

The Scholar and the Administrator

Twin Pillars of Truth

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When we hear of differences between the leadership of the church and its thinkers and scholars, whether they are theologians, researchers, or employed in some other discipline, some feel deeply distressed, especially if the differences center around our beliefs and lifestyle, or any of the other characteristics we have come to regard as sacred.

Stories about the discord tend to get distorted and exaggerated as they are passed on from one person to the next. This causes confusion and shakes the faith of some in the church and its leadership. For others, it excites distrust in the church's scholars and intellectuals. Often, one group is played against the other as if they have inherent and irreconcilable differences.

I believe that both the administrator and the scholar are called of God to uphold truth and to function as pillars of the church. Both have an important role to play in upholding and building the church. We must understand these functions, and each group should remain within its appropriate parameters through cooperation and respect.

The words of the Apostle Paul are pertinent here:

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:11-14, NRSV).

“Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. . . . Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone” (Titus 2:15-3:2, NRSV).

The apostle is telling us that God chose to bestow different gifts and functions for the good of the

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church. We need to understand these functions and the roles they play in edifying and strengthening the faith.

Both the scholar and the administrator perform tasks that are vital to the life of the church. They simply have different foci. The scholar seeks for truth, then attempts to organize, systematize, and reconcile what he or she has discovered with the existing body of truth.

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is not hard to see why, when we look at the nature of their work. The scholar is primarily concerned with the search for truth, while the administrator focuses on

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she understands it. The administrator also defends truth, but he or she works with concepts already agreed upon and embraced by the body of believers. It is the task of the administrator to preserve, uphold, and disseminate established truth. Both the scholar and the administrator write, teach, and preach their convictions. But the scholar pursues new truths, while the administrator perpetuates old truths.

Both scholars and administrators seek to know the truth, and may use similar methods in their search. Sometimes, the approaches used by the two groups will clash, resulting in tension and distrust. It

the welfare of the body of believers (the church organization).

Focusing on their primary concern, some scholars may become obsessed with their findings and come across as arrogant and dogmatic. On the other side, some administrators may become overbearing, behaving as though everything taking place in the church must first be approved by them. This creates a hostile environment and tensions in the camp.

Things may deteriorate further if scholars display little regard for the effects of their research and teachings on the church. Because administrators often lack the training or tools of the scholar, which

have aided the scholar in arriving at his or her conclusions, administrators may feel threatened by the scholar's findings and become combative or hostile. Since administrators control employment and reimbursement, scholars in this kind of situation may feel threatened and oppressed.

The tension exists because the scholar has the tools to modify perceived truth, while the administrator has the means to impose his or her agenda. It goes without saying that this kind of scenario can be potentially explosive. Abandoned to these conflicting dynamics, the church would have long ago splintered or disbanded. Its survival is evidence of God's direct intervention through the Holy Spirit to keep it united and cohesive.

Steps to Alleviate or Avoid Tension

We, as God's children, must place our energy and talents in His hands, and take all necessary steps to alleviate or avoid tensions within the church. The scholar must be humble about his or her findings and conclusions, especially when these point in a different direction than the church's traditional stance. Correspondingly, for the advance of truth, administrators must respect the role of the scholar and abstain from judging that which they do not understand, giving the scholar the benefit of the doubt until they investigate the facts for themselves. Ellen White wrote: "We are on dangerous ground when we cannot meet together like Christians, and courteously examine controverted points."¹

Controversy may be averted or even avoided if scholars consult, compare notes, and submit their findings to others before teaching or publishing them. This may open new avenues of research or shed new light on the conclusions reached. It may redirect the research, suggest the need for more investigation, modify or change the underlying presuppositions, or confirm the findings. Researchers should test their findings carefully to be reasonably certain that their conclusions are sound before openly sharing their ideas with fellow believers.

The administrator, on the other hand, should dialogue with the scholar before taking administrative measures. This is the minimum expected ethical conduct in a

civilized and democratic society, and much more so in the church where we are all equal under our Lord Jesus Christ. This will be easier to accomplish when the scholar shares new light and new findings sensitively and responsibly.

The administrator would be wise to provide a forum where scholars can present their findings, such as specialized magazines, and invite them to write articles in regular denominational organs such as the *Adventist Review* or *Ministry* that will strengthen and confirm the faith of their readers in Scripture and in Christ. This works better in some disciplines (such as theology), but it can still be done in other areas as well, since truth involves all of life.

Special events such as congresses and symposiums can be organized where scholars of similar disciplines gather to discuss common challenges and share their findings with small groups of colleagues. Events such as continuing education in the various disciplines, group discussions on selected topics, panels, presentations, and lectures will all help to defuse tension and provide a sense of acceptance and appreciation for the scholars' contributions to the larger body.

Both scholars and administrators should keep in mind that every phase of our perceived reality has faith implications. When they disagree, they should keep in mind this advice from Ellen White, written in regard to "Our Attitude Toward Doctrinal Controversy": "The Lord calls upon those of us who have had great light to be converted daily . . . All who are led by the Holy Spirit of God will have a message for this last time. With mind and heart they will be carrying a burden for souls, and they will bear the heavenly message of Christ to those with whom they associate . . . There are great privileges and blessings for all who will humble themselves and fully consecrate their hearts to God. Great light will be given to them."²

Challenges to Scholars and Administrators

For both gifts (the scholar and the church administrator), there are inherent challenges. It is absolutely necessary that the administrator and the scholar remain unquestionably committed to Jesus

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tors have for keeping our worldwide church united as they sort through the new and different approaches and doctrines being presented by the academics of the church.

Administrators, on the other hand, should not forget that truth is progressive.⁴ There is still more light to be found. Even in eternity with perfect

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Christ, His Word, and His church. All their actions and interactions should bear witness to this commitment. This will make it easier to allow each other the benefit of the doubt.

Scholars should remember that no one is able to explain the Scriptures without the aid of the Holy Spirit. But when they take up the Word of God with a humble, teachable heart, the angels of God will be by their side to impress them with evidence of the truth.³

Scholars will do well to realize how difficult a responsibility the administra-

minds and memories, we will continue to find new truths and explore old ones we now ignore or imperfectly understand. So no one should be surprised when new emphasis, new foci, new facets of the same truth or even new truth is discovered. As we approach the time of the end, this is bound to occur with increased frequency. That is one reason the Lord admonishes us about continued, careful study of the Word until we are firmly grounded in truth. We must use these tools continuously as we seek a more perfect understanding of truth.

The administrator would do well to remember that the scholar is faced with challenges and pressures he or she does not experience, but which are a common ingredient in the professional world. A basic presupposition of research, for example, is to question all things, prove, test, and explore other possibilities. The results may affirm, challenge, or contradict previous light—and may be controversial! This process can yield both truth and error. Patience is required so that many of these findings will withstand the trial of time. Quick, decisive action by the administrator can sometimes spell tragedy. Martyrs died for giving us some of the most cherished and precious elements of our doctrine.

The scholar may also need patience, for it often takes years for a new theory to be accepted and assimilated by the church. And sometimes, the new theory will *not* withstand careful scrutiny based on biblical principles. In history, many people considered heroes or even saints, were responsible for introducing heretical practices and beliefs into the Christian Church.

It is best for the scholar to keep in mind that the destiny of the church does not depend on its accepting his or her findings, no matter how true or necessary the ideas may seem. It is the Holy Spirit who leads and controls the minds and the will of the church. Sometimes, the Lord withholds some truth from His people when, in His foreknowledge, He sees that the church is not ready for it. The phrase

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“a truth whose time has come” expresses an important truth. Sometimes, waiting is the best action.

Patience is sometimes hard to exercise. It is natural to feel compelled to eliminate what we perceive as a threat or hindrance to God’s work. Both administrators and scholars must remember that it is **the Lord’s hands at the helm of His church**, not ours. He will see it through to victory. Let us love Him more than we love ourselves; our church more than we love our position or role, our brothers and sisters in Christ more than we love our talents, gifts, and contributions. Let us seek a humble submission to His will more than proud recognition of our service. We will never match His sacrifice, His commitment, His power, His mercy, His grace. Paul’s advice to Titus still applies today:

“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, . . . passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one an-

other. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:3–5, NRSV). ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1958), Book 1, p. 411.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 166.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 411.
4. Ellen White wrote: “Great light has been shining, but it has not been fully comprehended and received” (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 166). In the *Review and Herald*, she expounded further upon this idea: “There is no excuse for any one in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation” (“Christ Our Hope,” *Review and Herald*, December 20, 1892).

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