

[This paper has been reformulated from old, unformatted electronic files and may not be identical to the edited version that appeared in print. The original pagination has been maintained, despite the resulting odd page breaks, for ease of scholarly citation. However, scholars quoting this article should use the print version or give the URL.]  
*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 5/2 (Autumn 1994): 6-18.  
Article copyright © 1994 by C. Raymond Holmes.

## **The Past President's Address '94**

C. Raymond Holmes  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary  
Andrews University

In keeping with the theme of this convention, "Issues of Faith and Life," my focus in this address is two-fold. First, a response to two recently published keynote addresses; second, the issue of academic freedom in the context of confessional responsibility.

### **Response to Recent Challenges**

George Reid ("The Theologian as Conscience for the Church," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Autumn 93) challenged ATS to be "theological explorers," taking "the vision of the collective and transmitting it to each struggling Christian," to perceptively recognize the new world in which we live and work as one "in which religion is honorably imprisoned, released on weekends for those who savor it, but of little special meaning to most." Then he challenged us to conservative theological creativity, in which the ring of biblical certainty is combined with contemporary relevance and meaning.

A short time later, Alfred McClure ("Forging an Intentional Future," *Adventist Review*, January 6, 1994), challenged the Church to recognize that "people are seeking something personal and relational in a society that by its very inventiveness has created isolation," and not to obscure "the message of Scripture with our passion for doctrinal debate, thus engaging in our own intellectual interests while we fuel the current perception that the church has nothing of significance to say about life in the real world."

*HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

These challenges must be taken seriously. They require a response that preserves the vital connection between theology/doctrine (message) and life (mission). In order to say something significant about life in the real world, we must first be certain about what we are saying.

During the last presidential election a sign displaying, "It's the Economy Stupid!" was hung in Clinton's headquarters as a daily reminder of the major campaign issue. Perhaps we too could use such a reminder, "It's The Message!"

The apostle Paul did not fashion his message to suit any particular social or age group. He preached the same message to the youth and to the elderly, to men and women, to the educated and uneducated. He didn't take a survey, analyze "felt needs" and adapt his message. Meeting real needs took precedence over meeting felt needs. Though Paul was "all things to all men," he did not adapt his message. Paul would preach the same message to our generation that he preached to the upwardly mobile people of his time. Human need does not determine doctrine, divine revelation does.

Neither charges of blasphemy nor legalism stopped him from preaching the incarnation and God's Law. He didn't stop preaching the resurrection of Christ, though many considered it impossible. Because of the perpetual tension between the biblical message and human skepticism, the Church must always be engaged in theological/doctrinal debate.

While theology is intentionally engaged in, it is not to be done in isolation, with an occasional peek at the world. Nor is it reserved for the professional theologian. The pastor preparing for preaching, the members of the Church as students of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, the Church School teacher who images truth for the vivid minds of students, and the Church administrator who translates revealed truth into ministry and mission are all engaged in the theological task.

That task is dynamic rather than static and requires openness to revealed truth, faith in that truth's validity and cruciality, and the action such truth mandates. However, professional theologians must lead the way in moving from theological investigation producing diagnosis to the prescription needed in practical ministry. Privatization or imprisonment of the message must be avoided; it

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

must not be consigned to “respected irrelevance,” but made “personal and relational.”

*Making Truth Meaningful.* We can begin by recognizing that contemporary listeners want to know how Bible teaching works in human lives. This does not mean compromising or abandoning propositional truth and its analysis. It does mean that, “What happened in church this Sabbath?” is a more meaningful question to this generation than, “What did you learn in church this Sabbath?”

Let me illustrate. When I arrived at Andrews University in the fall of 1970 I took a course on the doctrine of the atonement. For four weeks the professor lectured about the messianic mission of Christ including Calvary, His resurrection, and His ascension. Then he began to speak of the heavenly ministry of Christ as High Priest, and I was deeply disturbed. But out of that disturbance—really a divine moment—came a new perspective of faith, a new hope, and a new ministry.

The problem was not with the biblical validity of the doctrine, but with its meaning for my life. I began to pray about that. My prayer was something like this: “Lord if I am to believe, preach, and teach this doctrine, please make it existential for me just like you did with Calvary.”

The miracle happened when suddenly, like lightning flashing across a dark sky, I realized that the sanctuary doctrine means I have a living Saviour who cares for me and exercises that care on a daily, moment by moment, basis from the heavenly sanctuary. My faith in what Jesus did for me on Calvary found a new dimension and a new completeness, resulting in a genuine revival and renewal. I am connected by faith with the present ministry of my Lord in the heavenly sanctuary, and subjectively experience the objective truth of it.

I fear that our preaching of salvation and atonement is becoming more evangelical and less Adventist. We are not saved by the cross, but by Jesus. Calvary is one aspect of the atonement being accomplished for us by Jesus. Assurance of salvation comes because He died for our sin on the cross, and because He is finishing His work as Saviour in the heavenly sanctuary. Isaiah 6:6-7 says:

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having a live coal in his hand

*HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

which he had taken with tongs from off the altar; and with it he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity and guilt are taken away, and your sin is completely atoned for and forgiven. (*The Amplified Bible*)

*The New English Bible* reads, “your iniquity is removed and your sin is wiped away.”

Sin is finally “atoned for,” “removed,” and “wiped away” when the heavenly record of it is blotted out by the blood of Christ which He took into the heavenly sanctuary. (See Heb 9:12, 14, 25.) When this good news is heard and believed the response is, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf” (Heb 6:19-20).

The sanctuary doctrine certainly has something significant to say about life in the real world of hopelessness and uncertainty! The truth of it embodies divine power to transform life. Even to transform faith. This is why God has called us to preach it to those who have not heard it before! The truth about the ministry of Christ in heaven is profitless unless it, like Calvary, is “united by faith in those who heard” (Heb 4:2). We can have confident faith to enter the heavenly sanctuary, because we have a High Priest who entered heaven with His own blood and pleads that blood before the Father on our behalf. His blood is the assurance we will be dealt with graciously (Heb 10:19-25).

My fascination with this truth continued as I looked for increased understanding and meaning for myself, and for preaching.

The Bible says: “Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart with full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our body washed with pure water” (Heb 10:21-22). But how is it possible for the conscience to be made clean? This is an important existential question, because the guilty conscience is a problem of the real world searching for joy and happiness. That conscience can tell us we are guilty sinners and condemned to live hopeless, joyless, lives.

Our great need is to hear the good news that the way into the sanctuary is opened by the blood of Jesus! His credentials are our confidence. The blood He took into the sanctuary cleanses the

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

believer's conscience by the removal of the sin the conscience recognizes and which condemns the sinner. The sanctuary truth proclaims that our Lord is doing a thorough job, dealing with our feelings of guilt and with the sin which produces guilt. He died for our sin "by the sacrifice of himself" on the cross (Heb 9:26).

But what about the guilt? Nothing we do can purify and cleanse the conscience. No resolutions, no promises, no rituals. It takes an act of God, an act of divine grace. Once again our Lord is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He removes the sin He died for by covering it with His blood and ultimately wiping away the record of it from the heavenly sanctuary. When that happens there is nothing to stand against us, to accuse us anymore! The conscience cannot condemn when God Himself does not.

That doesn't mean sin is removed from memory, for God does not cause the function of human conscience to cease. It does mean that by a sovereign act of grace and atonement, sin is pardoned in the record in the only place where it could condemn in the final judgment. There could be no records for the judgment if the record of sin was expunged at one's acceptance of Christ. But sin is forgiven or pardoned. Christ has assumed our liability as our surety.

The first time I preached this a man began to sob uncontrollably. When later I spoke to him he said, "I've never heard the message of my Lord's ministry in heaven described just that way before. It's the best good news I have ever heard!" The power of truth does work experientially in human life.

*Timely Cautions.* When it comes to the full atonement message, we must be careful that we don't turn wine into water, that our methods of Bible interpretation don't separate wheat from chaff, and then keep the chaff. Being progressive does not necessarily mean discovering something new. It can mean rediscovering that which is old and everlasting, and telling the story in new ways. Revival does not come by altering or rejecting that which gave us life in the first place, it comes by a renewed submission to, and faith in, the same message that converted us and gave us our mission.

It is the message that determines mission. If the mission is to evangelize the world and continue the reformation, then only the message that can accomplish it deserves our allegiance and our attention. Let us explore that message from the perspective of life

### *HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

in a contemporary world dominated philosophically by the goodness of man, a coming political/economic utopia, moral relativity, and radical individualism. Let us find creative ways to declare once again that man is wickedly depraved and deserves only judgment, that Christ and His kingdom are the only answers to our search for acceptance and security, that desperately-needed, transcendent, absolute values are found only in the inspired and infallible Word of God, and that Christ's call to the obedience of faith and sacrificial living is the solution to family and social fragmentation. Let us search for creative ways to proclaim the old message that the Gospel, understood in its broadest sense—justification, sanctification, glorification—is the only message powerful enough to counter such contemporary manifestations of barbarism.

ATS will fail as an instrument of renewal and revival, fail to be on the cutting edge of Adventist theological thought, if it perceives itself only as a place of safety, retreat, and isolation for likeminded thinkers. Defensiveness alone stifles creativity, the offensive stimulates it. We cannot leave theological/homiletical creativity in the hands of others. We must provide the concepts and supply the language to produce a revival of the message and renewal of Adventist life. We must dedicate ourselves as Adventists, and this Society as an instrument, to the shaping and renewing of the consciousness of the Church. Therefore, we cannot afford to allow conservative theology to be marginalized. Luther once observed,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Academic Freedom and Confessional Responsibility**

Many members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church today are uneasy and confused. They sense mixed signals being sent their way and are troubled by a loss of conviction concerning the Advent message, uncertainty concerning Adventist identity, and the adoption of open-ended values. While the Adventist faith may be world-

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

wide, they perceive that in some parts of the world it is only an inch deep relative to conviction and commitment. Could it be that in our concern for academic freedom we have minimized our distinctive beliefs? Has confessional responsibility taken second place, if it has a place at all, to academic freedom?

*Limitations to Academic Freedom Defined.* Schools established and supported by a Christian denomination are, by virtue of their mission, confessional institutions with a bias regarding revealed truth. In such schools responsibility for revealed truth defines the limits of academic freedom.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church holds that academic freedom constitutes “the guarantee that teachers and students will be able to carry on the functions of learning, research, and teaching with a minimum of restrictions” in an “atmosphere of open inquiry necessary in an academic community if learning is to be honest and thorough.”<sup>2</sup> It also holds that teaching at any level must be done with “due regard for the character and aims of the institution which provides [the teacher] with credentials, and with concern for the spiritual and intellectual needs of students.” Furthermore, the Church recognizes that “freedoms are never absolute” but “imply commensurate responsibilities” including “limitations made necessary by the religious aims of a Christian institution.”<sup>3</sup>

The widest liberty may be appropriate for a school of religion in which all points of view, all religions, are given equal value. But it is not appropriate in a Church school which has as its fundamental reason for existence the propagation of the faith. The Church, including its educational institutions, is a community of believers, not a debating society. The beliefs of the Church are its greatest treasure; they constitute the fundamental philosophy governing academics and administration in its schools. The more certain a Church is regarding its beliefs, the more certain will be its survival and the completion of its mission.

Academic freedom, therefore, is subject to the limitations imposed by the “religious aims of a Christian institution.”<sup>4</sup> This is not a matter of disallowing free investigation, but of subordinating that search to the doctrinal beliefs of the Church. Such limitations are not viewed as suppression of academic freedom, except by those who prefer not to take confessional responsibility seriously.

*HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

God created us to think and to reason, and that ability cannot be limited by any human authority. However, while Christian education is to “train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought,”<sup>5</sup> it was never intended to train them to be doubters, unable to make distinctions between true and false, right and wrong. Unfortunately, doubt rests too comfortably in the Church’s ranks, often in its highest halls of learning. The goal of much biblical interpretation today seems to be to prove that the Bible does not mean what it says, nor says what it means, that there can be no certain knowledge when it comes to God’s revelation of Himself. Belief has thus become relativized and privatized, and every person is a confession unto himself.

But teachers in a Church school are first accountable to the doctrinal beliefs of the Church rather than to faculty peers, administration, or professional bodies such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), or accrediting agencies. If a choice must be made between confessional responsibility and academic freedom, confessional responsibility must take precedence. The Christian teacher must never sacrifice faith to doubt. All views are not of equal value. All opinions of scholars and teachers are not of equal value. James T. Draper, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, writes:

The sanctity of academic freedom is . . . being used against conservative Christians today. We are told that the ‘fundamentalists’ are not really interested in genuine education; they are intent instead on pushing a narrow indoctrination. Furthermore, those in academia never tire of suggesting that ‘creedal interference’ from constituents may well jeopardize institutional accreditation and drive away the most competent faculty members. Again, academic freedom is a valuable concept when correctly perceived, but it is not a blank check for faculty members to teach anything they please.<sup>6</sup>

*Confessional Rights.* Seventh-day Adventists do not distrust education and learning. This is proved by the Church’s funding of the largest parochial school system among Protestants. They distrust educators who, under the guise of academic freedom, do not uphold what the Church believes and undermine that corporate confession instead. It is the neglect, the distortion, the suppression, the “reinterpretation” of the truth as revealed in the Bible that is



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

feared. Those who cry the loudest for academic freedom are often the most intolerant of those who hold conservative theological views. There are always those who, under the guise of concern for academic freedom, modify, reinterpret, and even attempt to destroy the historic faith of the Church.

Any endeavor to undermine the beliefs of the Church from the inside is a form of subversion and is morally and ethically unacceptable. One who cannot conscientiously teach what the Church believes, who no longer believes what the Church confesses, is morally obligated to leave Church employment. One is not free to teach views in a confessional institution that are in contradiction to the beliefs of the Church to which the institution belongs.

One may think wrong, but does not have the right to do wrong. The responsibility of a teacher in a Church school goes far beyond that of a teacher in a secular school. For this reason God's Word says that those "who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). They must "teach what is in accord with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

To teach what is not the beliefs of the institution served would be a wrong thing to do, and to disregard the faith of the Church is an act of lawlessness. "It would be an irresponsible use of a worker's freedom to press a viewpoint that would endanger the unity of the church body which is as much a part of truth itself as are the formulated statements of doctrine (see Phil 1:27; Rom 15:5-6)."<sup>7</sup>

Academic freedom in the service of confessional responsibility will bow to the Church's faith, because the Church has the duty to "guard" (1 Tim 6:20) the truth that God entrusted to it from that which it considers to be harmful to its faith and mission, and to guard those whom God has entrusted to its spiritual care. Members of a Church have the right to be protected in the truth they have accepted, and the right to protest when that truth is misrepresented or adulterated. There is, after all, a differentiation to be made between the genuine and the spurious.

What should be the attitude of the Church toward views which explain away the facts of the faith? It must resist any misleading modification or destruction of its beliefs. Anyone who cannot hold to the confession of the Church has already separated from the Church. While the Church insists on the individual's right to

*HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

believe as conscience dictates, it is not obligated to retain in its ranks dissenters from its beliefs. The Church must exercise its freedom and right to protect its beliefs and its members from what it considers to be teaching not in harmony with those beliefs.

The Lord inveighed against the Church at Pergamum because they tolerated members “who [held] to the teaching of Balaam” and “to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev 2:14-15). He held against the Church in Thyatira their toleration of “that woman Jezebel, who . . . by her teaching . . . misleads my servants. . .” (Rev 2:20). The Lord called those Churches to repent, implying that repentance involves dealing with the problem. The faithful are to “hold to what you have until I come” (Rev 2:25).

The Church is not obligated to grant the widest liberty to all opinions, to challenge no teacher or teaching. Faculty do not decide doctrinal direction in a confessional institution. The Adventist view is that the Church “reserves the right to employ only those individuals who personally believe in and are committed to upholding the doctrinal tenets of the Church as summarized in the document, ‘Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (1980).’”<sup>8</sup>

*Proper Function of Academic Freedom.* Academic freedom is not an end in itself. The purpose for the Church and its teaching ministry is “for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13, RSV).

Freedom to research, to investigate, must be maintained. But that freedom does not extend to the teaching of that which is tentative, which has not been accepted as fact or truth by the body. Constituents cannot be expected to support sacrificially that which is uncertain and/or tentative. There are some ideas that are wrong, that contradict Scripture, and there are some teachers who are wrong. We must not permit the skeptics to win the arguments by letting our schools drift from uncompromising belief into loosely-held opinion. A confessional school is not a place where no one can ever be wrong, or it would be a place where no one can ever be right, which would deprive the school of its fundamental subject matter and of its integrity.

If we are not willing to establish some limits, some parameters,

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

to what can be taught or who can teach in our schools, the door will be flung wide for doctrinal pluralism and an ecumenical approach to the faith. No one would be able to raise objections because there would be no right or wrong views.

Academic freedom for the denominational teacher does “not include the license to express views that may injure or destroy the very community that supports and provides for him.”<sup>9</sup> Such teachers jeopardize their employment in a confessional institution if they, while hiding behind academic freedom, ridicule the beliefs of the Church and undermine and destroy the faith of students.

There must always be room for differences of opinion on issues that do not involve testing truth. The right to investigate, research, and share the results with peers must be maintained. However, if there is a conflict between the teacher’s views and the confession of the Church, it is the teacher’s moral duty to be silent or to resign. If that is not voluntarily done, it becomes the moral obligation of the Church to release that teacher from employment. “Freedom for the individual grows out of his belonging to the community of Christ. No one is free in the Biblical sense who is out of relationship with God or others. Theological truth, therefore, is affirmed by community study and confirmation.”<sup>10</sup>

A good teacher will encourage his students to investigate all views, providing sources for that investigation. But that in itself does not fulfill the teaching responsibility of an Adventist teacher. The Adventist teacher will go beyond such investigation and show the students where the truth lies as confessed by the Church. Confessional responsibility requires that the personal doctrinal beliefs of the teacher harmonize with those of the Church.

Adventist teachers of all disciplines have a pastoral duty toward their students, from which academic freedom does not absolve them. They do not speak only for themselves. They speak for the body of believers. Honesty and integrity decree that those who are paid to teach the Adventist faith, do so. “Let the purchaser beware” should never have to apply to the education offered in Adventist schools.

Academic freedom and confessional responsibility are not mutually exclusive. It is not a matter of having one without the other. It is a matter of the proper relationship between the two, with

*HOLMES: THE PAST PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS '94*

academic freedom subordinate to confessional responsibility. We must always remember that without freedom of thought and inquiry no one could ever come to the faith. Yet at the same time we must assert that without the preservation of the faith no amount of freedom of thought will bring a person to know the truth. The most stable and lasting growth in the Church occurs when confessional responsibility is primary.

Education, thinking, intelligence, intellect, investigation, in themselves are not the greatest values. Such things have been valued and employed by the most evil forces in human history. The greatest values are faith in Christ and service in His name. If all we do in our schools is teach our students to be clever, to be successful in this world, we have miserably failed. We must always appeal for the highest reaches of intellect among our scholars and students, but always in the context of strong, unshakeable, convictions and beliefs. Someone has said that bigotry is the anger of those who have no convictions.

Many who have lost the faith, would passionately promote the evolution of Adventism into something that they can accept. Must those who believe most fervently give way to those who believe less fervently, and then to those who do not believe at all?

The moment Seventh-day Adventists and their educational institutions cease to stand for something definite, the cause is lost and the reason-for-existence collapses. Many great universities founded by Christian denominations, such as Harvard, Princeton, the University of Chicago, became thoroughly secular because the confession of faith was abandoned. The study of theology and religion was separated from other disciplines. Faculty productivity, in the form of publications, became increasingly important as criteria for employment, promotion, and tenure. Student behavioral standards were drastically modified or abandoned altogether, as was adherence by faculty to a statement of faith. Resistance to the trend by conservative clergymen was ridiculed.

There is only one justification for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be engaged in Christian education, and it is found in Christ's commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you;*

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:19-20).

**Endnotes**

1 Quoted in Francis Shaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 18.

2 1987 *Annual Council General Actions*, p. 17.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Assn., 1903, 1942), p. 17.

6 James T. Draper, Jr., *Authority: The Critical Issue For Southern Baptists* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984), p. 103.

7 1987 *Annual Council General Actions*, p. 14.

8 Ibid., p. 15.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 14.