

The Seventh-day Adventist Church and *The Clear Word*

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For years Dale Ratzlaff and others have been treating *The Clear Word* as if it were the official Bible of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. More recently Mr. Ratzlaff claims that although “the ‘official position’ of the Adventist church on *The Clear Word* is that the church has nothing to do with the paraphrase,” it gives its “unofficial blessing” to the paraphrase by promoting it in numerous ways. In addition, Mr. Ratzlaff claims that *The Clear Word* is “the most corrupt and twisted ‘Bible’ ever printed” ([“Why make an issue of *The Clear Word*? Proclamation!](#) January/February 2009, 3).

There are many ways I could respond to Mr. Ratzlaff’s claims. But for now I will focus on eight lines of evidence supporting the fact that *The Clear Word* is not an official (or unofficial) Seventh-day Adventist Bible.

1. **The production and promotion of *The Clear Word* belongs to the Review and Herald Publishing Association, not the world Seventh-day Adventist Church.**

I must acknowledge at the outset that the present aggressive advertising campaign of the different versions of *The Clear Word* can be interpreted to mean that this paraphrase holds some official status in the SDA Church. While it is true that the Review and Herald represents the church in general, it does not necessarily represent it in every particular advertisement. For example, the promotion of *The Clear Word* does not point out its interpretive nature or explain the difference between an “expanded paraphrase” and more literal translations. Neither does the promotion emphasize the importance of having a solid translation for serious study of the Bible. This is an issue Jack Blanco and I have discussed at length, and he has presented our concern to the Review and Herald. They have acknowledged the misunderstanding created by their advertising campaign and are willing to make changes. When the publisher does make changes in its promotion of *The Clear Word*, it will do so of its own accord, without any pressure from the General Conference one way or the other. Stay tuned for an update when the changes occur.

2. **Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders have been up front from the beginning regarding the status of *The Clear Word* in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.**

When *The Clear Word* was first published in 1994, the General Conference president made the following statement, which was published in the *Adventist Review*:

The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not limit the various meaningful avenues through which its members study the Scriptures and we would hope that Dr. Blanco’s significant personal effort would contribute to this purpose as well. Those who read it prayerfully should receive a blessing from it, just as they do from other paraphrases of the Bible. *This Bible should in no way be considered an official Seventh-day Adventist Bible,*

nor did Dr. Blanco intend for it to be considered as such (emphasis mine).
<http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/clearword/folkenberg_endorsment.htm>

The Ministerial Association of the General Conference also produced a statement in 1994:

The Clear Word is not actually a Bible, but a paraphrase/commentary that, when used properly, can enrich one's devotional study and can be recommended in that way. It should not be used as the Word of God for teaching purposes.

To minimize the potential for confusing *The Clear Word* with an actual Bible we recommend that it not be used for preaching from the pulpit or in teaching Sabbath school ("GC Comments on Clear Word Bible," *Record*, October 29, 1994, 10).

In the *Adventist Review*, the official periodical of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, editor William Johnsson devoted the April 1995 issue to paraphrases of the Bible. Concerning *The Clear Word*, he wrote:

The Clear Word goes beyond a paraphrase. Blanco injects his own interpretations into the text: sometimes he adds, sometimes he deletes, sometimes he supplies comments based on the writings of Ellen White, sometimes he brings in ideas from other passages of the Bible, sometimes he simply slants the text to make it say what he wants it to say.

The Clear Word is a combination of paraphrase plus commentary. In no sense can it be considered an accurate translation of Scripture per se.

It was unfortunate that the first edition of Blanco's work was released as *The Clear Word Bible*. This book is not a Bible, but a devotional commentary on the Bible. The second edition remedied the error by deleting the word "Bible" and adding "interpretive paraphrase" which is accurate ("For Devotional Use Only: *The Clear Word*," *Adventist Review*, April 1995, 14).

In an interview with author Jack Blanco shortly after *The Clear Word Bible* was released, he was asked, "Do we now have an Adventist Bible?" He responded in the following way.

No! That certainly wasn't the intention. And if anybody said this is an Adventist Bible, I would feel most hurt (Bruce Manners, "Do We Now Have an Adventist Bible?" *Record*, October 15, 1994).

3. The author’s Preface states clearly that *The Clear Word* is not a study Bible.

The first paragraph of *The Clear Word’s* Preface makes this very clear:

As has been stated in previous editions, *The Clear Word* is not a translation, but a devotional paraphrase of Scripture expanded for clarity. It is intended to build faith and nurture spiritual growth. It should not be considered a study Bible. Excellent translations of the Scriptures are available for such purposes (2004 edition).

This statement is so plain and so clear that anyone reading it with understanding cannot miss the point: *The Clear Word* is not a translation, nor is it a study Bible. According to its author, it is a “devotional paraphrase” or an “expanded paraphrase” (on the jacket), which means it is a paraphrase with added commentary. Thus, many of its added words are those of the author and are not meant to be understood as coming from God. There is no design “to deceive the reader into thinking this is an accurate rendering of God’s Word in modern English,” as Dale Ratzlaff claims (*Proclamation!* January/February 2009, 3). This paraphrase is up front from the beginning. The problem is that most critics (and some Adventist readers) *fail to carefully read* the Preface. Not surprisingly, Ratzlaff and company *studiously ignore* the Preface (see *ibid.*, 2-3, 7-13, 20).

This devotional paraphrase, therefore, is intended for private devotional reading only. It is not for serious study, teaching, preaching, or public reading of Scripture. It is unacceptable in these venues because of its interpretive nature (the same goes for any paraphrase). We don’t need an expanded paraphrase to prove Adventist doctrine or even to understand any part of Scripture—careful study reveals truth through any reliable translation.

At this juncture I will comment on a published statement circulating on the Internet by the well-known evangelical scholar, Dr. Wayne Grudem. I have great respect for Grudem and have studied his writings with benefit, particularly his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. While we have areas of significant disagreement because we come from different theological backgrounds, I nevertheless consider him to be an outstanding evangelical theologian. His statement can be found [here](#). In summary, he does not “think anyone should trust *The Clear Word* as a reliable translation of the Bible or even as a useful paraphrase,” because it “adds new ideas that are not found in the original texts,” supports “unusual Seventh-day Adventist doctrines,” and mixes the “words of man” with the “words of God” in such a way that “ordinary readers” will “not be able to tell the difference.” Interestingly, years ago an Adventist scholar, Sakae Kubo, co-author of *So Many Versions?* (Zondervan, 1983), feared that Blanco’s paraphrase would be strongly criticized by non-Adventist scholars (“I Am Concerned,” *Adventist Review*, April 1995, 15). As far as I know, Grudem is the first non-Adventist scholar to put in writing his criticisms of *The Clear Word*. Like Grudem, Kubo had issues with additions to the text (and Kubo is not alone among Adventist scholars): “As far as I am concerned,” he wrote, “any addition to the text is unnecessary, even if it is correct and

helpful. Such additional matter should be included in the footnotes. But additions that are private interpretations should definitely not be included; in fact, they should be studiously eliminated” (ibid.). I personally find myself in agreement with Kubo. However, if footnotes were put in *The Clear Word*, its purpose as a devotional paraphrase would be defeated.

As to Grudem’s criticisms, it is no surprise that he is against Blanco’s paraphrase—he doesn’t agree with the way Blanco has interpreted the text. I can only remind those who promote the idea that *The Clear Word* has official status in the SDA Church that the Preface explains how it is to be used. It should be pointed out that Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, a popular evangelical paraphrase that many Adventists appreciate, is also interpretive and idiosyncratic, thus adding words and ideas not necessarily found in the original Hebrew or Greek. Admittedly, though, Peterson’s paraphrase is not “expanded” like Blanco’s. *The Clear Word* is more of a devotional/commentary/paraphrase by one man. It does not purport to be a regular Bible, and this should be kept in mind when critiquing it.

4. The author’s Preface also clearly states that *The Clear Word* is for private devotional purposes only.

As noted above, the Preface states that *The Clear Word* is a “devotional paraphrase” intended to “build faith and nurture spiritual growth.” In the second paragraph of the Preface, Blanco states:

This paraphrase provides my personal insights into the gracious and long-suffering character of God, the loving ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ and the struggles of the church from its inception to the last days. May the Holy Spirit use *The Clear Word* to bring about a stronger faith and a deeper spiritual experience to its readers.

The best way to understand *The Clear Word* is to think of it as Dr. Jack Blanco’s devotional journey through the Bible. As he says in the fourth paragraph of the Preface, “This paraphrase began as my own devotional journey in seeking a deeper relationship with the One who loved me and gave His life for me.” Thus, it should be read as devotional literature, not as a Bible. Because it reflects the spiritual life of a Seventh-day Adventist theologian and his interpretation of Scripture, *The Clear Word* will appeal more to the Adventist audience. Jack Blanco is a personal friend of mine, and I know him to be a man of deep spirituality and joy, who loves Jesus Christ with all his heart. When his expanded paraphrase is read correctly for what it is, it can be a blessing to Adventist readers.

My suggestion to all those who read and appreciate *The Clear Word* is to remember that it is not your Bible. It is an expanded interpretive paraphrase of the Bible (see below on the strengths and weaknesses of a one-man paraphrase of Scripture). Read it, enjoy it, and

gain a blessing. But please do not make it your only exposure to Scripture and please do not use it as your Bible while at church. If *The Clear Word*, in any of its versions, is the only way you read and study the Bible, you are missing the blessing of hearing the purest translation of God's Word today, the formal equivalent versions. These versions are literal translations that seek to retain the form of the Hebrew or Greek, while producing understandable English. Examples include: *King James Version* (KJV), *New King James Version* (NKJV), *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), *New American Standard Version* (NASU), and *English Standard Version* (ESV). For an excellent guide in choosing a Bible version, see Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2007). In any earnest study of the Bible, the seeker after divine knowledge and truth will be found buried in the pages of these kinds of Bibles.

I suggest two helpful uses of *The Clear Word*. First, it can be used as devotional reading. If you use it in your personal devotions, though, use it alongside the more literal translations of the Bible. I think personal devotions work best when serious study (head) and meditation (heart) are combined. *The Clear Word* can also be read devotionally outside of personal quiet time. Second, use it like any other paraphrase—listen to how this particular author paraphrases a verse. But always go back to a formal equivalent version and study the text in its context there. Do not use *The Clear Word* as a crutch for your belief in Adventist doctrine. You should understand and be able to explain Adventist doctrine from a formal equivalent version. If you cannot understand a particular Adventist doctrine without referring to *The Clear Word*, then you need to put it aside and study the doctrine for yourself in a literal translation until it is absolutely *clear* in your mind. Otherwise, you will never really understand the biblical evidence for Adventist teaching. I believe these two steps should be practiced by Adventists in using all paraphrases, particularly *The Clear Word*.

5. *The Clear Word* was the enterprise of one man rather than a committee of Adventist translators.

If the Adventist church were to produce an official SDA translation of the Bible, it would involve a committee of Adventist translators with input from the world SDA Church. But the church has never felt the need for an “SDA translation” and, I am confident, never will. The point here is that the church would never allow a one-man paraphrase or translation, without external check or control, to represent the world church as an official Bible. Interestingly, an international team of Adventist Bible scholars is working on a [new study Bible](#) to be published by Andrews University Press. This study Bible will use study notes and be based on one of the “standard English translations of the Bible commonly used by conservative evangelicals.”

One-man paraphrases, such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, Kenneth Taylor's *The Living Bible*, and Jack Blanco's *The Clear Word*, possess both strengths and weaknesses. One of the strengths is the freedom to use fresh, vivid, and vigorous language in paraphrasing the text. The major weakness is no formal “check or control,” such as a

“committee of translators or readers to criticize and give a wider perspective” (see Hugh Dunton, *Bible Versions: A Consumer’s Guide to the Bible* [Autumn House, 1998, 114, 115]). Neither *The Message*, *The Living Bible*, nor *The Clear Word* are immune to the weaknesses of paraphrases. While some Adventist readers will lean towards Blanco’s paraphrase because he is an Adventist theologian, caution must still be exercised because he is only one man interpreting and paraphrasing the Scriptural texts.

6. *The Clear Word* is not cited in official SDA Publications.

There are numerous examples, but two will suffice:

The book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, published by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Silver Spring, Maryland (2005), is a detailed exposition of the 28 fundamental doctrinal beliefs of SDAs, with Scripture citations on almost every page. Not once is *The Clear Word* used in these citations. If *The Clear Word* was official in any way as a Bible, then one would expect to see it cited here. But this is not the case.

The *Adult Bible Study Guide*, the quarterly Sabbath School Bible lesson studies, never cites *The Clear Word*. If it were official in any way in the SDA Church, one would expect to find it cited in the official Bible Study Guide of the SDA Church. But not so. Only well known and accepted Bible translations are used, such as the NKJV.

7. *The Clear Word* is not recommended for use in Seventh-day Adventist pulpits or Sabbath School classes.

As noted above under fact #2, in 1994, the year Blanco’s paraphrase was published, the Ministerial Association of the General Conference recommended that it “not be used for preaching from the pulpit or in teaching Sabbath School.” There was some confusion when *The Clear Word Bible* was first published, because reports show that some Adventists misused it for teaching and preaching. In the October 15, 1994, edition of the Adventist journal, *Record*, Jack Blanco said in an interview regarding the issue of misusing his paraphrase, “Apparently people have used it in Sabbath school classes and that sort of thing. That’s not its intent. In the first paragraph of the preface I state that *The Clear Word* is not for study—it’s not to be used for study or in the church.” Bruce Manners, Blanco’s interviewer, explained why in 1994 the word “Bible” was dropped from the title:

The paraphrase is about to undergo a second edition (the first edition ran to 20,000). After consultation with the North American Division, the Ministerial Department of the General Conference and the Review and Herald, the word “Bible” will be dropped from the cover and the words “interpretive paraphrase” added.

This is a significant change, because while a translation is an attempt at a word-for-word understanding of the text, and a paraphrase is an attempt at getting at the thoughts behind the words, an “interpretative paraphrase” will interpret the text.

“I agree with the decision,” adds Dr. Blanco. “If it can help prevent the misuse of it, let’s make those changes” (Bruce Manners, “Do We Now Have an Adventist Bible?” *Record*, October 15, 1994, 8).

The latest editions of *The Clear Word* emphasize it as a “devotional paraphrase” or “expanded paraphrase,” the same as an “interpretive paraphrase.”

Has this stopped Adventists from misusing *The Clear Word*? For the most part, I believe it has. I have not heard of any SDA preacher who preaches from *The Clear Word*. Furthermore, I have taught expository preaching to scores of preachers in Adventist pulpits today, and they use formal translations of the Bible, not *The Clear Word*. Our Sabbath School Bible study guides, as noted above, use the standard formal equivalent versions, such as the *New King James Version*. In short, while I have certainly not listened to every sermon or visited every Sabbath School in the SDA Church, if *The Clear Word* is used in teaching or preaching, it is a rare exception—and a mistake.

8. *The Clear Word* is not used in Seventh-day Adventist college and university Bible classes.

The Clear Word is not used in Bible classes taught at SDA colleges and universities. Neither is it used in classes at the Andrews University Theological Seminary, where SDA ministers are taught. Students are required to use formal translations or the original biblical languages. Most interestingly, *The Clear Word* is not used in Bible classes at the university where it originated, Southern Adventist University, where Jack Blanco was the dean of the School of Religion for over a decade. During the years I worked with Dr. Blanco, not once were students required to use *The Clear Word* as their Bible version for any religion class. Furthermore, in the 12 years I have taught at Southern, I have never heard Dr. Blanco preach or teach a university class or Sabbath School lesson from his own paraphrase, nor has he ever promoted it among his colleagues.

Conclusion:

We have seen that multiple lines of evidence support the fact that *The Clear Word* has no official (or unofficial) endorsement from the SDA church as an Adventist translation of the Bible. It is one man’s interpretation and should not be treated in any sense as a Bible. While the advertising campaign has been a problematic issue, those who focus on this to the exclusion of the other seven facts are ignoring the big picture.