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All grin and no cat

By Norman H Young

The Cheshire cat with its constant grin annoyed Alice. "I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly," Alice complained. 'And this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.' "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life."

Adventists pride themselves on being 'the people of the book', but have we become a grin without a cat? The claim that the Scriptures are our central text is there, but is the substance equally visible? There are disturbing indications that we are losing the reality while affirming the theory—retaining the grin as the cat disappears. There is considerable evidence pointing to this parlous state. Expository sermons are neither common nor popular in our churches. Sales of records and biographies are the financial mainstay of the ABCs, not books expounding the Scriptures—as a glance at the latest catalogue confirms. An emphasis on the Bible in the study of the Sabbath School lesson in the majority of churches is on the wane. Although the Sabbath School Department has for some time now pursued a laudable and systematic concentration on the books of the Bible, such lesson quarterlies still generally present the church's doctrines rather than expound the actual text.

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Coming back from a 'wonderland'

High school and college students do not usually place Bible classes at the top of their academic agenda. Counselling skills are considered more important for a minister than exegetical abilities. There is a widespread feeling that the Bible is too culturally and historically distant to be a relevant guide for today's complex personal problems.

What has caused this decline in the vigorous study and debate of Scripture amongst us? It would be easy to blame it all onto the modern media. Now, it may be that the electronic age has affected communication skills adversely as far as serious Bible reading is concerned. However, the real problems lie elsewhere. Indeed, they lie within ourselves, and not in some external scapegoat. I would suggest that some of our own claims have paradoxically militated against our central self-understanding to be the people of 'the Book'.

First, the belief that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the sole custodian of Biblical truth appears to have been inimical to Bible study. Why search the Scriptures if their message has already been extracted and enshrined in the doctrinal formulae of the Adventist tradition? A fixed doctrinal past is a considerable barrier to an open attitude to the continuing potential of the Bible to challenge and provoke our understandings and practices.

Secondly, the conviction that this church arose as the direct fulfilment of Bible prophecy has often led to a self-satisfied smugness. Inherent in the claim that Adventists are the true church of Bible prophecy is the risk that the submissive spirit of inquiry will be lost. Proclaiming oneself as the true church can too readily lead to a haughty disdain of learning from other Christian communities or even from contemporary thought leaders in our midst.¹

The belief that one is the 'true church' tends to stress

ecclesiastical structure and membership over the challenge of Scripture. Being in the 'true church' replaces seeking after and practising the truth of God's Word. This is not to deny the importance of Christian community and fellowship, but to be aware of the dangers of institutional arrogance. The recent development amongst contemporary Biblical scholars of reading the Bible in its historical setting has made it difficult for any particular church group to claim to have a monopoly on original Biblical truth. As Bruce Chilton observes:

It is now impossible for any group in the Church to claim authoritatively that its doctrine is the only one which accords with the New Testament. Any such claim can be tested by individuals in their critical reading of the texts, who know very well that historical conditions have changed radically over the past two thousand years, so that continuity with the New Testament is scarcely a matter of course. Today, any reader might, on reflection, decide that the New Testament is consistent with her or his faith, but there is also the risk that a revision of one's beliefs will be necessary....In our time, for good or ill, the Church cannot determine from the outset what a reader, or even a believer, will find in the New Testament.²

Thirdly, the lesser light of Ellen White has tended to dim the splendour of the greater light. This is at first surprising, for her labours were intended to achieve the very opposite result. In practice, however, the Adventist community has seen little point in labouring with an ancient text originally written in a foreign language when a clear exposition is available in English. Since Ellen White deals in detail with issues more related to modern life than does Scripture, many seek her specific counsel in preference to Scripture's broader approach.

The recent challenge to Ellen White's authority has also led to a loss of faith in Scripture's veracity. In Adventist tradition, the writings of Ellen White have been so interlaced with the Biblical writings that any

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damage to the former inevitably reflects badly on the latter.

Fourthly, prophetic declarations made by individual Adventist preachers have often proved wrong, and this has not enhanced the layperson's confidence in either Scripture's authority or the church's ability to interpret it. One may refer to over-confident claims that certain signs irrefutably indicated the imminent return of Jesus, or to negative pronouncements concerning Europe or the race to reach the moon, or to assurances that the Jews would never possess old Jerusalem.

Furthermore, controversy within the church over interpretations has exacerbated this loss of confidence by the laity in the Bible as a clear guide to Christian faith

and life. Every acrimonious dispute over interpretation either engenders a doubt about the usefulness of the Bible in a hostile world or leads the layperson to submit to hierarchical authority to define truth.

Thus, it is apparent that Adventism's fine history of bold Biblical interpretation is in need of revival. Various cautions need to be heeded and some creative steps

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taken to restore the Bible to its central place in the life of the Adventist churches.

As cautions I would suggest the following:

1. We can no longer afford to act as an island of Biblical understanding and remain ignorant of the history of interpretation or isolated from present-day scholarship.

2. Our sense of being a prophetic people must not beguile us into thinking we have nothing old to unlearn or anything new to learn.

3. It is vital that, in our language and usage, Ellen White's writings remain subservient to Scripture. Her statements are not to have an absolute control over the meaning of the Biblical text.

4. We need to present our pronouncements about the future with greater humility, recognising that in the end saints rebuke the world more powerfully than seers.

There are also some positive steps that can be recommended. Congregations need to be awakened to the richness and vitality of Scripture. To read the Bible merely as a compendium of doctrine is to impoverish it. The books of the Bible should not be read piece-meal but, like all great literature, as whole units. For example, to know the prophets as predictors of the future while being ignorant of their passion and anguish is to miss their power.

Bible circles should be encouraged, and resources—both persons and written materials—provided to increase the laity's Biblical literacy. The possibility of having Avondale College provide some units of Biblical Studies as 'distance education' must be explored.³ The laity should have guided freedom to explore the range and depth of the Biblical literature without massive monitoring. There is some risk in this, but the middle ages has shown us that there is a greater danger in strict ecclesiastical control.

Whether from the pulpit or in the classroom, the Bible should be approached with an expectation of discovery rather than a bored anticipation of more-of-the-same. The Bible's insights over the whole range of the human experience are sublime, profound, variegated

and relevant. Twentieth-century Adventists need to discover that for themselves.

Claims without the reality are as useful as the empty beetle shells that last summer adorned the Australian bush once the cicadas had emerged and gone off to mate. Or to return to our original illustration, to claim the Bible is central to the life of Adventism and yet lack the reality is to have the grin but no cat. ○

1. I do not suggest that we should gullibly accept any and every view presented by such persons.
 2. Bruce Chilton, *Beginning New Testament Study*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986, 8-9.
 3. The provision of such a service for adult lay members has become increasingly urgent since the inclusion of Religious Studies in the ABC's pilot program in tertiary education through television known as 'Open Learning'.
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