



# TEACHING RELIGION FOR THE CHURCH:

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JAN PAULSEN**  
PRESIDENT OF THE  
GENERAL CONFERENCE

**Paulien:** As far as I know, Dr. Paulsen, you are the first General Conference president with a Ph.D. in Religious Studies. So I want to ask what impact your scholarship has had on you as a Christian and as an administrator in the church.

**Paulsen:** My studies in theology began at Emmanuel Missionary College back in the late 1950s. Then I came to the [Seventh-day Adventist Theological] Seminary [in Berrien Springs, Michigan] and did a B.D. in the days when we had those. After these studies, my wife and I went to Africa as missionaries in 1962. While I was in Africa, I began my teaching ministry, and I found it appealing. I felt drawn to the wonderful privilege of helping to create the mind of a preacher.

After four years in Africa, I made contact with three or four



**Dr. Jan Paulsen**

universities in Europe to see if I could be accepted into a doctoral program. I was very open about being a Seventh-day Adventist minister. If anybody wanted to accept me, they

needed to know what they were getting. I applied to Edinburgh, but in my heart I really wanted to go to Germany. I come from a country where the Lutheran Church is the state church. So I wanted to study the German language, and I wanted to study theology with a faculty based in the Lutheran tradition. I didn't know then that you would not be accepted into a theology program if you came from a church that was not a member of the World Council of Churches.

Because of this, two of the German universities I applied to immediately rejected my application. But I heard nothing from Tübingen for a couple of months. Then I got a letter from Professor Peter Beyerhaus, the professor of missions and ecumenical theology. He himself had served in Africa for a number of years, so he wrote: "You have made a submis-

**BY JON PAULIEN**



**Dr. Jan Paulsen and Dr. Jon Paulien.**

sion here to the faculty of Systematic Theology, but since you live in Africa now, would you be interested in doing a study that is related to Mission Theology? Since you have a certain touch with the African reality, you could explore some aspects of the Christian witness in the African tradition.”

So I thought about it and thought, “If I can do it on the basis of biblical theology instead of anthropology, I might like to do that.” So, we worked it out and I did my studies under Beyerhaus at Tübingen. It was an interesting time, and I used the opportunity to do courses in dogmatics under Jürgen Moltmann and in the Book of Romans under Ernst Käsemann (the last year he taught at Tübingen before he retired). So it was a very fascinating period of my life. I finished at Tübingen in 1972.

How did it impress me? I think primarily in the sense that a systematic and comprehensive study of theology shapes your mind. It is a *discipline*. It’s not so much a question of what you learn as what you become as a thinker and as a person. It teaches one a certain generosity of mind and hopefully also some humility along the way. You don’t know everything, and what you think you know you

might have to acknowledge as wrong. I think it has given me a broadened mind without becoming a threat to who I was and where I belong.

I would probably not recommend that a young graduate go to a school such as Tübingen. I had been in ministry for 10 or 12 years when I went there. My strong background in ministry conditioned me for the challenges. It was probably the one period in my life when my wife and I had almost all of our social life with people who are not members of our church. It was wonderful to associate with people who did not share our theological convictions, yet to have respect and mutual acceptance of each other as people.

**Paulien:** That’s very interesting to me because I’ve noticed in various committees that you don’t seem threatened when somebody differs with you. You have a capacity to say, “I have to re-think this.” I don’t see that in every church administrator. But in today’s world, one has to have a certain flexibility with many issues that we face. Were you an Adventist all of your life?

**Paulsen:** I was. My mother was baptized when she was carrying me, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle in Norway. Finding a job there is challenging when the Sabbath begins

at noon on Friday! But I grew up in a wonderful Seventh-day Adventist home. My father was a shoemaker, and my mother was at home. It was a simple life, but it was a wonderfully secure Christian home; there was a lot of joy.

**Paulien:** From a cobbler to Tübingen! That’s quite a leap. Are you having as much joy being General Conference president, or is that a bit more stressful than growing up in northern Norway?

**Paulsen:** Well, an assignment such as this is a very serious thing. It takes a lot of thought and prayer. You really need to feel in your heart that this is the best way you can serve God. You wouldn’t want to do it otherwise. Having said that, people are sometimes surprised that I don’t feel a great burden—I actually enjoy what I’m doing. It’s a weighty assignment, but I feel that things don’t depend on me. I don’t go to bed at night and stay awake. The Lord is going to look after His church.

**Paulien:** I wonder if the security you felt growing up in Norway has something to do with your ability to handle pressures now.

**Paulsen:** Yes, maybe it has. I think my life has been shaped by a wonderfully strong faith that my parents had. They allowed space for us to grow, to make mistakes and move on, and I’m sure that had an impact of the kind of person I am today.

**Paulien:** I feel that I know you a little better from some of these experiences you have shared. I’d like to turn to some challenging topics now. Let me begin with a tough one. Most Adventist scholars recognize that the church’s International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education was well intended. But many of us feel that the harm it could cause outweighs the good. Could you help us understand your strong support for this initiative?

**Paulsen:** Let me comment on two different perspectives. First of all, this was voted on by the church at Annual Council before I became president. I have a strong conviction

that if the church sits in council, with leadership from around the world, and they decide that something has high value for us, it is my responsibility to give it an opportunity to demonstrate whether it has value or not. So unless it has shown that it cannot accomplish what it was designed for, I'm duty-bound to honor the decision that was taken. So that is the purely mechanical side of it.

Does the IBMTE action have value? Well, when the Annual Council took this action, it outlined half a dozen goals or values that the IBMTE was designed to attain. And they're good values. Even those who have problems with the whole initiative do not argue with these values. They relate to the life and the witness of the church; they encourage the togetherness of theologians and administrators in the church. The IBMTE was designed to foster these values.

The council action then outlines how the church felt these values could be achieved, and that is, I grant, 90 percent of the document. But it is also recorded in the Annual Council action that if a given division finds that these values can be better accomplished a different way than the one that's outlined in this document, they are free to submit an alternate route to the council. Now if it does not work, it should have a very limited life. But if it does work, we should look for creative ways to make it even better for the needs of the local fields.

I must say, however, that I don't think we handled the setting up of the IBMTE well. I think the process of consultation beforehand should have been much more comprehensive than actually took place. There could have been a greater buy-in from the start if there had been wider consultation.

**Paulien:** I guess one of the things that worries me about the IBMTE is that it seems to imply that the leadership of the church doesn't trust the church's scholars. They want to keep tight control over what we're

doing. How would you respond to a scholar who felt distrusted?

**Paulsen:** I would say to you, and to all my colleagues who teach our students: "The church desires no other way of training our ministers and our youth than through the systems we have. We do trust those who teach theology. That trust is based on the extent to which we are bonded together. We belong to the same family, but that doesn't mean that we always see and express things in the same way. In the family, parents and children are bonded by a love that will overcome many things, even

occurred a couple of years after that first Glacier View. At that time, about 60 administrators and 60 scholars worked together in small groups. I've had the privilege of working with the Daniel and Revelation Committee and the Biblical Research Committee, so I have a fairly regular interaction with a lot of the church's top leaders. But most of my colleagues don't. Perhaps we should consider a broad meeting where a new generation of scholars can get better acquainted with the church's leaders. The trust you are speaking about can be developed in the kind of personal



when they shout at each other. Families find a way to deal with all sorts of difficult things."

So I feel that church administrators trust those who are teaching theology, although we might not always express it in the way we should. Trust is there, first of all, because we don't have any desire or intention to do it any other way. So we need you. The elected leaders that I work with, the division presidents particularly, readily acknowledge the high value that the theologians bring to our church.

**Paulien:** It strikes me in hearing you that it's been more than 20 years since the theological consultation that

contact that has been missing for many of our religion teachers.

**Paulsen:** Yes, I accept what you've said. That may well be what should be done. You know, you do something which you think is a good idea at one time, but it has value only for a short period. It would be good to set up a forum in which we can come together and talk about these things.

**Paulien:** A related question: Religious scholars have a very difficult task because on the one hand, we're expected to have a prophetic voice in the church, to probe the edges of knowledge, to challenge where chal-

lenge is necessary. At the same time, we're supposed to mentor a new generation in the tradition of the church. Those two tasks seem to be in tension at times. Do you have any thoughts on how we can balance these two tasks in our lives?

**Paulsen:** Those who are involved in scholarship and teaching will always feel this tension. As a committed Adventist and as a professional, you will always be dealing with fresh ideas that are not as fully developed as others. It is part of your thought-life. After all, how do you limit thinking? The reality is, you

positions of the church. There are proper venues where individuals can be given opportunity to share findings that challenge where we have been up to that point.

**Paulien:** We need to explore that. It might not be as big a problem for me and for some of my colleagues in the seminary, because we have a doctoral program. This is made up of people in their 30s and 40s; mature pastors and thinkers. You can explore some really heavy stuff there and keep things together. But in the undergraduate classroom, as you've noted, there is a lot of vulnerability.

three institutions. It doesn't have to be a General Conference [GC] initiative.

On the other hand, there is a forum already provided by the GC in BRICOM. People can get a hearing for their new ideas there. The church needs to give individuals the opportunity to air their findings so somebody else can test them.

**Paulien:** While I've enjoyed being a member of BRICOM, I think some of my colleagues who were invited to share their findings there felt that they were on trial. And that's not always the best context in which a



don't. You read and you search and you think, and you pray, and you wonder, and sometimes it comes together and sometimes you have to file it away for a while, to allow time for things to mature.

While it is important to do that, you mustn't leave your students with so many loose ends that they don't know what to do. Teachers and theologians have a responsibility to a young student so he or she isn't left to flounder. We are responsible to help students tie all the threads together. A theology teacher does not use the classroom to lay out findings that are in conflict with the stated

So I feel for my colleagues who teach undergrads. Where do they go, what venue do they have when they have questions or problems, when their research takes them to the edge?

**Paulsen:** I think we do have a couple of venues for that. The church has the responsibility to provide opportunities for religion teachers to air findings that are somewhat different from where the church is, so they can receive some good feedback. One place where it needs to happen is inside an institution like Andrews. It is helpful to start at a more local level, either within the institution or possibly with the participation of two or

person can process ideas. What I hear you say is that we ourselves may need to create venues outside the classroom where we can challenge one another and learn from one another. The classroom often seems the place where intellectual stimulation best occurs.

**Paulsen:** But it's also a place where you have a very vulnerable group. I think it is fair and right, however, that people who work with material, such as a theologian does, must be given opportunity to test their findings outside the classroom in an appropriate forum of colleagues and church leaders.

**Paulien:** Now that we're on the subject of theological thinking, do you have any thoughts on the future of Adventist theology? Are there any trends around the world that might be of interest to us?

**Paulsen:** Well, I don't see one particular global issue. When I think of our church as a global community, there is so much diversity. There is no one issue that seems to be surfacing everywhere. I think the church will always be challenged with "How can I be a faithful Seventh-day Adventist, alive to the church, alive to my task of witnessing, yet do it in my unique cultural situation?" The church is expanding rapidly around the world. And many of the cultures the church encounters are very different from those in the Western world. How can the church cope with this rapid growth and still keep its Adventist identity intact? That is one of the big challenges.

**Paulien:** When it comes to a variety of cultures, would it make more sense to increase the fundamental beliefs and make them more specific or to make them a little more simple?

**Paulsen:** In every culture, you have to be sure that you have stated your faith in as basic a way as possible. Being a believer shouldn't require much formal training. It was never meant to be a complicated science. So should we shorten the 27? Changing the fundamentals doesn't mean that the belief of the church has changed. When we drafted the 27, it was stated we intended to re-examine them every now and then and say, "Have we said it the best way? Was there something we left out, which we have now discovered that we should have included?"

An example of this is occurring now. Recent advances in the 10/40 window indicate that there are realities in respect to God and evil powers which the statements from 1980 do not address. We are, therefore, proposing an additional fundamental belief at the session in St. Louis.\* This new fundamental addresses our need to say something about prayer, the devo-

tional life, and how Christ has overcome the powers of evil.

**Paulien:** A concern I have is that every word of our Fundamental Beliefs has an oral tradition as to why this word was chosen, and that word wasn't chosen. It seems to me that if we wait until all those who drafted the 1980 statement are no longer with us, we can end up with a lot of misunderstanding or even an unchangeable creed. So I'm thinking that taking a fresh look at all of the fundamentals in the very near future would make a lot of sense. Would this 28th fundamental provide an opportunity to evaluate the whole thing in the light of the past 25 years?

**Paulsen:** We were not meant to have a creed, these are not fixed statements; they are always going to be subject to change. I hope that in bringing in this additional one we are signaling to the church that these are things that we will constantly be looking at. We will constantly ask the question, "Did we say it as well as we should have, does it make sense at this time in history, or was there something we overlooked that we should have included?"

I don't expect that we will just open all of these at a General Conference session; you will run into chaos if you do that. There has to be

a process beforehand. Some thought should be given to these matters before they come to the session, and that is how we have handled the new fundamental. It was sent to world divisions and institutions of learning to examine the choice of words that have been made.

**Paulien:** Would you reflect a little on the purpose of the Faith and Science Conferences and their final outcome?

**Paulsen:** It's easier, of course, to define the purpose than to define the outcome. Some seven or eight years ago, when I was chair of the board of the Geoscience Research Institute, the request came through that board to the GC to set up a conference where theologians and scientists at our schools could come together and look at Creation. There have been many caricatures of what is being taught about Creation at our institutions.

So the GC agreed to schedule, over a period of two years, a series of faith and science conferences that would look at Creation. These conferences would have input from men and women who teach theology, who are involved in administration, and who teach science or are involved in science research. We were quite deliberate in choosing people who would



be able to bring a certain broadness of input. It has to be possible for us to talk together, even when we don't see eye to eye on everything. There is nothing to be gained from running away from something simply because it's not so easy to talk about.

The purpose of these conferences was to bring people together in an open discussion, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and safety. I don't expect the church to change its position on the matter of Creation. We have clearly stated in our Fundamental Beliefs our view on Creation. I expect the church to stand firm on that. But I hope that we can come out of these conversations with a better understanding of each other on both sides.

**Paulien:** Most Protestant denominations faced with issues like Creation have tended to split into a number of smaller groups. Do you see Adventism heading for a breakup, or is there something different about us that will keep us together?

**Paulsen:** Well, I would like to think that there is. I really don't sense that we're going in the direction of a division or a split along that line. In the first place, we are different from other Protestant churches; we are very global. There are many, many elements that bind us together: the way we handle our resources, our Bible study materials, the writings of Ellen G. White. Many things hold us together as one family, and we are very deliberate in making sure that bonded quality stays intact.

So I don't sense that there is that kind of a rupture coming. As I travel around the world, what I sense from our members, leaders, and teachers is a strong desire to hold the church together. There is a very strong sense in our international family that we are one. You don't really find this in any other church quite the way we have it. This is God's design for us that we are going to preserve.

**Paulien:** I'm encouraged that you're not as worried about this as some of us might be. A related issue is that at times evangelists take some very different tacks in handling the

same subject around the world. It makes me wonder if differences in evangelism could one day lead us to a breakup.

**Paulsen:** It is a fact that in public evangelism, the basic core teachings of the church are being expressed in largely the same way. But there are evangelists who will highly profile the role of the Papacy in parts of the world, while in other areas, such as in parts of Latin America (where the Catholic Church is a very strong church), our public evangelists deliberately take a different approach. They set about accomplishing their mission, not as a focused Catholic-bashing exercise, but as spreading the complete gospel, which will draw people on the basis of positive values rather than on the basis of negative attacks or criticism.

So I think there are differences in emphasis on that. Being an evangelist is a very challenging role. Each culture has to select its approach and the people who can best carry the message into that culture. Clearly, some people can do that better than others.

**Paulien:** Thank you very much. Before we close, I'd like to give you an opportunity to talk about any other opportunities or threats the church faces.

**Paulsen:** When I look at the world church, the biggest challenge that I see is not to focus on growth at the expense of nurture and discipleship. In some places, numbers have become the final criterion that defines whether you have succeeded or not. As a result, there are places in the world where we've had large numbers come in, but they have no place in which to worship and they have no one to look after their spiritual needs. They are left like sheep without a shepherd, and they become easy pickings for someone else. So I think we have a huge challenge to make sure that we not only bring people into the church but sustain and grow the Christian life that follows baptism.

Another issue we need to address is the question, "What is the heart of Adventist life?" I think this is some-

thing that we need to define very carefully, what is the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist faith identity. There is a reason God called this movement into being 150 years ago. We need those who teach theology and religion to provide strong input on Adventist identity. We need to be clear on the beliefs that give us good reasons to pursue our mission. I feel it is so important that we be clear about the core issues.

In conclusion, when I was a teacher of theology, I found it very rewarding and a sacred responsibility to create a young mind. To our religion teachers, I say that there is no larger or more responsible assignment in the church. Our young people are tomorrow's church, and they stay with you for many months. It gives you a chance to shape their mind. I appeal to you, therefore, to carefully review the elements that you bring into your teaching in light of this. I would want you to share with your students the central components of Seventh-day Adventist identity. These are what drive and compel us into mission, and mission is what we're here for. ✍



Jan Paulsen



Jon Paulien

**Jan Paulsen** is President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, whose headquarters are in Silver Spring, Maryland. At the time of the interview, **Jon Paulien** was President of the Adventist Society for Religious Study. He is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. The original video interview was presented at a meeting of 150

North American religion teachers in San Antonio, Texas, on November 19, 2004. Some of the oral flavor of the original has been retained.

\*When this interview took place, the church's 28th Fundamental Belief had not yet been adopted.