

IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES TO USE WHEN DISCUSSING THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Introduction

The great controversy between Christ and Satan, which was inaugurated by Satan's accusation that God had given a law that His created beings could not obey, has been in process for at least 6,000 years. There have, of course, been many individual battles within that larger controversy.

One of the battles in which we Seventh-day Adventists are now engaged is a contest within our own church between the teachings of Adventism and the teachings of Calvinism. While the battle continues we may find it helpful to consider some basic principles to use when discussing theological issues.

1. Quotations must be used in harmony with their context.

A quotation out of context is one that is used in such a manner that the writer's intention is not correctly reported. A theologian stated that Ellen White denies the possibility of character perfection and gave as his evidence this statement:

“Perfection exists only in the imagination.” RH 8/08/93

Tracing the quotation to its source found that the writer (Ellen White) was referring to the world and the church, not to human character:

“We may create an unreal world in our own mind or picture an ideal church, where the temptations of Satan no longer prompt to evil; but perfection exists only in our imagination. The world is a fallen world, and the church is a place represented by a field in which grow tares and wheat.”

In the column preceding the above statement she had written:

“By beholding and copying the perfect Model, we shall present to the world a character that is Christlike.” RH 8/08/93

The intention of the writer had obviously been ignored, and the few words taken from the statement were used to suit the purposes of the theologian. This is an example of violation of context.

Note how we may go astray if we read the first two sentences in this paragraph and fail to read the third sentence:

“In Christ dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily. This is why, although He was tempted in all points like as we are, He stood before the world, from His first entrance into it, untainted by corruption, though surrounded by it. Are we not also to become partakers of that fullness, and is it not thus, and thus only, that we can overcome as He overcame?” SDABC VII, 907

When those who are promoting Calvinistic doctrines use quotations from Ellen White's writings to support their views, we should not accept those quotations without first examining the context. This should be our first step in evaluating such arguments.

2. Statements and interpretations must never be confused.

A statement is the expressed thought of the writer. An interpretation is someone else's opinion as to what the writer might have meant, but did not say. No number of interpretations can equal a single statement. There are extensive compilations of quotations from Ellen White's writings that were put together to create the impression that Ellen White said babies are born with inherited guilt from Adam's sin. The simple fact is that she never made any such statement. The compilations are the interpretations of the compiler, not the thinking of Ellen White.

Ellen White wrote clearly and specifically, and like all inspired writers her work hardly needs interpretations.

3. An obvious or clearly stated truth needs no interpretation.

Some will argue that all research is interpretation, and that all study is interpretation. There is danger in pushing this concept so far as to make it appear that the Scriptures have no meaning unless they are interpreted. Suppose I introduce you to a lady standing beside me and tell you she is my wife. Should you say, "That is only your interpretation?"

When we read in the Ten Commandments that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, should we say, "This is just someone's interpretation?"

The Seventh-day Adventist message was built upon the principle that the Bible is its own interpreter. Let's stay close to that principle in our Bible study and in our study of the Spirit of Prophecy.

4. A series of tandem definitions can easily go astray.

By linking one definition to another we may turn a writer's words in a direction far removed from the writer's intention, even though we are scrupulously following the dictionary.

Illustration:

The writer's statement: The man is handsome.	
Handsome can mean beautiful.	Webster
Beautiful can mean lovely.	Webster
Lovely can mean exquisite.	Webster
Exquisite can mean delicate.	Webster
Delicate can mean dainty.	Webster
Dainty can mean particular.	Webster
Particular can mean fastidious.	Webster

Fastidious can mean squeamish.	Webster
Squeamish can mean oversensitive.	Webster
Oversensitive can mean critical.	Webster
Critical can mean quibbling.	Webster
Quibbling can mean evasive.	Webster
Evasive can mean deceitful.	Webster
Deceitful can mean dishonest.	Webster
Etc., ad infinitum	

When someone says, "Ellen White used this word, but the meaning is the same as that word," we should beware. Let the writer speak to us in her own words. Substitutions are not needed.

5. Adventist definitions and Calvinistic definitions may be quite different.

An Adventist minister said that he had gone to Adventist schools from the first grade through college and had been "taught legalism all the way." But he was using a Calvinistic definition of "legalism." We Adventists, like other non-Calvinistic Christians, have always defined "legalism" as an attempt to do God's will in our own strength rather than in strength supplied by Christ. Some Calvinists, however, omit the condition regarding strength supplied by Christ and define "legalism" as any effort whatever to do God's will. As they see it, God does everything and man does nothing.

It was by this definition that the minister had made the allegation that he had been taught "legalism" in Adventist schools.

As we hear the words "legalism" and "legalist" used in the present discussions, we may find it necessary to ask which definition of the term is being used, the non-Calvinistic or the Calvinistic.

6. The use of sneers, mockery, and ridicule indicates a lack of evidence.

It is well to keep this point in mind when such epithets as "legalist" are being hurled. One of the most widely recognized principles of debate has always been that those who have evidence will present their evidence, while those who do not have evidence will resort to the argument "ad hominem," which means "against the man." Careful thinkers will neither use such methods nor be impressed when others use them.

7. A half-truth presented as an entire truth can have the effect of an untruth.

The half-truth that is heard most often in our ongoing discussions is this:

"What we do has nothing to do with our salvation. "

If this is intended to mean that we are not saved by works, we can accept it, but only as a half-truth. The other half is this:

"What we do has a great deal to do with our damnation. "

The apostle Paul puts both halves of the truth before us in Romans 6:23:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. "

Damnation is earned by what we do. We get what we deserve, our wages. But eternal life cannot be earned. It is a gift. God will never owe it to us. Are we then free to do evil because the best we can do will not earn heaven? Look again at the first half of the verse. By practicing sin we earn its wages, and disqualify ourselves to receive the gift of eternal life. Here is the entire truth in which there is no danger. Half-truths are always dangerous. This leads directly to the next point.

8. A negative disqualification and a positive qualification are not the same thing.

If you have only three wheels on your car you cannot drive across the continent. This is a negative disqualification. Putting the fourth wheel on the car removes this disqualification but does not guarantee you a safe trip across the continent. You must also have the necessary positive qualifications, such as gasoline, oil, water, etc.

A violation of any of God's commandments is a negative disqualification. Ceasing to violate the commandment removes this disqualification, but it does not guarantee you eternal life. You must have the all-important positive qualification, the forgiving and restoring grace of Jesus Christ.

To be more specific, we recognize that

--we cannot talk our way into the kingdom of God, but we can talk our way out. (The third commandment and/or the ninth.)

--We cannot finance our way into the kingdom of God, but we can finance our way out. (The eighth commandment.)

--We cannot marry our way into the kingdom of God, but we can marry our way out. (The seventh commandment.)

Thus the statement:

What we do has nothing to do with our salvation - is a half-truth, which, if presented alone, can be dangerously misleading. **It fails to make clear the distinction between a negative disqualification and a positive qualification.**

9. Word bending exercises make all statements uncertain and unclear.

A famous speaker spent several minutes in a word-bending exercise by which he hoped to destroy the force of Paul's statement in Romans 8:3 that Christ came to earth "in the likeness of sinful flesh." He endeavored to show that the word "likeness" included something of similarity and something of difference. By the time he had finished he had totally bent the words to his liking and if we may so freely bend this word, may we not do the same with other words?

Perhaps the word "Sabbath" includes something of Saturday and something of Sunday.

Perhaps the word "tithes" includes something of ten percent and something of two percent.

Perhaps the word "baptism" includes something of immersion and something of sprinkling.

Once we have started down this word-bending road, where do we stop? Why not accept the Word of God as it is written and avoid these problems?

10. The "New Theology" is nothing but centuries old Calvinism.

Arminius fought it in Holland. John Wesley fought it in England. Francis Asbury struggled with it in colonial America. And it is now confronting us. There is not a principle in it (the so-called "New Theology") that cannot be found in Calvinistic textbooks of systematic theology. Its argument that man cannot live without sinning is simply a restatement of Satan's oldest and greatest lie.

11. The "New Theology" cannot be harmonized with the Spirit of Prophecy.

Early attempts to make it appear that Ellen White did agree with Calvinism have had to be abandoned. The evidence regarding the nature of Christ is overwhelming and those who yet wish to cling to Calvinism are finding it necessary to resort to a variety of stratagems for the purpose of downgrading the Spirit of Prophecy as evidence. As Ellen White predicted:

"The very last deception of Satan will be to make of none effect the testimony of the Spirit of God. "Selected Messages, Volume I, page 48"

The Spirit of Prophecy counsels will not be openly and straightforwardly rejected, but they will be made of none effect. Some argue that they were written for an earlier time, then urge upon us the ideas of John Calvin, which were three hundred years earlier still.

Some argue that Ellen White was not a theologian, although her output of 25,000,000 words exceeds that of any theologian, and the subject matter is uniformly either statements of theological principles or ethical applications of those principles. There is no hint in Scripture that the person chosen

by God to bear special messages to His people needed to be a theologian. In fact, His choices seldom included theologians.

We don't put Ellen White's writings above the Bible, but we put them above every earthly writer!!!

Some set before us such Spirit of Prophecy concepts as making our schools like the Biblical schools of the prophets, or cities of refuge for our young people. They then describe "lunatic" misapplications of these concepts and close the discussion. This creates the impression that there is no sound and sensible application of these concepts.

Some ignore the principle of drawing conclusions based on the weight of evidence, and employ "loophole logic," justifying their actions by the use of isolated passages which they interpret to suit themselves.

But probably Satan's greatest ally in his attempt to make the testimonies of none effect is simply our ignorance. As a people, leaders and lay-persons, we do not adequately value and study the messages that God has given for these last days.

May we repeat here the suggestion that in every Seventh-day Adventist home there should be a complete library of Ellen White's writings, including the bound volumes of the magazine articles? These should be studied systematically and marked for future reference. The cost would be little more than the price of an appliance or a piece of furniture, and the benefits would be as far reaching as eternity.