

Book Review

Bissell, Ronald D. *Proclaiming the Promise: A Short History of Seventh-day Adventist Doctrinal Development*. Saraburi, Thailand: Institute Press, 2011. 215 pp. 200 THB.

There is no perfect textbook. Some texts strive to be exhaustive while others lightly survey a subject. No textbook can meet the needs of every student. The definitive textbook on Adventist Church history since its publication in 1979 has been *Light Bearers to the Remnant*, the latest edition of which stretches to nearly 700 pages. It is a valuable resource to the serious student, but is too lengthy and dense to make it practical as a text for introductory-level college classes, especially in locations where English is not the first language.

In 2009, Asia-Pacific International University asked Dr. Ron Bissell, a teacher with many years of experience in Adventist studies, to write a concise textbook on Adventist history that would be useful for future ministers and Bible teachers in Southeast Asia. This Bissell has done and more. *Proclaiming the Promise* is short, provides details where necessary, yet does not lose sight of the big picture. It is both readable and informative.

Bissell limits himself by focusing especially on doctrinal developments, but spends plenty of time telling the stories of the major characters who made contributions to Adventist doctrine. Such an approach makes for an engaging read with plenty of human interest. This is not merely a book about doctrine, but about Adventist history as well. Since major Adventist doctrines were settled early, it makes sense that the book spends the majority of its time on the early history of the church. Out of twelve chapters only the last two deal with events since Ellen White's death in 1915. Good coverage is given in later chapters to various dissidents and critics of the church, especially where the criticisms were doctrinal. Especially helpful are the biographical details of more recent critics like Walter Rea, Desmond Ford, and others, along with Bissell's suggested explanations for why they may have arrived at their divergent doctrinal positions.

In one respect this book could be viewed as a compendium of the latest Adventist scholarship. Bissell incorporates some of the best insights from leading Adventist historians like George Knight and historical theologians like Woodrow Whidden. It is like a CliffsNotes of Adventist history and doctrine. For a person with limited knowledge of Adventist history who wants to gain a strong foundation in the subject Bissell's book may be the most accessible option available.

Many of the hot topics in Ellen White studies from recent years—the plagiarism charge, confusion about the 'Shut Door', the lost minutes of the 1919 Bible Conference—are masterfully woven into the story of the text so that the reader ends up with a balanced view of Ellen White and the nature of inspiration. We see that prophets are authoritative but not infallible and can grow in their understanding.

Though not a major focus, the book matter-of-factly addresses controversial issues like debates over worship styles and music, the 1957 publication of *Questions on Doctrine* and subsequent charges that the Adventist Church has embraced a faulty 'New Theology', and recent anti-Trinitarian trends in Adventism. By providing background information to these ongoing issues the book becomes an even more valuable resource in the college classroom.

The opening chapter of the book is an excellent digest of major doctrinal changes in the Christian Church during the first 1,800 years of Christian history. Many Adventists will be familiar with the list because our pastors and evangelists often speak of the change from Sabbath to Sunday, infant baptism, confession to priests, and other unbiblical doctrines. Bissell provides a great service to future Adventist pastors and teachers by providing historical details and explanations in a short space showing how major doctrinal changes happened.

The survey of doctrinal changes would be strengthened, however, if it spent more time talking about how ascetic and monastic practices were adopted into Christianity and later rejected by Protestant reformers. In an Asian context where Hinduism and related religions encourage ascetic practices as a path to enlightenment, it would be helpful to see how and why the spiritual ancestors of Adventism rejected such practices in Christianity.

Bissell helpfully explains the Methodist doctrine of 'Entire Sanctification', a form of Christian perfectionism, and shows how Ellen White, though once a Methodist herself, came to reject it. Later in the book Bissell discusses Robert Brinsmead's 'Awakening Message', another form of perfectionism rejected by the Adventist Church. These two forms of perfectionism are discussed in isolation from each other. Bissell

could provide a valuable service to students of Adventist history by clearly tying together and explaining Ellen White's teachings about sanctification, Brinsmead's views, and more recent concepts of Christian perfection within Adventism.

At present a major trend in Adventism is known as 'Last Generation Theology', the idea that God's faithful people will reach a state of sinless perfection sometime before the Second Coming. It is surprising, given his attention to both 'Methodist Sanctification' and the 'Awakening Message' that Bissell nowhere deals with 'Last Generation Theology' or its birth in the writings of M. L. Andreasen. Even in the section about *Questions on Doctrine* Bissell makes no mention of Andreasen, who was perhaps the most vocal critic of the book. It is a curious omission.

Appropriate to a book focusing on doctrinal development, Bissell spends significant time on the 1872 statement of fundamental beliefs and its subsequent modifications. While Bissell does a commendable job explaining how the statement of beliefs was first drafted and later modified, he does not spend enough time exploring why. For a Church which began with such strong opposition to creedal statements and formulas, and in 1872 prefaced the list of doctrines by saying the statement did not have 'authority with our people', it is surprising that the most recent version of the baptismal vows makes belief in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs a requirement for admission into fellowship. The book would be stronger if Bissell had gone deeper in his analysis of why Adventism has moved consistently towards creedalism.

The major failing of the book, however, is the prevalence of typographical errors. The most glaring of these is a misspelling of the book's title on the cover and the omission of (presumably) several lines of text at the beginning of page 202. Hopefully Bissell will see fit to produce a revised edition and the editors will be more thorough in their work next time.

Bissell has written a concise history of the Adventist Church from an insider's perspective. He is clearly an Adventist himself and his supportive concern for the Church shows throughout. In some places he could even be accused of being triumphalistic. This is not dispassionate, unbiased historical writing, but it does meet the need of helping other insiders—church workers, interested church members—to understand their church and its doctrines a bit better. With its plain engaging style and short length, *Proclaiming the Promise* should quickly find its place as a preferred text for introductory classes in Adventist history.

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