



Alden Thompson's *Inspiration*: Why Is It A Cause Célèbre?

Reviewed by Clark H. Pinnock

Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*. Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991. \$19.95 hardcover. 332 pages.

Though I have not met Professor Thompson, certain facts about him are apparent from reading the book. Vivid allusions to incidents tell me that he is a well-known Adventist speaker, an energetic college Bible teacher, and an involved Old Testament scholar. Most importantly, I detect Thompson as a man of vision with an urgent message. He longs for God's people, especially his Adventist community, to derive full value from the Bible without being distracted unnecessarily. As a pastor, he wants to prevent believers giving up their faith because of certain mistaken expectations they have picked up about the Bible. The dialogical and autobiographical character of the book make it absorbing to read, even for a Baptist.

Thompson has a perspective on biblical inspiration that he believes will make it possible for people to study the Bible without fear. His first sentence captures the paradigm: "The discovery that the Bible is more like a family letter and less like a theoretical treatise has made a profound impact on my life." He points out that we would not quibble if in a family letter we came across a misspelling, an unusual chronol-

ogy, or an unorthodox turn of phrase. As readers, we would be able to handle such features without difficulty and get the message loud and clear. Such difficulties in a letter would not disturb us because we would take them in stride. The same can be true of Bible difficulties, if we break free of the bondage of the theoretical paradigm and adopt a practical standpoint that listens to the Father and lets the text transform us. The Bible does not need to be perfect in a logical and scientific sense for us to hear its message of salvation. It was given to meet the needs of ordinary people, not to satisfy the demands of experts. Thompson wants us to think of the Bible as God's love letter to his family. Referring to 1 John 3:11, he writes: "This is not the language of science or philosophy, but the language of relationship and experience, the language of the family" (p. 140).

Thompson thus calls us to focus on the practical emphasis of a text like 2 Timothy 3:15-17 which, saying nothing about inerrancy, highlights instead the plenary profitability of the Scriptures in conveying a saving and equipping knowledge of God. It does not take a theoretical posture, and we should not. If we would look at the Bible this way, we would be liberated from all sorts of anxieties that we so unwisely and unnecessarily suffer from.

Clark H. Pinnock, a distinguished evangelical scholar, is professor of theology at McMaster Divinity College in Ontario, Canada.

Thompson's proposal is really about hermeneutics more than inspiration. One does not find him spending time proving that the Bible is divinely inspired. Why should he do so? Theology from the beginning has implicitly or explicitly acknowledged the inspiration and authority of the Bible. This is true not only of Adventists but also of practically every other tradition as well. The real question is seldom *whether* the Bible has authority but what *kind* of authority it has. Thompson knows that the urgent issue is hermeneutics, not inerrancy.

The key question to be asking is this: Does the Bible convey a message of liberating good news or is it a burden full of difficulty? Is the Bible a source of renewal or a worry to us? Alden Thompson wants to free the Bible for Adventists and others, so it can transform lives as it was meant to. He is critical of the kind of theology which, in "defending" the Bible, makes it a burden and something unbelievable. In contending that the real issue is hermeneutics, not inerrancy, Thompson is speaking not only to Adventists but to the larger evangelical world in North America, of which (I believe) Adventism is a part. I welcome his voice in this broader evangelicalism. He has the role played earlier by such as James Orr, Dewey Beegle, and Jack Rogers, who also urged us to read the Bible without fear.

The central feature of Thompson's doctrine of Scripture is the divine and human character of the Bible. As Paul says in a favorite verse of mine: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV). Chapter six of the book is crucial: "Heavenly Message, Earthen Vessel." Thompson views the Bible in an incarnational manner, as a blending of human and divine. He believes that God adapts his word to

us in a human form so that it might be understood. Because of this, we must give as much attention to the human form of the texts as we do to its divine inspiration, because only by attending to God's word in human language can we hope to discover the divine teaching. The miracle of Scripture is that, despite all human fragility and all limitations of human authors, God's word is effectively heard and realized. As an Adventist, Thompson is able to appeal effectively to Ellen White on this point. I almost envy him the prophet because it is harder for me to appeal to any comparable figure to secure the point with the likes of Harold Lindsell about!

Thompson holds that inspiration does not entail a perfectly inerrant Bible, but does not do much to answer those who think otherwise. This is an omission for the non-Adventist evangelical because in his or her world there are many illegitimate arguments along these lines that need to be exposed. I was forced to expose them for example in *The Scriptural Principle* (1985). The fact is that the Bible does not claim to be inerrant in the autographs, that texts are regularly cited to prove what they do not actually say, and that a lot of circular argument is practiced defending a perfect Bible. Biblical inspiration, according to the Bible, is different from biblical inspiration according

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to Warfield, as James Dunn and Paul Achtemeier among others have shown. I judge that a fair reading of those biblical claims for inspiration are in close agreement with the general perspective of Alden Thompson.

Being Adventist, he applies the incarnational principle especially to biblical law. Like Charles Kraft, he calls the Bible a casebook, not a codebook. Just as the gospel writers adapt the sayings of Jesus to different situations, so God's laws are situationally directed and need to be thought out when applied today.

As a biblical scholar, Thompson naturally concentrates on areas of the Bible's humanity. He knows about many difficulties in the text and their possible effects on people who do not understand the point about incarnational revelation. He is concerned that people may lose their faith, not recognizing this principle. Part three is chock full of illustrations from the Bible that can cause believers (who are not alert to the divine/human nature of Scripture) to panic. He tries to help readers cope with these passages.

There will surely be objections to his strategy. Some will say that if we allow details like the numbers leaving Egypt to be discounted, we may undermine confidence in the Bible as a whole. Unscrupulous people will list his alleged concessions to unbelief and make him appear a dangerous fellow. (This happened to me.) Not everyone wants to know what the text actually contains, if it contradicts their ideal picture of the Scriptures. More reasonably, others will urge him not to give up so easily on the Bible difficulties but put greater effort into solving them. My sense is that Thompson will agree that any difficulties that can be solved should be solved, but he will not endure dishonesty in the defense of orthodoxy. To that I say, Amen.