

# Present Truth

## Walking in God's Light

BY WILLIAM G. JOHNSON



In 1843, 15-year-old Ellen Harmon, her parents, and other family members were cast out of the Methodist Church because they believed that Jesus was soon to return. It was a bitter experience, but one that encapsulated the spirit of the early Adventists: they were determined to follow truth wherever it might lead.

The Bible, the Bible only—this became their rallying

point. What the Bible plainly taught they would follow; what it did not teach they would reject. No practice, no decree of pope or church council, no religious observance, no matter how venerated, could stand unless the Scriptures mandated it; and what the Word revealed they would cling to, regardless of the cost.

The expectation of the imminent Advent first separated them from other Christians; further beliefs from the Bible soon followed. Walking in God's light, searching the Word, they step-by-step arrived at those doctrines that made them—and make us—a distinct people: the Sabbath, the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, the three angels' messages, the pre-Advent judgment, and the nonimmortality of the soul.

A phrase from the Bible itself summed up their passionate devotion to the Scriptures—"present truth" (2 Peter 1:12, KJV).<sup>\*</sup> Present truth meant that God had a message, light, a particular understanding of His will that had contemporary relevance and force, one that was right because the time was right. Present truth meant heeding the summons of the Spirit, striking out into new territory under the leading of God.

To be an Adventist 150 years ago demanded daring

and boldness, freshness of mind, openness to truth. What does it demand today?

Our fundamental beliefs, voted by the world church assembled in session in Dallas, Texas, in 1980, indicate that Adventists still retain a dynamic view of truth. The preamble to the 27 articles establishes a context for understanding them; and that context is present truth (see sidebar, p. 9). These beliefs aren't a creed, because they may be modified in the future; God's people may expect new insights as the Spirit continues to lead them.

Do we take this preamble seriously? Does truth have *present* power and meaning for us? Are our minds still fresh and our spirits bold to walk in God's light?

But how does the "new" relate to the "old"—which is now the 150-year system of doctrine we have developed? In a world church of 190 countries and nearly 8 million members, how do we stay together and yet remain open to God's light?

Tough questions—but worth the struggle for answers. The day we cease to be a people of the Book, seeking for and walking in present truth, we will have lost more than the spirit of the Adventist pioneers. We will have settled down to become just one more denomination.



The Bible itself, Ellen White's writings, and our 150-year history all call us to the struggle. They challenge us to a dynamic understanding of truth, one that seeks to find the truth and seeks to live the truth, one that values the past but makes it contemporary.

### The Bible and Present Truth

Because God is, truth is. He, the moral arbiter of the universe, ensures that truth is absolute; it is not relative, as so many people believe in these times. "He will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

In several places in Scripture Yahweh is called "the God of truth" (Ps. 31:5; Isa. 65:16, etc.). The Holy Spirit is designated "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 1 John 4:6), while Jesus, the incarnate Word, was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The Bible reveals God's will to us; it is truth (John 17:17). Through the commandments, story, prophecy, and history God, the source and measure of truth, identifies truth for His people. Over and over, Jesus prefaced His remarks with "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (KJV), which means, "I tell you the truth . . ."

Thus the truth stands over against the lie. Beyond our feelings and perceptions, beyond human rationalization and conjecture. Truth confronts the false, the pseudo truth, the counterfeit. Truth is because God is.

"I am writing you a new command," said the apostle John; "its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. . . . I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the

truth" (1 John 2:8-21).

Jesus, full of grace and truth, brought grace and truth to a world in darkness (John 1:17). Yet He did more: He not only brought truth to light, He *was* the truth. "I am the way and the truth and the life," He said (John 14:6).

To know Jesus, then, is to know truth. To be connected to Him is to grow in understanding of eternal verities.

If truth is rooted in God, the changeless one, what can *present* truth imply? An aspect or emphasis of eternal truth that presses home with specific, contemporary thrust.

Our grasp of truth will ever be partial. We cannot encompass the mind of God; we see and understand in part; we see through a glass darkly. We are conditioned by our times: we understand via the thought patterns of our day.

If King David were to rise from the dead, he would find himself utterly at a loss to communicate with us. His world was sheep and shepherds, small towns and villages, petty monarchs armed with swords and staves. Our world of computers, television, airplanes, vast metropolises, tanks, and H-bombs would confound him.

God spoke to David in the language of his time; He speaks to us today through the context of our experience.

Every generation thinks it has a lock on wisdom and knowledge, but "time makes ancient good uncouth." Ideas that people held dear are exploded by the next generation.

Further, the Holy Spirit today *leads* us "into all truth" (John 16:13). Truth is progressive; God reveals His will successively. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many

times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1, 2).

Our God is God of the new, the fresh. All eternity is open to His view; His knowledge sweeps across the centuries, over the past, in the present, on to the future. He is working out His grand design for the universe, and He gives to humans increasing light into His purposes as the generations unfold.

Thus, if we had lived in Noah's day, present truth would have focused on the message of the impending destruction of the old world. If we had lived among the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, it would have come as the glad word of deliverance. In John the Baptist's era present truth proclaimed Messiah's imminent appearing. And in 1844—and still today—present truth centers in Jesus' second coming and a people who prepare to meet Him.

Note, however: While our understanding of truth is progressive, truth never contradicts itself. "New light" cannot deny "old light," if both derive from the One who is the light of the world. New light amplifies and clarifies, never nullifies the old.

### Ellen White and Present Truth

That teenage experience of being cast out of the Methodist Church because she followed her biblical convictions remained a lodestar for Ellen. Through her long life and ministry we find her calling Seventh-day Adventists to walk in God's light, to be open

## Preamble

***Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.—Preamble to Fundamental Beliefs.***



to the cutting edge of the Spirit.

No artificial creed, no doctrinal schema set in concrete—"the Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 416). She was concerned that we would remain a *movement*, ever

advancing in knowledge and understanding.

We find her using the term "present truth" frequently; another expression that seems to have been equivalent to "present truth" was "the truth as it is in Jesus."

Ellen White stressed that new light was possible for God's people. "The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in increasing light," she wrote (*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 33). "Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed. The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the Word of God" (*ibid.*, p. 35).

Further, she encouraged Adventists to ongoing study: "Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation" (*ibid.*). A lack of discussion and questioning, she indicated, shows stagnation and apathy: "When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves, to make sure they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what" (*ibid.*, p. 39).

However, Ellen White makes clear that openness to new light does not leave our entire belief system up for grabs. Those distinctive truths that emerged with the 1844 experience, which she calls the "pillars" and identified as the sanctuary, the law of God, the Sabbath, the three angels' messages, and the nonimmortality of the soul (*ibid.*, p. 30) are to remain unmoved. "We are one in faith in the fundamental truths of God's Word," she

wrote (*ibid.*, p. 79). With increased understanding we may discern new dimensions of these truths, but they will continue unshaken.

Thus "present truth" builds on the foundations of the present truth of the pioneers. It does not seek to provoke dissension (*ibid.*, p. 74), and it is not speculative (*ibid.*, p. 92). Rather, it is dynamic, interacting with "old" truth, testing and probing, questioning and challenging as the Holy Spirit leads us ever onward toward the perfect day.

### Adventist History: Walking in the Light

Some Adventists today think that our beliefs have remained unchanged over the years, or they seek to turn back the clock to some point when we had everything just right. But all attempts to recover such "historic Adventism" fail in view of the facts of our heritage.

Adventist beliefs have changed over the years under the impact of "present truth." Most startling is the teaching regarding Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Many of the pioneers, including James White, J. N. Andrews, Uriah Smith, and J. H. Waggoner, held to an Arian or semi-Arian view—that is, the Son at some point in time before the Creation of our world was generated by the Father. Only gradually did this false doctrine give way to the biblical truth, and largely under the impact of Ellen White's writings in statements such as: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 530).

Likewise, the Trinitarian understanding of God, now part of our fundamental beliefs, was not generally held by the early Adventists.

## Following Present Truth

"The minister did not attempt to refer to a single text that would prove us in error, but excused himself on the plea of a want of time. He advised us to quietly withdraw from the church, and avoid the publicity of a trial. We were aware that others of our brethren were meeting with similar treatment for a like cause, and we did not wish it understood that we were ashamed to acknowledge our faith, or were unable to sustain it by Scripture; so my parents insisted that they should be acquainted with the reasons for this request.

"The only answer to this was an evasive declaration that we had walked contrary to the rules of the church, and the best course would be to voluntarily withdraw from it to save a trial. We answered that we preferred a regular trial, and demanded to know what sin was charged to us, as we were conscious of no wrong in looking for and loving the appearing of the Saviour.

"Not long after, we were notified to be present at a meeting to be held in the vestry of the church. There were but few present. The influence of my father and his family was such that our opposers had no desire to present our cases before a larger number of the congregation. The single charge preferred was that we had walked contrary to their rules. Upon asking what rules we had violated, it was stated, after a little hesitation, that we had attended other meetings, and had neglected to meet regularly with our class. . . .

"It was asked if we would confess that we had departed from their rules, and if we would also agree to conform to them in the future. We answered that we dared not yield our faith or deny the sacred truth of God; that we could not forgo the hope of the soon coming of our Redeemer; that after the manner which they called heresy we must continue to worship the Lord.

"My father in his defense received the blessing of God, and we all left the vestry with free spirits, happy in the consciousness of the approving smile of Jesus.

"The next Sunday, at the commencement of the love feast, the presiding elder read off our names, seven in number, as discontinued from the church" (Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, pp. 51-53).

Even today a few do not subscribe to it.

Other areas of debate and change over the years include the covenants; the interpretation of the king of the north in Daniel 11, of "the daily" in Daniel 8, and of Armageddon; and the meaning of the law in Galatians 3. At various periods in our history argument has burned hot over one or more of these points; today we may find it difficult to understand why the protagonists were so exercised.

Through all these changes, however, God was leading His people. Sometimes He would point the way of truth through Ellen White, as in 1888 when she sided with the young

preachers Waggoner and Jones in their presentation of righteousness by faith. On other occasions He allowed Adventists to find the answers themselves, as when Ellen White refused to adjudicate the debate over "the daily" in the early 1900s and told both sides to go back to the Bible and stop quoting her for support.

And here we stand at the gate of 1994, as the 150-year anniversary of our movement opens before us. Do we still walk in the light? Are we still people of "present truth"?

For us, as for previous generations, truth meets us at the confluence of three streams: the Bible, our heritage, and life in our day. As we seek to do

God's will in these times, His Word confronts us as challenge and promise: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

\* Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this article are from the New International Version.



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## VOICES OF ADVENTIST FAITH

With each AnchorPoint we will run a cross section of Adventist voices responding to the topic presented or one related to it.

### Question: What is the most vital aspect of present truth?



**Lulu Lindiwe Muze, 24**  
Coordinator, Information Systems  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*Christ's coming is very near, so we need to do His will. To me the law of God is the most vital aspect of present truth. We need to obey the Ten Commandments, which cover our duty to God and our fellow beings. Without these laws people cannot see clearly God's holiness, their own guilt, or their need to repent.*



**Jennifer L. Parker, 30**  
Accounting/Data Entry  
Glen Burnie, Maryland

*The most vital aspect is accepting Christ's death on the cross for our sins. The Holy Spirit can then begin to work in our lives to change us. Galatians 2:20 says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." All this is based on acceptance; it's so simple.*



**Penny J. Nielsen, 44**  
Professor  
Weaver, Alabama

*The Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy point to the second coming of Christ as our hope and thus the most vital aspect of present truth. Anticipation of His second coming inspires hope in this troubled world. His second coming is the apex of His love for us as our Creator, Saviour, Mediator, Advocate, Great Physician, and Friend.*



**Keith Potts, 31**  
Computer Analyst  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*I think the most vital aspect is keeping God's commandments, including the one most easily trampled upon—the Sabbath. Job 22:21 says it succinctly: "Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you" (RSV). In these last days of stress and turmoil, why give up a golden opportunity for God's day of relief?*



**John L. Bechtel, 46**  
Pastor  
Willows, California

*Present truth is more than just one doctrine (e.g., Sabbath, state of the dead, sanctuary, etc.). Present truth has Jesus the truth (John 14:6) as its center, and most important to us is our relationship with Him. This relationship is enhanced through Bible study, prayer, and witnessing, which will reflect in love, loyalty, caring, and obedience in our characters.*