

# HISTORICAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

by Ron Graybill

It is with reluctance that I present this paper to the members of the select committee assigned to explore the theological implications of the Don McAdams study. My misgivings are inspired by the dangers inherent in focusing on the historical problems in *The Great Controversy*. Nevertheless, it is necessary to confront the possibility of historical errors in a direct way in order to understand what sort of authority this important book carries.

The object of this paper is not to prove error, but to understand the nature of the authority which *The Great Controversy* should have in our spiritual and intellectual lives. It is not necessary that everyone be convinced that the items discussed in this paper are, in fact, historical errors. The paper's more modest goal is merely to satisfy those who read it that honest and acceptable Seventh-day Adventists can believe that there are historical errors in *The Great Controversy*, and can both espouse and teach a doctrine of inspiration which assumes these errors to be demonstrable. Once that is accomplished, any further focus on these errors will be rendered unnecessary and undesirable.

There are two elements in any effort to determine whether a passage contains a historical discrepancy. First, one must decide what the passage actually says. Second, one must establish, insofar as it is possible, what the historical facts of the case are.

Pursuant to the first objective, the reader should carefully examine

the following passage from *The Great Controversy*, pp. 100-101:

*Tidings of the work at Prague were carried to Rome, and Huss was soon summoned to appear before the pope. To obey would be to expose himself to certain death. The king and queen of Bohemia, the university, members of the nobility, and officers of the government united in an appeal to the pontiff that Huss be permitted to remain at Prague and to answer at Rome by deputy. Instead of granting this request, the pope proceeded to the trial of condemnation of Huss, and then declared the city of Prague to be under interdict.*

*In that age this sentence, whenever pronounced, created widespread alarm. The ceremonies by which it was accompanied were well adapted to strike terror to a people who looked upon the pope as the representative of God Himself, holding the keys of heaven and hell, and possessing power to invoke temporal as well as spiritual judgments. It was believed that the gates of heaven were closed against the region smitten with interdict; that until it should please the pope to remove the ban, the dead were shut out from the abodes of bliss. In token of this terrible calamity, all the services of religion were suspended. The churches were closed. Marriages were solemnized in the churchyard. The dead, denied burial in consecrated ground, were interred, without the rights of sepulture, in the ditches or the fields. Thus by measures which appealed to the imagination, Rome*

essayed to control the consciences of men.

The city of Prague was filled with tumult. A large class denounced Huss as the cause of all their calamities and demanded that he be given up to the vengeance of Rome. To quiet the storm, the Reformer withdrew for a time to his native village. Writing to the friends whom he had left at Prague, he said: "If I have withdrawn from the midst of you, it is to follow the precept and example of Jesus Christ, in order not to give room to the ill-minded to draw on themselves eternal condemnation, and in order not to be to the pious a cause of affliction and persecution. I have retired also through an apprehension that impious priests might continue for a longer time to prohibit the preaching of the word of God amongst you; but I have not quitted you to deny the divine truth, for which, with God's assistance, I am willing to die."—*Bonnechose, The Reformers Before the Reformation, vol. 1, p. 87. Huss did not cease his labors, but traveled through the surrounding country, preaching to eager crowds. Thus the measures to which the pope resorted to suppress the gospel were causing it to be the more widely extended.—Great Controversy, pp. 100, 101.*

Having studied this passage carefully myself, and having presented it to a number of other individuals and groups, I am convinced that a reasonably intelligent and careful reader, with no prior knowledge of this material or the historical events involved, would understand the following points to have been made in this passage:

1. That the Pope was the one who issued the order placing Prague under interdict.

2. That during this interdict, all the churches in Prague were closed, and all religious services were suspended.

3. That as a result of the tumult, Huss left Prague at this time.

4. That Huss wrote the letter quoted on page 101, paragraph 2, at this time to explain why he had left Prague.

Nevertheless, on the basis of the primary and secondary sources I have consulted, I am fairly certain that items one and three are not correct, and I am fully certain that items two and four are not correct. I will attempt, in this paper, to demonstrate only that the interdict of 1411 was not effective, and that Huss did not write the letter quoted on page 101 at this time.

Actually, none of those who have discussed this problem have disputed that the interdict of June, 1411, was not effective. Rather, they either suggest that Mrs. White was talking about a different interdict here, or that hers is simply a general description of what usually happened during an interdict, not a specific description of the events of June, 1411. The first approach was recently taken by a scholar who agreed that the statements are not correct if they are meant to apply to the June, 1411, interdict, but went on to argue that Mrs. White is really describing the 1412 interdict. Unfortunately, Mrs. White does not allow for this approach because she mentions both interdicts and describes the circumstances preceeding them in a way that establishes beyond any doubt that she is indeed speaking of the June, 1411, interdict. Furthermore, she is following Wylie's *History of Protestantism* at this point, and Wylie's narrative and Mrs. White's account of the 1411 interdict have all

of the same factual difficulties.

Another scholar, whose paper has not been released for general distribution, argues that Mrs. White's description of the interdict, found in the middle paragraph of the above passage (the first paragraph on page 101) should be taken out of its context and made to stand alone as an accurate description of what generally happened during an interdict, not as an indication of what happened in Prague on this occasion.

I wonder if this interpretation really helps us much. In order to render this paragraph "accurate" we have rendered it meaningless and misleading in its context. If one is writing a historical narrative of actual events, the significant thing about the 1411 interdict is that it was not observed. To come to this point in the narrative and suddenly insert a description of what usually happened during an interdict would be almost like writing a narrative of Lincoln's life and, on reaching April 14, 1865, the day he was assassinated, inserting a description of what usually happened when Lincoln went to the theater instead of telling what actually happened on that particular evening.

It does not seem to me that a reasonably intelligent and careful reader of *The Great Controversy*, with no prior knowledge of these events, could possibly know that the interdict was not effective. Indeed, the relationship of the two paragraphs on page 101 makes it very clear that Mrs. White intended the first paragraph to apply directly to the interdict of 1411. She describes the interdict as "this terrible calamity" in the first paragraph, and in the next says: "A large class denounced Huss as the cause of all their calamities." Then she goes on to

quote Huss as saying he fled Prague because he feared that if he didn't, "impious priests might continue for a longer time to prohibit the preaching of the word of God amongst you." The reader cannot but assume that this particular interdict had these particular results. Mrs. White is telling us that the interdict was effective, that all the churches were closed. Yet all of those who have discussed these problems agree that that is not, in fact, what happened.

Let us explore the actual evidence that establishes beyond any reasonable doubt that the interdict of 1411 was not effective. The effort to do this focuses narrowly on the portion of the paragraph which says: "... all the services of religion were suspended. The churches were closed." The evidence brought together here shows that not all the churches in Prague were closed at this time, that not all the services of religion were suspended in Prague.

Matthew Spinka's account of these events in his biography of Huss will be useful in spreading before the reader a contemporary historian's understanding of what actually happened:

*King Wenceslas was extremely angry at the curia that all his efforts in behalf of Huss had been so cavalierly ignored. He deeply resented the aspersion of heresy thus cast on his country by the cardinal and his own archbishop. . . . The king now . . . issued an order commanding the stoppage of payments to . . . the priests of the cathedral, as well as to the pastors of the churches in Prague. He gave as his reason that they had spread lies about the realm.*

*By this time Zbynek [the archbishop] was so determined to exercise*

all his ecclesiastical powers that, being instigated to it by his advisors, he pronounced (June 20) an interdict over Prague and its environs for two miles around. The terrible weapon, normally stopping all church services and ministrations such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and granting of all sacraments, failed of effect. The king simply forbade its observance. Those priests and prelates who had defied his order were deprived of their positions, which were then filled by such as were obedient to his will. The canons of St. Vitus fled and their places were taken by others. This obviously hopeless struggle continued to be waged by the archbishop for only two weeks. On July 3 he, along with the remaining prelates and priests who remained faithful to him, accepted the arbitration proffered him by the king.—Matthew Spinka, *John Huss: A Biography* (Princeton, 1968), 124-125.

Three pieces of primary evidence may be offered in confirmation of the essential point I wish to make with this passage: That not all the services of religion were suspended.

As part of his agreement with the king, Archbishop Zbynek was expected to write to the Pope, telling the pontiff certain things which the arbitration committee had suggested. Zbynek could not bring himself to do this, and eventually fled, sending a letter to the king in which we find the following passage, translated from the Czech:

Your grace asked me to write letters to the Holy Father and also other letters concerning the excommunication, saying that those who served during the interdict did not sin; but if I had done this it would have been against my soul and against my

honor. No matter how much I insisted that those under the ban (or curse) should not serve mass, preach, or give confession, I could never achieve that request.—Zbynek to Wenceslas, Sept. 5, 1411, in Francis Palacky, *Documenta Mag. Joannis Huss (Pragae, 1869)*, 444.

This question concerning the guilt of those who had not obeyed the interdict was, in fact, the problem which resulted in the production of all the primary evidence I will use to prove that the interdict was not observed.

M. Stephan Palec, later to become one of Huss' chief prosecutors at the Council of Constance, issued his own suggestions, probably sometime in June, 1411, as to how the problem of guilt should be handled. Here is his statement, translated from the Latin:

The reason why His Lordship the Archbishop can lift an interdict against all [concerned], even against those who performed sacred rites: That he, the one who has the authority to place an interdict, has also the power of lifting it because in a spiritual judge the power of binding is not greater than is his power of loosing. And if it is said that he can lift the interdict even as regards those who have performed [sacred] offices (as is true) but cannot absolve these from the sacrilege ["profanation"] they have incurred by officiating, since such a case and jurisdiction would be papal, the answer is given that they at no time during the interdict committed sacrilege—from and by reason of, this, that that interdict was not a true one but one (merely) presented as such; since His Lordship the Archbishop himself imposed it (as one) badly informed.—*Ibid.*, p. 432.

Those priests and friars who, though mortal enemies of Huss, had nevertheless been forced to disobey the interdict, were not at all satisfied with Palec's casual approach to the problem. Instead, they petitioned the Pope for absolution. On September 27, 1413, Pope John XXIII enjoined the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Ambrose to grant, in his name, absolution from the offense to the New Town Carmelites. I quote from this papal bull, translated from Latin:

Since . . . the city of Prague and certain other places then mentioned had besides been placed under ecclesiastical interdict—the forementioned prior and priars, moved by fear of our most dear son in Christ, Wenceslaus, the illustrious King of Bohemia and fear of his officials, who were commanding them to do so under penalty of loss of life and property, and also as being themselves of simple mind and ignorant of the law, celebrated and participated in masses and other religious services in their own church or elsewhere during the same interdict. . . . [et c.]—V.J. Novacek, "O interdiktu v Praze r. 1411," *Cesky Casopis Historicky*, Vol. 9 (1903), 321.

A similar bull was issued on March 23, 1414, from which we could also quote to the same effect, but the above should be sufficient to indicate clearly that not all the churches in Prague were closed and not all the services of religion were suspended during the interdict of 1411.

The second problem with which we will deal in depth involves whether Huss left Prague in the summer of 1411 as a result of the tumult caused by the interdict. All the circumstances of this interdict and all the evidence

concerning what Huss did during this period would lead us to believe that he did not leave Prague at this time. However, it is difficult to "prove" that he did not slip out of the city for a few days unless we take on the virtually impossible task of establishing where he was each day.

The reader will recall, however, that Mrs. White quotes a letter Huss ostensibly wrote at this time in which he explains why he has retired from Prague. It can be clearly demonstrated that this letter is used erroneously in this context since it was written in December of 1412, and not in 1411 as the reader of *The Great Controversy* would be led to believe. The anachronistic use of this letter seems to offer proof that Huss left Prague at this time when in all likelihood he did not.

Mrs. White quotes the letter as it appears in Emile de Bonnechose's *Reformers Before the Reformation*. Bonnechose, in turn, cites a sixteenth century Latin source, *Hist. et Monum. Huss*. \* Since Huss wrote in Latin and Bonnechose in French, the letter as it appears in *The Great Controversy* has been translated from Latin to French to English. This makes it difficult to match it directly with the letters in Matthew Spinka's *Letters of John Huss*, translated directly from Czech to English.

\*I am not sure just what edition of this work Bonnechose used. I have consulted the earliest edition extant in the United States, that of 1558. The complete title is: *Ioannis Hus, et Hieronymi Pragensis confessorum Christi Historia et Movementa. . . Impressa Noribergae, in Officina Ioannis Montani & Vlrici Neuberl. Anno Domini 1558.*

However, Bonnechose identifies this letter as "Ep[istle] xi, p. 177." Checking letter Number 11 in *Historia et Monvmenta*, we find the complete Latin text of the letter in question. It is then relatively simple to show that this is indeed the December, 1412, letter which Spinka presents on pp.92-94 of his collection of Huss' letters.

A key phrase in the text of the letter makes it certain that it was written in the month of December: 'Dearly beloved,' Huss says, "The day is now near when we shall commemorate the Lord's birth." To suggest that we cannot be sure that a letter containing this phrase was written in December is simply absurd. If such a phrase is not sufficient to establish the month in which the letter was written, then we are dealing with a species of historical agnosticism which will not yield to any historical evidence, no matter how overwhelming. But if the letter was written in December, it had to have been written in December of 1412, not 1411. Huss was in exile by December, 1412, which was after the second interdict. Thus this letter fits perfectly his circumstances of that time. The letter could not have been written in December of 1411, because even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, that Huss left Prague in 1411, the interdict was a thing of the past and Huss was certainly back in the city by December. We have him writing the Pope from Prague on the "Day of St. Giles" (1 Sept., 1411). (Spinka, *The Letters of John Hus*, pp. 54-56.) Thus we know that Mrs. White's citation of this letter in this context is a historical error known as an anachronism.

How did these problems arise? W.C. White speaks of the truths of the controversy story having come to

his mother "chiefly as flashlight views of great events." He also refers to her getting "time and place" or "dates and geographical relations" from extra-visionary sources. She also, according to W.C. White, relied on these sources "to perfect her description of details." While W.C. White's testimony cannot be considered an infallible one, he was in a position to know more about these matters than anyone outside of Mrs. White herself. Furthermore, the natural tendency of a person in his position would be to exaggerate the evidences of divine intervention in his mother's experience. Thus when he makes statements such as these they must be taken all the more seriously. This is all the more true because his understanding fits the evidence before us so well.

Perhaps Mrs. White saw an interdict, yes, even an effective interdict. Perhaps she also saw Huss flee Prague. As she sought in extra-visionary sources to locate this interdict and Huss' departure as to time and place, she used Wylie or Bonnechose. Unfortunately, these two historians had confused the consequences of the ineffective 1411 interdict with those of the effective interdict of 1412. She followed them in their account and was accordingly confused on the specific facts in this portion of her narrative.

Following W.C. White's suggestions and the evidence before us then, we would conclude that *The Great Controversy* is not a book which is usable as an independent source of authority on matters relating to time, place, or the details of historical event. It may be that in some instances Mrs. White did indeed have visionary information on these matters, but she has not presented us with a book in which it is possible for us

to distinguish between the items drawn solely from historical sources and the material presented on the authority of vision.

In what sense is *The Great Controversy* authoritative then? It gives us authoritative answers to the questions the author says in her introduction that she set out to answer. What was her object in writing the book?

*To unfold the scenes of the great controversy between truth and error; to reveal the wiles of Satan, and the means by which he may be successfully resisted; to present a satisfactory solution of the great problem of evil, shedding such a light upon the origin and the final disposition of sin as to make fully manifest*

*the justice and benevolence of God in all His dealings with His creatures; and to show the holy, unchanging nature of His law, is the object of this book.—The Great Controversy, p. xii.*

In dealing with these themes—themes far more significant than the question of where Huss was in the summer of 1411—the Great Controversy is a crucial and authoritative source.

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