

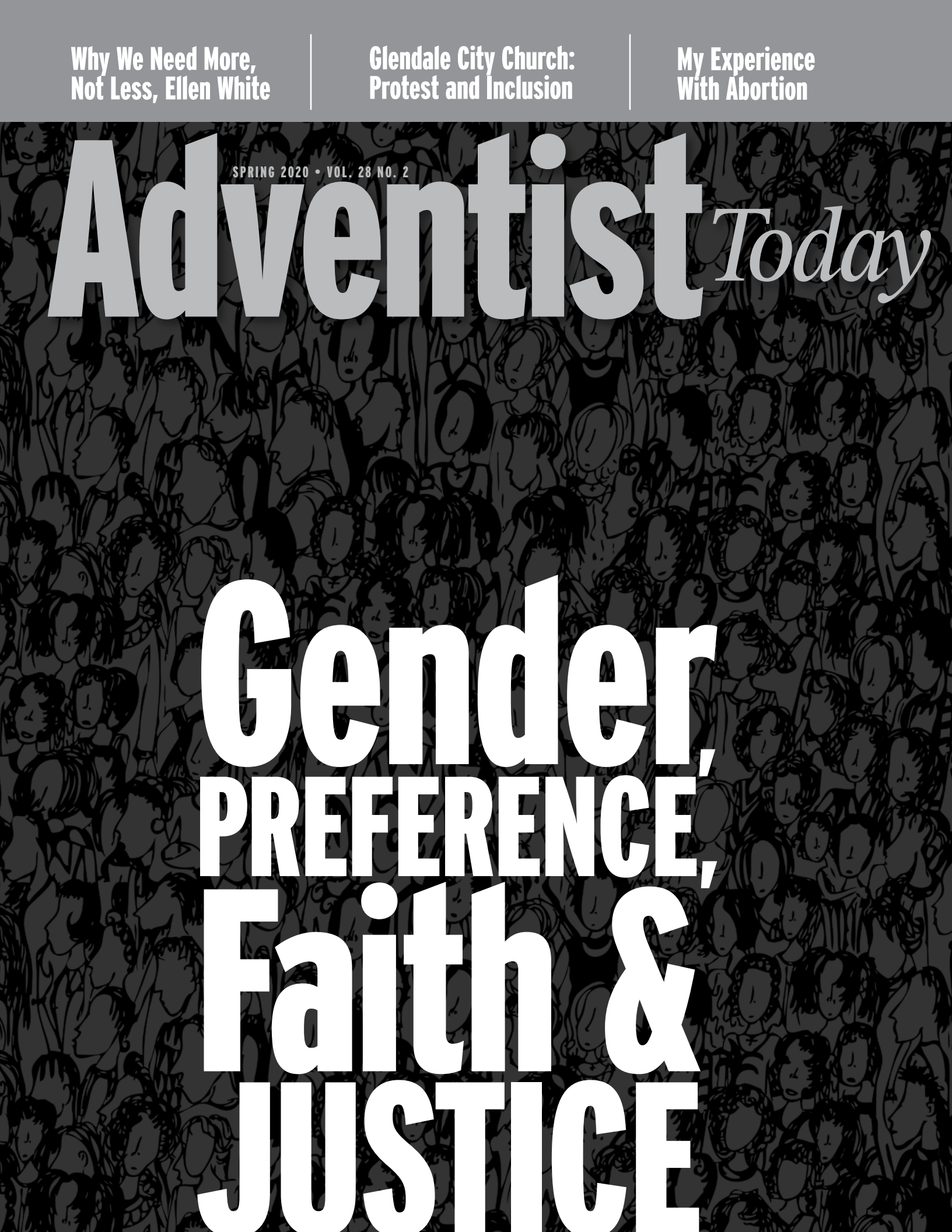
Why We Need More,
Not Less, Ellen White

Glendale City Church:
Protest and Inclusion

My Experience
With Abortion

SPRING 2020 • VOL. 28 NO. 2

Adventist *Today*



Gender, PREFERENCE, Faith & JUSTICE

features

8 Protestantism, Authority, and Women's Ordination

By Elle Berry

10 Women's Ordination: A Crisis Too Good to Waste

By Alvin Masarira

13 An Abortion Story

By Laura Wibberding

16 Theology vs. Relationships, Men vs. Women: Are Women Naturally Unsuitable for Church Leadership?

By Sonja DeWitt

18 When Religious Abuse Is Sexual Abuse

By Winona Winkler Wendth

20 In Search of an Adventist LGBT+ Relationship Ethic

By Ronald Lawson

34 What If God Were Goddess? Why We Need to Acknowledge the Feminine in God

By Lindsey Abston Painter

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) 2020 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community and beyond.

DEPARTMENTS

3 Editorial

Why Seventh-day Adventists Need More—Not Less—Ellen White

By Loren Seibold

22 AT Interview

Glendale City Church: Intentional About Including Everyone!

26 The Exegete

Isaiah 56:1-8: Righteousness and Gender Nonconformity

By Olive J. Hemmings

30 Adventist Heritage

Antiochus Epiphanes in 1919: Ellen White, Daniel, and the Books of the Maccabees

By Matthew J. Korpman

36 Barely Adventist

News Briefs

39 Contributors

Executive Editor

Loren Seibold

Copy Editor

Debra J. Hicks

Contributing Editors

James 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, R. Marina & Gary Raines, Judy & Gordon Rick, Darilee & Elmar Sakala, 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, Marit & Steve Case, Pat & Ron Cople, Rita & Grant Corbett, Jill & Fred Cornforth, Kathryn & James Dexter, Rosemary & Merlyn Duerksen, Dan Engebreg, William Garber, Sandra & Sam Geli, Rick Gordon, Patricia Hare, Jackie & Jim Henneberg, Mariel Lynn & Edwin Hill, Carmen & Clive Holland, Erika & Brian Johnson, Carmen & Yung Lau, David T. Person II, Patricia Phillips, Judith Rausch, Teri & Paul Richardson, 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, Jeanne & Gary Bogle, Gerald Chipeur, Beverly & Sidney Christiansen, Keith Colburn, L. Humberto Covarrubias, Lawrence Downing, Debra & Anders Engdahl, Annette & Gary Frykman, Anne & Dale Lamberton, Dolores & Dean Kinsey, Lyndon Marter, Daniel Paulien, Corinne & Michael Pestes, Mariellen & Nicholas Reiber, Missy & Richard Rouhe, William Sandborn, Yvonne Stratton, Alden Thompson, Amabel & Eric Tsao, Betty & James Webster

GENERAL ADVISORS (\$500+/YEAR PLAN)

Cherry Ashlock, Almon Balkins, Charlotte & Robert Brody, Ruth Christensen & Glenn Henriksen, Joshua W. Dee, Ed Fry, Jiggs Gallagher, Karita & DeWitt Goulbourne, Helen Grattan, Heather & Mark Gutman, Judy & Richard Hart, Dolores & Robert Hasse, Georgia Hodgkin, Melva Hicks, Sharon Jacobson, Catherine Lang-Titus, Carl & Evangeline Lundstrom, Vincent Melashenko, Barbara & Dale Morrison, Cieta Nelson, Claudia Peterson, Edwin Racine, Orlene & James Riggs, Tracy & Craig Reynolds, Ruth & Beryl Rivers, Freida Roos, Diane & Gary Russell, Gretchen & Monte Sahlin, Beverly & David Sandquist, Carolyn & Robert Tandy, Blair Tikker, Jackie & Hal Williams



Why Seventh-day Adventists Need More—Not Less—Ellen White

By Loren Seibold

DURING THE YEARS OF MY CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH, Ellen White was probably at her most potent as an influence in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her teachings were not always used graciously or correctly, but her words permeated everything Adventist. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that at least in practical life applications, Ellen White was more influential than the Bible in many Adventist families, including mine. Our lives were saturated with her big themes, such as why and how to be a Sabbath-keeper, and overshadowed by an eschatological narrative that kept us in a state of expectancy and terror.

Even small things she said had outsized importance. I knew people who would discard any piece of fruit that had on it the slightest blemish, because Ellen White had once scolded a school leader for serving rotten fruit to students. Black pepper never appeared in our home, and vinegar and mustard were kept guiltily hidden. Polishing shoes and taking baths on Friday afternoon were as integral to our Sabbath ritual as going to church, because she had written, "Let the boots be blacked and the baths be taken."¹

In my family, Ellen White seemed sometimes to outrank Jesus.

The Reversal

It's astonishing how effectively, for at least 50 years after her death, the information that would have shown Ellen White to be anything less than a direct pipeline from God was kept from church members. D. M. Canright's criticisms were known, but he was dismissed as a tortured soul who never got over his rejection of our truth.

The first time a critique of Ellen White penetrated my consciousness was Ron Numbers' *Prophetess of Health*,² which presented evidence that her health principles came from reformers who were her contemporaries. I was a ministerial student at Walla Walla College when *Prophetess of Health* came out. The book was in the library, but it was kept behind the counter for the librarians to decide whether or not you were mature enough to read it. (One older



librarian showed the only bit of snark I'd ever seen from her when she sweetly referred to the author as "wrong numbers.")

We would later learn that some church leaders already knew the difficulties with White's methodology and sources. Yet when Walter Rea³ and Ron Numbers wrote their exposés, denominational leaders portrayed them as hostile critics—men who hated God's remnant church—and many believed that. Walter Rea was pushed out of ministry, and he, like Canright before him, was portrayed as a tortured, angry man.

But it was harder to explain away the notes of the 1919 Bible Conference, which reveal that concerns about how much Ellen White was inspired by influencers other than God were known by many in her lifetime and were addressed at the conference, even by the General Conference (GC) president.

One explanation I heard—that God dictated to her the very same words that other writers had written—didn't, thankfully, get traction. But apologists

It may benefit the church to lift up Ellen White again—this time not as a flat, one-dimensional prophet, nor merely advice on a page, but as a strong Christian woman.



rushed in to assure church members that, first, copying other people's work wasn't regarded as a crime back then (it was—Charles Dickens' fury that American publishers printed and sold his books without paying royalties is well-documented, and even *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* criticized those who plagiarized from its pages⁴) and, second, that her copying was no big deal because the Bible writers had also done it!

This last rationale was expressed in a two-part piece in *Ministry* magazine⁵ by one of my seminary professors, George E. Rice, who flirted with some of the notions of the higher critics when he said that a prophet could be inspired by doing "research" on other writers, as Luke did when he wrote others' accounts of Jesus' life and teachings under his own name. This explained why White could still be a prophet, even though in her books and articles she copied extensively from other writers: *the bits God guided her to plagiarize* were what made her writing inspired. This notion is still widely accepted.

Coming to Terms

The quasi-inerrant Ellen White hasn't gone away completely, even though enough of us are sufficiently aware of the human influences upon her writings that we've changed how we use them. Most of us no longer reach for her little red books before we reach for the Bible. We generally don't use her statements to prove doctrines, even if most Adventist Bible studies end up saying precisely what she advocated. Many, like me, use Ellen White pastorally; we are more likely to quote *Steps to Christ* or *The Desire of Ages* than *The Great Controversy* or the *Testimonies*. The all-Ellen White, no-Bible sermons of my childhood are gone everywhere but at the most cultish fringes of the denomination.

While George Rice's scholarship may have made us more comfortable with White's plagiarism, for me it had the paradoxical effect of helping me to see the Bible as a more flexible, less authoritative document. Just as she

While Adventist leaders for a long time thought Ellen White lovely as a prophet, in the era of feminism they began to find her rather threatening as a female.

was influenced by writers in her time, so was the Bible in its time. Both Luke and Ellen White have a discoverable, researchable context, which means that they contain content one can negotiate with. It is no longer difficult for many of us to see beyond the Bible's cultural attitude toward women, for example, to embrace women as pastors in our modern context. I believe a case can be made that coming to grips with White's inspiration may improve our understanding of all inspired writings.

The New Attack on Ellen White

While many progressive Adventists have come to appreciate Ellen White in their own way, I believe that an attack on her credibility from a conservative corner of the church is heating up. This more nuanced opposition has been catalyzed and shaped by the women's ordination controversy.

Many Seventh-day Adventists have argued that one of the strongest arguments in favor of ordaining women is the pivotal role of Ellen White in the origin of this denomination. She was issued ordination certificates by the General Conference for 44 years. She preached in churches and instructed men. She was a formidable figure in church affairs, and during her lifetime male church leaders were not only instructed, but at times cowed into submission, by her.

After White died, the Adventist Church lapsed into a troubled relationship with its women. The church's regard for ordinary women seemed to decline to the degree that Ellen White was sainted. Abusive behavior toward them was routinely hushed up. When women at Pacific Press demanded equal pay for their work, then-General Conference President Neal C. Wilson, father of our current GC President Ted Wilson, said some of the most unProtestant things ever uttered in the name of the denomination to argue against the church's following the law in regard to female workers.⁶

Yet Neal C. Wilson was also partially responsible for securing the votes for commissioning female pastors, which—while insufficient—was at least *something*. (If nothing else, this demonstrates that one ought not judge a person by one bad act.)

In the last two decades, a new set of Adventist leaders and pastors is more opposed to women in church leadership than we had seen before—probably ever in our denomination's history. Men such as Steven Bohr, Doug Batchelor, Clinton Wahlen, and Ted Wilson are not just literalists in their understanding of the Bible passages about women, but also will do almost anything to prevent women from being pastors or even church elders.

People try to explain this type of opposition to women's ordination as devotion to biblical authority. Yet the way these men have latched onto this particular issue, while setting aside other matters that could be addressed by biblical authority (such as corruption in church entities



around the world), gives every evidence of their having a personal antipathy toward strong women. Such prejudice formalized into a “headship theology,” which says that men are to not just run the church, but to have total authority over women—in some formulations of it—throughout eternity!

What this boils down to is that while Adventist leaders for a long time thought Ellen White lovely as a prophet, in the era of feminism they began to find her rather threatening as a female.

Fundamental Belief No. 18

This change in the theological currents is, I believe, reflected in subtle alterations to Fundamental Belief No. 18 at the 2015 General Conference Session (additions italicized):

“*One* The Scriptures testify that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and *we believe it* was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. *As the Lord's messenger, her* Her writings speak with prophetic authority *are a continuing*



and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (Num. 12:6; 2 Chron. 20:20; Amos 3:7; Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10; 22:8, 9.) (Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14-21; Heb. 1:1-3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10.)”

Some applauded this change as a careful diminishment of White that let the Bible’s authority, as expressed in the final sentence, shine a bit brighter. The *Adventist Review* gave as the reason for this change that “Some felt that the church’s prior statement gave Adventist Church co-founder Ellen G. White authority comparable to that of the Bible. Changes have been made to remove this potential ambiguity.”⁷

Fewer noticed the potential problem in replacing “the Lord’s messenger” with “her writings speak with prophetic authority.” Behind these edits was, I believe, an attempt to subtly alter how the church regards Ellen White. While giving her official “prophetic authority” may seem at first

reading like a promotion, it is actually a restricted role. In the edited statement, it is not Ellen White as a woman who speaks with prophetic authority, but only her writings: she is no longer a full-throated “messenger,” but just words on a page. She could in this formulation be a radio receiver who broadcast what she’d been told by God, but without a personal contribution to it, in contrast to those biblical “holy men of God” who, out of their own personalities and experiences, “spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21, KJV).

This diminishes Ellen White by compartmentalizing her into a single role—prophet—and giving her a single voice—the written word. Conservative Adventist preachers already dismiss her ordination and preaching ministry. The change to Fundamental Belief No. 18 implies that we needn’t take White seriously as a female church leader or preacher, because her job was just passing along what God gave her. A traditional sobriquet for Ellen White, “the

It’s hard to find an Ellen White who doesn’t confirm the beliefs of almost anyone across the Adventist theological spectrum.

inspired pen,” fits well in this scenario.

This has the effect of setting aside the hopes of other women who might want to exercise a large spiritual leadership; unless they are prophets who put their words down on paper, they have little to offer us. And who could possibly qualify anymore?

The Problem for the Defense

We Adventists haven’t generally treated Ellen White as a background figure, nor merely as a writer. Though still a sort of hagiography, the five-volume biography by her grandson, Arthur White,⁸ presents her as a more fully

rounded person. Her personality shows through again in Gerald Wheeler's biography of James White,⁹ where he reveals that near the end their marriage, Ellen White found her husband overbearing and impossible to live with, and that she separated from him—even speculating, in letters to a friend, about divorce.

That is to say, Ellen White wasn't a plaster saint, but a real woman with strengths and flaws, with emotions, joys, and disappointments. She not only wrote articles and books, but preached, taught, and ministered—which is what today's women ask to do as ministers of the gospel.

We understand now that Ellen White has a context, and that context changed throughout her life. When students ask, "What does Ellen White say about this?" a well-seasoned theologian friend of mine answers, "Which Ellen White?" The teenaged Ellen White, the young mother, the woman in mid-life, or the widow? The Ellen White influenced by husband James, or by Joseph Bates, or by her son Willie, or by the editors who often completely recomposed what she wrote and copied entire sections from other writers on her behalf? The Ellen White who was getting along well with the General Conference brethren, or the Ellen White who was angry at them? Ellen White in New England, Battle Creek, Australia, or Elmhaven?

Like the Bible—and perhaps more so—Ellen White provides enough sentences to support just about anything you want to hear, from the stingiest legalism to the most expansive grace; from an obsession with minor details of diet and lifestyle to a large, principled life; from a terrifying eschatology perpetrated upon us by a petty God to confident living in the moment, in the light of God's goodness. It's hard to find an Ellen White who doesn't confirm the beliefs of almost anyone across the Adventist theological spectrum. Some theologians, such as Alden Thompson, wield Ellen White for progressive causes, just as she has long been wielded on behalf of sectarian Adventism.

Let us admit that Ellen White's writings are not a reliable and consistent corpus. If we are to defend them as inspired, we must deal with serious questions of provenance, inconsistencies in message, and some indefensible nonsense. The effect of the alteration to Fundamental Belief No. 18 (making her writings her lone contribution to the church) is to bring to the fore precisely these difficulties, while diminishing that about her which

could be of much good to us: that she was a strong and courageous female church leader and a female messenger from God—surely not a saint, but still the central character in our denominational story.

A Messenger, Not Just a Message

For a generation, the cry of progressive churchmen and churchwomen has been that we need less Ellen White. I'm arguing here that it may benefit the church to lift up Ellen White again—this time not as a flat, one-dimensional prophet, nor merely advice on a page, but as a strong Christian woman. She was, in her best moments, a decisive church leader, a preacher and thinker, a survivor in a male world. She was not just a shelf of books, but a real person: opinionated, spiritually intense, a student of the Bible, and also, when she needed to be, angry and demanding. It would make us a better church to appreciate Ellen White as a strong woman who gave of herself to make this denomination as strong as she was.

It is likely too late for Seventh-day Adventists to accept a new prophetess, even were God to raise one up. What we *can* offer our daughters is an example of a strong woman from our history, one who could move masses of people to follow Christ and who spoke prophetically to the patriarchy that then ran, and still runs, our denomination. Those are footsteps our young women can step into. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 6, p. 655.

² Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (1976).

³ Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (1982).

⁴ Unsigned editorial (Sept. 6, 1864).

⁵ George E. Rice, "How to Write a Bible" parts 1 and 2, *Ministry* (June and August 1986). These articles were adapted from his book *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (1983).

⁶ As part of the defense during the class action lawsuit *Silver v. Pacific Press Publishing Association*, Neal C. Wilson testified that the church's leadership wasn't unlike that of the Roman Catholic Church, with himself as the "first minister," somewhat like the pope is to his organization. Pacific Press was as much under his authority as was the General Conference. The church, therefore, had authority to pay women whatever it wanted to. Pacific Press lost the case.

⁷ *Adventist Review* (July 7, 2015).

⁸ Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: A Biography* (1981-1986).

⁹ Gerald Wheeler, *James White: Innovator and Overcomer* (2003).

Protestantism, Authority, AND WOMEN'S ORDINATION

By Elle Berry

IN MARCH OF 1776, PEOPLE COULD ALREADY FEEL THE LABOR pains. Even though the Declaration of Independence would not be adopted for another four months, the Continental Congress was already on the path to declaring American independence.

On the last day of that same month, one of my favorite letters was penned by Abigail Adams to her husband, John, a leader of the American Revolution who assisted in drafting the historic Declaration. While I was aware of her use of the phrase “remember the ladies,” I had never read the complete letter. As it turns out, that’s the gentle part. What this feisty Founding Mama actually says is this: “I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. *Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.* If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation” [emphasis added].

It would be almost 150 years before the 19th Amendment gave American women their first actual participation in American democracy. Women understand long gestation.

It's Been Decided—or Has It?

Through most of my life, my interest in church was at the local level. But following the 2015 General Conference Session, I found myself paying attention to General Conference (GC) Executive Committee meetings. I know I haven't been alone in suddenly becoming intensely interested in the conversations regarding women's ordination.

I won't spend time here recounting details of the last few years (as others have done so well¹), but I believe many of us see the compliance committees as nothing more than a smokescreen for the General Conference to justify opposition to women's ordination and provide a church-endorsed pushback for anyone who supports women's ordination. An ordained woman could hold office in the highest branches of church leadership, after all, and I believe that the GC hopes to close the door on this possibility.

Following the 2015 vote against allowing divisions authority to decide women's ordination for themselves, the GC chose to act as if *that* vote were some kind of final answer regarding women's ordination. Which, of course, it wasn't.

So I've been amused to see in subsequent Annual Council meetings how those opposed to women's ordination are shocked—shocked!—when individuals supporting women's ordination continue to bring it up. They insist that we've already voted on women's ordination, and now we're only talking about complying with what was decided.

But the most important thing about women's ordination wasn't settled, which is why the issue keeps creeping back.

The Flaw in Complementarianism

To understand why women's ordination isn't going away like some wish it would, we need to widen the lens a bit.

The old, widely accepted norms of patriarchy and complementarianism have been in a slow-motion collapse for a while now, and just as a ball gathers momentum as it rolls down a hill, it seems unlikely that there will be any return to *the way things were*, short of defying organizational physics.

The most important thing about women's ordination wasn't settled, which is why the issue keeps creeping back.

Since it's important to be clear on terms, complementarian theology says that women and men have equal value and worth before God; *however* (and this is a big stipulation), men get the final say in matters of authority in the home or in ministry.

The concept of complementarianism can be juxtaposed with egalitarianism, which also says that women and men are equal in value before God. But egalitarianism doesn't depend on authority to decide who performs which roles in ministry or in the home. Rather, individuals operate according to their gifts, under the authority of God.

Despite the historic complementarian slant of the church, many women have behaved in an egalitarian way when answering the call to speak, preach, and lead. Yet I doubt many have done so without facing considerable pushback.

Well-known author John MacArthur was recently asked at a conference to play a word association game. (For instance, you might say “sky” and then I might say “blue.”) When the

interviewer said, “Beth Moore,” the name of a legendary evangelical Bible teacher, John MacArthur’s immediate word association with “Beth Moore” was “go home!”

Defenders of complementarianism say that they’re advocating a softer, kinder complementarianism, in which men are less tyrannical and more like gallant heroes protecting women and children—i.e., the Christ figures in the story. The problem is that when we put this to the test in real life, it almost always sounds way less like Jesus and a lot more like John MacArthur. As Carolyn Custis James has noted, “Complementarian convictions go by the wayside when one of their inner circle comes under fire. Instead of protecting women and children and sacrificially enduring harm for their sakes (as they profess in theory), their actions prove that when it comes to a real crisis, real men protect each other.”²

And as the complementarianism model is fading, those who have held power seem to be doing exactly what Carolyn Custis James predicts. MacArthur’s response to the name “Beth Moore” signals a lot of problems, but I think the most condemning one is revealed in the response that author Sarah Bessy made to MacArthur: “You know who never told women to go home? Jesus.”³

Welcome to Our World

This latest John MacArthur episode reinforces the trouble I’ve observed in other examples of complementarian Christianity, most recently with the formation of compliance committees in the Adventist Church. Here is a perfect example of why giving anyone absolute authority is dangerous. Abigail Adams was right: all men *would* be tyrants.

There was a bizarre moment during the 2019 Annual Council when GC President Ted Wilson was scolding members of the General Conference Executive Committee as if they were naughty children. It was ridiculous to watch a group of grown men, who serve as presidents of the world’s biggest union conferences, getting called out as though they were schoolboys. You could feel their collective discomfort and righteous indignation in being belittled in such a way.

I wish these same men could have recognized and understood the problem when it wasn’t only *their* authority being called into question. I hope that after experiencing the same paternalism most women have endured for the entire history of the world, these men have now entered into solidarity with us women.

Welcome to our world.

Individual vs. Collective Authority

After the 2015 GC Session vote, I remember feeling crushed in spirit. I so wanted to see the world church welcoming Adventist women into leadership. But I remember talking to more than one well-intentioned person who said something along these lines: “I

believe women should be allowed to be ordained...but this isn’t a salvation issue, and women can work in the church even if they aren’t ordained. So we should just get back to the ‘real’ mission of the church.”

I found this infuriating, but at the time I wasn’t sure how to articulate why. In the last few years I found my words, and others did, too.

Protestantism and Women’s Ordination

It’s easy to get lost out in the weeds and believe that the central issue here is compliance committees or women’s ordination. But that’s not what this is about. You might even think the main problem is complementarianism, male headship, or perhaps gender roles. But again, that isn’t the crux of what is going on. This is about power and authority: who has it and who gets to keep it.

What we’re actually talking about is Protestantism and who gets to be Protestant. Adventists belong to a tradition that says authority is only in the hands of God and that we as individuals are accountable to God. In this Protestant tradition, no person is permitted to dismantle your identity in Christ by denying that authority. Yet, ultimately, complementarian ideology is saying that you can be a Protestant if you’re a man, but if you’re a woman, you must live under the authority of some man somewhere.

This is the deeper reason why the issue of women in leadership is not going away. The natural culmination of our Protestant heritage was always going to be the freedom of individual believers. And so long as we are standing anywhere short of Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”), then that process has not been realized—not for Adventists, and not for our fellow Christian brothers and sisters. The natural conclusion of the Reformation was always abolition, feminism, and egalitarianism. It was all of these things because the Reformation was about authority, personal autonomy, and owning the God-ordained freedom to live your convictions.

And so, to echo my favorite American founding mother, Abigail Adams, I too would caution the church elders. I would say, “*Remember the ladies*, or be prepared for us to stage a Reformation of our own.” The question isn’t whether or not God is moving to empower women with freedom; the question is whether or not the Seventh-day Adventist Church will join in the movement that is already underway. **AT**

¹ Edwin Torkelsen, “The Ministry of Missed Possibilities,” Adventist Today Online (Oct. 19, 2019). Online at atoday.org/the-ministry-of-missed-possibilities/

² Carolyn Custis James, “The Failure of Complementarian Manhood,” blog post (Apr. 21, 2016). Online at carolyncustisjames.com/2016/04/21/the-failure-of-complementarian-manhood/

³ “Nope, Not Going Home,” Sarah Bessy’s *Field Notes*, e-newsletter (Oct. 20, 2019). Online at <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/nope-not-going-home>

WOMEN'S ORDINATION:

A Crisis Too Good to Waste

BY ALVIN MASARIRA

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH HAS FOR DECADES BEEN discussing the role of women in ministry—specifically, whether or not female ministers can be ordained. It is worth noting that by 1878, at least three women in the Adventist Church had been licensed to preach. Between 1872 and 1915, the church recognized more than 31 women for ministry. In 1881 the General Conference Session voted: “Resolved, that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.” This was referred to the General Conference Committee, but no further word on it was heard.

The 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis voted: “To accept the following report and recommendations of the Role of Women Commission as recommended by the 1989 Annual Council: While the commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G. White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide-ranging, and continuing ministry for women, which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.”

The delegates cast 1,173 votes for and 377 against this resolution, in which the policy to not ordain female pastors was predicated on the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion. The implication is that because the commission discovered no convincing evidence in the Bible or Spirit of Prophecy regarding ordaining women to pastoral ministry, the reasons for denial must be found elsewhere.

The 1973 Camp Mohaven Committee, after studying the role of women in the church, had recommended that women be ordained as local church elders, which was approved during the 1990 General Conference Session.¹ That should have removed the last barrier against ordination of women to pastoral ministry, since the role of elders and pastors is, according to Scripture, one and the same. It seems to me inconsistent for the church to ordain women as church elders but deny them ordination to ministry.

Women's ordination was again discussed at the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, but the session delegates didn't approve the North American Division request to allow each

division to decide for itself. The 2010 General Conference Session in Atlanta set in motion the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC), composed of scholars, theologians, and church leaders from all of the world divisions, and tasked it with coming up with a theology of ordination statement for the church, as well as a recommendation on the question of ordaining female ministers. The 2015 GC Session received the gender-neutral theology of ordination statement from TOSC, but delegates there chose to maintain the status quo by not ordaining female ministers.

A Source of Tension

This issue has caused a significant amount of tension across the world church, with very strong positions at both extremes. The current General Conference administration has invested a disproportionate amount of capital and resources on a matter that is not doctrinal in nature, but rather, a policy and administrative issue.

Some might argue that the denomination is in a crisis, with certain sections of the world church publicly defying the General Conference position. This led to the by now well-known decision to create “compliance committees” to discipline union conferences that don’t comply. Demeaning public reprimands at the 2019 Annual Council against three union conferences in Europe and two in North America have made the atmosphere even more toxic, which has hardened positions on both sides.

No one expects the matter to come up on the floor of the next General Conference Session, although it will likely be debated in many conversations in the corridors, and maybe even in some of the committees that will meet during the 10-day session.

My own position is that I don’t see the Bible or the writings of Ellen G. White prohibiting the ordination of female ministers to the gospel ministry. As a church we believe in the priesthood of all believers, and this alone is enough to establish an equal calling of both male and female. I am frustrated that the church still denies female ministers the full authority of their calling and that this opposition is driven by an erroneous “headship theology.”

The Benefits of Crisis

The lack of an acceptable resolution on the matter of women’s ordination has created a crisis in the church. I believe, however, that this crisis has a benefit: namely, it has helped us understand ourselves better as a church and as individuals. It has been a reality check for a people that sometimes tended to be arrogant about our understanding of Scripture and our unity of faith across the globe.

Here are some of the realities this crisis might give us an opportunity to process and address:

The church has many fault lines and dividing cracks. We sometimes pretended that there was unity, only to discover that the unity was artificial and, at times, imposed through the suppression of dissenting voices.

Adventists hold a variety of different, yet legitimate, understandings of God and his Word. Although this ought to be expected in a 20-million-member church operating in more than 200 countries and thousands of cultures, we didn’t previously understand that these differences were big enough to divide us to such an extent.

Our world church has fractured more than many members realize, and this is an opportunity for a serious mending of those cracks and addressing the structural weaknesses.

Within the church we find a great potential for deep-seated antagonism toward those with whom we disagree. We read that “the dragon was furious with the woman” (Rev. 12:17, GNT), and we automatically identify ourselves as that persecuted woman—but never imagine that there might be some dragon in all of us.

Some members exhibit high levels of intolerance. Adventists sometimes assume the role of “Defender of God and His Church” (a role no one has ever been assigned) and demonstrate high levels of intolerance toward the “other”—the “heretics.”

Differences between various cultures have caused suspicion and mistrust. African Adventists could suspect that Europeans and Americans were bringing in nonbiblical teachings through women’s ordination, while Adventists in Western countries could suspect that Africans wished to impose on the rest of the church an unbiblical cultural understanding on the role of women.

A deficit of leadership exists at many levels of the church. The General Conference failed to provide guidance in determining what is and what is not core to the Adventist faith and mission. After the TOSC completed its work and submitted

its gender-neutral “theology of ordination” statement, as well as a report indicating that the majority in the committee did not oppose the ordination of women ministers, the General Conference leadership failed to take advantage of that window of opportunity to embrace a “win-win” solution. They rejected a solution that would have met the needs of North American and European churches, which face unique challenges that significantly differ from those of the church in the global South, and at the same time would have allowed territories with reservations on women’s ordination to maintain the status quo.

Allowing each territory (division) to decide on the matter

The Adventist Church needs leaders who understand that unity is not uniformity—and that policy must support and be subservient to mission and should, therefore, make the execution of mission as smooth as possible.

would have been a perfect solution that would have put the matter to rest, since this is already current practice when it comes to the ordination of female elders. Letting each territory, or even local congregation, decide the matter has not resulted in any disaster or calamity for the church. The question of the ordination of female ministers has revealed some deep-seated weaknesses in our organizational leadership.

We have a propensity to place organizational policy above mission. Church policy cannot be an end in itself but, rather, is a vehicle to make the church more effective and efficient. When an organization loses its focus on mission—what God has called it to—in order to protect itself, it is time for serious introspection. The church was established for mission, and mission must be the driving agenda.

It is time for an extensive organizational structural review. The current structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,

dating back to 1901-1903, served its purpose in a world where letters and documents were sent from Europe to America or Africa by ship. The world today is vastly different, and our organizational structure should reflect that. The continuance of overly centralized authority in Silver Spring, Maryland, is a hindrance rather than an enabler of mission.

All of these realizations could be opportunities to talk and find win-win solutions, which would make us a stronger, more mission-focused church.

The Role of Church Leadership

As we look ahead to the next General Conference Session, there is a need, in my opinion, for a serious discussion about the role and function of church leadership. The Adventist Church needs leaders who understand that unity is not uniformity—and that policy must support and be subservient to mission and should, therefore, make the execution of mission as smooth as possible. We don’t create policy for its own sake. This crisis has revealed some serious challenges and weaknesses in our church governance system and structure. We should learn from it and make necessary changes.

Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff wrote a song in 1973 titled “Now That We’ve Found Love, What Are We Gonna Do With It?” The song was a big hit and appeared on albums by the O’Jays, Martha Reeves, and the reggae band Third World. The question for the Seventh-day Adventist Church today is “Now that we know this about ourselves, what are we gonna do about it?”

I pray that we won’t waste this crisis by doing nothing and hoping that the problems will blow over. The issue of women’s ordination has opened a rift that won’t go away on its own. Our world church has fractured more than many members realize, and this is an opportunity for a serious mending of those cracks and addressing the structural weaknesses. Church members in many parts of the globe are ready to walk away from the church, or at least reduce their level of commitment and involvement, because they believe the church system is more interested in protecting itself and the positions of those in leadership than it is dedicated to the greater mission and purpose. May God have mercy on this, the Seventh-day Adventist Church. **AT**

¹ <https://atoday.org/has-a-general-conference-session-approved-female-church-elders/>

An Abortion Story

By Laura Wibberding

THE SILENCE WAS WHAT UNDID ME. I LAY in a dark room, draped in a paper sheet, knowing something was wrong. For long minutes the ultrasound tech turned the probe in one direction or another, searching layers of black-and-white grain on the little screen. For long minutes I waited for some sign, while the foreboding rang in my ears. It would not be good news.

This is my story. It may not be a typical story of abortion—we heard no heartbeat that day in the exam room, and fetal growth had stopped weeks before—but it is the story of how I learned to see abortion in real life. This is how I learned how much deeper, grayer, and messier it is than we like to believe.

The ultrasound tech found a box of tissues for me and broke the news to my family in the waiting room. She told me I had two choices. I could go home and wait for my body to get the message. Spontaneous abortion could happen at any time, and how intense or long-lasting the event would be often varied. Things could go wrong. Or they could make an appointment with the surgery center, and I could face general anesthesia. I went home grieving, angry, and anxious.



I am restless when I don't want to feel. I meant to lie down in bed, but I dusted the headboard instead. I tried to sleep, then finally gave up and opened my computer to find the miscarriage and infant loss group I'd been told about. I read women's accounts of their own ordeals—how many days it took, when to go to the emergency room, what other options exist. It was comforting to absorb their words and to know that I wasn't alone.

I didn't want to be a walking tomb. I didn't want to wait, not knowing when or if the ordeal would hit. But the cost and complication of surgery made me equally ill. I called my local obstetrician for advice, and he offered a third option. I took an

oral sedative he prescribed, and he did the procedure in his own clinic, while I slipped in and out of sleep. My husband took me home to ibuprofen, a heating pad, and a simpler grief. It was done.

What Is It, Really?

Over the weeks and months afterward, then even throughout my next pregnancy, I kept logging in to connect with my online community. While I put

*If we want to protect
the unborn, we
must care for the
living. If we want
to fix a problem,
we need to start by
understanding it.*

on a brave face at church, my online group held me and loved me. I told my story, and they told me theirs. That's how I learned how murky pregnancy loss and abortion are, particularly when you try to draw the lines between them.

During the past year, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has worked on a statement about abortion. It's scheduled to be voted on at the next official business session of our world church. The proposed statement has two categories: spontaneous abortion, called miscarriage, and abortion.

My loss wasn't spontaneous. It was, in fact, *elective*. Probably no one on the committee that created the statement would say we did anything wrong. They wouldn't call our choice *abortion*. But this only shows that the difference between abortion and miscarriage isn't a clear line; it's a spectrum.

I learned that from listening to the people in my online group.

Next to me was a woman in her second trimester who went to the emergency room bleeding excessively, but the staff didn't intervene for hours—until the baby's heartbeat finally stopped—because it was a Christian hospital, and policy decreed that its physicians couldn't perform an abortion.

On the other side of her was a mother whose water broke during the second trimester, while she was aboard an airplane. When she finally reached a hospital, they had to induce labor so her baby could be delivered to die.

Next I became acquainted with a woman whose baby wouldn't live beyond birth, and she felt the grief start fresh every time a stranger touched her belly or asked when she was due. She decided to terminate the pregnancy so that she could start healing.

This online group was full of grace. The other women never rated tragedy, never ranked my nine-week loss beneath theirs. Because in spite of the fog of pain and the waves of ethics and politics we waded through, we agreed on one thing: it hurts.

No matter what the story, it hurt. Some women had to choose whether or not to end their pregnancies, and others had no choice. But no matter how they got there, there was no way out without blood and pain and emptiness.

The Problem With Statements

And that's why I'm wary of an official church statement on abortion. It's not that I think unborn life isn't important. I'm simply disinclined to pile onto someone else's pain. I got a little window into the lives of real women who had to terminate pregnancies, and it changed my views.

I know the window was narrow—there are a lot more scenarios and many other reasons why people choose abortion. I can't speak about rape or incest, or financial or social catastrophe. Shades of nuance line the path all the way to the other end of the moral spectrum. My loss certainly didn't make me understand all of the scenarios. But I know that I don't want to draw the line between moral and immoral abortion.

I wish it were clear. I wish this belief—that life is sacred—could be the answer, the end of the story. It's not.

It's not, because for nine months, two separate beings occupy the same space. If, somehow, their best interests go in two different directions, there is often no way to accommodate the one without compromising the other. Abortion can't be *simply* healthcare or *simply* murder, because it isn't simple. And we can't make it so.

A strong abortion statement might comfort the church members in voting booths, but it won't help people

It was community, not theology, that got us through. Imagine what it would be like if that same gift were offered in our churches!

dealing with hard choices. Political beliefs have forced our convictions into false simplicity, but “pro-life” and “pro-choice” mean nothing in the silent ultrasound rooms, and they shouldn't be shaping our theology, much less telling us how to treat the women in those rooms.

In that dark ultrasound room, drowning in the silence, no theology could save me from the ordeal. No church or hospital administrator could make it easy on me. The words of committees, however well-intentioned, would be just another obstacle to stumble over in the fog.

Less than a year after my loss, my twins were born. My children are a gift, but my post-birth complications were so severe that my cardiologist said another pregnancy would probably kill me. I had a hysterectomy a few years later, but in the meantime, I was haunted by the fear of conceiving. What if I had to decide about another termination, this one of a viable pregnancy? How great was the risk? How great a risk would justify abortion?

Community, Not Theology

I didn't have to make that choice, but other people do. Someone is making it right now. And it's foolish to think we can banish the moral ambiguity with a Bible study. If we really care about abortion, if we are heartbroken over terminated lives and never-born babies, then we need to do something better.

The proposed abortion statement will almost certainly be voted at the next General Conference Session. The document's strengths and weaknesses aren't the point. I could argue over the wording, but the real problem isn't the words. A better document won't help, because no words can solve the problem. If we want to protect the unborn, we must care for the living. If we want to fix a problem, we need to start by understanding it.

Women in crisis don't need more theology. They need community. That online group helped because real, compassionate people were on the other side of my computer screen. The women I met there didn't need more information. We needed one another and had found a way to hold hands in the dark. We could feel our way together through the fog because so many other women were there with us, calling out the landmarks next to them. It was community, not theology, that got us through. Imagine what it would be like if that same gift were offered in our churches!

Women in hard spaces need Jesus, kneeling in the dust beside them, telling them that they are safe, they are his, and no one will stone them for their pain today. They need the church to help them grieve their losses, not simplify them. Imagine the impact of a church that could do that. Imagine if we could resist the political pressures—as well as the urge to prooftext—and offer God's love instead. That, I would love to see in real life.

Until the church is ready to embrace women in crisis, statements are pointless. Until we can accept the complications and be willing to stand with them in the fog, we have no right claiming clarity. Unless we can offer community, we have nothing to say. **AT**

THEOLOGY VS. RELATIONSHIPS, MEN VS. WOMEN:

ARE WOMEN NATURALLY UNSUITED FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP?

BY SONJA DEWITT

I HAD A RATHER HEATED DEBATE ON FACEBOOK RECENTLY WITH a man who believes that God made men for spiritual leadership to the exclusion of women because men are created to be “logical and theological,” while women are merely emotional and “all about relationships.”

Let’s put aside for a moment the absurdity of generalizing about an entire sex. I know many women who are capable of being at least as “logical and theological” as any man. Let’s set aside, too, the insufferable arrogance, the “leave the thinking to me, sweetie!” condescension. This man’s theory poses serious problems.

Logical and Theological

First, the terms *logical* and *theological* aren’t synonymous, as even a casual perusal of the Bible would make plain. Christian theology is intimately concerned with mysteries that transcend mere logic, that cannot be grasped by human intelligence alone. The entire premise of Christianity makes little sense from a purely logical point of view. Paul often contrasts the rational Greek philosophy of his time with the faith of believers. He writes, “Great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16, KJV) and that “Christ crucified” is “foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23, NIV).

This does not mean that we check our brains at the door when we examine holy things but, rather, that human logic alone will not give us an understanding of God. It also means that a belief that we can define God logically—that we, by our own intellectual exercise, can create the perfect theological system—is eminently dangerous and destructive, and probably idolatrous.

How Jesus Did It

But the second problem is even more serious.

Every Christian would agree that Jesus’ ministry is the ultimate

standard for Christian leadership. In the gospel narratives, we see two directly opposing viewpoints: one held by Jesus, and other by the Jewish leaders. So which viewpoint was “logical and theological”?

Hint: It wasn’t that of Jesus!

The Jewish leaders were extraordinary theologians. They had developed an extensive and frankly oppressive system of theology, with laws circumscribing every aspect of everyday life. As Jesus said to them, “You bind on men burdens grievous to be borne, but you yourselves will not lift a finger to move them.”

For example, their theology:

- Forbade healing on the Sabbath (theological)
- Forbade threshing wheat on the Sabbath (theological)
- Shunned Gentiles and sinners (theological)
- Refused to touch the unclean (theological)
- Despised and degraded women (theological)
- Held women responsible for men’s lust (theological)
- Allowed a man to give property to the temple rather than support his parents (theological)
- Despised the poor (theological)
- Considered sickness a judgment of God (theological)
- Disfellowshipped from the synagogue a man who was healed (theological)
- Put their faith in “Abraham is our father” (theological)

The focus of Jesus’ ministry, on the other hand, was always on people. One of his best-known proverbs was “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” And in response to the Jewish leader’s baiting question about the greatest commandment, Jesus emphasized love—love for God and love for one’s neighbor. In fulfilling his mission of restoring broken relationships, Jesus:

- Healed the sick, even on the Sabbath (relationships)
- Raised the dead (relationships)
- Drove the moneychangers out of the temple and said, “My house is a house of prayer for all people” (relationships)
- Said the Sabbath was made for man (relationships)
- Ate and drank with “publicans and sinners” (relationships)
- Traveled with, talked with, and touched women (relationships)
- Allowed an unclean woman to touch him and commended her (relationships)
- Condemned the religious leaders’ distortion of the teachings of the Bible (relationships)
- Said, “Blessed are the meek” (relationships)
- Allowed a sinful woman to anoint him with perfume and then commended her (relationships)
- Was arrested, tried, tortured, and killed in order to save us (relationships)

Even Paul, the most theological of the apostles and the one who came out of Pharisaic Judaism himself, placed love at the pinnacle of his hierarchy of virtues (1 Corinthians 13)!

Who’s Better Qualified?

So, if a focus on relationships is a primary characteristic of women, perhaps women are *better* qualified to be Christian leaders.

Certainly, there is significance in the fact that women make up the majority of the members of most churches, and frequently they do the bulk of the work.

I am not among those feminists who pretend that there is no difference between men and women. I believe that God made men and women with complementary gifts. Although no distinction is absolute or universal, women tend to possess an instinctive ability to understand the principles of nurturing loving relationships, while men, at their spiritual best, have a drive to engage in self-sacrificing service.

Neither quality is exclusive to either sex, and neither is superior, more praiseworthy, or more valuable. God intended that in developing his work in the church and building his kingdom, each sex would enhance the other’s gifts and influence the other. Men would learn relationship skills from women, and women would be influenced by men in their desire to serve on a broader scale. By their influence on one another, men and women would be able to work together most effectively in advancing God’s kingdom.

Genesis makes it clear that both men and women were created in the image of God. Thus, the image of God in society and in the church demands the equal representation of both sets of gifts. God did not intend for men alone to project his image to

the world as the public face of the church, but for the sexes to work together in church leadership to complement and balance each other. The tension between males and females would help to bring both into balance. If men become too outwardly focused and neglect relationships, the pull of women would bring them back to center. Conversely, if women become too narrow and inwardly focused, the more external focus of men would turn their minds to the needs of the larger world.

Offsetting the Balance

Sin destroyed that ideal balance. Men’s desire to serve, protect, and provide was overshadowed by the sinful desire to control and to dominate. Women became more insular and narrowly focused as they lost opportunities to interact with and influence the external world.

God did not intend for men alone to project his image to the world as the public face of the church, but for the sexes to work together in church leadership to complement and balance each other.

Jesus came to restore the balance between the sexes that existed at creation. He meant for men and women to work together to complete the mission he gave them, and in doing his work there would be “neither Jew nor Greek, ... neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28, KJV). He intended for all Christian believers to see themselves and each other as fully equal, members of the same body, each with individual and unique gifts to equip them for ministry.

The denigration of the role of women in ministry, and a corresponding disrespect for women’s unique gifts, has had disastrous consequences for the mission of the church. Men in leadership positions have promulgated the dangerous philosophy articulated by my Facebook “friend.”

Elevating theology over relationships and marginalizing the women who are the guardians of relationships, our church is eviscerating the spirit and the soul of our God-given message, as did the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day. Such an approach makes our message, as Ellen White once put it, “as dry as the hills of Gilboa that had neither dew nor rain.”¹ In doing so, the church blatantly disregards the relationship-centric pattern for ministry laid down by Jesus and the apostles. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, “Christ Prayed for Unity Among His Disciples,” *The Review and Herald* (Mar. 11, 1890).

When RELIGIOUS Abuse Is SEXUAL Abuse

By Winona Winkler Wendth

“YOU HAVE POWER OVER MY BODY BUT THE LORD JESUS HATH power over my body and soul.”

During the early spring of 1638, Puritan reformer Anne Hutchinson stood before a tribunal led by Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop. Hutchinson was answering to a crime: “a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex, and notwithstanding that was cried down you have continued the same.” The governor continued, “Therefore we have thought good to send for you to understand how things are, that if you be in an erroneous way we may reduce you so that you may become a profitable member here among us.”

Winthrop, the man who transformed Matthew 5:14 (“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill”) into a religious mandate that laid the foundation for American exceptionalism, was protecting the smooth-running operations of his community, which he believed was founded and developed according to God’s plan.

Yet theological disagreements had been growing over the previous year on matters having to do with grace and law. In a theocracy, disagreement means disruption, and Winthrop believed that disruption to the system could take them all down.

Hutchinson was a student of the Bible and a master of argument; she one-upped Winthrop over and over again, and she did it with better success than her male allies, most of whom had already been forced out of town. She was the remaining testifier to what she believed, and she gave support from Bible passage after Bible passage.

But John Winthrop pulled out one final accusation, against which Anne Hutchinson could not argue: she was a woman. As Winthrop said in the later part of the trial, even though she was acting on conscience, her position was in opposition to that of the church fathers. The town fathers were her ecclesiastical parents, and since she did not honor them, she was breaking the fifth commandment. Winthrop told her, “Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you.”

Components of Sexual Abuse

Today we consider what John Winthrop did to Anne Hutchinson a form of sexual abuse. Was she physically accosted? No. Was she

touched in an inappropriate way? No. Was she an object of the abuse of power? Definitely. Was this abuse a direct result of her being a woman? Yes.

The transcript cannot fully communicate condescending tones of voice, body language, or the expressions on the faces of Winthrop and his colleagues. But we can imagine them. Any woman who has been called in by her supervisor recognizes the nature of these situations, whose foundations lie deep beneath what is said and overtly acted on.

What we do know is that Hutchinson stood in front of a panel of men who looked at her, appraised her, and found her wanting—even dangerous.

This situation speaks to several components of sexual abuse:

The first is derived from the nature of sexuality itself, especially repressed sexuality in a social system that makes it impossible to recognize—let alone talk about or negotiate—maturing and adult drives. Indicators of sexual need or drive are reinterpreted into demonized or romanticized notions of women. Why women and not men? Because men are more likely to have claimed the responsibility for maintaining social order. Not surprisingly, this order conserves power for those who maintain it.

The second component of sexual abuse comes from truth about power: who holds it, and who benefits from it. Anyone who was once a child knows how important it is to keep parents present, validating, and contented. Life is easier that way. Of course, some children never grow beyond this or learn how to balance control and responsibility, rule-giving and rule-following. Some families produce repeated generations of grown-up children who cannot navigate the fluid streams of power and dependence to move toward creative, productive, thoughtful, or imaginative lives.

The third component comes from the notion that men and women have determined roles in society and that these roles give permissions or liberties to those in power, just as they prevent others from claiming them.

For example, until recently we recognized the permission of those in power to *look*—to watch those without power. We even see this in some missionary photographs, in which native peoples were photographed as though they were interesting or entertaining objects.

We have been treating women in this way for centuries. Students of cinema and photography often refer to this as “the male gaze.” Does staring at someone cause trouble? Not necessarily, except that it evidences a yearning or desire for ownership of whatever object is being stared at. Some men cannot give full visual attention to a woman without an exertion of power, a sexually energized experience. Some find it difficult to remove this sexual element from concentrated visual attention. (One wonders if this is part of a reluctance to see a woman in the pulpit: short-circuiting that “who is looking at whom?” confusion of power positioning.)

Male Permission

Today, horrific examples of powerful men in the media, government, and academia demonstrate sexuality, power, role-playing, and a sense of ownership run amok. But this is not the only way women suffer. Sexual abuse isn’t limited to physical violence or bizarre sexual habits.

What we’re discussing here is the permission women have given men to tell us who we are and what we must do and what we get to do, to make us the objects of interest or use *because we are women*. We are talking about the nature of sexuality, even if no overt sexual act has taken place. Women are told that we are best served if we cooperate. We are told, overtly or not, that doing our part—whether in the home, the workplace, the government, the casting couch, or the church—ensures our own security or success or the smooth-running operations that, in the long run, make life good for us.

Like Hutchinson, many of us have heard biblical principles called into play to denigrate our opinions, to cajole our behavior. Many of us have been advised, then prayed with in the privacy of a boss’s office, so that God will help us see the best course of action. And some of us would rather be patted on the rear, so that we could face an abusive situation directly, rather than watch it worm around in subterranean tunnels invisible to the public.

We are reluctant to complain about these situations—about words that taken alone may seem so insignificant that they are not worth collecting into a complete picture, such as the insistence with which some bosses call their female employees “girls,” saying that this makes women feel young. We work with men who hold women above and apart by describing us in the most romantic and delicate ways, believing that they are being respectful.

General John Kelly remarked in 2017 that when he was a child: “Women were sacred, looked upon with great honor. That’s obviously not the case anymore.” *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus responded: “Women are not sacred. If the upside of chivalry is the cape spread upon the muddy ground, the downside is the presumption, perhaps subconscious, that women are weak.... To be put on a pedestal also risks being kept in a box. In the good old days that Kelly mourns, women were not so much elevated by gender as constrained by it.”

Staying in Your Place

What does all of this have to do with the woman whom church fathers sent out into the cold 379 years ago, excommunicated from her village—accused, mostly, of being a smart woman who didn’t know her place? The governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony was creating a city on a hill, a light to the world, and she was casting a shadow. Winthrop exercised power over Anne Hutchinson’s body and her soul, whether he touched it or not. No earthly being has that permission, and Hutchinson called him on it. She paid dearly for her intelligence and insight.

In the past few years, tens of thousands of women have been openly sharing their experiences at the hands of those who see them as tools, as objects, as a means to an end. The #MeToo movement seems astounding, except that it isn’t. Sometimes the reported treatment is physically violent, sometimes not. But the experiences all have this in common: some people have notions of what less powerful people are good for, notions of where those people belong in the general scheme of things. And often violence—physical, emotional, social, or political—follows the refusal of the less powerful to be who they are expected or hoped to be.

It is difficult to know to what degree the Seventh-day Adventist Church protects women who, like Anne Hutchinson, refuse to stop talking and refuse to toe the line; but I am aware of no public denominational discussions about the abuse of religious power in the church or workplace, or religious power at home. I have heard nothing about how to handle people who attempt to control women by Bible verse or by prayer. Is religious coercion more acceptable than an unwelcome arm around a shoulder or a pinch on the bottom? The causes are the same.

Anne Hutchinson did not suppress her femaleness. She had survived 15 pregnancies and was a caretaker and midwife to the Puritan community in colonial Massachusetts. She did everything a woman could and should do. But she refused to consider her femaleness a prison.

“Assure yourselves this much,” said Hutchinson during her trial, “you do as much as in you lies to put the Lord Jesus Christ from you, and if you go on in this course you begin, you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” On March 22, 1638, she was excommunicated and condemned to leave Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Hutchinson and her fellow believers helped found the Providence Plantation a safe distance from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which calmed things down—for a while. Fifty years later, however, the colony began aggressive witch trials, an extreme form of systematic sexual abuse. Almost all of the accused and executed were women who were tried on religious grounds. Interestingly, a disproportionate number of those had controlled a significant portion of colony resources. Women were not supposed to have that kind of power, and they were killed for it.

But sometimes you just have to claim what’s rightfully yours. **AT**

IN SEARCH OF AN ADVENTIST LGBT+ RELATIONSHIP ETHIC

BY RONALD LAWSON

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, LIKE MANY conservative denominations, has officially rejected its members who practice homosexuality. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* states that “homosexual practices and lesbian practices are among the obvious perversions of God’s original plan.”¹

This being so, to what extent has our church been able to help its LGBT+ members with the ethical issues they confront as they attempt to live Christian lives? Its only advice has been to tell them that such conduct is sinful and that they must change orientation if they are to be accepted by God: “By means of the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit, all may be freed from the grip of sinful practices as they are restored to the image of the Creator.”²

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was the first denomination to fund a “change ministry” directed at gay people. The declared purpose of the Quest Learning Center and Homosexuals Anonymous was to help homosexuals become heterosexual. The endeavor ended disastrously when it was revealed that its head counselor had been sexually molesting young male counselees.

Even after this failure, however, the church’s message remained firm: if you cannot change your orientation, you must practice celibacy. When Loma Linda University ethicist David Larson prepared a paper at the request of the General Conference’s Biblical Research Institute, in which he urged the church to nurture gay relationships as the best option available, the paper caused outrage and was summarily rejected. Adventist leaders seemed to assume that the church had no members who were practicing homosexuals; they had either changed orientation or were living in celibacy. Consequently, the denomination avoided addressing the ethical issues that a member who is striving to live as a gay Christian would encounter. Adventist books dealing with sexual issues have followed this lead.

Looking for Answers

LGBT+ Adventists have typically found the church’s cease-and-desist advice destructive and unbearable, and they have instead chosen to live their lives as practicing gays and lesbians. They see the church’s position rooted more in the anti-gay prejudice dominant in American society than in inspired writings, for there was no understanding of a homosexual orientation in biblical times, nor any specific direction in the writings of Ellen White. (The White Estate, which is the guardian of Ellen White’s writings, has attempted to find and index out-of-context quotations that can be made to say what they wish she had written on the topic.)

For almost 20 years, I beseeched God to change my same-sex attractions. In 1974, at age 34, I concluded that the answer to

my prayers was that God was happy with the way he had made me. I then faced the question of how was I going to live as a gay man. I so wanted to find an Adventist partner, but I did not know another gay Adventist. I placed a notice in the national gay paper inviting gay Adventists to contact me, and I received about 40 replies. At least two other gay Adventists placed similar ads. These contacts led to the formation of Seventh-day Adventist Kinship, with the first chapter in Southern California.

Help from Our Church

In 1979, as I helped Kinship plan for a national camp meeting, I discovered that the central question each of us had was whether or not God accepted us. Could we be both gay and Christian? I was charged with finding the best Adventist scholars and pastors to help us study that question.

Our faith was of great importance to us. We wanted a relationship with Jesus and, because we were Seventh-day Adventists, we sought help from our church. I met at LaGuardia Airport in New York with Elder Duncan Eva, assistant to then-General Conference President Neal C. Wilson, and Dr. James Cox of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, to arrange for speakers. Elder Wilson surprised us by offering to shoulder the cost.

These Adventist teachers (three from the seminary) showed us that the Bible did not address the issue of homosexual orientation and that, without question, God loved gay and lesbian people immeasurably and accepted us as we were. They encouraged us to continue to walk with Jesus. They also suggested that God has called us to similar standards as those to which heterosexual Christians are called: to seek committed monogamous relationships.

We have since been helped by many amazing Adventist Christians, and we are grateful that the number who understand and accept us fully has steadily increased. Some Adventist universities and colleges have also been supportive, and a few congregations, such as Glendale City Church in Southern California, have adopted written policies that welcome and include us, not only in membership but in congregational leadership.

In Search of a Relationship Ethic

But since that first contact, the General Conference has failed us, offering little helpful direction. We are more accepted in some regions of the denomination than in others, but in most congregations, the best we can hope for is “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Because we are expected to hide our orientation, it is difficult to find an Adventist partner. Most of us must work on our relationship ethic with partners of a different religious background. And sadly, in some congregations we still hear sermons that portray us as immoral subhumans.

While many LGBT+ persons of Adventist background are deeply religious, they are so disappointed with their congregations that they have concluded that Adventism (and perhaps all Christianity) is either so biased that it is not relevant to them, or that the church (and therefore also Christianity) does not speak to the ethics of gay relations and behavior. Consequently, they are left on their own in working out ethical issues.

I continue to encourage gay and lesbian Adventists to consider the relevance of their Christian faith to their lives and to communicate with one another about it. As we work on this, we need the cooperation of Adventist ethicists, theologians, pastors, and members to illuminate the ethical dilemmas faced by their lesbian and gay sisters and brothers, and thus begin to fill this yawning gap. I do not expect or desire unanimity but, rather, to raise consciousness concerning the issue, with the result of making spiritual counsel and educational materials available to those in need of it.

Congregational Support

I also wish to say to my fellow Adventists that if their congregations do not welcome LGBT+ people, they should not be surprised if LGBT+ people default to secular patterns of gay relationship as the only patterns available to them. If gay Christians have no Christian ethic to bring to bear as they construct their relationships and sexual practices, they are left with the norms of the secular gay and lesbian community. And quite frankly, there is so much diversity in that community as to provide little moral guidance. Imagine if heterosexual Christians, when looking for ethical relationship guidelines, were to consult only the variety of practices among their kind in the secular world!

When our churches expect us to hide who we are rather than welcoming us and our partners, they contribute to destabilizing those relationships. If you want to encourage LGBT+ people to behave according to a Christian ethical standard, it is your responsibility to include us in a community of support and accountability.

In the heterosexual Christian community, monogamy has been the ideal. Marriage failure has become so widespread, however, that the church has been forced to countenance divorce and remarriage and also to draw up guidelines concerning how

to handle these situations when they happen—and how they affect church membership. That is, the church has accepted serial monogamy, even though it is not seen as ideal. Similarly, premarital sex has been increasingly overlooked or easily forgiven, especially once members marry. Should the same ideal and “second-best” mores apply to gay and lesbian Adventists?

Informed by Christian Ideals

In the early decades after the birth of the gay movement in 1969, the secular gay community reveled in sexual liberation—which is hardly surprising, given the repression it had endured for so long. But within the gay *Christian* community, and certainly among the Adventist LGBT+ people in Kinship, the expressed longing was typically for a loving, committed relationship. In this, we showed that we had absorbed the Christian ideals we’d been taught.

Back then, such relationships were often not easily achieved, since we’d had no homosexual socialization. We were unsure how to find and establish such relationships, and our churches did not celebrate and support them when we found them. Moreover, the fact that so many homosexual Adventists tried to hide their orientation from their churches led many of them to content themselves with fleeting sexual contacts.

However, as LGBT+ people have become known and appreciated in society, as same-sex marriage has become legal, and as many such couples have become successful parents, the younger LGBT+ generations have become increasingly focused on finding a committed partner and perhaps having children.

It is extremely sad and frustrating that the Adventist Church continues to refuse to recognize and support our marriages and relationships. Some church leaders apparently prefer that its members with LGBT+ orientations and identities keep them hidden. They do not grasp that as a result of this attitude, many have entered loveless heterosexual marriages in order to maintain a charade, while secretly engaging in serial same-sex promiscuity.

Since the General Conference remains so blockheaded about this matter, perhaps the best solution is to extend the network of Adventist congregations that make it part of their stated mission to welcome and include LGBT+ members. Surely this is what Jesus would have us do!

Has your congregation made a decision to be supportive of LGBT+ people? If you do, you may save many for the church, as well as for God’s kingdom. **AT**

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1990), p. 147.

² *ibid.*

Glendale City Church:

Intentional About Including Everyone!

EDITOR LOREN SEIBOLD TALKS TO THE PASTORS OF THE GLENDALE CITY CHURCH

Glendale City Church (GCC) was for many years the most prestigious pulpit in the Los Angeles area—a congregation known for sophistication, money, great music, and extraordinary ministries. In more recent years, it has evolved into a controversial pioneer for a more accepting understanding of the Adventist faith, one spelled out in statements of mission, inclusion, and affiliation.

I talked to two of GCC's pastors. Todd Leonard has been the senior pastor for seven years. Leif Lind has served as an associate pastor for 16 years.



ADVENTIST TODAY: Glendale City Church is known for its unique personality among Adventist congregations. Can you sketch out a bit of the history behind that?

Lind: Although GCC had long been a strong congregation, it was the ministry of Arthur L. Beitz in the 1960s that moved it in the direction of the openness it has today. Beitz was, among other things, a psychologist and a captivating speaker who addressed standing-room-only congregations and radio listeners every Sabbath morning. He also believed in the gospel and in motivating the church to make a difference in the world.

A turning point in the congregation's relationship with LGBT+ people happened in the early '80s when a young man, Carlos Martinez, began attending a weekly Bible study group comprising mostly elderly women at church. One evening he mustered the courage to "come out" to the participants, suspecting that he could be rejected. Instead, they gathered around him in a group hug. It soon became obvious that Carlos was HIV-positive, and he was hospitalized. This was at the height of the AIDS crisis, when gay men were dying in large numbers, often alone. GCC members regularly visited and prayed with Carlos and others on his ward, which at the time was astonishing to the nursing staff. The head nurse later visited GCC to see what kind of congregation this was that had embraced its most vulnerable.

Under Pastors Rudy Torres (1980-1990) and Mitch Henson (1984-2007), the congregation made its stance clear by welcoming LGBT+ people into the congregation and incorporating women into church leadership. "City Church Opens Way for Women to Be Elders and Deacons" read the headline from the church's 1984 newsletter, which announced that Bible worker Mary Walsh had become its first ordained woman elder and Linda Gage its first female associate pastor.



Mission Statement

Our mission is to reveal the love of Christ in all its tenderness and grandeur to the community in which we live. We desire to embrace the wonder of humanity in its complexity, diversity, and beauty—and to do so without precondition. In short, we yearn to reveal the splendor of Christ and to affirm the worth of all people.

Statement of Inclusion

Glendale City Church welcomes people of all backgrounds to fully participate in our church community. We do not discriminate based on gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, wealth, education, or religious background. If you are learning to love God and others, you belong here. God excludes no one. Neither do we.

Affiliation

Glendale City is a Christian church affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist

denomination. Our congregation was one of the first Adventist churches established in this part of Southern California.

While we continue to partner with this denomination, we are in a posture of protest against the unjust actions taken by our General Conference that attempt to undermine the contextualized work of the Adventist churches and centers of education in the Western United States. We are in solidarity with the actions of our Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists that:

- Ordain both women and men as clergy
- Protect the right of Adventist centers of education to teach current science to their students while honoring God as Creator
- Stand with congregations that welcome and include our LGBTQ loved ones in their faith communities

Carlos eventually succumbed to AIDS, but not before bequeathing his assets to the congregation. Others pitched in with larger donations, thus establishing what would eventually become a substantial endowment fund.

ADVENTIST TODAY: What I admire the most about the GCC is its intention of being a wholly inclusive congregation. What does it mean in the church's ministry?

Lind: We had already been an affirming church for LGBT+ individuals for many years when, in 2009, during the pastorate of Smuts van Rooyen, the congregation revisited its mission and vision statements. We intentionally rewrote these with a view to inclusivity. The motto "Revealing

Christ, Affirming All" has appeared in our bulletins and newsletters since then. The word "affirming" is understood within the LGBT+ community to indicate a place where gay and lesbian people are accepted.

These are not just empty words to us; they guide our ministries. We ask gay and lesbian members to be fully a part of everything we do here.

Leonard: We added our Statement of Inclusion in 2015 to make sure it was clear what we meant by "affirming all." Some evangelical Christian congregations were using deceptive affirmation language to attract LGBT+ people, but when they attended, they found they weren't eligible to be baptized, teach Sunday School classes, or be part of the choir or worship team.



At Glendale City Church, we accept LGBT+ people fully—and have for decades.

This bait-and-switch tactic is an especially cruel form of exclusion. Because gay and lesbian Adventists know that they're not welcome in many Adventist congregations, we wanted to be explicit that a person of any orientation or gender identity could fully participate—no limits—in the life and ministry of Glendale City Church.

ADVENTIST TODAY: To accept gay people into full fellowship must have been considered radical and rebellious by many in the denomination.

Lind: Far too many Adventists still feel that gays and lesbians cannot be genuinely spiritual people. Comments in official church publications and websites show continuing antipathy toward the LGBT+ community. Most congregations prefer a “don’t ask, don’t tell” interaction with their non-normative members, meaning that those who don’t fit into the church’s normative view still feel a sense of moral condemnation. The best LGBT+ people can hope for is “love the sinner, hate the sin” treatment—unkind and ultimately unhelpful.

It’s good to see some larger congregations and a few institutions in recent years showing a willingness

to accept LGBT+ people. In 2015 the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary voted a statement that “All persons, including practicing homosexuals, should be made to feel welcome to attend our churches, while non-practicing gay persons should be welcomed into membership and church office. All should receive spiritual care from the church (Gal. 6:1).”¹ Shortly thereafter, a similar statement was voted by the North American Division.

We welcome these efforts, yet for many gay Adventists it may have been too little, too late. At Glendale City Church, we accept LGBT+ people fully—and have for decades.

ADVENTIST TODAY: GCC’s statement of affiliation is probably unique in Seventh-day Adventism. While affirming your Adventist roots, you also say that you are “in a posture of protest against the unjust actions taken by our General Conference that attempt to undermine the contextualized work” of local congregations.

Leonard: When the General Conference voted at the 2018 Annual Council to set up compliance committees, we felt we had to communicate our continued commitment to be part of the

denomination but, at the same time, convey that our commitment would be shown through protest rather than silent acquiescence. Our members needed assurance that we still valued our Adventist faith tradition but that, at GCC, it was evolving into a better expression of our faith—one that practiced a fully integrated approach to individual and community well-being. We also needed to assure the members of our congregation, who had found a safe and welcoming community here, that we were still on their side. We added appreciation for our own Pacific Union leaders, who have been defending people marginalized by General Conference decisions, especially women pastors.

ADVENTIST TODAY: Where most Adventist mission statements talk about sharing the gospel or the three angels’ messages, GCC’s talks about “embracing the wonder of humanity in its complexity, diversity, and beauty—and to do so without precondition.” How do you pursue that goal?

Leonard: We host an significant number of ministries. To start with, our campus is wide open to our community as we seek to become a “village square” for our neighbors.



We have long been known for our strong music program. Our annual Christmas concert draws people from all of the surrounding churches and packs our sanctuary. We have twice-monthly, free noonday concerts at the church, as well as monthly concerts sponsored by freewill offerings.

We are part of the Glendale Sunday Lunch Program, an ecumenical rotation of local congregations that host meals for up to 70 of our low-income neighbors.

We run A+ Adventist Children's Center, which has more than 25 children attending from non-Adventist families. We also launched two nonprofits: the Glendale Communitas Initiative, an interfaith organization helping prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless through compassionate case management and financial coaching, and the Caesura Youth Orchestra, providing after-school instrumental and orchestral education for low-income children at two public elementary schools.

We received the 2017 Church of Compassion award from the North

American Division for our community work, and we have been nominated again for the 2020 award.

We actively participate in ecumenical work, such as an annual city-wide prayer breakfast, through the Glendale Religious Leaders Association. This included hosting an interfaith sermon series in 2018 that brought Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox, and Adventist speakers to talk about the common and unique aspects of our eschatological understandings of the kingdom of God.

Finally, because of our reputation as a uniquely inclusive church, we have become a sanctuary of refuge to more than 100 Adventists whose membership in local congregations all over the world was threatened because of their orientation, identity, or support of LGBT+ people. For many years we've produced an online webcast of our worship service to serve these individuals, who are members but don't live nearby.

ADVENTIST TODAY: What has been the result of GCC's unconventional approach to Seventh-day Adventism?

Leonard: We have an emotionally healthy and spiritually vibrant congregation that continues to welcome new people. But as an historically white congregation in the heart of the second-largest metropolitan region on the continent, we cannot escape being near the leading edge of the great dying of North American Adventism.

We wish that our fully inclusive mission would lead to more growth. For previous generations of LGBT+ Adventists, finding a way to remain a church member was so important because of the belief that salvation could only be found through

our denomination. More of us Seventh-day Adventists have met a more generous God and grown beyond that way of thinking. But that also means that LGBT+ people who were raised in the Adventist faith are not as likely to remain in the church as adults, especially if they have once been rejected. They will simply join a congregation in a different affirming denomination and find a spiritual community there.

Yet the important thing is that GCC is doing what is right, what Jesus wants us to do: to be a church community for whomever in our faith tradition seeks one, no matter whom they love. **AT**

¹ Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, *An Understanding of the Biblical View on Homosexual Practice and Pastoral Care* (Oct. 9, 2015), p. 16.

Isaiah 56:1-8: Righteousness and Gender Nonconformity

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

AS I HAVE ARGUED IN A PREVIOUS ESSAY IN THIS magazine, righteousness in the Prophets is not about personal piety based on the performance of and conformity to social, dogmatic, and ritualistic norms. The word translators consistently render *righteousness* in the Hebrew scriptures actually means *justice*. When the Old Testament prophets speak of righteousness, they often use the twinned words *mishpat* and *tzedekah*—“justice and righteousness,” which is what Isaiah uses at the beginning of Isaiah 56.

“Thus says the LORD:

‘Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my righteousness be revealed” (verse 1, ESV).

In the Hebrew Bible, this justice/righteousness lies at the heart of Sabbath observance.

“Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil” (verse 2, NRSV).

Isaiah, like the others, advocates justice for every marginalized, oppressed, and outcast group in ancient Israel, including eunuchs—a gender-nonconforming group.

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’;
and do not let the eunuch say,

‘I am just a dry tree.’

For thus says the LORD:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,

all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—

these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;

for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,

I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered” (verses 3-8, NRSV).

Gender Nonconformity in Isaiah

In this passage not only the eunuch is gender nonconforming, but also the foreigner—commonly referred to in Scripture as the Gentile. The eunuch is a castrated male, and the Gentile is an uncircumcised male.

The norm in this case is unqualified Jewish maleness, which both the eunuch and the Gentile transgress. (It is important to understand that in ancient Israel, the category of believer or nonbeliever is with reference to the Jewish male. Women had no agency and, thus, were not part of the general conversation regarding the covenant relationship with God.)

The eunuch Isaiah has in mind is probably the castrated male, for in classic Hebrew literary form, he declares that the eunuch who observes *Shabbat* will receive “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”¹

In many ancient cultures, forced male castration occurred as a result of war and conquest and was meant to disempower males, sexually possess their women, and cut off their lineage. Slaves were castrated to carry out important social and religious functions, such as “courtiers or equivalent domestics, treble singers, religious specialists, soldiers, royal guards, government officials, and guardians of women or harem servants.”²

In Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus notes three categories of eunuchs: those who are biologically eunuchs, those who have been made eunuchs by others, and those who choose to be eunuchs for religious purposes.³ Jesus and Paul of Tarsus may have been considered under the third category, because as Jewish males they did not live up to social role expectations as husbands and fathers, and they even further breached the gender boundary by interacting spiritually and intellectually with women in the public sphere.⁴

Regardless of the category, the eunuch breaches the clear boundaries of gender—as is the case with what we today refer to as transgender persons. The eunuch must remain outside of the assembly of the righteous. According to Hebrew law, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (Deut. 23:1, NRSV). The law makes no distinction between natural, elective, or forced gender nonconformity.

This faith community, if it is to build on witness of and witness to the nonconforming Christ, cannot function like a social club that accepts only those of a certain type.

Isaiah’s eunuch is this ostracized or exiled gender nonconformist for whom Isaiah demands inclusion when he says, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7, NRSV).

Yet in this passage, Isaiah seeks the inclusion of the foreigner and eunuch on the condition that they “Maintain justice and do righteousness” (verse 1, AMP) and observe *Shabbat*. Such persons are not, by virtue of their gender nonconformity, out of covenant with God (verse 4).

Nonconforming Males

It is upon the prophetic ideal articulated by Isaiah that Jesus, Paul, and the primitive church built their outreach.

In Luke’s second letter, Acts of the Apostles, he demonstrates Isaiah’s inclusiveness when the good news

of salvation comes to the very two types of gender-nonconforming males mentioned in Isaiah 56: one an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) and the other a Gentile named Cornelius (Acts 10).

In the latter, Peter receives a shocking vision in which God tells him to eat unclean creatures. The message, as Seventh-day Adventists know, was not intended to change his diet, but was directing him to mingle with the uncircumcised Gentile Cornelius, on whom (to the concern of the circumcised believers) the Holy Spirit falls (Acts 10:45-46).

Two chapters later, an angel directs Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, who at the moment Philip meets him is reading from Isaiah:

“Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living” (Isa. 53:7-8, NRSV).

The Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip, “Does the prophet say this about himself, or about someone else?”

Why does he ask this question? Perhaps the Ethiopian sees in Isaiah someone who identifies with his own stigma and is seeking justice. Philip tells him the good news about Jesus, and the eunuch joins with the gender-nonconforming Christ through baptism, by which he enters into the life of the Spirit.

The religious tradition would have shut out the Ethiopian eunuch, along with the Gentile Cornelius. But the good news preached by Isaiah, Jesus, and the primitive church includes them both.

Gender, Spirituality, and Justice

According to the apostle Paul, when one enters into the life of the Spirit—when one joins with Christ—gender is of no importance. In his opposition to some members of the Galatian church, who attempted to force circumcision upon Gentile believers, Paul made a shocking statement: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29, NRSV).

Isaiah calls the gender-nonconforming person into the practice of justice, not into gender conformity, and in this way he advocates for their inclusion in the community of Israel, from which the law would have banished them.

The statement is shocking because Paul, like every other Jewish male, would have recited the following prayer each day: “Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a non-Jew. Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman. Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a slave.”⁵

As a result of his radical encounter with the risen Christ, Paul is convinced that these distinctions no longer exist. He undermines this religion that idolizes maleness based on a meticulously marked boundary between male and female, calling it a religion of flesh (Gal. 3:2-5). He invites all into the life of Christ, the life of the Spirit that admits all people, including the gender nonconforming.

He even opposes the time-honored requirement that Gentiles must go through the proselytizing ritual of circumcision. The uncircumcised—women, Gentiles, and slaves—are the people Paul has specifically included in Galatians 3:28. Here is Paul's astounding antithesis to the blessing that lauds Judaic maleness: "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:4-6, NRSV).

Again, the term translators render "righteousness" is the word *dikaioisunē*, which actually means "justice." In Galatians, justice comes by the grace of God, not because anyone deserves it (Gal. 2:15-21). That includes justice for the gender nonconforming, inviting them, as the prophet Isaiah did centuries before, into the covenant community of the just so they too may practice righteousness and justice.

What About Us?

The Adventist world church is a Shabbat-observing church.

None of the references to Sabbath in Isaiah carries the definite article. Isaiah speaks of Shabbat, not *the* Sabbath. The same is true in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. That there is no article indicates that the biblical Shabbat transcends the ritualistic observance of a day and, instead, symbolizes the all-encompassing principle of justice.

Both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 show the Sabbath demonstrated by solidarity in community. Exodus reminds Israel that all creation comes from One, while Deuteronomy reminds Israel that as slaves in Egypt, they were once outcasts on the margins of society. Sabbath is a comprehensive call to do to others as you would have them do to you, emblematic of the entire message of justice and liberation that characterizes the story of salvation.

Let us revisit the essential meaning of Shabbat: the practice of justice.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is also a movement of prophecy. This faith community, if it is to build on witness *of* and witness *to* the nonconforming Christ, cannot function like a social club that accepts only those of a certain type. It must attend to the reality that all humans do not experience *being* in identical ways.

Let us revisit the deeper meaning of prophecy and, like Isaiah, speak for God on behalf of the oppressed.

Read in context, Isaiah teaches us that righteousness is not based on whether one conforms to gender norms, but upon whether the person—conforming or nonconforming—lives a just life. Isaiah calls the gender-nonconforming person into the practice of justice, not into gender conformity, and in this way he advocates for their inclusion in the community of Israel, from which the law would have banished them.

Like Isaiah, Philip, and Paul, we must answer the call of the Spirit to invite the gender nonconformers into the fellowship of Shabbat and practice the righteousness that God requires of us all. **AT**

¹ From the Hebrew word *karath*, which means to "cut off."

² See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eunuch.

³ Self-castration in order to take on religious roles was performed by men in many ancient cultures. This continued into early Christianity, with members of the early church practicing celibacy (including castration) for spiritual purposes. The second-century church father Tertullian describes Jesus and Paul as *spadones* (often translated "eunuchs") and claims that Paul was actually castrated. See Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (2004), p. 85.

⁴ See, for example, Mark 14:3-9; Luke 10:38-42; and Romans 16:1-16.

⁵ See torah.org/learning/women-class31/.

Antiochus Epiphanes in 1919: Ellen White, Daniel, and the Books of the Maccabees

BY MATTHEW J. KORPMAN

SINCE THE 1980S, STARTING WITH the work of Ron Graybill,¹ Adventist historians have begun to shed new light on the topic of the Apocrypha in early Adventism.² Among its many other items of discussion, the pivotal 1919 Bible Conference included dialogue on the Apocrypha and a key figure in it, Antiochus Epiphanes IV.

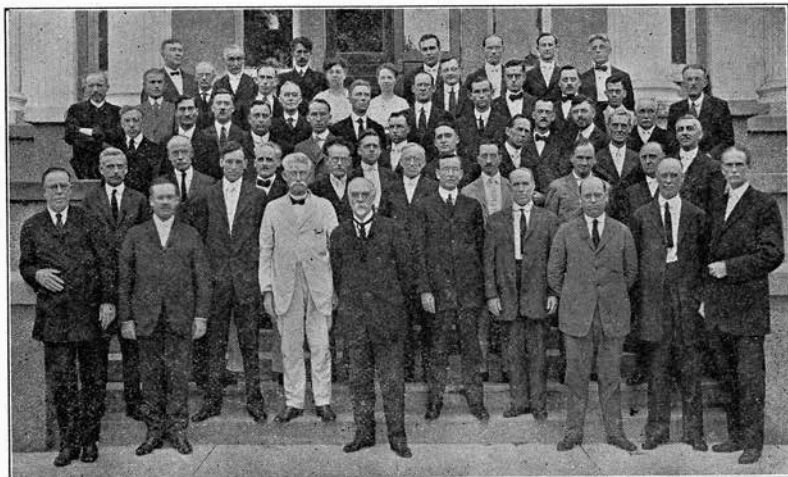
During the conference H. C. Lacey, a religion teacher at the Foreign Mission Seminary, noted a text from 1 Maccabees and stated, “You see that the language both in the Bible and the apocryphal book is practically identical.”³ Lacey later took this further, saying that Antiochus was indeed the little horn of Daniel 7 but that the prophecy intended to predict *two* events. He argued that what mainstream biblical scholars see as evidence of an *ex eventu* prophecy—namely, the part of the prediction that seemingly did not match known history and as such suggests the time of the author—is instead evidence that the prophecy has a second application, which will match the prediction in full.

Lacey declared: “In the career of Antiochus Epiphanes there is a kind of a little wheel within a wheel. There are events in his life which are very like what is predicted of the little horn—extremely alike, and I do not know why we could not consider this in the same way that Ezekiel expresses it—a wheel within a wheel. Just to illustrate: The things said about the little horn of Daniel 7 can apply to Antiochus Epiphanes in a small way. He is the eleventh down the line, three were plucked up in his place (names were mentioned), he did speak great words against the Most High, he did wear out the saints of the Most High in a small way, he did change the law of the Most High; things were given into his hand for just a time, times, and a half in a literal sense, which was three and one-half years. And in a very small way, Antiochus Epiphanes might have been the little horn. So, suppose you and I had been living in that day; we would have thought that that prophecy met its fulfillment to us, and we should

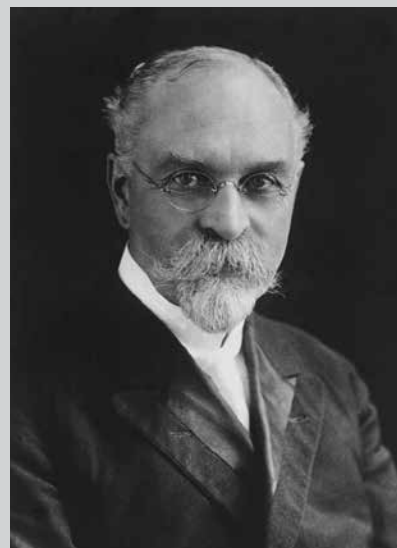
have been sustained through that hour of persecution.”⁴

The General Conference (GC) president at the time, A. G. Daniells, was concerned about this view, asking Lacey never to speak of it to his students, because he feared that “our boys will be out over the country saying that [Antiochus] is the little horn.” Someone else at the conference, whose identity is not recorded, spoke up and said that some Adventist ministers were already saying this.

Lacey later replied to Daniells: “I do not see why you object to taking this in a small way as referring to Antiochus Epiphanes,—as a ‘wheel within a wheel’ view of this prophecy. Living in those times we would have thought that the prophecy met its fulfillment, but in this time we see it has a larger fulfillment, we get a present message from it; and we read any chapter and make other slight allusion to those days and how it applies today. Sister White herself recognized the double application method.”⁵



Delegates to Bible Conference, Washington, D. C., July, 1919



Does Lacey mean to suggest that Ellen G. White embraced a theoretical framework of dual fulfillment, or a particular application of that framework to the Daniel passages in question? My research shows that some early Adventists were open to a combined preterist/historicist interpretation of Daniel and that Ellen White may have been also.

Antiochus Epiphanes in Daniel

Although disagreeing with Lacey's view, GC field secretary W. W. Prescott admitted that while he did not take the "little horn" to be a reference to Antiochus, "he may have been in a small way a type."⁶ Pioneering missionary J. N. Andrews noted that "it seems to me that to the Jewish mind there could not be a stronger picture of who the antichrist was than the character and conduct of this man Antiochus Epiphanes."⁷ M. C. Wilcox, then a Pacific Press book editor, called Antiochus Epiphanes "a type" of the papal persecution when discussing Daniel 11 in a discussion of "Principles of Prophetic Interpretation."⁸ Wilcox

said that Antiochus was "a striking type, so far as God's people are concerned, of the later persecuting power which was to arise."⁹

Elsewhere, Wilcox argued in his presentation, as did Lacey, that prophecies were often doubled. He noted: "Many of the prophecies of the Old Testament are double prophecies in which the local conditions of the prophet's time are so blended with greater future events that it is impossible to separate them, and we never can get a right understanding unless we recognize the fact that the prophecy is double. In other words, the foreground of the prophet blends with the larger and far future field, so that the objects seem as one. The nearer mountain seems one with the more distant peak or ridge. All blend in the far horizon. But if we were to climb the nearer mountains, we would find, perhaps, great valleys separating us from the higher elevations. The vision does not show the intervening valleys. The prophet sees the smaller, nearer mountains scenery blending with a far distant

peak, making one mountain, seemingly, of the two. It is only by the aid of the Spirit of God that we can divide between the local and far-reaching prophecies. Sometimes we must wait for fulfilment."¹⁰

Although he never specified which prophecies had double application, given his description of Antiochus as a "type," Wilcox possibly understood Daniel to apply to both the events of the Maccabean rebellion and future events. Whether or not he believed this explicitly, he seems to have allowed for the possibility.

Speaking on Daniel 11, Adventist editor W. E. Howell hinted at double prophecy, noting that "Not only has God shown the great mountain peaks of prophecy," but that the accuracy of Daniel's prophecies shows that "written 200 years before the days of Antiochus Epiphanes...God could look down and see that man's whole career."¹¹

W. G. Wirth, then a religion teacher at Pacific Union College, said: "It seems to me the great thing is as Brother Lacey brought out, the fact

that Antiochus Epiphanes is really the great figure in this chapter. Really, I think he should be emphasized more than we have emphasized him, and for this reason: That to my mind, Antiochus Epiphanes stands related to the people of God at that time in a typical way as the Pope stands related to the whole people of God.”¹²

Ellen White and Antiochus

Whether or not Lacey intended to suggest that Ellen White herself had applied the idea of “double prophecy” or “a wheel within a wheel” to Daniel, evidence does point to such an interpretation on her part. In 1898, White referred to the events of 1 Maccabees, writing that “The prophecy of Daniel revealed the time of His advent, but not all rightly interpreted the message. Century after century passed away; the voices of the prophets ceased. The hand of the oppressor was heavy upon Israel, and many were ready to exclaim, ‘The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth.’ Ezekiel 12:22.”¹³

The reference to Daniel, the cessation of prophecy in 1 Maccabees, and the “hand of the oppressor” makes very clear that this is speaking of Antiochus Epiphanes. Although one might imagine that the “oppressor” was the Roman army, the connection with 1 Macc. 9:27’s discussion of the cessation of prophecy clearly identifies the one spoken of as Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the main villain of the book.

Likewise, the reference to “not all rightly interpreted” appears to be a reference to 1 Macc. 1:54 and 6:7, which report that Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled fully during the Maccabean era. No one during the

Roman period was misinterpreting the Daniel prophecies. Moreover, prophecy had not ceased during the Roman occupation, for the Gospels mentioned prophets such as Simeon, Anna, and John. As such, Antiochus remains the only point of reference within the context of her passage.

Evidence of White’s familiarity with (and exegesis of) 1 Maccabees may be seen in another comment in connection with the work of Daniel, where she notes that “The world is stirred with the spirit of war. The prophecies of the eleventh of Daniel have almost reached their final fulfillment.”¹⁴ That White was familiar with and cited 1 Maccabees on other occasions, and that her husband greatly treasured 1 Maccabees for its history, makes it probable that her reference to “final fulfillment” means she accepted the interpretation, at least in respect to Daniel 11, and that it was both a description of the events surrounding Antiochus Epiphanes around 167 BCE and a prophecy regarding the final days of Earth’s history. The reference to “spirit of war” also appears to be a reference to the conflicts that enveloped the Maccabean oppression under Antiochus Epiphanes.

When she writes, “Study Revelation in connection with Daniel, for history will be repeated,” White seems to be alluding to a previous fulfillment of Daniel.¹⁵ Likewise, she reports: “The prophecy in the eleventh [chapter] of Daniel has nearly reached its complete fulfillment. Much of the history that has taken place in fulfillment of this prophecy will be repeated.”¹⁶

It appears from these quotations that White’s reference to “the history that has taken place in fulfillment

of this prophecy” is a reference to the events of the second century as recorded in 1 Maccabees. Dual fulfillment may help explain why, in reference to 1 Macc. 9:27, White commented that at the time of “the oppressor” (Antiochus), “not all rightly interpreted the message [of Daniel]” and that “the words of the prophets were uncomprehended by many.”¹⁷ Perhaps she recognized that while the events of 167 BCE were one *part* of the fulfillment, they were misunderstood by the author of 1 Maccabees to be *the final* fulfillment.

Why might Ellen White have accepted a dual-fulfillment or a partial-fulfillment view of Daniel’s prophecy? She had, we now know, explicitly affirmed the Apocrypha as the Word of God in her vision of 1849.¹⁸ She exclaimed in vision that Satan was trying to remove the Apocrypha and that Sabbatarian Adventists must “bind it” to the heart and never let its pages close, because it was “thy word.” Soon afterward she would note that the Apocrypha was something “the wise of these last days should understand.”¹⁹ James White’s reference to the Apocrypha as Scripture in *Word to the Little Flock* was likely reflective of not only his estimation of it, but also of those around him, including Ellen White herself.

She appears to have wanted to honor the identification of Antiochus Epiphanes in 1 Maccabees as connected with Daniel, while avoiding a strictly preterist understanding of the prophecy, which would have denied the papacy its role.

A high view of the Bible as a whole, apocryphal and canonical, appears then to have led to this dual fulfillment that she applies to Daniel.²⁰

Reassessing Our Prophetic Heritage

The 1919 Bible Conference gives us insight into many aspects of early Adventism, but in particular, it sheds light on both the role and value of the Apocrypha in the years after Ellen White's death. The books of Maccabees and their main villain, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, were still important and recognized by some Adventists as authentic and valuable for an understanding of biblical prophecy. This followed the tradition of early Adventism and the appeals of James and Ellen White for increased study into these materials.

A weakness in many of these approaches from 1919 is that while they proposed that large parts of Daniel mirrored Antiochus, and though some proposed a "wheel within a wheel" model, they never attempted to fully develop a practical double-fulfillment model. In all of their proposals, they tried to blend the two rather than laying out separate ways in which the prophecies were each fulfilled. The discussions in 1919 mirror Ellen White's own comments about the Hellenistic period and reveal that her implicit and repeated suggestions of double or partial fulfillment in Daniel at this time were shared by others.

The conclusion shows that White appears to have personally believed and privately shared convictions of the partial fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies at the time of the books of Maccabees. Having books in her library on the preterist view of Daniel, she seems to have come to agree with the scholarly consensus that still exists everywhere outside modern Adventism.

Ellen White did not limit such fulfillment only or primarily to the ancient period. She and others, like Lacey, recognized the incomplete preterist interpretation as only a sign of the true fulfillment to come. As the Apocrypha withered away in importance after her death, however, these views became less and less convincing or interesting during the rise of fundamentalism and evangelicalism that was imposing itself onto Seventh-day Adventist leadership.

Have we, in largely ignoring or minimizing the Maccabees and Antiochus, lost the proper sense of the prophecies that many earlier Adventists understood? And could our ability to wrestle with them be improved if we were to follow the course not taken, by attempting to read them as *both* preterist and historicist? The two views do not necessarily need to cancel each other, and we would probably be better off as a church if we could admit as much.

This research should cause us to pause and reassess the work of Desmond Ford. Part of the pushback against Ford was driven by his interest in the role of Antiochus, whom this research shows was of interest to not only the earliest Adventists, but to Ellen White herself. The church needs not only to re-evaluate our devotion to historicism alone, but also to take an introspective look at how the church has and will continue to act toward those like Ford, who were more in line with Adventist theological history than the traditionalists who opposed them. **AT**

¹ Ronald Graybill, "Under the Triple Eagle: Early Adventist Use of the Apocrypha," *Adventist Heritage*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 25-32.

² Matthew J. Korpman, "Adventism's Hidden Book: A Brief History of the Apocrypha," *Spectrum*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2018), pp. 56-65; see also my series of articles on TheCompassMagazine.com outlining the individual histories of each apocryphal book within early Seventh-day Adventist history.

³ General Conference of SDA, *1919 Bible Conference Collection*, ed. M. C. Wilcox et al. (1919), p. 336.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 344.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 849.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 393.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 58-59. "It again bridges centuries in passing over the remaining kings of Syria after Antiochus IV, B.C. 164, passing Egypt, passing the Roman Republic, to Roman persecution under the Papacy, of which Antiochus (IV) Epiphanes was a type, and rushes on to the last days, when world apostasy shall stand up against the Prince of princes, to be overthrown, when that Prince of Life, 'Michael,' shall stand up."

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 454.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 335.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 495.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 31.

¹⁴ White, "The Day of the Lord Is Near, and Hasteth Greatly," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 81, No. 47 (1904), p. 16. Repeated again, with variation, in White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9: "The world is stirred with the spirit of war. The prophecy of the eleventh chapter of Daniel has nearly reached its complete fulfillment" (p. 14). The change from "final" to "complete" does not, contrary to the Biblical Research Institute, change the meaning. Both words indicate that a partial fulfillment is possible previously.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg, Letter 56, 1896.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White to Hiram A. Crow, Letter 103, 1904.

¹⁷ White, *Prophets and Kings* (1917), p. 700.

¹⁸ White, "Remarks in Vision," Manuscript 5, 1849.

¹⁹ White, "A Copy of E. G. White's Vision, Which She Had at Oswego, N. Y., January 26, 1850," Manuscript 4, 1850.

²⁰ W. W. Prescott reveals that some understood Ellen White to have dismissed the Antiochus interpretation, because she had written that the word "sacrifice" should not be added to the Hebrew. However, this ignores the idea of double fulfillment. General Conference of SDA, *1919 Bible Conference Collection*, ed. M. C. Wilcox et al. (1919), p. 612.

What If God Were Goddess?

Why We Need to Acknowledge the Feminine in God

By Lindsey Abston Painter



WHEN I WAS IN COLLEGE, I WENT TO Europe with my best friend and we visited the Sistine Chapel. I was admiring the breathtaking beauty of the images on the ceiling when I noticed something odd. As I looked up at the temptation in the garden of Eden, I asked my tour guide, “Why is Satan painted as a woman?”

The guide appeared startled and looked upward. “He isn’t,” the man replied.

“Ummmm, yes,” I said. “She is. *She* very clearly has breasts. And *her* hair is long like Eve’s, not short like Adam’s.”

Thanks a lot, Michelangelo!

But Michelangelo wasn’t the first or the last to associate Satan with the feminine gender. Christianity, at least during the time of the some of these classical painters, seemed to have no problem depicting the devil as female.

God is always portrayed as a man, though. And this identification isn’t limited to classical painters. Referring to God as a woman has made Christians feel uncomfortable, even scandalized, for hundreds of years.

It appears that, in the Christian mind, something about women is bad. There is something a little indecent—just slightly off-putting—that makes God’s association with us unacceptable. As a little girl, I couldn’t have put this into words, but I sensed that to understand God in female terms would have been to diminish God.

Does God Understand Me?

What does that say about me? If a being as powerful and unchanging as God can’t be thought of in the female form without being reduced in some way, how am I, a lowly human woman, not to understand that my sex diminishes me? That by occupying a female space, I am smaller and less worthy than a man?

This question of the gender of God has been further confused by depictions of goddesses in pagan and New Age religious traditions. At least that’s what I’ve been told. We can’t refer to God as a woman, because the idea of God as a woman reminds us of Wiccans and dangerous New Age religions. My question, then, is why, when we refer to God as a male, do we not get

him confused with Buddha, Allah, Zeus, Krishna, Akal Purakh, or any of thousands of other male gods of religions around the world? Why is a female God tainted by association with false gods, but a male God is not?

Did Jesus Experience It All?

I remember being puzzled as a child when my pastor claimed that Jesus experienced every single thing that people experience on Earth so that he could have a complete understanding of humanity. In hindsight, I suspect he meant that Jesus experienced all human emotions and temptations.

But in my pre-teen years, that idea raised so many questions. Did Jesus know what it was like at the end of the day in junior high to see a bloodstain on the back of his pants? Did Jesus ever feel uncomfortable because grown men had made suggestive comments about his developing body? Did Jesus ever struggle not to feel shame about his breasts? Did he feel the humiliation of being rejected by a boy because of his looks? Obviously not.

When I lay in bed at age 13, missing school and crying in pain from menstrual cramps, I considered praying to God about my pain. I elected not to, though. I reasoned that because God was a man, he didn't want to hear about my period problems.

But even as a grown woman, I ask myself about Jesus' identification with the problems that women face. Did Jesus ever know the pain of a miscarriage? Did he know the longing for a child—or the dread of an unwanted one? Did Jesus experience the burden of emotional maintenance of a household, as the vast majority of women do?

My point is that an insistence that God is male—or at least that God be referred to as male even if we say God is genderless—creates a barrier between God and women. Was I created in God's image? The Bible says so. Yet the curve of my hips, my breasts, my monthly cycles, even the experience of growing a child and birthing it, has no place in the Christian understanding of God. The God I have been taught about doesn't experience these things. And that makes God seem distant, and very unlike me.

A Feminine God

There's a lot of talk in the larger culture these days about representation. Women, people of color, the disabled, LGBT+ people—all are underrepresented in movies, TV shows, and general culture. I believe it is far more important for people to see themselves represented in God. God isn't male. God isn't white. God doesn't have a sexuality. So it's interesting that Christians are so defensive about the way we imagine her.

(Use of the feminine pronoun in that last sentence might have made you uncomfortable. For better or for worse, we are all creatures of habit. Even as I am writing this article about how important it is to sometimes think of God as feminine, I have to keep going back and editing out the masculine pronouns I automatically wrote.)

I don't want to descend into gender stereotyping here, but our culture associates certain qualities, rightly or wrongly, with women: nurturance, compassion, empathy, mercy, and love. These are qualities that the Bible says God possesses. And that list doesn't even include the reproductive process she went through in creating human beings in the first place.

When our culture views God exclusively as a man, it's harder to see these stereotypically feminine qualities and much easier to see a male God portraying righteous anger, exacting justice, and showcasing strength. Those qualities exist in God as well, of course; but without the feminine aspects, her character is only half understood.

I am not the first to note that the reason Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been semi-deified within Catholicism is that she is a figure whom many women and men can relate to in a more intimate way than they can to a male God. Her popularity, deserved or not, is an indicator of the need for representation within the Christian faith of a feminine divinity.

If you, male reader, are created in the image of God, then so am I. David, Moses, Joseph, and Sampson were all created in the image of God. But so were Ruth, Naomi, Mary, and Esther. On behalf of my gender, I urge the church to take a hard look at what it finds so threatening about occasionally representing God as a woman—when, in fact, our God has to be far beyond sex and gender.

What if God were a woman? What if she were a powerful, glorious, mysterious, loving Goddess? She would want to hear me at 13 years old tell her about my body, my fears and shame, my growth and dreams. I want my daughter to feel a connection to her like I never could. I want my son to recognize the female in God as well as the male. I want all of us to see that calling God a woman isn't to diminish her, but to elevate her—a God representing us all. **AT**



NEWS BRIEFS

It's No Longer Wise to Sing "Side by Side"

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Along with postponing this summer's General Conference Session until next year due to restrictions prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world church headquarters has banned members from singing the Adventist favorite "Side by Side."

"This particular chorus, however near to everyone's hearts, is the last thing we should be singing these days," said the statement.

The General Conference (GC) explained that Adventists have "a particular weakness for this song and a tendency to stand far too close, often holding hands or throwing arms around each other's shoulders."

The statement called the song a "super spreader that could get us all in big trouble with the World Health Organization."

The GC also warned against tempting fate by singing "It Only Takes a Spark."

Some Adventists Cheer Social Distancing Rules

ADVENTIST WORLD — Recent social distancing guidelines imposed on populations around the world have come as music to the ears of countless Adventists who were already remarkably skilled at "us vs. them" thinking and behavior. The presidential order to stay several feet away from the overall population and shun most social gathering spots was

met with a hearty "amen" from saints who had always made it a point of pride to remain as separate and peculiar a people as possible.

As though earthly physical distancing measures were not enough, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports having received a torrent of letters from hopeful Adventists wondering if they can continue social distancing in heaven.



2 Cities Are Claiming to Be “Most Adventist”

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A question that has been burning for decades in the minds of thousands of Adventists in North America may finally be answered this year: Is Loma Linda more Adventist than Berrien Springs?

Since Adventists themselves have been entirely unable to make up their minds, the United States Supreme Court has offered to rule on the issue, in order to finally give territorial Adventists some closure. Residents of both towns have claimed that they are from the “Jerusalem of Adventism” and that the other community should stop pretending to be more Adventist.

Berrien Springs residents have wholeheartedly rejected Loma Linda’s claim to be “more Adventist,” which is based on the fact that the community of about 9,000 Adventists in the Loma Linda, California, area form the core of America’s Blue Zone region. Loyalists in Berrien Springs, Michigan, said that they aren’t dying earlier due to a less vegetarian diet, but because Michigan’s weather robs people of the will to live.

“Use GPS” to Replace Orienteering Honor

SILVER SPRING, Md. — The Pathfinder honor in orienteering, which used to involve using a complicated wilderness compass and reading topographical maps, has now been updated. The new honor, called Use GPS, recommends that Pathfinders simply download a handy app onto their favorite mobile device.

The General Conference Youth Ministries Department made the decision after way too many Pathfinder leaders complained about their club members getting lost in the woods while trying to earn the Orienteering Honor last summer during the International Pathfinder Camporee in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

“There’s no point putting our Pathfinders through all of this antiquated wayfinding when modern tech holds the answer,” said a Facebook update announcing the change.

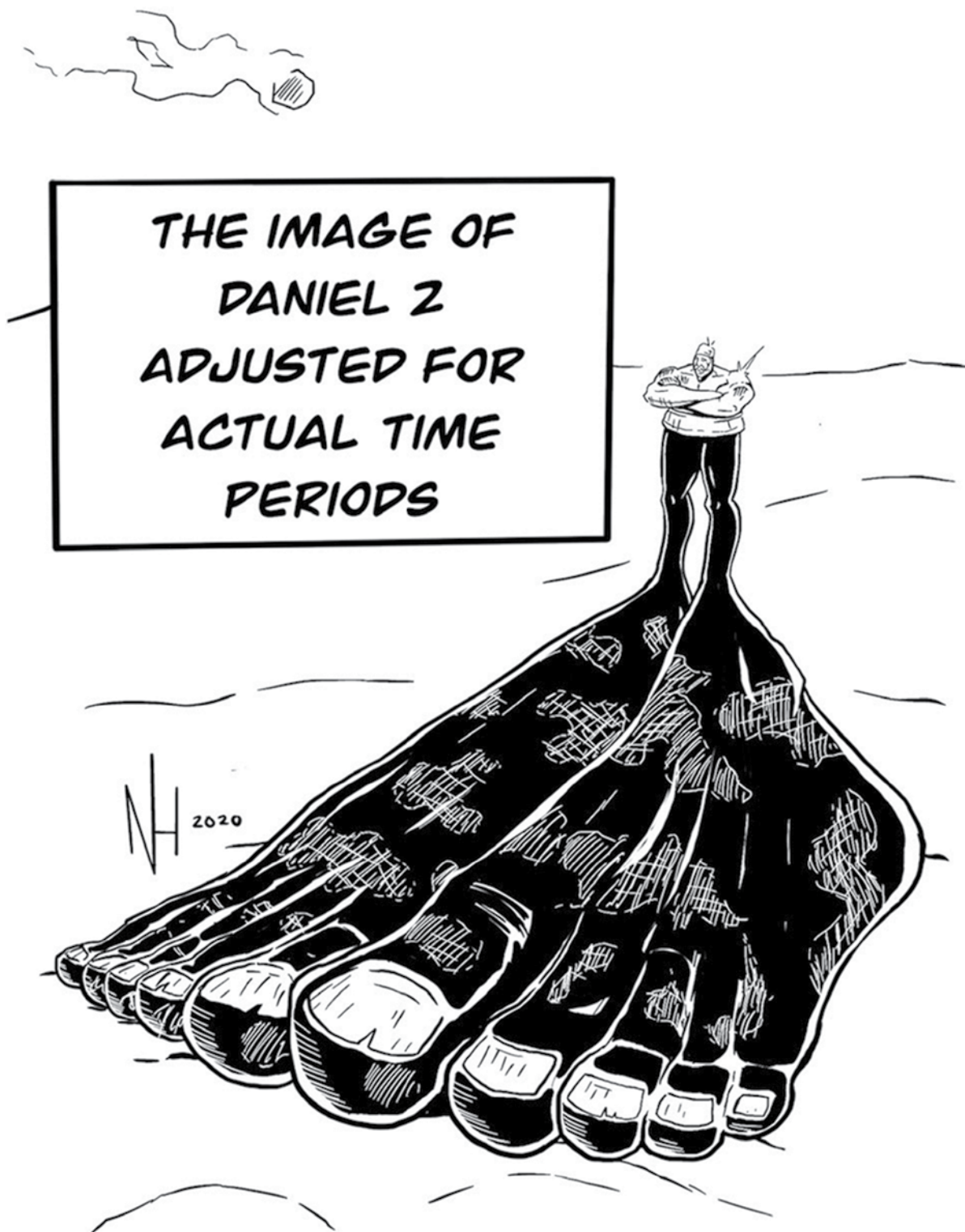
Committee Heats Up Over Quorum Rules

ADVENTIST WORLD — An update to the General Conference Working Policy addresses decisions about exiting burning Adventist structures. The update requires a quorum of the committee with highest local authority before a decision can be made to leave the building. After a quorum has been confirmed, committee members need to vote on the proposed exit route and achieve a two-thirds majority in favor of leaving before anyone can make a run for it. In the interest of time, votes need not be anonymous and can be indicated by the raising of a hand or by pounding madly on a fire exit.

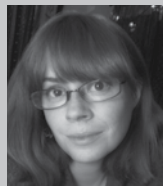
BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don’t mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

"WELL, THERE'S THAT..."

By Nate Hellman



Contributors



ELLE BERRY is a writer and nutritionist. She is passionate about creating wellness, maintaining a

bottomless cup of tea, and exploring every beautiful vista in the Pacific Northwest. She blogs at ChasingWhippoorwills.com.



SONJA DEWITT is a civil rights attorney with more than 20 years of experience handling Equal Employment Opportunity cases.

She has a strong interest in religious liberty and blogs about religion, politics, government, and social justice at www.voicesfromthewilderness.net.



NATE HELLMAN is a pastor and artist in the Pacific Northwest. He likes weaving art and ministry together creatively, including

doodling in the margins of his church board agenda. Find him @nates creations on Instagram.



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



MATTHEW J. KORMAN is a graduate of La Sierra University who is at Yale Divinity School pursuing a Master of Arts in Religion,

studying Second Temple Judaism. His 2019 book is *Saying No to God: A Radical Approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully*.



RONALD LAWSON is a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist and a sociologist studying urban conflicts and sectarian religions.

He is retired from Queens College, City University of New York. His papers are available at RonaldLawson.net.



TODD LEONARD is senior pastor of the Glendale City Church in California. He and his wife, Robin, have three daughters. He has

pastored and planted churches in Georgia, Tennessee, and California since 2000.



LEIF LIND was born in Uganda to a missionary family and grew up in eight countries on four continents.

He has served as an Adventist pastor since 1976 and today is an associate pastor of the Glendale City Church in Southern California.



ALVIN MASARIRA is a structural engineering consultant based in Johannesburg, South Africa. He and his wife, Limakatso, a medical

doctor, have three children.



LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER is a writer and trainer specializing in mental health topics in the social work field. She enjoys reading, playing

with her children, and writing about feminism.

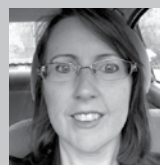


LOREN SEIBOLD is the executive editor of *Adventist Today*.



WINONA WINKLER WENDTH is a writer and editor who lives in Massachusetts. She also teaches humanities classes at

Quinsigamond Community College.



LAURA WIBBERDING is an adjunct professor of religion at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. She blogs at

theotheradventisthome.com.

BIBLE CREDITS

The Amplified Bible (AMP) is copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, CA 90631. All rights reserved.

King James Version 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.

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.™

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.

Adventist^{Today}

Read.Watch.Listen

We wish we could be delivering this magazine in person while bringing you some much-needed groceries or other household supplies as you “shelter in place” at a “safe distance” from other people. We are definitely in an uncertain season as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our prayer for you is that you stay well.

We're With You

We can't think of a better way for you to use your time (wherever you live, or are stranded) than to keep up on Adventist Today's eight channels of communication: print magazine, website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Patreon, PDF magazine, and AT Update newsletter.

We have recently started two new streaming video features: Anticipating AT1 every Friday night, and Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar every Sabbath afternoon. You can watch both of them in your home or wherever you get internet access.

The bottom line is that we haven't stopped working for you during this pandemic. In fact, we've stepped up our pace because we want to stay connected with you. We want you to know that you are not alone and that together we are going to handle this, by the grace of God.

Are You With Us?

To be able to keep our communication connection strong, we're going to need your generous financial gifts.

- We have 46,000 people who regularly look at our website.
- We have 18,000 readers who are Facebook fans of Adventist Today.
- We have 6,000 recipients of our weekly AT Update newsletter.
- We have 4,000 folks who connect with us on our other digital media services.

Adventist Today is worth supporting, and we need your financial gifts now more than ever. We're asking all of our readers to consider making a one-time donation of \$60 (or \$5/month) to keep your connection with Adventist Today strong. Our organization is efficient and lean, so that we can continue to give you the very best.

We Can Do This Together

Of course, we welcome gifts that are larger than \$60. In fact, other popular one-time giving levels are \$300 or \$1,200. Please respond today as you are prompted by the One who has been generous with you. And accept our thanks in advance for what you will do.

So while we're living in troubling times, it is our hope that you see Adventist Today as a conveyor and convenor of countless ways to make it through this season. We also want to be here for you once we pass through to the other side of the pandemic, however long that takes.

Donate online: a-tdy.org/dmo

**Mail a check to the address below,
or call us at 800.236.3641 or
503.826.8600.**

Adventist^{Today}

ADVENTIST TODAY | PO BOX 683 | MILTON-FREEWATER, OR 97862 | WWW.ATODAY.ORG



www.facebook.com/AToday.org/



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



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