

Largest of the three sections of the Bible conference was the gathering at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, early in June.



Bible Conferences of 1974

Credit: *Adventist Review*, August 15, 1974.

Bible Conferences of 1974

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The Bible Conferences of 1974, conducted in virtually identical form at three locales in the North American Division, addressed issues pertaining to Biblical hermeneutics and inspiration.¹

Plans and Organization

During the late 1960s several Adventist scholars, notably Andrews University president Richard Hammill (1913-1997), had requested church administration to hold a series of Bible conferences on issues, particularly inspiration, that were beginning to stir debate in the denomination.² Church leaders tasked the General Conference Biblical Research and Study Committee,³ chaired by Gordon M. Hyde (1919-2014), with developing a proposal. More concrete plans at the 1972 Annual Council authorized three consecutive Bible Conferences to be held in the North American Division in 1974.⁴

The program planning committee, chaired by GC vice-president Willis J. Hackett (1915-2002), also included Hyde (secretary), John C. Kozel (1911-1998), a GC assistant treasurer, and E. Edward Zinke (b. 1945), an assistant director of the Biblical Research Institute. A separate logistics and physical arrangements committee consisted of Kozel, chair; Lowell L. Bock (1923-2016), secretary and GC associate secretary; Charles E. Bradford (1925-2021), GC associate secretary; Harry D. Johnson (1916-2008), GC assistant treasurer; and Zinke. Kozel was appointed as the logistics coordinator for all three conference locations.⁵ Representatives from publishing houses and Adventist colleges and universities were urged to send representatives, as were the other divisions around the world church.⁶

The first meeting was held May 13-21 at Southern Missionary College (later Southern Adventist University), the second June 3-11 at Andrews University, and the final one at Pacific Union College, June 17-25. Each Bible Conference began on a Monday night and ended at Tuesday noon eight days later. *Adventist Review* editor Kenneth Wood (1917-2008)⁷ stated that the three meetings were so similar that they “were, in reality, one.” He pointed out that although held in three different locations, “the daily program, the material presented, the method of procedure, and the staff, except for minor variations” were “identical.”⁸ While all three were held in North America, representatives from every division of the world church were present.⁹ Some 450 participants attended the initial Bible conference at Southern; Andrews had about 750 delegates; and Pacific Union College, approximately 550. Church leaders estimated that, including non-delegate attendees, more than 2,000 pastors, Bible teachers, and church workers participated in these three conferences, easily more than three times the number of participants at the 1952 Bible Conference.

Major Themes and Presenters

Robert H. Pierson (1911-1989), president of the General Conference, used the words of King Zedekiah as a theme for his keynote address that opened the conference at each locale: “Is there any word from the Lord?”¹⁰ Pierson described the church as embattled by accrediting bodies, modern science, and liberal theologians. Any view of the Bible that emphasized human reasoning was “poles apart” from a Seventh-day Adventist understanding of inspiration, he declared, adding:

Anything that weakens faith in the Word of God, the commandments of God, the divinity and humanity of Christ, in His last-day message, the Spirit of Prophecy, is not God speaking. It may be materialism, secularism, humanism, modernism, liberalism, syncretism, but it is *not* Adventism. It is not God speaking. It is another voice.¹¹

Other religious groups that followed this course retained “little of their former orthodoxy” and were left with “a watered-down social gospel bolstered by political platitudes,” he said. Contending that the legacy of all of this was a vanished faith, with schools gone, membership plummeting, churches empty, and finances drying up, Pierson challenged delegates: “*is this what we want?*”¹² He called upon participants to cling to the Bible and Ellen

White as sources of divine revelation, and to “stop your criticism” without any reservations. He believed that a high regard for the Bible’s divine inspiration was the key to revival and reformation, and he called for a new emphasis upon personal holiness, character development, and victorious living. “Perfection of character,” he said, can only be attained “by becoming familiar with [God’s] Word.”³

Organizers stated that the 1974 Bible Conference was held “to focus on the Bible as the foundation of Adventist faith and doctrine, and to study sound principles of hermeneutics.”⁴ The conference theme was presented in 15 topics, principally by members of the Biblical Research Committee. V. Norskov Olsen (1916-1999), a specialist in the history of theology and newly-appointed president of Loma Linda University, traced the issue of biblical authority in church history. Raoul Dederen (1925-2016), chair of the Department of Systematic Theology and Christian Philosophy at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, gave two presentations (later published as papers) titled “Revelation, Inspiration, and Hermeneutics,”⁵ and “Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration.”⁶ He argued for “the right of the Bible believer to approach the Word with certain presuppositions regarding its nature (as invited by the Word itself), which he finds verified and justified in practice and experience.”⁷ Thomas H. Blincoe (1919-2000), from the same department at the seminary, presented a survey of the relationship between the Bible and Ellen White’s writings in the Adventist church.

Gerhard F. Hasel (1935-1994), professor of Old Testament at the Andrews seminary, built a statement of general principles for interpreting the Bible, emphasizing the significance of the word, the sentence, unit, book, author, the interrelationship between Old and New Testaments, and deeper meanings of the inspired words. “The practice of employing a particular philosophy,” noted Hasel, “as a prerequisite for engaging in the task of interpretation and exegesis is to superimpose an external category on Scripture and to make Scripture subordinate to the thoughts of men.”⁸ Later in the week Hasel gave a demonstration of these hermeneutical principles from Isaiah 5:1-7. W. G. C. Murdoch (1902-1984), who had just retired as dean of the seminary at Andrews, showed how principles of interpretation are applied, with special modifications, to the prophetic and apocalyptic literature of the Bible. Walter F. Specht (1912-1999), chair of the New Testament Department at the Andrews seminary, presented on the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. He argued that there was an essential unity of the Word and the Spirit, and every alleged ministry of the Spirit must be tested by the Word that the Spirit inspired.

Siegfried H. Horn (1908-1993), recently-appointed dean of the seminary, presented a paper and two slide programs concerning the contributions of archaeology to a better understanding of the Bible. Robert H. Brown (1915-2013), director of the General Conference Geoscience Research Institute, spoke about the relationship between the Bible and science, especially as pertaining to creation issues. Associate editor of the *Review*, Don F. Neufeld (1914-1980), presented on tools of interpretation for Bible study. Displays of books and journals were available at each site, facilitated by campus bookstores. This latter service was arranged by E. Edward Zinke. Authors featured in the displays included a lineup of evangelical scholars with books on biblical interpretation as

well as a variety of biblical commentaries and dictionaries. Notable authors included F. F. Bruce (5 books), Bernard Ramm (4 books), James Pritchard (3 books), George Eldon Ladd (2 books), Louis Berkhof, Anders Nygren, G. C. Berkouwer, Bruce Metzger, Carl F. H. Henry, and Clark H. Pinnock.

A demonstration expository sermon was given at each of the three Bible Conference locations: the first was by Norval F. Pease (1910-1995), religion professor at the La Sierra campus of Loma Linda University; Louis Venden (1930-2020) from Pacific Union College spoke at the Andrews gathering; and John W. Osborn (1907-1976), Ministerial Department director for the Pacific Union Conference, preached at the Pacific Union College meeting. During the week Bernard Seton (1913-2003), General Conference associate secretary, presented a devotional series on Ephesians during the morning devotional hour. Speakers for the Sabbath services included Charles D. Brooks (1930-2016), evangelist and General Conference field secretary, who addressed delegates on Friday evening and Neal C. Wilson (1920-2010), vice-president of the General Conference for North America, who spoke for the Sabbath morning service (see "Key Presentations" schedule below for the Sabbath speakers at the second and third gatherings). On Saturday evenings, Arthur L. White (1907-1991), head of the Ellen G. White Estate, presented insights about Ellen White's life and work in connection with a biography he was preparing (which would be published in the 1980s as six volumes). He was followed by Siegfried H. Horn, who gave a slide program featuring the archaeological excavation at the ancient site of Heshbon in the Kingdom of Jordan.

The conference's three final presentations, given in the following order, were: Hans C. LaRondelle (1929-2011), professor theology at the Andrews seminary, on "The Everlasting Gospel and Righteousness by Faith;" Herbert E. Douglass (1927-2014), associate *Review* editor, on "The Unique Contribution of Adventist Eschatology;" and finally, Kenneth H. Wood on "The Role of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Great Controversy in the End Time." The latter two presentations featured two Adventist thought leaders widely-noted as proponents of Last Generation Theology.¹⁹

Legacy and Reception

Materials from the conference were made available for participants in the form of a lecture notebook, which became the basis for the published 273-page book, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Gordon M. Hyde. A set of recordings of the presentations on cassette or reel to reel (5" and 7") tape was subsequently made available from the General Conference Ministerial Department for pastoral growth (copies held by the General Conference Archives).²⁰ Later the Biblical Research Institute conducted a smaller version of the Bible Conference at gatherings in France, West Germany, East Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Australia. Another outgrowth of the 1974 conference was Gerhard F. Hasel's extended treatment of the issues it addressed in *Understanding the Living Word of God* (1980) and *Biblical Interpretation Today* (1985).²¹

Kenneth Wood noted that, unlike the 1952 Bible Conference which, because it was not conducive to "a free exchange of ideas," left some delegates feeling "frustrated," the 1974 gatherings were designed with the intent

of dialogue. After each public presentation (up to 90 minutes) time was set aside (70 minutes) for discussion in small groups of 25 to 30.²² “No questions were off limits,” according to Wood.²³ Furthermore, two panel discussions took place each evening, one on the morning topic, and the other on the afternoon topic. This made for a total of 30 hours (15 hours in small groups and 15 hours of panels) spent discussing the topics raised by the speakers. Wood observed that the ability of the church to allow for different perspectives meant that the “church had matured tremendously in 22 years” (the time since the 1952 Bible Conference).

Alden Thompson, religion scholar at Walla Walla College, described the 1974 Bible Conference as characteristic of the “more conservative stance” of denominational leaders during the 1970s. “The crux of the issue,” he wrote, “was whether or not Adventist scholars could use the so-called historical-critical method in any form.”²⁴ Discussion of such terminology anticipated the adoption of the term “historical-grammatical method” as an approach that affirmed biblical scholarship while rejecting naturalistic presuppositions and methods.²⁵

The focus of the meetings on hermeneutics, argues Floyd Greenleaf, meant that the Biblical Research Committee was concerned to identify “correct methodology” in order to arrive “at doctrinal positions.”²⁶ Although the other previous major Bible conferences held in 1919 and 1952 also dealt extensively with hermeneutics, the 1974 conference was the most directly focused on inspiration and hermeneutics. By the time it took place, various positions were held by Adventist scholars on a continuum between the historical-critical method on one end and verbal inerrancy of Scripture on the other, with neither of these opposing positions being fully embraced in rigid form. Some, such as Horn and Raymond F. Cottrell, book editor for the Review and Herald, pushed for a more open approach to Adventist hermeneutics that sought to embrace the best of the historical-critical method. Others, notably Hasel and Hyde, pushed for a more literalistic and conservative methodology that repudiated the historical-critical method altogether and leaned toward inerrancy. Still yet others, such as Dederen, LaRondelle, and church historian Kenneth A. Strand, took a more moderate, irenic stance. It is also noteworthy that Wood and Herbert E. Douglass, both strong advocates of Last Generation Theology, succeeded in making a strong push for their views to be heard in the concluding sessions of the 1974 Bible Conference.

These various hermeneutical approaches and issues, which have ebbed and flowed through the 20th century and into the 21st, formed the boundaries for new areas of discussion and debate within Seventh-day Adventist theology. In doing so they took further the hermeneutical issues previously raised at both the 1919 and 1952 Bible Conferences and showcased the longevity of these debates that continued to shape Seventh-day Adventism.

Key Presentations—1974 Bible Conference

Note specific variations: (a) Southern Missionary College; (b) Andrews University; (c) Pacific Union College

Date and Time

Topic

Presenter

Monday, 7:30 pm	Keynote Address	Robert H. Pierson
Tuesday-Tuesday, 7:30 am	Morning Devotionals: (a) Studies in Ephesians; (b) Studies in Galatians; (c) Studies in Colossians	(a) Bernard E. Seton; (b) R. F. Cottrell; (c) Richard Hammill
Tuesday, 8:45 am	Biblical Archaeology as Aid to Biblical Exegesis	Siegfried H. Horn
Tuesday, 11:00 am	Conference Orientation	Gordon M. Hyde
Tuesday, 2:15 pm	Biblical Authority: In the Ancient and Medieval Church	V. Norskov Olsen
Wednesday, 8:45 am	Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration	Raoul Dederen
Wednesday, 2:15 pm	Relationship of Bible and Spirit of Prophecy in Their Interpretation	Thomas H. Blincoe
Thursday, 8:45 am	General Principles of Biblical Interpretation	Gerhard F. Hasel
Thursday, 2:15 pm	Principles of Interpretation of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature of the Bible	W. G. C. Murdoch
Friday, 8:45 am	Preaching the Bible	(a) Norval F. Pease; (b) Louis Venden; (c) John W. Osborn
Friday, 10:30 am	"The Song of the Vineyard" (A Case Study in Biblical Interpretation)	Gerhard F. Hasel
Friday, 2:45 pm	The Use of Tools in the Study of the Bible	Don F. Neufeld
Friday, 7:30 pm	Evening Service	(a) Charles D. Brooks; (b) W. R. Beach; (c) Charles E. Bradford
Sabbath, 8:15 am	Early Church Service	(a) Neal C. Wilson; (b) E. E. Cleveland; (c) W. J. Hackett
Sabbath, 9:30 am	Sabbath School Lesson Study	(a) Gordon M. Hyde; (b) Frank B. Holbrook; (c) A. Graham Maxwell
Sabbath, 11:00 am	Church Service	(a) Neal C. Wilson; (b) E. E. Cleveland; (c) W. J. Hackett
Sabbath, 3:30 pm	Panel Program	
Sabbath, 7:30 pm	Biography of Ellen G. White	Arthur L. White
Sabbath, 9:00 pm	Slide Show	Siegfried H. Horn
Sunday, 8:45 am	The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation	Walter F. Specht
Sunday, 2:15 pm	Toward a Balanced Hermeneutic and Avoiding of Extremes: Issues in Current Theology	Kenneth A. Strand
Monday, 8:45 am	The Interrelation of the Bible and Science with Particular Consideration of Issues Related to Creation	R. H. Brown

Monday, 2:15 pm	The Everlasting Gospel and Righteousness by Faith	Hans K. LaRondelle
Tuesday, 8:45 am	The Unique Contribution of Adventist Eschatology	Herbert E. Douglass
Tuesday, 2:15 pm	The Role of the SDA Church in the Great Controversy in the End Time	Kenneth H. Wood

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NOTES

1. George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 189-190.
2. Gilbert M. Valentine, *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn, 2022), 285-287.
3. Renamed Biblical Research Institute in 1975.
4. General Conference Committee Minutes, June 28, 1973, 73-1569.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Michael W. Campbell, "Wood, Kenneth H., Jr.," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventism*, October 19, 2020, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7AFA>.
8. K[enneth] H. W[ood], "The 1974 Bible Conference," *ARH*, August 1, 1974, 2.
9. Gordon M. Hyde, "Church Holds Historic Bible Conference," *ARH*, August 13, 1974, 4.
10. Robert H. Pierson, "Is There Any Word from the Lord?" *ARH*, August 15, 1974, 7-9. Note that there are several drafts of this speech available in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, Robert H. Pierson Collection, 1938-1989. PC 14. See "Sermon Outlines, A-I-1," D 13 52; Reference Materials: General, D 13 71; "Sermons Outline, I," D 13 58. The last folder includes versions I-V showing how important this sermon was for Pierson who frequently used it in his repertoire of messages while church president. Collection register accessed February 6, 2024, <https://adventistarchives.org/finding-aid-pc014-pierson-collection.pdf>.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. K[enneth] H. W[ood], "The 1974 Bible Conference," 2; see also Hyde, "Church Holds Historic Bible Conference," *ARH*, August 15, 1974, 4-6.

15. Dederen, "Revelation, Inspiration, and Hermeneutics," in Hyde, ed., *Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1-15.
16. Dederen, "Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration," in *North American Bible Conference, 1974*.
17. Hyde, "Church Holds Historic Bible Conference," 5.
18. Gerhard Hasel, "General Principles of Interpretation," 10. Raymond F. Cottrell strongly opposed the advance draft of Hasel's paper and in an unpublished manuscript wrote that he insisted that Hasel remove nine instances where he ridiculed those who disagreed with him. See "An Evaluation of Dr. Gerhard Hasel's Hermeneutic," unpublished paper, April 1973, Box 1, fld. 25. Raymond F. Cottrell Papers (collection 238), Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University. See also James W. Walters, "Cottrell, Raymond Forrest (1911–2003)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventist*, August 31, 2020, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=4965>.
19. For an analysis, see Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 67. See also the brief overviews of Last Generation Theology in Michael W. Campbell, "Wood, Kenneth H., Jr.," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventism*, October 19, 2020, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7AFA>, and Gilbert M. Valentine, "Adventist-Evangelical Conferences, 1955–1956," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. December 04, 2023, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=6JJ3>.
20. "North American Bible Conference Tapes," *Ministry*, June 1978, 46-47. See also advertisement published by *Ministry* magazine, December 1974, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/MIN/MIN19741201-V47-12a.pdf/>.
21. See Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 189-190.
22. Discussion leaders included W. R. Leshner, Wilber Alexander, and Fred Veltman. See General Conference Committee Minutes, Action A-510, March 7, 1974, 74-49.
23. K[enneth] H. W[ood], "The 1974 Bible Conference," 2.
24. Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 270.
25. See the statement "Methods of Bible Study" voted by the General Conference Committee in Annual Council, Rio de Janeiro, October 12, 1986, in *Ministry*, April 1987, 23-24.
26. Floyd Greenleaf and Richard W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 632. Note that the earlier 1979 edition by Schwarz does not mention the 1974 Bible Conference, which had only taken place five years before.

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