them to unity. In addressing the subject of Ordination of women in our time the same attitude needs to prevail.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 770.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 24-25.

¹⁰⁹Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206

¹¹⁰*Testimonies to Ministers*, 25.

¹¹¹White, *Selected Messages*, 1:206-7.

¹¹²Moon, “Lessons,” 2, 3.

¹¹³Ibid., 5.

In his conclusion Moon highlights three elements that are important in dealing with theological controversies. How we relate to God, the Bible and fellow believers is important in this process.¹¹⁴ However, the key toward dealing with controversial subjects in the church is a personal relationship with God. Moon states that this relationship with God is “the first issue to settle in resolving doctrinal disagreements within the church or in seeking a response to pluralism and postmodernism.”¹¹⁵ In Ellen White’s words, “There is no assurance that our doctrine is right and free from all chaff and error unless we are daily doing the will of God. If we do his will, we shall know of the doctrine” (John 7:17).¹¹⁶

III. Implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church Today

The Seventh-day Adventist Church today can learn how to deal with controversial issues from the early church and from the Adventist pioneers. The church ought to avoid the approach of the pioneers as manifested in 1888. Instead, we should promote the approach of the early church in the book of Acts (1-2, 15) and of the Adventist pioneers as manifested in both 1848 and 1855.

A. Implications: Wrong Approach

Where there is controversy a lot of energy is released and a lot activity happens toward church’s disunity. Controversial issues have the potential of causing the church to compromise its unity. We need to avoid this. One of the roles of leadership at all levels of the church has to do with preservation of church unity. Church leaders need to exercise much care and at the same time show firmness when dealing with controversial issues.

Lack of spiritual preparation on the part of church leaders, church members, and Bible scholars contributes to ecclesiastical disunity. When the Holy Spirit does not fill people, they

¹¹⁴Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁶Ellen White, *1888 Materials*, 46.

are either empty or they are filled with evil spirits. When people pray, they invoke the presence of God and His power to surround and protect them from harm and danger. When they cease to pray and invoke God's power and presence, they become vulnerable to satanic forces and ungodly practices. Lack of spirituality on the part of Bible scholars and church leaders may lead to wrong hermeneutics of the biblical text. Likewise, when church members are not spiritually connected with the divine they can easily become misled theologically. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit every attempt to study, understand, and interpret God's Word becomes a futile exercise. Wrong methods and approaches of biblical interpretation tend to breed ecclesiastical disunity. Lack of spirituality leads to wrong attitudes about God, His Word, and fellow believers and, hence, wrong hermeneutics. In other words our spirituality influences our presuppositions and, hence, our approach to biblical interpretation.

Presuppositions influence biblical interpretation. Varying biblical presuppositions among church leaders and theologians tend to threaten the unity of the church today. Frank Hasel states, "The notion of presupposition(s) plays an important role in biblical interpretation. We all hold a number of beliefs that we suppose or accept when we come to the task of interpreting Scripture. No one is able to approach the biblical text with a blank mind."¹¹⁷ The presuppositions of a spiritually fortified person or Bible scholar would lead to the biblical hermeneutics that build the body of Christ, the church. Likewise, a person who is not spiritually fortified tends to develop wrong biblical presuppositions. It is obvious that wrong presuppositions would breed wrong hermeneutics.

Hasel asserts,

Presuppositions delimit the boundaries within which biblical interpretation can and should properly function. They also determine the method and, through the method, also

¹¹⁷Frank M. Hasel, "Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (ed. George W. Reid; Silver Springs, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 27.

influence, to a considerable degree, the outcome of our interpretation. In other words, they directly affect our theology and the authority that Scripture has for our life and for doctrine. In turn, our theology influences spiritual and theological identity and, finally, also the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church.¹¹⁸

Often times, interpreters of the Bible face that which Hasel refers to as “the hermeneutical challenge.” This has to do with the fact that the interpreter’s “past, experiences, resident ideas, and preconceived notions and opinions” influence one’s methodology of biblical interpretation.¹¹⁹ Hasel suggests that, to an extent, subjectivity tends to interfere with the objectivity of the biblical text. The sinful nature and experiences of humankind, may also contribute personal and corporate biblical presuppositions and interpretation.

The apostle Paul, to the church in Rome, observes:

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.¹²⁰

John Baldwin calls attention to the influence of the cosmic conflict on hermeneutics. He says that “fallen spiritual powers, Satan and his angels, can influence the exegete The attempts of Satan and evil angels to redirect interpretations of the Bible cannot be dismissed.”¹²¹ To Timothy Paul writes, “Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils”¹²² To the church in Corinth Paul says, “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Hasel, *Understanding Scripture*, 27.

¹²⁰Rom 8:5-9.

¹²¹Baldwin, 18-19

¹²²1Tim 4:1.

not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.”¹²³

When the Holy Spirit departs the church does not hold together. The spirit of demons takes over. The church is left to vulnerable and to the control of evil forces. Often, when that happens church leaders, church members, and bible scholars would not agree in matters of Christian faith and practice. The Holy Spirit and angels’ departure from the church at individual or corporate level is a terrible occurrence that must be avoided at all cost.

Writes Ellen White:

Angels work harmoniously. Perfect order characterizes all their movements. The more closely we imitate the harmony and order of the angelic host, the more successful will be the efforts of these heavenly agents in our behalf. If we see no necessity for harmonious action, and are disorderly, undisciplined, and disorganized in our course of action, angels, who are thoroughly organized and move in perfect order, cannot work for us successfully. They turn away in grief, for they are not authorized to bless confusion, distraction, and disorganization. All who desire the cooperation of the heavenly messengers, must work in unison with them. Those who have the unction from on high, will in all their efforts encourage order, discipline, and union of action, and then the angels of God can cooperate with them. But never, never will these heavenly messengers place their endorsement upon irregularity, disorganization, and disorder.¹²⁴ Satan, the devil causes misinterpretation of the Bible. White states, “When Satan has undermined faith in the Bible, he directs men to other sources for light and power. Thus he insinuates himself. Those who turn from the plain teaching of Scripture and the convicting power of God’s Holy Spirit are inviting the control of demons.”¹²⁵

To the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul says,

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the

¹²³2 Cor 4:3,4.

¹²⁴White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:649-650.

¹²⁵Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, 258.

breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.¹²⁶

B. Implications: Right Approach

The Seventh-day Adventist church needs to take seriously the approach of the early church toward issues of doctrinal uncertainty or controversy. The experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus and in the Upper Room on Resurrection Sunday, and during the ten days before Pentecost, provides at least seven important principles to be adopted in facing a doctrinal crisis: (1) accept the foundational authority of Scripture; (2) employ a solid biblical hermeneutic; (3) maintain a Christ-centered focus; (4) foster a spirit of unity of mind/purpose/impulse; (5) engage in frequent seasons of earnest prayer and fasting; (6) seek for the illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to correctly understand Scriptural truth; and (7) maintain an evangelistic motivation and passion for lost souls.

The experience of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 provides a paradigm of at least seven additional steps for the church to follow in dealing with doctrinal controversy (building upon the aforementioned principles in the process): (1) assemble representative church leaders to investigate the controversial issue; (2) engage in frank and spirited discussion and give clarifying public presentations of relevant biblical and other data; (3) present reports and personal testimonies of the Holy Spirit's working through council members and others in relation to the issue under discussion; (4) verify and test these testimonies/reports by the witness of Scripture; (5) allow the Holy Spirit to lead the council to an emerging consensus (unity although not necessarily uniformity) from their close investigation of Scripture; (6) if the council is so mandated (as with the Annual Council and General Conference in session), make a formal decision, commit it to writing, and circulate

¹²⁶Eph 6:11-17.

the document among the world church; and (7) implement the council's decision as binding throughout the world church.

The church today can also learn to effectively deal with controversial issues from the practices of the pioneers during the Bible conferences of 1848 and 1855. The pioneers' practices teach us that relationships with God, the Scriptures, and fellow humans are critical for dealing with controversial issues. Our relationship to these categories has a direct influence on how we interpret and live the Word of God. Spiritual preparedness must characterize the nature of all people and groups involved in the study of Scriptures. Spiritual preparation includes prayer and fasting for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Personal or corporate spiritual preparation would include adoration and praise, confession, supplication, and thanksgiving. During any of our church meetings, it is important to saturate our meetings with united prayer.

During the Bible conference of 1848 and 1855, the pioneers' major concern were truth and unity of the church. Inasmuch as doctrinal correctness was also important for the church, they did everything possible to ensure that they did not compromise the unity of the church at that time. The way they approached the study of God's Word was better than the way they did in 1888. The attitude of pioneers was characterized by open-mindedness, a willingness to discern God's voice and to understand His will for the church then. The same ought to be the practice of leaders and Bible scholars in the Seventh-day Adventist church today and in the days to come. It is critical that we should emulate the example of the pioneers.

The pioneers studied the Scriptures with thoroughness during the Bible conferences. They gave priority to the study of the Bible. The Bible is still a dependable source of truth for the church in these last days. When given its rightful place in the lives of its students, it

acts as a bulwark against every wind of doctrine.¹²⁷ The Seventh-day Adventists' fundamental belief # 1 affirms the position of the church regarding the infallible nature of the Bible. Those who wrestle to understand Scripture must fully accept it as God's holy Word without which understanding they would consider it to be any other piece of literature subject to scientific methods of interpretation.

The choice of Bible study method is crucial for unity in the Seventh-day Adventist church. In the world today, there are various methods of approaching the Bible including the higher-critical method. Church unity is achievable if Adventist scholars, church leaders and church members would approach the Bible using the historical-biblical method or what is referred to as the historical-grammatical method. It is necessary for church leaders and believers to study God's Word with an open mind, ready to understand and do His will. Those who are interested to understand the will of God in the Bible must decide to surrender personal presuppositions.

White points out:

We should exert all the powers of the mind in the study of the Scriptures, and should task the understanding to comprehend, as far as mortals can, the deep things of God; yet we must not forget that the docility and submission of a child is the true spirit of the learner. Scriptural difficulties can never be mastered by the same methods that are employed in grappling with philosophical problems. We should not engage in the study of the Bible with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God, and a sincere desire to learn his will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth.¹²⁸

She goes on to say,

The spirit in which you come to the investigation of the Scriptures will determine the character of the assistant at your side. Angels from the world of light will be with those who in humility of heart seek for divine guidance. But if the Bible is opened with

¹²⁷Eph 4:14.

¹²⁸Ellen White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, 4:417.

irreverence, with a feeling of self-sufficiency, if the heart is filled with prejudice, Satan is beside you, and he will set the plain statements of God's word in a perverted light.¹²⁹

In *Messages to Young People* Ellen White has this to say:

In your study of the word, lay at the door of investigation your preconceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas. You will never reach the truth if you study the Scriptures to vindicate your own ideas. Leave these at the door, and with a contrite heart go in to hear what the Lord has to say to you. As the humble seeker for truth sits at Christ's feet, and learns of Him, the word gives him understanding. To those who are too wise in their own conceit to study the Bible, Christ says, You must become meek and lowly in heart if you desire to become wise unto salvation.¹³⁰

She goes on to say,

Do not read the word in the light of former opinions; but, with a mind free from prejudice, search it carefully and prayerfully. If, as you read, conviction comes, and you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the word, do not try to make the word fit these opinions. Make your opinions fit the word. Do not allow what you have believed or practiced in the past to control your understanding. Open the eyes of your mind to behold wondrous things out of the law. Find out what is written, and then plant your feet on the eternal Rock.¹³¹

The angels of God are capable of influencing the understanding of God Word. For instance, the angel Gabriel helped Daniel to understand the Word of God in Daniel 8:16; 9:22-23. According to White, “angels are round about those who are willing to be taught in divine things; and in the time of great necessity they will bring to their remembrance the very truths which are needed.”¹³² The Holy Spirit is at work to help those who are willing to understand God's will.

Church unity is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, the church must seek an outpouring of the Holy Spirit all the time, and more especially when dealing with controversial issues. Church executive committees, councils, and boards must always be saturated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Bible scholars must intentionally

¹²⁹White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 108.

¹³⁰Ellen White, *Messages to Young People*, 260.

¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²Ellen White, *Great Controversy*, 599.

choose to study the Scriptures under the influence of the Holy Spirit. He who caused the holy people of old—prophets and apostles—to speak as God gave them utterance is able to guide the church today to discover God’s will during Bible study times. If all those who search the Scriptures constantly seek to be filled by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church will experience unity of doctrine, faith, and purpose. Wernick affirms that unity of purpose among believers is possible through Jesus and the Gift of the Holy Spirit.¹³³

With reference to the disciples of Jesus Christ, he states,

This small band of eleven disciples was to become the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). If they were at variance with one another over their beliefs and driven apart by envy and jealousy, the superstructure of the church would not have a safe foundation. This was the central concern of Jesus. And Jesus’ words have relevance for His body of believers today. Only a fully converted church body guided by the Holy Spirit can be a unified church. Only a church body that allows the Scriptures to speak to them as the voice of God will be a harmonious church. This is the awesome burden that leaders have today: to lead the church members into a study of the Bible and into accepting the Holy Spirit’s presence in their hearts and lives.¹³⁴

The church should be united in belief and practice. Church leaders and Bible scholars should shun the temptation disunity caused by theological and ecclesiastical compromise. Wernick asserts, “Though there will always be peripheral areas of disagreement, in those truths that are crucial to the message of the church the body of Christ must be in agreement. Likewise, there must be harmony in the Biblical practices of the church.”¹³⁵ He goes on to say that church today ought to be grateful for the leadership that has preserved the unity of the church through a systematic study of Bible throughout the centuries. However, he observes that “pluralistic views on a number of essential truths and Biblical practices as they are urged upon the church” might negatively affect the unity of the church in future. He, therefore, pleads with church leaders and members to utilize this present time to study the Bible with sincerity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁶

¹³³*Here We Stand*, 770.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 771.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*

Church unity is possible if church leaders teach biblical unity based upon Scripture. In other words, Church unity is impossible outside the Word of God. Wernick points out that that church leaders should seek peace by teaching biblical unity.¹³⁷ He exemplifies the truth of biblical unity by quoting the words of the apostle James: “For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”¹³⁸ In the beatitudes, Jesus also said, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”¹³⁹ Paul adds saying, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”¹⁴⁰

The pioneers depended on the Spirit of Prophecy for biblical interpretation and understanding when they experienced a deadlock in their study of the Bible. The writings of Ellen White are a powerful tool for unlocking biblical deadlocks. We should still consider prophetic guidance as a way forward when dealing with controversial issues. The writings of Ellen White are still a valuable source of understanding God’s will especially where Bible students have reached what might appear as a dead end of their Bible study. Wernick urges church leaders and members to recognize the role of the Spirit of Prophecy as a unifying factor in the study of the Bible.¹⁴¹

We believe in the unity of the church. The church comprises of people from all walks of life and from various backgrounds. While the membership of the church culturally diverse we must preserve its unity under God’s leadership. Unity should not necessarily mean

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸James 3:16-18

¹³⁹Matt 5:9.

¹⁴⁰Hebrews 12:14

¹⁴¹*Here We Stand*, 772.

uniformity in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Rather it means oneness of faith, purpose, and practice in Jesus Christ.

The SDA fundamental belief #14 summarizes states,

The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children. (Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-14; Matt. 28:19, 20; Ps. 133:1; 2 Cor. 5:16, 17; Acts 17:26, 27; Gal. 3:27, 29; Col. 3:10-15; Eph. 4:14-16; 4:1-6; John 17:20-23.)

IV. Conclusion

As church leaders and Bible scholars we should emulate the zeal of the early church and Adventist pioneers, and even surpass them. In other words, more is required of us today than of our early Christian and Adventist pioneers. According to Ellen White, “Greater light shines upon us than shone upon our fathers. We cannot be accepted or honored of God in rendering the same service, or doing the same works, that our fathers did. In order to be accepted and blessed of God as they were, we must imitate their faithfulness and zeal,-- improve our light as they improved theirs, and do as they would have done had they lived in our day. We must walk in the light which shines upon us, otherwise that light will become darkness.”¹⁴²

The following words of Ellen G. White are a source of encouragement to the Seventh-day Adventist church today:

The apostles differed widely in habits and disposition. There were the publican, Levi-Matthew, and the fiery zealot Simon, the uncompromising hater of the authority of Rome; the generous, impulsive Peter, and the mean-spirited Judas; Thomas,

¹⁴²White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:262.

truehearted, yet timid and fearful, Phillip, slow of heart, and inclined to doubt, and the ambitious, outspoken sons of Zebedee, with their brethren. These were brought together, with their different faults, all with inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil; but in and through Christ they were to dwell in the family of God, learning to become one in faith, in doctrine, in spirit. They would have their tests, their grievances, their differences of opinion; but while Christ was abiding in the heart, there could be no dissension. His love would lead to love for one another; the lessons of the Master would lead to the harmonizing of differences, bringing the disciples into unity, till they would be of one mind and one judgment. Christ is the great center, and they would approach one another just in proportion as they approached the center.¹⁴³

¹⁴³*Desire of Ages*, 296.