

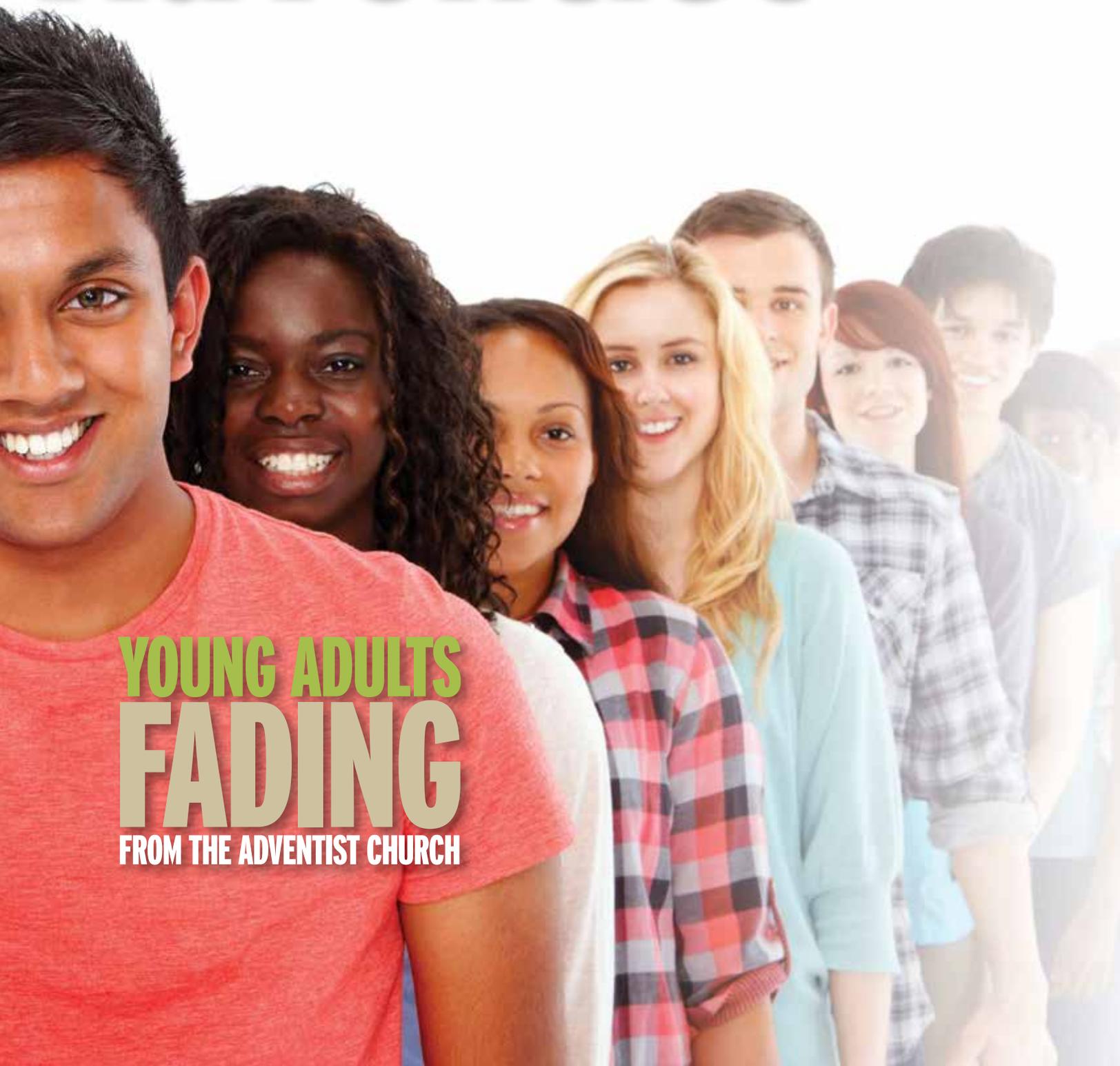
Death Before the Fall

Two Opposite Gospels
in the Adventist Church

Van Gogh and Me

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Adventist *Today*



**YOUNG ADULTS
FADING**
FROM THE ADVENTIST CHURCH



features

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Is the Sabbath Found in Romans 14?

By J. David Newman

There are people who quote Romans 14:5-6 as proof that the seventh day is no longer the Sabbath and that holy days, including Sunday, no longer exist. These people like to use the New International Version to buttress their claim: “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their [sic] own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

The Message Bible says something similar: “One person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.”

However, this is not what Paul wrote. We need to remember that Paul wrote in Greek, not in English. Here is how the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translates this passage: “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.”

Notice two things about these translations: (1) the NASB says nothing about days being sacred or holy, and (2) the NASB places *alike* in italics, which means that this word never appeared in the Greek.

So what did Paul actually write? Here is *Young’s Literal Translation*: “One doth judge one day above another, and another doth judge every day [alike]; let each in his own mind be fully assured. He who is regarding the day, to the Lord he doth regard [it], and he who is not regarding the day, to the Lord he doth not regard [it]. He who is eating, to the Lord he doth eat, for he doth give thanks to God; and he who is not eating, to the Lord he doth not eat, and doth give thanks to God.”

Verse 5 in the Greek literally reads “One judges or considers day from day, while another judges or considers every day.”

What is the context of Romans 14? Paul is telling readers that what a person eats or does not eat should not be a matter of judging and condemning. Since Paul is talking about eating and drinking, it makes sense to see these verses as discussing feast and fast days, of which there were many in the Jewish system. The immediate context seems very clear: “He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord.” Paul clearly links “day” with eating.

A German scholar named Ulrike Rauer gives three reasons why he considers this to be talking about fast days:

1. Paul was writing to Christians in Rome. All would have had a day of worship. It was highly improbable that some Christians observed all days the same or no days at all. If they worshiped together, they had to observe days.
2. The terminology is different from Galatians 4:10 and Colossians 2:16, where the observance of days does seem to have significance.
3. The phrase “to judge every day” is a very strange way to say “keep no day holy”—if that was Paul’s intent.¹

Since this passage does not use *Sabbath day*, *seventh day*, *holy day*, *sacred day*, or *worship day*, it cannot be used to prove that holy days have been abolished. Paul is simply saying that anyone who wishes may keep a feast or fast day, and no one is to judge if that person does or does not observe that kind of day. It is not an honest use of Scripture to quote a particular version as a proof text if the original language never said what that translator says it says. That is why it is important for everyone to be a student of the Word. Do not let others do your thinking for you.

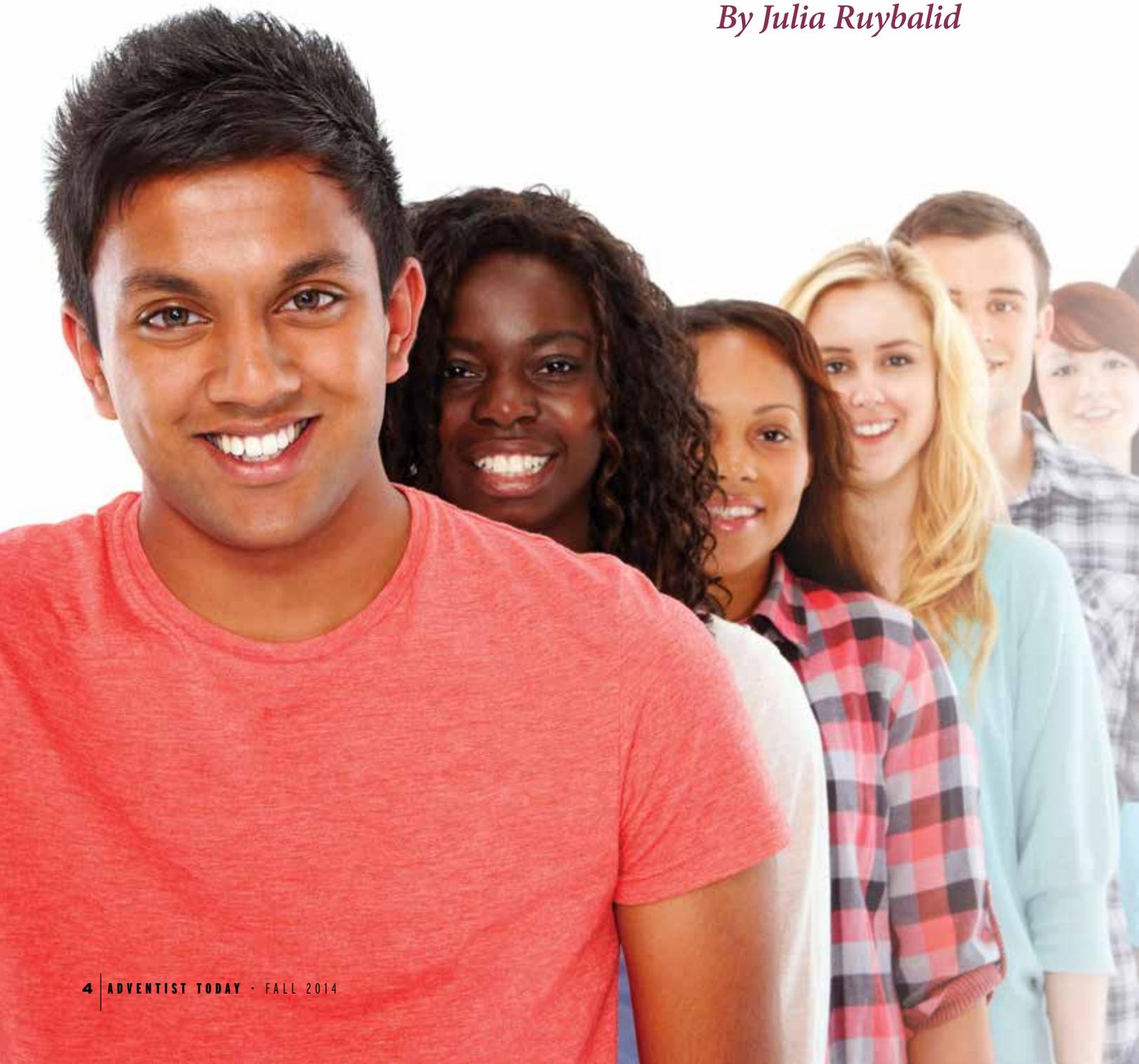
¹ John Brunt, *Romans* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1996), p. 242.

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C O V E R S T O R Y

YOUNG ADULTS **FADING** FROM THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

By Julia Ruybalid



WHY IS THE ADVENTIST CHURCH BECOMING MORE AND MORE unattractive to young people? Although I have been an Adventist all my life, I have strongly considered walking away from church, and God, many times over the past few years. I am not an expert in theology, nor do I claim familiarity with the writings of Ellen White. But as a twenty-something who was born and raised in a loving Adventist family and community, I have spent a few years in a sort of limbo—wrestling about my future with the Adventist church.

Even now, at the most secure I've been in my Christian beliefs and relationship with God, I don't read my Bible everyday and I can count on one hand the number of times I've attended church in the last year. I want to have a stronger relationship with God, an unwavering belief in the truth of Adventism, and a place where I feel completely comfortable no matter where I am at in my spiritual walk.

For a church that is wondering why so many young people are leaving the denomination, this is simply a glimpse into my journey as a young person—a college student—in the Adventist church, and how I have been affected mentally and spiritually. First, I should say that I wholeheartedly believe in the Adventist doctrines, the fundamental beliefs that are at the core of Seventh-day Adventism. Loving and serving are what I understand to be the root of this church, the calling of the remnant, if you will—to create a heaven on earth.

My family was on the liberal end of the wide spectrum of Adventist tradition. So, growing up, I would hear my parents discussing the occasional controversy over issues such as allowing drums in church or the laying on of hands to pray for healing, but I never felt ostracized or judged by my church family. The Seventh-day Adventist church was my home.

My years in Adventist academy were some of the best, and I was so excited to begin a new chapter at an Adventist college or university. I had chosen one of the more conservative schools because it was far from home; I wanted adventure, and I figured that the many rules I had heard about could not be any stricter than those at my Adventist academy. Secure in my beliefs and my relationship with God, I arrived on campus just two months after graduating from high school.

Almost immediately, I felt that I didn't belong. I experienced a kind of Adventist culture shock, and my first six months of college marked the beginning of the darkest time of my life. Now, after attending three Adventist colleges over the past five and a half years, I believe it's important to take an honest look at some of the attitudes and beliefs I came across that are prevalent in many Adventist communities—attitudes and beliefs that may be

playing a significant role in driving young people away from the organized church.

Why, in my early college years, did I move away from God, Adventism, and Christianity in general? It was because, at my first and most conservative school, whenever I met someone new and said that I was from California, he or she responded with an incredulous, "What are you doing *here*?" It was because, when those same people were introduced to me more than once, they would forget that they had met me before. The lack of sincerity in these students made it impossible to form connections with anyone. It seemed that being from California was akin to wearing a red letter on my chest. I was a heathen from the liberal West Coast. I was not worth knowing.

ONE OF MY BIGGEST FEARS IS THAT THE WORLD WILL NO LONGER KNOW CHRISTIANS—ADVENTISTS—BY OUR LOVE, BUT BY OUR HATRED OF ANYONE WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND, OF ANYONE WHO IS NOT LIKE US.

During Obama's first presidential campaign, I remember hearing an elderly lady in the campus grocery store say: "Well, you know we won't have black people in heaven. We will all be white, because God is going to wash away our sins." I remember an entire sermon being dedicated to condemning the LGBT community (the increasing amount of males who wear skinny jeans is apparently evidence of the gay agenda's influence on our youth). I remember my fellow college students clapping in agreement throughout that entire sermon. I remember being sent back to my dorm room from vespers to change out of my skirt because it looked like it was made out of denim. At more than one school, I heard many conversations discussing the ordination

of women. I remember overhearing a young man ask his friend, “You don’t really think we can trust a woman to be our spiritual leader, do you?”

I became lonely and angry, crying myself to sleep every night. I couldn’t believe the judgment and hatred I was witnessing in a Christian institution. My relationship with God was almost nonexistent by the time that first semester ended. Fueled by these memories, I began reading books and watching documentaries that questioned the existence of God and validity of religion. I considered atheism—not because I was sure God didn’t exist,

SOME OF THE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS I CAME ACROSS, WHICH ARE PREVALENT IN MANY ADVENTIST COMMUNITIES, MAY BE PLAYING A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN DRIVING YOUNG PEOPLE AWAY FROM THE ORGANIZED CHURCH.

but because I didn’t know how else to separate myself from what I had seen and experienced. What if this school had been my first exposure to Christianity? If I’d had no foundation and understanding of what a loving church community looked like, I know that I would have walked away for good.

Over the next five years, I attended two more Adventist colleges and was fortunate enough to come across many people who restored my faith in God, Adventism, and Christianity. Yet, when I see the same judgmental attitudes that I encountered in the beginning, I am always reminded of the song lyrics “They will know we are Christians by our love.” One of my biggest fears is that the world will no longer know Christians—Adventists—by our love, but by our hatred of anyone we do not understand, of anyone who is not like us.

My faith is still intact because I find it impossible to deny the existence of God, of a spiritual presence. It’s unexplainable. However, I still fear guilt by association. I do not want people

to think I am in any way connected with the places that left me spiritually confused, angry, and severely depressed. What if I am unable to connect with people because, after realizing that I am an Adventist Christian, they believe I will judge their choices and lifestyle or abandon them in their time of greatest need? All that my generation wants is to be loved and accepted. If these gifts are not freely given in the Adventist community, it hurts the whole church; Adventism becomes unattractive to a generation that does not want to conform in order to be loved.

In a college religion class my senior year, I was inspired by something my professor said about what loving people really means. The discussion was about abortion laws, and that it is our duty as followers of Christ to do everything we can to support a young woman throughout her pregnancy and the raising of her child. Our professor challenged us that while it is okay to not support abortion, a young woman who decides to go through with an abortion still deserves to be loved. It is not our job to judge another’s choices or way of life, but rather to approach all people with open arms. If all that radiates from the Adventist community is judgment, who will want to walk through the doors of our churches?

I have been fortunate to experience Adventist communities that understand church to be a place of acceptance and support, a place that is open to all people. As followers of the principles of Jesus, we should be meeting people where they are, not creating an impossible road for those who somehow don’t measure up to our ideals. It seems the Seventh-day Adventist church is more focused on playing God than on loving people. This can be hard to see when one has been raised in the church; the issues I encountered are often accepted as problems that are simply there, and they are not taken seriously.

Although it was the most difficult time of my life, I do not regret anything that I went through during my first years as a college student. It was a valuable learning experience that showed me the importance of unconditional love and the Adventist church’s failure to consistently show that to the world. Now I am happy and blessed to have also witnessed the triumph that our church can be.

Adventists must ask: what do we look like to outsiders? What do we look like to those who simply need to be loved? If the Adventist church is not offering acceptance, if its members remain so focused on condemning, its young people will not feel obligated to remain. In a world where personal spirituality is becoming more attractive than organized religion, what can the Adventist church do to keep its young people? Love. 

Julia Ruybalid grew up in Loma Linda, California, and is currently studying for her master’s degree in English at La Sierra University.

Van Gogh and Me

BY GREG PROUT

I STOOD IN FRONT OF VINCENT VAN GOGH'S HAUNTING self-portrait, recently on display at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California. This Dutch painter is a favorite of mine. His colorful self-painting squared prominently in the middle of a sky-blue wall, his wounded gaze piercing and telling, exuding pain. Transfixed by Van Gogh's suffering look, I was awestruck by his inspired style, the transcendent original beauty of his artwork, and the paradox of its emanating from shadows crippling and cheerless. Suddenly I wondered about my own mortality, my own paradoxes, about suffering, destiny, life's meaning. My thoughts chased around in my mind as I stood in the Holy of Holies, engulfed in clouds of mystery and wonder.

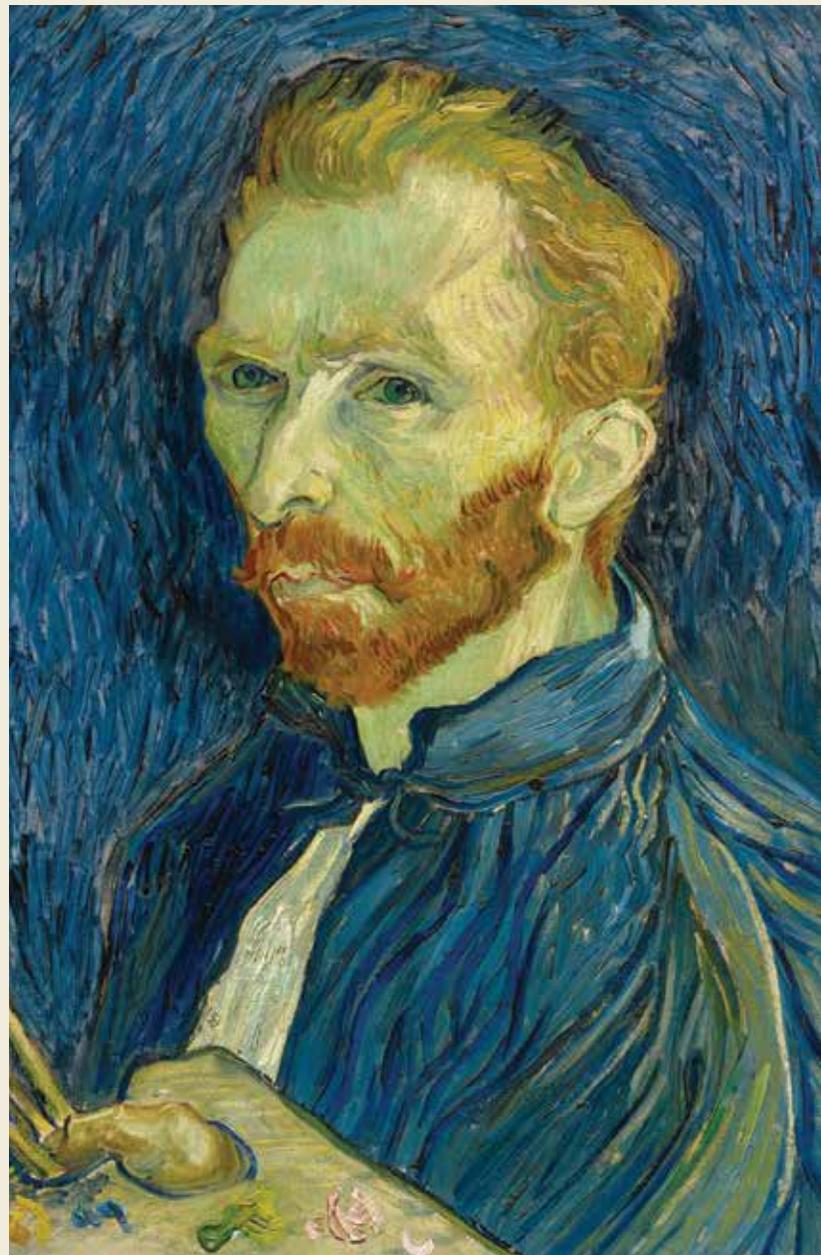
Van Gogh was a man who had a profound DNA relationship with pain and sorrow, the agony of a spirit too sensitive for this world. His efforts to hang on, to appease his hidden demons, drove him to paint life scenes in dazzling colors—hundreds of fat, truncated strokes of brilliant hues. Thick, heavy brush marks tell a story of how beautiful life can look in a world that is mysterious and cruel. At times, he used only somber colors—featureless grays, funeral blacks, joyless browns, lifeless blues, and melancholy charcoals—all to say what Don McLean sings in his 1971 tribute “Vincent”: “eyes that know the darkness of my soul.” Van Gogh represents the scope of human brokenness and the complex frailty of our composition; gifted and injured, his personal turmoil intrigues me.

The human soul can be dark and lonely, filled with a sense of morose nothingness, uncared-for and abandoned. We see such experiences in Scripture. David wrote:

“When my spirit was overwhelmed within me...
For there is no one who regards me;
There is no escape for me;
No one cares for my soul”
(Psalm 142:3-4, NASB).

Job too felt the black abyss of life that swallows the human spirit (see Job 10:18-22 or 30:26-31).

Like them, Van Gogh knew tortured reality. He failed at theology and ministry, fell addicted to alcohol and the narcotic absinthe, was often malnourished, and suffered debilitating mood



swings. After an argument with painter Paul Gauguin, he cut off a portion of his own ear; then he spent a winter locked up in a mental asylum at Saint Rémy. A failure at romance, he had a prostitute girlfriend. Finally, relentless mental anguish put a bullet in his chest.¹ Devastating despair and depression captured his life on Earth.

Yet he left behind paintings of radiant irises and gilded fields of amber grain; stars in dark skies bursting like torches, casting shimmers of gold dust across a midnight bay. From his palette flowed geometric fields of twinkling tulips and daffodils, scorching sunflowers, and diverse lonely silhouettes toiling in grey-brown fields—vestiges of humanity viewed from eyes troubled and forsaken, and yet the scenes are matchless in beauty. From deep-rooted human emptiness and sorrow came flower

I thought of Jesus and his arrival in man's blighted garden, placing himself on Van Gogh's easel and canvas. Every beauty, real or imagined, finds its source in God, caring and present. I have reverently reviewed Van Gogh's gallery, his ardor for lambent flashes of yellows (his favorite color²), effulgent greens, skies of blazing blues, swirling clouds of white and gray, heart-wrenching scenes of personal despair, and everyday lives of hard labor basked in sun-blinding hues. I saw my Lord amidst his "morning fields of amber grain/weathered faces lined with pain" through his shadows under sapphire skies, I pictured Jesus understanding us from the inside out.³ He meets us in our darkness. He is there in our agony, bleeding with us, bringing us the lustrous brilliance of the Father's abiding love; and though

Van Gogh confirms for me a common human trait: the blessing and curse flow simultaneously through the v

paintings so vibrant and mind-arresting that one marvels at the edges of such harsh contradiction.

But contradiction is often the chisel that sculpts life. From a mind going mad comes artistry of the genius kind. As a man wanting to do good and achieving the opposite, Van Gogh was in some ways like the apostle Paul, a veteran believer, lamenting the Yin and Yang of life as he pines in Romans 7. Paradox is our ball and chain. Van Gogh confirms for me a common human trait: that goodness and badness, blessing and curse flow simultaneously through the veins of mankind. We are Pharaoh and Moses, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A battle rages in civilized hearts, and it is here, in this dilemma, where divine grace finds us. Here, God calls our name. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25, NASB).

With the painter's self-portrait before me, I reflected on the liquid strokes of cobalt that moved around his face, his orangey-red beard, his sullen and afflicted gaze, eyes sorrowful and worn. I could feel the bleak texture of his despondency. Humanity's plight moves me. My own contradictions reflected in Van Gogh's sad eyes: I have a passion for the Lord and a readiness to sin; I believe humility is a virtue, yet I love applause; I have strong faith but am skeptical of prayer. Moreover, I love life but battle self-destructive behaviors; I believe in love but find myself a bigot; and I believe Jesus is the Prince of Peace while anxiety bites at my heels. My heart yearns for the Light yet often deals with its own darkness of soul. My daunting list carves deep contours in my faith.

we see him not, we trust nonetheless. Van Gogh knew Christ's sufferings; he knew obscurity and stifling loneliness, but his tortured depression never understood *trust*.

Vincent Van Gogh's short life (he died at 37) reveals a universal search for meaning and for a place to call home, where our hearts are at peace, nestled in love and acceptance. Many desperately reach out with plaintive hands, asking life to give them more than mere existence. We innately yearn for "abundant life" buried far down in our fractured souls, sometimes too deep to recognize. In our human suffering, each of us tries to exercise our own cure. Some of us find creations that boggle the mind and lift us to a higher place, while many pursue lives that end in the trash heap of a nameless history, clueless. Our Father misses nothing. Jesus, sent from the Father's "bosom" (John 1:18, NASB), sees and understands all of us as one of us, as a brother who walked the dark streets of a Van Gogh night to show us his tender heart. The Father comes to us with relentless love, not to be denied in our feeble efforts at understanding life. Jesus even now sits on his Father's throne as assurance that our twisted lives of ego and tragedy will find "green pastures" and "quiet waters" (Psalm 23:2, NASB). Although life experiences can obscure such promises, fill us with nagging contradictions, and bury us in obnoxious doubt, even so, faith calls us to believe. Some, like Vincent, either don't hear the divine assurances or become confused when such assurances come to them—"for God sets us nothing but riddles."³

As a result of viewing Van Gogh's stunning pigments and

poignantly flawed life, I contemplated the origin of our human dilemma. Adam, *a creature*, undid it all *without* our consent; could Jesus, *our Creator*, as our representative, our incarnate God, put it back together again *without* human consent? I wondered.

Our obsession with will and free choice finds its origins in the philosophies of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, among others, who placed Self on the throne of the modern Western mind and claimed it as the final arbiter of truth. (Descartes is the source of the philosophical statement “I think; therefore I am”⁴). Individualism became our new god. The “I” subordinated the “other” with the possibility of being transcendent even to God.⁵ This doctrine was polished to a gleaming gloss in the great Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries, where it touted that

at goodness and badness, eins of mankind.

man’s free choice and great rational mind would fashion utopia here on Earth—God’s kingdom mass-produced by the sheer will of man. The Industrial Revolution was its proof. World War I erupted and shattered this notion of manmade utopia into the smithereens of dystopia, its true reality.

I understand the relationship between love and free will; I am familiar with different models of atonement, and I have a degree from a conservative Christian seminary, but sometimes I think we put too much value and importance—at least in the eternal respect—in our human willpower. From the self-glory of our exalted free choice, we give ourselves credit we don’t deserve. We rob God of the great work he has done, the work *only* he can do; and therefore, God becomes dependent on our “getting it right.” Too often God has found himself created from our palette and painted on our canvas in our likeness.

“Choose you this day” (Josh. 24:15, KJV), but what if flawed genetics and/or nurturing (sin’s universal effects) has corrupted our ability to choose? Does “free choice” work more effectively with the strong and less so with the weak? Do the Van Goghs of this world simply fall through the cracks into an unnamed forever, their art their only gesture at eternity? Why is the Western mind and its obsession with Self so certain, so convinced that salvation lies in its power?

Then in my head, I heard a gentle murmur: “Jesus.” Yes, Christ is our perfect response, our undefiled “yes” to God. Where we failed, he succeeded. Where we cannot go, he goes; he does what

we cannot do. John tells us, “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20, NASB). When Jesus ascended to the Father, he brought *us* with him. Therefore, when God says, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased,” (Matt. 3:17, NASB), I hear him speaking to me. Jesus gives me this promise: acceptance and inclusion (the Father loves me), not condemnation (the Father is angry with me). God actually likes me. I have a life within the Trinitarian love and communion of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. I matter. I belong. I am important and vital to the Father, who adores me. In Jesus, the Father and I are one.

Van Gogh lingered for two days after he shot himself. As he lay dying, Theo, his best friend and supporter, sat holding his dying brother. Theo tried to encourage him to live; things would get better, he promised. But Vincent looked at Theo and whispered, “The sadness will last forever.” Moments later as Theo embraced him, Vincent uttered his last words: “I wish I could pass away like this” (in the arms of his beloved brother), and he died. It was July 29, 1890.⁶

Hope as incandescent as Van Gogh’s stunning colors awaits us. I wish Vincent had known this. I wish he had known that God suffered with him and prized him; that Theo’s arms at his deathbed were the arms of Jesus; that it was God who invented his pigments and gifted him his prodigy; and that he was a special delight to the Father and Son. I think it would have made a difference. It does with me.

I stood motionless in the midst of the crowd, unaware of anyone around me, as my mind absorbed the self-portrait. My heart imagined that someday God will surprise Vincent with his own divine masterpiece: Vincent on the canvas painted in tints and tones, shades and tinctures, living pigments from a palette of illustrious hues, loved by God himself. The limitless reaches of divine grace call to me. I long to be there in that museum of what God has done, that gallery where all our portraits will hang brushed from his palette and emblazoned on his canvas in the forever colors of his new world. 

Greg Prout is a Realtor and writes from Sierra Madre, California.

¹ These facts came from a docent lecture at the Norton Simon Museum, Feb. 1, 2013.

² “Vincent,” The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, www.vggallery.com, *Biography*.

³ Don McLean, “Vincent,” from his album *American Pie*, released 1971 by United Artist Records.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: The Modern Library by Random House, no date given), p. 111.

⁵ Found in part IV of *Discourse on the Method* (written in 1637 in French) and in part I of *Principles of Philosophy* (written in 1644 in Latin).

⁶ John Goldingay (Ed.), *Atonement Today*, Michael Alsford, “The Atonement and the Post-Modern Deconstruction of the Self,” (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), pp. 205-207.

⁷ “Vincent,” The Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, www.vggallery.com, *Biography*.

DO SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH leaders treat the issue of origins much the same as many meat eaters deal with the topic of sausage-making? Namely, because the process is messier than they want to admit, they warn against asking too many questions, lest we contemplate how sausages are actually made!

Can we so easily ignore nearly all scientists of worth, across multiple disciplines, who point to overwhelming evidence that the world is considerably older than just 6,000 years? Is it possible to reconcile belief in a literal 144-hour creation event with the modern scientific

time and space are linked to create “the fourth dimension” of reality, being space-time. Einstein believed that time actually passes at different rates depending upon the speed and location of the observer relative to the thing observed.

This is no longer just theory, by the way; it is proven fact. Atomic clocks in space and on supersonic jets tick away at different rates from clocks here on solid Earth. For this reason, our satellites must be calibrated to allow for this in order to keep our GPSs accurate.

Time’s relativity is just as much a scientific fact as the discovery of a round

because 144 literal hours of creation would not be exactly 144 literal hours for both a person standing on Earth and an individual observing that same event from outside of Earth. Like atomic clocks, the 144 literal hours of creation would tick at different rates, depending upon the location and speed of the observer in relation to the proto-created Earth itself.

A Theological Opportunity

This raises an interesting possibility and theological opportunity. Perhaps we have been wrong all along in assuming that creation was 144 literal hours from

Time-Relative, Heaven

BY STEPHEN FERGUSON

consensus? Although some will suggest that I might be attempting the impossible, I think we can make such a reconciliation.

I believe it is possible to do so by some small alterations to the focus of traditional Young Earth creationism (YEC). While proponents of the YEC model argue that we should ignore science and accept only the plain, literal words of Scripture, I think they have not been reading those inspired words literally enough!

Re-examining Our Assumptions

In the usual debates about evolution versus Creation, we have perhaps overlooked two obvious but vitally important questions. Assuming the world was created in a literal 144-hour period, from whose perspective and in what location should we count those hours—heaven or Earth?

These questions are important because while we usually assume that time is universal, it isn’t. In fact, Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity demonstrates that

world. Keep in mind that Christians did not en masse change their views about a flat world based on some new discovery of biblical exegesis, but because the practical demonstrations of explorers Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan were so undisputable that an alteration in the interpretation of Scripture was unavoidable.

Therefore, science is clearly the “lesser light” of divine knowledge, as the Bible itself admits in passages such as Psalms 19:1 and 111:2; and Romans 1:20-26 and 8:19-22. Jesus himself used nature as object lessons for divine truth in Matthew 6:26-31 and 10:29.

None of this should surprise us when we consider that God’s true name of *I AM* denotes his timeless transcendence. Relativity proves that time itself is not eternal or universal, but merely another thing created by God. God alone existed before time and is over it.

So why is this important? It is important

the perspective of humankind on Earth. Perhaps the creation of the world involved some passing of 144 literal hours from the perspective of God and his heavenly host, but the relative time experienced on the surface of the Earth was a longer period of time—much longer, in fact.

We don’t know exactly how fast or slow time ticks in heaven, but passages such as 2 Peter 3:8 seem to concur with the General Theory of Relativity that its time is unlikely to match Earth. Science is now just beginning to acknowledge things that until recently would have been derided as supernatural lunacy—from parallel universes (which heaven might be), to black holes, worm holes, dark matter, quantum physics, and string theory (with parallels to the universe created by the Word). I am not trying to trade one box for another but instead to suggest that we free God from our limited human-made understanding, which is actually the essence of keeping the second

commandment against graven images.

This approach of reading Genesis 1 from a God-centric and heavenly perspective, rather than our usual human-centric and earthly perspective, I describe as Time-Relative Heaven-Centric Creationism (the Time-Relative Creationism model, for short). In support of this new literal approach to reading Scripture, I make the following inferences from the first chapter of the Bible:

- In the beginning there is no earth to speak of, so the passage should not be understood from an earthly perspective.

The sun is not a god and not even worthy of being created first. Likewise, the notion that we might read Genesis 1 from a human-centric and earthly perspective is contrary to the whole intent of the passage.

- It is God who rests on the Sabbath day, and there is no reference at all to Adam resting. Adam's absence has long troubled Adventists, but perhaps this will cease once we realize that God is the central character of this story, not Adam. If God is keeping time from a heavenly perspective, and that rate of time passes at a different speed from Adam on Earth, then we would not expect earthly Adam to match

- Proponents of YEC also often point out, by cross-referencing Revelation 22:5 about the New Earth, that God can provide light without a sun. This argument is used to explain how there can be light before a sun in day 4. Assuming that inference is also correct, it merely points out that it is God himself who is producing the “evenings and mornings” (probably for the benefit of the heavenly host, who are not beyond time, as God is), not some other natural phenomenon on Earth. That again only supports the idea that time is being marked by God himself from his own heavenly timekeeping,

-Centric *Creationism*

- Throughout almost the entire passage, there are no humans to speak of, so the passage should not be understood from a human-centric perspective.

- The chapter gives the clear impression that God is watching events unfold from above and outside the Earth, probably best identified by the notion of the Spirit hovering over the primordial waters.

- God is clearly the central character in the passage, as it is God who does everything. Humanity is just another supporting actor in this scene, like all the other creatures.

- The central theological purpose of putting the creation of the sun and moon at day 4, the great sea monsters at day 5, and humankind at day 6, is perhaps in large part because God knew that pagans would worship all of these things as gods. The theological message of Genesis 1-2a is the central tenet of Judaism—that God alone is God, and we must never elevate mere creatures to the same level as God.

God's heavenly timekeeping.

- Several passages utilize the plural form in reference to God, such as the command “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image.” While Christians have read this as supporting the doctrine of the Trinity, the traditional Jewish response is to see this as a reference to the pre-existent heavenly host, who are watching the creation event unfold. This also conforms to traditional Adventist teachings about pre-existing worlds, and it again supports the idea that the passage is a heaven-centric, not Earth-centric narrative.

- Proponents of YEC often point out that the ordinary and literal understanding of the term “evening and morning” means a 24-hour period. Assuming that exegesis is correct—and it is still quite a leap—those 24 hours clearly are not to be understood by reference to earthly timekeeping, which is to mean a sunset followed by a sunrise, because there is no sun until day 4.

not from a human-centric and earthly perspective.

No Need to Fear

Adventists typically adopt the YEC model because they fear how deeply time might impact the Sabbath command. However, a Time-Relative Creationism model actually provides a more literal reading of Exodus 20:8-11. If God created the Earth in six days and God is distinct from his creation, then God obviously was not standing on the Earth he had not yet created. Thus, God (as watched by the heavenly host) created the world in six heaven-days and rested on the seventh heaven-day, which we human beings imitate every seventh Earth-day in perpetual memorial.

Before any upholders of “historic” Adventist tradition commence their attack on my theory of Time-Relative Creationism, consider our own denominational history. Let me remind

Continued on page 30



MORAL EDUCATION AND THE ADVENTIST PRINT MEDIA

BY MAURY D. JACKSON

NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, WHEN I READ ERIC CLAUDE Webster's dissertation *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology*,¹ I awakened to Adventist print media's potential role in either educating or failing to educate its members.

A denominational editor's ability to censor important conversations, based solely on the editor's ecclesial-political interest, tempts even the most conscientious person. An example of this can be seen in Douglas Morgan's book *Adventism and the American Republic*, where he tells of an exchange between Anson Byington (whose brother, John, was the first president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists) and Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review and Herald*: "Byington grew disenchanted with the *Review* by 1859 because of its passivity on the issue of slavery and wrote announcing that he would not be renewing his subscription: 'I dare not tell the slave that he can afford to be contented in his bondage until the Savior comes, however near we may believe his coming. Surely the editor of the *Review* could not afford to go without his breakfast till then. If it was our duty to remember those in bonds as bound with them eighteen hundred years ago, it must be our duty still.' ... The following month, Byington wrote again, citing gospel as well as apocalyptic passages of Scripture."²

This history warns Adventist journal editors today. It demonstrates that early Adventist journal readers expected

their publications to address the social justice concerns of their day. While I disagree with Morgan’s attempt to conflate the prophetic and apocalyptic voices among early Adventists (and view Adventism mainly from an apocalyptic perspective),³ I nevertheless agree when he writes that “Adventists indeed gradually incorporated Anson Byington’s view that believers could take prophetic action to restrain the ‘dragonic’ influences in America and nourish the nation’s ‘lamblike’ qualities.”⁴ Adventist journal editors can be tempted to screen more than theological conversations from the public Adventist discourse. As Byington recognized early in Adventist history, there is an important role for Adventist journals to play in educating their readers on moral issues of social import.

Is Church-Sponsored Media Doing Its Job?

Church-sponsored media gatekeepers are entrusted by the larger constituency to shepherd a healthy and free exchange of ideas. In the larger context of our media-saturated era, Howard Myrick writes: “Complaints about the lack of objectivity in the electronic media are as frequent, if not more so, than in the print media. Comparisons between print and electronic media aside, the net result is a loss of confidence on the part of the news-consuming public in what is reported to them.”⁵ With the advent of web blogs and Internet media sites, to which many Adventist constituents are turning for information, it is even more important that official church-sponsored journals embrace their role to educate the church and to model ethics in media.

It is exceptional, indeed, for a reporter to challenge the sponsoring organization that pays the reporter’s salary. This practice of dodging sponsor-censored and sponsor-driven reporting generates a considerable amount of suspicion about corporate media’s interest-motivated reports. Benjamin Radford notes: “Editors, publishers, news directors, station managers, and owners, in turn, are not impervious to the influence of politicians and business interests.”⁶ The so-called “secular” media sometimes report their own mishaps. There is an occasional correction of a misreported factual claim hidden near the bottom of a page, but critical investigation of the press, by the press—a kind of self-policing—is uncommon. If it is rare for non-church media outlets to self-report (or self-police in their reporting), is it rarer still for church media outlets to invite this kind of vulnerable self-critique? Are official Adventist ecclesiastical journal editors free (or willing) to challenge the sponsoring organization for Christ’s sake? This includes a willingness to question the unwise use of picture media that manufacture images loaded with iconic codes of race and gender stereotypes.⁷

An Adventist Case Study

I offer a snapshot of two Adventist journal publications for the purpose of comparing their professed mission with their journalistic practice.⁸ First, I will consider *Ministry Magazine*, an official denominational publication that reaches every Adventist pastor in the United States of America and the world. Its original stated purpose was to reach every English-speaking denominational working territory, and its charter opens with the recognition that “the obvious need of the hour is an effective ministry to challenge the *sinful conscience* of a *judgment-bound* world” (emphasis mine).⁹ Second, I’ll look at *Message Magazine*, the oldest and most widely circulated official Adventist magazine in the United States targeting an African-American audience. This magazine, founded during the Reconstruction era after the American Civil War, sought to respond to the conditions of recently freed slaves. Its stated mission includes effecting “*positive life-change* and passionate *virtuous living* for today and eternity” (emphasis mine).¹⁰

My investigation found that these journals show a spotted record in how they address moral topics: they fail to respond to the changing social context. Moreover, the way individual articles address subjects of moral import shows the need for Adventist writers to strengthen their ethical analysis if they are to speak to a 21st-century First World.

Given our Adventist history, one might think (from reading the contents of these flagship magazines) that the prophetic heritage of the Advent Movement is in a state of crisis. When denominational journals serve as a reader’s digest for clergy and laity, many of whom have precious little reading time, it is important that these magazines serve as sources of information relevant to the day’s pressing issues. The current global trend calls for timely, relevant, accessible, and inexpensive materials that educate newer members and remind longtime members of the early Adventist prophetic heritage and its commitment to social justice.

Ethical Issues Covered in *Ministry Magazine*

Christian movements that claim a prophetic heritage are called to bear witness to the gospel’s moral imperatives in matters of social justice. Popular news journalists and scholars of current events raise serious questions about the American empire’s role in creating new problems of global injustice.¹¹ New ethical concerns emerge with the move toward globalization. With them comes an emerging challenge to provide a more agile response to gathering information and analyzing data in the rapidly changing social, political, and economic contexts. In other words, the need for meaningful prophetic engagement is heightened in the post-9/11 global context.¹²

This need guided my study of *Ministry Magazine* and its articles published after the terrorist attacks on the United States. From the autumn of 2001¹³ through the autumn of 2005, *Ministry Magazine* published approximately 30 articles with titles indicating topics that address contemporary moral issues. The total number of articles for this same period that used the words “ethical” or “moral” or alluded to moral concerns with some elementary reflection numbered more than 70, including editorials. A review of these articles reveals how titles fail to denote the content covered within the articles; oftentimes titles are used as a pretext for an unexpected subject.¹⁴ An example is Will Eva’s 2002 editorial titled “Holy Wars.” This title is eye-catching, particularly during a military conflict between historically Christian and Islamic nations, but the content concerns church partisanship and how to maintain doctrinal purity.¹⁵ So, what initially appears to be a large number of articles on moral issues turns out on further investigation to be a relatively small number. The remaining articles that deal in some depth with moral issues exhibit a range of topics that show a reductive vision for moral concerns. A table of the explicit moral topics in *Ministry Magazine*’s articles exposes an imbalance: the journal addresses certain moral issues while neglecting to address others of equal, if not greater, importance.

Table 1. *Ministry Magazine* Articles Addressing Moral Issues, Sept. 2001-Dec. 2005

Category of Moral Issue	Total Number of Articles for Each Year				
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Issues of Life and Death	0	0	0	0	0
Issues of Social Justice	0	3	1	1	3
Issues of Sex and Reproduction	0	2	1	8	5
Issues of General Ethics	0	2	1	0	2

This table shows that during a 52-month period, there were no articles with titles indicating a concern for moral issues related to life and death, such as (1) abortion, (2) euthanasia, or (3) capital punishment. Among the articles addressing issues concerned with social justice, three out of eight dealt with subject matter that involves the public health problem of drug addiction.¹⁶ More than half of the articles that dealt with moral issues during this period tackled the moral issues of sex. If this data is any indication about

If readers are looking for an Adventist moral perspective to guide them in response to the changing social, political, and economic climate we are currently in, then a journal’s preoccupation with topics such as sex and drugs can wrongly be conceived as merely problems of individual, personal responsibility if those topics are treated as though they happen in a vacuum.

the journal’s commitment to a broad survey of contemporary moral issues, then moral concerns in *Ministry Magazine* are reduced to issues of sexual misconduct and substance abuse or co-dependency, for the most part. This is an educational failure with regard to its role in developing the broad-based moral reasoning of its readership.

Developing moral reasoning that takes Christian faith seriously requires distinguishing between personal ethics and social ethics. In the sense that private moral issues are always relevant to a life devoted to holiness (and also relevant to a morality of aspiration—that is, one that goes beyond simply meeting the obligations of negative rights, but also includes endorsing positive rights), the moral concerns regarding promiscuous sex and illicit drug use are not to be discounted. However, if readers are looking for an Adventist moral perspective to guide them in response to the changing social, political, and economic climate we are currently in, then a journal’s preoccupation with topics such as sex and drugs can wrongly be conceived as merely problems of individual, personal responsibility if those topics are treated as though they happen in a vacuum. In the current context, the question of how to deal with drug offenders, for example, cannot be separated from the problem of (1) the prison industrial complex, (2) the military industrial complex, (3) the use of drug cartels in funding weapons purchases, or (4) whether it is more humane to treat addiction as a medical problem rather than a criminal one. While we are able to distinguish between personal and social ethics, the emerging context reveals how these two forces overlap and at times are inseparable. And even if they did not overlap, Walter Rauschenbusch argues that

Christians do not give up on striving toward personal holiness (even though we recognize that we will not reach perfection in this life). Neither should we give up on efforts to achieve social justice (even though we will not bring to pass the kingdom of God in its fullness in this life).¹⁷ Social concerns are central to Christian moral reflection.

Moral Issues Addressed in *Message Magazine*

Given the history of Africans in America, one expects an alternative voice to emerge on social issues within *Message Magazine*. According to former editor Delbert W. Baker, *Message* “has responded faithfully to the social, domestic, and spiritual needs of Black people in the United States and around the globe.”¹⁸

Yet when it comes to the articles in this journal, the results are not much different from the findings in *Ministry Magazine*. One may expect, in light of *Message Magazine*’s mission statement, a range of moral concerns within its pages. Again, what makes an accurate account of the number of articles on moral topics difficult to assess in *Message* is a considerable amount of moral language expressed in continuously running columns. Because these columns function something like *Dear Abby* advice columns, the moral wisdom offered in them is without any depth or sophistication. And once more, the article titles can be deceptive. Clarence Hodges’ *Message Magazine* article “Terrorism of a Different Sort” exemplifies the unreliability of titles for denoting content.¹⁹ The title suggests a discussion of the social justice problem of war, when in fact the article is about the injustice of racial discrimination in the hiring of African-American football coaches.

Hodges’ article lists moral ills and offers a consequentialist ethic, where the end justifies the means. He writes: “Problems such as the break-up of families, arrests and incarceration, sexual misconduct, unwise pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, unhealthy lifestyles, and general failures most often result from too little self-discipline. Know the rules of society. Before deciding what you should do, evaluate your options, the costs and benefits, before you make decisions regarding family, community, work, entertainment, debt, savings, giving, appearance, and worship.”²⁰ The moral reasoning implied in this excerpt is ambiguous. Are we to know the rules of society and follow them because we believe that our legislators have done a thorough cost-benefit analysis? Or are we to question the rules and do our own cost-benefit analysis? If the rules of society are always valid, then how does the moral wisdom embedded in our legal codes ever improve?

Here is a clear example of why it can be difficult to decipher the

role ethical analysis plays in some articles. Hodges’ development, in one article, from the topic of international terrorism to the problems of racial discrimination in professional football to the role that self-discipline plays in overcoming victimization, can puzzle journal readers.

The focus of my study, then, is directed to the articles that do more than give a laundry list of moral ills, i.e., Hodges. A survey of the articles worthy of further review reveals that *Message Magazine* has a scorecard similar to *Ministry* (see Table 2). The table uncovers zero articles that address moral issues concerned with life and death. Although *Message Magazine* deals more with the social justice question of racial discrimination, one would expect this finding given the magazine’s identity as a journal that concerns African-American interests. Table 2 shows the number of articles in the various categories of contemporary moral issues featured in *Message*. Like *Ministry Magazine*, the survey of moral issues in *Message Magazine* displays a similar preoccupation with the subject of sexual misconduct in the magazine’s various columns.

Table 2. *Message Magazine* Articles Addressing Moral Issues, Sept. 2001-Dec. 2005

Category of Moral Issue	Total Number of Articles for Each Year				
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Issues of Life and Death	0	0	0	0	0
Issues of Social Justice	1	3	2	4	3
Issues of Sex and Reproduction	0	2	0	2	3
Issues of General Ethics	0	2	4	0	0

Prophetic Ministry and Social Justice Inseparable

Is the Adventist vision of social justice worth giving voice to in our print media today? The Advent movement is rooted in the call to “prepare the way of the Lord” (Matt. 3:3, NRSV).²¹ Like the prophetic work and ministry of John the Baptist, this preparing the way of the Lord also implies ongoing prophetic work. The prophetic voice is inseparably intertwined with social justice concerns and kingdom/*kingdom*²² of God metaphors. Social awareness is essential for effective prophetic-centered ministry.²³ John the Baptist, as an Adventist model of prophetic hope, displays the hallmarks of a prophet in an apocalyptic world. He roots

his ministry in the call of the Second Isaiah.²⁴ The remnant of Judah, left from the time of the exile, are to be about the work of preparing “the way of the LORD” (Isa. 40:3-5, NSRV). A clue to John’s social-justice interpretation of Isaiah’s passage for his day is evidenced by the way he lifts its images as symbols of social inequity. Isaiah’s exalted mountains, depressed valleys, crooked paths, and rough places serve as obstacles for the coming of the Lord. In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist identifies the prevalence of social injustice. According to Luke’s account, John views social injustice as an obstacle to the salvation of the Lord: “He said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ ... ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ ... ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’” (Luke 3:10-14, NRSV). John the Baptist defined the work of the prophetic Christian vocation in his day.

Today we hear a familiar sound from an unfamiliar voice. In his book *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Cornel West defines the work of a prophetic Christian for today: “To prophesy is not to predict an outcome but rather to identify concrete evils. To prophesy deliverance is not to call for some otherworldly paradise but rather to generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom. For me, to be a Christian is not to opt for some cheap grace, trite comfort, or childish consolation but rather to confront the darker sides, and the human plights, of societies and souls with the weak armor of compassion and justice.”²⁵ Prophecy is not about prediction, but it is about the “possibility for more freedom.”

In this definition, West highlights the dialectical relationship between prophetic Christianity and social depravity. The prophetic Christian calls for “the human possibility for more freedom.” Currently the poor are free to starve to death and the homeless are free to live without shelter, but they are in bondage to oppression. For Adventists, the kingdom (or *kindom*) of God gives image to our social metaphor for this possibility for more freedom, both now and in the future.

West’s language sounds familiar to Adventists when he also criticizes “Constantinianism in American Christianity.”²⁶ The dominant form of Christianity in America has become a force against the moral energies that attempt to hold leaders accountable and thereby generate “the human possibility for more freedom.” West identifies American dogmas that suffocate global democratic energies: free-market fundamentalism and escalating authoritarianism.²⁷

At this point, I turn now to address how Adventist teachers and clergy may fill in the gap and provide moral education in our churches. West’s warning about the suffocating effects of

When denominational journals serve as a reader’s digest for clergy and laity, many of whom have precious little reading time, it is important that these magazines serve as sources of information relevant to the day’s pressing issues.

authoritarianism is an invitation for teachers and pastors to be deeply Socratic (rather than dogmatic). When tackling topics on moral issues, we shouldn’t speak as if we have the definitive answers; rather, we should humbly offer our deeply held, yet revisable, Christian responses.

What keeps us grounded in humility, when dealing with topics that invite moral reflection, is first to consider each member’s different stages of development: cognitive, psychosocial, faith, and, especially, moral development. We need to be aware that our church members’ developmental level of reasoning ranges from pre-conventional morals to conventional principles to post-conventional ethics.²⁸ It is also important to determine the best level on which to analyze a moral discussion; is it best addressed at (1) the habitual level, (2) the factual level, (3) the conflict of rules level, or (4) the conflict of principles level?²⁹ Finally, it is important to review the major biblical themes that call to mind the broad-based principles for ethical reflection: (1) creation, (2) covenant, and (3) community.³⁰

Changing the Nature of Our Discourse

The questions remain, and still the hope remains. While Adventist teachers and pastors can do some things to fill in the gap, a great burden remains with journal editors. How may Adventist journals (both print and electronic) unleash the ecclesial-ethical energies of the Advent people? Has the church’s media taken the prophetic voice into Babylonian captivity: cuffed in the shackles of free-market fundamentalism, escalating authoritarianism, and cyber blog fanaticism? Can we change the nature of our discourse community? Can our ecclesial community hold accountable those writers who might be tempted to propose false dilemmas in order to silence healthy dissent?

The problem of the inadequate treatment of moral issues in the official denominational journals examined above raises the social justice question regarding ethics in Christian media. The publication of this article, in this journal, continues the work of alternative journals (located at the center of the Adventist community) that shepherd the discourse practices in Adventist print media. Given the premises that each journal accepts about the historical roots of an Adventist prophetic movement, can all Adventist journals stand up to a thoroughgoing, comprehensive, and in-depth critique? Can journals purport to be Christian magazines of a movement that proclaims a prophetic heritage without being prophetic in responding to the emerging context for 21st-century moral issues? I believe that Adventist publications can bind the Christian sacred story to today's moral imperatives and do so with a prophetic voice of liberation for the oppressed. However rare it might be for church media outlets to invite vulnerable self-critique, the publication of this essay proves that in the larger Adventist community, "the human possibility for more freedom" lives on. 

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¹ Eric Claude Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992), pp. 347-350.

² Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), p. 28.

³ Maury Jackson, "Sketching an Adventist Vision for Global Mission," *Adventist Today*, March-April 2012, pp. 16-19.

⁴ Morgan, p. 30.

⁵ Howard A. Myrick, "The Search for Objectivity in Journalism," *USA Today Magazine*, November 2002, p. 50.

⁶ Benjamin Radford, "The Changing Face of News" in *Ethics in the 21st Century*, ed. Mary Alice Trent (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 58.

⁷ Myrick, pp. 51-52.

⁸ Other publications not included in this study (e.g., *Adventist Review*, *Spectrum*, *Adventist Today*, *Signs of the Times*, etc.) were not chosen because they are either unofficial magazines or primarily news magazines. I am concerned with journals that American pastors might consider indispensable to their professional enrichment as shepherds of Adventist congregations.

⁹ L.E. Froom, "Our Apology and Our Authorization," *Ministry Magazine*, January 1928, p. 32.

¹⁰ About Us, "The Mission of Message Magazine," *Message Magazine*, July 2006 [online]; accessed Jan. 21, 2007; available from <http://www.messagemagazine.org/index.php>.

¹¹ See Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). See also Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), and David Ray Griffin, John Cobb, Jr. et al., *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹² Myrick, p. 50.

¹³ I chose the beginning of autumn in 2001 as the starting point because I wanted to see how the journal articles would be affected by the change in moral thinking conditioned by the Sept. 11, 2001, Al-Qaida attacks that resulted in

fatalities in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania.

¹⁴ Will Eva, "Holy Wars?" *Ministry Magazine*, January 2002, p. 4. This editorial has more to do with church partisanship and how to maintain doctrinal purity than it does with how to view the military conflicts against Islamic nations.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Cf. Marvin Moore, "Recovery and Pastoral Ministry," *Ministry Magazine*, January 2002, p. 20; Linda Royer, "Every Church Can Help Smokers Quit," *Ministry Magazine*, December 2003, p. 24; Andrew J. Weaver and Howard W. Stone, "Teen Smoking: The Church Can Help," *Ministry Magazine*, November 2004, p. 29.

¹⁷ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1907), pp. 308-309.

¹⁸ Delbert W. Baker, "100 Years Old and Counting," *Message Magazine*, July 2006 [online]; accessed Jan. 21, 2007; available from <http://www.messagemagazine.org/article.php?id=22>.

¹⁹ Clarence Hodges, "Terrorism of a Different Sort," *Message Magazine*, May/June 2005, pp. 20, 29.

²⁰ Hodges, p. 29.

²¹ The ministry of John the Baptist was clearly understood by the evangelists to be one that prepared the way for the manifestation of the first advent (see Matthew 3; Mark 1:1-9; Luke 3:1-20; John 1:15-42).

²² Womanist and feminist theologians alert us to the patriarchal roots of the "kingdom of God" metaphor. Alternatives to the symbol are: reign of God, "democracy, commonwealth, commonweal, rule, realm, or kindom of God; new creation, new age, and so on." Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education & Pastoral Ministry the Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 14.

²³ William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr. Gustavo Gutierrez, Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1986), pp. 1-7.

²⁴ It is commonly accepted by biblical scholars that there were at least two authors of Isaiah (some argue for three). From chapter 40 to the end, the prophet of the exile is called the Second Isaiah.

²⁵ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, anniversary ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), p. 6.

²⁶ West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 152.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 1-6.

²⁸ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1995 from 1981 ed.), p. 51.

²⁹ Thomas F. Wall, *Thinking Critically About Moral Problems* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Group, 2003), pp. 60-65.

³⁰ Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 72.

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TWO OPPOSITE GOSPELS *in the* ADVENTIST CHURCH

BY ERROL WEBSTER

The central issue in the Reformation, according to both Protestants and Catholics, was justification by faith.¹ Despite Catholics claiming to teach, as do Protestants, “that the whole of justification is the work of God’s grace,”² there are five areas of difference on the issue of justification: (1) the *meaning*; (2) the *basis*; (3) the *means*; (4) the *effect*; and (5) the *nature* of sin and depravity.

Ellen White says that Martin Luther clearly taught “justification by faith;”³ it was central to the 1888 message and “is the third angel’s message.”⁴ “Seventh-day Adventists see themselves as heirs of and builders upon the Reformation ... teaching on justification by grace through faith alone.”⁵

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) formulated the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of justification, in opposition to the Reformers’ teachings. To the question “How can a sinner stand before God’s holy law in the judgment and be acquitted?” came two radically different answers. For the Reformers it was by being “declared righteous,” based on the finished work of Jesus. For the Council of Trent it was by being “made righteous,” through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

According to Adventist pastor and former professor Dennis Priebe, “The gospel lies at the heart of Christianity,” and “there are two versions of the gospel being

proclaimed within Adventism.”⁶ I agree with these statements, and I also agree that the central issue in determining which gospel we follow is our definition of sin.⁷

In the *Adventist Review*, articles by author and speaker Clifford Goldstein⁸ and theology professor Woodrow Whidden⁹ have presented the Reformation gospel in contrast with the Catholic view. Priebe says that what these Adventist authors identify as the Catholic view “is really the Biblical and Protestant position.” And he claims that the Reformation gospel both Goldstein and Whidden promote is actually the Evangelical gospel presented “under the guise that it is the Biblical gospel.” (The word “evangelical,” from the Greek *euangelion*, means “good news.”) The gospel Priebe advocates is the one he calls the “Protestant and Biblical position.”¹⁰

I don’t question the sincerity of Dennis Priebe, but his view is neither Protestant nor biblical. Rather, it’s the Council of Trent’s gospel, which remains the current teaching of the Catholic Church.

Two Views of Salvation¹¹

As to the meaning of justification, Reformation scholar Alister McGrath says: “From the time of Augustine onward, justification had always been understood to refer to *both* the event of being *declared righteous* and the process of being *made*

righteous. ... The Council of Trent ... reaffirmed the views of Augustine” [emphasis added].¹² While stressing the need of God’s grace in justifying sinners, St. Augustine (who did not understand Hebrew and had limited comprehension of Greek) used Latin to define “justification” as “to make righteous.” In 1563 the Roman Catholic Council of Trent said: “God cannot consider one just or non-sinner without *making him just [righteous]*” [emphasis added].¹³ It is “not only a remission of sins but also the *sanctification and renewal of the inward man*” [emphasis added].¹⁴

Priebe’s position agrees with Trent. He says: “Justification by faith is being *made righteous*.”¹⁵ We “are accepted by God through justification and sanctification, which is God’s work *for us and in us*.”¹⁶

In contrast, for Luther justification meant to be “pronounced righteous.”¹⁷ For Adventists, as Protestants, White says that in justification sinners are “declared righteous” by Christ himself and pronounced “righteous before the universe.”¹⁸ Two 2011 Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guides, titled *Garments of Grace* and *The Gospel in Galatians*, state it well: “Justification is the name of the legal status in which we are said to be not guilty of sin because of the substitution of Christ’s life for ours in the eyes of God the Judge.”¹⁹

And: “*Justification* is a legal term, used in courts of law. It deals with the verdict a judge pronounces when a person is declared innocent of the charges brought against him or her. It is the opposite of *condemnation* ... a person ... is *counted* as ‘righteous.’ Thus, justification involves more than simply pardon or forgiveness; it is the positive declaration that a person is righteous.”²⁰

The basis of justification, for Luther, is Jesus’ perfect life and death *imputed*, or *credited* to the believer—an *act of grace for us*.²¹ For Adventists, sinners “are justified alone through the imputed righteousness of Christ.”²² Again from *Garments of Grace*: “Imputed righteousness’ means the substitution of His [Jesus’] *sinless* life for our *sinful* life ... It is *credited* to us, *outside* of us and it covers us completely. We are viewed in God’s eyes as if we have never sinned ... [were] completely obedient ... holy and righteous as Jesus Himself.”²³

For the Council of Trent, it was on the basis of an *inherent righteousness* infused, or imparted—*sanctifying grace in us*, “which is *poured* forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost.”²⁴

Priebe would agree: “Justification *transforms* at the same time it declares. Pardon is an *inward* transformation... justification is *imparting* Christ’s righteousness.”²⁵ “Eternal life,” he says, “comes only through being born again, and the new birth comes only through the work of the Holy Spirit. All of this is an *inward process of transformation*.”²⁶ Priebe disagrees²⁷ with Adventist theologian Hans Heint, who says: “Forgiveness and making-right contradict one another.”²⁸

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent denied that the **means of justification** is by faith alone in the merits of Christ.²⁹ Justification was accomplished by God making us righteous, “through *rebirth* in Christ” and the infusion of righteousness in sanctification through the Holy Spirit.³⁰

Again Priebe would agree. “The new birth does not follow justification;

it is justification... Obedience is clearly a condition of salvation... Sabbathkeeping... is necessary for salvation, as one of the conditions of salvation.”³¹ In making obedience a condition of salvation, he is denying that justification is by faith alone. Priebe equates “makes us righteous inwardly” with “imputed righteousness.” The “Biblical gospel,” he says, “is all about an *inward experience* in which the Holy Spirit actually *makes us righteous* through the new birth *before* we can be *pronounced righteous*.”³²

For Luther it was by “*faith alone*” in the *completed* work of Christ—*plus nothing*.³³ Adventists agree that “justification” comes “alone through faith in Christ.”³⁴ The fourth lesson in *The Gospel in Galatians* is titled “Justification by Faith Alone.” Author Carl Cosaert adds: “It’s important to remember that faith itself doesn’t add to justification, as if faith were meritorious in and of itself. Faith is, instead, the *means* by which we take hold of Christ and His works in our behalf. We are not justified on the basis of *our faith* [his emphasis] but on the basis of Christ’s faithfulness for us, which we claim for ourselves through faith.”³⁵

For the Reformers, the **effect of justification** was full and complete pardon and acceptance the moment a sinner believed in Christ (Rom. 8:1). New birth and sanctification were the immediate fruit.³⁶ While obedience is the immediate whole-hearted response, complete obedience is impossible due to our sinful nature (see Rom. 3:10-20; 1 John 1:8, 10).³⁷ White concurs, while “justification is a full, complete pardon of sin,” the best efforts of “true believers” are “so defiled” by the “corrupt channels of humanity.”³⁸

In opposition, Trent maintained that justification was incomplete; being based on sanctification, it could be increased by good works.³⁹ The Council said no one should say that “the observance of the commandments of God is impossible for one that is justified. For God does not command impossibilities.”⁴⁰

For Priebe, justification by faith is “an *inward process*,” involving “the Holy Spirit,” who “begins the work.”⁴¹ It includes “*both* justification and sanctification.”⁴² He insists that perfection “is the conclusion”⁴³ of this process. “Character maturity is simply the ripening of the harvest in the individual life. We are becoming mature in Christ when we are no longer choosing to sin against God.”⁴⁴ He says that “it is possible for fallen man to obey God’s law” and that God will provide the power necessary to “obey His law perfectly.”⁴⁵ This, of course, means that there can be no assurance of salvation until the process is completed and we are perfect.

The basic difference between the two views is their **understanding of sin and depravity**. The Council of Trent, with its semi-Pelagian view, taught that the will was not affected by the Fall. (Pelagius taught that the Fall had no effect at all on Adam’s posterity.) It limited sin to conscious wrongdoing, denied that sinful propensities constitute sin, and considered depravity curable in this life.⁴⁶ Consequently, it taught that sinless perfection and complete obedience are possible in this life through indwelling righteousness by the Holy Spirit.

Priebe defines sin as choice, limiting sin to conscious wrongdoing “after we are able to choose between right and wrong.”⁴⁷ While we inherit a sinful nature, we “do not inherit guilt or condemnation.”⁴⁸ A bent to evil, inherited from Adam, is not considered a sinful propensity until we yield to it.⁴⁹ “By nature we will always be sinful until Christ comes. But we can decide to make no choices against God’s will. We can actually have a sinless character in a sinful nature.”⁵⁰ Priebe believes that Jesus had a sinful nature. “If Christ overcame the promptings of His sinful nature by the Holy Spirit’s control, then the same method is available to us.”⁵¹ Priebe’s view is similar to Robert Brinsmead’s “Sanctuary Awakening” offshoot movement of the 1960s.⁵² By contrast, Martin Luther taught that we are born sinners and depravity is total,

affecting every area of our being. Sin will not be eradicated from our nature until glorification (see 1 Cor. 15:51-57).⁵³

In the Adventist view, White says that sin is the “inheritance of children.” It has “deranged” the “whole human organism.” We have “a bent to evil,” which “unaided” we “cannot resist” and which is not eradicated until Jesus comes again.⁵⁴ *Andrews Study Bible* on Psalm 51:5 says: “We are born sinners, alienated from God, with a sinful nature and tendencies to sin. Sin is not only an act, but a state into which we are born.”⁵⁵ Cosaert agrees, “Although by the Spirit’s power we certainly can subdue the desires of the flesh, the conflict [because the believer possesses two natures that are at war with each other, the flesh and the Spirit] will continue in various ways until we receive a new body at the Second Coming.”⁵⁶

Both the Reformers and the Council of Trent were influenced by Augustine. The Reformers followed Augustine in his view of “original sin” (that human nature was totally affected by the Fall and that we are born with propensities to sin, which makes us sinners under condemnation). They also accepted his view of the need of grace to be justified but rejected his definition of justification as meaning “to make righteous.” While the Council of Trent, with their semi-Pelagian view of human nature, rejected Augustine’s view of “original sin,” they accepted his definition of justification.

A Subtle Shift

The Council of Trent substituted the work of the Holy Spirit for the work of Christ as Savior.⁵⁷ The transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth and progressive sanctification (God’s gift of *grace in us*) is made the basis of justification, instead of the finished work of Christ.⁵⁸ This is exactly what Priebe

does, yet he denies that this is the Catholic position.

Priebe says that “the real Catholic position is infused righteousness through the sacraments,” administered only by the priests, which believers can use “to obey God and do good works” that merit eternal life.⁵⁹ (This Catholic view of the sacraments is not accepted by Protestants as biblical.)

He says: “[T]his is the real Catholic position on righteousness by faith. It is not about Christ dwelling in us. It is not about justification meaning to make righteous. It is not about the Holy Spirit’s work in us leading to justification. It is not about the new birth being necessary before we are pronounced righteous by God.”⁶⁰

What Priebe denies here, as the Catholic position, is the Catholic position. His discussion of the sacraments is a red herring to divert attention from the real issue, which is: on the five points of difference between Catholics and Protestants, Priebe takes the Catholic position. He is not being fair here. He accuses our scholars of teaching falsehoods and being highly deceptive, but it could easily be said that he is the one teaching falsehoods. I would appeal to Pastor Priebe to acknowledge that his teachings are Catholic.

Priebe also grossly misrepresents Luther and Calvin, implying that they taught justification by inward renewal. Priebe disagrees⁶¹ with Hans LaRondelle, who says: “Luther’s mature concept of justification is this: it is the forensic or legal imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the repentant believer.”⁶² Priebe cites Luther’s references to inward renewal and transformation⁶³ but completely ignores the fact that Luther taught that justification means to be “pronounced righteous,” is by “faith alone in Christ,” and the righteousness that justifies us is an

“alien righteousness” “outside of us.”⁶⁴

Priebe quotes Calvin completely out of context. Calvin is contending with the views of Osiander, a Catholic priest who joined the Lutherans but later opposed Luther’s teaching.⁶⁵ Calvin says: “Had he [Osiander] only said, that *Christ by justifying us becomes ours by an essential union*, and that he is our head not only in so far as he is man, but that as *the essence of the divine nature is diffused into us*, he might indulge his dreams with less harm, and, perhaps, it were less necessary to contest the matter with him” (emphasis added).⁶⁶ What is underlined is the part Priebe quotes,⁶⁷ which is about *Osiander’s theology, not Calvin’s*.

In the same paragraph, Calvin goes on to say: “He [Osiander] vehemently asserts ... that God justifies not only by pardoning but by regenerating ... and contends that they are one and the same.”⁶⁸ In sections 7 and 11, Calvin says that Osiander insists “on essential righteousness ... of Christ within us” and that Osiander opposed “forensic” justification “by a free imputation.”⁶⁹ Calvin is opposing the very thing that Priebe is advocating and is advocating what Priebe is opposing.

Calvin’s answer to Osiander: “as Christ cannot be divided into parts, so the two things, justification and sanctification ... are inseparable. ... But Scripture, while combining both, classes them separately” and “justification is *not separated* from regeneration, though the two things are *distinct*. But as ... the remains of sin always exist in the righteous, *it is necessary that justification should be something very different from reformation to newness of life*” (emphasis added).⁷⁰

Adventists would agree. “They designate two phases of salvation: Justification is what God does *for* us, while sanctification is what God does *in* us.”⁷¹ From *Garments*

of Grace again: while we “must *never separate* them,” we “must keep *distinct*, theologically, the imputed righteousness of Christ (the righteousness that justifies us) from the work that the Holy Spirit does within us to change us [sanctification]” (emphasis added).⁷²

Priebe’s Bible study on the topic is appalling. He does not “keep distinct” justification and sanctification, but lumps them together as part of a “process of justification” and says that they are all the same thing.⁷³ This is exactly what Trent did; as McGrath points out: “the Roman Catholic understands by ‘justification’ what the Protestant understands by ‘justification’ and ‘sanctification’ linked together.”⁷⁴

Priebe makes no mention of the need for faith *alone* in justification. Commenting on Galatians 2:16, 20, he says that “‘justification by faith in Jesus Christ’ is the same as ... ‘Christ liveth in me.’”⁷⁵ So it’s faith in Jesus *plus* the Holy Spirit in the life. It’s the same with Priebe’s comment on John 3. He asks: “How do we have eternal life? By being born again.”⁷⁶ He completely ignores what Jesus said about *believing* in him to have eternal life. To Nicodemus’ question: “How can these things [being born of the Spirit] be?” Jesus points him to the cross and faith in the Son of Man (John 3:14-21). The new birth is the result of this faith, as is eternal life.

He misuses Titus 3:5-7 to support his view. He considers it the clearest passage showing that “renewal and regeneration are the methods by which God saves or justifies us.”⁷⁷ This is a gross distortion of what Paul teaches. Priebe mistakenly equates salvation with justification, when in reality salvation includes more than justification. It also includes regeneration, sanctification, and glorification, and our faith in Jesus is the basis of all of this. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*

set correctly interprets Titus 3:5-7 in the light of Romans and Galatians: “regeneration is the initial step that begins the glorious program of sanctification.... *God regenerates only those whom He has justified.*”⁷⁸

Priebe writes that the Holy Spirit “begins the work of justification by faith, which automatically makes” it an “inward process.”⁷⁹ Now the Spirit is involved from the beginning. He awakens sinners who are “dead in trespasses and sin,” convicts them of sin, and points them to Jesus and his finished work, leading them to trust in that alone for salvation (Eph. 2:1-6; John 15:26; 16:7-14; 3:14-18; 1 Tim. 2:5; Acts 4:12). But—and this is the important point Priebe seems to miss—until a person exercises faith alone in Jesus, the Holy Spirit is outside that person. The moment sinners accept Jesus by faith, they are justified and declared righteous. That same moment the Holy Spirit comes into the life and the new birth takes place, beginning the process of sanctification. The work of the Spirit *in us* is as essential as the work of Jesus *for us*; but the Spirit is not our Justifier, Jesus is!

The issue *is* whether my salvation and acceptance with God, my justification and being declared righteous before God, and my guarantee of heaven is based on the finished work of Christ *plus nothing*, or on the work of Christ *plus* the work of the Spirit in my heart. If it’s the former, then I have full assurance the moment I accept Jesus as my Savior. If it’s the latter, then I can never have assurance of salvation until I am sinlessly perfect, meeting the claims of God’s unchangeable holy law. This latter view is the position of the Catholic Church.

It’s ironic that some who are most vocal *against* Catholicism hold a similar perfectionist view of salvation to the Council of Trent. There are two gospels

found within the Adventist church: (1) the Protestant Reformation gospel and (2) the gospel from the Council of Trent. If people want to believe that justification means “make righteous” and includes the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, that is their choice. But please be straightforward about it; that *is* the Catholic position!

The Judgment

“How can a sinner stand before God’s holy law in the judgment and be acquitted?” Because the Council of Trent made justification depend upon sanctification, there can be no assurance of salvation until we are perfect.⁸⁰ By limiting sin to conscious wrongdoing and lessening the effects of the Fall, Trent could advocate perfectionism. The same applies to Dennis Priebe’s view. All theories of perfectionism lower the standard of righteousness and lessen the enormity of sin.⁸¹

Priebe vehemently attacks our scholars, who have presented the true biblical gospel in contrast to the Catholic false gospel. He accuses them of a “high-level of deception,” of “misrepresenting the truth” and of “telling us falsehoods.” As one studies Priebe’s material, it’s obvious who is practicing “deception” and teaching “falsehoods,” and it’s not our scholars cited above.

I wonder how many sincere members have been misled by Priebe’s Catholic gospel? Paul says in Galatians 1:9, “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (ESV). I would fear and tremble, when facing the judgment, to be in the shoes of anyone teaching another gospel, as does Dennis Priebe.

For Adventists, believers have perfection credited to them—even the righteousness of Jesus—the moment they believe and accept the free gift of grace

in Christ.⁸² On this basis alone, they are acquitted in the judgment. Obedience is the loving response of the believer to this gift. White says: “We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith.”⁸³

Two opposite gospels in the Adventist church: Catholic versus Protestant. Which one are you following? 

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¹ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977 from 1867 ed.), pp. 9-10; W.J. McDonald (Ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw, 1967), Vol. VIII, p. 89.

² *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, p. 90.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 253.

⁴ White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), p. 91.

⁵ Raoul Dederen (Ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), p. 307.

⁶ Dennis Priebe, *Face-to-Face With the Real Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ Clifford Goldstein, “Testing Truths,” *Adventist Review*, Sept. 23, 1999, p. 29; Goldstein, “The Christless Cross,” *Adventist Review*, Nov. 22, 2001, p. 28; Goldstein, “Beyond Logic,” *Adventist Review*, Jan. 23, 2003, p. 28.

⁹ Woodrow W. Whidden, “The Antichrist,” *Adventist Review*, May 25, 2000, pp. 8-13.

¹⁰ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

¹¹ First four comparisons adapted from Buchanan, pp. 113-124.

¹² *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 108-109.

¹³ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, p. 85.

¹⁴ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6:7 (see www.forerunner/chalcedon/x0020_15_._Council of Trent.html).

¹⁵ Priebe, “Current Issues in Justification by Faith” (see [DennisPriebe.com](http://www.dennispriebe.com)).

¹⁶ Priebe, “Evangelicals and Adventists Together?” (see [DennisPriebe.com](http://www.dennispriebe.com)).

¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan (Ed.), *Luther’s Works* (1535), Vol. 26 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1999), p. 137.

¹⁸ White, *Selected Messages Book 1* (Washington DC:

Review and Herald, 1958), p. 392.

¹⁹ Goldstein (Ed.), *Garments of Grace* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDA, April-May-June 2011), p. 15.

²⁰ Carl P. Cosaert, *The Gospel in Galatians* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDA, Oct-Nov-Dec 2011), p. 42.

²¹ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1535) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1979), pp. 71, 80; *Commentary on Romans* (1515-1516) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1954), p. 83.

²² White, *Our High Calling* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1961), p. 52.

²³ Goldstein (Ed.), p. 8.

²⁴ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, Canon 11.

²⁵ Priebe, “Current Issues in Justification by Faith” (see [DennisPriebe.com](http://www.dennispriebe.com)).

²⁶ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

²⁷ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” Presentation at 3 p.m. March 16, 2002, at the Mentone SDA Church, Mentone, CA (see <http://www.greatcontroversy.org/reportandreview/pri-protestantorcatholic.php3>).

²⁸ *Ministry*, November 2000.

²⁹ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6:11; Canon 9.

³⁰ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XII, p. 125; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, pp. 84-85; *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6:3.

³¹ Priebe, “Evangelicals and Adventists Together?” (see [DennisPriebe.com](http://www.dennispriebe.com)). At other times Priebe inconsistently says that “the new birth is preceding justification” (see <http://www.greatcontroversy.org/reportandreview/pri-protestantorcatholic.php3>).

³² Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

³³ Pelikan (Ed.), *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26, p. 160.

³⁴ White, *Selected Messages Book 1*, p. 330.

³⁵ Cosaert, pp. 41, 46.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), Ch. 11: 6, 11.

³⁷ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, pp. 71, 129-133; Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 115.

³⁸ *Signs of the Times*, May 19, 1898; White, *Selected Messages Book 1*, p. 344.

³⁹ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6:10.

⁴⁰ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6:11; Canon 18.

⁴¹ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁴² Priebe, “Evangelicals and Adventists Together?” (see [DennisPriebe.com](http://www.dennispriebe.com)).

⁴³ Priebe, *Face-to-Face With the Real Gospel*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 86, 77.

⁴⁶ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, Canon 5. Session 5:5; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII, p. 88.

⁴⁷ Priebe, *Face-to-Face With the Real Gospel*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *God’s Eternal Purpose* (Conway, MO: Ministry of Healing Health Centers, 1959), pp. 102, 108, 130. *Sanctuary Institute Syllabus II*, p. 19.

⁵³ Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 95; Pelikan (Ed.), *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 1, p. 114.

⁵⁴ *Child Guidance* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1954), p. 475; *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), p. 451; *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), p. 29; *Signs of the Times*, March 23, 1888.

⁵⁵ Jon L. Dybdahl (Ed.), (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2010).

⁵⁶ Cosaert, p. 140.

⁵⁷ Buchanan, p. 387.

⁵⁸ Aliser McGrath, *Justification by Faith: What It Means for Us Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), p. 68; G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 95.

⁵⁹ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” Presentation at 3 p.m. March 16, 2002, at the Mentone SDA Church, Mentone, CA (see <http://www.greatcontroversy.org/reportandreview/pri-protestantorcatholic.php3>).

⁶⁰ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *Ministry*, November 2000.

⁶³ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁶⁴ Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 75, 83; Pelikan (Ed.), *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26, p. 160; Vol. 35, p. 182; Vol. 31, p. 297; Vol. 34, p. 153.

⁶⁵ Shedd, W.G.T. & Gomes, A.W. *Dogmatic Theology* (3rd ed.) (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 967.

⁶⁶ Calvin, Book 3, Ch. 11:6, 11.

⁶⁷ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁶⁸ Calvin, Book 3, Ch. 11:6, 11.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, Ch. 11:7, 11.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, Ch. 11:6, 11.

⁷¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...* (Washington, DC: Ministerial Association, 1988), p. 123.

⁷² Goldstein (Ed.), p. 14.

⁷³ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁷⁴ McGrath, p. 65.

⁷⁵ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁷⁶ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” Presentation at 3 p.m. March 16, 2002, at the Mentone SDA Church, Mentone, CA (see <http://www.greatcontroversy.org/reportandreview/pri-protestantorcatholic.php3>).

⁷⁷ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁷⁸ Nichol, F.D. (Ed.), Vol. 7 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1980), pp. 370-371.

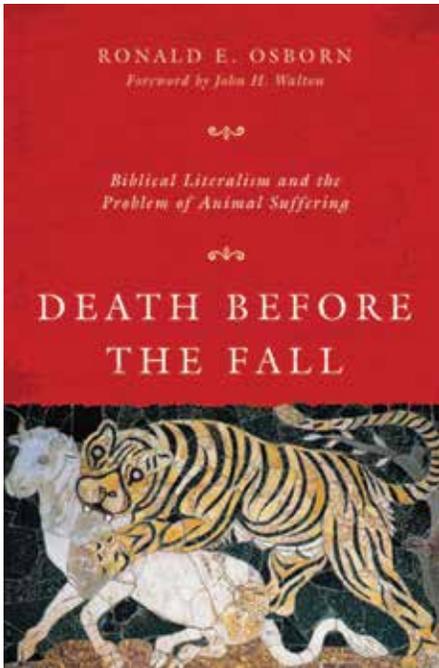
⁷⁹ Priebe, “Protestant or Catholic?” (see <http://www.dennispriebe.com/new/node/22>).

⁸⁰ Buchanan, p. 123.

⁸¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1941), pp. 537-538.

⁸² White, *Selected Messages Book 3* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), p. 195.

⁸³ White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892), p. 61.



“Death Before the Fall”

Reviewed by Marco T. Terreros

Ronald E. Osborn, *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), paperback, 197 pages.

This book, with a foreword by John H. Walton, grew out of articles first published by *Spectrum Magazine* online. Its author, scholar Ronald E. Osborn (Ph.D., University of Southern California), grew up in Thailand, Taiwan, and Zimbabwe as a child of Adventist missionaries and is the recipient of a 2015 Fulbright scholarship to Burma. He was a Bannerman Fellow at his alma mater; a Mellon postdoctoral fellow in the Peace and Justice Studies Program at Wellesley College; and has published numerous journal and magazine articles plus another book containing essays on faith, violence, and theodicy.

Primarily addressed to the author’s Seventh-day Adventist faith community, *Death Before the Fall* is frank in addressing issues in the interface between Christian theology and science. Osborn states that “the suffering of animals may be the most severe theodicy dilemma of all” (p. 19). Surely, misunderstandings regarding the presence of evil and suffering in the world have led many Christian believers to lose their faith.

Osborn’s central thesis is that all around us there is a world deeply mysterious, untamed, dangerous, and full of predatory creatures, where ferocity, suffering, and death are not only common now but were also present long before the Fall, making this world beautiful and good, so much so “that adjectives such as *evil* and *cursed*, when applied to the realities of life and death in the animal kingdom, somehow just do not ring true” (p. 13). As a theistic evolutionist, Osborn’s final

purpose is “to demonstrate to literalists [those who interpret the Genesis account of creation literally] that one can be a thoroughly orthodox Christian and embrace evolutionary concepts without contradiction” (p. 20).

Osborn is broadly informed. One can generally agree with him that this world—fraught as it is with “the harrowing suffering of innocent creatures through the violence of other creatures” (p. 14)—stands, at the same time, “delicately balanced, achingly beautiful and finely tuned to sustain tremendous diversity of life” (*ibid.*). What does not follow, biblically or theologically, is that, therefore, this world’s design “reveals a pitilessly indifferent if not malevolent intelligence” (*ibid.*).

Methodological Approach

Although Osborn believes “in the paramount authority of Scripture in matters of faith” (p. 21)—but not in matters of science—he also believes that Scripture must be submitted to tests of both reason and scientific observation and experience. In the process of so doing, he oftentimes uses mocking language to refer to “biblical literalists” (those who read Genesis literally), his book’s target population.

Even though it is not the book’s goal to reconcile Genesis with Darwinian theory, Osborn admits that “my reading of Genesis has taken the form it has because I have been writing from the start with questions of modern science and evolutionary biology very much in mind” (p. 39).

This methodological approach— influenced by presuppositions such as: (1) natural death is good (pp. 33-34), (2) creation and evolution are not mutually exclusive (p. 37), and (3) Genesis is not a historical account (p. 40, 44)—lead him to advocate throughout the book several concepts that do not exactly square with

the biblical data and which, therefore, are questionable. Some examples now follow.

- Writing about creation, the author states that Genesis 1:1 is “an ambiguous text that can be translated as the start of a process rather than as a *fait accompli*” (p. 25), an interpretation based on the translation of the Hebrew *Bereshit* as a dependent clause, namely, “When God began” [to create heaven and earth], which does not imply creation *ex-nihilo* [out of nothing]. It rather implies that “the Creator initiates emergent and generative processes that anticipate a continuous creation with (in philosophical terms) ‘secondary causes’” (p. 27).

However, as Hebrew language specialists and Old Testament scholars know, Hebrew grammar indicators in the text point to translating *Bereshit* as an independent clause, namely, “In the beginning” [God created heaven and earth], implying the creation of the planet out of nothing. And instead of a continuous creation still in process, the affirmation “Thus the heavens and the earth *were completed* in all their vast array” (Gen. 2:1, NIV, italics mine) corresponds with the New Testament declaration that “his works *have been finished since the creation* of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested *from all his works*’” (Heb. 4:3-4, NIV, italics mine).

- *Death Before the Fall* states that Genesis is completely silent on whether or not God’s creation included mortality before Adam’s fall, that “the notion that all mortality and all predation in nature is the result of divine curse is itself an interpolation ... imposed by pious readers on the great silences of the text” (p. 34), and that if predators were not part of the creation, we would expect Genesis or later books to provide some clues as to their origins or transformations.

However, such clues are actually given. According to the first chapter of the Bible, God gave green plants for food to *all the beasts* of the earth and *all the birds* of the air (see Gen. 1:29-30). And he pronounced this arrangement, like the rest of his works, to be “very good” (verse 31). Therefore, the fact that now so many animals have to kill others for food is not God’s “good” original plan. It must have resulted from the curse pronounced by God on the serpent “above” or “among” (see Gen. 3:14) the other animals. The curse included changes in diet, locomotion, and attitudes plus possible death by injury to the head (verses 14-15). None of these changes were for the good of either humanity or nature, for the earth itself was cursed (verses 17-18). Additional evidence of the lack of goodness in predation is the fact that many predators attack not only other animals but also humans. Also, pain, which due to all the former changes both man and woman experienced from their fall onward, was greatly increased for the woman in childbearing (verse 16).

Psalms 104 is not contradicted by these facts, as Osborn writes. Job chapters 38-40 do not contradict them either. These passages, more descriptive than prescriptive, show that God is not only Creator but Sustainer and that he takes good care of his creation, providing for all of his creatures, even in their present conditions. If God in his goodness feeds both good and evil humans, why wouldn’t he also feed both herbivore and now-carnivore animals? Both of the former are his children; both of the latter are his creatures.

As Osborn states, the Creator takes responsibility for animal predation. But we should notice that he also took responsibility for the devastation of Job, his family, and property (Job 2:3) although it was Satan who, taking advantage of

the occasion, actually inflicted those evils. And Jesus indicated that a dramatic bad change in “the field” of nature (see Matthew 13) was the work of an “enemy” (verse 28), “the prince of this world” (John 12:31, NIV), but that the Owner of the field is still in control (Matt. 13:30). He holds the control of his entire creation.

- Osborn writes that “Adam and Eve were not created deathless or immortal ... but as fully mortal beings from the start” (p. 131) and that in order for the divine command (Gen. 2:17) to have gravity for Adam, he must understand what death was. But neither is necessarily so. We do not now need to understand what eternal life is like in order to believe in God’s promise of it. We should remember that death, even as inflicted through God’s commanded annihilation of some nations in the Old Testament, is his “strange work,” his “alien task” (Isa. 28:21, NIV), a temporally needed evil, an enemy that will finally be defeated (1 Cor. 15:26) and will pass away (Rev. 21:4). This includes predation death (Isa. 11:6-9).

Key Concepts

In the following paragraphs, I’ve singled out other important ideas Osborn presents in his book:

- Genesis 1 and 2 are two contradicting creation accounts. This is a view held by historical-critical scholars who subscribe to the documentary hypothesis (that Moses was not the Pentateuch’s author).¹
- Rejection of the Adventist belief that creation took place in six literal, consecutive, contiguous, 24-hour days in a recent past.
- Creation science is a “degenerating” research program, not a “progressive” one (see chapter 4 and p. 72), and Creationists who read Genesis literally have an enclave mentality (p. 76).
- Lumping together of scientific

creationism and Adventism in a mixture that may confuse readers not informed on the issues. For example, Adventists do not advocate the inerrancy of Scriptures and do not believe that God's omnipotence entails his predestination of all events, as most scientific creationists do. They differ on important details in the interpretation of creation texts.

- Belief that New Testament passages such as Romans 5 are exclusively focused on humanity. However, Romans 8:18-25 indicates otherwise.²

The book argues that animals do not die because of Adam's sin, but as part of God's original plan. This idea puts the blame of animal suffering on God, which leads one to think that on this point atheist evolutionists, who altogether leave God out the picture, are better off.

By contrast, in the Bible mankind is the federal representative of the creation. As such, God "put everything under their feet" (Psalm 8:6, NIV). Thus, the whole of that creation fell with humanity's fall; the king fell with his kingdom (as illustrated in Psalm 135:8 and many Old Testament stories). Death, thereby, became an ecological necessity in order to preserve natural balance and, in God's love, ensure humanity's survival in their new situation. Otherwise, only humanity would have disappeared from Earth, while nature would have continued to live on endlessly.

Toward its end, the book presents a beautiful description of Sabbath keeping as an eschatological pointer, an intimation of eternity where man and nature will be finally at rest in the presence of their common Creator.

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¹ For arguments showing that Genesis 1 and 2 are not contradictory but complementary, see Randall W. Younker, "Genesis 2: A Second Creation

Account" in *Creation, Catastrophe and Calvary*, John T. Baldwin, Ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), pp. 69-78.

² For exegetical reasons to believe that such passages include not only human death, and for theological problems in theistic evolution, see Marco T. Terreros, "Death Before the Sin of Adam: A Fundamental Concept in Theistic Evolution and Its Implications for Evangelical Theology," Andrews University 1994 Ph.D. Dissertation, pp. 150-201.

"Death Before the Fall"

Reviewed by Ervin Taylor¹

Ronald E. Osborn, *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), paperback, 197 pages.

Dr. Osborn addresses this book "to the troubled [Seventh-day Adventist] Christian community" of which he is a member, "a community that now finds itself in a state of increasing turmoil ... (with some church officials attempting to resolve the tension once and for all by turning strict biblicism or literalism on Genesis into a dogmatic litmus test of 'true' Adventist identity)" (p. 18).

The author directs most of his attention toward one of the principal *theological* objections of fundamentalist Adventists and other fundamentalist Christians in their opposition to the scientific concepts accounting for the natural causes of biological evolution over several billions of years on this planet.² The concepts underlying one set of explanations for evolutionary biological processes, dominated by the concept of natural selection, were set forth in great detail in the 19th century by English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882). The same principles were also well-described by a younger contemporary of Darwin, the English biologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1833-1913). As with any set of scientific concepts, as new discoveries—such as a more detailed understanding of the role

of mutations and the development of molecular genetics—have accumulated, important aspects of some of the Darwin/Wallace original understandings of natural selection and other processes involved in biological evolution have been superseded, and others have been continuously updated.

However, the well-established *scientific* basis of contemporary evolutionary biology (not necessarily exclusively of the Darwinian type) and of the "deep time" uncovered by geological research over the last 200 years, as calibrated by isotopic dating methods over the last 50 years, is *not* the topic of this book. The reason for the hesitation concerning Darwinian evolution is that the author explicitly states that his goal is *not* "to reconcile Genesis with Darwinian theory" (p. 39). Rather, his focus is an examination of the origins and implications of a series of *theological concepts and assumptions* about how to view and evaluate biblical statements. The author suggests that these concepts and assumptions currently lie at the heart of the theologically based rejection of modern biological evolution and the nature of the geological column by adherents of fundamentalist Christian theological constructs.

The volume begins with the author's own experience as a child with the stark realities of animal predation. As befitting the title, this is followed by addressing various aspects of the hermeneutic of *biblical literalism* and then what the author terms "the central riddle" of his book, *animal suffering*. Osborn introduces his readers to the world that he has experienced firsthand as a result of growing up in Africa, as the child of Adventist missionaries. He characterizes that world as being "deeply mysterious, untamed, dangerous, beautiful and good" (p. 13) and also "inextricably linked to cycles of birth and death, as well as suffering, ferocity and animal predation" (*ibid.*).

The epistemology that informs the author’s approach to the biblical record is the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” (p. 21). In following that epistemology, Osborn confesses: “If there is a reading of Scripture that somehow stands pristinely on its own apart from all of the messiness and contingency as well as all of the richness of human culture and tradition, reason, observation, and experience, it is one I have yet to find” (*ibid.*).

The author’s own “plain reading” of the early chapters of Genesis leads him to view those narratives, in the words of Anglican evangelical clergyman John Stott, “not as a scientific treatise but as a highly stylized literary statement” (p. 37). He argues that

and modernist worldview” (p. 41). In this context, Osborn argues that *foundationalism* in philosophy is the position that “all truth claims” must ultimately be able to be traced to “an indubitable ‘firm foundation’” (p. 42) using “infallible first principles” (*ibid.*). In the European Enlightenment, this philosophical foundation was adopted by such rationalists as René Descartes, who sharply distinguished between reason and emotion. Because of this, Descartes rejected “the subjective realities of felt and lived human experience” (*ibid.*).

To Osborn, the attachment of biblical literalists to the epistemological assumptions of European Enlightenment/

(or visions) of creation and evidences of modern biology and geology can be asked without fear, rancor or dogmatism—whether of the religious *or* the scientific kinds” (p. 39). He admits he offers “few confident answers to the problem of animal suffering in the manner of some Christian apologists” (p. 20). He states that his main purpose is to “provoke honest even if unsettling conversations as one member in the body of Christ addressing others” (*ibid.*). In this context, he insists that the most important attitude brought to the dialogue on this topic is “epistemological humility” rather than “epistemological certitude” (p. 43).

The most direct and specific response

THIS BOOK MODELS FOR INDIVIDUAL ADVENTISTS HOW ONE MIGHT APPROACH THIS ISSUE FROM A NUANCED SCIENTIFIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FREE FROM DEFENSIVE APOLOGETIC DOGMATISM. A WATCHWORD THAT REFLECTS THE ETHOS PROJECTED BY THIS BOOK IS “EPISTEMOLOGICAL HUMILITY.”

“Genesis is not a story of material origins” (p. 38). Rather, Osborn follows what he views as the compelling arguments of John Walton (who wrote the foreword to this book) that Genesis represents a “‘temple inauguration’ in which God assigns the different parts of the cosmos their ordered *functions* in six days, however long it may have taken for them to be materially formed” (p. 38).

Dr. Osborn also draws on the studies of American philosopher and theologian Nancey Murphy to argue for what some readers will view as a counterintuitive understanding of the underlying intellectual foundation of modern biblical literalism and, by extension, fundamentalism. In Osborn’s reading of Murphy, it is the assertion that biblical literalism is, at its core, a direct expression “of the philosophical foundationalism and rationalism that underwrites the Enlightenment project

modernist standards of truth means that these biblical literalists have committed themselves to evaluating the truthfulness of the Genesis creation and flood narratives using “modern historical and scientific standards of truth” (p. 48). It is interesting to note that when the application of those modern standards of historical and scientific investigation results in conclusions that contradict the religiously inspired views of fundamentalist literalists, they reject those conclusions.

In the section on animal suffering, the author begins with a candid admission that there are no “tidy answers to the theodicy dilemma of animal suffering” (p. 127). To some, his approach to this issue will seem vague and unfocused. He indicates that his primary goal is not to offer answers but simply “to help clear a space in which questions about the relationship between the biblical vision

to “the central riddle of this book” (p. 13), animal suffering, is offered within a Christocentric confessional mode that appears to have some similarities to the views expressed by the late Catholic theologian and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardan. In the view of Osborn: “The most constructive approach to the theodicy dilemma of animal suffering, it seems to me, is the one taken by those theologians who have come to read Genesis and the evidences of natural science through a theological paradigm centered upon Christ’s *kenosis* or self-emptying on the cross, and the ancient patristic understanding of *theosis*—the view that God’s purposes in creating included his desire, from the beginning, for the divinization of humankind through the hominization of Christ. The creation was never a static golden age but always an unfolding story with an eschatological horizon” (p. 159).

Commentary

In the view of this reviewer, Dr. Osborn has written a highly nuanced and sensitive commentary on the problems associated with the standard theological arguments used by fundamentalist and conservative Christians—including fundamentalist and conservative Adventist Christians—in their rejection of the reality of biological evolution over long ages in the geological record. Osborn argues that the arguments of fundamentalist literalists are tenable only if one imposes on the biblical text a relatively modern hermeneutic of biblical interpretation. Such a hermeneutic certainly does not go back to those who produced the biblical record. It does not even go back to the Reformation. Osborn argues that it is largely the product of European late-17th-century Enlightenment thought, within which was created our modern secular approach to how questions of fact involving the material world are to be approached and what criteria should be used in explaining how that world works.

Some might reasonably question if the details of how Osborn has analyzed the history of ideas about this topic are entirely valid. For example, his interpretation and characterization of the views of various pre-modern and modern Western thinkers may not be exactly the way he has described. But, in the main, his core theme about the intellectual background of the fundamentalist agenda and ethos seems to reflect accurately the views of those who have studied it in detail.

For those who want concrete, specific statements, it might be argued that his approach does not even address the problems he has raised, let alone offer any “answers.” That certainly is a legitimate criticism. However, it seems to this reviewer that Osborn’s approach has much to recommend it because, at its core, it seems

to be arguing that the best “answer” to the problem of animal predation given the current political situation facing Adventist Christians is to accept the “ambiguous nature of much of existence and the need for epistemological humility” (p. 43).

We might note that from an ecclesiastical-political perspective, the contemporary corporate Seventh-day Adventist Church has invested much of its theological credibility and major resources (e.g., currently about \$1 million a year for the Geoscience Research Institute) in supporting a fundamentalist theological position on this topic. The result is that corporate Adventism has been forced by its apologists to travel into a theological and intellectual backwater with very limited options of how to get turned around and proceed collectively to deal effectively with the substantive theological issues that are at stake.

To place what is confronting Adventist ecclesiastical authorities into context, we might recall that the Roman Catholic Church took almost four centuries to officially state that it had erred when it condemned the understanding—at the time it was proposed by Galileo—that the Earth revolved around the sun. In a similar manner, like the political problems that confronted Catholic authorities at the time of Galileo, the current administrative leadership of the institutional Seventh-day Adventist Church appears to be organizationally incapable of making any kind of meaningful reassessment of its traditional theology to deal creatively with the clear scientific consensus on this topic. On the contrary, as Osborn notes, its leaders currently are attempting to turn this issue into a test to determine who and who is not a “true” Adventist.

This situation was vividly illustrated in the reports written by church authorities following the Faith and Science

Conferences organized by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at the beginning of the 21st century. Despite efforts by a number of the church’s scientists and theologians to explain to church administrators the lack of scientific and theological support for the positions that the corporate church has taken with regard to origins in the fields of biology and the earth sciences, church authorities reported in denominational publications that current church positions in this field had been fully validated.

This reviewer will hazard a guess that an unknown number of generations of Adventist administrators and apologetic theologians will live and die before the corporate Adventist Church will be able to come to grips with the reality that the current biological world is the result of evolutionary processes that have taken billions of years to accomplish. In the meantime, this book models for individual Adventists how one might approach this issue from a nuanced scientific and theological perspective free from defensive apologetic dogmatism. A watchword that reflects the ethos projected by this book is “epistemological humility.” 🚩

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¹ I would like to acknowledge the very helpful comments of Bill Breer and David Larsen, who provided to me insights concerning this book. However, they are obviously not responsible for any of my misstatements or misguided opinions.

² In this book and review, the term “fundamentalism” is used as a *descriptive* term designating a specific type of hermeneutical (biblical interpretative) principle adopted by several early 20th-century Western Protestant Christian denominations and evangelical interdenominational parachurch groups. Within the context of this review, the most important hermeneutical principle of fundamentalists is their adherence to the position that biblical statements are to be viewed as containing no errors of scientific or historic fact.



Prayer for the Double-Minded Believer

By Alden Thompson

Twice in the book of James, the focus of our Sabbath School lessons this quarter, the troublesome question of petitionary prayer confronts us. The title of a C.S. Lewis essay says it all: “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer.”¹ Originally addressed to the Oxford Clerical Society in 1953, the essay points out that Scripture presents us with two thoroughly contradictory patterns for petitionary prayer. The one is expressed in the Lord’s Prayer—“Thy will be done” (Matt. 6:10, KJV)—and confirmed in Jesus’ experience in the garden of Gethsemane: “not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV).

The other pattern is suggested by a number of passages of Scripture, and it is perhaps most vividly stated in James 1:6-8: “But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (NRSV).

Both approaches are solidly supported by illustrations in Scripture, but Lewis sees no way of harmonizing them and concludes his essay with this simple plea: “I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?”²

For a number of years, in a class called Research and Writing in Religion, English professor Bev Beem and I have asked our students to do a cluster book review of three authors/books: (1) Roger Morneau, *The Incredible Power of Prayer*,³ (2) Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,⁴ and (3) C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*⁵ and “The Efficacy of Prayer,”⁶ as published in *World’s Last Night and Other Essays*.⁷ Our rationale for these three authors is that they each present such a different approach to petitionary prayer. Morneau was a Seventh-day Adventist layman whose remarkable experience with the occult is told in his book *A Trip into the Supernatural*.⁸ His thesis is: If you are right with God, you will get what you pray for. His book is full of miracle stories, all of which are direct answers to prayer. It is worth noting, however, that he never

addresses the problem of unanswered prayer.

Kushner, at the other end of the spectrum, has concluded that God does not, indeed cannot, intervene in human affairs. A well-known “liberal” rabbi within Conservative Judaism in America, he was driven to this conclusion by the horror of watching his little boy shrivel up and die at age 14, a victim of progeria, early aging disease. Kushner could not believe that God was responsible for such a tragedy. So, to preserve God’s goodness, he totally sacrificed God’s power, concluding that God is a good listener but cannot intervene.

Lewis holds a middle position, affirming that God

A helpful approach to the passage in James 1 is to allow the context to direct the focus. Rather than seeing the passage as referring to all petitionary prayers, we can let it speak specifically to the prayer for wisdom, a prayer that God will always answer.

does answer prayer, but in ways we are not able to understand. The last lines of his essay “The Efficacy of Prayer”—in my view one of the finest short treatments of petitionary prayer—lay out his position with clarity.

“And I dare not leave out the hard saying I once heard from an experienced Christian: ‘I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning: before conversion, or soon after it.

As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent; they become more unmistakable, more emphatic.¹

“Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. There is a mystery here which, even if I had the power, I might not have the courage to explore. Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle.”²

While not solving the dilemma that Lewis addressed in his essay on petitionary prayer, I do believe we can find some helpful explanations for the two passages in James that represent the “hardline position” on prayer, cited here from the NRSV:

James 1:5-8: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.”

James 5:14-15: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”

A helpful approach to the passage in James 1 is to allow the context to direct the focus. Rather than seeing the passage as referring to all petitionary prayers, we can let it speak specifically to the prayer for wisdom, a prayer that God will always answer. Whatever we ask, expect, or receive, it will always

be a learning experience, one that enhances our wisdom.

The approach to the passage in James 5 is not quite so tidy or convincing, but I believe it could possibly help prevent the sensitive believer from being crushed by a load of guilt when a prayer for healing does not yield the desired result.

My suggestion starts with Psalm 23 rather than James 5. Several years ago a church historian, Philip Jenkins, gave a lecture on the Walla Walla University campus in which he noted what the people of Zimbabwe did to survive under the difficult rule of their president, Robert Mugabe. When they cited Psalm 23, instead of giving the normal emphasis—“the Lord is my *shepherd*,” thus lending a gentle pastoral interpretation to the psalm—they shifted the emphasis to Lord, giving the psalm an almost militaristic flavor, a kind of taunt to their oppressive president: “The *Lord* is my shepherd.” Whatever Mugabe might attempt, the believers clung to the conviction that the *Lord* was stronger and able to come to their defense.

Transferring that approach to James 5, we can shift the emphasis from *heal* to *faith*. Instead of reading “The prayer of faith will *heal* the sick,” we can read: “The prayer of *faith* will heal the sick. In other words, a prayer that is not of faith will have no effect at all. But if there is to be healing, it will be the prayer of *faith* that makes it happen.

The challenge of petitionary prayer remains. But by God’s grace and by careful reading, we can soften the hard edges on the difficult passages in James so that they can be encouraging rather than discouraging to devout believers.

¹ *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 142-151.

² *ibid.*, p. 151.

³ Review and Herald, 1997.

⁴ Schocken, 1981.

⁵ Harcourt Brace, 1964.

⁶ Originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1959.

⁷ Harcourt Brace, 1960, pp. 3-11.

⁸ Review and Herald, 1982, 1993.

⁹ *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, pp. 10-11.



Inflated Self-Importance

Thank you for the issue [Winter 2014] that addressed the question “Are the Three Angels Still Relevant?” This is an important topic, if for no other reason than that the current leadership of the world church has been harping on it for nearly four years. I found three of the four essays challenging, thoughtful, and provocative.

However, I have to register my displeasure with Edwin Reynolds’ piece, “Fulfilling the Mission of the Adventist Church.” Despite the fact that it’s exactly the worn-out argument propounded ad nauseam by Ted Wilson and the other literalists in the church, it contains the distinctly heretical notion that the only thing between us and Jesus’ returning in glory is us. According to Reynolds, if it weren’t for the lukewarmness of Seventh-day Adventists, Jesus would have been here by now.

Since when, out of all the 7 billion people who inhabit this planet, have

Seventh-day Adventists managed to garner that much influence? Indeed, since 90 percent of the world’s population (and that’s generous) doesn’t even know we exist, by what stretch of imagination can we assume that Adventists hold the key to Christ’s return?

I notice that Reynolds’ only support comes from Ellen White, which leads me to remind your readers of the old joke: “What’s the difference between the Pope and Ellen White? Everybody knows the Pope isn’t infallible.”

Perhaps one of these days before the Lord’s return, we’ll be able to generate enough humility to admit that there are 7 billion reasons for Jesus to return in a time and a manner that suits His purposes, not just to inflate the self-importance of Seventh-day Adventists.

NAME WITHHELD

Ferguson *continued from page 11*

those conservative readers that our pioneers once made the fatal error of ascribing certain biblical events to an earthly rather than heavenly perspective. Our pioneers had the post-Disappointment epiphany that the Bible was actually talking about events occurring in a heavenly rather than an earthly sanctuary. They were both right and wrong in the sense that they previously had only a limited understanding, which changed through progressive revelation leading to present truth. I am likewise suggesting we consider making a similar leap from an earthly to heavenly perspective on the issue of creation.

More progressive readers might wonder what is the benefit of Time-Relative Creationism. First of all, some might rightly observe this model as a modification and refinement of the

long-touted “day equals epoch” theory, which has been an explanation of origins going back as far as Augustine in the fourth century.

Let me also just say that I am not advocating the Time-Relative Creationism model as the only possible or best model of origins. (In fact, I am saying that we should be less dogmatic about origins.) Rather, I am merely suggesting that if we assume the YEC proponents are correct in saying Genesis 1 must be read literally, the Time-Relative Creationism model makes it possible to read the Bible literally and still accept the present truth of the modern scientific consensus.

Adventists should strive to grasp the holy grail of reconciling science with a literal reading of the Bible. Not only does the Time-Relative Creationism model reconcile with science, but I honestly believe it is a more literal and even more Adventist reading of Scripture than the traditional YEC view.

The Time-Relative Creationism model would allow Adventists to maintain a belief in evolution over millions of years while at the same time, with all honesty and integrity, affirming the traditional Adventist position of belief in six literal, consecutive, continuous 24-hour periods of creation—as taken from a plain and ordinary reading of the Bible. At a time when moves are afoot to tighten the definition of creation in SDA Fundamental Belief No. 6,¹ the Time-Relative Creationism model offers another interesting alternative of origins that is at least worth further exploration.

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¹ See <http://www.educatetruth.com/featured/voted-revision-of-sda-fb6-on-creation/> and <http://www.atoday.org/article/1130/opinion/taylor-ervin/2012/what-s-the-problem-with-adventist-fundamental-belief-no-6-part-i>.



You Need These Theme Bibles!

Sometimes life's greatest ideas spring from traumatic shock. A few weeks ago in a Christian bookstore, I was struck numb by my first sight of the *Playful Puppies Bible*. (Nope, not making this up. Check out the footnote.) Paging through this kid-size volume, I found that it was a standard NIV, but every so often a glossy page featured a puppy and a devotional thought.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a realist. Theme Bibles are here to stay. Ever since the NIV *Promise Keepers Men's Study Bible*, truckloads of spinoffs have been created to supply the needs of slavering shoppers: brides' Bibles, mothers' Bibles, fathers' Bibles (complete with *faux* weathering, as though worn by Dad's gnarled hands), the NKJV *American Patriot's Bible*, teen study Bibles featuring covers labeled with every possible title *except* "Bible," and so on.

But a *Playful Puppies Bible*? Picture a kid mulling thoughtfully through one of David's bloodier war psalms and then—*byoingggg*—pops a playful puppy. And later, while reading the Savior's solemn "In this world you will have tribulation" sermon in John 13:33—*byoingggg!*—another pup.

It was while I was making gagging noises that I suddenly had an epiphany: *Maybe Adventism could use some theme Bibles.*" Not Bibles with small dogs—we must draw a firm line somewhere—but Bibles like the following, which should be produced, printed, and promulgated pronto²:

Adventist Man

A SATIRICAL LOOK AT ADVENTIST LIFE

The Color-Coded Clear Word. Parts of every verse would be highlighted, depending on which content came from the original languages (blue highlighting), from the Spirit of Prophecy (yellow), or solely from the warm-hearted imagination of its paraphraser (rose-pink).

The Amish Romance Novel Bible. This product would enable its reader to appear to be absorbing Holy Writ while actually immersing herself in the kind of wholesome fiction whose book covers picture pensive, pure yet perky young ladies wearing white caps with tie-strings hanging beside either cheek. This Bible would contain the actual Pentateuch at the front, plus Paul's later epistles and Revelation at the back, but would have a hollow space in the center where the novel could be inserted. The ribbon marker could be positioned within Scripture itself so that if anyone nearby got too curious, the reader—with a quick tug—could appear to be deeply engrossed in Numbers 17.

The Intimidator Bible. *The Intimidator* would be incredibly useful in a Sabbath School class afflicted with a geek who always brings copies of the Greek or Hebrew Scriptures and who, at the drop of a hat, will read them aloud and expound on them.

The Intimidator Bible would have a reversible cover, designed to closely resemble well-worn versions of either the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* or *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The interior would be a standard version, such as the ESV, but would also include pronunciation guides and definitions for the 30 most obscure words in both Testaments—words the geek will have never heard of.

Also included would be even more obscure (because they have been fabricated by me) German theological

terms like *die Weltgeschmertzlich* and *Unterwickerlagensprangerbuch*, which (when in need of the ultimate geek-squelcher) you would bark out, using plenty of saliva, along with dense theological pronouncements. If someone asks you what these terms mean, give them a puzzled look as though to say, "What planet did *you* arrive from?" Then quickly change the subject, or as we say in German, *rapidieswitchen das subjectmattern*.

Finally, someone really needs to develop the desperately-needed *Greeter-fender-off-er Bible Cover*. Church-foyer greeters, as you know, are being sent to boot camps to make them more aggressive, and they are held to quotas. Yet there are some Sabbaths when you as a visitor just *don't* want to sign the guest book, *nor* receive a name tag, *nor* be rapidly introduced to five smiling people, each of whom will put in motion a programmed plan to become your closest friend.

This Bible cover sports a leather fish-symbol, which, when depressed with a furtive thumb, emits the sound of a ringing cell phone. The owner apologizes to the greeter, grabs for his or her cell phone, and then cries: "Molly! How are you?" while sidling safely off.

Okay, entrepreneurs. The rest is up to you!

¹ <http://www.zondervan.com/playful-puppies-bible>

² And no, I'm not considering an Alliteration Bible. But don't tempt me.

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