**Facing Finitude**

**Barthian Light on Adventism’s Long Struggle with the *Humanity* of Inspired Writers**

**by Charles Scriven**

INTRODUCTION

To Karl Barth, then a Reformed pastor in the Swiss village of Safenwil, Christians in Germany were disastrously complicit in their country’s World War I aggression. Its members and leaders, even its theologians, had aligned themselves with the Kaiser’s imperial ambitions, and this made, at least to Barth, no sense. His exasperation took him to St. Paul, and soon he was devoting himself to a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Liberal Protestantism’s confidence in humanity as the instrument of God’s unfolding purposes had shortened the “distance,” he wrote, between the divine and the human.[[1]](#footnote-1) It had thereby weakened awareness of how grace sets a “question mark” before every boast or achievement, shatters all self-satisfaction, and summons every human being to “repentance.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Christ, according to Paul, had “stopped up the trumpet of human arrogance,”[[3]](#footnote-3) yet, from Christian summits as surely as from elsewhere, vanity and overconfidence were still sounding forth. Barth’s commentary—his protest—first appeared in December of 1918, seven months before the convening of Adventism’s 1919 Bible Conference. The translation into English stemmed from the second edition, but through all the editions Barth’s reading of Paul was a fresh statement of New Testament and Reformation insight and a relentless take-down of piety gone awry.

Seventh-day Adventist church leaders were themselves ill-at-ease.[[4]](#footnote-4) Besides the war and the issue (especially for pacifists) of the draft, a worldwide influenza epidemic had seemed like a sign of the End. At the same time, tension over some aspects of prophetic interpretation—what the church claimed as its distinctive competence—had come into play. And with Ellen White four years dead (who now would steady the ship?), and Christian culture in general reeling from threat of Modernism, the circumstances required major conversation. The 1919 Bible Conference met that need.

Conference delegates considered the then-current issue of the Trinity, but questions about the “inspiration” of authoritative writings drew the most attention. Ellen White’s legacy included the fact that what she wrote underwent (necessary) revision, and that undermined, even if it did not extinguish, the conviction that her inspiration entailed “infallibility.” As for the Bible itself, delegate acquaintance with the “fundamentalist” response to modernism fueled support not only for its infallibility, but also for its “inerrancy.” But as Michael Campbell has noted, delegates disagreed about much of this. Traditionalists pressed even for the inerrancy of Ellen White and what she wrote. Progressives disagreed. A. G. Daniels, for example, had seen “the manifestation of the human” in Ellen White’s work, and doubted both her inerrancy and her infallibility. With regard, again, to the Bible, traditionalists echoed fundamentalist commitment to both infallibility and inerrancy, while progressives shrank from the inerrancy claim. Judging from Campbell’s account, no delegate, however, cast doubt on *biblical* infallibility, and all came to agreement that the Bible is the “supreme authority for settling doctrinal conflict.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Still, the conference signaled “increasing polarization” with respect to the inspiration of authoritative writers. One debate, as we saw, concerned the suitability, or not, of the concept of inerrancy; the other had to do with infallibility. Campbell declares that “the 1919 Bible Conference set the stage for every subsequent hermeneutical battle in Adventist history.”[[6]](#footnote-6) These debates, he was saying, would continue to resonate and, all too often, to divide.

My purpose here is to explore how Karl Barth may shed light on these matters. With that in mind, I am now going to summarize two “subsequent” treatments of hermeneutics. Both address the Bible specifically, yet both, like Barth himself, offer perspective pertinent to any human document or author believed to reflect the influence of divine inspiration. What does the *humanity* of inspired authors, biblical or otherwise, really mean? Or to restate the issue in a Barthian way, how ought the Christian community to understand inspired authorship in light of the *divinity* of God? Perspective on these questions is what we are looking for.

ALDEN THOMPSON AND JOHN C. PECKHAM

I now consider one book from each of two contemporary Adventist theologians. The first is Alden Thompson, whose *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, was first published in 1991. For years he had been asking his Walla Walla University students to read difficult as well as not-so-difficult parts of the Bible, and he had come to realize that some students were losing their faith over facts and ideas they were not, they thought, “supposed” to find there. Always determined to show both skeptical and devout that it was “possible to be honest with all of Scripture—and still believe,” Thompson realized that an adequate theory of inspiration would not explain away “imperfections” readers could see right in front of them.[[7]](#footnote-7) So the account of Scripture many of his students had grown up with would need revision.

Adventists typically have, or are at least familiar with, high regard for Ellen White. Reading her with a view to the issues at hand, Thompson realized that she could be his ally, and Part I of the book reflects this realization. It presents two “classic” passages from her published writing that bear on the theory of inspiration. In the first, from volume 1 of *Selected Messages*, she tells us that God “committed the preparation of His divinely inspired Word to finite man.” She soon amplifies the point: “Everything that is human,” she says, “is imperfect.”[[8]](#footnote-8) (This is the flipside of another declaration from her, published elsewhere and quoted later in Thompson’s book: “God and heaven alone are infallible.”[[9]](#footnote-9)) In the second quoted section, the introduction to *The Great Controversy*, White remarks that words “‘given by the inspiration of God’” according to 2 Timothy 3:16 are in fact “‘expressed in the words of men.’” The Bible reflects human input, though without compromise to its significance. It is still “‘to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation” of God’s will. [[10]](#footnote-10)

All this smooths the way, Thompson assumes, for Adventist recognition of the “traces of humanity” in the Bible, as when “slavery” goes uncondemned, or Paul’s memory suddenly begins to “improve.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The reference to “traces of humanity” is a “gentle” acknowledgment of what might otherwise involve harsher words like “error” or “contradiction.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Thompson aims for honesty, he is ever the pastor, nudging, but not bludgeoning, the flock.

Still, he does ask readers to accept two challenging concepts. One is the distinction between a “codebook,” where ideas, or requirements and rules, have a consistent, straightforward application, and a “casebook,” where such ideas fit distinctive times and circumstances.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Bible, Thompson argues, is more casebook than codebook. Some of its laws are ill-suited to new occasions, or less important than other laws, and no longer, or at least not always, apply. This does not, however, dissolve the Bible’s authority, or make human beings into mini-gods who decide for themselves what rules to live by. It means, instead, that living under scriptural authority requires deeper awareness. And just here the second of Thompson’s challenging concepts comes into play, what he calls the “Law Pyramid,” or “[t]he One, the Two, and the Ten.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Jesus acknowledged the Ten Commandments; he also summarized “‘*all the law and the prophets*’” into love for God and love for neighbor, two commands. But these two, in turn, resolve into one; as Paul declared, love itself, obedience to this one command, is “‘*the fulfilling of the law*.’”[[15]](#footnote-15) In this light, the required deeper awareness is the capacity to see the essence of the divine will, and so to discern—under the Spirit’s guidance—the Bible’s meaning for today.[[16]](#footnote-16) Now, to take one example, the Bible cannot authorize slavery. The Law Pyramid disallows it, period.

Thompson’s account provoked, almost immediately, an entire book of objections. Entitled *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, and marked by absence of opportunity for Thompson himself to respond, the book was a flourishing of fervor, outrage and ill-advised self-assurance. Again and again, the several authors set forth damaging criticisms: Thompson is “subjective”; he believes in human “autonomy”; he caves to “relativism”; he elevates “reason” over Scripture.[[17]](#footnote-17) As analysis so far indicates, however, these criticisms are either false or inexcusably misleading. But one objection from the authors falls closer to the truth. Thompson fails, they say, to make the case that Ellen White is with him. Nothing in the “classic” statements he depends on strips away the fact that she herself declared the Bible “infallible.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The book’s authors advance this argument like a punch, and Thompson is vulnerable to it.

Perhaps Michael Campbell overstated his suggestion that delegates to the 1919 Conference came to agreement that the Bible itself is the “supreme authority for settling doctrinal conflict.” Or perhaps the Adventist world has changed since 1919, and now a resource other than the Bible really can be determinative. But with this latter notion John C. Peckham, of the Seminary at Andrews University, would seem *not* to be at home. Along with several other works for evangelical readers, he has published *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon,* Sola Scriptura*, and Theological Method*. Although the book does not directly address an Adventist audience, and so does not weigh in on the significance of Ellen White, the author’s argument is nevertheless a challenge to Adventist thinking.

Peckham sets forth a Bible-based, or canonical, method for systematic theology; his purpose, taken up with a view to the Bible’s diversity of “human authors and historical contexts,” is guidance toward “coherent” expression of the Christian message.[[19]](#footnote-19) Against tendencies he associates with Catholic, Orthodox and some contemporary Protestant thinking, Peckham defends “canonical *sola Scriptura*,” or the view that the biblical Canon, taken as a whole, is “the uniquely infallible, sufficient, and fully trustworthy” basis for depiction and regulation of the “relationship between God and his people.”[[20]](#footnote-20) With completion of “the last written apostolic testimony” regarding Jesus, the “ultimate revelation of God,” the canon was closed, and now exists, uniquely, as “the rule and standard of Christian theology.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Complexities of both perspective and communication assure that theological effort will fall short of perfect understanding, or even “perfect interpretive correspondence to the canon.”[[22]](#footnote-22) As necessitated by its “dual”—meaning not just divine, but also substantially *human*—authorship, the canon itself, though truly the “Word of God,” displays “polyphony” and “apparent tension” that together complicate the interpretive process.[[23]](#footnote-23) All this magnifies the requirement that theological effort allow for humanity’s “cognitive and linguistic finitude,”[[24]](#footnote-24) and shows that such effort must take place again and again. The result is an always-developing record of Christian perspective, and in all its forms, whether creedal, scholarly, or of some other kind, that perspective is worth consulting. But—and here is the nub of Peckham’s argument—nothing in that record can be doctrinally determinative. No “extracanonical normative interpreter of Scripture” is allowable.[[25]](#footnote-25) One evidence for this is that, precisely within the Canon, “prophetic” voices challenge conventional thinking. If a community that slips into such thinking has elevated some post-canonical “authority” to normativity, such voices may be dismissed for being out of step with that authority. “Radical propheticity” could thus lose a foothold—and take truthfulness itself along with it![[26]](#footnote-26)

The premise for all this is divine influence during the process of canonization, and Peckham accepts this premise. By his lights, it entails not only that the right books have been collected into Scripture, but also that Scripture “is fully trustworthy and unfailingly accurate in all that it affirms.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The diversity of human authorship does require interpretation shaped by the biblical Canon “as a whole,” and the Canon as a whole does shine a particular light on Christ. Here Peckham quotes Kevin Vanhoozer: “‘Each part has meaning in light of the whole (and in light of its center, Jesus Christ).’”[[28]](#footnote-28) These nuances by no means detract, however, from biblical “infallibility,” and they certainly underscore the illegitimacy of extracanonical norms. All this would present difficulty, of course, for those Adventists who, in theological debate, turn to Ellen White as a final, or decisive, court of appeal.

BARTHIAN LIGHT ON THE BIBLE

Thompson and Peckham both acknowledge human finitude. Karl Barth seizes upon it. We saw that he wrote as an observer of German Christian complacency. Both World War I and the later Nazi catastrophe underscored the church’s desperate need for Paul’s message in the Epistle to the Romans. Here humanity is *human* and God is *God*, and here finitude is a *corollary* of grace. Grace is *God*’s grace, and one of its meanings is “shattering disturbance.” It reveals our “sin,” our flawed “understanding”—in sum, our delusional arrogance. No human response to this grace, and certainly no moral initiative, is truly basic, or “‘primary’”—except one, and that is “repentance.” This act of “rethinking,” itself a divine gift, is the indispensable premise for human renewal.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Barth’s scholarly output was unfathomably prodigious. After a highly productive first decade as an academic theologian, Barth completed, in the 1930s, the first of what would become the four-volume *Church Dogmatics*. Published as two separate books, it was some 1,500 pages long, and would turn out to be the shortest (!) of the four volumes. His theme throughout is the Word of God. In its primary sense, the Word, he argues, is God’s self-revealing *action* taken on behalf of humanity; crystalized in the Incarnation, it is at work whenever the divine voice addresses and renews human life. As for the Bible, it is the Word of God “indirectly.” The Word of God is a “person rather than thing or object.” [[30]](#footnote-30) The written Word is not the Word of God “in the same way as Jesus Christ,” who, after all, is “very God and very man.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the Bible human authors, writing under divine influence, “point beyond themselves” to what they attest, namely, the self-revealing action of God. They are “witnesses.” Like John the Baptist, they “testify to the light” without claiming themselves to *be* the light.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Divine influence, or inspiration, does not displace the humanity of these witnesses. No Bible writer would claim equality with God, or deny “limits” imposed by “psychological, biographical and historical” factors.[[33]](#footnote-33) So, on Barth’s view, we should acknowledge what Protestant Orthodoxy after Luther and Calvin precisely overlooked, and that is the Bible’s “human imperfection in face of its divine perfection, and its divine perfection in spite of its human imperfection.” Scripture reliably accomplishes what God wants to accomplish, and so reflects divine perfection. But the human witnesses who compose it cannot themselves be “inerrant proclaimers of all and every truth.” What they say may call, indeed, for “criticism,” whether in regard to history or ethics or even theology. [[34]](#footnote-34) Still, the “criterion” for such criticism is itself the Bible. Here inspired testimony presents Jesus Christ as Lord, the “One” who approaches humanity “in absolute superiority.” He is “the self-revealing God,”[[35]](#footnote-35) and to him all Christian conviction must conform. As the very “being,” or “essence,” of the Church,[[36]](#footnote-36) he is, indeed, Lord “over” the Bible as well as “in” it.[[37]](#footnote-37)

All this seems unassailable. No part of Scripture suggests that Bible writers are, like God, infallible. One crucial passage is 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, where all Scripture is said to have been “inspired.” But in Greek the word is “God-breathed,” a metaphor. Though often over-interpreted as backing for some (too-precise) doctrine of inspiration, this metaphor, like any other, does not convey a precise meaning. What the passage says, and the most that it can say for sure, is that divine influence went into the production of Scripture, making it “useful” for the formation of doctrine and moral character. As for Christ as interpretive criterion, numerous passages give clear support to the Barthian perspective. With the resurrection, “all authority” devolves to Christ (Matthew 28:18); God “spoke” through the prophets, but the Son alone bears the “imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:1-3); Moses and Elijah deserve great honor, but Jesus is God’s “Chosen” (Luke 9:35); Jesus is the “image of the invisible Father,” the very Word made “flesh” (Colossians 1:15 and John 1;14). Under just this conviction, Barth was one of the few German-speaking Christians who openly resisted the Nazi regime. Prominent Christian leaders were supporting Hitler. But Jesus Christ alone, Barth wrote in 1934 in the Barmen Declaration, is the one “we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Shortly afterward, he was fired from his professorship at the University of Bonn.

It was in the light of Christ, along with that afforded by God’s *divinity* and humanity’s *finitude*, that Barth said the Bible, or “Canon,” determines what is “valid in the Church.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Analysis here has described his account, and briefly defended it. Here are three conclusions, all pertinent to hermeneutical discussion exemplified at the 1919 Bible Conference, that follow from this analysis. 1) Readiness for repentance and correction is basic to authentic Christian discourse and activity; it should color—or better, *infuse*—discussion of any doctrine, including the doctrine of inspiration. 2) Truncated awareness of divine transcendence inflates humanity’s estimate of itself and its products; the concept of infallibility, applied to anything but God alone, is a misleading and unnecessary boast, and this fact should inform the doctrine of inspiration. 3) Thompson’s Law Pyramid and reference to the “school of Christ” evokes (undeveloped) Christocentrism, while Peckham’s mention of Christ as the Canon’s “center” suggests that the door to it is unlatched if not wide open; but where, as for Barth, the church is “wholly defined by its confession of Jesus Christ,”[[40]](#footnote-40) any account of written authority must have Christocentrism as its the very heartbeat.

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to The Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 33-35, 218.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Not least in Germany. Papers from a 2014 symposium, at Friedensau Adventist University, on World War I and the emergence of the Adventist Reform movement, will appear next year in a new collection, Rolf. J. Pöhler, ed., *The Impact of World War I on Seventh-day Adventism: Divergent Perspectives on the Reform Movement* (Friedensau Adventist University, Institute of Adventist Studies, 2020).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael W. Campbell, *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle with Fundamentalism* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 93, 58. I depend on Campbell’s book throughout the description of the conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 113, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*. 2nd Revised Edition. [Original published 1991] (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2016), 3-4, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 22, 26. The reprinted document is *Selected Messages, Book 1, 15-23.* [In case; I SM 16, 20] [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 112, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 31, 33. The reprinted section is *Great Controversy*, vii-xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 12, 117, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 173-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 113-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 136-137, Thompson’s emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Ibid., 127, where Thompson says that human reason arrives at conclusions “*in dialogue with the Spirit…*” Thompson’s emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 132, 108, 143, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 74, 112, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John C. Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon,* Sola Scriptura*, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 258, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 46, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 145. See 220-224 for backing for the first part of the sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 201, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 135, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 142, 201-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Barth, *Epistle*, 225, 259-263, 436-437. I am not certain why Barth puts “primary” in what I assume are scare quotes. The immediate context, starting with p. 434, addresses the self-delusion of supposing that any human thought or act is untainted by the “form of this world,” although some actions “seem almost to bear in themselves the mark of the divine protest against the great error.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), I/1, 117, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., II/1 513. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., I/1 111-112. For the point about John the Baptist, Barth is, of course, quoting John 1:6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. I/2, 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 507-508. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., I/1, 12, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 1/2, 513 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For a German Christian perspective that eventually changed in Barth’s direction, see Matthew D. Hockenos, *Then They Came for Me: Martin Niemöller: The Pastor Who Defied the Nazis* (New York: Basic Books, 2018). Chapter 4, “Trusting God and Hitler,” describes the period when Niemöller was a Nazi-supporting pastor. A key part of the Barmen Declaration is quoted on p. 110. There is consensus that Barth had major drafting responsibility for this document. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Barth, Ibid., I/1, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. I borrow these words from John Webster, *Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 8. They sum up his sense of the of the the perspective Barth injected into Barmen Declaration. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)