Implications of the Incarnation: Jesus in Adventist Theology

Jesus is our Theology

(Please do not reprint or publish in any way, online or otherwise, or pass on to others without permission of the author, Lisa Clark Diller)

 “Theology” means the study of the nature of God and the practices of worshipping God. For those of us who are Christians, who believe that Jesus is the express image of God,(Hebrews 1:3) studying theology actually MEANS studying Jesus. He is both the subject of our theology and models how we think about how to know God better. Today, my task is to provoke some conversation about how seeing Jesus as both model and content of our theology might play out in our particularly Adventist context.

The first element of doing theology (I am told by the experts) is to talk about the method by which we do something as audacious as study the nature of God—this is actually more important than statements of faith or creeds. This is why, for Adventists, the preface to our own list of fundamental beliefs, is the most crucial expression of theology we have**: “**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.[[1]](#footnote-0)”

 What is really astonishing about this is its confidence that no list of ideas about the study of God is final. Theology isn’t content, my friends. It is process. It isn’t a destination we’ve arrived at. It is our current understanding and it is to be EXPECTED that we will continue to grow, to reformulate our ideas and words. We do this collectively, and as individuals, and we understand that these concepts will change over time.

Jesus himself shows us how this is done: He told his disciples “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”[[2]](#footnote-1) Jesus represented a way of building upon the theology that the Hebrews had been given—adding to it, doing something new with it, but not discarding what had gone before. In this way, present truth isn’t a negation or undermining of our heritage, but a using it as a foundation for the new thing that God wants to do. Jesus described “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven” as being “like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”[[3]](#footnote-2) When we follow Jesus in our theology, we have to be open to how the work of God might lead us to interpret the Word of God in fresh and helpful ways.

We have a phrase in our tradition that encapsulates this idea perfectly. It is the notion of “present truth” and it clearly meant and means that ideas and theology are unfolding over time.[[4]](#footnote-3) James White declared in 1849 “In Peter’s time there was present truth, or truth applicable to that present time… The present truth now, is that which shows present duty.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Ellen White was also deeply concerned with progressive present truth at several points in her ministry. For instance, in 1884 she wrote, “There was a present truth in the days of Luther,—a truth at that time of special importance; there is a present truth for the church today.”[[6]](#footnote-5) This attitude of discovery, of openness to what the Spirit might be teaching them now, in this time and place, was fundamental to the heritage of our early church. A first generation Adventist wrote “We cheerfully admit that we have been mistaken in the nature of the event we expected would occur on the tenth of the seventh month.”[[7]](#footnote-6) In fact, of course, our entire denomination was formed out of a general acknowledgement that we had been mistaken in our understanding about Jesus’ second coming. Of all traditions, Adventists understand the importance of theology as process.

In 1888 at the Minneapolis session of the General Conference, Ellen White declared “that which God gives his servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth of twenty years ago, but it is God’s message for this time.”[[8]](#footnote-7)

This was over forty years after the Great Disappointment, and between the 1840s and the 1880s, Adventists had already adapted their formulation of their spiritual understanding on many different items. They had moved from a “shut door” theology which excluded any who had not been Millerites to one which actively welcomed and even recruited new believes into the Body of Christ. In those same years they had also moved from a view of Jesus as less than God to a fully Trinitarian theology.

And after 1888 there were more adaptations. Ellen White was part of the movement to replace a concern with the law to a concern with Jesus. Apocalyptic understandings and interpretations have changed over time—what would constitute Armageddon was once commonly applied to whatever was the most recent violent conflict (Russo-Turkish War, WW1, WW2, etc). Eventually we began to understand that battle as something more spiritual. Our explanations and metaphors for the covenants and sanctuary have changed over time, and so have our understandings of gender and race relations, just to mention a few items.[[9]](#footnote-8)

 So the first element of Jesus in our theology, Jesus as our theology, is the idea of present truth. This includes a commitment to any needed reformulation of traditional ideas, expansion of concerns to include issues we haven’t previously considered and, most painfully and hopefully most rarely, the correction of wrong beliefs we have held in the past. Even such corrections need not embarrass us or make us feel we are rejecting our spiritual heritage. Progressive thinking is by definition thinking that moves forward—it conserves the heritage even as it seeks new understanding and commits to better knowledge, better applications of that understanding within our own context. We continue to value the past, but we don’t expect to merely safeguardit. We will celebrate the way God continues to lead us into ever more full understandings of Jesus and how we can follow Him in this world.

The notion of “present” truth, has the connotation of here-ness. Present can both relate to time and space. So when we pull on our heritage of present truth, we can think of the way that Jesus was living in a particular place as well as in a particular time and how he sought to declare God’s presence and love in that time and place. So our Seventh-day Adventist tradition not only acknowledges that we have change over time, but that we may be different in our expressions from place to place. This should be expected. It is fully in line with our practice and our tradition.

The second element of doing theology as Jesus did, of studying God as He appears in Jesus, is to welcome the very fact of being part of a specifically Adventist tradition. We are of course, first of all, followers of Jesus. We might say, if we’re all Christian, why be part of a denomination? Why claim a specific tradition? There are many ways of answering this, but the one that seems most compelling to me is the model of Jesus himself. When God became Incarnate, He chose a specific group of people to identify with and took on their heritage and history. Jesus was a particular ethnicity, in a particular time and place, a particular gender and class—not because these elements were better reflections of God, but because they reflected humanness. God is universal, but the Incarnation made Him particular. And as humans, we aren’t universal. We are particular. And we exist in specific places with specific people.

It would be nice, perhaps, to think that we are part of some universal category of Christian (and some people even like to think they are generic God-followers with no specific religious identity), but in spite of how we might enjoy picking and choosing from a variety of traditions, we are limited in the extent to which we can do this. When we start with being disciples of Jesus, our understanding of that, our practice, are reflective of a particular tradition. This Adventist inheritance is rooted in a Wesleyan, Anabaptist, Protestant, Latin Christian heritage. We don’t need to be embarrassed that we are part of an specific group any more than we are uncomfortable having an ethnic or national or family identity (in spite of the fact my people in those categories may also have elements that make me unhappy from time to time).

I was recently at a gathering of Christians who were trying to find ways to work for justice and beauty in this world. There were lots of people sharing what they were doing and how sometimes their attempts to work radically as Jesus followers had led to tensions with their home congregations. One woman expressed how exhausted she was by trying to work for good in the world, and feeling like she was often isolated and burnt out. She said the greatest benefit of being at this gathering was hearing encouragement “in the cadences of my own tradition.” This really struck me as part of what we’re doing here at this gathering. We share so much in common with other Christians. But we need to hear how to think about God and practice following Jesus in the cadences of our own tradition.

In addition to having a specific identity and being committed to present truth, the third element I want to analyze about Jesus in our theology, is the way the Incarnation is critical to the specifically Adventist aspects of how we understand God and what he wants for us. There are many facets of our belief statements we could include, but I am going to highlight just a few. I should say that I’ve been deeply shaped by Fritz Guy’s analysis in his 1999 book *Thinking Theologically.*  I’ve already included what might be the most important, which is the notion of present truth, an openness to a progressive (in the sense of moving forward) theology.

But another powerful feature of Adventist theology that fully embodies the truth of the Incarnation is “the idea of multi-dimensional human wholeness.” [[10]](#footnote-9) I was in graduate school before I realized the amazing potential of this concept. The theology of being embodied souls gives great values to humans in the here and now. It says that, in one sense, we are all Incarnate. We exist in bodies. God has honored this—he took on human flesh and dwelt among us. By doing this, Jesus gave honor to this world, to human bodies. And we will continue to exist in bodies in the world made new. We don’t value simply ideas or the ideal, but the real, the physical. This is an amazing truth and one which many Christians around the world are beginning to take hold of, with radical implications for their care of the poor, the sick and disabled and the environment.

This concern for the body, for the material, for the particular, for Creation, is beautifully expressed in the practice of Sabbath-keeping, The Sabbath isn’t simply about saying there is a commandment that we need to keep—this is about the Incarnation—the enfleshment of what we really believe, the practice of trusting God and valuing the human and the material. We actually exist in bodies and we actually need rest. Rest is the most practical, physical practice of trust. You can’t make yourself sleep, you have to let go. You can’t rest by rote, you have to lay back into the pleasure and need that rest fulfills. The Sabbath is the practice of trust, the physical embodiment of prioritizing people, Creation, and faith. We choose not to work, to engage in the constant round of gain. We acknowledge that we need down time, we adjust to the rhythms of childhood and age. We revel in Creation, in time with each other, in good food. It may be counter-intuitive, but practicing Sabbath-keeping is all about the sensory, the bodily. Good smells and tastes and sounds and touch and indulgence in beauty. Sabbath is most of all a reveling in the physical. When Jesus said he was Lord of the Sabbath, he turned what the Sabbath meant (a sign of a special people) into an incarnation. He embodied what it meant to keep Sabbath, to practice it. And it was radical and upsetting to those around him.

Finally, Adventist emphasis on “the hopeful anticipation of the reappearance of God in the person of Jesus the Messiah” puts the focus of our story on our fullest unity with Jesus. When we put Jesus at the center of the Second Advent, we are reminded that this isn’t about being saved or not. It is recognizing that this world, in spite of Jesus’ Incarnation, still doesn’t reflect what God wants. God is here with us, and we see evidences of that all around us. But the fullest expression of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus spent his time announcing and living, and which we as his disciples are also to do, is yet to come. We spend our time living *as if* that kingdom is imminent, we “live into the world made new.” We do this as followers of the Jesus who came into a broken messed up little corner of the world and said “God is here, and this is how we live when he is king.” We are to do this too, and our emphasis on the Second Coming constantly reminds us that we have a model to live into that subverts the powers of the world around us. When we declare that God/Jesus is king, we are saying that we don’t need to be beholden to the imperialisms we live with here—the demands for constant consumption, the valuing of those who are physically strong, the identifying with political powers to the exclusion of the stranger in our midst. The Second Coming of Jesus is a reality that we live into, that we make real each day. We say this is what really matters—this world is messed up and while we declare God is here, we also know that things do not yet reflect how he wants them to be. This both liberates us and makes our tasks clear. We are to live as if he was king until he comes again. What would that look like? What does that look like?

So following Jesus is at the center of our theology. Historically, it is where we started and along the way we found new and better ways of putting Jesus first. There is constantly the temptation to put being right, to put our ideas of Jesus rather than the Man Jesus at the center. But being particularly Adventist allows us to have our own ways of focusing on the Incarnation. We have our own contributions to being disciples of Jesus that we can make to the larger Body of Christ, to the other streams of Christianity. We build on the heritage that we have—our own particular quirky past, in which we have seen progressive truth, present truth, people speaking out in the context of their time, learning to love and understand better. As a people rooted in this past, in a past that started from an admission of being very very wrong about something, we should have no problem following a man, Jesus Christ, who turned many of the most cherished ideas of his tradition on their heads. We can continue to revel in being followers of Jesus in the Adventist tradition.

G. K. Chesterton wrote a poem illustrating the dual nature of who Jesus was. If we can enjoy that knowledge, revel in it, celebrate it, and never stop studying it—it will also allow the Incarnation to shape our work and study and all that we do here in this life.

There has fallen on earth for a token

A god too great for the sky.

He has burst out of all things and broken

 The bounds of eternity:

 Into time and the terminal land

 He has strayed like a thief or a lover,

For the wine of the world brims over,

Its splendour is split on the sand.

Who is proud when the heavens are humble,

Who mounts if the mountains fall,

 If the fixed stars topple and tumble

And a deluge of love drowns all-

Who rears up his head for a crown,

 Who holds up his will for a warrant,

Who strives with the starry torrent,

 When all that is good goes down?

  For in dread of such falling and failing

The fallen angels fell

Inverted in insolence, scaling

The hanging mountain of hell:

 But unmeasured of plummet and rod

Too deep for their sight to scan,

Outrushing the fall of man

Is the height of the fall of God.

  Glory to God in the Lowest

The spout of the stars in spate-

Where thunderbolt thinks to be slowest

And the lightning fears to be late:

As men dive for sunken gem

 Pursuing, we hunt and hound it,

The fallen star has found it

 In the cavern of Bethlehem.

More of you, Jesus. Free us from the tyranny of debate and ego. Lead us to know more about how to love.

1. http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. John 16:12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Matthew 13:52. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1999), 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. James White, *Present Truth*, July 1849, 1. As cited in Guy, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1884), 118. As cited in Guy, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Joseph Marsh in *Voice of Truth*, 7 November 1844, 166, quoted in Knight *Millennial Fever and the End of the World,* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 230-231, as cited in Guy, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ellen White, *The Elleg G. White 1888 Materials,*  4 Vols. (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 1:133. As cited in Guy, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Guy, 88-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Guy, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)