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The Great Controversy Paradigm for History: Scholarship and Teaching

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Abstract

Seventeenth century England was a time of profound Protestant faith. It was also the heyday of the Scientific Revolution and the early Enlightenment. The Scottish Anglican minister, Gilbert Burnet, was deeply committed to the scientific advances he was learning in mathematics and chemistry. He was just as deeply committed to promoting Protestantism against what he saw as a growing tide of Catholic power in England, Scotland, and, indeed, all of Europe. As part of his pastoral role, he wrote *The History of the Reformation in England* to remind his fellow Protestants, both Anglican and Nonconformists of all kinds, of how God had led them in the previous 200 years. He did so from a Providentialist perspective but also using some of the new practices that were developing in the academic profession of history writing—citing sources, explaining human motivations, and looking at context for activity.

This paper assesses Burnet as an example of a devout Christian attempting to study history in a way that honored God while also using increasingly professional tools. These are the same skills devout Adventist professional historians can use today, both in our scholarship with our peers and in the classroom with our students. Historical knowledge can shape our classrooms by teaching our students about people who are very different from them. As they learn about historical trajectories outside their own time and geography, and the cause and effect of human actions, students can use biblical principles to evaluate the activities of the past. They will also, hopefully, develop understanding about them and perhaps practice the same skills that will teach them in the present to “love their neighbor as themselves” (Mark 12:31). They can draw lessons from the past to inform their choices as they follow God in their day to day lives. Historians can then become part of the ministry of reconciliation by teaching people how to understand those who are far off in time and space (2 Cor. 5:18).

Keywords: Great Controversy, history, Adventist, modernity, scholarship, Gilbert Burnet, Reformation, Providential, paradigm, students, biblical

The Great Controversy Paradigm for History: Scholarship and Teaching

My first realization that I wanted to be a historian was as a 9-year-old, paging through the photos and their captions in my parents' copy of *Triumph of God's Love*, one of the many editions of Ellen White's *Great Controversy* text. My father told me that if and when I read it, he would give it to me. I finished it before I turned 12. I knew then that I both loved history and I loved how White's revelation of God's work in history played out across time and space.

Since then I have read *The Great Controversy* many more times, but I have also, as a scholar, learned to articulate what that view of the universe, that understanding of how history relates to prophecy, might mean for me as a professional historian and for Adventists who study history in particular. For Ellen White, history was vital to her understanding of the church. "We need to study the working out of God's purpose in the history of nations and in the revelation of things to come, that we may estimate the true value of things seen and unseen and may learn the true aim of life. Learning here the principles of His kingdom and becoming its subjects and citizens, we may be prepare to possess it at His coming."¹

In stark contrast to this view, the historical profession as it developed in the 19th century took on the assumptions of the modern, materialist world. This was an assumption that history was an unfolding of the accomplishments of man, that progress meant that the past could and should be rejected as inferior, that what mattered was measurability, data, and efficiency. The authority of the Bible, the assumptions of tradition and the possibility of supernatural/miraculous intervention into human experience--these were all distractions from the purpose of the "high road to modernity." Not only liberal theorists but Marxists, Anarchists, and Positivists also held these same values.² They all presumed that true knowledge was found by studying that which was material and understood through sensory experience.

¹ Ellen White, *Education* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 110.

² R.G. Collingwood has famously laid out these assumptions in his *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), 135, 136. He also criticized these theorists as being too optimistic about how science reveals the laws of nature.

Historians also contributed to this, often blaming belief in God and submission to the Bible as causing the troubles of the past. Liberal as well as Marxist historians believed their job was to show the progress of man as they moved into a better, more productive modernity. Conservative Nationalist historians were also victims of this ideology as they looked for the progress and triumph of a particular ethnicity. These historians contributed to the rise and prominence of such ideologies as Nazism and the practices of genetic determinism and sterilization of “undesirables.” They all saw themselves as part of the great, scientific modernization process.³

As Adventist historians, whose view of the world (its history, nature and future) is rooted in the Bible, we see the Great Controversy between God and Satan, God’s unfolding revelation of Himself, rolling out in history, as God’s plan and disclosing of truth break out into brighter and brighter rays. Ellen White describes it this way: “Satan’s efforts to misrepresent the character of God, to cause men to cherish a false conception of the Creator and to regard Him with fear and hate rather than with love ... have been steadfastly pursued in all ages.” Yet, she hastens to remind us that “The Bible itself relates how, through the Holy Spirit, men received warning, reproof, counsel, and instruction.... The great controversy between good and evil will increase in intensity to the very close of time.”⁴ This, rather than the triumphalism of materialist modernity, is the framework or paradigm through which we study the past. Of course, not all Christians, or even Protestants, had the light that would break out in nineteenth century Adventism in North America, but Christian historians can still see God working to reveal Himself, His character of love, in all times and places.

Like Ellen White, Adventist historians see history as vital to the practice of the church, and we celebrate how God has brought us to where we are, in spite of the brokenness of humanity in accomplishing God’s work. We work as professional historians and we attempt to be salt and light in bringing our biblically-based paradigm to bear on our academic disciplines and in the classroom. This paper is divided into two parts: In the first I lay out my own attempt to use the Great Controversy

³ This high road to modernity is often labeled “Whig history” and was classically critiqued by Herbert Butterfield in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 1-8, 129-32.

⁴ Ellen White. *The Great Controversy* (Mountainview, California: Pacific Press, 1950), x, viii, ix.

paradigm in doing scholarship, with a secular audience for my work; in the second, I look at the Great Controversy principles in Scripture for deriving meaning from the past.

The Great Controversy Paradigm in Research and Scholarship

In the world of early modern studies, which is my area of expertise, we can see a certain kind of Great Controversy thinking in some of the Protestant leaders of the day, even if they didn't use that terminology. As I recognize that kind of commitment in the figures I study, I can both call attention to it and demonstrate the strength and value of that paradigm in my scholarship. In the fall of 2014 I did this when presenting research on the Anglican Bishop, Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715) at a conference at Cambridge University.

Burnet was one of the first English Protestant historians. He wrote a hugely popular *History of the Reformation in England* as a response to French Catholic histories criticizing Protestantism in general and supporting the suppression of the Huguenots in France in particular. Scholars of 17th century England see him as part of the liberal modernizing of the Church of England and primarily study him because of his long and detailed autobiography, *History of My Life and Times*. He was indeed hugely influential at the time of the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and helped contribute to the Act of Toleration in 1689 and oversaw much of the transformation in the Church of England and the politics of the burgeoning liberal British nation-state.⁵

So Burnet is a vital character to scholars of the late 17th century, and we draw on his prolific political writing and his autobiography to understand the politics of the times. But very few people read what was to him the most important work of his life: His three-volume *History of the Reformation*. I argue in my own research that it is this scholarship that reveals Burnet's commitments and vision. And it is a Providentialist history that, as Ellen White revealed in the *Great Controversy*, consistently saw God

⁵ John Coffey. *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689*. (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 213; Steven Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution*. (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2009), 206-207, 406; Blair Worden, "The Question of Secularization" in *A Nation Transformed*, Alan Houston and Steve Pincus, eds. (Cambridge, 2001), 34.

working through flawed people to accomplish His design in bringing Protestantism out of the corruption of the 15th century church in England.

For instance, Burnet argues that in tracing the histories of Henry VIII⁶ and then Queen Elizabeth, he was showing how God was working in spite of the flawed church leadership. He says God used someone of Henry's temperament even though the Reformation was not complete under him. God, Burnet argued, had used many bad kings in the past. As a professional historian, he decided to remain neutral on Henry's motives for the Reformation, though he was critical of many of his actions. "What were the king's secret motives and the true grounds of his aversion to the queen [Katherine of Aragon] is only known to God and till the discovery of all secrets at the day of judgment must lie hid," he explained, hedging his bets.⁷ And with the history of Elizabeth's church he said he was not so much "intend[ing] ... a full character of her and her counsels, as to set out the great and visible blessings of God that attended on her.... All which may justly be esteemed to have been the rewards of Heaven, crowning that reign with so much honor and triumph that was begun with the reformation of religion."⁸

The Great Controversy also makes these sorts of arguments, asserting that God worked through flawed people who did not completely understand what it was that He might be fully calling them to: "He who does all things according to the counsel of His will has been pleased to place men under various circumstances and to enjoin upon them duties peculiar to the times in which they live and the conditions under which they are placed.... The Reformation did not, as many suppose, end with Luther. It is to be continued to the close of this world's history. Luther had a great work to do in reflecting to others the light which God had permitted to shine upon him; yet he did not receive all the light which was to be given to the world."⁹

Burnet also built on and integrated the work of John Foxe, who had been more of a compiler than a professional historian. Burnet was able to integrate Foxe (who most English Protestant historians

⁶ Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 3 vols. in 6 (Oxford, 1829 [orig. 1679–1715]), 1:xv-xvii.

⁷ Burnet, 1:75.

⁸ Ibid, 2:815

⁹ White, *Great Controversy*, pp. 144, 148, 149.

at the time were neglecting) into this first professional attempt at a comprehensive history of the Reformation in England. Like Foxe, he saw the martyrs as playing a vital role in the expansion of the work of God: "All those fires [of persecution] did not extinguish the light of the reformation, nor abate the love of it. They spread it more.... This made those who loved the gospel meet oft together."¹⁰ Like Foxe before him and Ellen White after him, Burnet saw persecution as one of the signifiers of error. He complained that one of the worst effects of persecution was that people had their minds poisoned toward religion because of it. "The repeated burnings and other cruelties, of which now they saw no end, did increase their aversion to it beyond all expression."¹¹

What makes this significant from a research and scholarship perspective, and as part of my witness in the academic community, is that Burnet is often pointed to as one of the first "professional" historians.¹² He integrated primary texts and cited his sources throughout his work, often giving credit to those who helped in his project, such as "that ingenuous and worthy counselor Mr. Summers who out of his zeal to the reformation searched the books [in the Worcester collection] that he might gather such things as he thought would be of use to this work."¹³ He included an entire volume of original documents with each historical volume that he published. He saw himself as doing something new, contrasting his method with other historians, who he called "a rabble of ill writers of history who have without due care

¹⁰ Ibid, 2:680.

¹¹ Burnet 1:733; Ellen White puts it: "In England the establishment of Protestantism as the national religion diminished, but did not wholly stop, persecution.... The great principle of religious liberty was not yet understood.... The right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience was not acknowledged.... Yet God was with His people, and persecution could not prevail to silence their testimony." *Great Controversy*, pp. 251, 252

¹²Alexandra Walsham: "History, Memory and the English Reformation" *The Historical Journal*, 55, 4 (2012), Cambridge University Press; "'A special kindness for dead bishops': John Spurr, 'The Church, History, and Testimony in Seventeenth-Century Protestantism'" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), pp. 313-335; Felicity Heal, "Appropriating History: Catholic and Protestant Polemics and the National Past" *Huntington library quarterly*, vol.68, nos.1 & 2, 109 pp. 109-132; Andrew Starkie, "Contested Histories of the English Church: Gilbert Burnet and Jeremy Collier" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (March 2005), pp. 335-35; Tony Claydon, "Latitudinarianism and Apocalyptic History in the Worldview of Gilbert Burnet, 1643-1715" *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), pp. 577-597; Melinda Zook, "The Restoration Remembered: The First Whigs and the Making of their History," *Seventeenth Century* (August 2002), 220, 229.

¹³ Burnet, 2: 641; Burnet's work is chock full of references to these documents and he often gives a narrative of how he found the documents, which archives are best and what documents have been destroyed between the time of Foxe and his own time.

or inquiry delivered to us the transactions of that time so imperfectly that there is still need of inquiring into registers and papers for these matters.”¹⁴ Further, he attempted to be even-handed in his treatment of groups that disagreed with each other: “I know the duty of an historian leads him to write as one that is of neither party, and I have endeavored to follow it as carefully as I could, neither concealing the faults of the one party, nor denying the just praises that were due to any of the other side.”¹⁵

But he was clearly using the documentary evidence, which he tracked down in archives and private collections all over England, Scotland and the Continent, to study the outgrowth of what he saw God as doing. In fact, he said that shoddy scholarship made the cause of God look bad. Regarding histories of Henry VIII, he wrote critically that “in the latter part of his reign there were many things that seem great severities, especially as they are represented by the writer of the Romish party, whose relations are not a little strengthened by the faint excuses and mistaken accounts that most of the protestant historians have made.”¹⁶

I ended my paper by claiming that for Burnet, the Glorious Revolution allowed God’s work to continue in the heroic tradition of the reformers. But his view of that reform, clearly emphasized throughout the narrative, is one that pleaded for even more growth in godliness: “The Gospel has not had those effects among us which it might have been expected ... what will it avail us to understand the right methods of worshipping God, if we are without true devotion, and coldly perform public offices without sense and affection.”¹⁷

My academic arguments to my colleagues at Cambridge University were intended to show how Providentialist history could be written with good scholarship and that it is really important to the scholarly profession of history to see how evidence-based scholarship could be the foundation for such arguments as Burnet (and White in *Great Controversy*) made. Of course, I was also using that paradigm in

¹⁴ Burnet, 1:539, 540.

¹⁵ Burnet 2:v

¹⁶ Burnet 1:702.

¹⁷ Burnet, *History of the Reformation* 2:xxi.

my own study of Burnet's history—that God was working His will out, in spite of the flawed humans, to promote religious liberty and the spread of the Scriptures in England.

God has gifted people with different passions and skills (1 Corinthians 12: 7-11), and if he has given me skills in studying history, I can use those in the arena of professional history, with all of its commitment to modern materialist assumptions about secularism and progress, to show that the evidence is often in alignment with the biblical foundations about God's working out His will in the face of broken and rebellious humans.

The Great Controversy Paradigm in Teaching

So using the professional tools of history (which means collecting texts from the past and using them to try to say something true and significant about what happened before our own time) to demonstrate the ways that God does unexpected things in history and to communicate biblical perspectives to secular professional colleagues is part of my job. And perhaps the fact that I study early modern England makes it easier for me to bring Great Controversy principles to bear on my scholarship. But I spend much more of my time in the classroom, teaching World History. What is vital about the Great Controversy paradigm of history is that it can and must be applied to history even when it isn't biblical history or reformation history. The Great Controversy must also be applied when I am studying the Tang Dynasty in 7th century China, the Swahili coast in the 12th century, modern India, or the Mississippian culture in the Americas 1,000 years ago.

How can we do this? What biblical lessons and principles can we learn from and apply to history that is not revealed history? Clearly each professor, based on his/her skills and interests can approach this differently. But I will outline some of the biblical Great Controversy principles and then give some examples of how I have applied them in my own classes.

The World Is Broken and Does Not Reflect God's Principles or His Will as Creator

One of the first biblical foundations for studying history is that the world is broken and sin-filled because of the Fall (Genesis 3:19-24; Romans 5:12). This is in contrast to the world that God created and pronounced "good" in Genesis 1 and 2. God created humans in His image, with powers to work and serve

and do good in the world, and we rejected that, and all of human history reflects that fall away from the beautiful world and society that God wanted for us and which we, in the form of our parents Adam and Eve, rebelled against.

So we expect that people are not behaving well, and often assume that they act from bad motives. This shapes some of our reading of sources—we know that human documents are fallible and that the non-biblical texts that we read as part of our job as historians are the work of humans with their own agendas and perspectives. This knowledge also affects our assessment of kingdoms and societies. We don't look at any community in the past as fully reflecting what God wants. We fall into this same category (1Kings 8:46; 1 John 1: 8-10) and we know that, like all the people in the past who we study, we are broken.

It is important to remind my students of this because we are often so horrified, for instance, by the enslavement of people, by the treatment of the lower caste people in India, or the sexual mores of the Native Americans, that we become distracted. I find that reminding my students that we know people are sinning and that this isn't a surprise helps us move forward in our studies in more helpful ways, such as looking at how the caste system shaped work patterns and even religious practices. We do not believe that just because a group was successful politically means they were doing the right thing before God, and we weep for the pain and suffering sin has brought this world.

In Spite of Brokenness, It Is Still Possible to Act in Ways that Are Honest, Virtuous, and Contribute to Human Flourishing

My students are often very cynical, and as highly educated modern young people, with many of the assumptions of the materialist world, they may think that all people were acting out of motives for power and economic gain. And, as we have already established, this is in fact all too often the case. So we aren't surprised at the exploitation and hatefulness we study in history. But it is important for my students and I to see that the Holy Spirit does work on people and sometimes we can transcend that brokenness and act unselfishly (Proverbs 24:16; Titus 3: 1-2). And God can bring good out of even our selfishness (Genesis 5:20). But also we are not so cynical as to think that all our sources, all our subjects of

study, are lying to us or are totally useless and corrupt. We have to have some trust in our sources, which are manmade, in order to be able to move forward with the historical profession.

So whenever we see people in the past doing things that are consistent with biblical principles of morality, honesty, freedom, and love, we can assume that the Holy Spirit was acting on them (James 1:17; Romans 2:14, 15; Titus 2:11.). This is the acting of God in history as we are able to see it, even when we study history that isn't revealed in the Bible or the Spirit of Prophecy. Ellen White reminds us that the purpose of creation was that "the earth be inhabited by beings whose existence should be a blessing to themselves and to one another and an honor to their Creator. All who choose to may identify themselves with this purpose."¹⁸ Whether they knew it or not, they were part of God's plan for bringing His love and plans to bear on a fallen world. This is the personal God of history acting to restore us all to fellowship, in a way that won't culminate until the New Heaven and the New Earth. And yet, He is still abroad in this fallen world.

For instance, the Tang Dynasty in China was not founded on Christianity or on the Bible. But it was a place where freedom flourished for thinking and acting. That freedom meant that many people behaved immorally—but it also meant that Christians were able to gain a missionary toehold in China in spite of the prominence of Buddhism. So while the Chinese culture at the time was broken and sinful, there were also possibilities for redemptive activity and for freedom to flourish. Both things go on at the same time.¹⁹

Humans Have the Possibility of Making Good Choices, Even Ones that Go Against Their Culture

Connected to the principle of brokenness/redemption is the biblical principle of free will. The Bible reveals that people have freedom to choose differently than they did and their choices have consequences (Deut 11:25-28). My students are often too ready to think, like modern materialist historians, that all of history is naturally leading to "progress" and to better things. They think that ideas

¹⁸ Ellen White, *Education* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 105.

¹⁹ Daniel Bays. *A New History of Christianity in China*. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 7-9.

about civil rights just “naturally” changed. They are often to unaware of people’s ability to change their minds or behave in different ways with different outcomes.

For instance, when we study the conquest of the Americas in the 16th century, students sometimes think it is inevitable that there was exploitation and conflict between Europeans and the Native Americans. Part of what we can study in history is the choices that individuals made to treat native people differently from the dominant paradigm. We can study Bartelomé Las Casas, who argued in favor of the importance of protecting and not exploiting the Indians. He was able to influence the Spanish Crown and change the laws to benefit the natives.²⁰ That doesn’t mean that the Spaniards in the Americas obeyed those laws or lived up to the light that had been given them. But it does demonstrate that there were alternatives to racism and exploitation and that some people chose differently.

For my students, who are still figuring out how to follow biblical principles in their own lives, it is vital for them to learn from seeing concrete examples of how some people made the right choice in spite of their culture. And I can show how we can apply biblical foundations to their study of history, as well as learn vital lessons from studying the choices people made in the past and the consequences of those choices. “Today individuals and nations are being measured by Him who makes no mistake. All are by their own choice deciding their destiny.”²¹ “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 14:12). This is true whether we are studying the exploitation of the natural resources on Easter Island 500 years ago or the choice of the Ottoman sultan to join the Germans in World War One.

God Is Always Trying to Draw People to Himself and Teaching Them How to Love Him and Understand His World

Another Great Controversy paradigm and biblical foundation for history is that God is always drawing people to Himself and teaching them to love Him and how to understand their world. The ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:12) is something that the Bible calls us to and which the study of

²⁰ Paul Spickard, Kevin Cragg. *A Global History of Christians* (Baker, 2001), 220.

²¹ White, *Education*, 107.

history can empower us to do (Gen 12:2). Studying the past requires trying to understand people who were in many ways very different from us. For instance, my students cannot imagine why people, especially Christians, would be willing to own slaves. When we study the slave trade in Africa in the medieval period, we have to understand how slavery worked and what the reasons were for it, at least from the perspective of the people at that time. While we are still committed to biblical foundations of freedom (Isaiah 61:1; John 10:10) and against exploitation of others, the fact that my students can now at least imagine how someone would be able to justify their ownership of another human being is vital for the expansion of their hearts.

The biblical warning that “every way of a man is right in his own eyes” (Prov. 21:2), helps my students as they may prepare to go to another culture to serve and spread the gospel of the Kingdom. This is part of the ministry of reconciliation, the ability to show love and respect for others even when and where you disagree with them. In young people in the modern world, there is a quick assumption that other people are just ignorant or evil and that is why they made or make choices that are different from those of a 21st century North American Seventh-day Adventist, such as buying and selling other people. Yet God loves these broken people and sees their hearts and it helps my students get a glimpse of the love and understanding of God when they try to exercise their minds in this way, too. “The prince of teachers, [Jesus] sought access to the people by the pathway of their most familiar associations. He presented truth in such a way that ever after it was to His hearers intertwined with their most hallowed recollections and sympathies.... He made himself familiar with their interests and occupations that He might gain access to their hearts.”²²

The Past Has a Great Deal to Teach Us, and God Has Spoken in the Bible Through Prophets and Apostles Whose Culture and Time Seem Alien to Us

In a Christian classroom, I have a mandate to remind my students that they have (or are supposed to have) commitments to submitting themselves to and studying the Bible, which was written in

²² Ellen White. *Ministry of Healing* (Mountainview, California: Pacific Press, 1942), 23, 24.

a different time and place and yet has authority over us.²³ I hope that they have spent time reading it. I tell them that this commitment gives them an advantage in studying history. As Bible-believing Christians, they already know that the past and texts from the past can and should be relevant for us today. I ask them to bring that to the table when they study history. Obviously studying something like the constitution of modern India, which has no authority over us and is not sacred is different than studying the Bible. But their commitment to learning from a different time and place in the Bible is something that can predispose them to valuing the lessons of history. Learning to study and value historical texts can be made more interesting and relevant because of our previous commitment to the Bible, which is not only our guide to life today, but which was revealed in another time and place and describes historical events.

6. The Bible is text that was revealed in another time and place and love for it can help us understand some of the foreign places and times we study. One of the richest ways that Christian historians can use biblical principles for their discipline in the classroom is by directly using the Bible's history to help students learn about a different kind of history. For instance, in my class, "Pirates, Captives, and Slaves," there are many stories and examples in the Bible that illustrate the diverse way that captivity, raiding economies and enslavement/redemption have been practiced. The story of the little slave girl and Naaman shows how enslavement was often part of warfare and the border economies of many societies. The story of Joseph, a slave who becomes a ruler in the Egyptian kingdom, makes the role of slave prime ministers in the Ottoman Empire less strange. The practice of redeeming slaves in the Israelite laws is not only a great spiritual lesson, but it makes the study of the captivity and redemption economy in the American Southwest during the 18th and 19th centuries less foreign. These connections

²³ Richard Davidson explains this issue in his essay "Biblical Interpretation," in *The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology. Commentary Reference Series, Vol. 12*. "The necessity for interpretation of the Scriptures today is further indicated by the separation in time, distance, and culture from the scriptural autographs. The biblical canon closed almost 2000 years ago. Most of us are also separated geographically from the place where Scripture was written.... Different social customs; different civil, military, and political institutions; different economic and technological conditions; different patterns of thought—all these and more mandate the hermeneutical process," pp. 60, 86. Studying history and learning to respect some of the people and accomplishments in the past can help remind us that the Bible was revealed in another time and place and proper understanding of it is vital.

between biblical history and the early modern history that we study not only allow me to make complicated economic and anthropological elements of these societies clearer, but also serve as a way of reinforcing biblical literacy. And it allows me to emphasize the ways in which God is always working to free us from slavery and to redeem us. “While there are different degrees of development and different manifestations of His power to meet the needs of people in different ages, God’s work is forever the same.... The experiences of Israel were recorded for our instruction. ‘All these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.’ (1 Cor 10:11).”²⁴

All Our Learning Must Teach Us to Act in Loving Ways to Others and to Worship God Better

Finally, “Love, the basis of creation and of redemption, is the basis of true education.”²⁵ In all my history classes, I hope the study of history helps students learn to love better. They do this by seeing all people as created in the image of God and so therefore worthy of study and love (Matt 22:39). In studying them, especially in studying the “least of these” in each time and place, they are able to perhaps see God’s face, God’s presence, wherever there are people in need, people who are hurting. If they can see Jesus in broken and hurt people in the past, they can also learn to see him in those broken and hurt people in the present. As we study the causes and effects of the Opium Wars in 19th century China or the Hundred Years War in 14th century France, we will see Jesus as weeping for all the hurt and wounded people. Instead of a materialist view of history as being primarily about power politics and important people, students can imagine that God is with the very lowest of the low in each society and that they are also worthy of our study.

While modern historians may study texts from the past and make meaning from them based on the assumptions of the inevitability of progress and material secularism, biblically committed historians can make the Bible the foundation of their understanding for the world, giving us our reason for studying history and for what meaning to make of it as we do so. Adventist historians, with their paradigm of the

²⁴ White, *Education*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

Great Controversy, can go even further in framing the study of history within the unfolding of God's plan and values, His love for all His children, in all times and places.

However, make no mistake. As a historian and as a teacher, I look forward to the day when I can study history with the best tools available. Until then, I hope that learning from the events of the past 3,000 years of human history all around the world can help my students fulfill Ellen White's call to serve others. As she describes it: "Heaven is a school.... History of infinite scope and of wealth inexpressible will be open to the redeemed. Here from the vantage ground of God's Word, students are afforded a view of the vast field of history and may gain some knowledge of the principles that govern the course of human events. But their vision is still clouded and their knowledge incomplete.... Why was the great controversy permitted to continue through the ages?... In the plan of redemption there are heights and depths that eternity itself can never exhaust.... In our earthly, sin-restricted life, the greatest joy and the highest education are found in service. And in the future state, freed from the limitations of sinful humanity, we shall find our greatest joy and highest education in witnessing, and learning anew, 'the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.' Col. 1:27."²⁶

²⁶ Ellen White, *Education*, 187-192.

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