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FIFTH GENERATION:

Spiritual Treasures of Mature Adventism

Excerpts from an Adventist Today

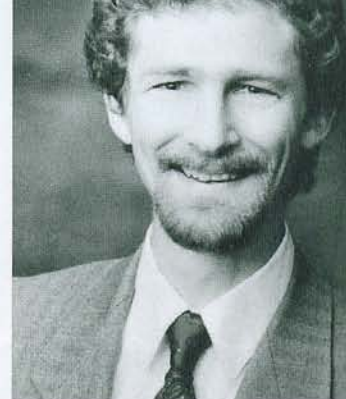
book, available July 2005

By John Mc Larty



Fifth Generation

THE TREASURES OF MATURE ADVENTISM



There is something charming about new life. Three years ago I collected a handful of acorns, brought them home and scattered them in my garden.

I forgot about them until the next spring, when oak trees started sprouting where I had planted carrots. I was thrilled. I put the trees in large pots, and now they are a couple of feet tall. I jealously guard them from the dogs and chickens and from family members who are not impressed by their gangly form. I'm dreaming of their future.

There is something awe-inspiring about mature life. In the middle of a field near my daughter's school stands a solitary, massive oak, its gangling and awkward youth enveloped in the grand, cathedral-like dignity of the mature tree. On summer afternoons, I see children playing at the foot of the tree. One branch suspends a crude swing. I've seen families gathered under the tree for picnics. On foggy mornings the tree sometimes appears to float in the sky, a sculpture 200 years in the making.

I am a child of five generations of Seventh-day Adventists. While the content of my faith is not identical with that of my great, great grandfather, I treasure the spiritual heritage I have received. It is a heritage too rich to keep to myself.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church had its immediate origins in a revival of keen interest in Bible prophecy in the middle 1800s. Some people in this movement became convinced that Jesus was going to return to earth in 1843. When that didn't happen they shifted their confidence to the next year. After that date passed, the people who became Seventh-day Adventists slowly weaned themselves from speculations about the date of the return of Jesus. They did not wean themselves from intense Bible study or enthusiasm for telling other people about God.

Adventism has been marked by its history. We have always given special attention to the interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, though the older we get the more concerned we are with the spiritual truths of these ancient books instead of trying to use them to

predict earthly events. We have been strongly influenced by the work of our missionaries in nearly every country of the world. We are a global church, not a national denomination. From our earliest days we have been intensely engaged in health ministry, both as care-givers and as health instructors. The practice of Sabbath-keeping has shaped our spiritual and social culture. The prophetic ministry of one of our founders, Ellen White, continues to shape our institutional forms and our theological concerns.

The Adventist community has been around for more than 150 years and has grown into a global community of tens of millions believers. Any community with that much history and that much geographical spread is bound to be diverse. The sketches in this magazine specifically portray the Adventism of mature, educated believers in North America. This mature Adventism is many things: beliefs about God and the Bible, a church community of congregations, schools and ministries, a way of eating, a global network of friends.

» The practice of Sabbath-keeping has shaped our spiritual and social culture. The prophetic ministry of one of our founders, Ellen White, continues to shape our institutional forms and our theological concerns.

We live in solidarity with our fellow believers in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They suffer hardships we can scarcely imagine. They demonstrate a zeal we admire. We hope that what God has taught us in our five generations here will be helpful as they build the church of the future there.

We pray that what we have learned in our life with God and with each other will be useful to other pilgrims outside our church who are seeking to integrate their learning and culture with their hunger to know and experience God.

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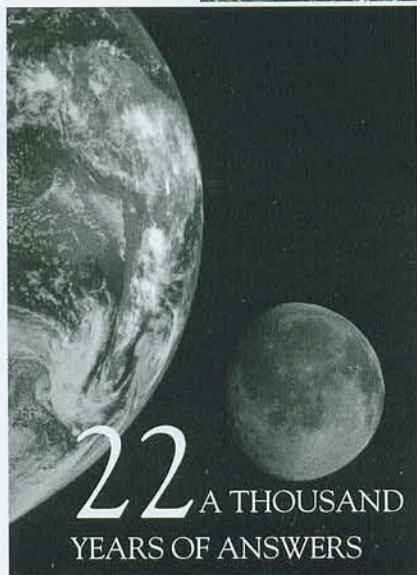
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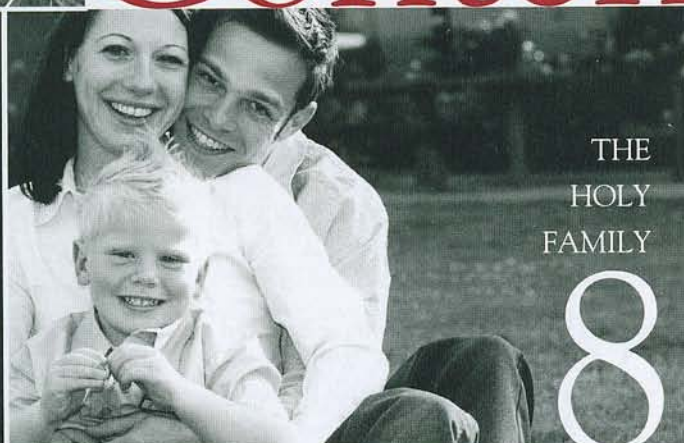
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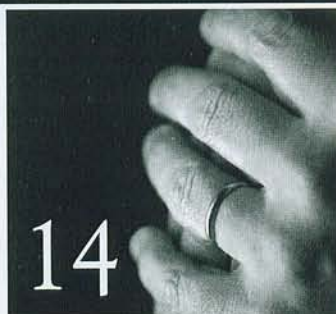


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YEARS OF ANSWERS



THE
HOLY
FAMILY

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The First Adventist Conviction

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” —Romans 5:8

God is love. This is the most essential Adventist conviction. While other ideas have been formative historically in Adventist evangelism and self-understanding—the authority of the Bible, the sanctuary, the Sabbath, distinctive interpretations of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation—I regard these as scaffolding God has used to build a clearer understanding of his love. These other beliefs are not ends in themselves. “God is love” is both the foundation and the goal of Adventist theology.

The most influential theological voice in Adventism is that of Ellen White. Her most highly regarded works are *The Conflict of the Ages* series, a five-volume narrative commentary on the Bible, and *Steps to Christ*, a handbook of basic Christian spirituality. The first sentence of the first book in *The Conflict* series is “God is love.” The final sentence of the last book ends with “God is love.” Between these two declarations, White works to show that love has been the overarching motivation for every act of God. Creation, the work of prophets, and God’s forgiveness of Israel’s sins were expressions of divine love. Of course. But so were the acts of severity—Noah’s flood, the execution of Uzzah, the Babylonian captivity. White works to persuade us that the sternest actions attributed to God in the Bible are best explained as divine “tough love.”

White opens *Steps to Christ* with a paean to God’s love. Spiritual life does not begin with our quest for God or even our hunger for God, but rather with his affectionate regard for us. The first chapter, titled, “God’s Love for Man,” begins:

“Nature and revelation alike testify of God’s love.... The sunshine and the rain, that gladden and refresh the earth, the hills and seas and plains, all speak to us of the Creator’s love. It is God who supplies the daily needs of all His creatures....

“Even amid the suffering that results from sin,

God’s love is revealed. It is written that God cursed the ground for man’s sake. Genesis 3:17. The thorn and the thistle—the difficulties and trials that make his life one of toil and care—were appointed for his good as a part of the training needful in God’s plan for his uplifting from the ruin and degradation that sin has wrought....

“God is love” is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass. The lovely birds making the air vocal with their happy songs, the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green—all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God and to his desire to make his children happy....

“God has bound our hearts to him by unnumbered tokens in heaven and in earth. Through the things of nature, and the deepest and tenderest earthly ties that human hearts can know, he has sought to reveal himself to us. Yet these but imperfectly represent his love” (*Steps to Christ*, pp. 9, 10).

I am citing White here not as a theological authority but as historical evidence. I am not suggesting her words prove God is love, but they are compelling evidence that in Adventist theology this conviction is foundational.

In recent decades there has been scholarly debate over the precise nature of White’s authorship. She made extensive use of copied material and literary assistants. But even if it could be demonstrated that someone other than White was directly responsible for the emphasis on love evident in her most revered works, that would if anything strengthen my argument. If we as a community were to assign someone to “write in the prophet’s name,” we would assign someone whose central conviction was God is love. The statements about God’s love in the Ellen White corpus are not mere decoration; they are not epicycles. They are integral to the central themes of the books.

As of 2004, the Seventh-day Adventist creed included 27 doctrinal statements ranging from a declaration that the Bible is the trustworthy revelation of God to a prohibition on smoking. Our church has never formally declared which of our doctrines are most important or most foundational. You could probably find examples of individual Adventists making almost any one of our doctrinal statements central in their thought and practice. Adventists are (to understate it) diverse. But the leading exponents of the major varieties of Adventism would unhesitatingly affirm that the great bedrock truth is God is love. Every other conviction is tested by this conviction.

One distinctive Adventist doctrine is our rejection of the common Christian teaching that hell is a place of continuous, eternal torment. Adventists adduce a number of Bible passages in support of our belief that hell is an event at the end of time rather than a place of ongoing torment. An increasing number of Protestant biblical scholars publicly teach that the New Testament view of hell is similar to the Adventist doctrine. The Adventist position is biblically defensible. But when I trace the history of our rejection of eternal hell, what strikes me is not the force of the specific biblical data, but the strength of the intuitive conviction that a God of love could not torture anyone forever. Our quest for biblical evidence against eternal torment was driven by an unshakable certainty that God is love.

An Adventist practice strongly linked with this conviction about God's love is health care. Progressive Adventism has been driven in large part by medical professionals working in conventional medicine.

Fundamentalist Adventism, on the other hand, has been anchored by small institutions that teach or provide alternative medical therapies emphasizing proper diet, exercise, and hydrotherapy. Both Progressives and Fundamentalists, who oppose each other in so many ways, appeal to the truth of God's love as a prime justification for what they are doing. God's love for people who are hurting provides the model for their health care mission. And each group argues their theology is the most congruent with the love of God.

We don't agree on the details of what it means to be loving. We argue about the meaning and appropriateness of "tough love." We debate the connection between love and retribution. Does love for the victim require retributive justice or does love for the perpetrator preclude it? But we carry on the debate with the shared assumption that our conclusions must align with our central conviction that God is love.

Adventists usually picture heaven as being very earthy and real. Instead of clouds and harps,

we imagine people talking with God, studying, traveling, building houses, playing with animals. It's not that we really think we know what heaven will be like, but we are utterly confident God in his love will make sure our future is better than our best imagination.

In line with a long Jewish and Christian history, Adventists have given a lot of attention to theodicy—the question of God's justice in the light of human suffering. We vigorously reject one classic resolution of this problem—God is God and can do whatever he wishes. We insist the final answer to this question cannot turn the assertion God is love on its head. A key element of the final judgment is a demonstration of the truth of these words in a way that makes sense to the human mind.

For Adventists the central theme in the human story is God's work to create a community of beings who will love him and each other. Creation was God's action of "giving birth" as a parent. All the acts of God, from sending of Jesus to save sinners to the decisions of the final judgment, are expressions of love. Even the misery and tragedy of human existence get linked to God's love by interpreting

» "Nature and revelation alike testify of God's love.... The sunshine and the rain, that gladden and refresh the earth, the hills and seas and plains, all speak to us of the Creator's love. It is God who supplies the daily needs of all His creatures."

pain and evil as consequences of human abuse of the freedom necessary for genuine love. Eventually, evil and suffering will disappear and God's love will triumph. Through the judgment process, all humanity will be finally convinced that God could not have "done it better." That future is describe in the final lines of Ellen White's most famous book:

"And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive so will love, reverence and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of his character....

"The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love (*The Great Controversy*, p. 678).

This is the first Adventist conviction.

*“Can a woman
forget her nursing
infant? And have no
compassion on the
child she has borne?
Though she may
forget, I will not
forget you.”*

—Isaiah 49:15

God's Grief

I had been in my new church just a few weeks and was making my rounds, getting acquainted. Not very many minutes into a visit, Lois began telling me about the great hole in her life left by the death of her daughter, Angela. Her grief was as sharp and fresh as if Angela had died just yesterday.

I listened closely as details spilled out. Angela had been a beautiful girl, sweet, thoughtful. It was a hot summer day. She and some friends had gone to the lake. She had drowned.

It did not quite make sense to me. The way Lois talked, I was sure the accident had occurred only a short time ago. But Angela sounded like a teenager. And Lois was 80 years old. Finally Lois mentioned the detail I had been listening for. Angela had died on her 16th birthday, more than 40 years before.

A mother's heart does not forget. Her grief does not go away.

According to traditional Christian teaching, when someone dies, he or she goes immediately into the presence of God or enters the torments of hell. In this view, before death God is limited in his interaction with people by the illusions and frailty of our bodily existence. When a believer dies, death heals this separation and leads immediately to the joy of unhindered spiritual fellowship between God and his children. So for God, death is a great boon. It is the door to heaven. We who are left bereft on earth may be racked by grief, but God's heart is gladdened by the homeward flight of his child.

The Adventist understanding of what happens when people die paints an entirely different picture of God. When someone dies, the person stops interacting with God through prayer, worship and obedience. Certainly the person is not lost to the heart or memory of God. But as an active, thinking, loving, talking human being, the person no longer exists. In the language of the Bible, the person “sleeps” (John 11:11-14). A dead person has no awareness of time or waiting. The person remains unconscious until the resurrection. At the second coming all God's people are united and taken en masse into the presence of God. They all arrive at the heavenly party together (Heb 11:39, 40).

In this view, God himself is deprived of the living companionship of a person who dies—along with the grieving family and friends. Instead of death being a boon to God, death robs God of the worship of his people (Ps 115:17). When people die, the heavenly Father no longer hears the voices of his children in praise and prayer. He has memories to cherish and a future to anticipate, but he is not in fellowship with their vital, interactive “souls.”

In the story of Jesus' friend, Lazarus, we read that moments before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he wept. Given Jesus' divinity, this incident portrays God's identification with human pain. Jesus knew that Lazarus was not going to remain dead. Still, the heartbreak of his friends brought Jesus himself to tears. It is a truism that when children hurt, their moms and dads hurt as much as or more than the young ones. And God, our heavenly parent, hurts for

his children. When grief batters our hearts and wets our eyes, God hurts because we hurt. But there is more to God's grief than that.

God's grief is not only the response of his heart to the arrows of pain that wound us. God himself is wounded by the separation caused by death. Death interrupts God's own conversation with his child. God bears the emotional cost of the system he has designed and allows to continue even in its broken condition. When it comes to enduring pain, God asks nothing of us he does not require of himself.

This perspective of God as a grieving parent has large implications for how we view the "delay of the Advent." Why hasn't Jesus returned as he promised? What's taking so long? Explanations include: God is waiting because he wants to save more people. He is waiting for some predetermined time. He waits for evil to reach its full flower or for the gospel to be preached in all the world or for the character of Christ to be perfectly reproduced in his people.

Each of these theories has something to recommend it, and each has problems. The Adventist understanding of the nature of death does not answer the question, "Why does God wait?" It does, however, change the emotional content of the question. In addition to asking why God doesn't hurry up and rescue us from our trouble (a very good and proper question), this picture of God's grief prompts us to ask, "Why doesn't God spare himself?" If the redeemed are sleeping, waiting the great resurrection morning described so vividly in the New Testament, then every day God delays the second coming is another day he carries the wounds of a bereaved parent. Since God loves every human more intensely than a mother loves her only child, the Adventist understanding of death is a picture of a brokenhearted God.

In the traditional view of death, there is little motivation for God to bring human history to an end. Every day God is welcoming children home. But in the Adventist view, every day that passes adds to the grief that weighs on God's heart. God does not ask us to bear burdens he himself does not carry. He does not encourage us to be brave in the face of pain that he himself does not feel.

I remember listening to a funeral sermon at a funeral in Akron, Ohio. On the front row were four or five kids, siblings of an eight-year-old boy who was killed when the front wheel of his bicycle hit a rock and threw him in front of a car.

The preacher spoke directly to the young people on the front row. "Try not to take your brother's death too hard. I know you miss him, but God needed him up in heaven and that's why he took him. God must have some very important job in mind for your brother up there. Stay close to Jesus

and someday you'll join your brother in heaven, and he'll show you around the New Jerusalem and tell you all about what he's been doing while you were down here working for Jesus."

The pastor was doing what a pastor is supposed to do—mining the spiritual and theological resources of his community for all the comfort and solace he could find. But I was appalled at the implications of his words.

"So are you telling me," I imagined shouting, "that every time God runs low on kitchen help in the heavenly cafeteria he throws rocks in front of little kids' bike tires? Is God really that hard up for help in heaven? What kind of God is that?"

This view, if true, would mean our deepest wounds bring great joy to God. People who are the most lovable and leave the greatest hole here on earth when they die, bring instant joy in the courts of heaven. We on earth bear all the cost of improving heaven's workforce.

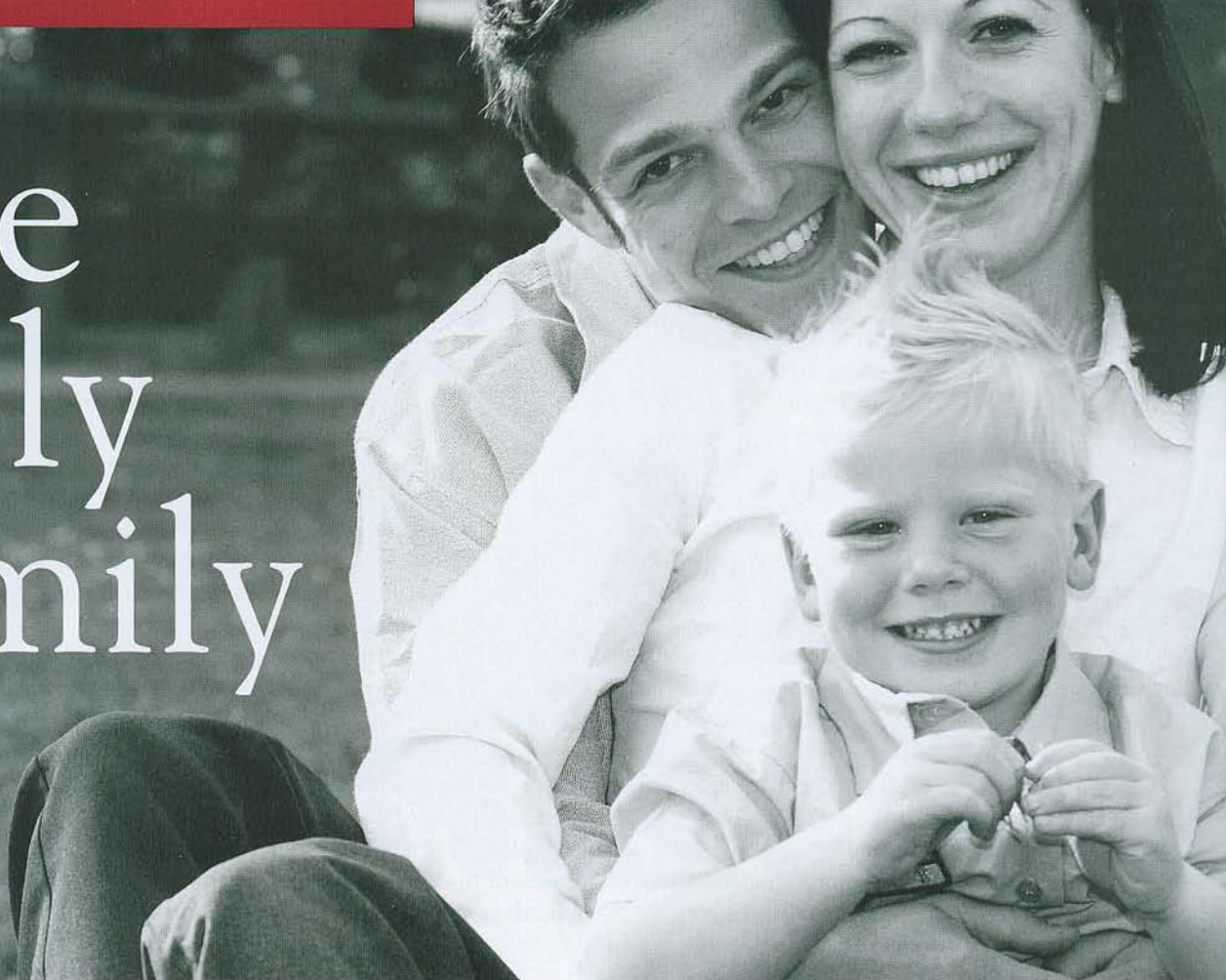
The traditional view of death does offer some comfort. It places those who have died in a good place, far from all pain. And this traditional view accurately describes the experience of the person who dies. When a believer dies, the very next moment in their experience will be the resurrection and the presence of God. The time in the grave that

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is felt all too keenly by grieving survivors does not exist in the experience of the one who has died.

The Adventist view, on the other hand, addresses the reality of pain confronted by those who are still alive. For those who survive the death of a loved one, the immediate reality is grief and hurt. And in every death, one of the survivors, one of the mourners, is God himself. There is no benefit for God in the death of his children. He is not knocking off children to fill the heavenly kitchens or choirs. He does not forget our grief in the great joy of his communion with his children who have escaped into his presence from their earthly prisons. Instead God enters the very depths of our grief. In fact, our purest, deepest grief is but a faint reflection of God's grief. If we are able to receive it, the pain of our grief is a stern education concerning the depth and intensity of God's love.

The Holy Family



***“So you are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”
—Ephesians 2:19***

I was 22 years old, headed from Memphis to Pacific Union College as a transfer student for my senior year. I had never been to the school and didn’t know a soul. I got off the plane in Oakland and waded into the sea of unknown faces in the terminal, looking for Uncle Ellsworth. I had met him only once before, when I was 6 years old, so I didn’t have the slightest idea what he looked like. But a tall man with a mane of white hair and a kindly face approached and greeted me tentatively. “John?”

Within seconds, I went from being a stranger lost in a crowded airport to a long-lost son coming home. Uncle Ellsworth and Aunt Bernice embraced me with warm affection. During the school year, my cousin Jeanine proved a wonderful friend, offering sage “sister’s” advice regarding girls and dating. Aunt Bernice’s spaghetti on Friday night was the highlight of my week. Here in this new place among new people, I found myself at home because I was family.

Americans celebrate the individual. Our national stories honor individuals who have risen above their families of origin and, through hard work and initiative, have achieved individual greatness. Most of us know nothing of Ben Franklin’s family, or George Washington’s, for that matter. We are suspicious of political dynasties like the Kennedys or Bushes. We wonder if the younger members of the families have gotten into office because of

family connections. And there is no compliment intended in the question. We protest affirmative action because it seems to undercut individual achievement.

But in reality, personal identity is not created ex nihilo by individuals. It is given by family (either literal or figurative). Individuals make real choices and shape themselves through choices that become habits and character. But all of this activity of the will is at most a mere remodeling of identities given us by our families. Identity is far more gift than achievement. This perspective is pervasive all through the Bible.

In the beginning, humanity’s identity was the gift of creation—we are created in the image of God. The story of the Jews celebrates the status they enjoyed as descendants of Abraham. The Bible highlights privileges that were theirs as members of the nation God had chosen, quite apart from the character or characteristics of the individuals or even of the community (Deut 7:7). In the New Testament, believers are not pictured as “saved individuals,” but as beloved members of the Holy Family, the household of God.

When the Old Testament affirms God’s regard for non-Jewish people, it does so by picturing them as honorary members of the Jewish community. Consider the stories of Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman (Matt 1; 2 Kings 5) and the inclusive language of

Psalm 87: "The Lord loves the gates of Zion. ...and he has made her his home."

He says, "I will count Egypt and Babylon among my friends; Philistine, Tyrian and Nubian will be there; and Zion shall be called a mother in whom men of every race are born.' The Lord will write against each in the roll of nations: 'This one was born in her'" (Ps 87).

Notice that Babylonians and Philistines, traditional enemies of the Jews, who receive the favor of the Lord are not honored as the noblest citizens of their respective lands. Instead they are received as honorary citizens of Jerusalem. They are reckoned as members of the earthly community that receives God's favor. This theme echoes through the New Testament as well. The story is told of an encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, a tax collector in the city of Jericho. In that society, tax collectors had the social standing of drug dealers in our society—envied for their wealth, despised for their wickedness. Because they worked with the Roman occupation forces, they were seen as traitorous collaborators and regarded as hopelessly corrupt. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus's house. At dinner, Zacchaeus announces he is giving away half his money and that he will repay anyone he has cheated four times what he stole. Jesus responds to this evidence of transformation by announcing, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9, 10).

Notice, Jesus describes Zacchaeus's new status not in terms of his individual, personal connection with God, but in terms of his restoration to citizenship in the community of Abraham (a figure of speech for the people of God).

The Bible says very little about "me and God." Its emphasis is "we and God." Salvation is not something I achieve through the pursuit of personal holiness, it is the gift of inclusion in the holy community. The spiritual gifts received by a follower of Jesus are gifts to the new holy nation of the church. They are not intended for holy individuals—except as those individuals are participants in the people of God.

The Book of Revelation brings this emphasis on community to a climax. In Chapter 3 Jesus is pictured knocking at the door seeking to enjoy dinner with individuals ("I will go in and eat with him and he with me"). But more frequently the focus is on the people of God, gathered from "every tribe, nation, kindred, people" whom Jesus has anointed as priests (Rev 1). They form a heavenly chorus and "follow the Lamb wherever he goes." They sit on thrones with their compatriots, judging and reigning forever (Rev 5, 7, 20, 22). Salvation is enjoyed by the host of God's people in corporate worship and reigning, not by individuals in private, one-on-one interaction with God.

The theme song of heaven is not "I Come to the Garden Alone," but "Shall We Gather at the River?"

This communal source of identity is celebrated in the central practices of the Christian church—prayer (Our Father...), baptism, communion, Sabbath keeping. It is associated with most of the classic explications of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus. It has profound implications for our understanding of the church and is inseparable from our doctrine of God.

Historically, Adventists have seen ourselves as uniquely called to serve as God's church at the end of time. This belief can be distorted into a cause for spiritual pride, but properly understood it highlights the essential role of community in the work of God. God is not looking for spiritual Lone Rangers to show up here and there and perform heroic deeds for the kingdom of heaven. Rather, God is looking for people who are willing to participate in building a holy community, a society known for its faith, hope and love.

To those who are vividly aware of their inadequacies or failings, God offers the gift of membership in his household. You do not have to earn your place or prove your merit or fight your way in. To people who see themselves as foreigners and strangers, God gives the assurance that he has set a place for them at the family table. On the other hand, for those hesitant to associate with the "riffraff" Jesus sometimes attracts, the reality of church offers a strong check on pride.

We readily recognize certain kinds of human ability as gifts—things like musical ability or high IQ. We have a harder time recognizing personal drive, motivation, or moral and spiritual sensitivity as gifts. But God, in calling us to his table, reminds us that none of us arrived here by spontaneous generation. We were birthed and re-birthed. And all of our abilities were gifts before they became achievements. And all of our failings were first weaknesses and wounds that came to us apart from our will.

One of the crucial functions of the church is to actively welcome others into full participation in the life of the Holy Family. As the family of Jesus, the church is obliged to seek and save the lost. These "lost ones" may be crushed with feelings of inadequacy or swollen with self-confidence, but they equally need the accountability and affirmation that comes from participation in the earthly family of God.

Our most precious identity is given to us irrespective of our accomplishment or demerit. The greatest benefits we receive come because of the resources of the family, not because of our own personal achievements. When we step off the plane, we are greeted by Uncle Ellsworth and taken home because we are family. And we will be welcomed into heaven because we are members of the household of God.

Sabbath in Zion

We were supposed to leave Los Angeles Thursday morning for a long weekend in Zion National Park. But when I called Pep Boys late Wednesday afternoon, the mechanic reported that our van was still comatose. Thursday afternoon brought no improvement. Friday about noon, my wife and I crammed kids and camping gear into our Subaru and 11 hours later, after stops for restrooms, gas, food and restrooms we arrived at the park. The campground was silent and dark. Scouting the message board I found the promised note: "Griswolds are in campsite 34; we've

registered you in site 35." I turned off my headlights. With the amber glow of the parking lights we found our site, pitched our tent and slept.

Sabbath morning over breakfast we met the others, the Bryants and their college-age kids, the Griswolds and their youngsters and Bill Jackson and his two boys. Strangers meeting in Zion. After breakfast we loaded into cars and headed down to the Virgin River, where we found a spot for church. We sang and talked about the creator and redeemer while watching the sun play on the massive formations around us. After a vegetarian lunch we climbed Angel's Landing, a breathtaking pinnacle. At the top we met a group of college kids,

one of whom was a drama student. There against the backdrop of stone and immense blue space he recited a poem for us with marvelous pathos and intensity.

Late that afternoon the group scattered across a landscape of cross-bedded sandstone, the younger kids scampering here and there like squirrels, older kids, women and men drifting into little groups here and there for conversation. The men chewed on questions that arise at the intersection of geology and theology. We talked the afternoon away, luxuriating in the social and spiritual space created by our Sabbath habits.

It was not a gathering of like minds; not in the sense of sharing common educations—our group included a geologist, an engineer, an entomologist, a theologian—and not in the sense of shared opinions about how creation happened and when. But we did share a haunting sense of the paucity of our knowledge and a deep appreciation for the

complexity and beauty of nature.

Sabbath was the wordless sacrament that created common ground for us, not by dictating our paleontological opinions, but by offering an opportunity to cultivate wonder, awe, humility and quietness. Sabbath linked us men to one another and to the community of women and college kids and youngsters.

For people whose theology is characterized more by questions than by confidence, Sabbath provides a way to participate deeply in the community of faith. Through walks in the park, shared meals with fellow believers and community worship, Sabbath provides a concrete way for intellectuals to practice believing. Sabbath practices—Friday night meal rituals, attendance at church, walks in the park, campouts filled with an awareness of God's presence and favor—provide a bodily way for us to honor God and confess our own incompleteness, frailty and evil. By keeping Sabbath we worship.

Sabbath is the most visible of a collection of distinctly Adventist habits—eating vegetarian, abstaining from alcohol, making prudish choices regarding videos and movies, counting 10 percent of our income as God's. In these and other traditions, we find a pattern for living as a believer in spite of our doubts. It offers a wholesome form of religious life we can teach our children without having to answer all their questions about the formal beliefs and institutions of Adventism or Christianity. We don't claim that everything we do is unambiguously commanded by Scripture or that our beliefs and norms are flawlessly consistent. Rather, we claim that our community has grown in the soil of Scripture. We honor the work God has done in the larger communities of Christianity and Judaism as members of these communities have studied the Bible through the centuries. They have been our mentors as we have developed our own distinctive norms through 150-plus years of reading the Bible and seeking God—together.

Vegetarianism

Adventists are vegetarians. Not that the majority of Adventists strictly avoid meat, but we honor our idealists by not serving meat at our community meals. This vegetarianism is linked with several ideals. First it is rooted in the picture of peace and harmony of the creation story. In Eden there was no death or predation. Vegetarianism is a way of walking lightly in the world. It is a social application

» This vegetarianism is linked with several ideals. First, it is rooted in the picture of peace and harmony of the creation story.

of the wilderness ethic of minimal impact on the environment. Historically, Adventists have opposed participation by our young men in war. We are aware of the evil that sometimes erupts and calls for forceful response, but as a community we have embraced a nonviolent ethic.

Vegetarianism also grows out of our conviction that body care is a moral issue. We view our bodies as masterpieces of divine art and temples for the activity of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we have a moral obligation to safeguard our health. Eating nutritious food, exercising, getting adequate sleep and other health practices are seen as essential elements of the normal Christian life. And public instruction regarding healthful practices is a normal part of our church life. The result of this emphasis on healthful living is increased longevity and decreased incidence of disease among Adventists who follow healthy practices.

Our advocacy of wholesome food goes beyond a concern for biological health. There is a substrata of inchoate conviction that abstinence from Twinkies and McDonalds is somehow more congruent with radical moral and ethical purity. Smoking is not just unhealthy; it is “unclean.” We are teetotalers, not because we think the Bible explicitly prohibits drinking alcohol, but because we are convinced a community that scorns alcohol consumption is a safer place for children and all the other unknown men and women who for genetic or other reasons are specially susceptible to alcoholism.

This carefulness, this abstemiousness, is carried over into our consumption of entertainment. Just as we are careful about what we eat, so we are careful about what we watch and read and play. We teach that people are responsible for input into their spiritual systems. We encourage members to actively seek esthetic, intellectual and recreational input that will foster spiritual sensitivity and faithfulness.

We know our eternal destiny is not determined by attention to food, holy days, environmental stewardship or by abstinence from tobacco and other drugs. We know lying is much more evil than, say, smoking. But as parents and friends, spouses and neighbors we are committed to building a community that promotes personal and social well-being as well as preparing people for the hereafter. In this, we are simply following the example and teachings of Jesus.

Saying Grace

Bill and I pushed our way into a crowded eatery in West Yellowstone on the last day of a geology field trip. We ordered our sandwiches—he, a hamburger with the works, and I, avocado, cucumber and sprouts on nine-grain bread. Our food was delivered. Bill picked up his hamburger and began devouring it. I paused for a second to say grace and then began inhaling my sandwich. After we had taken the edge off our hunger, I eyed the professor, then laughingly accused him. “Bill, you left out the human part of



» Saying grace (or thanks or “the blessing”) at meals is a way to turn eating into a spiritual exercise. In this pause for prayer we bring some of the holiness of the Lord’s Supper into our ordinary experience.

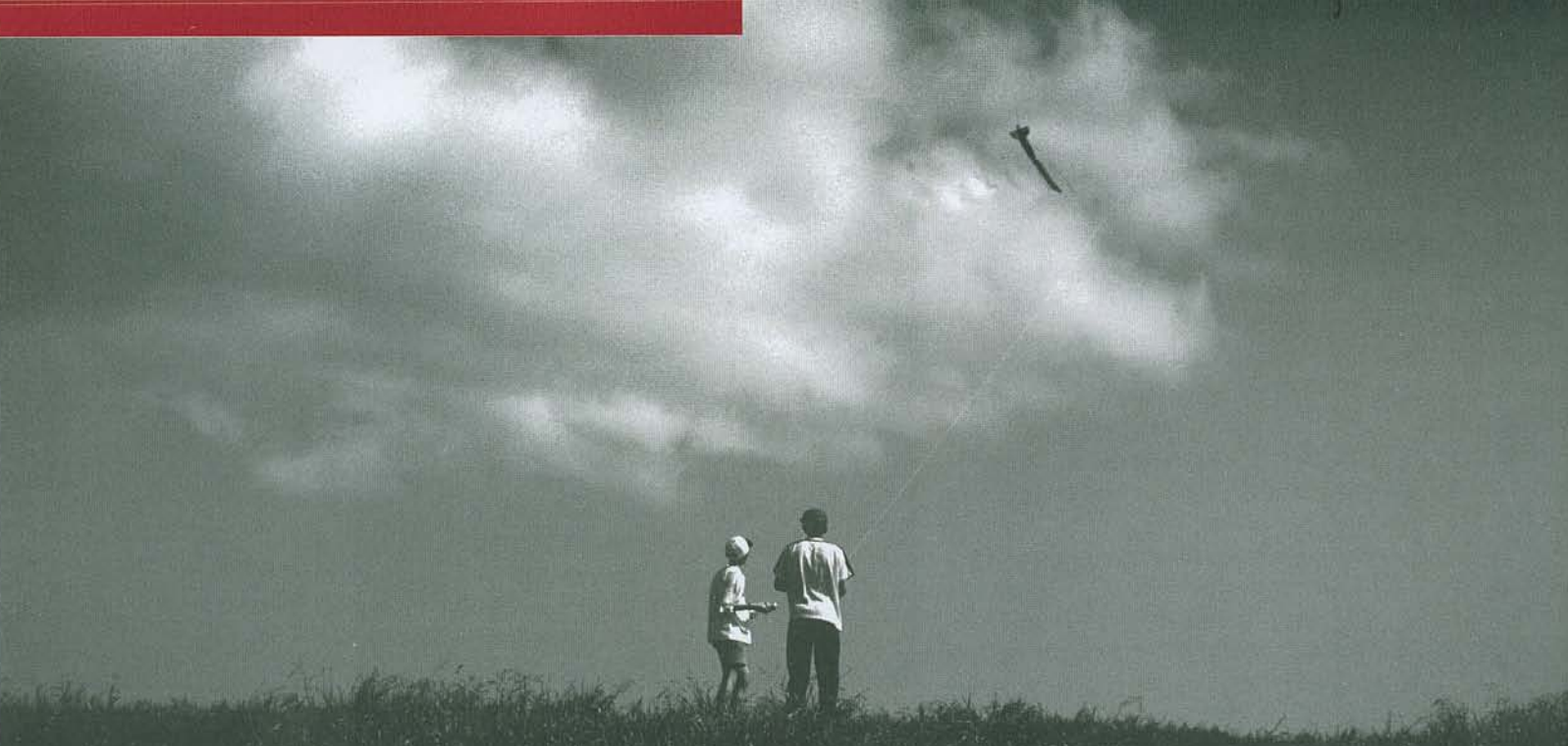
eating that hamburger.”

Bill didn’t get it at first. He thought I was teasing him for his carnivorous lunch, but that wasn’t it. “You ate that sandwich the way my dog would have. You forgot to say thanks.” Bill grudgingly acknowledged the rebuke.

Saying grace (or thanks or “the blessing”) at meals is a way to turn eating into a spiritual exercise. In this pause for prayer we bring some of the holiness of the Lord’s Supper into our ordinary experience.

“To the death of Christ we owe even this earthly life. The bread we eat is the purchase of his broken body. The water we drink is bought by his spilled blood. Never one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food, but he is nourished by the body and the blood of Christ. The cross of Calvary is stamped on every loaf” (Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 660).

As a community, Adventists are connected with each other through a shared concern for Sabbath keeping, a healthy lifestyle and a culture of purity and self-control. We don’t pretend our way of life is the only way to be authentically Christian. But we unabashedly claim this way of life as a treasured heritage and an authentic form of Christian practice. We find this way of life precious and welcome others to experience it with us.



The Sabbath: A Park in Time

*“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you are to labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.”
—Exodus 20:8-10*

I remember Overton Park in Memphis as a magical place. On Sabbath afternoons my parents took us for walks in the forest of old-growth oaks and hickories. We searched for crawdads in the creek. We fed the ducks. I remember flying kites there, swinging on the swings and eating watermelon. Summer evenings, we enjoyed concerts at the band shell. There was an art academy set in a sweep of lawn, and on the park's north side, the zoo. For a city kid, there was no better place in the world than Overton Park.

I remember one other aspect of life in Memphis in the '50s and early '60s. It took forever to go anywhere. There were no freeways. When the first section of freeway opened to traffic, it was one of the seven wonders of the world—four lanes wide, no traffic lights. It felt like flying.

The master plan called for a beltway around town and a cross-town expressway as part of Interstate 40. The beltway was the easier right-of-way to acquire. The east-west route through the established neighborhoods in the heart of the city progressed more slowly. The greatest challenge was finding a way through or around a band of grand homes running north and south in the center of town—right across the projected path of the cross-town expressway. (In Memphis, as in most places, you did not bulldoze the homes of the wealthy.) There was one obvious gap in this roadblock of fine homes: Overton Park. Fortunately for the planners, while there were exclusive neighborhoods north and south of the park, on both the east and west sides there were working-class neighborhoods which would present little effective opposition to an expressway cutting through.

There was just one problem. An elderly woman in town with a lot of money didn't want the park desecrated by an expressway. And she went to court.

Nearly everyone I knew was outraged by this woman's opposition to the park. Memphis desperately needed an expressway. And the park route was the most obvious, least expensive, and most politically feasible. Figuring it was just a matter of time before common sense prevailed, the state moved ahead with construction. They built the freeway to within a couple of miles of the park on the east, and purchased the right-of-way and demolished houses right up to the park border.

The court battles dragged on for 20 years. The park won. There is a gap in the interstate in the middle of Memphis. Interstate 40 is routed around Memphis on the northern beltway. Most of those who 30 years ago thought the old woman was crazy, now realize the wisdom of her opposition to cutting up the park with an expressway. When they take their grandkids to the zoo, they're glad it's not bordered by a thundering highway. It's good that the view from the art academy north does not feature fences, exit signs and passing semis. And it's right that when you golf or take your kids for a walk in the woods, you hear birds, not traffic.

Memphis still needs a cross-town expressway, but the city would be immeasurably poorer if it had allowed an expressway to cut through the heart of Overton Park.

The idea of using the park's open space to improve the transportation infrastructure of Memphis was rooted in historical precedent. When the city wanted to build an art academy, it was cheaper to site it in

the park than to buy more land. And art seemed to fit the purpose of the park. The park had long housed the zoo. And the animals seemed an appropriate accompaniment to the woods and ponds already there. Then there was the fire station. The wealthy home owners in the area had insisted on better fire coverage, and they were not about to sacrifice one of their fine homes. No one would miss half an acre of woods. So the city sited the fire station on the southwest corner of the park. And if it hadn't been for the elderly woman and her lawyers, pragmatists would have bisected the park with an expressway.

Open space in a city must be fiercely defended or it will be used for "more productive" purposes. Without champions to stop it, the press of development will occupy every square inch, leaving the city terribly impoverished.

Sabbath is like a park in time. It is intended by God as a tranquil open space in the frenzy of our lives. But like open space in a city, without constant vigilance it will disappear. Adventists believe we have been called to act as guardians of this park in time.

The idea of a weekly holy day (whether Sabbath or Sunday) has disappeared from American society. In 2000, in Seattle, the Boeing Company proposed a floating workweek in which work on the weekend would be treated like that done on any other day of the week. Any set of 5 days would be paid as a regular workweek—Monday to Friday or Wednesday to Sunday or Friday to Tuesday. It would all be the same. No more time and a half for work on Sabbath or Sunday.

In most Christian churches, Sunday is regarded as a convenient day for church attendance, but not as a holy day. There are a few voices among American Protestants lamenting the loss of the Sabbath (Sunday.) And John Paul II issued a strong statement about the sacredness of Sunday. But these are isolated voices in a larger cultural trend to fill up every available hour with "productive" busyness.

Nearly every adult I know needs more time—more time for work, for business, education, shopping, home and auto maintenance. We don't have enough time for a Sabbath—whether it is Saturday or Sunday. The Sabbath needs a champion as much as Overton Park did.

It would be silly to argue that a park is the most important need of the city. Does a city need parks more than roads, a water system, courts or fire stations? The city needs all of this and more. And it would be silly to argue Sabbath is the most important need of modern contemporary society or the contemporary church. But while Sabbath is not "most important," it is a vital constituent of Christian spiritual life.

Parks require community protection. We make rules: No freeways. No fire stations. No Taco Bell. No dogs off-leash. No wood gathering. Of course, every rule has exceptions. The park sign reads, "No flower gathering," but who will complain if a child

picks a dandelion bouquet? We would oppose the construction of a McDonald's but welcome the services of an ice cream cart on the Fourth of July. An expressway would destroy the park, but paved roads make it easy for families to gather in the picnic grounds.

There are Sabbath rules: No work. No hockey matches. No changing the oil in my car. No house painting. No TV news. No hiring others to work for me. To generalize and modernize the Sabbath commandment: On Sabbath quit your struggle to secure your place in the world. Instead, rest in the security God offers. Stop your struggle to make money, earn grades, win the championship, beautify your home or fix your car. All these things are necessary. You have 6 days to do them. On Sabbath ignore your failures and inadequacies and achievements and successes and give attention to God's accomplishments and promises. And remember the Sabbath is not just for you but for all whose lives

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and work are under your direction.

Fixed boundaries and consistent enforcement are a necessary condition for the preservation of the special nature of a park. And it's the same with the Sabbath. The only way for us to enjoy its blessings is for us to embrace the firm boundaries set in Scripture. If God merely gave us permission to take some time off, most of us would say "Thank you," then explain we are just too overcommitted right now to take any time off. So God commanded us to take the time off. He ordered us to stop our important tasks and take 24 hours for fellowship with him and with our families.

The frenzied pace of our culture is pressuring us to build multiple freeways through the few open spaces left in our lives. The requirements of commerce and personal achievement threaten to completely dominate the human landscape. Don't let it happen in your life. Keep the freeway out of the park, and not just for yourself. Our persistence in park-tending will ensure that the woods, zoo, duck pond and picnic tables—the tranquillity—remain available for our children, grandchildren and neighbors. Our stubborn Sabbath keeping serves to preserve a priceless sanctuary, an irreplaceable park in time, for generations to come.

God's Wedding Ring

*Sabbath is God's wedding ring.
It's a reminder of his surprising
pursuit of our love...*

It's a gorgeous spring day. A warm sun paints the patio where Janet is planting petunias and snapdragons in large terra-cotta pots. After pressing the soil around the last petunia, she pulls her hands from the dirt, pushes back her hair with the back of her hand, then studies her fingers. With her thumb she rubs the dirt off her wedding ring. The dull gleam of gold takes her back to the day she first met Andrew.

She was waiting tables at a cheap Italian restaurant on First Avenue, a block from Bellevue Hospital. It wasn't the job she'd dreamed of when she left Shaker Heights after her junior year in college. She was going to be an actress. She knew it would be hard, but she had some secretarial skills and figured she could make enough to live on while she developed her acting career. But all she could find was temp work, and too often she didn't even get that. She met a guy at an audition. They dated a few times. When she didn't have the money for another week at the YMCA, she didn't dare call home for help. She moved in with him.

They'd been living together 3 months the first time he hit her. He was terribly apologetic. He promised it would never happen again. But it did. Usually when money was tight. So, she'd taken the job waiting tables at Pappa Roma's. It didn't pay much, but it was regular, and sometimes the tips weren't too bad.

One night her boyfriend came home drunk. Again. They got into a shouting match, and before

she knew it, he was hitting her. Again. He ended up sobbing that he was sorry. She slept cuddled in his arms. He hadn't broken anything, and in the morning she was able to crawl out of bed. She did what she could with makeup and headed for Roma's.

Lunchtime at Roma's was always packed. Doctors and staff from the hospital. Relatives of patients. Andrew had come in with a couple of interns for lunch. Janet bantered with them a bit, angling for a tip. Okay, she flirted. She needed the money. The doctors got up to leave, but instead of heading out the door, Andrew came back to the kitchen looking for her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure. Never felt better." She tried to be flippant.

"Look," he said. "I'm an ER doc. You did a pretty good job with your makeup, but I do know a battered face when I see one. I'm worried about you. I don't want to see you down the street where I do my business. I much prefer seeing you here. So take care of yourself, okay? You don't have to let anyone beat you up. Get some help before you get killed, okay?"

And then he was gone.

Turns out Andrew was in his final year of an emergency-room residency. He was single. He kept coming to Roma's for lunch.

Janet still can't quite figure out how it happened. But they'd been married 12 years now. What had he seen in her? What had he seen behind the makeup on someone else's battered girlfriend?

With Andrew's encouragement and financial

support she'd gone back to college and finished a fine arts degree. His family, an old, established Connecticut family, had embraced her as one of their own. Their three children were a delight. Her husband's practice was going well.

She is wealthy, socially secure and spiritually whole—all because of her husband's love. And every time she glances at her hand and sees that wedding ring, she remembers.

Sabbath is God's wedding ring. It's a reminder of his surprising pursuit of our love, a symbol of our privileges as the chosen people of God, a declaration to the world of our admiration for our heavenly husband.

"I [God] gave them the Sabbath—a day of rest every seventh day—as a symbol between them and me, to remind them that it is I, the Lord, who sanctifies them, that they are truly my people.

"Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God" (Ezek 20:12, 20).

The word "sanctify" means to set apart. God sets people apart for a special relationship with himself. He gives us the Sabbath to help keep alive our awareness of his love in a world full of evidence to the contrary. The Sabbath reminds us of where we have come from and what God has in mind for us.

Sabbath celebrates God's initiative and God's intentions in his relationship with humans. None of us complain if our beloved is good-looking, wealthy, smart, caring and responsive. But the Bible pictures God as coming and wooing us while we were broken and poor. He found us when we were living with a violent boyfriend, waiting tables in a cheap restaurant. It mattered to him that we were getting beat up. He saw in us a beauty no mirror could reflect. He won our hearts and made us his own. The Sabbath symbolizes all that.

"We love him because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

"When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us—not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy" (Titus 3:4-5).

"And you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

Sabbath celebrates the spiritual realities described in these Bible passages.

But why the Sabbath?

At first thought, the Sabbath seems rather arbitrary. Why the seventh day? The year, month and day all are based on readily observable natural rhythms. But what's the week based on? In spite of scholarly efforts to find an ordinary historical origin for the seven-day week, the best evidence continues to be that it originated in the Jewish practice of keeping Sabbath. And the Jews kept Sabbath

because God said, On the seventh day, rest! Society has its week, and believers have their Sabbath, because of the arbitrary command of God: take the seventh day off.

I used the word "arbitrary" deliberately to be provocative. A much better word is "personal." The Sabbath is a personally-chosen gift of time from God to his people. Part of its charm is its personal—you could almost say, its idiosyncratic—nature. Like Janet's ring.

Janet could go to a jeweler and buy a replacement ring. It would give her the appearance of being married and might even be prettier than the original ring. But no ring she bought could ever convey to her the same message of affection and love her husband's ring does. He chose and won her for reasons buried deep in his own heart, and gave her the ring as a sign of that love.

It's the same with the Sabbath. There's nothing intrinsically unique about Sabbath time. It's like every other day, except for the personal intention

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and action of God. Taking one day off every week, no matter which day it is, provides many of the benefits of the real Sabbath. Any day off could provide release from ordinary work and the crushing stress so many of us work under. Any commonly accepted day could provide us with an opportunity for corporate worship. Any day is better than no day. But no substitute Sabbath can ever convey the personal message of divine affection embedded in the Sabbath. This is the primary argument against substituting Sunday for Saturday as the Sabbath. Sunday can appropriately commemorate Jesus' resurrection and offers a convenient time for church services. But it does not have the overtones of divine grace the Bible links with Sabbath. Substituting Sunday for Sabbath is like substituting a ring of my choice for the ring given me by my beloved.

Sabbath is God's wedding ring, a reminder of where God has brought us from, a symbol of his abiding affection, a promise of an eternal future together. It is one of the great treasures of Adventism.

A Good & Welcome Legalism

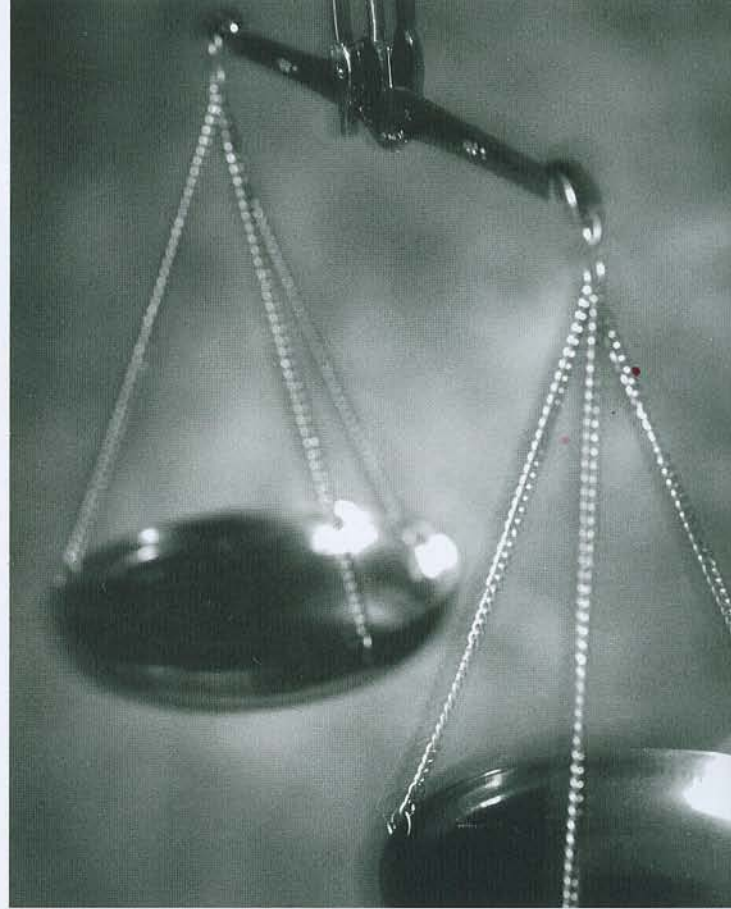
While there have been times in our history when our concern for law has been an unhealthy obsession, an appreciation for law remains one of the treasures of Adventist spirituality. A high regard for law is utterly essential for healthy societies and relationships.

If you are acquainted with the people of Latin America, Africa or the Middle East, you know the citizens of these societies are every bit as generous, noble and virtuous as individuals in the United States. Maybe more so. But the political, legal and commercial life of these societies is tragically dysfunctional, and much of this dysfunction has to do with their weak legal systems. In these societies personal relationship is everything. When the law offers no check on the use of position for personal advantage and offers no leverage for individuals without connections and power, all of life is degraded. Against this backdrop the relative strength of American law and courts is seen to be a good and welcome legalism.

But it isn't just in civic and commercial life where a high regard for law promotes healthy function. Satisfying spiritual life is dependent on the order and reliability associated with law. And human sexual attraction, which offers the most wonderful sense of connection and intimacy, becomes dysfunctional and even abusive outside the guidance of law.

What Is Law?

Adventists have given a lot of attention to the ten commandments because they are given a unique prominence in the Bible and include the Sabbath commandment, which is the most public marker of our community. Jesus referred to the ten commandments as authoritative and pointed beyond them to the "two commandments"—love God with



your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself. (It is important to note that both "the ten" and "the two" first appear in the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible.)

Often when Adventists speak of "the law" they are not referring to either "the two" or "the ten," instead they have in mind the fundamental notion of right and wrong. Law is shorthand for duty and obligation. It is what others expect; it is what God requires; ultimately it is what is congruent with the moral field of the universe. In this large sense, the Bible itself is not "the law;" rather, the Bible bears witness to the law. I take this to be the meaning of Jesus' statement that all the law and the prophets hang on the two commandments of love (Matt 22:40).

Law and God

Some people have an instinctive, deep confidence in God. "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." Their faith is simple and untroubled. But for many, the question, "Can God be trusted?" is intensely problematic. Is God good? Is God fair? One of the major projects of Adventist theology has been to address this question.

Adventists believe that law in its most fundamental form is not an arbitrary imposition of rules by God upon humans; rather, law is a description of the habits of God, or, in the language of Ellen White, "law is a transcript of the character of God."

God is not right merely because he says so. God is right because there is an absolute congruence between what he requires and what he is/does. The

very structure of the universe is a reflection of God. Our inescapable human sense of right and wrong is a reflection of God. God himself operates within boundaries, within limits. God must do right. Not simply in the sense that if God does it, it is right, but in the sense of holding himself to the norms which he expressed in creation and which govern our best thoughts and sensibilities.

One stream of Christian theology argues that human questions about divine justice are simply irrelevant. If God calls something right, it is right just because God said so. There is no objective, universal criteria by which the Creator can be evaluated. Adventists, on the other hand, believe the Bible shows that human questions do matter. Every human question about justice and fairness will be dealt with before history is finished and we enter the eternity of bliss. Law may be a divine creation, but having created it, God himself is defined in part by law and will not violate it.

The Bones of Beauty

I collect bones. Over the years I've picked up the skulls of deer, elk, a bobcat, a beaver, mice and rats. I've collected ribs, vertebra, pelvises, phalanges and leg bones. I'm fascinated by the massive strength of an elk femur and the tiny grace of a mouse tibia. Bones are beautiful. But their beauty pales in comparison to the loveliness and grace of the body forms they support.

I was talking with a friend after church. In the far corner of the parking lot, a couple of teenagers I knew were talking. He had a nice car and she was sitting on the front fender. There was evident chemistry between them, and I wondered if I was observing a casual conversation or a budding romance. I had a hard time keeping my eyes on my own conversation and noticed my friend was having a hard time, too. The truth is, neither of us was looking at the car or the guy. The problem was the young woman: She had very long legs, and she was wearing a very short skirt. And that combination was working its very predictable magic.

For all my documented interest in skeletons, no one would believe that I was glancing across the parking lot because of that young woman's tibia, fibula, patella and femur. But the enchanting beauty that drew my eyes was utterly dependent on the strength and rigidity of a healthy skeleton. Humans possess neither beauty nor health apart from a sturdy skeleton.

Law serves as the skeleton in spiritual life. We like stories about spiritual life that feature ecstasy, wonder and miracles. But most people do not find their lives characterized by frequent miracles or continuous rapture. At times God seems distant, the Bible appears uninteresting or untrue and faith feels like fantasy. In these spiritual "dry times," the skeleton of spiritual habits and religious

practices becomes indispensable.

We do not argue that law and duty are more important than sweetness and faith. That would be silly. No one falls in love with a skeleton. Spiritual disciplines must not be the essence of our spiritual life. The purpose of the skeleton is to support the life and beauty of the body. The role of duty and obligation, of spiritual disciplines, is to provide a sturdy framework of support for faith, hope and love.

A friend of mine once argued that genuine Christianity knew nothing of duty. A follower of Jesus should never do something just because he or she was supposed to. Instead, authentic Christians did only those things which arose from within as spontaneous and glad impulses.

Of course, he was not a parent. Changing heavy diapers, cleaning up vomit from some little person's bed at 3:30 a.m. or saying "No" to a teenager's tearful demands does not feel like "a spontaneous and glad impulse." These are loving actions. They correspond to our deepest desires to do our children good. But sometimes, we do them only because they are the right thing to do, not because, at the moment, we feel like it. When we think of love, the first thing that comes to mind is not years of attending our beloved as she battles cancer or he descends slowly into the nightmare of Alzheimer's. We don't think of the terribly difficult, almost impossibly painful work of rebuilding a marriage after an affair. But these things are every bit as much love as kisses and birthday parties, flowers and bedtime stories.

At some point in their married life, nearly all people encounter a prospective partner who seems more desirable than their spouse. Sometimes it is only the stern word of the law, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," that saves the marriage. Obviously a marriage that is only duty and obligation is far less than God's ideal. God's purpose for husbands and wives is that they will experience a union that reflects the very union of the Trinity (Gen 2:24). But a 50-year-old marriage rich in affection and shared history never happens if couples do not allow law to keep them during times of strain or illicit attraction. Law cannot create love or build rich, intimate relationships. But law builds the fence that protects the garden of love from the assaults of competing lovers, restless hormones, boredom or exhaustion. Law is a friend of love. Truly beautiful love requires the skeleton of commitment and the habits of caring.

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Good People But Unbelievers

Historically, Adventists linked their concern for the importance and authority of the law with another concept we called the “investigative judgment.” The idea of God closely investigating everything you’ve ever thought or done was pretty scary. But as we have continued to study the Bible’s teaching about judgment, we have found that judgment is not just a scary reminder that God is watching when we are pursuing mischief. It is also a strong statement about the justice of God. It assures us that ultimate salvation is not based on arbitrary decisions by God or “the luck” of being born in the right place at the right time.

Janet’s heart was utterly broken. While he was alive, she had prayed and hoped. But how do you live with no hope? Her son had died several weeks earlier in an auto accident. The ache of losing him in this life was unbearable. But since he wasn’t a

couch did he land on? Bill’s. When Bill’s dad had an accident that put him in bed for 6 months, who took off work and waited on him hand and foot? And who kept his mom’s swimming pool immaculately clean and her lawn manicured after her husband dumped her to chase a shorter skirt? Bill. I figured all this was just funeral talk, the nice things people feel obliged to say in the face of the darkness of death. But talking with people after the funeral, I heard repeated private validation of the public statements.

I recounted some of this to Janet, then asked, “Was Bill really like that?”

“Yes, he was.”

“Then you can hope to see him again.”

“How? How can you say I can see him again when he was so far away from God?”

“What do you mean, ‘when he was so far away from God?’”

“Well, the fact that he left the church and wasn’t a Christian and didn’t believe in God, as far as I know, and had no use for the church or religion.”

The Bible celebrates faith. It even declares that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). But it also teaches God is able to make very sophisticated judgments about faith.

The Bible explicitly states that if a person talks like an angel, but acts like a devil, his actions mean more than his words (Matt 7; James 2). And the opposite is also true. A person may deny with their words a faith that is evident in their lives.

This is illustrated in the ministry of Jesus. Once, a Roman officer came asking for help for a favorite servant who was at home sick. The officer told Jesus, “You don’t need to come, ‘Just say the word, and my servant will be healed’” (Matt 8:8). Even though this man was not Jewish, Jesus declared the officer’s faith superior to anything he had seen among the people of God. On other occasions, Jesus encountered people who were possessed by demons. In every case, these folk “expressed their faith” by shouting at Jesus and protesting his approach to torture them. Jesus ignored their words and responded to some unspoken cry of their heart and saved them from the demons.

In the judgment, God will be able to read the hearts of many who left the church (or never were part of it) and see the real faith hidden in their lives. Their words may be no more expressive of faith than were the protestations of the people who were

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believer, she knew she would never see him again. Ever. “He left the church when he was a teenager,” she told me, “and made no pretense of being a Christian. And the accident was so sudden. He never had a chance.”

Bill had been speeding through the Santa Monica Mountains in his Miata. He missed a turn and hit a massive live oak just feet from the pavement. No time for a last-minute conversion.

At the funeral, people said all kinds of nice things. When someone needed help, Bill was there. When someone was in jail and needed a friend to come and pick them up, who did they call? Bill. When someone broke up with his girlfriend and had to move out of his apartment on short notice, whose

possessed by demons, but God will read the faith expressed in their deeds of mercy.

Often those who say they reject God are actually rejecting a caricature of God—a caricature that we, too, reject. In Bill's case, it was easy to make sense of his actions. His dad had made a great show of religion, then dumped Bill's mom for someone else. During Bill's teen years, the pastor and the youth leader at his church became involved in scandalous affairs. Then the Bible teacher at the parochial high school he attended went off the deep end theologically and, finally, psychologically. Almost every man Bill knew who would have appropriately served as a model for God violated Bill's trust. When Bill turned his back on God and the church, he wasn't rejecting the true God who is faithful and compassionate. He was rejecting pretense, hypocrisy and dishonesty. He refused to believe in a god who would condone injustice and faithlessness.

In the crucifixion of Christ, God demonstrated the strength of his intention to save people (Rom 5:8; 1 Pet 3:9). Though no one can pay his or her own moral indebtedness and live (Ps 49), through the crucifixion Jesus paid the moral debt of every human (1 John 2:2). So it would be appropriate to ask why would anyone be excluded from heaven? The judgment is the public, visible process of determining who will fit into the society of heaven, who will enjoy a culture of service. Many who call themselves nonbelievers will discover, when all the misunderstandings have been swept away, that God is precisely the ideal to which they devoted their lives.

The most famous picture of the judgment is a story Jesus told. He pictures God as a shepherd separating his sheep and goats. The sheep are the good people and the goats are the bad people. The sheep are commended for their goodness, which consisted of giving God food when he was hungry, water when he was thirsty and visits when he was incarcerated. The sheep protest they never saw God hungry, thirsty or in jail. God responds, "What you did to the lowliest persons, you did to me" (Matt 25). The goats are excluded because they refused to give care. The great divide between the saved and lost is how they responded to down-to-earth human need, not how spiritual were their words.


The story of the sheep and goats does not contradict the theory that we are saved by faith, but it does qualify it. In reality, neither faith nor works is the fundamental cause of our salvation; rather, we are saved by grace—the generous, merciful activity of God. "Faith" and "works" are different ways of describing the human yielding to grace. God has given us a number of ways to express our faith: baptism, the Lord's Supper, Sabbath-keeping, and, of course, words. But trumping all of these is the gift of opportunities to serve.

Ultimately God is judge. But because of Jesus' words about the sheep and goats, I could offer strong

hope to Janet about Bill. And we are confident many who are not Christians will be saved at last. They will be in heaven because God will read their hearts and see that what they rejected was not him but a false god. God will demonstrate to the universe that through their care for people in need these "unbelievers" were, in fact, serving Jesus in camouflage. Their real loyalty is to the values of heaven. They have not "earned" heaven by their good deeds, but they have demonstrated a wordless faith in the God who saves. And God will take great delight in astonishing them with his invitation: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matt 25:34).

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A Thousand Years of Answers

A *dventists have specialized in the biblical prophecies about the end of time. When we tell the story of the “last days,” we begin with the “investigative judgment” mentioned in the previous article.*

Throughout the Bible the judgment is always pictured as a very public event. God does not make decisions about an individual's destiny in the privacy of his own mind, but in the presence of countless witnesses, heavenly beings who provide an independent verification of the accuracy of the record presented in court.

This court process begins in heaven before Jesus returns to earth, while life here continues its normal course. When the judgment is finished, Jesus returns to earth. (This is the Second Coming.) The dazzling brilliance of the unveiled presence of divinity annihilates the wicked but announces rescue to the godly. Jesus resurrects the righteous dead, then transports them, together with the godly who are still alive, to a glorious paradise called heaven, where they live and reign with Christ for 1,000 years—the famous millennium of Revelation 20. Apparently, the only “life” here on earth during the millennium is the devil and his demons.

At the end of the millennium, the residence of the godly, the New Jerusalem, is returned to earth, and the wicked are raised to life again. The devil and his demons busy themselves with rallying the wicked for a final desperate attempt to establish dominance by capturing the New Jerusalem. As the hordes of the wicked assemble to attack the Holy City, they are interrupted by the appearance in the sky of a great white throne, with Jesus seated on it. All the wicked are arraigned before the throne. They are confronted with the irrefutable evidence of the justice of their condemnation. Crushed by the vivid picture of their folly and evil, they reluctantly bow and acknowledge

God is right. They do not worship. They do not yield their hearts. But they grudgingly admit the truth: God is right; I am wrong. Even the devil bows and angrily acknowledges God is right.

Having bowed, however, the devil reaches deep inside himself for some last bit of rebellious courage. He summons his followers to join him in an assault on the city, and some rally to his call. But the entire judgment process has reached its conclusion, and fire descends from heaven to purify the earth in preparation for the re-creation of a perfect biosphere. The wicked, including the devil himself, die in this conflagration.

From that point forward begins the fulfillment of the promise: "Now the dwelling of God is with people. He will live with them. They will be his people; he will live with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order has passed away" (Rev 21:3, 4).

So what does this story mean?

We might not have every detail in our story correct. But the point of the story is what it says about the character of God. We connect our theories about the events at the end of human history with the picture of God given in the ministry and death of Jesus. The "moral of the story," even the scary stories in Revelation, is God is love. On one hand, if the story did not include any scary elements we would dismiss it as utterly disconnected from the real world we live in. On the other hand, if the story did not help us transcend the fear and anxiety of this world, then why bother telling it?

Hell

Conventional Christian thinking for much of the last two thousand years has seen hell as a place of eternal burning. This doctrine was rooted in the Greek philosophical notion of the soul as inherently immortal. The body was ephemeral; the soul was the real essence of a person and was absolutely indestructible. So if the soul did not go to heaven, it had to go somewhere else. That somewhere else was hell, a place of endless flames.

We view hell as an event, rather than a place. We believe a person is an indivisible whole. If the physical body dies, that means the whole person is dead. There is no separate soul that can inhabit a place called "hell." The fires of hell happen at the end of time and are designed to purify the earth in preparation for its re-creation. These fires are unstoppable in intensity but limited in duration.

Who will be lost?

Given the facts that Jesus died for the sins "of the whole world" and that God does not wish anyone to

perish, why would anyone be excluded from heaven? The answer is not simple, but one classic response of Adventism is that those who are lost would have found heaven a place of torment.

The Bible paints vivid pictures of the society God has in mind. "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain" (Isa 11:9). "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. For the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4). "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness will be at home" (2 Pet 3:13). For some people such an environment would be torture. Imagine Hitler assigned an apartment next door to a rabbi or Stalin being required to yield his will to the directions of a kulak superior or a member of the Ku Klux Klan being asked to sit next to an African at a heavenly feast. Heaven would be hell.

If at the last minute God offered the wicked a passport to heaven, any who accepted the offer would find heaven a miserable place. Heaven would be unending torment to those who have defined themselves through selfishness, oppression and narcissism. We shape our futures through our present choices. God is constantly working to shape our lives by the Holy Spirit. If we are successful in stubbornly resisting the values of heaven here, we would find them oppressive there.

In Revelation, when the wicked are raised to life, we see them immediately joining a movement to attack the city. They do not change their minds. They do not plead for inclusion in the peaceful society. They are stubbornly, adamantly rebellious. This story offers a visual confirmation of the judgment of heaven. If people were given a second chance, they would make the same choice they did the first time.

Answers to My Questions

One of the most persistent obstacles to faith is the problem of suffering: How can a good, powerful God allow the misery of this world to continue so long? Most of the useful answers to the questions surrounding suffering have to do with the nature of freedom and love. But while these explanations offer hints of rationality in the sea of human hurt, they never reach the bottom of our heart-wrenching angst. They don't answer the question, "Why my daughter?" "Why my son?" or "Why my lover, my friend, myself?"

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A Thousand Years

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Some religious systems dismiss the questions. God is God. You are a mere human. You should submit to God and quit asking silly questions. But these are not silly questions. They are huge questions. And they go to the heart of the questions, 'Is God good?' 'Is God trustworthy?' 'Why should I worship?'

The story of the millennium helps us deal with these questions. Revelation 20:4 states that during the 1,000 years, the redeemed will act as judges. What does this mean? The eternal fate of every human being has already been decided. God doesn't need assistance in figuring out the hard cases. The most likely focus of these "judges" is God himself. In the investigative judgment, the lives of people are examined to determine their eternal destiny. In the millennial judgment, the records of heaven are examined to build our confidence in God.

The saved will have 1,000 years to investigate to

their own satisfaction the divine-human history.

They will be able to trace all the lines of evidence that support God's decisions. This 1,000-year opportunity demonstrates how much God respects your questions. In this life, God says, "Trust me." In that life, God will say, "Test me." Now we live by faith. Then we will live by sight.

The investigative judgment lays the foundation for the millennial judgment by creating a publicly

attested record of God and humanity. The records available for scrutiny during the millennium are not videotapes God pulls out of his pocket or his personal archive. Obviously God could create whatever impression he wanted by editing the records, and we'd never know.

The investigative judgment doesn't happen inside God's mind. This is why it takes time. It is a public process conducted in the presence of tens of thousands, perhaps thousands of millions of celestial beings. These angels provide a check on the authenticity of the records the saved will examine.

That's how much God respects our questions. That's how far he will go to win our confidence. God loves us and wants us to trust him. He is willing to do anything lawful to win our love and affection. He'll even give us 1,000 years to process our questions and to recover from the grief and heartbreak characteristic of this world.

If you are a believer with a simple confidence in God and have no questions, I'm sure there will be other things to do in heaven besides poring over ancient records. But if your spiritual life is characterized by questioning and perplexity, the millennial judgment pictures a time of final resolution. We will finally find rest from our questions. We will receive a full accounting of divine activity (and inactivity). God loves us so much that he will not get on with the business of eternity until he has responded to every human question. That's how much he respects us. That's how much he cares.

After the Millennium

The Adventist version of the story of the universe begins with a loving God creating beings who could respond to his love and participate in a joyous, creative friendship. We then follow the story into the dark, heartbreaking world warped and bruised by evil—the world we live in. A world haunted with unanswered and unanswerable questions about justice and love, human freedom and divine initiative, foreknowledge and responsibility. We ache with a desperate hunger to understand how a loving God can tolerate a world that has become intolerable to us.

But the story moves forward. It ends with the restoration of the moral equilibrium and with the restoration of unalloyed love. Every human question has been answered, every doubt has been addressed. Questioners have come to confident, joyous trust. God himself demonstrates a new, amazing trust in humans. He assigns them a God-like status in the universe. God is still God. Humans are still human. But according to the picture in Revelation, God and humans share power and work. Jesus announces, "To the one who overcomes, I will offer a place on my throne, even as I overcame and am sitting on my Father's throne" (Rev 3:20). This picture of divine power-sharing is the ultimate declaration that truly God is love.

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Beyond Spiritual Adolescence

To children in a normal family, Mother is all-knowing, unfailingly devoted and affectionate, utterly trustworthy, completely able to manage every exigency of life. She is the most beautiful person in the world. Then we become teenagers, and that same omnipotent, omniscient woman loses her mind, her manners and looks.

As teenagers, we are ruthless in our demands that parents and all other authority figures be flawlessly consistent. (Of course, we cut ourselves considerable slack, but—) We scorn the accommodations our parents have made with what they call reality. We secretly or blatantly regard ourselves as truly perspicuous, sage and competent—quite in contrast to Mom.

Fortunately for most of us, Mother recovers. Somewhere in our 20s or 30s, we're chagrined to discover we've done a better job copying our parents' weaknesses than their strengths. While objectively we may be even more aware of our parents' real imperfections, we are able to trace the benefits we have received.

Adults who remain obsessed with their parents' failings are dangerous or tragic people. They make difficult spouses, prickly friends and impossible employees. Individuals who fail to grow beyond their adolescent rebellion against their parents never really mature and often pass on their dysfunction to their children.

It's something like that in spiritual life. Whether we first experience the church as children or adult converts, usually it appears perfect in our eyes. This is God's church. Everything it teaches is true, and all truth that matters is found within its teaching. Its mission is God's mission. God is scarcely capable of acting outside its boundaries.

Time passes. We discover there are flaws and lacunae in the church's theology. Maybe we've been damaged by faulty theology or evil clergy or an incompetent youth leader. We find out our prophet read and quoted other authors. We read *Spectrum* or *Adventist Today* and learn that scholars in the church question one aspect or another of traditional doctrine. The preacher in our local congregation leaves in moral disgrace. We go through a personal crisis, and the "caring church" doesn't exist.

We enter spiritual adolescence. We become engrossed in the failings and hypocrisy of the church.

We cannot believe that an institution professing to represent Jesus could possibly act with such blatant disregard for the teachings of its master. We don't understand how anyone with a modicum of intelligence could possibly say with a straight face they are glad to be part of this church.

This disillusionment is a normal, though painful, part of growing up spiritually. I don't know any way to avoid it. If the church did not appear all-sufficient when we first encountered it, we would never learn enough trust to become wholehearted members. If we never face the church's failings and inadequacies, we will be unable to help our children and friends as they move through their own spiritual adolescence. Some degree of disillusionment and identity separation is normal in personal spiritual development. But if we're healthy Christians, we will grow through this adolescence to spiritual adulthood.

As mature believers we move beyond our obsession with the brokenness of the church. We learn to value the church for its strengths and virtues. Instead of scorning the church for its failures, we honor it for its ideals. We acknowledge that as with Mom, so with the church—we more faithfully mimic her failings than her strengths.

After adolescence, we can no longer naively think the church is perfectly wise or good. We are not toddlers who uncritically regard our spiritual mother as God. But as adults we have grown beyond the juvenile notion that only perfect people can do good or that only perfect organizations are worthy of loyalty and honor. We find new joy in the church. We have fewer illusions, make fewer impossible demands and move beyond condemnation to affection. We are able to laugh at our own immature rantings and see the real wisdom that is the heritage of the church. Of course the church is defective. It's made of people like us. But it also preserves and transmits the collective learning of a large group of pilgrims.

New converts and children love the church in its imaginary perfection. Spiritual adolescents despise the church for its real failings. Those who are mature, love the church for what it is: the scarred body of Christ, a gathering of broken people like themselves, seeking pardon and transformation. A flawed organization pursuing a glorious, impossible dream. A cooperative venture of individuals much worse and much better than average. A mother worthy of honor.



God's Dogs

“But God has now brought you to life with Christ; God forgave us all our sins. He canceled the unfavorable record of our debts, with its binding rules, and did away with it completely by nailing it to the cross.” —Colossians 2:13, 14

A parks department official knocked at our front door. Did we have a brown dog? Yes. Well, all the garbage cans in the park had been tipped over and garbage strewn around. Witnesses said the culprit was our brown dog. And, the Parks official continued, this was not the first time. If we did not keep our dog in, we would face a hefty fine and the dog would be taken.

I apologized profusely and promised two things: to try harder to keep the dog in, and to clean the park whether Toby or another dog or human trashed it. Turns out it was much easier to keep the second promise.

Toby was an escape artist. He would dig under the fence on the park side in spite of my efforts with rocks, logs and fill dirt to make digging out impossible. (We shared about 500 feet of fence with the park.) He would climb over the fence on the opposite side of the yard and circle the block to the park. For several months, he pushed his way through a gate whose fastening had a slight give in it. After the kids discovered his trick, I strengthened the gate. Sometimes, for a while after one of my fixes Toby would be confined. A month or two would pass, then I would again be summoned by scratching at the front door. And there he would stand, grinning and happy about his feast in the park, ready to be welcomed home.

I would take him through the house to the backyard, put him in his kennel, and head to the

park to pick up trash. What a mess! Dirty diapers, McDonald's bags with ketchup and food smeared on the outside. Cigarette butts. Paper plates coated with food on both sides. Napkins. Soda bottles and cans. Wrappers. Watermelon rinds.

Even at home Toby was no angel. For a year after we first brought him home from the pound, he terrorized our cats. He ate the neighbor's chinchilla. We faced several options. We could disown him or have him put down. Or we could claim him, discipline him over and over and over until he left the cats alone, apologize to the neighbors about the chinchilla, and clean up the park. You already know what I did. Toby was my dog. His problems were mine.

We are God's dogs. We have made huge, horrid messes. The mess cannot be ignored. God could disown us. He could put us down. Instead, he claims our messes as his own. Even when others cannot handle our behavior, he still claims us as his own. Even when we have created a moral “indebtedness” we can never repay and maybe to which we are utterly oblivious, God still pays.

Theologians have long wrestled with how to make logical sense of Bible statements that the crucifixion of Christ ransomed sinners or paid their debt. Scholarly inquiry is useful, but it might help us make intuitive sense of this language if we thought of ourselves as God's dogs. And if you're offended by the comparison, you haven't paid enough attention to what humans have been up to lately.