

Losing My Religion
to Find God

A Secular Grace

Righteousness by
Faith Is Not a Doctrine

SUMMER 2019 • VOL. 27 NO. 3

Adventist *Today*

**GOD'S
GRACE**



features

6 Losing My Religion to Find God*By Damien Rice***8** Grace in the Wilderness*By Melissa Brotton***10** A Secular Grace*By David Geelan***12** To Raise the Sons of Earth:
An Incarnational Grace*By David Neff***15** Pay the Thunder No Mind*By Winona Winkler Wendth***16** God's Grace for the
Child-Free Mother*By Melody Tan***DEPARTMENTS****3** Editorial

God's Grace for Pastors

*By Loren Seibold***18** The Exegete

Genesis 2:16: Contra Luther, Righteousness

by Faith Is Not a Doctrine

*By Olive J. Hemmings***22** Science & Faith

Dividing the Church Over Evolution?

*By April Maskiewicz Cordero***26** Alden Thompson

It's the Law!

29 Contributors**30** Barely Adventist

News Briefs

Adventist Today brings contemporary issues of importance to interested readers. *Adventist Today* is a member of The Associated Church Press. Following basic principles of ethics and canons of journalism, this publication strives for fairness, candor, and good taste. Unsolicited submissions are encouraged. Payment is competitive. Send an email to atoday@atoday.org or mail to *Adventist Today*, PO Box 683, Milton-Freewater, OR 97862. Call 800.236.3641 or 503.826.8600 (outside USA).

Website: www.atoday.org

As an independent press, *Adventist Today* relies on memberships and donations to meet its operating expenses. To support *Adventist Today* and continue receiving this magazine, go to www.atoday.org, and click on Membership or Donate at the top. Mail payments to the address above. All donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Adventist Today (ISSN: 1079-5499) is published quarterly by Adventist Today Foundation, 14605 SE 262nd Avenue, Boring OR 97009-6038. Periodical postage is paid at Boring, OR, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Adventist Today*, PO Box 683, Milton-Freewater, OR 97862.

Copyright (c) 2019 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community and beyond.

Executive Editor

Loren Seibold

Copy Editor

Debra J. Hicks

Contributing EditorsJames Walters, John McLarty,
Jeff Boyd, J. David Newman**Art Director**

Chris Komisar

Digital Media

News Editor, Bjorn Karlman; Editorial Associates, Mark Gutman, Carmen Seibold, Stefani Leeper; Weekly Email Edition Editors, Lindsey Painter, Stefani Leeper; Monthly Edition Editor, Heather Gutman; Correspondents, Alethia Nkosi, Tyson Jacob

Executive Director

Monte Sahlin

Chief Operating Officer

Paul Richardson

Operations Team

Operations Specialist, Bjorn Karlman; Bookkeeper/Database, Lee Myers; Member Services, Nancy Myers; Production Specialist, Stefani Leeper; Technology Strategist, Warren Nelson

FOUNDATION BOARD

Nate Schilt (chair), Jim Walters (vice chair), Monte Sahlin (secretary), Andrew Clark, Keith Colburn, Chris Daley, Larry Downing, Bill Garber, John Hoehn, Bjorn Karlman, Mailen Kootsey, Alvin Masarira, Keisha McKenzie, Chuck Mitchell, Jim Nelson, Nathan Nelson, Warren Nelson, Lindsey Painter, Gene Platt, E. Gary Raines, Paul Richardson, Sasha Ross, Timothy Ruybalid, Ed Sammons, Dan Savino, Carmen & Loren Seibold, J. Gordon Short, James Stirling, David Van Putten, John Vogt

SENIOR LIFETIME ADVISORS

(\$25,000+)

Patricia & Douglas Ewing, Kathi & Richard Guth, John Hoehn, Judy & John Jacobson, Al Koppel, Joan Ogden, Thaine Price, Judy & Gordon Rick, Mike Scofield, Lovina & J. Gordon Short, Marilynn Taylor, Nancy & John Vogt, Priscilla & James Walters

LIFETIME ADVISORS (\$10,000+)

Jane Bainum, Susan & Hernan Barros, Diana & Ken Bauer, Kelli & Robert Black, Ginny & Todd Burley, Pat & Ron Cople, Rita & Grant Corbett, Jill & Fred Cornforth, Kathryn & James Dexter, Rosemary & Merlyn Duerksen, Dan Engeberg, Sandra & Sam Geli, Patricia Hare, Jackie & Jim Henneberg, Mariellyn & Edwin Hill, Carmen & Clive Holland, Erika & Brian Johnson, Carmen & Yung Lau, David T. Person II, Patricia Phillips, R. Marina & Gary Raines, Judith Rausch, Dee Dee & Nate Schilt, Stewart Shankel, James Stirling, Tierrasanta SDA Church, Kit Watts

UNDERWRITING ADVISORS

(\$2,500+ DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS)

Charmaine & Robert Bainum, Gerald Chipeur, Keith Colburn, L. Humberto Covarrubias, Lawrence Downing, William Garber, Lyndon Marter, Corinne & Michael Pestes, Mariellen & Nicholas Reiber, Paul Richardson, Missy & Richard Rouhe, Yvonne Stratton, Alden Thompson, Amabel & Eric Tsao

GENERAL ADVISORS

(\$500+/YEAR PLAN)

Cherry Ashlock, Almon Balkins, Charlotte & Robert Brody, Steve & Marit Case, Beverly & Sidney Christiansen, Ruth Christiansen & Glenn Henriksen, Joshua W. Dee, Debra & Anders Engdahl, Ed Fry, Jiggs Gallagher, Karita & DeWitt Goulbourne, Helen Grattan, Judy & Richard Hart, Dolores & Robert Hasse, Georgia Hodgkin, Melva Hicks, John G. Jacobson, Catherine Lang-Titus, Carl & Evangeline Lundstrom, Lillian McNeily, Vincent Melashenko, Barbara & Dale Morrison, Clea Nelson, Claudia Peterson, Edwin Racine, Orlene & James Riggs, Tracy & Craig Reynolds, Ruth & Beryl Rivers, Gretchen & Monte Sahlin, Beverly & David Sandquist, Carolyn & Robert Tandy, Gary & Diane Russell, Jackie & Hal Williams



God's Grace for Pastors

By Loren Seibold

THE FIRST TIME I KNEW I WAS IN OVER MY HEAD WAS when someone addressed me as “Pastor.”

I went on the payroll of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Sept. 15, 1978, and settled with my new wife a few blocks away from a tiny church in Bottineau, North Dakota. I was a college graduate with a BA in religious studies from Walla Walla College. There was nothing about me that would merit my being called “pastor.”

But almost right away, people did. Even before I understood everything that it would mean, it felt to me like a thing too big for me to inhabit.

On June 30 of this year, I retired from ministry. I now feel free to confess that the title “pastor” never felt any more comfortable than it did the first time I heard it. There are clergy who revel in it, who swell up into it, God bless them. As time has passed, I learned to live with it. I wore it for more than 40 years, performing its assigned tasks reasonably well.

But I have never been at ease with it. Even though my hair is now white and I’m somewhat more pastoral-looking than I was then, it still seems pretentious, imposterish. It describes a job that is infinitely consequential, while so undefined as to be utterly impossible.

Perfection and Expectations

A Christian psychologist I know once said that no one ever falls into ministry as they might into, say, selling insurance. Pastors go into ministry in pursuit of something personal, he thought, and all the talk of a “call” is a shortcut around identifying one’s own psychological struggles. Indeed, didn’t Ellen White say that if you “accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme,” you “will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before [your] feet”?¹ Many a pastor has gone into ministry because it felt like the route to a spiritually integrated life.

There is, of course, no guarantee of that. It didn’t take me long to see, in myself and in my

colleagues, that there is no magic in being a religious professional, no instant perfection of the spirit, and no divinely communicated insider information. I was still grouchy with my wife, occasionally lazy, overflowing with neither courage nor faith. The Lord didn’t talk to me aloud when I prayed, nor did he remove all of my temptations, discouragements, and uncertainties.

So one of the first things I grappled with was the need to accept that I wasn’t a perfect person—or even a perfect believer, if some wanted to imagine that I was. Those who expect perfect behavior and perfect faith from pastors might call this hypocrisy, but imperfection is as endemic to religion as infection is to hospitals: unwelcome, but inevitable. It’s better to be aware of that than to believe that you’re something you’re not.

This raises the question of what people expect of their pastors, which is not altogether clear. Prayers that work better than theirs? Sermons that transform their lives? A kind friend? A perfect example? It seems as if something more, something deeper, haunts this relationship—some sense that the pastor stands in for God. People joke about that to pastors, but in fact, they sort of believe it: that you have a special hotline to God. That your prayers have more clout than theirs. That you don’t have the same problems and temptations that others do.

We pastors cannot live up to this, though we are expected to try. What I would come to see later is that some people, after they’re through loving you for what they expect you to be, may hate you for not being it.

All of which is to say that if you are an honest person who tries to inhabit this role fully, to take yourself completely seriously, you cannot help but feel like an imposter. I would go even further and say that any pastor who doesn’t feel a bit like an imposter is someone you probably shouldn’t completely trust, because he’s insufficiently acquainted with his own shadow side.

Only one thing lets us attempt the job at all: that God’s grace flows in and wraps around us, even when we feel like the rankest imposters playing religious make-believe.

Fixing Things

When I was about 11 years old, our dachshund Pepper ran out on the road and was hit by the tire of the mailman's pickup.

As a child, you expect your parents to fix things. If you're hungry, they provide food. If you fall off your bike, they have bandages. If your tummy hurts, they know what to do. So, as Pepper thrashed about with a broken spine, we children cried and said, "Mommy, Daddy, do something! Make Pepper okay again!"

It was one of the first hard lessons of real life: that all Daddy could do was to put a rifle to Pepper's head and end his suffering.

How often as a pastor I've felt like a parent who couldn't do what needed to be done! How often I longed to do more than simply stand there looking benign and clerical! How

Like the Waters Cover the Sea

It sometimes seems to me that one must be, by definition, a failure at ministry. Not necessarily at running a church, or being charming and helpful, or preaching and teaching effectively, or praying for people, or generally being a good and decent leader. But the deeper things that ministry ought to be—the holy things, the divine power—are as much beyond our reach as they are everyone else's.

Only one thing lets us attempt the job at all: that God's grace fills in around well-intentioned pastors and covers over us—and our charges. God, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8, NIV), forgives us for all we are unable to be and cannot do. Such grace flows in and wraps around us in certain moments, even when we aren't aware of it, even

It didn't take me long to see, in myself and in my colleagues, that there is no magic in being a religious professional, no instant perfection of the spirit, and no divinely communicated insider information.

ineffectual it feels, how helpless! I wished I were a doctor who had medicines or a scalpel, an attorney who could work out the legal problems, a psychologist who could talk the marriage into happiness again.

But often I was the one left after those specialists had come and gone—after all of them had failed: the marriage broken, the child dead, the job lost. And what resources did I show up with to ease these tragedies? A Bible, a text, a prayer, a kind presence, a held hand, and some excuses for why the God who says he's all powerful and loves us supremely didn't miraculously fix something of extraordinary importance in a parishioner's life.

when we feel like the rankest imposters playing religious make-believe.

Calling oneself a pastor seems *ipso facto* arrogant. To stand in for God is a dangerous thing. How many in the Hebrew Bible were punished for regarding too lightly the things of God? Think of Uzzah with the ark, the people of Beth Shemesh, and the sons of Aaron. God appeared to have had little patience with familiarity toward what was holy. We pastors, though, are brash in God's name. So many of us deal so boldly with holy things that we ought to drop dead in the pulpit.

I conclude that we are forgiven and protected by the grace earned at the cross. Just as no one can expect salvation without God's grace, neither can one be a pastor without God's grace.

What Religion Has Done

Someone is going to say: “But, Loren, it wasn’t up to you. You are taking too much upon yourself. This is all up to God.” I reply, *Then why did I need a clerical title, a role, a holy designation?* (Perhaps those people are right who argue that the question of ordination should be solved not by ordaining more people, but by ordaining none of us.)

Let us peer closely for a moment at religion. While we Christians regularly fail in the particular, we aggrandize ourselves in the corporate. Organized religion has made us proud, possessive. We say the church is God’s thing, but we act as though it is ours. With our titles, our degrees, our theologies, our rhetoric, our buildings, and our too many presidents and vice presidents, we are experts at playing church.

There is a triumphalism here that must be called out. When I am in pastors’ meetings or denominational committee meetings, it strikes me how bold we are before God! How we rise up on our hind legs and make claims and promises in God’s name! How we brag with faux humility about our accomplishments and our assets and our programs! We insert prayers between each decision, each agenda item—not because we are reveling in God’s holiness, but to convince ourselves that God is on our side in this! We gather and decide—by vote!—what God thinks, and then we enforce it on 20 million people!

We give God the credit, to be sure—in an offhand way. Thank you for *our* successes, Lord. Thank you that *we* have all this marvelous truth, these hospitals and universities, these extraordinary leaders, these great ideas, all this money, and that *we’re* the highest authority of God on Earth.

No one uses God’s name in vain more than the clergy. What can save arrogant men and women like us but God’s overflowing grace?

My Complaint

For 41 years I watched over my little bit of the world. I prayed for it. I talked to it. Oh, how I talked! I made endless excuses for God. Mostly I tried to explain why, when I encouraged people to bring to God their prayers and petitions (“What a privilege to carry, / everything to God in prayer!”), God answered at best ambiguously—and sometimes (it seemed

to me) not at all. What else could we do but accept it? So we gave God credit for whatever happened; of even the most tragic outcome, we would say, “It was God’s will.” I fear that at times I implied that if faith wasn’t “working,” it was our own fault. We hadn’t tried hard enough, prayed fervently enough, or been faithful enough. (There are many things I used to say that I do not say now.)

This my confession. And now, like Habakkuk, I state my complaint:

For my part, dear Lord, I would have liked to see more miracles. I would have liked to see cancers disappear, legs grow back, dead children come to life, hurricanes reverse course, and wars end, all in response to prayer. According to the Bible, you did such things before. Why not now? How about sending an angel now and then—would that have been so hard? I would even have settled for more hopeless marriages saved, more addictions overcome, and more churches being happy, healing places; I longed for depression to disappear in response to prayer rather than to selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—these miracles would have been enough.

Instead, we attributed *our* efforts to *you* (clumsily, insincerely), and when we failed, we let you off the hook by saying, “It was God’s will.” Lord, do you see how much more effectively we could have witnessed for you if people had had more than our simplistic explanations for pain and suffering and confusion? It seems to me, just from personal observations in the small space you assigned me, that you left unexplored many opportunities for showing your power and demonstrating your love. I tried my best to do it on your behalf, Lord, but I did it very poorly.

So perhaps we are a pair, Pastor Loren Seibold and God. I need God’s grace and forgiveness—and God needs mine.

At the very least, on the other side, I’m hoping for an explanation. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 330.

LOSING MY RELIGION TO FIND GOD

BY DAMIEN RICE

I'M FINISHING THIS REFLECTION WHILE ON A CAR TRIP EXPLORING the valleys, vineyards, and villages of the Reformation heartland in Germany. Catholic, Evangelical, and Lutheran churches dot the landscape of this beautiful countryside, now also carved through by 130-kilometres-per-hour (80-mph) freeways.

I'm not on a Reformation study tour, but church history overshadows me here because, like Luther, I am a former pastor and church leader who is disenfranchised from the church in which I invested my life.

Ann Voskamp writes: "Shame dies when stories are told in safe places. *Shame poisons hope*—poisons the hope that things can change. That we can ever be changed, ever be accepted, ever be good enough."¹ I'm grateful for the people to whom—and the places where—telling that story is possible.

The Crash

Almost three years ago, my ministry ended in the metaphorical equivalent of a high-speed crash—the kind caused by fatigue, distraction, poor conditions, careless operators, and a series of unfortunate events. The resulting pileup left some seriously injured. For my career, it proved fatal. Though I took evasive action, it wasn't enough: I was charged with negligence and forced to give up my ministerial license. My lifework as a pastor and conference president came to an abrupt halt.

I'd thought of myself as one who had always tried to do the right thing, treat others justly, show compassion, and extend grace. But I did something that left me unrighteous in the eyes of many and, therefore, a person of deficient moral character who will never be good enough to make an acknowledged contribution to Adventism. I felt written off, and my relationship to the church was changed forever. My faith remains on life

support and is expected to recover—but cosmetically it may no longer be recognizable.

My faith in the church's members, leaders, and theology was shattered. Despite what I felt was the church's own substantial failings and complicity in what happened to me, I was expected to show grace and have faith. I found myself aggrieved at an institution that was preaching righteousness by faith while acting in ways that were neither faithful nor just. I was left feeling separate, alienated, and without hope in this world (Eph. 2:12). At times I even felt abandoned by God in his silence and apparent indifference.

In the Wilderness

Still, it can be refreshing out here in the wilderness. No Bible battles over imputed or imparted.² No policy books. No compliance committees. Like Job and David in their crises of life, there is a certain kind of deepening of faith.

In coming to terms with my own sin and woundedness, I find that my heart seeks more deeply after God's and longs to be in his sanctuary—the place of justice, mercy, and presence. In my questions and doubts, there is more clarity in God's word, just as I've seen more clearly how we have lost our way.

When I'm inclined to pride and conceit, Isaiah 64:6 reminds me, "We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (NKJV). Ellen White drives the point home: "If you would gather together everything that is good and holy and noble and lovely in man, and then present the subject to the angels of God as acting a part in the salvation of the human soul or in merit, the proposition would be rejected as treason."³

Jesus sets a high benchmark. "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you

cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20, NMB).

In dark moments, I turn the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) on its head and pray, “Thank God I’m not like the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees in our church.”

As you can see, I’m still struggling to show grace in the face of ungrace.

The Righteousness of God

While the church continues to negotiate the meaning of righteousness by faith, its behavior suggests that it still doesn’t understand the implications for the nature of sin, justification, sanctification, or grace. I don’t think we really know what grace looks like beyond our theories and creeds.

I think the problem is not that our standards are too high, but that they are too low—especially in the weightier matters of the law. We’ve excelled at establishing a righteousness of our own. Correct belief and practices around Sabbath keeping. Standards of health and lifestyle as measures of righteousness, requiring

While the church continues to negotiate the meaning of righteousness by faith, its behavior suggests that it still doesn’t understand the implications for the nature of sin, justification, sanctification, or grace.

one to gain the victory over cheese and Friday-night football. Compliance with policy that measures faithfulness regardless of what our conscience convicts. Protecting the denomination even when it means doing wrong.

Ellen White wrote that “A legal religion can never lead souls to Christ; for it is a loveless, Christless religion. ... Man must be emptied of self before he can be, in the fullest sense, a believer in Jesus.”⁴ In being emptied, I’ve been reminded that Jesus really is all.

Moving On

In the midst of all of this, I experienced feelings of helplessness, brokenness, and despair. My flesh was willing, but my mind was weak. I did not come to my senses like the prodigal son.

As a son of the church, I am no longer worthy to be a hired servant. Yet my Father calls me from afar and restores me to a

place of dignity and belonging within his family. I am loved as a son. Ellen White writes that “Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son.”⁵ I’m grateful for the legacy of grace, faith, and justice left by my forebears and my own parents. I am still alive because of them.

It is a strange paradox that I have been perfected forever (Heb. 10:12, 14) yet continue to be sanctified. That is the fruit of self-sacrificing love.

Paul wrote: “What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled” (Rom. 8:3-4, NKJV). I am thankful for God’s grace in the face of my unrighteousness and the ungrace of others. I am recovering in the personal knowledge that “when the kindness and the love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7, NIV).

All that is left for me is trust in Jesus. Like a journey of discovery, I am both finding and being found all over again (Phil. 3:9). Not because I was ever lost to God, but because my spirit is now uncluttered. I resonate with the words of urban gospel musician Lauren Daigle as she croons: “It all seems so insincere... Light a match and watch it burn, but to Your heart, I will return... I’m losing my religion to find You.”⁶

This driving holiday is a refreshing escape from the long and winding road of recovery after burnout and breakdown. The road trip continues. I will go in search of gelato shops, fine cuisine, breathtaking views, and friendly locals. I will attend a family reunion near the Cotswolds and a wedding in Germany. The satellite navigation instructs me to the left and right. Meanwhile, another voice gives me direction by echoing the motto of my Forbes ancestors: “Grace me guide.” **AT**

¹ Ann Voskamp, Devotion 21: “Unashamed Brokenness,” *The Way of Abundance* (2018).

² In Manuscript 21 (1891), Ellen White asks of this discussion, “Why try to be more minute than is Inspiration on the vital question of righteousness by faith?”

³ Ellen G. White, “Danger of False Ideas on Justification by Faith,” Manuscript 36 (1890), paragraph 18, reprinted in *Faith and Works* (1979), p. 24.

⁴ White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 280.

⁵ White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (1958), p. 367.

⁶ Lauren Daigle, “Losing My Religion,” from her album *Look Up Child* (2018). Online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw6_g0aTwt4

Grace in the Wilderness

BY MELISSA BROTTON

Thus says the LORD:
“The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness”
(Jer. 31:2, ESV).

Who is that coming up from the
wilderness,
leaning on her beloved?
(Song of Songs 8:5, ESV)

The term *wilderness* conjures up ideas of isolation, remoteness, and scarcity. To many of us, this kind of solitude is not wholly unwelcome. It is the reason we visit this kind of terrain in the first place—to get away from the city, its din and bustle. For a lot of Christian hikers, going to a wild place is a chance to commune with God through the wonders of his “second book.” Here, far away from the stress of city life, we have a better chance to sense his presence, to hear his voice, and to open our hearts in response.

But there are times when the wild places of life become something else: a prolonged emptiness, a sense of uncertainty and of feeling lost or without support. In these times, we may feel a sense of waste and dread, of desertion of family and friends—even of God himself. After all, *desert*

implies abandonment. And *wilderness* contains what is neglected, overrun, gone feral.

Though topographies of wilderness change depending on location and climate, some things are common to these wasteland places.

They are uncultivated.

They are uninhabited.

They are inhospitable.

No neat rows of colorful flowers, no fresh-cut grass, no pruned shrubs or any other signs of a human touch. Vegetation is spare. Weeds grow in the crevices of bare rock. Trees are scraggly and barren, the landscape covered in bramble and briar with a few dry-bed arroyos. This uncultivated aspect of the wilderness reminds us of its *wildness*, and hence, its danger. Potential threats are inherent not only in its climate and the unknown extent of its terrain, but also in its native creatures: bear, coyotes, mountain lions, or wild boar.

Deserts are largely uninhabited—without people and sometimes even without many animals. In one canyon where I hike, coyotes make only an occasional appearance. What I usually see are about seven common ravens, six

rufus hummers, five large black beetles, four lizards sunning, three painted ladies,¹ two Inca doves, and a partridge in a pear tree (or at least a red-tailed hawk in a sycamore tree). Even with the occasional gopher snake, kingsnake, or red diamond rattlesnake, it hardly appears to be a populated area. The sense of being alone overshadows everything.

Our interior wilderness may involve inescapable feelings of isolation, bewilderment, loss, grief, abandonment, or intimidation. These feelings may result in threats to our hope, our outlook, or even to our identity. They can crop up at work, at home, or at school; with friends, acquaintances, or even with strangers. At times when it seems unbearable, we may feel, like the psalmist Heman, that “darkness is my closest friend” (Psa. 88:18, NIV).

Many Bible characters—such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, John the Baptist, Hannah, Elizabeth, Naomi, and Ruth—found themselves in barren landscapes, whether external or internal. For each of these individuals, the wilderness was a formative place, where God’s grace shaped their lives and brought hope out of desolation.



The wilderness experience was formative for Jesus, too, as he suffered the harsh physical conditions and threats of the exterior landscape. He slept alone in the cold of night and wandered during the heat of the day. He also “was with the wild animals” (Mark 1:13, ESV). Yet even more intense than the physical circumstances were the spiritual and emotional challenges. Surrounded by the devil’s insinuating “ifs,” Jesus faced an interior maelstrom concerning his identity. Was he really God’s chosen Messiah? Had his parents been wrong? Were the prophecies about someone else? Had it really been his Father’s voice? As the sun beat down on him, God’s “beloved Son” (verse 11) faded in and out. “If” rang loudly in the silence of the desert.

He could have caved in right there. But instead, Jesus harnessed the inherent assurance of God’s Word. Quoting from the Torah, Jesus stood firm and resisted the devil’s intimidations, systematically winning each battle. Although to all appearances he had been abandoned, Jesus’ victory in the wilderness revealed his deep-down trust that his Father had been with him all along, a trust hard-won through habitual

knowledge of God’s Word. The deepened commitment Jesus forged in that barren place led him ultimately to fulfill his mission and his Father’s plan for the preservation of the universe.

Just as God used Jesus’ wilderness to shape his path and ministry, he can use the dry seasons of our lives to transform us. First, as Jesus did, we should recognize our wilderness as a gift—a rare opportunity to draw near to God. Prayer and daily devotions keep our focus on him, as he guides us along the unexpected bunny trails of life. Second, the cultivation of gratitude is a critical part of the journey. The word *gratitude* shares a root with *grace*: the Proto-Indo-European *gwere-*, meaning “to favor.” Choosing a grateful spirit reveals that grace is working in us. Third, we should look around. No wilderness is without some natural beauty. Cactus blooms with their flares of coral and yellow are exquisite, rock formations can be pleasing to the eye, and glimpses of wildlife provide a sense of wonder. We can take in all of the good that is happening around us and praise God for what he is doing through this foray. Fourth, we can find relief in reflecting on how God is working through this time to form Christ

in us, “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

Some wilderness paths are long ones; others may cycle back to the main trail rather quickly. Either way, God is waiting to help us. His grace is never actually far away, no matter how far it seems. Through God’s gracious words, we begin to see the wilderness break into bloom. Revival of hope received through faith in God’s promise has already met our deepest need, and we find that the desert fades from view. In its place is Jesus himself, and no wilderness can last in the life-giver’s presence.

In the Song of Songs, the Shulamite woman’s sense of desolation is past long before she leaves the wilderness. Once she takes her beloved’s arm, she is satisfied with the favor she has found in his eyes (Song of Songs 8:10). Leaning on Jesus is nearness to him. Perhaps then we will see that re-formation into Christ’s likeness is God’s greatest act of grace.

Your new rain comes—

It freshens everything. **AT**

¹ Aptly named for the splashes and dots of colors on its wings, and also known in North America as the cosmopolitan, this is the most widely distributed butterfly in the world.

A SECULAR GRACE

BY DAVID GEELAN

*I wonder if grace
isn't something
larger than religion:
a quality that is
deeply human, that
can be practiced—
and should be
practiced—without
reference to faith.*

IN (ABRAHAMIC) RELIGIOUS TERMS, THE motivation for showing grace toward one another is usually understood as a reflection of the grace shown by God toward humanity. From a human perspective, we think of it as being both gracious and graceful, both kind and forgiving. We value the people in our lives who show grace.

But I wonder if grace isn't something larger than religion: a quality that is deeply human, that can be practiced—and should be practiced—without reference to faith. Is it meaningful to talk about grace between human beings, outside a religious context?

Common Selfishness

In her relationship counseling practice, my wife, Sue, uses a way of thinking that suggests our interactions with each other tend to lie on a continuum from love to selfishness.

We seem to live in a world in which selfishness has become common and even desirable. The broadly influential writings of Ayn Rand glorify selfishness. Ironically, *The Satanic Bible* written by Anton LaVey was based on Rand's work, but so are the views of many on the right wing of politics, including the Religious Right. The so-called "prosperity gospel" also tends to focus on the acquisition of personal wealth as a measure of divine favor.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a radical example of someone whose life was driven by love and grace—and so are his teachings, as recorded in the Gospels.

Grace and Love

Thinking of our relations with one another in terms of grace, rather than of love, may be a powerful way of reimagining how we live together with other people.

Love is, of course, important, but the word as it is popularly used is remarkably imprecise. Our English word "love" can be used to translate three different Greek words: *eros* is romantic love between partners, *phelos* is love between friends, and *agape* is selfless unconditional love for all human beings. In English we may use "love" to talk about a song or book or a kind of food, so sometimes it's unclear which kind of love we are talking about when we use the word. Is it love for mangoes, love for a spouse, or love for all humankind?

Furthermore, the concept of "tough love" has been used to justify all kinds of abuse.

But grace is something more—something more active and perhaps less prone to misunderstanding than love. How to extend grace toward one another—how to be forgiving, generous, and kind—is something worth acting out so many times that it becomes instinctive and natural. American writer Kurt Vonnegut said something along the lines of “There’s only one rule that I know of, babies...you’ve got to be kind.”

Living for the Best Outcome

Grace includes the idea of forgiveness—not for the sake of those we forgive and, in my opinion, not (as is sometimes said) for our own peace of mind. Rather, we forgive because it is the thing that will yield the best possible outcomes for human life. Without the possibility of forgiveness and redemption, we cannot build and maintain relationships. We all make mistakes unintentionally, and sometimes, for whatever reason, we behave selfishly or even maliciously. We need the option of being forgiven, and for this reason we forgive. This reciprocity is a social contract. (As a side note, we may still take precautions when we forgive; forgiveness does not require giving predators unfettered access to victims.)

Grace means that we assume the best of others. This may, in fact, be one of the greatest differences between a humanist and a religious/Christian approach to grace. Humanism assumes that people are fundamentally good, albeit sometimes warped by choices or circumstances. Christianity assumes that people are fundamentally fallen and are good only as

God works through them. Nonetheless, I would argue that assuming the best in every interaction with others is a social contract that leads to better outcomes for all. Yes, sometimes we will assume the best and receive the worst. But, in general, people tend to rise to our expectations of them, so when we expect the best, we are more likely to experience the best.

Avoiding stereotyping is an important part of assuming the best. Stereotyping ascribes the characteristics—more often the negative characteristics—of some members of an identifiable group to all members of that group. Whether that out-group contains Muslims, men, Asian people, or unbelievers, stereotyping is unhelpful in extending grace to all human beings without discrimination.

Morality and the Social Contract

Religious believers typically claim that the roots of morality lie in their own beliefs, which have influenced the development of society. Yet human beings with a very wide range of religious faiths (and those with none) behave in moral ways and value truth, justice, and love. Think of the atheists of the French Revolution, the Deists among the United States’ Founding Fathers, the polytheistic Greek philosophers, and the followers of many religions. Foundational moral principles and practices appear to be fundamentally human, in that they are broadly shared across all human cultures, in different parts of the globe, and throughout many periods in history.

Exceptions—such as cultural differences relating to ownership of property, harming others, the types of sexual and family relationships that are sanctioned, and so on—are notable precisely because they stand out against the striking similarity of

the moral frameworks that apply across all human societies.

I have already mentioned the ways in which the roots of grace—kindness, forgiveness, and assuming the best about others—can arise as we seek to mutually treat one another better. Christians are sometimes surprised to learn that Jesus’ Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is not unique to Christianity; it exists in some wording in almost all major religious and philosophical traditions. That’s because this simple formulation outlines a universal social contract: if each of us chooses to live with grace, then we will live among people and in a society characterized by grace. Alternatively, if we choose to be driven by selfishness, fear, and stereotyping, we will ourselves be the targets of those emotions and actions.

I argue that a world characterized by human beings who extend grace and kindness to one another is a better world. Other authors in this issue of *Adventist Today* have considered what grace means in Christian and Adventist terms, but I have tried to show that even from a humanistic perspective, grace is also a central, indispensable quality.

And it’s worth reminding believers that it is more powerful to live and model grace than merely to preach it. It’s significant that Jesus and others taught that we should choose to do that—even in the face of provocation from others who are unkind and ungracious. It’s difficult to do, but worth it. **AT**



TO RAISE THE SONS OF EARTH

An Incarnational Grace

By David Neff

I DON'T KNOW WHEN I FIRST HEARD THE GOSPEL. BUT MY childhood memories of church are dominated by repeated calls to abstain from the many things Adventists abstain from. This message was reinforced by the threat of divine judgment. There wasn't much good news.

One example: after one of my church school teachers told us that anyone who ate meat could not be translated when Jesus comes, I made my parents' lives miserable as I inspected every can of food that came into our pantry to be sure there was no beef stock or tallow in the ingredient list. My religion was all about trying to be ready by trying to be perfect. Someone, somewhere along the line may have spelled out the gospel clearly for me, but if so, I didn't notice.

It was only after I was already a Seventh-day Adventist minister that I finally heard a crystal-clear gospel message. Several of us young pastors in the Southeastern California Conference had been sent to Campus Crusade headquarters to learn what we could about door-to-door witnessing.

I abhorred the manipulation and misrepresentation I was coached in there, but I learned their simple summary of the gospel. And that was good. It was about grace. It was about trusting Jesus for my salvation. It was about Jesus having already dealt with my sin long before I was born. It was about salvation as an accomplished fact to be grasped by faith.

The prolific 18th-century hymn writer Phillip Doddridge, who wrote at least 375 hymns, called God's grace-filled act at the cross "the great transaction." In "O Happy Day That Fixed My Choice," he wrote, "'Tis done—the great transaction's done." And the result, according to Doddridge, is peace and rest: "Now rest, mine oft-divided heart; / Fix'd on this blissful center, rest." Indeed, that is what the gospel of grace did for me as I learned more nuanced understandings of it from the writings of the 16th-century Reformers. I came to understand how I could be confident in God's grace, being *simul justus et peccator* ("at the same time justified and a sinner"), as Luther put it.

In the 1970s, when Adventism's perfectionist partisans clashed with its proponents of a grace-filled gospel of justification, I sided with the party of grace (as had my father-in-law, Norval Pease, who responded to the perfectionism of Robert Brinsmead with his 1962 book *By Faith Alone*). For me, however, siding with the party of grace meant leaving the church of my family and my childhood.

The Gospel's Greatest Hits

Gospel summaries that focus on the cross, such as the one from Campus Crusade, are like a greatest hits album. They give you a taste of a musician's work, but do they give you a thirst for more? Do they communicate the breadth and richness of an artist's achievement?

After I left Adventism in 1981, I began to run into people who understood salvation and life in Christ differently. Some of them were recent converts from evangelicalism to Eastern Orthodoxy, who found it liberating not to focus quite so much on the cross. And while the cross is central to Christian belief, I discovered that building an entire theology around it creates problems.

One problem is simply that the cross defies explanation. Every theological theory of the atonement can easily tip into some monstrous caricature. For example, some in the early church took hold of the biblical language of ransom—and ended up teaching that God paid a ransom to the devil for our souls!

Many preachers have portrayed a wrathful, bloodthirsty God who can only be satisfied by the suffering of an innocent victim. They picture Jesus, who is merciful, stepping between us and the angry Father, absorbing his wrath in our stead. I once heard a prominent evangelical preacher proclaim that it was not a Roman soldier but the Father himself who wielded the hammer that drove spikes into the Savior's hands. These distortions pit the persons of the Trinity against each other and distort our understanding of God's love. Whatever happened at the cross was

a cooperative effort among the members of the Trinity.

A cross-centered theology is not in itself wrong. But because it does not yield to clear explanations and analogies, this one event out of the entire story of God's loving interaction with humanity cannot bear the weight of a full-blown theology. And if the cross is viewed primarily in transactional terms (Jesus strikes a deal with the Father, e.g., his life for the lives of sinners), that transactional mentality can bleed over into our spirituality. We begin to think of God as someone to bargain with, and we offer him obedience in exchange for blessing.

Likewise, if the cross is envisioned in terms of Roman law and the Roman justice system, Christian faith becomes all about pardon received and penalties avoided. (Very little of Jesus' teaching had anything to do with that kind of justice. Most of Jesus' teaching had to do with difficult and demanding acts of love that characterize the spirit of God's kingdom.)

He Was Born for Me

The evangelical Protestant focus on the cross is not the only way that Christians understand salvation. Yes, Christ died for me. He was raised for my justification (Rom. 4:25). But he also lived for me. And in the greatest of miracles, he was born for me.

Pay close attention to Charles Wesley's Christmas carol "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." That hymn is not just about angels singing when Jesus was born. It is about the purposes of Christ's *incarnation*, the becoming-flesh of the eternal Word. Wesley wrote (and we sing): "Mild he lays his glory by, / Born that man no more may die; / Born to raise the sons of earth, / Born to give them second birth."

Purpose 1: The Word became flesh in order to defeat death. Mortality and corruption are to be replaced by immortality and incorruption.

Purpose 2: The Word became flesh in order to "raise the sons of earth." Who are the "sons of earth"? Adam was a son of earth. His name is wordplay on the Hebrew word for earth: *adamah*. All humans are by nature "sons of earth."

I used to think that phrase—"raise the sons of earth"—meant to raise us from the grave at the end of time. But then I learned of Wesley's fondness for some church fathers from the East. With that background, the phrase more likely means that when the Eternal Word "laid his glory by" to become fully human, the Word lifted our race from mere earthly existence (the old humanity signified by the "first Adam") to become part of the new human race that has Christ, the "second Adam," as its head.

Purpose 3: The Word became flesh in order to give us a

“second birth.” That is a reference to John 3, where Jesus teaches Nicodemus about being born anew (or from above) by the Spirit of God. Like “raise the sons of earth,” this act of the Spirit lifts up mere human nature so that it can take part in the divine life (cf. 2 Peter 1:3-4, where “divine power” is likely a metonym for the Holy Spirit and “participation in the divine nature” is the goal).

Wesley knew that human nature had been transformed in the incarnation. As Irenaeus of Lyons, who was a spiritual grandson to the apostle John, said: “The Word of God [became] what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”¹ Theologian Wes English wrote: “This is *God coming down* in order to *raise men up*.”² Two centuries later, Athanasius, the great thinker behind the Nicene Creed, wrote: “For He [the Word] was made man that we might be made God.”³



In an incarnation-driven theology, salvation is about greater fellowship with God.

Irenaeus and Athanasius, among the greatest theologians of the early church, were heresy hunters, and the heresies they fought were denials of the incarnation—of God in human flesh. Irenaeus was battling Docetists and Gnostics. Docetists denied that the incarnation was real, saying that Christ only *appeared* to assume human flesh. Gnostics, like docetists, believed that matter, and therefore flesh, was flawed, evil, and unfit for the divine. Later, Athanasius battled the followers of Arius, who denied that the Christ who came in the flesh was fully God and instead claimed he was the highest order of created being.

Small wonder, then, that the incarnation became the pivotal moment in salvation history for these early church fathers.

The Benefits of Incarnational Theology

Here are just a few of the pluses that come with building your theology around the incarnation as much as around the cross.

First, an incarnation-oriented theology is communal in its vision. It is about lifting up the human race, and it gives a platform to God’s grand vision for his whole creation.

American revivalist Protestantism, on the other hand, tends to be individualistic. It highlights what God wants to do through a small, exceptional group of individuals.

Second, an incarnation-driven theology highlights the priority of God’s action even more clearly than a cross-centered theology. The best cross-centered theologies teach that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The best incarnation-driven theologies teach that God’s desire to get up-close-and-personal with the human race was part of his plan even before the advent of sin or the creation of humankind. In an incarnation-driven theology, salvation is about greater fellowship with God.

Third, salvation in an incarnational theology is a kind of “benign infection” of immortality and incorruption. By being united to human flesh, the Christ infects human nature with these divine qualities and reverses the taint of Adam’s sin.

Fourth, an incarnation-driven theology should, but doesn’t always, give birth to a common-good ethic. The Adventist ethic with which I grew up was like the ethic of Methodist and Holiness movements on the American frontier. It was concerned with righteous personal behavior that would guarantee safety in the judgment, but it did not naturally foster an ethical vision for the well-being of all people. Because an incarnation-driven theology is about redeeming a fallen race rather than just rescuing a fallen me, its creative energies will tend toward the common good.

Can we give the incarnation its due without diminishing the cross? These early Christian teachers did so. The medieval church shifted its emphasis toward sin, punishment, and a sacramental escape mechanism. The Reformers rightly reacted to that distorted vision by asserting salvation by grace through faith. But they failed to recover the bigger vision of the early church. Too often, our picture of salvation is a small-screen version—akin to streaming a movie on a smartphone. We can enjoy it, but the experience is not what the Producer and Director hoped for. Many more Christians need to see the widescreen demonstration of God’s loving outreach. **AT**

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, preface to Book V, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1, Apostolic Fathers: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1999), p. 526.

² Wes English, “Deification: The Radical Nature of Our Relationship With God,” UCCF Leadership Network (2019). Online at www.uccfleadershipnetwork.org/resource/deification-the-radical-nature-of-our-relationship-with-god

³ Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, Volume 4, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1999), p. 65.

PAY THE THUNDER NO MIND

By Winona Winkler Wendth

MY GRANDFATHER, A MAN WITH MORE than 75 years in denominational service, used to tell me that a person has to work hard not to go to heaven. On one hand, that was a comforting thought for a young child: apparently, I didn't need to worry about harboring ill thoughts about my cousin or sneaking in some time with non-Sabbath reading when the grown-ups were napping after church.

On the other hand, this also meant that the cousin who had thrown me into thorny New Hampshire blackberry bushes and whacked me over the head with the family Bible would be in heaven, too, if he wanted to be.

I was not happy about that.

I was only 10 when the consequences of what my grandfather had told me started to sink in. Notions of fairness and justice were beginning to take hold, so the idea of equitable access and justice seemed at odds with each other. God forgives. Everything. I could count on that.

Everything?

Maybe my cousin could decide not to go to heaven, and that would be that; it seemed plausible. That would be the only way I could avoid bumping into him while I was strolling through sunny gardens with great-grandparents, friends who died "before their time," and dogs and cats our family had cared for over the years.

The Problem of Grace

Here is the problem of grace: It's all-encompassing and disregarding of fairness and what most people think of as justice. Fairness means playing by the rules, but grace is no respecter of rules, nor is grace complicit in retribution or punishment, which most people wrongly equate with justice.

But our ideas about fairness, justice, and grace do not themselves have agency.

They are ideas held by beings with agency. So we're talking about a condition, not an agent; we are contending with the spiritual air we breathe, not a tornado or hurricane. Nothing gets moved around; no whirlwinds are reaped. Grace is not the Holy Spirit, about which few of our fellow religionists agree, either. Grace does not sanctify or lead. Grace does nothing; grace is.

Nonbelievers go about life hoping things will turn out for the best, in spite of stupid or mean-spirited behavior. Believers do, too, but we give grace a role in that continual cycle of wrongdoing, asking for forgiveness, feeling better about things, and moving on. For the nonbeliever, this is a life of risk and luck: break the rules, hope for the best, enjoy the rewards if those risks pay off; feel either stupid or guilty if they don't. Try again. Christians count on grace to take them through to the next step, as well, hoping grace will "wash away" that guilt. But therapy can do that, too.

Those who assume that life will reward us for good thoughts and hard work tend to think of grace as a kind of perpetual forgiveness—a balancing out of what we have done (or not done). Nonbelievers think about good luck; Christians celebrate grace. Artists credit their muses as inspiration for their work; Christians credit grace.

Gallons of ink have been spilled on the nature of risk, luck, and guilt—on who gets to flout the rules, who has better "luck," and who feels guilty about any of it. Guilt manifests in a number of ways, dependent on neurology, family and social systems, and in America, confusion about responsibility.

We have had a conflicted relationship with risk, as well. Socially and financially comfortable Christians tend to be risk-averse, because they have something to lose. Those who live on the margins are

willing to brave painful consequences for simply living day-to-day and tend to credit grace not for their occasional good luck, but for their survival. Communities who have weathered the most horrible injustices get through their days by grace. Grace has the power to see them through—to the next day, the next paycheck, through incarceration, or all the way to heaven. To be able to tap into that cosmic influence brings joyous gratitude and thanksgiving. Grace is the power to do that.

That our ideas about God are determined by our feelings for our fathers is a commonplace among sociologists. If you ask many Christians, their ideas about grace seem to be influenced by their relationships with their mothers and include the core concepts of comfort, care, protection, encouragement, and undeserved acceptance. Grace, then, is both a classed and gendered idea and is the most personal part of a Christian's theology. Like Robert Louis Stevenson's "Rain," it falls on everyone, everywhere: "on the umbrellas here and on the ships at sea." Scripture tells us it "falls on the just and unjust alike" (Matt. 5:45, NLT), believers or gainsayers. We have all experienced it, even though we have different words and examples for it. Like luck, we can't explain it. We can't answer for it: It happens. It is. American musician Eubie Blake's take on luck might as well be about grace: "Be grateful.... Pay the thunder no mind—listen to the birds. And don't hate nobody."

My cousin probably counted on grace when he pushed me into the brambles and walloped me with a Bible. He is a firstborn white male, whose mother was by nature forgiving, so I doubt he even thought about it. If I run into him in heaven, I shouldn't be surprised—although I don't know how hard he is working not to be there. **AT**

GOD'S GRACE FOR THE CHILD-FREE MOTHER

By Melody Tan



We expect children to share their toys with one another.
We expect to be thanked when we help someone.
We expect people to talk softly on the phone (or not at all) when on the train.
When people behave in a way we don't expect, we are surprised and sometimes even outraged.
And we expect all women to want to be moms.

Expectations

In recent years, couples—and more specifically, women—who have chosen to remain child-free have come under intense negative spotlight in mainstream media. These are couples who have made the conscious decision to be childless, not those who have tried but, due to issues such as infertility, are unable to have children.

More often than not, such deliberately childless couples are deemed to be self-centered, portrayed as preferring to spend their time on personal pursuits, or their money on annual vacations to exotic destinations. Even Pope Francis jumped in on the debate, declaring that “the choice not to have children is selfish.”¹

Christians will quote the Bible as the reason why women are expected to have children. “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it,” God said to our first parents, Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28, NIV).

The argument goes somewhat like this: women, who are created with a womb, are not performing their God-given duty if they choose not to bear any children.

The “default” life path for young Christian women has always been to fall in love, get married, and have children. So when a married couple decides to go childless of their own free will, they abandon a deeply ingrained tradition. Women who choose to stay child-free typically notice more raised eyebrows and feel the resulting social stigma more profoundly than men, perhaps

because “Motherhood is seen as a sign of achievement and femininity, while a man’s accomplishments are viewed through his income and career. This provides more of an incentive for women to have children than men.”²

In a study published in 2013 in the *Journal of Social Inclusion*, the authors of “Why Are Childless Women Childless?” wrote: “Regardless of the reason for the increase in childlessness in recent decades, female childlessness continues to be characterised by western society as unconventional, undesirable and socially deviant.”³

What the Pope Doesn't Understand

I’m not trying to pick a fight with the pope of the Roman Catholic Church, and yet, I do wonder if he—and everyone else who thinks like him—has considered the full gamut of reasons why a woman may choose not to have children, and why not being “clucky” does not necessarily make one less of a woman than someone who has always wanted to be a mother.

Full disclosure: I am a mother and have a cheeky soon-to-be-3-year-old who runs away giggling whenever I kneel down and ask him for a cuddle.

And yet, if you’d asked me three or so years ago about motherhood as a rite of passage, I’d have told you that I wrestled with the point of having children (and to a certain extent, I still do).⁴ I never felt the “calling” to be a mum, and I still don’t.

Don’t get me wrong. The love I feel for my son knows no boundaries, and I would not choose to live my life any other way. But being a mother has not defined me or completed me.

Thanks to the various reactions I’ve received when I declared that motherhood wasn’t for me (and before I had a child), I am all too familiar with being characterized as “unconventional, undesirable and socially deviant” for not wanting to become

a mother. (It irks me to this day that I have proven the critics “right” by having a child, even though my reasons had nothing to do with discovering my so-called calling in life.)

Thanks to God

One of my reasons for not wanting to become a mom was not because I felt that children are, to quote the pope again, “worrisome, a weight, a risk.” If anything, I was worried that *I* would be the weight and risk for any potential offspring! I reasoned that the world didn’t need any more damaged individuals, especially those resulting from my subpar parenting thanks to my own issues and hang-ups.

Yet, here I am—surprising even myself—writing as a mother. There is not a single day of my parenting journey when I don’t wonder if my actions are causing my son damage, due to the aforementioned issues and hang-ups. And it is only thanks to God that I keep forging ahead, being a mom to my child in the best way that I can.

As most parents know, you never seem to have enough time when you have children, especially in the early years. My time spent in the trenches of parenting has taken a toll, much to my chagrin, on the time I have available for God. The curious thing, however, is that it has also increased the reliance I have upon God.

I suppose it’s when you’re left to your own devices that you begin to cling desperately to One whom you know has more than enough power, strength, and wisdom to support you. And he has more than come through for me, guiding me with the right things to say and the right path to take to raise my child these past three years.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, since God has said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9, NIV).

God’s love for me has nothing to do with my actions, but it has everything to do with my belief. This isn’t an excuse to kick back and do nothing for God, because love for him propels us into action, but it’s more of a reassurance that in whatever struggles we face and whatever season we’re in, he’ll come through for us, because that’s what he does.

Grace for Mothers

God’s love and grace extends to all of us, mothers or not, but we seem to have forgotten that minor detail due to all of the roles that we expect people to play.

We expect women to want to be moms.

We expect men to be athletic and in control, never showing weakness.

We expect Christians to lead morally and ethically upright lives.

We expect so many things from so many people, but it doesn’t matter what we do or haven’t done. It’s not our place to decide or to judge whether or not others have fulfilled the calling that God has given them.

As a Seventh-day Adventist pastor once remarked to me in a private letter: “A pastor’s work, in spite of the triumphalism of the gospel, is pretty much constant failure. In a large way, the world keeps getting wickeder, the church shrinking against all kinds of religions and secularisms. ... The grace of God is the lens through which people see pastors, too, or there’s no point.”

None of us are worthy, and yet all of us are worthy. God loves us anyway.

Whether we are women who want to be mothers, women who can’t be mothers, women who have no desire to be mothers, or women who are mothers, we’re all the same in the eyes of God. Precious children in need of his saving grace.

At the end of the day, what we refer to as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is not God’s pre-sin Garden of Eden edict to “be fruitful” but, rather, Jesus’ instruction to “go and make disciples of all nations.”

Our first calling as Christians is to share the amazing love and redemptive power of God with others, resting in the full knowledge that our “righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:22-24, NIV).

It’s not about whether we have offspring or not. It’s not even about whether or not we are successful when it comes to making disciples.

It’s simply about whether or not we have tried—and tried our best. **AT**

¹ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Pope Francis: Not Having Children Is Selfish,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 11, 2015, p. 35.

Online at www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/11/pope-francis-the-choice-to-not-have-children-is-selfish.

² DeAnna L. Gore, “I Don’t Want Any Children... Ever: Gender Differences in Voluntary Childlessness in the US,” Florida State University (2002). Online at paa2008.princeton.edu/papers/80315.

³ Melissa Graham, Erin Hill, Julia Shelly, and Ann Taket, “Why Are Childless Women Childless? Findings from an Exploratory Study in Victoria, Australia,” *Journal of Social Inclusion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2013), pp. 71-72. Online at dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30057292/graham-whyarechildless-2013.pdf

⁴ Melody Tan, “The Pregnancy Diaries,” *Adventist Record* (May 7, 2016), p. 5. Online at https://www.mumsatthetable.com/all_i_said_was_i_don_t_want_children

Galatians 2:16

Contra Luther, Righteousness by Faith Is Not a Doctrine

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH EMERGES from the writings of the apostle Paul, notably in Galatians and Romans. Therein, righteousness by faith is a call to a kind of spiritual awareness that moves us beyond physical and temporal forms such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and social class—things by which humanity draws boundaries against each other.

In modern Protestant Christianity, though, many think of righteousness by faith as a doctrine of individual salvation. This is thanks to the medieval monk Martin Luther, who formalized a teaching of righteousness by faith by which the individual is guaranteed a seat in heaven.

One can understand why Luther's thoughts developed along these lines. His proclamation of *sola fide* (by faith alone) freed the gospel from the death grip of the medieval papacy. But although Luther sources his theology of righteousness by faith in Paul's writings, it is not Paul who most influences his theology. Rather, his theology is shaped by the medieval obsession with personal piety through various acts of penance, good works, and monetary compensation. Luther's *sola fide* is a reaction to a self-destructive and corrupt pietism, which then prioritizes a personal piety. While the reformer's teaching contains psychological encouragement that has nurtured many a soul back from the brink of despair, his conception of piety does not enable a full realization of the freedom of the gospel that occurs only in community and inclusion.

While we appreciate Luther's contribution to our understanding of righteousness by faith, an exegesis of Galatians 2:15-22 shows that Paul teaches this idea in the context of the covenant community of first-century Judaism, and if we are to understand it properly, we must see it within that context.

The Context of Galatians

An accurate reading of Galatians 2:15-22 must take into account the following considerations.

First, Paul in his letter to the Galatians (the theme of which he expands in Romans) addresses the obsession of his own religion with itself in its identity as the covenant community. Paul opposes a religious separatism that excludes Gentiles who refuse to practice the gospel in the Jewish way.



Righteousness by faith in its original context is not a doctrine or a formula. It is an awareness of who we are, as demonstrated in Jesus Christ, the anointed one.

He does not, however, repudiate the Jewish way. His argument is for unity in diversity—or, better put, the embrace of a radically diverse creation that is the key to reconciliation and restoration of human community.

Second, in Galatians, Paul advocates for a more ecumenical understanding of salvation. He sees the oneness of all humanity evident in the Abrahamic covenant that “through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 22:18, NLT).

The Jews had come to believe that only they, by virtue of the Abrahamic covenant, comprised the community of the righteous: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Gal. 2:15, NRSV), and they viewed the act of circumcision as sealing this covenant. But ultimately, Paul will tell them, salvation comes through the mediation of Messiah—the anointed one—not through their exclusive community.

Finally, it is crucial to see that the early church was not a separate religion called Christianity. Paul, like Jesus, was a Jewish rabbi, teaching the gospel that Isaiah and the other

The apostle argues that God is not God of the Jew only, but of the Gentile also, for “God is one” (Rom. 3:29-30, NRSV). God is not a tribal God. The entire creation is the covenant

God’s people receive justice through the faithful mediation of the Messiah, not because they belong to a particular religion.

Hebrew prophets preached. As non-Jews joined the Jesus Movement, some Jewish believers expected them to become Jews, signified by the act of circumcision and all of the attendant purification rituals. Paul’s teaching on righteousness by faith is advocacy for non-Jews—that they, too, are beneficiaries of the covenant without becoming Jews.

community, not a single group of people. “God is one” is not a call to a particular God of a particular religion, but to the oneness of all things.

Paul is careful to note that there is nothing wrong with being a Jew (Rom. 3:31)—but neither is there anything wrong with being a Gentile, for God “will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (Rom. 3:30, NRSV).

In fact, Paul appears to say that the Gentile is capable of fulfilling the law even without access to Torah (Rom. 2:14). And how does one fulfill the law? The answer is to “Owe no one anything, except to love one another ... Love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:8-10).

What Is Righteousness?

Dikaosune, which translators render as “righteousness,” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *tsedakah*, which is the Hebrew prophetic plea against oppressive structures, corruption, greed, and the exploitation of the vulnerable. It is a call for right relations in community, as in treating others so that all may live in peace and freedom. This is the focus of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, summed up in the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12), hence his call to “seek ... first the kingdom of God, and his justice” (Matt. 6:33, DRA).

So the Greek words in Paul’s writings that translators render as “righteous” (*dikaiois*), “righteousness” (*dikaioisunē*), and “justify” (*dikaioō*) actually mean “just,” “justice,” and “to give justice.” The Bible’s righteousness is not just a way to secure a place in heaven, but a liberating justice. Paul uses the word “righteousness” to argue for an inclusive church, and in opposition to the notion of a tribal God who would insist that only by joining one particular religion and partaking of all its rituals can one be a beneficiary of the Abrahamic covenant.

What Is Faith?

Pistis (faith) in Galatians 2:16 isn't a quality of the individual believer. It is the Messiah who embodies faith.

Pistis is more accurately translated as *faithfulness*, as it is in Galatians 5:22, regarding the fruit of the Spirit. (The difference between the two translations is a great example of how difficult it is to translate without theological presuppositions.) The English word "belief" is not equal in meaning to the Greek word *pistis*.¹ In Greek argumentation *pistis* is the proof of, or faithfulness to, one's claim, not one's feeling of confidence in something.

So the phrase "faith in Jesus Christ" (*pistis tou Iesou Christou*), both in Greek and in the context of Paul's discussion, literally reads "the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah." God's people receive justice through the faithful mediation of the Messiah, not because they belong to a particular religion.

Righteousness Is Faithfulness

This means that righteousness (justice) is not the result of *pistis* (faithfulness). Rather, it is the definition of it. It is the responsibility one exercises because one is faithful. One is faithful when one is just; one is just when one is faithful. Hence, "The righteous live by their *faithfulness*" (Hab. 2:4, NRSV; cf. Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38), not just their belief.

The text forces us to depart from Luther's famous Scala Sancta moment of illumination of this passage. Righteousness by faith is not easy grace, but radical responsibility. Radical responsibility is not about making someone into what you think they should be (or rejecting them if they do not conform). As I noted above, this is the very problem against which Paul's advocacy for justice (righteousness) is reacting.

Rather, radical responsibility is love: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12, NRSV). "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rom. 13:8, NRSV). Importantly for Seventh-day Adventists, this statement by Paul comes from a discussion that includes questions of diet and observance of days.

To Be Faithful as Christ Is Faithful

To Paul, it is *Christ's* faithfulness that gathers the entire human community of Jews and non-Jews into covenant. To be in covenant is to be faithful as Christ is faithful, to be just as Christ is just: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20, NIV).

Paul dismisses the circumcision enforcement in Galatia "in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). He discredits the male headship argument "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:11-12). He undermines the Roman culture of domination evident in the household codes of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 at the outset: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (verse 21, NRSV). He points a Corinthian community that is in conflict over all kinds of differences to the temporality of all these things, saying that the only thing that lasts is love (1 Corinthians 13).

Righteousness by faith in its original context is not a doctrine or a formula. It is an awareness of who we are, as demonstrated in Jesus Christ, the anointed one. It is about oneness in creation, the healing of alienation, the liberation of creation as it "groans" (Rom. 8:22, NKJV) in the cages that humanity creates in our attempt to confine others, rather than accepting our diverse oneness in a God who is one. **AT**

¹ Paul's reference to Abraham's faithfulness in Romans 4 is about his "commitment, trust and devotion," not merely an intellectual affirmation versus doubt, as the English word "belief" implies. See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (2009), pp. 191-194.

DIVIDING THE CHURCH OVER EVOLUTION?

BY APRIL MASKIEWICZ CORDERO

BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION IS A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC FOR the Christian church, regardless of denomination. I discovered that this topic is especially provocative within the Adventist community when I was invited to speak about evolutionary creation at Loma Linda University in California. Although many in the audience, theologians and scientists alike, felt that biological evolution and the Adventist doctrine are compatible, many others objected to this claim.

While it's not unusual for an audience of Christians to hold a variety of perspectives about creation, during the Q&A session, one person suggested that the Adventist church needs to take a stand *against* evolution. The spirit of the declaration was that if you are an Adventist, then you would necessarily reject evolution. Many in the audience concurred.

As I listened, I wondered: Would this mean that *how* God created life on Earth is such a fundamental principle that there *must* be unanimity, and that those who accept evolution would no longer be able to be members of the Adventist community? Is this such a fundamental issue that the church should split over it?

Positional Statements

I have come to learn that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded on a noncreedal approach. It wasn't until the 1930s that the church formulated a doctrinal statement. More recently, in the 1980s and '90s, the Adventist denomination composed positional statements, and the current position on creation is "in contrast to an evolutionary explanation for the

origin of living organisms and the relationship of humans to other life forms."¹

I've also learned, however, that positional statements are dynamic and open to modification by church leadership. The official church guidelines state that the Adventist denomination wants its congregations to seek truth, and I've met many who would like to see the church rethink its anti-evolution position in pursuit of truth.

I am not at all suggesting that everyone accept evolution but, rather, am acknowledging that some fully committed Adventists embrace evolution. Evolutionary creation is one of the many ways Christians may reconcile mainstream scientific findings with their faith. Denis O. Lamoureux, an associate professor of science and religion at St. Joseph's College in the University of Alberta, writes: "Evolutionary creation claims that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created the universe and life through an ordained, sustained, and design-reflecting evolutionary process. This view of origins fully embraces both the religious beliefs of biblical Christianity and the scientific theories of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution."²

For those who hold this perspective, God established and maintains the laws of nature. God is the creator, and the mechanisms of creation are revealed to us through the sciences. Our ability to describe or explain something in scientific terms does not leave less room for God in the process. For example, science gives us the mechanism by which life develops, and religion gives us the agency behind the mechanism. Different fields of study—biology, geology,

theology, history, just to name a few—are gifts we bring to the table to help us answer questions about God’s creation.

For many, accepting biological evolution is a legitimately respectable Christian position. The unnecessary and perceived conflict with science in general and with evolution in particular can be damaging in many ways—but most importantly, spiritually, because it pushes people to either “accept science or the Bible.” I consider it my vocation, or my calling, to help *change* the cultural narrative that biological evolution and Christian faith are not compatible, because my own journey of reconciling my faith with my acceptance of evolution was a very long and lonely one.

Why I Became an Atheist

While I am a Wesleyan now, I grew up in the Catholic tradition, and during high school I was an active member of Young Life, a Christian youth organization. I don’t recall giving much thought to evolution at that time, but during my first year in college at a large public university, I remember my biology professor telling the class that a person cannot believe in God and accept evolution. The basic argument was that evolution proved that there was no God. I found this puzzling, and I met with a couple of different pastors who likewise told me that one must choose: either faith or evolution.

The more I learned in biology courses, the more evidence pointed toward the reality of evolution, and since both sides were telling me that they were mutually exclusive, I made the conscious decision to give up my faith and any belief in a God. I became an atheist.

Fast forward to one year after I graduated from college with a biology degree. It was 1989, I was living in Japan as a life adventure, and I had mailed myself two large boxes of books before leaving the States. I was very lonely in Japan and read through the two boxes of books rather quickly. At the bottom of the last box was a Bible. As an atheist I didn’t even own a Bible, so I’m not sure how the Bible got in there, but with nothing else to do, I began to read it. It was a slow process, but thanks to my sister, who responded to many questions about the Old Testament via snail mail correspondence between Japan and the United States, I made the decision to dedicate my life to being a Christ follower, and shortly thereafter I came back home.

So now it was 1990, and I was back in the States. I was hiding my love of all things biology from my church friends

and was hiding my Christian beliefs from my science colleagues, because everyone was saying that evolution and faith are incompatible.

For the next decade, my biggest challenge was to learn how to live out the Christian command to love the Lord with my mind (Luke 10:27, NIV). I was successful at loving him with my heart, soul, and strength, but I had to find a way to reconcile my faith, the Bible, and my acceptance of evolution. At the time, none of the pastors I knew would open-mindedly discuss evolution with me, and I couldn’t find any over-the-counter books on reconciling evolution and faith; remember, this was before we could do a Google search.

Coming to a resolution was a slow and lonely process, but by the end of the 1990s, I came to understand that many parts of the Bible are interpreted in ways that were

I was hiding my love of all things biology from my church friends and was hiding my Christian beliefs from my science colleagues, because everyone was saying that evolution and faith are incompatible.

not necessarily intended originally. For example, many biblical scholars agree that Genesis was not written as a scientific explanation of creation. This is supported by the fact that the order of creation given in Genesis 1 is quite different from the order given in Genesis 2. I also came to recognize that different books of the Bible were written at different times, for different groups of people, and that when viewed within their context, the messages from these books were even more beautiful and profound than without this perspective. I came to realize that taking the Bible on its own terms—not forcing it to answer questions or provide information it is not intended to address—allowed me to take science on its own terms.

Preventing a Faith Crisis

So where am I now? I am a professor of biology at a Christian university, and I have the pleasure and challenge of teaching evolution to college undergraduates. Almost all of my students self-identify as Christians, and based on surveys I've conducted for the past several years, approximately 80 percent of the freshmen at the start of my course reject evolution as the explanation for how humans came to be on Earth. Many students are coming into my course having been told the same thing I heard in the 1980s: that one must choose between evolution and faith. I want to change this paradigm, because pressuring young people to reject evolution outright forces them into a corner that can create a faith crisis.

Biological evolution is a theory that has much explanatory power for both human health and the health of the Earth, and it's not going away. In fact, the science of evolution is becoming more and more relevant to our daily lives.

This is exactly what a student at a Christian college in Oklahoma shared with me after a recent presentation on the evidence for evolution. He asked to meet with me, and over coffee he explained that he had decided to become an atheist. He said his parents and his home church rejected evolution and refused to engage in conversations about the evidence. He felt that they were being closed-minded, untrustworthy, and almost deceptive; as a result, he had made the choice to reject Christianity.

Unfortunately, this young man is not an anomaly. The Barna Group conducted a poll³ of young adults with a Christian background and found that nearly three in ten feel that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in.” Another 25 percent hold the perception that “Christianity is anti-science,” and nearly the same proportion (23 percent) said they have been “turned off by the creation-versus-evolution debate.”

Such data show us that we are putting heavy, heavy burdens on our young people by forcing them into an unnecessary choice between well-confirmed science and their faith in Christ. We owe it to our youth and to everyone in our congregations to engage in transparent and intellectually honest conversations regarding findings from the sciences. Why? Because the evidence for evolution is so abundant, consistent, and convincing that 98 percent of professional scientists affirm the evolution of all life on Earth—that all life, including humans, shares a common ancestor.⁴ Biological evolution is a theory that has much explanatory power for both human health and the health of the Earth, and it's not going away. In fact, the science of evolution is becoming more and more relevant to our daily lives. With the emergence of “evolutionary medicine,” the rise in superbugs (antibiotic-resistant bacteria), and increasing environmental degradation, I predict that evolution will be in the news in the next decade more than ever before.

When I teach evolutionary biology, I view my role as a shepherd guiding and supporting students as they navigate the evolution and Christianity terrain so that their faith is strengthened instead of threatened. I've spent the last several years researching the best approaches to do that, and I've found that for many people, the mere term *evolution* evokes fear. This fear exists because many people have been overly influenced by misinformation from the media or by “fire and brimstone” perspectives, and they haven't taken the time to learn about and really understand biological evolution.

The idea that accepting evolution puts you on the “slippery slope” to rejecting the whole Bible is a common and deeply rooted fear. But evolution is completely neutral about a higher power. In its most simplistic form, biological evolution is a well-tested and well-confirmed explanation for the incredible diversity of species we have on Earth. This idea of a so-called slippery slope is based on one particular interpretation of the early Genesis chapters,

but I appreciate an alternate perspective presented in the book *Telling the Old Testament Story: God's Mission and God's People* by Brad Kelle, an Old Testament scholar. He believes we need a shift in our thinking. Instead of asking what Genesis chapters 1 and 2 have to do with science, he says we need to ask what Genesis 1 and 2 are about. On their *own* terms, what is the message these chapters are trying to convey? Kelle's basic conclusion is that we shouldn't expect the Bible to speak authoritatively about geology or geography, because that was not its function when (and for whom) it was written. Rather, the Bible's function is to be a guide to salvation. Scripture tells us about who God is and his relationship to us.

Safe Spaces for Dialogue

Being an evolutionary biologist in the church has been a difficult journey. I have, on many occasions, felt interrogated by fellow parishioners, been yelled at, been told I was promoting Satan's agenda, and even been ignored or excluded. What I needed in those times were Christian brothers and sisters who would love me, support me, and accept me and my acceptance of evolution without judgment. Unfortunately, many Christians respond in decidedly non-Christian ways when it comes to controversial issues. Is the Adventist community different?

Former Adventist pastor Alicia Johnston wrote in the Summer 2017 edition of *Adventist Today* that after spending her entire life in what she called "Adventist spaces"—churches, small groups, seminary—she found that the healing power in one event with LGBT+ people had exceeded every Christian event she had ever attended. She argues that in her experience, Adventists do not provide a "safe community" where people can be accepted for holding nontraditional views. "We emphasize certain parts of the Bible over others, and we never question those parts that are destructive for people who don't fit the script," she writes. "We refuse to seriously entertain alternate understandings of Scripture. We fail to challenge the dogma. If any idea fits the script, then it feels right to those who are in charge, for whom following that script comes naturally."

The Adventist doctrine focuses on the well-being of the whole person. I believe that to achieve this, the church must create safe spaces to dialogue about issues that are not essential for our salvation. We can all agree that God is creator and savior; *how* God created is not an issue worth dividing the church. Even if you are certain that God created in six 24-hour days, this does not negate the fact that there are many Adventists who respect the authority of the Bible and accept biological evolution.

It may be time to modify the positional statement from the claim "that the seven days of creation were literal 24-hour days forming a literal week" to something that provides space for a more evolution-friendly perspective. Evolutionary creationists of all denominations offer evidence that we can engage with difficult scientific information that instigates internal conflict while maintaining our faith and living out our call to reflect Christ's character to others.

Christian thinkers have the freedom to boldly explore scientific, philosophical, and theological assumptions about evolution bolstered by the absolute faith that this *is* God's creation and that all truth, ultimately, will lead us to marvel at him who created the world. **AT**

¹ See www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/statements/article/go/-/creation-the-bibles-worldview/

² Denis O. Lamoureux, "Evolutionary Creation: Moving Beyond the Evolution Versus Creation Debate," *Christian Higher Education*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2010), pp. 28-48. Online at pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a65d/831418e009d429930cbb28165e8fa73bb695.pdf.

³ The referenced research was conducted by Barna Group from 2007 to 2011 for the Faith That Lasts Project, a quantitative study among 1,296 current and former churchgoers ages 18-29. The sampling error associated with 1,296 interviews is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points, at the 95 percent confidence level.

⁴ AAAS Scientists Survey, Sept. 11 to Oct. 13, 2014, Q16, Pew Research Center. Online at www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/29/appendix-b-about-the-aaas-scientists-survey/



"It's the Law!"

By Alden Thompson

"IT'S THE LAW!" IS A LINE I USE IN MY classes to illustrate the bad rap that law has in most people's minds. I use seatbelt signs to make the point, moving from "We Love You, Buckle Up!" to "Buckle Up! It's the Law" to "Click It or Ticket"—ironically, this last slogan is the only one that actually works. We all know that seatbelt laws have a gracious point: to save lives. But we still resist the law, and people still die because they don't wear seatbelts.

Modern Christians don't necessarily like laws all that much, either. In popular usage, old covenant equals Old Testament and new covenant equals New Testament. The Old is said to focus on works and fear; the New is said to be all about grace and joy.

But I would argue that the story is more complex and more beautiful than that.

The Condensed Bible

Not long ago I had to decide the fate of a host of family Bibles, including the tattered and gold-stamped. What would I do with grandpa's Bible? Bury it? Burn it? Drop it into the trash after dark?

While sorting, I dipped into a pocket edition of *Die Gute Nachricht*, the German edition of the "Good News Bible." What I found intrigued me. A pocket edition of the entire Bible would need a big pocket, so the editors reduced the size.

Forty-four psalms made the cut, and the choices are interesting. Included is Psalm 88, which finishes with the line: "You have caused friend and

neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness" (verse 18, NRSV). Also included is Psalm 137, the most violent of the psalms, which closes with the words: "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (verses 8-9, NRSV).

But the longest psalm, Psalm 119—a celebration of law—vanishes without a trace.

Deuteronomy, if looked at closely, points us in the direction of law as description, rather than just prescription.

Exodus chapters 19-20, a passage that contains the Sinai narrative and the first edition of the Decalogue, is there. But the Deuteronomy 5 edition is gone. In fact, all of Deuteronomy 1 to 5, which lies at the heart of this particular column, is gone. These are significant omissions for those who are searching for the seeds of grace in the Old Testament.

Description, Not Prescription

Compared with the law-giving narrative in Exodus 20, the Deuteronomy 5 version

offers us remarkable nuances that are missing from Exodus. Separation and fear are prominent in both accounts, but Deuteronomy helps us understand the reasons why. Deuteronomy, if looked at closely, points us in the direction of law as *description*, rather than just *prescription*. And the *descriptive* view of law is the tantalizing clue that helps us bring all of the pieces together.

Exodus 19 is blunt enough. Moses was commanded to tell the people: "Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live" (Exod. 19:12-13, NRSV). The Ten Commandments follow with thunder and fire, but little explanation.

By contrast, in Deuteronomy 5 Moses takes an intermediary role: "At that time I was standing between the LORD and you to declare to you the words of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain" (Deut. 5:5, NRSV). God caught their attention with lots of noise, but Moses graciously stepped in as a kind of shield between God and the fearful people.

God explains that their terror is not only justified, but a crucial step in understanding what the law could do for them. God told Moses: "If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!" (Deut. 5:29, NRSV). Note that their obedience is crucial, not because it would ensure

their eternal salvation, but because it will help them live long in their new land! In the last words of the chapter, Moses underscores the point: “You must follow exactly the path that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (Deut. 5:33, NRSV).

In Deuteronomy 4, the chapter just preceding the Sinai narrative, Moses even cites Israel’s non-Israelites neighbors as another evidence of the gracious intentions of the law: “See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” (Deut. 4:5-8, NRSV).

What is *described* here—as opposed to being *prescribed* as the condition of salvation—is that these laws are so innately good that they transcend God’s people, and they work even for the heathens!

Is the Law *Gute Nachricht*?

If both Israel and her neighbors were that enthusiastic about law, it’s understandable

that Israel would cherish Psalm 119, the longest psalm in our Bible, as a hymn in praise of law.

But deeply rooted ideas die hard, and law as an instrument of condemnation is one of those ideas. Traditional evangelical theology says that the law points out sin, while Jesus pays the price we should have paid. From a sinner’s perspective, therefore, law is first of all an instrument of condemnation. That doesn’t really sound like “good news,” at least not at first.

Deeply rooted ideas die hard, and law as an instrument of condemnation is one of those ideas.

The selections in *Die Gute Nachricht* reflect that pattern. During our year in Germany, while I was an exchange teacher there, I was startled and amazed by the intensity with which the Germans approached just about everything. Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, captures the religious version of that intensity when he cried, “Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.” Rather than rethinking their view of law, those in the Reformation tradition are easily tempted simply to turn to grace.

That provides momentary relief but does not address the relationship between the religious perspective and secular perspectives (such as those of Israel’s neighbors, and perhaps our neighbors, too) on life and law.

If, however, we can hear Deuteronomy’s good news perspective, we not only can integrate both testaments into a harmonious view, but we also can build a bridge between the religious and secular perspectives. If law is a *description of what works best*, of those laws that Israel’s neighbors so much admired, then we can see many aspects of Scripture that we thought were simply revealed or inspired as also being affirmed by nonreligious voices.

Larger Truths

In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus declares: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:1, NRSV). One doesn’t need a divine vision to learn that advertising one’s good deeds is odious business. *Everyone*, whether religious or nonreligious, dislikes a braggart. Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” gives us another example: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Both believers and nonbelievers admire those traits.

Remarkably, the Old Testament enhances this picture, especially when we realize that *the new covenant is an Old Testament innovation*. Jeremiah

31:31-34 is an Old Testament promise to Old Testament people, a promise that the “law” will become second nature to the point where no one will tell anyone what to do: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. ... No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD” (NRSV).

When that happens, the separation between God and his children, as well as the fear in God’s presence and at the sound of his voice, simply ceases, and we understand God as gracious and good. The clearest expression of that grace is found in Jesus, God incarnate. Unafraid,

The catastrophic impact of sin made it necessary for God to shield his people from the holy.

children sat on God’s lap. And the promise of 1 John 1:1-2 becomes a reality in the lives of God’s people: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (NRSV).

There remains, to be sure, plenty of tough stuff in both testaments. God is not afraid to use the heavy hand as needed. But that is all part of his gracious intent. Paul’s words to the church at Corinth are to the point: “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV). God’s preference for the spirit of gentleness is clear—in both testaments. But for our sake, he is graciously willing to use the stick. Like the terrors of Sinai, that stick is part of his plan to re-establish a kingdom of peace.

Ellen White’s Growth from Law to Love

Let’s bring this home to Seventh-day Adventism with a remarkable quotation from *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, written in 1896: “When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of.”¹

Living in a perfect world—and unaware of law! Like swimming or walking, once you learn to do it, you don’t even think about it. And when we glimpse the ideal, perhaps even realizing it on occasion, we can also recognize the necessity of stepping back from that ideal for practical purposes.

In her earlier writings, Ellen White glimpsed the ideal less frequently and often with less clarity. She penned this dark statement, for example, in 1856: “As soon as any have a desire to imitate the fashions of the world, that they do not immediately subdue, just so soon God ceases to acknowledge them as His children.”² And in a passage about John the Baptist, she moved from “John’s life was sorrowful and without pleasure” in 1858 to “John enjoyed his life of

simplicity” in 1897.

The striking phrase “law of love” appears for the first time in 1882—a phrase not seen at all in *Spiritual Gifts* (1858) or *Spirit of Prophecy* (1870ff). Linking law with love did not occur as even a possibility in her early thinking and early writings. And the beautiful phrase “God is love,” which opens the first book of the Conflict of the Ages series and closes the last one, are completely missing from *Spiritual Gifts* and *Spirit of Prophecy*.

That growth in Ellen White is analogous to what we see in Scripture. The catastrophic impact of sin made it necessary for God to shield his people from the holy. Indirect communication and the appeal to fear are crucial parts of that early story as God led his frightened people toward the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

All of this is to say that we can approach both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White openly and unafraid as long as we remember two crucial points: First, that the story of Jesus gives us the great ideal, the most complete revelation of God. And second, that God has given us not only absolute mandates and *prescriptions*, but also illuminating *descriptions* of how he wants to bless us, which we must apply in our time and place under the guidance of the Spirit.

And it all happens because of God’s grace. Believe it or not, it’s the law! **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (1896), p. 109.

² White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1856), p. 136.

Contributors



MELISSA BROTTON is an associate professor of English at La Sierra University, where she teaches writing and literature courses. Her

specialty areas are 19th-century British literature and religious studies, and she has published on the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and biblical ecology. She spends a lot of time outdoors, paints, and writes nature stories and poems.



APRIL MASKIEWICZ CORDERO is a professor of biology at Point Loma College in San Diego, California, a school that is associated

with the Church of the Nazarene. She received her BS in biology and a PhD in mathematics and science education from the University of California, San Diego.



DAVID GEELAN is Sue's husband and Cassie and Alexandra's dad. He started out at

Avondale College and is now as an associate professor of science education at Griffith University on the Gold Coast in Australia.



OLIVE J. HEMMINGS is a professor of religion and ethics at Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland.



DAVID NEFF is the retired editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*.



MAYLAN SCHURCH is pastor of the Adventist church in Bellevue, Washington, and has authored or

co-authored more than a dozen books.



LOREN SEIBOLD is the executive editor of *Adventist Today* magazine and website and is recently retired from pastoral ministry.

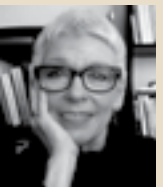


MELODY TAN is a magazine editor, features writer, and television presenter. When she's not at a computer typing her

life away, she enjoys snowboarding, traveling, beach activities, and the not-so-grandmotherly activity of knitting. She lives in Sydney, Australia, with her husband and son.



ALDEN THOMPSON is a professor emeritus of biblical studies at Walla Walla University.



WINONA WINKLER WENDTH is a writer and adjunct professor in the humanities at Quinsigamond Community College.

She is a graduate of Atlantic Union College and holds an MFA in literature and writing from the Bennington Writing Seminars.

BIBLE CREDITS

Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition (DRA) is in the public domain.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan (www.zondervan.com). All rights reserved worldwide. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

New Matthew Bible (NMB) Copyright © 2016 by Ruth Magnusson (Davis). All rights reserved.

New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

Adventist Today



NEWS BRIEFS

Powerful “Ellen G.” Advice Pod at ABCs

SILVER SPRING, Md. — As of this coming Monday, Adventist Book Center stores will stock a voice-activated smart-speaker device that is brimming with Ellen G. White’s advice on just about every life issue.

Unlike Alexa pods, which activate only when called by name, “Ellen G.” will speak up whenever her algorithms sense that you are reaching for another chocolate sundae, considering watching a movie other than *The Sound of Music*, or going against any of the instructions provided in the Adventist prophet’s prolific writings.

Ellen G. also has full access to your social media accounts and will dish out counsel to your friends when she detects (based on their updates) that they are getting out of line.

iPhone Designer to Fix Wonky Prophetic Charts

CUPERTINO, Calif. — Sir Jony Ive, the famed designer of the iMac, the iPod, and the iPhone, is leaving Apple after decades of service. He told reporters in a press conference that his next design challenge will be to “make Adventist prophetic charts less confusing.”

The designer said that the beast illustrations on the charts “are not scary in any conventional sense—they’re just scary bad.” He added that he could never, for the life of him, make sense of the timelines and “super-confusing arrows going all over the place.”

Sir Jonathan said that although it was hard to leave Apple after so many years, he knew it was time to give the charts a facelift. He said that he couldn’t stand “going cross-eyed every time I try to make sense of Adventist prophecy illustrations.”

Angels Constructing Adventist Subdivision

REMNANT ESTATES, Heaven — Construction angels have been working overtime lately as an ultra-exclusive gated community in heaven takes shape. The subdivision will house only Adventists and is being built so that residents think they are the only ones in town.

The walls around the subdivision have been fitted with mirrors so that Adventists can continue to see what they have always seen and are not burdened by new ideas or insights from others.

Angels are under strict instructions not to leave any



jewelry lying around as they put the finishing touches on residences. Instead, gold watches are being laid out as welcoming presents on every kitchen table.

Pantries have been stocked with Kellogg's Corn Flakes and Weet-Bix cereals, Postum drink mix, Little Debbie cakes, and carob treats—none of which the angels felt even slightly tempted to sample.

New Instagram Filter Removes Jewelry

MENLO PARK, Calif. — A new filter released by Instagram allows Seventh-day Adventist church members to automatically edit out jewelry

from their pictures before posting them to the platform.

Instagram released a statement claiming that the new filter would “save conscientious Adventists hours of laborious manual editing in Photoshop” that has always been necessary before they post photos that other church members will see.

The filter can even be adjusted to allow for wedding ring display, if this agrees with the theological views of the Adventist user.

Instagram is reportedly working on an additional filter feature that can make any Adventist dining room spread look vegan—or, at the very least, lacto-ovo vegetarian.

Lifelong Church Member Finally Accepts Christ

LOMA LINDA, Calif. — Martha Dogood has spent the entirety of her life in Loma Linda and is the current world record holder for personally earned Pathfinder honor patches, which fill up seven extra-wide sashes.

The octogenarian can quote the Spirit of Prophecy better than White Estate employees, and she makes U.S. bestselling author and “superhero of health” Hans Diehl blush at her dedication to absolute veganism.

Dogood has never missed a prayer meeting, and she can remember every Sabbath School memory verse she has learned since kindergarten. She has earned countless passport stamps over the years while participating in Maranatha church-building trips, and she always learned enough of the local language to dish out personal modesty tips without a translator.

Nevertheless, not until today did Martha Dogood accept grace. This afternoon, she felt a huge weight fall from her shoulders as she accepted Jesus Christ for the very first time.

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.





CHRIST CHALLENGES CULTURE

OUR INAUGURAL GRACE-FOCUSED EVENT WILL BE PRESENTED BY:



Brenda Billingy



Dilys Brooks



John Brunt
(Respondent)



Alex Bryan



Jennifer Deans



Linda Emmerson
(Reader)



Marlene Ferreras
(Respondent)



Karl Haffner



Michaela Lawrence Jeffery



John McLarty



Chris Oberg



Joey Oh



Kendra Haloviak Valentine



Don Veverka



Emily Whitney



Nicholas Zork & Band
(Music)



Christ at the Center of Adventist Today

October 4-6, 2019 | Portland, Oregon | Embassy Suites Washington Square

REGISTER AT

www.atoday.org/at1

Adventist Today

PO Box 683, Milton-Freewater, OR 97862

Phone: 800.236.3641

503.826.8600 (outside USA)

atoday@atoday.org



www.facebook.com/AToday.org/



[@AdventistToday](https://twitter.com/AdventistToday)



[Instagram.com/adventisttoday](https://www.instagram.com/adventisttoday)